

Two revelatory exhibitions upend our understanding of black models in art

By [Sebastian Smee](#)

The most famous painting in the Musée d'Orsay — and probably the second-most famous painting in Paris after the “Mona Lisa” — is Édouard Manet’s “Olympia.” What does this 1863 painting show? A pale-skinned prostitute in satin slippers, a black cat and . . . what else? Oh, yes, a black maid holding a bouquet of flowers.

Such is the response, in swift summary, of most of the art historians who have written about “Olympia,” a fountainhead of modern art and a painting as enigmatic as it is arresting. When you consider that the black maid dominates the entire right side of the painting, the lack of attention paid to her is baffling.

Unlike most black servants depicted in 19th century French art, she is clothed. We also know her name: Laure. But that was about it.

Now, thanks to Denise Murrell, an art historian with a background in finance, Laure has emerged from the shadows. We find her in the company, what’s more, of dozens of other black models in modern art.

“Olympia” itself rarely leaves Paris, so it is not among the works in “Posing Modernity: The Black Model From Manet and Matisse to Today” at Columbia University’s Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery. (It will, however, be the

centerpiece of an expanded version of the show traveling to the Musée d'Orsay in March.)

However, a little-known portrait by Manet of Laure is included — it is the show's capstone. It is joined by great works by 19th-century artists Eugène Delacroix, Frédéric Bazille, Edgar Degas, Thomas Eakins and Jean-Léon Gérôme; by 20th-century artists Henri Matisse, Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis; and by contemporary artists Lorraine O'Grady, Ellen Gallagher and Mickalene Thomas, among others.

Thomas also is the subject of a survey “I Can't See You Without Me” at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio. It's a perfect pendant to “Posing Modernity,” as Thomas's work — large, lavishly decorated paintings that shimmer with rhinestones — is a kind of prolonged visual fantasia on the erotics and politics of the black female model.

We may have thought we knew everything about “Olympia,” a disconcertingly real apparition inspired by “[Les Bijoux](#)” (“The Jewels”), a poem by Manet's friend Charles Baudelaire, and by Titian's painting “[Venus of Urbino](#),” among throngs of other putative sources. One of the painting's best aspects, of course, is its contemporaneity. Manet had an uncanny instinct for that.

That instinct has made “Olympia” the subject of reams of beady-eyed scholarship delving into social history, class and gender. Until now, however, race has been a footnote at most.

The model for the prostitute in “Olympia” was Victorine-Louise Meurent, a painter who started modeling for artists in the studio of Thomas Couture, Manet's teacher, when she was 16 years old. Remove Meurent from the picture, and you remove much of what made Manet great in his wonder decade (the 1860s). In 1862 alone, she posed for Manet's “[Street Singer](#),” “[Mademoiselle V ...](#)”

in the Costume of an Espada,” “Luncheon on the Grass” and a small but ravishing head portrait.

So what about Laure? In a notebook, Manet refers to her as “Laure, very beautiful black woman.” He painted her three times from 1862 to 1863. “A Negress,” also known as “Portrait of Laure,” shows her wearing a white, off-the-shoulder blouse, a turban in red, yellow and green, a necklace and pearl earrings. Seated at a slight angle, she turns slightly to her left with a soft smile and a tender expression in her eyes.

Nothing about the changing face of his beloved city failed to interest Manet. So Murrell is surely right to see Laure’s presence as part of Manet’s effort to incorporate new and overlooked aspects of life in Paris. Race figured into these shifting realities in more ways than one.

Slavery was abolished in France a few years after the 1789 revolution. But it was briefly reintroduced by Napoleon Bonaparte, and not banned from France’s colonies until 1848. Over the following years — and just as slavery was becoming the central issue in a brewing conflict across the Atlantic — freed blacks were becoming a fixture in the Paris of Napoleon III. They congregated in northwest Paris, in the same district as Manet.

Laure was one of them. She lived in an apartment less than a 10-minute walk from Manet’s studio, near the Place de Clichy. The racial mix here was complex. Alexandre Dumas, the son of a French nobleman and an Afro-Caribbean slave, lived nearby, as did Baudelaire, whose mistress, Jeanne Duval, also was of mixed French and African ancestry, born in what is now Haiti.

Manet’s very strange painting of Duval, “Baudelaire’s Mistress, Reclining,” is included in the show, as are studio photographs of black women by Manet’s friend Nadar (born Gaspard-Félix Tournachon), the charismatic photographer, man of letters, caricaturist and balloonist.

Scholars often over-egg Manet's intentions and exaggerate the political significance of his work. But he was certainly a republican with a keen sense of justice. When he was 17, he kept a journal of his voyage across the Atlantic in a naval ship. In Rio de Janeiro, the ship's destination, he saw a slave market — slavery wasn't abolished in Brazil until 1850 — and was morally revolted. He noted that the female slaves "are generally naked to the waist."

Murrell believes that years later, in depicting Laure conventionally clothed in "Olympia," Manet was making a conscious decision to depict her not as a slave or an Orientalist fantasy, but as "a free participant in the everyday life of modern Paris." She is surely right, although it's pointless to pretend that "Olympia" is a work of gritty urban realism. It is, above all, a piece of mischief.

As if to validate Manet's approach, his friend Bazille made a similar decision — to paint a black model in modern attire — in his 1870 painting "Young Woman With Peonies." The work, painted months before Bazille died in combat during the Franco-Prussian War, is not only a salute to "Olympia," but also an affectionate memo to Manet, whose favorite flower was the peony.

Manet delighted in underlining the fact that his models were playing roles. When he painted Meurent as a prostitute, then as a bullfighter and then in Spanish costume, he wanted us to register the game, to believe in his fictions — but only up to a point.

Matisse took up where Manet left off. In his Nice period paintings, when he was most under the influence of Manet, he painted and drew models in Orientalist modes. But his black models somehow float free of stereotypes, perhaps because he makes us so acutely aware of the artifice: They are models posing; he is an artist painting. The whole thing, he said, was "fake, absurd, amazing, delicious."

Matisse loved African American culture, and came to Harlem several times during the high years of the Harlem Renaissance in New York.

That's partly why it's such a treat to see "Posing Modernity," not only with Thomas's show at the Wexner, but also with [a Harlem Renaissance show](#) at the nearby Columbus Museum of Art.

The Columbus show displays more images of black models by African American artists, including Archibald Motley and Beauford Delaney, not to mention the great Romare Bearden, who was deeply engaged with both Manet and Matisse. Like Thomas, Bearden's work is presented in both shows.

Thomas's visually dazzling work owes much to Bearden. She, too, draws on both the hyperventilating decorative intensity of Matisse's Nice years and Manet's interest in the eroticized model knowingly playing a role. But Thomas's proliferating patterns are loaded with black cultural significance, and her relationships to her reclining models is deeply personal: She depicts her mother (a former model), her female lovers and herself.

The way Thomas describes her models precisely echoes how "Olympia" is usually described — only now, it's as much about race as gender: "The women in my work throw up a pretty formidable barrier to the tradition of fetishization of black skin. They look right back at the viewer with self-knowledge, demanding to be seen while creating the impression of seeing right through the viewer."

For 160 years, viewers have been looking past the figure of Laure in "Olympia." That, I predict, will no longer be possible.

Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today Through Feb. 10 at the Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, Lenfest Center of the Arts, 615 W. 129th St. (MC 9829), New York.

wallach.columbia.edu. ***Mickalene Thomas: I Can't See You Without Me*** Through Dec. 30 at the Wexner Center for the Arts, 1871 North High St., Columbus, Ohio. wexarts.org.



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