

Eunice Lipton

Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire

Chapter 1 (pp. 1–17) and Chapter 3 (pp. 50–62)

The selections frame Lipton's feminist method and recover Victorine Meurent within the class and gender structures of the nineteenth-century Paris art world.

ALIAS OLYMPIA

*A Woman's Search
for Manet's
Notorious Model
&
Her Own Desire*

EUNICE LIPTON

Cornell University Press

Ithaca and London

For my dear redheads
Ken, Carol Z. & Linda

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First published 1992 by Charles Scribner's Sons

First paperback edition by Meridian, 1994

First printing, Cornell Paperbacks, 1999

Printed in the United States of America

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Lipton, Eunice.

Alias Olympia : a woman's search for Manet's notorious model & her own desire / Eunice Lipton.

p. cm.

Originally published: New York : Scribner's ; Toronto : Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; New York : Maxwell Macmillan International, c1992.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8014-8609-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Meurent, Victorine. 2. Artists' models—France—Biography.
3. Manet, Edouard, 1832–1883—Relations with women. 4. Lipton, Eunice. 5. Women art historians—United States—Biography.
6. Feminist art criticism—United States. I. Title.

ND553.M3L56 1999

759.4—dc21

[B]

8-49414

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Paperback printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

History of an Encounter

I don't remember when I first saw Victorine Meurent, but I wouldn't have recognized her or known her name at the time. No one would have. She was just another naked woman in a painting. Maybe I remarked that the man who made the picture was called Manet or that the work itself was named *Olympia*, but that would have been it. When I was at college in the late 1950s, works of art were considered things of beauty. Period. One would never pay attention to a painting's literal content. One wouldn't even risk noticing that De Kooning's *Woman II* had a woman in it.

Even as I became a professional art historian in the 1960s, the look of *Olympia* did not change. The naked white woman on the bed seemed like any odalisque, Venus, or Danaë—idealized flesh made into art. I was

taught to appreciate Manet's particularly modern vocabulary, his tonal contrasts, flattened spaces, outlined forms, that is, his fundamentally abstract intentions. It was Manet who was placed first in the pantheon of modernist painting; we were told that before anyone else, he had seen people and events for what they really were: abstract pictorial forms.

But one day in 1970, try as I may, I could not shake the feeling that there was an event unfolding in *Olympia* and that the naked woman was staring quite alarmingly out of the picture. I could not make her recede behind the abstract forms I knew—I had been taught so fervently to believe—were the true content of the work. Her face kept swimming forward, her eyes demanded attention. I saw that unlike other naked women in paintings, *Olympia* did not drape herself suggestively upon her bed, or supplicate prospective lovers, or droop resignedly. Nor did she smile flirtatiously. Rather she reigned imperiously, reclining upon silken pillows, her steady gaze a dare, her tight little body and proprietary hand an omen. Now I could see that even the stilted pose of the black maid and overarching cat gave the lie to scenarios of seduction. *Olympia*, alert and dignified, resembled a noble consort on an Etruscan funerary monument far more than an inviting Greek or Oriental courtesan. This was a woman who could say "yes," or she could say "no."

Her contemporaries knew this in the nineteenth century though they didn't say it in so many words. In fact, Manet was greatly distressed over how his painting

was received; he even considered destroying it. What happened was this. In May of 1865 *Olympia* was exhibited in the Salon, the official exhibition forum of the time. The press took an instant and bellicose dislike to the work, using words like: "The vicious strangeness of [this] . . . woman of the night"; "a sort of female gorilla, a grotesque. . . ." "Such indecency! . . ." Before anyone knew what was happening, respectable Parisians were sweeping through the Salon's drafty halls brandishing walking sticks and umbrellas; they were heading toward *Olympia* with murder on their minds. The authorities were taken aback, and took the unprecedented step of cordoning off the painting. But the damage was done. Manet fled to Spain thinking: Titian had done it, so had Giorgione and Velazquez—he meant painted naked women—why is everyone so angry at me? This may have been the first time in modern history that a painting incited people to such public agitation.

I discovered that Manet painted the same red-headed woman nine times during the years 1862 to 1874, and from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's catalogue of French painting, I learned that her name was Victorine Meurent. In eight of the works Manet made of her, Meurent examines the viewer with *Olympia*'s unflinching gaze. In the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (in the Musée d'Orsay), she sits naked in the country with two clothed men. Canny, unflappable, she peers out, oblivious to the near-pornographic promptings of the story. In *Woman with a Parrot* (in the Metropolitan Museum), neither Meurent's plush, pink dressing gown nor the strange

still-life of parrot and orange distract from the penetration of her look. In *Victorine in the Costume of an Espada* (also at the Metropolitan), her blunt stare and iconic stillness halt the unfolding drama in the bullring.

From each and every canvas I saw that the model surveyed the viewer, resisting centuries of admonition to ingratiate herself. Locked behind her gaze were thoughts, an ego maneuvering. If later on Freud would ask, "What do women want?" then this woman's face answered. You knew what she wanted. Everything. Or rather she wanted, she lacked, nothing. And *that* is why in the spring of 1865 men shook with rage in front of *Olympia*. She was unmanageable; they knew she had to be contained.

These men only meant to persuade her, a single unwieldy woman, to comply. But the plot they hatched, and the map their worries charted, took them way off the road of Art Appreciation and Art History and deep into twentieth-century sexual struggle. Everything was done to silence her. Discourse would bar her presence, indeed would transform her into her opposite—a helpless woman. This is what scholars and writers said about her:

[She] was a young girl whom Manet met by chance in the middle of a crowd in a room at the Palais de Justice. [Théodore Duret, 1902]

Here [in *Olympia*] in the flesh is a girl whom the artist has put on canvas in her youthful, slightly

tarnished nakedness. . . . He has introduced us to Olympia . . . whom we have met in the streets. . . . [Émile Zola, 1867]

[Victorine Meurent] was, between 1862 and 1874, with long eclipses, because she was whimsical, Manet's preferred model. . . . [She was] like a lot of girls of the lower classes who knew they were beautiful and unable to easily resign themselves to misery. She immediately consented to model. . . . [Adolphe Tabarant, 1937]

Victorine Meurent disappeared from circulation for several years and was silent about this disappearance that one knows was for romantic reasons. . . . A sentimental folly had taken her to America. . . . [Tabarant, 1947]

A thin woman with red hair . . . was introduced to me and I was told that she was Marie [Pellegrin]'s intimate friend, and that the two lived together whenever Marie returned to Montmartre. [The red-head] was known as La Glue [sic]; her real name was Victorine. She had sat for Manet's picture of Olympe, but that was many years ago. The face was thinner, but I recognized the red hair and the brown eyes, small eyes set closely, reminding me of little glasses of cognac. . . . She lit cigarette after cigarette, and leaned over Marie with her arm about her shoulder. . . . [George Moore, 1920]

After having attempted, without much success, to give music lessons, [Victorine] tried to paint. She asked for advice . . . from Étienne Leroy, an obscure painter. Soon she thought about exhibiting in the Salon, and the jury was not discriminating. In 1876 she sent them her own portrait and then some historic or anecdotal paintings. Wretched little daubs. [Tabarant, 1921]

[At the café Nouvelles Athènes] going from table to table was a former model of Manet's, Victorine Meurent, nicknamed The Shrimp . . . ; she was showing artists her most recent studies because she had started painting since she was no longer able to pose in the nude. . . . [Georges Rivière, 1931]

[In the] very mediocre salon [of 1879] . . . what a surprise for Manet, that his neighbor in the same room was Victorine Meurent. She was there, smiling, happy, camped in front of her entry, which had brought her such honor, the *Bourgeoise de Nuremberg au XVIe Siècle*. . . . [Tabarant, 1947]

One day [ca. 1895] I was in [Lautrec's] studio and [he] said to me: "Get your cane and your hat, we are going to see 'la' . . ." I took my hat and cane, intrigued, and attempted to query Lautrec. He put his finger to his lips and murmured mysteriously. . . . At the end of a quarter hour's walk . . . he darted under the porch of an old house on the rue Douai. He climbed . . . five dark flights of steps and reaching

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the attic . . . said to me again, raising his finger, she is more famous than. . . Finally, he knocked on a little door. An old woman came to open it and Toulouse-Lautrec introduced me to . . . the Olympia of Manet. [Paul Leclercq, 1954]

She tried to sell her drawings to her companions of the night. . . But she no longer drew very well, and she stopped making them and returned to her guitar playing where she could, and then came the final disgrace. She descended into alcoholism. A painting by Norbert Goeneutte represents her collapsed in a chair against a table on which is located a monkey dressed in red. She grasps in her right hand a guitar and with the other presses down on the neck of a wine bottle. [Tabarant, 1947]

To these writers Victorine Meurent is a wretched lower-class model from the streets of Paris. She is promiscuous and alcoholic; she draws and paints unsuccessfully; she is foolish in her persistence and ambitions. She is a sad, failed person—a loser.

I never saw her that way. Was I missing the point, with all my expensive education? I didn't think so. But how was one to explain the competing images: a pathetic female character on the one hand, Manet's cocky, self-contained model on the other? I wondered why none of the writers were surprised that Meurent—this mere model—painted? Why only condescension and contempt? Why was no one captivated by her trip to the

United States? Why was it designated romantic folly? And what, finally, was behind all the attention this red-headed model received?

I was bewildered and perturbed, and had no idea what to do with these feelings that were so inappropriate to my profession. Art History, after all, promised serenity and pleasure—it's a gentleman's profession—not emotional excess. Luckily I met an extraordinary woman who helped me. Coincidentally she was a red-head, like Victorine, and something of a character as well. She was an art historian named Linda Nochlin. I had already heard of her in the mid-1960s when I was a graduate student. Even then Nochlin was a celebrity although it was not clear exactly what the parameters of her notoriety were. In fact, I sensed something missing in the stories that circulated. The talk was about her unorthodox dissertation, *Gustave Courbet: A Study in Style and Society*, completed in 1963. In it she proposed that the radical politics of Courbet's time emphatically and specifically informed his paintings. The very subjects he chose—an old man and a child breaking stones, the elaborate Catholic burial of a peasant, the portrait of a socialist—and the compositional schema he used had political meaning.

Reading historical events into the style of works of art was forbidden in Art History. This was most stringently the case in the realm of modern art where abstraction, both as visual content and analytic tool, was sacred. Typical thesis subjects in the field of modern Art

History were: "Color in Matisse," "Medieval Sources in Gauguin," "Classical Tendencies in Ingres." But Nochlin drew stylistic considerations into a net of political and social meaning. It was the 1960s. And, it turns out, her Russian-Jewish family had been committed liberals for generations, and she had gone to Vassar, a college noted for encouraging smart girls to speak their minds. She believed in her thoughts; she felt no shyness about her voice. Her prosaic, demystifying questions, her political passions, and her lively, sometimes biting, sometimes poetic prose were harbingers of things to come. Art History was changing.

What was omitted in the gossip about Nochlin I learned when I met her. That happened in the fall of 1970. We were colleagues at Hunter College. She was visiting for the year from Vassar, where she was now a professor of Art History. On the day I saw a striking redheaded woman down the corridor, I walked up to her and introduced myself: "I'm Eunice Lipton, we're colleagues. I'm so happy you're here. I'd love to have dinner with you." Fast. If she was surprised, she didn't show it. "Let's," she said. We made a date for the following week.

Nochlin was taller than I expected, and more girlish. Also less pretty. I assumed that if she was a woman and well-known, she couldn't be "girlish"; who would take her seriously? But because she was a woman she had to be of short to medium stature and pretty. Nochlin was none of these; she moved as if she had a right to.

There also was a querying hesitation, a kind of laughter around her edges, that made her simultaneously accessible and unpredictable.

When the day came for our dinner, I made a list of things to talk about and went to the restaurant. She was waiting. I felt for the list in my pocket.

"How do you like being at Hunter?" I asked.

"I like it," she said. "It's very lively, the students are smart. It is ugly though, isn't it?"

"Yes. Are you commuting?" I knew she had a home in Poughkeepsie. Her face kept turning away, distracted. Or was she shy?

"Yes. Do you like it here?"

"Oh, yes." The coming and going in the city, earning money just for myself having finally left a foolish marriage. I relished the trip to the anonymous Hunter College building on Park Avenue, the smart kids, the colleagues, then back into the city again, home to Barrow Street where I lived alone. A nice big empty bed. I loved it. "I like it a lot."

I thought about the list. "What are you working on?"

"Courbet. Also, I've been thinking about women artists, and why there haven't been any great ones. And if they don't exist and never have, isn't the real question why?"

"Interesting." What a nerve, to just say it like that, no defensiveness, no guilt.

"There *are* no women equivalents," she continued, "for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne,

Picasso or Matisse . . . any more than there are black American equivalents for the same. . . . The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education. . . ."

"I've been wondering about women, too." I told her what I'd been thinking about *Olympia*. She just kept nodding yes, yes, yes, and looking at me a little surprised. (Dear Linda! Such a mix of Vassar aristocrat and naughty girl, her accent vacillating between haute-Vassar and Flatbush, her eyes so alluring, saying come along, have some fun with me, but then darting nervously away.)

"You should write this up, Eunice," she said off-handedly. She meant publish it. No one had ever suggested that I publish anything.

"They're just ideas, Linda; I haven't done any research yet." She gave me this long look.

"And how many Art Historians have ideas, my dear?" Then I remembered a professor saying to me, "I worry about you, Eunice, you have too many ideas."

I went home and started writing. A few days later I received a poem from Linda in the mail; it was about Matisse and swans.

Nochlin is a mischievous and sexy woman; that's what the gossip in graduate school omitted.

At the same time that I met Linda, another colleague at Hunter made an impression on me. One afternoon I was sitting in the Art Department office and an ex-

tremely handsome man in his late forties walked in. No one could miss him—very aristocratic looking, he was: dark hair and beard, high brow, aquiline nose, thin but shapely lips, blue eyes. He was slight of stature, but dignified. We began to chat. I started telling him some thoughts I had about the introductory Art History course we all taught. He looked me over approvingly and invited me for a drink. It had already dawned on me that this man was the most famous person in the department, and a writer I admired. I was thrilled at the prospect of continuing the conversation. We went downstairs to a Chinese restaurant. His brilliant turns of phrase, his dark, brooding eyes tempted me. We talked shop. How to tantalize our lower-middle-class students was a formidable task. Why should they care about art? Of what use was it to them? Just as I was warming to the subject, I noticed that this handsome, intelligent man was finishing my sentences. He had no interest at all in what I might have to say. His own voice alone enchanted him.

"You know," I interrupted, "I've loved your writing, particularly its humility—the knowledge *and* the modesty—but you're really arrogant."

"My dear—Eunice? that's your name, isn't it?—one must be extremely self-assured to be that humble in print."

I can't say when it was exactly that my wonder about Olympia and the treatment she received turned to impatience, but I began to hear the rampaging walk-

ing sticks and umbrellas, and to feel the heat and rage the painting produced in commentators, the barely contained anger squeezed into stylish commentary about artist-geniuses and their pathetic models. I know it was about the same time that I met Linda, and also read an article in the *Village Voice* entitled "The Next Great Moment in History Is Theirs." In it, Vivian Gornick wrote that "women of this country are gathering themselves into a sweat of civil revolt. . . . [Their] energy . . . lies trapped and dormant like a growing tumor, and at its center there is despair, hot, deep, wordless. . . . [They have been] deprived . . . of the right to say 'I' and have it mean something. This understanding . . . underlies the current wave of feminism. It is felt by thousands of women today, it will be felt by millions tomorrow."

The next thing I knew I was throwing Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* across the room, demanding, "How can this be true, this silencing of women, this enforced invisibility? And what the hell did that professor mean when he said I had too many ideas?"

Then it was August 26, 1970, and a march was called to commemorate the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, the establishing of women's right to vote. I went with my friend Marcia. We made our way to Fifth Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street. As we approached, what we saw took our breath away. Women were everywhere—thousands and thousands and thousands of women. Marcia grabbed my arm and said the oddest thing: "What *would* my mother have made of this?" I

wouldn't have thought of my mother at such a moment. I never thought of my mother as a woman.

But what a sight the avenue was, women filling all the spaces, banishing the cars, the honking, the men. How we gazed upon each other. With what amazement and pleasure we talked and laughed and wept as we flooded that capacious boulevard. And with what confidence we lured the hesitant from the sidelines. How they fell into the arms of the river that we became that day, we women of all shapes, sizes, and ages marveling at each other.

We also handed each other leaflets and flyers that said: "Join the National Organization for Women!" "Come to meetings of Redstockings" "... The New York Radical Feminists" "... The Feminists!" And we did. We met in churches, in school rooms, in libraries. Then in each other's homes. We organized by neighborhood, ten to twelve in a cadre. We met weekly, and we talked our hearts out. We divulged secrets we didn't know we had. Nothing was off limits. We talked about sex and orgasm, ambition, marriage, homosexuality, our fathers, our siblings, our mothers. The rage at our families, our lovers, our teachers was staggering. And maybe for the first time in our lives, we turned that fury on to the world, away from ourselves.

The listening, the uninterrupted speaking, made us realize how smart we were, and how inhibited. For most of us, this talking—this consciousness-raising—was the first time we heard each other speaking discursively and analytically about our lives. Bit by little bit, our talking,

our weeping, and our anger added up to an emotional and political history. And a strategy.

What better emblem for the time—those opening salvos of the Women's Movement—than *Olympia*, a woman whose naked body said: "See this? It's mine. I will not be the object of your gaze, invisible to my own. This is my body, my life."

Yes, I marveled at the intricate psychological drama surrounding *Olympia*, which on the one hand elicited men's attraction—so many had written something about her at a time when models were usually nameless and invisible—but on the other provoked ridicule and contempt. *All that writing about her*. In our own time, in 1977, an entire book on *Olympia* written by Theodore Reff, and again in 1985, T. J. Clark, the most dazzling bad boy in the Art History community, published a notably long, obfuscating, and tortured essay on *Olympia* in his book on Manet. Every prominent scholar of nineteenth-century art planted himself in front of her, writing paraphernalia at hand. All thought their engagement disinterested, but it wasn't. They circled her from above, close up, on top. What did they mean to do with all those words? Describe her? Analyze her? Situate her? Or: Possess her? Control her? Silence her? No one admitted his emotions, neither the irritation nor the fascination. None could acknowledge what amounted to a professional obsession that spanned a century and a half. And continues.

More and more I brought Meurent up in my classes

as if I could somehow redress the balance by at least speaking her name, acknowledging her corporeality as Victorine Meurent, a real woman of the nineteenth century. Musingly, I'd say, "Some day I'm going to find this woman," and the more I said it, the more I meant it. It became a promise. I took her to myself, unconsciously, unwittingly. That face, those eyes. I wanted what she had: her confidence, her dignity, her "no."

Many things came between us though. My career for one, books and articles about geniuses—Picasso, Degas, Manet. And my own ambivalent self stuck in a conservative profession. And a culture that enjoined girls to behave themselves. Plus—I rationalized—all I know is Meurent's name, that she worked for Manet, traveled to the United States, exhibited a few times at the Paris Salon. She was only a model. What is there really to say?

I had no idea what the ramifications of the search would be. I didn't even realize that our names were the same: "Eunice" is a translation from the Greek of "Evnike"; it means "Happy Victory." And I certainly didn't *intend* to end up a redhead. All I knew was that I envied Meurent her autonomy even as I acknowledged the paradox that I was a well-paid American professor in the late twentieth century, and she a working-class model in nineteenth-century Paris. I was convinced that she had had more choices than I, and that she had acted on them. The dare of her gaze was the proof.

As I set out in earnest to find Meurent, I kept losing my way. A two-step of desire and longing crossed by

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withdrawal and passivity. I had learned this dance as a child, but coming of age in the era of McCarthyism, Eisenhower, and Doris Day refined it immeasurably. Across this faraway history I started looking for Meurent.

This is the record of my search.

Next, I take a look at the Adolphe Tabarant holdings. He is still the major source on Manet. Many others have written, some extensively, about the artist since Tabarant's publication of *Manet et ses oeuvres* in 1947, but he remains the place where one starts. I am hoping to uncover his original source material, papers touched by Manet's hand or others who knew him well and who might have known Victorine Meurent. But Tabarant's papers turn out to be surprisingly sparse. I ask one of the librarians where the rest of the material is. He doesn't know, but gives me the phone number of a woman in London whom I call. She says the papers are in New York, at the Pierpont Morgan Library, and don't I know that?

This feels like an omen. Why are these papers in New York? *I* live in New York, Victorine Meurent didn't. And *I* am in Paris, where it is appropriate that I be. Then I remember that six of the nine paintings Manet did of Meurent are in America—two in New York, two in Boston, one near Hartford, one in Washington. Was there a secret admirer in the States who was behind the purchase of at least some of these paintings—perhaps, for example, *Woman with a Parrot* in the Metropolitan, which was bought in 1881? People say that it was after she came back from the States that she started to paint. Maybe there are paintings of hers in New York and not in Paris, after all. I remember a story regarding a man named Étienne Leroy and American collectors. Leroy was involved with the purchase in Paris of the first paintings for the newly incorporated Metropolitan Museum

of Art. Whether Leroy went to the States is not known. Whether he is the same Étienne Leroy whom Victorine Meurent noted as her teacher in 1876 is also an enigma.

What had she done in the States? And how did she get there? Stories are rampant, but all turn on romance: "Oh, you know that Meurent, some rich boyfriend took her off."

Ken says, Call Michael. He'll go over to the Pierpont Morgan and take a look for you. Michael is a private detective and an aspiring writer. I knew, and Ken knew, that he'd be a good person to send to the Morgan; he's a charming, handsome man, and in this instance his dated machismo might work. He wouldn't take "no" for an answer. Obviously I couldn't ask him to comb the material for relevant information; he had no idea what I was looking for—I hardly knew—but I could ask him to try to locate a letter that Meurent wrote to Manet's widow, and that Tabarant quoted at length in his book. As expected, Michael finds the letter and sends me a copy along with some quips about the surveillance he was under while in the library. Librarians are an ilk he is clearly not familiar with.

Here is Meurent's letter:

Asnières, July 31, 1883

Madame,

I beg you to excuse me if in what follows I revive your grief over the extraordinary and greatly mourned Monsieur Manet.

You know without doubt that I posed for a great

many of his paintings, notably for *Olympia*, his masterpiece. M. Manet took a lot of interest in me and often said that if he sold his paintings he would reserve some reward for me. I was so young then and careless. . . . I left for America.

When I returned, M. Manet, having sold a great number of his works to M. Faure, told me that he was going to give me something. I refused, enthusiastically thanking him, adding that when I could no longer pose I would remind him of his promise.

That time has come sooner than I thought; the last time that I saw M. Manet he promised to help me get a job in a theater as an usher, adding that he would give me money to secure it. . . . You know the rest, and what a rapid sickness ravished your loved one.

Certainly I had decided never to bother you and remind you of that promise, but misfortune has befallen me: I can no longer model, I have to all alone take care of my old mother, who is now utterly incapable of work, and on top of all this I had an accident and injured my right hand (a broken finger) and will not be able to do work of any kind for several months.

It is this desperate situation, Madame, which prompts me to remind you of M. Manet's kind promise; M. Leenhoff and M. Gustave Manet can tell you that M. Manet certainly intended to come to my aid. If in my misfortune, and in remembrance

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of him, you will be so kind as to interest yourself in my destiny and can do something for me, please accept, Madame, my deepest gratitude.

I am respectfully yours,

Victorine Meurent
7, Boulevard de la Seine
Asnières
Seine

Most of the letter was reprinted in Tabarant, and I had read it, but still the handwriting thrills me. It's neat and constant. Controlled. Also, it's clear that Meurent took herself seriously; she considered her role in Manet's paintings significant.

Next, I take my search to the Jacques Doucet library, down where boulevard Montparnasse meets avenue de l'Observatoire. It's a clear, balmy day as I round the southern tip of the Luxembourg Gardens heading toward the red fortresslike library. I have every intention of going directly in, but something urges me down the avenue until I reach one of my favorite sights in Paris, a fountain of galloping stallions by Davioud and Carpeaux. Sleek and hungry, the horses pound and twist in the water's foam, as steamy a band as Rosa Bonheur ever imagined, as voluptuous as Courbet's bathers. Sprayed by the mist, and daydreaming, I notice a bulky woman on the other side of the fountain. She reminds me of my mother.

Once when I broke up with a lover, and was in

terrible pain, my friend Marcia said to me, "Let's go to London for Christmas." I didn't want to, but I went. One day I came back to the hotel and found a beautiful, broad-brimmed, rust-colored velvet hat on my pillow. Marcia bought it for me. A few days later she said, "Let's go to Paris and get some perfume." I said, no, I'm not interested in perfume. But we went, and I bought perfume.

Back in New York after the trip to London and Paris, I returned to my shrink appointments; I was in analysis four times a week. On the first day, as I lay down on the couch, savoring being home, I spoke of my beautiful new hat, I mentioned the perfume. Then I lay there quietly for a long time. "My mother had a wonderful smell. Her body. . . . And she'd get dressed up and I'd watch her. And she'd touch my face and kiss me. And just before she left, she'd put on a beautiful hat. My mother had hats with veils and feathers and bows and velvet. And she'd kiss me again."

I leave the stallions and the fountain and walk up the steps to the library. They have nothing for me. Nothing hidden away. No secret papers in Manet's hand with Victorine's name scrawled across it. No memoirs of friends of the painter musing over the strange and headstrong redheaded woman. Nothing.

Someone suggests that I search for traces of Meurent in the archives at the museums—the Louvre, or the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, or the new Musée d'Orsay. I don't

like receiving suggestions. You'd think I'd be grateful, but I'm not. I feel pushed. I want to do things my own way, at my own pace. Let people wait till I ask for advice. Paris is just the cocoon I want now. I can languish in cafés, stroll the tree-lined boulevards, sniff the sexual and culinary aromas. I can do anything, go anywhere, and say things I wouldn't in English. No one will notice. I feel like a child playing blocks near someone who loves her but lets her be.

I had this same feeling years ago in Carpentras, a town near Avignon where I was doing research on Evariste de Valernes, a friend of Degas. I used to breakfast on the town square so I could gaze out at Mt. Ventoux—so far away yet visible, its face always there, full of sweet promises. A covenant, really. I remember the women, too, going to market. Seven-thirty in the morning and the breeze blowing, they passed before me wearing sensible skirts and shoes, and dark blue mannish sweaters, wartime sweaters, buttoned in front at the bottom, with roomy pockets. Gliding by they showed their fair faces, their committed brows and straight noses. From their arms hung baskets.

I was directed to a villa; its owner was said to possess many paintings by de Valernes. He was old and stooped, kindly but distant, and he went on and on about his many rosemary plants; his house was called "La Romarin" (Rosemary). De Valernes didn't interest him. He asked a servant to display the paintings for me on the floor against the outer wall of the verandah. And

there they sat without frames, naked in the heat of high noon, waiting to be paid attention to.

Where are Victorine's paintings?

No, I don't want anyone's unasked-for help in Paris. I want to go my own way, alone. So, every time I am offered assistance, I get irritated. I say to myself, "Look, there was no life, just an interesting face. Eyes. A big maybe that went nowhere. Forget it. Go home. Go to sleep."

I take the suggestions, though. I'm a scholar and a professor; I have to be responsible. I go to the museums. First to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. Nothing. Then to the Musée d'Orsay. Very comfortable, but the same old books on Manet, and of course, pictures of *Olympia*. Everywhere I go there are reproductions of *Olympia*. Just as I am about to leave, a young librarian suggests looking next door in the artists' dossier department. "Perhaps it will be worth your while, madame." I smile, and push the glass doors into the adjoining department. It's hard to get anyone's attention, and when I do—smiling all the time; one must be charming in Paris—clerks and librarians shake their heads and show me pictures of *Olympia*.

"Oh, yes, a wonderful painting, but would you by any chance have a dossier on Meurent, the model? Yes, she was a painter."

"*Vous êtes certaine, madame?*"

"Yes." Quite. "Her name was Meurent. Victorine Meurent."

"I'm sure that you won't find anything here, madame."

"Might you perhaps take a look? *S'il vous plaît.*"

Several minutes later, one of the clerks, a young woman, returns, her mouth tightly pursed, and hands me a slim folder with Meurent's name on it.

Atop what appear to be two pieces of normal-sized paper is yet another reproduction of *Olympia*. But . . . just behind the picture is some kind of document, I begin to shake. It seems to be an exhibition form. Yes, that's it. There's a list noting the salons in which Mlle Meurent participated. And then there's something else, something in the top left-hand corner, but I can't bring it into focus. I try to assemble the letters. I'm trembling violently. Then I get it. Above Meurent's name, written in longhand, is "*décédée, 1928.*"

Dead in 1928? Writers had her an old woman by 1892, a broken-down, impoverished alcoholic, the suggestion being that she died soon after. I hear myself talking too loud and laughing. I want to hug everyone in the room. In that oh-so-dignified-Parisian archive, I'm hopping from foot to foot.

And there's more. Meurent was known to have exhibited her paintings in 1876, 1879, and 1885, but this dossier indicates that she also showed in 1904. The document further shows that she became a member of a significant artists' organization, the Société des Artistes Français in 1903. And most cryptically of all, that she received emergency aid—*secours*—from the Société in 1909 and an *allocation de guerre* during World War I.

This society had given Meurent thousands of francs. Why? Who was she to them?

Now I have the beginnings of a story to go with this woman's wonderful face, a real woman who lived to an old age, through the end of the century, a world war, and the 1920s, and who, despite the circulation of gossip cum Art History, had continued to live a fruitful life outside of established scenarios, on the very edge of what was possible, a woman who wanted—among other things—to be a painter, and who seems to have succeeded—up to a point.

"Well, thank you very much, *messieurs, mesdames*; you have been very kind. *Au revoir. Merci.*"

Bye-bye.

Victorine is alive!

Paris works its magic on me. I know, I'm predisposed. Most Americans do tumble easily into the luxurious lap of this city. No matter our actual ethnic background or political philosophies, we are all Protestant capitalists longing for permission to play. Headlong we rush to Puccini's love-drenched attics; the grapes, wine, and foie gras of Renoir's picnics; the lazy flow of Monet's rivers. We are not deterred by Zola's moralizing. We ignore the down-at-heel and dissolute as we heartlessly window-shop the boulevards they stumble down. We take the pleasure.

Now, the Paris art world is as clouded in fantasy and myth as everything else about the city, but it's possible to disentangle some social facts from romantic

myths. If we conjure artist-geniuses working, nearly famished in their garrets, struggling against all odds to paint their hearts out, we can also imagine something more ordinary and more accurate. To begin with, the Paris art world in the 1860s and 1870s bore little resemblance to today's. It was a much smaller affair, both more intimate and more attenuated. No avid market pulsed at its center. The Church, the State, some rich nobility and bourgeoisie bought and commissioned work out of the government-funded Salon. Commercial galleries had only just begun to emerge and with them a network of critics and collectors. Until the 1860s, a middle-class person with an appetite for modern painting, and a desire to make purchases, visited backrooms of antique shops, or frame shops or art supply stores. The best known of the latter is Père Tanguy's, commemorated so touchingly in Van Gogh's portraits of the Breton peasant sitting nervously amidst a cache of Japanese prints.

If an artist was ambitious, the only place a reputation could be made was the yearly Salon. It drew enormous crowds, as many as fifty thousand on a free day. Everyone came, rich and poor alike. It was an event, rather like the races or a day at the zoo. And an artist's stature hung on it. In *The Masterpiece*, Zola evokes the misery of the artist Claude Lantier, when he witnesses the crowd's derision in front of his painting. Berthe Morisot, writing to her sister, Edma, about Manet's anxiety at the Salon of 1869, says, "I don't have to tell you that one of the first things I did was to go to Room M. There

I found Manet, with his hat on in bright sunlight, looking dazed. He begged me to go and see his painting, as he did not dare move a step. . . . He was laughing, then had a worried look, assuring everybody that his picture was very bad, and adding in the same breath that it would be a great success."

Manet was irritated with his friends Monet and Degas when they decided to exhibit elsewhere than the official Salon. He insisted that to make an artistic difference one had to first change the minds of the reigning authorities, in this case, the judges of the Salon. But Manet was wrong if one considers that the great successes of the Salons of the 1860s and 1870s were works by Jean Léon Gérôme, Adolphe William Bouguereau, Jules Breton—artists we hardly hear about today.

Nonetheless, until the mid-1880s the Salon was an artist's only chance. In order to be chosen, you had to go to the *École des Beaux-Arts*, because the Salon judges were professors there. If the professors didn't know you, for all intents and purposes, you were *persona non grata*. Women were not formally admitted to the *École* until 1897. In any case, as Linda Nochlin pointed out in her essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," artists in general were middle class. The poor didn't have the time to study; they needed to earn money. The rich didn't have to learn anything; they had money. One wouldn't expect to find a working-class woman becoming an artist. A model, yes, but not an artist.

Although opportunities were limited for middle-class women, they did exist. Their parents could hire tutors and, with the right connections, procure the assistance of renowned artists. Berthe Morisot and her sisters were privileged in this way. In addition, starting in the early 1860s a number of Beaux-Arts professors opened studios for women. Among them were Charles Chaplin, Thomas Couture, Rodolphe Julian; and in the 1870s, the Belgian Alfred Stevens had such a studio. In these ateliers young women took criticism from visiting academicians like Gustave Boulanger, Tony Robert-Fleury, and Pierre Cot.

But who can imagine Victorine Meurent in these classes? They were expensive; they were for ladies. Working-class women, it seems, only entered these establishments as models and cleaning women. But can we be so certain that all the women who worked as models were completely satisfied with their work, that they never wondered what it would be like on the other side of the easel? That they never painted? Obviously, Suzanne Valadon and Victorine Meurent had. And is it really so inconceivable that as women lingered at the model market at place Pigalle waiting for work, they talked about art?

So it seemed Meurent lived to a ripe old age. And exhibited a number of times at the Salon and enjoyed some success as a member of a prominent artists' organization. Now it's evident to me that I have to find my way into the civic archives and leave the world of

Art History behind. I make a date with my friend Patrick, a labor historian. He is a burly, friendly fellow, who knows everyone and introduces them to each other. He also knows the archives of Paris inside and out, and this evening over dinner he tells me about the importance of notaries. He says, First locate where the person died, get the death certificate, and then find the notary. They know everything, but most of all they can tell you who the deceased person's inheritors were, and what remaining possessions became theirs. What paintings some old woman left on her walls and in her cupboards.

Next day, I set out across the Seine to the Archives of Paris. After establishing my credentials and getting my outsized but very tastefully colored beige identification card, I begin my search. It is not hard to find Victorine's birth date. It's in one of the slate-green metal cabinets tucked far back in the room:

Born February 18, 1844.
Baptized February 19, 1844.
Église Sainte Elisabeth.

But there's no death date and no marriage date. This is odd. Patrick told me that death dates appear on these forms, that it's the job of certain clerks to go back to the birth certificates and enter the death date. People say, find the birth date and you'll find the rest. Of course, it isn't a reference to the birth certificate that I've found, it's a notation of the baptismal certificate. I know I'd