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Suzanne Preston Blier, *Picasso's Demoiselles: The Untold Story of a Modern Masterpiece*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019. xvi + 432 pp. Chronology, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$114.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4780-0005-1; \$30.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-4780-0019-8.

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The spectre of Africa has long haunted interpretations of Pablo Picasso's 1907 painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*. Painted in Paris during a febrile period of artistic obsession with the sheer otherness of non-Western sculptural objects and a weariness with worn-out reformulations of Western classical ideals of beauty, Picasso chose the most theatrical of means to announce the presence of African art at the heart of the Western modernist project. Of the five female nudes who appear to pivot from various angles towards the viewer, two of their faces are scandalously transformed into African masks. Scandal was, of course, the holy grail of the avant-garde. Pierre Matisse had stunned audiences with *Bonheur de Vivre* in 1906, a vividly painted pastoral-cum-utopian-romp of a painting, and had once again caused a stir, along with André Derain, at the Salon des indépendants in 1907 exhibiting African-inspired nudes. The lust for scandal aside, Picasso did not immediately show his canvas. It was not seen publicly until 1916 and even so its exhibition was a semi-private affair organized by his friend, the critic André Salmon, who is credited with the work's title. New York's Museum of Modern Art eventually acquired the work, exhibiting it to American audiences in 1939 at its newly reopened space, where it has remained a canon-defining centerpiece of the museum's modernist collection.

It is surprising to learn in Suzanne Preston Blier's book, *Picasso's Demoiselles: The Untold Story of a Modern Masterpiece*, just how little has been made of the painting's reliance upon African art for much of its history. Leo Steinberg's "The Philosophical Brothel," first published in 1973, is one of the better-known accounts, but Steinberg's essay assigned African art little regard. [1] The shock of the painting had to do with its sexual charge, in Steinberg's view. In Steinberg's attempt to re-ignite the iconography of the painting--formalist art history had long deemed it irrelevant--the primitivism of the *Les Femmes d'Alger* became only a way station to a discussion of the painting's depiction of sex--and one deviant, diseased, and assaultive at that. Rereading his essay today, one can only be struck by an unforgivable choice of language--the essay is littered with references to harlots, whores, strumpets, and sluts. Previously, scholarship only fretted over the painting's connection, as a question of style, to the subsequent cubist movement. Was it the first cubist painting or merely a presage? For all the reasons it wasn't--there were many--the real reason might have had something to do with those masks. Might its African source dilute the requisite originality of an important early modernist movement in the West? As Anna Chave wrote during

the 1990s, when there was yet another sea change in the field as scholars turned to consider extra-pictorial (and postcolonial) concerns around gender, colonial primitivism, and race, “cubism should not be exposed as a black bastard.”[2] Blier leverages this quote in the introductory section to her book to reassert the significance of African art to her close visual analysis of the *Demoiselles*. With the assurance of someone finally putting an end to the matter, she summarily notes: “The most salient innovations of both *Les Demoiselles* and cubism—namely stylistic multiplicity, assemblage, and arbitrariness of form—came from Picasso’s seeing African sculpture” (p. 13).

As for the sense of the painting as a representation of sexual aggression or trauma (in part because of the grafting of African figures onto these Western female bodies), a view shared, along with Steinberg, by William Rubin and Yves Alain Bois among others, it is not one, interestingly enough, shared by women scholars who often take a more sober measure of the painting’s depiction of female sexuality.[3] Blier is no exception. What *Picasso’s Demoiselles: The Untold Story of a Modern Masterpiece* sets out to prove is that art historians have misread the iconography of those five female figures who have stared down the viewer for the 100 or more years the picture has existed. No longer the proto-cubist denizens of a brothel on the Rue d’Avignon in Barcelona, these women are argued to be citizens of the world, whose challenge to the classical ideal of beauty is lifted from the gender ambiguities and stylistic abstraction of African sculpture and whose differing ages and roles, along with racial and geographic identities, are splayed across the shallow surface of the canvas like an opened fan. No longer the prototypically modern misogynist whose fears and anxieties about female sexuality were transposed onto primitivist fantasies, the Picasso who comes into view here is a twenty-first-century globalist whose art, for added measure, complicates gender identity.

But the place of primitivism within the context of Parisian modernism—the larger point of Chave’s comment above and indeed the cultural milieu of *Demoiselles D’Avignon*—is not the concern of *Picasso’s Demoiselles*. One quickly gets a sense that its author won’t be troubled either with the painting’s relationship to colonialism since she states quite early on, after running through various scholars who have (Hal Foster, Jack Flam, Patricia Leighton, Anna Chave [4]), that these extra-pictorial matters “stand outside the ways in which Picasso would engage with African art” (p. 12). But can you have one without the other? Her central claim is that scholars have overlooked African art’s influence for a number of reasons, including being simply unfamiliar with it (hence the “untold origins” of the book’s title). Having waved aside “[p]olitically provocative” ideas, Blier declaims that as an Africanist she is ideally suited to account for the painting’s many mysteries—she can devote attention to African objects few others are comfortable analyzing (p. 12). But is not the very relationship between Africa and the West within modernity already “politically provocative”? There is a discursive jockeying for position here that requires something of a sleight-of-hand argument. For Picasso, along with any number of other artists, understands Africa and its various cultures only through the scrim of colonialist ideology through which all non-European cultures were perceived (including a number of the visual sources the author cites as important to Picasso’s work on the picture). As much as the painting is inspired by African art, it is equally—or more so—driven by European misconceptions of non-European cultures couched in pictorial terms. Anthropologists had long acknowledged the artistic merit of African and other non-Western artifacts discovered in the aftermath of colonial occupations in the nineteenth century, along with their ethnological significance, but artists only took note around 1906, as noted by Julia Kelly in her *Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects*. [5] The effect was nevertheless seismic. Looking for a way out of a staid academic

formulism, artists began emulating the visual properties and representational strategies they perceived in tribal masks and artefacts that turned up in curio shops and ethnographic museums like the Musée d' ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris. This encounter may well have changed the course of Western modernism, but it is only rooted in African visual culture inasmuch as it is a superficial copying of form.

Blier's hesitancy to take on primitivism, surely one of the most racially charged paradigms within modernism, has much to do with her training. Conjuring images of Michel Leiris's embarkment upon the famed expedition to Dakar-Djibouti in sub-Saharan Africa in 1931, the author claims early on that, as an historian of African art, her approach is an ethnographic one—in this context, primitivism is the air one breathes. But that ethnographic approach here is turned inward. Our journey takes us from a library at Harvard University (“The late afternoon sun raked across the mosaic of oversized books aligned neatly on Harvard's lower-level Tozzer Library shelving” begins chapter four [p. 111]) to the Montmartre district of Paris where Blier retraces the steps of Picasso near his Bateau-Lavoir studio, visiting the cabaret the artist frequented, which housed a collection of plaster casts from ancient Europe and elsewhere. The yield, nevertheless, is a number of fascinating anecdotes that in turn become correctives to the already sizable literature on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Blier recounts the story of Picasso's discovery of a small Vili sculpture from the Congo at the studio of Henri Matisse. The setting was a Thursday night dinner party in the fall of 1906 and, according to the poet, painter, and critic Max Jacob, Picasso “picked it up and held it in his hands for the duration of the evening” (p. 82). Blier argues that it was this moment—rather than the oft-told story of his fateful trip to the Trocadéro and its “dusty mannequins” [6]—that birthed the strikingly new visual language to which the artist would soon turn. Blier also convincingly demonstrates that it was Matisse's *Blue Nude (Memories of Biskra)* and Derain's *Bathers*, both exhibited at the Salon des indépendants (March 20–April 30, 1907) that begat *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and its turn to African art, more so than it was Matisse's *Bonheur de Vivre* (1906), as has been traditionally thought. One of the more interesting chapters in her book in fact concerns the close study of a small collection of photographs, signally one of Guus and Dolly van Dongen, the wife and daughter of artist Kees van Dongen, who had come to visit Picasso in his studio in the Bateau-Lavoir around the time of the painting's inception. With the help of x-rays and even the consultation of a pediatric surgeon, Blier argues that the infamous Iberian head and African masks supposedly painted over the faces of the three framing nude figures in a moment of exhilaration after his visit to the Trocadéro is nothing but a myth, one of the many accretions of fantasy and fabrication ladled on in the years after the delayed reception of the painting. Those heads, she posits, were there from the painting's inception. “From the outset,” Blier surmises with something of a leap in argument, “Picasso was likely envisioning a composition with women from various geographic areas” (p. 30).

How did we get from colonial source to global portrait? Alongside the Vili sculpture discovered at Matisse's studio, Koto reliquary figures from Gabon, and Congo masks, there is an array of print and other sources that are touted throughout as variations on the theme of materials overlooked by scholars and enlisted here as evidence for this now global portrait: a traveling troupe of Dohemy Amazons (female performers from present-day Benin who travelled throughout Europe); Iberian art at the Louvre; an 1864 travelogue by Richard Francis Burton entitled *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome*; the medieval along with the primitive section of the Trocadéro; Egyptian and Greek casts; images from various illustrated journals and books (notably the racial typologies in Carl Heinrich Stratz's 1902 *Die Rassenschönheit des Weibes* and masks in Leo Frobenius's 1898 *Die Masken und Geheimbünde Afrikas*);

photographs; *Katzenjammer* cartoons, and even a postcard of cherubs holding a beribboned easter egg that Picasso had sent to Leo Stein. All of these become a fecund progenitor of symbolism conducive to reading Picasso's painting as a mediation on renewal and immortality among other things. They are all keys (or clues as the author describes them, suggesting their trail was left behind by the artist as a sort of treasure hunt to meaning) to construing this new interpretation. There is even a Duchampian play on words here with the suggestion that the French word *bordel*, part of an early title, was a reference less to brothel than to a "complicated situation" or "mess." Much of this imagery is a fantastical set of racist typologies, part and parcel of a turn-of-the-century interest in the inhabitants of distant and near lands (many of which were of course under colonial rule). If the artist somehow subverted these tropes (as Blier suggests at moments) it is not made clear exactly how. All of this would seem to raise crucial questions: what part, for example, did these images--and Picasso's painting--play in constructing the colonial image of otherness? This road not taken is one that would require a more realistic view of colonialism than the one offered--and briefly at that--in the introductory section of the book: "Despite the violent and denigrating dimensions of colonialism, it brought an end to the slave trade and in some ways helped to unite the world in new and unexpected ways" (p. 12).

In the absence of a larger critical framework, the bulk of Suzanne Preston Blier's argument is built upon much musing and speculation. While the author has painstakingly examined artworks Picasso would have seen in museums and other collections as they relate to his painting, she has a more tenuous grasp on other possibilities, however fastidiously she has pursued them; each example of a direct source is hedged with a conditional adjective. No doubt Picasso sought out visual material as much as does any artist. But did he actually confer with *these* specific printed materials? "[W]e have no direct evidence that Picasso saw or studied those books" (p.16). It is not even clear which editions he may have seen if any. A discerning reader would not be wrong if they sensed a creeping self-indulgence here that could have benefited from a sterner editorship, a redoubt against fleeting impressions hardening too quickly into tenacious facts (perhaps an editorial nod as well towards a less rosy view of French colonialism). Take for example the claim of the artist's awareness of a 1906 edition of a thirteenth-century manuscript by the famed mason, Villard de Honnecourt. In chapter three, we learn that medieval casts in the Trocadéro were "likely important to Picasso" in the period from 1906 to 1907 (p. 96). By chapter seven, these casts migrate to a "strong interest" (p. 223). This chapter opens with the narration of a lecture at the Collège de France the author attended and as a page from de Honnecourt's manuscript appears on the screen, Blier "immediately recognized it as yet another possible source for one of Picasso's studies created around the time of *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, "based on his strong interest in medieval art in the 1906-7 period" (pp. 222-223). Conjectures piled onto propositions makes for some dizzying reading at times, as in the following sentence: "Like the question of editions, the source of Picasso's book(s) is not clear, but bibliophile Guillaume Apollinaire, at work in 1906-7 on a Marquis de Sade project, likely knew of *Radenschönheit*, even though it was not published in the catalog of his library following his death" (p. 188). One thing is certain: Blier's careful amassing of possible sources clearly shows that Western representations--specifically with the racist typologies of both Stratz and Frobenius whose illustrated books Picasso is argued to have pored over--played a bigger role than actual African art.

Blier's humanist view of a global sisterhood that makes up Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, standing together in unison as each represents a separate geographic part of the world (refracted through a corresponding art historical style, coiffure, and clothing, minimal as it is) and the whole representing female sexuality, motherhood, and progeny--even variations of age, time, and

space!—is a rather capacious one. (It strikes me here too that, read this way, it is at the same time very much of a piece with the utopian acadias painted by Puvis de Chavannes in fin-de-siècle Paris.) However it was not the world view of colonial France in the early part of the century, at which time, as Marc Weitzmann recently described in the *New York Review of Books*, France's second wave colonial period (which, as he writes, began in 1830 with the conquest of Algeria), the view of citizenship was rather Roman in character. France would provide emancipation and assimilation to its various territories as parts of citizenship but never the requisite French-ness, never a true sense of belonging or togetherness.[7] As much as Picasso had ancestral roots in roots in Iberian Málaga and a Cuban-African connection through a marriage of his grandfather, as Blier labors to show, thus gaining him some small purchase on a claim to an identity based in alterity, the painting was made in France, the seat of the modernist avant-garde movement in Europe, and thus very much a Western modernist distillation of larger colonialist ideology, re-worked in aesthetic terms.

This is not a book that is going to decolonize the art historical canon (the uncritical use of the term “masterpiece” in the book's title or the rather tacit acceptance of primitivism and colonialism as unproblematic concepts are indicative of that, if nothing else). As a work of visual and iconographic analysis, and an extension of, as much as a divergence from the work of art historians Leo Steinberg and William Rubin (both authors she cites frequently), there is much here that is valuable, owing to the author's extensive study of the immediate context of the painting. As for its larger context, there is little to add to the literature on primitivism, post-colonialism, or any revisionist approach to early twentieth-century modernism. Despite the book's many implicit claims to belong to a globalizing art history, in the end, *Picasso's Demoiselles* can only be read as a revanchist view still framing the painting's engagement with Africa from a Western perspective.

NOTES

[1] Leo Steinberg, “The Philosophical Brothel,” *October* 44 (Spring 1988): 7-74.

[2] Anna C. Chave, “New Encounters with *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism,” *The Art Bulletin* 76/4 (1994): 607.

[3] See William Rubin, “The Genesis of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*,” in William Rubin, Hélèn Seckel, and Judith Cousins, eds., *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, *Studies in Modern Art* 3 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994), pp. 13-144 and Yves Alain Bois, “Painting as Trauma,” *Art in America* 76/6 (June 1988): 131-140, 172-173.

[4] Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October* 34 (Autumn 1985): 45-70; Jack Flam and Miriam Deutsch, eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Patricia Leighton, “The White Peril and L'Art Nègre: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism,” *Art Bulletin* 72/4 (December 1990): 609-630; Anna Chave, “New Encounters with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism,” *Art Bulletin* 76/4 (December 1994): 597-611.

[5] Julia Kelly, *Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects: Paris, c. 1925-35* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

[6] See Andre Malreaux, *Picasso's Masks*, trans., June Guircharnaud (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), pp. 10-11.

[7] Marc Weitzmann, "Terror After 'Charlie Hebdo,'" *New York Review of Books* (February 11, 2021).

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