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Scott Allen, Emily A. Beeny, and Gloria Groom, eds. *Manet and Modern Beauty: The Artist's Last Years*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019. viii + 384 pp. Plates, catalogue, references, sources, illustrations, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781606066041.

Review by Margaret Werth, University of Delaware.

This volume accompanies an important exhibition of Édouard Manet's last years—one cannot say “late work” as Manet died at the age of 51 in 1883—*Manet and Modern Beauty: The Artist's Last Years*, on view at the Art Institute of Chicago and the J. Paul Getty Museum in 2019-20. The exhibition was co-organized by three curators, Scott Allan and Emily Beeny of the Getty and Gloria Groome of the Art Institute of Chicago. The published volume includes ten substantial essays by Allan, Beeny and Groome, as well as other experts in the field, a chronology, catalog entries for the works in the exhibition, and copious illustrations. It addresses Manet's last years expansively, but also contributes perspectives that reflect on the artist's entire life and career, touching on artistic process, technique, and materials; the dynamic of public and private in Manet's life and work; problems of interpretation; and the artist's negotiation with the art world of his day. The book marks an important and valuable contribution to the scholarship on the artist.

The approaches to Manet in the essays range from socio-historical to formalist, documentary, literary, and technical. This variety of perspectives generally works well and helps to create multiple, sometimes competing, narratives. The impetus for the exhibition was the acquisition by the Getty Museum in 2014 of *Jeanne (Le printemps)* of 1881. This depiction of a fashionable *parisienne*—exhibited in the Salon of 1882 as *Jeanne* but in Manet's posthumous memorial exhibition in 1884 as *Jeanne (Le printemps)*—appears to have been part of a never-completed allegorical series on the seasons that was exhibited with the much more famous and studied work, *Un bar aux Folies Bergère*, at the Salon in 1882. Although these two works could not be reunited for *Manet and Modern Beauty*, the curators generally succeeded in bringing together a critical mass of works that generated new research and ideas. Exhibition and book were shaped by the idea that beauty, femininity, and fashion were particularly resonant in the artist's life and work in his last years. While this premise sometimes falters in accounting for the complexity of the artist's last years and their multiple currents, the curators achieved some outstanding series and juxtapositions and uncovered new documentary and technical discoveries along the way.

As noted, the essays engage with a variety of topics: Manet's production, public reputation, and Salon submissions and exhibitions from 1879 to his death in 1883; *Jeanne* in the context of other depictions and cultural representations of fashionable women, particularly performers and *demi-*

*mondaines*; the artist's engagement with French eighteenth-century art in works characterized by a new manner of painting and the frequent use of pastel; Manet's confusion of public and private identities and spaces in his studio as registered in his painted backgrounds; the letters Manet wrote, some illustrated, that highlight his artistic ambitions in the context of a liberalizing Third Republic, his relationships with individual women, and his representations of femininity; the interpretation of his painted flowers in relation to the work of Charles Baudelaire; and a technical examination of *Jeanne*. One problem with study of Manet's last works is the large number that were unfinished at his death, some of which were posthumously doctored. The organizers focused primarily on uncompromised works, but there are exceptions, the portrait of Méry Laurent as *L'Automne*, the only known companion to *Jeanne*, for example. The two had not been exhibited together for nearly forty years. Unfinished at the artist's death, it appears that changes were made to *L'Automne* before the artist's memorial exhibition in 1884 at the École des beaux-arts (pp. 313-14).

The introduction by the three curators--whose title, "Beauty, Fashion, and Happiness," reprises the inaugural sub-title of Baudelaire's famous essay "Le peintre de la vie moderne"--argues that *Jeanne*, which was more successful with critics in 1882 than *Un bar aux Folies Bergère*, should be brought back into the spotlight, given its due rather than subordinated to the more famous work (p. 3). They push back against previous judgments of the last works as weak, merely pretty or charming, representing a decline in quality at the moment that Manet was finally garnering Salon honors and privileges. Previous scholarship on works that depicted women and often adopted or emulated a medium associated with women artists and femininity, pastel, have been prejudiced, they argue, by a gendered bias that fails to take into account the important role that women--as muses, friends, and *demi-mondaines*--femininity, and fashion played in Manet's last works. They argue for a "feminization" of Manet's practice at multiple levels, and that his late work should be understood "on its own terms, as the expression of a new vision for modern beauty" (pp. 4, 7). Ideas and aesthetics of beauty were under revision in the nineteenth century, from Romanticism to Symbolism, but here beauty is aligned with fashion and femininity, and the beauty of the stylish *parisienne* and the *demi-mondaine*--ubiquitous cultural types who in this account are given historical specificity and credited with performative agency--is given greater prominence than other revaluings of beauty. Less entrenched in the fashion system, alternative and more marginal ideas of beauty such as the "ugly," the fragment, and the decadent, for example, contrast with the figure of the *parisienne* or *demi-mondaine* flashing her symbolic capital and armored for sexual and social conquest by her mastery of style through dress, accessories, and make-up.

Several of the authors suggest that flowers are an important key to understanding the artist's last years. When *Jeanne* was exhibited in 1882, the critics praised her as a flower of feminine beauty and fashion and as a typical *parisienne*. As one suggestive critical review in 1882, cited in at least four of the essays, commented: "Since we are speaking of living flowers, let me introduce you to *Jeanne* by Édouard Manet. She is not a woman, she is a bouquet, truly a visual perfume" (pp. 4, 48, 65, 137-38). But model, figure, or painting as flower, bouquet, or perfume are interpreted in different ways in *Manet and Modern Beauty*, often relying on significantly different understandings of Baudelaire's ideas of modernity and "beauty, fashion, and happiness."

*Jeanne* is the "ideal emblem," the organizers affirm, of Manet's thematic and pictorial concerns at the end of his life, "his fierce embrace of beauty and pleasure"--beautiful young women, fashion, bright sunlight in suburban gardens, flirtatious correspondence, still lifes of fruits and bouquets-

–“in the teeth of acute physical suffering” (p. 4). There were thorns in these last flowers: the artist’s declining health and increasing disability that ended in his death in 1883. He suffered from *tabies dorsalis*, known as *locomotor ataxia* at the time, as a result of tertiary syphilis. By 1879, if not before, he suffered severe chronic pain, and his mobility was curtailed, affecting his ability to stand before the easel or work much outside the studio or residential garden. The authors view the charm and gallantry of the illustrated letters and the depictions of beautiful, fashionable women as recto to the verso of the artist’s ill health, and signs of a spirited resistance to his increasingly restricted life and enforced isolation outside Paris to pursue therapeutic treatments. Many of the works of this period certainly demonstrate playfulness, wit, and spirit. But they also hint at a disavowal aimed at shielding the artist from the gradual closing down of a future that would have leavened his long-suffering notoriety with positive public recognition, even an institutional legacy, which, nonetheless, he continued to undermine in his choice of Salon submissions. The intertwining of art and illness involved concealing knowledge of his worsening state—letters to friends dismiss news of his decline—perhaps even from himself. In the letters and the work there is evidence of mixed motives and emotions: pride and disavowal, hope mingled with confusion, some self-delusion as he imagined getting better and pursuing new projects. Success might come, it was coming; death might still be cheated. Women and fashion alleviated his boredom and suffering and stimulated new painterly ideas the authors argue. However, in Manet’s last year things moved to an ugly close: there is nothing less beautiful or fashionable than the way he died. The treatments for his condition proved woefully inadequate; the amputation of his leg in April 1883 was his death knell.

A tragedy nested at the heart of the *comédie humaine* of “beauty, fashion, and happiness” as it was constituted in those years in Paris, from Manet’s studio to the Salon, the cafés and *café-concerts*, the theatres, skating rinks, private conservatories, streets, and parks of the city, as well as the suburban gardens to which the ailing artist was sometimes exiled. The fashionable *parisienne* portrayed in *Jeanne* is promoted in *Manet and Modern Beauty* as the central figure of that world—along with other fashionable female friends and figures, singers and *demi-mondaines*—but the last works also included other figures and different spaces. Some of these contradict the central premise of the “feminine turn” the organizers assert—politicians and big game hunters, mixed social groups on city streets and in cafés. *Un bar aux Folies Bergère*—with its fashion-savvy barmaid, gleaming commodities, and clouded mirroring of society at play—is as complex a meditation on modernity and “beauty, fashion, and happiness” as Manet ever painted. Perhaps even *Jeanne*, favored by the critics in 1882, should be understood less as a charming antithesis to *Un bar aux Folies Bergère* than one part of a paired statement on the ironies and contradictions of modernity, its limitations and tragi-comic aspects.

Allan’s essay only intermittently supports the modern beauty framing, since he stresses the multifariousness of Manet’s strategies of public exhibition. He is particularly interested in the social identities, representations, and spaces that can be linked to Manet’s last works. He argues that the setting of *Dans la serre*—one of the highpoints of the exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago—exhibited in 1879 and paired with a contrasting earlier picture, *En bateau* (1874–75), of informal outdoor leisure, was “imaginatively congruent” in its “elevated social tone” with the Salon’s own spaces, the architecture of the Palais de l’Industrie with its atrium outfitted with potted plants and benches and audience participating in “social spectacle.” *Dans la serre* positioned the artist as a “fashionable insider” (p. 21). However, Allan nuances his argument about the spatial and social network Manet and his work traverse in his discussion of the last three Salon pairings of Manet’s life. In 1880, *Chez le Père Lathuille* (1879–1880) and *Portrait de M. Antonin Proust* (1880)

could be associated with the Batignolles neighborhood and thus both an avant-garde milieu and fashionable Parisian society. But the viewer is confronted with a disjunctive contrast between the “embarrassing spectacle of a young man’s ardent advance” in *Chez le Père Lathuille* and the portrait of a rising power broker of the cultural establishment as a fashionable man-about-town (p. 27). The pairing at the 1881 Salon of *Portrait de M. Henri Rochefort* (1881), an intense portrayal of a political radical and Communard, and *M. Eugène Pertruiset, chasseur de lions* (1881), which Allan understands as a dig at masculinist clichés, turned up the dial of provocation. Analogous urban spaces are again invoked in Allan’s discussion of *Un bar aux Folies Bergère*: in Manet’s day, the Salon was compared to skating rinks, the Folies-Bergère, and other meeting places for the fashionable set, and these suggest analogous social functions for Allan. “Contemporary Salon painters were commercial producers of branded luxury goods,” which scholars have also seen reflected in the array of consumables on the bar of Manet’s painting (p. 37). The non-space occupied by the figure in *Jeanne* with its sky, flowers, and foliage, is taken up by other authors who emphasize the play between nature and artifice, and the relation between figure and background in Manet’s last works generally.

Manet investigated modern fashion personally and artistically. His interest in the circulating signifiers of the fashion system and the materiality of dress is well documented here and in previous scholarship. He had a passion for dresses, fabrics, shoes, ribbons, hats, and jewelry, and there is ample evidence of his obsession with obtaining just the right item for a sitter or model and his reuse of items from painting to painting. Helen Burnham’s essay explores the *parisienne* as a cultural type that epitomized French style, how Manet’s last works demonstrate his “understanding of how fashion works and what is involved in constructing and displaying a stylish image,” and how clothing creates meaning and shapes identity (p. 43). Jeanne (Jane) Demarsy (Anne Darlaud), who posed for *Jeanne*, was a 16-year old model who posed for Renoir too. She would later become an actress and turns up as Jeanne de Marsy in *The Pretty Women of Paris* (1883), an English guide to the prostitutes of the French capital (pp. 310-11). Burnham emphasizes the competition between nature and artifice in *Jeanne*, and speculates on the meaning of its framing in glass when it was exhibited at the Salon, connecting it to the display of pastels, the visual effects of a shop window, and the enhancement of the “packaged” character and distancing effects of the work (pp. 47-48). She links the static profile view of Jeanne to modern fashion plates, *ukiyo-e* prints, and Renaissance portraits of beautiful women (p. 48). Leah Lehbruck contributes a complementary essay that examines the cultural context, including post-1848 redefinitions of masculinity and femininity, new forms of publicity and celebrity, and the performative identities of the individual women of the *demi-monde*—models, actresses, and courtesans—that Manet painted.

Groom’s essay illuminates the importance of the *fonds* of Manet’s works. Through a fine analysis of Manet’s compositions, she argues that he breaks down the boundaries between private and public space and creates feminized spaces, even in male portraits, through patternings of wallpaper or fabric and *plein air* backgrounds made out of outdoor canvases present in the studio. The “garden fiction” of *Jeanne* complements the coding and artificiality of the hat and the fabric of her dress (p. 84); the last works were modern life studio constructs that often had a decorative element, she writes. Emily Beeny’s essay takes up Manet’s “ambivalence, citation, emulation, and competition” with eighteenth-century French art (p. 89). While Antoine Watteau’s *Pierrot*, then known as *Gilles*, has long been cited in relation to Manet’s early work, she sees Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin as the more important model, particularly in Manet’s still lifes, but in both cases she understands their influence as more iconographic and compositional than painterly. In the

1870s, however, Jean-Honoré Fragonard was an important reference point for loose and fluid brushwork that conveyed the illusion of speed and fleetingness, evident in works by Manet like *Devant la glace* of 1876. One wonders how far Manet's connections to Impressionist technique should be factored into this account. Manet's use of pastel "appealed to [him] because of its specifically feminine connotations," she argues (p. 102).

Two contributors take up Manet's letters. Samuel Rodary, currently editing the artist's complete correspondence, introduces and annotates a selection of letters, included in original French and translated into English, that reveal three defining aspects of the last six years of Manet's life: his interest in decorative art; his solo exhibition at *La Vie moderne* in 1880, with its contrast of cabaret scenes and pastel works; and his personal relationships with women, many of whom exercised considerable freedom from the social strictures of the day. Carol Armstrong examines Manet's illustrated letters and related works, which she sees as signs of Manet's painterly intelligence and engagement with femininity. Armstrong proposes that in the letters the drift between image, text, and thing "makes something out of nothing in the eye and mind of the reader and the viewer" (p. 114). With wit and humor, the artist jokes about the exchange value between a vegetable and a painting, or a piece of fruit and a woman's name; pictures, texts, framings, handwriting, and signatures spur a game of desire that invokes mobility and connection but is dependent on absence and communication without consummation. The style of Armstrong's essay is in sympathy with the spirited dynamic of "femininity and supplementarity" she locates in Manet's work, modeling the heights to which the pleasures engendered by the imaginative interplay of masculine and feminine, commodity and "little nothing" might go (p. 124).

In contrast to Armstrong's attention to the play of difference in Manet's work, the affirmation of Manet's feminine turn, or the performative agency of *demi-mondaines*, Bridget Alsdorf allies the flowers of Manet's figure paintings and late still lifes with the decadence, melancholy, and urban ennui of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*. Manet's flowers suggest "a dialectics of beauty and death, spleen and ideal," she writes, that departs from the conventional nineteenth-century language of flowers (p. 130). In the late flower still lifes, she finds the base materialism of *fleurs du mal* in the rotting muck at the bottom of vases and the obscurities of glass and water. Her close readings of individual works are sometimes inspired, sometimes strained. She is right to look for a stranger "beauty" in Manet's art. Certainly, for Baudelaire, beauty is often at odds with happiness. But she aligns Manet too closely with Baudelairean poetics and loses sight of the differences between painter and writer, and between early and "last" Manet. Manet's final decade was marked by close friendship with the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who offered a different poetic and critical approach to flowers, fashion, femininity, and beauty. The dynamic of immateriality and materiality, immediacy and irony, affirmation and negation in Manet's last works cannot be aligned fully with Mallarméan poetics either, but Alsdorf's Baudelairean argument is too heavy-handed to accord with the spirit of Manet's flowers (p. 141).

The study of *Jeanne* by the conservators Devi Ormond and Catherine Schmidt Patterson, (with Douglas MacLennan and Nathan Daly), uncovers Manet's strategies at the level of material, technique, and process. Their work reveals approaches learned in Thomas Couture's studio in the 1850s combined with various modern twists. The underpainted *ébauche* layers that served as a first sketch were made over a white commercially prepared ground, flashes of which are visible in the foliage, suggesting shimmering light, just as the *ébauche* layers too are glimpsed here and there, creating an illusion of immediacy. Manet even simulated a ground in an area of the foliage that was reworked. The diversity of brushstrokes achieved with a wide variety of brushes,

attention to the smallest details, and extensive reworking—which involved scraping, layering new brushwork over dried paint layers, and exquisitely delicate final touches—suggest that his working method, while aiming at “the illusion of a consistently quick, confident application” and effects of spontaneity, was complex, even fastidious (p. 157). They argue that modifications made over numerous sessions suggest that Manet reworked the individual Jeanne Demarsy into a typical *parisienne*. She was legible as the latter to contemporaries not only through her fashionable dress, accessories, and demeanor, but also by the *nez retroussé* (snub nose) and graphic contour with which he accentuated her profile in the final stages of work on the painting (pp. 156-157). Liveliness, spontaneity, and confident assurance were suggested only through struggle and constant modification, which led to new campaigns of improvisation.

This volume offers substantial new research and interpretation of the artist’s last works, long under-served by scholarship. The central argument about Manet’s “feminine turn,” fashion, and beauty sometimes aligns a bit too much with contemporary perspectives, steeped as we are in the power of the social network, celebrity, publicity, and fashion, and our justified wish to highlight the agency of women in patriarchal societies of past and present. Fashion has been a key feature in the critique of history, social relations, and economic production and reproduction in modernity. Georg Simmel wrote in 1905 that through fashion “the fleeting and fluctuating elements of life gain that much more free space,” and that the “pioneers” of fashion—the *parisienne* and *demi-mondaine*—were situated in “a distinctively uprooted form of life....striving for ever-new forms of appearance” in order to elevate themselves through style.[1] The authors of *Manet and Modern Beauty* are right that Manet represented himself and his times in such “emblematic” figures—but not only female ones, I would argue. In his last years Manet pictured diverse modern differences and relations, from a bourgeois couple in a conservatory; to the barmaid, customer, and crowd in a café-concert; to the fashionable *parisienne* of an urban spring; and much more. For Theodor Adorno, fashion’s immediacy, ephemerality, and factitiousness were key conditions of art’s communication with the objective spirit of its present.[2] Walter Benjamin saw fashion as exemplary of his concept of the dialectical image: joining revolutionary newness and death-like commodification, it was an “eternal recurrence of the new” that ruthlessly abolished itself and mocked death.[3] Manet explored the real and imaginary powers and pleasures of fashion in his day and their relation to femininity, beauty, and happiness. His art suggests, on the one hand, the attractions of the fleeting and unstable now of changing appearances—among them forms of freedom, irreverence to tradition and social conventions, particularities of moment and thing—and, on the other, cycles of repetition and reification: alternate dimensions of a dialectic inescapably joined.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

Scott Allen, Emily A. Beeny, and Gloria Groom, “Introduction: Beauty, Fashion, and Happiness”

Scott Allen, “*Faux frère*: Manet and the Salon, 1879-82”

Helen Burnham, “‘The Type of an Era’: Manet and the *Parisienne*”

Leah Lehmbeck, “All the World’s a Stage: Manet’s Images of Model-Actresses”

Gloria Groom, “Foregrounding Manet’s Backgrounds”

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Emily A. Beeny, “Manet and the Eighteenth Century”

Carol Armstrong, “Manet’s Little Nothings”

Bridget Alsdorf, “Manet’s *Fleurs du mal*”

Devi Ormond and Catherine Schmidt Patterson with Douglas MacLennan and Nathan Daly, “The Making of a *Parisienne*: Manet’s Methods and Materials”

Samuel Rodary, “Édouard Manet: A Selection of Letters, 1878-83”

#### NOTES

[1] Georg Simmel, “The Philosophy of Fashion,” (1905), in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, eds., *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings* (London: Sage Publications 2000), pp. 193, 198.

[2] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Gretel Adorno and Rolk Tiedemann, eds., trans. C. Lenhardt (New York and London: Routledge, 1984), pp. 274-275, 435-437.

[3] Walter Benjamin, “Central Park,” in Michael W. Jennings, ed., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940 (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 179; Benjamin, “Convolute B: Fashion,” *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 66.

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