

A PORTRAIT OF FRIENDS AND RIVALS

A comparative exhibition of Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas works as a kind of biography of the pair whose work became the inspiration for Impressionism

LARA MARLOWE

Rarely in the history of art have two painters had so much in common, yet been so different, as Édouard Manet (1832-1883) and Edgar Degas (1834-1917), the friends and rivals who inspired the Impressionist movement.

The Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York have brought together 140 works in Manet/Degas, a comparative exhibition combining world famous masterpieces from their own collections and rarely loaned works from around the world. The show will remain in Paris until July 23rd, then move to the Met from September 2023 until January 2024.

The opposite characters of Manet and Degas are evident in self-portraits at the entry. Though Manet was nearing 50 when he painted his, he appears younger in spirit than Degas at age 21. A renowned dandy, Manet wears a buttercup yellow jacket. His unkempt blond hair and beard give him the air of a Bohemian painter. Degas looks more like an undertaker than a ground-breaking artist.

Manet's contemporary Théodore de Banville immortalised him in poetry as "This laughing, blond Manet ... Gay, subtle, charming ... exuding grace". The Italian painter Giuseppe De Nittis praised Manet's "sunny soul, which I love."

How could Degas not have been jealous? "Manet was talked about in the

newspapers, and not just art journals," says Stéphane Guégan, a co-commissioner of the exhibition. "He liked giving interviews. His work may have been misunderstood, but his elegance and charm were appreciated." Degas, on the other hand, was secretive, press-shy and reluctant to show his work.

The two painters are believed to have met in the Louvre around 1860. Manet began showing in the official Salon, the only path to recognition, attended by half a million people, the following year; Degas in 1865. Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* and *Olympia* (both 1863, Musée d'Orsay) created scandals. Degas' work went unnoticed.

"Manet understood better what the public wanted," Guégan says. "His painting is easier to decipher than Degas'. Manet projected his figures to the foreground, whereas Degas' remained dispersed. There is something decisive about everything Manet does. Later, after Manet died, Degas said he always admired Manet's self-assurance and composure."

Olympia exemplified Manet at his most transgressive. Brothels and mistresses were staples of male bourgeois life in the 19th century, but they were taboo subjects. Idealised nudes from classical mythology were acceptable to the official Salon. An unabashed prostitute staring at the viewer with one hand over her pubis as flowers arrive from a client was not. Even the black cat perched at her feet was a symbol of lubriciousness.

By painting his model and mistress, Victorine Meurent, in this way, Manet





Photo portrait of Eduard Manet, 1867, by Anatole Louis Godet; Portrait de l'artiste by Edgar Degas, 1855. Images: Musée d'Orsay; The Metropolitan Museum of Art

exploded the hypocrisy of his own social class. Gendarmes had to prevent visitors to the Salon from slashing the painting with knives. It may have been his response to the death of his father, a high-ranking official in the ministry of justice, from syphilis the previous year. Manet would die of the same disease.

Guégan compares Manet's Olympia to Les Fleurs du Mal, Charles Baudelaire's book of sonnets, which was censored in 1857. "Like Baudelaire, Manet awakens our conscience," says the art historian. "He transforms us from passive spectators into people capable of reflecting on bourgeois morality and the depth of hypocrisy."

Manet and Degas were from the same grand bourgeois milieu. Their families wanted them to be lawyers. Manet's mother was the goddaughter of the king of Sweden. Much of the Degas family emigrated to Italy

and to New Orleans, where they made fortunes in banking and cotton.

Manet and Degas would often run into one another at the Guerbois and Nouvelle Athènes cafes. The Irish writer George Moore frequented both painters and wrote of their "friendship shaken by inevitable rivalry". Manet mocked Degas' long theoretical perorations.

Women who went to cafes were presumed to be prostitutes, so the sisters Berthe and Edma Morisot, aspiring painters, instead invited artists to a weekly salon organised by their mother. Degas went into ecstasies over Berthe's pink satin shoes. Manet told his friend and fellow painter Henri Fantin-Latour that he found the Morisot sisters charming, adding that it was a pity they were not men.

Manet recruited Berthe Morisot as a model for The Balcony (1868-69, Musée

d'Orsay) modelled after Goya's Las Majas. Morisot leans on the railing outside Manet's mother's apartment, flanked by a violinist who was a friend of Manet's wife Suzanne, and a painter. Over 15 subsequent oil paintings, watercolours and engravings by Manet, Morisot matures from an innocent, bride-like figure to what Guégan refers to as "a lesson in female seduction". In an 1872 portrait, Berthe hides her face behind a black lace fan and flirtatiously extends a foot shod in a pink satin shoe.

When the Prussian army invaded France in 1870-71, most of the artists fled. Manet attempted to persuade Morisot to leave too, telling her she wouldn't like it if her legs were blown off. Manet and Degas joined the National Guard.

Morisot was jealous of Manet's student Eva Gonzales, who he painted that year. On Moore's advice, Hugh Lane later

purchased the portrait for his Dublin gallery. Stung with jealousy, Morisot uncharitably claimed that Manet spent the whole war trying on his uniform. She nonetheless made her way to Manet's studio to pose invitingly on his red sofa in *Repose* (1871, Rhode Island School of Design Museum).

Manet's paintings make clear the attraction between himself and Morisot. But he was already married to Suzanne Leenhoff, a Dutch woman two years Manet's senior who had taught piano to his brothers. Manet persuaded Morisot to marry his younger brother Eugène and became the godfather of their only child, a daughter called Julie. Degas would arrange Julie's marriage to Ernest Rouart, his only student and the son of a wealthy industrialist and close friend of Degas.

One hundred and fifty years later, the Rouart family remain the keepers of the Morisot-Manet legacy, and continue to discourage speculation about an affair.

Guégan says it would have been "inconceivable" for a woman of Morisot's social standing to succumb to desire. Others believe that passion inevitably overwhelms convention. When Manet died, Morisot wrote to her sister Edma, "Add to these almost physical emotions the long friendship that tied me to Édouard. Our shared past made up of youth and work has disintegrated, and you will understand that I am broken."

Suzanne Manet did not admit that she was the mother, rather than the older sister, of her son Léon until he was 20 years old. The boy haunts Manet's paintings, sometimes in shadow, as in *The Balcony*, sometimes in portraits such as *Boy Carrying a Sword* (1861, Metropolitan Museum of Art) and *Boy Blowing Bubbles* (1867, Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon). Art historians speculate that Manet or his father Auguste was Léon's father. Léon's middle name was Édouard. Manet was listed on his birth certificate as godfather and left his estate to Suzanne and Léon.

A painting which shows Manet sprawled on a sofa while Suzanne plays the piano (1868-69, Kitakyushu Municipal Museum of Art) is one of numerous portraits of Manet by Degas. Manet so disliked Degas' rendition of his wife's face that he slashed off the right side of the canvas. Degas was furious. He took the mutilated painting back and returned a still life which Manet had sent him to apologise for having broken a salad bowl.

Even Manet's portraits of his wife, for example *Madame Manet at the Piano* (1868-1869, Musée d'Orsay) show Suzanne to have been plump and plain. De Nittis, the Italian painter, wrote of Suzanne Manet's "goodness, simplicity, candour, and serenity, which nothing altered. One sensed in her slightest words the deep passion that she felt for her charming, enfant terrible of a husband."

Despite his nonconformism, Manet sought honours and believed his future could be ensured only through the approval of the official Salon. Degas asked Manet to join the rebellious artists who were in 1874 preparing to show their work in what would become known as the first Impressionist exhibition. Manet declined. His notoriety was established and he probably did not want to lend his name to an undertaking



Clockwise from above: *Le Repos* by Manet; *Monsieur et Madame Manet* by Degas; *Jeune Femme à l'Ibis* by Degas; *Jeune femme* by Manet

with the lesser-known artists he had inspired with his daring. "I think Manet is more vain than intelligent," Degas wrote.

Manet also advised Berthe Morisot against showing with the Impressionists. She ignored him and became the first woman Impressionist. Morisot would participate in seven of eight exhibitions, missing only one, when she gave birth to Julie.

The Impressionist exhibitions brought critical and financial success to Degas at last. Though Manet and Degas are often associated with the movement, neither was strictly speaking an Impressionist. Manet refused to show with them, and Degas shunned open-air painting and the light, quick brushstrokes so typical of Monet, Morisot, Pissarro and others.

Manet and Degas' painting resembled each other's more than anyone else's. They accused one another of stealing themes. Both painted horse races, a pastime recently imported from Britain, cafes, brothels, and seascapes, for which there was great demand in the UK. Degas refused Manet's invitation to travel to London in 1868 in the hope of finding a market for their work, as their friend James Tissot had.

In their early years, Manet's paintings were clearly superior to Degas'. His portrait of Émile Zola (1868, Musée d'Orsay) hangs alongside Degas' *Collector of Prints* (1868, Metropolitan Museum of Art). The men in both paintings are seated at desks and stare into space. Degas' subject looks dreary, whereas Zola's handsome face, posture and expression seem to pull one into the canvas. Manet's paintings always tell a story, and the copy of *Olympia* above the desk is Manet's way of thanking the writer for his moral support through the scandal.

Manet's *Woman with a Parrot* (1866) and Degas' *Young Woman with Ibis* (1857-58, reworked in 1866-68, both from the Metropolitan Museum of Art) are signature paintings for the exhibition. Commission-

ers suggest that Manet's juxtaposition of Victorine Meurent in a pale pink dressing gown with a parrot on a stand beside her may have inspired Degas to add two startling red ibises to his earlier, almost mystical picture of a woman draped in blue on a terrace above a middle eastern city.

Degas' *Cotton Office in New Orleans* (1873, Pau, Musée des Beaux-Arts) stands out as one of his best works. It was the only painting Degas brought back from America and brilliantly combines such features as the perspective of the large, pistachio-

green room, men testing the quality of snowy white cotton – among them Degas' top-hatted uncle in the foreground – the relaxed attitude of Degas' brothers René and Achille, respectively reading a newspaper and leaning against an open inner window, and a still life of a basket full of letters on the floor.

The comparison between Manet and Degas feels somewhat unfair, since Degas' most beautiful and best-known paintings, of ballet dancers, are not included in the exhibition on the grounds that Manet never painted ballerinas.

Degas' works sometimes surpassed Manet's. For example, Degas' pastel of a woman sponging herself in a tub (1886, Musée d'Orsay) has a grace and beauty that are lacking in Manet's pastel of the same theme (1878, Musée d'Orsay).

Degas' *Absinthe* (1875-76, Musée d'Orsay) shows a woman seated before the mind-numbing drink with slumped shoulders and a vacant look in her eyes, behind the zigzagging surface of cafe tables, perhaps accompanied by the man seated beside her. The grey and earth tones are harmonious and aesthetically pleasing, but the overall effect is of alienation and despair.

Plum Brandy (1877, Washington National Gallery), Manet's portrait of a prostitute in the same cafe, smoking a cigarette and seated in front of what appears to be a scoop of ice cream, conveys nowhere near the pathos of Degas' absinthe-drinker.

Manet and Degas had profoundly different attitudes towards women. Manet told Morisot that Degas was "incapable of loving

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a woman, of even telling her he does". Women painted by Manet appear happy, alluring and in control of their lives. In Degas' paintings, for example Interior (also known as The Rape 1868-69, Philadelphia Museum of Art), relations between men and women are tense and troubled.

The American Impressionist painter Mary Cassatt maintained a long friendship with Degas, despite the unflattering portrait he painted of her. Unlike Manet and Morisot, there appears to have been no sexual attraction between them.

Degas was notoriously cranky. At age 43, he complained to a friend of the difficulty of living alone. "Here I am, growing old, in poor health, and almost penniless. I've made a thorough mess of my life on this earth," he wrote.

The art dealer Ambroise Vollard recorded in his memoirs that when he invited Degas to dinner, the painter sent strict instructions: "No butter in my food. No flowers on the table. Very little light. You shall shut your cat away, and no one shall bring a dog. And if there are women, ask them not to wear perfume ... And we shall sit down at table at 7.30 on the dot."

Manet, who loved life, died at age 51. Degas the curmudgeon lived on for another 34 years. Manet was "greater than we thought", Degas said at Manet's funeral. Encouraged by Berthe Morisot's daughter Julie Manet, he bought eight paintings and 60 engravings by Manet with the intention of founding a museum.

Degas attempted to restore Manet's largest painting, The Execution of Maximilian (1867-68, National Gallery, London).

The French ruler Napoleon III had chosen the hapless Habsburg to be emperor of Mexico. He was executed by Mexican republicans in 1867.

Manet, a lifelong republican, was outraged by the way Napoleon III abandoned Maximilian. The painting is modelled on Goya's painting of the Third of May 1808 executions by the army of Napoleon I in Madrid.

In the last of several versions, Manet dressed Mexican republicans in French imperial uniforms and made the officer recharging his gun resemble Napoleon III. The painting was rejected by the Salon and Manet's engravings of it were banned.

After Manet died, Suzanne and Léon cut the canvas into pieces because it had been damaged by salpeter, and in the hope of earning more money from the fragments. Degas purchased all the pieces he could find, and reassembled the mutilated painting.

The story had come full circle. In what Guégan calls "an act of piety", a friendship once damaged by Manet's slashing of a Degas painting was restored by Degas' salvation of a slashed Manet painting. ●

Manet/Degas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, March 28th-July 23rd, 2023; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, September 24th, 2023 - January 7th, 2024

Ticket

THE IRISH TIMES culture magazine



There's no arc... he starts the play as a bastard and ends the play even more of a bastard.

Which is a joy for an actor to play
Ryan Donaldson



THEATRE

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FILM

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Reviews *Are You Happy Now* by Hanna Jameson; *Hungry Ghosts* by Kevin Jared Hosein

Saturday, February 18, 2023

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VERMEER UNBOUND

LARA MARLOWE VISITS THE YEAR'S
MOST ACCLAIMED EXHIBITION

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PAINTINGS IN THE WORLD

Hundreds of thousands will flock to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, searching for the otherworldly tranquillity imparted by the paintings of Johannes Vermeer

LARA MARLOWE
in Amsterdam and Delft

This is as close to perfection as museum exhibitions come: 28 oil paintings by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) – three-quarters of those known to exist – at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam until June 4th. The largest Vermeer exhibition in history took eight years to

organise and is unlikely to be repeated.

The “impossible dream” became possible when the Frick Collection in Manhattan, which normally does not lend its three Vermeers, closed for renovation, says Taco Dibbits, director of the Rijksmuseum.

The Rijks and Mauritshuis together own seven Vermeers. Museums in Berlin, Dresden, Dublin, Edinburgh, Frankfurt, London, New York, Paris, Tokyo and Washington DC, and a private collector, US billionaire Thomas Kaplan, loaned the rest.

An unprecedented 200,000 tickets sold before the show even opened. All 450,000 tickets have been sold at this writing, though late-night openings may enable more people to see it. Failing that, the actor Stephen Fry has recorded an enjoyable, free viewing on the Rijksmuseum’s website.

One cannot help hoping there is an afterlife so that Vermeer, who died penniless in a time of war and economic collapse, may savour his posthumous triumph.

The only previous monographic Vermeer





Installation of Vermeer's *The Milkmaid*, 1658-59, in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum. Right: *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 1664-67; *The Geographer*, 1669; *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657-58). Photographs: Kelly Schenk; Bequest of Arnoldus Andries des Tombe, The Hague; Städel Museum; Wolfgang Kreische

exhibition was held in Washington DC and The Hague in 1995-1996, with 22 paintings. Arthur K. Wheelock, one of the world's leading Vermeer experts and curator of that show, recalls people queuing for 12 hours in snow to see it. A 2017 exhibition entitled *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting*, at national galleries in Dublin and Washington and the Louvre, was hugely successful, though with half as many Vermeers.

The Rijksmuseum paid tribute to Rembrandt, the other great of Dutch Golden Age painting, with blockbuster exhibitions in 2015 and 2019. They owed Vermeer equal treatment.

We know virtually everything about Rembrandt's life, precious little about Vermeer's. Rembrandt painted nearly 80 self-portraits. We're not sure what Vermeer looked like, though the grinning young man in shadow to the left of *The Procuress* (1656) may be a self-portrait. He wears a black beret and has shoulder-length, curly, reddish hair.

Several masterpieces eluded the Rijksmuseum. The Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna said *The Art of Painting* (1666-68), considered to be Vermeer's most important work, was too fragile to lend. Vermeer kept the painting with him until he died.

The Astronomer (1668) is another aching absence, because the Louvre sent it to its partner museum in Abu Dhabi for 20 months. Städel Museum in Frankfurt came through with *The Astronomer's* counterpart, *The Geographer* (1669). He leans over a map, compass in hand, staring into space, perhaps dreaming of unexplored tropics.

These are the only Vermeers in which men are central figures. Anton van Leeuwenhoek, who discovered micro-organisms, may have been the model for both paintings. Van Leeuwenhoek was, like Vermeer, born in Delft in 1632 and buried in the Old Church. Local authorities asked him to administer Vermeer's widow's bankruptcy.

Was the *Girl with the Pearl Earring* (1664-67) a figment of Vermeer's imagination? Stand in front of her in Amsterdam, or travel to The Hague when she returns early to the Mauritshuis in April. Contemplate her creamy complexion, parted lips and longing, liquid eyes. She looks back at you. She is alive.

Pearl Earring sold for two guilders – about €1 – in 1881 and was bequeathed to the Mauritshuis in 1903.

The painting inspired Tracy Chevalier's 1999 novel, which sold five million copies and was made into a film with Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth. Chevalier's imagination fanned the Vermeer mania that started when the 19th-century critic Théophile Thoré rediscovered the long-forgotten painter and dubbed him the Sphinx of Delft.



The Milkmaid (1658-59) too is part of the world's visual lexicon. A kitchen maid, dressed in a yellow bodice and lapis blue apron, Vermeer's favourite colours, pours milk from a jug. Vermeer's trademark pointillé dapples the bread crusts and ordinary objects with pearls of light. Like figures in other paintings, she concentrates intensely but appears somehow elsewhere. Action in Vermeer's paintings is minimal, often suspended.

Vermeer records every detail of the

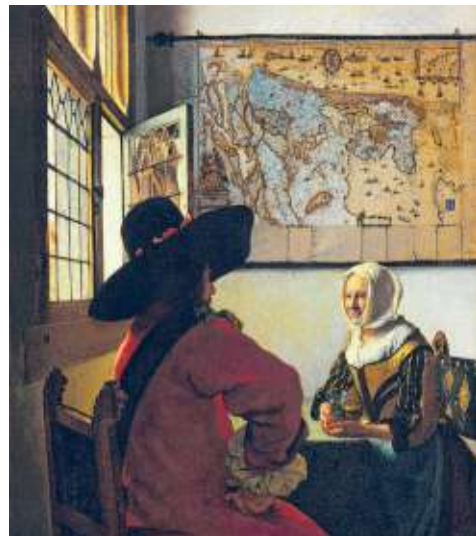
◆ kitchen: damp plaster on the window wall; the nail and its shadow above the milkmaid's head; a foot warmer; Delft tiles comprising the floor skirting.

Advanced scanning technologies have revealed that Vermeer painted out a shelf with jugs and a large basket painted on the floor. He did no preparatory sketches, but painted directly on to the canvas, altering his composition as he went along, usually simplifying.

"It was important for him to isolate the figure of the milkmaid against the white wall. The effect is to make her more monumental, a sort of sculpture," says Gregor J.M. Weber, cocurator of the exhibition. "Less is more was one of Vermeer's mottos."

Vermeer joined the painters' guild in Delft in 1653, the year he married. He spent four years trying his hand at mythological and religious themes. *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657-58), on loan from Dresden, is the first painting that is immediately recognisable as a Vermeer.

A delicate woman whose blonde hair is arranged in a chignon with falling tendrils stands before an open window, her face reflected in the leaded panes. She clutches a letter in both hands and reads as if her life depended on it. A beautifully rendered Persian carpet and still life of fruit in a Chinese bowl appear on the table in the foreground. Infra-red studies found a cupid on the wall behind her, which had been painted over after Vermeer's death. The theatre masque at cupid's feet could be a



premonition of duplicity. With Vermeer, there is always a story, but we are never certain what it is.

Officer and Laughing Girl (1657-58), from the Frick Collection, shows a seated man in a red coat and beaver hat conversing with a young woman wearing a gold and black bodice and white kerchief. The fresh-faced girl smiles engagingly, which is almost unique in Vermeer's oeuvre. The map behind her appears in other paintings and could signify an absent loved one or the tremendous wealth of Holland as a trading nation.

The Rijksmuseum published Weber's book *Johannes Vermeer, Faith, Light and Reflection* to coincide with the exhibition.



Despite a lack of documentary evidence, Weber has no doubt that Vermeer, who was baptised into the Dutch Reformed Church, converted to Catholicism. "To marry a Catholic woman and live in a Catholic neighbourhood, you had to be Catholic and bring up your children as Catholics," he says.

Jesuit doctrine influenced Vermeer's paintings, particularly the bizarre *Allegory of the Catholic Faith* (1670-74), his last work. Other canvases can be interpreted as morality tales.

The Woman with a Pearl Necklace (1662-64), from Berlin, holds a necklace up to her reflection in a mirror. She wears the yellow, fur-trimmed jacket that belonged to



Vermeer's wife, and which we encounter in several paintings. The exquisitely quiet scene is in fact a typically Jesuit warning against the sin of vanity, says Weber.

The ethereal face of the *Woman Holding a Balance* (1662-64), from Washington, studies the small scale she dangles from her right hand. Gold and pearls are scattered on the table before her. A painting of *The Last Judgment* hangs behind her.

"*The Last Judgment* is a Catholic subject, because Calvinists believed one was predestined," Weber says. The tiny scales are empty. Is the woman weighing souls? Or merely the light glinting off the metal balance? With Vermeer, God is in the details.

REMBRANDT AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

dThe Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg and the Hermitage in Amsterdam organised 30 exhibitions together between the fall of the Soviet Union and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In exchange for contributing to the renovation of the St Petersburg museum, the Amsterdam exhibition centre shared its name and was given access to St Petersburg's treasures.

The relationship ended abruptly. "The war started on February 24th, and we cut ties on the 4th of March," says Annabelle Birnie, director of the Hermitage Amsterdam. "We were very strict about not wanting anything to do with the Russian state."

During the Covid pandemic, Birnie jokes, she had a collection but no public. When Russia invaded Ukraine, she had a public but no collection.

Arthur K. Wheelock was for 45 years the curator of Dutch painting at the National Gallery in Washington, and is today senior adviser to US billionaire Thomas Kaplan, owner of *The Leiden Collection*. Wheelock

received a call from the Hermitage asking if Kaplan would loan his paintings.

Kaplan began collecting 17th-century Dutch paintings with his wife Daphne 20 years ago. They have purchased more than 250 Dutch masters, including 17 Rembrandts, the largest number in private hands. The Kaplans have posted the entire collection online and lend the masterpieces to museums around the world in the interest of cultural understanding.

Kaplan and Wheelock proposed showing history paintings from *The Leiden Collection* at the Hermitage Amsterdam. The show, entitled *Rembrandt and his Contemporaries*, is the first designed specifically for the Hermitage Amsterdam since it broke ties with Russia.

Rembrandt and other 17th-century Dutch painters took from the Flemish theoretician Karel van Mander the idea that history painting – allegorical scenes and subjects from the Bible, antiquity or Greek and Roman mythology – was the most noble, prestigious form of art.

"Van Mander believed that history painting was at the highest echelon of art because it required knowledge of the Bible and mythology, and it required imagination to tell these stories through gestures and expressions," Wheelock explains.

Rembrandt's *Minerva in Her Study* (1635) is the signature painting for the exhibition. Rembrandt's beloved wife Saskia served as model for the goddess of wisdom and war. Dressed in pale blue and gold, crowned with laurel leaves, Minerva rests her forearm on a book – knowledge – and shuns war by turning her back on a



shield emblazoned with the head of Medusa, a helmet and spear.

Kaplan has also loaned Rembrandt's *Bust of a Bearded Old Man* (1633). The painting resembles the *tronies* – Dutch for faces – which Rembrandt often painted as sketches for larger history paintings. But the fact that he signed and dated the tiny portrait – his smallest painting ever – shows he considered it a work of art in its own right.

Rembrandt painted elderly men and women throughout his life. The



large, squarish head with unruly hair and a white beard is charged with emotional energy. The US banker, industrialist and art collector Andrew Mellon, a previous owner, had a velvet-lined leather case built for the painting, which accompanied him everywhere.

History paintings by Ferdinand Bol, France van Mieris, Caspar Netscher, Godefridus Schalcken and Jan Steen, all better known for genre scenes and portraits, are included in the exhibition. Two paintings show figures being comforted by angels, with great poignancy.

Hagar and the Angel (1645) is one of only 13 surviving paintings by Carel Fabritius, Rembrandt's most talented pupil. *Christ on the Mount of Olives* (1715) was painted by Arent de Gelder, the student who

Minerva in Her Study, 1635, by Rembrandt; *Hagar and the Angel*, 1643-45, by Carel Fabritius. Photographs: The Leiden Collection

Seventeenth-century Delft was a centre for optical research, which Jesuits embraced as a way of exploring God's creation. Weber believes Vermeer used optical equipment at the Jesuit station next door to his home in the so-called Papists' Corner of Delft to perfect his painting technique.

The mainly Protestant Dutch Republic had just fought an 80-year war with Catholic Spain when Vermeer fell in love with Catharina Bolnes, a Catholic. Her family owned brick factories, so while she was more affluent than Vermeer, she also belonged to a persecuted minority. Catholics were not allowed to hold office or organise public gatherings.

Johannes and Catharina's first wedding banns were crossed out in the register, probably at the instigation of her mother, Maria Thins. The second time, Vermeer dispatched two friends, a painter and a ship's captain, to Thins's house to plead with her. She refused to give formal permission, but signed a document saying she would "not prevent or hinder" the marriage. It is on display in the Vermeer Delft exhibition at Museum Prinsenhof in Delft.

The couple lived with Thins for 15 years. It cannot have been easy. Catharina bore 15 children, of whom 11 survived infancy. Vermeer was under great pressure to support them and is believed to have retreated from the noise and stress into his studio sanctuary.

"He loved his children, of course, but he also needed to live in the idealised world of his paintings," Weber speculates. That idealised world was an illusion. "He depict-

remained faithful to Rembrandt's style after late 17th century painters turned to French-style classicism.

Rembrandt and his Contemporaries runs until August 27th and coincides with the reopening of Rembrandt's house on March 18th. Combined with the fabulous Vermeer exhibition at the Rijksmuseum until June 4th, these events constitute a stunning celebration of 17th-century Dutch painting.

But could there have been a Dutch Golden Age without the enslavement of more than half a million Africans? Contemporary Dutch society has virtually banned the term Golden Age from its vocabulary, though one is still allowed to refer to the Golden Age of Dutch painting. The word slave is now seen as the equivalent of the N-word, and has been replaced by enslaved person.

The Rijksmuseum, the Netherlands' most important cultural institution, contributed to the debate by organising an exhibition on slavery in 2021. Last December, prime minister Mark Rutte declared that slavery had been a crime against humanity. King Willem-Alexander may apologise next July 1st, on the 150th anniversary of abolition.

"I am troubled when the beauty of the art somehow gets compromised by the other story," says Wheelock. "These are miraculous paintings. The other side of the equation of slavery is there. We have to deal with it, but it shouldn't take away from the beauty of the art that was created."

LARAMARLOWE



From far left: *Officer and Laughing Girl* 1657-58; *Woman with a Pearl Necklace*, 1662-64; *Woman Holding a Balance*, 1662-64. Photographs: Joseph Coscia Jr/ The Frick Collection, New York; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Gemäldegalerie; National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

ed the very rich. The marble floors and other things were invented ... Vermeer wanted to match the status of his new family, to be a member of the upper class."

The art history professor Frans Grijzenhout identified in 2015 the location where Vermeer painted *The Little Street* (1658-59). The red brick facade had been fissured by the explosion of the Delft powder magazine in 1654. Known as *The Delft Thunderclap*, the explosion claimed dozens of lives, including the painter Carel Fabritius.

Vermeer's aunt sold tripe from a stand in the market to support her family, and lived in the house portrayed in *The Little Street*. Could she be the woman sewing in the open doorway? Or the figure cleaning in the alley? The only children in Vermeer's oeuvre play on the stoop. The aunt's house was rebuilt in the 19th century, but the alley is unchanged.

If one stands at the confluence of the canals and Schie river where Vermeer painted his *View of Delft* (1660-61), the skyline is recognisable, marked by the towers of the New Church and Old Church, where Vermeer was baptised and buried.

Marcel Proust called the *View of Delft* the most beautiful painting in the world. At an exhibition in Paris, his character Bergotte, a writer, goes into ecstasy over a little yellow wall – in fact a rooftop – bathed in sunlight and concludes: "That is how I ought to have written". Bergotte collapses and dies in the museum.

Nothing, or very little, happens in Vermeer's paintings. Yet hundreds of thousands of people will flock to the Rijksmuseum by June 4th, retreating from our over-stimulated age, searching for the otherworldly peace and tranquillity imparted by Vermeer's paintings.

There is something similar about the oeuvres of Vermeer and Proust; the slow pace at which they were created, the minutiae and perfectionism, the desire to freeze time. "If a thing happens once," the late poet Derek Mahon wrote, "It happens once forever". ●

Hugh Linehan

Why is trust in media falling? Maybe it's not us, it's you

Efforts to explain the decline in public trust in media tend to focus on the media's own undeniable flaws, as American journalist Matt Yglesias pointed out this week. But what if such analysis actually obscures what's really happening? "Fundamentally, 'trust in media is declining because the media is bad' is a fallacious explanation," argued Yglesias. "Not only is there little evidence that the media has gotten worse since the high-trust, pre-Vietnam era, I think there's considerable evidence that it's gotten better."

Yglesias was riffing off a recent New Yorker article by Louis Menand headlined "When Americans lost faith in the news". Looking for explanations, Menand pointed to the current poisonous state of American politics. "The press wasn't silenced in the Trump years," he wrote. "The press was discredited, at least among Trump supporters, and that worked just as well. It was censorship by other means. Back in 1976, even after Vietnam and Watergate, 72 per cent of the public said they trusted the news media. Today, the figure is 34 per cent. Among Republicans, it's 14 per cent."

Trust in media has declined in Ireland too, although at 52 per cent it remains relatively high in comparison with other European countries, and significantly better than the dismal US numbers. None of which should be any cause for complacency; the shortcomings of Irish media are many. Menand is correct, though, about the corrosive impact of populist narratives: the Trumpist framing of media as the enemy is commonplace on both the far right and far left of contemporary Irish politics.

But even a cursory examination of media history dispels any notion of a lost Edenic past. A new book, *City of Newsmen: Public Lies and Professional Secrets in Cold War Washington*, reveals the extent of collusion between American postwar governments and media organisations in keeping the truth about American interference in the Middle East and Latin America concealed from their readers and viewers.

The people who ran media and those who ran government came from the same social strata and held identical ideological views. Add in the structures of so-called "pack" journalism, whereby a pool of correspondents collaborate closely with government officials on generating stories, and you don't need to have read Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* to know what the outcome was.

The exact same factors, on a more modest scale, applied here in Ireland, and many of them still do. Studies of

modern Irish social history focus on the groundbreaking work of a handful of dogged investigative and campaigning journalists in uncovering institutional abuse, political corruption and corporate malfeasance. Less attention is paid to the failure of so many newspapers and broadcasters from the 1950s onwards to face down powerful interests.

When it comes to the present moment, though, Yglesias is probably right when he answers his own rhetorical question about why so many stories are misleading, while important facts are under covered.

"I'm afraid that the main problem is the news-reading audience, which simply does not agree that the purpose of journalism is to bring true information to light," he wrote. "I don't know why people read what they read, but they are mostly not seeking actionable intelligence about the state of the world and therefore don't care that much about accuracy."

This grim diagnosis has a ring of truth for those of us who pay attention to how certain news stories go viral while others are ignored.

"The term 'news media' is a capacious abstraction that contains multitudes," wrote conservative commentator Brink Lindsey recently. "But when we look at the enterprise taken as a whole, the commendable efforts of the truth seekers and fact finders are overwhelmed by the flood of sensationalistic infotainment bullshit – a flood that panders to the public's worst instincts and whips both sides into a mutually antagonistic frenzy, all to maximise media company revenues."

Lindsey is less sanguine than Yglesias about the current state of media in the US (and, by inference, around the world). His conclusion is surprising from a lifelong Republican and self-described libertarian. "There is a fundamental misalignment between profit-seeking and democracy's need for a well-informed public," he wrote. "That misalignment can be mitigated when profit-seeking is appropriately constrained, but in today's competitive free-for-all for eyeballs, clicks, and ratings, the result is informational anarchy in which truth is hopelessly outmatched."

Market deregulation, technological innovation and new forms of aggressive, data-driven entrepreneurialism have all transformed the media landscape in so many ways that it becomes hard even to agree a definition of what "media" is (most of the articles mentioned here were published on Substack, a platform that didn't exist six years ago).

This genie isn't going back in any bottle, but at least we may be beginning to understand it a little better. ●

Ticket

THE IRISH TIMES culture magazine



Because she had no boundaries, people feel close to her ... I feel like all her emotions had to be just under the skin and very palpable
Ana de Armas on Marilyn Monroe



GUIDE

Going-out guide The best movies, music, art and more coming your way this week

CULTURE

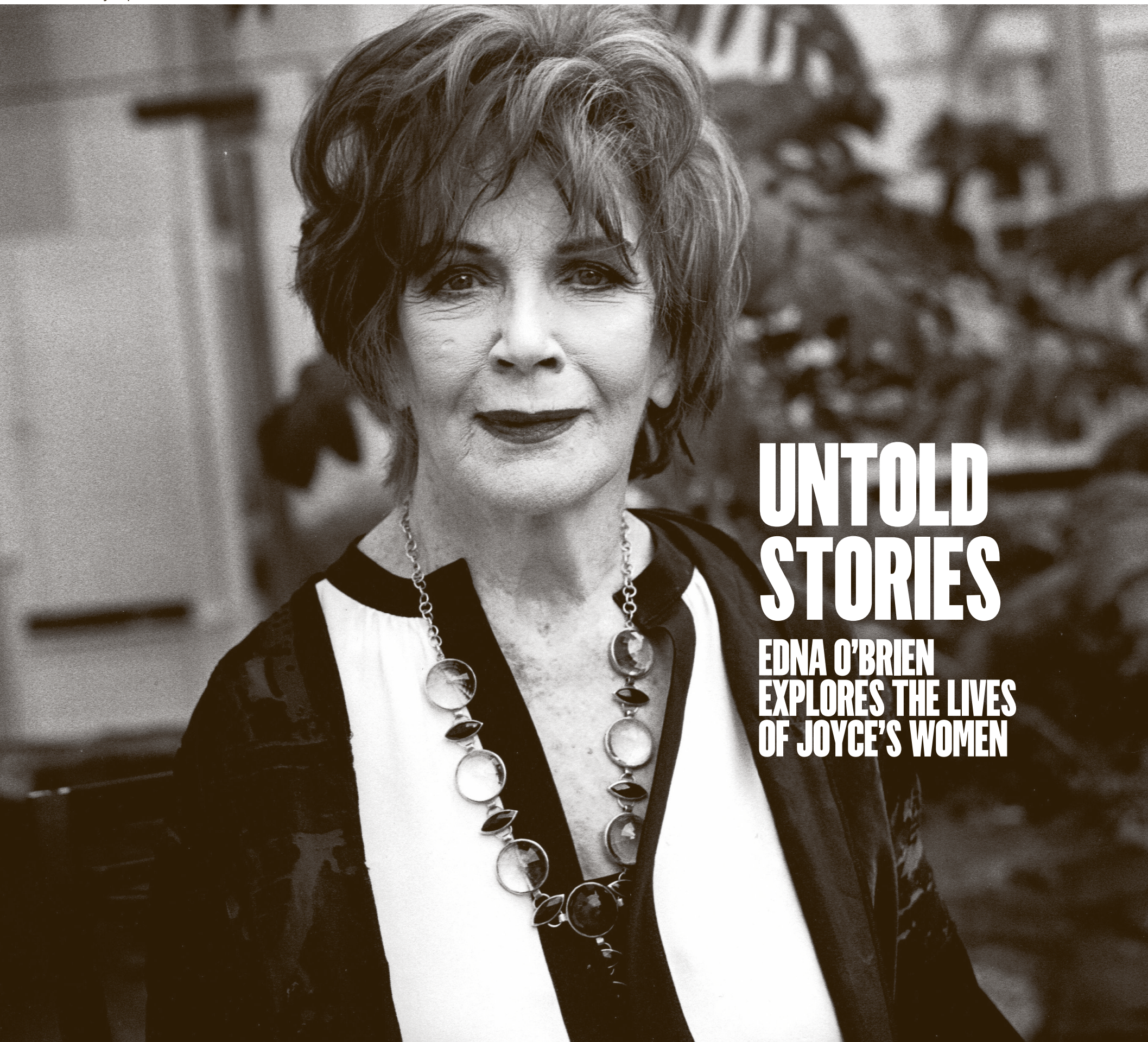
Friday night lights A pick of 25 things to see from the 1,000-plus events taking place on Culture Night

BOOKS

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Reviews All the Broken Places by John Boyne; There's Been a Little Incident by Alice Ryan

Saturday, September 17, 2022

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UNTOLD STORIES

**EDNA O'BRIEN
EXPLORES THE LIVES
OF JOYCE'S WOMEN**

GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Edna O'Brien's new play tells the story of her first and greatest literary hero, James Joyce, through the eyes of the women who surrounded him

LARA MARLOWE

A package from London arrives on my doorstep in Paris this summer, soon after I make an appointment to interview Edna O'Brien about her new play, Joyce's Women. The author has tied its loose pages together with a grey satin ribbon stained with purple ink.

O'Brien's 1960 novel *Country Girls* is a monument of modern Irish literature. She went on to write dozens more books. She is a woman whose love stories, real-life and imagined, end badly.

Travelling on the Eurostar, I listen again to her 2007 interview with *Desert Island Discs*. "I don't think I know or have ever learned the game of men and women," she said. "It's like a dance that I cannot learn." Then aged 77, she nonetheless hoped to fall in love again.

O'Brien calls the small house in a posh area of southern London where she has lived for more than 35 years her Doll's House, in honour of Ibsen. She laments the fact that she still struggles to pay the rent.

We sit at the kitchen table, beneath the eagle-eyed gaze of Samuel Beckett, while she gathers the strength to climb the stairs

to her book-lined study. She will turn 92 on December 15th and is frail and exhausted by successive rewrites of her play.

Joyce's *Women* will run at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin until October 15th. "I hope I don't get booed off the stage," she says. Her play is brilliant, I tell her. The audience will love it. "The writer never knows," she says tremulously. "Unless you are a publicity hound, unless you mix among people. I know many writers who ruined, harmed their talents by becoming social, social, social. This is tosh . . ."

"But you had a period in your life . . ." I interrupt her.

O'Brien once owned a six-bedroom house at 10 Carlyle Square in Chelsea, where she entertained everyone who was anyone in literature or entertainment: Marlon Brando, Richard Burton, Jane Fonda, Paul McCartney, VS Naipaul, Jackie Onassis, Vanessa Redgrave, JD Salinger . . . Her sons, Carlo and Sasha, ferried champagne up from the cellar.

"I had a reckless period," O'Brien admits. "Do I regret it? No, because it was part of the trip."

Like her greatest hero, James Joyce, O'Brien did not manage money well. She stopped writing for 10 years and lost her house. Now living in genteel poverty, she dresses well, in a patterned black and white silk dress and black cardigan, despite the summer heat. The trip to the hairdresser is her main extravagance, her honey-coloured hair her crowning glory.

She has many things in common with Joyce, I suggest.

"A stick!" she laughs, waving her walking stick in the air.

She admits to a similar upbringing to Joyce's, dominated by Catholicism and



I learned more from Joyce than anyone else in the world. I learned how to put one word after another and make sense of them

alcoholic fathers. Their books were banned but later regarded as seminal texts. Both engaged in an endless quest for *le mot juste*. Despite spending her adult life in exile, O'Brien could say, like Joyce, "People ask why I never went back to Dublin and my answer is, 'Have I ever left?'"

O'Brien tells Joyce's story through the eyes of his wife, Nora Barnacle, daughter Lucia, mother May, brother Stanislaus, his long-suffering benefactor Harriet Shaw Weaver, and Martha Fleischmann, who was briefly his mistress.


The protagonists recreate Joyce's life while they wait for his death in Zurich. Scenes are threaded together by ballads sung by Zozimus, the Blind Bard of the Liberties in early 19th century Dublin.

O'Brien has so thoroughly absorbed Joyce's speech patterns that it is often difficult to distinguish between quotes from his writings and her words. Not pastiche. Osmosis.

"I learned more from Joyce than anyone else in the world," O'Brien says. "I learned how to put one word after another and make sense of them. Beckett was once asked what made Joyce such a great writer and he replied, 'He made the words do the work'."

With a fervour reminiscent of Joyce's first sighting of Nora Barnacle, O'Brien recalls her first encounter with his prose. She was training to become a pharmacist, though she wanted to be a writer. In a Dublin bookshop on her day off, she happened upon a copy of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

"I read only a paragraph before realising that everything else I had read before, except perhaps the gospels and some ancient myths, everything else was



Edna O'Brien: 'I had a reckless period. Do I regret it? No, because it was part of the trip.'
Left: James Joyce Paris, 1934.
Photographs: Julien De Rosa/EPA;
Roger Viollet/Getty Images

◆ third rate. What I ate and drank from his writing was to get to the true pith of not only each scene, but each little moment in each little life. Nothing extraneous and yet nothing absent.”

O’Brien whispers as if in confidence: “He taught me some secret thing, and I don’t know what it is. No other writer has taught me what Joyce taught me, which is to get to the pure, to the thing that hurts, to the thing that moves . . . Even Faulkner, whom I worship, no one else taught me that. No one ever will. It was like a huge, miraculous gift.”

She breaks the dramatic spell with laughter. “He would be very pleased with the miraculous word . . . I would love to have met him, preferably at evening time, with a glass. And would I have asked him a question? I am not sure.”

The infernal love triangle between Joyce, Nora and their gifted but troubled daughter Lucia lies at the heart of Joyce’s *Women*.

The bond between James and Nora, a hotel chambermaid from Galway who lived in poverty and exile for him but never read his books, remains a mysterious alchemy of sexual attraction and almost metaphysical mutual dependence. In *James & Nora, A Portrait of a Marriage*, O’Brien called it “forever mingling the genitalia and the transubstantial”.

Joyce slept with Nora’s glove under his pillow and sent her magnificent love letters. “I was his wild flower of the rain-drenched hedges, made beautiful by moonlight, his soul trembling beside mine . . . I was the other half of Ireland,” she recalls.

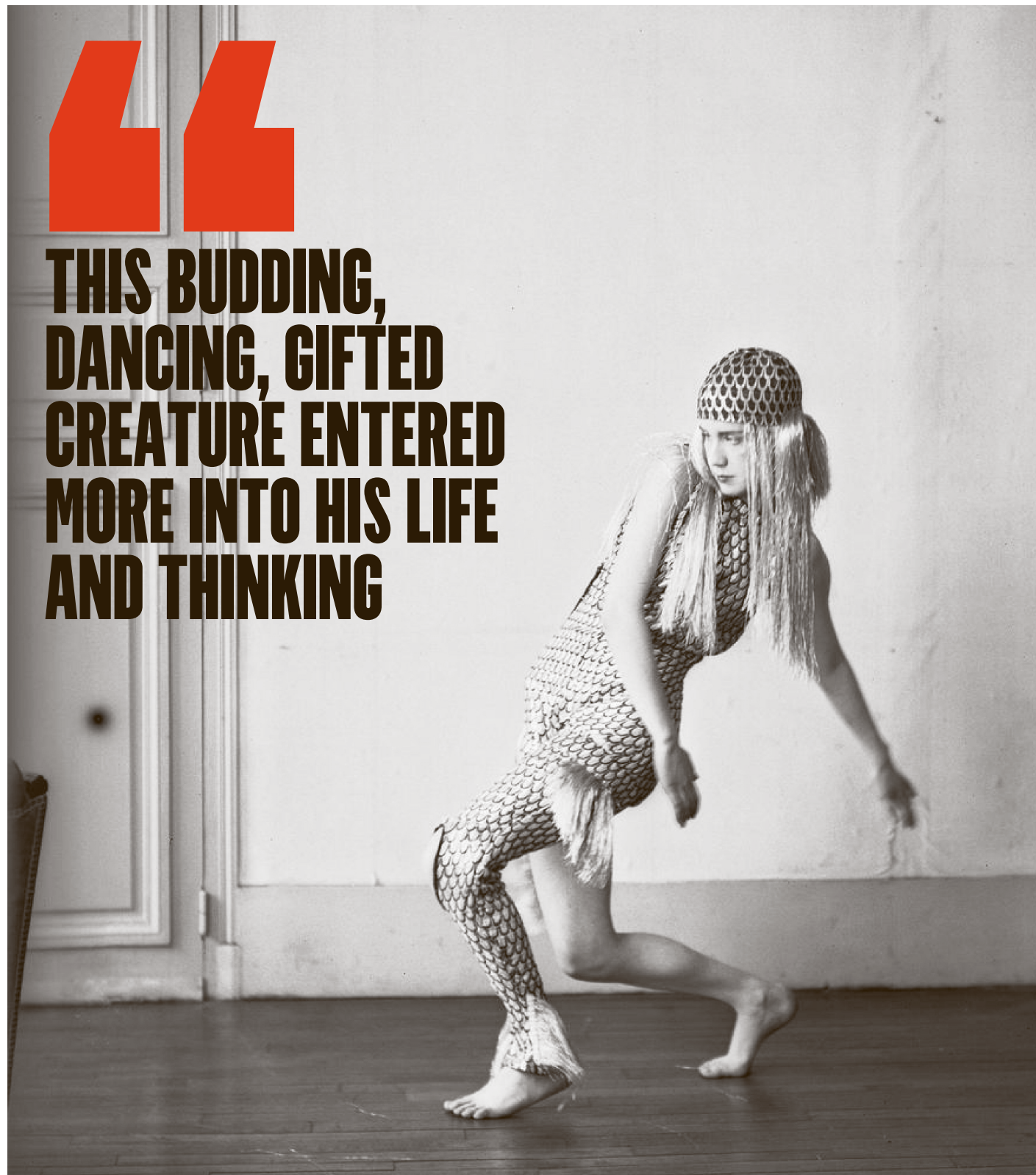
“Jim is my child . . . Jim is my life,” Nora says in the play. “I learned to roll Turkish cigarettes to keep hunger at bay. If I gave him a stern look, he would put a note under the teapot begging forgiveness”.

Joyce said that he wanted to be a woman. “He called himself ‘a womanly man’,” O’Brien says. She believes that his desire to experience womanhood was part of what attracted him to Nora. “His overwhelming impulse towards Nora Barnacle was to do with the possessing of her womanness, body and soul, her thinking, her sexuality. He wanted to absorb every bit of her. I don’t think even she understood the mystery and astonishment of her power over him.”

Joyce was prone to getting “maggoty drunk”, as his brother Stanislaus put it. “When he had a second bottle, he wanted a third bottle. And Nora tried to stop him,” O’Brien says. She quotes Charmian, Cleopatra’s lady in waiting in Shakespeare. “Cross him in nothing” was Nora’s attitude.

“Nora could stand up to him about whether they would buy a carpet when they got into the money, but she never contradicted his deeper intent,” O’Brien says. “She read some proof pages of *Ulysses* and called them *ein schwein*, a pig”. When the first two copies of *Ulysses* reached Paris on the train from Dijon, Joyce gave one to Nora as a gift. “Nora proceeded to sell it, half in jest, to his friend Arthur Power. Nora was funny. She was spry and, in a sense, she stood up to him. She didn’t kneel at his feet or call him the great master or say, ‘Have you read my husband’s masterpiece?’ she was much too shrewd for that.”

It was not an easy marriage. Nora ignored Joyce’s penchant for prostitutes



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and sometimes locked him out when he came home drunk. She had no interest in cooking or housekeeping. In the play, Stanislaus recounts his arrival in Trieste: “Pots and pans all over the floor, chairs stacked on top of one another, broken crockery, Giorgio spurting water from a pistol and little Lucia sitting on the floor combing her hair for nits which she called eggs.”

Genius and parenthood make poor bedfellows, O’Brien says. When James and Nora were “young, besotted, bohemian and chaotic” they were “entangled with each other but not in a normal marital way like dinner at six or a walk in a park on Sunday. There would be none of that codology”.

The play contains only one allusion to Giorgio, the Joyces’ first child. “My brother runs with the smart crowd, drinking daiquiris, chasing rich divorcees,” Lucia tells her father.

“Joyce from the very start, as is often the case with fathers, favoured his daughter,” O’Brien explains. “As years went on, his love and daily habits, his affections for Nora, were certainly sexually dampened or lessened. That’s no surprise to anyone, biologically, and this budding, dancing, gifted creature Lucia entered more into his life and thinking. Nora was jealous.”

O’Brien categorically rejects rumours of incest between Joyce and Lucia. “Bollocks!” she exclaims. “Do you know why I say that with such certainty? He loved and revered her too much. He revered his daughter. He revered her mind. He thought she was part of his mind, which she was, in a sense”.

Unlike Nora, Lucia was interested in Joyce’s writing. She recites from *Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses* in the play. In a haunting scene she and Joyce speak alternating lines from the *Anna Livia Plurabelle*

section of *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce is amazed, for he has not yet written them.

Lucia was the inspiration for *Anna Livia*, the river woman. “My daughter. She will drown me with her eyes, with her hair, lank coils of seaweed hair around my heart,” Joyce says on his deathbed, while father and daughter long heartbreakingly and in vain to see one another.

Joyce refused to recognise Lucia’s increasingly dangerous behaviour. “Tantrums, wild fits of rage, setting fire to the kitchen table and often disappearing for days,” Nora tells a sympathetic listener in Zurich. “Then one night we were called. She had climbed on to a balcony, wearing a ball gown and addressing passersby.”

Lucia was furious when Nora stopped her dance classes because of the cost. O’Brien combines several incidents in a scene of shocking physical and emotional violence, when Lucia hurls a chair at her



Clockwise from left: Lucia Joyce in her homemade silver fish costume. James, Nora Barnacle, Lucia and Giorgio in Paris in 1924. Genevieve Hulme Beaman as Lucia in Joyce's *Women*. Photographs: Berenice Abbott/Getty; Bettmann Archive; Ruth Medjber

mother during Joyce's birthday party and is taken away in a straitjacket. "Poetic license, but also, I think poetic truth," O'Brien says. "It is not exaggerated. It is not gratuitous. She threw a chair at her mother."

The saddest part, Nora reflects, "was that I brought out the worst violence in her. For a parent that is a death sentence".

One often sees photographs of Lucia Joyce, aged 21, at the Bal Bullier in Montparnasse in 1929. "Lucia made her own fish-like costume, with a scaled cap and a tail. She was one of six in the competition. She was dazzling, it would seem. Certainly, Joyce thought so," O'Brien recounts.

Samuel Beckett, who worked as Joyce's secretary, attended Lucia's performance. The young woman fantasised that Beckett would marry her. "Lucia was an inventress," O'Brien says. Beckett did nothing more than hold Lucia's hand and never thought of marrying her. Yet he was the only person from Lucia's past to visit her in the mental hospital in Northampton where she spent the last 30 years of her life.

Lucia's failure to place in the dance competition "was the coup de grace" that doomed her hopes of a career in modern dance, O'Brien says. "Escalating madness, disappointment and a total sense of failure were all drawing in on her."

Lucia recounts electroshock therapy in a disturbing monologue: "They tried it out first on pigs in slaughterhouses. All the pigs died ... Three men came. One put a heavy canvas over me and tied it to the bedpost. My head stuck out ... Two fitted a steel cap over my skull. I begged them not to. Then the machine is turned on. I start to jump, jumping Jesus. They won't stop. Everything going, my mind, my grasp, my name. They are cooking my brain. I smell

it. Then the volts go judder-juddery and then it stops."

O'Brien struggled to find an end to the play. "I thought I was never going to be able to finish it, that it would fall asunder like a jigsaw puzzle," she says. In a moment of great discouragement, a friend played on his smartphone for her a recording of *Liebested — Love Death* — the finale of Wagner's opera, where Iseult sings over Tristan's dead body.

"I said, can you please play it to me three times, just the same bit and then leave me alone. And he did. It was like a gift. Another gift."

To write such a play at any age would be a great achievement. By writing it now, O'Brien has reaffirmed her position as a national treasure and grande dame of Irish letters. She created Joyce's *Women* despite a host of problems which she does not wish to see discussed in print. "Why tell them your woes?" she asks. "I'm not on the cross yet. You can do that later."

O'Brien says she weeps when she thinks of all that Joyce endured to create his oeuvre. But she considers his life to have been "a triumph as well as a tragedy".

Edna O'Brien is a theatre unto herself, at the same time fierce and vulnerable, serious and flamboyant, proud and self-deprecating, weary and enthusiastic. Joyce's *Women* has not yet reached the stage, and she is already thinking about her next play, tentatively entitled *Iphigenia's Corset*.

She deplores the fact that she must keep writing to pay her bills, but then adds, "If I don't write, I might as well not live". James Joyce would surely have understood. ●

Joyce's *Women* runs as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival at the Abbey Theatre from September 22nd until October 15th

Hugh Linehan

Turning on and tuning in with your eyes wide shut

Life can bring you to strange places. A few weeks ago I found myself in a decommissioned Scottish ice rink, preparing to submit to an allegedly hallucinogenic experience devised by an obscure post-war beatnik intellectual. All courtesy of a government-funded celebration of Brexit.

In 1961, Brion Gysin, a painter, poet and performance artist best known for the invention, along with his friend and fellow experimentalist William S Burroughs, of the cut-up literary method, devised what he called the Dreamachine, described as "the first art object to be seen with the eyes closed". The concept derived from Gysin's transcendental experience on a bus to Marseille in 1958, when the flickering of sunlight through avenues of trees along the roadside put him into a hallucinatory, dream-like state. Gysin worked with Cambridge maths student Ian Sommerville to create a cylindrical device that he believed would replace every TV in every home and make us all creators of our own cinematic experiences.

Obviously that didn't happen, but the contraption remains an intriguing relic of the ambitions of the post-war, pre-hippy avant-garde at a time when it was rebelling against the boundaries of rationality and seeking to remake the human psyche, sometimes but not always with the assistance of psychedelic drugs.

There were no drugs on offer at Murrayfield during the Edinburgh International Festival, but it felt as though there might as well have been, such was the number of forms to be filled, disclaimers to be signed and health and safety warnings to be heeded before we entered the new Dreamachine, a circular structure in the centre of the rink (the ice, mercifully, had been removed). Our seats had speakers built into the headrests, and we were given blankets for our legs, along with eyemasks to put on if the experience proved too overpowering). The translucent ceiling above our heads would deliver the pulses of light, while the speakers would play a soundtrack by electronic composer Jon Hopkins.

The vibe was mindfulness session meets chill-out zone. The revived Dreamachine, the work of art producer Jennifer Crook and architecture collective Assembly, seeks to emphasise the collective nature of the experience alongside the internal voyage of self-discovery that attracted Gysin. An important part of the project is gathering the reactions and impressions of the thousands of people who have visited it in Edinburgh, Belfast, Cardiff and London.

Anil Seth, professor of computational neuroscience at the University of Sussex, told the Guardian that the machine helps us address deep questions about the meaning of consciousness and the inner diversity of our mental lives. "We're used to, as it were,

external diversity — skin colour, different belief systems," he said. "When people report what they have experienced in the Dreamachine, it shows us something that has obsessed me for years: internal diversity. Your experience of blue may be different from mine, but language suggests they are the same. In fact, maybe language works because it papers over these differences."

For me, the experience was certainly intense. As powerful lights strobed across my eyelids, I saw a rapid sequence of shifting geometric shapes in bold primary colours. Relaxing further, I noticed my limbs were jerking slightly, like that involuntary spasm you get when you're entering sleep and think you're falling. None of this was unpleasant. It felt as if it had unlocked something in my brain of which I had previously only been dimly aware.

What was going on? Seth believes the geometric and kaleidoscopic images people see "might be the visual cortex revealing its structure to us. These flickering light effects may be inducing us to see the cortex. It's not by any means certain, but computational models suggest as much."

It felt as if it had unlocked something in my brain of which I had previously only been dimly aware

There are ironies here. You can trace a line of descent from utopian precursors of the psychedelic counterculture like Gysin to the digital anarcho-libertarians of early Silicon Valley and on to the immersive, addictive, commodified environments purveyed by Meta, Alphabet and the rest. But Dreamachine, which is much closer in spirit and aesthetic to the transcendental, communitarian impulses of clubbing subcultures, is the anti-metaverse, the opposite of VR. Gysin, who wanted his invention to release us from being passive consumers of the mass-produced imagery of the late 1950s, would surely have recoiled from the far more media-saturated world we live in now, and found common cause with those who reject it.

Dreamachine has another week left to run in Edinburgh as part of Unboxed 2022, a programme of cultural and scientific projects initiated by Theresa May's government in 2018 to "celebrate our nation's diversity and talent". It never quite recovered from its underlying rationale, made explicit by Jacob Rees-Mogg when he described it as the "Festival of Brexit", It's good, nevertheless, to see something genuinely thought-provoking finally come out of that benighted political process. ●