

Bodies of Tow and Paraffin

The Alarm Spreads

The first reactions to the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* came from members of Picasso's intimate circle of friends and acquaintances, those who had admittance to the painter's studios since, as we have mentioned, the work did not leave the painter's succession of studio homes until 1916 when it was exhibited to the public in the Salon d'Antin. In fact, it was only in 1924 that the work was moved to the home of its first purchaser, the fashion designer and art collector, Jacques Doucet until it became the property of his wife until September of 1937 when it was acquired by the firm of Jacques Seligmann & Co of New York who sold it to the New York Museum of Modern Art where it can still be seen.

From what we have been able to establish from anecdotes and various testimonies—almost never direct, almost always through intermediaries¹—, the reaction from this circle of Picasso's acquaintances was more one of alarm and incomprehension, despite the majority of its members being accustomed to the scandals of the avant-garde. The general response of painters as advanced as Georges Braque or André Derain, as well as members of the public who might have seen it at the time, including writers, critics or collectors, seems to have been a mixture of scandal, disgust, apprehension, horror, derision and even affront or outrage. No-one appeared to understand what the painting was about,

¹ Hélène Seckel compiles these testimonies in a detailed anthology from 1907 to 1939 in Elderfield 1994, 145–205.

what it meant or how it had come about. It was as though Picasso had remained alone with his extraordinary creature, as suggested by Christopher Green. It is surprising to find that this was a type of reaction very similar to that shown by the art critics of the time, whose chronicles on modern art exhibitions published in the general press fell somewhere between scandalised and sarcastic.

For example, one of those critics made the following comment when the work was shown for the first time in public in the Salon d'Antin in 1916:

The Cubists are not waiting for the war to end to recommence hostilities against good sense. They are exhibiting at the Galerie Poiret naked women, whose scattered parts are represented in all four corners of the canvas: here an eye, there an ear, over there a hand, a foot on top, a mouth below. Monsieur Picasso, their leader, is possibly the least dishevelled of the lot. He has painted, or rather daubed, five women who are, if the truth be told, all hacked up, and yet their limbs somehow manage to hold together. They have moreover piggish faces with eyes wandering negligently above their ears (Bohm-Duchen 2001, 202).

We have before us a work that apparently was disturbing, bizarre and excessive even for the practitioners of the “excesses” of modern painting. Among the declarations which have become legendary are those of Georges Braque or André Derain. Braque, who would soon, together with Picasso, become the inventor of Cubism, supposedly said that the painting had the same effect on him as “eating tow and swallowing paraffin.”² Generally this quotation is completed with the expression “to spit fire.”³ Many commentaries have been made on such an original exclamation. Some, like Ángel González (2000, 321–30), in a text entitled precisely “Beber petróleo para escupir fuego” have understood it to mean that for Braque, *Les Demoiselles* were a sort of Molotov cocktail, resembling those the anarchists were making for their attacks at that time. Whatever the meaning may be, it is anything but reassuring. On the other hand, Derain who would, it must be remembered, be pursuing a type of painting that would lead to nothing short of Cubism, also left an unforgettable testimony: *Les Demoiselles* would be the rope with which Picasso would end up hanging himself (Kahnweiler 1916, 214); a comment certainly as disturbing as that of Braque. The critic Félix Féneon, for his part, said something that at first sight might appear

² Fernande Olivier tells this story, surprisingly, not connected directly with *Les Demoiselles* but about burgeoning Cubism (in particular referring to the landscapes that Picasso had painted in Horta in the summer of 1909) and which, according to Olivier, Braque found incomprehensible. She explained that in a conversation with Picasso “Braque was not at all convinced. He finally replied ‘despite your explanations your painting is as if you wanted to make us eat tow and drink paraffin’” (Olivier 2001, 133). Other variations of Braque’s comment about tow and paraffin were vouched for by Kahnweiler, Carlo Carrà and Salmon (Elderfield 1994, 228–29).

³ This is Kahnweiler’s version in a text relating the dismay of Picasso’s circle faced with *Les Demoiselles*. “Braque declared that for him it was like drinking paraffin and spitting fire” in an unpublished interview dated in 1973, with Claude de Givray (Elderfield 1994, 240).

offensive but that some art historians of the period have come to be considered as most appropriate: he seemed to see that Picasso was showing talent for caricature (Parmelin 1966, 37). And, apparently the Russian art collector Shchukin, who would amass one of the greatest collections of modern art of the time, on seeing the work, told Picasso's close friend Gertrude Stein, with tears in his eyes, that "it was a tremendous loss for French art!" (Stein 1984). And here would be a good moment to mention that Henri Rousseau, nicknamed *Le Douanier* (the Customs' Agent), exclaimed in the course of the banquet Picasso held in his honour: "You and I are the greatest painters of our time—you in Egyptian style and I in modern style" (Olivier 2001, 113).

The contrast between these remarks showing disgust, incomprehension, distaste or alarm and the unanimously favourable opinion of the critics and art history during the following hundred years is truly remarkable. And, in fact during the 20th century *Les Femmes d'Alger* has been considered the paradigm of modern art, the most innovative painting since Giotto, the work destined to change the course of the history of painting. André Breton, the surrealist writer was responsible for finding its first buyer, in the person of the art collector Jacques Doucet. Breton managed to persuade the fashion designer to purchase the work because he himself was convinced that it was something quite exceptional, "the decisive occurrence at the start of the 20th century", an unavoidable turning point in art history: "with this painting we bid farewell to all the paintings of the past", he declared (Dupuis-Labbé 2007, 134).

Agreeing on the exceptionality does not, however, curb the controversy that has been its faithful companion for a hundred years. And at times it seems that Picasso himself, by his own declarations, poked the fire of contradictions that presided over the opinions on his work.

Playing to Distract: Picasso's Declarations

Experts on Picasso's work have often advised caution when commenting on the painter's declarations about his own work since an avowal may be contradicted immediately and his fondness for whimsy is apparent. Leaving these warnings aside, some interpretations of his work are based on his comments, confusing, furthermore, intentions with results. In point of fact Picasso himself did not refer explicitly to the *Femmes d'Alger* until the 1930s and that all his pronouncements on it were made in retrospective mode. Whether or not it was his intention to sidetrack and sow confusion, there are many contradictory comments referring to the painting, in particular to the Cubist paternity of the work and relating to one of today's most thorny issues; that of the role *Art nègre* would have played in its conception and development and, obviously, in the final result. It is important to remember that the majority of Picasso's comments on the work do not come from a direct source. They have come down to us through his intermediaries and albeit exceptional witnesses like Kahnweiler, André Malraux, Christian Zervos, Pierre Daix, they are, in any case, indirect testimonies.

In regard to the two matters mentioned, and according to Dor de la Souchère in *Picasso à Antibes*, published in 1960, the painter had stated that “It has been said that *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* was the first painting to have shown signs of Cubism: that is true”. But, at the same time, it has been said that *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* was inspired by *Art nègre*: that is untrue” (Bernadac 1998, 133).

However, on an earlier occasion Picasso stated that the Damsels was his first exorcist painting and was linked to his visit to the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro: to wit to his direct experience of what was known in the first decades of the 20th century as *Art nègre*. The exact date of this visit is unknown but in all probability it happened while he was working on the painting, sometime in 1907. From 1882 to 1936 the goal of this museum was to house a collection that would literally illustrate a history of the uses and habits of peoples from every era. Using life-size reproductions they tried to place objects in the context of the people who made them. A lack of resources together with its growing collection—a result of colonialism itself—turned the museum into a Cabinet of Curiosities or Wonder Room. Many of the objects on show had been part of the rituals of different civilisations.

Thus, in the context of the comments to which we are referring, “exorcist painting” must be understood to mean an object with apotropaic or talismanic properties. This well known and quoted phrase is part of a conversation with Malraux. We must quote him literally and be aware not only that it would have been pronounced in 1937, thirty years after completing the canvas and just as the painter was finishing *Guernica*, but also it was never made public until 1974:

The masks were unlike any other sculptures. Totally. They were magical objects. But why were the Egyptian or Chaldean works not the same? We hadn’t realised. They were primitive but magical. The Negroes⁴ were *intercesseurs*; a new word I learned in French. Against everything: like unknown, threatening spirits. I had always admired fetishes. And I understood why I was also fighting everything. I also believe everything is unfamiliar, hostile [...] all fetishes serve the same purpose. They are weapons. To help people withstand the spirits, to break free. Instruments. If we give shape to the spirits we become independent. Spirits, unconsciousness (people still do not talk much about this), emotion, it is all the same.

I understood why I was a painter. There, alone in that terrible museum, with the masks, the redskin dolls, the dusty dummies. *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* must have occurred to me that day but definitely not because of the shapes: but because it was my first exorcist canvas, Yes, indeed! [...]

This was also what drew me away from Braque. He adored the Negroes but, as I have mentioned, because they were good sculptures. He never felt the least fear of them. He was not interested in exorcisms. Because he did not feel what I call All, or Life or whatever, the World? That which surrounds us but is not part of us; he never considered it hostile, or even, and mark this, strange. He always felt at home, even today. No way did he understand these things: he is not superstitious! (Malraux 1974, 18–9).

⁴ “Negroes” was a common expression at that time used to refer to the figures of African or Oceanic art.

Again we must stress that these comments were made thirty years after Picasso painted *Les Demoiselles* and again, as mentioned on several occasions, they cannot be separated from Surrealism and its ideology which, in all probability, influenced the sort of ideas expressed here about the unconscious or the existence of a kind of primordial terror. There is no doubt that they are also an important testimony of a type of automatic association between African art or objects and the mystical spirit of the peoples of that continent that emerged in the first decades of the 20th century in Europe. We will return to this subject below. For the moment, let us keep in mind that Picasso could just as easily say that the figures from Africa and Oceania that he saw in the Trocadero were merely “witnesses” and not examples of the work (Fels 1923, 4) as declare that there was nothing of *Art nègre* in the *Demoiselles*.⁵

But that is not all; no sooner do we find declarations that assure the presence of *Art nègre* in his work was simply an incorporation of its protection, we find others in which he denies this type of influence and confirms that its impact had a formal character. Thus, for example, in his book on “negro sculpture”, written in 1913 and published in 1919, Markov cites in his turn Tungehold (in *Apollon*, 1914) who had written: “When I was in Picasso’s studio and saw the negro idols from the Congo I asked him if he was interested in the mystical aspect of these figures. ‘Absolutely not’ he replied. I am captivated by their geometric simplicity” (Markov 2003).

Perhaps the apparent contradictions perceived in both Picasso’s declarations and the compilation of first reactions to the work could be assembled in a vision that is more synthetic than paradoxical. In his response to the work, another of Picasso’s friends, the writer and critic André Salmon, combined calmness and horror: he described *Les Demoiselles* as “naked problems, white numbers on a blackboard” while recognising that they inspired a kind of terror. (Salmon 1912, 43). Salmon went as far as to attribute to Picasso a rational approximation to the primitive: “Those who see in Picasso’s work masks of mystery, of symbolism or mysticism, run the risk of never understanding it. Instead of this, what he wants is to give us a total representation of man and things. This was the aim of the primitive sculptors of religious images. Here we are concerned about painting, an art on a surface and for this Picasso was obliged to create something new, in his turn, placing these balanced figures—way beyond the rules of traditional formalism and anatomy—in a space that is strictly coherent with an unusual liberty of movement.” (Salmon 1912, 43). This was an affirmation that could have been subscribed by any of the historians or critics who had examined the work with the eyeglasses of formalism. We shall see why below.

⁵ Zervos (1942, 10) stated that Picasso reiterated on several occasions the absence of African influence in *Les Demoiselles*, in *Pablo Picasso. Oeuvres de 1906 à 1912, Cahiers d’Art*, Paris, 1942, p. 10. See also Daix (1970).

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