
Gray Grace

The Street Singer's New Aesthetic

2010 Lawrence Lader Prize in Expository Writing

BEAUTY DOESN'T USUALLY COME IN GRAY – NOR IN PALLID SKIN and dirty clothes. It did, however, for Édouard Manet. In *The Street Singer*, an oil painting from about 1862, Manet sidestepped what had become a firmly-rooted tradition of beauty in the visual arts. He immersed the large, towering canvas of *The Street Singer* in muted hues, linearity, and flatness rather than in vibrant colors and gentle curves. His painting is atypical even in its subject, an unflattered street performer exiting an equally unglamorous café. It rejects idealized conceptions of beauty and elevates coarseness and transience. However, Manet painted *The Street Singer* with a formal unity and complexity befitting a subject of uncommon beauty, even if that subject is a “common” café singer. *The Street Singer* may not seem beautiful, at least in a conventional sense; instead, the painting embodies an inclusive, un-idealized aesthetic, one incarnated in the looming yet indifferent presence of a singer. It is a new aesthetic that

Manet leveraged against the otherwise stiff standards of his viewers. In doing so, Manet continues to push us to question beauty itself even today. *The Street Singer* suggests that beauty can be defined by inclusiveness rather than narrowness, by the un-idealized in place of the flawless. Perhaps most important, the painting suggests that a common café singer warrants the same craft and complexity as a more traditionally beautiful subject.

Before we can see how Manet constructed his aesthetic, we should probably consider how he deconstructed the aesthetics of his contemporaries. In order to depart from conventions of beauty, Manet omitted several conventions of technique, including common artistic tendencies like *chiaroscuro*, careful finishes, vibrancy, and curvature. Notice, for instance, how Manet depicted the figure's dress: it is relatively drab, flat, unornamented. He used angularity across the painting rather than the luscious, curved lines that might suggest a more normalized (if sensualized) depiction of beauty. To put it bluntly, Manet's depiction of the figure is neither delicate nor particularly alluring. Her face appears flattened by uniform values and by the darkness surrounding her; shadows line the insides of her eyes; and the cloth of her dress is not the clinging, translucent drapery of classical sculpture or Romantic painting, but rather a relatively shapeless, de-feminized mass. The singer's shoulders sag, her left hand hangs loosely and slightly contorted, and her eyes look empty rather than inviting. Formally, the painted surface remains unpolished, with brushstrokes easily visible in several areas of the painting: at the base of the dress, in the guitar, on the edges of the doorway. In these choices Manet set

himself at odds with some of the values of his contemporaries. He painted his singer with certain attributes clearly omitted. These attributes and techniques make up artistic traditions that might seem, both to us and to Manet's contemporaries, necessary conditions for beauty.

Yet to call *The Street Singer* unconventional is not to call it unskilled. In this sense, Manet's painting has the potential to split two traditionally linked elements: the conventional, ideal beauty of the subject's portrayal and the effectiveness of the artist's formal execution. Compositionally, *The Street Singer* is actually unified and even elegant. ([Click here to launch an interactive viewer of The Street Singer](#) from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.) Almost every line is echoed in another place: the angles of the singer's shoulders reappear in the tops of the doors; the guitar creates clear parallel lines with the dress trimming; the dress' folds match its edge; and vertical lines repeat on both the sides and in the center of the painting. Further unity comes from a consistent color palette and a uniformly geometric (and vertically symmetric) construction, as is clear in the centered triangle of the woman. Design and technique, then, are in fact strong in *The Street Singer*, even if they are not in the service of an ideal beauty. They instead elevate the relatively unglamorous subject of a café performer.

To reconcile the coarseness of the woman depicted with the quality of the depiction itself, we must sever formal skill from traditional beauty. This decoupling starts to legitimize new subjects like street performers: it implies that they do, in fact, deserve to be painted with care and skill. If Manet was legitimizing new subjects, then the validation of his subject

matter and style seems a central concern of *The Street Singer*. Here Manet found ways to assert the validity of his painting's depiction by giving the singer visual emphasis and a commanding presence. Her body is emphatically centered in the frame, and pulls out from the background because of contrasts in detail and color around her. Light tones highlight her right side, while the guitar's yellow sheen emphasizes the left; both underscore her form as the painting's dominant compositional element. She becomes firmly concrete, and nearly architectural, by the stark opacity and pyramidal construction of her dress. The singer fits into the space as would a statue, gently surrounded by an arch-like curve formed by the doors behind her. Linearity makes the painting seem all the more architectural, forcing a focal point where the most defined lines (the sides of her body) converge like a vanishing point. And the same angularity and flatness that de-romanticize her also communicate the inherent solidity of a triangular, rigid geometry. What depth we do find – the shadow on the ground, the lighting in the doorway, the seeming recession of the café – serve to visually force her forward. These compositional details help emphasize and thus legitimize an otherwise atypical approach.

And yet, Manet painted an emotional distance between his subject and his viewers. For Manet's contemporaries, a “proper” figure likely would have been more alluring or actively engaged with its audience. Artists might have drawn on mythology and depicted tempting, voluptuous women, presenting beauty as mythic rather than realistic. (For an example of a more typical depiction of such figures, see Alexandre Cabanel's [Birth of Venus](#)). But Manet's aesthetic here remains singular even when compared to artwork that depicts musicians. Jules-Joseph

Lefebvre's [Autumn](#) (also known as *Girl with a Mandolin*) and William-Adolphe Bouguereau's [Gypsy Girl with Basque Drum](#), for example, comprise sentimental depictions of a more idealized subject. In *The Street Singer*, on the other hand, we are drawn to the singer's face. Almost all of the lines on the dress converge on her visage, where the paint is already the brightest and has the most contrast. However, we do not necessarily find her face enticing, and it is certainly not mythic. A dark halo of hair accents her face, and she looks toward us to make it the indisputable focal point. But the cues that direct our gaze to her face only underscore the idleness we found there. She is unfocused on her actions, and her stare is blank. The left and right sides of her face seem, on closer inspection, to differ in expression: one side of her mouth appears open, the other looks closed; one eye reflects light, the other seems opaque. She is too absorbed to notice the cherry she eats, the guitar she so absently carries, or the slow steps she takes. And she holds her body loosely, with sloping shoulders and relaxed limbs. Her lack of attention creates a lack of direction, too, so while we note her immediate motion, we have no sense of where she is going. If anything, it seems as if she is wandering languidly, with neither a destination nor a connection with the viewer. Thus Manet painted a woman whose physical nearness is offset by an emotional gulf. Just as he managed to demonstrate formal skill without ideal beauty, he painted the figure to appear close, even as she distractedly ignores the viewer.

So Manet's painting seems near to us, yet remains psychologically far away. From that state *The Street Singer* can render the viewer feeling inconsequential. The sheer size of the canvas and figure only magnify the singer's detachment. Her

architectural presence places her high in the frame; her feet, obscured by shadow, are hidden enough that she seems to float over us. Even if the painting were displayed at ground level, the figure would seem above the ground and therefore above us. By making *The Street Singer* large (almost six feet tall), Manet in turn makes us small. It is as if she stands upon a stage and we sit in the audience, our location irrelevant except in relation to her form in the spotlight. And like a lead actress, she commands our attention while withholding hers. Whatever knowledge she might be privy to remains singularly hers. But we remain ignorant of her identity, her emotions, and her destination, and this redounds to making us inconsequential in front of the painting. The world we perceive essentially ignores us, as she walks by with an empty glance and as the faint figures in the café continue to eat and drink. Yet that world draws us in. We became implicated in it, as well as subservient to it: we are by association made part of what we witness, thrust into the life of the street. Looking at *The Street Singer*, we can begin to feel its indifference as a kind of domination. Vis-à-vis the painting, we feel a towering presence.

Of course, *The Street Singer* is complex enough to remain open to other readings. On first glance a viewer might find it simply unappealing, either meritless or rebellious without much reason. However, the painting's unity, deliberateness, and shrewd characterization of the figure should render such an objection groundless. Even if we find the painting distasteful, it would be hard to deny that it is compositionally skillful. On the other hand, one could argue that *The Street Singer* simply depicts the sad ramifications of poverty, making it a genre scene in the fashion of artists like Pieter Breughel the Elder or

Caravaggio. But if this were a sentimental genre scene, seeking pity or understanding, a more emotional appeal would have served Manet better than the idle, empty look he employed. Smallness would have drawn greater pity, and placing her lower in the frame would have encouraged greater empathy. Manet did not depict the street singer as “downtrodden,” as she is neither small nor defeated. In this scene, we are the small; we are the defeated. She does not offer the feeling of a common humanity among us. Instead, she holds power over us.

What better way to reject the conventional than by defying the expectations of a more conventional audience? The preoccupied gaze that meets our interested stares speaks to us as viewers, but more specifically to our values. If our lives are hardly worth a glance, then what of our taste in art? Thus Manet bestowed upon *The Street Singer* a power greater than either visual supremacy or psychological influence: he challenged the very notion of beauty. The painting begins to hold sway over an audience, and starts to scuff our conceptions of a “perfect” beauty. If this is true, perhaps we can finally understand the new aesthetic Manet has to offer. Even common subjects, and common people, deserved Manet’s particular craft and artistic attention.

It is important to note, at end, that Manet seemed to avoid claims about *what* is beautiful, or even explicitly how to portray beauty; it is likewise possible that he presented no clear agenda here, no concrete rules for a “correct” method or an “appropriate” subject. In other words, it might be more accurate to say that he expands the realm of aesthetics to allow for a multiplicity of subjects and modes of representation, rather than

prescribing any particular one. He did, after all, leave us a complex and multifarious body of work. We can therefore define his aesthetic by the possibilities it leaves open: if he resisted strict rules, he remained open to various subjects and various modes of representation. In offering us another angle in *The Street Singer* on this new aesthetic, in other words, he did not lay claim to an absolute standard. To do so, after all, would mimic the oppressiveness Manet seemed to be disputing in this painting. The implications of that dispute extend past the elevation of a single subject, or the disruption of a single artistic trend. *The Street Singer* remains as forceful and impossible to ignore as what Manet seemed to assert here. An aesthetic of new subjects, new techniques, and new values – an aesthetic that belittles neither beauty nor reality by idealization – was beginning to emerge.

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Works Cited

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