

New Encounters with *Les Femmes d'Alger*: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism

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What was "the amazing act upon which all the art of our century is built"? What is "the most innovative painting since Giotto," the "harbinger comet of the new century," the very "paradigm of all modern art," no less?¹ What is the modern art-historical equivalent of the Greatest Story Ever Told? What else but the monumental *Les Femmes d'Alger* (Fig. 1) painted by Picasso in 1907? Six years ago, this single painting, "probably the first truly twentieth-century painting," occasioned a major exhibition at the Musée Picasso in Paris commemorated by a ponderous two-volume catalogue.² The director of the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York swore he would kill himself if the plane transporting the work to that event were to crash.³ What can account for such hyperbole, for such an unparalleled fixation on a particular picture?

"In mystical terms, with this painting we bid farewell to all the paintings of the past," pronounced André Breton of *Les Femmes d'Alger*.⁴ More than any other work of art, Picasso's picture has been held to mark or even to have precipitated the demise of the old visual order and the advent of the new. That art historians should have conscripted *Les Femmes d'Alger* to serve in such a strategic capacity might seem odd, however, if we take into account that the cognoscenti resoundingly rejected the picture at the time it was painted, and that it remained all but invisible to the public for three decades thereafter, when it finally found an audience—though at first only in the United States.⁵ The painting "seemed to everyone something mad or monstrous," the dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler recalled; "Derain told me that one day Picasso would be found hanging behind his big picture."⁶

Why have historians parlayed this once reviled and ignored image of five rather alien-looking prostitutes vying for a client into the decisive site of the downfall of the prevailing visual regime?⁷ Undeniably, Picasso violated pictorial convention in *Les Femmes d'Alger*: by his deidealization of the human form, his disuse of illusionistic space, and his deployment of a mixture of visual idioms. In the standard art-historical narratives, however, these violations on the artist's part tend to get conflated with the putatively violent aspect of the women he depicted, who often come to assume a kind of autonomous agency. And whereas Picasso's contemporaries fingered *him* as the perpetrator who "attacked" his female figures, later accounts often cast the artist together with the viewing public as the prostitutes' victims.⁸ Leo Steinberg experienced the picture as a "tidal wave of female aggression . . . an onslaught"; Robert Rosenblum perceived it as an "explosion" triggered by "five nudes [who] force their eroticized flesh upon us with a primal attack"; and Max Kozloff deemed it simply "a massacre."⁹

Les Femmes d'Alger is generally credited not only with a momentous act of destruction, but also with one of creation. Long designated the first Cubist painting—"the signal for the Cubist revolution" in its full-fledged dismantling of representational conventions¹⁰—the painting is now more loosely considered a curtain raiser or trigger to Cubism.¹¹ Others had pulled crucial triggers before Picasso, however. When Baudelaire told Manet, "You are only the first in the decrepitude of your art," he referred to the scandalously frank picture of a courtesan, *Olympia*, rendered with startling flatness in 1865. For that matter, a compressed or otherwise compromised female form, often that of a

I thank Christine Poggi, Lisa Saltzman, and Lorraine O'Grady for their comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

1. Bois, 1988, 172; Richardson, 475; a phrase of Max Jacob's employed by Arianna S. Huffington to describe *Les Femmes d'Alger* (A. S. Huffington, *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer*, New York, 1988, 93); and Steinberg, 20 (Steinberg says that the painting has come to be regarded in such terms, not that he himself sees it in that way).

2. E. F. Fry, *Cubism*, New York, 1966, 12; and Seckel.

3. This story is told by Bois, who helpfully suggested to William Rubin that he ride along with the painting, thereby sparing the necessity for the suicide (Bois, 1988, 172, n. 14).

4. Cited by Daix, 1993, 187. Breton became a champion of the painting in the 1920s: in 1923 he engineered its (initial) sale, to Jacques Doucet; and in 1925 he reproduced it in *La Révolution surréaliste* (ibid., 69, 252).

5. *Les Femmes d'Alger* was first reproduced in the *Architectural Record* of May 1910. Though it was visible in a studio photograph published by André Salmon in 1912, it was not properly reproduced in France until 1925 (see n. 4, above). The painting was first

exhibited by Salmon at the Salon d'Antin in 1916, but it met "with indifference." In 1939 Alfred Barr acquired it for the Museum of Modern Art, where it has remained ever since, the virtual centerpiece of the collection. It was not shown again in France until 1953, when it again "receive[d] very little attention" (Daix, 1993, 68–69).

6. Cited in Rubin, 1989, 348. Those openly critical of the picture included Georges Braque, Leo Stein, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Félix Fénéon (ibid., 348, 346), Ambroise Vollard (Daix, 1993, 79), and the collector Sergei Shchukin, who appeared at Gertrude Stein's home, "almost in tears," bemoaning the "loss for French art" (G. Stein, *Picasso* [1938], New York, 1984, 18). Stein supported the picture (Daix, 1993, 79), as did Salmon and Ardeno Soffici (Rubin, 1989, 348).

7. That this way of narrating the story of modern art has entailed an overestimation of Picasso at the expense of other modernist pioneers, including some active in centers other than Paris, could easily be, though it will not be, a subtheme of the present essay.

8. The word is Salmon's, cited in McCully, 57.

9. Steinberg, 22; R. Rosenblum, "The 'Femmes d'Alger' Revisited," *Artnews*, LXXII, no. 4, Apr.

1973, 45; and Kozloff, 35. Kozloff does not clarify whom he regards as the sociopath(s), whether Picasso (whose "antipathy to his disfigured subjects" is mentioned) or the prostitutes (those "avenging furies of a new order"), or who would be the victims (Kozloff, 38, 37).

10. Salmon's phrase, cited in McCully, 140.

11. The earliest dissenter from the position (promulgated by such authorities as Kahnweiler and Barr) that *Les Femmes d'Alger* was the first Cubist picture was John Golding, who still regarded the picture as "a natural starting-point for the history of Cubism" (J. Golding, "The 'Femmes d'Alger,'" *Burlington Magazine*, c. 1958, 162–63). Rubin much later took up this point, arguing that the picture "pointed mostly in directions opposite to Cubism's character and structure—although it cleared the path for its development." Further, "none of the earliest references to the *Femmes d'Alger* characterizes it as Cubist; nor did Kahnweiler so qualify it in 'Der Kubismus' [of 1916]. . . . By 1920, he had apparently changed his mind" (Rubin, 1983, 628, 644). Richardson persists in the view that the picture "established a new pictorial syntax" (Richardson, 475).

prostitute or femme fatale, would come to serve almost as an avatar of modernism.¹² Feminist critics have lately diagnosed this fact, that the avant-garde's testing of cultural limits so often played itself out on the female body, as symptomatic of a visual regime where "Woman" serves as "the very ground of representation, both object and support of a desire which, intimately bound up with power and creativity, is the moving force of culture and history."¹³

The Greatest Story Ever Told was perforce a narrative of exclusion, then: a story told by a heterosexual white male of European descent for an audience answering to the same description; and the stories told ever since about that Greatest Story have mostly been no less narratives told by straight white males for a like public. Virtually every critic who has addressed *Les Femmes d'Alger* has not only assumed what is indisputable—that the picture's intended viewer is male and heterosexual—but has also elected to consider only the experience of that viewer, as if no one else ever looked at the painting. (Through *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Picasso "tells us what our desires are," one critic declared, peremptorily.)¹⁴ No doubt Picasso's chosen subject dictates this scenario, since today, just as in 1907, prostitution marks an indelible social boundary between the sexes: between men, who can routinely contract for the sexual services of women, and women, who have never had a comparable opportunity.¹⁵

Among my objectives in the present text, then, is to examine where *Les Femmes d'Alger* positions some of its unanticipated viewers; to explore the painting from, as it were, unauthorized perspectives. What follows is a study in reception, present and past, in short, but one that takes its focus through the critical lenses of gender and race. (Examining the painting's reception history from a given, raking angle, not in a full, even light, will bring some neglected aspects of that history into relief while, admittedly, flattening or obscuring other elements that would figure prominently in a more general or comprehensive kind of reception study.)¹⁶ Poststructuralist and reception theories have shown that all publicly circulated images accrue meanings beyond their makers' intent and control, or that the meanings of works of art are more contingent than immanent, for in the act of interpreting art works critics shape their significance by shaping how and what the public sees. As for the terms in

which *Les Femmes d'Alger* has been read, they have often been incipiently sexist, heterosexist, racist, and neocolonialist: so I will argue. (I should perhaps add plainly that neither Picasso's own intentions for the picture nor his susceptibility to the biases enumerated above are the principal subjects of investigation here.)

To begin with, the place that *Les Femmes d'Alger* conspicuously marks out for a client-viewer is hopelessly unsuited to me—a heterosexual, feminist, female viewer.¹⁷ But I can find some basis to identify with its protagonists. Although my privileged background has insulated me from the desperate straits that have long driven women to toil in the sex industry, like other independent women I nonetheless have an inkling of what it means to be treated as a prostitute. When I traverse the city streets alone I am subject to pestering by strange men who lewdly congratulate me on aspects of my anatomy while ordering me to smile. If I am not mistaken for a prostitute, given my reserved dress and behavior, I remain prey to that pervasive suspicion that a trace of whore lurks in every woman—just as an "honest" woman supposedly lurks in every whore.

As it happens, the streets in my own longtime neighborhood on Manhattan's Lower East Side encompass a major prostitute "stroll." The streetwalkers I encounter there are a lower class of prostitute, more drug-addicted and ill than the type of woman Picasso portrayed, but I occasionally see them assume the poses of the two demoiselles at the center of the painting, their arms crooked over their heads in an age-old formula for seductive femininity. On the Lower East Side, as in Picasso's picture, however, the woodenness of the women's stances and their faces' masklike stolidity suggest that they know they are party to a tiresome artifice. Like virtually all women, I have engaged in such half-hearted acts of simulation, engaged in such a "masquerade,"¹⁸ and this helps me to view the demoiselles empathetically: they seem to me at once to demonstrate and to withdraw from patriarchal stereotypes of femininity, as if in an act of noncooperative cooperation. These women—who are Picasso's fictions no doubt, but fictions founded on his observations of actual, disgruntled women and prostitutes—these women can be had, of course, but on another level they are not for the having, and that puts the client-viewer in a position of nerve-wracking uncer-

12. "From the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, modernism obsessively and anxiously displays its innovative desire by fragmenting and disfiguring the female sexual body, epitomized in male fantasy by the prostitute," observes Bernheimer, 266. Baudelaire's remark is cited in *ibid.*, 292, n. 51.

13. T. de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington, Ind., 1984, 13. Also, "masculine sexuality and in particular its commercial exchange dominate the works seen as the 'founding monuments of modern art,'" notes Janet Wolff (who credits Griselda Pollock for this insight); it follows that "the definition of the modern, and the nature of modernism, derived from the experience of men and hence excluded women" (J. Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture*, Berkeley, 1990, 57, 58).

14. R. Johnson, "The 'Femmes d'Alger' and Dionysian Destruction," *Arts*, Oct. 1980, 94; my emphasis.

15. First to remark on the dynamic of exclusion at work in *Les Femmes d'Alger* was C. Duncan, "The MoMA's Hot Mamas," *Art Journal*, XLVIII, no. 2, Summer 1989, 175–76.

16. A more traditional study of the reception of *Les Femmes d'Alger* is promised by a new publication—William Rubin, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, *Studies in Modern Art*, no. 3, New York, 1994—which was as yet unavailable when the present essay went to press.

17. Though I do not address the position of the lesbian viewer in this paper, it is an issue worth pursuing, particularly considering that aristocratic, lesbian patrons frequented brothels to an extent in turn-of-the-century Paris, and that prostitutes at the better establishments were trained and expected to serve this clientele. See Corbin, 125.

18. That womanliness and masquerade are in a sense one and the same was initially suggested by the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere (J. Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929), in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. V. Burgin, J. Donald, and C. Kaplan,

London, 1986, 35–44; see also S. Heath, "Joan Riviere and the Masquerade," in *ibid.*, 45–61).

19. Luce Irigaray, cited in Heath (as in n. 18), 54.

20. Whether Picasso's intention in giving caricatured African masks to these prostitutes was consciously denigratory or not is a moot point. Leighton, who was the first to focus on the issue of colonialism in relation to *Les Femmes d'Alger*, has argued strenuously, but I believe unconvincingly, that his gesture was one of fervent solidarity with anticolonial thinking (P. Leighton, "The White Peril and *L'Art nègre*: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism," *Art Bulletin*, LXXII, no. 4, 1990, 609–30).

21. H. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October*, no. 28, Spring 1984, 126–27. Mimicry can go two ways, of course, but for a white person to imitate a person of color, to perform in effect as a minstrel, is at once to acknowledge and to disavow "difference at the level of the body." From that perspective, minstrelsy emerges as a form of fetishism, an attempt "to restore the wholeness and unity threatened by the

