



TOO GOOD TO EAT

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Jan van Kessel (1641–1680) (attributed to) and Jan van Kessel the elder (1626–1679) (circle of), *Still Life with Cheese*, c. 1650, 16.5 (x) 20.3 cm, The Holburne Museum, Bath

- This would have been described as a '**little breakfast**', a selection of simple foods, such as bread and cheese, plain tableware like the pewter plate and the rush-covered carafe. But on close examination is a strange collection of foodstuffs. A slightly mouldy cheese and a rotting lemon. You might wonder about the small white worms on the table, don't worry they are ragged comfits, sugar-coated nuts, seeds or strips of cinnamon.
- So we are off to a simple although slightly queasy start. Let's go back to the beginning and look at some basic food items.

NOTES

1. Egyptian
2. Roman,
3. Medieval,
4. Renaissance,

5. Nathaniel Bacon,
6. Dutch Golden Age,
7. Nathaniel Bacon
8. Victorian,
9. French, Renoir Galet
10. Dutch van Gogh Potato Eaters
11. Xmas,
12. Modern food -
 1. dinner table,
 2. Warhol soup
 3. Roy Lichtenstein - Still Life With Crystal Bowl, via [scottzagar.com](https://www.scottzagar.com)
 4. Wayne Thiebaud - Cakes, 1963
 5. Flesh dress, eat art movement

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Bing's Chat feature was used to assist with the research and references are given where appropriate.

<https://researchingfoodhistory.blogspot.com/> a website dedicated to those researching food history

<https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/food-in-art-history>

<https://artuk.org/discover/stories/food-and-feasting-in-european-art-history> The exhibition 'Feast & Fast: The Art of Food in Europe, 1500–1800' at The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (26th November 2019 – 26th April 2020) reinforces the notion that 'we are what we eat'.



A painted ancient Egyptian limestone fragment dating to around 2500 B.C. depicts servants baking bread

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- **Bread and beer** were the staple food items in ancient Egypt and they are also the products most frequently found in the tombs. Cereal growing was the most important farming activity for the region and was made possible by the periodical flooding of the Nile.
- But what did they actually taste like. You might think we will never know but a team in Queensland, Australia has isolated and grown yeast from an Egyptian tomb and used it to make bread. Their next project is to make beer using other yeast strains and by studying ancient Egyptian beer recipes. So will soon be able to eat a genuine ancient Egyptian meal of bread and beer.

NOTES

- The ancient Egyptians had a fairly simple diet. Bread and beer were the two staples of their diet². They also ate fruits,

vegetables and sometimes fish³. Meat, poultry and dairy products were available but were considered a luxury mostly for the rich³.

- Source: Conversation with Bing, 08/03/2023
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- (2) Ancient Egyptian Food. <https://www.experience-ancient-egypt.com/ancient-egyptian-culture/ancient-egyptian-life/ancient-egyptian-food> Accessed 08/03/2023.
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Wall painting from Pompeii (around A.D. 70) depicting autumn produce, grapes, apples, and pomegranates overflowing a large glass bowl, next to a tilting amphora and a terracotta pot of preserved fruit

- What about the Romans? This is a wall painting from Pompeii (around A.D. 70) depicting autumn produce, grapes, apples, and pomegranates overflowing a large glass bowl, next to a tilting amphora and a terracotta pot of preserved fruit.
- The Romans had three varieties of apple and 30 varieties of pear. They believed that wine was a daily necessity and it was drunk by slaves, peasants and aristocrats alike, men and women. Greek wine was the most highly valued but from the 2nd century BC Southern Rome developed its own high quality wines.
- One of the most important wine centres was on the slopes of Vesuvius so when the area was destroyed by its eruption in 78 AD prices rose and there was a rapid replanting including vineyards planted nearer to Rome. This led to a wine surplus and prices dropping putting wine producers out of business. Not only that but the large number of vineyards meant fewer fields for grain which led to a food shortage.
- This demonstrates the interaction between major events and food shortages and prices. We are experiencing it today with

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which before the war was the world's fourth largest exporter of wheat.

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Giampietrino (active 1500–1550), *The Last Supper* (copy after Leonardo da Vinci), c. 1520, 302 × 785 cm, Royal Academy of Arts

Giampietrino (active 1500–1550), *The Last Supper* (copy after Leonardo da Vinci), c. 1520, 302 × 785 cm, Royal Academy of Arts

- This is a copy of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* painted by Giampietrino.
- According to Matthew's Gospel the Last Supper was a Passover meal consisting of unleavened bread and wine. Archeologists confirm this and add that it would also often contain bean stew, lamb, olives, bitter herbs, fish sauce, and dates.
- The Torah's Book of Exodus, Chapter 12, describes one Passover meal, “[lamb] roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs”.
- However, Leonardo's painting shows something else that the recent restoration and this copy have helped identify. It is a seafood dish reflecting the type of meal that Leonardo would have eaten. On closer examination one professor of art concluded that the fish was a chunk of eel garnished with a

lemon or orange. A cookbook found in Leonardo's library backs this up with two recipes for eel that produce a dish that looks like the one in the painting.

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<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/how-to-read-it-copy-of-leonardo-da-vinci-last-supper?authuser=1>



Peasants sharing a simple meal of bread and drink; *Livre du roi Modus et de la reine Ratio*, 14th century (Bibliothèque nationale)

Peasants sharing a simple meal of bread and drink; *Livre du roi Modus et de la reine Ratio*, 14th century (Bibliothèque nationale)

- Moving on to the Middle Ages every day foods included cabbages, beans, eggs, oats and brown bread. Occasionally cheese, bacon and poultry. All classes drank beer and ale but milk was usually only drunk by the young.
- Rich and poor ate pottage, a thick soup made by boiling vegetables and grain with fish or meat added if available. Vegetables typically would be carrots, cabbage, turnips and swede. Herbs were used to give flavour, such as caraway, nutmeg, mace, cardamom, ginger and pepper.
- The most common sweetener was honey and those living near the sea or near a lake would eat a lot of fish which was dried, smoked or salted to preserve it over the winter.
- Everything was cooked as it was believed raw fruit and vegetables caused disease, one cookbook warned, "**Beware of green salads and raw fruits, for they will make your master**

sick".

NOTES

- Nutmeg was imported from the Banda Islands in Indonesia in the 14th century. Nutmeg is the seed of a tree that is native to Indonesia, while mace is the outer covering of the nutmeg seed. Both nutmeg and mace have a warm, spicy flavor, but nutmeg is more intense and mace is more delicate.

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Miniature of Richard II dining with the Dukes of York, Gloucester and Ireland. Jean de Wavrin, *Recueil des chroniques d'Angleterre* ('Collection of the Chronicles of England', Volume III), c.1470–80, British Library

Miniature of Richard II dining with the Dukes of York, Gloucester and Ireland. Jean de Wavrin, *Recueil des chroniques d'Angleterre* ('Collection of the Chronicles of England', Volume III), c.1470–80, British Library

- The wealthy would have spectacular dishes to show off their wealth. Animals such as peacocks and swans were stuffed and seals and even whales were created from other foods. Jellies and custards were died with bright colours.
- The most spectacular dishes were called sotiltees ('subtleties') and used sugar to create castles, ships and famous scenes. (CLICK) Here we see a ship made of sugar being carried by a servant. They were known as 'warners' as they warned or notified the guests that the main food dishes were coming.
- There were no courses, everything was laid out together and sweet and savoury were mixed either in the same dish or in separate dishes placed together on the table.
- Note there is roast pig on the table and bread rolls and the only

only eating implement is a knife. Forks were introduced in England in the early 1600s but not widely used until the 18th century.

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Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526/7-1593), *Portrait with Vegetables (The Greengrocer)*, c. 1590



Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526/7-1593), *Fruit Basket*, c. 1590, 56 x 42 cm, French and Company

Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526/7-1593), *Fruit Basket*, c. 1590, 56 x 42 cm, French and Company, art dealer New York, image Wikimedia Commons.

Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526/7-1593), *Portrait with Vegetables (The Greengrocer)*. Image via Wikimedia Commons

- Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526/7-1593) was a sixteenth-century Italian artist who painted standard, unoriginal paintings until 1562, when he was 36, and he was invited to become court portraitist at Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II's Imperial Court at Vienna and later Prague.
- It is thought that these bizarre faces constructed from food were created for the bizarre tastes of the court and its interest in riddles and puzzles. After his death he was largely forgotten until the surrealists came across his work.
- The image on the right is interesting because no matter how long we look we cannot see a face. (CLICK) Yet if I turn it round a face suddenly appears.

- Our brains are hard-wired to recognise faces although some people with prosopagnosia cannot recognise or remember faces, a terrible social problem. Such people do not recognise friends and might join a group of strangers thinking they are friends. One person was afraid they would take the wrong child home from school, another avoided all eye contact when out walking and another greeted everyone like a long lost friend.

NOTES

- Here he uses fruit such as apples and grapes on the left and vegetables such as onions and carrots on the right.

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Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–610), *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, c. 1595, 70 × 67 cm, Galleria Borghese

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, c. 1593-95, 70 × 67 cm, Galleria Borghese

- When Caravaggio painted this he had just come from Milan to the highly competitive art world of Rome. The model was his friend and companion the Sicilian artist Mario Minniti, who was 16 years old.
- At one level it is a masterwork demonstrating the skill of the artist at depicting a whole range of texture from the boy's skin to the skin of a peach.
- The basket contains many fruit all in perfect condition. There is a peach with a red blush, four bunches of grapes, a ripe pomegranate split open, four figs, two medlars, three apples, two branches with small pears. The leaves show discolouring with prominent fungal spots on the grape leaf and a white insect egg mass on another.
- The painting expresses sensuality through the boy and the ripe fruit and Caravaggio has balanced the colours and tones so

that there is a harmonious whole with the boy's face and shoulder dominating. The light falls from the left but the shadow of the boy appears to fall on the left rather than the right. Caravaggio has kept the background a neutral colour and has balanced the shadows to accentuate the head of the boy with his black hair against the light wall and the darker lower basket of fruit against the dark wall.

- It was said at the time that Caravaggio learned **“to paint flowers and fruit so well imitated that everybody came to learn from him how to create the beauty that is so popular today.”**

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Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Supper at Emmaus*, 1601, 141 × 196.2 cm, The National Gallery



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), *The Supper at Emmaus*, 1601, 141 × 196.2 cm, The National Gallery

- Another Caravaggio. This 1601 painting is *The Supper at Emmaus* and shows the scene where the resurrected Jesus appears before two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus.
- Food is highly symbolic in this painting. The scallop shell worn by Cleopas (the man gesticulating on the right) signifies that he is a pilgrim.
- On the table lies a basket of fruit, chicken and bread. The dead chicken on the plate mirrors Christ's recent death, while the bread represents the body of Christ.
- The basket hanging over the edge of the table is a common symbolic device, indicates the impermanence of life and in this case the immanent disappearance of Christ. The basket contains grapes, a reference wine and the blood of Christ and its shadow looks like a fish, another reference to Christ.

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Clara Peeters (c.1585–c.1655), *Still Life with Cheeses, Almonds and Pretzels*, c. 1615, 34.5 × 49.5 cm, Mauritshuis

Clara Peeters (c.1585–c.1655), *Still Life with Cheeses, Almonds and Pretzels*, c. 1615, 34.5 × 49.5 cm, Mauritshuis

- Painted a few years later in Antwerp by one of the best known Flemish still-life painters Clara Peeters (active 1607-1621). She is one of the few female Flemish artists of the seventeenth century.
- This type of still life is called a banquet in Holland. The symbolism is not known but it could be a Last Supper, an encouragement to temperance or simply a display of wealth.
- The dish containing almonds, figs and dates is Chinese Wanli (1572-1620) porcelain known as Kraak ware. It was sent to Amsterdam where it achieved huge profits for the traders. Its influence was enormous, it spread Chinese culture and influenced European art from the Baroque to the Rococo. It was widely copied across Europe and although initially the copies were poor the ceramic industry thrived and eventually produced real porcelain.

- The gold-plated glass is Venetian from the island of Murano which produced the best glass in Europe. The method of production was top secret but then, in 1612, a Florentine priest (Antonio Neri) wrote *The Art of Glass* in which he revealed all the secrets of Venetian glass production and this was the beginning of the end of their virtual monopoly.
- Peeters has signed the painting by placing her name on the handle of the knife. A knife hanging over the edge of a table is a common feature of Dutch still life paintings. It may be to add dramatic tension, increase the feeling of depth as it projects into our space and it hints at the impermanence of life.
- (CLICK) Peeters has added her own self-portrait to the lid of the jug behind the cheese. She introduced these self-portraits hidden in reflections in seven of her works following the example of Jan van Eyck who painted his self-portrait in the mirror in his 1434 *Arnolfini Portrait*.

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clara_Peeters

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venetian_glass knife edge table
dutch still life

Jan Davidsz. de Heem
(1606–1683/1684), *Still
Life with Lobster*, 1643,
79.2 × 102.5 cm, The
Wallace Collection



Jan Davidsz. de Heem (1606–1683/1684), *Still Life with Lobster*, 1643, 79.2 × 102.5 cm, The Wallace Collection

- This was painted in 1653 at the height of the Dutch Golden Age when there were endless pictures of flowers and arrangements of food.
- De Heem can be considered as **the inventor of these sumptuous still lifes**. Notice the attention paid to balancing colour, tones and the size of each element and its position in the composition. Earlier we saw the humble still life of Clara Peeters but **here we have unlimited expensive, high quality food packed into the frame**. This is all about wealth and abundance with no sign of transience. Such paintings were developed in Antwerp in the 1640s and were called 'pronkstillebens' (pronounced 'PRONK-still-lay-vens'), literally showpiece still lifes.
- De Heem was considered one of the greatest painters of his day and he could hardly satisfy the demand for his work. One of his portraits (of Prince William III) sold for 21000 guilders one

of the highest prices paid for any painting during the Dutch Golden Age.

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Nathaniel Bacon (1585–1627), *Cookmaid with Still Life of Vegetables and Fruit*, c.1620–5, 151 x 247.5 cm, Tate Britain

Nathaniel Bacon (1585–1627), *Cookmaid with Still Life of Vegetables and Fruit*, c.1620–5, 151 x 247.5 cm, Tate Britain

- This type of painting was very popular in the Netherlands but this was by a British artist, Nathaniel Bacon. Even more unusual was that he was an aristocrat at a time when painting was not seen as a suitable occupation for the nobility.
- He was also passionate about horticulture, which was a pastime of gentlemen as it required great wealth to import specimens from all over the world and employ teams of gardeners to do the hard work. It was very competitive and the aim was to produce as wide a range of plants as possible, to force them to grow as early in the year as possible and to grow the largest possible specimens.
- So how did Nathaniel Bacon learn to paint. He claims he was self-taught but we know he visited the Netherlands and may he received training there.
- Bacon obviously gives pride of place to two cultivars of 'cantaloupe' melons and the bunch of white turnips on her arm

are also prestigious items. The fruitfulness of nature is reinforced by the **voluptuous figure of the female servant and the relationship between her breasts and the melon.** Heaped around her are perfect specimens of exotic vegetables from the New World and Old Worlds with some showing realistic signs of powdery mildew and birds damage.

- There is an enormous variety of fruit and vegetables in the painting. The three roots on the right at first sight look like parsnips but are more probably yellow carrots and the thin light brown root is probably a skirret from central Asia. The huge cabbages are 'kraut' cabbages, which were often preserved in brine or vinegar for the winter. On the cabbage leaf in the foreground are cherries, cherry-plums and Mirabelle plums. Quinces rest on the corner of the table with greengages, plums, black and white cultivars of figs and, in the basket, peaches, plums, pears and perhaps two varieties of apples from central Asia. Interestingly rather than show perfect fruit, one of the pears has been attacked by a blackbird.
- In the background there are two people talking behind an enormous hotbed constructed of dung of the kind recommended at the time to force plants to fruit early.

NOTES

- Nathaniel Bacon was the youngest of the nine sons of Nicholas Bacon, the premier baronet of England. He was wealthy and did not paint professionally. He was a keen gardener and all the items shown are known to have been grown in Britain although not at the same time of year. At

this time almost all painters were craftsmen so Bacon was unusual. It is known he was a keen artist as there is a palette carved on his tombstone. He is credited with inventing a new type of 'Pinke' from a green weed. The name 'pinke' was used from 1598 to the mid-18th century for stil de grain yellow or yellow madder, a type of pale yellow made from yellow berries.

- His interest in horticulture was a fashionable pastime at court. His tombstone contains the inscription (translated from Latin), 'Look Traveller, this is the monument of Nathaniel Bacon, a Knight of the Bath, whom, when experience and observation had made him most knowledgeable in the history of plants, astonishingly, Nature alone taught him through his experiments with the brush to conquer Nature by Art. You have seen enough. Farewell.'
- He is known to have travelled to the Low Countries a number of times and may have received artistic training there. No other British artist of the period painted still lifes. The Antwerp artist Frans Snijders (1579–1657) was a major exponent of the genre and Bacon visited Antwerp in 1613. The display of fruit and vegetables displays the artist's skill and the illusion of real produce would be seen as a reference to Pliny the Elder's description of the grapes painted by Zeuxis which were so convincing that the birds flew down and pecked them. Cabbages made a moral point, live modestly and not to excess.
- There are marrows, squashes, pumpkins, ornamental gourds, runner beans, black and white grapes, brown-skinned onions and new fangled white turnips. A basket of

fruit with peaches, plums, pears, figs and apples; cherries and plums lie heaped on a cabbage leaf from one of the enormous specimens on the right.

- The dish on the right is **kraak ware** which was imported from China and later was copied by Delft. It had become popular only 20 years before so it was very fashionable.
- Some historians have suggested **the woman is the Ceres**, the Roman goddess of agriculture, fertility and motherly relationships.
- It celebrates the **latest achievements of gardening**, a pastime of gentlemen. It should be pointed that there were famines in 1623-24 when it was painted although thanks to advances in agriculture this has been described as 'the last peace-time famine in England'. Despite many later harvest failures and the 'hungry nineties [1690s]' the death rate never rose more than 6% and sometimes fell, unlike other European countries.
- Tradescant connection. Nathaniel Bacon was a nephew of the philosopher Sir Francis Bacon and a benefactor of John Tradescant the Elder (c.1570-1638) the English naturalist, gardener, collector and traveller, who was probably born in Suffolk. He started as head gardener to Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury at Hatfield House, and he sent Tradescant to the Low Countries for fruit trees in 1610/11. Later, Tradescant was gardener to the royal favourite George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham and after he was assassinated he was employed as Keeper of Charles I's gardens at Oatlands Palace near Weybridge. Tradescant collected curiosities which he housed in a large house

called 'The Ark', in Lambeth. The Ark was the earliest English 'Cabinet of Curiosity' and became the first museum open to the public in England, the Musaeum Tradescantianum in Vauxhall in about 1634. It became a 'must see' for visitors to London and contained 'The hand of a mermaid, the hand of a mummy ... a small piece of wood from the cross of Christ'. After his son's death it passed to Elias Ashmole who gave it to Oxford University in 1691 as the nucleus of the Ashmolean Museum.

- The painting is oil on a fine linen canvas. It is in good condition and was painted as a single layer, evenly applied with little evidence of brushstrokes.

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Willem van Mieris (1662-1747), *The Greengrocer*, 1731, 39 x 32.1 cm, Wallace Collection, London

Willem van Mieris (1662-1747), *The Greengrocer*, 1731, 39 x 32.1 cm, Wallace Collection, London

- This eighteenth century view of a greengrocer's shop works on two levels. First the artist Willem van Mieris warns us about the deceitful nature of appearance. The young woman is testing the melon to make sure it is ripe while the old woman tries to distract her by pointing out some carrots. One commentator at the time said '**Friends are like the melon, / from ten often not one is good.**'
- The painting might also refer to a classical story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The Etruscan god of seasons and vegetation **Vertumnus** tries many tricks to seduce the beautiful but aloof goddess of plant life and nature, **Pomona**. In the end he **disguises himself as an old woman** and tells her that there is a young man who truly loves her but she has no interest as she just wants to tend her garden. He returns to her over and over again in different disguises until finally he appears in his true forms and she realises she has fallen in love and the two of

them live happily ever after and their love brought abundance and fertility to the orchards and gardens of Rome.

NOTES

- Willem van Mieris was an 18th-century painter from the Northern Netherlands ¹. He was born on June 3rd, 1662 and died on January 26th, 1747 ¹. He was active in Leiden as a painter, sculptor and etcher ¹. He studied under his father Frans van Mieris the Elder who was a successful genre painter ¹.
- Willem van Mieris belonged to a group of Dutch artists based in Leiden known as the Fijnschilders ('fine painters') because of their attention to accurate, realistic detail and their smooth technique. They aimed to show each object and texture so authentically that they would seem tangible ²³.
- Source: Conversation with Bing, 08/03/2023(1) Willem van Mieris - Wikipedia.
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<<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/willem-van-mieris-a-woman-and-a-fish-pedlar-in-a-kitchen> Accessed 08/03/2023>.
- "A young woman tests the ripeness of a melon, a motif that

suggests a warning against the deceitful nature of appearance. The moralist Jacob Cats accompanied an emblem of a woman with a melon with the comment that **'Friends are like the melon, / from ten often not one is good.'**

- This painting may also refer to the seduction of Pomona by Vertumnus, disguised as an old woman, a subject from the classical author Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, XIV). Vertumnus and Pomona were the god and goddess of gardens, orchards and ripening fruit, and so were particularly appropriate deities to be evoked in the context of a greengrocer's shop. The lavish display of fruit and vegetables is rendered in minute detail and affords the artist an opportunity to display his ability to evoke a multitude of material textures in much the same way as a still-life painter." [1]

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Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, 1880-81, 130.2 × 175.6 cm, The Phillips Collection, Washington DC

Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, 1880-81, 130.2 × 175.6 cm, The Phillips Collection, Washington DC

- Jumping forward 150 years we see a lunch in nineteenth-century France consisting of mostly wine with some fruit. It is The Maison Fournaise of Chatou overlooking the Seine River and was frequented by businessmen, socialites, seamstresses, and artists.
- We see Aline Charigot (seamstress and Renoir's future wife in the foreground on the left with the affenpinscher dog), Charles Ephrussi (a wealthy collector wearing a top hat), Ellen Andrée (an actress, drinking from a glass in the centre), Jeanne Samary (an actress on the far right), Gustave Caillebotte (lower right wearing the straw hat) next to actress Angèle Legault and the Italian journalist Adrien Maggiolo. Leaning on the balustrade is the proprietor's daughter Louise-Alphonsine Fournaise and her brother, Alphonse Fournaise, Jr., both sporting traditional straw boaters and appearing to the left side of the picture. Flirting

with her and with his back to us is Baron Raoul Barbier, former mayor of colonial Saigon.

- Included in the Seventh Impressionist Exhibition in 1882, it was identified as **the best painting in the show** by three critics. It was purchased from the artist by the dealer-patron Paul Durand-Ruel and bought in 1923 (for \$125,000) from his son by industrialist Duncan Phillips, who spent a decade in pursuit of the work.[4][5] It is now in The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C
- It was acquired by the American writer, art collector, and philanthropist Duncan Phillips (1886-1966) for \$125,000, his entire year's budget. He considered it not just a masterpiece but "**one of the greatest paintings in the world.**"
- To illustrate the hold it has over people, actor Edward G. Robinson (1893-1973) is quoted as saying: "**For over thirty years I made periodic visits to Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* in a Washington museum, and stood before that magnificent masterpiece hour after hour, day after day, plotting ways to steal it**". Needless to say, he never did.

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Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890), *Potato Eaters*, 1885, 82 cm x 114 cm, Van Gogh Museum

- A change of mood from frivolity to poverty.
- This is considered Van Gogh's first masterpiece and he wanted to demonstrate his ability to represent a complex figure group to show he was a good figure painter. The painting gave rise to a lot of criticism because of its dark colours and the mistakes made representing the figures anatomically correctly although this was not Van Gogh's aim.
- He wanted to depict the harsh reality of country life, so he gave the peasants coarse faces and bony, working hands. He wanted to show in this way that they **'have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish ... that they have thus honestly earned their food'**.
- He painted the five figures in earth colours – **'something like the colour of a really dusty potato, unpeeled of course'**.

NOTES

- The *Potato Eaters* is an oil painting by Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh painted in April 1885 in Nuenen, Netherlands. It is considered Van Gogh's first masterpiece. The painting depicts a family sitting around a table sharing a simple meal of potatoes.
- The original oil sketch of the painting is at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo.
- Vincent van Gogh lived in Nuenen for two years (from December 1883 until November 1885) with his parents where his father became a pastor. This was one of the most productive periods of Van Gogh's life where he produced more than 195 paintings over a two-year period. Some of his paintings made during this time include "The Potato Eaters" and "The Parsonage Garden at Nuenen".[1]

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Salvador Dalí (1904-1989),
Autumnal Cannibalism,
1936, 65.1 × 65.1 cm, Tate

Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), *Autumnal Cannibalism*, 1936, 65.1 × 65.1 cm, Tate

- From now on, in the spirit of modern art, I play fast and loose with my theme of food.
- This is one of Salvador Dalí's greatest works. It is called **Autumnal Cannibalism**. There is what could be a beach on which we see a chest of drawers and on top two torsos. If you look closely you can see that the two figures are eating each other using bright silver cutlery. The one on the left looks female with soft milky skin and the one on the right wearing a suit could be male. The female figure has her right arm round the neck of the male and is slicing what at first looks like his flesh with a knife. However, if you look more closely you can see it is her own breast she is cutting. Her elongated breast flows across the other figure and over its shoulder and she is carving a slice from it. Sadism and masochism are combined with cannibalism and self-cannibalism.
- The painting is about unrestrained consumption and Dalí draws

us into the horror by adding detail upon detail, encouraging our eyes to penetrate further and further until we find ourselves visually consuming the painting.

- So, what is going on? It was painted in 1936, the year the Spanish Civil War started. There were atrocities on both sides—half a million people died, and a similar number fled the country but Dalí took little interest in politics. Here, he is representing **the civil war as an orgy of consumption, the Spanish people are eating themselves**. Dalí wrote about, 'These Iberian beings mutually devouring each other' and saw it as a 'pure phenomenon of natural history'. He compared his view with 'Picasso who considered it a political phenomenon'. In other words, he observed it as a scientist might observe the behaviour of ants and in the painting, you can see a group of ants surrounding a hole in the skin of the female figure. She has a flap of skin hanging off, but her flesh looks like the inside of a fruit.
- Dalí though was not an dispassionate observer, for from it, as a child he was fascinated and repulsed by watching ants consume his still living, pet bat, so for him ants represented decay and decomposition and he also said they refer to enormous sexual desire. So, for Dalí, it could be death and decay or two lovers destroying themselves through their overwhelming sexual attraction.

NOTES

- Symbols. Ants are just one of the many symbols Dalí used. The drawers in the table, for example, store sins, unconscious and secret, often sexual desires. The apple on the figures head could represent the apple used by William

Tell. Tell was a Swiss hero who resisted Austrian rule and was made to fire a crossbow bolt at an apple resting on his son's head. This was relevant to Dalí as in 1930 his father had broken off their relationship and Dalí described William Tell as 'the man whose success depends on his son's heroism'. William Tell represents a dangerous family conflict which in Freudian terms represents a father castrating his son.

- Can art change the world? Dalí is representing the Spanish Civil War using themes of sex, violence and consumption. Two figures suck, chew, cut and eat each other surrounded by food products, such as apples, nuts, bread, slices of Spanish sausage and soft pieces of meat. For Dalí the war was a lesson in natural history and so was unavoidable; to his countryman Picasso, by contrast, it was a terrible political reality and could be resolved through conflict.
- Salvador Dalí i Domènech (Figueres, Catalonia 11 May 1904-23 January 1989). Dalí had an elder brother also called Salvador who had died the year before he was born. His parents saw him as a reincarnation of his dead brother and dressed him in the same clothes and gave him the same toys. Dalí believed his father had been responsible for his brother's death and Dalí rejected and provoked his father by deliberate bed-wetting, simulated convulsions, prolonged screaming, feigned muteness and acts of random aggressiveness towards other children. Dalí first exhibited when he was 14 and even then he was recognised as someone who could become a great painter. Dalí's mother died when he was 16 leaving him devastated. The following year his father remarried his aunt and Dalí was accepted as a student at the prestigious San Fernando Academy. He

disagreed with a lot of the teaching but established a relationship with Luis Buñuel and Federico García Lorca. Lorca adored Salvador Dali and wanted a physical relationship that Dalí was too frightened to consummate.

- In 1925 (aged 21) Dalí held his first one-man exhibition and in 1929 (aged 25) he met his muse Gala (1894-1982), a Russian immigrant who was married to the Surrealist Paul Éluard. Dalí is most often associated with the Surrealists but he was formally expelled in 1934 for his reactionary political views. She divorced and married Dalí in 1934. Because of Dalí's purported fear of venereal disease and female genitalia he was said to have been a virgin when they met, and he appears to have preferred masturbation to sexual intercourse. Gala was a nymphomaniac and shared Dalí's love of money, power and notoriety. Dalí was a candaulist, that is he liked to watch Gali make love to other men (the word is based on King Candaules, pronounced can-doe-lees, who exposed his wife to one of his Ministers). Dalí was also an enthusiastic masturbator who was aroused not just by women but by objects such as church towers. He was worried about the small size of his sexual organ which he claimed gave rise to 'inextinguishable laughter' and he was also worried about the sexuality of women and he admitted to being a premature ejaculator who could achieve an orgasm just by looking.
- Autumnal Cannibalism was painted the year before Guernica. The Spanish Civil War had, on one side, General Franco's Nationalist army fighting the evils of communism and on the other the Republicans were fighting the evils of fascism. The Spanish Civil War was won by General Franco

and the Nationalists and he became a dictator of a one-party state in which the only legal party was the Falangist, a form of fascism that was anti-communist, nationalistic and supported the Roman Catholic Church. Franco remained in power until his death in 1975 when Juan Carlos became King.

- Dalí said, 'My entire ambition in the pictorial domain consists in materializing the images of concrete irrationality with the most imperialistic rage of precision.' In other words, Dalí's aim is to turn his fantasies and dreams into a real physical landscape by making them submit to his will through precise, detailed painting. Freudian theory underpins all of his interpretations of dreams and hallucinations. Dalí draws upon autobiographical material, childhood memories and his fetishes and animal symbolism. Dalí subscribed to André Breton's theory of automatism, but he opted for a method he called 'critical paranoia', a state in which one can cultivate delusions while maintaining one's sanity.
- What is Surrealism? André Breton defined it as 'Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations'. Surrealism seeks to subvert the rational basis of society and Dalí uses surrealism to attack and undermine sexual and social conventions. He had a number of personal symbols he used to represent his ideas, such as soft watches (eternity), burning giraffes (a monster of the Apocalypse), thin-legged elephants (man shackled to the earth but reaching for higher things), open drawers (the secret, hidden sins and complexes described by Freud), crutches (weaknesses but

also instruments enabling superhuman performance), eggs (hope and love), ants (death, decay and immense sexual desire), snails (the human head), grasshoppers (fear, as Dalí was very scared of grasshoppers), butterflies (the soul), silhouettes (imagination, dreams, good thoughts and motivational power as well as evil inner conflicts and inhibitions) and lion's heads (sexual savagery).

- In this painting we see the Spanish countryside in the background but with disturbing changes. The mountain on the horizon looks like a sleeping dog and a gnarled tree looks like a man with branches for arms and legs. The long shadows of the setting sun suggest an end is coming and the end is also suggested by the title, 'autumnal'. But we don't know what is coming to an end is it the war or is it the lives of everyone involved?
- There is an apple on the head of the male figure and another half-peeled apple on the table top perhaps representing William Tell's son's feelings after his father had fired a bolt at him—emotionally stripped. It could also represent the fruit of the tree of knowledge in the garden of Eden and its consumption as the beginning of sin.
- The merging of the male and female heads could relate to Dalí's description of when he first kissed Gala. He wrote, 'And this first kiss, mixed with tears and saliva, punctuated by the audible contact of our teeth and furiously working tongues, touched only the fringe of the libidinous famine that made us bite and eat everything to the last! Meanwhile I was eating that mouth, whose blood already mingled with mine' (see John Richardson, *Sacred Monsters, Sacred Masters*).

- Dalí made two films with Luis Buñuel, *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or*. In *Un Chien Andalou* there is a man's hand coming around the edge of a door that a woman is pushing closed. The hand has a hole in the palm and is covered in ants. The hand could be linked to masturbation and the door edge to the 'castration' of the hand. The French phrase for pins and needles is to have ants in the hand ('avoir des fourmis dans la main') and 'ants in the pants' ('avoir des fourmis dans son pantalon') means to be excited or agitated. The repeated close-ups in which the frame cuts off a hand at the wrist evokes the age-old paternal threat to sons found masturbating. Fingers are often bandaged in the film and the French word for bandage ('bander') also means 'to have an erection'.

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Méret Oppenheim (1913-1985), *Ma Gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen*, 1936, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

Méret Oppenheim (1913-1985), *Ma Gouvernante—My Nurse—Mein Kindermädchen*, 1936, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden

- Dinner is served - and it is a pair of white high heels. They are sole-up, on a silver platter, and trussed like an oven-ready chicken, they are white, that is pure, but scuffed, that is dirty.
- This has a trilingual title, *Ma Gouvernante* (pronounced 'ma goo-ver-nont'), *My Nurse* and *Meine Kindermädchen* and it is by Meret Oppenheim.
- It has been interpreted in many ways:
 - An association between femininity and violence, as the shoes resemble a slaughtered animal on a plate or the trussed legs of a headless woman. Do men treat women as slaughtered animals to be served up on a plate?
 - She questions gender roles and stereotypes, as the shoes suggest domesticity and submission, while also being erotic and fetishistic. There is bondage and foot fetishism. The oval tray and the crevice between the shoes suggest female genitals and oral sex because of the association

with food.

- She has subverted everyday objects and transformed them into something unfamiliar and disturbing. Oppenheim was the only Surrealist who had any authority on psychoanalysis. Born into a family of Swiss analysts, Oppenheim was steeped in psychoanalytic theory and followed the teachings of Carl Gustav Jung.[1]
- If the sexual content and its sinister undertones are disturbing now, the following story gives us a glimpse into what it looked like to people **in 1936. A female spectator flew into a rage and smashed the original work when it first appeared at an exhibition in Paris (1936).** This is a second version, made by Oppenheim, shortly after the original was destroyed." [1]

NOTES

- She once said: "Freedom is not given to you—you have to take it." [1]
- The trilingual title probably reflects the sophisticated bourgeois multilingual society of the early twentieth century.
- The symbolism unfolds before us like the plot of a sinister novel. The artist has encapsulated nearly every imaginable sexual fetish. Bondage is perhaps the most obvious, but of course, there is the foot fetish. The oval form of the tray and deep crevice between the shoes is vaguely vaginal (and, especially in a dining context, hints at oral sex). The white shoes and their scuffed appearance might reference the Madonna/whore complex. Oppenheim knew her Freud backwards and forwards. Her references are intentional. But what do they mean?

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Meret Oppenheim, *Spring Feast*, 1959, performance using a mannequin, Paris

Meret Oppenheim, *Spring Feast*, 1959, performance using a mannequin, Paris

Meret Oppenheim, *Spring Feast*, 1959, performance using a live model, Bern

- Méret Oppenheim held an elaborate banquet for a small group of friends in Bern shown in this small photograph. She invited a woman she didn't know to lie naked on the table her face painted gold and her body covered with lobsters, fish, breads, vegetables and fruits that were eaten by all who attended.
- André Breton asked her to reproduce the piece for the 1959 Exposition Internationale du Surre²alisme (EROS) in Paris. (CLICK) A mannequin was used as a naked live model was considered too scandalous. Breton is at the end of the table and Oppenheim is wearing the leopard skin coat.
- One interpretation is that she was drawing attention to the fact that in our society women are often regarded as commodities to be consumed like food.

NOTES

- Main photo: "Méret Oppenheim's *Spring Feast*, the mannequin version. The original live performance with a nude model exhibited on the opening day of the 1959 Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme (EROS) in Paris seems to not have been photographed, perhaps because a nude woman posed as a cannibal feast was considered too scandalous for recording. An earlier *Spring Feast* performance in Bern that also featured a live nude woman on a banquet table was photographed and is seen above. Among the Surrealist group seen here are Oppenheim (leopard skin coat) and André Breton, sitting at the head of the table. Photograph by William Klein."
- Small photo: "The one published photograph of Méret Oppenheim's *Spring Feast* that includes a live woman offered among the banquet is this one taken in Bern, 1959, and staged for a small group of friends. As Oppenheim relays, she invited a woman she did not know to pose nude for her guests. Her face was painted gold and her body covered with lobsters, fish, breads, vegetables and fruits that were eaten by all who attended."

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Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, acrylic with metallic enamel paint on canvas, 32 panels, each canvas 50.8 x 40.6 cm

Andy Warhol, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, acrylic with metallic enamel paint on canvas, 32 panels, each canvas 50.8 x 40.6 cm

- Andy Warhol said that, “**Many an afternoon at lunchtime Mom would open a can of Campbell’s for me, because that’s all we could afford, I love it to this day**”.
- Each can is **slightly different** and **hand-painted and framed separately** and he exhibited the 32 canvases on shelves, like groceries in a shop. Warhol was a successful commercial artist and he knew that advertisers creates **simplified images** that represent **something desirable** to a certain group of people, the target market, and then **endlessly repeat them**. Warhol never tells us if he is criticising consumer society or celebrating it. It is better to think of it as drawing our attention to the techniques used to influence us and leaving us to form an opinion.
- Some saw it positively. The product marketing manager of Campbell Soup Company wrote to him: ‘**Your work has evoked a great deal of interest here... At one time I had**

hoped to be able to acquire one of your Campbell Soup label paintings – but I’m afraid you have gotten much too expensive for me.’ It was 1964 and they were still relatively cheap, later he probably wished he had bought one as by 1985 one black and white print sold at Sotheby's for over half a million dollars and, in 2006, one complete set was sold for \$11.8 million.

NOTES

- Warhol also loved repetition. In the early 1960s he began designing dress fabrics in vibrant, non-naturalistic shades. He made repeating patterns of hand-drawn buttons, insects, watermelons and ice-cream sundaes with a cherry on top of each. The technique of repetition, and of printing different colours over a black outline, fed into his later studio practice. We see the same process in his silkscreen prints of celebrities, with their green skin or blue lips. Warhol was clear about his methods and intent, explaining: ‘I started as a commercial artist. I was always a commercial artist.’
- "When asked why he chose to paint Campbell’s soup cans, Warhol offered a deadpan reply: **“I used to have the same lunch every day, for twenty years, I guess, the same thing over and over again.”** That daily meal is the subject of this work consisting of thirty-two canvases—one for each of the flavours then sold by Campbell’s—using a combination of projection, tracing, painting, and stamping. Repeating the nearly identical image, the canvases at once stress the uniformity and ubiquity of the product’s packaging and subvert the idea of painting as a medium of invention and originality."

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Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997), *Still Life With Crystal Bowl*, 1973, Whitney Museum of Modern Art



Wayne Thiebaud (1920-2021), *Cakes*, 1963, 152.4 × 182.9 cm, National Gallery of Art

Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997), *Still Life With Crystal Bowl*, 1973, Whitney Museum of Modern Art

Wayne Thiebaud (1920-2021), *Cakes*, 1963, 152.4 × 182.9 cm, National Gallery of Art

- Other artists also used food to represent the way that our society turns everything into a saleable commodity but at the same time it standardises it and takes away its personal, unique, handmade character.
- This is an late Roy Lichtenstein and an example of his still life paintings which span from 1972 to the early 1980s.
- Morton Wayne Thiebaud (1920–2021) is less well known but his work pre-dated most Pop Art. He had a solo shown in 1960 two years before the launch of Pop Art at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in 1962. He was known for his colourful works of commonplace objects—cakes, lipsticks, paint cans, ice cream cones, pastries, and hot dogs—as well as for his landscapes and figure paintings.

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Ralph Goings (1928-2016), *Donut*, 1995, 76.2 × 110.5 cm

Ralph Goings (1928-2016), *Donut*, 1995, 76.2 × 110.5 cm

- An American painter closely associated with photorealism in the late 1960s and early 70s. Goings was a photographer and would reproduce his photographs as realistically as possible in paint. He pointed out that the photograph and the painting could always be told apart and that difference was what he was interested in as an artist.
- Ralph Goings was an American painter closely associated with the Photorealism movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He was best known for his highly detailed paintings of hamburger stands, pick-up trucks, and California banks, portrayed in a deliberately objective manner¹².
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Jana Sterbak (b. 1955), *Vanitas, Flesh Dress for An Albino Anorectic*, 1987

Jana Sterbak (b. 1955), *Vanitas, Flesh Dress for An Albino Anorectic*, 1987

- *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* is an artwork created by Canadian artist Jana Sterbak in 1987. When it was first exhibited in Canada it attracted national controversy ¹. The work was composed of 50-60 pounds of raw flank steaks sewn together ¹. When shown the meat dress is placed on a mannequin and there is a photograph of a model wearing the dress on the wall alongside. A new dress must be made for each exhibition and the meat changes from bright red to dark brown during the course of the exhibition.
- As suggested by the title, the work is considered within the genre of "vanitas", a category of art showing death and decay. It also demonstrates a trend in modern art to use **non-traditional materials**. The meat disturbs us as it breaks our conventional categories which gives rise to multiple suggestions and interpretations. We categorise meat as food not as clothing. It suggests we are all just meat or maybe that

men sometimes regard women as just meat.

- **In 2010, singer Lady Gaga attended an awards show wearing a meat dress** similar to Sterbak's in style. The media attempted to analyse the meaning of the dress with suggestions by BBC News ranging from anti-fashion, to feminism, aging and decay, and society's attitude towards meat. A chef explained that "People often don't want meat to look like meat. They want it to be neatly wrapped in plastic from a supermarket." The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and The Vegetarian Society condemned the dress. On a talk show Gaga said, "**if we don't fight for our rights pretty soon, we're going to have as much rights as the meat on our own bones. And, I am not a piece of meat.**"

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Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979, Brooklyn Museum

Detail *Emily Dickinson*

Detail *Virginia Woolf*

- *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago was made in 1979 and is the first large scale installation on a feminist topic. It represents the history of women symbolically. There are 1,038 women mentioned, thirty-nine as place settings around a triangular table and 999 written on the floor. Thirty nine was chosen as it is three lots of 13, the number of people present at the Last Supper, an important comparison for her as they were all men.
- The three sides of the table represent three periods of history Wing I: From Prehistory to the Roman Empire; Wing II: From the Beginnings of Christianity to the Reformation; and Wing III: From the American Revolution to Women's Revolution. The women range from the goddess Ishtar to Artemisia Gentileschi, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keefe.
- Each place setting includes an embroidered runner, gold

chalices and utensils, and china-painted porcelain plates with raised central motifs that are based on vulvar and butterfly forms⁴. The settings were designed to represent each woman's accomplishments and contributions to society.

- When it was exhibited the backlash of threats and hate resulted in the only time in her life when she considered suicide. It has been criticised for representing all women using the same metaphor and for the fact that only one black woman is represented (Sojourner Truth, c. 1797-1883, an American abolitionist and women's rights activist). It has become a very popular work with the public although some (Congressman Robert K. Dornan) still criticise the "**butterfly vagina**" imagery as pornographic. I will give the artist Cornelia Parker the last word on this piece, she said, "... **we're all reduced to vaginas, which is a bit depressing. It's almost like the biggest piece of victim art you've ever seen.**"

NOTES

- The 39 women with places at The Dinner Party table include influential figures such as the Primordial Goddess, Ishtar, Hatshepsut, Theodora, Artemesia Gentileschi, Sacajawea, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emily Dickinson, Margaret Sanger and Georgia O'Keeffe¹. The table is divided into three wings: Wing I: From Prehistory to the Roman Empire; Wing II: From the Beginnings of Christianity to the Reformation; and Wing III: From the American Revolution to Women's Revolution³.
- The Dinner Party is an installation artwork by feminist artist

Judy Chicago. It is widely regarded as the first epic feminist artwork and functions as a symbolic history of women in civilization. There are 39 elaborate place settings on a triangular table for 39 mythical and historical famous women¹. The table measures 48 feet (14.63 m) on each side². The artwork was produced from 1974 to 1979 as a collaboration and was first exhibited in 1979⁶.

- "The Dinner Party comprises a massive ceremonial banquet, arranged on a triangular table with a total of thirty-nine place settings, each commemorating an important woman from history. The settings consist of embroidered runners, gold chalices and utensils, and china-painted porcelain plates with raised central motifs that are based on vulvar and butterfly forms and rendered in styles appropriate to the individual women being honored. The names of another 999 women are inscribed in gold on the white tile floor below the triangular table." [7]

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TOO GOOD TO EAT

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- **Food is essential to our existence** and every society uses food to **represent its class divisions, its hopes and its aspirations.** This talk has just touched the surface of the long journey through the spiritual, religious, social, cultural and political associations of food in all its forms.
- Thank you.