An Artistic Inquiry into “Light” in Manet’s Paintings

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Abstract
As traditional painting styles developed into impressionism, the expression of "light" has undergone important changes. Manet's painting style carves out new development paths, with the expressive element of "light" featured in his paintings assuming a sense of vividness on the canvas. This paper explores the use of "light" in Manet's paintings, whilst also investigating the role of "light" factors. To do so, the early development of "light" in Manet's paintings is summarized and analyzed to identify the most prominent "light" characteristics present. From this, it can be concluded that light most often takes the form of "positive light" in Manet's paintings. Next, it moves on to look into the role of "light" representation in Manet's paintings. This paper takes Manet's paintings as the object of analysis to elaborate on the rich possibilities of "light" transmission and expression in his work. It is expected that the conclusions of this paper will provide new development ideas through which artists can use "light" in their paintings.

Keywords
Manet's paintings, Positive light, Artistic connotation

1. The initial transformation of "light" in Manet's paintings

In the course of his education, Edward Manet came to the realization that Kurere's perfect technique could only produce beautiful works indoors. Eager to transcend this limitation, Manet ceased his studies in the Kujel studio and traveled to Italy, the Netherlands, and other countries, where he often visited local museums to copy the Old Masters' works. The works of these artists furnished Manet with a new understanding that allowed him to break new ground with his creations. Gradually, Manet broke free from the shackles and barriers in the traditional use of "light" and created his own unique painting language.

In Manet's early work, The Boy with the Cherry (The Boy with the Cherry, 1858), some underlying similarities to Courchel's earlier paintings remain. The painting uses the traditional indoor "side light" illumination method of lighting. However, the use of "light" in his 1859 work Absinthe (Absinthe, 1858-1895) began to exhibit a degree of thematic exaggeration; it is an attempt to simultaneously be not only bold, but also relatively conservative. It can be seen that the painter is still in the stage of finding himself, with Manet gradually adapting the way he uses light. This work marked the beginning of a shift in the use of light in Manet's paintings, with Manet's attempts becoming bolder in his subsequent work.

These two works were followed by The Spanish Singer, composed in 1860 (Spanish Singer” oil on canvas, 1860). The unusual singularity of Spanish painting at that time, as well as the expression of a sassy temperament, imbued Manet with a fresh perspective. It can be seen that the character in the picture is shrouded in a dark and monotonous "light". It should be noted that the object is illuminated from the "side front" and the character is almost entirely illuminated by this "light". It should be noted that the picture effect produced here is different from traditional
painting. In the illumination of this "light", it can be found that Manet gradually shifted from the traditional classical academy’s delicate approach to light and dark transition to instead use a strong contrast.

![Figure 1.1. "The Boy with the Cherry"
Oil painting 65cm×55cm (1858).](image1)

![Figure 1.2. “Absinthe”
Oil painting 181cm×106cm (1858-1859).](image2)

![Figure 1.3. "Spanish Singer" oil on canvas"
Oil painting 29.8cm×24.4cm (1860).](image3)

The 1861 painting Boy with a Sword (Boy with a Sword, 1861, and Boy with a Sword" Part, 1861) exemplifies the transformative use of light in Manet's paintings. By taking a closer look at the boy's face and hands (Boy with a Sword" Part, 1861) and the overall expression of the painting, it can be seen that the light source illuminating the boy is "directly in front" of the picture. Judging by the projection direction of the boy's feet (Boy with a Sword" Part, 1861), this "light" hits the boy's body vertically.

Manet’s use of this technique matured in his later work, gradually forming a unique personal style centering on the use of "light". His unique and ingenious use of "light" creates a different effect on the canvas, with “positive light” becoming the dominant form of “light” in Manet's paintings.

2. An exploration of positive light

The presence of light, an objective being, can be perceived by human sight organs. Human vision is produced by the penetration of light into the eye; without light entering the eye, a person will not see anything. In Leonardo da Vinci's "On Painting", the types of light are divided into four forms: universal light, special light, reflected light, and transmitted light. The types of light sources used in photography include artificial light, natural light, and
mixed light. From this point, they can be further divided into three irradiation positions according to the direction of illumination: front light, side light, and backlight.

In photography, the front light is also termed "positive light". Specifically, it refers to when the light projection direction, the shooting direction of the same light, and the light source are in the same direction: facing the subject. As a result, there is sufficient light towards the face of the camera lens, thus rendering the subject clearer. Regarding the use of positive light in Manet's paintings, it is suggested that there are slight similarities with the positive light in photography, although there are also key differences. As a result, it is not possible to completely generalize the use of positive light in Manet's paintings and photography, respectively. This is because the frontal light used in Manet's paintings is based on "observation", in that it is produced based on the artist’s observation of the object with his eyes, and unlike the instantaneous capturing of an image in photography, painting is an extended process of creation. The representation of positive light in Manet's paintings is based on something “real” which he presents in his work. Contrastingly, the photos taken in photography are often processed by machines and are slightly "deformed" to seem real. Furthermore, the positive light in Manet's paintings is based on "beauty", i.e., how the artist decides to capture the “beauty” of objects. It should be noted that photography does not typically adopt this shooting method, as it will produce a strong exposure, resulting in flooding of light. This will make the picture monotonous, stereotypical, and lacking three-dimensionality, such that the illuminated photo may not be “beautiful”.

It is posited in this paper that the use of positive light in Manet's paintings needs to be considered from three positions: the position of the eyes, the position of the picture, and the position of the irradiation. The eye observes light and shadows differently in these three positions: First, the eye and the light are on the same side of the object. Second, the eye is in front of the object, and the light is behind the object. Third, the eye is in front of the object, the light is on the side of the object, and the straight line leading from the eye to the object and the straight line leading from the object to the light are at right angles. Based on this inference, it can be gathered that, in Manet’s paintings, the position of the eye is more inclined towards the first position described above. However, the difference is that the frontal light used in Manet's paintings is largely parallel to Manet’s perspective of the scene in the painting. Moreover, Manet’s perspective line is parallel to the ground, in that the eyes are in front of the canvas and are not limited by the position relationship between the front and side of the object in the picture; instead, the light shines on the scene from the front. In other words, Manet's way of lighting the object is to act as though the real light is shining from the front direction outside of the image. Moreover, the illumination of this front light is not simply lighting the specific model's location with a traditional light source. From this point of view, the position of the frontal light in Manet's painting has little to do with merely illuminating the object, as the painter's eyes act as metaphorical luminous bodies and shine on the picture. "Illumination" is necessary when objects need to be seen

clearly. An object that is evenly illuminated by light, in which there is no indication that the object is lit from another direction, is shown entirely as its own objective nature. In the same way, with the illumination with frontal light in Manet's paintings, although this light source may exist objectively, the viewer cannot see its illumination, just as they cannot see the light emitted by the light source to illuminate an object of uniform brightness. The illumination of light in Manet's paintings is relative to the picture; simultaneously, this frontal light illumination is the illumination of the whole picture, which is the illumination of the picture as a whole. To phrase another way, regardless of the difference in distance or height, it will feel that the light reflected by the object in the painting into the human eye comes from the front of the canvas. It is not the "real" light source in question. This light perception is mapped on our retina, and when the viewer feels the picture, there is a response that "registers" in visual perception. It can be said that Manet created the irradiation effect with a paintbrush, which in turn produces "objective brightness" on the canvas.

This then leads to the question of how Manet makes the object emit front light. Under normal circumstances, in order for an object to emit light, it needs to have a certain absolute brightness. Additionally, its own brightness needs to exceed the brightness level of all surrounding objects. That is to say, there needs to be a certain contrast between light and dark, and between light and dark comparisons, as even a black object can produce a slight light between the background that is deeper than it. The light in Manet's paintings largely depends on the distribution of luminance values within the viewer's field of view. In other words, Manet uses the surface of the canvas to rank the brightness values, with the brightness of the light fixing the objects in the painting in the same constant state. However, it should be stressed that the task of distinguishing illumination is left to the eye. This state produces an effect where the eye perceives that light is shining from the front. Therefore, it is suggested here that the positive light in Manet's paintings pertains to Manet's perception of the object, the "return to the object", and the information on the retina that should be corrected by the viewer's perception of the "real" state of the object. In reality, this is a corrective phenomenon that looks at different viewing angles or lights with a deviated schema. Manet's entire perception of the object he sees is removed from the mind, and the expression of positive light is then used to reproduce the object, such that the interrelationship of light in the picture forms a gradient response.

Whether this is an "optical illusion" akin to the "optical illusion"4 of illusion art remains up for debate, and no specific judgment can be made on whether the "visual experience" is in the viewer's field of vision. Even so, when Manet picks up the brush, he must first correct his eyes and ensure he acts according to artistic principles that dictate how he sees things not only as they are, but also how they should be reproduced. By analyzing the artist's paintings, the viewer mobilizes their memory and experience of visible objects to interpret them through experimental projection.

Manet's positive light is not perceived with "eyes of innocence"5, but rather as an exploration of a desirable way that was not initially thought of. Adopting such an approach is a desirable way to achieve something through the effect of painting that is more responsive to people's feelings. In fact, this is Manet's willingness to employ a unique way of using light in furtherance of achieving the final effect of the picture. The front light in Manet's paintings transforms the viewer's reaction to the phenomenon of light into selective attention, drawing the eye to unrelated things and events to find meaning, from which it can perceive the causal relationship with the positive light. The frontal light in Manet's paintings is directly provided directly by the eye, which is markedly different from the interpretation of light by scientists and physicists, who are of the view that light needs to be observed directly with the eye. The artist's purpose is to paint, requiring the viewer to mobilize his memory of the visible world without any structural assistance; to do so, he projects this gaze onto the canvas and brings about "change" in his mind to assume the role of the viewer.

Therefore, this paper defines the frontal light in Manet's painting as the specific light used in the painting. To be precise, this is Manet's setting of the light source in the preset scene of the picture according to the eye’s line of sight, which is completed through the observation of the eye. The so-called positive light is not the objective real light shining on the specific object; instead, this light is replaced by the outside real light and the observation is done through the eyes. This is the same as the order of the level in which the brightness value of the object in the

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4 Art and Illusion [M]. Optical illusion refers to the juxtaposition of shapes and colors that can play the most unexpected tricks on us, also known as optical illusion, P. 371
5 The innocent eye refers to a concept advocated by the 19th-century art critic John Ruskin to defend his interpretation of art history as a progression towards visual authenticity.
picture is in a constant state. The result is an effect similar to that of light shining on the canvas from the front.

3. The performance of positive light

3.1 Restoring "real" colors

What is determined to be "real" is consistent with objective facts. "Real" color is the color of objective reality that actually exists in social life, which relates to Manet's natural feeling of the color of objects in the medium of painting. The biggest feature of frontal lighting is to restore "reality". Therefore, this paper suggests that the reason for the use of positive lighting in Manet's paintings is to restore the authenticity of color and depict color in the painting based on "real" transmission.

![Figure 3.1. "Balcony"
Oil painting 169cm×125cm (1868-1869).](image)

![Figure 3.2. "The Girl on the Balcony"
Oil painting 194.9cm×125.7cm (1800-1810).](image)

Under the influence of the frontal light, the color purity in Manet's paintings is relatively high and the saturation of the color is strong, such that the depiction presented on the canvas is closer to the actual color of the object; it is the color that the inherent properties of the object appear under normal light sources. In Manet's painting "The Balcony" (Balcony, 1868-1869), it can be seen that although his composition is similar to that of Francisco Goya's "The Girl on the Balcony" (The Girl on the Balcony, 1800-1810), it radically differs in its color expression. Specifically, with regard to the depiction of the white in the woman's skirt, in the use of white in Manet's paintings, white is mixed with the influence of the ambient color green. As a result, the color has a distinct change in terms of warmth and coolness, which is more in line with the laws of nature, thus rendering it more "real".

Contrastingly, in Goya’s depiction of a woman's white dress, the white he uses is relatively rigid and there is no rich color change in the "stereotype" of white, which is more inclined to the "ideal state". Additionally, Manet’s depiction of the green of the iron railing in his paintings is a subversion of traditional painting techniques. Meanwhile, it can be seen that in Goya's works, the depiction of iron railings is dark, has no color tendency, and is largely obfuscated by the darkness. In traditional painting, the color depiction of structures is usually achieved with dark colors so as to highlight the figure. The iron railing in Manet's paintings is expressed in a vivid green, which is the color of the iron railing itself. The bright green expression of the iron railing here does not need to "cater to" and highlight the human image, so it is presented in a more “real” manner.

Therefore, the use of positive light restores the "real" color, restores the essence and true meaning of the real world, and realizes the trinity of truth, love, and reason in art.

3.2 Increasing the "visual quality" of the picture

Any change in light and shade and color within the visual legibility range can produce a visual texture. Texture in this sense refers to a variety of crisscrossing, uneven, rough and smooth texture changes. The use of positive light can clearly show the texture of the object, thus allowing Manet to capture the feeling of the texture of the object’s surface. The seminal feature of frontal light is that the subject is evenly bathed in light. Uniform irradiation
allows the texture of the object to be clearly depicted. Therefore, this paper adopts the position that Manet uses positive light in his paintings to increase the "texture" of the painting and enhance its "visual texture".

"Texture" has aesthetic value in painting that cannot be underestimated. In his paintings, Manet expresses the texture of the object through its visual perception, producing an unexpected beauty that is imbued with vitality. In Manet's "Brandy" (Brandy, 1878), he boldly uses his paintbrush to depict the texture of the objects he presents, such as the texture of the marble, the wood grain, and the sofa under the frontal light (Brandy, 1878). The prominent featuring of the texture of the object increases the sense of volume of the picture, as well as enhancing the authenticity and layering of the object. This "visual texture" allows the viewer to "empathize" when viewing the painting.

Therefore, "the use of Front light performance returns to the essence of the object, increases the "visual sense" of the picture, and establishes a sensory visual experience, so as to achieve the balance between the picture and the "visual texture".

![Figure 3.3. "Brandy"
Oil painting 73.6cm×50.2cm (1878).](image)

![Figure 3.4. "Brandy" (partial)
Oil painting 73.6cm×50.2cm (1878).](image)

4. Summary

This paper explores the concept of "light" in Manet's paintings, finding that his use and expression of "light" is unique. It is hoped that the artistic exploration of "light" in Manet's paintings undertaken here can help artists re-evaluate and think about more possibilities of "light" expression and its important role in painting. In the future, new ideas and forms of "light" used in the medium of painting can be carved out, which will, at the same time, provide opportunities for reference and reflection.

References


