

Rethinking Self: Eva Gonzalès (1849-1883) On Her Own

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A week after the opening of Eva Gonzalès' retrospective exhibition in 1885, the illustrated newspaper *La Vie Moderne* printed an article discussing the event, which included a two-page spread with sketches of recognizable attendees (Fig. 1).¹ One can identify Émile Zola, Puvis de Chavannes, Léon Leenhoff, Théodore de Banville, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Jean-Jacques Henner, Jean-François Rafaelli, among many others. Noteworthy visitors not captured visually were mentioned by name in the text, including the widow of Édouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, Edgar Degas, Camille Pissarro, French critic Champfleury, and Stéphane Mallarmé, to mention a few. As the sketch and article indicate, in the latter decades of the nineteenth century Gonzalès was a well-known artist and many friends and associates paid homage to her at this exhibition held a year and a half after her death. Today, however, the most immediate association with Eva Gonzalès' name may not be her paintings, but Manet's depiction of her as seen in *Portrait of Mlle E. G.*, exhibited in the Salon of 1870 (Fig. 2). In an effort to understand how her reputation and identity were mediated by this work, this paper compares Manet's version of Gonzalès with several of her own self-portraits and images of women. These images offer thoughtful correctives to her teacher's vision of her and illustrate the complexities of selfhood that she faced as she negotiated artistic and familial relationships. Two primary relationships—with her teacher Manet and with her sister Jeanne—powerfully impacted her sense of individuality as well as her artistic output, and the nuances of these associations will be explored in several paintings.

Manet commenced his portrait of Gonzalès in 1869, shortly after meeting the twenty-year old artist at a gathering of friends hosted by Belgian artist Alfred Stevens.² Intrigued by her dark

¹Paul Ferronnays, "L'Exposition d'Eva Gonzalès," *La Vie Moderne*, 24 janvier 1885, pg. 60.

²Paul Bayre, an art critic who wrote several articles on Gonzalès in the first few decades of the twentieth century, suggests that the introduction occurred at Stevens' home during an evening gathering of friends. Paul Bayre, "Eva

looks and Spanish heritage, Manet sent a letter to Gonzalès and her mother, inviting them to come to his studio so he could paint the young artist. Her family eventually agreed to the proposal and Gonzalès and her mother began visits to the studio in February.³ Shortly thereafter, Gonzalès became Manet's pupil and Manet continued for several months to complete his portrait of her. In the work, Gonzalès wears a formal white dress, somewhat impractical for the messy activity of painting, and daubs at a floral still-life on an easel. Manet delayed finishing the work, struggling to satisfactorily capture her face. According to Berthe Morisot, who frequently perceived Gonzalès as a rival for Manet's approval and attention, Manet reworked the face countless times. In letters to her sister Edma, Morisot wrote, "he has begun her portrait over again for the twenty-fifth time. . . She poses every day, and every night the head is washed out with soft soap. This will scarcely encourage anyone to pose for him."⁴ In another letter she adds, "As of now, all his admiration is concentrated on Mlle Gonzalès, but her portrait does not progress; he says that he is at the fortieth sitting and that the head is again effaced . . ."⁵ Morisot closely followed the development of the painting and wrote Edma that it was perhaps the best portrait Manet has thus far completed.⁶ Later, however, as Manet struggled endlessly over the face, she changed her mind: "I do not know how to account for the washed out effect of the *Portrait of Mlle Gonzalès* . . . The head remains weak and not pretty at all."⁷

Manet's inability to complete her face is intriguing. What exactly was it about her visage

Gonzalès," *La Renaissance* (June 1932): 112.

³ Grant, 111. Paul Bayre adds that it was largely due to Philippe Jourde that the Gonzalès consented to this invitation. He explains, "Le peintre de l'Olympia, fasciné par la beauté d'Éva Gonzalès, désira faire son portrait, et Philippe Jourde, parrain de la jeune fille, travailla longuement à lever les scrupules de la famille qu'apauraient les audaces artistiques du maître." See Bayre, 112.

⁴ Marie Caroline Sainsaulieu and Jacques de Mons, *Eva Gonzalès, 1849-1883: étude critique et catalogue raisonné* (Paris: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 1991), 12. Also quoted and translated in Carol Armstrong, *Manet/Manette*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002):184. "En attendant, il recommence son portrait pour la vingt-cinquième fois; elle pose tous les jours et le soir, sa tête est lavée au savon noir. Voilà qui est encourageant pour demander aux gens de poser."

⁵ Ibid. "Pour le quart d'heure, toutes ses admirations sont concentrées sur Mlle Gonzalès, mais son portrait n'avance toujours pas; il me dit être à la quarantième séance et la tête est de nouveau effacée . . ."

⁶ Armstrong, 185.

⁷ Ibid. "Je ne sais à quoi attribuer l'effet décoloré du portrait de Mlle Gonzalès...La tête est toujours restée faible et pas jolie du tout..."

that he was trying repeatedly, albeit unsuccessfully, to capture? As many artists will attest, depicting a face is not a simple task. In addition to recording the specific physiognomy of a person, a portrait presents the facial expressions, personality, intelligence and even mood of the sitter. Of course, Manet was well known for his ability to illustrate nuances of expression and psychological tensions on his canvases. In fact, this is perhaps best illustrated by his numerous portraits of Berthe Morisot, which have been the focus of much scholarship.⁸ However, Gonzalès was the only woman he painted as an artist and his struggle to do so suggests his own division between two aspects of her identity: beautiful model and talented artist. The first role typically allows artists to deal with generalities but the latter requires the specificity of the individual. Manet's inability to allow the two elements—model and artist—to coalesce harmoniously creates a painting that shifts between an homage to Gonzalès or an homage to Manet, ultimately residing upon the latter, since he was the mastermind behind the work. In the end, the painting exemplifies, as many feminist scholars have noted, an appropriately feminine amateur artist, who rests her feet on a footrest while absent-mindedly producing flowers.⁹

Perhaps not surprisingly, considering Manet's record, contemporary critics almost universally disliked the painting. One critic described Gonzalès' face as a "plaster doll with stupefied eyes and a nose like a parrot's beak."¹⁰ Others commented on the dazed expression, the unmodulated skin color, and waxen physiognomy.¹¹ Most disapproved of her very bare arms and her "dirty" white dress; some even questioned Gonzalès' decision to pose for Manet. These reactions are significant because, despite the critics' disapproval of the painting, many assessments of Gonzalès focus primarily on this work, rather than her own paintings. Both

⁸In addition to Carol Armstrong, see also Marni Kessler, "Unmasking Manet's Morisot," *Art Bulletin* 81, no. 3 (September 1999): 473-89, and Nancy Locke, *Manet and the Family Romance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Press, 2001).

⁹For example, see Tamar Garb's discussion of the painting in "Gender and Representation," included in *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 243.

¹⁰V. Fournel, "Le Salon de 1870," *La Gazette de France*, 8 June 1870. Quoted in Tamar Garb, "Framing Femininity in Manet's Portrait of Mlle E.G." in *Self and History: A Tribute to Linda Nochlin* Thames and Hudson, 77.

¹¹For the best discussion of the contemporary reaction to this painting, see Tamar Garb, "Framing Femininity in Manet's Portrait of Mlle E.G." in *Self and History: A Tribute to Linda Nochlin* Thames and Hudson, 77-89.

Charles Bigot and Philippe Burty reviewed her 1885 retrospective and each devoted large portions of their articles to Manet's painting rather than examples from her oeuvre. Likewise, in a review of a 1950 exhibition of Gonzalès work at the Galerie Dabert, Jean Bouret illustrated his article with Manet's portrait of her, even though it was not a part of the exhibition.¹² These examples demonstrate that Gonzalès' identity and the critical reception of her oeuvre have been frequently mediated and, at times, overshadowed by Manet's portrait of her.

As Gonzalès posed for Manet, she could not have failed to notice his difficulty in completing her face. It was perhaps during these sessions that she began to ponder how she would present herself on canvas. What would her version of herself look like seated in front of the easel? In the following years, Gonzalès would explore her response to this question across several canvases. The year after Manet's portrait, Gonzalès produced a painting of an artist in front of an easel. *La Jeune Eleve*, from 1871, essentially reverses Manet's composition, placing the artist on the left and the easel on the right side of the canvas (Fig. 3). This would not be the only time that Gonzalès would take an idea from a Manet painting and reverse the compositional elements in her own version. In 1874, Gonzalès produced a painting based loosely upon a sketch that Manet had completed a year earlier, for which she and Léon Leenhoff had posed. In her version, *La Loge aux Italiens*, the figures are switched and the woman placed in a position of prominence (Figs. 4-5). Gonzalès' reversal and reworking of compositional elements was a way for her to ensure ownership of the work and foster her own creativity and vision. The first example of this subtle reworking was seen in *La Jeune Eleve* (Fig. 3).

Strictly speaking, this is not an official self-portrait of Gonzalès, but the parallel it shares with her life at the time, as a young student, is undeniable. The artist depicted engages in her work upon the canvas, which she controls and the viewer is not allowed to see. Her surroundings are simple and plain, without comforting foot rests, elegant floor rugs, or lovely

¹²Jean Bouret, "Eva Gonzalès: Muse inspirée de Manet," *Arts* (Vendredi 3 Mars 1950).

flowers, and she wears an equally sober gray dress. Sitting alone in a sparse studio setting, she concentrates fully upon her canvas, emphasizing her dedication to her work as a chosen profession rather than amateur amusement. Her clothes are much more appropriate to the physical and messy process of painting than the white and frilly dress by Manet. The acute differences between these canvases underscore the difficulties faced by women artists and reveal Gonzalès' own attempt to create a space for herself as a professional artist.

Perhaps most intriguing, however, is the face of the student. Painted with quick, broad brushstrokes, its legibility is hindered by an extremely hazy left side. The right side of the face has recognizable facial features of a mouth, nose, eyes, and eyebrow but these features fade almost entirely on the left side. Although there is a slight suggestion of an eye and eyebrow, its contrast to the right side is quite noticeable. In general, it leaves the painting looking slightly unfinished. Just as Manet had trouble capturing the face of Gonzalès in his portrait, Gonzalès also struggled to complete the face of her female artist; but instead of removing the paint and attempting numerous times, Gonzalès opted to leave the face slightly undefined and mysterious. The lingering questions about her own identity and future as an artist would remain unanswered for the next several years as she continued to exhibit and develop her style. She would return to this topic two years later, with her first self-portrait.

Completed between 1873-74, this painting was never exhibited publicly during Gonzales' lifetime but was part of her 1885 retrospective exhibition (Fig. 6). Sometime in the 1920s it was sold by her son into a private collection and has rarely been reproduced in color.¹³ The portrait, an oil on canvas, evokes a somber tone, emphasized by the darkened background and pensive facial expression. It is an intimate, close-up portrait of her head and upper-half of her chest and torso area. Depicted in black shirt with a pale lavender coat, she gazes off to her left, not facing the viewer and holds a cylindrical object in her arms, perhaps for holding her sketches. The

¹³ I am grateful to Marie Caroline Sainsaulieu for her generosity in sharing this color reproduction with me.

painting is somewhat similar to two pastel works she completed several years earlier of her sister Jeanne (Fig. 7) and her mother (Fig. 8). However, her self- portrait lacks the semi-smiles of her family members or their fashionable clothing. The painting provides a rare glimpse of her serious and introspective personality, and subtly points to her artistic skill.

Most summers the Gonzalès family vacationed in Dieppe, a resort beach town in Normandy that was easily accessible by train. It may have been there that Gonzalès painted her second self-portrait (Fig. 9). It was completed in 1875, and bears some similarities to the *Portrait of Eva à Dieppe* painted by her sister Jeanne (Fig. 10), who was also an accomplished artist. Gonzalès has her dark hair piled high on her head and wears loose day dresses in both works. The self-portrait has a sense of motion and immediacy; the quick brushstrokes of pink and white for the dress are clearly visible. She has depicted herself in profile view with her arms somewhat raised in front of her body. Though the activity with which her hands are engaged is not included in the canvas, her gesture and her concentrated attention are both necessary elements of art making. That she may be caught in a moment of artistic creation would not be an implausible speculation, especially because this was the very position she literally assumed to create this painting. One also notes the similarities of posture between this work and Manet's portrait of Gonzalès. The position of the arms in both paintings is remarkably alike, with the right arm raised slightly higher than the left and both outstretched in front of their bodies. Now though, the bare arms are covered and the white dress has been replaced by light pink fabric, softening the overall effect and eliminating the starkness of the former. Her profile view emphasizes her utter concentration on the object in front of her as opposed to Manet's Gonzalès who turns slightly away from her canvas in a three-quarter pose.

The profile format is particularly arresting here, perhaps partly because of its contrast to Manet's version but also because it is so infrequently seen in self-portraits. How does one go about painting a self-portrait in profile? One is rarely able to see one's own profile, usually only

with the help of several mirrors or photographs. While these painting aids may have been available to Gonzalès, her preferred method of painting was with models and she repeatedly used her sister Jeanne in her canvases. Is it possible that she had her sister pose for the initial parts of this painting and later added her particular features such her own darker hair and strong nose? The close resemblance between the two sisters would not make this an incredible supposition, as contemporary photographs of the sisters illustrate (Fig. 11-12). In fact, the descriptions of their lives are quite similar. Both pursued painting beyond amateur levels, each exhibited at the Salon, and both used the other as a model. As Eva began to excel beyond her younger sister, Jeanne took a supportive role, frequently posing for her sister and accompanying her when she was sketching outdoors or working in the studio.

The blending of their identities is seen at various points throughout Gonzalès' life. For example, in 1872 the sisters jointly submitted a pastel to the Paris Salon under the name of "Mlle Jeanne-Eva Gonzales" (Fig. 13). *La Plante Favorite*, unfortunately now lost, depicts a young girl in the process of watering a plant. The cooperative canvas further solidifies not only their working relationship, which here reached an apex as they collaborated, but also establishes their conscious creation of a joint name and identity in "Jeanne-Eva." This person, both painter and painted, artist and model, represents both sisters simultaneously. Their joint effort and sense of shared identity is a harbinger of the way in which their lives would blend, blur and become one in the future. Perhaps the most extreme example of this occurred in 1879, shortly after Gonzalès' marriage to the artist and engraver Henri Guérard, when she had her unmarried sister Jeanne pose in her wedding dress for two pastels. This passing of the wedding dress became uncannily prophetic, as Jeanne would eventually marry her brother-in-law after Gonzalès' unexpected death due to complications of childbirth. Shifting her role from aunt to mother, Jeanne would help raise her sister's son, Jean-Raymond Guérard. In at least two oil paintings, *La Loge aux Italiens* and *La Promenade à Âne*, Gonzalès posed her sister and husband as a couple, solidifying this

complex twist of familial relationships and identity (Fig. 4 and 14). Discussing Gonzales' relationship with her sister, critic Claude Roger-Marx commented, "One could say that she observed and imagined herself through this double of herself, whom she loved, treated harshly, and transformed as she pleased. . . ." ¹⁴

The intermingling of their identities can also be noted in the page of sketches of her 1885 retrospective exhibition (Fig. 1). The central figure, who is sketched with more detail and attention than any of the other figures, is not Eva, but rather her sister Jeanne. Her prominence here is slightly puzzling, as she did not organize the exhibition or do anything that might merit this privileging. Her close relationship with her sister and their similar physical resemblance is the only justifiable explanation. Here, she becomes a double of Eva, essentially standing in for her sister as she had in many paintings. Although Gonzalès explored her own subjectivity in her self-portraits, she was bound in life and in death to her sister Jeanne and she often reinforced this connection by using her sister as a surrogate self in various paintings.

One can hardly speak of Gonzalès without mentioning her sister and Manet, one or both of these two pivotal figures, illustrating the difficulty women faced in claiming an autonomous identity in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, *La Jeune Eleve* and Gonzalès' self-portraits all suggest that she was exploring her independence and identity as artist and individual and presenting subtle correctives to Manet's version of her. Their subtlety was necessary; Gonzalès needed to maintain a positive relationship with her teacher while still seeking to establish herself independently of him. But she was accustomed to negotiating her relationship to him as the situation demanded. For the first two years of her Salon submissions, 1870 and 1872, Gonzalès' name appeared on the Salon brochure as a student of Charles Chaplin, not of Manet. Although Gonzalès had only attended Chaplin's studio for slightly over a year in 1866 and had left

¹⁴Claude Roger-Marx, *Eva Gonzalès*, (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 1950), 20.

« On dirait qu'elle s'est observée et rêvée à travers ce double d'elle-même qu'elle aimait, rudoyait, transformait à sa guise. »

dissatisfied with his conservative and academic approach, she recognized that her prior connection with Chaplin, who was on the Salon jury, could potentially aid her more than her current association with Manet. After working several years with Manet, she included his name as her teacher, but still listed Chaplin as well. Thus, Gonzalès frequently walked a tight rope of artistic acceptability, attempting to placate teachers and juries while quietly exploring her own potential. Her need to separate herself from Manet can be noted not only in reversals and distinctions from his works, but also in several letters written to her by Manet in the late 1870s. In several, Manet asks what she is working on and asserts that he is available to aid her if she so desires.¹⁵ Manet is even more specific in a letter dated May 28, 1877, which reads, “It has been a long time since you have called upon me for consultation. Have my recent failures caused your scorn?”¹⁶ Although they maintained a positive and close relationship until their deaths, which occurred within a week of each other in April and May of 1883, Manet's words suggest that Gonzalès was working much more independently than she had earlier and not relying on Manet's advice as frequently. This has not often been noted by critics in part because of the repeated emphasis upon Manet's painting of Gonzalès, which has diverted attention away from her own work and reinforced her connection with Manet.

In her brief thirty-four years, Gonzalès produced a significant oeuvre and one that is worthy of further study. Her efforts at self-portraiture and several of her major paintings produced from 1871-1880 reveal a concentrated endeavor to establish an independent voice and explore her individuality like and against both her sister Jeanne and her teacher Manet. While her identity has often been influenced by Manet's representation of her, any attempt to understand her subjectivity should include a discussion of her self-portraits and her later works. They suggest that the artist was intelligently responding to the complex matrix of artistic and

¹⁵Sainsaulieu, 17.

¹⁶Edouard Manet, letter to Eva Gonzalès, 28 mai 1877, copy in the Centre de documentation of the Musée d'Orsay. On auction at Hotel Drouot in Paris, March 27, 2003. “Voilà bien longtemps que vous ne m'avez appelé en consultation, est-ce que mes insuccès m'aurient attiré votre mépris?”

familial relationships that surrounded her, using people and artistic styles that would enable her success, and, simultaneously, discovering her own selfhood.



Figure 1. “L'Exposition d'Eva Gonzalès,” *La Vie Moderne*, 24 janvier 1885, pg. 60. Illustrated by L. Galice.



Figure 2. Edouard Manet, *Portrait of Mlle E. G.*, 1870.



Figure 3. Eva Gonzalès, *La Jeune Élève*, c. 1871-1872.



Figure 4. Eva Gonzalès, *La Loge aux Italiens*, 1874.



Figure 5. Edouard Manet, *Loge sketch*, c. 1873.



Figure 6. Eva Gonzalès, *Autoportrait*, c. 1873-74.



Figure 7. Eva Gonzalès, *Portrait of Mlle J.G. [Jeanne Gonzalès]*, 1869-70.



Figure 8. Eva Gonzalès, *Portrait of Madame E.G. [Emmanuel Gonzalès], Mère de l'artiste*, 1869-70, pastel.

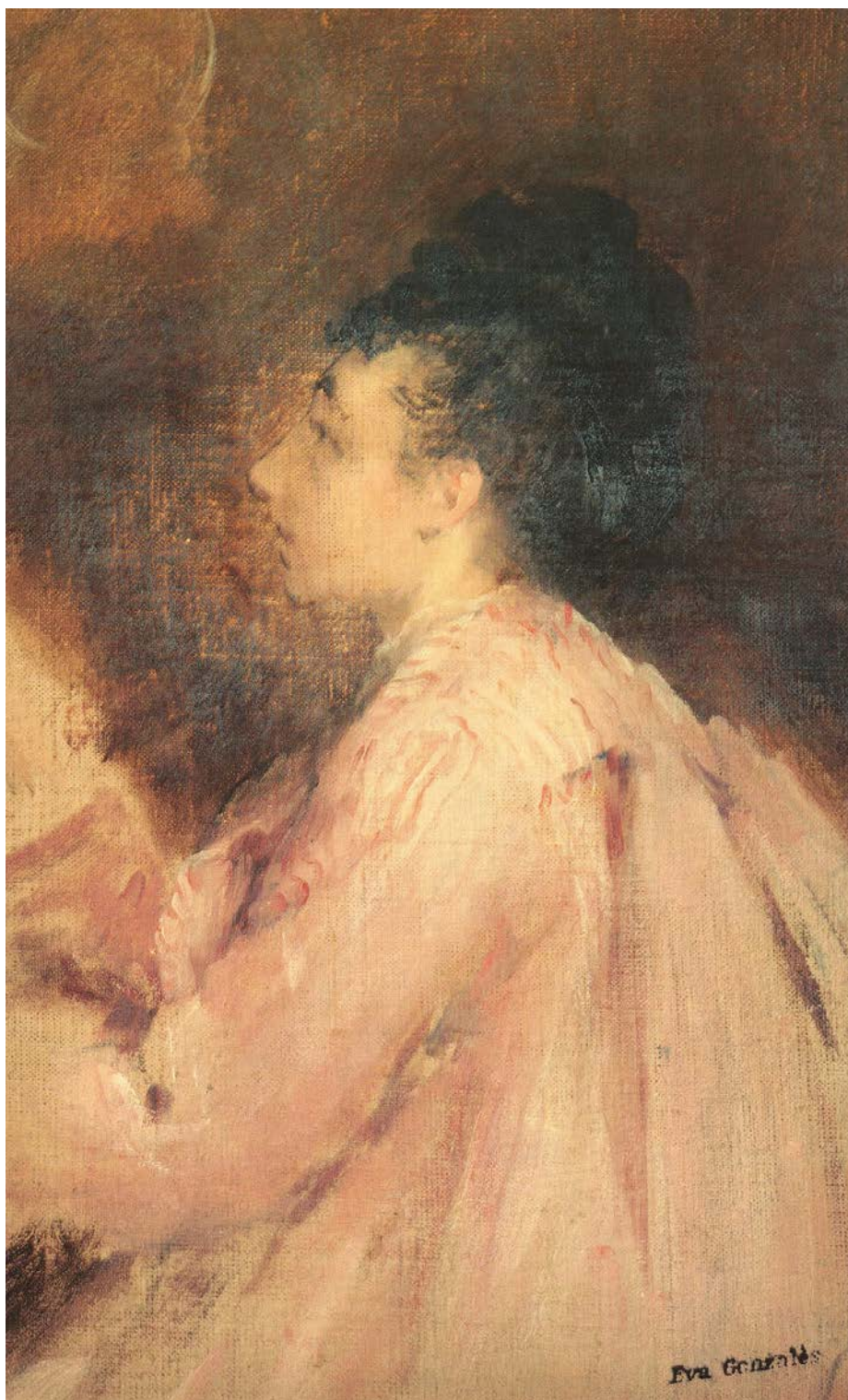


Figure 9. Eva Gonzalès, *Autoportrait*, c. 1875.



Figure 10. Jeanne Gonzalès, *Portrait of Eva à Dieppe*, n.d.



Figure 11. Photograph of Eva Gonzalès, c. 1874.



Figure 12. Photograph of Jeanne Gonzalès, c. 1874



Figure 13. Mlle. Jeanne-Eva Gonzalès, *La Plante Favorite*, c. 1872.



Figure 14. Eva Gonzalès, *Promenade à Âne*, c. 1880-1882.