

Naked in the Everyday World

OLYMPIA

Paris in the Age of Manet.
By Otto Friedrich.
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By Nicholas Fox Weber

WALTER BENJAMIN called Paris "the capital of the 19th century." Otto Friedrich illustrates why in "Olympia: Paris in the Age of Manet." The city was a hotbed of licentiousness and, at the same time, of fierce judgments. Some of its citizens cultivated decadent living with unprecedented imagination; others were reduced to conditions of dire squalor. Opera and painting flourished, but when their styles were out of line with public taste, their foes lacerated them mercilessly and even rioted against them. The public took cultural matters desperately to heart.

For musical theater, the favorite composer during the reign of Napoleon III was Jacques Offenbach. The Emperor and Empress attended performances of his works regularly. Mr. Friedrich writes that Offenbach's leading singer, Hortense Schneider, was so alluring that her high-ranking admirers made extraordinary gestures to win her approval. Her lover, the Duke de Gramont-Caderousse, gave her a giant Easter egg that housed not just a real coach but also its horses and driver. Another suitor, Khalil Pasha, the Egyptian khedive, visited France during the run of Offenbach's "Vie Parisienne" and declared that the operetta made him feel that the entire city of Paris was his mistress. To consummate the relationship, he had his aides arrange for Schneider, its star, to meet him in Vichy, where he was taking the cure. But his staff mistakenly thought that the guest he was requesting was Eugene Schneider, a leading arms merchant. And so it was Eugene rather than Hortense who was made to await the khedive at Vichy's Grand Hotel in a suite that had been specially filled with flowers and perfumes, and who was told that he should bathe in order to prepare himself for his royal host.

Flaubert described the mood perfectly: "The whole trend in Paris now is toward the colossal. Everything is becoming crazy and out of proportion." When Gioacchino Rossini composed a hymn to Napoleon III on the occasion of the Exposition of 1867, Mr. Friedrich writes, it was publicly performed by "800 instrumentalists and 400 choristers." Richard Wagner, on the other hand, could not get a piece played all the way through. Napoleon and Eugénie supported the 1861 production of "Tannhäuser" by attending both the premiere and the second performance, but catcalls, hissing and whistling periodically brought the singing to a total halt.

Mr. Friedrich tells these stories and many more in "Olympia." With Édouard Manet's painting ostensibly as the fulcrum of his book, he touches on disparate elements of Parisian life between 1860 and 1890. The relationship of Manet's painting to Mr. Friedrich's subject matter is at times tenuous; the points of emphasis range from the volatile Empress Eugénie and the writings of Émile Zola to the prevalence of prostitution and the horrific five-month siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War.

When Manet's painting hung in the Salon of

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1865, two uniformed guards were required to protect it from viewers attempting to strike at it with sticks and umbrellas. It was all right if nudes were portrayed as mythic creatures. The public at large was aghast, however, that a naked woman on view looked like an actual person and was shown in the real, everyday world. Manet presented his model, Victorine Meurent, in a way that a demimondaine of the era might have posed for her clients. Stretched out on ordinary bed linen, she accentuates her nudity by her shoes, bracelet, neck ribbon and hair flower.

Convention demanded the waxen-surfaced bodies of anonymous females. The subjects were expected to be based on professional models in the art academies, not on knowable individuals. Prostitution was widespread and a reality of everyday Parisian life, but its representation in artworks was



Detail from Édouard Manet's painting
"Olympia" (1863).

unacceptable. Nudes were permissible only in artificial settings that resembled stage sets of waterfalls or temple ruins.

The critic Théophile Gautier voiced the opprobrium with which the French population in general responded to Manet's approach: "'Olympia' can be understood from no point of view, even if you take it for what it is, a puny model stretched out on a sheet. . . . Here there is nothing, we are sorry to say, but the desire to attract attention at any price."

Manet's problems had begun in 1863 with his "Déjeuner sur l'Herbe." Instead of depicting a group of naked gods and goddesses, which would have been acceptable, that canvas showed a nude woman next to, according to one contemporary account, "two dandies dressed to the teeth" who "look like schoolboys on a holiday." The effect of those companions was to transform the woman from a proper allegorical subject into a harlot.

"Déjeuner sur l'Herbe" had been turned down by the official Salon. But Napoleon III had rare pluck when it came to government censorship of the arts. He overrode the traditionalist bureaucrats who served under him. He asked the jury to reconsider the rejection of the Manet and of similarly advanced paintings by Pissarro, Whistler, Fantin-Latour and Cézanne. When the jurors replied that they could countenance no such weakening of their authority, the Emperor announced that the public must be given the opportunity to judge for itself. So he arranged for the rejected works to go on view elsewhere in the Palace of Industry, in what became known as the "Salon des Refusés."

Mr. Friedrich does a good job of presenting both the world that inspired "Olympia" and the society that rejected it, and of provid-

ing lots of pertinent facts and colorful anecdotes along the way. As he has proved in two of his previous books, "City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s" and "Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s," he can recount fascinating information even when his organization is flawed.

But he is far less deft in his analysis of human emotion. When he quotes Manet as saying "I'll take a beating, but let them say what they want," it oversimplifies the painter's attitude. His characterization of Manet's model Éva Gonzalès as "a fairly simple and straightforward girl" who "knew what she wanted, and . . . went for it" is the stuff of pop fiction. Moved more by the dramatic effect of his statements than by their substance, Mr. Friedrich also employs a grating form of verbal repetition; we read, typically, of "a frivolous grand duchy ruled by a frivolous grand duchess" at "a far grander international exhibition" that provided "a far grander opportunity for a far grander success," which was "completely contemporary and completely absurd."

The author also makes points that he does not substantiate. Just after explaining why Manet was modern, he announces, "Indeed, if the term post-modern means anything, Manet could almost be called post-modern." We are left with nothing but questions after reading that "Offenbach represented, as only an impoverished German immigrant could, the carefree spirit of the Parisian operetta under the empire. The son of a cantor from Offenbach-on-Main, whose family name was Eberst (or perhaps Wiener, or perhaps Levy), young Jakob Offenbach was a cello prodigy." Why could only a poor transplant from an entirely different, and not notoriously carefree, culture embody the *joie de vivre* of French operetta? And why Wiener or Levy? Is this to suggest that it might also have been Katz or Goldstein? We get no explanation. And at one point Mr. Friedrich's scholarship is so lax that, recalling "a scene in some novel," he asks his readers, "Is it somewhere in Tolstoy?"

IN a book that purports to be at least in part about art and its sources and effects, Mr. Friedrich shows little eye for the quality of actual paintings. He writes, "In contrast to, say, Giorgione's 'Fête Champêtre' or even Titian's 'Venus of Urbino,' Goya's 'Third of May' is a great masterpiece." On what does he base this judgment? To most of us, that magical, luminous Giorgione or the richly layered Titian are among the world's finest pictures — which is not to denigrate the Goya. Mr. Friedrich refers to Manet's sister-in-law, the painter Berthe Morisot, copying a painting "by Rubens, of all people." For him not to recognize the value of Rubens's dynamic rhythms and feeling for composition is a serious flaw in the author's grasp of the issues of painting — not just for Morisot, but also for scores of other artists.

For all that we glean about issues peripheral to Manet's art, we learn nearly nothing about his revolutionary strides in the act of painting, or the glorious visual impact of "Olympia" and his other masterpieces. Instead of conjecturing on such irrelevant subjects as Degas's sexual potency, the author might have considered the visual and technical tasks that were paramount for the artist. Manet's flattening of forms, deliberate distortions, forthright brushwork and majestic use of black opened the world to a new way of seeing; they warrant more attention. In his vibrant canvases, Édouard Manet took what he saw and made it coherent and profound. In the book "Olympia," for all his enticing display of facts and stories, Otto Friedrich has not. □