

YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Angles on Art

“Revelations from Female Portraiture”

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Transcript of Web feature

Introduction

I'm Damaris Yeh. I'm a Biology major at Yale College, Class of 2005. The theme of my tour is “Revelations from Female Portraiture,” focusing on how artists reveal their ideals, worldview, personality, and style through different representations of women.

Edouard Manet (French, 1832–83)

Young Woman Reclining in Spanish Costume, 1862

When Edouard Manet painted *Young Woman Reclining in Spanish Costume* in the mid-nineteenth century, people were used to seeing art that featured historical subjects rendered in the precisely illusionistic style taught by the French academy. Manet broke away from convention in both subject matter and painting technique. Here, the artist both conveys his infatuation with Spanish culture and challenges societal norms by posing a voluptuous studio model in such a masculine costume. Manet also experiments with style—notice how he created the woman with smooth, broad strokes, while the cat is rendered with lively, staccato strokes. Manet's quick and loose brushwork preceded the well-known Impressionist style of artists like Claude Monet, leading Manet to become known as the “Father of Impressionism.” Even though Manet resisted association with this rising young group of artists, his stylistic endeavors were pivotal in ushering in the new art movement of the late 1800s.

Thomas Eakins (American, 1844–1916)

Girl with a Cat (Katherine Crowell), 1872

Thomas Eakins was the first artist to insist on using anatomy as an observational tool in his teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He scandalized students by introducing photographs of nudes, plaster casts of cadavers, and most contentious of all, live nude models into the classroom. This portrait of Katherine Crowell was Eakins' first full-length portrait. His focus on anatomical accuracy is evident in this well-proportioned and delicately rendered study. Eakins carefully composed this piece to suggest his subject's frail condition. In the dark room of *Girl with a Cat*, the dim light draws your eye to Katherine's pale face and boney fingers. The towering Victorian bookcase behind her, with its strong vertical and horizontal lines, accentuate her delicate curves and feeble posture. Katherine holds her fan limply in her hand, and the bright color of its edge leads your eye to the ribbon at her throat. The vivid pink of the ribbon brings out the pallor of her face and the animation of the cat in her lap contrasts

with Katherine's stillness. These details all work together to suggest her delicate state. Eakins' tender painting appropriately reflects his connection with the young woman—he was engaged to Katherine for five years before her death in 1879.

George Wesley Bellows (American 1882–1925)

Lady Jean, 1924

As a young man, George Bellows had two passions: sports and painting. He chose to pursue painting as his career. This portrait of his second daughter, Jean, was painted when she was nine years old. When this painting is placed in tandem with Eakins' *Girl with a Cat*, you can see that although the stature of the two young women differ greatly, their lacy dresses look very similar. In fact, young Jean's dress is an outfit from her grandmother's generation, and the nine year-old's clothes and shoes are too big for her. Her confrontational stare indicates that she wasn't too pleased to pose for her father. Domestic objects surround Jean: a stuffed chair, ornate rug, and cabinet. They crowd her space. To add to the feeling of compression, the portrait is twice as high as it is wide, and the figure looks as if it might pop right out of the picture plane. A man of a strong social conscience, Bellows revealed his support for the social cause of women through this portrait of his own daughter. Depicting both Jean's uncompromising gaze and the uncomfortable space, Bellows conveys a desire that his daughter would be freed from the domestic sphere. This farewell from a father to his growing child is especially striking in light of the artist's death only one year after painting this picture.

Edward Hopper (American 1882–1967)

Western Motel, 1957

Edward Hopper was a prominent American realist, influenced by the Ashcan School of Art which revitalized the realist tradition before World War I by painting scenes from daily urban life. Inspired as well by the French Impressionists, Hopper experimented with the treatment of light in his paintings. *Western Motel* has a strikingly spare quality. Notice that there are no labels on the luggage tags, no picture in the frame on the nightstand, no bulb in the light fixture. This nondescript room resonates with the equally nondescript scenery of flat hills in the background. This void of detail augments the solitude and uncomfortable position of the woman. Her back is rigid; her hands hold the side of the bed. She stares out from the picture plane, framed by two rectangles of light—one from the window behind her and the second from the sunlight shining into the room. Her feet seem trapped in a sliver of shadow. Painted during the peak of American cinema, this picture has the quality of a film still. Hopper seems to have captured a moment frozen in time. Perhaps as a result of his disillusionment after the two World Wars, Hopper leaves us to wonder about the woman's circumstances in and beyond the moment captured.

Winslow Homer (American 1836–1910)

The Old Mill (Morning Bell), 1871

A contemporary of Edouard Manet, Winslow Homer was a self-taught American artist. *Morning Bell* is a painting of a post-Civil War, rural New England scene, reflecting Homer's characteristically well-planned composition and meticulous attention to detail. Immediately we see that Homer has divided the picture plane into two halves with the makeshift addition of the ramp. On the left side, a weathered factory with broken windows obstructs the natural landscape. The river that once drove the mill is now dry. On the right, the green woods fill the background, and a bird in the far distance adds the sounds of nature. The central figure, with her face turned slightly down, is at the crossroads between the rickety addition and the ramp to the factory. Had the woman stayed on her original trajectory, she would have headed straight for the fields and woods. Instead, she turns left, taking hesitant steps away from the offer of freedom and beauty to answer the beckoning call of the bell. Homer captures the isolation created by industrialization by showing the woman separate from the community, represented by the gossiping women to the right. In this painting, the artist laments the loss of his beloved agrarian society, which is quickly being supplanted by the drive for industrialization.