
A Reconsideration of Edouard Manet's The Students of Salamanca

Among the early works by Edouard Manet, *The Students of Salamanca* (fig. 1) is an oil painting that has not yet been researched in full. Measuring 72.7 centimetres in length and 92.6 centimetres in width, it may not be a large work, but it is hardly a small work either. Signed and dated “Ed. Manet 1860” at the lower left, it is definitely a major work executed by the artist around 1860.¹ And yet, besides the fact that information about it gleaned from people of the time is scarce, for a long time, this painting belonged in a private collection. Therefore, as I discuss in the course of this essay, no more than brief mentions about it by Farwell or Stuckey and Wilson-Bareau may be found. As it is being put on public view at the Pola Museum of Art, We have an excellent opportunity to reconsider this painting.

1. The Subject of the Painting

Standing in the forest are two men in the dress of an earlier era. The man on the left is wearing a large hat, a pourpoint, and a sword. He is bending backwards with his hands at his waist. The man at the right has his hat and cloak placed by his side. With both hands on the ground, he seems to be staring at something. Beyond them is a landscape with a blue sky. At first sight, this would appear to be an

1. Data such as the date etc. of all works including this painting are based, in principle, on the following *raisonné*: Denis Rouart and Daniel Wildenstein, *Edouard Manet: Catalogue raisonné*, 2 vols., Lausanne-Paris, Bibliothèque des Arts, 1975.

anecdotal genre scene, but Manet entitled it *The Students of Salamanca*. This subject derives from *Histoire de Gil Blas* (12 vols., 1715–1735), a story by the 18th-century French writer Alain-René Lesage. In this classic picaresque tale full of villains and adventure set in 17th-century Spain, Gil Blas, a common man without rank or status, leads a life full of ups and downs at the mercy of his ever-changing fate. This plot proved a huge success and ran into several volumes into the 19th-century.² The scene Manet portrays is none other than the short allegorical episode that teaches a moral, appearing in the Introduction “From Gil Blas to the Readers.”

The content may be summarized as follows: When two students traveling together to Salamanca take a rest by a fountain, they notice some worn and faded letters inscribed upon a stone on the ground nearby. In Castilian, the letters read: “Confined here is the soul of Bachelor Pedro Garcias.” Upon reading this inscription, one of the two students sneers at the ludicrous idea of a confined soul and walks away. The other student digs beneath the stone and finds a leather purse. In it, together with 100 ducats, is a note praising the finder and instructing him to make good use of the money. The student rejoices and continued his journey to Salamanca with the purse in his breast pocket. The author, pretending to write as Gil Blas, inserts a moral after this allegory, to this effect: Which of these two students is the reader of the coming story most like? That is to say, the first type reads without noticing the moral lesson while the second type benefits from it and enjoys the story.

If we reexamine Manet’s painting on the basis of this story, the circumstances of the image are evident. There is no doubt that the man on the left is the student sneering at the inscription and the man on the right is the student staring at the letters on the stone, who will

2. Ever since *Histoire de Gil Blas* was published in the 18th-century, approximately 80 editions appeared until Manet produced this painting in 1860. To refer to the illustrated versions alone, there were 18 kinds published in the 18th-century and 16 in the 19th century (1 in the 1800s, 1 in the 1810s, 6 in the 1820s, 4 in the 1830s, 3 in the 1840s, and 1 in the 1850s). Its popularity continued to the mid-19th-century. In this essay, I referred to the following text: Alain-René Lesage, *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane*, 2 vols, Société Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1935.

[image omitted]

fig.1: Edouard Manet, *The Students of Salamanca*, 1860, Pola Museum of Art.

later find the purse. The rock-like lump diagonally behind the student on the right would appear to be the fountain (or well) from which the two men quenched their thirst. In an enlightening commentary on *The Students of Salamanca*, Charles F. Stuckey and Juliet Wilson-Bareau, who organized a Manet exhibition in Japan in 1986, report the results of an x-ray examination of the painting. According to their research, there was originally a close-up, a half-length portrait of a man in the foreground where the cloak and hat lie at the right-hand side of the image.³ Perhaps this was meant to be the author Lesage or the bachelor Pedro Garcias; yet again, perhaps Manet originally intended to insert someone else altogether into the painting. No matter who it was, what we do know is that this figure was erased in the end. Moreover, the subject of *The Students of Salamanca* derives

3. *Manet*, exh. cat., by Charles F. Stuckey and Juliet Wilson-Bareau, Tokyo, Isetan Art Museum, Fukuoka, Fukuoka Art Museum, Osaka, Osaka Municipal Museum of Art, 1986, p. 119.

from literature, which is exceptional among Manet's works. What were his motives or interests in creating this painting?

2. Possible Sources of Inspiration—Illustrations and Painting

In Antonin Proust's memoirs of Manet, there is an annotation on *The Students of Salamanca*, that should not to be overlooked in considering how this painting came to be. This picture was included in a one-man exhibition of works by Manet, which was held in 1867 near the site of the Universal Exposition then taking place in Paris. Indicating the list of exhibits, Proust comments, "Number 44: *The Students of Salamanca*, (Landscape, two students of Salamanca are treasure hunting in the foreground. Inspired by an illustration by Jean Gigoux in *Gil Blas*, which Manet applauded wholeheartedly)".⁴

According to Beatrice Farwell, who made investigations based on this note by Proust, Manet's source of inspiration was a woodblock print by Jean Gigoux (fig.2), which was used as the title page for *Histoire de Gil Blas* (1838).⁵ While it is quite likely that this print served as one source for Manet in painting *The Students of Salamanca*, the differences are more conspicuous than the similarities, as far as the costumes, postures, or gestures of the figures and the individual motifs or background are concerned. Unlike Manet's painting, in Gigoux's print, the student on the left is leaning on the well and the student on the right places his left hand under his chin as if in deep thought. In the foreground of Gigoux's print is a book. The flowers in the front right of Manet's painting and the details of the cloak and hat are not to be found in Gigoux's print. Rather than letting the landscape spread out behind the figures, Gigoux closes the background in with a watering cliff. At the very least, we can say Manet

4. Antonin Proust, *Edouard Manet—Souvenirs*, ed. by A. Barthélemy, Paris, H. Laurens, 1913, p. 54.

5. Beatrice Farwell, *Manet and the Nude*, New York, Garland, 1981, pp. 59–60. The edition Farwell introduces is Lesage, *Gil Blas de Santillane*, orné de 600 vignettes par Gigoux, Paris, Dubochet, 1838. Gigoux also provided illustrations for an edition published in 1835, but that for the title page was not *The Students of Salamanca*. Lesage, *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane*, Paris, Paulin, 1835.

[image omitted]

fig.3:

Hillemacher, *The Students of Salamanca*, dessin of Pauquet, *Magasin pittoresque*, 1857.

fig.2:

Jean Gigoux, *The Students of Salamanca*, the title page of *Le Sage's Gil Blas de Santillane*, 1839.

did not follow Gigoux's print very closely.

Farwell also mentions the existence of an oil painting of the same title by Hillemacher, but she does not include an illustration of it. This painting was submitted to the Salon in 1857 and although Farwell does not place much emphasis on it, I consider it very interesting. Bearing in mind that Hillemacher's painting was submitted to an exhibition around the time Manet created his painting and that it was included in the magazine *Magasin pittoresque* that year (fig.3),⁶ it is highly possible that Manet caught sight of it. In Farwell's opinion, Gigoux's print was the source of inspiration for Hillemacher, just as it was for Manet. In a sense, Hillemacher relies on Gigoux's print even more than does Manet. For example, the two figures are

6. "Salon de 1857: Peinture.—Les Deux Ecoliers de Salamanque (préface de Gilblas), par Hillemacher. Dessin de Pauquet," *Magasin pittoresque*, December 1857, p. 393. The provenance of the original work by Hillemacher remains unknown.

positioned along a diagonal axis stretching from the far left to the front right. The seated student places his hand under his chin and a book is placed on the ground. What I wish to stress here is that, for Manet, not only Gigoux's but Hillemacher's work also may well have been a precedent. The student laughing with his body bent backwards or the setting of a forest with trees are elements identifiable in both examples. Of course, there are some elements that are unique to Manet's work, such as the student's pose with both hands on the ground or the way the figures are small in proportion to the scenery. These points will be discussed later on.

Be it the illustration by Jean Gigoux or the oil painting by Hillemacher, is it really enough to assume that Manet's only sources of inspiration were images that are directly related to the subject, "The Students of Salamanca"? What was it that made Manet think of taking up *Histoire de Gil Blas* in the first place? Let us consider the significance of this work in the context of the early years in Manet's artistic career.

3. From Velasquez Admirer to Full-Blown Spanish Flavor

The year Manet's painting was executed, 1860, is important here. Although *Histoire de Gil Blas* was an 18th-century French novel, it was set in 17th-century Spain and the characters appeared in costumes of the time. Could this be regarded as the beginning of Manet's Spanish work? Could this painting be ranked among his works with a Spanish flavor? Let us consider this point in more detail.

Just as a start, recall such paintings as *Lola de Valence* (1862, Paris, Musée d'Orsay), *The Spanish Ballet* (1862, Washington D.C., The Phillips Collection), *Mlle. Victorine in the Costume of an Espada* (1862, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), *Episode in a Bullfight* (1863, two fragments, Washington D.C., The National Gallery of Art and New York, The Frick Collection), *Monk in Prayer* (1865, Boston Museum of Fine Arts), *Tragic Actor* (1865, Washington D.C., The National Gallery of Art), *Bullfight* (1865, Musée d'Orsay, see p. 52), and *Matador Saluting* (ca. 1866, New York, The

Metropolitan Museum of Art). As these numerous works demonstrate, Manet's work certainly had a Spanish flavor in the 1860s. Triggered by a performance of the Spanish Ballet given in Paris in the summer of 1862, Manet's fascination with Spain began with addiction to bullfighting; indeed, he actually traveled to Spain in 1865. From then on, his fervor for Spain became only more and more conspicuous. Before the above-mentioned examples, Manet did paint *Boy with a Sword* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) in 1861 and probably one other painting, *Spanish Singer (Guitarrero)* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), after *The Students of Salamanca* in 1860. However, in the early 1860s, he had not yet reached a stage fit we might describe as the clear arrival of his Spanish work.

Consequently, it would appear, after all, to have been out of a personal interest that Manet created this painting. As Proust pointed out, it was probably out of admiration for the illustration by Gigoux that Manet was inspired to create his own version in oil. By examining the works Manet executed from 1859 to around 1860, one notices there is a work that was very important to him during this period. It was *Gathering of Thirteen Persons of Rank* (fig. 4), an oil painting considered an authentic Velasquez in the 19th-century (but now attributed to an artist in Velasquez's circle). In those days it was entitled *Collection of Portraits* and taken to be an artists' gathering in 17th-century Spain. It was also commonly referred to as *The Little Cavaliers*.⁷ This painting is well-known as one of the few works by Velasquez on view at the Louvre. The figure at the far left is considered the artist's self-portrait. Manet took a great interest in this work. Around 1859, he made an oil copy (fig. 5). Furthermore, Manet was so enthusiastic about this work that he later did copies in etching and drypoint, too.⁸

That is not all. Based on *The Little Cavaliers*, Manet painted two more small but imaginary works around the same time as *The Students of Salamanca*. One was *Spanish Cavaliers* (also known as *Memory*

7. Frédéric Villot, *Musée impérial du Louvre: Notice des tableaux exposés dans les galeries*, Paris, Charles de Mourgues Frères, 1861, p. 311.

8. Françoise Cachin, Charles Moffett, Juliet Wilson-Bareau, *Manet 1832–1883*, exh. cat., Paris, Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Paris/New York, 1983, pp. 120–121.

[image omitted]

fig.4:

Atelier of Diego Velasquez, *Gathering of Thirteen Persons of Rank*, 17th century, Musée du Louvre.

fig.5:

Edouard Manet, *The Little Cavaliers*, ca.1859–1860, Chrysler Museum of Art.

on Velasquez or *Boy with a Tray*, fig.6) and the other *Spanish Studio* (also known as *Velasquez Painting*, private collection). With due respect to Velasquez, both works are composed of characters quoted from *The Little Cavaliers*. For example, *Spanish Cavaliers* is obviously an arrangement of the second, third, and fifth persons from the right in *The Little Cavaliers*. In other words, around 1859 to 1860, Manet was devoted to Velasquez and worked from a stance somewhat different from the Spanish flavor then in fashion.

Bearing this context in mind, we might subtly alter our appraisal of *The Students of Salamanca*. Early on, Manet pursued his subject simply by copying *The Little Cavaliers* and producing variations on it. *The Students of Salamanca*, which also features characters from 17th-century Spain, suits this aim almost perfectly. As a matter of fact, the two figures in *The Students of Salamanca* (especially the standing one) are dressed more like the figures in *The Little Cavaliers* than the plainly dressed students in the illustration by Gigoux. Therefore, this

[image omitted]

fig.6:
Edouard Manet, *Spanish Cavaliers*, ca.1859–1860,
Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.

painting can be considered a pivotal point in Manet's artistic achievements at the beginning of the 1860s as he shifted from merely "admiring Velasquez" to a more full-blown "Spanish flavor." One element clearly linked to Manet's later Spanish flavor, is, for example, the hat and cloak lying behind the man on the right. This is a motif passed on to *Guitar and Hat* (fig. 7) around 1862. In Manet's case, the Spanish in vogue began from around *Spanish Singer (Guitarrero)*, which was painted in 1860 and acclaimed by Théophile Gautier at the Salon in 1861. From 1865 onwards, Manet traveled to Spain and visited the Prado in Madrid, where he directly confronted masterworks by Velasquez, and began to produce work after work nourished with inspirations from this great painter.

[image omitted]

fig. 7: Edouard Manet, *Hat and Guitar*, ca.1862, Musée Calvet.

4. *Manet's Singularity*

Thus, we have confirmed precedents for depicting this subject matter and also identified Manet's "admirer" phase with regard to Velasquez, both of which we have connected to *The Students of Salamanca*. Now it remains only to point out the rich individuality of the artist manifested in this work.

Although it originates in an allegory, it is rather strange that the figures portrayed are relatively small. As quoted above, Proust describes this work primarily as a "landscape," and indeed, the proportion of nature—the forest, trees, and plain—in this picture is quite substantial.⁹ Details of the individual figures' facial expression are left ambiguous, so that unlike Hillemacher's painting, the storytelling element is minimized. Instead, what catches our eye is the resonance among the colors. The base color of the scenery is green accented with touches of brown and blue, to which the black tone of

9. As far as landscapes are concerned, including *Fishing* (fig.8) and *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863, Musée d'Orsay) are concerned, it is quite likely that they were taken from the actual scenery on the Ile Saint-Ouen in Gennevilliers on the outskirts of Paris, where the Manets owned an estate.

[image omitted]

fig. 8: Edouard Manet, *Fishing in the Saint-Ouen, near Paris*, 1861–1863, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

the men's costumes harmonizes beautifully. Perhaps it was necessary to keep the figures small in order to produce this harmony. A similar method of composition, in which small figures are blended into a nature scene, was also applied to *Fishing* (fig. 8). This was a portrait of Manet and his future wife based on works by Rubens. It is obvious that Manet places more emphasis on style and form than on subject and story, and the artist's unique brushwork employing elegant *matière* is already noticeable.

We should not fail to note that enigmatic details, which are often identifiable in Manet's works, can also be found in *The Students of Salamanca*. For example, the man standing laughing at the left. He is wearing a glove on his right hand, but the left hand is bare and there is no sign of the other glove. His left leg below his ankle is invisible. Upon careful examination, one realizes that the left foot is hidden behind the stone monument buried in the ground. However, at first sight, the viewer is caught off guard and destabilized by the sense that the shoe-clad foot has been cut off. The way the man's body bents backwards strikes a contrast to the balanced serenity of the landscape based on a horizontal and vertical structure.

Further, note how there is also a gnarled, warped tree trunk stand-

ing conspicuously in the middle of the painting amidst the trees in the background. It is as if this tree is repeating the posture of the man in the foreground. The two figures correspond to each other in formalist terms. As a result, a picture that might have tended to monotony is provided with modulation and tension. Likewise, the gesture of the student on the right with both hands on the ground corresponds in form to the tree trunk behind him at the right edge of the image, one that splits and grows in two directions. The background is not there simply to provide background for the figures; rather, it plays an active role in structuring the composition overall. Signs of a pure picturesqueness that transcends the subject and a formalist autonomy, both characteristic of Manet's œuvre, can already be identified in this painting.

There certainly is a literary subject in *The Students of Salamanca* by Manet and it does indeed convey an allegory of an individual at the crossroads where one's fate may diverge depending on one's careless or prudent choices.¹⁰ However, the most profound impression that lingers on after viewing this painting is its pictorialism in formal terms. *The Students of Salamanca* insists on influences by Velasquez on a level quite distinct from those of mere illustrations. Of course, there can be no doubt that both in subject and style, this is a significant work from Manet's early career, at a time when he was in search of a style of his own.

Figures

fig. 1: Edouard Manet, *The Students of Salamanca*, 1860, Oil on canvas, 72.7×92.6cm, Hakone, Pola Museum of Art.

fig. 2: Jean Gigoux, *The Students of Salamanca*, the title page of Le Sage's *Gil Blas de Santillane*, 1839.

fig. 3: Hillemacher, *The Students of Salamanca*, dessin of Pauquet, *Magasin pittoresque*, 1857, p. 393.

10. Adolphe Tabarant suggests that the secret relationship between Manet and Suzanne Leenhoff, who was later to become his wife, may be implied in the hidden treasure hunt-like theme of *The Students of Salamanca* (The two got married on 28th October 1863). Adolphe Tabarant, *Manet et ses œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, 1947, pp. 33–34. However, I doubt whether Manet would have placed a hidden meaning on a personal level in his work.

- fig. 4: Atelier of Diego Velasquez, *Gathering of Thirteen Persons of Rank*, 17th century, Oil on canvas, 47.2×77.9cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.
- fig. 5: Edouard Manet, *The Little Cavaliers*, ca.1859–1860, Oil on canvas, 47×78cm, Norfolk, Chrysler Museum of Art.
- fig. 6: Edouard Manet, *Spanish Cavaliers*, ca.1859–1860, Oil on canvas, 45×26cm, Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.
- fig. 7: Edouard Manet, *Hat and Guitar*, ca.1862, Oil on canvas, 77×121cm, Avignon, Musée Calvet.
- fig. 8: Edouard Manet, *Fishing in the Saint-Ouen, near Paris (La Pêche)*, 1861–1863, Oil on canvas, 76.8×123.2cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.