Nineteenth century is truly an age of changing. In France, the deepening of Industrial Revolution has pushed middle class further to the forefront of the society, meanwhile, the lack of basic living guarantee forced the working class to rise and fight for human rights. Monarchy and republic took control of the nation alternately; different thoughts and viewpoints were able to collide with each other. Under this turbulent social background, many radical intellectuals and artists emerged in the new order.

Among all the great artists during this period, Édouard Manet is a remarkable individual. Born in 1832, Manet was from an upper-middle class family. In his early years, he planned to become a naval officer. After failing the entrance exam, he decided to step into the world of painting. The young man studied with Thomas Couture for 6 years and during this time he visited the Louvre frequently to copy old masters. Starting in 1861, Manet had been sending his paintings to Salon, an official art exhibition through which artists could get known to the public. *Olympia* (see Fig. 1), exhibited there in 1865, was considered "the most shocking work" of the year (the Met).

*Olympia* depicts a scene in which a high-class prostitute is lying on her bed,
Fig. 1  Manet, *Olympia*. 1863. Oil on canvas. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Fig. 2  Titian, *Venus of Urbino*. 1538. Oil on canvas. Uffizi, Florence.
accompanied by a black maid and a cat. Manet used bright tone in the foreground and the dark color in the background to form a sharp contrast. The confrontational gaze of Olympia, the leaning-back pose of the maid, and the hostility of the irritated cat all give the painting a sense of eccentricity. In a modern viewer’s eyes, this eccentricity is an enigmatic charisma, but it was unacceptable in mid-19th century Paris. When the painting was first shown in Salon, it immediately became the target of the wave of criticism.

Parisians were enragcd by Olympia. According to Jamot, the painting caused “displeasure, scandal, and indignation”, and the administration of Salon had to send special guards to protect it from being attacked by “some avenger of morality”.¹ What makes people angry is not the nudity, since many Renaissance paintings had shown nude women and were highly admired at that time. Venus of Urbino, the compositional model of Olympia, also depicted a naked woman lying in bed, yet it was considered “the venerable masterpiece” of Titian and also “a paragon of Renaissance decorum” (Moffitt 21). Titian captured every nuance of different textures as well as the change in light and dark with fine strokes to mimic a precise and gorgeous human body. Unlike Titian’s goal of creating a three-dimensional illusion, Manet’s intended to make his painting hard and flat. The use of large color blocks and thick brush strokes (which was seen as childish and low-skilled) help him achieve his intent. This technique might be influence

by Ukiyo-e, a Japanese art consist of the application of rich color and flat depiction:

It is in portrayals of women and landscape that we see the primary Japanese influence on European artists. Maybe the first reliable account of Japanese art in Paris is from the printer Auguste Delatre who owned a copy of the Hokusai Manga in 1856. He showed it the same year to the artist Felix Braquemond who in turn purchased a copy which he then showed to the artists of his circle: Manet, Degas and Whistler (Faulkner).

The graceful and natural pose of Venus gives a quality of pleasure, while the stiff and out-of-proportion body of Olympia was condemned by the artist’s contemporaries:

Olympia’s pale, thin, and stiff figure struck some critics of the 1865 Salon as corpseslike: “The body’s putrefying color recalls the horror of the morgue”: “[she has] already arrived at an advanced state of decomposition.” (Mitchell 40)

It is not surprising that critics associated Olympia’s body with ugliness and horror: their job is to look for the “badness” in artworks and amplify it infinitely. However, some later scholars also tried to give the objects in this painting some symbolic meanings. Instead of criticizing the painting, most of they have a neutral attitude, but their discoveries are as farfetched as those of Manet’s contemporary critics. Mitchell himself also claimed that Olympia’s face represents a mask, which is connected with “venereal disease”, the full blossom
of the bouquet is a symbol of “the brevity of life”, and the black ribbon ties Olympia with Medusa. Nonetheless, Manet said “I paint as simply as possible the things I see.” (Flescher 31) He is a realistic painter, and he regarded himself as an avant-garde artist, so it is more likely that he would like to show how everyday life is really like than overusing hidden symbols to suggest the notion that sensuality is bad.

What makes Olympia profound in the history of art is Manet’s desire of tearing down the deceptive appearance of the society. Olympia reveals the reality, smashes the fantasy of classical goddess and social expectation to femininity, and promotes women’s liberation. In other words, people were not angry at the painting itself, instead they used rage to cover their weakness of not being able to face the reality.

The name of the artwork remains mysterious since the day it was shown in Salon. The model’s real name is Victorine Meurent rather than “Olympia”. Flescher mentioned that it was widely agreed that “Olympia” came from French name “Olympe”, which was often associated with French courtesans during the second empire, and the suffix “-ia” gives it a classical or Italianate flavor (27). Based on her own study, Flescher suggested that the name could refer to the two defiant heroines named “Olympia” in an opera and an unpublished play:

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The opera Herculaneum, by the French composer Felicien David, has striking correspondences to Manet’s painting (although, it is not my intention to prove a direct link between them). Most notably, its heroine, a brazen and seductive pagan queen-powerful, independent, and defiant-is named Olympia (not Olympe). But she is not the only defiant heroine of the period bearing that name; another Olympia (again not Olympe) appears prominently in an unpublished play "Le Dialogues des vierges folles et des vierges sages" by Manet’s friend Zacharie Astruc.³

According to Flescher, the powerful Queen Olympia in the opera was accepted widely by the critics and audience, although they agreed that the Queen was like a defiant courtesan (28). However, when the public saw Manet’s Olympia, they rejected this similar female personality as fiercely as possible. What makes the difference? It’s the modernity in Manet’s painting. Flescher pointed out: “the opera's ancient and exotic setting established distance in time and place and then provided the ultimate downfall of the evildoers.”(28) It’s easy for people to pretentiously accept the anti-norms in made-up situations, but when they notice that the life-size figure in the painting is actually someone they know in real life (maybe her jewelry or the bouquet was bought by one of them), a deformed feeling of hatred would come out of their mind.

Modernity could also explain the mid-19th century Parisian’s different attitude towards Venus of Urbino. At that time, the Venus was believed to be a courtesan

as well. Although it seems that the Venus is more seductive than Olympia, people defends her as “ladylike”. People praised the Venus as if she is an ideal goddess, which she does appear to be. Yet when the goddess on the bed changes into a public girl, she is now called “female gorilla” and “skeleton”. It a human nature that we tend to be detached with distant scenes: We talk about fantasy and history, but we never really care, because we know they cannot influence this moment we’re living in. However, modernity is affecting us all the time. People paid for prostitutes, but they also believed prostitution is immoral. The modernity of Olympia threw their hidden ugliness into sunlight and made them feel more uncomfortable than ever.

Olympia’s defiant gaze is absolutely the most controversial part of the painting. It is her controlling and aggressive glance that irriated the spectators. Manet did not adapt the narrative background in Titian's painting and he poses both the maid and the cat towards the direction of Olympia; these elements lead viewers to focus on the foreground and give enough space for views to directly interact with Olympia (Mitchell 39). Moffitt confirmed the effectiveness of the application of eye communicating in the painting:

The unwavering, contemptuous eye contact of Manet's rampant modernist and conspicuously undraped Jeune fille still decidedly connects with the present-day museum visitor's eyes. In this case, one naturally

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tends to read her glance as regarding us as perhaps less-than-welcome gentle man callers—that is, customers. (23)

Her gaze reminds me of Mona Lisa’s. Both of the women give the viewers a “you are not welcome” looking, and both of them are looking down at us and seem to be making fun of us. Mona Lisa thinks that she is qualified for looking down at us because she is from a wealthy family and she has gotten enough education to do so, while Olympia’s glance is more like a celebration of her victory over male domination. The victory allowed her to lead a high-class life: she owns freedom to live and love, plus having enough money to hire a maid and to buy lavish adornment. Nevertheless, her intense gaze was considered improper at the time:

Manet’s Olympia differs strikingly from her prototype, Titian’s Venus of Urbino, in that the gaze of the nineteenth-century courtesan is confrontational. Patriarchal societies have acknowledged the power of the gaze through social codes that prohibit women from looking men in the eyes. (Mitchell 43)

In the mid-nineteenth century, most of the Salon viewers were males, and many artworks were therefore created deliberately to please these male viewers. In contrast to those art works, Olympia brought men displeasure: she is not only looking at you, but also looking down at you. What makes male viewers more uncomfortable is the presence of the black cat. The quiet sleeping dog in the Venus of Urbino is usually seen as a symbol of fidelity, but cat is often associated
with betrayal and evilness. The cat here is staring at the viewers with the expression of “not welcoming” just as its mistress is.

Although the painting was harshly criticized by the public, it was highly admired by a group of young artists, who then became the masters of French Impressionism. The radical style of Manet led to a revolution in the standard of beauty and eventually pushed art into a new era. *Olympia*, a perfect interpretation of Manet’s avant-garde spirit, also becomes a recorder of social movement and women’s independence in the nineteenth century France.


