Theme 4: Picasso and the Avant-Garde

Lesson 2: The First Avant-Garde

Part 1

In May 1863 a group of painters were given a show in Paris in direct opposition to the show at the academy. Their work had, in fact, been rejected by the official exposition. The self-styled emperor of France, Napoleon III, called the counter exhibit the Salon des Refusés: the Show of the Rejects. Not only was the action scandalous for its time; it also became quite a popular Sunday attraction. In the conventional reading of art history, the show proved so popular because the painting there was far superior to the academy’s choices: pictures at the Salon des Refusés were progressive, pioneering, energetic, full of life and passion, while the academic works were viewed as dull, formulaic, and stuck in dead traditions.

Yet according to newspaper accounts of the time, it would seem that the majority of visitors went to the Salon des Refusés not to admire, but to laugh at the paintings. Of course, the victors write history, and with the benefit of hindsight art historians consider the Salon des Refusés as the birthday of the avant-garde. Read such an account by Jim Lane on the Humanities Web. Although the article mentions Gustave Courbet as the leader of the rejected group, be aware that Courbet’s paintings were also rejected by the Rejects, which must have added insult to injury.

A quick look at the Internet reveals that even today many artists routinely exhibit their works in a self-proclaimed Salon des Refusés. By laying claim to the name, they are also claiming the fame that some painters in the original Salon des Refusés of 1863 eventually garnered for themselves. It is as if to say: You may not like us, but History will vindicate us. See, for example, the series of Internet articles under the Salon des Refusés Atlantique Press, which frame the debate in terms such as the following:

The idea of the salon dates back to 1863, when artists like Cezanne and Monet were declined entry into the art shows of their contemporaries because their work wasn’t judged to be appropriate. They opened the first Salon des Refuses in response, and, needless to say, it wound up bigger and better than the shows that had denied them. So Grant and May and the other film festival "rejects" are in good company.

Although Courbet gets much of the credit—or blame—for launching the first avant-garde movement, his absence from the Salon des Refusés allowed other painters to rush into the front lines of the battle. The most influential among the

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1 See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 315–320.
rejects would prove to be Édouard Manet (1832–1883)\(^2\) and Paul Cezanne (1839–1905).\(^3\)

\(^2\) See *Great Masters of Western Art*, pages 339–344.
\(^3\) See *Great Masters of Western Art*, pages 369–374.
Part 2
The most outrageous painting of the entire Salon des Refusés in 1863 was the **Lunch on the Grass** or **Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe**, which looks more like a picnic (below). Even the Emperor condemned it as offensive. Although the pose of the figures can be traced back through Raphael and the Renaissance to a Roman sarcophagus from the third century, the treatment of the theme, like the handling of the paint, ran counter to accepted academic practices. The group in the foreground is not only naturalistic—that is, intended to create the illusion of real objects in space—but also realistic, in that the men are dressed in the latest fashion for their time; the discarded dress of the woman is also the latest rage in Paris fashion. In other words, there is nothing mythological, allegorical, or idealized about them: they are as candid as a group of picnic goers in a snapshot. Even the title offers no loftier interpretation. The woman is as confrontational as Goya’s **Naked Maja**, a painting Manet admired. Has she no modesty? A real naked woman, cool and brazen and unashamed, sitting with two clothed men on a picnic in the park would surely bring down the police in 1863.

Consider also the painting style, which seems abrupt and even violent in comparison to polished and professional academic standards. The **Turkish Bath**, painted by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867)⁴ only a year before the **Lunch on the Grass**, is certainly more fleshy than Manet’s image. In fact, the flesh tones are far more delicate, warm, lifelike, and sensual than anything in **Lunch on the Grass**. Thematically, the quantity of naked flesh is unobjectionable according to academic canons because the bodies are so idealized, unreal, and the whole scene is dreamy and exotic: this is, after all, a fashionable view of oriental luxury and decadence. The painting style is smoothly academic. The sun beams down from the left to fall like a spotlight on the lute-playing woman’s head and shoulder. The colors shift in subtle gradations suggesting warm dense air—late afternoon?—and the languorous steam from hot baths. Every woman strikes a different pose, and not one of them seems as frank, natural, and—well—unposed as the naked model in Manet’s painting, who turns the crinkly, dirty sole of her decidedly unclassical foot towards us. Furthermore, if we studying a larger reproduction of the **Turkish Bath**, we find in the small details that nearly photographic handling of light and texture perfected in the Northern Renaissance by painters like Van Eyck to enhance the naturalistic illusion of the picture plane. In Manet, it is difficult just to untangle visually the blue cloth into the shape of a dress.

Furthermore, Manet uses much broader and abstract swatches of color. He juxtaposes flat areas of dark against flat areas of light: consider the contrast between the naked woman and the shadowy foliage behind her head. The background woman frolicking in the pond—her pose imitating a classical Venus rising from the sea—hardly seems part of the scene at all, as if she were painted on a curtain behind the group in the foreground. Not surprisingly, Manet painted

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⁴ See *Great Masters of Western Art*, pages 279–284.
this image in his studio, and the whole landscape, from grass to leaf, looks theatrically artificial.

Although it may seem tame and perhaps even quaint to us here in the twenty-first century, this is a revolutionary painting. Janson explains:

The *Luncheon*, as a visual manifesto of artistic freedom, [...] asserts the painter’s privilege to combine whatever elements he pleases for aesthetic effect alone. The nudity of the model is “explained” by the contrast between her warm, creamy flesh tones and the cool black-and-gray of the men’s attire. Or, to put it another way, the world of painting has “natural laws” that are distinct from those of familiar reality, and the painter’s first loyalty is to his canvas, not to the outside world. Here begins an attitude that was later summed up in the doctrine of Art for Art’s Sake, and became a bone of contention between progressives and conservatives for the rest of the century. Manet himself disdained such controversies, but his work attests his lifelong devotion to “pure painting”—to the belief that brush strokes and color patches themselves, not what they stand for, are the artist’s primary reality. Among painters of the past, he found that Hals, Velázquez, and Goya had come closest to this ideal. He admired their broad, open technique, their preoccupation with light and color values. Many of his canvases are, in fact, “pictures of pictures”—they translate into modern terms those older works that particularly challenged him. Yet he always took care to filter out the expressive or symbolic content of his models, lest the beholder’s attention be distracted from the pictorial structure itself. His paintings, whatever their subject, have an emotional reticence that can easily be mistaken for emptiness unless we understand its purpose.5

It is well worthwhile to ponder some of these assertions, and to bear them in mind when we consider the later avant-garde. We cannot understand what so-called modern art claims to do without taking the following into consideration:

- painting (and thus art) has “natural laws” distinct from those of familiar visual reality
- brush strokes and color patches, rather than what they stand for, are the primary reality of painting (and thus art)
- the painter’s first loyalty is to his canvas, not to the outside world (including the viewer), all of which will inevitably lead to an ideological shift, a new paradigm or world-view of art and artists:
  - the right to paint for aesthetic effect alone
  - the elimination of representational content—especially emotive content—to focus attention on the pictorial structure itself

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o in other words, pure painting
o the doctrine of Art for Art's Sake

It must be borne in mind, however, that nothing was so neatly laid out at the end of the nineteenth century as Janson has expressed it here. These painters were groping along, experimenting, searching for something they could not yet name.
Part 3
Michael Fried is a professor of art, an influential art historian, and a poet who on occasion combines all his influences into a single work. The following poem comes on the heels of a new edition of his seminal work *Manet’s Modernism: or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*. An ekphrastic text, in poetic form or otherwise, bears special scrutiny, since he makes his living by analyzing visual images in words. Whether or not the resulting text works as poetry, readers must decide for themselves. “Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe” has to do with Manet’s revolutionary painting of the same name.

The bullfinch poses in mid-flight,
like the Holy Ghost, above the picnickers.

In a pool in the middle distance a woman
wearing a shift seems, I repeat seems, to be douching herself.

The other woman, naked, seated on the grass
and twisting her rubbery neck to look at us, is no beauty. But try to ignore her.

In contrast the men are expendable. There is nothing going on in their heads, their gestures are vacuous, their wide-open eyes gleam meaninglessly.

Only their brilliant accoutrements reward our attention, especially the clay-gray trousers, miniature cane, rose cravat, and black pillbox cap of the type on the right.

In the lower left corner an angry calligraphic frog wonders why these stilted Parisian nobodies have invaded his bright green woodland world.

It was a moment in the history of the art of painting when the weight of the broken water rushing out to sea exactly counterbalanced the force of the waves rushing in.

No matter how hard we try, we cannot imagine actually entering that space, eating that food, breathing that nonexistent air.

When at the age of eighteen I first stood staring and breathless in the Jeu de Paume what most astounded me was that the paint appeared still wet.\(^6\)