Flattening and Simplifying: Flatness and Modernity in the Space of Manet's Paintings

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Abstract

The "flatness" and "modernity" in Manet's pictorial space are of great significance to early modernist painting. The internal factors of European local culture, references to new technologies, and foreign borrowings are the three main factors for Manet's formal innovations. Manet's use of "frontal light sources" and "flat application of color blocks" to generalize and compress the depth of the pictorial space is key to the formation of "flatness" in his painting space. In early modernist painting, the modern life of Paris is reflected not only in the leisure life of entertainment themes but also in the modern information of goddess-themed works. Through the image capture and formal analysis of the works' styles, Manet placed his "Venus" goddess in the "modern" mirror space and image space, and closely linked the "flat" visual space with the "modernity" consciousness, reflecting the free outlook of modern culture in European capitalist society in the late 19th century, and more importantly, expressing the innovative spirit of early modernist painting in visual space.

Keywords: early modernism, pictorial space, flatness, modernity, frontal light source, flat application of color blocks

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Introduction

In the second half of the 19th century, the figurative modeling in early modernist painting showed characteristics of flatness. This feature broke the fixed aesthetic conventions of the time, represented a breakthrough and innovation in aesthetic consciousness, and was the result of the development of European social culture, art, and technology at that time. During this period, painting practice began to dissolve the traditional linear perspective and sculptural three-dimensional space, attempting to return to the “flatness” of the artistic ontology. In formalist theory, flatness is an important feature that distinguishes modernist painting from other arts. Traditional painting conceals the two-dimensionality of the picture with illusory depth in visual space, while modernist painting shifts from spatial depth to flatness. Whether three-dimensional or two-dimensional in the visual illusory space, its form remains flat, consistent with the two-dimensionality of the material substrate that carries it.

The “flatness” and “modernity” in Manet's pictorial space are of great significance to modernist painting.

The Main Reasons for Manet's Formal Innovation

The internal factors of European local culture, references to new technologies, and foreign borrowings were the main reasons for Manet's formal innovations. There were three external factors that led Manet to adopt flatness.

The Emergence of Photography Provided New Perspectives and Reflections on the Artistic Style of Paris

France at that time. The pictorial space in black-and-white photos had a flat quality, and the special interest and sense of form in such black-and-white compositions subtly inspired painting expressions. Perhaps considering the needs of formal aesthetics, Manet borrowed the flat characteristics of strong black-and-white contrast in photos, as well as the arbitrary cropping of picture scenes.

The Knowledge Transfer of Far Eastern Art

Especially Japanese ukiyo-e prints, to Western aesthetic culture. In handling the stylization of figures and environmental space, Manet drew more on and absorbed the stylistic characteristics of Japanese ukiyo-e prints, such as bold and vivid color contrasts, flat images, picture cropping, and formal elements. This fully illustrates the aesthetic migration of Far Eastern art to Western art, especially the profound significance of the flat decorativeness of ukiyo-e to 19th-century European painting. Represented by Manet's prints, his prints were obviously influenced by ukiyo-e, and the flatness in his etchings was particularly prominent. For example, his series of etchings Olympia based on the oil painting Olympia transformed the oil painting into a graphic medium, greatly changing the original visual effect of the picture.

The Influence of Spanish Artistic Styles

Manet was fascinated by Spanish art and was deeply influenced by Spanish artistic tastes during his trip to Spain in 1865. For instance, his Monks in Prayer borrowed from Francisco de Zurbarán's St. Francis in Meditation in terms of theme and light source—both depict

kneeling monks with light coming from the side where the figures face the picture. However, the light source in Zurbarán's work emphasizes the pictorial space and the volume of the figures, while the light source in Manet's work strengthens the direct painting method of juxtaposing large brushstrokes and colors, with weakened space. The figures in Manet's works have modernity, while those in Zurbarán's works have religious spirituality.

Frontal Light Sources and Flat Application of Color Blocks in Manet's Pictorial Space

The fascinating image space and formal elements on the canvas surface are the interests and obsessions that painters delight in pursuing. Under the dominance of perspective thinking in traditional painting, the visual space emphasizes the reproduction of three-dimensionality while hiding the spatial characteristics inherent in the formal elements themselves (such as the painterliness constituted by factors like color, brushwork, texture, and lines). In the late 19th century, "Flatness" was rediscovered and recreated by early modernist painters. Formal language began to take the artistic ontology as its purpose, and "Flatness" has been of great significance to the evolution of the visual space in modernist painting since the early 20th century.

Frontal Light Source-The Key to the Formation of Flatness in Manet's Painting Space

From the perspective of formalist theory, Gustave Courbet was one of the earlier painters to propose modern artistic ideas. He believed that painting should express an abstract concept rather than blindly imitating nature. In his paintings, Courbet indirectly or consciously used general formal language to arrange the overall sense of the picture. Courbet did not want to repeat the existing conventions of popular images but adopted a modern artistic language tending to simplification. For example, in the sketch draft of his large landscape A Burial at Ornans, the composition is characterized by a procession of people. The crowd is simplified into a silhouette-like whole, carefully arranged against a fluffy background, suggesting an ancient low-relief space. The strong sense of presence in Courbet's realistic paintings forms a huge contrast with the traditional and exquisite artistic handling techniques (Men, 2007/2019).The significance of this work lies in Courbet's recognition that painting itself has an authenticity: it is on a flat canvas, defines the two-dimensional pictorial space through the special properties of pigments and the thickness formed by the texture of the picture.

Manet inherited and developed Courbet's artistic ideas. For example, in addition to being inspired by the works of Titian and Raphael during the Renaissance in composition, the themes of daily life in Manet's paintings, the impasto technique of colors, the relaxed and fluent brushstrokes, and the rigorous color relationships all come from Courbet's realistic characteristics. He consciously interpreted this concept as flatness. For example, in his 1860 debut work The Spanish Singer, the transition between the figures and the background already shows the characteristics of formal simplification and spatial compression. In handling the spatial relationship between figures and the background, the three-dimensional effect is weakened. Under the stage lights, there is no strong projection behind the singer sitting on the bench, and the large area of the background is treated flatly, reducing the three-dimensional layers of space. Thus, in Greenberg's (1960/2018) view,

> Manet was one of the first modernist painters to boldly and straightforwardly declare flatness in his works. And inspired by his artistic spirit, the Impressionists painted directly on the canvas with colors squeezed out of tube paints, abandoning the

> procedures and methods of transparent and semi-transparent colors in classical techniques. (p. 74)

The formal generalization of “frontal light sources” and “flat application of color blocks” is key to the formation of flatness in Manet's paintings. His approach was to weaken the intermediate tones, linear perspective, and formal elements of the depicted objects, compress the pictorial space, and use contour lines to shape figurative forms. “Frontal light source” is an important means for the emergence of flatness in Manet's works. Manet's great significance to modernist painting lies in the “flatness” in his works, and one typical method is the extensive use of “frontal light sources”.

Before the mid-19th century, academic or classical paintings mainly used side light or top-side light to express a visually realistic three-dimensional space. For example, the most typical side light is the “spotlight method” or “cellar light” with dramatic stage effects in Caravaggio's works of the 17th century. It uses focused light to concentrate on the main figures in the picture, with the background space hidden in a large number of dark areas, such as the right light crossing the picture in his The Calling of Saint Matthew. This “spotlight method” of expressing space through light and shadow influenced the handling of pictorial space by Rubens of the Baroque school and Rembrandt of the Dutch school.

However, Manet clearly used frontal light as a method. Frontal light uses a light source almost consistent or parallel with the viewer's line of sight to represent the object. Such light directly shines on the figure, and the presented object will not form strong light-dark contrasts like side light. The depicted object will weaken or reduce many intermediate tones, forming a large area of light areas and very few dark areas compressed to the edges, naturally forming a flat characteristic. Manet's works form a rich and peculiar flatness through the use of frontal light sources. Compared with the indoor side light in classical paintings, the frontal light used by Manet is not limited by space, including both indoor light and natural light. In the use of light sources, it can be seen that he consciously used the special space formed by frontal light to distance himself from classical painting.

Compared with The Spanish Singer, his The Fifer has typical flat characteristics. The picture uses top light from the front. Unlike classical paintings, there is no subtle color transition between the figure and the background to form a sharp contrast. The young's black upper garment and red trousers are large areas of flat color blocks. The black upper garment is almost flat, without light-dark undulations under the light. The volume of the figure is weakened and presents flatness. The background is also an almost flat gray-blue tone. The space between the figure and the background is only emphasized by the black line at the edge of the red trousers, which thus becomes the finishing touch of the picture, forming a formal compositional element. Although it is a frontal light source, the picture has neither light-dark contrast nor contour lines. The background has no horizon line. The picture weakens the spatial depth between the figure and the background with the minimum level, strengthening the unity of form and color.

“Flat application of color blocks” is a flat method of formal simplification or generalization in Manet's works. The biggest difference in his Olympia is that the picture obviously abandons the perspective and space of the Renaissance, with both figures and background having flat effects. The picture adopts a relationship of highlighting flatness in three dimensions in visual space. This is also what makes the audience interested: the generalization of the nude's edge lines, and the flat processing of the grass-green curtain

adopt a free and special representation method. The undulations of the human body and the white bed sheet are almost painted as two large color blocks. Light and shadow are extremely stingy here. The use of intermediate tones and light colors makes the figure in the picture tend to be flat, and at the same time, the flat figure is placed in the three-dimensional background. In such an atmosphere, the figure image has an obvious sense of separation from the background. At the same time, it has too many fictional links that can be used by the audience, but it also confuses the audience's visual perception, making it impossible for the audience to identify the recognizability of its three-dimensional existence.

Honoré Daumier once drew a lithograph cartoon called In front of master Manet's painting for Olympia, depicting a family of three standing in front of Manet's work with puzzled expressions. In that year, there were as many as 70 review articles about Manet's Olympia; critics mocked that even cats would laugh at the work (Honour & Fleming, 1982/2013); critics did not notice the relationship between the author and traditional art hidden in Olympia (Clark, 1984/2013).

Olympia is Manet's modern adaptation of mythological scenes in classical works. He imitated the characteristics of Titian's Venus of Urbino. The nudes in the two paintings have similar postures and compositions. The difference is that Olympia brings the goddess to the world with a reckless and passionate attitude, abandons its old schema, endows her with new standards of modern society, makes Olympia a new reality, and creates a new time and space. The white nude body in Olympia is also treated with flat application under frontal light. The intermediate tones of the human body volume are weakened to the contour lines, forming a unified bright tone with the white couch, which forms a strong light-dark contrast with the dark green curtain in the background and the black maid. However, in any case, in this work, Manet explored a new method of presenting image space through formal simplification experiments, especially the reduced intermediate tones, strong color contrasts, contour lines depicting volume, and flatness of the surface. This is one of his most important inspirations and influences on young artists.

Formal Generalization – Image Association and Technical Innovation of the Picture Theme

Another work by Manet, Le déjeuner sur l'herbe, uses outdoor natural light to treat the nude as the most focused light tone in the picture. The human body volume reduces many light-dark layers due to the direct frontal light. Many intermediate tones in the picture environment are also deleted, many details are omitted, and painting traces such as brushstrokes and textures become distinct features in the picture. The reason why the nude in the painting caused a huge response is that she was a socialite in reality, but she sat calmly with gentlemen, staring calmly at the real space outside the picture, which was one of the factors that caused great discomfort to the public. At first, critics focused their interpretation of this painting on the great contrast between the nude and mainstream views, and few noticed Manet's flat processing of the figures in the picture. Only a few critics found that Manet changed the traditional way of depicting nude figures. Instead of using the woman's left leg to construct light-dark space, he directly covered it with a blanket, treated the woman's feet flatly, and made them part of the entire flat body (Brettell, 1999/2013). The “flat processing” mentioned in the comments at that time in Le déjeuner sur l'herbe was related to Manet's adoption of the new technique of “flat application of color blocks”.

The picture relationship seemed “disorderly” and “shoddy” (in the eyes of the time) due to the use of direct painting. The trees around the figures are composed of large brushstrokes, forming a flat dark green tone. The black clothes of the two gentlemen in the picture also appear flat with almost flat color blocks, forming a sharp color contrast with the light-colored nude body next to them. The flat figure image is placed in a three-dimensional background environment. Compared with the block representation of the goddess's body in Giorgione's Concert Champetre, the nude in Le déjeuner sur l'herbe is depicted without using too many transitional intermediate tones, thus appearing relatively flat. However, when viewing the two works from a distance, we will find that the nude in Concert Champetre enters the image space, while the nude in Le déjeuner sur l'herbe jumps out of the image space. This is an interesting phenomenon, which may be related to David Hockney's view on ways of seeing (the difference between monocular and binocular vision). In my opinion, it is also related to the use of new technologies, such as the simplification of human body tones and the use of strong contrasting light tones.

However, the form does not lose volume due to the simplification of tones. It is mainly achieved through contour lines with compressed tones, as well as the characteristics of reversed perspective in the picture. The perspective does not conform to traditional linear perspective, the figure images do not conform to the perspective viewing method, and the juxtaposition of the three figures in the front and the maid in the distance also seems inconsistent. In contrast, Monet's work of the same name Le déjeuner sur l'herbe uses light and color to handle the subtle relationship of space in the air in the juxtaposition of figures and space and shapes the visually realistic three-dimensional space through the cold and warm of colors. However, Manet avoided these and consciously compressed the depth of space. These formal problems arising from technical methods are now seen as innovations in expression techniques, but at that time, they were as stimulating to the eyes as the realistic nudes in the picture, so there were comments questioning its technology. Manet was not an Impressionist painter, but he was a key figure in turning art from Realism to Impressionism. Especially in emphasizing painterliness, such as the inherent qualities of the medium such as brushstrokes, texture, and color sense. In addition, in borrowing and inheriting classical schemas, Manet refused to use dramatic traditional scenes and sculptural models as carriers of image coherence.

Modernity Is a Conceptual Response to the Changing Political, Economic, Cultural, and Artistic Phenomena in Modern Life

In the works of early modernist painting, the modern life of Paris in the late 19th century was reflected not only in the modern life of entertainment themes but also in the modern information of goddess themes. In the image capture and formal analysis of the works, Manet placed his “Venus” goddess in the modern mirror space and image space, and associates the connotations of flatness and modernity, thereby expressing the spiritual combination of artistic truth and social freedom, reflecting the modern social and cultural life of this period. Therefore, this modernity is reflected in three aspects: First, modernity is part of the landscape changes in the urban development process. Since modern life is often urbanized, industrialized, socialized, and even has obvious mobility. European life in the 19th century, especially urban life centered on Paris, France, has a distinct modern sense. For example, the urban modernity in Renoir's The Umbrellas or Gustave Caillebotte's Rue de Paris, temps de pluie; Second, the modern significance of the new image medium of photography itself. The spread of new photography technology in the second half of the 19th century and its exchange with works of art (such as the optical reproduction of works of art by photography)

have given the image value of modernity a brand-new innovative significance; Third, modern art exhibitions play an important role in the public's understanding and interpretation of the nature of modern painting. In modernist painting, flatness, as a special space separated from modern life, is more symbolic of modernity. Artists accepted the two-dimensional nature of painting through their keen perception of the times. Other things beyond flatness were selectively abandoned (Clark, 1984/2013). The emphasis on flatness in new painting means a response to the two-dimensionality in image media such as popular posters, logos, consumer prints, and photos in modern life.

Modern Life and Mirror Space in Entertainment Themes

In the mid-19th century, Haussmann's geometric transformation plan for Paris made the urban space of Paris quickly modernize, which is an important factor for the modernity of painting themes. The exploration of spatial order has always been an indispensable formal element of modernity. The Industrial Revolution accelerated the modernization of cities, and the urban landscape changed with each passing day, bringing a lot of hypocrisy and uncertainty to modern life (Clark,1984/2013), but also bringing opportunities and occasions, providing image landscapes with modern flavor for the depiction of street scenes in painting. For example, the street scenes in the paintings of Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro, and the tourists full of the spirit of the times. The handling of the picture space has obvious expressiveness, and the modern images with uncertain themes are far from classical images. Classical paintings must have important themes and figures, but in the modern paintings of the late 19th century, what we see is the fleeting moments and modern entertainment life. Especially the modern music cafes and street bars bred this popular culture at that time. At this time, modernity is the fleeting, elusive fleeting moments, and the advocacy and enjoyment of freedom.

Among them, Manet's Un bar aux Folies Bergère (hereinafter referred to as The Bar) depicts a typical modern entertainment phenomenon. As a bar theme reflecting modern entertainment life, the picture has no spatial depth and gazing and mirror space become the theme of the whole picture. In the image of the picture, the barmaid stands alone in front of the bar like a bystander, staring blankly ahead, i.e., the space reflected by the mirror behind her. Through the mirror, the maid's image becomes part of the entertainment crowd in front of the bar. Her silence, loneliness, and melancholy contrast sharply with the bustling scene in front of her. Her expression is double, reminiscent of Olympia's gaze outside the painting. After The Bar was exhibited in 1882, it caused various comments and rumors. Jules Comet's comment and description of the mirror in the painting in L'Illustration was “everything in the painting is in the mirror, but there is no mirror in the painting” (Clark,1984/2013, p. 319). Charles Flo expressed his objection to the work being different from tradition in Le National de 1869, believing that the work lacked the depth of theme and was elusive, the mirror did not conform to the spatial structure, and the maid was also incomprehensible (Clark,1984/2013). The cartoonist Stop published Barmaid at the Goddess Edouard Manet Casino in Le Journal Amusant, intending to help Manet repair the flaws in the picture space. Therefore, early audiences did not pay much attention and reflection to the modern significance of this large mirror in the painting.

In fact, mirror space is a common expression technique in Western traditional painting. Tracing back the history of Western art, there is no shortage of this technique. On the wall in the center of the picture of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife, Jan van Eyck used a circular convex mirror to prompt the wedding scene. Other examples include Velázquez's Venus at her Mirror and Ingres's Portrait of Madame Moitessier. Among them, what may have the most

inspiration for Manet's The Bar is Velázquez's Las Meninas: the painter stands in the painting staring at somewhere or someone outside the painting, and his gaze leads the audience's questions to outside the painting. The space scene outside the painting is presented by a mirror on the wall behind. Through this mirror, the audience can capture the person outside the painting staring at the painter. Velázquez's use of the social function of the mirror to generate this relationship of seeing and being seen, inclusion and being included, mapping and being mapped may be a cultural origin that triggers the hidden presence in Manet's The Bar.

William Conger, in perspectival diagram of Manet's A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, used the psychological imaging method of modern art to propose suggestions for reconstructing the perspective of the painting, which is characterized by no less than four different vanishing points. Through perspective lines from inside to outside the painting, he analyzed the multiplicity of image space in The Bar (Onians & Fleming,2013): The mirror behind the maid gives the picture space duality, and the figure image forms a multiplicity of concealment and revelation through the mirror. The mirror space on the entire wall behind the maid is like a kaleidoscope full of modern consciousness, reflecting the lively scene in front of the maid. Through this ever-changing mirror, all aspects of life come into full view. The prosperity of modern Parisian life is fully reflected in the mirror, which contrasts sharply with the maid's lonely expression. This sense of loneliness excluded from modern life is precisely a true portrayal of modern people's emotions (Duve &Holmes, 1998).

Modern Life and Mirror Space in Entertainment Themes

The modern life of Paris in the late 19th century was reflected not only in entertainment themes like The Bar but also in the identities and social classes of the characters in Olympia and Le déjeuner sur l'herbe. In the image capture and formal analysis of the works, every detail in Olympia and Le déjeuner sur l'herbe has not escaped the keen eyes and in-depth discussions of theoretical critics, including the definition of character identities and the diverse interpretations of every material element (even ambiguous ones). Discussing the flatness in these two works cannot avoid the invisible within the visible in the works, i.e., the modernity expressed by formal elements. At this time, flatness and modernity are interrelated and discussing either feature cannot avoid the other. No matter which feature is discussed, from the perspective of the work's image, the analysis of formal language is the most critical link. Therefore, any character, element, or symbol in the picture is a reference for research.

Modernity is reflected in the redefinition of women's social identity in Olympia. In Olympia, “modern” and “model” are the two key words presented in the image. Manet allows the audience to see two modern working classes up close: one white and one black. The white woman is not an artistic nude; the black woman is not an artistic slave. In Paris at that time, the coexistence of black and white female working classes was a phenomenon. But in the picture space, there is a sense of distance in their existence. Perhaps Manet did not let them meet at the same time or space, and they did not pose at the same time (Gridsby, 2015). Especially from the subtle postures and expressions of the characters, this sense of alienation is obvious. The black maid in the picture is striking. Paintings with black themes are not common in art history. Marie-Guillemine Bernoist, a French female painter during the Napoleonic era, exhibited a bust portrait Portrait of black women at the Paris Salon in 1800, expressing the extraordinary dignity and charm of women themselves. After the abolition of slavery in 1848, French black female waiters symbolized the symbols of race, gender, and social identity in works. In this regard, Clark's sociological interpretation of the class nature

symbolized in Olympia made many scholars begin to re-examine Olympia and even interpret this painting from the perspective of racial relations. Discussions on racial differences in painting were relatively rare before this.

Olympia is often discussed, probably because of the naming Manet gave to this work, the cat, the shawl, ornaments, slippers, and the black maid, all of which are foils to Olympia. Regarding the interpretation of the black maid, even astute researchers like Clark, Fred, and Carol Armstrong ignored her existence. Clark even used nearly 50 pages to interpret the white nude lying on the bed. Clark believed that the modernity of Olympia is concentrated in its symbolic class nature (Clark,1984/2013). But after paying more attention to the black maid Raul, it changed the way contemporaries interpreted the painter's portrayal of the white nude Victorine Meurent. In this work, the black maid's face is easily overlooked. Her warm brown face is absorbed by the green-brown and red-brown background, but it has received closer attention. When handling the image of the black maid, Manet depicted the dark face and neck with almost flat dark reddish-brown, green-brown chin shadows and facial contours, pink coral earrings, shining thick lips, sparkling eyes, light-colored Oriental-style headdress, and carefully depicted white gauze circular skirt collar, all of which vividly strengthen the facial details of the black maid. In any case, turning the aesthetic perspective to an aesthetic opposite to aesthetic conventions is itself a value. The value of Manet's painting space, in addition to the emergence of flatness, lies in its rejection of the modernity of aesthetic inequality, including the subordinate status between black and white women.

Conclusion

In short, the connection between modernism and “flatness” is not like Athena leaping out of Zeus's head. From the cultural environment at that time, Manet began to express vision with the formal generalization of flat application and simplification. This spatial representation was a modern attempt within the scope of traditional realism. Fortunately, the attempt was ultimately successful. The “flatness” and “modernity” in Manet's paintings are of great significance to early modernist painting. Flatness and modernity are a conceptual response to the changing political, economic, cultural, and artistic phenomena in modern life at that time. In early modernist painting, the modern life of Paris is reflected not only in the leisure life of entertainment themes but also in the modern information of goddess-themed works. In the image capture and formal analysis of the works' styles, Manet placed his “Venus” goddess in the modern mirror space and image space, and closely linked the flat visual space with modern consciousness, reflecting the modern cultural outlook of European capitalist society in the late 19th century, and more importantly, embodying the innovative significance of early modernist painting in visual space, expressing the pursuit of artistic truth and the spirit of freedom.

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