

## Manet: A fictitious account of the woman in Bar of the Folies-Bergère

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Who are the people we encounter in paintings? Why should we care about them? Painters may serve the same function as historical documentarians or narrators of fictional characters. Such is the evocative power of visual art. For this paper, I analyze the female characters in the painting, *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882, Fig 1) by Edouard Manet. Although my principle concern is with the woman behind the bar, I also touch on the other female characters within the painting. In doing this, and examining the iconography within the painting, I discover the general roles of women within the social culture in France at the time the picture was executed. In addition, I have composed a series of monologues spoken by the woman at the bar and inserted them throughout the paper. The purpose of this is to evoke a sense of what she may have said to Manet while he painted. Manet is prompting her to speak, but we do not see or hear him. Only the barmaid responds to his questions. The monologue will be inserted throughout the paper. Thus, we may provide conjecture as to the real character of the barmaid and deduce whether Manet represented her appropriately or not.

Edouard Manet was born in Paris, 23 January 1832, and died fifty-one years lat-

er.<sup>1</sup> Manet believed in making an impression and a statement with his art. He did not come from an artistic family. His father, a highly placed official at the Ministry of Justice, was against Manet becoming a painter. With his middle-class upbringing, Manet was surrounded by a judicial bourgeoisie [2]. He was a cultured youth who was raised to be liberal-minded. His work often provoked scandal, especially with regards to his *Olympia* (1863) and *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863). Manet was regarded as a wise rebel as well as the father of realism: “Manet painted what he saw, apparently without discrimination; but he saw what he expected to see, what he was on the look-out for, what he loved” [3]. Manet was a man of the epoch and this is why he is considered the “painter of modern life” [4].

Late nineteenth-century painting was about what was popular, which applied to people, manners and entertainment [5]. It was very popular to attend café concert halls such as the Folies-Bergère, one of the trendiest nightspots in Paris during the nineteenth-century. The Folies-Bergère was a beer-hall with music, circus acts, and other entertainments besides: “The Folies-Bergère [...where] visitors take seats where they please, or promenade in the galleries, while musical, dramatic, and conjuring performances are given on stage. Smoking is allowed...” [6] The painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* was first exhibited in the salon of 1882, and was one of Manet’s last major works [7]. This is a modern painting because of its contemporary subject matter, mainly illustrating the social life that was considered popular. Specific things that were considered popular were trapeze acts (such as is visible in the mirror of *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*), which were considered the latest entertainment of the time [8].

The principle character in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is the barmaid situated at the center of the canvas. Through recollections by Manet’s friends, it was discovered that the girl at the bar is named Suzon [9]. Suzon is a young, fashionable female of the era. She has a voluptuous body and is dressed in tight fitting attire making her look older than her age. She has a nice round fresh face and is most probably employed by dint of her appealing appearance; tempting customers to approach and buy drinks from her. Her look is absent, weary, dispirited and, because of her outward gaze, she manages to intrigue the viewer.

*Véronique. No, you’re mistaken, everyone here knows me as Véronique.*

*Suzon? No, no...Will you write that on the painting?*

*Twenty-two...*

*(seductively) I'm working to become an actress...I'll be famous...My name will be popular...(whispers) Tell me, I need to know, what makes you want to paint me?*

**Beat**

*(disappointed) Oh. Is that it?*

**Beat**

*Refreshment?*

This is a very lively painting with plenty of action and energy even though Suzon looks as if she is tired, bored or both. Perhaps she has been working a long shift: "...[S]he creates her own spectacle, a form of self-entertainment that momentarily emancipates her from the job and perhaps gives her a sense of superiority to the crowd through her imaginative control..." [10] She has something on her mind. She does not look like she wants to be there, or perhaps to be standing behind the counter while the lively scene unfolds before her. Nonetheless, she is ready and alert and all about business.

*Tired? Bored? (laughs) With all this action and glamour?*

*The café is so big, one can get lost with amongst these people.*

**Beat**

*Make sure your patrons see the painting. It's good for publicity.*

*(pouts) oui ou non?*

*(the trapeze act attracts her attention)*

*That's Olga, she is doing a special performance tonight. You should watch.*

**Beat**

*I call her Olga. I have a special name for everyone.*

*(laughs) Yes, but you don't work here. Why don't you watch?*

*(looks behind her)*

*What are you staring at?*

*(notices Olga's reflection)*

*...Oh. You do see Olga.*

*(frowns) Are you painting Olga and me...at the same time? And here I thought I will be able to show off the painting to others...*

*Well, the more women, the better.*

*(shrugs) I agree!*

*(looks out at Olga)*

*I hope she doesn't fall this time.*

*Refreshment?*

Suzon stands behind the bar, like a firm-rooted saleswoman with her hands decidedly placed on the marble counter, her arms open, waiting to receive, despite her facial expression being so stoical. She is interacting with the viewers. Her attitude encourages the viewers to probe deeper visually. Her body language informs the client that she is at his service. She is in control and knows how to handle herself, and how to address a client when the occasion arrives. Her gaze is neither seductive nor flirtatious. Suzon knows what her job consists of, “like the beverages for sale, she has become a commodity.” The marble counter has bottles of champagne, Bass Ale, crème de menthe, compote with mandarin oranges and roses in a glass. Suzon’s attire is store-bought finery, a product of optical and economical consumption, becoming an object like the bottles on the counter.<sup>11</sup> The woman performing the trapeze act is likewise a commodity. The spectators do not seem to be paying much attention to her, but she is meant to please and entertain those who do take an interest.

Everything about Suzon and her surroundings suggests vanity. The combination of the mirror reflection, the flowers, and the worldliness of the place are standard features of the iconography of vanitas paintings, or remembrances of mortality [12]. Suzon is wearing a locket and what looks to be a corsage on the front of her navy blue coat.

*(places her hand over her locket)*

*This? Why, I always wear it. Important...? Jewellery is always valuable...*

*Only thing that doesn't lose value...not like these flowers and...*

*Things are prettier when they are valuable.*

*But, I don't own many things of value, nor do I need them.*

*In time, I will be able to purchase what I wish, if I wish.*

However, Suzon does not appear affected by her surroundings. She gives the impression that everything is futile and meaningless. Her expression is resistant, as if she were wearing a protective mask shielding her from potential humiliation and disillusionment [13]. There is no disillusionment for Suzon, she knows her job and that her youthfulness and sexual appeal are conditional and that she is a “representative of the enchanting life” [14] The enchantment in the painting describes a rather superficial aspect and not that which is real and important.

*Everyone is always having a good time. You never see them enjoy themselves like this*

*outside. Their different here, they treat me differently. There's so much glitter...*

What is real in this painting and what is presented realistically? It is affirmed that Suzon is surrounded by realistic objects pertaining to her work environment. But what about discrepancies such as the magnitude of the same bottles placed on the counter. Champagne bottles should be chilled unless of course they are empty and meant selection. The mirror doubles the objects in its reflection, highlighting the nature of mass production, and the sale of goods [15]. “[...]the guiding principle of modern display in department stores...was to make the merchandise accessible and close to the consumer senses” [16]. Manet is showing the importance of commodity and how highly it is held within the culture. It is very telling of the owners’ marketing tactics that the bottles are placed on the bar, and that service is offered by an attractive young woman. A broad variety of bottles exemplify that the café-bar is a gathering place for diverse people, from all social classes, all partaking of the same products offered for sale [17].

*Work where there is most demand. No sense any other way.*

*I have yet to be discovered so...I know nothing more or better than this job.*

*Need the money.*

*And, of course, there is the pleasure of serving people like you.*

***Beat***

*I've done other work, a little here and there. There is not much selection.*

I already mentioned above that Suzon is solid and real, along with the objects near her atop the bar. But the world before her only exists within the bar at night. The Folies-Bergère, with all of its glitter, entertainment and décor, will be empty, and the crowds gone, like the beverages in the bottles, at the end of the night.

Behind Suzon is a gilt-framed mirror offering a reflection of the concert hall: “Mirrors, always popular in the décor of Parisian theatres and Parisian public life generally, lined the perimeter walls including the balcony level, where Manet has depicted his refreshment alcove [...] The mirrors of the Folies were an integral feature of its ambience, mentioned often in contemporary texts [...], tall mirrors’ behind the women working the refreshment counters reflected their backs and the faces of the passers-by.” Manet manages to seduce with the mirror, which serves to reveal the elements of enchantment and fantasy: “By

aligning the counter and the mirror with the picture plane, the canvas almost pretends to be a reflection of our world, with the barmaid negotiating the interval between the fictional and actual realms” [18].

What about the notion of disillusionment? In this case, the mirror has become a source of revealing and distorting images particularly concerning the barmaid: “She appears as a signboard advertisement for the bar and its wares, also a sort of cut-out figure, an insert between the two domains of counter and mirror, flatter than anything else before, behind or around her” [19]. Suzon is plumper in her reflection, making us question whether it is still her or someone else. But what about the action illustrated in the reflection? Who is the mystery man with the top hat? He is a well-dressed man visible only as a reflection. Perhaps he has softened Suzon with his charm, thus explaining her sudden warm demeanour. Perhaps this man is an employee and not a customer of the café.

*There is no relationship on my part. Some men do not recall me,  
everything will be an illusion in their head. The night is about expressions,  
the moment, a phase, gone the next day and tried again the next night...  
I don't have to worry about being remembered...*

### **Beat**

*(dreamy) Ahh, but to be remembered for a performance is something different.  
The lights will be on me...  
There is something magical. Do you not agree?*

Suzon's demeanour turns from cool to receptive once she serves the mystery man. Thus, her reflection reveals two aspects of Suzon's personality. This duality can be understood as the feminine duality, between sex-object and nurturer. In the direct view of Suzon, she is alluring, seductive, and aloof. Manet places her importance as saleslady above that of caregiver.

Aside from Suzon's beautiful dress, nicely coiffed hair, the lights, mirrors and entertainment, her appearance is not explicitly sexual. The roses in the painting, which have been referred to as symbols of love and beauty, give a personal touch to the scene. The fruits, traditionally symbols of fertility and sensual pleasure, surreptitiously seduce the café's patrons [21]. Hence, fruits and flowers are items which highlight the dual roles of women, based upon their repertoire of domestic life: “ [They] fulfill a decorative purpose, connoting, along with the image of woman near them, an older regime of domesticity deployed to pro-

mote sales” [22]. Their presence highlights the nurturing character associated with mothers and wives, making women ideal for working in sales. By offering concern and aid to her clients, her service to the café’s clientele reflects that which she extends to her personal family. Inevitably, we witness Suzon accommodating the needs of her male clients.

*If I have served you before, then I remember what you like to drink.*

*It is not a ploy for the job. I like the clients...*

In France, women from different social classes were easy to distinguish. At the time the painting was executed, women were becoming economically independent and involved in the public sphere as workers. Wage-earning women came from the lower classes and worked outside the home. Other class distinctions involved women of the bourgeoisie. The petit-bourgeoisie were those who predominantly frequented the department stores and fashionable entertainment spots [24]. Manet depicts these women in *A Bar at the Folie-Bergère*.

One of these women is shown looking through opera glasses. Her action is, in itself, unusual. Nineteenth-century etiquette required that women avert their gaze: “Women must avoid looking people in the eye, especially men [...] this would be the mark of incivility and impudence” [25]. A woman’s image and reputation could easily become tarnished if she did not comport herself accordingly. With regards to Suzon, what class of woman is she? One would speculate that she is a lower class wage earner. Furthermore, we are inclined to assume she is a courtesan, especially in the way Manet has portrayed her staring directly into public, both within and beyond the painting. Only courtesans took such liberties in exercising bold gazes [26]. On the other hand, perhaps the bar is not such an egregious establishment if upper-class women are depicted frequenting the place and committing the same transgression as Suzon by openly viewing their surroundings.

*I watch out for myself, always have.*

*I set the rules and boundaries, if any.*

**Beat**

*What about the other barmaids? What, you want to paint more girls?*

**Beat**

*Friends? Here? Well, I have my name for them...always have good times.*

*Some female clients are nice, but it depends upon the person.*

*You get to meet a variety of people. I managed to allow some acquaintances of mine to get a seat on the balcony. Their good girls... they have their regular spot.*

The two fashionable women are both looking out into the crowd. Their gazes are neither provocative or sexual. Suzon's gaze is similar, except that her employment requires her to boldly look at her patrons. The underlying difference between the two classes of women is that one is there for pleasure, and the other is there for work.

Manet has included an entertainer in the painting. The trapeze woman is famous and hard at work, but the spectators take no notice. We see this inattention through the aid of a mirror. The patrons are more concerned with being noticed in fashionable company than the actual performance.

Manet depicts wealth, class and the fashionable life. Suzon has the mirror behind her which refers to vanity. However, rather than look at her own reflection, Suzon gazes towards the viewer. This painting is an illustration of the female gender becoming more powerful in France: "Female roles predominate in the painting: the pyramid of brightly attired ladies in the gallery who observe the entertainment, the trapeze artist who provides it, and the monumental barmaid..." [27] In control, Suzon refuses to yield her gaze. She does not appear helpless.

The painting is an honest depiction of a young girl in her working environment. Women of Suzon's occupation were pitied by people who viewed them as "victims of their elevated position, particularly those who worked in the cafés." Moreover, women who worked in the cafés "grew old quickly because [they] had not only to suffer the fatigue of [their] employment, but also the inopportune advances of employer and customer" [28].

*I know what people think...No matter where you work, whether in a boutique or here, we are exposed to the same thing. Why imagine, I've heard that actresses have a bad reputation. (pouts) Unfortunately, I will always be bad.*

While Manet's depiction of the barmaid remains vulnerable to public scrutiny, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* may well be a criticism of the way society expects its women to function according to the types of professions available to them. With resignation replacing submissiveness, the barmaid at the Folies-

Bergère emerges as a self-conscious individual. Far from a mere object of the gaze, she stands, cognizant of her role, and ready to serve the next customer. She and the other women like her exist in this immediate environment. While the seduction of beauty, and, in particular, a woman's beauty, has long been exploited as a tool for making profit, what is unusual about *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is the way in which the object being commodified appears aware of this fact. If she does not meet our gaze, it is because we come to her as strangers to her narrative:

*I don't plan on staying here long, I'm an actress, remember.*

*But it is alright now. If I didn't work here, I'd be coming here for the shows, just like you.*

Figure 1. Manet, Edouard. *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882). Oil on canvas. The Samuel Courtauld Trust, Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London.

## Endnotes

1. Françoise Cachin, Charles S. Moffet, & Michel Melot, *Manet 1832-1883* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983) 478.

2. Françoise Cachin, *Manet: The Influence of the Modern* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995) 12.

3. Novelene Ross, *Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère: and the Myths of Popular Illustration* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982) 15.

4. Ross, 33.

5. T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1984) 205.

6. Clark, 244.

7. Ross, 1.

8. Ross, 77.

9. Cachin, et al., 478.

10. Richard Shiff, "Introduction," *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, Bradford R. Collins et al., eds., (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996) 64.
11. Shiff et al., 39.
12. Shiff, 172.
13. Albert Boime, "Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergere* as an Allegory of Nostalgia\*," *Zeitschrift fur Kunstgeschichte* (February 1993): 242.
14. Ross, 85.
15. Shiff et al., 27.
16. Ruth E. Iskin, "Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergere*," *Art Bulletin* (March 1995): 29.
17. Shiff et al., 165.
18. Boime, 235.
19. Shiff et al., 40.
20. Iskin, 29.
21. Shiff et al., 119 & 172.
22. Iskin, 27.
23. Ross, 84.
24. Iskin, 35.
25. Iskin, 37.
26. Iskin, 37.
27. Boime, 242.

