

When Edouard Manet finished his painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* or *Luncheon on the Grass* (Figure 1) in 1863, he submitted it to the annual exhibition in Paris. It was rejected, but placed in the alternate public display, the Salon des Refusés. This event was organized by the artists to allow the public to see and judge for itself the works deemed to be of poor quality or inappropriate. The reaction to this painting by most of the public and the critics matched that of the jury. This controversy stimulated discussion and interest and helped further the new style of impressionism by Manet and other artists of his time.

The painting was controversial for several reasons. Most obviously the woman in the painting is nude while the men sitting near her are fully clothed. Although the public was accustomed to paintings of nudes, they had never appeared in such a casual setting with other characters in modern dress. Also criticized was the harsh tone and brightness contrast of her pale, peach skin to the rich dark background. A yellow-blue opposition has been manufactured between the women and the blue blankets. There is no red to counter the greens from the foliage so they seem to be less important. Manet's critics attacked his technique, complaining of the visible brushstrokes and "flat", non-shaded appearance of the nude's skin. The painting is quite large, 208 x 264 cm, so while the large brushstrokes are not visible on small reproductions they are quite obvious in the actual painting. The impressionist style was new and Manet was criticized for the loose "unfinished" quality of the painting.

As part of his artistic training, Manet copied many famous works and exposure to these images influenced his future paintings. The arrangement of the figures in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* was borrowed from a famous engraving *The Judgment of Paris* by Raimondi after a work by Raphael (Figure 2). In that image three naked figures are seen lounging next to a small stream in

the lower right corner of the frame. Manet has taken the figures out of context and dropped them in a new situation and skillfully reframed the scene with these three characters. The characters' pose and line of sight remains the same. The fact that none of the individuals are looking at each other allows the viewer to interpret the scene in several different ways. The addition of a fourth character, the women bathing in the pool behind the picnickers, suggests a foursome, or "partie carrée", which was a popular topic of other illustrations of the time (Figure 4). He was also influenced by the style of the old masters and remarked to a friend that he would include a nude in the painting just to please the judges by suggesting his work was similar to the old masters.

Throughout the years, appreciation of Manet's painting increased, leading many artists to fall into the cliché: "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery". Just two years after Manet completed *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Claude Monet creating a painting with the same title (Figure 5). This version shares the theme of a picnic set amongst the trees and the figure in the lower right is in a similar pose; however, Monet's image was more socially acceptable to the public audience. The painting emphasizes the beautiful play of sunlight on the leaves, and shows a larger group of fully clothed people whose gazes suggest that they are exchanging pleasantries.

Picasso also produced a number of images based on Manet's painting (Figure 6) and explored the different possible interpretations of the relationships between the characters. In the cubist style of Picasso's paintings we do not have the sense of depth in the scene, and it is more difficult to extract the characters from the foliage background. The sightlines of the figures are not as three-dimensional allowing us to invent communication between the characters. In Picasso's work, the contrast of the skin to the background is emphasized, as well as the natural curvature of the women's bodies versus the angular shapes of the men. The unrealistic blueness of the nude's skin suggests shadows and night.

Several recreations of the scene have been photographed. The nudity of the woman would be much more apparent in a photograph, so to avoid additional exposure, the woman is either clothed or her arm is carefully re-positioned. In the image “Esther and Her Manet Men” the facial expressions and sight lines have been adjusted to tell a different story (Figure 7). The clothing and hairstyles in Bow Wow Wow’s album cover emphasizes the dress of the 80’s (Figure 8). Direct comparison between the original and the photographs reveal inconsistencies in the exact placement of objects that can leave the image less balanced. The addition of a fifth character in the boat (presumably he is a member of the band) makes the right side of the image heavier. Usually in western artwork the left side contains more visual information to counteract the influence of our reading both text and images in a left to right manner. Unlike the original painting, the green of the foliage is contrasted with the bright red pants of the figure on the lower right and the dark pink of the boat, distracting us from the nude character.

The work has also been imitated in modern illustrations appearing in comic books and magazines. Reframing the scene within the vertical format of this media destroys the careful framing of the subject, requiring a more distant viewing of the main subjects but saves room for the titles within the foliage. The framing for the work *Mrs. Manet Entertains in the Garden*, is awkward; the position of the fruit basket is shifted downwards leaving an empty space on the lower right of the image (Figure 3). The nude is no longer the central focus of the painting. The role reversal in this modern work is evidence that society is still sensitive to gender issues raised in Manet’s painting.

## References

- Alan Krell. *Manet*. Thames and Hudson Ltd. London 1996.  
Paul Hayes Tucker, ed. *Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*. Cambridge University Press, 1998



**Figure 1** *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, Edouard Manet 1863



**Figure 2** *Judgment of Paris*, Raimondi/Raphael



**Figure 3** *Mrs. Manet Entertains in the Garden* Sally Swain 1988



**Figure 4** *Partie carrée*, James Tissot 1870



**Figure 5** *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, Claude Monet 1865



**Figure 6** Two imitations by Picasso



**Figure 7** *Esther and her Manet Men*, Radio Times



**Figure 8** Bow Wow Wow album cover