

This photo is available in the print version
of *The Pornographic Culture*.

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hardly scandalous today. Yet in another way, it makes us
a bit uncomfortable, for it causes us to realize that too
often we are also just voyeurs.**

*Edouard Manet (1832-83), NANA, 1877. Oil on canvas, 60 3/4 x 45 1/4 in. © Hamburger
Kunsthalle. Photographer: Elke Walford, Hamburg.*

Just Watching

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Manet's *Nana* assembled all the elements for scandal in the Parisian art world of the late nineteenth century: theme; disproportionate size for an everyday subject; an easily recognizable model who was the talk of Paris; and, for good measure, a free technique and a clear and violent palette that associated him directly with the scandal of Impressionism.

The jury of the Paris Salon rejected this painting for their prestigious 1877 exhibition. So, instead, Manet displayed it in the window of a shop on a major boulevard in Paris. Contemporary observers wrote, "From morning to night, crowds gathered before this canvas, and...it draws screams of indignation and derision." Only one critic in the Paris press defended *Nana*: "The great condition for surviving is to *be of one's own time*.... Manet's high crime is not so much that he paints modern life as that he paints it life size...only the [ancient] Romans are allowed that."[†]

Manet was brought up in a middle-class family and was one of the last great French painters to receive an academic training. His adult life was discreetly bohemian; he lived with a woman for years before marrying her but did not tell even his closest friends. He shared his life in Paris with the literary greats Mallarmé, Zola, Baudelaire, and Balzac and the Impressionist painters Cezanne, Renoir, and Caillebotte. Zola's novel *Nana* was not yet published in 1877 (although Zola did publish a series in a journal that had a character named Nana), but it is agreed that Manet's title for this painting did come from a suggestion by the novelist.

Though *Nana* shows a scene typically reserved for pornographic photography and caricature in his time, Manet's aim was not to make pornography, but to comment upon the pornographic culture of which he was a part. He paints in a very frank and maybe even humorous manner this scene of a young woman dressing not just before a man, but also before us, the spectators studying the work. In the early twenty-first century this painting is hardly scandalous; far more provocative underwear ads are displayed on television for even the youngest of our children to see. Yet in another way, *Nana* makes us a bit uncomfortable, for it causes us to realize that too often we are also just voyeurs.

A "painting from life" methodology is characteristic of the Impression-

ist painters. But rather than haystacks or still-life objects, Manet paints a *cocotte*, or prostitute. The Nana we see in the painting is in her undergarments, but she does not reveal anything to the viewer or the half figure of a man seated and waiting for her to be finished primping. (Manet's sources for the flat and incomplete male figure are Japanese prints that he studied and enjoyed.) Nana unabashedly looks out at us between puffing her face and finishing the application of her lipstick. The curves of her plump body are echoed by the lines of the furniture behind her.

Interestingly, Nana stands before a mirror with two extinguished candles—a symbol of St. Genevieve, the patron saint of Paris. The saint, a life-long virgin, is frequently shown with an extinguished candle that, according to legend, she could ignite by making the sign of the cross. She would then use the lit candle to lead herself and her sisters back to safety. Could Manet be reminding us that God's watchcare extends to Nana?

When we watch ads on television or see fashion magazine layouts, either we can watch uncritically and voyeuristically, or we can develop a discerning eye for what they are saying about our popular culture and about us, the viewers. We must "be of one's own time" in our culture, rather than remaining naïve regarding those aspects of culture that offend us; yet we need to develop a discriminating Christian comprehension and concern about the visual material that bombards us daily. Manet's painting might awaken us both to recognize elements of our own pornographic culture and to resist its temptation to mere voyeurism.

NOTE

[†]Quotations from primary source material are from *Manet 1832-1883*, edited by F. Cachin and C. Moffett (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1983), 392-396.