The Presentation Of Female Nude In Works Of French Impressionists

Females in the Nude was a topic that was approached lightly. Three common nude paintings were Édouard Manet's Olympia, painted in 1863, Edgar Degas' The Tub which was painted in 1886 and also Paul Gauguin's Spirit of the Dead Watching, painted 1892. All three paintings and artists are different in their own right but they share one common factor, the way their works of art challenged the social standards and boundaries set on the presentation of the female nude. By looking into the way each artist challenged standards, people are able to gain a closer understanding of why some works were celebrated among critics and the public whereas some where seen as immoral and controversial.

Édouard Manet was known early on for creating what seemed to be a conscious affront to tradition and accepted social convention so when he painted and exhibited Olympia in the Salon it raised some questions and concerns for the public and his peers. Complacent academic painters who regularly painted the female nude in very distinguishably disguised eroticism as what could be seen as a virtuous homage to the Greek gods and goddess', Venus being the most popular among artists. Olympia, provocatively named, the African-American woman, the cluster of flowers and of course the cat were viewed as symbols of what is known as sexual licentiousness. In painting reality as he saw it, Manet challenges the accepted function of art in France, which was to glorify history and the French state, and create what some would consider the first modern painting. While both middle and upper class men of the time would frequent courtesans and prostitutes, none wanted to be confronted with on in a painting within a gallery. A real woman, flaws and all with an independent spirit (no man within painting), stares out from the canvas, confronting the viewer, something French society in 1865 was perhaps not ready to come face to face with.

Edgar Degas was most known for the subject of dance, more than half of his works depicted dancers. In 1886, Degas produced the pastel work The Tub as part of a series of seven pictures on the theme of women at their ablutions, a subject Degas has already explored in a series of monotypes approximately ten years prior. Degas' observation of women's intimate, everyday gestures is a far cry from the traditional romantic scenes of women at their toilette. The young woman pictured pose, often interpreted by critics as the expression of a certain animality. The still life of the subject, with a certain distorted Japanese-style perspective, and its plunging view, made The Tub, one of the most audacious and accomplished works of Degas' on the modern theme of the woman in her bathtub. Degas reconciled Nudity and modernity after centuries chaste tradition, describing to clothe the naked female in floating draperies or surround the symbolic attributes of the goddesses. It's not provocative and shameless nudity such as Olympia by Manet, it is presented in the most natural, casual and senseless environment in which a woman can be naked. The woman doesn't look the viewer in the eye, not even her face is visible. Degas said, "Until now, the Nude model was always depicted in poses suggesting the presence of an audience." Which he added that his vision was to create the feeling of peeping through a keyhole. Critics praised Degas in his vision, the pastel artwork committed an act of reconciliation.

Paul Gauguin and his work were influential to some of the French avant-garde and many

modern artist, notably Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. In 1892 Gauguin painted Spirit of the Dead Watching (Manao tupapau) which is said to be the depiction of a naked Tahitian girl lying on her stomach, with an old woman seated behind her. Gauguin said the title could be taken as either the girl imagining the ghost, or the ghost imagining her. He was determined to shock the bourgeoisie and certainly his own nude with this artwork—“a slightly indecent study” as he described it—was in many ways as radical as Manet’s, Gauguin even painted his own version of Manet’s Olympia. The female is awkwardly positioned and disproportionate, the age of the woman and the fear she portrayed were pointed out by some critics. The painting was among eight others that he sent for exhibition in Copenhagen a year after her painted it, he evidently prized it highly but later that same year when exhibited in Paris, it failed to sell despite the celebrated and favourable reviews from different critics including Edgar Degas. Gauguin’s painting didn’t end up selling and found its way into the hands of Count Kesslar of Weimar.

Manet, Degas and Gauguin were rebels who grew up and, each in their own way rejected the importance of fleeting impressions, looking for timeless images that focus the mind on something important and let the classical art itself influence. However viewers and critics choose to look at the works of art, it provokes endless questioning, in which they are forced to encounter the other, whether that be in terms of age, faith, gender, spirituality, ethnicity, sexuality, culture, whatever you will, it is a painting that explores the heterogeneous nature of identity, asking profound questions as to who and what we are.