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Hilla Rebay Lecture:
"Manet and Marx: Two Sides of the Coin" by George Heard Hamilton, 1983

PART 1

THOMAS M. MESSER

And welcome to the fourth Hilla Rebay Lecture at the Guggenheim Museum. As many of you know, Hilla Rebay was the first Director of the Guggenheim Museum, then called the Museum for Non-Objective Painting. And it is Hilla Rebay who is responsible for some of our most important acquisitions, acquisitions that we continue to be proud of, and that show up in such exhibitions as the present survey of Kandinsky's art during the Russian years, and the Bauhaus. A foundation in her name was created still during her lifetime, and occupies itself with that part of the collection that [00:01:00] remains in the possession of the executors of Hilla's will, but is administered, actually, and is in custody at the Guggenheim Museum. So the foundation works closely with us, with relation to the collection, as well as toward such activities as the lecture series.

The annual Hilla Rebay lectures, then, have enabled us during the years to bring to the Guggenheim very distinguished lecturers, especially in twentieth century art, none of whom more so than George Heard Hamilton, Director Emeritus of the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown. Dr. Hamilton is known to [00:02:00] many of us as the author of such decisive and important publications as the *19th and 20th Century Art: Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture*, and, even more apropos to the lecture tonight, his book on Manet and his critics. George Hamilton will speak to us about the intriguing and interesting them of Manet or Marx, two sides of the coin. George, may I ask you? (applause)

GEORGE HEARD HAMILTON

Tom Messer is very generous in his introduction. I wish I could repay it by telling you of a long and interesting acquaintance with Baroness Rebay. I can't [00:03:00] do that, but I can say that in a sense I am one of her products, because I remember so well the times I spent in the museum when it was on was it 54th Street, looking at the pictures and wondering what the Bach fugues on the phonograph, as it may have been in those days, had to do with each other. And when I did find that out, of course, then I gained an admiration for her. I met her once at a reception in New Haven, and I recall that we had a very interesting talk. I think my wife says that that means that I did all the talking, but (laughter) I'm not quite so sure with Hilla Rebay. But it was an interesting visit.

Now, we have this interesting subject, which I have to wrestle with [00:04:00] because I thought it up. (laughter) This lecture began to be organized last summer as a study of what is called Marxist criticism, which, frankly, I have great difficulty understanding, and I thought it would be interesting to talk about it. And it was going to be called "Manet or Marx: A Scholar's Revenge," (laughter) but I couldn't find anything to stir my ire. Nor did I discover weaknesses upon which I could have built a devastating lecture in support of the statement a friend of mine made recently that Marxist criticism is intellectual terrorism, which is a very interesting idea. I don't think it holds water in this case. [00:05:00] But neither did I discover any very great strengths. In fact, I discovered what may be a totally fallacious idea on my part that Marxist

criticism is part and parcel of the general methodology of art history, which has been developed now for 150 years in Europe and this country, that its claim, as was stated by a Marxist critic at the Metropolitan Museum seminar on Manet in October, that the Marxist criticism is a way of explaining the, and I quote, "sufficiency of a work of art in its own time" is a beautiful phrase. I've tried it out on colleagues of mine, and they've all been stunned (laughter) at its precision and its clarity. But that is just what every art historian, [00:06:00] it seems to me, has been doing for a long, long time when they have been writing art history as historians. They have been explaining the sufficiency of a work of art in its own time.

The problem is somewhat complicated by the fact that Karl Marx left no aesthetic treatise, or no treatise on aesthetics, and that his remarks on art are sporadic, occasional, often of profundity or of great interest to us nowadays, but in no way comprising a coherent theory. That theory has been developed afterwards by Marxists, and it is then a Marxist theory. Neither Marx nor Engels seems to have subscribed to the idea that works of art should be tools for propagandizing the workers in the event of future revolutions [00:07:00] to overthrow the bourgeoisie. Now, that has been done in Marxist countries, but it seems to have very little to do with Marxist criticism, which does, I must say, carry a grudge against the upper middle class. Since everybody in America thinks he or she belongs to that class, or would like to, it's a little hard to take (laughs) in the long run. But otherwise, I don't find any desperate political implications in the criticism of works of art according to their sufficiency in their own time. So there I was left with nothing much to talk about, but have no fear, you're not going to be shortchanged. (laughter)

[00:08:00] There is one startling connection between Manet and Marx, and that is that they both died within eight weeks of each other. (laughter) The older one, Karl Marx, died on March 3, 1883, at the age of 65, and Manet followed him to the grave on April 30, three months after his fifty-first birthday. They were therefore not even contemporaries in terms of belonging to the same generation, but they did. And I think this is very important. From the years between 1850, when Marx settled in London, and Manet returned from his brief experience on a training ship to see whether he would be any use to the French Navy — and it turned out he wouldn't — in 1849, [00:09:00] Marx, in '50, started living in London, and Manet from then on never really left Paris for any but the shortest of excursions or holidays. London and Paris were the two most important, largest European cities, world capitals in every sense of the word. But what did those two men do there? Rather different things.

Karl Marx, as you know, spent his time trying to solve the problems of the urban proletariat, which had been dispossessed by the rampant capitalism which grew up with the Industrial Revolution. Manet, so far as we know, had very little interest in the proletariat. I shall try to show you (laughs) what he did, and it's very little. But as a member of the *haute* [00:10:00] *bourgeoisie*, the very class which Marx scorned, Manet filled a prominent role as a boulevardier, meaning someone who strolls along the boulevards in the late afternoon, taking a cognac or a coffee at the Café Tortoni on the Boulevard des Italiens just around the corner in the '70s from the new opera house, a man of beautiful manners, magnificently dressed in the fashion of the day. If I could have the first slides now. Do I just push? This is right and that's left. Yes, that's just push forward right, and forward left. What happens?

Here are portraits of them. I tried to find two portraits of them at the same age, not at the same time, but I have Marx in 1849, when he was [00:11:00] editor of the *Rheinische Zeitung*, which was a journal of very advanced social theory, and Manet in 1867. Marx is 30, 31 in the picture on the left. Manet is 35 in the picture on the right. So they're pretty close. Just look at Marx for a moment. He is, as you can see, a handsome man, and he became handsomer in his later years, after a friend noticed when Marx visited the friend that Marx's head resembled the Otricoli bust of Zeus, (laughter) and told him so. And it is said that Marx thereafter trained his hair and beard to [00:12:00] look Olympian. Now that seems strange for the greatest political economist of the nineteenth century, (laughter) but let me remind you that he is the first great political economist for whom we have any record of his having taken a course in art history. But he was taking a course in the University of Berlin, or Bonn, in early 18... He was born in '18. He was 20. It was '38, when, of course, the ideals of the Greek revival were still a dominant factor in Europe, as they were in America, too. And he therefore came to feel that the art of antiquity was the highest achievement artistically of the human race, which landed him in a very unfortunate kettle of soup, because how is he to account for [00:13:00] improvement, progress, and striving upwards if what we were to achieve had already been created in a very primitive society? But he was sufficiently honest to admit that that was a difficulty, and to cling to his belief in the beauty of antique sculpture.

This indicates that he was a man of considerable culture. He was the holder of a doctorate of philosophy from the University of Jena after his studies in philosophy and history at Bonn and Berlin. No painter could equal him, therefore, in the range of his book learning. Manet could beat him, of course, in his training for nine long years in Couture's studio in Paris. The men are balanced, but not exact [00:14:00] duplicates of each other.

Now, the fact that they both lived at the same time, in large cities, means that they were both familiar with city life. And it is city life which is Manet's subject. He was not an agrarian painter. He preferred the boulevards. He preferred the living rooms, the studios of the city, and that city was always Paris. Occasionally he did paint in the summer at Boulogne or Dieppe, and he did make a trip to Venice, from which there are two magnificent landscapes, but otherwise it is Paris. And this controls his production to such an extent that it would seem to offer [00:15:00] admirable opportunities for critics of a social persuasion, as the Marxist critics consider themselves, to analyze his attitude towards his subjects. And here is a subject where Marxist criticism seems to offer a novel approach, but I'm afraid that that is not true, because 50 and more years ago the study of subject matter had been developed at the Warburg Institute in Hamburg and taken to London in 1933, or a few years earlier, and then brought to this country by Panofsky, and by Edgar Wind, and by many others. And the study of what the subject means in terms of its time received a brilliant efflorescence [00:16:00] right here in New York City, so that when the Marxists claim to be disentangling the threads of the social fabric, they are merely intensifying in a certain direction what had been spread over the whole spectacle of allegorical, mythological, historical, and genre painting by the Warburgian scholars.

Now, I want to show you Manet's paintings in three groups. One, in terms of something for which we have more evidence than we do for many another artist, and that is his political persuasion, where he stood in relation to the political events of his time. And then I want to

show you — and this will be very [00:17:00] briefly — how the proletariat fare in Manet's work. And then, a slightly longer set of slides, dealing with one of the principal psychological situations in the 1860s and '70s.

Now, first of all, Manet and politics. Our first hint of his feelings about those matters occur in two letters written from Rio de Janeiro in February and March, 1849, to his cousin, Jules de Jouy, and to his father. In both letters, he makes somewhat derogatory remarks about a man he calls L. Napoleon, who, of course, is Louis Napoleon, who was about to be elected president of the [00:18:00] French Republic, the second French Republic, the first one having been established in 1692 — 1792, I beg your pardon. This lasted from 1849 to 1851. Manet said in the first letter, "Do not let him become our emperor," and in the second letter he said to his father, "Keep France a good republic until I return. I'm afraid that L. Napoleon is not a good republican." How right he was, because two years after he returned, or a year and a half afterward, Napoleon, annoyed that the presidential term was for four years only, and was not repeatable, staged — you do stage, don't you, [00:19:00] a coup d'état? You don't just have them. (laughter) He staged a coup d'état, by which he dissolved the legislature and abolished limitations on the presidential term. This enabled him the following year, in December 1852, to have himself declared emperor of the French through a national plebiscite.

Now, the coup d'état of December 1851 was unexpectedly brutal. The army struck quickly and thoroughly. At that time, Manet was a student in the studio of Couture, and with his friend, Antonin Proust, he went to see what was going on in downtown Paris. Now, the Boulevard des Italiens, they were looking at the place where a few passers-by [00:20:00] had just been shot almost at random by the military — it sounds all to up-to-date, somehow — and escaped damage themselves when a troop of cavalry suddenly appeared, the corner of the Rue Laffitte by being dragged by a picture dealer into his shop. He closed the door, and they subsequently succeeded in getting themselves home. But a few days later they went to the Montmartre Cemetery to see a solemn and dreadful spectacle: the bodies of the people who had been mercilessly exterminated were laid out under a layer of straw, with only their heads visible. Groups of 20 were permitted to go and look for their lost relatives, and as Proust said in his account, which, it's true, [00:21:00] was published many years afterwards, but it would seem as if the experience had been unforgettable. The silence was occasionally broken by heartrending screams. Remember that when we come to the year 1871, 20 years later. Proust says that when they... Oh, they went, by the way, with all their friends in the studio, Couture studio, but when they came back the visit was never mentioned again by anyone.

Now, in 1867, on the occasion of the prize-giving ceremonies at the International Exposition, staged by Napoleon III that year, [00:22:00] word reached Paris that his protégé, the Archduke Maximilian of Austria, who had accepted the throne of the brand new Mexican empire, with the support of the European powers, had been captured by an insurgent Mexican army. He and two of his Mexican generals had been shot by a firing squad. It plunged the court into grief, not only because Napoleon and his Empress Eugénie, though really not themselves of royal or imperial blood, nevertheless counted the Archduke Maximilian as a cousin. But more than that, it was so patently Napoleon's fault, because he had supported the establishment of an empire in Mexico as a foreigner, and therefore in direct contradiction [00:23:00] to the Monroe Doctrine. It so

happened that President Lincoln had his hands full between 1861, when this empire started, and '65, when he was shot. But President Andrew Johnson sent Napoleon a firm letter, and the French troops were removed in 1866. And it was only months later that the entire empire fell. It was therefore Napoleon was blamed, you see, for having let the emperor very seriously down.

Manet started immediately, as soon as news seems to have reached Paris on that June day, on planning a painting of the execution of the Emperor Maximilian, of which the first study with the firing squad in sombreros [00:24:00] is in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. This, the final version, is in Mannheim, and, as you can see, the soldiers wear a uniform remarkably close to the Mexican firing squad, a photograph of which reached Paris in late July or August. So Manet was not, as some people have thought, painting them in French costumes, French uniforms; it's just that the Mexican troops, as being supported by the French, adopted a uniform which was rather close to the French one.

Now, this painting I have always maintained, even in print, and had my typewriter slapped for it, that this painting is singularly emotionless, and I still think it is. I've actually seen it in Mannheim, and it is that way. [00:25:00] And the beautiful fragments of the second version, which are in the National Gallery in London, are similarly as cold as ice, as emotionless as possible. But I think that there is something there which speaks of the message Manet was trying to get to the emperor, that in coldly rational terms what you did was wrong. Of course, we might say in coldly rational terms that he should never have come anyway, but he should not have left at that juncture, and allowed this innocent, and a charming man, to die, and his wife, the Empress Carlotta, to run mad for many, many, many years.

Now, in 1869 Manet was informed by the administration, the imperial administration, that the picture could not be exhibited, [00:26:00] nor could the lithograph which he had made of it be published. In other words, these were the years of the liberal empire, as Napoleon liked to call it, but it was sufficiently strict in its censorship to prevent the French from seeing this masterpiece of historical painting, because it is the finest historical painting, probably, since Baron Gros. Maybe my art historian friends can suggest others, but don't do it now, (laughter) because I'm trying to get through so you can have supper.

Now came Napoleon's worst mistake, which was to tangle with the Prussians, and to become involved in a way, which began in July and ended on the first of September, when the French army was surrounded at Sedan in northeastern France, and Napoleon was [00:27:00] imprisoned by the Germans. Within three weeks, the city of Paris was invested by the German army, and the Siege of Paris began, which lasted until the thirtieth of January, 1871. The stories of suffering and privations are appalling. It was, fortunately, briefer than other famous sieges, but it was perhaps harder on the French, because their cuisine had never yet been reduced to rats and mice and things like that. In those dreadful days, which were punctuated by uprisings in the industrial suburbs of Belleville and Montmartre, Manet was a member of the National Guard. But when the French capitulated and signed an armistice, he left [00:28:00] on February twelfth to join his family in the south of France. After spending the spring months of March and April there, he decided to return to Paris, where the city was now in the hands of the so-called commune, which represented the radical socialist elements, the Jacobins, as they have been called, of the Second

French Revolution, so to speak, or the Third or the Fourth, depending on how you count them, the first revolution to which the name "Communist," although in French they were the Communards, which distinguishes them as the men and women of 1871, rather than other Communists. And everything went from bad to worse so that finally the government troops, [00:29:00] finding a breach in the walls, entered the city on May twenty-first, and subdued it by May twenty-eighth, seven days later, the famous Bloody Week. Manet was there in Paris then or very shortly thereafter. One wishes one knew whether he were actually within the city walls, but we do know that in the previous weeks he had spent one night here and one night there at other cities on a wide periphery around Paris, obviously testing to find out whether it was safe to return. Why? Because he was Parisian, in the first place, even before he was a Frenchman; and secondly... Well, for that I offer you the words of a very curious letter from Madame Morisot, the mother of Berthe Morisot, [00:30:00] the painter, who said that "Those two Communists, Degas and Manet, have been seen around town. They are still outraged by the military executions." The date of that letter is June fifth. Paris had fallen on May twenty-eighth, for three more days. That's eight days. That's a week and one day.

Now, Manet wrote to Berthe Morisot herself on June tenth, saying, "I have been in Paris for several days." Does several mean eight or more, or does it mean less? This is a very difficult question to answer, and I cannot answer it for you. I would like to think [00:31:00] that he was in Paris and saw some of the horrors, and there were horrors there, that he saw the shooting of the Communards at the barricades by the government troops, which you see here in this watercolor in the museum in Budapest where the soldiers on the right are curiously taken from one of his own paintings, the fragment which eventually belonged to Edgar Degas, which is now in the National Gallery in London, of the firing squad. It doesn't look quite focused, from where I'm standing, but maybe it is. The use of his own work is not new. He often did it, just as he used other people's works. He was voracious in his curiosity about other compositions, other figures, [00:32:00] other colors, so on. No, not about colors; I'm sorry about that. But here, on the back of this watercolor from Budapest, which was unfortunately not in the Metropolitan exhibition, there is a tracing of those figures from a reversed photograph from his own execution of Maximilian. This was then published, but only after his death. Even under the republic, this was a dynamite.

The other lithograph is called *Civil War*, and repeats, although in reverse, the figure of the dead toreador, which is in the National Gallery in Washington, from a painting of 1864. I am showing the etching [00:33:00] here, reversed on the screen, to show you how accurately Manet has followed his own former figure, which in its turn was copied from a painting now believed to be Neapolitan of a dead warrior lying in the entrance of a cave, which is now in the National Gallery in London. Somehow these things go around the world. These two lithographs are direct statements of either what he saw or what he learned from other sources, and there were certainly many at hand, because the illustrators of the revolution were as industrious as they had been 40 years before in the July revolution of 1830, and they furnished Delacroix so many ideas for his revolutionary pictures.

The next step in this process is [00:34:00] a little later, comes at the end of the decade of the '70s, when he paints a portrait of Georges Clémenceau, whom we know, some of us, as political

historians, as the premier of France from 1916 to 1920, and, as art historians, as the great and close friend of Claude Monet, whom he encouraged and secured for him the commission for the great waterlily paintings in the Orangerie in Paris. But that was not why Manet painted this portrait of his friend Clémenceau, I don't think. It was because during the Commune Clémenceau had begun his political career by being elected mayor of Montmartre. I beg your pardon, not during the Commune; during the Siege. [00:35:00] And he was the mayor of Montmartre during the Commune, which followed, towards the end of March, and lasted until the end of May. So here is a man who must have meant much to Manet's political sympathies.

Then, finally, at the very end of the period comes the two pictures related to Henri Rochefort was a marquis of the old dispensation; that is, of the Bourbon nobility, not of the Napoleonic. But he was a violent radical, who had been imprisoned several times by Napoleon III, for printing seditious statements about the emperor in his liberal newspaper. And then got into terrible trouble when the republic was established in 1871, [00:36:00] because during the Commune he had published sympathetic accounts of the Communists, the Communards. So he was once more arrested, imprisoned, tried, and sentenced to life imprisonment in New Caledonia, which is a world away, in the South Pacific. But he was only there for a few months in the penal colony when he succeeded in escaping in an Australian boat, which you see at the top of the picture, to which he and his comrades are rowing their way. This picture, called *The Escape of Rochefort*, was not ready in time for the Salon of 1881, and it's understandable — I mean, we can imagine that if it had been submitted it might have been rejected, because Rochefort was a really very difficult [00:37:00] person. You can see this in the portrait which Manet sent instead. It's really one of his best portraits. There is more life to the character, although Manet's said always to have trouble with eyes, but don't pay any attention to that. The eyes do look a little unfocused, but that's common with Manet's most wonderful portraits. But there is a vigor here, and certainly a sympathy toward this very crusty individual.

Now, *mirabile dictu*. Do you know what happened? Antonin Proust was the secretary to Gambetta, and he secured for Manet enough votes... No, I beg your pardon; that goes with the Legion of Honor. That has nothing to do with this at the moment. The painting was awarded a second class medal, which meant that [00:38:00] hence forward Manet would not have to submit his works to the jury. Alas, he had only one more year to do so, 1882. But it was a distinguished honor for a man who had been the butt of ridicule and the scorn of the conservatives, and anathema to that very middle class from which he came, the upper bourgeoisie, and it was the first medal he had won since his first one in 1861, 20 years before.

Now, I hope that persuades you that Manet took a very vigorous interest in politics. It does not mean, by any means, that he was a follower of Karl Marx. And I have read that there was only one card-carrying Marxist, so to speak, in the Paris Commune, though I don't know how anybody would know that mysterious factor. [00:39:00] But it was, in some senses, a spontaneous French uprising, but it had aspects of associations with both Marx and the international in London, and with the strain of French Communism, which had begun in France in the 1840s. And it remains, of course, a great memento to the Soviets. In one of those spatial excursions they went on, the astronauts took up a fragment of a flag which had flown at the

Commune — a red flag, of course — to indicate that these ideals were being carried out in outer space. (laughter)

Now, what about Manet and the proletariat? As I said, there isn't [00:40:00] very much, and what there is is disconcerting. There on the right is what I consider a very proletarian painting. It is Millet's *Man with a Hoe*, in the Crocker Foundation in San Francisco. And it certainly speaks very strongly, directly, and truly about the plight of the French peasant in 1862, which is the year it was finished. It inspired a notable poem of the labor movement, by our American, Edwin Markham, which was once much better known than it is now. It is also, I said, true to the facts of agricultural life, because I discovered some years ago that in the early 1860s the [00:41:00] agricultural tool which existed in France in the largest numbers was the mattock, which that man is using. It isn't really a hoe; it's a little more sophisticated than that, because his work is harder to do. And you see it has broken his body. It has stunted his mind. You can say all those things about it, and they will be true to the picture, and true, I suppose, to Millet's intention.

Eighteen sixty-two is the year when Manet finished the painting, which also looks a little out of focus — let's just try that — a painting called *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*, which is in the National Gallery in London, and was unfortunately not here in New York. It would have been very interesting, important even, to see it in connection with the other early pictures. But who are these people? These are that upper class, [00:42:00] not aristocrats, necessarily, though some may have had titles, but insofar as they can be identified they are upper middle class intellectuals. There is Manet himself at the very far left. There you are. (laughter) Right here. This is Albert Balleroy, a painter with whom he'd shared a studio. That is Charles Baudelaire, the greatest poet of the nineteenth century, let's say. This probably is Théophile Gautier, a great poet in the Romantic days of the 1830s but who had become a rather conservative journalist for the government newspapers. And this is Baron Taylor, a famous traveler who wrote books about — well, he didn't travel all that far, but he wrote books. Especially interesting are those about the provinces [00:43:00] of France. And over here is Jacques Offenbach, who wrote the music for those wonderfully melodious and gay musical comedies, so to speak, the operettas which so charmed the idle brains of the Imperial Court. (laughter) But Offenbach was a man of considerable intellectual powers. The ladies are not that well known, but they are all women, obviously, of substance and of manners.

The other night I heard Professor T. J. Clark of Harvard speak on this painting in a college in Vermont, and, bless his heart, he had gone and looked at what none of us have ever looked at, which are the figures behind the figures in front — [00:44:00] This man with the red beret, the people way back here — and he had enlargements which he produced. And lo and behold, and, of course, very shocking, these are the lower classes who are seen, according to his interpretation, as about to upset the very fragile balance of the governing classes, the ruling class, the owners of the means of the production who Marx wished to have abolish and have the workers, you know, own the means of production, and own their own products, too, which they could then sell at a proper wage, proper price. Now, if this is so, of course, it lends a very interesting touch to the picture, but as I say, this was only a week ago yesterday, [00:45:00] and

Professor Clark hasn't yet published, so I think we must leave it to him to present more formally his final remarks on the subject. But it is public knowledge, because he did give it as a lecture.

Now, Manet is therefore, from the beginning, it would seem, attached to his own class, and this will remain true through the rest of his life. The most proletarian painting I can think of is this one, which shows the men paving the Rue de Berne outside his studio window, in the Batignolles section of Paris. And it's an interesting picture. It belonged to Lord Butler of Saffron Walden, who inherited it from his father-in-law, [00:46:00] Samuel [Crouteau?], and is now on loan at the Ashmolean Museum in Cambridge. So if you're in Cambridge do try to see it, because this slide gives no hint of the brilliance of the effect of sunlight and shadow on that street. But does it give you any introduction to the hardships which these road pavers are undergoing in this grueling and demeaning labor? I think it was more grueling and demeaning then than it is now. There certainly seems very little that can relate this painting to the *Man with a Hoe*.

And I show you here another painting of the area where Manet had his studio, where the six streets come together and cross the tracks leading to the Gare Saint-Lazare, over the Bridge of Europe, as it's [00:47:00] called. Now, this is by Claude Monet, and it was one of the 15 paintings of the Gare Saint-Lazare and its immediate environment, which Monet showed at the Impressionist Exhibition, the third Impressionist Exhibition of '77. Now, trainmen lead terrible lives, and they did in the nineteenth century, but is there any indication of that? And wait till we come in the last section, which is practically upon us, to Manet's own railroad painting, the painting called *Le Chemin de fer,* and you will see a difference.

I show you here a painting of '82, Degas's *Laundresses,* one of a group which has often been mentioned by students of Degas in connection with [00:48:00] Zola's treatment of this class of people in the Paris of the '70s and '80s. But look at *Le Linge — The Laundry* — by Manet on the right. Because it's in the —

PART 2

GEORGE HEARD HAMILTON

— had always been a medical term, but had used it to describe the condition which humankind goes through at the end of the great Romantic age with the dawn of the new ideal, which he believed to be the third and final great period of human society. Marx has been accused of turning Hegel upside down, and in this he certainly did, because, may I remind you that Hegel believed that the world, reality, as we call it, outside of ourselves was a product or representation of or by the mind. Marx turned that around and said that the mind, or consciousness, did not determine the world, but [00:01:00] reality, by which he meant the real relations between people, which are the relations of the producer to the person who owns the means of production, those complicated relationships of worker and factory owner, were the only reality upon which the whole superstructure of law, religion, aesthetics, so on and so on and so on, are built.

Now, curiously, there is much to be said for both points of view, though to argue in favor of Hegel would take us too long away from dinner. But I would remind you that Marx's statement that consciousness is determined by the nature of the economic order may be worth paying more attention to than art critics have. [00:02:00] I have no way of knowing how the very rich feel about art — the really rich, as they were saying in Washington a few years ago — and I have no way of knowing how the poor feel about art, but I suspect that there are many close points of contact. (laughter) I really mean that, seriously. I think that the people who know most about art are the people who really have a much smaller stake in the economic structure than either the very rich or the very poor. I have never been able to figure out how my wages and my salaries affect my taste, and I suddenly realized that I have never been paid a nickel except for some book royalties by anything other than a tax-exempt institution — you know, schools and colleges and museums. Therefore, am I a charity case because they are classified as charities? (laughter) Well, you see how idiotic [00:03:00] this is, and how careful it must be thought about. But at any rate, alienation, which Marx described as an integral part of the situation in mid-nineteenth century France, is, I think, present in Manet's paintings.

Now, this is a gamble on my part. You may all disagree and get up and walk out, but just stay till we get through these pictures and look at them. Here is Manet's most impressive proletarian picture. It is a rag picker, a chiffonier, as they were called, picked up rags around Paris. They were almost a cottage industry, and the police had records of the numbers of them year by year in the '60s. Does that [00:04:00] add anything to this picture for you, the fact that the police had the records of the numbers of the old men like this? I don't know. I suppose it really should, but I can tell you that this is a most magnificent painting. I even tried desperately to buy it for my museum, but it was snatched out of the teeth of culture by somebody else, (laughter) and has gone a continent away. But someday you will see it, and I know that you will agree with me that its ravishing beauty makes you forget the squalor of the subject, who's supposed to have two left shoes, by the way, but I just recently learned that I think it was in the Civil War for the first time soldiers were supplied with lefts and rights, [00:05:00] which is helpful when you're looking at pictures like this, because they are a new invention, shoes of different shapes for each foot.

Now, that closes the proletarian part. Here, briefly — no, it doesn't at all — I wanted to show you that painting on the right, which is called *On Strike*. It's a little later than the Manet, and it is not by a Frenchman, but it stands for an enormous amount of material which was being produced in France at this time on similar subjects. It's a very serious picture by an incredibly serious artist, never laughed in his life, and thought hard about the plight of the workers. But it is faulted by its academicism. The figure of the woman, the wife, the sorrowing mother, is just not right. [00:06:00] People in those situations do not drape themselves so elegantly. But this is '69. It's Manet's last excursion with this kind of subject. And I show you how the decade ended in 1870 with the portrait on the right of Eva Gonzalez, his prized pupil, his only pupil, and on the left a detail from the portrait of Monsieur and Madame Lavoisier in the Metropolitan Museum of around 1790, which indicates how the style of those years was based upon the declining years of the eighteenth century. Earlier, in 1852, when Eugénie de Montijo became the empress of France, she revived the rococo style with very bouffant skirts, crinolines, which then swept the country, and Mrs. Lincoln wore them in the White House. But by the end of the century, [00:07:00] the clothes had become simpler — by the end of the reign, though nobody knew, of

course, it was going to end so abruptly, July of 1870, September — they were simpler white dresses with black ribbons. And you can see them in Manet's portrait of Berthe Morisot, the one in Providence called *Resting*, and you can see it in Renoir's *Lise,* portrait in Essen. And so it goes.

Now we come to this little survey of Manet from the beginning. His first painting was certainly of someone who was suffering strongly from alienation, as well as from strong drink, because this is an alcoholic. Whether he was actually an alcoholic, I would hate to say, but he probably knew the pleasures of drink, because there is the bottle on the [00:08:00] floor in front of him, and he was a sort of derelict whom Manet had encountered wandering around the Louvre. I think he must have been wandering around the outside of the Louvre, (laughter) but that doesn't seem to be clear.

First alienation, the great painting of alienation, which has been much the subject of extensive scholarly investigation in the last five or six years, is *The Old Musician* in Washington, which could not come to the Metropolitan exhibition because the Chester Dale pictures cannot be lent. But it was one of the most ravishingly exciting in terms of color and technique of his early work, 1862, like the *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*. And there would seem to be little doubt but that it does represent types of people who had been dispossessed [00:09:00] from the rather squalid houses and tenements and so on they lived in in those quarters of Paris, which were being rebuilt by Baron Haussmann to make it a truly imperial city. But Manet has confused us by moving the city-dwellers into the open country, into a mountainous landscape, on a very interesting day, when the sun and the rain clouds are battling for supremacy. But there, his use of himself — you see the first time that happens, because the absinthe drinker has turned up with these other people who are victims of civic displacement.

And if we look at another beautiful picture, which is just down the street in the Metropolitan, *Mademoiselle V as an Espada,* we have a sexual displacement, because she is a woman, [00:10:00] but she is dressed as a man. Now, that often happened at masked balls; to go *en travesti* was a very fashionable thing. And it occurs in operas, in the trouser roles, and so on. But it always a bit puzzling, a bit disturbing to the older, more conservative elements, and I suggest that Manet is doing this intentionally to suggest alienation.

There is another, more famous picture, the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe,* which, as everyone knows, everyone in the whole world knows that it is based on (laughter) the righthand group from Marcantonio's engraving of *The Judgment of Paris,* after a drawing by Rafael, which has been said over and over and over again. But if you look again at that engraving, I think you see why the picture was so shocking. I always thought [00:11:00] it shocked Manet's mother because there she saw one of her three sons with the brother of Manet's mistress and a naked woman. And I always thought that she thought, dear, dear, what the two boys are up to. (laughter) But then I began thinking about it in connection with what I wanted to tell you, and it did occur to me that the shocker is the fact that the men are dressed. We recently had no less a sculpture than the *Apollo Belvedere* in New York. Can you imagine what we would have thought if that had been dressed in blue jeans? You know, it would have been shocking. So this picture shocks, then, on two levels, where nakedness and clothing are equally dangerous.

[00:12:00] Here is *The Dead Toreador*, from which you saw the etching a moment ago in reverse. And I suppose this is greatest alienation of all: death. And a death so cold, so impersonal, that we can scarcely even feel anything. It is not, certainly, a tragic death. That's the way Manet painted it. And then two pictures which still puzzle us, because we do not know what the really mean. The first, the *Luncheon in the Studio* of 1868, which began as a, presumably, luncheon scene based upon a moment in Boulogne where he was spending the August of that year, but grew into this picture. It has been said — it was said at the Manet Symposium — that this picture would be unthinkable [00:13:00] without Vermeer. Vermeer had been discovered that year by Théophile Thoré, the very distinguished French critic in those years who wrote under the name of W. Bürger, which means Wilhelm Bourgeois, really, because the name Bürger is related to Berger, and Berger is related to Bourgeois. So this is the commonsense man's point of view. It's three beautiful articles about Vermeer in the fall issues of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* in 1866. And I thought the other day, having read in the Metropolitan Museum catalog that this picture is related to Dutch painting, but there is no actual painting which resembles it — although some people think *The Artist's Studio* is a good one — but I was looking through our slides, and I may have fallen victim to the poor color quality which slides acquire [00:14:00] when they age. But I thought that that painting really showed something of the stillness, the light, and the subdued color, as I remember the *Déjeuner dans l'atelier* in Munich, and here in New York last month, two months ago.

Well, this painting is in the Frick. No, Manet did not come to the Frick. But in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, where this picture is discussed, there is an absolutely exquisite etching after the painting by Jules Jacquemart, who was a very prominent printmaker in the '60s. And the painting was then in the collection of a Monsieur Leopold II, who owned it until 1881. So, such are the mysteries of [00:15:00] art history. One likes to think that Manet may have seen, if not the painting, at least the reproduction in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, and he didn't have much of a choice if he wanted to look at art journals in those days, and this would have been it. But what is going on? Is it an [*ars pengende*?], as was said at the Metropolitan Symposium? Is it a treatise on the art of painting? Not a treatise, of course, but a statement about it, visual statement. It is very difficult to say, but the fact that all the people in the picture are looking off in different directions implies either that this is one of those split-second snapshots when that happens, or it is some kind of statement about the difficulty of communication among the generations, and possibly between the social classes. Those are just suggestions.

And then the next year — [00:16:00] or, no, in the same year, in the Salon '69 — with the picture you've just seen, he showed this one, called *The Balcony*, which is a less puzzling picture at first sight, because we know that they are all there on the balcony. But what are they doing? This annoyed Jules Castagnary, who was a great French critic of those years, and it annoyed him enormously, and he said, "How can I do anything with the picture when I don't know whether this woman standing is putting on her gloves or taking them off?" Now, that's a perfectly decent question to ask, because if she's taking them off she's just arrived, and if she's putting them on she's jus going, but they must just have had dinner because the coffee seems to be brought in by the obscure figure in the background. The picture begins, you see, to have puzzles in it. Also, they are [00:17:00] none of them looking at each other. If they're doing anything, they're

thinking, and if they're thinking, they're thinking different thoughts. And in that sense, they are estranged momentarily. They're all good friends. They were actually good friends in life. This is Berthe Morisot seated, who was to marry Manet's brother a few years later. It's a picture about thought, and like the other picture, but perhaps more successfully, because simpler, less complex, it is more forceful, it is about the difficulty of thinking together.

Now comes the decade of the '70s, when Manet learns about Impressionism, and I have just a few to show you, and they'll go very quickly. In '73 he sent to the Salon the painting of the railroad. This is his railroad. It's a picture of peace and serenity, and of inner disturbance [00:18:00] of some sort, because no art historian worth his or her salt will pass it by without making all kinds of tentative suggestions as to what they're thinking about. Is the little girl thinking about anything except the trains? Is the older woman, or is the young woman — I mean, she's an older girl, let's say — with the little dog in her lap, is she doing what? Well, we don't worry about that. We think it's beautiful and we let it go, and by letting it go we have taken it at its face value. And as a great art historian said, we trivialize art when we take it at its face value. But as yet, nobody has plumbed below the surface of this picture.

At the end of the decade is this curious painting from Berlin, which was here in New York, called *In the Conservatory*, *Dans la serre*, [00:19:00] which shows two people, Monsieur Jules Guillemets and his wife, who ran a shop on the Rue Saint-Honoré, which is still a fashionable shopping center, which is described as a *magasin des elegance*; I suppose they sold underwear, but very fine feminine fashions. They were very successful. And Madame Guillemets was admired particularly in Paris for her elegance. Most remarkably, she was an American. Proves it can be done, if you work hard enough. (laughter) But look a little more closely. Look, for instance, at her face. Oh, I beg your pardon. That had to do with *The Balcony*, but you'll see that some other time somewhere. Look at her face. I would like to suggest that the maquillage, the makeup, is so perfect, [00:20:00] and so close to an enamel, that it's difficult for her to smile, not that she was grim, but she was enclosed within an artificial cage of her own contrivance. (laughter) She was alienated. She was set upon.

Now, the picture as a whole does suggest that Manet may have had in mind, since this was a happy couple, the wedding paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is Rubens and his first wife, Isabella Brant, in Munich. And it's a picture full of the joy and affection of those two people. Can this be a wedding picture on the left? Now, here we're put off, as we were by *The Execution of Maximilian*, as we were by *The Dead Toreador*, as we are by the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. [00:21:00] It is very difficult to tell exactly what Manet means. Maybe he didn't know, or maybe he is waiting for us to catch up with him. But look just at that detail of the two hands, both firmly married, as you can tell by the wedding rings, which are on the wrong finger, as far as the French are concerned; they wear their wedding rings on the right hand. This just adds one more difficulty for the iconologist. But this lack of actual physical contact suggests that the two people on the left are existing on some kind of estrangement from each other. It may be intellectual, rather than emotional, but it is a puzzle picture, and it accounts, perhaps, for the peculiar stiffness [00:22:00] and airlessness of the painting, even though it is a conservatory with kind of warm and human atmosphere.

The last painting of all — I should say the latest; he never painted his last picture, because he died without being able to, but it's the latest picture which he painted. It is worth a great deal of discussion, and Professor Clark has devoted a long article to it, which I read, and didn't really understand very much. I'm slow at these things. But I read it again on the bus this afternoon coming down from Williamstown, and to my joy and surprise, I found that he believes that this is a painting of alienation, and the alienation this time — and it's a word which had been mentioned by Paul Bourget, [00:23:00] and by Zola, is *ennui*, which is not exactly boredom. When you're bored, you can become un-bored and get up and do something, but when you are *ennuiyant* you are unable to get out of your melancholy. It is deeper. It is more profound. And although Professor Clark does honestly and seriously believe that this woman is a prostitute who is offering herself as a commodity to the man who is talking to her, and is reflected in the mirror, there is no reason, it seems to me, to start abusing her for her character. She is so impressive, she is so handsome, she is so dignified, she is so much a woman of Manet's Paris world, [00:24:00] and she simply finds the tedium of life almost too much.

Now, on to dinner. Thank you. (applause)

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