



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART *The Railway* by Edouard Manet, 1873

Art in the Classroom National Gallery of Art, Washington

Every picture has many stories to tell—about the artist, a moment in history, or a glimpse into a culture or society. In Edouard Manet's painting *The Railway* (sometimes also known as *The Gare Saint-Lazare*), we find ourselves in the vicinity of the Gare Saint-Lazare train station in Paris, France, in the 1870s, in the company of two fashionably dressed people: a young girl facing a black iron railing and a woman seated beside her, who looks directly at us. We might ask: was the woman reading her book just a moment ago? What is the girl looking at so intently? We can't help but wonder who these individuals are, how they are connected to each other, and what they are doing. The relationship between the two figures—whether that of mother and child, nanny and charge, or older and younger sister—remains unclear. Manet is intentionally ambiguous.

Visually the two figures can be seen as opposites: the child wears a white dress trimmed with a blue bow, and the adult is clad in a dark blue dress trimmed with white. The little girl's hair is tied up with a black ribbon, while the woman with flowing tresses wears a similar black ribbon around her neck. The girl stands with her back turned, while the young woman sits and gazes directly at the viewer.

When Manet painted *The Railway*, the Saint-Lazare train station was the largest and busiest in Paris. Although the railway itself is unseen in this painting, clouds of rising smoke and steam suggest the recent departure of a train. In the 1870s, the French rail system was overhauled, and newer, coal-powered steam engines (traveling up to sixty miles per hour) transported people farther and faster than ever before. Trains became a symbol of modernity in France.



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

Manet, a native Parisian, was convinced that art should concern itself with modern life, and he painted the people and places of Paris that he observed firsthand. Even Manet's handling of paint and composition was modern: he used broad, unblended patches of color that flatten the composition and interrupt our perception of the space. The woman and girl seem confined between the narrow foreground (front edge of the painting) and the black railing behind them. Some viewers and critics in the 1870s struggled with Manet's lack of obvious subject, seemingly unmodulated application of paint, and ambiguous sense of space in this painting.



Edouard Manet, *The Railway*, 1873, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Horace Havemeyer in memory of his mother, Louise W. Havemeyer

Look for These Details



Despite the clouds of smoke and steam, we are able to identify the location of the painting:

a: The window and two arched doors in the upper left corner depict the entrance to Manet's studio at the time the painting was made.

b: To the right are a stone pillar and black iron grillwork. These details have been identified as part of the Pont de l'Europe, a massive star-shaped bridge that was built to connect six broad avenues over the Gare Saint-Lazare railway bed. With its unique view of the train tracks below, the bridge was a favorite place for Parisians to stroll and a popular subject with artists, like Manet, who were interested in capturing everyday life.

c: A signalman's hut, beneath the cloud of smoke, helps us identify this location as a railyard.



activity

Before You Start

This activity encourages looking at, thinking about, and making meaning from art. It can be used flexibly and lends itself well to individual, small-group, or whole-class work.

Here are a few tips:
Summarize students' comments and ideas. It will propel their thinking forward.

Encourage students to use descriptive language based on what they see in the work of art.

Provide information about the painting only after students have shared their careful observations, puzzles, and ideas.

When possible, document the students' responses on chart paper to make their thinking visible.

For Further Study

Picturing France 1830–1900 teacher packet:
www.nga.gov/education/classroom/france/

Manet, Monet, and the Gare Saint-Lazare exhibition brochure:
www.nga.gov/exhibitions/pjmanet.htm

1

Observe and Describe

Take a quiet minute to look carefully at this work of art.

What do you see? Share words or phrases that describe any aspect of the work. Include as many details as you can. (Stick to what you see with your eyes. Don't rush to interpret.)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

Now look again.

What new things can you find?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

2

Ask Questions, Seek Puzzles

With a partner, brainstorm a list of three to five questions about the work of art. Use the following prompts to help you think of interesting questions:

- I wonder...
- Why...?
- Who...?
- I am puzzled by...
- What if...?
- I am most curious about...
- What might...?
- How would it be different if...?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5

What new ideas do you have about the work of art that you didn't have before?

3

Create a Poem

Building on your observations, questions, and ideas, write a poem using the format below.

one-word title

two action words

three descriptive words

a question you have about the work of art

three descriptive words

two feeling words

one word that completes the statement
"When I think of this painting, I think of..."

About National Gallery of Art School Tours

By slowing down and looking carefully at a few works of art, students have the opportunity to think creatively and critically. Through open-ended discussion students find that questions seldom have a single answer and that art can possess multiple layers of meaning. Students are encouraged to be curious, to reason with evidence, and to develop their own ideas and interpretations.

Here are some examples of school tours offered:

Art Tales: Little Cloud
Ages 4–6

Art Tales provides an engaging three-step experience for exploring works of art. Through children's literature, students are introduced to different themes in art in a familiar way, followed by an opportunity to connect these themes with works of art they observe in the galleries. A hands-on experience at the end of each tour links the art works and themes discussed. Choose from two themes: Eric Carle's *Little Cloud* or Karen Nagel's *Shapes That Roll*.

Nature in Art
Grades K–3

If you could step into a landscape, what would you hear or feel? This tour explores how artists depict the natural world and invites students to use their imaginations while carefully exploring art and nature too.

Every Picture Tells a Story
Grades 3–12

This tour looks at paintings as unfolding stories with multiple perspectives. Students learn to "read" works of art by identifying characters, setting, and plot, and by creating dialogue.

Mythology
Grades 4–8

Which significant episode or moment in a mythological story did a particular artist choose to depict, and why? This tour unravels Greek and Roman myths, which artists through the ages have depicted with great drama and imagination.

Sculpture and Sketching
Grades 4–12

Looking at works ranging from figurative bronze and marble sculpture to objects that challenge traditional ideas about sculpture, students investigate materials and techniques as well as sculptures' subjects and functions.

French Art
Grades 6–12

This tour gives students a taste of French art and explores a variety of themes, such as artistic styles, portraits of historical figures, scenes from everyday life, and images of patronage and power.

Renaissance Art
Grades 6–12

What radical changes in art (and life) marked the period known as the Renaissance? Original works of art provide students with firsthand answers to this question. Students will explore such artistic developments as perspective and the naturalistic representation of the human figure, and how these stylistic changes were influenced by scientific discovery and the rise of humanism.

Exploring Modern Art: Breaking the Rules
Grades 6–12

What is "modern" about modern art? Students investigate the ways artists "break the rules" when they depart from realistic representation, use innovative techniques, and engage the viewer as a partner in the creation of meaning.

Teacher Programs, In-services, and Resources

The National Gallery of Art offers on-site professional development, workshops, and institutes, as well as a wide variety of online teacher resources.

Visit our education page at www.nga.gov/education for more information about:

- school tours, and how to request a school tour
- high school and teen programs
- learning resources
- family programs
- games and art interactives

For high-quality downloadable images visit images.nga.gov.

The information and activities on this poster can be found online at www.nga.gov/education/posterpdfs/manet.pdf.