

## Shifting Female Identity in Paris: Manet's Altered "Barmaid" in Folies-Bergère as an Allegory (1880s) by LI Ruowei

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With the Second Industrial Revolution triggering overall social transformation in France, Paris, as a capital city of the nineteenth century, provided a panorama of rising petit-bourgeois' popular culture. The term petit-bourgeois characterizes the lower middle class as semi-autonomous and seeking to identify themselves as bourgeois, especially with reference to perceived conventionalism and conservatism. This mass culture, Clark (1999) suggested, was infused with "elusiveness" caused by the latent ideological involvement with class belonging, or in the greater picture, identity fluidity and authentication (205). This kind of subculture was at first restricted to the emerging middle class, characterized by their attachment to the outdoors, hypocritical and even absurd reluctance to face reality, foul language and epicurean motto of "eat, drink, and be merry", then took a remarkable turn to dominate the whole society. In the aspects of art, the Marian Age (1830-1950), labelled by church historians as a period which features the resurgence of the cult of Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary, looms large. Folies Bergère, an institution gaining its reputation and prevalence since 1869 and reaching the pinnacle from the 1890s to 1920s, is still in business today and remains a tactile and visible commemoration of iconic Parisian life. The barmaid Suzon in Manet's iconic painting *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, 1881-82 (Figure 1), was an actual maid who tended bar at Folies Bergère, and was actually hired to *model* in his private studio as the painting progressed. Manet worked on her portrayal more than once. Scholars suspect Suzon as a prominent *Lorette*, which is a term employed to describe a group of women who occupied a partly prestigious social position, enjoyed a bohemian Parisian life, and were supported financially by casual prostitution (Driskel 1996, 155).

Meanwhile, society's perception of women, and their self-perceptions, were also undergoing a notable shift at that time. Edouard Manet, a gifted French painter, after being absorbed in a variety of genres such as realism, and experiencing the daunting climate in response to the encroaching technology, namely the advent of photograph (Stalnaker and Nan 1999; Heilbrun 2009), pioneered numerous controversial Impressionist masterpieces underscoring changing identity and the valuable artistry.



**Figure 1** Edouard Manet, *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère*, 1881-82. Courtauld Institute Galleries, London.

This essay, referring to the assumed prototype of Suzon (Figure 2), explores the information-laden identity Manet was hinting at by modifying the protagonist-barmaid's appearance in that very context. This investigation may be relevant to the concept of feminism and social stratification and mobility in the 1880s. This discussion also explores the modifications to the famous painting made by Manet as shown by the x-ray reconstruction (Figure 3). Through perpendicular and paralleled comparisons, echoing the changing perceptions of women's identity, this essay explores Manet's creation of this underprivileged barmaid as a "rebellious" image with self-awareness and even a distinctive individuality. Ultimately, this essay attempts to rebuke the interpretation of Suzon as epitomizing the atmosphere of consumerism and victimhood in the industry of prostitution.

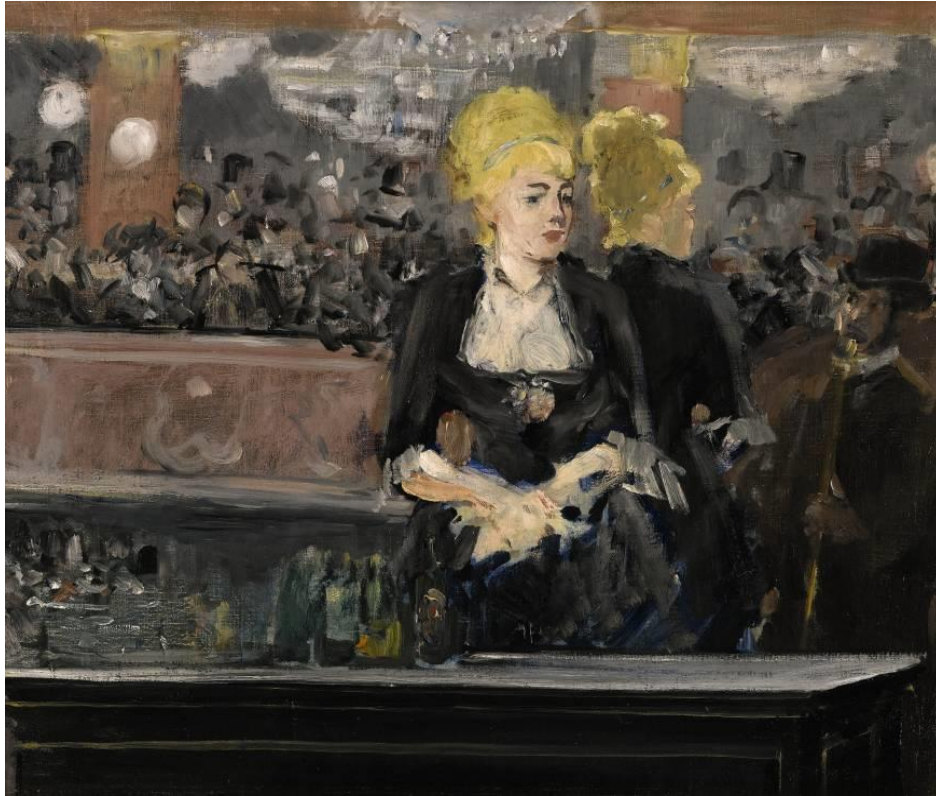


Figure 2 Edouard Manet, *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère*, c.1881. Private Collection.

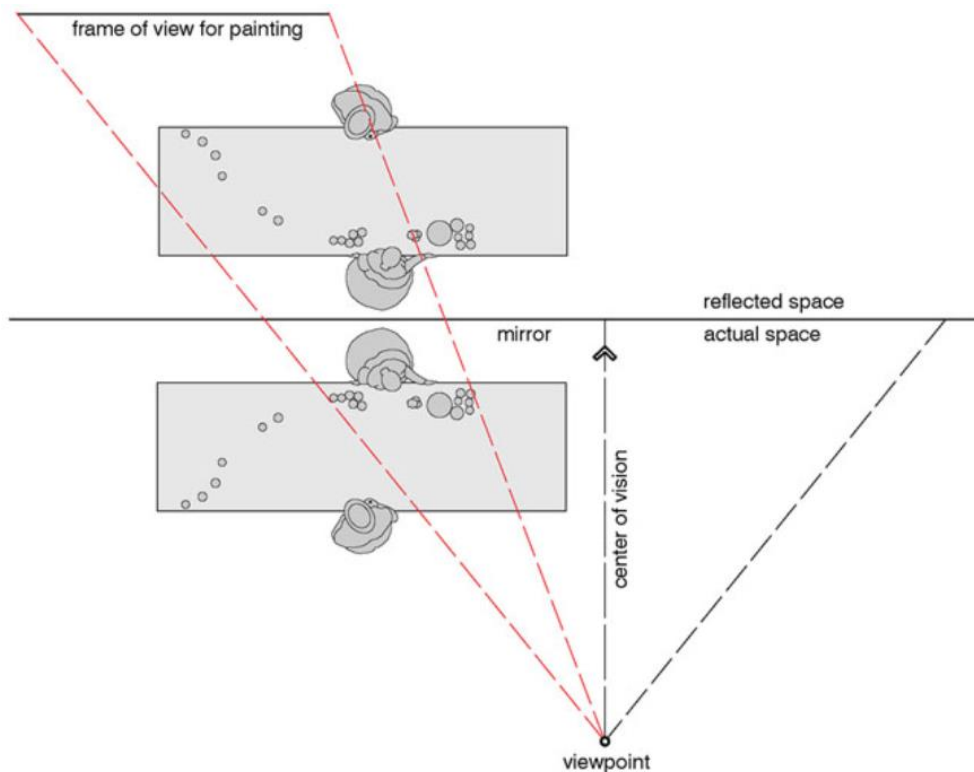


Figure 3 X-Ray photograph of Edouard Manet's *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère*. Courtesy of the Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

## Paradoxes, inconsistencies, and other interpretations

Previous literature on *Un Bar at Folies Bergère* has thoroughly analyzed this great work from numerous aspects. Clark (1999) commented that the “prostitution, electric light...” are all cliché and nondescript, while what makes the painting so special is its “negative terms”, that is, that which renders the realism of the painting impossible (245, 248). The paradoxes demonstrated by the mirror, confirmed by art historians’ technical investigation shown in Diagram 1, are an area of focus in academia, which is more unmeritorious than intriguing. As is put:

The barmaid's reflection does not seem to be where it should be, the reflected images of the bottles on the marble bar do not match their more tangible models. Historians have attacked the problem like sleuths, expecting to find some key to a logical and naturalistic explanation. There is none. (Hanson 1966, 185)

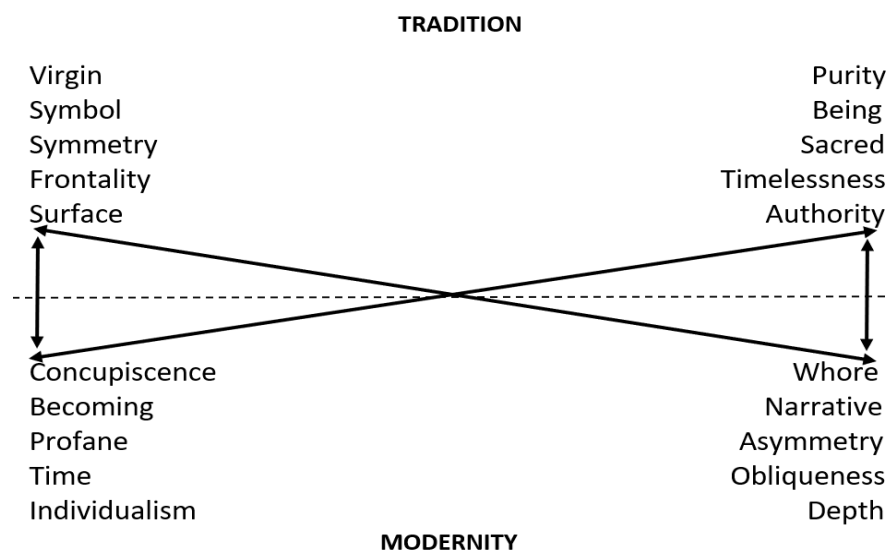


**Diagram 1** Arrangement of the bar and its reflected image, viewed from above, showing the "offset" viewpoint of Manet's *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère*. Computer-generated diagram by Malcolm Park, with the assistance of Darren McKimm. Courtesy of Malcolm Park

Here, however, Herbert’s perception of the design of the “perspectival inconsistencies” borne by the mirror is somehow thought-provoking: the functionality of this design creates a demand for “being satisfied” right before Manet’s violation of conventions becomes transparent (De Duve and Holmes 1998, 141). This point of view bears a resemblance to Clark’s comment that “[Manet] seems to have worked instead to discover and exacerbate inconsistencies in his subject, teasing out the anomalies, letting in the blanks, having them dictate the picture’s order” (Clark 1999, 252). In light of these descriptions that seem to bridge the connection between the idiosyncrasy of the painter and his masterpiece, it seems more natural that:

Manet was sick and tired of critics telling him how to do it "right", how to use perspective and make use of the laws of reflection. Idiots, he called them. ‘I am a camera’ was not his slogan. In that sense, Manet was one of the inventors of modernism. (Bode 2011)

Then, again, we return to my topic of modernity and the primary concern about identity. Hereby, the dichotomy of tradition and modernity as illustrated in Figure 4 by Driskel (1996), which discloses their systematic oppositions and interrelationships, is necessary for us to unlock the word “modernity” contextually.



**Figure 4** Map of dichotomy Tradition/Modernity. Retrieved from “12 Views of Manet’s Bar”, chapter “On Manet’s Binarism: Virgin and/ or Whore at the Folies-Bergère”, p157

Clark (1999) provides readers with a provocative study of the origins of modern art through numerous paintings and focuses on the modernity, which has ushered in the make-believe and uncertainty in modern life, especially in matters of social class. Regarding *Un Bar at Folies Bergère*, he proposes that Suzon's gaze is "steadily" aiming at things which are constraining her subjectivity and giving her this detached appearance, while finally realizing that "they all float by with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money" (Clark 1999, 254). In response to the objectification of the customer, her full-time job in a sense becomes a trap, in which she must display her desirability and perpetuate the illusion that "she is one more such subject which money can buy" (Clark 1999, 254-255). By the same token, Fried (1996) recognizes the discourse that Manet's disconcerting image of the barmaid seems to be "arbitrary encounters of modern life", which, again, suggests that the significance of modernity in this painting (286). Collectively, scholars elaborate that the barmaid is a victim of the era, while the most common female representative of this kind of victim is a prostitute.

The most interesting interpretation of this painting is articulated by Boime (1993). His perception of Manet's nostalgia as described as a "resistance against his current affliction", noting that Manet's incapability to walk when painting the artwork served as techniques for "pathos gaining" (239). This pictorial transference basically associates the controversial artist, his experience and the mental state that he was in with the presentation of the painting. He furthered this thought by implying that Manet was taking advantage of the barmaid's "quotidian role" to "allow for his own subjectivity" and assigning his body to the "woman tending the bar", using alleged transference (Boime 1993, 56, 60). His understanding of the figure of Suzon as Manet creating a "female equivalent" indeed provides concrete evidence of potential room for discussion of and fascination with this distinguished masterpiece (Shiff 1996, 17).

## **The central painting: *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère***

The Impressionist painting *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (Figure 1) was created by Edouard Manet in 1882. The canvas shows the extravagant café-concert nightclub Folies-Bergère in the 1880s. The painter extracted one particular scene to provide a critical glimpse of the transforming Parisian society.

The viewer is first drawn to the barmaid standing behind the marble-topped counter. The blonde-haired woman is dressed and groomed as a perfect “insider” considering the trendy earrings, refined necklace, slender waist, golden bracelet, elegant boutonniere, and her carefully tended full dress decorated with blue lace and tissue-thin textiles. However, her facial expression (Image 1) seems to signify her attitude as a cynical “outsider”: lips stiff, and a dull and seemingly weeping look in her eyes, which projects vacancy, alienation, disillusionment, and a sense of uncertainty of the future ahead. Her arms are depicted as open with hands facing outward, which was quite unusual and considered as “one of the most emotionally, politically, and socially charged signs in nineteenth century of France” (Driskel 1996, 153). Furthermore, it is evident that a mirror, one of the enduring artifacts that many renowned artists fetishize, reflects the female barmaid leaning slightly towards the blurred gentleman client, who features a moustache and outstanding top hat. Her reflected image appears comparatively coy, flirtatious, and can be interpreted even as a hateful objectified figure both sexually and aesthetically. An unprecedented incongruity compared to the portrayal of actuality occurs, followed by a classic metaphor indicative of the double personality adopted by the underprivileged to pander to the upper middle class and to conceal themselves from the thriving petit-bourgeoisie as well as the split double reality “presumably of Manet and other men of his class” (Puchko 2015; Shiff 1996, 12).



**Image 1** Head of Manet’s barmaid

Atop the bar, clementines, a beautiful arrangement of flower blooms along with liqueur decanters and champagne of all sorts of colors shed light on elements of modernity and the exquisite and epicurean night life of the booming middle and upper class. It is noteworthy that the white label on the bottle of red wine at the bottom-left side reads ‘Manet 1882’ (Image 2). This may suggest that just like the luxurious liquor, this painting itself is expendable and subject to being “consumed” by viewers in the era of growing consumerism (Iskin 1995, 27).



**Image 2** Liquor depicted in *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère*

Turning to the bar patrons depicted, only three female figures appear who wear gloves and fashionable wide-brim hats, while the rest of the crowd is obscured to such an extent that a large number of critics have accused Manet of crudity of brushstroke when one shifts eyes from the heroine to the reflected background of the image: a profoundly bustling and crowded hall full of gentry (Clark 1999, 240). The accusation and misapprehension, if I could say, seems plausible especially when encountering so “non-traditional” a painter and his painting which has provoked untold controversial negative feelings and enlightenment at the same time. The grand chandeliers glisten softly, complementing the large proportion of cool tones, blue, to be more specific. Two mirrors on the brown red pillar scatter the glaring lighting, highlighting the magnificent hall. The upper left-hand corner reveals a pair of green stockinged feet, evincing the popular entertainment of the time -- trapeze acrobatics performed above the patrons.

## **Differentiated delineations of the barmaids in Figures 1 and 2**

Perceptibly, the two barmaids under so similar a circumstance leave the impression as anything but the same person in the same vocation. Manet painted the barmaid of Figure 2 with her arms crossed at her waist and her right hand holding her left forearm above the wrist, which strikes the spectators as a server, instead of the gesture demonstrated in Figure 1. Moreover, the barmaid in Figure 2 has her hair tied up like a member of the nobility instead of falling naturally. The image of the barmaid facing the viewer in Figure 1 contradicts with her counterpart in the mirror, as every detail of the reflected barmaid in Figure 1 impresses us as a competent server catering enthusiastically to her customer instead of being half-heartedly and tragically detached. Meanwhile, it is discernible that the barmaid in Figure 2 is rejuvenated and projecting “professional attentiveness” (Shiff 1996, 15), while in Figure 1 she appears weary and filled with melancholy.

## **Investigating Suzon’s identity**

There is a recurring discussion of the barmaid’s likely identity as a prostitute. Clayson (1991) compellingly concludes that avant-garde artists of the era shared a certain commonality of



viewing prostitution as “an emblem of modernity”, and under this circumstance, modernity has become an implicit justification for a negative construction of the female identity (152). Actually, there is little doubt that these struggling women often sustained their lives by working as barmaids or *serveuses* with casual prostitution serving as a supplement in café concert (Driskel 1996). In light of these previous modernized representations of the female body and its exotic, however vague, sexuality as constructed by Manet, it is understandable for critics to subconsciously consider Suzon a presence of prostitution. This stigmatization, as Clark maintained, is exactly what the twisted literary critics “delighted in” under the name of revealing modern metropolitan life while using the generally agreed typology of naturalists (Clark 1999, 243). Given this, it is not surprising that later generations would associate the Folies-Bergère, this special venue, with sexual entertainment pursuits, thus contributing to what was taken as default by Wikipedia that the bar-girl is one of the pathetic *demimonde*, referring to a class of women who is regarded as not respectable owing to their promiscuous and libertine lifestyle and conspicuously seeking for inappropriate sensation (Wikipedia 2017). Furthermore, Berger (1972, 56) has observed, “almost all post-Renaissance European sexual imagery is frontal - either literally or metaphorically - because the sexual protagonist is the spectator owner looking at it”. Berger is attempting to convince readers that the representation of female submission serves as “feeding male fantasies while it erases any potentially threatening signs of woman's desiring subjectivity” (Bernheimer 1989, 258).

This seductive functionality and concept of the barmaid selling and merchandising herself are amplified and reinforced by the way Manet painted, if I am allowed to opine, intentionally: this is done with the invisibility of the spectator. Intriguingly, the reflected image shows a gentleman, grasping something, conjecturably a brush, beholding the female body with his masculinity. We are in this case cornered by Manet with no choice but to be precisely “a” man, even Manet himself. Whereas, the visual discrepancy and her indisposition being what they are, scholars still plausibly neutralize and compromise this dramatic presentation by emphasizing the nonchalant face as an icon of fashion and mask of “professionalism” as a practitioner in her workplace (Boim 1993, 242; Clark 1999, 253). Although both of these ideas are hinting at modernity, it seems clear that both are ignoring the idea of emerging femaleology, or women’s studies, a discipline centered on gendered issues, including women’s personality and motherhood (Hunter

College 1995) and feminism, which may lead to misconception. Though it is argued that the attribute of an “insider” labelled by “fashion” is a popular disguise to dissimulate identity, in this case, the barmaid’s social class (Clark 1999, 253), this, in my opinion, largely clouds her subjectivity and autonomy while covertly legitimating the ingrained consumption of female sexuality.

The specifically historical factors, outlined above as the Marian Age, in which the unprecedented emphasis on “role of the Virgin in Catholic worship” was assumed by certain theologians and was finally “distributed in seminaries throughout France”, may contribute to the justification of exempting Suzon from the accusation of being a whore theoretically (Driskel 1996, 150). Before the analysis of the modification of the posturing of Suzon, the examination of the symmetrically arranged hands shown by Marcantonio Raimondi in his portrayal of the Virgin (Figure 5) is necessary and paved the way for the establishment of a Suzon at odds with her surroundings. This depiction of a woman’s body in Figure 5, which follows the artist’s personal interpretation of a virgin and in accordance with the religious motif or Christian presentation of a virgin, is indeed similar to the barmaid in Manet’s work of art. The analogical posing of arms as well as hands conveys a sense of pessimistic compromise or desperate relinquishment. However, together with the wasted terrain of the background and the prostration or the finality of Christ, this gesture gives a feeling of ascension mingled with purity and innocence, even confidence, as evidenced by her unfocused gaze, as a virgin daring to display her holiness, spreading positivity through the unobstructed view of her body. In view of the Impressionists’ rejection of religious obscurantism and Manet’s extraordinary revolt against conventions in the face of the resurgence of tradition of the worship of the virgin or “antitype of virgin”, it seems reasonable to take in the opposite elucidative approach (Driskel 1996, 157). However, what is more important is the remarkable intrinsic consistency: the nearly identical expression, which is not fully engaged, nor in juxtaposition with secularity. Returning to the barmaid, the opened arms and frontal stance provide a panorama of the female body, even her breasts and genitals; the pose contrasts that of the slender seductive woman in Figure 2 who clasps her hands at the waist to indicate reservation and modesty. In Edouard Manet, *Before the Mirror*, 1876-77 (Figure 6), the pose of this woman, exuding femininity and erotically appreciating herself before a mirror, was once taken as signal of vanity and sexual welcoming. While she is holding a similar pose as the barmaid of Figure 1,

apparently, it is hard to associate this noble lady with Suzon, who is actually posing before a client or the painter, and cannot take the initiative to “appreciate”.

Furthermore, what renders the depiction of the barmaid unique is related to a particular property – the bar before her. A counter is a natural instrument of partition, which in this case separates the barmaid and her male spectators and creates distance. A strong sexual tension is produced through her open and baring pose and the withdrawal, distance and isolation created by the bar top. The act of “baring it all” hints at showing vulnerability, while her need for security after all-day-long consumption as a sexual object is necessarily grounded by the table, which extends across the painting. We should bear in mind the hypothesis that Manet was making the modification after much thought, or he was doing it intentionally, as confirmed by Figure 3. From this hypothesis, it should be clarified that Manet was motivated to depict a woman who distinguished herself from the customary social role, a high-headed lady for sale (Driskel 1996, 154) as depicted in Figure 2. This atypical woman somehow gives beholders an impulse to associate her with the Christian virgin situated in modern life, although as Shiff (1996) admitted: “The ‘real’ Suzon, with all her ‘real’ emotions, if ever ‘she’ existed, was and will remain invisible” (16). Nevertheless, the mask of her identity is not yet revealed, but the deviant nature of both the exceptional barmaid and Manet should create some distance between Suzon’s identity and that of a prostitute and leave room for a tentative ambiguity.



**Figure 5** Raimondi, Marcantonio, *La vierge au bras couvert*, ca. 1490-1534, Prints. Drawings & Paintings Collection.



**Figure 6** Edouard Manet, *Before the Mirror*, 1876-77. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

The conception used here to stereotype the female body would dwarf itself when turning the focus to the larger epochal background, namely feminism. A thought-provoking quotation declares “There is no place in the conceptual architecture of Christian society for a single woman who is neither a virgin nor a whore” (Warner 1976, 235). Despite this ingrained polarization of women’s identity, I may argue that it is the spectatorship and the conceptual reconstruction of Suzon that is problematic by and large. Freud et al. (1905) employed psychoanalysis theory to elaborate on the differentiated formation of mentality between genders in their growth. He illuminates that girls instinctively tend to restrain their sexuality, resulting in passiveness and even masochistic thinking. Freud takes it a step further, inventing the concept of “Penis Envy”, an anxiety caused by girls realizing the absence of a penis and their contentious binding to a man to alleviate their asynchronous physical development (55). However abrupt the argument may be, it indeed targets the theoretical logical loop of the hierarchical social institution of patriarchy, and confines the social reconstruction of “female” within the internalization of the patriarchal practice system. This biological hindrance is also manifested in physiological vulnerability, for instance, periodical menstruation, which together with psychological deviation explicates a woman’s inherent sexual personality marked by frailty and passivity (Bonvillain 1998, 204). As Pollock discloses, “the patriarchal maneuvers” of modern bourgeois culture are based on the exploitation of women’s sexuality and restriction/delimiting of femininity (Zemel 1990, 340). Berger (1972) generalizes that the spectator’s possessive fetishizing, and simultaneously, objectifying of the female body is a distressed “way of seeing” the female body contextually (page 64).

In the case of Suzon, she is clearly rejecting her sexual availability by displaying such a detached and enigmatic countenance, especially with her gaze, which is not only directed “elsewhere”, but also anomalously escaping and eluding the viewers (Shiff 1996, 17). This tension between Suzon’s gaze and appearance and the spectator’s yearning to objectify her body defies the widely-recognized patriarchal bigotry and enjoys a similar parallel allegorical meaning as *Vanity* (Figure 7) by unraveling the opposite using the vehicle of phantasy. The mirror held by the naked woman is signaling that she is “joining the spectators of herself”, but the painter named the piece *Vanity*, which is regarded by Berger as hypocritical, so the depicter is genuinely moralizing and beautifying his/her pleasure-seeking existence (Berger 1972, 50-51). Similarly,

while Manet has predetermined the viewer to be a man, you are doing your utmost to conceal your lust by morally condemning her as a proficient seductress enticing you through the provocative phantasmal mirrored image, regardless of her self-containment and dispirited attitude. Thus, *you are hypocritical* and spitefully wronging her. The close scrutiny of this entrenched prejudice may essentially emancipate Suzon from the accusation of being a coarse prostitute on the one hand.



**Figure 7** Hans Memling, *Vanity*, c.1485, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Strasbourg, Strasbourg, France

On the other hand, her alluring nature and promiscuity are reduced to such an extent that it is reasonable for her to be considered a “virgin” in the aspect of cultural individuality. Boime (1993) furnishes another insight into the accentuation of the painting’s setting, where decadence, vulgarity and hedonism override domesticity and productivity. The latter issue of productivity is bound up with her occupation, at least in what she appears to be doing here and now. There is a possibility that she belongs to the working class, dreaming of owning her own establishment,

plotting her financial schemes, and takes on a disconcerting expression owing to her long tedious day at any rate; these characteristics hinting at the strive for financial independence are the prerequisites of feminism (de Beauvoir 1949, 682). Conclusively, the perspective derived from feminism elucidates that Manet's initiative is to invent an illusion in which spectators simply subliminally accept that the drawing "should" be a continuum of the publicly-recognized bigotry regarding female body revivification, while the reality inexorably, as well as revolutionarily, points to the opposite.

## Conclusion

After turning to the background of Manet and emerging feminism and examining the two different figures presenting Suzon, it can be concluded that Suzon has her individuality and even silently but hardly negligibly bids defiance to the "traditional" societal prejudices, regardless of her real identity or her self-identification. Manet aimed to echo modernity by revolutionizing the way of depicting as well as viewing a woman's body and used this controversy to reconstruct a cultural "virgin" – an entity with humanity, a rebel against objectification and manipulation. While the identity of Suzon is debatable and the ambiguity of her status can cause visual discomfort, this status should not be distorted to tendentious promiscuousness; this simplistic categorization of her as a prostitute follows a biased thinking pattern when confronted with a female body. This ambiguity is indicative of her uniqueness, in contrast to her counterparts' endeavors, and that of her mirrored reflection, to flaunt a perfect body and to search for a sense of being in an age which worships consumerism. The independent awareness conveyed through her acquisition of pecuniary compensation for her own labor and rejection of a flirting gaze, which I suppose is more modern, should morally and theoretically liberate Suzon - although it seems unseasonable to be enmeshed with arguing "virgin or whore" and barely take one step further in appreciating the influence of another aspect of modernity, namely feminism. Moreover, the problematic starting point of viewing the female body superficially as a deficient body is partially responsible for the misunderstanding of Suzon as a figure of prostitution. It should not be taken for granted that the larger picture, modernity, is linked to dehumanized exploitation and flux of capital. Instead, modern times have witnessed both individual emancipation and the undermining of social stratification at the same time. Manet's modernity,

given his own interest in representing women and sensitivity to class configuration, fittingly rebels against patriarchal conceptualizations, from which we can conclude that this presentation of Suzon as in consonance with shifting female identity in the 1880s.

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