Modern muses

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Slide 1

To understand the modern muse one must first look at the roles of ancient and classical muses.

Slide 2

The Venus of Willendorf dates back to 22000 BCE. Her large breasts and wide hips characterize this small sculpture. There is no question that she is a symbol of fertility but there is some speculation as to whether she was a goddess or a symbol. The artist chose not to give her a face, which implies her sole purpose to be a symbol of fertility and femininity. She was made to show the purpose of a woman as a vessel through which life is created.

Slide 3

The Aphrodite of Knidos was one of the first nude female sculptures and is revered as one of the greatest classical works. She was sculpted by Praxiteles who is considered the father of late classical sculpture. He shows the goddess in the moment when she has taken off her clothes to get in a bath. She is posed with contrapposto that gives her a shy quality as if she knows that she can be seen. She lays one hand over her body to hide her pelvic area. Her pose is sensual but modest. She stares past the viewer, which sends a message that she can never be fully possessed and this allows her to become even more tantalizing. This work was considered very erotic at the time, which is shown by the careful attention that Praxiteles gave to this goddess. But why did he spend so much effort to make her
beautiful in every way? There is no doubt that as an artist one strives for success but it is known that the model for this sculpture was a woman named Frini. She was a cortisone who Praxiteles had desperately fallen in love with. Frini was not only his model but also his beautiful muse and lover.

**Slide 4**

The Grand Odalisque by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres is a beautifully executed painting. The woman here is depicted in the reclining position surrounded by comfortable bedding and lavish curtains. Ingres elongates her features which makes her even more aesthetically pleasing but there is something else she does that makes her stand out to the viewer. Art historians refer to it as the power of the gaze. The back of her body faces the viewer but she slightly turns her head in profile to look out of the picture plane. She has an expression of innocence but looks coyly at the viewer. This muse is meant to excite the senses of male viewers by revealing a hint of lust in her eyes. The style Ingres employs here was used for many years by artists who painted nude women until the revolutionary artists of the mid 19th century came in to shake the typical style of painting.

**Slide 5**

One of these great artists was Edouard Manet. He rebelled against the salon by refusing to paint in the typical style. He ignored perspective, which thrusts his subjects to the foreground. He also painted the truth about life in the 19th century, which many people were not happy to face, especially the art critics. Manet was a
defiant and brilliant man, so naturally he chose a muse that could compliment his vision.

**Slide 6**

Victorine Meurent was a working class woman who was an aspiring artist but also supported herself by playing music and posing for artists. Her role changes from simply a model to a student. She was poor and did not have the luxury of proper schooling or access to supplies like women artists of the time such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Marisot. Meurent worked hard to get into the salon and along the way she helped create a rebellion that would change art forever. Unfortunately many of her works are not widely known but she played a key role in Manet's rebellion against the salon. There are speculations about how Manet met Victorine Meurent. Some say they met through Thomas Couture, who was Manet’s mentor and another artist Meurent posed for. Others say that Manet discovered her while walking down the street as he spotted her playing music. People who believe this scenario claim that he was stricken by her beautiful red hair and confident stature. Regardless of how they met, Meurent became Manet’s favorite model. In this case she is not just a model but also a student and was not intimately involved with Manet, as history had previously dictated about artist's models. We will now take a look at two of Manet's most famous paintings and discover how together they changed the art world.
**Slide 7**

Dejeuner sur l’herbe, also known as Luncheon on the Grass, shocked the critics. It showed the truth of the world in a crude and undesirable manner. The scene shows two men and two women who are in a country setting. Both men are clothed but one woman is in her undergarments while the other is completely nude. The two men are students at a university, which is shown by the style of hat that they wear. The two women with them could be interpreted as prostitutes. This is suggested by how Manet places a nude figure in broad daylight with two men in a modern Parisian park. While prostitution is the oldest profession in the world at this time it was legal but frowned upon. Manet does not hide their profession but forces it to the viewer’s attention. This effect is furthered by the lack of perspective and brings the figures directly into the foreground. The woman seated on the left of the picture plane is Victorine Meurent. The rest of the figures are engaged in other activities but she turns to address the viewer.

**Slide 8**

She sits nude in a relaxed pose but her gaze is defiant. She does not look coyly at the viewer but shows an expression of confidence. This woman is independent and relies on no one but herself for support. She is proud of herself as a woman and her eyes dare the viewer to judge or question her.
Victorine Meurent appears again in Manet's Olympia. In this scene, without dispute, she is depicted as a prostitute. Critics described this painting as beneath them and claimed it a disgrace to art. The rawness of this reality appalled critics because she was flaunting her sexuality and knew that she was doing it. Here she is in the reclining position awaiting her visitor. Her maid holds flowers, which symbolizes what a male caller would send to indicate his arrival. There are no male figures in the painting. Instead Manet chooses to make the viewer the focus of Olympia’s attention. It appears as though she is the viewer and we are the ones she is judging.

Again Manet has her stare defiantly out at the viewer. Her physique is delicate but her brash expression shows a strong and intelligent woman. Manet sought to channel the truth of the world and is able to excel because Victorine Meurent was a self made woman who commanded respect.

Another equally revolutionary artist was Gustave Courbet. He claimed that a nude is simply a nude and had gave him no inspiration in his art. Courbet may have claimed this but evidence in his paintings suggests otherwise.
Joanna Hiffernan was a modern woman like Victorine Meurent. She was fiery and independent which attracted her to many artists. Hiffernan posed for Courbet but also for artists such as Thomas Coutoure and James Whistler. She was also involved with Whistler and was without question his muse. Courbet refutes that he gained no inspiration from any muse but Hiffernan is a prevalent figure in his paintings. This fact alone does not prove that she was inspiration to him but by taking a closer look at the paintings we can examine the hidden message.

In *The Painter’s Studio*, Hiffernan is shown next to the artist but she is not his inspiration. Here Courbet shows her as simply a model who is needed only for reference in his painting process. She stands along with other figures who are also models and are also used as aides in his painting.

*The Origin of the World* was an enormous shock to the art world for obvious reasons. Hiffernan posed for this painting and here Courbet shows her in a very erotic manner. Her continued presence in his paintings leads one to believe that although Hiffernan may not have started out as his muse, during their relationship she became more. The time that this was painted was the same time that Whistler gave up his friendship with Courbet because of his newly physical relationship with Hiffernan. At this point it is assumed that they were physically involved but there still leaves the question of admiration, inspiration, and possibly love.
Slide 15

This painting seals the evidence about the relationship between muse and artist. The painting is titled *Jo the Beautiful Irish Girl*, where she is posed in a room brushing her hair. Courbet mentions her beauty but looking further one can see that this is a moment of admiration for Courbet. From the viewer's perspective it appears as if you are standing or sitting in the room with her, watching, while she delicately brushes her hair. Courbet had ideas for other paintings which were used for shock value but this one seems more personal as if by this point he cared for her more than simply an artist's model.

Slide 16

The role of the muse as an apprentice, lover, inspiration, and model has not changed over the centuries. What changed were the women themselves. The women in these paintings were modern and not clothed in allegory as a goddess. In the 19th century the first modern artists came about with men like Francisco de Goya, Gustave Courbet, And of course Edouard Manet.

Slide 17

They say that behind every great man is a great woman and this cannot be more truthful in the case of Victorine Meurent and Joanna Hiffernan. These men were defiant and rebellious and sought women who were equally intelligent and independent. Together they were able to change the ideals of the salon and set in motion the modern age.
Images Cited

1. Venus of Willendorf. arthistoryresources.net/willendorf/

2. The Aphrodite of Cnidus (Knidos) by Praxiteles (c.350 BC).

3. *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, oil on canvas, 91 x 162 cm, Louvre.

4. Manet, Édouard. 1862-1863, oil on canvas, 208 cm × 265.5 cm (81.9 in × 104.5 in), Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

5. Manet, Édouard. *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 130.5 x 190 cm (51 x 74.8 in).


7. Courbet, Gustave. 1866, oil on canvas, 46 cm × 55 cm (18 in × 22 in), Musée d'Orsay, Paris.