The Tensions of Manet
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This paper was written for Dr. Dorothy Joiner’s Art of the Nineteenth Century course.

It has been said of Manet that “as a man he was Dr. Jekyll; as a painter, Mr. Hyde” (Schneider 8). He is known as the painter of such scandalous works as *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* and *Olympia*. To the public he was a revolutionary, but to those who knew him, Manet was a bourgeois and a gentleman who yearned for both acceptance and originality (Cachin 13, Schneider 8). While the innovative originality of his work often reaped rejection, Manet seemed to have found a solace for his opposing desires in still life painting, where he received praise from even his most disapproving critics (Loyrette 155, Mauner 12). Of still life Manet once said, “A painter can say all he wants to with fruit or flowers or even clouds” (12), and indeed the same depth and insight visible in the artist’s figure paintings follows him into the seemingly static world of still life. Manet was an artist of great contradictions, and his unique approach to still life echoes his struggle to combine the traditional and the innovational. Just as Manet the man found himself constantly at odds with Manet the artist, the painting of Manet is wrought with tensions, such as those between the subject and paint, volume and flatness, and the laborious and spontaneous; further tensions lie in the message of the painting itself, such as that between the tangible and the transcendent and between the motifs of life and death.

Still life has its roots deep in the tradition of art, but because it was, at Manet’s time, considered a “lesser” genre (Loyrette 161), it remained both vastly unexplored and unnoticed. For all its seeming directness, still life painting has one overarching transcendent quality: that of vanitas. A vanitas symbol draws attention to the brevity of life and the fleetingness of beauty as seen most evidently in wilting flowers and ripening fruit (Mauner 19, 41). Manet approached still life by embracing its profound quality of vanitas while rejecting its traditional status as lesser art. Of Manet’s life work, almost twenty percent of his paintings are still lifes themselves, and most of his other pieces include still life in their composition (Loyrette 154, Mauner 14). *Le Déjeuner*, *Olympia*, *Portrait of Emile Zola*, and *The Bar at Folies-Bergère* are among the most famous of the artist’s figure paintings that owe much to the inclusion of a still life. Interestingly, Manet gave the still life portion of each of these pieces the same attention as the figures, and, in doing so, ignored the traditional hierarchy of figures and objects (Loyrette 158). He was able to elevate still life, as it will be examined, by exploiting those qualities that Manet found rich with transcendence. Thus, in still life painting, Manet found a moldable genre that allowed him to explore revolutionary ideas in a comparatively accepted field.

The most immediate tension of Manet’s work is that between his subject and his use of paint. As in all areas of art before Manet’s time, still life painting was seen as a way to mirror a subject smoothly and impersonally (Schneider 7-8). Paint was not meant to be seen as paint but rather the subject of a work was to be seen as if it were not painted. Manet, however, was delighted and inspired by the works of Spanish artists, such as Velázquez, who painted with drama and energy in powerfully juxtaposed brushstrokes (22). When observing Manet’s still lifes, it is difficult to see either the subject or the paint apart from the other. In *Moss and Roses in a Vase*, for instance, the viewer is at once struck by the thick texture and brushy quality of the paint in the filmy...
vase and up into the swirling mass of flowers. Upon close inspection, the flowers all but disappear in mad dashes of paint and color. At second glance, however, one notices that the brushstrokes, although heavy and stylized, are not positioned randomly but rather in such a way that enhances the shape of the object portrayed. Whereas the Impressionists used brushy strokes to create a patterned surface, Manet’s brushwork followed the contours of the objects painted making the scene tangible instead of flatly patterned (Hanson 22, 25). His brushwork then allows the viewer to see the roses in this piece as living, tangible roses with a unique life injected into them. The subjects of Manet’s still lifes are therefore more alive, and, hence more realistically depicted, because of their painterly quality.

To analyze further this paradoxical subject, a second tension may be seen in Manet’s contrasting use of volume and flatness. Often his figures and subjects are thought to be flat because they are painted with solid or subtly varied color in large areas. In the Classical style, subjects were modeled using light and dark values to create form, and, by contrast, the Impressionists used color to give their subjects visual depth. It can be said that Manet used both and neither of these techniques in his paintings. A strong sense of dark and light in Manet’s work was influenced from his love of the Spanish style; however, his interpretation of dramatic values is seen not in the shading of objects but rather in the juxtaposition of light and dark objects in a composition (Schneider 22). Likewise, Manet uses color in his forms but less in the Impressionistic sense that called for dashes of varying color, as is evidenced by his comparative subtleties in the use of simplified color (Hanson 21). While his compositions were flat in the traditional sense and, often times, in an Impressionistic sense, Manet was able to give his painting depth through the medium of texture (21). The Portrait of Emile Zola offers an illustration of this concept. From a distance and in photographic reproductions, the portrait appears flat, but as the light catches the rough textures of paint on the face and arm of the figure, the features are suddenly rounded and take on a dimension of depth (21-22). Again, the paint is used in a way that undercuts the viewer’s expectations of flatness or, as seen previously, of lifelessness. Manet’s still life paintings gain much from the artist’s life-infused texture, and seemingly flat areas of paint become the embodiments of the objects they represent.

In a final assessment of Manet’s style, the tension between the elements of laboriousness and spontaneity may be explored. It was Manet’s intention to create paintings that seemed spontaneous and quick, but he was too much a perfectionist and rational thinker to paint in such a way. X-rays of paintings reveal that he often redrew his subjects making even the most minor adjustments in his compositions (Hanson 22-23). His perfectionist nature urged him to rework his pieces by scraping the surface down and building it up again with layers and textures of paint (Hanson 22, Schneider 8). The precise placement of objects and figures in Manet’s compositions and his frequent allusions to art historical works expose his meditated approach to painting (Loyrette 160). Manet’s still life entitled Oysters is simple in overall composition, but its relationships between texture and form reveals an underlying complexity (Mauner 72). The halved oysters echo the half lemon and the textures of moistness and dryness offer contrast between the two subjects, while the diagonally placed fork unites the two parts of the composition (72). Thus Manet’s straightforwardness and simplicity give his paintings a
spontaneous exterior while his deliberateness gives insight to the deeper complexity of his work.

In addition to the tensions of Manet’s style, there are also contradictions in the messages and motifs of his art. One such tension is between depictions of the tangible and the transcendent. There is apparent appeal to the senses in Manet’s paintings, and his still lifes are especially tangible in their appeal to those senses other than merely sight (Mauner 19). Images of peeled fruit, for instance, evoke the viewer’s sense of touch in their complementary textures, and of taste and smell in their presentation as food instead of as objects (17-19). The style of the artist itself with its loose but heavy brushwork and texture-built forms lend the paintings a tangible quality (Hanson 25). However, Manet took advantage of the many connotations he knew particular objects to possess not only to make his paintings sensually appealing, but also to give them the additional quality of transcendence (Mauner 13). On this subject, the art critic and historian George Mauner concluded that in his still lifes Manet “had in mind the significance that things have for our consciousness, the associations with which they are laden, in short, the wide range of human thoughts and feelings that they can be made to recall” (13). Manet’s use of peonies most masterfully illustrates his attempt to give his paintings a transcendent quality. Peonies are beautiful, vividly colored flowers that reach their peak of splendor during a single day, releasing an exhilarating fragrance, only to rapidly wilt the next day (41). In the painting *Peonies in a Vase on a Stand*, Manet makes obvious reference to the flowers’ voluptuousness and pleasurable sensuality in a physical manner but not for the mere sake of realism; the picture tells a story (Cachin 208). The rapidly fleeting life of the flower is masterfully rendered in the inclusion of fresh buds, explosively mature blossoms, and fallen petals. The poet André Fraigneau observed of the painting, “Manet’s vase of peonies is the story of the death of a flower, or to use the cruel and more precise medical term, the *agony* of a flower. The story reads from right to left, ending in the middle” (208). Instead of rejecting the transcendence of art in favor of a more materialistic approach, Manet embraced the impressions and expressions that art could conjure.

Expanding upon the transcendent and sensual qualities of his work, Manet displays the final tension between life and death as the most poignant characteristic of his artwork. Still life paintings traditionally depict living objects that will soon ripen and wither away in following with the concept of *vanitas*; likewise, Manet explored the conflicting imagery of life and death as his own life was ebbing away. In 1878, at the height of Manet’s physical and artistic life, he developed pains in his feet and legs (Schneider 169). Only two years later the artist was all but bed-ridden as his illness progressed and was diagnosed as the later stages of syphilis (169-170). Although he had been painting still life throughout his artistic career, Manet seems to have developed a renewed interest in the fleetingness of life, and moved from arranging still lifes with fruit to composing those of flowers (Cachin 208). Flowers have long been a metaphor for the brevity of existence because they have been “cut off from their source of life” (Mauner 41). Occasionally, Manet alluded directly to this concept by including in his compositions the same shears used to cut the flowers, leaving them open to make the ordinary garden utensils appear menacing (Cachin 211). More frequently, however, he depicted flowers in all their freshness and beauty and in their perishable fragility (Schneider 170). Like the subjects he painted, Manet was eminently aware that his life
was ending, and, as the writer Pierre Schneider observed, he was “more brilliant for being manifestly destined to wilt” (170). While it is true that Manet’s paintings are rendered wonderfully alive and energized, it is this same life that leaves his subjects vulnerable to death in a final paradox.

One cannot experience a Manet still life in all its perplexity and contradictions without feeling the man behind the paint. Taken together, the tensions exhibited in Manet’s art reflect his over-arching struggle to combine the traditional and the innovational in art as well as in his own life. In art, although not necessarily seen during his time, he achieved his goal. The complexity of his style and the layers of meaning found in his still lifes give them the richness absent from many traditional works of the genre. In life, however, Manet found the society in which he lived unwilling to compromise with his endeavors as an artist, and he found himself even more uncompromising in his effort to conform to society. Upon Manet’s death, the fellow artist, Degas, said of his friend, “We did not know that he was this great,” and as Pierre Schneider noted, “Manet the man had hidden Manet the artist; the removal of the former suddenly revealed the later with utmost clarity” (Schneider 7). Perhaps the artist is best represented in those still lifes he created: often misunderstood when examined superficially but always delightfully rich with layers of meaning that are constantly being revealed and rediscovered.

Bibliography