

Edouard Manet and France's ill-fated puppet

Clare Hurley
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Manet and the Execution of Maximilian, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, November 5, 2006-January 29, 2007

Manet and the Execution of Maximilian is a small, compelling exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. It brings together three large paintings and two smaller images by Edouard Manet, one of the most influential painters of the nineteenth century, depicting the execution of the French-installed Emperor Maximilian by a Mexican firing squad in 1867.

Censored by the French government when they were produced, these works are less familiar than many of Manet's other paintings, such as *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (1863) or *Olympia* (1863). The three Maximilian paintings have not been widely exhibited and then always individually, except on one other occasion in 1992-1993 in a joint exhibition held by the museums that own two of the paintings, one in London, the other in Mannheim, Germany. The third is in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

While inevitably losing some of their original impact, these paintings are offered a new opportunity to startle viewers in this exhibition. Current political events also play a role, both in the decision to stage the show, apparently, and in one's response to the works. According to curator John Elderfield, devoting an exhibition in 2006 to "works that depict the baleful consequences of a military intervention and regime change" was not an accident. [1]

In addition to the *Execution* paintings, the exhibition presents the historical circumstances of the execution through photographs, press reports and other documentary evidence. It also includes several of Manet's other paintings, as well as some of his artistic sources, to place the series in its fullest context.

The execution of Maximilian in 1867 was the ignominious culmination of France's colonial adventure in Mexico. Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew, Napoleon III, had usurped power after the revolution of 1848 by exploiting the conflict between the aristocracy, the ascendant bourgeoisie and a restive working class. In 1852, his coup against the Republic restored the French monarchy with himself as emperor.

But Napoleon III's Second Empire was fraught with cross currents of class struggle. As Marx described, "[I]n this torment of historical unrest, in this dramatic ebb and flow of revolutionary passions, hopes, and disappointments, the different classes of French society had to count their epochs of development in weeks when they had previously counted them in half-centuries." [2] Power under these conditions could only be maintained through political repression and foreign wars.

After intervening in Italy's wars of independence to defeat the Austrians at Solferino in 1859, Napoleon III saw his next opportunity in Mexico. Victorious in the War of Reform, nationalist President Benito Juárez cancelled Mexico's foreign debt in 1861; this gave France a pretext to send troops to secure its assets. At first, France, Spain and Britain all proposed to intervene, prompting Marx to exclaim that the "contemplated intervention in Mexico by England, France, and Spain" was "one of the most monstrous enterprises ever chronicled in the annals of international history." [3] The British and Spanish fleets took part in the initial action, but the two countries withdrew their forces in April 1862.

France carried on. Napoleon III was further encouraged to seize the war-weakened country by the fact that his only potential challenger, the United States, was embroiled in its own civil war. However, the insufficient French forces were routed at Puebla on May 5, 1862, and *Cinco de Mayo* subsequently became a Mexican national holiday.

First censoring news of this humiliating defeat for fear of encouraging opposition within the French population, Napoleon III played on nationalist sympathies to create support for sending more troops to restore French honor and the Mexican monarchy. But because of the weakness of the monarchist forces within Mexico, Napoleon III offered the Mexican crown, on their behalf, to an Austrian archduke, Maximilian, brother of Emperor Franz Josef.

Thus the ill-fated Emperor Maximilian arrived in Mexico in 1864, where in an alliance with the conservative generals Miguel Miramón and Tomás Mejía, he attempted to rule in opposition to Juárez's government. However, Juárez's forces were strengthened by popular resistance to foreign occupation, along with the American aid that became available after the Civil War ended in 1865.

Sensing imminent defeat, Napoleon III withdrew French troops, and as a result, on June 19, 1867, the abandoned puppet-emperor Maximilian along with Miramón and Mejía were executed for treason by firing squad at Querétaro, north of Mexico City. (In an October 1865 decree, Maximilian had threatened any Mexican captured in the fighting with immediate death. Several high-ranking republican officials were put to death under this decree.)

When the news of the execution finally got past the French government censors, it provoked widespread public outcry and revulsion, and prompted Edouard Manet to begin what would become a series of paintings.

Manet's three large paintings dominate the central wall of MoMA's exhibition. They are powerful and intriguing when viewed together, bringing out both their political and artistic evolution. The first painting was begun in July of 1867. At 6.5 by 8.6 feet (195.9 x 259.7 cm), the work's large size is typical for a history painting. Yet the style is sketchy and atmospheric, most unlike the elaborate rendition of troops, horses and noble generals generally associated with nineteenth century French historical painting.

The figures of Maximilian, Mejía and Miramón are all but completely obscured by the smoke from the fusillade, the firing squad is a mass of indistinguishable figures in sombreros and flared pants, and one faceless figure holding a lowered rifle is turned toward the viewer in a confrontational pose. The background landscape hints at dry distant hills with just a few touches of beige and blue, and the foreground is a flurry of broad brushstrokes.

Some scholars have taken the loose style of this painting to mean that it was a sketch, especially since Manet almost immediately set to work in July or August of 1867 on a second version that maintained the overall composition but rendered the figures with greater definition. Others have thought that Manet, known for his exactitude, started his painting over again to show the uniforms of the Mexican firing squad accurately as detailed press reports became available. (There were no photographs of

the event itself, since photography was not yet able to capture rapid motion. There was, however, a group portrait of the firing squad that Manet might have seen.

We cannot know Manet's reasons for revising his painting; but he evidently decided to let the first version stand, rather than developing the final painting over it, which would have been the normal procedure if the first canvas had been a full-scale sketch. Certainly, the second (and third) versions seem bent on more precision than the first impressionistic one. This can be seen particularly in the uniforms of the firing squad. However, it has been pointed out that the uniforms and the overall appearance of the firing squad actually suggest French rather than Mexican troops, reflecting Manet's developing political assessment of the event, not merely a desire for accurate detail.

The second version exists only in fragments because the canvas was damaged in storage, and later cut up. The firing squad now appears as one compact central unit, with a soldier on the left standing slightly apart. Of the executed men, only Miramón in his white shirt remains, holding the hand of Maximilian, the rest of whom is cut away. Miramón's figure is disproportionately large, and his face crudely painted, perhaps unfinished, suggesting that Manet might have been struggling with his composition. Indeed the smaller lithograph and oil sketch that he produced while he was working on the paintings show that he continued to adjust various details in pursuit of his desired effect.

However, the most significant change from the first to the second version is the transformation of the confrontational yet blank-faced figure in the front of the first version into the officer on the right, now distinguishable as the non-commissioned officer (NCO) cocking his rifle in readiness to administer the final coup de grace. Not only has his rifle been brought to the ready, his face clearly resembles none other than Napoleon III, as seen in contemporaneous photographs!

So while Manet may have had difficulties deciding on some aspects of his composition, he clearly had made up his mind who was responsible for Maximilian's death. As a staunch republican, Manet opposed Napoleon III's hijacking of power in 1852. In Manet's view, the French Emperor was no more a legitimate representative of the people than Maximilian, and in his misuse of state power might just as well have shot his proxy himself.

The third version of the painting makes this conclusion even clearer, its impact derived from the cold-blooded casualness of the image. The firing squad looks trim in dark uniforms; their stances are relaxed, even jaunty. Their faces, averted from the viewer, are impersonal as they confront Maximilian and his two generals. Pale as a ghost, his sombrero making an improbable halo, Maximilian's expression is blank, whereas Mejía's head is thrown back under the impact of being shot. Compositionally, the rifles have become so long that they virtually touch the chests of their victims, and visually seem to decapitate them. A small group of spectators peers over a high wall that has been added, with one possibly making a gesture of protest. The NCO impassively readies his gun.

It is a grim, unequivocal image, which if it had been more widely shown at the time would have only added to Manet's established reputation for producing violent paintings.

In the nearly 150 years that separates us from Manet's time, so much graphically violent imagery has been produced in the visual arts, especially if one includes film and photography, that it is hard to appreciate or even perceive it in Manet's paintings. And yet its understatement, its mundane quality has always been most shocking. His paintings were additionally troubling because they transformed the traditional subjects and motifs of the great masters, often borrowing compositions directly from illustrious sources, into modern, class-specific terms.

His Déjeuner sur l'Herbe was rejected from the Paris Salon of 1863 to take its place with other Realist and early Impressionist works in the *Salon*

des Refusés (which opened just as Napoleon III was intensifying his intervention in Mexico). Although the composition of the three central figures was lifted from a Raphael painting of water dryads, Manet's group looks more like bohemian picnickers in a Paris park. The painting was ridiculed in the press, the nude said to resemble a shop girl who needed a bath—the dark shadows against her skin were taken for dirt. She certainly was no nymph.

This process of stripping away mythology and other forms of idealization in order to achieve social and historical specificity can similarly be seen in Manet's reworking of his *Execution* paintings. The first version perhaps has greater emotional impact, but is ambiguous as to time and place. Manet did not seem satisfied that viewers be appalled at executions in general, but rather wanted to communicate what it was about this particular execution that was so appalling—namely that the supposedly civilized force of the French state would see its own representative killed in pursuit of its strategic goals.

Several of Manet's sources are included in the exhibition, showing the complex synthesis of his work. Although his paintings are best classified as Realist for their focus on scenes from modern bourgeois life—with its cafes and parks, racetracks and railroads—Manet in fact drew many of his compositions from other paintings, not from direct (or *plein air*) observation, as did the Impressionists with whom he is often grouped.

As a result, particularly his earlier works have a staged, even awkward quality. To whatever degree Manet intended his paintings to expose the pretensions of the bourgeoisie, the gracelessness with which this new class wrapped itself in the mantle of earlier periods of art, so as to “present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language” [4] was unflattering, to say the least.

Several of his early works have a Spanish theme (a Parisian fad perhaps echoing foreign policy interests), though again, his figures are clearly models posing in Spanish costumes, not Spaniards. Manet's *Mademoiselle V in the Costume of an Espada* (1862), included at MoMA, is recognizably the same model as his grubby water nymph.

Additionally, the influence of Spanish painters, particularly Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), is apparent in Manet's placement of single figures against a blank grey background. He would have seen Velázquez's paintings at the Prado on his trip to Spain in 1865. There he also attended bullfights; the defined space of the bull ring with its high walls, spectators, and ritualized violence would be reused in subsequent paintings, including the *Dead Toreador*, as well as the final version of his *Execution of Maximilian*.

But his most direct source for the latter was Francisco Goya's 1814 painting *The Third of May, 1808*. The Goya painting, represented in the MoMA exhibition in a wood engraving, depicted the execution of Spanish nationalists by Napoleon I's forces. Manet has adapted Goya's composition, with firing squad on the right, victims on the left, a high wall and hill behind, but the Goya image is far more dramatic. The firing squad leans into its task, the already executed lie bleeding in the foreground, while those mounting the block clasp their heads in dread. The figure at the point of execution, brightly lit in his white shirt, throws his arms wide in a Christ-like gesture.

That Manet should rework this image of the uncle Napoleon Bonaparte's foreign expeditions into the nephew Louis Napoleon's—with a similar change in tone from the elevated if not exactly noble, to the callous and mundane—parallels Marx's assessment quite neatly, though Manet was probably unacquainted with the latter's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.

Nevertheless, the politically explosive nature of Manet's painting was unmistakable. He was given to understand that he should not submit the work to the Salon jury in 1869 when the final of the three versions would have been finished (though it is dated 1867, in reference to the event itself). A lithographic stone of the image was confiscated, and Manet had

to sue in order to prevent it from being destroyed.

While it is well known that Manet was a controversial and pioneering figure in painting, whose work conveyed the social instability and transformation of class relations in the mid-nineteenth century, it is less acknowledged that his paintings explicitly addressed some of the epoch's political events.

Nor was the *Execution of Maximilian* series unique in Manet's work. In *The Battle of the "Kearsage" and the "Alabama"* (1864), a small seascape depicts an American Civil War battle that took place off the coast of France.

However, a small gouache painting of the barricaded streets of the Paris Commune is of even greater interest; in it, Manet reused his own image of the firing squad to depict the execution of the Communards by government troops two years after he finished his third version of the *Execution*.

Manet had stayed in Paris during the siege by the Prussians in 1870, and served in the Republican National Guard. Whether or not he actually witnessed the executions he depicted, the French military uniforms would have been correct this time, and the addition of a gesture of defiance by the executed is unmistakable.

Bringing attention to this complex, and somewhat overlooked, political engagement of an artist with the definitive events of his time makes MoMA's exhibition of Manet's *Execution of Maximilian* paintings particularly valuable. In the context of the present US occupation of Iraq, such historical and artistic precedents couldn't be more pertinent.

*Images courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art

Notes:

1. John Elderfield, *Manet and the Execution of Maximilian* (Exhibition catalogue), Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2006, p. 23
2. Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, Part II*, 1850
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/ch02.htm>
3. Karl Marx, *The Intervention in Mexico*, 1861
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/11/23.htm>
4. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, 1852
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>



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