

Gonzalès - Manet

The three self-portraits

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Let me start with some questions I received on the first paper, as these questions are relevant to this paper.

I was asked whether, in the end, we should consider the Manet painting only to be an homage to his (to-be) former student and as a framework for Gonzalès to interact with him.

I don't think so. It is much more likely that Manet initially wanted to create, once again, an enigmatic, provocative work of art, possibly / probably critical of society towards women artists.

We shouldn't forget that the intriguing face and appearance of Gonzalès is very suitable for such a painting and that he started working on the painting straight away.

It took Manet months to complete the painting and it was only during this lengthy period that he began to understand his model and recognise the (still partly hidden) great talents, skills, power of comprehension and sensitivity of his pupil. Perhaps we might even say that Manet progressively felt that he had discovered his alter ego.

This awareness made it far more challenging for him to find the right answers. How to teach, 'protect', incite and 'instruct' his talented pupil and still produce an enigmatic, provocative work of art. A work of art that could well be misinterpreted once again ?

From that moment his real problem was to strike the right balance between all these objectives and to embed and combine the different elements in one painting.

This brings me to another question I received: 'Why is the order of events perfectly in line with the letters Morisot wrote ?'.

The letters of Morisot (Janalee Emmer, p.97) tell us that Morisot changed her mind a couple of times (dislike - like - dislike) and that all her criticism was related to - was focussed exclusively on - the head of Gonzalès. Apparently, one or two more realistic achievements, among the numerous versions of the head, were to her liking.

Her letters demonstrate that she wasn't aware of the underlying intentions of Manet, so she must have thought that he wanted to create a (more or less) faithful representation of Gonzalès head.

Manet, on the other hand, surely must have noticed that a faithful representation of the Gonzalès head significantly weakened and undermined the enigmatic, general character of his painting.

And even worse, such a painting (in that setting) could well be regarded as a direct insult to his young pupil and offensive to women artists in general. This would mean exactly the opposite of what he was trying to achieve.

His problem was not that he was unable to capture the visage of Gonzalès; his problem was to

determine which visage was the most appropriate for this very unusual work of art.

A faithful representation of the head was thus not possible. And the exact opposite, a fictive head, would make the painting a rather silly representation of an amateur artist and so, once again, offensive to women artists in general. And, of course, such a work would no longer be a portrait of - an homage to - his (to-be) former student.

As said before in the previous paper, Manet's solution to his problem was a touch of genius and courage.

By omitting all visible character elements of his pupil and model, he created not only the framework for Gonzalès to interact and to open a dialogue with him by means of a painting, but, in doing so, he also created a work of art far more enigmatic and provocative than he initially had in mind.

Far more enigmatic and provocative because her incomplete head became older but otherwise more or less ageless.

This created and provoked of course all sorts of comments, interpretations and criticism.

In the broader, general context, the unfinished Gonzalès head without the character elements, can and should be seen as constructively critical of women artists and as an advice to them, to work on - and discover - their own individuality / personality as a woman and as an artist, as this is the only way to distinguish themselves and to be successful as an artist.

Thus, the incomplete Gonzalès head is a metaphor for what women artists still need to do / the task that lies ahead of them. The staged scene is a metaphor for conditions and restrictions imposed by society on them (for instance the dress), but also a metaphor for their (eventual) later social success and perhaps greater freedom (the bare arms ?).

Manet must have sensed, and perhaps foreseen, that critics would be very harsh on him (Janalee Emmer p.100).

However, it's not surprising that, in this case, critics were harsh. Without knowing its background and the underlying thoughts and intentions, it was impossible for them to appreciate and assess the painting.

Unfortunately, 150 years later, and with access to a wide variety of documents, writers, art critics, art historians and curators are still struggling with this highly innovative and fascinating painting, so I'm inclined to say that Manet overestimated their ability to assess his painting.

It seems that at the very least Manet has fully succeeded in one of his aims.

So, let's concentrate on his other objective: His pupil, the person and painter Eva Gonzalès, for she's the one who's going to help us.

As we will see later on, it is almost certain that Manet asked Gonzalès, or better, gave Gonzalès the task, to analyse his painting and to comment on the portrait by means of one or more self-portraits. It is also almost certain that he asked her to concentrate on her identity as an artist and as a person.

As already mentioned in the first paper: This explains perfectly why the Gonzalès family valued Manet's portrait so much.

Between circa 1871 and 1875 Gonzalès produced three self-portraits. Especially the second and third painting may have come as a bit of a shock / a surprise to Manet, as these paintings go far beyond a mere comment by means of a self-portrait.

As indicated in the previous paper, the three Gonzalès paintings are interconnected and respond to - and interact in their own way and also as an ensemble with - the Manet painting.

The first painting, 'La jeune élève' ('L'Artiste occupé à peindre'), comments on the staged, sumptuous setting. 'La jeune élève' seems at first sight rather easy to understand, as the use of metaphors is limited.

Janalee Emmer describes the scene (J.E. p.104) accurately, so there is no need to do this once more. We can add that Gonzalès distances herself completely from Manet's staged scene and shows us the working environment she / an artist really needs and prefers.

However, the deductions relating to the face (J.E. p.105) are today in need of a few additions and corrections.

As emphasised previously: Manet's problem was not that he was unable to capture the face of Gonzalès; his problem was to determine which visage was the most appropriate for that particular painting.

The same applies to Gonzalès. She too was of course skillful enough to complete a face. But her approach (producing more than one self-portrait) allowed her to separate progress, artist (profession) and person and to choose the right moment for each painting.

The painting shows the artist focused on her work. She reveals only one side of her identity: Her wish / her goal to be a serious, professional artist.

Her individuality as an artist and a person / a woman (the undefined / unfinished side of the face) remains, for the time being, hidden for us.

The painting bears indeed a strong resemblance to her appearance, but has been painted in such a way as to ensure that the general nature of her comment on the Manet painting is not affected and well preserved. As such, the painting relates / applies also to women artists in general.

Furthermore, the other title, 'L'Artiste occupé à peindre', implies that the painting she's working on is not yet finished. As the left side of the face is unfinished, this very same painting could be the one on the easel. In that case Gonzalès is telling us (and Manet) that her choice to leave the left side of the face unfinished, was a well-considered decision and that she's still in search of - and working on - her individuality / identity as an artist and as a person / a woman.

This also implies that this 'slightly unfinished looking' painting is a perfectly finished painting.

The second painting, 'Autoportrait'.

In this painting Gonzalès focusus indeed on her identity as a person / a woman.

The Sainsaulieu-de Mons catalogue raisonné reveals (p.142): "Jeanne ayant constamment servi de modèle, Eva s'est probablement portraiturée se donnant quelques traits similaires à ceux de sa soeur. A bien l'examiner, le menton, les oreilles, le regard, sont ceux d'Eva dessinés dans l'ovale du visage de Jeanne".

Then: "Octave de Parisis écrivait en 1885: 'Une seule fois Eva n'a pas bien vu: c'est quand elle s'est peinte. Est-ce donc par une modestie absurde qu'elle a gâté cette admirable figure (...) ?'."

And finally, Sainsaulieu-de Mons explain to us: "Ce n'est pas la modestie, mais sans doute la vérité troublée par l'habitude".

A rather rashly, superficial and premature conclusion, as we shall see.

It's these kind of ill-considered comments that puts you initially on the wrong track and that affect seriously the way in which we assess this ingenious and brilliant painting.

The description of Janalee Emmer (J.E. p.108, 109) is very accurate, but, for some reason, the final logical deduction and logical consequence is missing.

All emphasise the fact that the two sisters were exceptionally close, both accomplished artists etc.etc.. Then there is the pairing of the sisters names and identity (La plante favorite).

Janalee Emmer even speaks of "a harbinger of the way in which their lives and identities would blend, blur, and sometimes become one in the future" (J.E. p.107, 108). Later she elaborates on their strong connection again (p.121 - 123)

But again, for some reason, she doesn't extend her line of thought. It almost seems as if she didn't want to elaborate further on her views out of a sense of professional courtesy towards Sainsaulieu (J.E. p.108, footnote 216).

Anyway, apparently it hasn't come to mind that Gonzalès knew exactly what she was doing and that this self-portrait too, was, just like 'L'Artiste occupé à peindre', very well thought-out.

It is, of course, out of the question that Gonzalès, being very serious, methodical, meticulous / conscientious and gifted when it comes to painting subtle, facial characteristics (for instance 'le Réveil'), would make the sort of mistakes as described by Octave de Paris and Sainsaulieu-de Mons.

The painting is the logical follow-up to 'L'Artiste occupé à peindre'. The portrait is a metaphor for the merging of her individuality and identity with that of her sister. In this manner Gonzalès reveals that her identity and individuality cannot be separated from that of her sister. They are indissolubly bound together.

The face of Gonzalès (the merged sisters) shows not only a 'reserved and circumspect character' (J.E.), but is above all the face of a woman thinking carefully about something or someone (preoccupied, absorbed in thought). Furthermore, the woman seems on her way (the cylinder) to Manet ?

The painting must be seen as her second answer to Manet. Through this portrait she shows her discovered identity as a person / a woman.

Her sister might have contributed to / have participated in the creative process. This could explain why the painting wasn't signed.

The assumption of Janalee Emmer that the painting was meant to be for a private audience (family members (but surely first of all her teacher Manet)) seems very plausible. This explains also why the painting was never exhibited publicly during her lifetime (J.E. p.108).

As said before, this painting and the following self-portrait go far beyond a mere comment by means of a self-portrait.

By means of the cylindrical object in her arms, Gonzalès creates an interesting enigma for Manet. The cylinder could indeed contain her sketches. Or sketches of her sister. Or this very painting.

However, it is far more likely that the cylinder contains the print with the Manet signature (the previous paper, p.2) and should be regarded as an allusion to / a reference to his portrait of her.

In that case this self-portrait should also be interpreted as a signal to Manet that she wants to start working more independently.

Shortly thereafter she created her third self-portrait.

About seven / eight years ago I read the paper <http://www.huichawaii.org/assets/emmer,-janalee---rethinking-self--eva-gonzales-%281849-1883%29-on-her-own.pdf> of Janalee Emmer and noticed that she was wondering how one goes about painting a self-portrait in profile.

I brought to her attention that she had overlooked the circular lines in the upper left corner of the painting and that Gonzalès, in my opinion, wanted to demonstrate in a subtle way how she had created this self-portrait: With the aid of a mirror.

This seemed a logical and plausible, but still a somewhat simple interpretation, so I gave it again a lot of thought and did some research in the French language. Eventually I found the answer.

There is the saying 'the circle is completed'. In French 'La boucle est bouclée' or 'Boucler la boucle'.

Its meaning: 'Finir et faire quelque chose en se retrouvant au même point qu'au départ. Au sens physique, la boucle désigne un parcours, en forme de cercle. Ainsi, on utilise cette expression lorsqu'on réalise un parcours, dont son point de départ sera aussi son point d'arrivée. Au sens figuré, l'expression prend une autre signification. Elle désigne une épreuve ou une tâche que l'on vient de terminer, de finir. Mais au final, on revient au point de départ, comme si on n'avait rien fait'.

<https://www.expressio.fr/expressions/boucler-la-boucle> and

<http://www.linternaute.fr/expression/>

I think that today we may safely conclude that Manet gave Gonzalès the task to respond to his portrait of her and that this self-portrait is the last in this series of three.

In order to understand and assess the interrelation between these four paintings this information is of crucial importance.

By means of this third self-portrait and with the enigma of the circular lines, Gonzalès indicates to Manet that she has found her identity / individuality as an artist and that she considers her mission completed. Gonzalès gives Manet thus a taste of his own medicine !

Her self-portrait is in almost every aspect the opposite of Manet's painting, and very complex. The painting shows a reality in total contradiction with the staged scene, painted by Manet. Manet must have been flabbergasted.

First of all there is the size: The Manet painting measures 191,1 x 133,4 cm; the Gonzalès painting measures 21 x 12,5 cm.

The Gonzalès painting is in sharp contrast with the staged, sumptuous setting of the Manet painting. All objects and other elements are gone. A painting on an easel is lacking. Even the hands holding the palette and brush are absent. And still, we instantly recognize Gonzalès engaged in painting.

Gonzalès has perfectly understood that these sorts of details detract from that what is essential: depict the process and the moment of artistic creation / artmaking.

The large Manet painting shows a head that reveals no significant facial expression or emotion. The head is turned away from the canvas. The face lacks specifics and looks incomplete.

The very small Gonzalès painting shows her in profile. Her face expresses full concentration, but at the same time a (brief) moment of reflection / introspection / hesitation.

Only a few painters are skilled enough to show that many states of mind simultaneously and on such a small canvas.

Manet painted his portrait of Gonzalès in 1869-1870. Gonzalès painted her auto-portrait around 1875. However, Gonzalès seems younger in 1875 than she did in Manet's painting.

As already mentioned, her face, painted the way Manet did, makes her look a little older but otherwise more or less ageless. The portrait was also meant to be an homage to his (to-be) former student.

The choice of Gonzalès to paint the circular lines (la boucle est bouclée) was a stroke of genius. Their meaning tells in fact the whole story of these four paintings and reveals also the answer to this final enigma.

Whereas Manet offers us a glance into her future, Gonzales goes back in time and offers us a glance in the past, and more precisely 1869-1870, the years Manet created his painting.

Boucler la boucle; the circle is completed. In 1875 Gonzalès offers us an image of her in 1869-1870.

(A funny side-note: If today someone were to ask me to put a name to this self-portrait, I'd say 'La jeune élève')

This third and last self-portrait tells us that Gonzalès has found her identity / individuality, which means her independence as an artist.

And, thanks to Gonzalès, the enigmatic Portrait of Mlle E.G. is today far less enigmatic.

I would like to end with a few general comments and an amusing supposition. First the supposition:

Galerie Heim in Basel claims that this painting <https://galerieheim.com/oeuvres/autoportrait-eva-gonzales/> is an 'autoportrait, Vers 1880'; subsequently 'probablement un autoportrait' and 'Une certaine ressemblance physionomique avec le portrait réalisé par Manet et avec un oeuvre conservée dans une collection particulière le confirme'. As provenance is only stated 'Collection privée'. The painting is not signed.

This doesn't give cause for great optimism, but the Galerie states that its authenticity has been confirmed by Sainsaulieu-de Mons, so we have to rely on the expertise of the writers of the Catalogue Raisonné.

Subsequently the painting has been exhibited and presented as 'self-portrait' on several occasions. However, some critics disagree with the attribution 'self-portrait' and argue that the painting is in fact a portrait of Morisot. They point to a ressemblance with Morisot and in particular the eye (strabismus).

I'd like to present a different approach. Let's just assume that it's 100% certain that the painting is the work of Gonzalès.

The painting seems incomplete; the margins are sparsely or not painted and the ear is unfinished.

Manet, and other critics, often criticized Morisot for the unfinished appearance of her paintings, but Morisot didn't want to listen. https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-museums/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more/page/4/article/berthe-morisot-47695.html?S=&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=649&cHash=8f4a35a5fd&print=1&no_cache=1&

In my opinion the painting is a persiflage of the paintings of Morisot. Gonzalès is saying: 'This is the consequence / the outcome when you don't want to listen'.

In that case, the depicted person can only be Morisot (the unfinished ear is of course a metaphor for Morisot not willing to listen). The shape of the unfinished, sealed ear (the external auditory meatus is lacking) supports this hypothesis.

This would imply that this intentionally 'unfinished' painting actually is a perfectly completed painting.

Hilarious, but a little mean; a little mean, but hilarious.

It is my hope that this paper will provide the impetus for a comprehensive rethink and (re)assessment of the **work** of Gonzalès.

This will not be easy, as she frequently (just like her teacher, but in a different manner) makes use of metaphors and/or enigmas. Her ability to show states of mind simultaneously is exceptional, but makes it even harder to interpret and/or 'understand' these paintings.

What sometimes, at first sight, seems to be just a beautiful (or less convincing) painting, can suddenly

or progressively change into something far more complex and interesting.

Working on this paper was a true pleasure.

The four paintings



