

Part 5

You are going to read an article about the 19th century French painter, Edouard Manet. For questions 31–36, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think fits best according to the text. Mark your answers on the separate answer sheet.

Manet: Portraying Life

A new exhibition of portraits by the great French painter, Manet

It is probably fair to say that Manet is not associated with the idea of penetrating portraiture. Although he used models as well as friends and insisted on painting only from prolonged, frequent sittings, it wasn't to dig deep into the psyche of his subjects, but to comment on their place through their appearance. All Manet's works were an assault. All, except for the flower paintings so derided by modern curators, were efforts to catch something of the contemporary world about him.

Very few of Manet's extensive output of portraits were commissioned. As the son of wealthy parents, he didn't need to earn his crust this way. Instead he painted his family, particularly his wife, the Dutch-born Suzanne Leenhoff, and her son, Léon, friends from among his wide circle of cultural contacts and professional models. What was it that he was seeking from these pictures? The simplest answer is 'realism', the observation of what was new and contemporary, which his mentor, the poet and critic Charles Baudelaire, proclaimed as the true test of modern art. Realism meant not just painting accurately from life, but stripping art of all the connotations of moral lesson and monumentality found in traditional art. Its heroes would become the man about town, the observer, the dandy.

But realism in portraiture for Manet was never merely a matter of recording the face and figure with verisimilitude. 'I cannot do anything without the model,' declared Manet. 'I do not know how to invent ... If I amount to anything today, I put it down to precise interpretation and faithful analysis.' But it was the 'interpretation' and 'analysis' that made him so different. With men it was to convey what they meant for the world about them. His portrait of Zacharie Astruc, the writer and critic who had done much to support him in his early years, is divided into two parts. On the right, Astruc sits somewhat pompously, his hand thrust into his jacket, while to the left is seen his wife in the kitchen, along with the symbols of the domestic life which underpins him. The portrait of Emile Zola, another great supporter, arranges the novelist with the attributes of his art criticism, an open book on Spanish art in his hand and a Japanese print above his desk.

With women it is quite different. Manet was clearly entranced by them, soaking up their vivacity, admiring their poise and revelling in a pretty face. It doesn't appear to have been predatory. Indeed the most touching pictures in the exhibition remain those of his wife, whom he painted more often and for longer than any other sitter; she is depicted at the piano, stroking the cat, resting in the conservatory. The plump and humorous face is always done with fondness, the background painted with quick, fleeting brushstrokes that envelop the sitter in the flowers around her or the dress she is wearing.

For Manet, dress was an assertion of modernity, a way of depicting the modern bourgeois woman who was emerging from the constraints of an aristocratic past. But, going round these galleries, it is difficult not to believe that he thought women the better, or at least the more life-enhancing, of the species. It is noticeable that in almost all the portraits of couples or couples with children – in the rather touching portrait of *The Monet Family in Their Garden at Argenteuil* and *In the Garden* of 1870 – it is the women who take the foremost role. It's more than their attractions and the dress; it's that Manet looks on them as the future more than the men in the background.

In Manet's portraiture, the parts don't add up to a whole. His efforts to start each picture anew don't make for an easy synthesis and, as such, gallery curators struggle to categorise them. A gathering of these varied and sometimes uneven works can't express all of the man. For that you really do need his bigger set pieces. This exhibition is not a gathering of masterpieces. Nor is it a comprehensive showing of his portraiture, given the paucity of the borrowings from France. But what you have is the outpouring of one of the towering geniuses of art who stood each time before his canvas with a subject, thought and thought about what he wanted to say and then worked to express it. Forget the whole, just look at the individual works and feel the mind behind them.

- 31 How does the writer say Manet's portraiture differed from that found in traditional art?
- A It was less commercial in style.
 - B It demonstrated superior technical ability.
 - C It was non-judgemental in approach.
 - D It showed the influence of a literary movement.
- 32 According to the writer, Manet believed he was successful because he
- A had worked with the right people.
 - B tried to convey his ideas accurately.
 - C could see his subjects as they saw themselves.
 - D was capable of highly life-like portraits.
- 33 References to the portraits of Astruc and Zola suggest Manet's
- A disdain for self-important men.
 - B belief in the importance of context.
 - C idea that nobody is beyond criticism.
 - D view that all men are basically the same.
- 34 What do Manet's paintings of his wife show the viewer?
- A the way he felt about women in general
 - B the important role his wife played in furthering his career
 - C the variety of locations in which he enjoyed painting
 - D the ability he had to capture the appearance of a sitter
- 35 Why does the writer think that Manet's portraits are problematic for gallery curators?
- A There is no common element running through them.
 - B They are not sufficiently consistent in style.
 - C They do not represent the true man behind them.
 - D There are no truly outstanding pieces among them.
- 36 What does the writer conclude about the exhibition?
- A It tells us more about Manet than is obvious at first sight.
 - B It gives an insight into the total commitment of a great painter.
 - C It provides some serious challenges for the viewer.
 - D It proves that art cannot be appreciated without understanding the artist.