



Meurent, Victorine (1844-1927)

by Linda Rapp

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Best known as the model for a number of paintings by Édouard Manet, including *Olympia* (1863) and *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), Victorine Meurent (sometimes spelled Meurend or Meurand) was also an artist in her own right. While only one of her works is known to survive, and her own identity has been obscured or even replaced by the images she modeled, she has nevertheless emerged as symbolic of the fate of women artists in nineteenth-century France.

Meurent began her modeling career at the age of sixteen, when she posed for Thomas Couture, an artist who also offered drawing classes for women. She first worked for Manet in 1862, posing for a painting entitled *The Street Singer*. He continued to use her as a model at various times until 1874.

Because Manet painted her as a courtesan, viewers and commentators have often assumed that Meurent was a girl of the streets, a wanton and dissolute character. In fact, she came from a family of artisans and aspired to a career in art from an early age.

Manet's biographer Alphonse Tabarant noted Meurent's ambitions--albeit dismissively--saying that she fancied herself an artist at the time she came to work for Manet. In view of her youth, it is hardly surprising that she was not yet an accomplished artist. She was, however, serious about art. In the years to come, she would continue her study of drawing and painting at the Académie Julian and with private instructors.

At some point in the early 1870s Meurent traveled to America. It is not known how long she spent there or why she made the trip. There is some indication that she hoped to sell paintings, although Tabarant claims that she was motivated by "*une folie sentimentale*."

By 1873 she was back in Paris, dedicating herself to her painting and showing her work for the first time. In 1875 she became the student of Étienne Leroy, a portrait painter whose work had been shown at the prestigious Paris Salon; and in 1876 one of Meurent's works, a self-portrait, was selected for the Salon's annual show.

Another of her paintings, *Bourgeoise de Nuremberg au XVIe siècle*, appeared in the Salon of 1879. Her work was also included in the exhibitions of 1885 and 1904.

By 1879, when Meurent exhibited at the Salon for the second time, she had become estranged from Manet and his circle. Tabarant states that she was no longer welcome among them due to certain love affairs that had caused her to become the subject of unpleasant gossip, the exact nature of which he does not specify.

Meurent continued to live and work in Paris, but during the 1880s she appears to have fallen on hard times. In 1883 she wrote to Manet's widow, recalling to Madame Manet her late husband's promise to provide her with some money if he succeeded in selling the paintings for which she had posed. She had declined his



Victorine Meurent served as a model in a number of paintings by Édouard Manet including these three.

Top: A portrait (1862).

Center: *Olympia* (1863).

Above: *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863).

offer at the time but said that she would remind him of it once her modeling career was over. The appeal to Madame Manet was unavailing.

The next glimpse of Meurent comes in the early 1890s, when her path again crossed that of people from the circle of Manet. They reported that she was frequenting the Montmartre district, drinking heavily, regaling people with her stories, and trying to sell them her drawings. She was said to be *l'amie intime* of Marie Pellegrin, described as a lesbian and a courtesan.

Tabarant calls this period of Meurent's life her *fin douloureuse* ("sad end"), but in 1893 she was again exhibiting her artwork, this time at the Palais de l'Industrie.

In 1903 Meurent was admitted to the Société des Artistes Français. Candidates for this organization needed the sponsorship of two members, and one of those who presented Meurent was the society's founder, Tony Robert-Fleury.

For the last two decades of her life, Meurent shared a home in Colombes, a suburb of Paris, with a woman named Marie Dufour. Local census records indicate that Dufour worked at different times as a secretary and a piano teacher. Meurent is listed as an artist.

The two women took turns identifying themselves as *chef*, the head of the household. In the column for the relationship of another resident to the household head, the second woman put *amie* ("female friend").

Sadly, the whereabouts of most of Meurent's artwork is now unknown. Indeed, it was long believed that all of it had been lost. A record of the sale of one of her paintings in 1930 was the last report of her works until 2004, when her "Les rameaux" (1885) resurfaced. Included in an art auction in France, it fetched 4,000 euros (almost \$5,000 U.S.) and was sold to a private collector.

As Eunice Lipton has argued, Meurent's significance is an emblematic one, revealing how women artists are frequently excluded from art historical discourse and more comfortably assigned the role of the subjects or inspirers rather than the creators of art.

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtc.com.