

Manet and Degas: A Masterful Pas de Deux at the Met

Two titans of modern art — and famous frenemies — face off in New York in a show exploring their enigmatic relationship.



By **Holland Cotter**

Sept. 21, 2023

The Met's galleries for 19th- and early-20th-century European paintings and sculpture are among the museum's buzziest places. Packed, always. Why? Because we like what we know. Here, we're in a secular world of relatable narratives — about work, play, sex, fashion — set in smoke-gray cities and landscapes as lush but tame as those of Central Park. No halos here, no hellfire, few kings or queens, pretty much no suffering or death. Or so it would seem at a glance.

And so it might seem on a quick trot through “Manet/Degas,” a powerhouse exhibition of 160 oil paintings, prints, pastels and drawings installed immediately adjacent to those permanent galleries, and guaranteed to bring in its own heavy-to-overwhelming foot traffic. Imported from Paris, where it debuted at the Musee d'Orsay earlier this year, and opening here on Sunday, it's the major tee-off event of the Met season. And overall, it's about as good as exhibitions get.

Everything's here: charismatic art, deep information, an alluring installation, and a theme with plenty of flex and quirks. The result is a complex, attention-absorbing presentation of many interlinked parts, with a combustion chamber at its center.

There are also imbalances of attention and energy. There's a hint of this in the title. Why is it out of alphabetical order? Why not “Degas/Manet”? On a practical level you could put the choice down to chronology: Manet was the older of the pair by two years, born in 1832. But in the end, the billing feels like a critical ranking, leaving a naturally recessive artist, one we still need to know better, in half-light.



Édouard Manet, "Olympia," 1863-65. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

That said, the show's compare-and-contrast approach to two early modernist titans is fascinating and apt. Édouard Manet (1832-1883) and Edgar Degas (1834-1917) were Paris natives, born into wealthy haute-bourgeois families. Both veered from familial expectations in becoming artists. Both abjured a conventional art training and invented the art we call modern day by day, year by year, as they went.

Legendarily, they bumped into each other in the early 1860s while on separate, self-educational trips to the Louvre to study and sketch old art. They remained friends — and periodic frenemies — till the end of their lives.

It was a relationship that survived, possibly even thrived, on difference. On the political spectrum, Manet was socially progressive, Degas conservative, increasingly so. Yet when it came to career politics, the roles were reversed. Manet's ambition was to have his work shown and lauded at the annual Salon of the august École des Beaux-Arts, while Degas was instrumental in founding an alternative yearly showcase, the anti-establishment Impressionist exhibition (with Claude Monet, Camille Pissaro and Berthe Morisot), in which Manet refused to participate.

Their personalities were fundamentally unlike, in ways that could scratch like sandpaper. The Irish critic George Moore, who hung out with them in Paris, described them thus: "Manet loud, declaratory, and eager for medals and decorations; Degas sharp, deep, more profound, scornfully sarcastic."



At the show's entrance, self-portraits suggest that Manet, left, paintbrush posed, was the extrovert, ready for a talk and a drink. By contrast, Degas sulks and pouts and keeps his distance. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Put simplistically, the dynamic was extrovert versus introvert. You might even glean this from the two self-portraits that open the show. In Manet's, dated around 1878, the artist stands alert, eager-eyed, paintbrush poised. Dressed in a sporty beige jacket and hat, he's ready to wrap up this quick-job self-sketch and join you for a talk and drink.

By contrast, in a high-polish painting from almost 20 years earlier, a somber-suited, sideways-looking Degas sits and sulks and pouts and keeps his distance. He too holds a brush, or maybe a pen, but it's half-hidden, as if he didn't want to advertise his labor. Withholding and appraising is the vibe.

Beyond this introductory meet-and-greet, the show takes the form of a labyrinthine sequence of thematic sections — the plum-colored, vista-rich design is by Joachim Hackl, complemented by the graphics of Frank Mondragon — which traces the path of two careers shaped by shared influences and tensions.

Tension is in the air in the first section, titled "An Enigmatic Relationship." Here we find more than half a dozen portraits — drawn, etched, painted — of Manet by Degas, but not even one of Degas by Manet. Hmm. And Degas's painted portrait of his colleague has

been curiously altered, edited. It was originally a double portrait of Manet and his wife, Suzanne Leenhoff, a talented pianist. But Manet so hated Degas's depiction of Suzanne that he impulsively razored it out. Degas, furious, stalked off with the picture, which he had intended as a gift.



Left, Degas's "Monsieur and Madame Édouard Manet," 1868-69. Intended as a gift from Degas, its depiction

of Madame Manet made her husband angry enough to slice the canvas. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



Degas's "Scene from the Steeplechase: The Fallen Jockey," 1866, reworked 1880–81 and circa 1897. In depicting a scene drawn from modern life, and a sport gaining popularity, Degas drew inspiration from Manet's "Episode From a Bullfight." Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



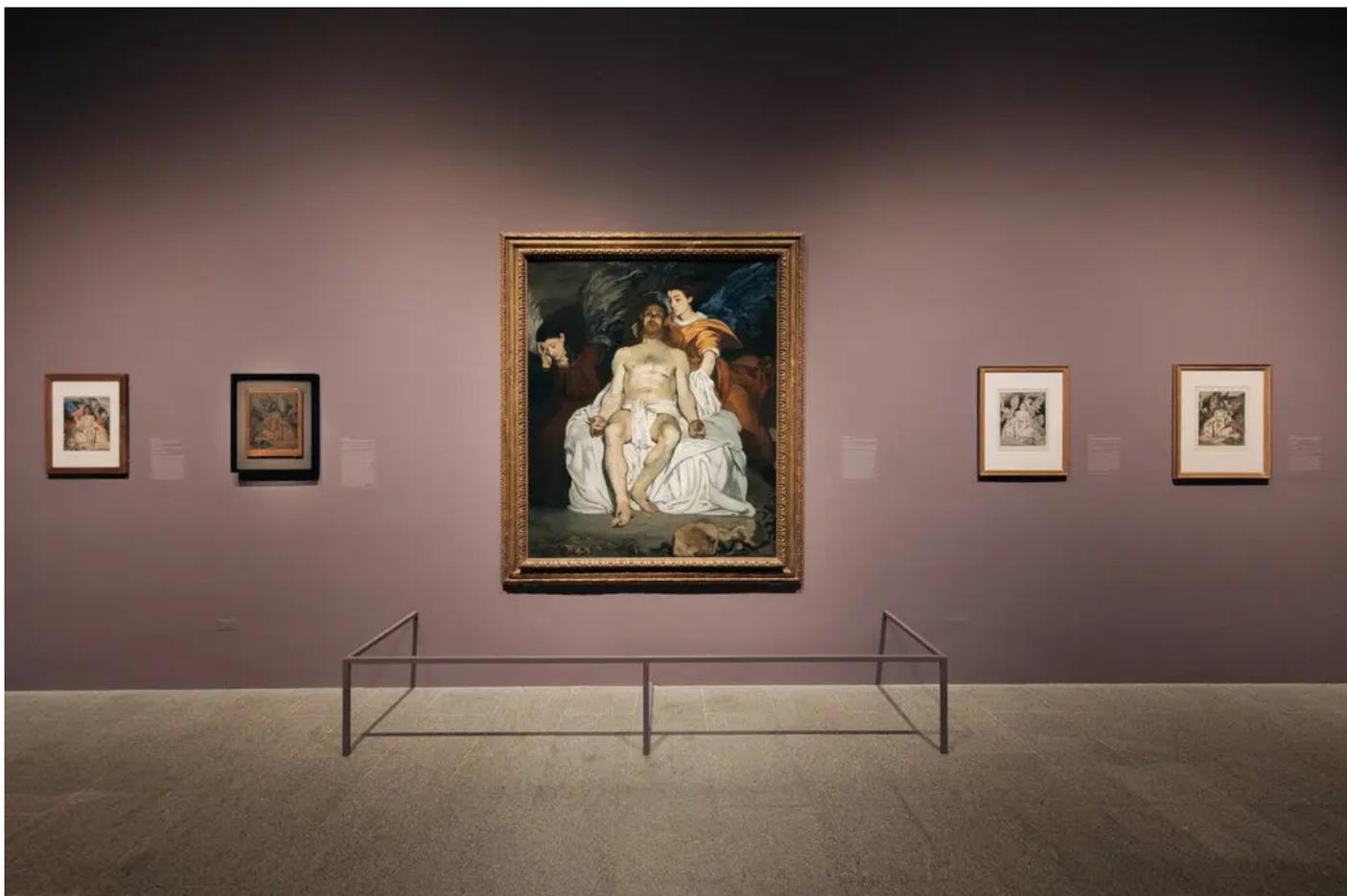
Manet's "Study for Déjeuner Sur l'Herbe," 1863-68. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Then we're back in the artists' journeyman years, when they were prowling the Louvre, and galleries and churches in Florence and Rome, channeling art history, looking at and absorbing many of the same things. We see, for example, an early drawing by Degas of a nude mythological figure by Raphael. A decade later, the same image serves as a model for the picnicking nude woman in Manet's corner-turning "Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe."

"Dejeuner" — represented in the show by a Manet oil study — is often cited as an opening volley in the revolution called modern art. But it was a mere anticipatory rumble to the detonation that soon followed in the picture called "Olympia" (1863-65), here on first-time loan from the Orsay to the United States.

Its image of a Paris courtesan, with tungsten-white skin and a level gaze, stretched out on her bed and approached by a Black female attendant bearing flowers, punched many a hot button — social, aesthetic and ethical — in French bourgeois culture. (A catalog essay by the Met curator-at-large Denise Murrell is a must-read on this.) And, surrounded by some of Manet's other in-your-face radical pictures from the same time, it turns the gallery into a kind of atomic reactor, blasting complex energy out in all

directions.



Manet's "The Dead Christ With Angels," 1864–68, part of his ambitious foray into religious painting. Critics denounced its realism and Christ's wound on the wrong side but Degas admired the work for its "real drawing." Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



Manet's "The Dead Toreador," probably 1864. It reflected the enthusiasm for Spanish culture. Heeding criticism about its original spatial relationships and scale, he cut the original canvas in two and displayed this portion in 1867. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



Manet's "Woman With a Fan (Jeanne Duval)," 1862. Duval, a young actress, stares directly at the viewer and wears a billowing white dress. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

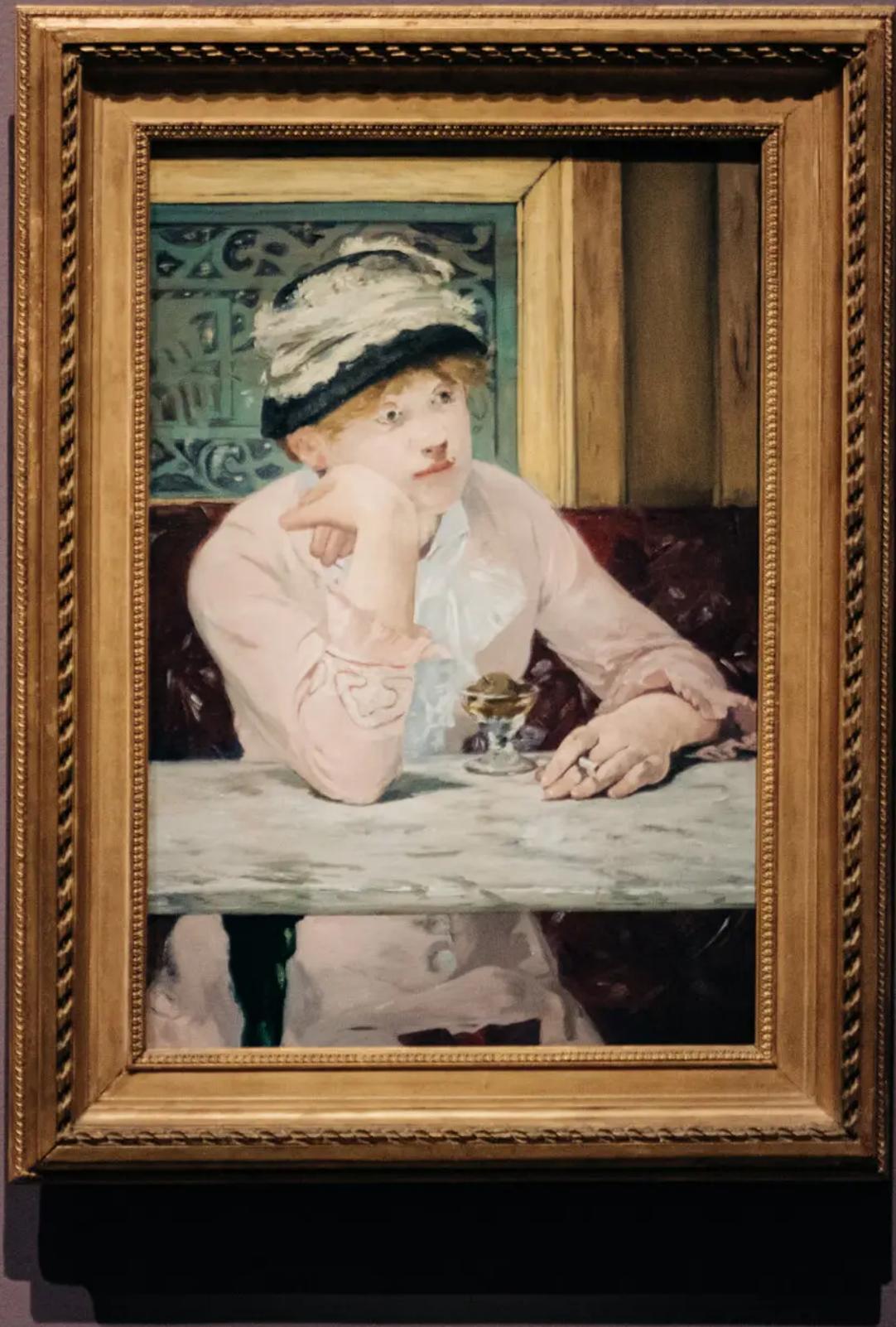
Modern means secular only? Manet's "Dead Christ With Angels" (1864), as unpretty as an autopsy and hung nearby, argues otherwise. Modern means denying mortality? Another Manet stunner, "Dead Toreador" is as stark as a Weegee murder scene. What you won't see much of in this atom-smasher of a room, though, is work by Degas. Just a couple of old-style history paintings, a portrait-and-still life mash-up — the glorious "Woman Seated Beside a Vase of Flowers (Madame Paul Valpincon?) — and a scene of a horse-racing accident, its figure of a fallen and comatose jockey surely inspired by Manet's bullfighter.

Images of horse-racing — the sport had huge Paris vogue — comprise another, much smaller section of the show. Other groupings are devoted to leisure pursuits such as beach tourism and cafe culture. (The side-by-side placement of Manet's "Plum Brandy" and Degas's "In a Café (The Absinthe Drinker)" is one of the exhibition's great pairings.) And still others bring viewers into social networks the artists shared, which included the much-loved Morisot family. (Berthe Morisot married Manet's younger brother, Eugene.)

Not everything in these installations is riveting, but at least in some of them the Manet-to-Degas ratio is fairly even. And everywhere there are indelible sights. Manet's portrait of the biracial actress Jeanne Duval, she of the coal-black eyes and parachute dress, is a traffic stopper. So is Degas's monumentally edgy "Family Portrait (The Bellelli Family)." (It's his one blockbusterish entry.)



One of the show's great pairings, two women in isolation, Degas's "In a Café (The Absinthe Drinker)," from 1875-76, and at right, Manet's wistful "Plum Brandy" from 1877. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



Degas's "Interior," 1868-69, by a dark-minded realist artist, shows a looming figure and hints at a molestation in progress. via Philadelphia Museum of Art

And there are surprises. The inclusion of Degas's chilling 1868-69 narrative painting — once titled "The Rape," now called "Interior" — of what appears to be sexual predation in progress identifies a strain of dark-minded voyeurism in the work of both artists that the exhibition, organized in New York by the Met curators Stephan Wolohojian and Ashley E. Dunn, never directly addresses.

Throughout the years, Manet and Degas remained an odd couple, particularly in their politics. Patriots both, they fought side by side defending Paris during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). But in other matters, their loyalties diverged, as suggested in a dynamic section called "From One War to Another."

One of the wars addressed is the American Civil War, which predictably outraged Manet, who had adamant views on the evils of slavery. And we find him asserting his partisanship in two splashy, swashbuckling marine paintings, both celebrating an 1864 Union naval victory. Nearby are two thematically corresponding paintings by Degas. They are also about America and, covertly at least, about its racial politics, but could hardly offer a greater contrast.

Degas's paintings date to 1873 and were done on a visit to New Orleans, where his mother was born and his family ran a lucrative business in the slavery-dependent cotton

industry. That business is the subject of the paintings: top-hatted white merchants gather in an office, chat, read the paper, inspect samples of a new crop. Business continues as usual, as if the effects of a terrible war and the failures of Reconstruction — during which members of Degas’s family were active in a white supremacist group — didn’t exist.



From the left, Manet’s “The Battle of the USS Kearsarge and the CSS Alabama,” 1864, and “The ‘Kearsarge’ at Boulogne,” 1864. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times



Degas's "A Cotton Office in New Orleans," 1873. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Whatever Degas's opinions of Manet's political thinking — he referred to him once him as "more vain than intelligent" — his belief in the importance of his art held firm, and may even have grown stronger after Manet's death from syphilis at 51. And if gestures of tribute speak louder than words, Degas made a powerful one. In his increasingly reclusive later years he set about assembling a personal collection of Manet's work, a sampling of which, in a section called "Degas after Manet," concludes the show.

Degas acquired, as they came to market, a significant group of Manet's drawings, a nearly complete set of his prints, and eight oil paintings, several of which are here. Most are small: a penumbral portrait of a grieving Berthe Morisot is one; a high-color likeness of a smiling "Gypsy With a Cigarette" another. (Bizet's "Carmen" was a popular hit at the time.) The outstanding picture, though, is a monumental but strangely fragmented image of an act of political violence.

Titled "The Execution of Maximilian," it depicts the firing-squad death in 1867 of an Austrian archduke whom Napoleon III had set up as a straw man ruler in Mexico and then, when colonization failed, abandoned to his fate. The painting was so polemically

pointed that Manet had to keep it hidden in storage. At some point someone, probably a family member, cut the canvas up and sold off pieces. Gradually, ardently, Degas rounded up and preserved some of them. (In 1992 the present owner of the fragments, the National Gallery in London, mounted the pieces on backing in a partial restoration of the original composition.)

Degas and Manet, at the start of their careers, first met in the galleries of a grand public museum. In the end, they kept company in a small private one, the shadowy rooms of Degas's Paris apartment. That object-stuffed home-museum might seem, to some of us, very unmodern. It was a shrine, a reliquary, a devotional site, overseen by a monkish artist who is personally hard to like and aesthetically hard to track, one who is a distinctly second-place presence in the Met's great show, yet who emerges from it, in the end, a torchbearer hero.



Manet's "The Execution of Maximilian," 1867–68. It was cut up into pieces after Manet's death, but the fragments were saved by Degas and later partly restored. Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Manet/Degas

Opens Sunday through Jan. 7, 2024, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, (212) 535-7710, [metmuseum.org](https://www.metmuseum.org).