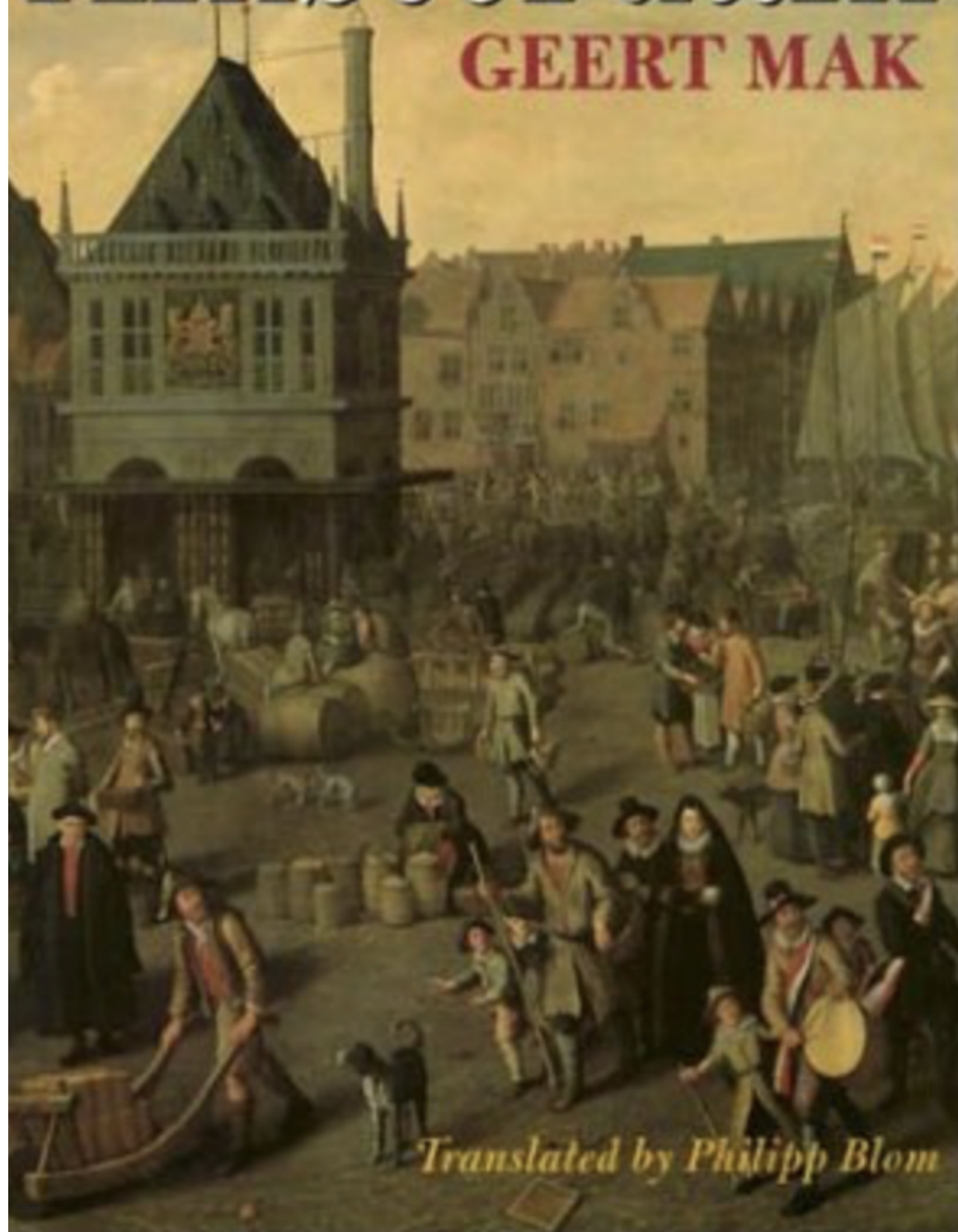


# Olympia's Gaze

# Amsterdam

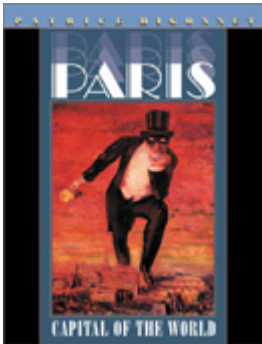
GEERT MAK



*Translated by Philipp Blom*



Geert Mak, *Amsterdam*. Translated by Philipp Blom. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. 338 pp. \$31.50.



Patrice Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002. 494 pp. \$35.00

Olympia stares directly at us from Eduard Manet's 1865 canvass with a demeanor as casual as her body is naked. She defies us to make sense of her, to give her what we would call an identity, on any terms others than her own. Olympia is the incarnation of modernity, asserting her independence and subverting tradition in ordinary details. "My body is my own, and I will do with it as I please," she seems to declare. "I am what I am, whatever meanings you ascribe to me." Manet's painting, rejected by Parisian salons because of its flippant mockery of genre conventions, not to mention taste, is a masterpiece of perspective. Olympia looks at us as we look at her. Her defiance has a populist, anarchic, liberating quality. This, we are led to assume, is a free woman.

Yet the Olympia with whom we exchange looks is an image, a representation, created by a man. The story of the painting is a tale of Manet's defiance of tradition. The model for Olympia may have been a real Parisian courtesan named Victoria Meurent, just as the African maid in the background reflects the existence of colonialism. But the canvass ultimately tells us more about Manet and art in nineteenth-century Paris than it does about women or empire. Manet's commentary on the history of nudes is all the more compelling because he honors tradition as he subverts it. Capable of painting like Titian in the *Venus of Urbino*, he chooses not to do so, using quick brushstrokes and creating two broad planes rather than smooth surfaces and linear perspective. The radical

content matches the subversion of form: Olympia shocks because her creation is as defiant as her demeanor.

Like Olympia, the great cities of nineteenth-century Europe and North America stare at us, full of defiance and naked energy that obscure the process of their construction, both physically and metaphorically. The dominant image is motion. Constructed (theoretically) as places of individual autonomy, with brand-new facades that affirmed revolution, facilitated change, and celebrated choice, cities offered multiple manifestations of movement. These, or so we are led to assume, are free places. Perfecting the traditional role of urban centers as sites of exchange, their residents traded goods, people, and information with abandon. Enslaved African Americans sold at auctions in New Orleans were the ultimate symbols of the calculus of the urban marketplace, in which space and bodies were bought and sold as freely as meat or shoes. The fact that in New York or Paris human beings could find anything they craved gave a sinister dimension to Samuel Johnson's remark that a man who was bored with London was bored with life. The bodies of women (like Olympia) were like the bodies of slaves, valued to the extent that they fetched in a competitive market. The proliferation of cheap newspapers, chock full of advertisements and sensational stories about individuals transformed into celebrities, were the engine of what seemed to be an anarchic world in which everything was a potential commodity. Vital cities—Amsterdam in the 1600s, London in the 1700s, Paris in the 1800s, New York in the 1900s, Istanbul in the 2000s—are collections of provincials, immigrants from other places, in search of refuge and opportunity. Whatever the local, personal, or idiosyncratic origins, power comes only with recognition at the seat of commercial power. And then culture returns the favor by affirming the power of commerce.

The collision of desires and goods created enormous energy that radiated from cities like warmth from a stove on a cold night. Dangerous up close, attractive from a distance, cities proved to be irresistible to tens of thousands of people who had grown up in rural areas or other continents. The bright lights of Delmonico's and Moulin Rouge promised excitement, life, and possibilities otherwise unimaginable. It was hard, indeed, not to feel something in a city. And in the nineteenth century, Europeans and North Americans prized feelings. The bourgeoisie, wanting to be entertained and edified simultaneously, courted at museums full of bright colors, congregated in parlors full of lively conversation, and listened to big, bold music in cavernous concert halls. In the words of the astute reactionary Louis Veuillot, "a democratic nation is a nation of second-rate actors," and the city was their primary stage (Higonnet, 201). At times, the primary appeal of this new world seemed to lie in its sheer novelty. Newness was, almost by definition, progress. Even the tales of distortions and disappointments by the likes of Dickens and Balzac have movement. The pace of life in a nineteenth-century city was frenetic.

In the early twenty-first century, a great many Americans visit European cities as tourists and come away enthralled with how different they are from cities in the United States. The former supposedly have a character rooted in a sense of

tradition and history, both of which have been washed away in most American cities by single-minded obsession with commercial development. In Paris and London, monuments to war and empire crowd the horizon. Broad avenues lead the eye to a focal point in the Arc de Triomphe or Nelson's column. More than charming, nineteenth-century urban landscapes are full of representations of national power, their presence testimony to the solidity of that achievement. Like Olympia, they defy us. And, like Olympia, they both affirm and obscure power.

Exploiting Roland Barthes's insight that "modern myth is deception" that deliberately "ignores the origin and true purpose" of whatever it is representing, Patrice Higonnet argues that Paris in the 1800s was all about the making of facades (3). The elaborate rebuilding of the city in the mid-1800s under the direction of Georges-Eugene Haussmann blended enlightened concerns with order and rationality together with the public (and private) ambitions of middle-class citizens. He laid out two hundred kilometers of streets and inspired the construction of thirty-four thousand buildings.

Like Manet, Haussman took the genre of the city and subverted tradition by presenting revolution as an act of liberation, of individual defiance. Unlike Manet, however, Haussman was not deliberately subversive, nor did he invite multiple readings of his creation. His new Paris of grand vistas, gleaming monuments, and steel towers presented the world of exchange in a magnificent setting that organized change as a legitimate, and essentially final, achievement. It does not welcome criticism. Neighborhoods it did not destroy, it made peripheral and quaint. It imprisoned art, music, and books in secular temples. Libraries, concert halls, museums, and government buildings took pride of place from churches. The myth of the modern city was a "machine, ordered and rationalized" (203).

The new Paris of public space in the service of commerce and empire was as radical a structural change as the revolution of 1789. The Place de la Concorde, site of thousands of public executions in the name of a Republic of Virtue, became a grand traffic exchange, facilitating the mobility of Parisians as efficiently as a stock exchange. Railroad stations became the face of the city. Paris, like Beethoven, is overpowering, a loud, brazen assault on the senses that achieves a specific kind of harmony through conscious design. It prettifies revolution, ennobles change, and gives disruption credibility.

There is no better way to see the extent to which the facades of Paris were a distinctly nineteenth-century achievement than to look at Amsterdam. Once one of the great cities of Europe, the Dutch city had long since faded from prominence as a major marketplace. "Stagnation has set in, it is sleeping country," wrote the de Goncourt brothers of Paris during a visit to Amsterdam in 1861. "One enters a museum, and one meets the house or the canal exactly as one has seen it in a painting by Peter de Hoogh" (Mak, 192).

The capital of an empire built on commerce and freedom and little else, a city-

state without a hinterland, an army, or even a consistently powerful prince, Amsterdam had peaked in the seventeenth century. Because its facades are from an earlier era, the city hides the structures of power even more effectively from twenty-first-century eyes than Paris or London. Full of energy, it has nevertheless a muted, confined quality dictated as much by the arrangement of space as anything else. Like a Dutch house, plain and unassuming externally and enormously rich and complex internally, Amsterdam contradicts itself. In the canvasses of Johannes Vermeer (of Delft), women are not ostentatiously defiant or overtly sexual (like Olympia). Rather, they are caught in the middle of motion, energy not fully released, autonomy tamped down by the details of polite domesticity. Choice abounds in Vermeer, but not liberation.

In the 1800s, Amsterdam, once the center of global exchange, precocious beyond any other city in this regard, was the antithesis of Paris. “[O]ther European capitals competed with one another in building substantial urban palaces, tearing down old parts of the city and transforming them into imposing boulevards, and creating new streets and whole new districts of a hitherto unknown theatricality,” writes Geert Mak in his biography of the city (200). Only the Reichsmuseum and the Centraal Station offer hints of what might have occurred had Amsterdam flourished in the nineteenth century. Because it was a seventeenth-century city, “the culture that emerged . . . was one in which possessions were held to be more important than honour and where money usually counted for more than fashion, morality, social origin, and prestige.” It became a “character trait,” this “lack of pride,” this “unspoken ban on displaying high spirits” (5).

Taken together, Paris and Amsterdam throw into bold relief the radical nature of the nineteenth-century city. Like Olympia, nineteenth-century Paris is a representation of populist defiance and bourgeois affluence emerging inexorably toward freedom but a carefully constructed architecture of desire created and maintained by state power. In a larger sense, Rembrandt and Manet, the Dam and the Place de la Concorde, are more than variations on the themes of mobility and exchange; they express the different ways in which human beings experience and organize the structures of economic power culturally.

Why should historians of North America care about Paris and Amsterdam? Because when we consider other places on their own terms, we move beyond the value of straightforward comparison to locate the development of American cities within larger patterns of human development. To do so is neither to deny the importance of national history nor to delineate the contours of American exceptionalism. It is simply to think of nineteenth-century American cities—their spiraling demographic growth; their remarkable diversity in race, religion, and ethnicity; their incredible range of wealth and comfort; their endless disputes over development and infrastructure; the unceasing conflicts between markets and governments—as variations on a global theme. Place matters. But it should not prevent us from exploring American cities as something more complicated than configurations of a unique obsession with capitalism, immigration, and class.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the leaders of Cleveland, Ohio, barely a century old, stagnant until the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, overflowing with immigrants from all over Europe and the Americas, cursed with pollution and poverty and other consequences of the industrial order that sustained it, tried to revive their city with monuments, museums, halls, government centers, and libraries. Their ultimate model was Paris, a city revised in the 1800s to embody a new world. We could do worse than consider Paris occasionally ourselves, if only to visit Olympia in the Musee d'Orsay and contemplate how effectively a gaze of casual defiance can mask the structures of power.

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