

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon

Painted in 1907

Pablo
Picasso

Pablo Picasso's (1881-1973) painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* depicts a scene in a brothel in Barcelona with five nude females, two of which appear to be wearing traditional African masks. Picasso had always referred to it as *Le Bordel d'Avignon*, but art critic **André Salmon**, who managed its first exhibition, gave the work its present title to lessen the scandalous impact on the public. In this Proto-Cubist painting, Picasso favoured a flat, two-dimensional representation of the women, in contrast to the traditions of the time.



Les Demoiselles was Picasso's response, in the hope of making a name for himself, to **Henri Matisse's** *Blue Nude*, which was also painted in 1907 and garnered plenty of media attention. However, Picasso replaced Matisse's smooth brush strokes with sharp and jagged forms. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* was first exhibited in July 1916, and an art review was published in *Le Cri de Paris* soon after, claiming that the "five women ... have piggish faces" - the public was not impressed.



Picasso created over 100 sketches and preliminary paintings, taking nine months to complete the final piece. Initial sketches included a male figure, perhaps a medical student, in a brown coat, visible in the preliminary paintings below. Eventually this figure was replaced by a woman with her face painted in a primitive archaic style, holding back the red/brown curtain to reveal the others. The painting shows the contrast between the Iberian-styled women on the left and the two abstracted and alien women wearing African masks.



Blue Nude, **Henri Matisse** (middle left) // preliminary paintings and studies by **Picasso**

Personal Context

of Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso was born in Málaga, Spain, on the 25th of October 1881 and died on the 8th of April 1973. His father, José Ruiz y Blasco was a painter, an art teacher and a professor of art at the Escuela Provincial de Bellas Artes. From the age of 7, Pablo's father taught him figure drawing and oil painting. In 1895, Picasso's sister died of diphtheria, leaving Picasso traumatised, and causing the family to move to Barcelona. He joined the school of fine arts at the age of 13, and was soon sent to Spain's top art school in Madrid - *La Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando*. He admired the works of El Greco and this can be seen in his later works, including *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Picasso's friend Carlos Casagemas committed suicide in 1901, also influencing Picasso's paintings in the early 1900s.



"Women are machines for suffering," Picasso told his mistress Françoise Gilot in 1943 "For me there are only two kinds of women, goddesses and doormats". Of the seven most important women in Picasso's life, four of them either committed suicide or went mad. Picasso made many portraits of his 'muses', such as of Dora Maar. (1907-1997; with him 1936-1944) [*Woman in Blue Dress*]

At first, Picasso painted traditional art just as he was taught by his father, as visible in his self-portrait at age 15 in 1896 below. African culture features heavily in his works around the time of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, such as in his self-portrait below from just a decade later.

The suicide of his friend Carlos in 1901 caused what is known as the **Blue period**, the most famous work being *The Old Guitarist*.

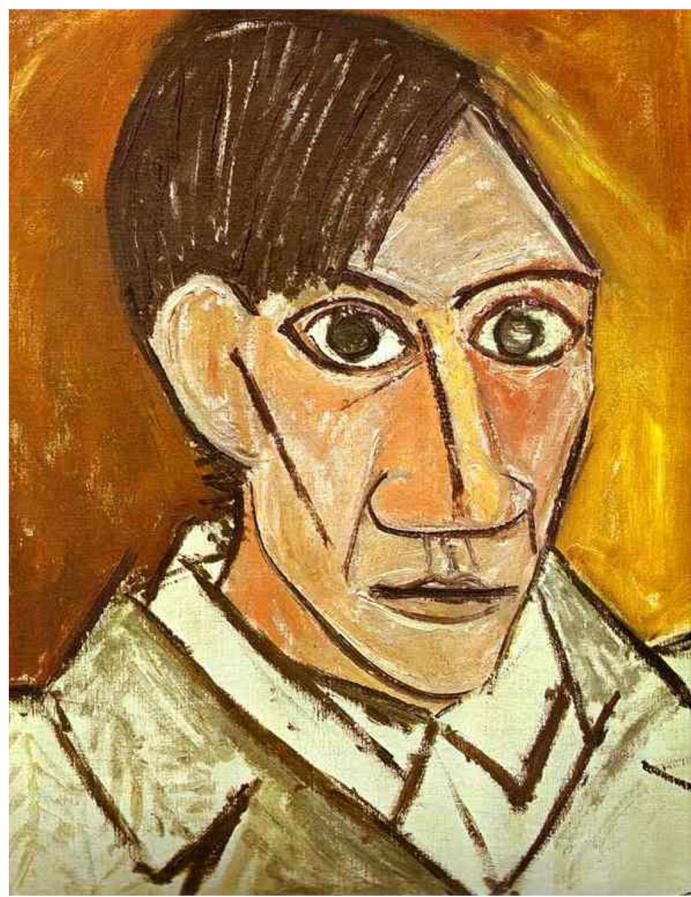


Woman in a Blue Dress
(Portrait of Dora Maar)
- above (surrealism)

Self-portrait, 1896 (age
15) - far left (early work)

Self-portrait, 1907 (age
26) - left (African
period)

The Old Guitarist, 1904
- right (blue period)



Historical Context of Les Demoiselles d'Avignon

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon was painted at the turn of the century, when many important changes were happening, such as the revolutions in Russia and the first Antarctic expedition to the South Pole.

Picasso was one of the first modern artists, as most art at the time was either very traditional, such as this portrait by John Singer Sargent, or part of the Impressionist movement which included artists such as Cézanne and Degas. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* was a very controversial painting at the time.



Paul Cézanne, Mont Sainte-Victoire, 1902-04



The first aircraft - the Wright Flyer - flew in a controlled flight on December 1903



Antarctic Exploration - Sir Ernest Shackleton reached the South Pole in 1907

At the time, Picasso was surrounded by a rather old-fashioned society, when men still wore top hats, as shown by the photographs below of Paris at the time



Artistic Context of Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)



Central figure in Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)

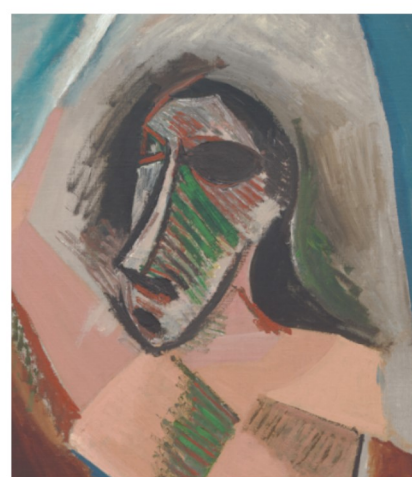


Paul Cézanne, *The Large Bathers*, 1906, oil on canvas, 82 7/8 in × 98 3/4 in. (Philadelphia Museum of Art)



Henri Matisse, *Bonheur de Vivre*, 1906, oil on canvas, 175 x 241 cm. (The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia)

Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) shows the influence of African art on Picasso, especially with the two female figures on the right and in general the abstracted and flat forms that he used. Picasso was inspired by Cézanne's *The Large Bathers* and probably more so Matisse's *Le Bonheur de Vivre*. The pose of central figure in Picasso's painting closely resembles the left-most figure in Matisse's painting. Pablo Picasso blended the highly stylized treatment of the human figure in African sculptures with painting styles derived from the post-Impressionist works of Edouard Manet, Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin. Picasso had recently seen an exhibition of archaic Iberian sculpture (an ancient pre-classical style from Iberia—the land mass that makes up Spain and Portugal) at the Louvre, demonstrated very clearly by the left-most figure of Picasso's painting. The two figures at the right are the most aggressively abstracted with the faces rendered as if they are wearing African masks. By 1907, when this painting was produced, Picasso had begun to collect such work. The three women on the left were painted to look more Iberian as a symbol beside the African inspired right. The piece was a rebellion against bourgeois society and colonialism and it opened the door to subsequent movements such as surrealism and Dadaism.



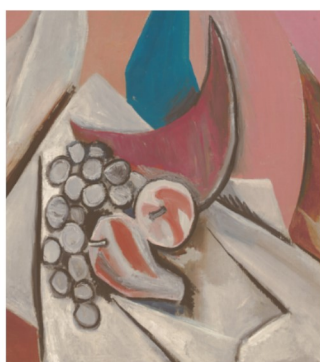
1st Woman with African mask on the right



Left-most figure resembles archaic art



2nd Woman with African mask on the right



The distorted table with still life (left), a traditional and ancient symbol of sexuality gives the painting a traditional grounding but at the same time shrinking it to the bottom of the painting shows how far Picasso has moved on from traditional art. The table would have been next to the male figure which he later removed. (see preliminary sketches on previous pages)