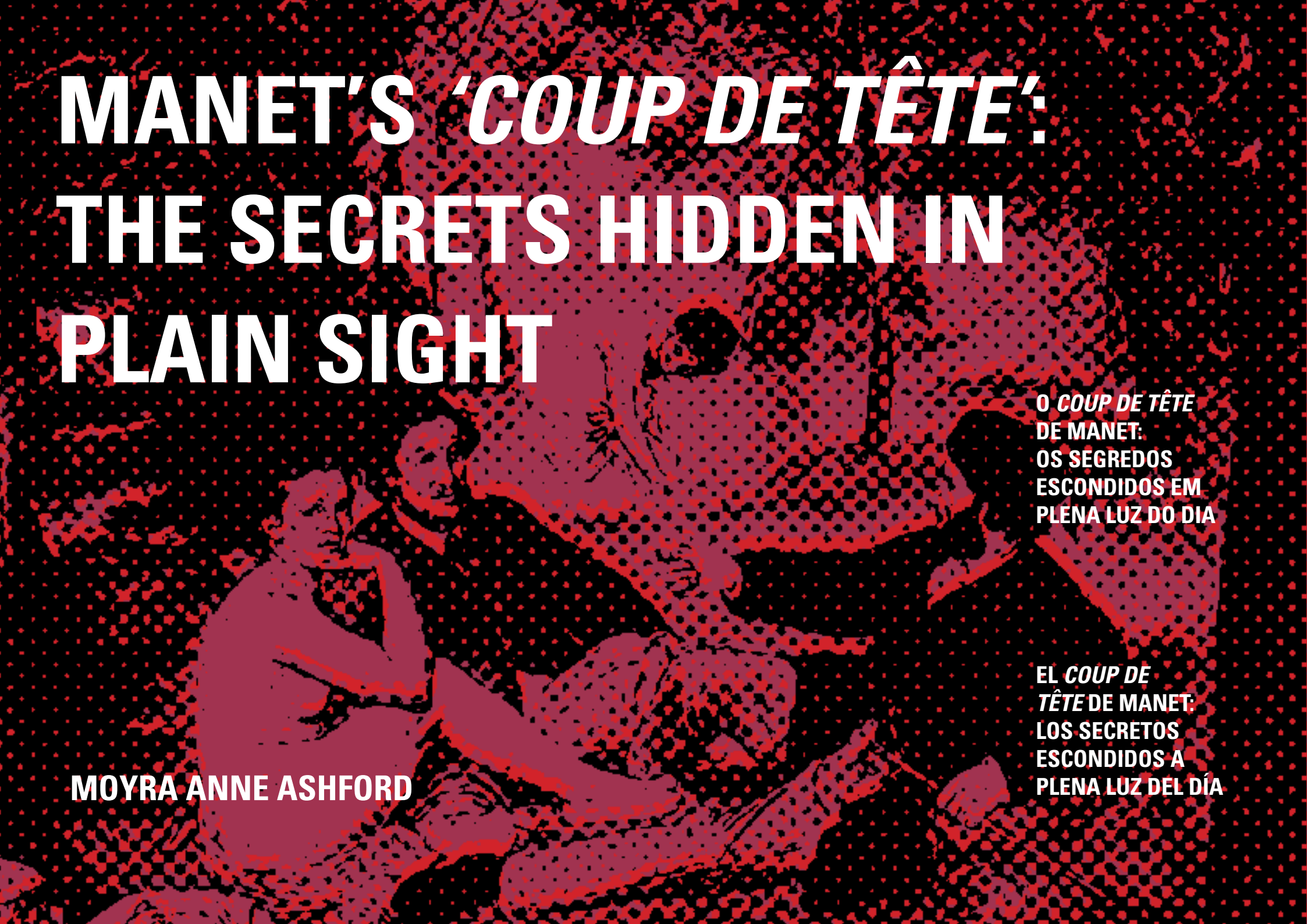
MANET'S *'COUP DE TÊTE'*: THE SECRETS HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT



MOYRA ANNE ASHFORD

O *COUP DE TÊTE* DE MANET: OS SEGREDOS ESCONDIDOS EM PLENA LUZ DO DIA

EL *COUP DE TÊTE* DE MANET: LOS SECRETOS ESCONDIDOS A PLENA LUZ DEL DÍA

ABSTRACT

Modern art began with Édouard Manet's *The Picnic (Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe, 1863)*. A small minority of scholars have ventured that Manet's impetus for breaking from tradition stemmed from memories of his 1849 voyage to Brazil. This view is eschewed by the majority and the museum establishment, who hold to a French and classical origin. Through a close examination of early written sources, the paintings themselves and links to 19th century Rio, the author proposes that Manet worked distinct Rio memories into two pivotal paintings: *The Picnic*, which he set in the forests of Guanabara Bay; *Olympia* (1863) was inspired not by a Parisian brothel, but by slave-owning, mid-nineteenth century Rio de Janeiro. This article recounts how the research unfolded.

KEYWORDS Édouard Manet; Rio de Janeiro; Émile Zola; *Olympia*; Impressionism

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RESUMO

A arte moderna teve início com *Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe* (1863), de Édouard Manet. Alguns poucos estudiosos sugeriram que seu ímpeto em se desvencilhar da tradição derivava de reminiscências de sua viagem ao Brasil, em 1849. Essa interpretação é rechaçada pela maioria e pelo *establishment* dos museus, apegados a uma origem clássica e francesa. Examinando detidamente fontes escritas primárias, as próprias pinturas e aspectos do Rio oitocentista, a autora defende que Manet elaborou diversas memórias da cidade em duas pinturas fundamentais: *Le Déjeuner*, que teria sido ambientada nas matas da Baía de Guanabara, e *Olympia* (1863), inspirada não em um bordel parisiense, mas no Rio de Janeiro escravocrata da metade daquele século. Este artigo relata como tal pesquisa foi desenvolvida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Édouard Manet; Rio de Janeiro; Émile Zola; *Olympia*; impressionismo

RESUMEN

El arte moderno empezó con Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe (1863), de Édouard Manet. Algunos estudiosos sugieren que su ímpetu en romper con la tradición se originaba en reminiscencias de su viaje a Brasil, en 1849. Esa interpretación es rechazada por la mayoría y por los museos, apegados a orígenes clásica y francesa. Deteniéendose en fuentes primarias escritos, de las pinturas en si y de temas del Rio ochocentista, la autora defiende que Manet elaboró memorias de la ciudad en dos cuadros fundamentales: Le Déjeuner, que se pasaría en la Baía de Guanabara, y Olympia (1863), inspirado no en un burdel parisino, sino que en el Rio de la mitad del siglo y sus esclavos. Este artículo relata la elaboración de la pesquisa.

PALABRAS CLAVE Édouard Manet; Rio de Janeiro; Émile Zola; *Olympia*; impressionismo

The questioning began in São Paulo thirty-five years ago, the morning that the post delivered the page proofs for a new Brazil travel guide. I had written on music and a few pages away, the Art Chapter, by the late US journalist Sol Biderman, opened with:

'It has even been said that Impressionism began in Brazil when Manet, suffering from a tropical disease aboard a French frigate in the Rio de Janeiro harbour, captured the luminous sky vibrating off Guanabara Bay and the rain-forest mountains.' (INSIGHT, 1986, p.125)

How fascinating, Édouard Manet (1832-1883) inspired by Brazil. But why wasn't such an important fact common knowledge?

It is feasible. Foreign light has recalibrated the vision of countless painters, from J.M.W. Turner to David Hockney and all the French artists seeking the warm sunlight of the Cote d'Azur. On a bright day, Guanabara Bay is almost beyond luminous. Sunlight turns into millions of glittering splinters on the water and shimmering patterns on the shore. Shadows are tight black knife-edges by day, then at sunset move over the mountains in translucent veils. A complete contrast to grey and fawn Paris.

I rang Sol Biderman to ask his source. He said he could no longer remember who had told him. Probably a professor at São Paulo University (USP), where he taught undergraduate classes.

'But you'll find it's well known,' he said.

It really wasn't. No-one I asked could shed any light on this fascinating fact – or myth. In retrospect, had I gone to an USP library, I'd have been directed to *Manet no Brasil*, written in 1949 by art critic Antonio Bento de Araújo Lima.

But in the way that you put off the non-essential – I was a news journalist, and events were always more urgent – I returned to London in 1990 without having visited the USP library, and only read Bento's *Manet no Brasil* in 2018: fortuitously, for had I found it back in 1985, I might never have embarked on my own research. By the time I came to Bento's impressively thorough work, I knew that the voyage's visual impact was well-known to Manet's contemporaries.

Without the the power of a large computer screen the Brazilian elements would probably have remained undetected. I first noticed a faint grey mountain on the horizon. And then a marmoset. Magnifing more, the loaf resembled the tough loaves baked in ship's galleys; the glass flask, the weighted type used at sea. Amongst the fruit spilling from the picnic basket were two globes looking very like cashew apples, one complete with cashew nut. The toad in the left-hand corner had been noted by scholars, but not identified with Rio.

If *The Picnic* was a Rio picnic, then Antonio Bento and Sol Biderman were right. It was necessary to look at the original in the Musée d'Orsay, an imposing former railway station overlooking the Seine.

Manet's *Picnic* hung on a charcoal-grey dividing wall on the d'Orsay's 5th floor. Facing it, Claude Monet's *Picnic*, dominated by the flat greens of Paris plane trees, appears domestic and temperate. If you turn from one to the other you feel the wildness in Manet's: the leaves glisten, even in the deepest shade; vague dark clumps and protuberances lurk amongst the leaves – something may be about to jump out at you.

The heightened lighting effect has been likened to a flash going off in front of the canvas. But it could also be tropical light. The conventional wisdom is that Manet located *The Picnic* in the Bois de Boulogne or at Gennevilliers, a Seine river port 10 kilometers northwest of Paris where the Manet family owned land. Yet how many bare grey mountains and marmosets are there in Paris?

I took dozens of digital photos, without flash, of course. Back home, enlarged on screen, the forest sprang to life with pairs of eyes everywhere and snakes like tree vines – or tree vines like snakes – revealing more Brazilian signs. These are the eleven I found, professional examination might well reveal more:

1. Grey peaks

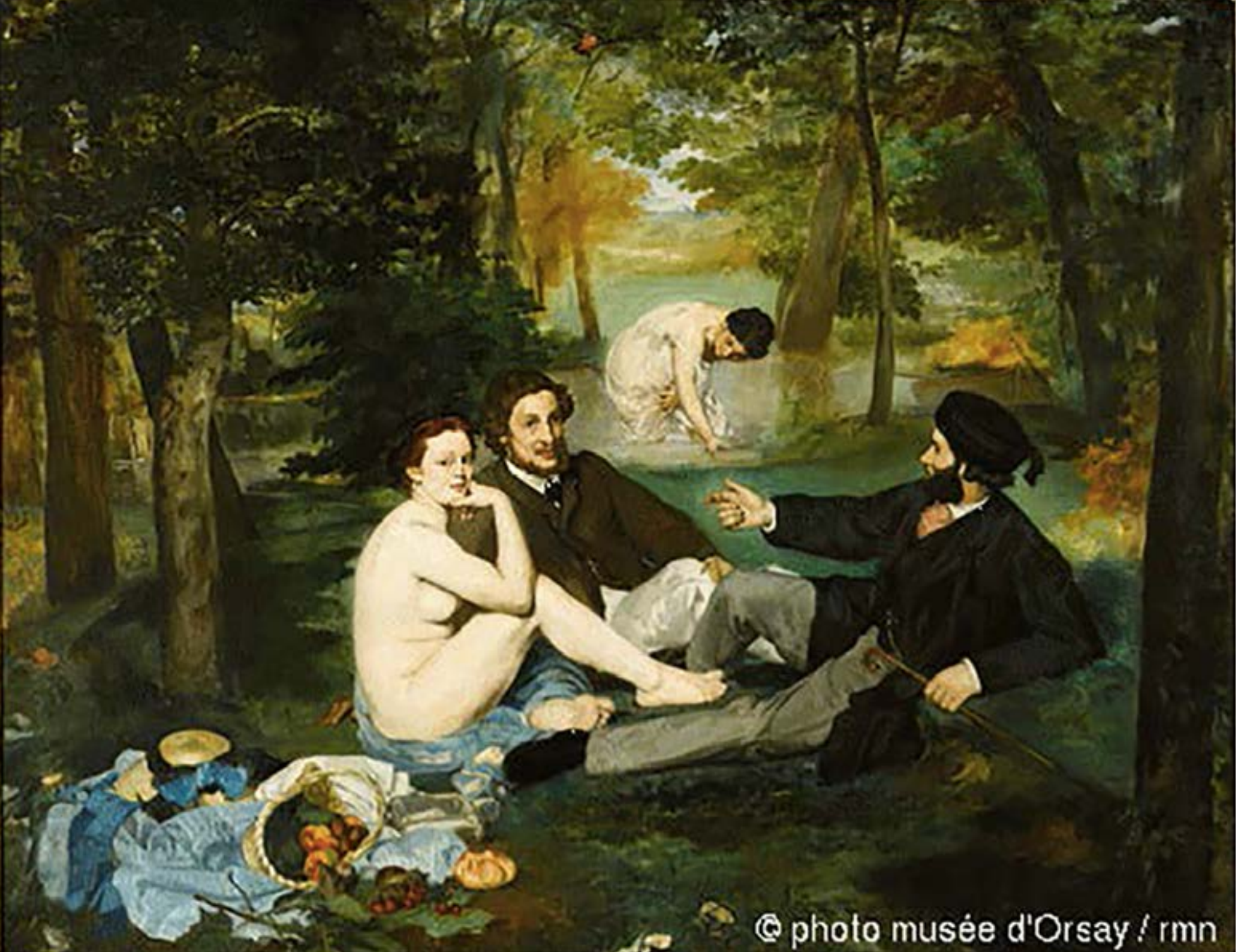
2. Evil-eyed toad, sometimes explained as sexual metaphor, but more feasibly the 'some sort of reptile' that bit Manet on the foot on Paquetá island (the 'tropical disease' cited by Sol Biderman must have been Manet's severely swollen leg). The biographer Henri Perruchot said that when syphilis pains first shot through Manet's left leg 30 years later, he blamed them on this reptile (PERRUCHOT, 1962).

3. A fuzzy marmoset descending the far left tree.

4 and 5. Two caimans: one heading towards the water, one submerged bar its eyes.

IMAGE 1.
Édouard Manet, *The Picnic (Le déjeuner sur l'Herbe)*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 207 x 265 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

IMAGE 2.
Édouard Manet, *The Picnic* (details). Graphic: Carol MacShane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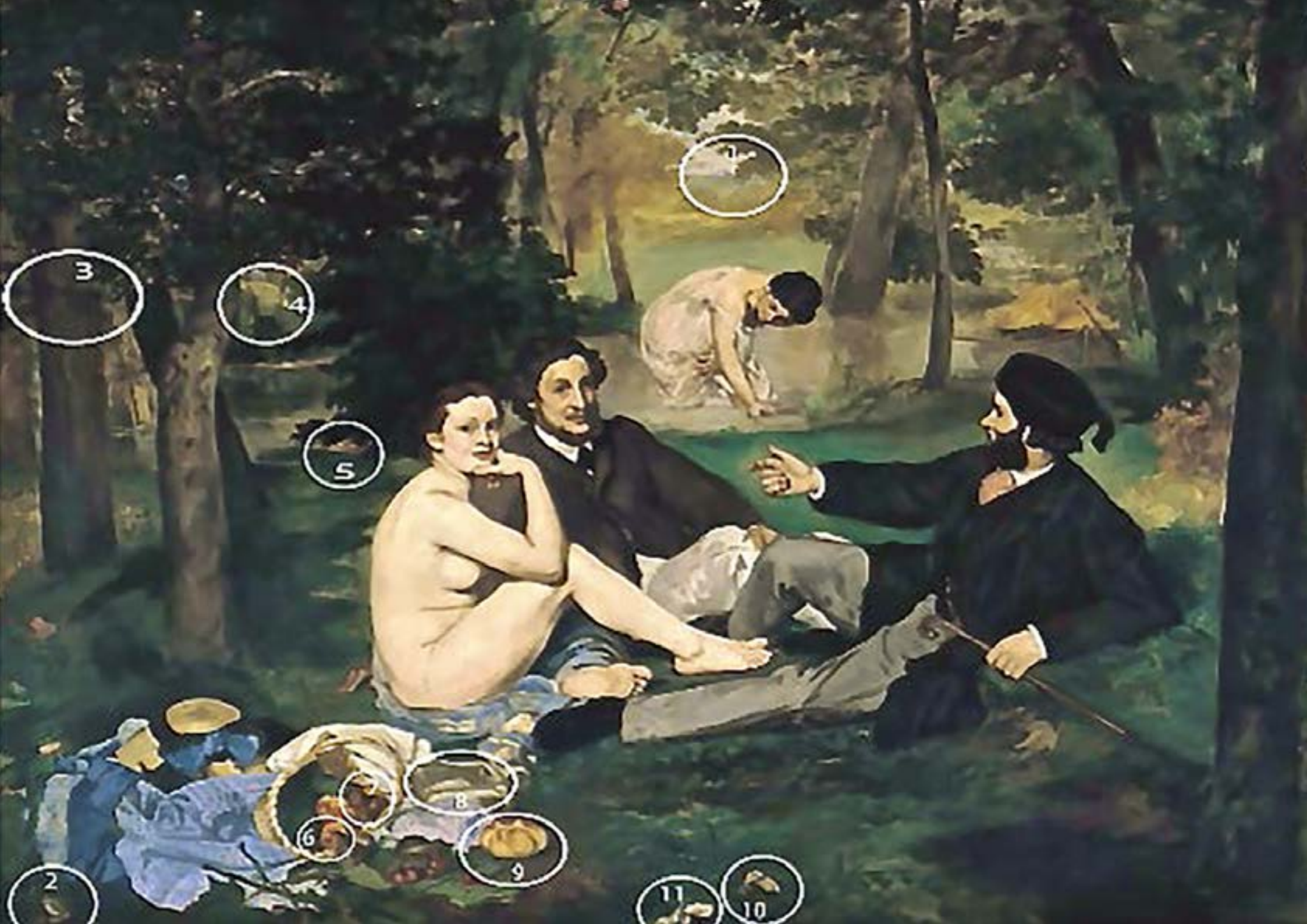
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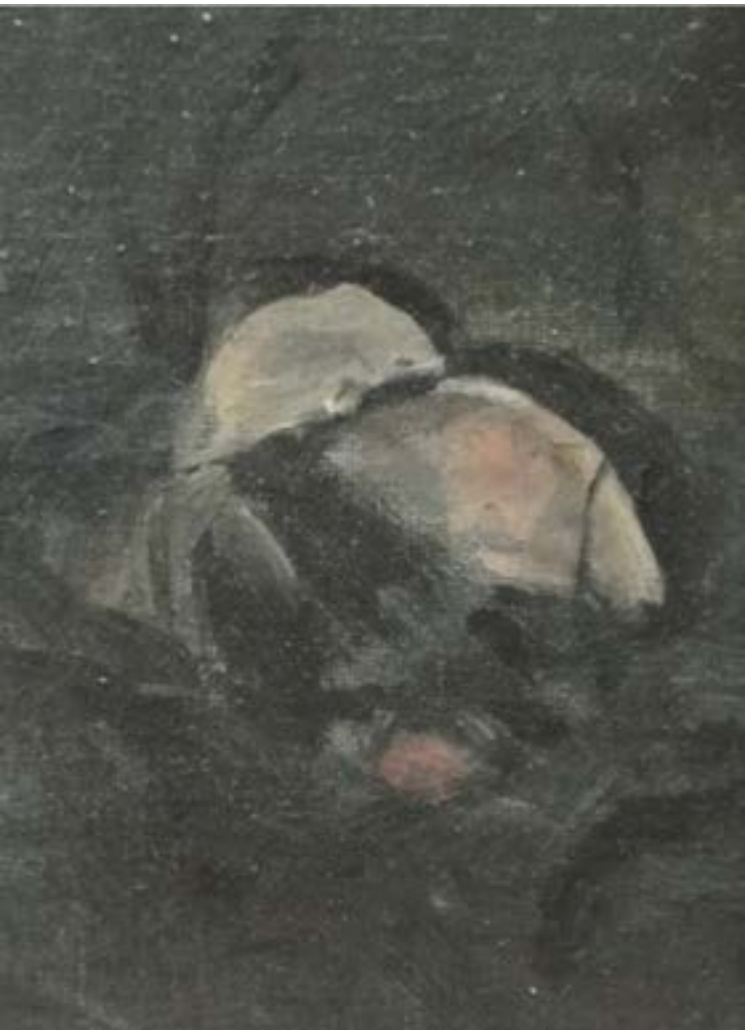


IMAGE 3.
Édouard Manet, *The Picnic (Le déjeuner sur l'Herbe)*, 1863. Detail. A crab, or a hermit crab or possibly two crabs.

6 and 7. Tropical fruits in the basket – a cashew apple with pod, two persimmons with calyxes. Scholars have questioned 'the cherries of June, the figs of September,' this is resolved by Brazilian growing seasons.

8. Weighted naval flask.

9. Tough white loaf typically baked in ship's galleys.

10. A crab, two crabs, or a hermit crab.

11. A trio of shapes at the lower edge, resembling a fat snake, an egg and pinkish seeds, puzzled me for months until checking back to the letters Manet wrote home from his voyage and there, on January 11, 1849, three weeks before arriving in Rio, Manet wrote: 'At 5 o'clock we caught an enormous tuna, it was immediately cut open and there were two intact flying fish in its stomach' (MANET, 1928, p. 41)[1]

Q.E.D.: - a dead flying fish and tuna entrails. The 'seeds' are either a section of tuna gills or part of an egg sac; the egg-shape is another organ, possibly the pancreas. These have to be the clincher that Manet was channeling memories from his voyage.

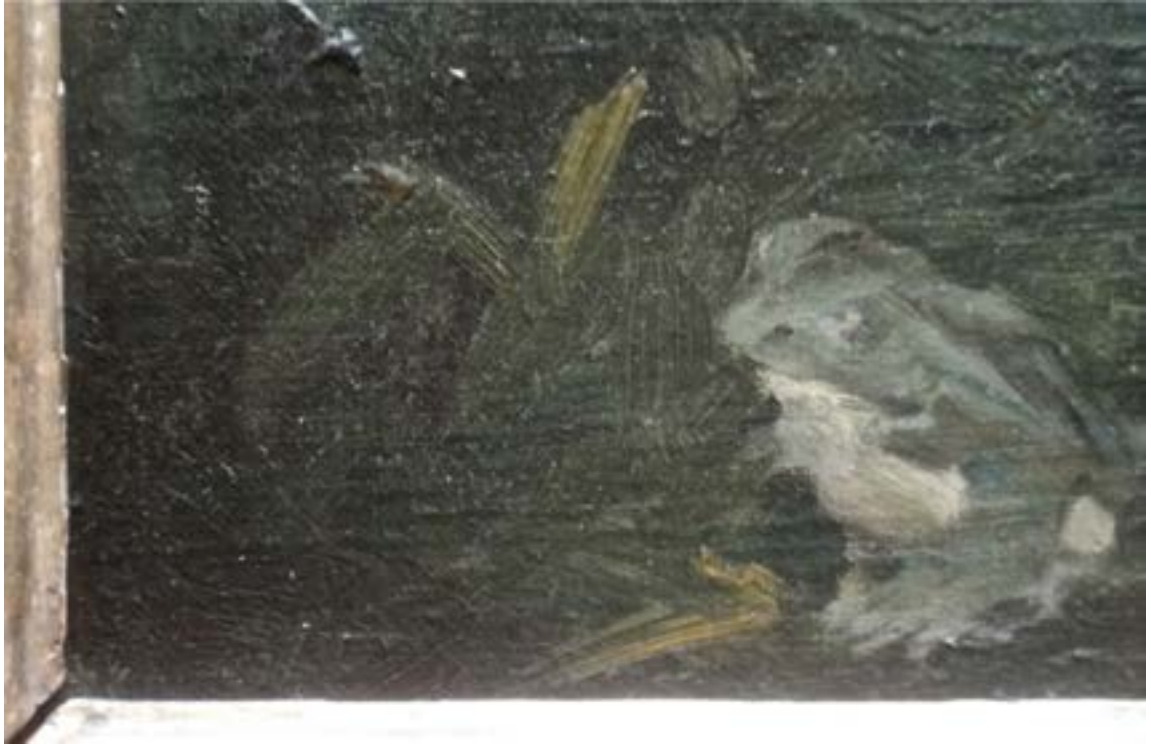
Back in London I visited the Courtauld Gallery which owns a smaller, drabber version of the d'Orsay *Picnic*. Luck was in. Shortly before, in 2016, forensic examination had deemed it a preparatory study for the d'Orsay canvas, rather than a posterior

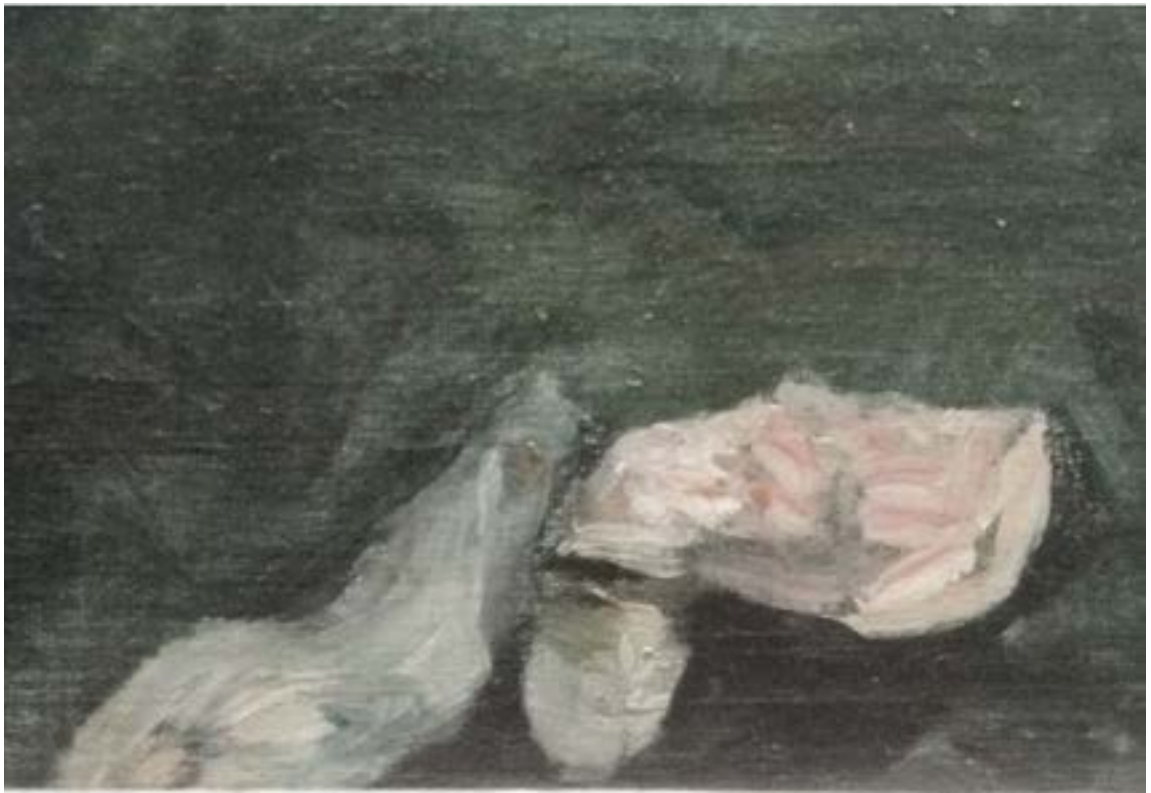
IMAGE 4.
Édouard Manet, *The Picnic (Le déjeuner sur l'Herbe)*, 1863. Detail. The sagui, descending the first left tree.

copy as previously thought.

There are no Brazilian details. But there are two splodges of greyish paint, nothing in themselves, but placed in the exact positions where Manet would later insert the crabs and tuna in his final, d'Orsay version. The fruits spilling out of the basket in the Courtauld are vague, mere daubs of red and orange, suggesting that Manet first needed to find references for the tropical fruits he intended to paint, which were unlikely to be on sale in 1862 Paris.

This was initially hard to believe as it is a much-studied, ground-breaking painting. It started life with rejection, relegated to the Salon des Refusées in 1863 because the jury for Paris' official Salon considered Manet's work poorly finished and unfathomable. Over time, it was credited with launching Impressionism and also, by some, Modernism and Surrealism.





IMAGES 5 AND 6.
Édouard Manet, *The Picnic (Le déjeuner sur l'Herbe)*, 1863. Detail. Above, the frog or toad; below, tuna remains (dead flying fish, an egg sack or lungs, other organ).

Manet bibliography is vast. In my local London library, I'd expected the voyage's influence to be evaluated in the first weighty book I opened. But no. The recent studies I found there mentioned the voyage, but not one related it to Manet's subsequent work, nor took into account that, at the age of seventeen in 1849, he spent a full nine weeks in Rio.

Looking in primary sources soon turned up evidence. Antonin Proust, Manet's friend from schooldays who briefly served as French Culture Minister, wrote in his 1913 Manet biography: 'His short stay in the sun-blasted countries kindled a conception in which everything appeared to him with simplicity (...) He all but removed the half- tones.' (PROUST, 1913 p. 16).

A younger artist, Charles Toché, recounted Manet saying, 'I learnt a great deal on my trip to Brazil, I spent endless nights looking at the play of light and shade in the ship's wake. And in the daytime, from the upper deck, I would keep my eyes on the horizon. That's how I learnt how to capture a sky' (VOLLARD, 1984 p. 172).

And in the late 1950's, Denis Rouart (Manet's great-nephew, the son of Ernest Rouart and Julie Manet) wrote that Manet, 'was enraptured by the beauty of the scenery and especially by the brilliant light, which may well have influenced his future painting.' (ROUART, 1960 p.6).

Following Manet's death in 1883, Manet's long-term friend, novelist Émile Zola, wrote a eulogy. 'He had a tormented youth, rows with his father - a judge perturbed by painting - and then the *coup de tête* of a voyage to the Americas, then years lost in Paris, an internship in the Couture studio, a slow and painful search for his own personality.' (ZOLA, 1884 p. 10).

Impossible to be the more emphatic than *coup de tête* – a sudden, radical shift in understanding. Nevertheless, I found *coup de tête* translated into English in one Zola- Manet compendium as 'a desperate journey' (Idem, 2013 p.123). From then on, I sought out the originals in French.

Manet left a detailed record of his journey to Brazil in the letters he wrote home to his family, first published in Paris in 1928 as *Lettres de Jeunesse 1848-1849: Voyage à Rio* by Louis Rouart (brother of Ernest Rouart, the husband of Manet's niece, Julie). José Olympio published a Brazilian edition in 2002 (MANET, 2002). The letters have never been published in full in English.

The voyage had arisen from family impasse. Manet's father wanted a legal career for his oldest son while Édouard was set on art. The French Navy was the compromise. But in 1848 Édouard failed the Naval Officer Training Academy's entrance exam. Shortly afterwards, the Academy changed its rules to allow re-sits, waiving several exigencies for candidates who completed a voyage of at least six months south of the equator.

So, in late November 1848, Auguste Manet escorted his sixteen year-old son to Le Havre, to join forty-seven other trainees, twenty-six crew, four instructors and a larder of live pigs and sheep on board *Havre et Guadeloupe*, a four-masted frigate that an astute entrepreneur had converted into a sea-borne cramming school.

It was on board that Manet first had his talent recognised. At home he had had to hide his art from his father but talk of his sketches soon reached the ship's master, Captain Besson, who requested a portrait of himself to give as a Christmas present. When Besson took on twelve Brazilian naval trainees in Rio, he appointed Manet as drawing instructor.

Bad weather stretched the Atlantic crossing from six weeks to nine. They eventually sailed into Guanabara Bay on February 5, 1849.

Compared to today's airport arrival, the approach by sea was a majestic experience. Vessels pitched out of the choppy Atlantic through the entrance guarded by 16th century forts, into a 30 kilometre-long expanse of emerald-fringed, shimmering waters. 'The Bay is enchanting, filled with warships from all the nations, circled with green mountains where you can see charming dwellings', Manet wrote (1928, p. 50).

Every Thursday, the pupils left the ship at 4 am in small boats to row to the far side of the Bay, accompanied by the ship's cook, the black headwaiter and 'all sorts of provisions'.

> 'We walk in the countryside, we swim; we dine and lunch there ... the walks are charming', wrote Manet, 'we see the spectacle of the most beautiful nature possible, we have as many fruits as we want.' (Ibidem, p. 55)

Manet spent his Sundays and Mondays with the Lacarrières, a French family whose oldest son, Jules, was his age. They lived at Mme Hortense Lacarrière's renowned dress emporium at No. 64 Rua do Ouvidor, where she imported and copied the latest Paris fashion.

Writing in the Rio weekly *O Espelho*, the young Machado de Assis described her shop as 'brilliantly illuminated and even more brilliantly decorated [...] Everything modern that exists presents itself to our eyes [...] Fur shawls and frocks decorate the counter [...] All this, with some accessories that Mme Hortense Lacarrière knows how to arrange so well'. (O ESPELHO, 1859).

Manet said he could make himself understood in the town 'because of the many French nationals'. His visit coincided with the peak of French influence, midway through the Empire. While it was Napoleon Bonaparte's invading armies that sent the Portuguese royal family fleeing across the Atlantic in 1808, the Portuguese monarchy remained deeply Francophile.

French artisans soon arrived to design their palaces, landscape public gardens and clothe the royal wives and mistresses. As soon as Napoleon abdicated in June 1815, Dom João VI invited the French Artistic Mission to set up a school of arts and artisanship, with painter Jean-Baptiste Debret among its members.

Iron balconies, elegant tearooms and top hats sprouted everywhere and enterprising young Frenchwomen arrived to take over the high-level sex trade. Contemporary accounts paint mid-century Rio as a riot of sexual commerce and transgression – Catholic priests with large families, brothels disguised as finishing schools, boudoirs in the back of bars, rooms by the hour at boarding houses with French names such as *Champs-Elysees*, *Chappelle* and *Bordeaux*. Right at the top of the scale, to be seen glittering from theatre balconies, reigned the celebrated French actresses and singers (CASTRO, 2004; SOARES, 1988; SILVA, 2012).

With an emperor and court, pomp and luxury, the city was in boom, the population quintupling from c.50,000 at the beginning of the century to 266,466 in 1849. Rio liked to think of itself as Paris in the tropics. This would have been apt had it not been for slavery, an issue that the politically-aware Manet must have followed during the debates leading to abolition in the French colonies the previous year. Slavery had been banned in France itself since the sixteenth century.

'All the blacks are slaves', he wrote, 'all these unfortunates have a brutal air; the power the whites have over them is extraordinary' (MANET, 1928, p. 52). He was roughly accurate: the 1849 census counted slaves at 44.5% of the overall population, with 4.5%, a small but growing number, being freed blacks living in the incipient shanties.

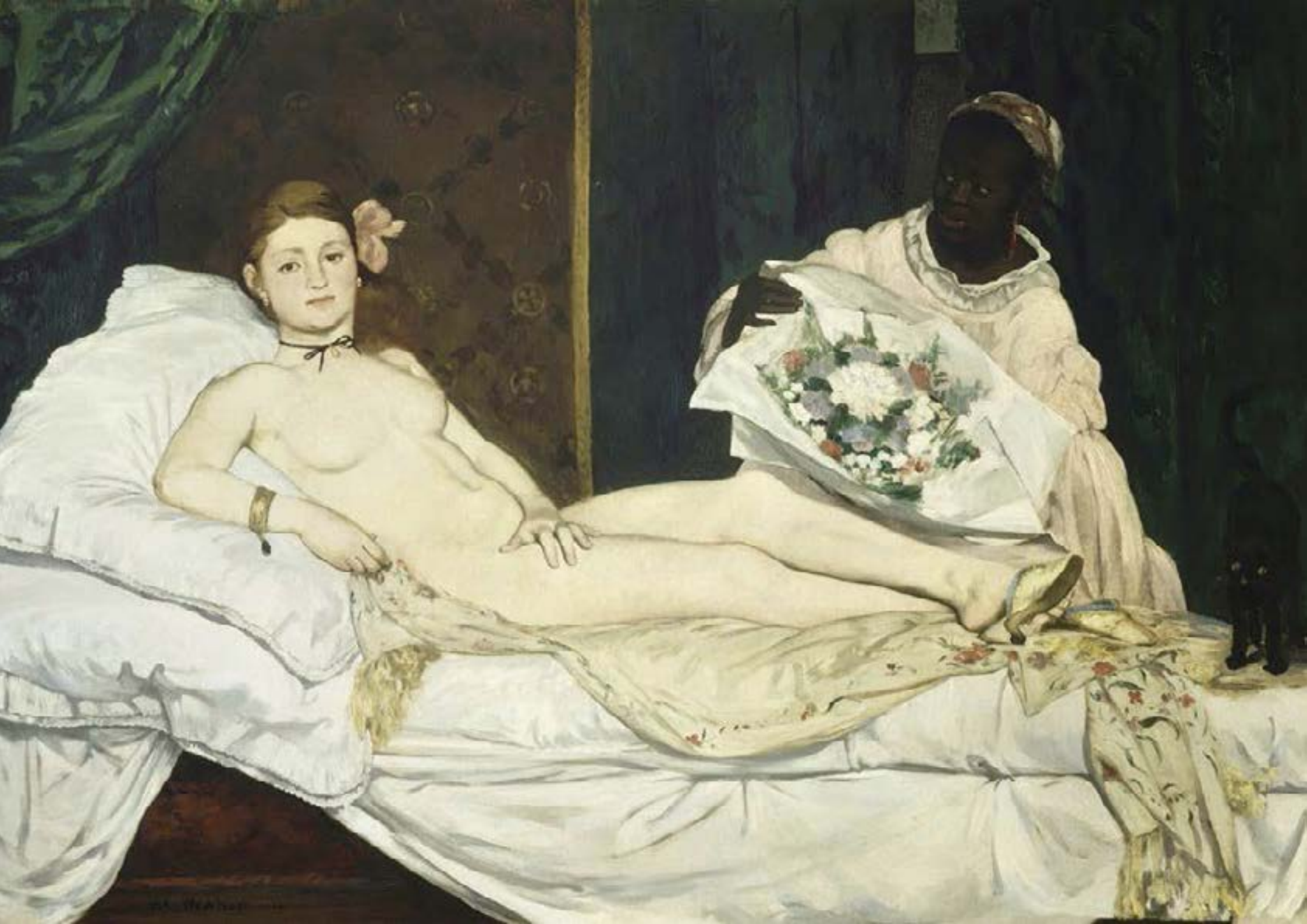
Nevertheless, Manet admitted, 'for any European even a little artistically-inclined, Rio, although rather ugly, offers *un cachet tout particulier*'. (MANET, 1928, p.58)

Many of his descriptions concern Rio women, 'The mulatas, in truth, are nearly all beautiful ... As for the Brazilian women, they are generally very pretty; they have magnificent black eyes and hair ... but they do not deserve the reputation for frivolity that they have in France; there is nothing so prudish or so stupid as a *Brasilienne*.' (Ibidem, p.58)

He was struck by the ingenious style of female slaves. 'They do themselves up very well. Some wear turbans, others arrange their curly hair very artistically and they nearly all wear skirts with monstrous flounces.'

Indeed, exactly as *Olympia*'s black maid.

IMAGE 7.
Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863.
Oil on Canvas,
130.5 x 191.0 cm.
Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



It turned out there was an original copy of Antonio Bento's *Manet no Brasil* in Essex University library. Bento (1902-1988) was the preeminent critic of his day. His connections were not with USP but with Rio where he studied law after a childhood on the family's *fazenda* in Rio Grande do Norte.

He championed Impressionism, abstract art and the Brazilian portrayers of everyday life, Candido Portinari and Cicero Dias. A cultural grandee in later life, he helped found Rio's Modern Art Museum and the Brazilian Critics Association (ABCA), judged at international Biennales and sat on numerous committees.

In 1949, on the 100th anniversary of Manet's journey to Rio, France sent Brazil *The New French Painting and Its Masters (From Manet to Today)*, exhibited in Rio's Ministry of Education and Health building. The ministry's Documentation Service commissioned Bento's book. 'Having recorded the intensity of Brazilian light on his supersensitive retina, Manet was above all the first contemporary painter to [...] use large areas of simple, pure colour,' wrote Bento.[2]

Bento was a regular visitor to Paris and his book is impeccably sourced. He distinguishes clearly between reportage and his reflections. He also translated all Manet's letters from Rio into Portuguese and included both versions in the text. Nevertheless, he is ignored by international scholars and within Brazil has been criticised for 'appropriation of foreign art' (REIS, 2008, p. 220). He didn't notice the tropical details in *The Picnic* but was viscerally certain *Olympia* stemmed from Rio memories.

For Bento, *Olympia's* maid recalled the character, 'so well known from the times of our great grandmothers – the black woman who delighted in being the accomplice of difficult or persecuted loves.'[3]

He describes Laure, the nanny who was Manet's model for the maid, as a 'perfect baiana'. Had Zola been familiar with Brazilian iconography, I have no doubt he would have agreed.

A tiny minority of other scholars suggest a Rio origin for *Olympia*, notably Yale professor George Heard Hamilton in 1954 (HAMILTON, 1954, p. 78) and the late Manet connoisseur, Françoise Cachin, who organised Manet's 1983 Centenary exhibition and became Musée d'Orsay Director in 1986.

'Never has a woman's nakedness been so covered with commentary; except for the Mona Lisa, never has paint been

varnished with so many layers of literature, never has a painting so tempted the gluttony of the art historian,' wrote Cachin in the 1983 exhibition catalogue (CACHIN; MOFFET; WILSON-BAREAU, 1983, p. 176).

After leaving the d'Orsay in 1994, Cachin wrote a short Manet guide in which she said, 'the black-skinned servant in his 1863 painting *Olympia* is perhaps reminiscent of a sight in Rio that struck him deeply' (CACHIN, 1995, p. 16).

Hamilton and Cachin were heavy-weights, yet their views on *Olympia* met the same fate as Bento's – no-one in the art establishment, it seems, wanted a Brazil source for Manet's famous nude. The d'Orsay website today says Manet referenced orientalist images by Titian, Goya and Ingres to depict 'the cold and prosaic reality of a truly contemporary subject'[4].

Olympia's identity as Parisian prostitute is so enshrined by art history that it takes an effort of will to remember that this categorisation has never been more than an assumption. You can see why – *Olympia* appears wholly contemporary. She has 'presentness', as Manet's friend, writer Charles Baudelaire, was fond of saying.

As far as we know, Manet left nothing written and never publicly explained who *Olympia* was. His sole recorded comment

comes via Antonin Proust, recalled from a lunch together some 30 years earlier when Manet was venting his fury at the critic who described *Olympia* as 'firing a shot to attract attention' (PROUST, 1913, p. 201).

'I render the things that I see, as simply as possible,' protested Manet. 'Take *Olympia*, could anything be more naive? There are harsh parts (*duretés*), I'm told. They were there. I saw them. I put down what I saw'.

Such vehemence – he was THERE. This was something experienced rather than a studio model. Were the *duretés* the girl's youth or slavery?

Olympia reclines in a burgundy-painted room off the Musée d'Orsay's ground- floor concourse. Her golden skin glows; the maid's manner is gentle and intimate, recalling Juliet's maid in Shakespeare.

The composition and the maid's skin colour certainly echo Orientalist works. Paper-wrapped florist's flowers, though,

do not. And instead of eastern silks, *Olympia's* servant wears an outfit typical of an 1849 Brazilian slave – voluminous fine cotton or muslin dress, a gathered under-blouse and a cloth wound into a turban, as can be seen in numerous paintings by fellow Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Debret, the greatest portrayer of 19th century Rio. *Olympia's* embroidered mules, boudoir-wear in France, were daywear for Brazilians.

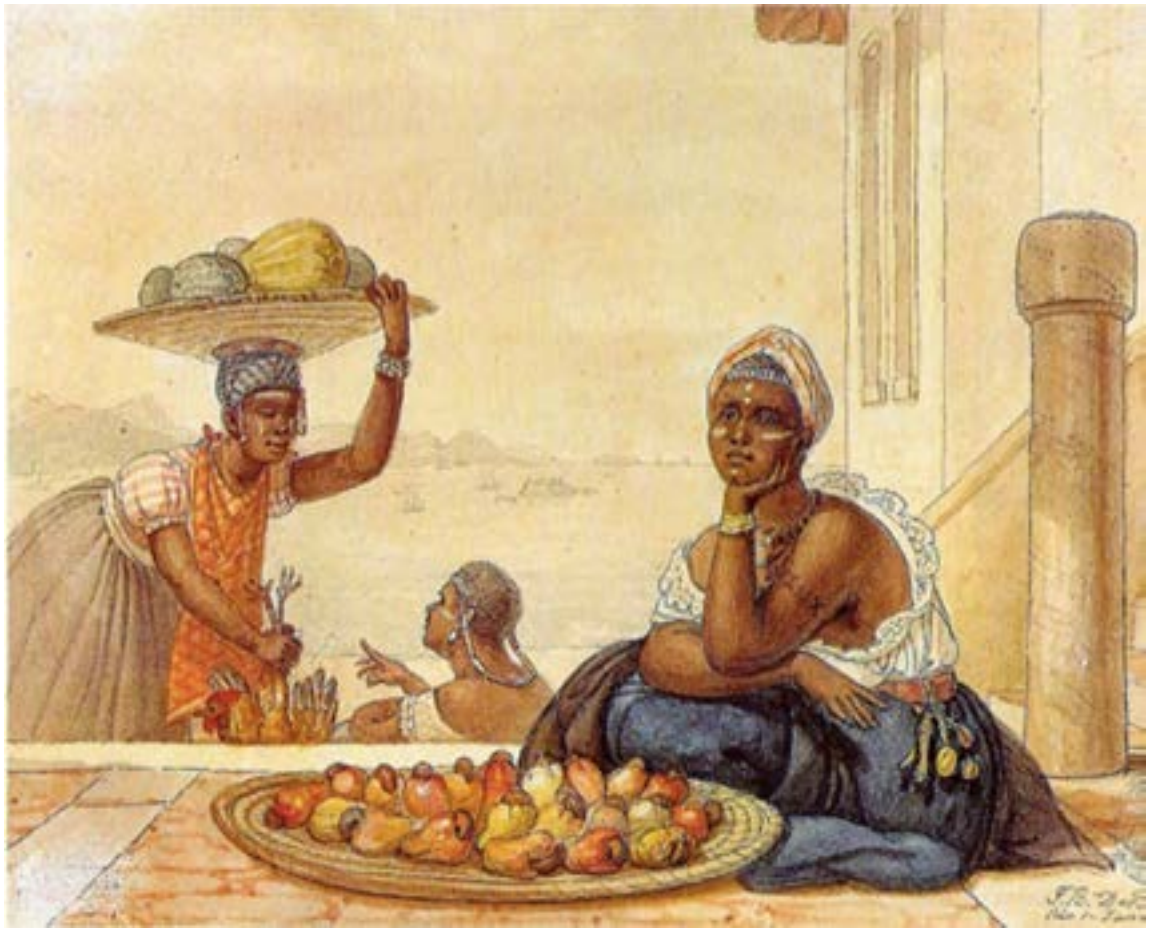


IMAGE 8.
Jean-Baptiste Debret, *Black woman selling cashew fruits*, 1827. Watercolor, 15.7 x 21.6 cm

Victorine Meurent, Manet's favourite model at the time, modelled for both *The Picnic* and *Olympia*, with starkly different results. Victorine had green-grey eyes, pale skin, red-brown hair and sandy eyelashes and brows, but is plumply pink in *The Picnic*; mignon with tanned skin and black eyes in *Olympia*.

Two red chalk preparatory drawings for *Olympia* survive. In one, Manet left the face totally blank. In the second, squared for transference, the facial features are very faint, which Françoise Cachin interpreted as 'reserving the face for a personal memory' (CACHIN; MOFFET; WILSON-BAREAU, 1983)

Over the years, writers have come up with the most varied explanations for the maid: that she represents primitive sexuality, a comment on colonialism, an emblem of lesbian desire and, even, Manet's alter ego.

That was never Manet's style. In person he was a sophisticated member of the upper classes: urbane, witty, charming and discreet. But fellow artists describe his work as truth-seeking, even naive. He painted what had meaning for him, and if anything was expressed subliminally, it was his feelings towards the subject, as is clear in the many impassioned portrayals of Berthe Morisot. As Bento wrote, 'It is more logical, human and natural that the painter was inspired by memories and images of life in Rio.'[5]

Surely it is worth trusting Manet. For his principal figures, he worked from models. If he was painting a Spanish dancer, a Roman soldier or a fisherman, the model posed in the appropriate costume. As Zola described it, 'It was necessary that the subject should pose, and then he could attack it as a copyist, without any tricks, without any recipe'. Had Manet wanted a harem slave, he would certainly have dressed model Laure as such. Equally for a contemporary Parisian maid: maids in brothels wore high-necked dresses and aprons just as maids elsewhere. But he didn't, he dressed her as a Brazilian slave.

A neglected clue to *Olympia's* identity is the 50-line poem, "Olympia, The Young Girl of the Isles" written in 1864 by Manet's friend, Zacharie Astruc (1833-1907), the year Manet was painting his portrait. Besides his prolific journalism, Astruc was a painter, sculptor, musician, composer, novelist, poet and playwright and had been the first to praise Manet's work in print, some three years before Zola, in a daily newsletter for the 1863 Salons. Astruc wrote that *The Picnic* stood out from pictures that attracted for their skill ('material practice') because 'it imposes only his own living voice. It is the soul that strikes' (ASTRUC, 1863).

Manet chose the first stanza (below) of Astruc's poem (ASTRUC, 1908)[6] for *Olympia's* 1865 catalogue listing and, by some accounts, also affixed it to the painting:

> Tired of dreaming, Olympia wakes;
> Spring enters in the arms of a gentle black messenger;
> She is the slave; like the amorous night;
> She comes to flower the day, delicious to see;
> The august young girl, ardour in abeyance[7].

In the voice of *Olympia's* lover, the remaining nine verses recount an evening, night and morning that started with mutual bathing and ended with the bouquet. The 1865 critics jeered at the last line – fancy calling a prostitute 'august'.

As Manet chose to include it, the stanza should surely be taken seriously. Yet art historians brusquely dismiss it: 'tedious' (REFF, 1977), 'insipid' (CACHIN, 1983), 'dreadful' (FRIED, 1996), 'ill-advised' (BROMBERT, 1997).

What other branch of history rejects evidence on the grounds of taste?

'It was intended to explain the subject but, perhaps with reason, was judged to be thoroughly incomprehensible', wrote the Paris newspaper *L'Univers Illustre* in 1890.

However, it makes perfect sense in the context of 1849. Manet spent three nights on Paquetá Island in the depths of Guanabara Bay, hinting in a letter to his cousin that a significant event took place there.

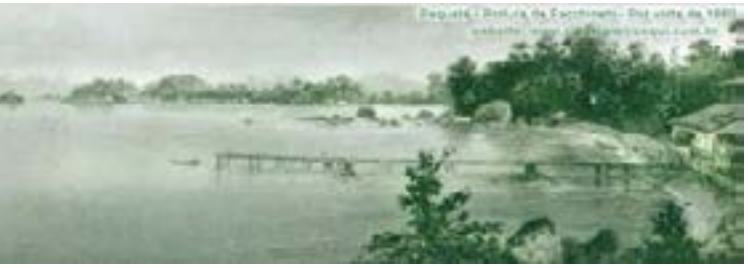
The black woman is always 'slave' and once, 'the loving negress, maternal goodness that anticipates your desires'.

'Where else would Manet see black slaves if not Rio?' Bento had asked[8].

There are 'lazy, lulling seas', 'palm trees against the azures' and a voyage: 'the tide that carried me'. *Olympia's* physical description tallies with the painting: 'superb indolence', 'this languishing infanta', 'your tranquil eyes', 'your slender forms', 'mouth on fire', including an eastern allusion: 'Where do you get these airs of slave, of sultana?'.

Guileless, *Olympia* was content with 'music, a mirror, the fan, a shawl'. She says prayers 'to protect hearts' and sings 'a joyful song'. She is thrice referred to as a 'virgin'. No wonder it confused everyone. The possibility that this girl was at ease with her nakedness does not figure in the literature.

Paradoxically, the phrase that best indicates that the poem could only have come from Manet's recounting is where Astruc



IMAGES 9 AND 10.
Paquetá in c. 1880 and today, respectively.

got the wrong end of the stick: 'the marbles scattered in the beautiful gardens'.

Paquetá has a distinctive outcrop of large, rounded granite boulders tumbling down a forested incline and out into the waters. Manet said 'stones', Astruc imagined 'marbles'.

Manet added the typically Parisian black cat after completing *Olympia*. Remnants of rubbed paint can be seen around its legs, suggesting it was painted over an earlier image. Being a French emblem of prostitution (*chat* is slang for vulva), the cat left viewers in no doubt that this was a brothel scene.

What made Manet combine a cat signifying red-light Paris with a stanza about a tropical island? A deliberate ambiguity? To disguise his Brazilian memories? For the record, Brazilians would hardly allow a cat, let alone a black one, up on the bed.

When Zola interviewed Manet in his studio in 1866, he asked about the maid and the cat. Manet prevaricated, saying he had needed dark areas for pictorial balance. At 26, Zola had just published his first novel but was better known as a campaigning journalist – famously he later defended the framed Jewish army officer, Alfred Dreyfus, in his open letter, *J'Acuse*.

Zola's text is the most detailed contemporaneous record we have of Manet's early work (ZOLA, 1867). From Zola's words

you can hazard a guess at his questions. Manet was forthcoming on his painting philosophy and methods, such as creating an image from 'various components, taken perhaps from here and there'. But one can presume that Manet dodged Zola's questions on meaning.

After describing *Olympia's* colour contrasts, Zola asked, 'What is all this saying? You don't know much, and neither do I.'

I still have hopes of discovering the identity of Manet's Brazilian *Olympia*. The possible candidates range from a casual liaison during carnival, a Rio prostitute, or even Madame Lacarrière's pretty, 13 year-old daughter.

Madame Lacarrière's shop was located in Rua do Ouvidor where French 'cocottes' dominated the upper end sex trade. In the mid-1860's, 17-year old Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), also a sailor, was seduced in Rua do Ouvidor by the older Frenchwoman, Mme Aimée, a renowned singer and courtesan.

Interestingly, Gauguin was obsessed by *Olympia*. He hung a copy in his Tahiti house and painted a faithful version in oils, *Olympia, d'Apres Manet* (1891), which was bought by Edgar Degas.

Recent Manet biographers largely dodge the sex question, but earlier ones plunged right in with stereotypical scenarios. In 1928, without citing sources, Albert Flament wrote that Manet was seduced at a masked carnival ball by 'the mulata…the dance hall queen.' (FLAMENT, 1928, p. 40).

In 1962, Henri Perruchot described Manet's 'first experience of love being embodied in the sable features of a Rio slave girl'. That is possible – a densely populated shanty bordered the port – but again, Perruchot offers no source (PERRUCHOT, 1962).

My guess is that being shy, determined and aesthetic, Manet favoured a private encounter and that this occurred on Paquetá Island. He spent three nights there the week after carnival, apparently at the invitation of a second contact in Rio, Manuel Ferreira Pinto, the Portuguese shipping agent for *Havre et Guadaloupe*.

Manet's letters about Paquetá contain untypical awkward stretches. He gives different descriptions of his male companions

in letters to his mother, brother and favourite cousin. Bento senses this, writing that the purpose of the Paquetá trip was 'farra'.

To his cousin, Manet underlined certain words, 'Yesterday I went with several older boys to an isle in the depths of the bay, we greatly amused ourselves, the house where we stayed three days was delicious and totally creole' (MANET, 1928, p. 59)[9].

Whatever the details, given that Manet was 17, a sailor and spent nine weeks in 1949 Rio, the least likely scenario is his NOT having a sexual encounter.

Back home, Manet's father finally gave in to an artistic career and Manet never resat the naval exam. Six months later, Manet and his friend Antonin Proust enrolled at the studio of Thomas Couture, a respected academic painter. Manet soon became the star pupil but came into conflict with Couture's traditional teaching, once walking out in protest at the classical pose struck by a male model.

Nevertheless, he stayed for nearly six years before setting up his own studio. He took on portrait commissions and painted his family and street scenes, developing an emphatic style that heightened the presence of his subjects. In 1861, the official Paris Salon jury selected two of his portraits – one of his parents and one of a Spanish singer[10].

The next Salon would be in 1863 and Manet was painting *The Picnic*, his largest canvas to date, with that in mind.

Shortly after Manet started work on *The Picnic*, his father died. As Manet's 1861 portrait of his parents shows, for the previous five years a stroke and tertiary syphilis had left Auguste Manet virtually immobile and deprived of speech, a sad husk of the Justice Ministry official, Court judge and controlling paterfamilias.

Distressed by his father's ailing and pain-wracked death, Manet spent long hours at the studio (MORISOT, 1987). Grief can set off vivid dreams, flashbacks and even spells of psychosis, opening a gateway to the unconscious. Besides *The Picnic*, several other 1861-65 paintings are strange and other-worldly, full of intimate metaphors.

Music in the Tuileries Garden (1862) shows an outdoors crowd, peopled by family, friends, soldiers and some blurred

masks. The eerie *Fishing* (1862-3) appears to be an allegory of Manet's relationship with his soon-to-be wife, Suzanne, and their illegitimate 11 year-old son, Leon, within a Rubens-like landscape. *The Surprised Nymph* (1861), often cited as forerunner to *The Picnic*, has a looped snake, black snails and threatening shadows in sea and sky. Suzanne modelled as *Nympth*, and it may have been her modesty that prevented that picture from achieving the result attained in *The Picnic*.

Manet's only major religious works also come from this period: *Jesus Mocked by the Soldiers* (1864) and *Christ with Angels* (1865), both depicting a Christ in pain and abandoned. The figures recall baroque Catholic statuary, which Manet would have seen in churches in France, Spain and Rio.

As the years went on, Manet's style softened and his subjects became more objective and everyday. The intensity of the early 1860's was not to be repeated, except perhaps in his very last oil painting, *The Bar at Folies Bergere* (1882).

The Musée d'Orsay says that *The Picnic* was Manet's 'tribute to Europe's artistic heritage', pointing out echoes of two Renaissance works: *The Pastoral Concert* by Titian (attributed to Giorgione in Manet's time) and an engraving by Marcantonio

Raimondi[11]. Indeed, Manet had told Antonin Proust that he wanted to 'remake' *The Pastoral Concert*, 'in a lighter atmosphere' (PROUST, 1913, p. 42).

Manet may have borrowed poses, but it is unlikely that his purpose was to pay tribute. According to Zola in 1867, Manet had resolved 'to forget everything he had learned in museums and not to resort to advice he had been given, nor to all the paintings he had seen' (ZOLA, 1867).

Zola summarises *The Picnic* thus, 'In the end, it is a vast outdoor ensemble, this corner of nature rendered with perfect simplicity, all this admirable page on which an artist has placed the particular and rare elements that are within him'.

In 2001, the US art historian Nancy Locke was the first to note how Manet created 'hybrid' portraits in several 1861-3 paintings, blending his mother's features into figures modelled by Victorine Meurent (LOCKE, 2001, p.104).

Locke's hybridisation theory can be applied to *The Picnic*. Manet's studio models were red-haired Victorine Meurent for the nude bather, Ferdinand Leenhoff, Suzanne's sculptor brother, for the left-hand man, and Manet's two brothers modelling alternately for the right-hand. In the Courtauld study, they are all identifiably themselves.

For the definitive *Picnic*, Meurent gains brown hair and several pounds in weight, looking more like Suzanne. The left-hand man gets a fuller mouth, like Manet and Suzanne's son Leon. Both men wear white-ish trousers and this may signal Manet's own 'hybrid' presence: pale coloured trousers were unusual in 1863 Paris but were Manet's hallmark attire.

'He was invariably dressed in a jacket or waisted coat, trousers of a light colour', wrote Antonin Proust (1913, p. 44).

The right hand man, with his cane and magistrate's hat, pointing imperiously, appears to incorporate Auguste Manet. The bather's distinctive broad cheekbones and centre-parted, wavy hair are exactly those of Manet's mother.

The Picnic was Manet's 'This Is Me': a taking of account of himself and his close family, in Renaissance poses within a remembered Rio forest. Tropical wildlife and classical references were ingredients, but not the whole. For Zola, this was the 'admirable page', where Manet placed his inner self. Locke added the underlying tensions of the Freudian 'family romance', a concept involving 'desire, propriety, repression, and transgression within the family'. (LOCKE, 2001, p. 44).

Just as Zola had, pre-Freud, and Locke did this century, in 1983, in one of his final writings, the unjustly criticised

Antonio Bento highlighted the power of the unconscious, 'One knows that, in all the arts, the role of the unconscious is greater than that of the conscious and of reason,' he wrote. (BENTO, 1983, p. 183)[12].

'Manet was the first painter to paint through his own instincts', said Matisse. Picasso was so obsessed by *The Picnic* that he painted 27 versions of it, along with numerous drawings and prints.

Manet's original title for *The Picnic* at the Salon des Refusées in 1863 was *Le Bain - The Bath*, or *The Bathing*.

In his 1922 study of 1850's Brazilian social life, Gilberto Freyre wrote, 'Rich and poor took a sheer delight in bathing'. He cited a U.S. traveller's astonishment at seeing 'a number of persons of both sexes and all ages, bathing indiscriminately together in the waters of the river, in a state of entire nudity' (FREYRE, 1922, p. 626). It is easy to envision delighted young cadets stumbling upon a naked woman calmly drying herself in the sun.

In a studio notebook found after his death, Manet had logged *The Picnic* as '*La Partie Carrée*', a 'squared meeting', often used to imply a foursome with partner swapping.

For accuracy's sake, it might now have a fourth baptism: *Le Déjeuner dans la Forêt Atlantique*.

NOTAS

1. Translations from other idioms were provided by the author of this text, except when otherwise stated.

2. 'Tendo gravado em sua retina supersensível a intensidade da luz brasileira, Manet foi sobretudo o primeiro pintor contemporâneo a [...] recorrer diretamente às grandes chapadas de cores simples e puras'.

3. ' […] da alcoviteira solícita tão conhecida dos tempos dos nossos bisavós, da negra que tanto gostava de tornar-se cúmplice de amores difíceis ou perseguidos.'

4. See http://www.musee-orsay.

5. '"Mais lógico, humano e natural teria sido que o pintor se inspirasse em recordações e imagens da vida do Rio."

6. A posthumous edition of his poetry containing the full ten verses of 'La Fille des Îles', with some small changes to the original words.

7. "Quand, lasse de songer, Olympia s'éveille / Le printemps entre au bras du doux messager noir; / C'est l'esclave, à la nuit amoureuse pareille, / Qui vient fleurir le jour délicieux à voir; / L'auguste jeune fille en qui la flamme veille".

8. 'Onde vira Manet escravas pretas se não no Rio?'

9. Letter of 26 February, Manet says that he now has two correspondents, one of them recent.

10. *Portrait of M. and Mme Manet* (1861) and *The Spanish Singer* (1861).

11. See http://www.musee-orsay.

12. "Até mesmo pelo fato de saber-se que o papel do inconsciente é maior do que o do consciente e da razão, em todas as artes."

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