

Édouard Manet | Sample answer

“In his work Édouard Manet (1832-1883) challenged the traditional ideas about art. Discuss this statement with reference to “Le Déjeuner sur L’herbe” and refer to subject matter, composition, colour, style and techniques. AND Briefly describe and discuss one other named work by Manet, Illustrate your answer. (2018 Q12)

Édouard Manet was born 1832 in Paris, France. He attended the École des Beaux - Arts for 6 years, but became frustrated with the academic style. He said “I paint what I see, not what others choose to see”. He greatly admired 17th century Dutch and Spanish painting and also collected Japanese prints as he was influenced by their unusual compositions and perspective. Manet was also influenced by the newest development at that time - photography. Manet was one of the first 19th century artists to paint modern life and a pivotal figure in the transition from realism to impressionism. Manet inspired many younger impressionists such as Monet, Degas and Morisot. They often met in the Café Gourbois in Paris to discuss ideas. Critics often included him in the impressionist movement but this was not the case. Manet had a high regard for the Salon and his goal was to exhibit here. Manet had no desire to go against the Salon’s strict rules, however his style did not fit with the Academic style.

He preferred painting directly from reality. He chose everyday scenes of fashionable people in Paris, but his subjects also included beggars, street singers and scenes in cafes. His drawing line was firm and strong and he liked dark colours. He worked directly and often applied wet paint on wet, which meant paintings were completed much more quickly. Instead of mixing colours on his palette he often placed colours side by side, allowing for optical mixing. His brushstrokes were loose and parts of the canvas were often sparsely covered. He used strongly contrasting tones and many different colours to suggest tone. The Academic method of lighting from one side was too

false for him, he preferred to work with natural light such as sunlight. He chose stark contrasts of light and dark rather than the traditional grading of tone. As a result, his figures tended to 'flatten out' rather than have the smooth rounded Academic finish.

Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe

Manet's painting "Le Déjeuner Sur L'herbe" (1863) caused immediate outcry and deep outrage when exhibited in the "Salon des Refuses". The Salon des Refuses was established by Emperor Napoleon the third. However the thousands of people who attended mainly went to laugh, jeer and be shocked by the work the respected Salon had rejected. The first upset to the establishment was that Manet used a very large canvas. In the academic tradition large canvases were reserved for "history paintings", subjects of mythology or religious stories, none of which are shown in this painting.

Subject Matter

In "Le Déjeuner sur L'herbe" a nude woman sits in a non-romantic pose on a picnic blanket. Her chin is resting on her hand and her arm on her knee. She is sat beside two men who are fully clothed, and in the background there is another woman in her undergarments bathing herself in a river. In the left foreground I can see the female's clothes as well as some fruit and bread spilling out from a basket. There are trees in the surrounding background. Manet's model was Victorine Meurant, she is well known in artistic circles. This woman's direct, cool gaze was far more sensual than any remote ancient goddess. People felt unnerved by her stare and Manet was ridiculed for his painting.

Composition

Viewers of this painting found the composition puzzling. The foreground lighting is directly on the subject as if it had come from a studio light. However, the lighting in the background falls straight down from above like sunlight, which complicates the perspective. We can see a triangular composition in the painting, which assists in guiding our eye around the painting.

Style and Technique

Manet liked to work quickly, using loose brush-strokes. We see this in the background of the painting, on trees and the woman bathing herself. In contrast, the central figures are painted more tightly and have a flat, more smooth finish. This makes the figures stand out and be in focus, especially the nude woman.

Colour

Manet went against Academic painting in many ways in this work, one being his use of colour. He placed colours side by side on the canvas rather than mixing them carefully on the palette, this is called optical mixing. “Le Déjeuner sur L’herbe” is an oil on canvas. His use of light and dark gave the painting more value, and our eye is drawn to the nude woman in the centre, as she is the palest object on the canvas.

This painting is one of the most famous and well known of the time. It started the trend of challenging the academic style and making artwork more individual. For this, Manet will always be a well-remembered and admired artist.

A Bar at the Folies-Bergère

After 20 years of not being accepted into the Salon, Manet’s “A Bar At The Folies-Bergère” got accepted in 1882. However, it was Manet’s last great painting before his death in 1883.

A young barmaid named Suzon is standing behind the bar gazing out. Behind her is a large mirror which reflects the scene before the barmaid which she looks upon. The mirror was used by the artist to trick our perceptions. We realise her reflection does not match her figure, and the man is standing directly in front of her but his reflection is to the side. This is confusing but certainly adds interest.

Resting her hands firmly on the bar, the barmaid stares out blankly and with little sign of emotion. She dominates the central position of the painting and holds our gaze - much like in the previous

painting “Les Déjeuner sur L’herbe”. The impressionist-like background creates the sense that people are moving, creating drama.

Her dress as well as the other solid realities in the foreground have been rendered with meticulous realism. Manet won a medal for this painting in The Salon and it’s to be considered one of the greatest masterpieces of the 19th century.