

# LE DÉJEUNER SOLVED

by Simon Abrahams



Fig. 1 *The Bath*, subsequently known as *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*).

Some of Édouard Manet's important paintings are so strange that one can only wonder why anyone ever thought they depicted the real world. Yet contemporaries thought so and most people still do today. Reject the idea for a moment and your eyes will open. As you read on, the scene will transform into something else entirely but, unlike now, all will be logical with everything in its right place. True perception of Manet's settings are as self-evident as a mathematical proof.

## *Mlle. V. in the Costume of an Espada*

Of the two examples here, we begin with *Mlle. V in the Costume of an Espada*. Now in the Metropolitan Museum, the large painting hung in the *Salon des Refusés* next to *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. It is a scene that looks like a bullring but that on the surface makes no apparent sense (fig. 2). Indeed there are at least seven visual problems that art scholars almost always query.

- Why is a woman, Manet's favorite model Victorine Meurent, in a bullring?
- Why does her pink cloth bear no resemblance to the color and shape of a matador's cape?
- Why is her figure so large when those not far away are so small?
- Why does Mlle V appear 'pasted onto a tipped up, spatially unconvincing ground'?
- Why is the background broadly-brushed while the matador is smoothly painted?
- Why did Manet copy the picador motif in the background from a print by Goya rather than invent one himself?
- Why does the matador's shadow seem to stretch half-way across the ring?

Can it be coincidence that *one* answer resolves all *seven* 'inconsistencies' and that it is the same answer that makes sense of his equally confusing masterpiece, *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*?

The problem, as always in great art, can only be resolved by thinking through the artist's mind. What was his intention? The matador, despite appearances, is not in the ring; she is distinct and separate because she represents the 'artist' who is *painting* the background with a pink 'palette' in one hand and a 'brush' in the other. The basic shape of her cape, less its tail, is the shape of an oversized palette with her unseen thumb penetrating where the thumb-hole would be (fig. 3). The sword is a brush. The artist/matador turns away from her canvas while in the act of painting the top left-hand corner. The picador motif was taken from Goya because the background represents a "Spanish painting". That is why it is more broadly brushed than her own figure. It is not a bullring but a "painted bullring". The background is 'painted on canvas' while the 'artist' in the foreground is 'real'. Even her implausibly long shadow suggests that it really strikes a vertical surface, the "upright canvas." Lastly, the artist is female because Manet, like Michelangelo (see May's issue), believed in the androgyny of the creative mind.

To identify the matador as a great master Manet added echoes of another source: an early self-portrait by Ingres. The matador's cape, roundish with hanging tail, echoes the round cloth *with tail* with which Ingres wipes his canvas (figs. 4-5). Both figures look out over their shoulder, their arms in a not dissimilar pose. As you can see in the online article Manet used Ingres' self-portrait again to help construct his celebrated painting of *Nana*, the prostitute. She too is "an artist" in the act of painting her face.



Fig. 2 Mlle. V in the Costume of an Espada

Despite its strange and deceptive appearance as tangible reality, the scene is plausibly accurate as a mental image. Manet, like Michelangelo, has depicted the interior of his own mind. Identifying with the great masters of the past, Manet has painted himself, *as he imagines himself*, at the moment of creation immersed in his own picture. 'He' stands there like the matador he is about to paint, "palette" and "brush" in hand. Associating the mental activity of an artist with the courage and quickness of mind of a matador, Manet depicts "himself" in the act of creating a great masterpiece. "He" looks outward, not at the spectator, but at "himself", reflected in the mirror of his mind. "He" sees "his" own reflection and paints it. That is how in the exterior world an artist paints a self-portrait.

### Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe

When Manet sent his greatest masterpiece, along with Mlle V, to the *Salon des Refusés*, he named it *The Bath* (fig. 1). Since no-one except great masters understood why, it has ever after been known as *Luncheon on the Grass*. *The Bath* is the more appropriate description; the other quite misleading.

If this painting depicts an outdoor picnic, as we are always told, then there are at least five major problems:

- the bather is out-of-scale.
- a nude woman at a picnic with clothed men is absurd as a scene of modern life.
- the sunlight comes from two directions simultaneously: from above the bather and from behind us, the spectator.
- three of the figures seem unaware of each other; two have dream-like expressions.
- the landscape is broadly brushed and has been criticized as poorly painted.

How can these problems be resolved to make sense? While the derivation of the three foreground figures from a print after Raphael is well known, it has never been noted that Manet changed the direction of the head of the man at left to resemble the self-portrait of another artist (not illustrated here). Since the man modeling for it actually was an artist, let us assume that the figure represents an 'artist', a painter like Mlle. V. Moreover, Victorine Meurent, posing again for the nude, was both a recognized model and looks like one. Indeed all three figures resemble a group in a studio. One scholar described Victorine as 'resting between poses'. Another commented that 'the landscape...is treated in a very casual way, sketched with the brush like a stage set behind the models, who quite obviously are posing in the studio'. A third has described the painting as 'a not-very-veiled evocation of the painter's world of the studio'.<sup>2</sup>

Since those posing on the left were actually an artist and a model and are likely to be so in the painting, the reclining man might also be an 'artist', as a writer once suggested.<sup>3</sup> If we assume for a moment that the man *is* another artist an insight can be gained that, in hindsight, will confirm the identification. There is, though, one last point to make. The hand of the reclining man unmistakably connects the two women in that his thumb curls towards the bather while his finger points at the nude.<sup>4</sup>

That link between the two women is important for what has not been recognized: the nude is the bather. They are the same woman. Two 'artists' and a model are relaxing in front of a canvas that the nude has just posed for. The bather's figure is out of scale because it is not 'real'; it is part of another canvas. The background is a 'painting' called *The Bath*, thus explaining Manet's title which until now has made no sense at all. It is a scene *inside Manet's mind* where the studio and the painting have been fused. This is not supposition but can be proved, as Manet intended, point-by-point. Once again, the much-criticized handling of the landscape indicates in its brusque technique that the background is "painted" while the foreground figures are not. The lighting, also, is contradictory. The foreground is lit from behind us, by implication a studio window; the background from above, that is 'painted' sunlight. Moreover, the presence of the nude, on whom the window-light shines, only makes sense in a studio, not out-of-doors.

There is also strong evidence that the two women are one. They share the same hair style with an identical parting and hairline, though Manet darkened the bather's hair to disguise the similarity. Their earrings are the same color and size and hang precisely the same distance from the earlobe. They have the same body types. The 'live' model is clearly painted from life in a studio while the 'painted' bather, as Carol Armstrong noted, 'is clearly lifted from art'. The white fabric by the basket, moreover, is the dress she wore for the painting. Finally, the dreamy expressions of the "artist" and "model" are typical depictions of poetic inspiration in an artist's mind. Thus, once again, multiple inconsistencies and problems are logically resolved with one answer. *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, one of the most investigated images in the entire history of art, makes sense after all.



Fig. 3 Detail of fig. 2



Fig. 4 Detail of fig.2



Fig. 5 Copy after Ingres' 1804 Self-Portrait (inverted)

1 Armstrong, *Manet Manette*, 2002, p. 149; 2 Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition*, 1977, p.95; Cachin, *Manet* 1983, p.167; Armstrong, "To Paint, To Point, To Pose: Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*" in *Manet's Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, 1998, p.92; 3 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 1987, p. 246; 4 Mauner, *Manet: Peintre-Philosophe*, 1975, p.19; 5 Armstrong, 2002, p.152.