

Picasso's angular creation remains cutting edge

Louis Laganà highlights some of the stories about the famous painting Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) which marks its first centenary

Undoubtedly, in the history of art one of the famous paintings of the 20th century is Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) by Picasso. It is the core of Picasso's laboratory. He called this painting his "first exorcism picture". This pivotal masterpiece is 100 years old and the Museum of Modern Art in New York is celebrating a series of events to mark the centenary since its creation by the leading figure of Modern Art, Pablo Ruiz Picasso (1881-1973). The events include an exhibition of Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) which was acquired in 1939 and the preparatory studies which Picasso made in 1906-1907 and other archival material which the gallery acquired since its acquisition in 1939. The exhibition was inaugurated on May 9 and will remain open until August 27. We know that much has been said and written about this eight-foot-square canvas and probably no other modern work has been under so much discussion.



So how did the story of the Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) begin? The painting began as a narrative of a brothel scene. At that time, Picasso was so profoundly influenced by tribal art, that the earliest art critics identify him as the main protagonist of primitivism, but we know that there were other artists before him who discovered African art which had an impact on their artistic career. These were Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck. Perhaps, it was his great fear of death and his superstition which triggered his sympathy with Primitive art. Although many times Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) is usually discussed in terms of the formal qualities we find in African and Iberian sculpture, particularly in the mask-like faces of the two women in the painting, many historians claim that it was just a psychological and formal "affinity" which Picasso had with "primitive" artists. It is also argued that the painting was a direct anti-colonial political statement. Patricia Leighton strengthens this argument in her writing in *The White Peril* and *L'Art nègre* when she stated that its conception emerged out of the scandals of the French policy in Africa in 1905-06.

In his study on Primitivism Prof. Colin Rhodes argues that there is little doubt that the first people who saw Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) before 1918 did not perceive the message in the painting as an anti-colonial statement or Picasso's intention to show the two women on the right of the painting as African masks. It was rather the expression of "ugliness" which shocked the first viewers, like his friends André Salmon, Leo Stein and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. Above all Picasso wanted to shock his viewers through his violently distorted forms and spaces.

Two key writers who wrote extensively on Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) are Leo Steinberg and William Rubin. *The Philosophical Brothel*, a groundbreaking essay on Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) by Leo Steinberg (b.1920) was published in 1972. Steinberg was the first writer to come out with an entirely new interpretation of this masterpiece. Steinberg made a meticulous study of the several sketches which Picasso prepared before he did the

actual painting. These sketches were ignored by earlier critics. In the earlier sketches, the artist included two male figures, one of a sailor and the other of a medical student holding a book and a skull. For Steinberg, the medical student symbolised vice and virtue and the sailor, the prostitute's client. These figures were later removed by Picasso from the final masterpiece although most of the sketches of the demoiselles were mainly masculine. This supports the argument, as Hal Foster, contemporary art historian wrote, that "Picasso's thematic concern revolved around the primordial question of sexual difference, and that of fear of sex." Picasso already took as a subject the theme of sexuality and danger. This reminds us of his 1903 celebrated painting called *La Vie (Life)* where he shows a naked couple and a clothed woman with a baby in her arm together with other allegorical nude figures in the background.

On the other hand, William Rubin (1927-2006) who is well known for his two-volume catalogue, *Primitivism In 20th Century Art*, accompanying the major art exhibition on Primitivism held in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, included a long essay on Picasso in one of the volumes and discussed at length the conception of this painting. He disagreed with Steinberg's hypothesis that *Les Demoiselles* was viewed as a "sexual metaphor" but maintained that it had a "primitive" influence. Rubin's comment was that the *Demoiselles*, was "Picasso's transformation from the narrative to an 'iconic' picture which must be seen as taking place within a broad and continuing progression toward a static, frontal, and concentrated type of image that marks the elaboration and reworking of all the four most ambitious of Picasso's 1905-09 paintings, and is paradigmatic for the development of his art from the *Rose* into the early Cubist period."

In my opinion, today, one has to look at this great masterpiece within psychoanalytic territory. We here have to deal with the "primal scene" and try to understand the allegory within this context. The encounter with prostitutes and tribal objects was traumatic for Picasso. He was very much afraid of the threatening sexual disease which was rampant in Paris at that time. When Picasso produced this work between June and July of 1907, he was fully conscious that he was producing a major work.

Let us not forget also that Picasso was introduced to African art in 1906 by Matisse. The primitivistic appeal is significant in the painting and the way the artist shifted his interest from archaic Iberian sculpture to African sculpture. So some kind of formalism is present in the final work, and in the way Picasso changed his ideas from the early sketches for this work. It is, as Alfred H. Barr, one of the first critics who published the preliminary studies on *Les Demoiselles*, calls it, a "transitional picture", although some other writers dismissed this view.

Today we can say that this major work by Pablo Picasso reached a mythical status. Many art historians still debate and reinterpret its conception, and there is still a question about the psychoanalytical interpretations of Picasso's terror of women. Also, artists from all over the world still use its concept to create work within a sexual theme.