

Manet and woman: Portraying Life

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As an exhibition of

portraits by the great French painter opens in London, Adrian Hamilton asks why he treated his male and female subjects so differently

The Royal Academy claims its new exhibition of the painter Edouard Manet is the largest so far in Britain and the first to be devoted to his portraiture. Can it really be true of an artist whose work is so well known over here, of whom one thought there was nothing to left say beyond glorying in his deep blacks, those wondrous whites and the endless experiments with traditional forms put to new work in contemporary life?

The answer is that there is always something fresh to be learnt about this most sociable and elusive of artists, friend of most of the novelists and critics of his day, revered as a radical father figure by younger artists and respected as a regular contributor to the salons of the establishment. Portraiture, which he pursued in oil and later in pastel throughout his relatively brief career of some two decades (he died aged 51 in 1883), is as good a way as any of exploring his varied works.

Not that you go to Manet for penetrating portraiture. Although he used models as well as friends and insisted on painting only from prolonged and frequent sittings, it wasn't to explore the character or dig deep into the psyche of his subjects. It was to comment on their place through their appearance. [\(περισσότερα...\)](#)