

THE LONG, PETTY FRIENDSHIP THAT CHANGED ART

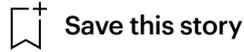
Manet and Degas were rich, competitive, and often unpleasant. They also discovered new ways of seeing the people around them.

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In works like "Repose" (ca. 1871), Manet depicted the entitlement of the bourgeoisie, if on somewhat gentler terms than Degas. Art work by Édouard Manet / Courtesy RISD Museum



It began, the story goes, with an insult, unless the insult was a compliment—with ambitious young artists, one never knows. Édouard Manet would have been about thirty when he visited the Louvre and met Edgar Degas, only two years his junior but as sullen as a teen-ager. Degas was hunched in front of a Velázquez painting of the Infanta Margarita Teresa, trying to copy what he saw. Manet, the chatty type, looked down at his fellow-artist's attempt and said, "How audacious of you to etch that way, without any preliminary drawing, I would not dare do the same!" It was the early eighteen-sixties, and a two-decade friendship, marked by endless subliminal pokes and a few out-and-out slashes, had just been born.



"Portrait of the Artist, After Filippino Lippi" (ca. 1857). Art Work by Édouard Manet / Courtesy © Musée D'Orsay / RMN-Grand Palais; Photograph by Patrice Schmidt

"Audacious" is a weaselly word, but I mean the best when I say that "Manet/Degas," the Met's sprawling yet intimate two-hander, is an audacious show. To me, it comes as a breath of fresh air, since—I might as well admit this now—I've often found its co-stars easier to respect than to

enjoy. With Degas, I know I'm not alone: the austerity of his paintings borders on nastiness. (That they've decorated so many little girls' bedrooms is one of art history's tarest ironies.) Manet is a gentler painter, beloved by many, but his work has a peculiar stiffness that's sometimes hard for me to take in bulk—I can't always tell if it comes from the artist, his subjects, or both. What follow, then, are the thoughts of a reformed skeptic, who's still not blind to these artists' foibles but has learned to love them unconditionally.

The Louvre meeting, almost too perfect-sounding to be true, was nothing special by nineteenth-century Parisian standards. These guys all knew one another, not just the artists but the writers and the politicians. (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Zola make cameos in this show, as does Antonin Proust, Manet's childhood friend and later France's Minister of Fine Arts.) Both Degas and Manet came from posh families and bobbed on the same vast sea of connections. Degas, despite being something of a loner by temperament, as well as an enthusiastic critic of women and Jews, seems to have been incapable of *not* knowing everyone. When Manet's brother married the Impressionist artist Berthe Morisot, Degas gave him a portrait as a wedding present; Manet's son later worked for the Degas family. Degas painted Manet, too, and drew him looking dark-browed and bushy-bearded.



"Self-Portrait in the Manner of Filippino Lippi" (ca. 1858). Art Work by Edgar Degas / Courtesy Robert Flynn Johnson

Apparently, Manet never returned the favor. The show's curators, Stephan Wolohojian and Ashley E. Dunn, are wise not to overexplain this, or much else about the relationship. (Notice the lack of subtitle in the show's name—

just Manet and Degas, thanks very much.) As you walk through the Met, theories come to you unbidden. It could be the case, e.g., that Manet never painted Degas because he wasn't as natural a portraitist (a fifth of his oeuvre are still-lifes), though I suspect an unspoken hierarchy of reputations. For much of their friendship, Manet was the bigger deal, touted first for his success and then for his succès de scandale; Degas later became highly popular, but by then Manet was dead of syphilis. In some of the portraits at the Met, one senses Degas eying his cooler friend with a lean and hungry look, begging to be eyed in return. The show's most revealing pieces, however, are a pair of heads modelled on Filippino Lippi's self-portrait. Manet dials up the gawkiness of the lips and teeth, but not out of cruelty; there's plenty of warmth in this face. Degas's version is smoother, with a silvery sheen as pretty as it is chilly. They were only in their twenties, but they already knew what kind of artists they wanted to be.

The Lippis raise an important point, which "Manet/Degas" can't help circling back to: great painters are not necessarily good painters. Art lovers, probably overcorrecting for "my kid could do that" philistinism, can be touchy about this, but in the case of Manet, a painter as great as he was technically dubious, it can't be said too often. In much of his early work, near and far bump against each other—the rainbow in "Fishing" (ca. 1862-63) is as phony as the backdrop for a middle-school play—and his figures never really seem to be standing on solid ground, as though he's cut them out of someone else's painting. In the eighteen-sixties, Manet cut out a significant chunk of his own painting, "Episode from a Bullfight," in response to criticism that he'd botched the perspective. It's the kind of story you rarely find in art mythology: avant-gardists are supposed to be indifferent to critics, deliberate in their desecrations of tradition. In the case of Manet, the celebrated ur-modernist who made the world safe for flat, unfinished-looking art, it's extra startling. Surely he, of all people, understood what he'd done.



"Olympia" (1863-65). Art Work by Édouard Manet / Courtesy © Musée D'Orsay / RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource

The ur-modernist painting to rule them all, "Olympia" (1863-65)—Manet's triple portrait of a Black maid, a bug-eyed cat, and a naked white prostitute making no effort to pretend she enjoys her work—is this show's inevitable centerpiece. Most everyone who saw it at the Paris Salon of 1865 despised it, for the subject or the technique or both. It's fun, reading old complaints that Manet made the prostitute too ugly or mishandled the shaping of her flesh, to imagine that we would have known any better, but in a sense the haters were onto something—you can't really appreciate "Olympia" unless you feel the rude slap of its shortcomings. Manet was as uneven with faces as he was with bodies; here, you look at, rather than into, the prostitute's eyes, and her elbow sticks out ever so slightly more than an actual human being's. And yet unevenness hits harder than refinement could. Manet's refusal to play along with the strictures of academic art matches his refusal to cater to France's bourgeois fantasies. His painting is about going through the motions: half

obeying the rules of your profession, whether that's art or sex work, until they start to seem ridiculous. Studying "Olympia" at the Met (this is only the third time it's left Paris), you're reminded that, long before it was a masterpiece, it was a gamble, courtesy of an artist who knew his formal limitations, worked hard to rebrand them as strengths, but wasn't always sure if he'd succeeded.



"The Bellelli Family" (ca. 1858-69). Art Work by Edgar Degas / Courtesy © Musée D'Orsay / RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource; Photograph by Patrice Schmidt

You're reminded of this because Manet has been paired with an artist who was both great and, on a formal level, astonishingly good. Vividness was Degas's superpower—he had a schoolyard bully's knack for noticing what was wrong with people and making sure everyone else saw. When you look at his 1857 oil portrait of the banker Hilaire Degas (who appears to be trying

to convey his disappointment with his grandson telepathically) or his 1869 pastel portrait of Yves Morisot (who appears to have been rushed from the emergency room where she had her sense of humor removed), it's unclear if he's being mean or merely telling the truth, or if there's a difference. His faces are so un-Manet-like—so precisely rendered and so defenselessly transparent—that he seems to be roaming the aesthetic plains, looking for somewhere new to plant his flag.

“The Bellelli Family” (ca. 1858-69) marks something close to the pinnacle of ruthlessness in visual art. It's less a massacre than a slow, miserable bleed. Each of the Bellellis—Degas's aunt Laura, her husband, and their two girls, plus a tiny chalk portrait of her late father—is in a different stage of upper-class zombification. Laura's is the most pronounced; somehow, she looks deader than her dad. Her daughter Giulia, in the center, still has some warmth left, but one day she'll be just like her *maman*. Degas, a lifelong bachelor, was still young when he completed the painting. In many ways it's a smug, young-guy view of domesticity, but his technical prowess gives him an alibi: he's not *doing* anything to these people, even if he refuses to make them look any better than they do. Just because he's smug doesn't mean he's wrong.



"The Millinery Shop" (ca. 1879-86). Art Work by Edgar Degas / Courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource

Annihilate the entire institution of marriage before you turn thirty-five, and you'd better find some other way of occupying yourself. I'd say that this, as much as anything else, explains why Degas went on to experiment with Impressionism, despite resisting the label. The pitiless gaze came too easily to him, so he switched to the glimpse. In 1870, he discovered that he couldn't see a rifle target with his right eye, and by the end of the century he was almost blind. But first came acres of color-smearred jockeys and naked women seen from odd angles. Vividness pounces when you least expect it. "The Millinery Shop" (ca. 1879-86) looks mistily Monet-ish at first, but

then you notice the hollow in the woman's right cheek, a side effect of the pin between her teeth, and realize that Degas is as sharp as ever, determined to see everything for as long as he can.

Manet refused to call himself an Impressionist, too, but in the years leading up to his death, in 1883, he learned from the movement as much as any card-carrying member. In his later paintings, you can almost discern what gesture the subject is making, but not quite. His lushly enigmatic portrait of Berthe Morisot slouching on a sofa is like the optical illusion of the duck that's also a rabbit; her dark eyes and long pale hands seem to communicate everything at once. In the interest of science, I took a picture of the painting, sent it off to a dozen or so of my friends, and asked them what they thought it suggested. Some said anxiety, or disappointment, or exhaustion. Many said boredom.



"Monsieur and Madame Édouard Manet" (1868-69). Art Work by Edgar Degas / Courtesy Kitakyushu Municipal Museum of Art

No one guessed repose, which happens to be the painting's title. Clearly, that's a joke on Manet's part, but I think he's up to something more. In a sense, almost all of Manet's and Degas's best work is *about* repose, the glorious right of the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie and the seed from which a thousand entertainments sprouted: gardens, promenades, dances, horse races, picnics, prostitutes, bars. Manet is milder in his depictions of these new delights, but on some level both artists understand what's going on: leisure can be anxious, disappointing, exhausting, and boring—sometimes for the bourgeois, sometimes for the working-class folks

paid to keep them happy, sometimes for all concerned.

And perhaps this explains their biggest fight. Toward the end of the eighteen-sixties, Degas began to paint a double portrait: Manet reclining on his sofa, his wife, Suzanne, playing the piano—the spitting image of cozy bourgeois repose. Later, for reasons nobody remembers, Manet took a sharp blade to the picture, ripping out most of Suzanne. There's some evidence that Degas was hoping to restore the painting, wife and all, but I prefer to think of it as a finished work, co-authored by his paintbrush and his rival's razor. On the right, the back of Suzanne's head pokes eerily out of nowhere. On the left, Manet stares at nothing in particular. Everyone who knows this painting has his own hunch about what happened to it, so here's mine: Degas gazed deep into the Manets' marriage, found something sad and empty, and didn't bother to sugarcoat it, the smug bastard. Manet saw the result and accepted the slight—Degas had accepted plenty of his—but refused to let it extend to his wife. He did the nastiest thing you can do to a painter, but only because he couldn't stand knowing that Degas had a point. In the right circumstances, an insult is the ultimate compliment. ♦