

## *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*

What we're looking at is a painting completed by Edouard Manet in the last two years of his life, when he was already suffering badly from the effects of the disease that would kill him, at the age of 51, in 1883. The condition was a result of an untreated syphilis infection.

Apparently one early owner of this painting was the composer Emmanuel Chabrier.

That is all the biographical information I'll go into; from now on we'll concentrate on the picture.

The painting itself does what the title says it does: it depicts a bar at the music-hall, or the theatre (it's hard to find a precise English equivalent) known as the Folies-Bergère. In the foreground there is a marble counter with various bottles arranged on it, together with a glass bowl containing oranges or mandarins and a glass with two flowers standing in water.

Behind the counter, with her hands resting on the edge, stands a young woman wearing a grey skirt, a dark velvet jacket fastened by a line of buttons and with a low-cut lacy collar. Her blonde hair is cut in a fringe in front and gathered behind. There is a large gold locket on a black ribbon around her neck. She has a gold bangle on her right wrist, two small earrings, and a corsage of pink flowers at her breast.

Everything we see is painted in a style of dash and brilliance, with textures such as the velvet of the barmaid's jacket, the waxy skin of the oranges, and the crinkled gold foil on the champagne bottles rendered beautifully. The reflections in the various glass surfaces are especially vivid and convincing.

Behind the barmaid is a large mirror, the lower edge of whose golden frame can be seen just above the marble counter, running along the whole width of the painting parallel to the counter and only, apparently, a few inches behind the barmaid. She hasn't got much space to move in. Most of the picture-plane is occupied by what is reflected in the mirror ... and here the puzzles begin.

Because whereas it's possible to describe what's in front of the mirror, that's to say on our side of the mirror, reasonably

objectively, as I've just done, what's behind the mirror or within it is much less easy to pin down. Is it a mirror at all? In some ways it behaves like a mirror – in other ways it doesn't. Let's assume that it is, and look at what it reflects.

Reading upwards from the gold frame, then, we see the marble counter, and we see the left-hand end of it, which isn't visible in the space on our side of the mirror. We can see that the marble is an inch or so thick, and the corner is slightly rounded. On it there stands a group of bottles including one that looks like the bottle of Bass on the counter in front, a bottle of some reddish wine or liqueur, and some bottles of champagne which are mostly behind her arm. But the ones in the mirror are not where they ought to be: in front, the red liqueur and the beer are level with each other, in the mirror the beer is considerably nearer to us.

On the right-hand side of the picture, behind the dish of mandarins, the gold frame of the mirror is visible again. But here too things begin to go awry, because the line of the frame on that side is an inch or two lower than the one on the left, and in fact is tilted downwards slightly from right to left. If the barmaid weren't there, we could see that the two parts of the frame wouldn't join up. (As a matter of fact, that part of the frame is tilted exactly as much from the horizontal as the barmaid's head is tilted from the vertical). Above the line of the frame there's the back of a young woman – the barmaid's reflection is how it's usually described – who, unlike the young woman who's facing us and standing upright, seems to be leaning slightly forward, engaged in some transaction with the man in the top hat, most of whom is out of the picture altogether, and whose face is sketchily painted very close to hers. I'll come back to her in a minute.

Behind the reflection of the immediate foreground, the bottles and the counter, we see a reflection of the interior of the theatre, with spectators behind a gilded balcony front, chandeliers, glowing lights on the columns, what looks like a cloud of tobacco smoke between the barmaid's head and the reflection of her head, and high up in the top left-hand corner, a trapeze with the feet of the artiste at the far end of her swing poised above the crowd in the balcony and about to swing back towards us.

There are many puzzles here, but to make sense of the space, we need to know how the Folies-Bergère was arranged. The auditorium

was horseshoe-shaped, with a balcony running all the way around supported on columns. At the back of the balcony was a promenade with bars like this one spaced along it, and behind each of the bars was a large mirror. The spaces between the large columns in the area at the back apparently represent the mirrors on the far side.

However ...

If we, the spectators, are standing on a balcony like the one we can see on the far side, then where is it? If we look at the reflection of the counter again, we can see nothing supporting it. It seems to be floating in mid-air above the crowd below, and so must we be too, if we are standing in front of it. Certainly, if this side of the balcony has a front like the one the women in the background are resting their elbows on, it's invisible. It should be there beyond the reflection of the counter, and so should the reflection of the spectators who must be sitting at this side like the ones across the way.

Then there's the reflection of the barmaid, which I mentioned a minute ago. If the mirror is parallel with the plane of the picture surface, then her reflection should be directly behind the barmaid and invisible to us. And yet it's some way to one side; and where on our side is the man whose face is so close to hers, and whose reflection we see on that side? Those two figures, the man and the reflected barmaid, are seen as they would be if firstly there were a man in front of her, and secondly if the mirror were swung away from us, the right-hand side close and the left further away; but the slight tilt in the frame at the bottom, which I mentioned before, implies that if it's swung at all, it's swung the other way.

All very puzzling, if we take it literally, if we think of a painting as a window into a space. This space doesn't seem to make sense.

Now a few days ago I was in Liverpool, and I thought I'd visit the Walker Art Gallery. One of the paintings I saw there – one of their most popular exhibits – is probably much better known for its title than for the name of the artist who painted it. It's by Frederick William Yeames, and it's called "And When Did You Last See Your Father?" It's a narrative painting, showing a scene from the English Civil War, and it shows a little boy of about six years old being interrogated by Roundhead officers. The scene's taking place in the comfortable parlour of a large manor-house, and the little boy is dressed in bright blue satin, his golden hair neatly brushed, his

hands politely folded behind him as he stands on a little stool to give his evidence. His trembling mother and sisters are waiting in the background hoping that the honest little chap won't betray his father. The Roundheads – there are seven of them, each clearly characterised – are behaving strictly, and efficiently, as we might expect, but not brutally; indeed the Roundhead sergeant seems to be comforting the little boy's older sister, who's weeping. It's effectively composed, as if an experienced stage director had blocked out the scene; and the draughtsmanship is secure; and the handling of the paint is immaculate; and everything works, from the perspective of the room in which they're standing to the shine on the sergeant's steel helmet to the little boy's pale profile against the dark oak panelling.

Yeames was only a year or two younger than Manet, and "And When Did You Last See Your Father?" was painted in 1878, only a year or two before Manet painted "A Bar at the Folies-Bergère". They were exact contemporaries, and their paintings embody two utterly different conceptions of art – they almost belong to two different worlds.

I think the main difference between them goes right to the heart of what we call modernism in all the arts, not just in painting. It has to do with what the subject is – what they're about. The Yeames is, of course, about the figures, the personages, the individuals in their historical-dramatic situation. It's a literal sort of painting, in that it depicts the space with a one-to-one easy-to-read correspondence between the image and the actuality, but it's also a very literary painting: it looks like the illustration to a historical novel. And that, I think, is how it was read and enjoyed by its first public, and by the probably millions of people who have seen and enjoyed it since in reproduction.

But here's a thought-experiment. Let's imagine a full description of that Civil War scene in words – we haven't got time to do it now, but let's imagine it done. It would be perfectly possible. There are no puzzles about mirrors and reflections and things in the wrong place: everything is easily and immediately readable.

Then let's imagine we give that description to another artist, of equivalent skill in draughtsmanship and composition and the handling of paint, one whose ability to convey character through facial expression was the equal of Yeames's, and let him or her paint

a picture on a canvas of the same size and shape. It would be a different painting, but would it differ substantially in ways that are important to the way the painting works? I don't think so.

Effectively, functionally, it would be the same picture. It would move a spectator in the same way. What there is in Yeames's painting that excites admiration for the skill of the artist or arouses compassion or empathy for the characters in the scene would do just the same in this one.

Now imagine the same experiment carried out with the Manet.

Well, would that be possible at all? We could describe what's in front of the mirror more or less unambiguously, but as for what's beyond it – we've already seen how difficult that is. There are too many passages that are ambiguous: what's that patch of lighter pigment under the marble counter in the reflection, between the barmaid's right arm and the champagne bottles? Is it a leg for the counter to stand on, or is it something happening down on the lower level among the spectators? No, it can't be that, because if we look closer it seems to be in front of the marble in the mirror, not below it. And then there is the effect of the painted surface itself, which is so important a part of our experience of the picture: the way the paint is scumbled in the handling of the flowers in the barmaid's corsage, and in the great chandelier, and in the massing of the spectators on the balcony. It's Manet's particular touch, his hand, his brushstrokes, that matter in passages like these. I don't think we could describe this picture in words with anything like the clarity and accuracy with which we can describe "And When Did You Last See Your Father?"

So the thought experiment fails at the very first hurdle. Long before we get to the difficulty of painting an equivalent picture by reading a description of this one, we can't even find the words to say exactly what's there. The important things about the Yeames can be put into words: the important things about the Manet cannot. That's why I can stand in front of this one and describe the Yeames, and the important things about it come through, but I couldn't stand in the Walker Art Gallery and describe the Manet and hope the important things would come through. Yeames's picture is a window on something behind it, which is the subject, the important thing about the picture: the surface isn't really important, provided it does its job of representing without confusing or being

ambiguous. In Manet's picture, the painted surface itself is as important as the subject. If Manet had wanted to paint a window, he'd have been perfectly able to; and if he had, the things that puzzle us in the depiction of space would all be solved and clear and readable. But he wasn't interested in windows.

And this is the difference I mentioned before, the great chasm that divides modernism from what it was reacting against. The modernists in painting, from the Impressionists through Cezanne to Picasso and beyond, were interested not only in the things that painting depicted – they were interested in the very nature of depiction itself. Painting became self-conscious in their hands. The modernists in literature – James Joyce, Virginia Woolf – show narrative becoming self-conscious in the same way. It was no longer necessary to find a grand, noble, dramatic, historical, religious subject for your work of art or literature to be taken seriously: the thoughts passing through the mind of an ordinary man during an ordinary day in Dublin, or an ordinary woman on her way to buy flowers in London, or the way light flickers and divides in a mirror, or the way the sun glows as it sinks behind the smoke of a railway station – the substance of daily life, especially modern life with all its glitter and variety, was more than enough material for the new self-conscious consciousness to work on. A little later, Picasso's most profound and revolutionary explorations of the nature of seeing and representation were conducted on the most ordinary and everyday subjects: a pipe, a bottle, a newspaper on a table.

And that's why the only thing in this painting that's anything like a story, the transaction on the right-hand side of the picture between the man and the barmaid, is depicted so briskly and so casually. If Yeames, or his colleagues among the Victorian narrative painters, had depicted a bar at the Folies-Bergère, you can bet that this transaction would have been at the very centre of the painting, and the picture would be called something like "Temptation", and we'd be invited to wonder about whether the barmaid was tempting the man to drink, or whether he was tempting her to come away with him and lose whatever remained of her virtue. For Manet, it was no more important than the oranges.

But I still haven't mentioned the greatest mystery of all, an enigma so profound that even if we solved the difficulty of how to describe

the rest of the painting in words, we'd still have to throw up our hands in despair at the impossibility of resolving it, and it's this: what does her expression mean? What is she thinking about? How on earth do we describe it? It is the most unreadable expression I know in any painting. It is far more mysterious and enigmatic than that smirking Florentine we know as the Mona Lisa. At the heart of this scene of pleasure, of glittering light and the sensuous richness of a dozen different textures, with the promise of delicious things to eat and drink, with music (you can almost hear the band) and conversation and laughter and applause as the trapeze artist swings fearlessly across the auditorium, with the hint of sexual bargaining as well (the Folies-Bergère was well known for that) – at the very centre of this world of brilliant surfaces, at the very point to which our attention is led by the line of her arms and the buttons on her jacket, there is this pretty young face expressing that profound, inexplicable ... What is it, sadness? Regret? Unease? Alienation? Her face is flushed; it might be simply that she's warm under all those lights; it might be the flush that suffuses the cheeks of a young child kept too long from her bed. She's by no means a child, but for all the corseted fullness of her figure, she does look young; she looks innocent; at the same time, we wouldn't be surprised to learn that the conversation in the mirror between her reflection and the man in the top hat concerns her availability for quite other purposes than pouring glasses of wine and selling oranges.

But perhaps there's a clue in that. Which is the real girl, this one, or the one in the mirror? The reflection is displaced: is she displaced in another way as well – made strange, made different, a Mr Hyde to a Dr Jekyll (which Stevenson wrote, incidentally, only a year or two after this picture was painted)? Is she two people, one whose character is as shallow as that of the man in the hat, as shallow as everything else in the mirror, only as deep as the glass itself, no more truly there than anything else in that glittering surface, because it's all surface – and the other who is as complex and profound as the expression on her face, a look that defies all description?

I said that “And When Did You Last See Your Father?” could be the illustration to a novel, but “A Bar at the Folies-Bergère” is nothing like an illustration. It's more like a novel itself, compressed into a single image. Nothing shorter than a novel, anyway, would begin to plumb the depths of the character who seems to be standing

patiently, thinking of something else, in a dream, abstracted, miles away – all those expressions that mean not there. The one in the mirror is not really there, and the one who is really there is not there either. She's somewhere else, thinking of her lover, or her debts, or her parents in the village she comes from, who haven't heard from her for months; or her little sister who has consumption ... or thinking of nothing. And of course she can't think really, she's not real at all – she's a painted surface, just like the reflection that isn't a reflection.

But these reflections on reality (we can't get away from reflections) are right at the heart of modernism, that astonishing movement in all the arts that was fertilised by Baudelaire, germinated with the Impressionists, and grew throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century to burst into a brilliant and fertile flowering with Picasso and Braque, with Stravinsky, with Joyce. In Wallace Stevens's great poem about modernism, "The Man With the Blue Guitar", he has the guitarist faced with the accusation that he does not play things as they are.

The man replied, "Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are."

They wanted "And When Did You Last See Your Father?" But what they got was "A Bar at the Folies-Bergère", and Cézanne's "Grandes Baigneuses", and Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" – and "The Rite of Spring", and "Ulysses", and "The Waste Land" – and jazz, and the cinema, and the whole great twentieth-century cornucopia of beauty and strangeness and truth, and a new kind of artistic consciousness, which was really a re-working of an old consciousness, a making explicit something that true artists of every

period have always known: that the work of art is not only about the things it depicts, it is about itself as well. As Wallace Stevens says later in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* –

Poetry is the subject of the poem,  
 From this the poem issues and  
 To this returns.

This is how art is different from science. Science progresses: it proceeds by falsifying what came before, by providing better and truer explanations. Later science is better than earlier science.

But in art, there is no progression. Later art is not better than earlier art. Revolutions in art – such as Impressionism, and Cubism, and the whole enterprise of modernism – are all, at bottom, attempts to get back to something that had been lost sight of. The tomb-painters of ancient Egypt were interested not only in depicting everyday life – fowling in the marches, hunting with a chariot, dancing – they were interested in making beautiful patterns on a flat surface. Leonardo da Vinci was concerned not only to paint a likeness of that woman I was so rude about a few minutes ago – he was concerned with the fascination of applying paint so as to suggest the way air casts a soft veil over the rocks in the distance. Vermeer was deeply interested in representing the appearance of a young girl with a pearl earring and her mouth slightly open – and he was equally interested in the way he could represent her three-dimensionalness by painting the highlight in her left eye in a slightly different place from the one in her right. The Chinese artist who painted a branch of bamboo on a porcelain pot was trying not only to make it look like bamboo, but also to dispose the line of the branch and the leaves across the curved surface in a way that would be beautiful even if it meant nothing. The marks in soft black crayon that Seurat made on rough paper look just like the figure of a woman that he intended them to, but we can also see the sensuous pleasure he took in the application of the pigment, the way the light seems to soften and gather around the edges where the pigment catches only the high parts of the paper and lets the tiny depressions remain white. The unknown, the immensely ancient geniuses who painted the bison, the horses, the lions on the cave

walls of Lascaux and Chauvet took the greatest of care to represent them accurately, but that wasn't their only motivation: we can also see a delight in the rhythmic arrangement of the figures, an awareness of the contours of the cave and how they could be used to add liveliness and movement to the shapes they outlined with ochre and carbon.

Great art has always had this double character, and the greatest art is perhaps where we see the two things in perfect balance. That's the real difference between "A Bar at the Folies-Bergère" and "And When Did You Last See Your Father?" Yeames and all the other Victorian narrative painters were only interested in half of what there was to be interested about. Manet was interested in all of it. "A Bar at the Folies-Bergère" is about a bar at the Folies-Bergère, it's about the mystery of that unfathomable expression on this ordinary young woman's face, it's about those legs suspended at the very end of the acrobat's swing, it's about champagne and oranges and tobacco smoke and chandeliers and fashionable dress; but it's also about seeing, and about recording the way the light glistens on those oranges, and the way things in a mirror are different from things in front of our eyes; it's about the sensation of sight and the mysteries of representation; it's about painting itself.