



John Constable

Life's a pretty picnic

French artists have appropriated alfresco dining ever since Édouard Manet scandalised Paris with his *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, yet many charming scenes were painted in Britain, too, and are worth rediscovering, says Deborah Nicholls-Lee





Preceding pages: John Constable's *The Wheat Field*, 1816, may be bucolic, but the picnic it shows will be brief, mere sustenance before continuing the toil of the harvest. Above: Claude Monet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Luncheon on the grass*), 1865–66, with its full skirts and languid gentlemen, is by contrast, a scene of indulgence, albeit tamer than Édouard Manet's earlier picnic scene

THE verdant scene in Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), art's best-known evocation of the delights of picnicking, contrasts with the smothering crowds at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. A naked woman—perhaps fresh from a dip in the river—lounges in a glade with two fully dressed men, as another woman, wrapped in diaphanous cloth, bathes in the background and an upset food basket in the foreground hints at moral transgression. The shock value of this scenario—a female nude was perfectly acceptable in mythological scenes, yet scandalous in a modern context, especially when her nakedness was underscored by clothed men—together with the picture's monumental proportions (it measures nearly 82in by 104in), made it an instant talking point. *The Foursome*, Manet's nickname for his painting, would go on to inspire Claude Monet's (much tamer) *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1865–66), now in the same French gallery; and James Tissot's 1870 *Picnic*, where the diners may all be elegantly dressed, but the stage is set for yet more sensual indulgence.

A potted history of picnicking

The picnic had an unlikely beginning: it took place, for the most part, indoors. Aristocrats from 18th-century France were early adopters, laying out a lavish spread, sometimes accompanied by music and dancing. Each diner would contribute to the selection and sample small amounts of each dish—hence the name, which is thought to derive from *piquer* (to take a little bit) and *nic*, an old French word for something of little value.

When the French Revolution dispersed the nobility, the pastime extended to foreign shores. In London, the decadent Pic Nic Society of 1801—which purportedly included the Prince of Wales among its members—required attendees to bring six bottles of wine each, together with a tasty delicacy.

On verdant country estates, it made sense to take the tradition outside, where it would stay as the Victorian era dawned. Although shop-bought finger food has largely supplanted the Victorian array of home-baked pies, cold cuts and potted meats, cakes and neatly cut sandwiches have remained a staple and the wicker food hamper that once accompanied gentlemen on the long journeys to their country piles is still *de rigueur* for discerning picnickers at Henley and Glyndebourne.





In *The Picnic* by Wynford Dewhurst, the seated figures at their repast are incidental to the Impressionistic play of light in the trees

Although these French picnics loom largest in art history, across the Channel, depictions of alfresco meals were also being painted and deserve their moment in the sun, whether it's John Constable's bucolic *The Wheat Field* (1816) or William Kay Blacklock's series of charming paintings of affluent ladies and their children taking long lunches in the open air. Although Constable shows rural labourers grabbing a quick bite between the wheat sheaves, the early picnic was the preserve of the leisured class: 'You needed to have time... [and] the funds to have the picnic prepared for you,' notes Amelia Yeates, associate professor in Art History at Liverpool Hope University and a specialist in British 19th-century art. It wasn't until the 1800s that picnicking moved into public spaces and was taken up by the middle classes: 'That's probably why we see a lot of 19th-century

'The subject takes the eye on a circular tour around the picnic rug'

examples in art... because that's the period when it became more popular and widespread.'

The subject certainly proved appealing for artists, taking, as it does, the eye on a circular tour around the picnic rug and the interactions among diners, which made it ideally suited to genre paintings. In Henry Nelson O'Neill's *A Picnic* (1857), a cheeky child points at a suitor seeking the attention of an indifferent woman. Across the rug, a man conveys the clumsiness of table-less dining, stooping over a plate piled high with food, with a boy restraining a dog. In O'Neill's picture, as in

George Goodwin Kilburne's *The Picnic*, painted more than 40 years later, the tablecloth glows white in the middle—a symbol, perhaps, of the wholesomeness and innocence of alfresco eating, often repeated in the women's attire. Yet, on the periphery, where the scene edges into shadowy woods, small social infractions or moments of intrigue are taking place, from carelessly discarded possessions to whispered conversations and courting couples. 'In the 1850s and 1860s, there were a lot of these kinds of works with the coming together of people of different ages and sexes,' which, says Dr Yeates, provided 'these little vignettes of everyday life'.

For landscape artists, the picnic offered a pretext for celebrating the best of the British countryside, with paintings such as Joseph Murray Ince's watercolour *A Picnic on Richmond Hill* (undated, early to mid →



So much more than a picnic: Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* caused a stir on its unveiling in 1863 and still challenges viewers today

19th century) seeing the majority of the composition given over to the dramatic view. The 1900s ushered in Impressionist works by James Charles, Wynford Dewhurst and William Charles Penn, who showed picnickers immersed in a dappled landscape, enveloped by Nature, with the play of light on the leaves as interesting as the people in the scenes.

In her posthumous memoir *Sophie, An Edwardian Childhood* (2012), Sophie Leighton Harding, daughter of historical genre

painter Edmund Blair Leighton, notes that picnics 'were not at all the light-hearted affairs they are today, but meals which involved complicated preparation', as well as 'food, plates, cloth and cutlery... packed in a large hamper'. All this made a fascinating ensemble of interesting shapes and textures for an artist, from the glazed skin of a roast chicken to the reflective surfaces of porcelain and metal. Yet, as idyllic as the scenes may seem, most contain a seed of disorder. In J. M. W. Turner's

1831 drawing of a picnic by Richmond Bridge, the threat is the weather. Gusting winds have snatched a gentleman's hat from his head, the ladies' ample skirts stream behind them and two abandoned parasols look set to take flight. Despite this potential for mayhem, Cyrus Redding, Turner's friend, recalls that picnicking revived the habitually 'terse' artist, who, having once invited friends to eat alfresco in the West Country, was 'frank and merry... as the hospitable giver of the feast'.



A fictional feast

As well as in art, the picnic plays a key role in some of Britain's best reads.

- In Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815; right), it is a plot device that allows Emma to reveal her foolishness in cruelly snubbing the spinster Miss Bates and receive Mr Knightley's admonishment, which causes her feelings for him to surface
- Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997) is bookended by picnics. The first unleashes havoc as Joe's proposal to Clarissa is derailed by an accident that throws him into the path of a stalker. The river picnic at the end of the novel does the reverse, offering resolution by facilitating a conversation that ties up the plot's key threads
- In *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, the extravagant picnic Roland Lansdell stages to seduce Isabel Gilbert yields wonderful descriptions of food, from jellies that 'quivered in the sunlight' to a 'magnificent game pie... the crust of which was as highly glazed as a piece of modern Wedgwood'
- Picnics evoke the joy of outdoor adventure in Enid Blyton's 'Famous Five' series,



where the merry mystery-solvers wash down 'lashings of hard-boiled eggs' and 'heaps of fruit' with inordinate amounts of ginger beer. In *Five go off in a Caravan*, they sit watching the sun set over a lake. 'I don't know why,' says George. 'But the meals we have on picnics always taste so much nicer than the ones we have indoors'



Excitable dogs—in everything from oil paintings to book illustrations—are another mainstay of the picnic tableau, ready to rush in and upturn the entire spread at any moment. At other times, the tension comes from within the group of diners. In Kilburne's *Picnic*, the abundance of recumbent wine bottles suggests the party might have over-indulged and a couple exploit the distraction provided by a musician to slip away on their own.

One notable exception to a picnic's implicit jeopardy is Blair Leighton's *A Picnic Party* from 1920, a rose-tinted re-creation of the

Everything idyllic about a shady spot, sundry goodies spread out on a rug, is captured in *The Picnic* by James Charles, even the dog waiting to swoop on an unattended sausage

Regency era 100 years before. The spread, with its decorative china and neatly sliced cake, is all too perfect. The diners' hair is unruffled by the summer breeze, the basket's contents are secure and the only animals, grazing cows, are at a safe distance across the river. Where the music-making in Kilburne's *Picnic* leads a high-spirited diner to put her hands to her ears, here the ladies seem enchanted by their companion's turn

on the guitar. All well and good, but somehow the result is less satisfying. Art history—and our own experience—has taught us that the best picnics are imperfect: the anticipation of a comic disruption being the hallmark of dining outdoors. After all, as Henry James writes in *Roderick Hudson* (1875), an ideal 'rustic luncheon' is 'not so good as to fail of an amusing disorder, nor yet so bad as to defeat the proper function of repasts'. 🐕