Cézanne and the Modern

MASTERPIECES OF EUROPEAN ART
FROM THE PEARLMAN COLLECTION

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Édouard Manet’s Young Woman in a Round Hat can be seen as a response to the poet Charles Baudelaire, whose essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863) called on artists “to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distill the eternal from the transitory.” For Baudelaire, modern painters had to capture “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent,” and their primary subject was to be portraits of women, in which everything “from costume to coiffure down to gesture, glance and smile . . . combines to form a completely viable whole.”¹ In Baudelaire’s view, women and fashion represented the fleeting character of modern life. Their superficiality and changeability was, paradoxically, modernity’s core.

Young Woman in a Round Hat is one of many paintings in Manet’s oeuvre that hovers between portraiture and the painting of modern life. The woman has never been identified, so it is unclear whether she is a model or a well-to-do Parisienne, and the painting obscures her features enough to suggest that the physiognomic specificity of portraiture was not the artist’s principal goal.² The half-length, three-quarter pose, frozen against an indeterminate background, combined with the woman’s seeming awareness of our gaze — her left eye peering out the side of her veil and her lips slightly pursed — suggest a knowing dialogue with the conventions of portraiture, yet there is little about the woman that renders her distinguishable as an individual. According to Linda Nochlin, this ambiguity defines the Impressionist portrait. As she muses in an essay on the subject, “Are the figures ‘sitters’ (portrait subjects whose identities are maintained or reinforced) or are they ‘models’ (figures hired by the artist to pose for him, usually with their actual identities erased or transformed)?”³ But although critics and audiences in nineteenth-century Paris associated Manet with Impressionism — indeed, many saw him as its invertebrate leader — Manet did not consider himself an Impressionist, and repeatedly declined to participate in the group’s exhibitions. This painting vividly demonstrates his conflicted relationship to the Impressionist movement, and exemplifies his fascination with the modern Parisienne.

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¹ Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life.”
² Though often referred to as a “portrait,” Young Woman in a Round Hat is considered by many critics to be a depiction of an unknown Parisienne, though no one has ever been identified with it.
³ Nochlin, “Women in the Arts: Portrait.”
The woman in Manet’s painting is dressed as a fashionable bourgeoise outfitted for a promenade, with a dress of deep cobalt blue, black gloves, an umbrella, and a round black hat. The painting’s signature feature, the hat, is embellished with a short veil extending from the brim to just below the woman’s nose, lightly shading her features. Manet materializes the voilette in the form of a loose, broken outline that hovers around the top half of her face, indicating its delicate texture with a loose freckling of black dabs painted with the tip of a brush. The veil’s edge loops around the contour of the woman’s nose, calling further attention to its prominent shape — with a stray black dab beneath the tip that seems to have escaped the fabric’s dotted pattern — and then curls around her upper ear, guiding the eye to this feature’s awkward shape. The delicacy of the veil is incongruent with the relative indelicacy of the woman’s features: her strong nose, with its yawning nostril; her crooked, ruddy-colored ear; her ample chin and jowl; her slightly thick neck; and the suggestion of a sideburn on her temple that casts a masculine shadow across her face. Her disproportionately large right hand — a misshapen clump of thickly gloved fingers — is another feature that subverts the feminine fragility of the veil. This clash of bodily awkwardness and fashionable chic is a hallmark of Manet’s paintings. The stiff posture and claw-like hand of the elegant woman in the contemporary In the Conservatory (fig. 51) is a case in point, and contributes to that painting’s study of the tensions of bourgeois social relations.

The most remarkable feature of Young Woman in a Round Hat (fig. 52) is the large smudge of blackish-brown paint that appears to rest on the bridge of her nose. This smudge echoes and amplifies her neatly manicured eyebrow, which is further echoed by a third black stroke that could be a tendril of hair escaping from her hat. Perhaps a representation of shadow cast by the hat’s down-turned brim, the smudge blocks the woman’s vision, shielding her eyes like a blind. Its insistent opacity and materiality contrasts sharply with the immateriality of the shadow or
palette; and a preoccupation with light. In this painting, the insubstantiality and opticality of these techniques are linked to the dissimulations of female fashion—the coy flirtation of a veil, the alluring surface and silhouette of a dress, the way that makeup can model a face.⁷ The blues that compose the woman’s bodice and sleeve are painted with loose, dynamic strokes that play off passages of bare canvas throughout the collar and along the buttons, accenting the overall solidity of her form. But despite those areas of impressionistic brushwork, Young Woman in a Round Hat displays several decidedly non-Impressionist features, most notably, its extensive use of black. Manet was a master of black in all its varied textures, shades, and sheens. Like the pastel portrait of Maureau, this painting demonstrates a range of examples: from the rich, matte felt of her left glove, which contrasts with the rougher, duller fabric of the umbrella; to the violet-tinged shadow under her chin; to the wispy, faded strokes that outline her veil.

The thickly outlined contours of the woman’s form also defy the impressionist approach to modeling with color, without the aid of chiaroscuro or drawn lines. Manet drew her silhouette with a bold, blackish-blue border that makes her shape stand out against the pastel background. Compare these effects with those achieved in At the Milliner’s (fig. 54), where Manet employed a similar technique, framing the woman’s alabaster skin with dark contour lines that separate her body from the wall. The colorful floral pattern of the wallpaper in this painting evokes the impressionist style of artists like Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, brought indoors and made into a decorative backdrop to the modern figure painting that was Manet’s focus.

The self-fashioning of modern women sustained Manet’s interest throughout his career, much more than the suburban landscapes and transient light effects that captivated his Impressionist friends. Even in the more Impressionistic portrait of his wife, Madame Manet at Bellevue—where Manet limited black to the sash of the hat and a few isolated shadows in the foliage, brightening his palette with creamy dashes of white—his emphasis remains the mystery of a woman and her clothing. Nature is merely a setting, an accessory to the illusory seduction of surfaces. Rather than staging the portrait in a conventional outdoor setting, Manet evokes a park-like environment through light layers of color that connote the natural world without concretely depicting it. Long, vertical strokes of pale white and gray blur the green decoration beneath, conveying an almost aqueous milieu, as if the woman were standing in front of a stream of water behind which float the foliage of plants and trees. This background effectively serves as a second veil in the painting; here, paint itself is a scrim whose masking forms distort and embellish. A roughly contemporary pastel portrait of Manet’s fellow painter Alphonse Maureau, also known as Man in a Round Hat (fig. 55), has similar features: a bust-length, three-quarter pose; a pair of loosely sketched, seemingly unfinished hands; a series of dark shadows playing across the face; and a diaphanous background of blue, white, and gray that approximates a light-filled window thinly veiled by a curtain. The soft texture of the pastel medium lends itself to such atmospheric effects. The background of the Pearlman Collection painting looks more labored, and Manet seems to have fiddled in particular over the area around the woman’s hat. A gray halo indicates that he shifted or contracted the volume of her head, and the outlining of her arms and bust similarly suggests a concern to distinguish figure from ground.

In the late 1870s, when Young Woman in a Round Hat was painted? Manet was drawing on the stylistic innovations of Impressionism—a loose, feather-like facture; a bright, pastel palette; and a preoccupation with light. In this painting, the insubstantiality and opticality of these techniques are linked to the dissimulations of female fashion—the coy flirtation of a veil, the alluring surface and silhouette of a dress, the way that makeup can model a face.⁷ The blues that compose the woman’s bodice and sleeve are painted with loose, dynamic strokes that play off passages of bare canvas throughout the collar and along the buttons, accenting the overall solidity of her form. But despite those areas of impressionistic brushwork, Young Woman in a Round Hat displays several decidedly non-Impressionist features, most notably, its extensive use of black. Manet was a master of black in all its varied textures, shades, and sheens. Like the pastel portrait of Maureau, this painting demonstrates a range of examples: from the rich, matte felt of her left glove, which contrasts with the rougher, duller fabric of the umbrella; to the violet-tinged shadow under her chin; to the wispy, faded strokes that outline her veil.

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to defy the demands of the art market, Manet greatly desired public attention and appreciation for his work. He submitted paintings to the Paris Salon jury year after year, despite frequent rejection, and was known to take negative reviews of his work as a personal affront. He once struck the writer Edmond Duranty upon encountering him in a café because Durety had written a sharp critique of Manet’s Salon submissions the previous year. The men fought a duel to settle the dispute, an event that Manet, ever the dandy, took as an opportunity to buy a new pair of shoes.⁸

Young Woman in a Round Hat [image 101x256 to 266x372] in The Illustrated London News review, a block of text describes Fry’s exhibition as a “quarrel with the Impressionists,” but then admits that Post-Impressionism’s connection to Impressionism is “extremely close.”⁹ A fitting caption for a painting that wears its quarrel with Impressionism quite literally on its sleeve.


57 Edouard Manet, Amazon (L’amazone de face), ca. 1882–83. Oil on canvas, 73.5 x 52.1 cm. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

6. See Moffett’s discussion of the picture’s dating in Manet, 1832–1883, p. 146.


11. Ibid., p. 293.

12. At Wilson-Bareau recounts, Manet never managed to complete his final Amazon painting for the Salon of 1883; he died of syphilis in April of that year, on 30 April, 1883. However, the Amazon’s face (fig. 57) is frequently shown in its unfinished state, and even serves as the main marketing image for the exhibition Manet, inventeur du réalisme: Modernism, held at the Musée d’Orsay in 2011.