The Appropriation of African Objects in Pablo Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon

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The Appropriation of African Objects in Pablo Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon

A Senior Thesis Presented By
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Chapter One: Primitivism and the Context of African Art Prior to the Demoiselles

The embarking question in this thesis is the appropriation of African art in Picasso’s Demoiselles D’Avignon. The work displays Africanizing masks on at least two of the prostitutes painted. While Demoiselles would be hailed as the “first modern painting” as the precursor to Picasso’s proceeding Cubism, with its avant-garde representation of perspective and composition, the Demoiselles also contains one of the first significant introductions of African art into Western painting. The way that these African masks are presented to the viewer is of considerable interest; the confrontational nature of the work, as well as the combination of Africanizing elements on the nude female form, make the piece one of the most unique paintings in the Western cannon for its involvement with the phenomenology of the viewer, or the way in which the viewer experiences the work. In our discussion of the inclusion of African objects in the Demoiselles, it is necessary first to discuss the context in which the painting was created and the greater artistic movement of primitivism, or the artistic interest in tribal art, that affected 20th century art. The Demoiselles is one of the most significant works created under the influence of primitivism; before considering why the masks were eventually added, the work should first be considered in the greater context of the history of primitivism and the colonial relationship that facilitated the availability of tribal objects.

Primitivism, while often associated with the 20th century interest in the art of Africa, Oceania, and Native America, can be traced as a concept through the history of Western art. The term “primitivism” itself has, in the last half a century, come to be considered problematic, since the term “primitive” implies a comparison between civilized and uncivilized cultures; one culture
is more sophisticated, refined, and enlightened, while the primitive culture is cruder, underdeveloped, and primordial. Underlying the use of the term “primitivism” is “the incontrovertible fact that the exchange between the West and the so-called Primitive cultures was basically a dialogue between ‘white people’ and ‘people of color’”, Jack Flam writes in his catalogue on Primitivism.¹ While this thesis uses the term “primitive” to speak about tribal objects, “primitive” has been used traditionally to characterize a variety of art outside the tradition of European naturalism: folk art, ancient art, and even children’s art all fall under the category. This makes the term itself both politically charged and rather unspecific. Especially in the nineteenth century, when many of the African objects available to Picasso’s circle were collected, “the label ‘primitive’ had an even broader application than today, designating early Renaissance art as peasant crafts, Japanese prints as well as tribal artifacts; its connotations were more consonant with objects considered ‘rustic’ or ‘archaic’ than would be the case today”.² My use of the term “primitive” is a choice made based on the frequency of its use in scholarship, and the absence of an alternative term. “Tribal” is an option that has been suggested by some scholars, but admonished by others for its disparaging connotations. While this thesis will continue to use the word “primitive” to discuss the appropriation of African forms, it is with full awareness of the Western bias with which the term is imbued.

It should also be stated that the discussion of primitive “art” is complicated by the issue that many of the objects admired by the modernists were not intended as artistic objects, but cultural or religious tools. This I will discuss further in chapters concerning Picasso’s own

engagement with primitive objects. This chapter, rather, serves to explore the movement of primitivism as a whole and the first objects from Africa that were collected by Picasso’s inner circle.

Finding artistic inspiration in a civilization other than one’s own was not a new concept when African art began to interest Picasso and his inner circle. Non-Western art has impacted European artistic practices throughout the course of art history. The artists of the Renaissance, arguably, rediscovered Greco-Roman art similarly to the modernists “discovery” of the primitive—their art reflects a fascination with ancient proportions and culture, and fueled a cultural interest in the collection of ancient artifacts. Trade with China in the eighteenth century excited a similar interest in non-Western art; a fascination with China ignited Rococo trends in chinoiserie prints, pottery, music, theatre, and the practice of tea. Orientalism, or the interest in the art of Islam, and the introduction of Orientalizing elements into academic art in the nineteenth century, as well as the work of the Impressionists and their Japonism, exemplify that European art had been influenced stylistically by non-European civilizations before African objects began to intrigue the Cubists and the Fauves. Increased trade outside of Europe in the modern age allowed the continent to come into contact with objects outside of Western culture. While previous trends involving non-European cultures focused mostly on the application of their stylistic elements onto European concepts, European interest in these cultures was limited to the Western interpretation of these non-Western objects. Their incorporation into European life was grounded in a shallow understanding and materialistic fascination—oftentimes, how their aesthetic components could enrich trends in the upper-class lifestyle. While Japanese, Chinese, Greek, and Islamic art are not included in the trend of “primitivism” applied to 20th century art, the attitude towards these cultures prior to the collection of African art exemplified
similar disregard for the accuracy of information. The objects were collected for their perceived aesthetic value rather than their cultural purpose; why they were created in the first place was less important than how the final product enriched the life of the new owner. The excavation of Herculaneum and Pompeii in the mid-eighteenth century reignited an interest in Roman art due to the number of artifacts found preserved in volcanic ash. Most of these objects were removed and sold to private buyers before they could be catalogued and studied in their original state.3 By neglecting to study collected artifacts alongside the culture and environment in which they were found, the artifact becomes imbued with a perpetual air of mystery, which further separates Western and non-Western art. African art was handled much the same way two centuries later.

Through treatment of non-Western art as mysterious and foreign, Western art is, in contrast, logical, and even superior. Divorcing an object from its cultural background places it within a cultural vacuum. By separating meaning and object, observers can imbue it with their own perceptions. Not unlike the colonialist attitudes of the 18th and 19th centuries, the artistic exchange between Western and non-Western countries was characterized primarily by racism and social “othering”. As we will see, the continent of Africa was particularly associated with the concept of the racial “other”, perhaps even more so than most other non-Western societies. European colonization and artistic trade perpetuated the idea of the people of Africa as devoid of modern technological and scientific advancement, instead trapped within the primordial beginnings of civilization. In many ways, the concept Africa as a place untouched by modernity was what drew many of the modernists to African art in the first place. Cultural flirtations with Japan and the Middle East, at best, still conceded that within these countries there still existed a

3 Alden Gordon, “Art and Architecture in the 18th Century”, Lecture at Trinity College, October 2014
cultural history and civilization; Europeans, typically, thought theirs was just better. The European relationship with Africa, on the other hand, regarded the continent as a place barren of history. To the Europeans who colonized Africa, it seemed that African civilization had not progressed. “Primitive art had no known historical development and seemed to exist in a kind of temporal vacuum. The idea that the origins of Primitive art, like those of prehistoric art, were lost in the mists of time allowed for a fair amount of romantic speculation and rumination about it”.4 This “speculation” likely accounted for the polarized views of Africa as a place to be admired for its separation from the technological advancement of the West, and also admired.5

Moreover, an interest in primitive art coincided with a period in art history where artists were seeking to develop less naturalistic styles of depiction. Artists were “moving away from the Renaissance tradition of verisimilitude and naturalism. The Post-Impressionists, especially Cézanne, had played an important role in opening the eyes of the younger artists to the possibilities of non-mimetic representation and of using ‘distortions’ from naturalistic norms for expressive ends”.6 Cézanne’s simplification of forms to their geometric origins, and exploration of perspective beyond single-point perspective enabled modern artists to move beyond naturalism and begin to abstract their artwork. Gauguin’s primitivism especially was influential at the end of the nineteenth century. Gauguin’s disillusionment with Impressionism as a form of art imprisoned by its reliance on the natural world and his ensuing interest in rustic arts “divided organ from intellect in a way that pointed to a newly revived, alternative idea of the min’s innate, autonomous generative power”, William Rubin notes in the Museum of Modern Art’s

"Primitivism in the 20th Century" catalogue. Unlike the complex systems of narration and representation in Asian and Islamic art, African art was seemingly much more reductive. To Europeans, African forms were simplistic, almost childlike in their representation of figures from the natural world. We now know that many of the objects collected by the modernists were anything but simple, and the notion that they were stemmed from deep colonial and racial bias that disregarded the cultural practices of the tribes the Europeans conquered.

While Oceanic Art was also included in “l’art nègre” that French artists began to admire in the early 20th century, in the following chapters I will focus on the role that African objects and French colonization of Africa played in the inclusion of African elements in Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon. It should be noted that Picasso “usually did not even distinguish between African and Oceanic art”, according to William Rubin. This was because “both African and Oceanic art differed from European norms in similar ways, and because both were produced by non-literate peoples, thereby posing similar sorts of historiographic problems…there was no doubt also a racial bias involved in this blending together”. I have chosen to concentrate on the African elements in the Demoiselles because of their comparative prominence within the piece and the colonial circumstances surrounding France’s relationship with tribes in Western Africa around the time of the Demoiselles’ creation. For one, African artifacts outnumbered Oceanic pieces; the relationship between France and Africa was also much more prominent in the media and public opinion, which I feel may have contributed to Picasso’s incorporation of African masks to the Demoiselles. Lastly, Picasso seemed to admire African art above Oceanic—his collection of African objects in later years would reflect this.

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7 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 182.
8 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 14.
9 Flam, Primitivism, 6.
The discussion of primitivism and art is traditionally begun with Paul Gauguin. Prior to the collection of African art and engagement with primitive objects in the 20th century, perhaps no artist engaged with primitive cultures more than Gauguin. Gauguin’s engagement with the people of Tahiti embodies much of the idealization of non-Western societies. Rubin identifies Gauguin’s primitivism as “ultimately more philosophical than aesthetic”; unlike the modernists incorporation of tribal art into their work, the artwork Gauguin produced during his Tahitian periods “hardly involved the tribal art of the Pacific peoples among whom he lived”. While Gauguin painted scenes involving Tahitian life and culture, the complex pictorial histories present in his work reflect a combination of Tahitian, Egyptian, Persian, Cambodian, Peruvian, and Javanese cultures, rather than specific Tahitian art objects. The result is not an imitation of primitive art forms, but rather a commentary on the connection between Tahiti and the rest of the world; as Rubin puts it, “the larger questions of the Tahitian’s role in human history. Rather than a stripping away toward some essential truth, his Tahitian primitivism emerged as a composite elaboration of this layered richness”. Gauguin’s engagement with Tahiti as an “island paradise” resulted more from his lifelong struggle with introspection, and the faith he placed in primitive societies, including French Brittany, as places untainted by cultural advancement, where one could return to a more natural state of being. “Consistent with a long-standing strain of Romantic primitivist thought, Gauguin saw the strength and wholeness of primal life not only as the privilege of simpler folk and foreign societies but as a birthright recoverable within himself”. 

12 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 189.
This more profound relationship to the primitive culture that he appropriated makes Gauguin a complex figure in the history of primitivism; in many ways, he was the inception of the modernist’s engagement with the works of Africa, but he also had a much different relationship to primitive culture. While Vlaminck, Derain, and Matisse would use primitive art to advance the visual representation of forms in their art, Gauguin’s primitivism projected his own personal idealizations of primitive life, rather than the direct appropriation of the artistic vocabulary of Tahiti. While Matisse, arguably, incorporated some aspect of Gauguin’s romanticization of primitive life into paintings such as Bonheur de vivre, Picasso’s more emotively charged connection to primitive objects as objects of “exorcism” reflects a more Gauguin-esque attitude. As Rubin identifies, much of Picasso’s own primitivism came from his knowledge of Gauguin, the influences of whom on the Demoiselles will be discussed in the following chapters.

In 1906, “the massive European colonization of Africa had been going on for only about 25 years and was still in its first phase, which consisted of (often brutally) effacing local cultures and replacing them with European administrative structures. The objects that came back from the newly acquired colonies at the turn of the century were still seen as trophies or curiosities—evidence of the ‘savage’ or childlike aspects of the people who made them”. The colonization of Africa by Europe is inseparable from the study of primitivism. The interactions between the two continents that brought African art to Europe were characterized by “unequal political, economic, and technological power—with missionary and anthropological approaches to native peoples implicitly used to justify military and political conquest”. Othering the subjugated people...

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group as inferior was crucial to rationalizing colonialism. Perceived elements of Africa’s inferiority were the absence of Christian morals, supposedly debased sexual practices, physiognomic studies of the stunted evolution of the African physique, and a lack of technological advancement past the primitive era of civilization. Ironically, the assumptions of Africa that justified colonial advances on the continent were also somewhat admired by the Europeans. As Flam outs it, there existed “the desire of the privileged party to in some way imitate or return what was perceived as the ‘purer’ or more ‘natural’ state of the exploited”.17 In this way, the romanticization of “uncivilized” societies that modernist artists admired is born. Michael Bell writes that “Primitivism is born of the interplay of the civilized self and the desire to reject or transform it…primitivism, we might say, is the projection by the civilized sensibility of an inverted image of the self. Its characteristic focus is the gap or tension that subsists between these two selves and its more characteristic resultant is impasse”.18 “Even as he robbed it”, Rubin writes, “civilized man thought the Primitive world his cradle”.19

This dual admonition/admiration for primitive peoples was represented in the polarized views of African peoples as both “noble” and “degenerate” savages.20 The concept of the “noble savage” was not new to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the term first appeared in John Dreyden’s seventeenth century play *The Conquest of Granada* to describe the uncorrupted state of people not affected by Western society. Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* perpetuated the idea by discussing the natural state of man as the uncivilized state, although he

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19 Rubin, “*Primitivism*”, 181.
never specifically used the term “noble savage” (“bon sauvage” in French).\textsuperscript{21} The noble savage was commendable in his lack of knowledge of corruptive society; he could also, however, be regarded as the “degenerate” savage in his behavioral patterns. A lack of Christian morals—rumors of which often included cannibalism and murder—and a tendency towards violence and madness also made the savage inferior to European society.\textsuperscript{22}

The greater context of colonialism provided much of the primitive art admired by the modernists to France and England in the late years of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Prior to the primitive movement, artifacts from Africa were seen as curiosities, rather than works of art. African objects were rare in Europe before the nineteenth century; what few pieces made their way to Europe were usually given as gifts to royalty on behalf of explorers to the continent. In 1850, the Musée Naval du Louvre was established, which contained objects collected by overseas companies serving under the French navy that included “weapons, agricultural tools, articles in leather and basketwork, headdresses, and musical instruments”.\textsuperscript{23} In 1874, E.T. Hamy proposed to bring the tribal objects that had been collected by the state together in one museum, the Musée Ethnographies des Missions Scientifiques. The museum, the precursor to the Musée d’Ethnographie in the Trocadéro museum that Picasso would eventually visit in the summer of 1907, consisted “essentially of artifacts from the ancient cultures of Asia and the Americas”, with “a smaller section for Oceania and Africa. For the latter, there were two displays from Gabon, arranged by Hamy with material collected by [naturalist and explorer] Alfred Marche during his second expedition to the Ogowe River. This was probably the first time that a Kota

\textsuperscript{22} Gilman, \textit{Difference and Pathology}, 81.
\textsuperscript{23} Rubin, “\textit{Primitivism}”, 125.
reliquary figure could be seen in France”. Kota figures, from the Bakota tribe in Gabon, would play an important role in the development of primitivism, and were likely admired by Picasso in particular; there is some indication that Kota features contributed to the African masks in the

*Demoiselles.*

The success of the first Musée d’Ethnographie led to the establishment of the Trocadéro’s Musée d’Ethnographie, which was, at first, a small collection located in the right wing of the museum containing “ethnographic objects of peoples outside Europe”. This included, along with objects from “Alaska, Mexico, and Peru”, some objects from the Americas and Africa, including “a group of carved ivories from the Congo belonging to the merchant Conquy Senior, some weavings and weapons from Basutoland lent by Casalis, and a few small Asante objects”. It should be noted that at this time, relatively few tribes were represented in the ethnographic museums of Paris, and little formal separation between tribes, regions, and even continent was important to the curation of the objects. William Rubin notes also that “the Musée Permanant des Colonies, the Museum d’Histoire Naturelle, the Musée Naval du Louvre, the Musée d’Artillerie, and the Bibliothèque Nationale, as well as some learned societies (of geography, anthropology, and zoology) had collections in the same period that were somewhat more extensive, comprising weapons, fabrics, dress ornaments, musical instruments, domestic and ceremonial objects”. In 1879, the display “Musée Africain” was installed in the lobby of the Théâtre du Châtelet, which contained objects from central, southern, and eastern Africa. The display was an extension of Adolphe Belot’s play *La Venus noire*, which followed the German naturalist Schweinfurth’s account of his exploration of Africa. While the play noted the high

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24 Rubin, “*Primitivism*”, 125.
25 Rubin, “*Primitivism*”, 126.
26 Rubin, “*Primitivism*”, 126.
culture of many of the tribes included, the lack of Christian influence was also reiterated to negatively affect the behavior of the African peoples. “Thus”, Rubin says,

“Nourished by reports of the discovery of unknown lands, by descriptions of the strange customs of the societies encountered, and by stories of the adventures of intrepid explorers, the taste for exoticism was steadily whetted. But the transition from the fantastic to the more pragmatic realism represented by France’s political and economic influences was constantly being introduced”.

The presence of colonialism in the 1880’s included France’s struggle to establish a colony in the Kingdom of Dahomey, beginning in 1877. This “long and murderous campaign” brought back tales to Europe of the barbarity of the Dahomeyans, including “human sacrifice, cannibalism, despotism, and anarchy”.

The end of the war in 1894, concluding with the surrender of Dahomeyan ruler Behanzin. The Musée du Trocadéro exhibited a display of religious and political objects taken from the holy city of Kana by Colonel Dodds—this included “the royal throne, four relief doors with symbolic motifs, three allegorical statues said to be representations of the ancestor, the father, and the king himself, to which were later added a metal effigy of the Fon thunder god and two monumental thrones.”

Apart from the Dahomeyan acquisitions, colonial acquisitions to the Musée d’Ethnographie from 1984 to 1900 were also largely derived from West Africa—particularly of note, over forty anthropomorphic “fetishes” were acquired, thirty-five of which were created by the Vili tribe, from which Matisse’s nkisi figure originated.

Despite the variety of objects shown, little specific information about the use of the objects was known. Rubin notes that the Notice sur les collections de la Mission Scientifique, written to catalogue artifacts shown at the Orangerie of the Jardin des Plantes in 1886,

27 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 126.
28 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 127.
31 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 131.
“despite the importance of the items that had been gathered, little was known about their purposes or use. At most, the author relates the longitudinal stripes on the face of some ‘fetish’ to scarifications customarily practices by the Teke, the side wings on the head of some other to the headdresses of Mbamba women, or the filling of eye sockets with bits of glass to a technique resembling that employed by the ancient Egyptians. These hasty considerations…show that ‘customs and costumes, beliefs and myths, were scarcely touched upon’ by those who brought together the material evidence of them”.

This disparity between assumption and reality would later come to affect the modernists’ interpretation of these objects into art. The hectic accumulation of the objects, without much regard to their cultural significance, presented those interested in their collection with little real information. The racial bias of colonialism led to a lack of cultural understanding in the presentation of these objects back in Europe; the context in which the objects were collected made it difficult to study their intended usage. While some of the African art in Paris came from expeditions made by naturalists, most of the art collected was from colonialist enterprises in the continent. Objects were treated as spoils of war, rather than cultural artifacts. This meant that little real information was gathered on their cultural significance. As such, their interpretation within modernist art was restricted to mostly aesthetic components and cultural speculation. While the art of the modernist’s demonstrates a lack of significant knowledge on the forms they appropriated into their art, this was largely the result of the colonial bias under which they were presented to the public.

Despite the availability of African art in Paris, the modernists did not appear to take any significant interest in primitive art until 1905 or 1906. This is interesting, since, as we have seen, colonial enterprise and explorative expeditions made African objects available for viewing to the public, and no major acquisitions in African art were made around these years. Patricia Leighton, in her article “White Peril and L’Art nègre”: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism”,

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32 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 129.
attributes this delayed interest to the presence of anticolonial political media following the exposure of military atrocities committed in the French Congo, which we will reexamine in later chapters as possible motivation for Picasso’s undertaking of the Demoiselles. There were a significant number of circumstances prior to 1905/1906 wherein the modernists may have been exposed to “primitive” culture before they used it in their art; The Exposition Universelle of 1900, for instance, included ethnographic exhibits of Dahomey and Congolese villages. This exhibit was particularly significant in its depiction of the African colonies, including pikes “which were stuck on the actual skulls of slaves executed before the eyes of Bahanzin, the last king of Dahomey, and reenactments of ‘the rites of fetishism, performed by haggish witch doctors and priests in their native costumes’”.33 This display is notably similar to Picasso’s interpretation of the African mask in the Demoiselles in its fearful depiction of African culture; there is a possibility the artist may have indeed seen the Exposition, according to Leighten: “Picasso may well have visited this part of the Exposition on his first trip to Paris since he was exhibiting a painting in another building”.34 The French people’s interpretation of Africa was formed mostly through the representation of Africa in the French media. In particular, the Dahomeyan wars had prompted the depictions of Africans as barbarians in the press.

“Travelers who ventured into the interior earlier in the nineteenth century frequently returned with sensational and fanciful tales of human sacrifice, cannibalism, despotism, and anarchy that were made much of in the French press. Such mass illustrated magazines as Le Journal illustre, L’illustration, and Le Tour du monde and the illustrated supplements of the newspapers Le Petit Journal and Le Petit Parisien, emphasized the purported savagery of customs they misconstrued in accordance with their preconceptions.”35

These assumptions regarding African culture were certainly present in the environment in which the modernists discovered African art. While the modernists would come to praise the art of Africa after they included it in their work, their initial knowledge of Africa can hardly be separated from the colonial stereotypes at the time. In 1906, the year prior to Picasso’s undertaking of the *Demoiselles*, the artist’s circle had begun to collect primitive objects and circulate their discoveries to each other. The interest in African art seems to have begun with Vlaminck, who would frequently insist that he was responsible for introducing his peers to African objects. By Vlaminck’s own account, around the end of the summer of 1905, he “in exchange for buying drinks for customers in a café in Argenteuil” acquired “two Dahomey statuettes, daubed with red ocher, yellow ocher, and white, and another from the Ivory Coast, all black”. While Vlaminck includes 1905 as the year in which he bought his first African objects, this claim is somewhat disputable; the year-long gap between Matisse, Derain, and Picasso’s responses to this acquisition, as well as the significant passage of time between 1905 and Vlaminck’s *Portraits avant décès* in 1943, when the popularity of primitive art was well-established. Rubin argues, and it is now widely believed by scholars, that this event likely occurred in the spring of 1906, due to the artistic reactions of Picasso and Matisse in the following fall. In a letter written to Vlaminck in on March 7, 1906, Derain discussed an early encounter with African art at the National Gallery in London.

“It is absolutely essential for us to break out of the circle the realists have locked us into. I’ve been rather moved by my visits around London and to the National Museum, as well as to the Negro Museum. It’s amazing, and disquieting in expression…This is something

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36 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 139.
37 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 139.
to which we should pay close attention, in terms of what, in a parallel way, we can deduce from it.”38

According to the most recent scholarship, including the curators of “Picasso Primitif” at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris in the summer of 2017, Vlaminck and Derain most likely first visited the Trocadero in the summer of 1906.39 “Derain and I had explored the Trocadero Museum several times. We had become thoroughly familiar with the museum, having looked at everything with great interest. But neither Derain nor I viewed the works on display there as anything other than barbarous fetishes”, Vlaminck wrote in 1943.40 Vlaminck again dates the encounter to 1905; there is no definitive evidence of this, and the Trocadero visit is now widely dated to 1906.

Perhaps most infamous to the beginning of the modernist’s engagement with primitive objects, in August of 1906, Vlaminck showed Derain a recently purchased Fang mask from Gabon. In Portraits avant décès, Vlaminck describes how he purchased the mask and a few more African statues from a restaurant after frequent trips to the Trocadero had prompted him to begin collecting African art. The mask came from,

“a friend of my father’s. He offered to give me some of his African sculptures since his wife wanted to get rid of these ‘horrors’. I went to his place, and I took a large white mask and two superb Ivory Coast statues. I hung the mask over my bed: I was at once entranced and disturbed: Negro art was revealed to me in all its primitivism and all its grandeur”.41

41 Vlaminck, in Primitivism, 28.
Fang art, from the Fang tribe in Gabon, was certainly present in France due to French colonization of West Africa. According to Jean-Baptiste Bacquart in *Tribal Arts of Africa*, Fang art was interesting to collectors due to their naturalistic depiction of the human form and the unique black varnish which gave their figurines a particular shine. The mask, now visible in the Musée du Quai Branly, seems to be one typically associated with the Ngil society. Ngil society members acted as disciplinary figures in the northern Fang societies; the French government would ban these masks in 1910 after they were associated with a series of ritual murders. Due to the banning, much of the information on the cultural significance of Ngil masks has been lost. The heart shaped face and elongated nose abstractly emulate a human face, while the color white was associated with the ancestral, otherworldly realm in Fang society. Masks like these were believed to have “judiciary powers, and so were worn when sentences were handed down by the [Ngil] society”. It is highly unlikely that Vlaminck or Derain knew any of this information; the murky origins of the mask, along with the previously stated colonial biases against African objects, would make it nearly impossible for any information on the cultural significance of the Ngil mask to have reached either of the artists. Derain bought the mask from Vlaminck a week later for fifty francs, and placed it on the wall in his studio; Picasso and Matisse supposedly viewed the object sometime that autumn. The mask itself is now visible at the Musée Quai du Branly; it depicts a bordered human face, with two small eyes and arched brows, along with an elongated nose and small oval mouth. “When Picasso and Matisse saw it at Derain’s,” Vlaminck

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wrote in 1943, “they were absolutely thunderstruck. From that day on, Negro Art became all the rage!“

In the fall, on his way to visit Gertrude Stein, Matisse bought his first African object from Emile Heymann’s exotic curiosities shop on the rue de Rennes. He brought the nkisi sculpture back to Stein’s apartment, where Picasso was intrigued by “les yeux de porcelain de la statuette et leur expression ‘magique’”. In the transcript of Pierre Courtion’s interview with Matisse in 1941, the artist recalls the purchase:

“I frequently walked through the Rue de Rennes past a curio ship owned by a merchant of curiosities called ‘chez le Pere Sauvage; and saw a variety of things in the window. There was a whole corner of little wooden statues, of Negro origin. I was astonished to see how they were conceived from the point of view of sculptural language; how it was close to the Egyptians…these Negro statues were made in terms of their material, according to invented planes and proportions. I often used to look at them, stopping each time I passed by, but without any intention at all of buying anything, and then one fine day I went in and bought one for fifty francs. I went to Gertrude Stein’s apartment on the Rue de Fleurus. I showed her the statue, then Picasso came by, and we chatted. That was when Picasso began aware of African sculpture”.

Matisse’s statuette can be attributed to the Vili tribe in the Congo. Nkisi figurines are often referenced in the Western world as “fetish” figures due to their reputation for magical abilities and the subsequent devotion they inspire. “Fetish”, however, is an entirely European term used to generally classify an expanse of minkisi (plural of nkisi) over a variety of tribes. Minkisi are both spirit and object; they are tools for healing, preservation, and good fortune, but also contain “a hiding place for people’s souls”.

46 Picasso Primitif, 24.
facilitates the statue from an empty shell its deified state as a nkisi. MacGaffey gives a concise summary of the medicinal contents of a nkisi in “Fetishism Revisited: Kongo “Nkisi” in Sociological Perspective” in his examination of the Kinzezi charm for easy childbirth:

“Kodi, a large shell, which is the container of the charm. Related etymologically to kola, 'to be strong', and by its spiral form to 'life' (zinga). Mpemba, white clay, comes from streambed. The word means also 'cemetery' or 'land of the dead'. The dead live in or under the water, and are white in color. Nsadi, red earth. As earth, also associated with the dead. Red colour implies transition. Dust of kitundibila leaves. This plant, a kind of ginger (Amomum albiovialaceum) is used as an aphrodisiac. Its fruit is phallic in form, and it never loses its leaves. Mbika malenga, squash seeds, representing infants in the womb. Powdered kinZengi, 'cricket'. Crickets and grasshoppers, eaten, are considered diarrhetics”49

Once the nkisi has been impregnated in its physical form with the proper packet of medicinal contents, the form is then considered to be imbued with one of four kinds of spirits: “ancestor (bakulu), local spirit (bisimbi, bankita), ghosts (minkuyu), or those that voluntarily or otherwise are present in nkisi objects”.50 Minkisi spirits are classified also as either “of the above”, or sky spirits, or “the below”, water spirits, with the “above” spirits classified as more aggressive, potent, and masculine, and spirits of the “below” considered more benign and feminine. Once the nkisi is created, his personhood is insisted upon through careful treatment of the statue as conscious, distinguished, and potent. Mistreatment of a nkisi is dangerous and must be corrected with atonement; for example, should someone carrying the nkisi by chance drop it,

“he had to kneel down there on the ground and salute [the nkisi] and say: 'I kneel in apology, I kneel like a goat [as though to a chief]. Relax your neck, sir, do not stiffen it ...' Then he makes an obeisance to either side and upwards, and then again three times to each side and upwards; first he rubs his hands on the earth and then makes the gesture [as though to a chief].51

51 MacGaffey, “Personhood of Ritual Objects”, 53.
While a spirit may rest within the nkisi, such as souls rest in human bodies in a Christian sense, a nkisi needs to be activated to achieve results. In the Western world’s concept of fetishism, the most common aesthetic identifier of a “fetish” figure are nails in the body of the statue; it should be noted that nails are used in situations where a nkisi is created to invoke a punishment or revenge upon the enemy of its client. The process of penetrating the statue with nails, called “koma nloko” (meaning “to nail a curse”), begins with the ignition of gun powder to encourage the nkisi to “open its eyes”. After this, nails will be driven into the nkisi figure to aggravate it into action.\textsuperscript{52} In many instances, the nkisi will not be nailed; instead, insults may be hurled at the statue to elicit the same aggravated response on the spirit’s behalf.

The statue will correspond to the task with which the nkisi is designated, and has no relevance regarding the spirit itself, but rather the purpose for which it is called into action. Matisse’s nkisi is a statue, in the form of a seated man, whose torso remains upright as he tilts his head back slightly to look up with wide white eyes. His hands rest, as if in shock, on the bottom lip of his open mouth, where a large, bulbous tongue appears to protrude in fear. Interestingly, unlike typical nkisi statues, Matisse’s nkisi does not have a hollow opening in its abdomen for a box of medicines. The absence of signs of koma nloko could be an indication that Matisse’s nkisi was not created for spiritual use and is instead tourist art, as part of the ongoing consumption of African objects and tourist photographs on the behalf of Europeans. “Woodshops existed that produced wood and soapstone figures intended for sale, many as minkisi but others as ‘art’, or at least souvenirs”.\textsuperscript{53} The lack of markings and medicine, as well as the feathers and fabric often used to decorate and clothe a figurine, demonstrate a bareness in the object and indicate its

\textsuperscript{52} MacGaffey, “Personhood of Ritual Objects”, 53.
\textsuperscript{53} MacGaffey, “Personhood of Ritual Objects”, 31.
creation as a tourist souvenir. In the Congolese tradition, a nkisi’s status as a nkisi is dependent upon proper attentiveness and circumstance. “A nkisi that has been sold or otherwise transferred to become a curio or objet d’art is no longer a nkisi”.54

The circumstances surrounding Matisse’s nkisi demonstrate the context of African art in the early nineteenth century. The interest in African objects was mostly grounded in treatment of the objects as curiosities; their aesthetic values were intriguing, but the cultural reasons for their appearance was not known or important to the consumption of African art. This context, under which Picasso would create the Demoiselles, is an essential component to the question this thesis poses. In asking to what extent the Demoiselles is culturally appropriative, the discussion extends beyond the painting itself into the environment in which African and European culture overlapped. In this colonial encounter, one culture acted as the superior in the ensuing interactions; colonialism could not very likely exist if the relationship was not unequal. “If certain people were supposed to be inferior, it was perfectly fine to rule and exploit them; and since they were ruled and exploited, the reasoning went, they were obviously inferior”, Flam writes.55 While scholarship has at times separated primitivism from the colonial exploitation of Africans by Europeans, in many ways it reflected colonial thought, as we will see in the consecutive chapters.

54 MacGaffey, “Personhood of Ritual Objects”, 11.
55 Jack Flam, Primitivism, 8.
Chapter Two: The Compositional Evolution of the Demoiselles through Preparatory Studies

This chapter is to discuss the compositional evolutional of the Demoiselles through the exploration of preliminary sketches made by the artist. Before arriving at the final painting on a large canvas, Picasso executed numerous compositional studies. Six notebooks worth of preparatory sketches indicate that the artist’s original concept of the painting was much different than the work he put on canvas in the summer of 1907. Beginning in the winter of 1906-07, Picasso seems to have begun the painting with a more narrative approach. He also seems to have begun to consider a bather theme prior to Demoiselles with works in the year before, such as Two Nudes. Examining the prior treatment of similar themes, as well as the choices made by Picasso within the compositional studies, deepens our understanding of the final canvas—what was important to keep, what was not, and what considerations Picasso made in depicting the subject matter.

In the summer of 1906, Picasso was spending the summer in Gósol with his lover, Fernande Olivier. There he began a string of sketches and images indicating an interest in the pastoral nude—one of these, a sketch of nude boy (fig. 1), hints at a potential consideration of the bather theme as a response to Matisse’s recent exhibition of Le Bonheur de vivre at the Salon des Indépendants, which Picasso saw before leaving Paris for Spain.56 One of the earliest works to anticipate the Demoiselles is The Harem (fig. 2), an oil on canvas composition in which four nude studies of Fernande take on the poses of a bather, while two seated figures watch. One of which is an older woman, a “procuress crouching in the background corner, a descendant of

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The other figure seems to be something of a voyeur, looking up at the four bathing Fernandes while holding a porrón, a Spanish ceramic designed for wine-drinking with a long spout at the top. The object’s phallic shape had “recently begun to intrigue” Picasso.  

The porrón, according to Leo Steinberg in his essay on Demoiselles, “The Philosophical Brothel”, is a phallic surrogate in Harem and links the male figure holding it with the Fernandes as a sort of “proud possessor”.  

While Harem speaks to a much more traditionally erotic approach to the female nude, its relationship to Demoiselles can be noted in its composition and themes of sexual prowess. Rubin notes that the Harem possibly responds to Ingres’s Turkish Bath, seen by Picasso during the Ingres retrospective during the fall of 1905 at the Salon d’Automne.  

Rosenblum as well remarks that Harem and Turkish Bath share similarities in their “ambiguous spatial scheme”.  

The setting of four nudes displaying themselves for a male character may forecast the later resurrection of the theme in early sketches for the Demoiselles. Another work from the Gósol stay that indicates Picasso may have been thinking about a bather composition is Three Nudes of 1906, a potential study for a larger picture. Two nude women gaze down towards a crouching male nude, stroking a porrón placed in front of his genitals. Three Nudes contains a similar interaction between the bather and the man who watches her bath as Harem, and shares the same theme of confrontation with the female body as the early sketches of Demoiselles. Many of

57 Rubin, “Genesis”, 35.  
58 Rubin, “Genesis”, 35.  
60 Rubin, “Genesis”, 36.  
61 Rubin, “Genesis”, 36.
Picasso’s works from the stay in Gósol indicate an interest in the female form; along with multiple sketches of a nude Fernande, Rubin identifies three sketches of a young girl (fig. 4), potentially an orphan who stayed with Picasso and Fernande during their time in Gósol. One of the sketches depicts the same young girl with her left foot lifted over her right knee in the act of “pedicure”, which may anticipate a seated nude in the early sketches of Demoiselles.62

It should be stated that Picasso’s own “primitivism”, by many accounts, began with an interest in Iberian sculpture, after an installation in the winter of 1905-1906 at the Louvre, according to Rubin.63 Leighten points out that he may also have been familiar with Iberian works in the early years of his career in Barcelona.64 Regardless, a distinctly Iberian style began to enter into his art in the late summer and autumn of 1906. The Osuna and Cerro sculptures that influenced him “were backwater areas of Mediterranean culture and commerce, where sculptural style had remained essentially provincial, almost indigenous”.65 James Sweeney’s early work on the topic, “Picasso and Iberian Sculpture”, argues that the Osuna sculptures were “unorthodox in formal idiom. These sculptures gave the impression of a complete disregard for any refinements of manual dexterity, much less technical virtuosity”.66 The influence of Iberian sculpture may also be partially indebted to their origin in Picasso’s native Spain, where they were regarded as the oldest form of Spanish art. The Iberian influences somewhat facilitated the introduction of African art into the final Demoiselles. The theme of the female nude was also seemingly accompanied in Gósol with what may be the preliminary stages of Picasso’s relationship to

63 Rubin, “Genesis”, 38.
Iberian art. One of the first works to possibly demonstrate the Iberian influence is a sketched portrait of Fernande, *Reclining Nude* (fig. 5), in which the body of the figure is worked in a similar style to that of the Harem figures. Fernande’s head takes on a more hardened and simplistic reduction from the rest of the body, echoing the stony facial features of Iberian sculpture. Picasso’s figures in the fall of 1906 after his time in Gósol share similar stylistic elements to Osuna art. His previously unfinished portrait of Gertrude Stein was reworked (fig. 6), and her facial features take on the almond-shaped eyes, widely arched brows, and straight mouth reminiscent of Osuna heads. John Golding wrote of the changes to Picasso’s faces in 1958, “Immediately on his return from Gósol, while Gertrude Stein was still in Italy, he repainted the face, using the conventions of Iberian sculpture, although, since he was anxious to achieve a likeness, they appear in a slightly modified form. The same facial type is adapted to his *Self-Portrait* (fig. 7) of a few months later”. 67 Regardless of whether the artist struggled to connect Iberian characteristics with a realistic likeness, his faces do seem to adopt a generally Iberian style around this time. The artist’s interest in Iberian sculpture “accounts indeed for the new facial type which begins to make its appearance in his work during this year”. 68

Perhaps the most discussed example of Picasso’s relationship to Iberian art is *Two Nudes* (fig. 8) from the late autumn of 1906, which also relates to the *Demoiselles* in its setting. The painting isolates two female nudes, stocky in build, with geometricized breasts and Iberian facial features, (similar to Gertrude Stein’s portrait from earlier in the year). The figures stand on either side of the canvas and face one another, while the figure to the left disrupts the background by pulling a curtain into the frame. The figures are nearly identical; it seems, for a moment, that it

68 Golding, “The Demoiselles”, 159.
could even be the reflection of one nude woman due to the similar postures, proportions, and hair. Upon examining the work, details arise that differentiate the two. The hands of the figures differ: slight differences in their bodies also allow the viewer to arrive tentatively at the conclusion that these figures are separate. While the heads of the figures demonstrate Iberian influence, their thick build and relationship to the space may reference Cézanne, specifically his treatment of the female form in the *Temptation of St. Anthony* and *Five Bathers* (fig. 9).69

William Rubin discusses in “Genesis of *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*”,

“As in Cézanne, the shading that models Picasso’s nudes is not consistent with any outside source of light and thus seems a property of the monumental forms themselves. Despite the figures’ insistent plasticity, which creates a sense of weight and bulk far greater than Cézanne’s, they are modeled—like Cézanne’s bathers—not in the round but in relief, diminishing to virtual flatness in a few passages.”70

In relation to the *Demoiselles*, *Two Nudes* contains elements that seem to possibly anticipate components of the later work. The inclusion of the nude’s engagement with the motif of a curtain, for instance, can be linked to the later more Baroque use of curtain in the *Demoiselles*. The Iberian heads are also repeated in the *Demoiselles* in the preparatory sketches of the figures, which seem to continue an interest in primitive Iberian sculpture. The blocky approach to the female figure in *Two Nudes* is comparatively different to the angular figures of *Demoiselles* in Picasso’s more geometric approach to rendering the female form, however, it seems to indicate a possible eagerness to render the body in a non-naturalistic manner. While *Two Nudes* retains many elements of the naturalism of the artist’s Rose Period, the breasts and haunches of the woman may verge into the more abstract approach that comes later with *Demoiselles*. The work,

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69 Rubin, “Genesis”, 41.
70 Rubin, “Genesis”, 41.
when compared to *Harem* from the summer of the same year, appears to indicate a significant shift in the artist’s style.

*Demoiselles* and *Two Nudes* are also more literally related in the studies for the two works. Rubin reports that,

> “the earliest study for the Demoiselles is literally back-to-back in the same sketchbook (Carnet 2, 32R and 32V) with a postscript for Two Nudes. Moreover, the second demoiselles from the left in Picasso’s bordello painting (who was originally seated), and the crouching demoiselle on the lower right (also originally seated), are direct descendants of two seated nudes in a sketchbook drawing that is also a postscript for Two Nudes.”\(^7\)

While the two works contain similar themes of nudity in isolation, Leo Steinberg postulates that the two pieces represent opposite versions of female sexuality. Where *Demoiselles* is carnal and confrontational, *Two Nudes* represents “primal virginity…ripe and unbreached”.\(^7\) Steinberg even goes so far as to link *Two Nudes* and *Demoiselles* as two sides of the same picture, with the curtain in *Two Nudes* the other side of the curtain in *Demoiselles*.\(^7\) While Steinberg’s interpretation isn’t confirmable, he raises an interesting point about the relationship between the two pictures as potentially polarizing approaches to the female figure, with the borderline barbaric display of flesh within the forms of *Demoiselles* the antithesis of the more quiet, statuesque physiques of *Two Nudes*. “The whole picture is inner directed, a strange prelude to the extrovert plot of the *Demoiselles*”.\(^7\) Although the depth of the connection between the two works is debatable, the link between the two works in Picasso’s sketchbooks also demonstrates their sequential occurrence. One of the sketches, *Four Nudes in an Interior* (fig. 10), from late autumn of 1906 demonstrates this relationship quite neatly; the two figures who would later

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\(^7\) Rubin, “Genesis”, 45.
\(^7\) Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 42.
\(^7\) Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 43.
\(^7\) Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 51.
become isolated in Two Nudes are drawn on the left side of the parchment, with two other figures sitting and standing in the right corner surrounded by drapery. While it is not possible to date the sketches of the works within Picasso’s notebook precisely, the dates of both works completion, similarity in theme, and physical proximity within the sketchbooks would seem to indicate closeness in their timelines. “For both the Two Nudes and the Demoiselles are about the human condition, about that perpetual moment in which self-knowledge arises in sexual confrontation”, Steinberg says.

The evolution of the sketches for the Demoiselles reveals a thoughtful gestation of the piece into the final form. In its earliest conception, the Demoiselles demonstrates little of the later abstraction and radicalism of the final form. With Picasso’s Trocadéro visit still many months away, the first sketches demonstrate a more erotic, narrative approach to the composition. The absence of primitive elements, save for perhaps Iberian influence and some later consideration of possible Egyptian sources, places the studies for Demoiselles within a more Western, traditional approach to the nude. The earliest sketches contain first six, then seven, figures in the composition. Two of these figures are male; one, a sailor, and the other a medical student, only identified as such by Picasso in 1972. The “medical student” of the first sketches holds a skull, and enters from the left side of the work as four women surround the sailor, seated in the center of the composition. Alfred Barr, director of the Museum of Modern Art during the museum’s retrospective on the artist in 1939, hypothesizes in Picasso: Forty Years of His Art that the piece was originally intended as a kind of “memento mori” due to the

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75 Rubin, “Genesis”, 42.
76 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 52.
77 Rubin, “Genesis”, 43.
78 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 41.
presence of the skull in these sketches. Barr speculates that the later removal of the man with the skull from the piece demonstrates that “all implications of a moralistic contrast between virtue (the man with the skull) and vice (the man surrounded by food and women) have been eliminated in favor of a purely formal figure composition, which as it develops becomes more and more dehumanized and abstract.”

Scholarship on the Demoiselles after Barr often looked to the early sketches to attempt to make sense of the work in its final form. The inclusion of the two men in the work adds another layer of interpretation to the scene; ultimately, Picasso seemed to make the decision to move these two men beyond the canvas, implicating their possible dichotomy of virtue and sin into the gaze of the viewer, although Barr credits the loss of the figures to “no very fervent moral intent” that Picasso had in pursuing the piece. Barr’s interpretation became standard reading of scholarship on the Demoiselles for thirty years after its publication—according to Barr, the painting was “an allegory or charade on the wages of sin”

The inclusion of the medical student, as exemplified through the above excerpt from Barr, was read often in early scholarship in the mid-20th century as a symbol of the consequences of vice, after Barr claimed that Picasso privately identified the man in the sketches as “carrying a skull” in a conversation in 1939. Despite this, no known sketch at the time contained an example of this—only in 1972 did Picasso release sketches showing a man carrying a skull that he identified as a medical student (fig. 11). While speculation around the figure and some accounts, such as Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Romoald Dor de la Souchère, perpetuated the theory that this man was a “student”, their arguments preceded the 1972 evidence. The

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79 Rubin, “Genesis”, 47.
80 Rubin, “Genesis”, 47.
81 Rubin, “Genesis”, 44.
provided studies on the figure indicate that at one point, the features seem to match those of the Iberian head that Picasso had owned briefly from 1907 to 1911 (until it was discovered that they had been stolen before his ownership). The sketches for the medical student reveal similar almond-shaped eyes, arched brows, and “‘scroll’ ear” that coincide with the appearance of the Iberian head from Osuna. The renewed interest in the male figures of the preliminary sketches led to debate over the significance of the figure, particularly between Leo Steinberg and William Rubin. Both scholars generated major studies of the compositional sketches of the Demoiselles to illustrate their respective interpretations of the work: Steinberg emphasizes the piece as a sexual metaphor that, engages the viewer in a psychological sexual confrontation. Rubin argues that the work reflects the anxiety of syphilis and argues for a more medical reading of the piece; he interprets the inclusion of the medical student as further evidence of a theme involving “disease or death” that probably emerged from Picasso’s panic over syphilis in the year coinciding with Demoiselles.

“The trepidation in regard to syphilis and gonorrhea had to play some role, I believe, in Picasso’s symbolism. After all, his fear of illness and death was legendary, and he had already demonstrated an exceptional concern for and fascination with venereal disease in visits to both the prison hospital of Saint-Lazare in Paris and the Santa Creu I de Sant Pau hospital in Barcelona, where he also visited the morgue…Lest we forget, syphilis was still very much a fatal disease at the time Picasso painted the Demoiselles.”

To Rubin, the medical student links the artist’s fear of syphilis to the confrontational nature the female nude he arrives at in the final composition of the Demoiselles. Steinberg’s interpretation in the “Philosophical Brothel” dismisses the “memento mori” interpretation from the Barr period and instead views the student as a symbol of an analytical approach to the female nude. He also

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83 Rubin, “Genesis”, 44.
84 Rubin, “Genesis”, 56-57.
believes the sketches indicate a resemblance to “the plump features of Max Jacob”, friend to the artist at the time.\textsuperscript{85} The sailor and the student are foils to each other in Steinberg’s interpretation, with the sailor falling prey to the erotic intoxication of the female nudes, and the student “a man apart, self-exiled by reliance on studious dissection; condemned for not entering”.\textsuperscript{86} Steinberg postulates that the preliminary sketches indicate that \textit{Demoiselles} was created “as an allegory of the involved and the uninvolved in confrontation with the indestructible claims sex”—much to the annoyance of William Rubin and his syphilis argument. While their work on the subject argues for different conclusions, both scholar seem to generally agree on interpretation of the two men as polarized participants—one who watches the revelry, and one who partakes in it. The medical student ceases to be male in the eleventh composition of May 1907 (fig. 38); he will transform into another demoiselle to pull back the left curtain in the final composition.

The sailor, usually depicted sitting at a table, remains male and present within the studies until the final watercolor of June 1907 (fig. 42). The sailor’s disappearance can possibly be attributed to the narrative of the work moving into the psychological plane; his initial appearance in the preliminary sketches up until the first watercolor with five figures done in June 1907 may refer to familiar clientele of the brothel, and potentially the prospect of venereal disease. The “contrast” between sailor and student, “he who cures the pix and he who gets it—probably struck Picasso in time as overly anecdotal, and perhaps even too banal”, says Rubin.\textsuperscript{87} The sailor also may have been associated with Picasso’s self-portrait (fig. 7). Rubin illustrates the similar facial features between early sketches of the sailor and \textit{Self-Portrait} from the previous year.\textsuperscript{88} The

\textsuperscript{85} Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 43.  
\textsuperscript{86} Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 43.  
\textsuperscript{87} Rubin, “Genesis”, 58.  
\textsuperscript{88} Rubin, “Genesis”, 58.
sailor’s existence potentially originates as a symbol of careless carnal relations, with the student’s inclusion a symbol of “non-participatory and theoretical” knowledge, to quote from Steinberg. The first three studies for the work (fig. 12-14) depict the sailor with the same porrón Picasso used to reference male virility in 1906 with *Harem* and *Three Nudes*. The sailor’s perceived participation in the scene with the female figures in the early compositions, along with his “Bacchic porrón” and the usage of the porrón as a “phallic attribute” and sexual symbol, contrasts to the sterility of the observing medical student, as his participation appears to be more observational. Picasso seems to have held on to the inclusion of the sailor for quite some time. The sailor will outlive the student; remaining in the studies with his table of food after the student becomes the curtain-drawing nude. His action within the portrait changes from holding a porrón to rolling a cigarette in Picasso’s studies for the sailor, dating from winter through to the spring of 1907. By an oil sketch of the composition dated to March or April, he drops his gaze to his lap and begins to roll a cigarette (fig. 15)—another potential sexual innuendo. His new focus towards the cigarette changes the nature of the figure; once the center of the demoiselles’ performance, the studies with the cigarette “show him as mild and shy…inadequate as a personification of vice; more likely a timid candidate for sexual initiation”. The sailor was most likely an important figure to Picasso, for he would not have maintained his existence within the piece even after the loss of the student had he not felt him relevant to the composition; “There can be no doubt that the sailor was meaningful to Picasso, but the meaning eludes, the more so as his figure drops out”. Arriving at the watercolor study for the *Demoiselles* in June

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89 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 41.
90 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 41.
91 Rubin, “Genesis”, 42.
92 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 37.
93 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 38.
of 1907, the sailor is lost for good and the final composition form of the work is demonstrated for the first time. (It is in June, as well, that he visited the Trocadéro for the first time.)

Along with the two male figures, early sketches demonstrate another facet of the work thematically in their more naturalistic, sensual approach to the setting of the brothel. Rubin argues that the shift in style and representation of the figures altered the potential receptions of the work as well.

“...the promiscuous and unregenerate sexuality that Picasso evoked in his early studies for ‘my brothel’ was not at that time considered acceptable subject matter for serious painting. Indeed any large brothel picture...constituted an outright social challenge. Had Picasso carried out the Demoiselles in the more realistic, narrative spirit of its early sketches, the seductively postured whores would certainly have conveyed little of the psychosexual déchaînement that characterizes the Demoiselles as we know it.”

Perhaps what Rubin calls the originally “banal” approach to the composition and the movement away from it explains the loss of the sailor and the student in favor of the five-figure composition. The five demoiselles that survive to the June watercolor have a unique individual history within the compositional studies. The original six figure, then seven figure sketches from early 1907 to April of the same year show nearly three demoiselles nearly identical to their forms in the final composition; the right side of the composition is only moderately modified before the Philadelphia watercolor. The left side of the work, from the seated sailor all the way over to the intruding student, undergoes the most drastic transformation within the sketches. While the three female figures on the right would be studied in greater detail in individual sketches and reoriented in the final composition to move closer or farther from the surface of the canvas, their bodies remain mostly within the same recognizable pose leading up the final piece.

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94 Rubin, “Genesis”, 42.
Sketches from the period of *Two Nudes* reveal the figure of the squatting demoiselle may derive from a sketch from winter of 1906 (fig. 18), in which two women sit facing opposite directions. One nude sits with her back to the viewer, her hand placed on her knee and her buttocks revealed in full as she rests on a block-like structure. She arrives within the first compositional study as the solitarily clothed demoiselle, in what Rubin calls a “belted, filmy peignoir”, her torso facing the figure of the sailor and head turned to acknowledge the medical student’s interruption. Her pose, relative to the other demoiselles, does not change aside from a brief consideration of her orientation and her eventual disrobing. In studies for the “squatter” as Steinberg calls her, Picasso seems to have considered facing the front side of her naked body towards the viewer, instead of the final backwards orientation. A study from March of 1907 (fig. 19) shows a heavily muscled female figure sitting on another block-like structure, her knees spread apart, face directed towards the viewer. “This drawing, contemporaneous with the early ensemble projects, is not erotic or lubricious, but Picasso nevertheless appears to have decided that its front view was finally inadmissible; from then on we see the crouching demoiselles only from behind”. Consecutive studies demonstrate the squatter in the same backward position as she will appear in the final watercolor (fig. 20).

The incoming figure from the right, the “curtain-parter”, also seems to also be traceable to studies from the *Two Nudes* era. One sketch (fig. 21) from autumn of 1906 depicts a nude stepping forward, right hand tugging an adjacent curtain and left palm flipped upward. This particular nude is drawn in the same wideset proportions as the final *Two Nudes*. In future sketches for *Demoiselles*, the curtain-puller adopts a thinner figure than her “Cézannesque”

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95 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 45.
96 Rubin, “Genesis”, 81.
counterparts from the previous year (fig. 22). She is shown in full form in one of the studies from March (fig. 23), though her legs and stomach will be obscured in the final composition by the squatting nude. Until she dons the Africanized mask in the final composition, the curtain-parter remains relatively unchanged within the studies by the artist.

Also only slightly modified in pose is the standing demoiselle, who occupies the center of the composition. She is depicted in all known preparatory sketches with her body directly facing the viewer, her naked body bared toward to front of the canvas. The standing nude is one of the most sketched figures in the composition, as Picasso varied the height of her elbows before arriving at her final pose of forearms dropped back in the June watercolor. The artist varies her arms in three major phases, with Carnet 3, 49R as an exception (the standing nude here stretches her arms above her head, leaning to the right) (fig. 24). The first variation is reminiscent of Cézanne’s bathers; the demoiselle drops her forearms behind her, elbows pointed up to the ceiling and biceps drawn closely up by her ears (fig. 25). The second depicts the arms linked behind the head, elbows butterflied and framing the head within a sort of rectangle (fig. 26, 27). This may reflect of Picasso’s interest in Egyptian sculpture, according to Rubin, although studies of the figure demonstrate a variety of stylistic departures in depicting the figure with boxed elbows. Studies done in gouache, as well as others in oil and charcoal, demonstrate a stocky, Iberian approach with a waist that shrinks throughout the month of May. At one point, Picasso angulates her hips to sharp points (fig. 28). Rubin postulates the second phase to “echo that of the left-hand figure in Derain’s Bathers, which was shown at the Independents of 1907, and which Picasso would have seen the previous year in Derain’s studio”. Her final form,

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98 Rubin, “Genesis”, 76.
somewhat of a compromise between the two previous positions, drops the forearms once again behind the body, although the biceps are significantly loosened from the first phase. Though the arms can be reduced to three stages, studies of the individual figure from late May to June demonstrate stylistic variation of her proportions; she stands rigidly upright in one watercolor from June (fig. 29), but seems to lean backwards, with a heavy backside and angulated breasts in Carnet 8, 18V (fig. 30). One study from late June (fig. 31) stands out in its almost animalistic depiction of the figure—her stomach distends, her backside gets an unnatural dosage of musculature, and her face elongates into a primate-like rendition. She arrives in the watercolor much more naturalistically depicted than in this late study, before becoming one of the Iberian figures on the final canvas.

The four figures on the left change the most throughout the studies. Before the final watercolor, they are reworked in their grouping by the artist multiple times. An extra demoiselle remains in the sketches from winter of 1906-1907 to late spring, when the first six-figure sketch can be seen (fig. 35). In the seven-figure studies she can be seen standing somewhat behind the medical student and the seated demoiselles. Studies for her from Carnet 3 (fig. 43 - 46) depict a muscular standing nude, one hand curling up under her chin and the other resting on the back of the adjacent chair in which the seated nude does her pedicure. As with many of the other sketches for individual demoiselles during March-April, Picasso appears to approach her drawing with Michelangelo in mind (fig. 44, 46); her rippling muscles and broad shoulders are potentially reminiscent of the Renaissance artist’s style. While she was eliminated the earliest of the figures, her existence demonstrates an importance within the compositional contours of the picture.

“Picasso considered this whore’s left arm part of an important compositional contour linking the chair and the upper left corner. This connecting contour was lost when Picasso
dropped the figure, but his instinct led him progressively to restore in in the six-figure studies by ‘breaking loose’ the chair’s contour so that it becomes the diagonal curtain hem (which may thus be considered the ‘ghost’ of the excised demoiselle’s arm).”

The demoiselle’s disappearance in the first six-figure study (fig. 35) shifts the depth of the figure. The more spatially balanced assortment of figures from the preceding seven-figure studies angulates; the medical student and the crouching demoiselles flank the work, and the demoiselle with raised arms recedes deep into the curtains, creating a more triangular working of the depth of the space. The sailor slopes in from the left side towards the scene, and the seated demoiselle is placed a little closer to the medical student. Without the extraneous demoiselle, the composition recedes from the canvas, as opposed to the shallower composition of the seven figure studies. While Picasso would ultimately return to the shallower space with the final watercolor, he seems to have considered a deeper composition (fig. 35 - 39) for a period in May after dropping the extraneous demoiselle.

The medical student is the second figure to leave the composition, transforming in the eleventh six-figure study (fig. 38) into a woman. Angular breasts and a cinched waist replace a sloping chest, with feminine hair and hips also added. She is the only figure to be somewhat clothed in the final composition (fig. 42) (replacing the squatting demoiselle, who previously wore the peignoir). According to Steinberg, this sets her apart significantly from the other nudes.

“Her dishabille introduces the theme of exposure. She is the overture, the true curtain raiser, The character that invested her figure from the beginning still clings; she remains non-participant and go-between, not part of the revelation but one who reveals.”

Why Picasso chose to make the figure female is unclear; perhaps Steinberg is correct in believing that her half-clothed state symbolizes exposure. Rubin suggests that the figure’s sex

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100 Rubin, “Genesis”, 73.
101 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 45.
change is part of a greater shift away from the original focus on the male participants, since “the student had long since lost his symbolic attributes of book and skull and, even in the latter of the seven-figure studies, was shown pulling the curtain with both hands—as his female counterpart continues to do right into the final state”. The history of the figure complicates her arrival within the painting; how appropriate it is to infer meaning from her previous life as a medical student is unclear. Nonetheless, in May of 1907 the figure becomes permanently female, and studies for this curtain-pulling demoiselle show her in the repeated pose of pulling back the curtain with both hands.

Perhaps the figure that undergoes the most change within the compositional evolution of the Demoiselles is the seated figure that eventually becomes the second Iberian demoiselle, whom Steinberg refers to as a “gisante”. Some version of her first appears in studies for Two Nudes (fig. 47), in which she addresses the viewer while seated opposite to the preliminary inception of the squatting nude. As she does in the first compositional study, in this example as well she sits with her left foot crossed over her right knee, with her left arm resting on her left knee and right hand touching her right foot. The compositional studies with seven figures demonstrate the same pose; she picks up her foot, crossing her calf over her knee in an act of “doing her pedicure”, somewhat similar to Picasso’s studies of a naked young girl cleaning her foot from his stay in Gosol.102 In a few of the seven-figure compositions (fig. 33, 34), the foot is dropped from the demoiselle’s right knee and seems to cross behind her right ankle instead—the position she will later take up in the six-figure compositions before ultimately losing the chair in which she sits. Hints of a high-back chair can be seen in the seven-figure compositions as support for the seated nude through to the first six-figure composition. The extraneous nude

102 Rubin, “Genesis”, 5.
discussed above also uses the chair to lean on with her left forearm. By the time the extraneous demoiselle disappears and Picasso draws the first six-figure composition (p. 35), “the high back chair is still present” according to Rubin,

> “but it is evident that its now asymmetrical contour ‘resists’ forming the oval top of the chair. Its curve, on the sailor’s side, takes on an increasing life of its own and seems to want to rise rather than drop down, which is precisely what it begins to do in the third and fourth of these small sketches. By the sketch on page 5 of Carnet 6, it has effectively metamorphosed into the hem of a middle-ground curtain that rises toward the upper left corner of the composition.”

Rubin links the chair’s disappearance to the loss of the extraneous nude, which then leaves a sort of gap in the composition on the left side of the work. The transformation from seated nude to what Steinberg calls the “gisante”, with her arm raised above her head in the pose of the reclining nude, may be a compositional tactic by Picasso.

> “The empty area between the arching draper hem (formerly the chair back) has been filled—or perhaps, refilled—by having the seated whore raise her right arm, bending her forearm back almost at a ninety-degree angle, so that the wrist and hand disappear behind her head.”

With the composition no longer in need of the linear component of the high-back chair, the demoiselle has no discernable support in the six-figure compositional studies. A study from the infrared photograph of *Bust of a Woman with Large Ear* from May of 1907 (fig. 41) shows evidence that the demoiselle may be seated on the sailor’s knee, however, the imminent eradication of the sailor leaves the gisante without a seat. Her raised arm and crossed left ankle leave her in a vulnerable contrapposto. Steinberg rationalizes the strange posture of the most-altered demoiselle with the history of the reclining nude. According to Steinberg, the figure “ends up recumbent—what the French call a *gisante*—but seen in bird’s-eye perspective”.

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103 Rubin, “Genesis”, 71.
104 Rubin, “Genesis”, 73.
105 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 27.
Steinberg’s theory that the gisante figure is actually meant to be read as a reclining nude in vertical has been mostly adopted by scholars, including William Rubin.

The argument of a “birds-eye perspective” of the gisante introduces discussion of potential artistic influences to the compositional studies, before the five women arrived on canvas. One of these influences is potentially Picasso himself; the artist tends towards repetition of similar themes and figures within his own art. Steinberg identifies the posture of the gisante to be similar the female counterpart of the 1905 watercolor *Nudes Entwined* (fig. 48); he also cites The *Dryad* (fig. 49) of the next year, 1908, to demonstrate a similar “vertical perspective”.106

The “reclining nude in vertical” can be traced to back to Michelangelo in particular—his “drawing of Tityos, the punished giant laid low and chained to a rock”. Steinberg also cites the Louvre *Slave* (fig. 50), created originally for the tomb of Pope Julius II, with its one arm raised, as a “pose which haunted Picasso during the *Demoiselles* period”.107 The gisante and the *Slave* are indeed similar in posture; later in his career, Picasso kept a plaster cast of the *Slave* in his studio.108

The *Slave* was also a favorite of Cézanne, who echoed it in works such as *Five Bathers* (fig. 9). In many ways, early sketches of the *Demoiselles* points towards Cézanne’s influence. Alfred Barr postulated in *Forty Years* that *Demoiselles* shared Cézanne’s shallow space: “late bather pictures in which his figures and background are fused in a kind of relief without much indication either of deep space or of the weight in the forms”.109 Barr’s commentary on the presence of Cézanne, which he published along with the first three known compositional studies

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106 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 51.
107 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 55.
for Demoiselles, became canonical within literature surrounding the inception of the Demoiselles. John Golding, over a decade later, furthered the argument that the “closest prototype for this kind of painting—a large composition of naked and partially draped women—is to be found in Cézanne’s Baigneuses”.\textsuperscript{110} While stylistically, the Bathers of Cézanne’s later work and Demoiselles differ, “the liberties taken with the human body, the overall composition, and the way in which the figures are closely grouped together in shallow depth and intimately related to their surroundings…indicate a debt, however remote, to Cézanne”.\textsuperscript{111} Golding even suggests that the squatting demoiselle is derived from Three Bathers, which Matisse owned and Picasso had likely seen before beginning Demoiselles.\textsuperscript{112} Cézanne’s presence within the painting was widely commented upon in early scholarship as the lineage for the formal components of the painting. Rubin acknowledges potential “battening, consciously or not, on recollections of paintings by Cézanne” within the compositional studies, especially regarding the gisante. The final form, however, he believes contains a departure from formal elements of Cézanne’s art:

“The final echoes of Cézanne are perhaps found in some of the sketches for the first, seven figure versions of the Demoiselles that contain elongates figure types…Whatever Picasso’s affinity for Cézanne in the Demoiselles, we should seek it more in mood than in the formal aspects of Cézanne’s bathers and nudes—particularly in that of such early works as The Temptation of Saint Anthony and Luncheon on the Grass.”\textsuperscript{113}

Steinberg, as well, seems to mitigate Cézanne’s influence to the modified bather theme.\textsuperscript{114}

Steinberg also links the theme of the vertical reclining nude found in the gisante to Matisse’s ceramic Dancer (fig. 52) of the same year, in which a nude female figure also raises her right arm and crosses her left foot over her right. Golding also takes up the Matisse

\textsuperscript{110} Golding, “The Demoiselles”, 156.
\textsuperscript{111} Golding, “The Demoiselles”, 159.
\textsuperscript{112} Golding, “The Demoiselles”, 159.
\textsuperscript{113} Rubin, “Genesis”, 97.
\textsuperscript{114} Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”
connection with *Bonheur de vivre*; he suggests this may have incited Picasso to create *Demoiselles* “by a spirit of rivalry”, due to the similar theme.\textsuperscript{115} While the artists did seem to respond to each other’s work within their own, this similarity may also derive from shared interests within the artists’ inner circle as well, particularly regarding the legacy of Cézanne and Gauguin.

The final studies from May to early June of a six-figure composition for *Demoiselles* depict the nudes in their near-final forms. Apart from the presence of the sailor, each individual figure has arrived within the twelfth six-figure compositional study (fig. 39) for the work in the general posture they will assume on the canvas. The watercolor study in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, dated to June 1907, depicts the first known composition without the sailor and his table. The fruit from the table, however, has survived to be moved closer to the pictorial plane. The figures have shifted only slightly; the gisante moves closer to the central demoiselle to make up the space, and the central demoiselle in turn moves closer to the pictorial plane.\textsuperscript{116} The low-relief that Barr attributes to Cezanne takes form here, and the sharper, geometric approach to rendering the female form that early scholars will identify as the potential beginning of the Cubist style is also evident.

In arriving at the June watercolor (fig. 42), Picasso chiseled away the components extraneous to the narrative. The composition’s presence onto canvas exhibits more influence from primitive sources, and move the narrative confrontation originally conceived in the early sketches to a psychological interaction between the viewer and the demoiselles. Steinberg wrote in 1988, “no modern painting engages you with such brutal immediacy… The picture is a tidal

\textsuperscript{115} Golding, “The Demoiselles”, 159.
\textsuperscript{116} Rubin, “Genesis”, 62.
wave of female aggression; one either experiences the Demoiselles as an onslaught, or shuts it off".117 In chronicling Picasso’s compositional sketches for the piece, we can understand more fully how the startling composition of the final piece was conceived. While it is widely acknowledged that the Africanized masks on the three outer demoiselles were a late addition to the painting, it is important to our understanding of the piece to recognize that those changes were not, perhaps, as drastic a choice as it may seem, because the series of modulations and changes to the composition in the preparatory studies demonstrate that the work, from the beginning, has continued to evolve. The decision to paint over the figures with African masks seems less spontaneous in the context of the constant alterations in the compositional studies.

117 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 12.
Chapter Three: Identifying the African Elements in the Demoiselles

This chapter discusses the introduction of Africanizing elements into the *Demoiselles* of Avignon. After painting all five figures of the piece in the Iberian style seen in the final watercolor, Picasso decided to repaint at least two, likely three, heads of the demoiselles to depict primitive influences. This was likely not to emulate specific tribal art seen previously, but rather to depict a generally Africanizing aesthetic on two of the demoiselles’ faces.

Picasso moved the picture to a large canvas around June of 1907. From the Philadelphia watercolor, the figures remain roughly the same in terms of the composition, save for a few spatial tweaks to bring the figures closer together on canvas (fig. 1). The curtain-puller and the gisante were moved slightly closer to one another, pressing the three leftmost figures more tightly together than previously seen. The squatter’s legs became slightly more closed, and the curtain-parter moved inwards slightly. The proportions of the figures were also slimmed. The table with fruit was moved upwards slightly on the canvas to be closer to the demoiselles.

The central two figures in the composition, the gisante and the nude with raised arms, remain unchanged from the original painting, before the Africanized heads were added. Along with the fruit, the figures remain mostly unaltered from their arrival on the canvas. These figures, often referred to as the Iberian figures, gaze out at the viewer with the same wide, almond-shaped eyes and reductive faces typical to Picasso’s Iberian period. Steinberg’s argument that the gisante is a vertically recumbent nude is typically the best explanation for the demoiselle’s unique posture; she pulls a stretch of drapery over her left leg, feet swept to the left side of the canvas.

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canvas. The nude with arms raised is seen behind the gisante, drapery covering her genitals and most of both of her thighs. Although the Iberian figures likely do not strike the viewer as particularly attractive, Rubin believes that the figures “were intended by Picasso to be attractive—and thus to be foils for the three others in the picture. Even in conventional terms of beauty, they are far more prepossessing than any other female figures painted by Picasso in all of 1907”.119 This may have been Picasso’s intention at leaving the Iberian figures as they were, however, it should be noted that all five figures were painted first with variations of an Iberian head. Arriving at the Iberian heads as foils for the masked demoiselles may have taken place at any point of the development of the piece, if this was the artist’s intention at all. Leaving the Iberian figures as they are, however, does seem to create a dichotomy between the demoiselles—how we are meant to label the polarized depictions of woman is more unclear. Rubin believes that:

“failure to read the two Iberian figures as beauties prevents the viewer from satisfactorily perceiving the underlying polarities with which Picasso implicitly began the project and on which he settled definitively: Eros and Thanatos, beauty and ugliness, age and youth, human and animal—all of which can and do become reinforced on a stylistic level by means of Picasso’s revolutionary departure from the traditional “unity” of figuration”.120

The discourse of love and death (Eros and Thanatos) is reintroduced after the loss of the sailor and student with the African masks—before the reworking of the canvas, the uniform approach to the figures was an Iberian-derived face with angulated bodies. This new layer of paint included Africanizing masks on the heads of the two demoiselles on the right side of the canvas, and potentially a repainting of the curtain-puller on the left. X-rays of the canvas done by the Museum of Modern Art show the layers of painting applied to the five heads. The conservation

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120 Rubin, “Genesis”, 69.
report on the Demoiselles done by the MoMA in 2003 notes that no major changes to the composition of the heads of either of the Iberian demoiselles were made (fig. 3 and 4).  

The curtain-puller on the leftmost side of the canvas is somewhat of an outlier in the composition of the Demoiselles – neither distinctly African nor Iberian, her head was also compositionally unaltered in the final composition. She has consistently been the most difficult figure to place within the timeline of the work—her head was not significantly distorted in the overpainting of the African masks, and the darker pigmentation of her face was painted over the terra-cotta color of the original Iberian head (fig. 2). Overpainting on the curtain-puller’s face in brown paint deepened the existing contours and seemed to petrify the pre-existing Iberian face. Early critics, such as Kahnweiler and Barr, did not count the curtain-puller alongside the masked demoiselles on the right. They focused on the demoiselles in two polarized depictions: Iberian and “African”. After observing a set of X-rays done by the MoMA in 1950 at the request of Barr for an uncompleted revision of “Fifty Years”, Golding noted in 1958 that the curtain-puller’s head looked reworked as well. Golding’s explanation for this was a Dan mask from the Ivory Coast with similar coloring and features—this has since been proven to be highly improbable, since Dan masks were not visible at the Trocadéro nor “in the Paris market in 1907”, according to Rubin. The curtain-puller’s dark face is often attributed to a general tribal aesthetic, rather than a copy of any particular mask visible to Picasso at the time. Rubin has

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122 Rubin, “Genesis”, 92.
123 Rubin, “Genesis”, 92.
124 Rubin, “Genesis”, 93.
125 Rubin, “Genesis”, 93.
126 Rubin, “Genesis”, 93.
argued for a visual link between the figure and the ancestor spirit in Gauguin’s *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (fig. 7).

“I believe this figure may constitute a direct echo of the half-idol, half-human ‘Tupapau’ or female ancestor spirit, in Gauguin’s *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, which Picasso certainly knew in lithographic form (its elements are present in *Noa-Noa*, of which Picasso owned a copy).”

Picasso’s awareness of Gauguin has been reiterated by numerous scholars, notably Ron Johnson, who emphasized the importance of Gauguin on Picasso’s early primitivism. Rubin writes,

“Allusions to Gauguin in Picasso’s work begin in 1901 when he and Sabartés visited Durrio. ‘There was much talk about Gauguin, Tahiti, and the poem *Noa Noa*…Durrio possessed a number of Gauguin’s early works and knew Charles Morice, who soon gave Picasso a copy (now apparently lost) of Noa Noa, in the margins of which Picasso made at least two drawings’.”

Gauguin’s influence on Picasso is possibly present in two of his early sculptures, *Seated Woman of 1901* and *Woman Combing Her Hair* of early 1906. A sketch dated to 1906 in the Musée Picasso, *La Parisienne and Exotic Figures* (fig. 8), depicts what is perhaps one of Gauguin’s Tahitian figures alongside a Parisian woman, and a sneering female nude. With an awareness of Gauguin likely demonstrated through his art prior to the *Demoiselles, Spirit of the Dead Watching* may explain why the curtain-puller’s head differs from the outright abstract and Iberian heads of the other four demoiselles. Richardson goes so far as to suggest that Picasso may have even seen *Spirit of the Dead* “at Vollard’s at the time of his 1901 show”. The curtain-puller and tupapau, when compared, share the same facial composition of “protruding

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127 Rubin, “Genesis”, 95.
131 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 35.
132 Richardson in Rubin, “Genesis”, 95.
lips, a receding chin, and, above all, a frontal eye”. The frontal-facing eye, along with the nose in full profile, are a significant departure from the final watercolor. At first glance, the figure seems visually linked perhaps to Egyptian murals, in their shared combination of profile with a frontal-facing eye.

“The Gauguin figure, with its conflation of Archaic influences—Egyptian, in particular—seems to me as close to the Picasso as any African or Oceanic mask. Indeed, there were no masks that, viewed in profile, show frontal eyes; this is a pictorial convention, and is fundamental to Egyptian painting and to other forms of Archaic art from which Gauguin borrowed ideas”.

Rubin points out that a closer look at the head of the curtain-puller reveals another eye behind the nose placed in profile. “Picasso no doubt added this because, while he wanted to maintain the archaism of his Gauguinesque formulation, he also wanted the figure to function logically in a space that was malleable and not flat”. While Gauguin’s ancestor spirit is a possible explanation for the curtain-puller’s altered appearance, her transformation from Iberian to Gauguinesque is difficult to place on an exact timeline. Because her transformation is less severe than the two African heads, she is often considered a byproduct of the introduction of primitive art to the picture, occurring alongside or before the African heads were painted. The reference to Gauguin convolutes her timeline further; Picasso’s awareness of Gauguin predates his interest in African art by many years—the two African heads can be roughly dated to July of 1907 in reference to the Trocadéro visit, but Gauguin’s influence is more omnipotent than specific. Rubin offers a photograph as possible evidence that the curtain-puller may have been painted after the African heads were complete—the Demoiselles can be seen propped in Picasso’s studio in the background of a photograph of Guus and Dolly van Dongen (fig. 9), most likely taken in

133 Rubin, “Genesis”, 95.
134 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 264.
135 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 93.
the summer of 1907. While the painting is blurry and the light is uneven in the studio, illuminating the left side of the canvas, the curtain-puller’s head looks to be as light as the rest of her body, while the squatter and curtain-parter have their African masks already painted. The photograph is in no way definitive evidence of when the curtain-puller’s face was painted—it merely demonstrates the possibility that the timeline typically assumed of the work may not be certain. In any case, the origin of the curtain-puller’s dark head is difficult to decipher, and places her in a unique position within the work. Neither as wholly African as the demoiselles on the right nor Iberian, her role in the painting as the one who seems to reveal the scene behind the curtains leaves her in a unique position. Her previous identity as the medical student may still be somewhat present in her proximity to the scene as one who watches, but also makes us watch the unfolding display. She is both a part of the scene and an observer, which may indicate why Picasso made her head both somewhat African and Iberian.

The primitive elements in the *Demoiselles* were potentially added as a response to a trip to the Trocadéro in June of 1907. Malraux’s posthumous novel on the painter, Picasso’s Mask, contains his version of Picasso’s account of the seminal encounter with African objects in the Trocadéro. Apparently recounted while Picasso finished Guernica in 1939, Malraux transcribes a conversation between the artist, José Bergamín, and himself, in which Picasso speaks about his first impression of African objects at the Trocadéro in 1907. There are obvious issues with Malraux’s account; it is secondhand, and Picasso’s perspective on the subject comes after the influence of Surrealism and Dadaism on the artist. Picasso also publicly rejected the connection to African art with his statement in 1920, “L’art nègre? Connais pas!” However, Francoise

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136 Rubin, “Genesis”, 93.
Gilot’s “Life with Picasso” contains a similar account of the trip to the Trocadéro, in which Picasso says instead, “at that moment I realized that this was what painting was all about” as opposed to Malraux’s “I understood why I was a painter”.138 William Rubin also verifies Picasso’s sentiment on African art in his contribution to the Museum of Modern Art’s catalogue on Demoiselles, in which he explains that Gilot’s account closely resembles his own conversation with Picasso in which he expressed the same narrative on the Trocadéro. Rubin also believes that the trip to the Trocadéro is the best answer to account for the painting’s departure from its original Iberian format.

“Given the sudden rupture in development represented by the right-hand figures of the Demoiselles, whose color is unprecedented in Picasso’s (or any other Western) art, a trigger can readily be assumed—and there is no better candidate for this than the Trocadéro visit”.139

According to Rubin, Picasso had gone to the Trocadéro in June of 1907 to look at Romanesque sculpture, which was located in one wing of the museum.140 He, by both Rubin and Malraux’s accounts, spontaneously visited the wing containing the Musée d’Ethnographie. At the Trocadéro, according to Rubin, records at the Musée d’Ethnographie show that on view in 1907 were objects labeled “cures the insane”, “cures ailments caused by the deceased”, and “protects against the sorcerer”, as well as one poignantly labeled “cure” for “gonorrhea”.141 Pictures taken of the permanent collection at the Trocadéro around the time of Picasso’s visit demonstrate a variety of objects placed near one another from a variety of civilizations (fig. 10 – 14). Amongst the arts of Africa are Native American works, Aztec sculptures, Oceanic idols and even religious items from New Zealand. The Trocadéro’s curation of the objects was cluttered; according to

139 Rubin, “Genesis”, 105.
140 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 254.
141 Rubin, “Genesis”, 16.
Malraux’s version of Picasso’s account “it was disgusting. The Flea Market. The smell”. The photos echo the sentiment—masks from New Caledonia can be seen hanging together on the walls, alongside arrows, bottles, and other cultural items. Photos from the Trocadéro in many ways demonstrate the lack of concrete knowledge on the behalf of museum curators concerning the cultural context of the works. Objects were arranged according to region and labels gave rough estimates as to what the objects were used for—in a picture of figurines from New Caledonia, their label reads simply “carved post”. Mannequins were frequently included to demonstrate how clothing and jewelry were worn by native peoples (fig. 10). Picasso’s lack of interest in African objects prior to June of 1907 may be explained in this context; while the artist had likely encountered objects in the collections of his friends, he had not previously seen them in some semblance of a primitivist context.

“To see a few tribal sculpture’s in an artist’s studio is to see them in a situation of aesthetic delectation…Viewed this way, tribal art clearly did not impress Picasso between the autumn of 1906 and June 1907, Then we suddenly find him regarding these masks and ‘fetishes’ in a new compelling light that is relevant to what he is trying to get at in the Demoiselles. He now begins to think in terms of ‘exorcism’, ‘intercession’, and ‘magic’.”

The Trocadéro’s use of mannequins, imitation flora and fauna, and dim light created the same effect of our American natural history museums today; in visiting the Musée d’Ethnographie’s collection, the visitor was engulfed within a primitive experience rather than an observation. The curation of the objects as anthropological artifacts rather than artistic accomplishments may have inspired Picasso’s interest. Patricia Leighten demonstrates that Picasso’s awareness of Africa was likely not just restricted to African art but also to the controversy surrounding French

143 Picasso Primitif, ed. Yves Le Fur, 14.
144 Rubin, “Genesis”, 104.
presence in the continent in the eighteenth century and the early years of 1900. France’s relationship with the Kingdom of Dahomey, as well as her colonial presence in the Congo, had been discussed in leftist newspapers and political cartoon, often in content created by members of Picasso’s own inner circle. 

While the Congo and the Dahomey Kingdom were in the news before and after Picasso completed the *Demoiselles*, they were also largely present within the collection of the Trocadéro due to European colonial campaigns that decimated the kingdom of Benin at the end of the nineteenth century and brought much of Benin’s royal art to France and England. Scholarship and knowledge of Africa was mostly limited to colonial and trade-based interactions, so the curation of the objects was likely somewhat misinformed and influenced by racial prejudices and colonial biases—however, placing the objects within a more experiential context seems to have piqued Picasso’s interest in the objects as cultural tools, rather than artistic objects. Malraux recounts the artist’s statement:

“All alone in that awful museum, with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty manikins. *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* must have come to me that very day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism painting—yes, absolutely!”

While scholarship on the Trocadéro visit has been restricted to second-hand sources written many years after the visit took place, for the sake of the information presented here we will assume henceforth in this chapter that Picasso indeed visited the Musée d’Ethnographie in June of 1907. Most of the research done on Picasso’s relationship to the primitive has been conducted on the assumption that Picasso was aware of the museum’s collection up to that year. Even if the Trocadéro visit was not Picasso’s first trip to the museum, he repeated the information of a revelation at the Trocadéro enough times, to enough separate sources, that we may assume that

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he knowingly chose to align the *Demoiselles* with knowledge of the Trocadéro’s collection. Supposing Malraux’s account to be generally true to Picasso’s impression of his trip to the Trocadéro many years later, Rubin’s comment, that forms were not as relevant to Picasso as the surroundings of the Trocadéro museum, may explain the lack of specificity in the masks Picasso places on the figures. The squatter and the curtain-parter are, obviously, the picture’s greatest connection to the primitive. Attempts to identify the masks within existing African art have proved to be somewhat futile; African and Oceanic masks that seem to share a visual vocabulary with the heads of the two right demoiselles have been disproved as potential informants due to the impossibility of Picasso seeing them before 1907.

The MoMA’s conservational report contains X-rays to demonstrate that the face of the curtain-parter was originally an Iberian face, not unlike the heads of the central figures, with somewhat of an Archaic smile (fig. 5). The opaque black eye of the figure once contained a pupil staring directly towards the viewer, and her nose was once much more similar to the noses of the two adjacent demoiselles. A large ear, similar to the swollen Iberian ears that intrigued Picasso earlier in 1906, was also painted over in lieu of scarification marks. Early in the scholarship of the *Demoiselles*, Alfred Barr proposed an Etoumbi mask as a source for the curtain-parter’s elongated face. While the Etoumbi mask does seem to have proportions eerily similar to the demoiselle’s, there is no record of any of these particular masks reaching Paris

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149 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 261.
before 1907. Therefore, in looking at the acquisitions of the Trocadéro and the small collections of Picasso’s inner circle, no Etoumbi mask was likely seen by Picasso. Rather than identify the head of the curtain-parter to one particular tribe, we may consider the head to instead be an assimilation of Africanized features that the artist may have noticed while at the Trocadéro.

“The African head of the standing demoiselle on the right is not directly inspired by any one particular African type, but is a kind of gloss—the symmetry, suppression of the ears, and the elongated, snout-like animalistic face being generalized from a number of African typologies visible at the Trocadéro in 1907. The front bombé, or bulging brow, and elongated museau, or snout, of Picasso’s woman probably come close to some masks and bieri figures of the Fang people, but these, however, do not have the parallel scarification markings that are sometimes suggested as the source of Picasso’s striated red and green shading.”

There was “at least one example” of Fang art at the Trocadéro in 1907, according to Rubin. Picasso would have also already seen Fang art in the collection of Derain, who had bought a Fang mask from Vlaminck in autumn of 1906 that Picasso and Matisse viewed in Derain’s studio. Perhaps the reiteration of Fang proportions both in Picasso’s inner circle and within the Trocadéro’s collection account for the elongated features of the curtain-parter; her small mouth, absent ears, and long nose, as well as the particularly slanted eyes (fig. 16). As Rubin says, the face does not imitate one form in particular. The snout-like nose of the curtain-parter does not resemble Fang masks in anything but its length, and the scarification marks, while possibly found on Kota reliquary figures, do not appear on the masks or figures of the Fang people.

Another form that may have played a role in the Africanized head of the curtain-parter is the Baga d’amba, a fertility mask from Guinea that Picasso may have seen at the Trocadéro. The label

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150 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 263.
152 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 141.
153 Picasso Primitif, ed. Yves Le Fur, 12.
154 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 139.
on the Baga d’mba in a photograph of the permanent collection in the Trocadéro reads “Nimba: Idole de la Maternité: Baga”, and the statue itself still has the ceremonial grass skirt around the underside of the breasts (fig. 12). It is identified in the Trocadéro label as “Nimba”, the name commonly given to the headdress by Western and non-Baga writers. This is likely because most of the trade in Guinea at the end of the nineteenth century was done through the Susu tribe, neighbors to the more elusive Baga, who use the term “nimba” as an identifying term for a variety of headdresses. The Bulunits and Sitemu tribes of the Baga people insist on “d’mba” as the proper name for the maternity headdress. The mask of the d’mba itself represents motherhood through the inclusion of both physical references to mothers and symbols of motherly wisdom. The d’mba stands on four legs and is meant to be worn on the shoulders of the man who dances the Baga at weddings, births, festival, and other celebrations of fecundity. The flat, heavy breasts of the d’mba represent the successful nursing of many children, and therefore selfless devotion. The intricate braids on the d’mba exemplify feminine beauty, and the face of the d’mba will most commonly have striations in the face lined with metal tacks (a reference to the “intelligent and spiritually guided mind”). The recognition of the d’mba as a maternity idol in the Trocadéro’s label may have intrigued Picasso, especially considering the combination of anthropomorphic facial features and female nudity that Picasso combined in his own style with the Demoiselles. The d’mba’s striated face, tiny mouth, and beak-like nose may also have contributed to the final masks of the two right demoiselles. Drawings done later in 1907 such as Head (fig. 15) use d’mba-adjacent facial features and may demonstrate that the d’mba had a

155 Picasso Primitif, Yves Le Fur, 11.
157 Lamp, Art of the Baga, 156.
158 Lamp, Art of the Baga, 159.
memorable effect on Picasso. Nonetheless, the curtain-parter’s mask does not have an undisputable relationship to any one tribal object. Whether the features derive from any combination of Fang, Kota, or Baga art, the curtain-parter’s new mask is likely a response to the collection of African objects in the Trocadéro, as opposed to one particular object. Rubin puts this nicely: “When Picasso was inspired by motifs in tribal art, he extrapolated, metamorphosed, and fused them—in effect creating his own version of tribal art”. 159 Picasso did not tend to mimic the art that he saw, instead, he fused elements from all types of art to create a unique outcome that could not be easily attributed elsewhere.

The squatter’s head was repainted the most of any of the five figures. Her first head, Iberian, is barely visible in the MoMA x-rays due to an intermittent stage of wherein Picasso painted a thick layer of cadmium yellow paint (fig. 6). Studies for this intermittent head can be found in Carnet 13, 10R and 11R; the drawings show the squatter’s head turning to look over her left shoulder, eyes large and nose pointing to the right of the painting (versus the final form, in which the nose points left) while her cheek rests on a banana-shaped hand. Somewhere along the composition, the artist decided to move the head farther, twisting the squatter’s neck so that her face looks directly at the viewer while still resting on an impossibly upturned hand. He switched the nose to point to the opposite side of the canvas and brought in a right ear to emphasis the frontal position of the head. The eyes of the squatter are altered to become much more skewed than in the drawings, with the left blue eye rotating to an angle and dropping well below the eyebrows. The hair of the figure is also changed into a sort of top knot. The yellow hue of the head noticeable in the MoMA x-ray of the head can be seen in an oil study for the figure from

159 Rubin, “Primitivism”, 278.
July (fig. 17) that shows the composition of the head nearly identical to the final squatter, save for the color.

This head, too, contains ambiguous associations to African art that are not identifiable to one tribe. Some relationship to Kota reliquary figures from Gabon, visible at the Musée d’Ethnographie at the time, may be seen in the eyes and striated face—a motif Picasso would revisit later in 1907 with *Nude with Raised Arms (The Dancer of Avignon)* (fig. 18), in which a nude with a face quite reminiscent of the almond shaped head, wide eyes, linear nose, and striated skin of the Kota figures raised her arms above her head and bends her legs to echo the bend body of the reliquary figures, often misunderstood to be legs.\(^{160}\) Ironically, the head of the squatter most closely resembles a Mbuya sickness mask from Pende (fig. 19) carved after the *Demoiselles* was completed, as Rubin identified in the *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art* catalogue.\(^{161}\) While the carver could not have known about the *Demoiselles*, Rubin uses the mask as evidence of the *Demoiselles’* relation to syphilis and the long-term effects of the disease, including the eventual graphic disintegration of the face.\(^{162}\) Picasso would likely have seen such effects of syphilis in his visits to Saint-Lazare, as mentioned in the previous chapter. It is possible, as well, that Picasso may have been thinking syphilis in modeling the face of the squatting demoiselle, particularly the treatment of the blue eye, which may reference the blindness caused by the disease. Mbuya masks are, as well, modeled on syphilitics in the Pende tribe.\(^{163}\)

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\(^{160}\) Rubin, *“Primitivism”*, 268.

\(^{161}\) Rubin, *“Primitivism”*, 264.

\(^{162}\) Rubin, *“Genesis”*, 116.

\(^{163}\) Rubin, *“Genesis”*, 117.
Picasso’s relationship to Africa in the Demoiselles, therefore, is unspecific in its visual form to any one tribe. In the next chapter, we will explore potential explanations for this more general appropriation of African aesthetics.
Why did Picasso choose to add these Africanizing elements to the *Demoiselles*? We have seen that Picasso did not directly copy the art of a specific tribe. We have also seen, in previous chapters, that the artist was aware of African art before the summer of 1907, and did not incorporate African references into his work in any significant pieces before the *Demoiselles*. The ensuing argument departs from Patricia Leighten’s essay “The White Peril and L’Art nègre: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism”, which places the *Demoiselles* within the greater context surrounding popular conceptions of Africa in the early years of the 1900’s, particularly in the form of political cartoons and caricatures. While Leighten uses this political narrative to identify a possible anarchical element in the *Demoiselles*, I wish to elaborate upon the argument she presents that Picasso knowingly referenced stereotypes about Africa, magic, and sexuality in his incorporation of Africanizing elements into the *Demoiselles*. Leighten feels that the primitivism included in the painting “indicts not only the old artistic order but also the old moral and political order as well”; this inclusion of politics is where I differ from Leighten’s interpretation. The political connotations of African art are part of the effect the work has upon the viewer; however, Picasso does not seem to use these connotations towards political commentary. Instead, the incorporation of African objects may be considered a means of advancing the representation of the nude female form in art. I believe that Picasso’s choice not to take up the African theme previously, and not to visit the Trocadéro until he was nearly

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completed with the *Demoiselles*, expresses that Picasso was interested primarily in the subject of Africa in relation to his work on the female nude and the bather theme taken up in Gósol. His interest in the bather theme in the year prior, and the initially erotic approach to the brothel painting in the beginning of 1907 seem to link the incorporation of African art to Picasso’s exploration of sexuality present in his studies with the sailor and the student. This dichotomy of enticement and horror is carried on with his inclusion of African art in a way that would not have been present with Iberian heads alone. While Leighten argues that the *Demoiselles* makes a political statement, I propose that the piece uses the associations the viewer would have had with Africa, politics included, to create a complicated relationship between the nude and the viewer. As a result, Picasso intentionally engages the viewer in a struggle with compulsion and repulsion to the female body. Representation of Africa in the media demonstrates that Picasso was not only interested in African art for its non-Western aesthetics, but also as a mechanism through which to create new symbols in the depiction of the nude.

Leighten notes that the popular opinion on Africa, through its depiction in the media in France, was divided into two schools of thought: on one hand, coverage of the Dahomey wars and the French conquer of the Kingdom of Benin in 1892 sensationalized Africa in the media as a place of brutality and bloodthirst due to the violence conjured in the Dahomeyan struggle for liberation (fig. 10).

“During the Dahomeyan Wars, the French popular press played up such hair-raising tales, as part of quite a successful attempt to justify French conquest. The press followed the wars only superficially, concentrating instead on the legendarily grotesque practices of the natives and illustrating their accounts with uncredited and rather free copies of earlier engravings. “Sacrifices humains au Dahomey”, for instance, accompanies a text whose author confesses that he himself had only witnessed the sacrifice of a hyena...Though all the tales of cannibalism did not actually come from the Dahomeyan Kingdom, so little
distinction was popularly made between various tribes and regions of Africa that such images resonated around the word ‘Dahomey’.”

“Dahomey”, therefore, became associated with the barbarism of Africa. Since racist thought so strongly pervaded information about Africa, there was a lack of differentiation between tribes, and in effect the European idea of “Africa” became largely based on misinformation, colonial thought, and racism. While the Dahomeyan Wars flooded the European media with images of Africans as, what Leighten calls, the “degenerate savage”, French and Belgian colonial presence in the Congo also caused Africans to be portrayed as victims of the Europe’s colonialism. Anarchist news outlets especially used stories of atrocities committed in the Congo to critique French society. “Parisian artists responded strongly, as can be seen in a series of cartoons from L’Assiette au beurre, involving the debate surrounding French treatment of the Congolese (fig. 11 – 14)”.

Picasso’s close friend at the time, Alfred Jarry, was particularly close to the anticolonial debate in his work as a playwright and frequently used issues of colonialism in his work through his manipulation of the stereotypes reflected in the press of Africa. Jarry’s anticolonialist satire, Ubu Roi, served as a critique over the practice of colonialism, which Leighten says draws many parallels to Demoiselles d’Avignon in the dichotomous treatment of Africans as both degenerate and noble. According to Leighten, Jarry’s position on Africa is similar to Malraux’s account of Picasso’s feelings over the Trocadéro visit. “Picasso and Jarry implicitly reject [positions of the black as a noble savage or a degenerate savage] by pointedly reveling in ethnic difference, by evoking “tribal” life and art, which they saw as irrational, magic, and violent”.

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In order to understand the effect that the inclusion of African art would have had on the viewer of 1907, I believe a phenomenological discussion of the work allows us to explore how the piece arrives at confrontation. While Husserl would not invent the term “phenomenology” until 1920, the experience that phenomenology speaks to predates the formal use of the term. The reflection of consciousness and experience in the viewership of art is something most artists certainly thought about before Husserl first used the term. I do not in any way mean to suggest that Picasso was aware of the word “phenomenology”, since this is impossible, and my use of it is purely to discuss the interaction between the viewer and the canvas more formally. I believe the Demoiselles can be best explained in looking at the methods Picasso used within the piece to guide the viewer’s reaction as a result of the context surrounding African objects and the female nude in 1907. Using Leighten’s article as a vantage point, which examines a phenomenological reading of the work in everything but name, I will discuss how non-specific African masks in the work conjure popular constructions of Africa, as well as how these associations apply to the female nude.

Phenomenology, from the Greek word “phainomenon”, meaning “that which appears” is a philosophical methodology that studies the structures of consciousness and experience.\(^\text{169}\) Based off of Husserl’s work in the early twentieth century, the term has been adopted and discussed by many Western philosophers to discuss the experience of consciousness. Husserl’s original version of phenomenology focuses on the systematic way in which we “consciously perceive the world around us”.\(^\text{170}\) In the simplest terms, phenomenology is how we experience what we see. In our discussion of art, a phenomenological approach can be understood as thus:

\(^{170}\) Smith, “Phenomenology”.

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we, the viewer, see the work in front of us. We begin to identify shapes and forms, and from there, we associate those shapes with experiences in order to label them. We notice how these shapes relate to one another; we also notice how we relate to those shapes. John Berger adapted phenomenology to art history quite cohesively in his 1972 publication on the subject, *Ways of Seeing*. According to Berger, “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe”—our viewership of a piece involves our conscious experience prior to seeing the work.  

The *Demoiselles*, in its most basic interpretation, is a confrontation between the nudes and the viewer. As Steinberg says, “No modern painting engages you with such brutal immediacy. Of the five figures depicted, one holds back a curtain to make you see; one intrudes from the rear; the remaining three stare you down.” The loss of the sailor, who served as the object of the demoiselles’ naked display in the studies, allowed Picasso to move the attention of the demoiselles off the canvas, to the viewer (fig. 1). We take over the sailor’s role in the painting as the object of the demoiselles’ display; they aim their nudity at us. The curtain-puller draws the fabric back to emphasize where we should look. The squatter and the Iberian conspicuously display their nudity. Unlike the precedent of the objectified female nude, the Demoiselles takes the concept of the docile female nude and inverts the practice. “The painting

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itself mocks and challenges the time-honored status of the easel painting-as-commodity in its refusal to charm, in its principled ambition to offend”, Leighten says.174

Depictions of the female nude prior to the Demoiselles focused on the nude as a spectacle of beauty. It was presumed by the viewer that the artist’s motivation in painting the nude was to capture and preserve her beauty for the pleasure of posterity. Speaking to the traditional, academic nude, Berger puts it as such: “You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her...she is not naked as she is. She is naked as the spectator sees her”.175 The nude is related to the viewer as an object of their gaze; she is painted for their reception, and thus exists stripped of autonomy. Her displayed body receives the action of the working and defines her in proximity to the viewer. “A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object).”176 The nude is painted for the pleasure of the viewer, who Berger calls the “spectator-owner” of the work. Berger writes, “this nakedness is not an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner’s feelings or demands”.177 The nudity of the figure is addressed to the existence of the spectator on the other side of the canvas; she exists as a response to his desire for her body. Therefore, his gaze is the action of the traditional nude, and the nude body the object.

The use of the gaze as a form of power is intentionally manipulated in the Demoiselles. Traditional nudes that dare to gaze out at the viewer, such as Titian’s Venus (fig. 2) or Ingres’s Grand Odalisque (fig. 3), do so while seductively displaying their body for the viewer’s consumption. While their gaze is aimed towards the viewer, it is used to compel the viewer

175 Berger, Ways of Seeing, 50-51.
176 Berger, Ways of Seeing, 54.
177 Berger, Ways of Seeing, 52.
towards their body. Their gaze is inviting; the contortion of their body for the viewer’s pleasure makes them into an object. Two works from the nineteenth century set a precedent in breaking the erotic tone of the female nude: *Olympia* (fig. 4) and *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (fig. 5). Manet’s *Olympia* is the most obvious antecedent to the *Demoiselles* in disrupting the viewer’s domineering gaze; Manet is one of the first artists to use the nude’s gaze non-erotically. The direct, subtly confrontational gaze of Olympia acknowledges the viewer as a consumer both in fiction, as a brothel client, and, in reality, as a viewer, of the female body. This choice provoked outcry at its first exhibition in 1865. While we consume the figure of Olympia, her confrontational gaze makes us realize that *she* is aware of our prying eyes. She halts her palm over her groin to control which parts of her body we can see, interrupting the power dynamic we suppose within the painting. Olympia comments on the experience of realizing that we are being watched while we watch another; it is aimed to make the viewer self-conscious in his consumption of the naked female body. We are caught in the act of looking, and we don’t quite know how to respond. The experience of realizing we are being watched while watching another can be explained as a phenomenological experience by Sartre in “The Look”:

> “I now exist as myself for my unreflective consciousness. It is this irruption of the self which has been most often described: I see myself because somebody sees me -- as it is usually expressed… the person is presented to consciousness in so far as the person is an object for the Other. This means that all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness but in that I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other.”

*Olympia’s* similarities to the *Demoiselles*, aside from the use of the gaze, are also interesting to note: both paintings use the prostitute as a basis to depict the nude female body, and include

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references to black sexuality (Olympia with the maid, Demoiselles with the masks). Olympia would have been readily available to Picasso, as the painting was on display at the Luxembourg Museum in Paris until 1907, when it was moved to the Louvre.\textsuperscript{180} In a sketch dated to 1902, A parody of Olympia with Junyer and Picasso (fig. 6), Picasso places himself within the context of Olympia as the client she directs her nudity towards. Picasso’s Olympia is African—perhaps a combination of Olympia and the black maid in the original painting. Picasso was seemingly not only thoroughly aware of Olympia, but also the power of the gaze present within the work. He situates himself and Junyer on either side of Olympia and directs her gaze to them, not the viewer, therefore usurping the power dynamic in the work back to the presence of a male within the picture, for whom this new Olympia displays herself.

Gauguin’s Spirit of the Dead Watching also engages the viewer in a direct interaction with the nude herself, but with different implications. While Manet uses Olympia’s gaze to confront the viewer, Gauguin introduces fear to the female nude, which Picasso would later incorporate into the Demoiselles. Gauguin painted Teha’amana, his Tahitian mistress, lying naked on a bed on her stomach, her face turned to look up at the viewer and her eyes fearful. Behind her, Gauguin includes a tupapau spirit, mentioned in the previous chapter, upon which Picasso may have based his curtain-pulling demoiselles. The work is “a variant of Manet’s Olympia, inverted and exoticized to be more alluringly acquiescent”, according to Rubin.\textsuperscript{181} There is evidence that Gauguin brought a picture of Olympia to Tahiti.\textsuperscript{182} Drawing from


Olympia’s composition, Gauguin usurps Olympia’s assertive glance and replaces it with Tehe’amana’s look of apprehension. While her nudity and presumed sexual availability reintroduce the objectification of the female nude, fear is the dominant narrative of the painting. Gauguin, by his own account in a letter to his wife Mette from October 8, 1892, acknowledges the combination of fear and nudity:

“I painted a nude of a young girl. In this position she is on the verge of being indecent. But I want it that way: the lines and movement are interesting to me. And so, I give her, in depicting the head, a bit of a fright… For the Kanaka, the phosphorescences of the night are from the spirit of the dead, they believe they are there and fear them. Finally, to end, I make the ghost quite simply, a little old woman; because the young girl, unacquainted with the spirits of the French stage, could not visualize death except in the form of a person like herself.”

He also acknowledged a dual meaning of the title in a notebook intended to his daughter, from the following year. “According to Tahitian beliefs” he wrote, “the title Manao tupapau has a double meaning... either she thinks of the ghost or the ghost thinks of her”. Fear dominates the display of nudity in Spirit of the Dead Watching. This fear is somewhat multifaceted; Gauguin implies that the fear arrives in the picture from the presence of the spirit, real or imagined, but Tehe’amana’s fear may also stem from the presence of Gauguin, whose sexual history included a strong possibility of spousal abuse, a taste for young Tahitian girls, and, quite likely, syphilis. In Noa Noa, Gauguin redirects Tehe’amana’s fear to the focus of her gaze, i.e. the artist himself or the viewer. “[Tehe’amana] lay motionless, naked, belly down on the bed: she stared up at me, her eyes wide with fear, and she seemed not to know who I was...Did I know what she thought I was, in that instant? Perhaps she took me, with my anguished face, for one of those legendary

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184 Maurer, *Spiritual Wisdom*, 163.
demons or specters, the *Tupapaus* that filled the sleepless nights of her people”¹⁸⁵ This redirection of the narrative to the outside of the canvas embodies a similar viewer-nude confrontation as experienced with *Olympia*.

The reproduction of *Spirit of the Dead* in *Noa Noa*, which, as Rubin has evidenced, Picasso owned a copy of as early as 1902, along with the “Gauguinesque” drawings and sketches noted by Rubin from 1901 to 1906, make it likely that Picasso had seen *Spirit of the Dead* prior to completing the *Demoiselles*.¹⁸⁶ As discussed in the previous chapter, this awareness is possibly the aesthetic heritage of the curtain-puller’s face, which is reminiscent of the tupapau spirit. The *Demoiselles* and *Spirit* also share a significant theme of fear. The “primal terror” present in *Spirit* anticipates the element of fear in the *Demoiselles*; *Spirit*, however, retains this fear within the confines of the canvas.

*Olympia* and *Spirit* to the *Demoiselles* both also contain an eroticization of non-white women. The inclusion of Nana, the black maid, in *Olympia* implies a more primitive side of sexuality, since “black women had generally been considered more uninhibited and passionate than white women and more desirable as lovers”.¹⁸⁷ As Theodore Reff describes, “the Negress in *Olympia* must have connoted for contemporary viewers a primitive or exotic sensuality, enhancing…the ‘primitive barbarity and ritual animality’ of the naked, elegantly adorned courtesan herself”.¹⁸⁸ *Tehe’amana’s* nudity in *Spirit* is placed within the greater context of Tahitian culture, thus embodying a distinct colonialist perspective of the nude Tahitian native that characterized much of Gauguin’s romanticized excursion into Tahitian culture. *Spirit*

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fetishizes Tahitian women as colonial objects; Gauguin would write to his daughter that indecency “does not happen in Oceania”. While Picasso’s *A Parody of Olympia* is a far cry from the *Demoiselles*, the existence of an erotic black nude that predates a formal interest in African art may indicate Picasso’s awareness of the stereotype of hyper-sexuality surrounding non-white, particularly, black, women.

The fascination with black female sexuality dates back to the colonial period of the eighteenth century—the overwhelming response to the displayed naked body of Saartje Baartman in European freak shows in the early 1800’s, for instance, demonstrates an objectification of the black female body intensified by racism. While the spectator-nude relationship of white female nude carried connotations of ownership, the power dynamic present when a black woman was depicted in art was imbued with a double layer of spectator ownership; firstly, because she was a woman, and secondly, because she was black and therefore subjected to racial inferiority. Racist stereotypes were also perpetuated by Europeans from the early colonial period of black women as overly salacious. Sander L. Gilman’s *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, discusses the stereotype at length in its roots in eighteenth century pseudo-science:

> “Buffon, the French naturalist, credited the black with a lascivious, apelike sexual appetite, introducing a commonplace of early travel literature into a pseudoscientific context. He stated that this animal-like sexual appetite went so far as to encourage black women to copulate with apes...Buffon’s view was based on a confusion of two applications of the ‘great chain of being’ to the nature of the black. In this view, the black’s position on the scale of humanity was antithetical to the whites. Such a scale was employed to indicate the innate difference between the races...The antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is the black, and the essential black, the lowest exemplum of mankind on the great chain of being, is the Hottentot”.

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These stereotypes were perpetuated in the nineteenth century with the popularity of physiognomy. J.J. Virey’s essay on black female sexuality from the early years of the nineteenth century, included in the widely used *Dictionary of Medical Sciences* from 1819, transcribed the stereotype into a medical context. Virey used anatomical studies by Georges Cuvier to argue that the genitalia of black women prove their “sexual lasciviousness”. “Their voluptuousness is developed to a degree of lascivity unknown in our climate, for their sexual organs are much more developed than those of whites”.\(^{191}\)

One of the ways in which the sexual imagery of African women was perpetuated in the period of European colonialism was through anthropometric photographs taken by European photographers of posed, naked African women. The photographs depict forced displays of nudity under the guise of scientific study.

“Anthropometric systems were used by European anthropologists and ethnographers from the last quarter of the nineteenth century well into the twentieth, in large part to document ‘scientifically’ the racial hierarchies that ostensibly reinforced imperialist ideas of European superiority and legitimized colonial rule. Anthropometrics were also used by early twentieth century French anthropologists to study criminality and ‘degeneracy’ in their own populations, including efforts to identify a ‘prostitutional physiognomy’”.\(^{192}\)

In many ways, anthropometric photographs embody the convoluted, racially-prejudiced idea of Africa that Europeans had in the early nineteenth century. These photographs circulated around Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as postcards and collectables, avoiding pornographic censorship due to the scientific, ethnographic purpose the images supposedly carried, as well as the degree of removal from European society.\(^{193}\) Janie Cohen’s recent article,

\(^{191}\) Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, 85.


\(^{193}\) Cohen, “Staring Back”, 64.
“Anthropometric African Colonial Photography and Picasso’s Demoiselles”, links the Demoiselles to Picasso’s personal collection of anthropometric photographs as a source for the work’s composition and overall tone. Picasso’s collection of over forty photographs, presented by Anne Baldessari in Picasso and Photography: The Dark Mirror from 1997, were part of Edmond Fortier’s work in Africa from late 1905. Cohen asserts that Picasso’s collection, as well as the sheer popularity of the photographs, make it “clear that from 1906 through the spring of 1908, Picasso was looking to specific colonial African photographs in his creation of a new female nude and his search for a radical alternative to the European tradition”.194 The use of anthropometric photographs as visual material is especially compelling when considering Picasso’s close friendship and competition with Matisse, who modelled his Two Negresses of 1908 on a photograph of two Tuareg women.195 The photographs may be the origin of many of the avant-garde methods Picasso uses to depict the demoiselles—their poses, for instance, are similar to also explain the use of the gaze in the work (fig. 7 and 8).

“Indeed, one of the most radical aspects of the Demoiselles is the confrontational gaze and the aggressive breaking of Diderot’s ‘fourth wall’… the use of the outward gaze within a multi-figural composition introduces a disconnectivity among the figures that was rare in painting at that point, with the exception of group portraits. It is a fundamental characteristic of anthropometric-style photography that the figures are disassociated from one another, yielding the primary relationship between each subject and the photographer or viewer, thus created a tension between group and individual”.196

The indignant expressions of the African women in these photographs is also reflected in the Demoiselles, according to Cohen.

“Anthropometric photography, and the commercial ethno-pornography that developed from it, involved routine forced nudity and the objectification of African people—chiefly women—by colonial powers in the form of European men with cameras… Frequently, however, their expressions suggest emotional responses, discomfort, or defiance in

particular, presumably to the directives and violations that shaped this corpus of images. Both a lack of affect and an affect of defiance can be seen on the faces, masked and not, in *Demoiselles*.\(^{197}\)

It should be noted that Picasso did not choose to paint the demoiselles as black women, but instead white women with African masks, probably to limit the viewer’s consciousness to associations with the Western traditional nude and African art, rather than associations with black or African women. Painting the demoiselles as black women would have placed the work farther from the traditional nude and brought up associations of exotic sexuality too blatantly. By placing the African mask on the white woman, Picasso combines two themes that have not been explored together. The cultural insensitivity and racism that this choice contains will be explored in the following chapter. By removing these African references from the provenance of their creators and appropriating them into white culture, Picasso does a disservice to a culture whose art he claimed to “understand”.\(^{198}\)

*Parody of Olympia* demonstrates another aspect of Picasso’s relationship with Africa: an interest in the informal art of caricature. Departure into caricature was not unusual for Picasso; he explored caricature numerous times, particularly to divulge sexual imagery, such as in the sketches “Phallic Domination” (fig. 16) and “Sex on His Mind” (fig. 17) from 1903.\(^{199}\) Picasso’s early interest in erotic caricature, along with the inclusion of a black woman in *Parody of Olympia*, coincidentally occurs alongside his inner circle’s involvement in political cartoons.

Images from *L’Assiette au beurre*, a French weekly anarchist magazine, ran articles and cartoons

\(^{197}\) Cohen, “Staring Back”, p. 71


of the atrocities committed upon the Congolese people at this time (fig. 11 – 14)—a number of Picasso’s friends and acquaintances, including André Salmon, Juan Gris, Kees van Dongen, and František Kupka, contributed to the magazine. \(^{200}\) Picasso’s proximity to political caricature and personal exploration of the art form may also explain the more generic incorporation of African elements into the *Demoiselles*. In “The Genesis of the *Demoiselles d’Avignon*”, Rubin discusses caricature as a potential explanation for the masked figures in the Demoiselles:

“Picasso’s undoubted absorption of elements from African morphologies for the head of the standing demoiselle appears to me to have been suggested, however racist this may sound today, in part by their expressive appropriateness for investing his picture with what must have seemed to him an allusion to total sexual déchaînement—a primal physicality so enveloping and so instinctual that it overcomes the inhibitions and controls that inhere to the Western psyche, thus tending to erase the distinction between human and animal. The combination of human and animal features common to many tribal masks provided Picasso with admirably expressive prototypes that served as ways of materializing at the center of his art (and thus in ‘high’ art) an ‘associational’ sentiment he had long explored on the margins of his work in the ‘low’ art of erotic caricature.” \(^{201}\)

Rubin’s suggestion that the use of familiar caricature of Africans in the *Demoiselles* as an “associational” element contributes to the argument that viewer phenomenology was likely a large factor in including the masks as such. Through the use of stereotypical portrayal of African cultural objects, Picasso expands the potential for recognition of the masks as African objects. Painting, for example, a copy of the Baga d’mba mask on the standing demoiselle would reference only a specific collected artifact, and could likely be recognized only by a select group of individuals educated in African objects. Depicting a caricature of an African masks, however, broadens the scope of viewers who will be able to recognize the shape as somewhat African or tribal in nature, and therefore be more likely to make associations of fear, fetishism, and savagery.

\(^{200}\) Leighten, “White Peril”, 615.

\(^{201}\) Rubin, “Genesis”, 105.
While Leighten uses the comparison to argue for the presence of anarchical undertones in the *Demoiselles*, I believe that Picasso’s incorporation of African art into the work can be best explained as a means of pushing the limits of the Western nude. Picasso’s proximity to Jarry demonstrates that he was likely aware of the debate surrounding the colonial relationship with the Congo going on in the years before the *Demoiselles*. The similar treatment of African life as “irrational, magic, and violent” echoes Picasso’s response to the objects in the Trocadéro as spiritual “tools” that Malraux’s account contains.²⁰² This would indicate that Picasso’s opinion on Africa was not entirely formed in terms of the artistic objects seen at the Trocadéro, but as well because of the opinions of his inner circle. A sketchbook page from 1905 called “African” (fig. 15), depicting an emaciated dark figure, demonstrates that Picasso had considered Africa in an artistic setting prior to the *Demoiselles*, and chose not to explore the theme at the time.²⁰³ According to Leighten, this sketch also shows Picasso’s interest in Africa “as a place both culturally fascinating and politically oppressed”.²⁰⁴ News of the atrocities in the Congo may have also been one of the reasons why Picasso’s inner circle, such as Vlaminck and Derain, decided to look more closely at the African art, which had been at the Trocadéro since the 1880s.

“Italvinck, by his own account, had looked at African art with Derain at the Musée d’Ethnographie several times before his “revelation”—at the time of the scandals—in the bistro in Argenteuil, the revelation that resulted in his first acquisition of the masks”.²⁰⁵

The acquisition of the Fang mask in 1906, when Africa would have been in the news and cartoons of Paris, places the interest in African art into a greater socio-political perspective. The political circumstances in Africa, timed alongside Vlaminck, Matisse, Derain, and Picasso’s

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interest in African objects, indicate that African art was not only interesting to these artists for the new aesthetic it provided their work, but also as a representation of non-Western society and belief.

Returning to my proposal of phenomenology, I believe it is Picasso’s awareness of the phenomenological associations that viewers may have had with Africa that led him to paint African masks with the nude form. As viewers over one hundred and ten years after its creation, we tend to forget how shocking this combination would have been for viewers in 1907. Then, a viewer of the female nude would have expected the demoiselles’ nudity to be erotic, due to preconceived notions of pictures that focus on the female body as an object of beauty and attraction. Picasso, seemingly, knew this, and subverted those expectations. His combination of African elements and non-erotic nudity plays with our phenomenological associations twofold: we are shocked through the aggressiveness of the demoiselle’s display, and disturbed in our association of these women with fear and black magic. As Steinberg puts it, “the picture is a tidal wave of female aggression; one either experiences the Demoiselles as an onslaught, or shuts it off”. Steinberg seems to acknowledge the phenomenological participation on the other half of the canvas:

“But the assault on the viewer is only half the action, for the viewer, as the painting conceives him on this side of the picture plane, repays in kind”. Steinberg seems to acknowledge the phenomenological participation on the other half of the canvas:

Our phenomenological experience of the work, and the associations we have prior to our viewership with the female nude as an object of beauty, facilitate the work’s effectiveness in its avant-garde depiction of the female form. Even Manet’s Olympia, in the poignancy of her gaze, could not have prepared us for a nude that engulfs both the roles of spectator and object. The

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206 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 15.
207 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 15.
demoiselles neither exclusively receive the viewer’s gaze, nor enact the gaze upon the viewer; they do both. The presumed power dynamic within the painting of the nude as a display meant for the viewer’s pleasure is intentionally upset—three demoiselles gaze down, directly at the viewer, while consciously prostrating their nude bodies in objectifying positions to make the viewer see them as a sexual object. They do not attempt to enchant the viewer, but instead intimidate. The work relies upon the participation of the viewer and the associations of the female body that we bring into the picture; without the expectation of our authority as a viewer over the nude, the painting would have no shock value. Cohen asserts that “Picasso was intentionally and forcefully transgressive in breaking the fourth wall with the outward gazes of three figures”. The way in which the demoiselles use their nudity to subdue the viewer’s objectification of the female form pushes the confines of the power dynamic of the nude. “Picasso’s demoiselles are of a different world; their agency is palpable”.

The African sources layer the flagrant display of nudity with a primal fear and terror. They push our reaction (or the reaction of the white, male viewer) beyond disgust and into the realm of distress. We must remember that at this point in history, knowledge of Africa was restricted to colonialist relations of war and biased comparisons between European and African societies. There was no formal scholarship of Africa as there is anthropologically today—as we have seen in the distribution of anthropomorphic-style photographs, any studies of Africa were done under the precedent of European superiority. The European conception of “Africa” was very different from the actual reality of the continent—since there was so little information of African culture, stereotyping filled the place of scholarship. Europeans understood little of the

cultural practices of Africans, yet still collected their religious and cultural objects as “art”. As
we have seen in the Trocadéro’s display of such objects, African cultural practices were seen
under Europe’s Western-Christian biases as necromantic. Leighten describes:

“The radical treatment of the traditional idealized nude female announces the end of the
old world of art with a new, staggering violence. The violence comes not only from the
savage treatment of the distorted faces and forms of the two “African” figures, and from
the transformation of usually passive nudes in tamed attitudes into aggressively challenging
mock-temptresses, but also from the very allusion to the dark continent unavoidably carried
with them”.210

The masks carry connotations of barbary, fetishism, and most of all, magic, that the viewer in
Picasso’s Paris would have had with African culture. By basing his incorporation of the African
components in generic, familiar styles of African objects, Picasso references the ambiguity and
mystery that the 1907 viewer would have felt towards Africa. Leighten confirms:

“Picasso’s primitivizing style aspires, like the African sculptures he so admired, to an act
not of mere decoration, but of power. Picasso paints here not as the Nietzschean artist, a
conduit for the charged outpouring of ‘genius’, but as a shaman, exorcising the thralldom
of civilized decorums and summoning against them the primordial forces of awe and dread
so compellingly embodied in the ‘savage fetishes’ whose meanings and motives (‘they
were against everything’) he wanted to appropriate for his own project”.211

If we consider the phenomenological experience of seeing the Demoiselles, particularly in 1907,
the power dynamic present in the work expands beyond the gaze and the pose of the figures, but
also in what was believed to be the spiritual power of African masks and reliquaries as protection
against malice. The masks represent mystery in that they literally conceal the identity of the
individual—they also introduce the concept of a spiritual threat, i.e., death. The incorporation of
the African into the work allows Picasso to effectively depict the dichotomy found in the
incorporation of the sailor and the medical student into the viewer’s phenomenology. Unlike the

Venuses of the past, Picasso does not use symbolism to reference fidelity or fertility; he inverts the traditional symbolism of the nude and updates it into a modern typology of death to elicit fear. The complex associations that the viewer had with Africa facilitated the symbolism of the masks: “their appearance in Picasso’s already ‘grotesque’ painting echoed inherited images and evoked associations of superstition, irrationality, darkness, and horror, adding to the artist’s considerable arsenal of anticlassical devices” says Leighten.212 The ability of the African masks to easily reference fear of the unknown is noted by Steinberg as well: “In the end, his reason for making them savage was the same as his reason at the beginning for making them whores. They were to personify sheer sexual energy as the image of a life force. The primitive was let in because that’s what the subject craved”.213 Alfred Barr’s reading of the demoiselles as a modern vanitas still life may hold some truth, after all, not as a reference to sin and vice but instead as a means of understanding the new symbolism of death. Leighten summarizes this nicely:

“The enormously inventive subversive maneuvers of the work speak to many levels of public and private experience, as well as to conventions of inherited tradition, which this public would have recognized and which Picasso would have expected it to recognize. And part of this recognition, by virtue of ‘masking’ his figures (traditionally masks reveal rather than hide truth), would have inescapably involved the complicated mixture of ideas, fantasies, political postures, and racial attitudes relating to Africa as the French public ‘knew’ it in 1907”.214

While I believe we may glean the most meaning from Demoiselles through exploring the phenomenological associations of the viewer with the nude and Africa that Picasso purposefully manipulates, using phenomenology to explain the piece contains our study of the Demoiselles to the canvas. Biography is another method of exploring why the Demoiselles arrived at such an explosive final form. It should be noted that the element of confrontation in the piece also likely

213 Steinberg, “Philosophical Brothel”, 48.
reflects Picasso’s own struggle with women during the years of the Demoiselles creation. At the age of twenty-five, Picasso was eager to prove himself as a painter, but also gripped with anxiety over syphilis after frequenting brothels to ease the heartache of a recent breakup with Fernande Olivier. Rubin identifies the primitive as a means of facilitating the painting’s theme of the dichotomy between sex and death that originated earlier in the conception of the painting with the sailor and the student. This was somewhat of a repeated theme in Picasso’s art, with works such as La vie and Casagemas.

“The cohabitation of Thanatos and Eros in the Demoiselles—the contrast between the horrid squatting demoiselle and the comparatively elegant Iberian maidens in the center—recalls a very particular component of Picasso’s psychology: his deep-seated fear and loathing of the female body, which existed side by side with his craving for and ecstatic idealization of it. This dichotomous attitude was time and again evidenced in Picasso’s art, as it was in his behavior: it is parodied in his treatment of women as ‘either goddesses or whores’”.215

Picasso’s struggle with these conflicting ideologies is not quite new to Western art. The concept of woman as a necessary evil dates back to Eve, Salome, even ancient Greek beliefs of sexual contact with a woman as disastrous to male virility.216 Picasso’s misogyny—his attraction to women and his resentment of them—was probably inflated through his syphilis fear as Rubin describes. Syphilis as a causation of the theme of sex and death does seem to neatly explain the radical treatment of the female nude. The curation of African objects in the Trocadéro perpetuated the stereotypes of black magic, as well as the protective and curative uses of the objects on display. At a period in history where syphilis had no cure, Picasso would have seemingly been quite receptive to spiritual “tools that embodied his fear of death and disfigurement. He projected this fear into the Demoiselles, by referencing the power of both the

naked female form and tribal art. “I understood what the Negroes used their sculpture for…They were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. They were tools”, Picasso would recount to Malraux years later.217

The *Demoiselles* is perhaps best understood as a subversion of viewer expectation. The women we look at are meant to be beautiful; they are not. The prostitute is meant to please her client; we, the presumed client, are instead fearful. These expectations refer to the experience of the white, heterosexual male viewer; as many feminist art historians have noted, the confrontation in the *Demoiselles* is mostly aimed towards men. “There is nothing for women in this game, Tamara Garb writes in “‘To Kill the Nineteenth Century’”, “The picture both misrepresents the women it depicts and excludes actual women from constituting its audience or participating in its radical project”.218

It is interesting to consider Gertrude Stein’s perspective on the piece, since her patronage and criticism were important to Picasso’s development as an artist. There is little documentation of Stein’s response to the representation of the female form. In response to the aesthetic qualities of the painting, she “was struck”, according Garb, by “the painting’s rejection of traditional aesthetic principles. She knew that it could not be understood in terms of conventional notions of beauty. Indeed, its very ‘ugliness’, its ‘brutality’, rather than being negative properties of the work, testified to the struggle its production had involved”.219 If Stein did not take issue with Picasso’s representation of woman, it would not be entirely surprising. Picasso and Stein’s relationship, in many ways, transcended their difference in gender. Stein seems to have regarded

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217 Malraux, Picasso’s Mask, 10.
219 Garb, “‘Nineteenth Century’”, 58.
Picasso’s sexual exploits as a faction of his genius: she seems to have accepted his lustfulness, maybe even identified with and exonerated it. “When Stein assessed the painterly prowess of her friend Picasso,” Garb writes, “she understood that sexuality and style were both at stake here, but she felt such a sympathy with the interrogative power of the attack on convention and the exploratory sexuality of the man who had mounted it, that she seems not to have minded that the vehicle of the attack was via the image of a body not unlike her own”. Stein’s homosexuality and separation from the heterosexual confrontation depicted in the painting, as well as her identification with masculinity, are also likely relevant to her opinion and interpretation of the piece. Alice Toklas through Stein’s account in her autobiography said that the Demoiselles was something “painful and beautiful…oppressive but imprisoned”, and does not seemed to have praised it much.

Perhaps no critic has noted the issues of gender representation in the Demoiselles more poignantly than art historian Carol Duncan, who argued for the misogynistic undertones in the Demoiselles. She writes in “The MoMA’s Hot Mamas”,

“In the finished work, the male presence has been removed from the image and relocated in the viewing space before it. What began as a depicted male-female confrontation thus became a confrontation between viewer and image…Picasso thus isolated and monumentalized the ultimate men-only situation. As restructured, the work forcefully asserts to both men and women the privileged status of male viewers—they alone are intended to experience the full impact of this most revelatory moment.”

She argues also that the dichotomy of compulsion and revulsion present damn the representation of women twofold: they are objects and monsters, but never autonomous or respectable;

“the women have become stylistically differentiated so that one looks not only at present-tense whores but also back down into the ancient and primitive past, with the art of "darkest Africa" and works representing the beginnings of Western Culture (Egyptian and Iberian idols) placed on a

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220 Garb, “‘Nineteenth Century’”, 58.
221 Rubin, “Genesis”, 114.
222 Carol Duncan, "The MoMA’s Hot Mamas." Art Journal 48, no. 2, 175.
single spectrum. Thus does Picasso use art history to argue his thesis: that the awesome goddess, the terrible witch, and the lewd whore are but facets of a single many-sided creature, in turn threatening and seductive, imposing and self-abasing, dominating and powerless—and always the psychic property of the male imagination. Picasso also implies that truly great, powerful, and revelatory art has always been and must be built upon such exclusively male property.”

Duncan’s notation of the exclusion of women from the narrative of the Demoiselles has become somewhat canonical in feminist art history; women are arguably excluded from the phenomenological experience argued here. The grotesque depiction of the female body as a vexatious compulsion leaves little for the autonomous female viewer to identify with.

Picasso understood that the objects he saw were more than visual representations of the supernatural; they were, in many ways, engaged within the supernatural world as facilitators. This understanding, however, was not be placed within a larger political context, because Picasso’s interest in the Africa was limited to furthering his own career as an artist. Cohen words this well: “he clearly would have recognized that the use of such source material at the time would only have intensified the shock value he so fervently sought”. Hence, I believe Leighten’s thesis that the Demoiselles contains a political statement seems to be somewhat of a miscalculation on Picasso’s interest in political art during the Demoiselle years. The consistency of Picasso’s work on a bather composition, variety of approaches for a death/love theme exhibited from the preparatory sketches through to the final painting, and poignant intent on breaking the phenomenological experience surrounding the nude, particularly Diderot’s fourth wall, demonstrate that the application of African art is intended as a symbol for the unwarranted magnetism Picasso associated with women.

Chapter Five: Applying the Demoiselles to the Modern Question of Cultural Appropriation

This thesis began with the question of cultural appropriation of African objects into the Demoiselles of Avignon, and how we may apply the term cultural appropriation to art history. In recent years, practices, objects, and concepts that are “culturally appropriative” have been discussed in mainstream culture. While the term is not new, society has grown much more sensitive in recent years to the ways in which cultures interact with one another, particularly how predominantly white cultures adopt and “whitewash” the practices of non-white cultures.

“Columbus-ing”, or white people claiming to discover a cultural practice of non-Western cultures and then making it popular in mainstream white culture, has entered into slang terminology. Native American headdresses as Halloween costumes are only recently widely considered to be tasteless demonstrations of cultural insensitivity. Kim Kardashian’s “Bo Derek braids” are not braids, but cornrows, and her appropriation of them as a white woman is insensitive to black culture. David Chang’s recent Netflix documentary on food trends, “Ugly Delicious”, featured an entire episode on whether it is culturally offensive for white people to cook and profit from the sale of fried chicken, a food which is often used to stereotype the black community. Talking about appropriation and calling out cultural insensitivity, in many ways, is a positive thing. It encourages respect and sensitivity in our interactions with cultures unfamiliar to us, and protects the provenance and history of cultural objects and practices that carry meaning to their original culture. But the term, “cultural appropriation”, can be a slippery slope. In discussing culture as something that can be taken or traded, culture becomes something that can also be owned. As such, the ownership of culture perpetuates the idea that culture is fixed, unchanging. Culture as a concrete, immutable thing, in many ways, does not exist. Especially in our modern era, our ability to communicate with one another across cultural boundaries makes
cultural appropriation” can be a useful tool in identifying practices that exploit minority cultures, it somewhat seeks to pigeonhole an object, rather than illuminate the complex weaving of cultures and history from which it arose.

In our discussion of art and art history, the boundaries of cultural appropriation become much less clear. Cultural appropriation in its modern usage poses a difficult question for artists and art historians; appropriation of aesthetics, in large part, is what makes for successful art. Artists have for centuries appropriated the art of other artists, and admired the artistic elements of other cultures. 20th century primitivism is, seemingly, the continuation of a long artistic tradition of appropriation. What makes primitivism different from previous periods of admiration for non-Western art is the colonial presence of Europe in Africa and the subjugation of the people who made the art that the modernists admired. Picasso and the modernists looked to primitive objects for inspiration in rendering forms more simply, and freeing their art from the confines of naturalism. My discussion of cultural appropriation alongside the Demoiselles is not meant to reduce the painting as culturally insensitive, but instead to conclude my discussion of the Demoiselles in a more modern context of cultural discourse. As I have reiterated in the previous chapters, there was no way that Picasso could have known about the cultural provenance of any of the works he saw in the Trocadéro, because the curators and ethnographers themselves had no idea about the origins of the objects they curate. His interpretation of the forms he saw into a typography of Africanism was misinformed, but it was also the result of the larger cultural issues of colonialism. In short, it is difficult to argue that the Demoiselles is not a work of cultural appropriation; it certainly does appropriate forms that hold meaning to minority cultures in a one-sided discourse. However, labelling the work as culturally appropriative merely brands the piece with a charged terminology as something to consider offensive. Calling the Demoiselles
appropriative is accurate, but reducing its effect to the appropriation of non-Western art prevents some of the larger issues at hand from coming forward. It places the blame in the object, rather than the society from which it arose.

Over the last fifty years, scholarship on the appropriation of non-Western art has significantly increased. The Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition in 1984, “Primitivism in 20th Century Art”, examined the relationship between modern artists and the tribal arts for one of the first times in the latter half of the century. Jack Flam writes that the show “precipitated great changes in thinking about the subject. It revealed a shift in cultural values marked by a new relativism and a concomitant rejection of Eurocentric thinking”.224 Some critics suggested that the exhibition had not gone far enough in separating the notion of Western superiority from the tribal arts, as well as the hesitancy of curator William Rubin to take a definitive stance on the appropriation of the objects. “Clearly the organizers of this exhibition want to present Modernism not as an appropriative act but as a creative one”, Thomas McEvilly wrote.225 James Clifford wrote that “the affinities shown at MoMA are all on modernist terms. The great modernist ‘pioneers’ (and their museum) are shown promoting formerly despised tribal ‘fetishes’ or mere ethnographic ‘specimens’ to the status of high are and in the process discovering new dimensions of their (our) creative potential”.226

The MoMA’s exultation of the tribal objects displayed also introduced the Western art world’s shifting treatment of them. Clifford writes;

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226 James Clifford in Primitivism, 355.
Since 1900, non-Western objects have generally been classed as either primitive art or ethnographic specimens. Before the modernist revolution associated with Picasso and the simultaneous rise of cultural anthropology...these objects were differently classified—as antiquities, exotic curiosities, Orientalia, the remains of Early Man, etc. With the emergence of 20th century modernism and anthropology, figures formerly called “fetishes” became works either of ‘sculpture’ or of ‘material culture’”.

Since the 1984 exhibition and the inflammatory response that followed, there have been a significant number of attempts by museums to rectify the art world’s tempestuous relationship with non-Western artists. In 1989, the Pompidou held their response to “Primitivism” and attempted to bring contemporary non-Western art into the fine art world: “Magicians of the Earth”, which proved itself to be problematic (the name alone speaks to the superlunary quality with which non-Western objects are often imbued).

Most recently, the exhibition held at the Musée du Quai Branly, “Picasso Primitif”, held in the summer of 2017 and attended by the author, attempted to concisely demonstrate Picasso’s relationship to the tribal objects he collected and appropriated into his work. There, too, the title alone and the inclusion of the word “primitive”, perhaps demonstrated the very same Western bias that plagued the MoMA’s show over thirty years before. “Primitif” approached the subject in a way that the MoMA hadn’t; the format of the show split the exhibition into two parts. The first half was mostly text-based, and gave a chronology of Picasso’s relationship to tribal art: what was collected, when it was collected, and, to some extent, why. The second half of the show exhibited tribal artifacts alongside Picasso’s painting and sculpture. The effect on the viewer was quite educational—we were immersed in a well-researched timeline of Picasso’s exposure and collection of tribal artifacts. The curators hinted in the first half of the show at the misrepresentation of the objects into Picasso’s art, although they were careful not to demonstrate

227 Clifford, in Primitivism, 356.
an opinion. “Primitif” was executed with a degree of removal from the delicate subject matter of appropriation. What remained was a strong catalogue of the objects that Picasso was inspired by, but one that perhaps did not go far enough to liberate those objects as cultural artifacts with a deep history themselves. As the name suggests, it was Picasso’s transformation of the objects that the Branly articulated, rather than the setting of colonialism in which the objects were misrepresented in his art. The result was a careful handling of the subject matter; not explicitly tone deaf to issues of racism and appropriation, but not definitively rectifying the Western bias through which non-Western, specifically African, art has been explored. The objects shown alongside Picasso’s interpretation of them in the second half of the show were given the same treatment as Picasso’s art; they were shown in the same style, given the same labels, and treated as equals in the world of fine art. However, the lack of information that a European audience had to African religious objects was entirely ignored. Most viewers, I would assume, knew little of the non-Western objects on view, and as a result were prohibited from understanding the relevance of the pieces due to the Branly’s refusal to acknowledge the Western bias that discludes tribal art from the standard art historical education. In the end, “Picasso Primitif” was a benign addition to a tempestuous subject in art history; interesting in its presentation of the material, and meticulously curated, but barren of an argument in the debate over the treatment of “primitive” art.

This fluctuation of the treatment of non-Western objects also exemplifies the issues of misrepresentation evidenced in the interpretation of these objects into art. One could argue that even the labelling of some of the objects admired by the modernists as “art” is ethnocentric. In many cases, the creators of these artifacts (nkisi vili, baga d’mba) did not consider them to be art.
Our discussion of them as art on its own reflects a cultural bias to label them as such. Can an object be considered art even if its creator, or native culture, does not consider it to be so?

It could certainly be argued that the modernist’s admiration for these objects enlightened the artistic qualities of these objects, as Flam writes in the introduction to his catalogue on primitivism:

“Much is sometimes made of the ways in which the modernist artists appropriated Primitive art, which are compared to the way the colonial powers appropriated raw materials. But one must be very wary of reading the situation in such a reductive way. Appropriation is a basic dynamic of all artistic exchange; artists constantly borrow from other artists, whether within their own culture or from others. Moreover, the Western artists who appropriated forms from Primitive art did not inflict harm on the people who made the art, and in fact helped to encourage recognition and appreciation of their humanity and culture. That the modern artist’ response was based on deep respect and admiration for Primitive art is apparent in their writings as well as in their works. So although they were engaged with Primitive art at the same time that the European governments were exploiting the colonies that produced the art, one must be cautious about drawing parallels. One might even say that the cultural interaction produced by Western artists’ enthusiasm for Primitive art was one of the few aspects of the colonial encounter that had saving grace”.  

I feel, however, that the phenomenological interpretation of the work explored in the previous chapter demonstrates the opposite. I disagree, and argue that the enthusiasm for primitive, namely African, art was inseparable from the exploitative colonialist mindset. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, African elements were included in the Demoiselles to provoke stereotypes about Africa and Africans that the viewer in 1907 would have had. We compare the “African” masks to Western representations of the face and recognize that they are separated by realism, which was seen as the highest form of artistic skill before abstract art was popularized in the 20th century. The use of the masks to symbolize irrationality and barbarity, in effect, perpetuates the viewer’s assumptions of Africa as a place of savagery. By using the masks as another means of repelling the viewer from the female body (along with the demoiselles’ graphic

228 Flam, Primitivism, 11.
posture), colonialist ideas of Africa as the Other are reinstated. “All those thrillingly nightmarish and well-publicized tales from Dahomey inevitably echo in the African forms imported into this work, summoning up an imagined ruthless barbarity that the modernist makes it his mission to bravely face”, Leighten says.229 Picasso chooses to paint the African elements as terrifying to use the viewer’s assumptions about Africa to carry the theme of compulsion/repulsion; in doing so, he brings the comparison between African and European culture to the canvas.

The argument against the harm of Picasso’s cultural comparison and the stereotypes it perpetuated could be Picasso’s comments to Malraux about how he felt he understood the arts of Africa as “tools”—seemingly, Picasso understood African art’s intended usage as religious and cultural objects.230 Unlike Matisse and Derain, who used African art for its aesthetics, Picasso appears to have presented the African mask more closely to their original intention. While Picasso comes closer than any other modernist in referencing the masks’ provenance, it should be remembered that at the time, Picasso did not know the true cultural relevance of these masks. The Baga d’mba that many scholars have linked to the Demoiselles in its presentation of the female form is a shoulder mask used for entertainment in Baga culture to represent the maternity and fecundity. Picasso likely reacted very differently than a Baga person would have to viewing the d’mba—in his depiction of the general African mask in the Demoiselles, he invokes fear in response to what he claimed later to Malraux were tools of exorcism. The d’mba mask, in reality, represents the comforts of the spiritual world, and is often used in parades to entertain women.

and children. This misrepresentation of African cultural objects perpetuated stereotypes that Europeans associated with Africa, rather than separating them from colonial discourse.

Including the masks on white women is another way in which we might consider Picasso’s use of African objects to be appropriation. In putting these masks on white women, rather than black women, Picasso separates them from their provenance. Picasso must have, at some point, considered the possibility of painting the *Demoiselles* as black women; *Parody of Olympia* may demonstrate a previous interest in the depiction of black women in a brothel setting. Due to the stereotypes surrounding black women, however, Picasso may have felt this choice to be too obvious, too contrived, or too explicit. Instead, Picasso takes the mask out of the culture of its creation, paints it into a stereotype, and utilizes it as a symbol within the work, therefore usurping its cultural history for aesthetic use. And while Flam argues that this did not harm the creators of these objects, there are seemingly many ways in which to argue that it did, namely, with the inheritors of their history. Lucy Lippard writes, “Ironically and sadly, access to information about global art is more available to the educated and well-traveled Western artist than to most of the heirs of those dehistoricized cultures. This constitutes a dilemma for the nonwhite or non-Western artist whose work may even be called derivative just because its authentic sources have already been skimmed off by white artists”.  

Unlike what Flam says, it is also impossible to separate the modernists admiration for African art from the negative aspects of colonialism and racial bias. Everything the modernists knew about Africa came from information discovered by through Christian missionaries, self-aggrandizing European explorations, and colonial conquests of Africa. For example, at the Trocadéro, most of the objects came from the Kingdom of Benin, due to European colonial

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231 Lucy Lippard, in *Primitivism*, 404.
campaigns that decimated the kingdom at the end of the nineteenth century and brought much of Beninian royal art to France and England. A raid by the British Punitive Expedition in 1897 decimated the kingdom and brought a huge amount of royal art back to Europe. The objects in the Musée d’Ethnographie were not acquired through an anthropological study of their native tribes but through military victories—thus, little real information was known about how the objects were used or why they were created. Labels at the Musée d’Ethnographie were brief and vague. For example, royal statue of Behanzin, the last king of Benin, was included in the Trocadéro’s collection at the time of Picasso’s visit. Now attributed to the nineteenth century Dahomey wood carver Sossa Dede, the statue depicts Behanzin in an anthro-zoomorphic style as a shark with legs to compare his tenacity as a leader to the ferocity of a shark. In a photograph taken from the Trocadéro’s collection around 1900, the label on Behanzin’s statue reads “fish-man”. Military conquest and European cultural authority were the filter of information between Africa and the European public. The cultural significance of the works was not available to Picasso and the modernists, because it was not the antecedent for the collection of African objects. Even when European admirers of African art traded it for its aesthetic value, they did not have access to information on the provenance of those objects because of the inequality of Europe’s colonial relationship with Africa. Anthropological scholarship on Africa would not actually come about until the mid-to-late 20th century, in which publishing scholars America began to spend time in respective regions of Africa learning about the culture, religion, and social systems of African tribes by actively separating their Western biases.

232 Flam, Primitivism, 11.
In my conclusion on Africa and the Demoiselles, Picasso seems to have believed he appreciated African art in an unbiased manner. André Salmon’s novel, La négresse du Sacré-Cœur, contains a protagonist who loves Dahoney sculpture and believes he is extremely knowledgeable on the subject (Salmon would later identify his protagonist as Picasso).\textsuperscript{235} To his credit, Picasso’s insistence on African objects as spiritual tools makes him the closest of the modernists to understanding that African objects were created with a greater cultural purpose than aesthetics—unfortunately, colonialist circumstance made it impossible for Picasso to really know the objects he appropriated. For while he correctly estimated that the works he saw in the Trocadéro were potent spiritual objects, he had no idea of the context of their intended spiritual power. His genuine admiration for the objects is inseparable from the colonial bias of the culture in which he learned about them.

Is the Demoiselles an act of cultural appropriation? In short, yes. African objects were taken out of their original context and used to demonstrate negative aspects of both white culture and Picasso’s opinions on women in the figure of the prostitute. The result is a misinformed representation of African art, done, as I have argued in the previous chapters, to consciously manipulate the phenomenological associations of African culture in the early twentieth century. Rather than educating his contemporaries on non-Western civilizations, Picasso works with common stereotypes of Africa to perpetuate his own artistic success. But to discuss culture in art as something that has an ownership is somewhat of a cyclical argument. Due to the constant appropriation across the provenance of visual art, it seems reductive to label art of the past as “cultural appropriation”. The moral implications of the term evoke clear definitions of right and wrong, which seldom exist in art. In my opinion, it is more beneficial to our study of art to delve

\textsuperscript{235} Leighton, “White Peril”, 630.
into the crosshairs of culture and educate ourselves, not only on the expanse of sources, both Western and non-Western, but on how those sources came to interact with one another through socio-cultural circumstances. The issue of African art and the Demoiselles is not cultural appropriation, but rather the layers of misrepresentation through which African masks were placed on the naked female form. An object is not inherently culturally appropriative or racist; instead, it is a racist society that makes racist objects. Art has always been strongly connected to the society from which it stems. The Demoiselles reflects colonialism at the turn of the century, and the ethnocentricity of the collection of African objects. Rather than labelling a piece culturally appropriative in our derogatory usage of the term, understanding how a non-dominant cultural source was misrepresented through historical conditions may be a better use of our time as academics. “Cultural appropriation” simplifies the faceted circumstances that our increasingly global world elicits when cultures interact with one another. It is not so much cultural appropriation that is an issue to art historians but a lack of cultural edification, which the art world has only recently begun to rectify.

I feel obliged to reiterate again that, in my study of Picasso and the Demoiselles, Picasso sincerely admired African art, and believed his connection to the tribal objects to be a progressive affinity for non-Western art. However, this admiration does not necessarily mean that he was responsible in his treatment of the objects in the Demoiselles. I originally embarked upon this thesis hoping to identify the masks in the Demoiselles; instead, I found myself confronting the women in the painting as phenomenological tools, meant to reflect now-outdated stereotypes, rather than references to specific artifacts. This may not have always been the case—Picasso’s collection of African art in his later life demonstrates to me that the artist thought about African objects beyond his initial reaction in the Demoiselles to the objects as
malicious. Malraux’s frequent references to “magic” indicate Western bias in the romanticization of African religion as mystical, but they may also demonstrate a genuine astonishment on Picasso’s behalf of the cultural practices of Africans. There is, also, a chance that Picasso intentionally manipulated the negative stereotypes that the 1907 viewer had with Africa in order to point out Western bias—I believe this may read too far into Picasso’s political views on Africa, which, as I have argued in the previous chapter, I do not find to be as present in the Demoiselles as his views on female sexuality.

Flam’s comment on the West’s enthusiasm for Primitive art as a “saving grace”, in my opinion, is too much of an overstatement on the circumstances in which the Demoiselles was painted. It may be, too, that “cultural appropriation” in its application to the Demoiselles overlooks the ingenuity of the piece. My concern in labelling the Demoiselles as a work of cultural appropriation is the blame this places in the object itself, when the issues of misrepresentation present in the Demoiselles really demonstrate the broader distortion of African objects in colonialist France. Picasso’s use of African objects is representative of the greater cultural issues at hand in the interpretation of primitive objects. If we, as art historians in the twenty-first century, must label the Demoiselles as appropriative, we must do so while keeping in mind that the term does not encompass the complexities in the cross-hairs of Western and non-Western culture. It only scratches the surface of the complex, endlessly evocative canvas.
Bibliography


Images for Chapter Four


