

Pablo Picasso

Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K. Version O), 1911-12

Posing in the nude before the painter, five young women appear disfigured by **asymmetrical physical features**.

Painted by Picasso in 1907 and housed today in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, this piece is considered the artist's most innovative work as well as **one of the most revolutionary pieces of art in the entire twentieth century**. It is common knowledge that the artist had difficult relationships – intense but ambivalent – with women and at the time he painted this canvas he had just broken off his living arrangements with Fernande Olivier.

Intersections of Planes

The subject of the painting picks up on a Barcelona brothel that the artist knew well, situated in the Carrer d'Avinyó (which gives the canvas its title). In Picasso's composition the faces and bodies appear cut and marked by sharp angles. The figures' noses are sharp, their breasts pointed, even the melon slice looks more like a pointed scythe. There are neither shadows, nor perspective devices nor any sense of empty spaces. The **planes are all jammed one into another**, the crouching girl looks forward even if her body is seen from the back.

The woman on the left recalls Egyptian art while the two figures to the right make clear reference to African masks. In fact in a short space of time Picasso had become a passionate collector of African objects, masks, sculptures, and even postcards; he felt overwhelmed by the **formal synthesis** demonstrated by each one of these objects. It is just this synthesis that the artist is trying to achieve in his own painting's structure and which will be the stepping stone for every forward movement in Cubism.

Following his desire for extreme simplification the **colours have been essentially reduced to two**, all variants of ochre and blue.

The painting was the result of a long conception period, during which time the artist prepared some 806 preparatory sketches. Even if the painting presents some areas that seem unfinished, it was instead a slow and progressive definition process that left nothing to chance.

The picture's most important focus is the intersection of traditional female nude painting, still anchored in mythological reference, with the very prosaic theme of a brothel.

Originally Seven Figures

In the preliminary sketches close to the women there were also two male figures – probably a sailor and a medical student, judging from the book he holds. Some commentators see this choice of figure as a symbol of Picasso's troubled relationship with the body in general. This would seem to find further confirmation in the fact that, in an even earlier sketch, the student figure held a skull. In such a case the painting would have taken on the meaning of a **vanitas, which placed primacy on the flesh rather than on the spirit**. But it also points to a threat of contact and perhaps we should recall here that, in Picasso's time, syphilis was a widespread disease – similar in transmission, contagion and results – to what AIDS is today. **Youth and beauty menaced by death** as well as **a reflection on the source of pleasure and suffering** were also emphasized by the painting's original ironic title, *The Philosophical Brothel*, which, it seems, was suggested by Picasso's friends Salmon, Jacob and Guillaume Apollinaire.

Modern Painting, Classical Inspiration

The closest forerunner to Picasso's piece is the *Turkish Bath* by Ingres (1862) but also the *Bathers* by Cézanne as well as the female portraits by Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec.



Fig. 1 Paul Cézanne, Five Bathers, 1885-1887. Oil on wood panel, 65,3 x 65,3 cm. Basel, Kunstmuseum.

Lower left Fig. 2 Venus de Milo, perhaps inspired by one of Lisippo's sculpture from 4th century B.C. Marble, h. 202 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Lower right Fig. 3 Michelangelo, Prison, also known as the Dying Slave, 1513 ca. Marble, h. 229 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre.



Within Picasso's own evolution the precedents are found in the bleak female portraits of his blue and rose periods but also in his earliest Spanish divisionist pieces. Probably the artist chose this theme because it allowed him to **paint the female body in a completely innovative way** that remained tied to **ancient art**, his constant meter of comparison.

Another reference to ancient art can be found in the still life formed by the fruit arrangement which was considered, historically, as proof of a painter's expertise. By stylizing his fruit bowl Picasso declares his definitive refusal to copy from nature. In its portrayal of the young women the *Demaiselles* painting proposes other cultured references: Ancient Egypt, the *Venus de Milo*, Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*, all works that Picasso – a formidable connoisseur of museums – often saw first-hand in the Louvre. The artist manipulated all these masterpieces of noble origins, which collectively represent a highpoint of the Western artistic tradition, to make a key painting of the twentieth century. In the process he deforms, almost profanes, the female nude onto which he grafts grotesque and savage masks showing, in an almost brazen way, his figures' ugliness and monstrosity. His friend, the author Gertrude Stein, commented on this operation by saying, «*Picasso once said that anyone who created something new had no choice but to make it ugly; the effort to generate such intensity always results in a certain degree of ugliness. Anyone coming after can take the same thing and make it beautiful because it has already been invented and knows what it must do; it is inevitable that the inventor, who doesn't know what he's making, originates something that possesses its own ugliness.*»

In the painting we see the young women "on parade" – almost in a theatre scene, as is suggested by the curtain on the left – as they offer themselves for selection by the brothel clients. Once Picasso eliminated the two male figures from the composition, we find ourselves sitting in the clients' places. In this way **Picasso situated viewers inside the painting and made a four-dimensional space** that includes our time and our gaze.

The *Demaiselles d'Avignon* was seen by very many artist colleagues in Picasso's studio where it remained until 1916. It was not reproduced until 1925.



Fig 4 Pablo Picasso,
Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.), 1912.
Oil on canvas, 244x233 cm. New York, The Museum of Modern Art.

Fig. 5
Pablo Picasso, *Study for Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*.
Watercolour on paper, 17,5x22,5 cm. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Detail.

