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Painter of Modern Life

A native of Paris, Édouard Manet (1832–1883) believed art should be about modern life and embraced the role of social commentator.

Born into a wealthy family, Manet was good-looking, charming, and cosmopolitan, and he was friends with many avant-garde artists and writers. While he admired paintings by the great artists of the past that he saw in the Louvre, Manet did not paint traditional subjects from history, mythology, or religion. Instead, he turned to the world around him: the grand boulevards, fashionable cafés, busy racetracks, and people and activities in his own neighborhood.

Manet's bold style of painting was as revolutionary as his subjects. He used broad, unblended patches of color that seemed to flatten the space in his paintings. When *The Railway* was exhibited in 1874, reviewers criticized its unfinished appearance, unusual composition, and the absence of the rail station itself. These qualities, for which Manet is now admired, were neither understood nor appreciated by audiences accustomed to smoothly finished and detailed paintings in which the story was easily perceived. Manet's art, however, inspired a whole generation of younger painters, including Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, and Auguste Renoir, who later became known as the impressionists.



Henri Fantin-Latour, *Édouard Manet* (detail), 1867, oil on canvas, Stickney Fund, 1905.207, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago

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Changing Times

During Manet's lifetime, the urban landscape of Paris changed dramatically. Napoleon III appointed Baron Georges Haussmann to rebuild and modernize the capital city of France. Haussmann transformed Paris by creating new water and sewer systems, railway stations, and bridges. He replaced the city's old, narrow, and winding streets with wide, straight boulevards. The railroad, in particular, became a symbol of progress and modernization. Steam locomotives carried passengers farther and quicker than ever before, and they transported workers from the countryside to labor in new industries.



Édouard Manet, *The Railway*, 1873, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Horace Havemeyer in memory of his mother, Louise W. Havemeyer

The woman is Victorine Meurent, Manet's favorite model in the 1860s. The child is the daughter of a fellow artist who allowed Manet to use his garden to paint *The Railway*.

**"You must be of your time
and paint what you see."**

Édouard Manet

3 The Railway

Manet's *The Railway* shows two fashionably dressed people in the bustling city of Paris. A seated woman pauses from her reading and looks directly toward us. A small puppy naps in her lap, nestled between a folded fan and her open book. A young girl grasps the black iron railing and gazes into the distance. Clouds of steam from a passing train hide the train tracks and billow over a signalman's hut.

Wonder: Manet introduces many questions in this painting, but he provides few answers. How are these figures related? Are they mother and daughter, two sisters, or a nanny with a child? Are they waiting for a train to arrive? Have they just seen someone depart? Or are they taking a break during a long walk?

The artist makes the composition visually interesting by including contrasts and opposites.

The woman wears a long, deep blue dress with white trim, while the young girl wears a short, white dress trimmed with a big blue bow.

The girl's hair is tied up with a thin, black ribbon. The woman's long hair is down, fanning over her shoulders. She wears a thin black ribbon around her neck.

The woman is seated; the girl is standing.

The woman looks at us, while the girl looks away, with her back toward us. What might have caught the young girl's attention? What is the woman looking at?

Like many artists of his time, Manet was fascinated by this transformation, and he painted scenes of the modernized city. *The Railway* is set outside of the Gare Saint-Lazare, the largest and busiest train station in Paris. The white stone pillar and section of iron grillwork in the background are part of the newly built Pont de l'Europe, a massive iron bridge that connected six large avenues over the railroad tracks. By calling the work *The Railway*, Manet emphasizes the importance of the train, even while steam obscures the locomotive itself.

The neighborhood of the Gare Saint-Lazare was part of Manet's daily life. He moved into a studio close to the station in 1872. In fact, the door and window of his studio are visible in the background to the left.

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“The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvelous subjects.”
Charles Baudelaire, 1846

Édouard Manet, *The Old Musician*, 1862, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Chester Dale Collection

Under the direction of Baron Haussmann, old neighborhoods in Paris were torn down to make way for wide boulevards, bigger buildings, and new bridges. In his paintings, Manet chronicled the changes taking place, including the busy cafes, crowded train stations, and large parks. In *The Old Musician*, he shows the less-glamorous side of modern life.



Jean Lagrène, age 66, Bohemian born at Repiwiller, albumin print (photo: Jacques-Philippe Potteau), Musée du quai Branly/Scala/Art Resource, NY

Manet's Urban Subjects

In 1861 Manet moved to a new studio in the district of Batignolles nearby an area known as Petit Pologne, which was home to the poor who were being uprooted and displaced by urban renewal. Manet presents characters from his neighborhood. Most are real individuals. The seated violinist was Jean Lagrène, the leader of a local gypsy band who earned his living as an organ grinder and artist's model. The man wearing a top hat was a rag picker named Colardet. The dark-haired street urchin was Alexandre, while the blond one was Léon, a boy who worked for Manet. The old man dressed in fur at the painting's edge was called Guérout.

By painting these people on a monumental scale—the large canvas is six feet by eight feet in size—Manet was making a statement about those who lived on the margins of society in Paris. Although he presents them with a certain sense of detachment, Manet was likely sympathetic to their poverty and homelessness, and he gives them the dignity that was probably denied them in real life.