

1 PAUL HAYES TUCKER

MAKING SENSE OF
 EDOUARD MANET'S
LE DÉJEUNER SUR L'HERBE

In late summer 1959, some ninety-six years after Edouard Manet completed his ambitious painting depicting a group of contemporary men and women picnicking and bathing in a lush forest glade, Pablo Picasso began a series of variations on his elder's famous image (Figs. 1 and 2). It was hardly the first time the Spaniard had devoted his energies to reworking a specific Old Master painting; he had plundered the past for most of his career. In the fifteen years prior to his engagement with the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, he actually had done variations on nearly half a dozen major canvases, from Nicolas Poussin's *Triumph of Pan* of 1635 (National Gallery, London) and Eugène Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* of 1834 (Louvre, Paris) to Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* of 1656 (Prado, Madrid), producing no less than forty-five paintings of the latter alone.¹

This “window opening” process, as Picasso called his practice, was prompted as much by Picasso's advancing years and his desire to measure himself against recognized masters as by his rightful sense of the importance of those paintings to their respective artists and the contributions those individuals made to the advancement of Western art. The paintings also often held specific meanings for Picasso, confirmed interests he had long expressed, and challenged him to rethink his aims as an artist, “to get behind the canvas,” as he put it, in the hope that “something will happen.”² The series devoted to Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, or *Luncheon on the Grass*, while part of Picasso's personal campaign, would be decidedly dif-



Figure 1. Edouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. (Photo R.M.N.)

ferent, as Douglas Cooper sensitively pointed out shortly after Picasso completed it.

First, the group was enormous in size, totaling one hundred and fifty drawings, twenty-seven paintings, five concrete pieces of sculpture that were preceded by eighteen cardboard studies, several ceramic plaques, and three linoleum cuts. This constituted the single largest concentration of material prompted by any individual work of art that the twentieth-century master had ever produced.³

Picasso also devoted more time to this series than to any other; he worked on it off and on for more than three years in three dif-



Figure 2. Pablo Picasso, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe after Manet*, Vauvenargues, March 3–August 22, 1960. Musée Picasso, Paris. (Photo R.M.N.)

ferent locations.⁴ In addition, the group was more diverse than any previous ones. Besides employing different media, Picasso has the figures change clothing, appearance, and location; the landscape shifts, slides, and disappears; the accouterments – fruits, breads, canes, boats, and birds – are featured in some paintings and drawings and edited in others.

Most poignantly, perhaps, particularly for this volume of collected essays on Manet's picture, Picasso offers an unprecedented number of ways to interpret the original scene by devising variation after variation on the action Manet depicted. At one moment, the protagonists in Manet's reformulated picture are engaged in what appears to be a normal conversation; at another, they are embroiled in an interrogation or are admonishing one another. In some scenes, the women offer themselves to the viewer and their male companions; in others, they withdraw or become involved in forms of self-examination. Occasionally, all of the figures appear casual and relaxed, at other times, stiff and uneasy, at still others, blank-faced or terrorized. They vacillate between being humorous

and horrible, intimate and indifferent, childlike and mature. They also change identity – from bourgeois student to Jewish intellectual to arcadian shepherd to Grecian bard and from model to seductress to heroine to victim.

One could say that all of this has more to do with Picasso than with Manet. And in part that is correct. After all, it was Picasso who created the series, conceiving it both as an homage to an artist he admired (one who also had appreciated the art of Picasso's own Spanish past) and as a way to test his powers against a renowned figure. Given Picasso's competitive nature, the series also was a means to bury the achievement of his predecessor under the onslaught of Picasso's own inventiveness.

But for whatever it tells us about Picasso, the series affirms even more the incredible complexity of Manet's picture. For it clearly was the painting's insolence and enigmas, its historical resonance and aesthetic idiosyncrasies that pushed the aging twentieth-century artist to such iconographic and painterly extents, encouraging him to be as contradictory as he was consistent, as impenetrable as he was straightforward, just like his nineteenth-century counterpart.

It is precisely these dialectics – so typical of the modern age from Manet's moment to our own – as well as their relation to contemporaneous issues that have contributed to the iconic status of Manet's inimitable canvas.⁵ That Picasso would have noted many of these oppositions – and suggested many more – is a sign of his keen sensitivity to Manet's intelligence and skill and to the *Déjeuner's* powers of suggestion.

His series, however, like Manet's painting, presents us with a host of unresolved questions because Picasso had little to say about the group. This is not surprising. The ever-evasive master was essentially confirming what Manet and his nineteenth-century avant-garde friends had often suggested: that the language of painting is fundamentally different from most written or spoken forms, just as the artist's stylus or brush is not the same as the critic's keyboard or pen.⁶

The exclusivity of those tools, just like the mutual compulsion of most artists to let their art speak for itself, forces the historian to search for whatever meanings a painting like the *Déjeuner* may possess in a variety of tangential, if not sometimes contradictory, realms, as the essays in this volume reveal.

This has always been the case. Writers in Manet's own day,

struggling to make sense of his baffling canvas, looked to a number of sources for assistance – contemporary art and events, past images and art-historical hierarchies, Manet's training or lack thereof, writings on the artist, friends' statements about the picture, Manet's own references to it.⁷ Many of these authors may have felt they were privy to something that approached the truth – about the picture and their observations. Some of them knew the artist personally; others knew of him; most were at least vaguely familiar with his work. All of them lived at the same moment as he, in the same country and city. Many came from the same middle-class background if not the same Parisian neighborhood.

For all of their advantages – and they were considerable – these observers unfortunately prove to be only partially reliable guides. The meanings they found in the *Déjeuner*, the problems they felt compelled to enumerate, even the pleasures they derived from the picture or their reading about it depended as much on their point of view – or on their editor's – as on the painting itself. Dispassionate assessments were rare, if they existed at all. This may be self-evident to readers who are accustomed to divergent voices, but it is worth repeating, particularly in the late twentieth century when simulacrum often poses for the real and differences easily evaporate in the homogenizing process of globalization. The comments of all of these contemporaries, therefore, while important grist for the mills of later historians, nonetheless cannot be taken at face value.⁸

The same must be said of statements made by or attributed to Manet himself. Like the critics, the artist and those who may have recorded his observations clearly were not unbiased observers. Manet in particular had a very specific agenda – to become one of the leading French painters of his day. To be sure, he did not hold exclusive title to that desire; every aspiring artist laid claim to it in one form or another, which meant the Parisian art world of Manet's day was nothing if not competitive, again not so dissimilar, in that respect at least, to the art centers of our time.

What then can we rely on to make sense of Manet's painting? The picture itself, one might think. But even here much remains unknown. We are not certain, for example, exactly when Manet began the canvas, where he painted it, or when he declared it finished. We don't know who all the models were, how he had the idea of posing one of them stark naked and the others in their own

worlds, seemingly oblivious to everything around them. We don't know how many preparatory works he may have done for the picture, what other works of art from his own hand or by others he may specifically have been thinking about as the picture evolved, or what relation he wanted to establish between this picture and others he planned to exhibit with it. We don't even know why he gave it the title he did; he originally called it *Le Bain*, or *The Bath*, not *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.⁹ Most surprising, perhaps, we have no assurances about the meaning of the picture. It offers us so many possibilities – just like Picasso's series – that it is virtually impossible to separate one from the others and declare it definitive.

It is, therefore, an ideal candidate for a book such as this, the timing of which also could not be better. That is because the ways in which we can understand Manet's painting have been increased in recent years by the happy expansion of art-historical inquiry to include methods derived from the criticism of other media, most notably literature and film, from gender and philosophical studies, and from more textured probes based on revised notions of the interrelation between history, biography, and the production of art. The following essays, all written exclusively for this volume by leading scholars of nineteenth-century art, were chosen to provide the reader with a sense of the discipline's present breadth and the range of opinions it can generate.

Limitations of time and space prevented the inclusion of many other voices; every project has its boundaries. This collection, therefore, does not claim to cover all of the problems the picture raises or represent all of the methods presently used by art historians. It thus does not pretend to be the last word on the subject. The number of things we do not know about the picture should be sufficient caution about the latter. Nonetheless, it is hoped that these essays prove to be sufficiently satisfying or, conversely, challenging – both individually and as a group – that they reap their rightful praises and prompt further probes of Manet's painting.

There is an obvious question, however, that should be posed before we turn to those discussions – namely, why have we singled out this particular picture? What makes it so important?

In order to answer these questions, we need to ask others. For example, did the painting mark a radical change in Manet's work or reorientate the evolution of modernist art? Did Manet invest so

much in it intellectually or emotionally that it provides us with unique access to his thinking as an artist? Was it sold for some fabulous amount of money like so many celebrated pictures today and thereby reveals something special about the passions or peculiarities of Manet's collectors? Or was it a painting that was rediscovered after a period of neglect and deemed worthy of attention on the basis of its obscurity or formal qualities?

The answer to all of these questions is no. The painting did not drastically affect the development of Manet's art or that of his modernist contemporaries. Manet did not endow it with the kind of emotional or intellectual weight that would make it the sole key to his mind-set (though it certainly tells us much about him). Nor did he sell it for any spectacular sum. In fact, it remained in his hands until 1878 when the opera singer and active collector of Impressionist art, Jules Faure, purchased it for 2,600 francs, a respectable price but far below the 25,000 francs that Manet had claimed to be the painting's value in 1871.¹⁰

Part of its claim to fame comes from the clamor it caused when it was first exhibited in Paris in 1863 – it attracted considerable attention from contemporary critics – and from the fact that it almost immediately became a touchstone for avant-garde painters; Claude Monet, for example, did a monumental version of the picture (Fig. 3) only twenty-four months after it appeared, cleansing the original of its nudity and ambiguities in an apparent effort to make it even more modern and believable. Paul Cézanne painted several variations on it shortly thereafter (Fig. 4), and Paul Gauguin revisited it for the most important painting of his career, *Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?* of 1897 (Fig. 5), which includes various references to Manet's picture, the most apparent being the Tahitian girl seated on the right who is based on the *Déjeuner's* foreground nude. Henri Matisse borrowed the picnic theme and the combination of clothed and nude figures for his *Luxe, Calme, et Volupté* of 1904–5 (Fig. 6), and Picasso exploited the foreground nude again for the masked female on the right in his groundbreaking *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)* of 1907 (Fig. 7). That Picasso would come back to Manet's picture nearly half a century later is ample testimony to its continuing powers and to the prodigious line of artistic responses that it produced.¹¹

What attracted avant-garde artists to the picture and what made

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Figure 3. Claude Monet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1865–6. Pushkin Museum, Moscow.



Figure 4. Paul Cézanne, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, c. 1870–71. Private collection, Neuilly-sur-Seine.

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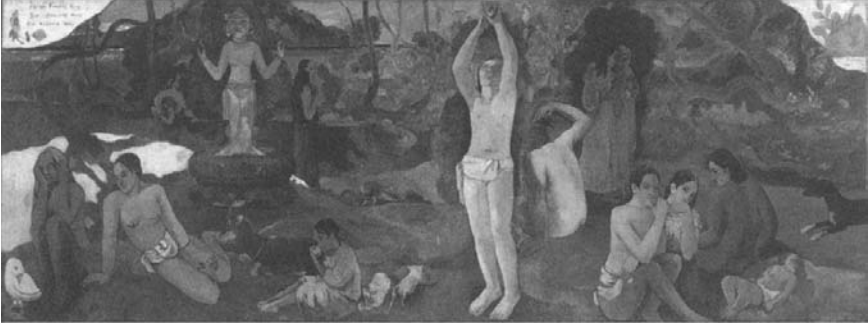


Figure 5. Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897. Tompkins Collection. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

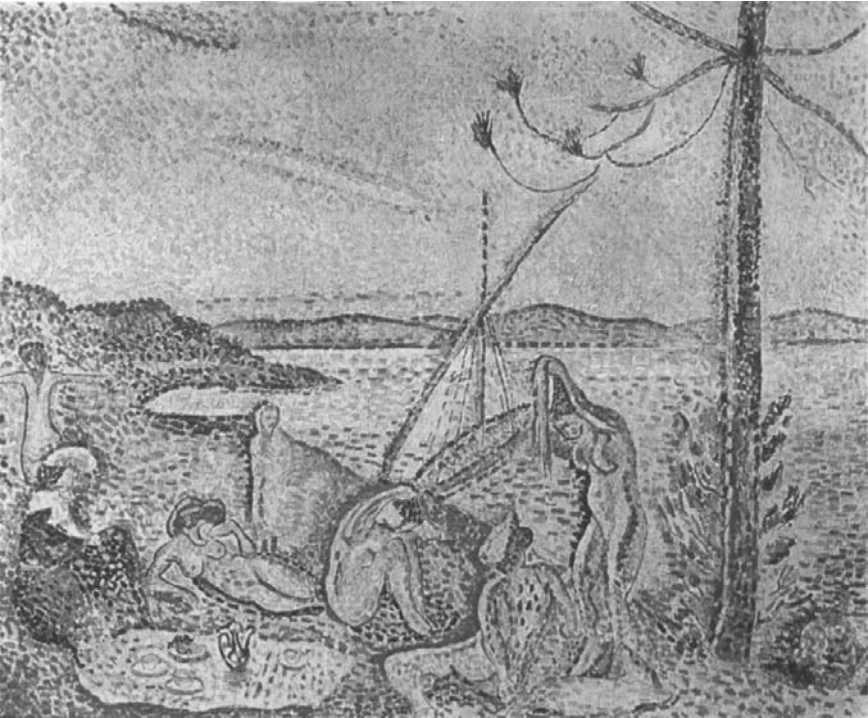


Figure 6. Henri Matisse, *Luxe, Calme, et Volupté*, 1904. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. (Photo R.M.N.)

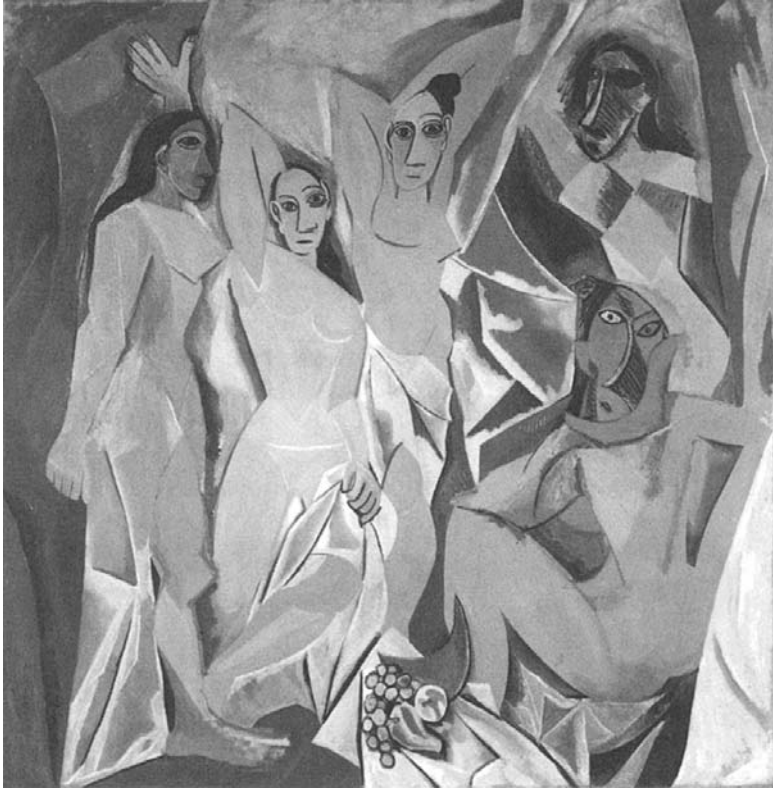


Figure 7. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, 1911. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. (Photo © 1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

it so controversial when it was first exhibited are not necessarily what viewers today generally find so startling – namely, the boldness of the female figure who sits without a stitch of clothing on in front of us and her male companions and who has the audacity to stare at us in such a self-conscious, unflinching manner. She knows that we know she is naked. She also is fully aware that we are staring at her with the same directness that she foists upon us. This curious exchange makes most people feel slightly uneasy or at least a bit perplexed, particularly because Manet offers no clues as to what is occurring in the picture or what our relationship is supposed to be to the scene as a whole. Have we stumbled upon some