

Manet's Hidden Talent

"The Potency of Pure Painting: Manet's Still Lives" by Karen Wilkin, in *The New Criterion* (Mar. 2001), 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019; "The Urbane Innocent" by Peter Schjeldahl, in *The New Yorker* (Nov. 20, 2000), 4 Times Sq., New York, N.Y. 10036.

Édouard Manet (1832–83) is so much associated with large painted images of the human figure, in *Olympia* (1863), *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (1881–82), and other masterworks, that even art critics Schjeldahl and Wilkin were surprised to learn how much of a still-life painter he was. The 80 or so still lifes he did during his brief career constitute a fifth of his oeuvre.

"I was even more surprised," writes Schjeldahl, "by a dawning conviction that still-life wasn't a sideline of his art but fundamental to it. What are his celebrated figure paintings but still-lives in which people are objects of a particular variety?"

Until *Manet: The Still-Life Paintings* opened at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris last fall, and then at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore this past winter, no major exhibition focusing on Manet's still lifes had ever been organized. Though the exhibition was "short on masterpieces," that "turns out to be a virtue,"

Schjeldahl says. "A viewer is admitted to the workshop of the artist's technique and rhetoric, which are indistinguishable from his soul."

Oysters (1862), which is considered Manet's first still life, and other works from the 1860s use motifs of earlier painters and "are self-consciously showy, exuding decorative panache," observes Schjeldahl. The other main group consists of still lifes done toward the end of Manet's life, when he was ill (probably with syphilis) and racked with pain. Most of these paintings, Schjeldahl says, "memorialize bouquets that were brought to him by friends: roses, peonies, lilacs, tulips, carnations, and pansies in glass or crystal vases against dark grounds. They are desperately moving."

The best of these later paintings, writes Wilkin, "are energetic and dazzling, with their rapidly evoked particularities of petals and the complexities of stems and leaves seen through water and crystal." Manet's greatest talent, it



Oysters (1862), by Édouard Manet

seems, may have been bringing inanimate objects to life.

Despite his most celebrated figure paintings, Manet was, in Schjeldahl's view, "a terrible portraitist—too respectfully well mannered and too shy, I think, to express anybody else's personality. He was also too honest, perhaps. (What mood, besides glum torpor, can a person who must hold still for hours and days convey?) Only when Manet's affection for a sitter is intense does a portrait sparkle."

"A painter can say all he wants to with fruit

or flowers or even clouds," Manet once told an artist friend. But he did not confine himself to still lifes. The naked women in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) and *Olympia* caused public scandals, which much vexed him. "Some critics who initially found *Le Déjeuner* or *Olympia* vulgar in subject and wanting in execution," notes Wilkin, "were receptive to Manet's treatment of inanimate objects." But while he wanted to please, he kept going his own way. "What is Manet's essential quality?" asks Schjeldahl. "I think it's innocence."

Longfellow's Footprints

"The Importance of Being Earnest" by Rochelle Gurstein, in *The New Republic* (Mar. 12, 2001), 1220 19th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Once deemed America's greatest poet by critics and public alike, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82) has long since been relegated to the literary shadows. He deserves better, argues Gurstein, the author of *The Repeal of Reticence* (1996).

Longfellow's poetry was so popular during his career that he was able to quit his job as a professor of modern languages at Harvard University. He established his reputation with his first book of poetry, *Voices of the Night* (1839). "Nothing equal to some of [the poems] was ever written," novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne said. Longfellow became "a literary sensation," Gurstein notes, and 50 years later—after 12 volumes of poetry, five book-length poems (including *Evangeline*, *The Song of Hiawatha*, and *The Courtship of Miles Standish*), and many other works—his bust was placed in the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey, to this day a unique honor for an American poet.

"Life is real! Life is earnest!" Longfellow proclaimed in "A Psalm of Life," one of his earliest poems. For Victorians, writes Gurstein, "to be in earnest meant recognizing that life was more elevated and more serious than money-making and sensual gratification. And this recognition entailed the assertion of a transcendent moral and spiritual order."

By the time of Oscar Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), however, earnestness had become a term of derision, Gurstein observes. "And by the time of the centenary celebration of Longfellow's birth in 1907, the revolt against

gentility and classicism was in full bloom." Longfellow and his age came to be accused of "shallowness, conventionality, sentimentality, moralism, and willingness to sacrifice art to didactic purposes." Modernists, favoring free verse, disdained Longfellow's long, rhyming, storybook poems. His "extraordinary prosodic virtuosity" now went largely unappreciated, says Gurstein. "What could be said for a poet who was not exercised by irony, tension, and paradox, whose utterance was distinguished by unaffected simplicity and clarity?" By the early 1930s, his reputation was shattered.

Longfellow's legacy has been almost reduced to the astonishing number of his lines that have come into common use: "Ships that pass in the night," "The patter of little feet," "Into each life some rain must fall," "Footprints on the sands of time," "When she was good, she was very, very good."

If his poetic achievement, judged on aesthetic grounds, is not first rank, Gurstein says, there is no denying his historical importance. And while complex and profound meanings usually are absent from his poetry, this is not always so. To his great translation of *The Divine Comedy* he affixed some of his own sonnets. One of them pays tribute to Dante, poetry, prayer, and the memory of his beloved wife, recently dead. "With this beautiful sonnet," Gurstein says, "Longfellow reminds us that the great poetry of the past was great not least because it transcended the confines of subjectivity and turned personal, unbearable, and ineffable experiences into a public expression of humility."