

## Manet's "The Smoker"

Edouard Manet  
French 1832-83  
"The Smoker" 1866  
Oil on Canvas  
68.79  
G355



*The Smoker* is a portrait of the painter Joseph Gall. He and Manet met in Paris in 1861. Manet presents him in a cloth coat and fur hat, smoking a long-stemmed clay pipe. The composition is broadly brushed, in the neutral grays and browns for which Manet became known.

Manet was influenced, and drew upon, the styles of the Dutch Frans Hals, and the Spaniards Goya and Velazquez, all evidenced in this painting: geniality of the subject and freedom of brushstrokes from Hals; contrast of the dark tonalities with the bright blue handkerchief in the foreground reflect the Spaniards. *The Smoker* was painted several years after Manet's short visit to Madrid in 1865. Manet was enchanted with Spain since the beginning of his career, but the live contact with a large number of originals exhilarated him and strengthened his already-felt affinity and admiration for Spanish art.

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With the invention of photography in 1839, artists became increasingly interested in optics and the nature of light. Manet was one of the first painters to observe that objects viewed in dull sunlight appear not as rounded forms but as two-dimensional shapes. He uses a minimum of modeling and shading to succeed in representing this visual perception in his art. *The Smoker* demonstrates this characteristic flatness. Manet composed by instinct and in a way that was completely visual. In virtually every portrait, monochromism is set off by an area of intense color, as seen in *The Smoker*. A key feature of Manet's style at that time is this contrast, with the small area of color - unrelated coloristically to anything else in the painting - heightened in intensity within the neutrality of the rest of the painting.

Light and dark are treated the same way: flesh tones, by their contrast with an otherwise dark painting, are made to seem lighter than they are. The result in this painting is that the smoker appears on first encounter to have been painted in just two values - one very light and one very dark.

This kind of contrast startled the viewer of the 1860's, who had been taught that painting had been a connective and elisional art since the Renaissance,

To reject gradation and to strive for contrast was to challenge the illusionistic premise on which Western painting rested. Through successive experiments over hundreds of years, artists had discovered how to give the appearance of the experiential world on a flat surface. The painter in the 19th century was expected to accept this legacy, but Manet was to show that one of the most cherished beliefs of the 19th century had to be re-examined - that is: that history was the record of man's progress. Charles Dickens, in one of his few art-critical writings, lambasted the Pre-Raphaelites precisely because they had reverted to a pre-Raphael style and thus disavowed progress.

*The Smoker* is confined to a narrow plane at the front of the picture. The grayish atmosphere, while suggesting space, does not simulate it; rather it reads as an almost abstract plane and as such serves as a foil for the figure. Resultant focus on the figure, rather than on its relationship to its setting is completely in accord with the 19th century vision which is characterized generally by a greater sensitivity to objects than to space. He is placed in the frontal plane and rendered by heavily applied paint.

The pose is disarmingly simple, also contributing to the modernity of the picture. There are no contrasting directions - such as torsion and foreshortening - so that movement is avoided. Rather, this smoker sits as if for his photograph, and the use of props to stabilize the figure - table and pipe - borrowed from photography which was still new.

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The pose contributes to the modernity of the work in another way: to see a picture as a surface is to experience it in a very modern way, and thus, what we encounter in *The Smoker* is an uncanny and prophetic sense for the kind of 2-D design which was to become the basic predicate of 20th C. painting.

Encountering this painting today - at least initially - is not its innovative qualities but its old masterliness, which is an intrinsic feature of it and as essential to Manet's aesthetic as his reduced modeling.

### **Questions:**

1. What seems modern about this painting?
2. What seems more traditional about this painting?
3. Manet was influenced by the recent invention of photography: what is and what is not photographic about this portrait?

### **Resources:**

ArtsConnected  
Object Files  
History of Art texts