

Odalisque, Cummings Style

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Dictionaries tell us that “odalisque” refers to “a female slave or concubine in a harem, especially in that of the sultan of Turkey” or “any of a number of representations of such a woman or of a similar subject, as by Ingres or Matisse.” In museum vernacular, the term “odalisque” has been used more loosely to describe any representation of a reclining nude female figure. E. E. Cummings created odalisque paintings of his second wife Anne Barton and his third wife Marion Morehouse. This paper will describe these images in the context of other odalisque paintings to which Cummings would have been exposed during his time in Paris, France.

Many such classical odalisque images appear through the centuries. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres completed the landmark painting, *La Grande Odalisque*, in 1814 (fig.1). This artwork is considered a break from



Figure 1: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque* (1814), oil on canvas, 64” x 35”, Musée du Louvre

Neoclassicism and a shift toward Romanticism by Ingres. Ingres has been criticized for distorting anatomical dimension by favoring elongated lines and curvature to accentuate sensuality. Scholars have noted how increased numbers of vertebrae have been added to physically lengthen and highlight the lower back and pelvis (Maigne, Chatellier, and Norlöff 342-44).

Edouard Manet's *Olympia* was met with considerable protest when it was displayed at the Paris Salon in 1865 (fig. 2). The subject appears to be expecting a male suitor or client who has sent flowers in advance, held by her servant. Her confrontational gaze is directed at the viewer, and a num-



Figure 2: Edouard Manet, *Olympia* (1863), oil on canvas, 75" x 51", Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

ber of features identify her as a courtesan, including the orchid in her hair, her bracelet and earrings along with the shawl and slippers (Clark 100). The hostile public response that *Olympia* engendered was based on moral boundaries for what was acceptable in art rather than on stylistic boundaries.

E. E. Cummings painted *Nude*, an odalisque of his second wife Anne Barton lying in repose on a red blanket and wearing nothing more than a ring, a bracelet, green heels, and a come-hither look (fig. 3). She is sporting the typical flapper girl haircut that is a recognizable feature in other portraits of her by Cummings. This painting is number 53 of the ninety-nine total artworks that Cummings selected for inclusion in his art book *CIOPW*, which was published by Covici-Friede in 1931. It is also listed in the extensive exhibition catalog of the Gotham Book Mart Gallery show, which was held from September through December 1973 (number 23 of 930 artworks by Cummings). Based on the floor boards and back wall, this painting appears to have been executed at the Joy Farm house, likely be-

tween 1925 and 1930. It is not clear whether this is the same painting as the one titled *Nude* that was exhibited in 1928 at either the Society of Independent Artists or Salons of America Spring Salon.



Figure 3: E. E. Cummings, *Nude*, oil on canvas, 71” x 43”, Private collection



Figure 4: E. E. Cummings, *Untitled reclining nude*, oil on wood, 16.25” x 13”, Ken Lopez, Bookseller

Cummings also painted a later odalisque of his third wife, Marion Morehouse (fig. 4). The stylistic variations in the paintings may be significantly related to differences in the personalities of the subjects. Barton was the ultimate party girl and hypersexual seductress. Her sexuality, which defined her, is prominently displayed centrally with the frontal view of her ample pubic region as the focal point. She is the main subject of the painting, stretching across this oversized canvas. Overall, this painting is a nod to Edouard Manet thematically and to Paul Cézanne from a technical standpoint. As in Manet's *Olympia*, Cummings' *Nude of Anne* uses adornment in the form of a ring, bracelet, and green heels to accentuate the sensuality of the subject. In a particularly provocative fashion for the time, Anne meets the gaze of the artist/viewer with a more coy rather than direct stare.

The Marion Morehouse odalisque is not oversized and displays a more classical temperament with a distinct lack of adornment of the subject and a gaze averted from the viewer. There is less focus on the subject and more attention to the interior; the flowers, open window, and textile pattern of the bedspread are common themes of Matisse. Similar themes are noted in Matisse's *Odalisque with Red Culottes* in which a busy interior with a distinctly decorative quality distracts attention from the subject (fig. 5).



Figure 5: Henri Matisse, *Odalisque with Red Culottes* (1921), oil on canvas, 33" x 26", Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France

Consideration of the artists who influenced Cummings adds to the personal, professional, and historical value of his visual work. Cummings clearly embraced “The New Art” in his commencement speech upon graduation from Harvard in 1915, espousing the work of Cézanne, Matisse, Manet, and Monet, among others. While his poetry has received tremendous critical review for almost a century, the evolution of Cummings’ considerable body of visual art warrants further study and attention.

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