

# The Representation of Nude Female Figures in Édouard Manet's Realistic Painting "Olympia"

Dhea Azhari<sup>1)\*</sup>, Dyanningrum Pradhikta<sup>2)</sup>, Satria Bagus Wicaksana<sup>3)</sup>

<sup>1,2,3)</sup> Department of Arts and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Brawijaya, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author

Email : [itsmedhey@student.ub.ac.id](mailto:itsmedhey@student.ub.ac.id)

**How to cite:** Azhari, D., Wicaksana, S. B., & Pradhikta, D. (2025). The Representation of Nude Female Figures in Edouard Manet's Realistic Painting "Olympia". *Gorga : Jurnal Seni Rupa*, 14 (1), 269-276. <https://dx.doi.org/10.24114/gr.v14i1.64612>

**Article History :** Received: February 13, 2025. Revised: March 17, 2025. Accepted: June 30, 2025

## ABSTRACT

This research aims to dig deeper into women's rights to freedom from ideological constraints. The research method used in this research is descriptive qualitative, by applying Kate Millet's theory of radical feminism. One of Kate Millet's ideas is to support the dismantling of the patriarchal system through social and cultural change, and criticize how culture, literature, and psychology can strengthen and dominate men over women. Observation in the form of extracting core data is obtained from literature studies or relevant previous scientific articles, and secondary data retrieval as a complement to core data comes from websites that have high credibility for information on the artist Edouard Manet, to information on relevant artworks. The results of the research on the representation of nude female figures by Manet in his painting entitled "Olympia" are influenced by several things. The use of art objects in the form of nude female figures has its own meaning for Manet in conveying messages and criticism related to gender issues, especially women. Manet criticizes women's freedom, which is in line with the application of feminism theory in this research. The conclusion of this research is that men tend to exploit women in economic and social terms. Men argue that women do not deserve to be equal to them, because women are objects that must submit to the stronger and dominant. Edouard Manet in painting "Olympia" succeeded in providing social criticism related to feminism through the meaning of the painting which was considered negative by art lovers who saw it.

## KEYWORDS

Nude Painting,  
Feminism, Olympia,  
Patriarchy, Édouard  
Manet

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## INTRODUCTION

As time goes by, fine art is not only a place to admire the beauty of art. In the current situation, fine art has become a place for self-expression and the development of creativity towards visual elements, which makes it more beautiful by adding artistic value to it. Given this development, over time the body figure has become one of the objects with diverse imagery, and of course is often found in works of art, especially in painting. Art and women have a close relationship as subjects, themes, or even moral messages represented in depictions of female body figures. The depiction of male and even female body figures that are used as visual elements in the process of work will certainly lead to a social response to the use of body figure ideas, especially the female body. The image of the female body used as an art object is not only about the shape or curves of the body, but also the figure of the female body completely naked.

Nowadays, the depiction of visual elements in artworks, especially paintings that use the nude female figure as the idea of form, is a taboo to be depicted and shown to the general public. This has led to different perceptions among people. Some people think that the exposure of naked female body

figures is taboo and should not be shown and become public consumption. The depiction of female body figures in a naked state certainly makes women, whether their bodies are used as art objects or not, feel uncomfortable with the views and opinions expressed by art connoisseurs towards the art objects used. The depiction of naked female figures is considered unethical and seems to want to bring down the image of women in front of the public. Thus, many also have different opinions on the use of nude female figures as art objects.

Similar research on the depiction of visual elements using the idea of the female form with nude body figures is found in research (Yandri et al., 2022). In this research, the presence of nude paintings made by painting artists in West Sumatra certainly gets obstacles from people who have religious and customary values and are instilled from childhood. The traditional perspective in West Sumatra has similarities in terms of religion, especially Islamic teachings, where Islamic customs and religion strongly oppose works with nude themes or nudity. The research has a suggestion which indirectly supports researching the difference in approach between art in West Sumatra and other regions in Indonesia and even beyond related to the theme of painting nudity.

People who are familiar with art and beauty will see that the use of female nude figures in artworks is to be enjoyed from the aspect of beauty and the use of techniques that successfully bring female figures into the artwork. Not only that, the nude female figure is not necessarily enjoyed for its visual beauty, but it also has a meaning or delivery implied in the artwork. Therefore, many artists of both impressionism and realism genres use the female nude as an art object in their paintings. The nude female figure represented in realism artworks is present in many of Edouard Manet's artworks, who also practiced impressionism. One of Manet's realistic works that uses nude female figures is a painting titled "Olympia" created in 1863 using oil paint applied to a 130.5 cm x 190 cm canvas. The object certainly has its own beauty in the visual elements used. The depiction of the female body figure completely naked and on a bed in a half-sleeping position makes the painting have different narratives according to the viewer.

According to the explanation described above, it can be further investigated regarding the representation of visual elements in the form of the idea of a female form with a naked body figure, which Manet used in the painting entitled "Olympia" using the theory of feminism according to (Millet, 1970). One of Kate Millet's ideas is to support the dismantling of the patriarchal system through social and cultural change, and criticize how culture, literature, and psychology can strengthen and dominate men over women. Using the feminist theory approach, this research aims to dig deeper into women's rights to freedom from ideological constraints. Thus, the existence of these problems in this study there is a formulation of problems to answer the topic and the main focus of the research including: 1) What is the representation of the idea of depicting the nude female figure in the realistic painting "Olympia"? 2) How is the feminism perspective related to women's rights to freedom in the realistic painting "Olympia"?

## METHOD

The research method used in this research is descriptive qualitative. The use of feminism theory in research methods as a reference and foundation in examining and answering problem formulations. According to (Lexy J. Moleong, 2000: 17) Qualitative research is research that has techniques in analyzing data that will be used in this study, especially data reduction, data presentation and processing, and conclusion making.

The theory of feminism that will be used in this research to examine and reveal the representation of the female nude body figure in the painting entitled "Olympia" is radical feminism (Millet, 1970). One of Kate Millet's ideas is to support the dismantling of the patriarchal system through social and cultural change, and criticize how culture, literature, and psychology can strengthen and dominate men over women. According to (Suratno in Putri et al., 2014) the injustice and oppression done to women stem from the patriarchal ideology that governs men and women in general. According to (Jones, Pip., Bradbury, Liz., Boutillier, 2016) Patriarchy is a form of women's control over men, which for radical feminists oppresses women is men, not the economic system.

The data analysis technique in this research uses descriptive written data from the objects and artists observed. This method is used to obtain the artist's interpretation in depicting the female nude body figure in Edouard Manet's painting titled "Olympia".

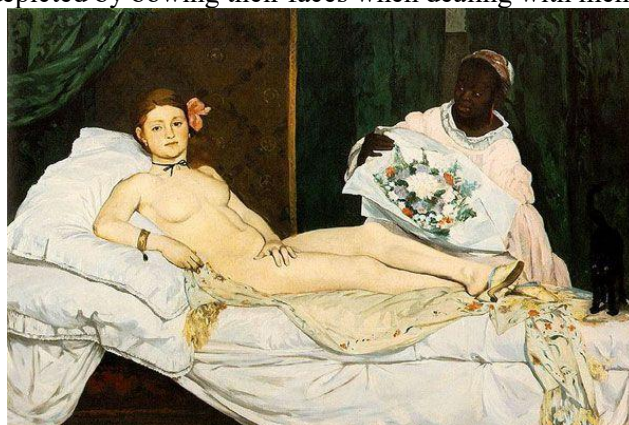
Observation in the form of extracting core data is obtained from literature studies or previous scientific articles that are relevant to the research topic being discussed. Secondary data collection as a complement to the core data comes from websites that have high credibility for information on the artist Edouard Manet, to information on relevant artworks. The results and discussion are presented in the form of a description of the results of data processing in the form of literature studies and previous research, supporting documentation, and descriptive explanations about Edouard Manet's painting entitled "Olympia".

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This realism painting entitled "Olympia" is the focus of discussion in this research study. The painting is the result of Edouard Manet's creativity obtained through literature studies and scientific articles from relevant reference journals. Women's resistance to patriarchal constraints is one of the backgrounds in the creation of the painting "Olympia". The view of feminism in the work, the woman in Edouard Manet's painting entitled "Olympia" is visually bold in exposing her beautiful curves in a state of complete nudity, with a face that seems to challenge and does not want to submit to anyone.

The application of feminism theory (Millet, 1970) in this research believes that the representation of the female nude body figure in the painting entitled "Olympia", women can actually choose to be a brave female figure without the shadow of masculinity from men. Thus, women who used to be submissive, passive objects, always controlled by men, independent, in fact can also fight and even control themselves.

The use of nude female figures was very normal in its day, including the use of nude female figures in representing classical goddesses or angels. As erotic as the style displayed in the figure of the goddess or angel is, it will still look respectable and not violate the norms or taboo rules of its time. This is contrary to the depiction of the naked female figure in the painting titled "Olympia". This realist painting, created in 1863 by French artist Edouard Manet, uses the nude female figure as a critique of traditional gender roles. Manet gives an implicit message by representing the naked female body figure in relation to women's sexuality and independence. This representation can certainly be interpreted as an acknowledgment of women who have full rights over their bodies and control over their lives. Often women's rights are obscured in traditional art and tend to be depicted with representations of women being very submissive to men, such as not daring to look directly into men's eyes and often depicted by bowing their faces when dealing with men



**Figure 1.** "Olympia" painting by Edouard Manet  
Source: The Art Story of Edouard Manet website

According to (Taruan et al., 2022) as the general view, women are always beautiful objects in a painting, that is why they always inspire a painter. In fact, women have always become "icons" in the mass media, because women's bodies are considered as "art goods". Reviewing how Edouard Manet's "Olympia" painting is presented as a critique of traditional gender roles in the painting,

Manet tries to incorporate his views on the independence and courage of *Olympia* who wants to break free from the constraints of patriarchal ideology. Manet applied various art elements and principles to the painting “*Olympia*”, which he hoped would convey his critique. *Olympia* is painted with a flat dimension or plane that lacks depth, has poor contour lines, and is interpreted as a resident of the seedy and contemporary world of Parisian prostitution. There are also art critics who question the application of art elements that are so lacking in dimensional depth and so on. Recalling Manet's reasoning for presenting “*Olympia*” as a critique of the traditional gender roles of his day, Manet is considered to have made a great affront to gender traditions, as well as the ancient tradition of practicing the noble ideal of nudity. As such, Manet's “*Olympia*” paintings of his time employed a technique of broad, flowing brushstrokes, and a speed of execution that seemed more than a trick. In a single stroke of color, Manet has dissolved the classical illusion of ancient art teachings on the principle of painting nudity, and recreated a painting with the principle of nudity according to Manet's conditions, and ultimately the visualization of the painting as a representation of Manet's conditions at that time. Therefore, the painting “*Olympia*” was created with less depth as a representation of Manet's condition in delivering criticism, and the final visualization is a realistic painting with a touch of impressionism.

In Eunice Lipton's short memoir *Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire*, has the outlook to remain academically unrecognized. Theodore Reff and T.J. Clark, for example, Clark's well-known essays since published in *Screen* in 1980 and in book form in 1985, have largely established disciplinary terms with Manet's paintings of which Clark has opined that, “In depicting a prostitute in 1865, Manet deals with modernity in one of its most poignant and familiar, but on the other hand also difficult aspects. The painting is so insistent on its own materiality, it does so in and through the gaze of a prostitute, a professional and standardized concern with the self that protects itself from the gaze of the buyer”. It is the self of a working-class woman caught up in the capitalist network of the *bourgeois* “prostitution game” that Clark sees as at stake in *Olympia's* naked body and flirtatious gaze. In 1975, Lipton challenged pre-existing views of Manet's *modernism* by insisting that not only were his formal innovations radical such as flatness, *tonalism*, shortened shadows, and strange perspectives but also those of women in their realism.

The representation of Edouard Manet's painting “*Olympia*” when viewed through the context of feminism which dominantly leads to feminist or feminine elements, things related to this issue in addition to the use of nude female body figures are the colors presented.

*Widyatama said that color is a factor that has a significant impact on every facet of human existence. Because of how closely color is related to human existence, color plays a number of important roles, including the color itself, representations of nature, symbols or symbols, and symbols of expression (Rostiyati in Miswar et al., 2022).*

According to (Faliha & Sari, 2021), colors in feminist architecture usually use feminine colors or bright and soft colors, such as yellow, light purple, white, orange, and so on. Color plays an important role in feminist architecture, because color can affect the psychology of every human being, especially for women. In Edouard Manet's “*Olympia*” painting, pale pink is the main color component that is dominantly applied to the representation of the idea of form, to all visual elements, especially the color of human skin. The application of the pale pink color component in his time, art lovers easily remember and know that the color is the identical color of maestro Edouard Manet. The color of feminism in the painting “*Olympia*” is found in the idea of *Olympia's* own body figure in the form of a smooth ivory white skin color, and is supported by the white color of the wavy, wrinkled, and folded bed sheets like *meringue*, as well as *Olympia's* smooth skin color that seems to shine from the background color on her dark body. The use of colors usually worked on by traditional artists, such as white, represents purity, innocence, and purity in a work of art (Miswar et al., 2022).

The use of various shape ideas in the overall visualization of Edouard Manet's “*Olympia*” painting has its own interpretation and purpose. Given the view of radical feminism that emphasizes that patriarchy is the main system that oppresses women and must be abolished, there are several visual elements in the form of shape ideas in the painting “*Olympia*” that represent this.





**Figure 2.** Cat Shape Idea in “Olympia” Painting

Source: Artsper Magazine website, The Influences Behind Edouard Manet's “Olympia”

Basically, Manet's “Olympia” painting is meant to emphasize and underline her sexual and economic independence from men. Another difference is the visual element in the form of an animal, instead of presenting a visualization of a dog, Manet painted a visualization of the idea of a black cat that interprets the traditional symbol for women and for sex workers.



**Figure 3.** *Olympia's* Gaze Shape Idea in “Olympia” Painting

Source: Artsper Magazine website, The Influences Behind Edouard Manet's “Olympia”



**Figure 4.** Flower Carried by the Maid Shape Idea in “Olympia” Painting

Source: Artsper Magazine website, The Influences Behind Edouard Manet's “Olympia”

In the visualization of the painting, the depiction of *Olympia* in a naked state means that women are not objects, but subjects who have control over themselves. Therefore, Manet depicts *Olympia* looking straight as if challenging the viewer with a confident expression without any fear implied in her gaze. *Olympia's* body position and expressive stance emphasize the rejection of obedience and submission to patriarchy. Indirectly, in the depiction of *Olympia's* body position, there

is a gender critique of the traditional art of her time. Women could only be enjoyed for their nudity and it was not a serious problem when the nude female figure was depicted on the incarnation of goddesses and even angels. Such erotic depictions were considered honorable and did not violate the prevailing rules and norms, which of course were deliberately made for the purpose of admiring and even respecting the object, not respecting the subject. Another interpretation comes from scholars who suggest that the woman was looking at the door, as her client arrived unannounced. On the other hand, the depiction of *Olympia's* behavior represents courage by ignoring the flowers that are interpreted as a gift from the client brought by her maid.



**Figure 5.** Symbol of Wealth Shape Idea in “Olympia” Painting

Source: Artsper Magazine website, The Influences Behind Edouard Manet's “Olympia”

Given that one of the key things that people found offensive about Manet's painting in his day was the look in *Olympia's* eyes, not her nudity or her maid. The painting contains several visual elements in the form of bracelets, pearl earrings, and an oriental shawl on the place where *Olympia* is lying, all of which symbolize women's wealth and sensuality. In the view of radical feminism, the idea of these forms is something that greatly restricts women in gaining their right to freedom. It is as if women are not given the right to be equal to men or even the right to surpass the masculinity of men. Edouard Manet's “Olympia” was used in the 1970s as a major and important reference in the context of the male gaze promoted by feminism. Black feminist women argue that Manet did not incorporate the idea of the maid form for artistic purposes, but rather to create an overall idea of black and white, good and bad, and clean and dirty.



**Figure 6.** Black and White Female Shape Idea in “Olympia” Painting

Source: Artsper Magazine website, The Influences Behind Edouard Manet's “Olympia”

The depiction of *Olympia* in the nude represents women having the courage to dismiss societal assumptions by not submitting to male patriarchy. In its day, traditional art often depicted the exploitation of women by denying them the opportunity to choose and be fully controlled by men in both their bodies and lives. Therefore, in order to have the right to freedom in body and life, the patriarchy would have to abolish the differences in their status and roles marked by gender.

The visualization in the painting creates a social response to taboo things or activities. For example, *Olympia* is stylized in a naked state, which makes other women feel uncomfortable in

exposing body parts that can be said to be sensitive. Many negative perspectives arise from Manet's paintings, because they are too bold in exposing women's naked bodies and of course with the context of the experiment that Manet carried in the painting. In the view of feminism, women teach the recognition of women's self-expression in various ways. This view aims to provide equality of status, role and position in each gender without one dominating the other. Thus, women will have freer rights without the dominance of male masculinity and the stereotypical demands of patriarchal ideology.

Broadly speaking, Manet wants to provide a narrative in the painting "Olympia" related to gender issues, especially women who want to change the stereotypes of women's weaknesses against men. Women have the right to equal status and role with men without having to take over the status and role of men. Apart from the dominant norms and rules that limit women's movement in managing their lives, women have the right to freely control and manage their bodies and lives without the demands and dominance of male masculinity. It is not meant to be a rebellion, but freedom and gender equality that is owned by everyone of both sexes. Therefore, the painting "Olympia" tries to convey this intention in an expressive and stylized representation of Edouard Manet's realism painting.

## CONCLUSION

According to the results and discussion that have been presented descriptively, the research results regarding the focus and topic of Manet's representation of nude female figures in his painting titled "Olympia" are influenced by several things. In the painting, Manet carries the idea of a nude female figure. The use of art objects in the form of naked female body figures has its own meaning for Manet in conveying messages and criticism related to gender issues, especially women. Manet criticized women's freedom, which is in line with the application of feminism theory in this research.

In the painting "Olympia" by Edouard Manet, the view of feminism is easily obtained from the meaning that Manet gives. Women have equal rights, roles, and statuses with men without the restriction of masculinity dominance owned by men. Just like men, women have the right to organize and fully control their bodies, choices, and lives. From the visualization of Manet's paintings, men tend to exploit women in economic and social terms. Men argue that women do not deserve to be equal to them, because women are objects that must submit to the stronger and dominant. Edouard Manet in painting "Olympia" succeeded in providing social criticism related to feminism through the meaning of the painting which was considered negative by art connoisseurs who saw it.

There is a suggestion for further research considering the limited sources of information related to the interpretation of various art views regarding art objects in nude paintings or nudity. Therefore, further research is recommended to narrow down the relationship between the depiction of nude female figures and feminism theories, both liberal and radical, in detail.

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