

## THE MODERN METROPOLIS AND EDOUARD MANET'S *THE RACES AT LONGCHAMPS*

Must we admit that the center of this powerful city...is today an opera house? Must our glory in the future consist above all in perfecting out public entertainments? Are we no longer anything more than the capital of elegance and pleasure?

*Le Temps*, 18 August 1867

The editor of *Le Temps* was astonished by the extent of entertainments that made Paris "the theater of nations." In 1867, the year of the Universal Exposition, visiting monarchs, visitors, and even most Parisians reveled in the activities exploding in France. Guidebooks written for the World's Fair described circuses, concerts, pantomimes, magic shows, puppet and shadow plays, dozens of balls (commercialized dance halls or gardens), and several dozen cafes-concerts. To be a painter of modern life meant grasping this energy and excitement on canvas, and many young artists in their 20s and 30s saw no better technique than painting *en plein aire* (out of doors). Painters living in Paris made the urban scene their preferred subject: cityscapes, city people, and their passions. By the mid 1870s all aspects of theater, opera, the cafe-concert and the races became common Impressionist themes. Artists approached these subjects aided by the innovations of photography and manufactured paints in tubes as well as by new scientific theories of color and light.

Edouard Manet was very much the modern French dandy. Financially independent, like Edgar Degas and Gustave Caillebotte, he enjoyed the Paris "high life" and absorbed it into his paintings. He was well-educated, studied with Thomas Couture, and ultimately evolved a very distinct style -- a style influenced by Spanish artists Velasquez and Goya, Flemish and Dutch masters, Japanese prints and photography.

In *My Paris, French Character Sketches* (1868), Edward King described the appeal of one of Manet's favorite spots, the newly created Bois de Boulogne:

Whatever you wish you may have here. You have only to go to Longchamps for the rush and rattle of the race-course or review; to the Pre-Catalan for garden gossip and sociability of the cafe; to the charming lakes to gather lilies; and a few steps will take you into the wild wood.

The racetrack at Longchamps opened in 1857 and was a popular seasonal event for upper-class Parisians like Manet and Degas. The opening of the spring racing season was a highlight for the Parisian social elite. It engaged the entire fashion industry -- because one went to the races, as to the theater, to see and be seen. The French public lined up along the Champs-Elysees to watch the procession of open and closed carriages and mounted horsemen, all "dressed within an inch of their lives."

Between 1864 and 1872 Manet created several oils and watercolors, and a lithograph of the races at Longchamps. Manet, in the Art Institute painting, is like a stop-action photographer: he catches the "photo-finish." This view is not a side view from the stands, but for the first time in the history of art, we look head-on at the horses in the same way

that Monet looked at the Iron Horse (the train) at the Saint Lazare railway station. We are "at the turn" breathing clouds of dust from thundering hoofs and sensing the thrust and energy of the massive horses as they stretch for the finish line indicated by the raised circular pole. Manet pulls us closer to the horses by opening out the front of the canvas to the green turf, the slopes of Saint-Cloud, and the windy sky. On the left, two foreground figures can be distinguished, and further back, a man in top hat and tan coat spreads out his arms to steady his binoculars.

Painted ten years before the first exhibition of the "Impressionists," Manet here used energetic, spontaneous brush strokes, filled with color and action. The two women on the left are painted with wide strokes whose texture and direction prepare the way for van Gogh two decades later. For the racing scene, horizontal strokes, partly blended, define the green turf; curved swipes of the brush represent the hunched-over jockeys and thin strokes of yellow catch the light on the horses' reins and glistening muscles. The spectators are mixed dabs of paint, with hats, parasols, faces and bodies suggested but not defined.

Whether applied to horses, viewers, or landscape, the artist's marks seem to result from a spontaneous response to a scene, a perceptual quickness and power of execution that explains why Manet was considered the unofficial father of Impressionism. Only a year before painting this work Manet scandalized the art world with his *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass). The work shows an undressed young woman lounging in a park with two fully dressed men. The painting was rejected by the official Salon jury and was instead seen by thousands at the Salon des Refuses.

For Manet, painting modern life included such a vision of tension and excitement. Four years after painting several versions of the races at Longchamps, he decided not to send anything to the Salon of 1867. Instead, he and Courbet set up separate one-man shows in the Paris World's Fair as if affirming their leadership role of the avant-garde art world.

### Questions and Activities

- 1) Have students describe the scene. What is taking place and who is present? Using their imaginations while referring to the painting for clues, have students guess what sounds and activity they would experience if placed within the scene.
- 2) How did Manet create a sense of excitement? How did he create a sense of "the moment"? How would this scene look different if it were captured five seconds later than as depicted? Based upon the painting, where does it look like Manet was standing to paint the picture? Where do students think he really was situated when he painted it?
- 3) Manet painted scenes of modern life that he experienced in his own city. Have each student select an activity or event that is popular today in their community to observe and depict in a work of art. Encourage students to create a sense of movement and drama through their composition and choice of colors and style.

## AT THE RACES

Salon exhibitions of the 1840s and '50s bore witness to a dramatic increase in paintings of French landscape and rural civilization, and those of the 1860s announced a growing preoccupation with modern urban imagery. Manet was the leader of this later, iconographic trend, and his *Luncheon on the Grass* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), shown in the 1863 *Salon des Refusés*, and *Olympia* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), exhibited at the Salon of 1865, brought modern life and the world of sophisticated mores directly before the public. The most sought-after subjects of such urban realists were associated with Parisians at play, and the paintings, drawings, and prints they made present Paris in ways quite consistent with the city's self-image as the world capital of leisure and luxury.

Manet explored the parks and boulevards during the daytime and attended the opera and ballet in the evenings. Shortly after they met in 1859 or 1860, Manet and Edgar Degas began to vie with one another to find new cosmopolitan subjects. It was at the horse races that their visual interests overlapped most closely in the first decade of their friendship; these three works of art explore various aspects of this most fashionable of outdoor spectator sports. Although horse racing had long been practiced in France, it had its first great age in the Second Empire (1852-70) during the reign of Napoleon III, when intense anglophilia led to the creation of that most chic of men's establishments, "le Jockey Club." It was during the Second Empire that the splendid racecourse at Longchamps in the Bois de Boulogne was finished, making it easy for residents of the fashionable west side of Paris to go to the races.

Manet and Degas seem to have raced each other

to the races, and each of their initial attempts at this difficult subject proved to be a failure. Dating from around 1862, Degas's earliest canvases show a definite dependence on British racing prints and Gérault's considerably earlier paintings of English horse races. By 1863, Manet was at work on a large canvas entitled *Aspects of a Racecourse in the Bois de Boulogne*, intended for exhibition the following year. It seems clear from the surviving evidence that Manet never exhibited, and possibly never completed, the painting, although a highly finished watercolor and gouache at the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts, records it in detail. Manet evidently cut the original painting into sections, because two small canvases representing female spectators survive. However, he probably never salvaged the main part of the picture, preferring to create another canvas in 1867, which is now in the Art Institute and is reproduced here.

For Manet, the race itself was a total event. In the museum's composition, for the first time in the history of art, the viewer is startled into believing that he is standing not safely along the sidelines, but directly in the center of the track with six horses charging full speed toward him! This threat to the sense of the viewer's well-being is perhaps the painting's most extraordinary aspect of modernism. The rest of the scene is a blur, brilliantly and rapidly painted so that one's attention cannot deviate from the thundering excitement of the race.

Like Ingres, whom he so admired, Degas was always more analytical and conscious of detail than Manet. He was less concerned with the spectacle of the race itself than with the machinations of the spectators or the periods just before or after the

main event, when the jockeys' movements are slow and deliberate. In *Four Studies of a Jockey*, the riders sit stationary atop their invisible mounts, suggesting that the drawing was made from a model in the artist's studio, rather than from an actual jockey at the race. The same detachment characterizes Degas's beautifully finished portrait drawing of an unidentified gentleman spectator, who himself is on horseback. Interestingly, Degas never used these two drawings as preparations for larger works. Rather, he made them, along with other separate studies of figures at the horse race, to familiarize himself with each aspect of the event. Whereas Manet's impulse was to grasp the essence of the whole visual field and to interpret the race as intensely directed motion, Degas's was to create a grammar of form with which to construct a painting. His earliest successful paintings of the race are just as we would expect them to be, that is, quite the opposite of Manet's *Races at Longchamps*. With their precise, almost enameled surfaces and lack of single focus, they are as radical

in their lack of psychological cohesiveness as Manet's painting is in its unity of motion.

Even if he did not share Manet's preoccupation with speed, Degas was no less fascinated with movement. In these sheets, the instability and balance of the riders captivated Degas, and there is a sense in which the artist compared the training and preparation of the race horse with that of ballet dancers. Later in life, he devoted a sonnet to a comparison of horse and ballerina. In early preparatory drawings such as these, he aestheticized the race, emphasizing the aspects of costume and pose that would have appealed to any seasoned observer of court life in either the eighteenth or the nineteenth century. Indeed, for all his vaunted interest in modern life, Degas was less modern than Manet in his mode of representing that life. Surely, it is no accident that his sheet of *Four Studies of a Jockey* is a *mise-en-page* that recalls the drawings of eighteenth-century artist Antoine Watteau, whose interest in depicting rustling silks surpassed even that of Degas.