

# Historical Influences of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*

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Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (Plate 1) was a ground breaking painting, in terms of both its artistic and social impact. Painted in 1907, it is raw, primitive and is deliberately meant to be shocking. It horrified many of those who first saw it, critics and artists alike, but it eventually came to be regarded as a work of monumental influence and value. It portrays five naked prostitutes in a brothel, and was indeed originally entitled *Le Bordel d'Alger*.<sup>1</sup> The leftmost one is shown in profile facing the other four with her face painted in a style reminiscent of Egyptian art. The two figures in the center have Iberian features and are looking alluringly at the viewer, placing him in the position of customer. The two figures on the right have contorted bodies and faces that look much like primitive African masks. There is a distorted still-life in the foreground of the painting that at once gives it a grounding in traditional painting and emphasizes its extreme departure from tradition.

Many of the techniques used, such as the use of flat planes, the deconstruction of human bodies and the angularity of form had a revolutionary effect on painting. Along with the work of Georges Braque, *Les Femmes d'Alger* was one of the first Cubist pieces to be painted. It revolutionized perceptions of art and the aesthetic, opening the door to subsequent artistic movements such as Surrealism and Dadaism. The use of imagery borrowed from African art was also

groundbreaking. Other well-known painters had previously incorporated elements of 'primitive' art into their work, but *Les Femmes d'Alger* was the first to portray African fetishes.

*Les Femmes d'Alger* was a rejection of bourgeois society, colonialism, traditional art, sexual inhibitions and outdated mores and conventions. The fetishes and the setting of a brothel were both devices to convey this, and the new artistic devices he employed emphasized his social messages.

Picasso (1881-1973) was the Spanish son of a drawing master, and was an infant prodigy in the Barcelona Art School.<sup>2</sup> During his lifetime, he reinvented himself repeatedly, and was at the forefront of several artistic movements.

He came to Paris at the age of nineteen, and gained a following painting subjects such as beggars, outcasts and circus people. He eventually tired of this, however, and began to look elsewhere for inspiration. He was introduced to primitive art and the work of Primitivist European painters while in Paris, and was profoundly influenced.

Primitivism was a movement in the arts in which painters attempted to escape the confines of industrialized, urban Europe. Like Romanticism, it was in part a reaction against the negative results of the industrial revolution (pollution, overcrowding, etc.). Artists looked to the directness, instinctiveness and exoticism of non-urban cultures for

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<sup>1</sup> Brassai, *Picasso and Company*. Trans. Francis Price (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 163.

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<sup>2</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (Hong Kong: Phaidon Press Limited, 1995), 573.



**Plate 1:** *Les Femmes d'Alger*. 1907. Pablo Picasso.

inspiration.<sup>3</sup> Painters such as Paul Gauguin and Henri Rousseau (see plates 2 and 3) felt that it was necessary to abandon urbanism and 'advanced' European culture and search for something more idyllic in rural or primitive settings.

Primitivism found expression in music as well as in art, particularly in the work of

Igor Stravinsky. His ballet, *The Rite of Spring*, depicted rituals of pagan tribes and imported ideas from primitive music. *The Rite of Spring* caused a riot in its first performance in Paris in 1913.<sup>4</sup> The violent and overtly sexual nature of the choreography as well as the pounding rhythms and dissonances had much the same impact on

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<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Yudkin, *Understanding Music* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1996), 330.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.



**Plate 2:** *Contes Barbares*. 1902. Paul Gauguin.

audiences as *Demoiselles*. Indeed, Picasso was an admirer of Stravinsky.<sup>5</sup>

There is some debate as to whether or not Picasso had been exposed to African fetishes prior to painting *Demoiselles*. Picasso himself claimed that he had not,<sup>6</sup> but much of the evidence seems to contradict this. Both Matisse and Max Jacob assert the he was shown African statuettes and masks in the Trocadéro well before painting *Demoiselles*,<sup>7</sup> and Gertrude Stein also contradicted Picasso's claim<sup>8</sup>. Fernande Olivier stated that "Picasso was becoming a fanatic on the subject of Negro works, and statues, masks, and fetishes from every country in Africa were accumulating in his apartment"<sup>9</sup> In any event there is a clear resemblance between the faces of the two rightmost figures in *Demoiselles* and African masks

<sup>5</sup> Araianna Stassinopoulos Huffington, *Picasso Creator and Destroyer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 149.

<sup>6</sup> Brassã, *Picasso and Company*, 23-24.

<sup>7</sup> Huffington. *Picasso Creator and Destroyer*, 89-90.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe* (Princeton: Princeton Press, 1989), 86.

<sup>9</sup> Brassã, *Picasso and Company*, 24.



**Plate 3:** *The Dream*. 1910. Henri Rousseau.



**Plate 4:** African mask.

(plate 4), and Picasso himself acknowledged that he was eventually very influenced by fetishes.

In contrast to others involved in the Primitivism movement, Africa did not represent an idyllic, pre-European society to Picasso, but rather a (welcome) threat to



**Plate 5:** *Violin and Grapes*. Pablo Picasso.

civilized Europe.<sup>10</sup> What struck Picasso most about the fetishes was not their form, although this was certainly evident in his paintings, but their spirit. As Picasso said, “The masks weren’t just like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things . . . they were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help (the Africans) become independent. They’re tools. If we give spirits a form, we become independent. Spirits, the unconscious, emotion—they’re all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter.”<sup>11</sup>

To Picasso, all of creation was his enemy, and his paintings were a defense against nature. He said, “Nature has to exist so that we may rape it.”<sup>12</sup> This manifesto was very destructive, but it was accepted and bought by the public partly because it was a reflection of the destructiveness of the previous century, the pitting of industrialism against nature. Primitive art had the same purpose as modern industrialism: to keep nature at bay. These destructive ideas were a part of his motivation for the deconstruction in his Cubist paintings, of which *Demoielles* was the first.

Picasso and the other Cubists felt that it was pointless to simply copy objects as realists did. In order to truly capture the essence of images, it was necessary to deconstruct them. By seeing different aspects of an ob-

ject at the same time, some of which stand out clearly and some of which are blurred, one sees more of the true subject than one would in a meticulously realistic painting. The deconstruction of the form allows the audience to reconstruct it in their own way, attaching their own meanings to it.<sup>13</sup> Plate 5 shows an example of how Picasso was to develop cubism in later years.

This was part of a general artistic movement in the early twentieth century to reject established forms, to self-consciously pursue innovation. Artists, writers, intellectuals, poets and painters all reacted against established rules of art and looked for new, experimental forms of expression. At the turn of the century, Europe was in a period of unusual stability. The economic growth, increasing standard of living and scientific breakthroughs of the time all contributed to a sense of excitement and experimentation which made artists and audiences more receptive to experimental work.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from the spiritual and artistic meanings that were expressed in Picasso’s use of fetishes, there were also important social messages. Picasso was a friend and disciple of Alfred Jarry, who was well known for his anti-colonial satires on black Africa, and cannot help but have been influenced by him.<sup>15</sup>

Much of Africa was still independent in 1875, but by 1912 virtually all of it was under the control of Europeans. There are several reasons for this rush to conquer Africa, including the desire to control mineral resources, the need to control trade routes and to establish new markets for European products, to help missionaries convert Africans and to gain control over strategic areas. Once the scramble began, many countries

<sup>10</sup> Leighten, *Re-Ordering the Universe*, 88.

<sup>11</sup> Huffington, *Picasso Creator and Destroyer*, 90-91.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>13</sup> Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 574.

<sup>14</sup> Yudikn, *Understanding Music*, 319.

<sup>15</sup> Leighten, *Re-Ordering the Universe*, 64-65, 88-89.

simply seized regions to prevent other countries from getting them first.<sup>16</sup>

European officials felt that the governments of African nations were incapable of producing the economic changes needed to implement the trade that they wanted, so they simply conquered the African states and ruled over them directly. Faced with the newly invented machine gun, there was little that the Africans could do to resist. For example, a force of 32 Europeans and 500 African mercenaries defeated the 31 000 strong army of the emir of Sokoto in 1898. Only twenty Europeans died, but there were 11 000 Sudanese casualties.<sup>17</sup>

To most Europeans, the nature and culture of the conquered peoples in Africa had little significance. They were confident of their superiority, both cultural and otherwise, over 'primitive' societies. This self-assured smugness is well displayed in works such as Rudyard Kipling's *White Man's Burden*. Pseudoscientific ideas like Social Darwinism were used to justify this, and it was commonly believed that whites were superior to blacks. Europeans recognized themselves as the rulers for whose benefit the rest of the world existed.<sup>18</sup>

The methods used to secure colonial lands were brutal. William Howitt, an Englishman who traveled to several colonies, gives an example: "To secure the dominion of these, (the Dutch) compelled the princes of Ternate and Tidore to consent to the rooting up of all the clove and nutmeg trees in the islands not entirely under the jealous guard of Dutch keeping. For this they utterly exterminated the inhabitants of Banda, be-

cause they would not submit passively to their yoke."<sup>19</sup>

Many atrocities were committed under white rule. Even the pro-colonial contemporaries of the time were horrified by some of the acts committed. Sir H. H. Johnston, the British Consul for Southern Nigeria and Portuguese East Africa, who repeatedly extolled the virtues of bringing civilization to the 'savages,' wrote that the Belgian King Leopold II "debased himself in history by the exploitation of the position conferred on him at the Congress of Berlin. His agents were allowed to inflict indescribable misery on millions of unhappy savages."<sup>20</sup> A British governor of Ashanti admitted that, "The reader will find much to deplore in the public and private acts of many of the white men who, in their time, made history."<sup>21</sup>

The huge numbers of babies of mixed race that were born in Africa during the time of colonial expansion clearly shows that none of the European reverence for female chastity was extended to the Africans. Howitt had this to say of one of the colonies he visited: "The treatment of the females could not be described. Dragged from the inmost recesses of their houses . . . the virgins were carried to the Court of Justice, where they might naturally have looked for protection, but they now looked for it in vain; for in the face of the ministers of justice, in the face of the spectators, in the face of the sun, those tender and modest virgins were brutally violated . . . Other females had the nipples of their breasts put in a cleft bamboo and torn off."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Kishlansky, Patrick Geary and Patricia O'Brien, *Civilization in the West*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Vol. II (New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 1998), 858.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 860-61.

<sup>18</sup> W. E. Burghardt du Bois, *The World and Africa* (New York: Viking Press, 1947), 26.

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<sup>19</sup> William Howitt, *Colonization and Christianity* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1838), 194.

<sup>20</sup> Sir H. H. Johnston, *The Opening up of Africa* (London: Williams & Norgate, before 1927), 238.

<sup>21</sup> du Bois, *The World and Africa*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Howitt, *Colonization and Christianity*, 280-281.

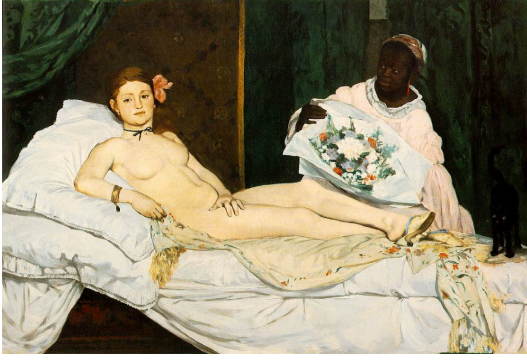


Plate 6: *Olympia*, Edouard Manet.

By 1907, many Europeans, including Picasso, were protesting against the atrocities, although they often did not go so far as to say that Africans should be given self-rule until significantly later. By using African art in his work, Picasso was validating African fetishes, and thus African culture, as something to be taken seriously, as true art rather than just curiosities.

European art traditionally portrayed woman as either the Madonna or the Venus. The former was an expression of purity and virtue and the latter was an expression of sexuality and desire. Both were seen as pure forms, and while the eroticism of the Venus form was socially acceptable, it was certainly unacceptable socially for a woman to be an erotic being. In a very real sense, both the Madonna and the Venus could be considered to be European fetishes. They displayed aspects of womanhood in an idealized, supernatural form. With his *Olympia* (plate 6), Edouard Manet created a huge stir in 1865 by painting a well-known prostitute in a pose associated with the Venus.<sup>23</sup> He was presenting a real person as a fetish. Picasso took this idea further in *Demoiselles* by mixing African fetishes, which had sexual connotations because of their use in fertility rites, with the European sexual symbol of prostitutes. The link between the two was strengthened by the belief of some of the intellectuals of the time that the same psychological mechanisms were responsible for

<sup>23</sup> Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe*, 84.

religious superstition in primitive societies and sexual ‘perversions’ in modern society.

In the nineteenth century, middle-class women were worshipped, cherished, deferred to and considered vulnerable, virginal and remote pure angels to which men could seek refuge from the cruel world of business realities.<sup>24</sup> Their husbands sheltered them from the realities of the ‘vulgar’ outside world. As James Fenimore Cooper wrote in 1828, the genteel wife lived “retired within the sacred precincts of her own abode . . . preserved from the destroying taint of excessive intercourse in the world.”<sup>25</sup> A London court ruled in 1840 that a husband had the right to kidnap his wife and lock her up in order to “protect her from the danger of unrestrained intercourse with the world.”<sup>26</sup> Well-bread women took on the virtuous aura of the virginal Madonna, and were expected to see sex as a revolting experience that must occasionally be performed in order to ensure procreation. Dr. Alice Stockham went so far as to assert in 1894 that any husband who indulged in marital intercourse for any purpose other than procreation was turning his wife into a private prostitute.<sup>27</sup> There was a general consensus that married couples should have sex no more than once a month, and never during pregnancy or menstruation.<sup>28</sup>

The perception of woman as a pure angel did not extend to working-class women. They were often forced to work as part-time prostitutes in order to support themselves and their families, and they were certainly given none of the special moral reverence that was granted genteel women.<sup>29</sup> Men found an outlet for their sexual desires with these prostitutes that they could not with their wives. Indeed, it was believed by many that cool, unemotional sex with a prostitute

<sup>24</sup> Reay Tahhahill, *Sex in History* (New York: Scarborough House, 1992), 349.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

was less sinful than passionate sex with one's wife. This belief was partly based on the writings of St. Augustine, who claimed that intercourse had been free from "unregulated excitement" in the Garden of Eden, and that Original Sin had only been committed when lust and passion became involved.<sup>30</sup> This led several, such as Leopold Deslandes, to claim that sex with a prostitute was "generally attended with less derangement" than sex with a wife.<sup>31</sup>

All of this caused prostitution to flourish in European cities. Estimates put the number of prostitutes in Paris in the 1860's in the range of 30 000 to 120 000 and up to 80 000 in London. The average in Europe in the late nineteenth century was one prostitute for every twelve men, with some areas such as Vienna having one for every seven men.<sup>32</sup> As their numbers continued to increase, both the legal and moral authorities who had previously vocally denounced yet tolerated prostitution began to take serious measures to curb it. This was also due in large part to the spread of syphilis. In the 1860's, 60% of the prostitutes sentenced to the prison Saint Lazare were infected.<sup>33</sup>

Prostitutes were treated with the utmost disdain, partly because they were blamed for the spread of syphilis, but mostly because they were 'fallen women.' According to one nineteenth century article in the *Westminster Review*, they were treated as "outcasts, Pariahs, lepers. Their touch, even in the extremity of suffering, is shaken off as if it were pollution and disease . . . They are kicked, cuffed, trampled on with impunity by everyone."<sup>34</sup> Little was done to help them. As the Bishop of Newcastle remarked in 1898, "too many professing Christians repudiate all responsibility for these outcasts of society. They will say no prayer for their conversion,

give no alms towards agencies that are set on foot to win them back."<sup>35</sup>

Earlier versions of *Demoiselles* included a sailor sitting in the brothel and a student presenting a skull to him and the prostitutes. One interpretation of this is that the skull is meant to remind the sailor and prostitutes of death and the spiritual wages of sin. However, given Picasso's negative attitudes towards the church, it is more reasonable to believe that Picasso was commenting on the hell of being a prostitute, a recurrent theme of his work from 1898 to 1904.<sup>36</sup>

By portraying prostitutes that repel rather than attract in *Demoiselles*, Picasso was emphasizing the ugliness that was at the core of being forced into prostitution. By putting the viewer in the position of the customer, Picasso forced him or her to openly confront the reality of prostitution and its prevalence in European society. This was shocking to many, who felt that prostitution was certainly not something that should be dealt with in polite company.

As mentioned earlier, part of the motivation of Cubism was to deconstruct things so that the viewer could consider them in new ways. This is exactly what Picasso is doing with sexuality in *Demoiselles*. He forced people to confront their attitudes about sexuality, and perhaps reconsider them.

Picasso also brought together the ideas of Primitivism and his opposition to European conceptions of sexuality. The 'Iberian' women in the middle of the painting are prostitutes on display, while the 'African' women on the right can be seen as mocking this display and challenging bankrupt western society.<sup>37</sup> Rather than the Europeans looking down upon African culture as primitive and savage, now African culture is judging Europeans and their moral hypocrisy. Perhaps Picasso was thinking of how the Africans must have been judging the Euro-

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 141-42.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 356-357.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 364-365.

<sup>34</sup> Eric Trudgill, *Madonnas and Magdalens* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976), 101.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>36</sup> Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe*, 85.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 88.

peans for the atrocities that they committed upon them.

By dealing with two of the most oppressed groups of his time, black Africans and prostitutes, and by breaking artistic boundaries, Picasso was at once challenging moral, political and artistic traditions. *Demoiselles* established him as an original voice in the Primitivism movement and was the most significant painting in the birth of Cubism. He forced people to openly confront problems in society when they looked at his painting. As Andre Salmon writes, "The expression on (the prostitutes') faces are neither tragic nor passionate. These are masks almost entirely freed from humanity. Yet these people are not gods, nor are they Titans or heroes; not even allegorical or symbolic figures. They are naked problems, white numbers on the blackboard."<sup>38</sup>

Even Picasso's followers were initially horrified by the ugliness of the faces and the subject matter of the painting.<sup>39</sup> Matisse and Gertrude Stein, two of his most important associates, temporarily distanced themselves from Picasso upon seeing it. However, by the time Picasso finally sold *Demoiselles* in 1925, it was well on its way to becoming the monumentally influential work that it is.

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<sup>38</sup> Andre Salmon, "La Jeune Peinture Francaise," in *A Picasso Anthology: Documents, Criticism, Reminiscences*, ed. Marilyn McCully (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 57.

<sup>39</sup> Huffington, *Picasso Creator and Destroyer*, 93.



