

Literary Club
March 25, 2019
Joseph P. Tomain

My First Time

Gentlemen, let me admit to no small amount of nervousness as I share with you my first time. Hopefully, you will sympathize with me taking this story public at the risk of exposing my ignorance; my youthful incomprehension; exposing my tender conscience.

As fathers do, my father recommended a place to me. I was 14, maybe 15, and it would mean going into The City. I recruited my friend, Pat Federici to go along and, as it happened, his father, another similarly disposed Italian Romantic, had made the same suggestion. We boarded a Greyhound, which deposited us in the bowels of the New York Port Authority Bus Terminal, then we hoofed it across town and found our destination. The building was a few stories at best. We manly entered and began exploring to find it almost empty.

The rooms were oddly configured. Few were square rooms with normal entries and exits. The rooms were all shapes and sizes including curved rooms and rooms that were more hallways than enclosures. We wandered through this funhouse with no plan, no expectations. At some point, we found ourselves in an unfamiliar space. As I turned to my left, I faced five tall, naked women. More arresting than their nakedness were their stares; stares that were challenging and came with an invitation that was as troubling as it was threatening. Noticeable, disturbing even, were the looks of the three women on the left that were intentionally, consciously directed at me.

The first woman on the left was powerful, had long dark hair and as she entered the room to join the others she walked purposefully, determined. The two women to her right,

and center stage, had brief cloths covering a patch of a hip or a thigh with their arms raised and their pink breasts tantalizing against a pale blue background. While, at first, their gazes were harsh; there was also a softness about them, a youthfulness, an innocence perhaps. Perhaps an invitation to love. To their right, one woman squatted with her back to me, elbows akimbo. She turned. Was that her face? Was she wearing some odd makeup? Her gaze was quizzical. Who was I? Why was I here? Why was I bothering her, bothering them? The last woman on the far right was opening a curtain and although she had an eye on me, she gave the other girls a look that said the break is over, it's time to work.

What had I walked into? Where was I? What was I to make of those several invitations made by these staring women? Was I being invited to join them? It seems that I was being asked to enter their setting; the world in which they lived; the world that was being made and the world that was to be; and I was being invited to look at myself. I was being challenged to confront power, fear, women, sex, and for the faint of soul – an invitation to sin; to surrender to the temptations of the flesh, of desire, of the secular world. What was a poor Catholic school boy to do? Accept the invitation and succumb? Or, reject and regret?

Those five young women were sold in 1937 for \$28,000 to the Museum of Modern Art. Alfred Barr, MoMA's first director, said that *Les Femmes d'Alger* was "one of the few pictures in the history of modern art which can justly be called epoch-making." He added, "In few works of art is the arrogance of genius so powerfully asserted." Those ladies, those coquettes, those prostitutes, those whores, those *jeunes filles*, have been in MoMA's collection ever since.

If you will allow me an abbreviation, *Les Dems* has a remarkable dual history. The history of its painting and its release to the world is itself fascinating. The history of its critical reception is, I believe, even more so.

Picasso may have begun painting *Les Dems* in 1906 after his fertile Blue and Rose periods that ignited his career and put a few francs in his pocket, enough to enjoy a modest meal at the Lapin Agile. After several months of work, Picasso finished *Les Dems* in 1907 in his Bateau Lavoir studio in Montmartre; the heart of bohemian Paris; the heart of the European, of the world's, avant-garde. The grimy Bateau, and its surrounds, hosted an assortment of artists, models, hangers-on, vagrants, and hookers. Hookers?! (Excusez-moi, I meant girlfriends.) This band of merry fools enjoyed the dives and brothels, the circuses and cinema, the jugglers and acrobats that inspired them as much as their shared dinners, cheap wine, and available opium.

For all of his notoriety as the preeminent “painter of modern life” (as Baudelaire would have it), Picasso did not create *Les Dems* in a burst of artistic genius and energy. Rather, he brooded over the painting that has been called the “most deliberate, the most carefully plotted of his career.” On the way to completion, Picasso filled sixteen sketchbooks with hundreds of preliminary studies, the quantity of which was not only unique to Picasso, but “without parallel . . . in the entire history of art.” Understandably, the sketchbooks have become central for art critics.

Toward the end of 1907, Picasso showed *Les Dems* to a few friends, art dealers, and fellow artists. He knew that he was onto something, something with which he could compete with his rival Matisse. He wasn't, though, quite sure about what that something was. Neither were the first viewers quite sure of what they were seeing.

Leo Stein, Gertrude's brother, thought that it was a "horrible mess." Others laughed. His dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler thought that it was obviously unfinished. His artist friend, André Derain, predicted that Picasso would be found hanging behind his own canvas for its affront to art. Among the first to see *Les Doms*, was Picasso's future partner-in-crime against classical representation – George Braque. On seeing the picture, Braque exclaimed "It was as if someone was drinking kerosene so he can spit fire." To Braque, *Les Doms* exploded the very conception of what had then been understood as modern art.

Braque later recalled that when he saw the painting with Apollinaire he felt that this was his first true meeting with Picasso in which he saw Picasso's "unswerving determination, and extraordinary yearning for freedom asserted with a daring." Apollinaire later recounted that he "saw [Picasso's] new painting: even colors, flesh pinks, flowers, etc. . . . women's heads, all the same and simple, and men's heads too. A wonderful language that no literature can express" The poet Apollinaire tipped his hat to, his friend, the painter Picasso.

Gelett Burgess, an American author and humorist visited Picasso at the Bateau-Lavoir and wrote:

"The terrible pictures loomed through the chaos. Monstrous, monolithic women, creatures like Alaskan totem poles, hacked out of solid, brutal colors, frightful, appalling. How little Picasso, with his sense of humor, with his youth and deviltry, seemed to glory in his crimes!"

The 26-year-old Pablo quite liked that review.

When Matisse saw *Les Doms*, he immediately understood not only the meaning of the painting but also the artist's intention. He saw it as a mockery of all that he had been working toward. *Les Doms* could not be further from Matisse's dreamlike figurative paintings and his Arcadian landscapes of nymphs at play in Fauvist colored gardens.

Matisse used color to define and dominate form. Picasso expropriated form by jettisoning color.

These initial reactions were hardly auspicious and hardly prefigured claims like Barr's that *Les Dams* was "epoch-making" or John Golding's 50 years later that it was the "most important single pictorial document that the 20th century has yet produced."

The painting was first publicly shown in 1916 at the exhibition *L'Art Moderne en France*. There the painting acquired the name by which we know it much to Picasso's annoyance. Picasso wanted to call it a bordello; that's what it was, that's what it represented, and that was his vision. To Pablo, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, as his friend André Salmon christened them, were not strolling on some placid Barcelona Street; they were working girls. But the name stuck. From there, the painting went into seclusion until it was privately purchased in 1924 for 30,000 francs and then acquired by MoMA where it was exhibited two years later.

The reemergence of *Les Dams* in 1939 opened it to the viewing public and to the critical world as well. It is when the painting's critical history began and continues.

How did the painting come to be? What does it mean? Here is where the now famous sketchbooks (and the critics) enter the drama. And, here is where things get a bit tricky. First, the initial assessments of *Les Dams* were made without full access to the sketches. Then come the critical assessments with them. And, just to add a complicating (and troublesome) touch, the practice of criticism changed dramatically at the end of the 20th c. with the intended consequence of altering the way *Les Dams* was to be open quote – read – close quote.

Although the finished work contains only the five women; the studies show two male figures – a sailor and another later identified as a medical student. A sailor in a brothel is a common enough trope. But why a medical student? In early sketches, the student is carrying a book and later he is carrying, or contemplating, a skull. With naked women, clearly Eros makes an appearance. With the skull, does Thanatos appear as well? The critics have had much to say about these two now vanished gentlemen.

Now, let's not dismiss the idea of two men in a brothel, two men in *Les Dams*, too quickly. After all, Pat and I were standing in front of it. Over its critical history, these two men take the place of us, they represent us. In Leo Steinberg's words "the unity of the picture . . . resides above all in the startled consciousness of a viewer who sees himself seen." The whole experience of the picture, Stein continues, is "centered on the beholder." We, the viewers, are as much a part of the painting as the Demsoiselles themselves.

The sketchbooks also contain a line drawing of Picasso's live-in lover/model Fernande Oliver. The drawing shows that her portrait was originally intended for a carriage scene with Fernande holding a parasol promenading through the Bois de Boulogne. In the finished painting, Picasso transforms Fernande from a society woman to a whore; a transformation that he later joked about with friends.

There are two groups of women in *Les Dams* – three on the left and two on the right. The groups are distinct and those on the right are particularly exotic as the result of three experiences. First, as told by Gertrude Stein and confirmed by Matisse and Max Jacob, Matisse introduced Picasso to African sculptures. He had brought two small fetishes to dinner at the Steins and showed them to Picasso who held them all evening and sketched them that night.

The second experience is a shady, questionable dealing with a Belgian con man named Géry Pieret. The shady part is that Pieret stole two ancient stone Iberian heads from the Louvre that he allegedly “sold” to Picasso. The questionable part is that the theft was instigated by a remark Picasso made at a dinner party. Regardless, Picasso had the heads, was fascinated by them, and they triggered his interest in primitive art that was deepened by his third experience, his visit to the ethnographic museum in Paris, now the Museum of Man. There he was mesmerized by African exotica and, as the story (or as the legend) goes, this visit changed his view of art.

Years later, he told Andre Malraux, that:

“When I went to the old Trocadéro, it was disgusting. The smell. I was all alone. I wanted to get away. But I stayed. I stayed. . . . The masks weren’t just like any other pieces of sculpture. They were magic things. . . . The Negro pieces were *intercesseurs*, mediators . . . They were against everything . . . I understood; I too was against everything. . . . I understood what the Negroes used their sculptures for The fetishes were . . . weapons. . . . *Les Femmes d’Alger* must have come to me that very day. It was my first exorcism painting.”

Yet, on another occasion, Picasso adamantly denied any connection between *Les Femmes d’Alger* and “l’art nègre,” “the art of black Africa.” He said that he did not visit the museum until after the painting was finished. It’s difficult, impossible really, to accept his disclaimer. The women, in various degrees, wear tribal faces that are one source of the painting’s magic and its mystery.

So, while there are a few stories about the creation of *Les Femmes d’Alger*, the stories from the artist are vague, when not contradictory. Some of the sketches may or may not have been of Fernande. Picasso did or did not visit the Trocadero before or after painting *Les Femmes d’Alger*. *Les Femmes d’Alger* is a finished work of art or it was left intentionally, or unintentionally, incomplete. Picasso called the painting either jokingly *El Bordel Philosophique* or *The Brothel of*

Avignon. The Barcelonan street either housed a brothel or it did not. Matisse may or may not have given Picasso fetishes that Picasso did or did not return. All may be true. All may be apocryphal. Most likely both. Or, we can believe the man himself who said “You must not always believe what I say. Questions tempt you to tell lies, particularly when there is no answer.” Picasso, simply, is an unreliable narrator of his own life. Then again, aren’t we all unreliable narrators in our own mythmaking?

What influenced or inspired *Les Dams*? There is no shortage of candidates and attributions change according to the critic. Influences range from El Greco and Baroque group portraits to Cezanne’s *Three Bathers* and Gauguin’s primitives. The more convincing argument, though, is that the painting was an inspired answer to his antagonist Matisse.

In 1906, Matisse, 10 years Picasso’s senior, had exhibited *Joie de vivre* at that year’s salon. Although Picasso did not show at the salons, he was fully aware (and jealous) of Matisse’s accepted reputation. Their pictures could not be more different. As John Golding writes “Unlike the *Joie de vivre*, which was intended to soothe and delight the eye, the *Demoiselles* can hardly have been calculated to please. Whereas Matisse’s painting is . . . wonderfully joyful and full of rich color and sensuous rhythms, the *Demoiselles* is angular, harsh, and grating.” Regarding color and form, these two artists were painting on different, separate canvases yet both coveted the same championship title of The Modern Artist.

The first criticisms of *Les Dams* were not about its subject matter. Ladies of pleasure had been done before. Ingres painted his *Grande Odalisque* in 1814. Manet’s *Olympia* was painted in 1865 and both were paintings of prostitutes. Or, we could go back to Greek sculptures or the frescoes at Pompeii for such delights. Nor was the criticism that *Les Dams* had the effrontery of confronting the viewer. *Olympia* had broken the fourth wall decades

earlier as had the court characters in Velázquez' *Las Meninas* two centuries before that. The criticism was not about its subject; it was about its style.

Courtesans of yore were classically posed as reclining nudes and, while they had seductive, come hither looks, they were also portrayed with an element of high romanticism. In a search for the classical, some critics see a reclining nude in *Les Femmes d'Alger* and say that Picasso in fact painted one; he just painted her vertical.

Nor was the criticism that *Les Femmes d'Alger* was particularly erotic. Gustav Courbet more than owned that territory with *The Origin of the World*. Rather, the early criticisms were based on rejection; Picasso's rejection of the erotic in favor of the exotic; of classical representation for something new and unfamiliar; and of space, depth, and perspective for something flat and cropped. One might imagine that the idea of the conflation of space and time was in the air given that 1905 was Einstein's year of special relativity. *Les Femmes d'Alger* stops and fuses space and time. For all of its angles, the surface is flat. For all of its figures, motion is suspended. And, if there is a story to tell, it is told in a glance; there is no narrative. It is all impact.

MoMA Director Barr wrote the catalog for the 1939 exhibition. He thought the painting "was a transitional picture, . . . a work of formidable, dynamic power unsurpassed in European art . . . [and] together with Matisse's *Joie de Vivre* it marks the beginning of a new period in the history of modern art."

Barr thought that the medical student was carrying a skull and that the skull referenced death and constituted a "moralistic contrast between virtue (man with the skull) and vice (man surrounded by food women)." He then described it as "a kind of *momento mori*" or as an allegory about the "wages of sin." For Barr, this scene was a conflict

between sex and death, between good and evil, between human desire and human weakness. Such a morality tale makes some sense. Consider Picasso's background – close knit family, Catalonia, Catholicism – what better way to challenge, if not reject, the authority of those influences than by welcoming, and in no small part, inventing modernity.

The next major study of *Les Dams* was published in 1959 by John Golding. He insightfully discussed the influences of other painters, the importance of the Iberian sculptures, and Picasso's visit to the museum in the Trocadero. Importantly (and, I believe, correctly), he downplayed the significance of *Les Dams* in the development of Cubism.

“Cubism was an art of realism, and insofar as it was concerned with reinterpreting the external world in a detached, objective way, a classical art. The impression made by the *Demoiselles* . . . is one of violence and unrest. Indeed, the savagery of the two figures at the right-hand side . . . would justify its classification as one of the most remarkable products of 20th century expressionism.”

Writing shortly after Golding, the critic Robert Rosenblum expanded on the notion of savagery:

“The ‘savagery that dominates the painting’ [is demonstrated by] the ‘jagged planes that lacerate torsos . . . harsh junctures . . . [and] the furious energies of . . . collusive, cutting angles’; the ‘demonic’ eyes of the crouching demoiselle [has] ‘magical force.’”

After Golding, Leo Steinberg's important 1972 essay, “The Philosophical Brothel,” adopted the early joke name for the painting. Steinberg had access to many of Picasso's notebooks together with 19 full studies. He set out to answer some open questions: How was the painting composed? Why were the two men there then gone? Did the women have to be prostitutes? Why the African masks? Why the several styles? And, why the staged setting? Opening the essay, he announces his conclusion: “No modern painting engages you with such brutal immediacy.”

Steinberg breaks the picture down into its particularities. Each figure is studied individually as is the sequence in which each woman enters the frame. Each pose is analyzed. Each facial expression. He comments on details such as the placement of the fruit, the table, and the curtain. Steinberg dissects the lines and edges of the painting; its colors and shadows; and its very shape. The canvas is large, a roughly 8' x 8' square; a square that compresses the figures as if they are being viewed through a window.

Regarding the two male figures, Steinberg asserts that even with their elimination, they remain a “shadowy presence” and we, the viewers, become the shadows of those figures.

Considering *Les Dems* as a group portrait, he said that each woman stands alone. It is a discontinuous group. There is no obvious communication among them. Instead, they direct their attention outward thus giving Les Demoiselles girl group power through a seduction that brings the viewer into the scene; into art; and into the modern world. The five figures are five versions of the subject, and they are five versions of the artist, and of the direction of art.

The women of *Les Dems* are primitive and tribal precisely to tap into the preternatural power of sex; to tap into the energy of the life force. These nativistic creatures have been trafficked into an urban brothel as a means of importing the pre-historic jungle into the city and infusing the origins of passion into modern consciousness.

Steinberg debunks Barr's *memento mori* conceit, a conceit that even Barr did not hold onto too tightly. A skull is in a preliminary sketch or two; in others, the figure is holding a book; and, and still others, he is holding nothing at all. Maybe the skull is nothing more than a simple prop. Sometimes a skull is just a skull.

Still, Barr's *momento mori* interpretation was later embellished by other critics who argued that the student with the skull represented Picasso's fear of death and, since the scene is taking place in a brothel, Picasso's fear of syphilis. Maybe, though, Picasso disappeared those two guys because they added two too many to the women's party. Isn't it more likely that Picasso was aiming at other, larger, more artistically and historically impactful quarry than another tale about good and bad?

Steinberg's 1972 essay arrived at a particular, maybe peculiar is a better word, time in intellectual and art history. For about a decade or so before then, New York art critics, led by their high priest Clement Greenberg, were asking: "Did Picasso still matter[?]" "Didn't Picasso's artistic genius end with Cubism?" And since then, "hadn't he dissipated his gifts on minor works?" Odd questions indeed. Cubism's sell by date was 1916 and Picasso's 1937 *Guernica* can be called many things; minor is not one of them. Still, the whole Picasso oeuvre was not universally admired.

In another advertisement for himself, Norman Mailer weighed in on *Les Doms*. He began focusing on differences between Matisse and Picasso. "If Matisse was rousing prodigies of attention among his fellow artists and critics by what he could accomplish with color, Picasso now had to show what could be done with form – even more, the destruction of form, at least as everyone understood it." Mailer had done his homework; but the artistic conflict between color and form had been mined earlier.

Mailer may well have been infected by the Greenberg School of Picasso criticism. He writes of *Les Doms* that although it is an artistically pleasing work: "We are looking at nothing less moving than a prodigiously important historical artifact – for those who are aesthetically devout, it is quite equal in modern art to the relics of the saints." He goes on to

call it a repellent work “not unlike an obscure poem that will never repay one’s attention without a solemn search into the poet’s notes, ambitions, and themes.” For Mailer, *Les Dems* is modern in a way that it cannot be enjoyed on its own without expert commentary. *Finnegan’s Wake* anyone?

Mailer concludes that *Les Dems* is a “notable event” on Picasso’s journey to Cubism. Well, so much for Mailer as art critic.

The young ladies left New York City for Paris in 1988. They did not visit the Bateau Lavoir in Montmartre; instead, Les Demsoiselles went to the Marais and stayed at the Hôtel Salé, recently converted to the Musée Picasso. As a brief aside, I also remember my first time at the Musée when the special exhibition was a voluminous display of Picasso’s pornography. Oops, I did not mean pornography, I meant his erotic art.

I have since regretted not buying the exhibition catalog; you know how heavy they are and it was in French. Still, I should have bought it. After all, I didn’t want to read it; I only wanted to look at the pictures. In my mind’s eye, those pictures were more startling, by far, than *Les Dems*. Regarding them, let me just say that Picasso was not afraid of menstrual blood.

The 1988 exhibition catalog, two volumes of over 700 pages, republished Steinberg’s 1972 essay together with all of the sketches and additional critical essays. Notably, the 1988 exhibit, and the surrounding criticism, occurred at the height of Postmodernism in academic Europe and America.

By way of example, one interpreter sees Picasso’s use of African motifs as an example of colonial appropriation:

“*Les Demsoiselles* and the primitivising work it generates necessarily constituted both an act of valuing the products of African culture and an allusion to French

brutality that contradicted the nation's image of itself as a 'civilizing' force, pointing up this 'hypocrisy' and 'bankrupt' cultural traditions at a charged period of political debate."

From such an altitude, art criticism takes a left turn away from art appreciation directly into cultural criticism. Typical of that period is the focus on the sexuality in the painting as a way to critique sexuality wholesale. In an essay entitled "Painting as Trauma" Yve-Alain Bois says that with *Les Dams*, Picasso "meant to take on the whole history of painting," including his own work and that the painting is intentionally "self-referential, even onanistic." Continuing, he writes:

"The *Demoiselles* creates a fundamental break with the symbolist tradition, and that break may be linked to an investigation of what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls the symbolic (i.e., the order of the law – governing the Oedipus complex and its correlative, the castration complex – that structures of personality give access to every construction of opposition, to language, society, or, even, art)."

Whew! Masturbation, castration, deconstruction, Picasso's

Oedipal killing of the father? Who could have guessed?

If Lacanian psychoanalysis can enter the critical world of *Les Dams*, can feminism (and the dreaded male gaze) be far behind? Not according to Tamar Garb who opines:

"But about one thing there is universal agreement . . . *Les Demoiselles* was intended to be viewed by men – virile, heterosexual men of European origin. . . . The fact of the matter is that most of the men who first looked at the painting in the privileged conditions of Picasso's studio could not recognize themselves They could not fathom its formal disjunctions, its incoherence, its peculiar iconic hybridity. Neither did it speak to their sexual fantasies, their dreams of dominance or fears of castration. They could not 'penetrate the picture' Only much later, when its pictorial transgressions had been tamed by formalist teleologies and its secret history had been revealed by careful tracking of studies and sketches, could this picture provide the narrative spur to scintillating tales of sex and seduction"

I apologize for the lengthy quotations but postmodernists can get windy. Note that again, we have, penetration, male privilege, teleology, reduction; there is something afoot here other than the study of a particular work of art or of an artist.

In an attempt to get away from the condemnation of male sexuality and domination, Garb, to her partial credit, recognizes that one of the painting's first admirers was a woman. In the world according to Garb, Gertrude Stein appreciated the power of the painting and the power of the artist's vision. Stein drew inspiration from Picasso for her own work. Just as *Les Doms* was an assault on previous artistic conventions, it also allowed her to reject traditional narrative and linguistic models. Garb notes: "What the painting represented to [Stein] was an attack on a genre, not an attack on women. She identified with the artistic agency thematised in it, rather than the image of femininity brutalized by it."

Unfortunately, Garb gives with one hand and takes with the other. She continues: "Perhaps . . . [Stein] was so identified with masculine models of agency that she failed to notice the potential for her own symbolic objectification here." Apparently, Gertrude was not man enough to acknowledge her own gendered subjugation. Peut-être. Maybe Picasso's attribution of the erotic to women is not to objectify them but to venerate their power, their awe, their majesty, their mystique.

Yet there is Picasso's misogyny. A critic writes: "I am fascinated that no one I have read seems to have noticed that the literature on Picasso continually turns grown-up women into girls." And, more, the very name "'Picasso' has come to signify a heroic myth of greatness – an agonistic narrative of influences and stylistic revolutions – that coincides with the sequence of women and their consequent ouster from favor: Picasso as Henry VIII." This criticism is not far off. Picasso did use women as models and as lovers and he

did move on from one to another. Is it possible, though, that his art is infused with sex to the point where sex and art form a unitary and essential dimension in his art as in his life? Or, does that interpretation just perpetuate the heterosexual male impulse to relish sexual privilege and erotic power?

With another critic, the curtain is pulled back from Po-Mo think to expose its true target. After recognizing that *Les Dems* has been “read” as “incipiently sexist, heterosexist, and neocolonialist,” Anna Chave confesses that “neither Picasso’s own intentions . . . nor his susceptibility to [those] biases” are the targets of her investigation. Instead, she continues, “poststructuralist and reception theories have shown that all publicly circulated images accrue new meanings beyond their maker’s intent and control. . . .” Here she has admitted that the role of the critic is to “interpret[e] art works [to] shape their significance by shaping how and what the public sees.” Ah-ha, in the Po-Mo world, the art and the artist disappear and they are replaced by the art critic just as art appreciation is replaced by politico-cultural interpretation.

Next, William Rubin’s 1994 monograph *The Genesis of Les Femmes d’Alger* moves in a slightly different, and a bit more familiar direction. Rubin’s study returns to the painting and the sketches and for him *Les Dems* “created an historical fault-line” for modern painting. He thought that Picasso was painting a “terrifying night journey of the soul.”

Rubin explores Picasso’s state of mind at the time such as his troubles with Fernande, their adoption of the 13-year-old orphan Raymonde, and her return to the orphanage shortly thereafter. He also discusses Picasso’s “deep-seated fear and loathing of the female body, which existed side-by-side with his craving for and ecstatic idealization of

it.” And yet, can it not be the case that this common Freudian, male attraction/repulsion meme is transcended in *Les Dams* to attain something more universal, more amplified, more encompassing?

Rubin also argues that the painting’s diverse styles reveal Picasso’s “underlying polarities:” “Eros and Thanatos, beauty and ugliness, human and animal – all of which can and do become reinforced on the stylistic level by means of Picasso’s revolutionary departure from the traditional ‘unity’ of figuration.” But isn’t art always about form and content and their ever-changing relationships?

Rubin’s detailed study describes the development of each figure; the sequence of the women in the picture; how their poses change over time; the disappearing act of the two men; and even the placement of the objects in the square. He also discusses the influences on Picasso and is skeptical of claiming too much. He recognizes Cézanne’s contribution to Cubism but less so to *Les Dams*. Instead, pride of place goes to El Greco particularly his *Apocalyptic Vision* and his *Vision of St. John*.

Let’s return to MoMA for a final viewing. In *Les Dams*, as in literally all of his paintings, Picasso has inserted himself not only as artist but as participant. Whether he represents himself by his coal black eyes or by the mythic figure of the Minotaur, Picasso is there. He is staring at you, daring you, inviting you, challenging you.

In *Les Dams*, each woman has Picasso’s eyes. The male gaze, so much criticized by the PoMo school, is there in the painting but it is not the gaze of the male ogling naked women. Instead, it is the gaze of the painter contemplating (and challenging) you, the viewer. And, Picasso’s male gaze is neither reproving nor prurient; rather, it is a gaze of wonderment and amazement, and of declaration and authority. “I did this,” he says. “I am

the master.” “My eyes can be seen in the women I paint not because I am expressing the feminine; No, I am Eros, the source of all sex; I am the seducer of art, of life.” No one has ever doubted Picasso’s sense of self or his ego.

Art criticism changes from time to time and from critic to critic. At times it is informative; and unreliable at others. There is much to learn from the history of a painting and reading the history of its criticism. One danger, though, must be avoided and, let me return to Steinberg. We cannot, he says, let “source-hunting forays” into the picture “remove our gaze from the picture itself.”

There are other, reliable ways to look at art. About the turn of the last century, the young Anglo-American Iris Cutting, later the Marchese Iris Origo, was living in the English enclave in Florence when she asked her mother’s friend Bernard Berenson to teach her about art. BB’s reply? “Use your eyes.” Indeed, when we use our eyes to see – what do we see? With thoughtful, reflective viewing our eyes will tell us.

After the museum and before returning to the Hades of the Bus Terminal, Pat and I walked a block to the Tiki Bar in the Hilton Hotel on Lex for our first Mai Tais those sophisticated drinks in coconuts with umbrellas, cherries, and pineapple slices! I remember those drinks; I remember the bar; and when I use my eyes to see, I most certainly remember the other new friends that I met on that visit to MoMA; those friends named Brancusi, Giacometti, Modigliani, Monet, Revelson, and many others and, of course, I remember *Guernica* and I remember those *Les Femmes d’Alger*. You never forget your first time.

Thank you.

Bibliography

ALFRED BARR, *PICASSO: FORTY YEARS OF HIS ART* (1939).

Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Trauma* in CHRISTOPHER GREEN (ED.), *PICASSO'S LES DEMSOISELLES D'AVIGNON* (2001).

Anna C. Chave, *New Encounters with Les Demsoiselles d'Avignon: Gender, Race and the Origins of Cubism*, 76 *THE ART BULLETIN* 596 (1994).

Judith Cousins and Hélène Seckel, *Chronology of Les Demsoiselles d'Avignon* in WILLIAM RUBIN, HÉLÈNE SECKEL AND JUDITH COUSINS, *STUDIES IN MODERN ART 3: LES DEMSOISELLES D'AVIGNON* 145 (1994).

Tamara Garb, *"To Kill the Nineteenth Century": Sex and Spectatorship with Gertrude and Pablo* in CHRISTOPHER GREEN (ED.), *PICASSO'S LES DEMSOISELLES D'AVIGNON* 55 (2001).

John Golding, *The Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 100 *BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 154 (May 1958).

John Golding, *Demsoiselles d'Avignon and the Exhibition of 1988*, in CHRISTOPHER GREEN (ED.), *PICASSO'S LES DEMSOISELLES D'AVIGNON* 15 (2001).

John Golding, *The Triumph of Picasso*, N.Y. *REV. BOOKS* (July, 21, 1988).

SIRI HUSTVEDT, *A WOMEN LOOKING AT MEN LOOKING AT WOMEN: ESSAYS ON ART, SEX, AND THE MIND* (2016).

Patricia Leighton, *Colonialism, l'art nègre, and Les Demsoiselles d'Avignon* in CHRISTOPHER GREEN (ED.), *PICASSO'S LES DEMSOISELLES D'AVIGNON* 77 (2001).

NORMAN MAILER, *PORTRAIT OF PICASSO AS A YOUNG MAN* (1995).

JOHN RICHARDSON, *A LIFE OF PICASSO: VOLUME II 1907-1917 THE PAINTER OF MODERN LIFE* (1996).

SUE ROE, *IN MONTMARTRE: PICASSO, MATISSE AND THE BIRTH OF MODERNIST ART* (2015).

William Rubin, *The Genesis of Les Demsoiselles d'Avignon* in WILLIAM RUBIN, HÉLÈNE SECKEL AND JUDITH COUSINS, *STUDIES IN MODERN ART 3: LES DEMSOISELLES D'AVIGNON* 13 (1994).

Hélène Seckel, *Anthology of Early Commentary on Les Demsoiselles d'Avignon* in WILLIAM RUBIN, HÉLÈNE SECKEL AND JUDITH COUSINS, *STUDIES IN MODERN ART 3: LES DEMSOISELLES D'AVIGNON* 213 (1994).

Leo Steinberg, *The Philosophical Brothel*, 71 ART NEWS (September/October 1972).

MILES J. UNGER, PICASSO AND THE PAINTING THAT SHOCKED THE WORLD (2018).