

“Naked Problems”. Origin and Reach of the Formalist Interpretations

Despite the reaction of general alarm and the exacerbated feelings that the painting aroused in Picasso’s circle of friends, the first significant interpretation of the work that managed to clear the way did so by completely ignoring the emotional side. It was a purely formalist reading that saw only a series of “naked problems” in the painted women, as André Salmon had called them, understanding this expression as problems about the pictorial fact itself and its extremely intimate nature. This is how *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* was seen by one of the first theorists of Cubism, and Picasso’s first gallerist, the German Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, who referred to it as “a large, strange painting with women, fruit and drapery”, adding “that Picasso had left it unfinished.”¹ He then went on to describe the rigid way nakedness was treated in the work and compared it to that typical of a large marionette with huge, untroubled eyes.

Obviously, Kahnweiler went further because he was seeing the dawn of Cubism in the work but pointed out that this was only present in one part, specifically in the foreground where, “oblivious to the tranquillity of the rest, a figure squats behind a bowl of fruit. There is no roundness modelled by *chiaroscuro*, the lines are angular. The colours are strong blue, bright yellow, pure black and white. The beginning of Cubism! The first outburst”. It was his appraisal of the origin of Cubism because he considered that in this particular place “a desperate and passionate struggle was being fought against all the problems at the same

¹ D.-H. Kahnweiler, *Der Weg zum Kubismus*, written in 1915 and published in Múnich in 1920 (1997: 39).

time. What were the problems? The problems of the painting: representing the tri-dimensional and colour on the flat surface and its bond in the unity of this plane” (Kahnweiler 1997, 41). Hence the German theorist considered the work as if its greatest goal were to solve, once and for all, and boldly to boot, all the basic or essential quandaries of painting. Which ones? Mainly, how to represent the three dimensions of reality on a bi-dimensional surface without impairing the integrity of the pictorial surface that is essentially flat and must remain so; doing so by means of a solution unlike that of Renaissance painters who resorted to perspective to give a false illusion of depth. We must remember that with Kahnweiler the vision of Cubism is coming into being as a radical and irreversible rupture with the Renaissance visual order, based on perspective and modelling. We have here, notwithstanding, the first phase of formulation of this idea that associates the identity of modern art with the integrity of the pictorial plane, expressing a theory that would live long and have many advocates during the 20th century. It is the notion that, many decades after Kahnweiler’s idea, in the 1960s, Clement Greenberg would proclaim successfully in New York, linking flatness of pictorial surface to modern art identity. The theoretical discourse that stemmed from this idea aspired to justify or explain the eclosion of abstraction in avant-garde art during the first decades of the 20th century. This would later become known as Modernism.

We must, however, state explicitly that for Kahnweiler, Cubism did not diminish in this trend towards abstraction. Had this happened it would have run the risk of becoming purely decorative. On the contrary it was also either the reconciliation or the maximum tension between the two important extremes of painting: between the representative and the constructive, the alliance of the idea of art as mimesis or reproduction of a pre-existing reality with the notion of art understood as the creation or construction of a new reality. This reconciliation would have brought about the invention of a signic language that would convey the definitive recognition of painting as such a language, complying with previously established conventions and not simply a natural way of copying reality. Thus Kahnweiler could state (1997, 23):

If I ask myself today, after all, what novelty Cubism brought, I can only find one answer: thanks to the invention of signs that appear in the outside world, Cubism endowed the plastic arts with the possibility of transmitting the visual experiences of the artist to the spectator without the illusion of imitation. Cubism is the recognition that all plastic art is no more than writing, in which the spectator reads the signs and it is not a reflection of nature.

With this avowal, Kahnweiler gave Cubism the merit of having recognised the signic character, or the non-iconic, of painting; a substantial attribute of painting in every place and every time, not exclusive to modern painting. It is a formula that fits the semiotic postulates about art made during the last decades of the 20th century like a glove. Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois especially were those who reclaimed Kahnweiler’s comments in the 80s and 90s in order to convert them into the very definition of Cubism (Rubin 1992).

This manner of conceiving the artistic action, which will become the characteristic mode of the avant-garde, is sometimes known as "the linguistic turn" in the art world. According to the Kahnweiler's propositions—although he himself would never have used that expression—the first symptoms of this revolution were found in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. In other words, exploring possible solutions to the problems of representing the three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional surface irremediably leads to the effect of moving the centre of gravity of any painting from *what* it represents to *how* it represents it. Thus, from a formalist perspective, the fact (for some as primeval as it was scandalous) that *Les Femmes d'Alger* represented a group of naked prostitutes could be considered of relatively secondary importance. The truth is that Kahnweiler never mentioned it in his writings nor did he mention even its title.

In short, the German theorist ignored the content of the painting and this, among other things, was how he allowed himself to situate it as the start of Cubism; it was the first time that this consideration had been made. With it he contributed to founding a critical tradition mindful, fundamentally of the formal problems *Les Femmes d'Alger* presented, with the question of the origin of Cubism in the forefront. He also observed that the canvas was unfinished, in his understanding, for its lack of unity or its incoherent mixture of styles.

Between 1939 and 1972 the perspective used to analyse *Les Femmes d'Alger* roughly followed the path marked by Kahnweiler, the work as the solution to a problem of an entirely pictorial nature, and therefore, as a proto-Cubist work in formalist terms. Furthermore, important authors like Alfred Barr, the first director of the MoMA in New York and John Golding, one of the greatest authorities on Cubist painting would continue to treat it thus.²

In accordance with the formalist vocabulary of this type of critique, the most remarkable thing about the painting is its compressed character, leaving no breathing space between the figures and that like them, it is constantly brought back to the surface as soon as there is the slightest glimpse of depth. Together with this, the volumes obtained by means of faceting, are a clear obstruction of the traditional Renaissance *chiaroscuro*. In the same way, so is disobeying the postulates of linear perspective by means of the unorthodox cloning of viewpoints. At the same time there is a proliferation of resources that pushes the nudes, the still life, the draperies and any other element towards the pictorial plane, even including the Cézanne *passage* and in passing, conferring an almost material consistency to the pictorial space. Nor must we forget the peculiarity of the young women's bodies, traced as if they had been cut with the stroke of an axe. Or even, to summarise all these features, the very palpable presence of the brush stroke on the two-dimensional canvas, calling our attention to its genuinely artistic nature. All these would be purely pictorial elements that proclaim

² Barr 1939; 1946; and Golding 1958: 155–63. This was the first monographic article on the work and the one that places it for the first time in an appropriate context in the discipline of art history.

here its liberation and in this way, its own independence in regard to its servile secular function to represent and advocate a renewed and freer existence. They are also topics on this pictorial independence that according to the formalist discourse of Modernism, would only be conquered gradually as the history of Cubism and the avant-garde advanced but that could already be predicted in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. This is the best-known story, the story that was told for a long time in a multitude of textbooks on the history of modern art and that Alfred Barr and Golding, following in the wake of Kahnweiler, encoded brilliantly. For all these experts the crux of the work was the compression and flattening of the space and the use of multiple perspectives because they opened new avenues for modern art and involved a radical rupture with the habitual composition and perspective in practice at least since the Renaissance.

Alfred H. Barr Jr. was actually the director of the MoMA when the museum acquired the canvas. In 1939 he wrote *Picasso: Forty Years of his Art*, and then in 1946, he published *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*. Both books immediately became compulsory textbooks of reference on the artist. In these Barr had undertaken to set forth, for example, the influence of Cézanne's bathers in *Les Femmes d'Alger* "in which the figures and the background merge into a sort of relief with scarcely any indication of spatial depth or the volume of the figures", by recourse to the *passage*, mentioned above. This tallied with the widespread opinion of the time that *Les Femmes d'Alger* should be considered the first Cubist painting because one must consider its content as Cubist. That is, the decomposition of the natural forms in a design of sliding and inclined planes within a space with limited depth. It was Cubism in a rudimentary state, he admitted but Cubism when all is said and done and furthermore, he stated that the work, together with *Le Bonheur de vivre* by Matisse would mark a new period in the history of modern art (Barr 1946, 56). The entrance into the historiographic arena of *Le Bonheur de vivre* by Matisse presented at the *Salon des Indépendants* of 1906, just before the creation of *Les Femmes d'Alger*, is important and caused a notorious *succès de scandale*. And this was because a significant part of later literature came to interpret the Picassian scene as a response or reaction to Matisse's *Bonheur*. Or, in other words, it was considered the source of inspiration for the birth of Picasso's young ladies.

It goes without saying that, according to the formalist perspective, the presence of the African element in the work corresponds to a purely artistic type of reason because Picasso's knowledge of *African Negro art* had offered him a model of freedom to distort anatomy for the sake of creating a rhythmic structure that can merge solids and voids and invent new shapes. To put it in another way, *African Negro Art* offered a model of the antinaturalism because its works were equivalents rather than copies of reality. It was Robert Rosenblum who wrote the above in his book about *Cubism and 20th century art* in the 1950s (2001, 25). In truth, although he never abided by an exclusively formalist examination of the African presence in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, he did also comment that its grotesque character, terrifying power and the suggestion of a supernatural presence must have been a considerable stimulus for a Spanish painter like Picasso.

That said, however much the form was to monopolize the attention of the critics, the painting presented a content that was difficult to ignore completely. Five young, naked women accompanied by a still life and draperies, compressed into a clearly small place (almost like the Marx brothers' cabin) seen head-on, in profile, three-quarters foreshortened, from behind and whose gazes are fixed candidly on the spectator. On various occasions Picasso himself, according to some witnesses, had explained that it was a scene from a brothel, inspired, as he would tell Zervos (1942, 10), in one situated in the *Carrer Avinyó* in Barcelona. Nor was that all. While preparing the work he had drawn many sketches where we can see some solutions that included male personages sharing the scene with our young ladies. The formalist critics were aware of these preliminaries. Kahnweiler commented that Picasso himself had told him that: "According to my first idea, there were going to be men, you saw them in my drawings. There was a student holding a skull. A sailor as well. The women were eating, hence the basket of fruit that stayed. Then it changed and became what it is now."³

How was it possible to justify a content like this, so uncomfortable for conventional morality, from a perspective centred on the formal? And again, how could the transformations the work had suffered through the many sketches Picasso made before finishing it, fit the formalist type of interpretations?

The answer of formalism to these questions was given by Alfred Barr himself for example, who was also aware of the earlier steps. He published three sketches in which the evolution of the painting to its present state could be seen (one in the Basel Kunstmuseum, another in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a third that has been lost) and revealed the identities of the male figures in the earlier studies that tallies with an explanation made by Picasso in 1939. The centre figure corresponds to a sailor, while the figure on the far left of the canvas, who appears to erupt on the scene, would be that of the man holding a skull. According to the director of MoMA in these earlier sketches Picasso began by conceiving the work as a sort of allegory or riddle, a *memento mori* where vice and virtue are matched against each other (illustrated respectively by the sailor surrounded by flowers, women and food and the student with the skull). The idea was not morally very convincing. And an allegory unworthy of much attention that faded away when the two male figures disappeared from the final version. In the end they had been eliminated to enhance a purely formalist composition that, in the defining process, became more and more dehumanised and abstract.⁴

In his analysis of the evolution undergone by the picture in the sketches, Barr interpreted the step from a scene with various women and a couple of men to another of women only as a desertion of the allegorical and its substitution with a purely pictorial interest. It is as if the disappearance of the men was taken for granted and, with them the moral dilemma of the male personages, and that the women's bodies would be considered and interpreted as forms, as objects;

³ Kahnweiler 1952, reproduced in Bernadac and Michael 1998: 61.

⁴ Kahnweiler 1952, reproduced in Bernadac and Michael 1998: 61.

perhaps as another object in a still life. All things considered, the evolution of the sketches was the proof that the allegory between vice and virtue was being reduced in favour of problems of an exclusively pictorial nature. Barr considered that this scenario could be easily disregarded because Picasso himself had ruled it out but also because its production process or the sketches that led to it cannot be identified nor mixed up in it. Barr's attitude is habitual in the formalist explanation, whose logic establishes that if the key of the painting is made up of purely artistic matters, the progressive transformation of the narrative in the prior sketches do not play, or do not have to play any relevant role. And as we shall see, it is this logic that was fated to confront the iconological interpretation that would follow on from the formalist in the critical discourse of modernity.

Barr also established a link between *Les Demoiselles* and African art, pointing out that the figures on the right appear to be inspired by Ivory Coast art, and in what was then the French Congo, rather than Iberian sculptures. This was contrary to what the painter himself had decisively stated. Namely the impossibility of a *negro* presence in *Les Demoiselles* because he discovered this art after finishing the painting. We should remember that in 1942, when Zervos (1942, 10) published the second volume of his descriptive catalogue of Picasso's art, he categorically denied this influence, emphasising that Picasso was unaware of *Art nègre* in 1907 and that his figures were influenced by Iberian art. Barr (1946, 56) did, however, point out that Picasso may have retouched the two heads on the right after he had discovered African art and that he had simply forgotten because this influence was much more evident than the Iberian in this part of the painting. In *Forty Years*, Barr (1939, 56) qualified *Les Demoiselles* as "masterpiece of Picasso's Black Period", besides being the "first Cubist painting" (1939, 60). In *Fifty Years* he dispensed with the former and just retained the latter idea of the start of Cubism (Barr 1946, 56). The debate initiated here over the presence of *Negro Art* in *Les Demoiselles* continues today. Furthermore, in the last decades of the 20th century and first of the 21st century, it has revived, sparked by the studies on colonialism and the support of the post-colonialist theories, as we shall see below. In any case, the crucial work by Zervos will not alter the predominantly formalist focus of interpretation of the work. He would favour it against positions, possibly sentimentalist or centred on narrative arguments.

John Golding, another of the quintessential historians of the Cubist movement, while also putting forward formalist arguments, did call into question some of the premises established by Kahnweiler or Barr. Furthermore, Golding (1958, 155–63) also holds the honour of being author of the first monographic article on the work. He also was responsible for something of great importance for the discourse of Modernism. For the first time he disassociated *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* from Cubism, removing it from the pedestal that had raised it to the consideration of fountainhead of this movement, by adducing that none of the fundamental characteristics of Cubism were present in it: neither distance nor intellectual control, nor objectivity combined with intimacy, nor any interest for establishing a balance between representation and an abstract pictorial structure. Cubism had been a realistic art inasmuch

it was interested in reinterpreting the outside world in a distanced and objective way, it was a classical art. Golding considered the work too expressionist, carrying a first impression of violence and restlessness, incompatible with "impartial and objective reinterpretation—classical—of the outside world" proposed by the Cubist painters.

This did not mean that it lost the honour of being "the beginning of a new phase in art history" and the logical starting point for tracing the history of Cubism for, as André Salmon had pointed out, for the first time, painting was presented like algebra (Golding 1959, 51).

Golding would also be charged with examining *Les Demoiselles* in its historical-artistic context, in relation to the works that Matisse and Derain were working on at that time basically *Blue Nude (Souvenir de Biskra)* by the former and *The Bathers* by the latter that no doubt inspired Picasso). He also pointed out the influence that Cézanne's *Bathers* might have had and finally explained the importance of the two Iberian sculptures that Picasso had bought in 1907. Previously Barr had also pointed out the part played by El Greco in the composition and later, in the sixties, Werner Spies would add the association with Ingres' *The Turkish Bath* while for his part, Edward Fry underlined the importance of Gauguin and his reliefs, as another artistic source (Barr 1939; Spies 1969, 18; Fry 1966, 70–3).

With the formalist interpretation firmly consolidated, in the 1960s no other monographic text was written about *Les Demoiselles*,⁵ in contrast, as we shall see to the large number that appeared especially in the 1980s, and we shall understand why immediately. It might be said that the formalist discourse was exhausted long before the iconographic, particularly, if the latter was allowed to be combined with biographical and historical visions as historiography would do in the last decades of the 20th century and the start of the 21st. This may have much to do with the new interpretations that were looming on the horizon and especially Steinberg's famous version of the work—that we shall comment on fully below—which, at last allowed for the establishment of a relation not exclusively formalist on the work. It is indeed worth mentioning an important prior circumstance in the history of the interpretation of the work's content. In 1966 Edward Fry began to focus on the matter of the brothel, comparing or contrasting Picasso's treatment with that of some of his predecessors, especially the Impressionists. This did not prevent him from lingering over, and giving full consideration to, the formal features of the work, according to the critical trend of the time, underlining the influence of the Cézanne *passage*, as we have mentioned, to achieve the fusion of the background planes with the forefront with the aim of attaining the identity of the pictorial surface and the pictorial space (Fry 1966).

⁵ In this decade it only appears in works on wider studies on Cubism, Rosenblum 1960; Fry 1966. From 1970 it will be another classic study on Cubism, that of Cooper 1970, whose vision of *Les Demoiselles* that slipped into the formalist wake.

From the foregoing it is easy to confirm that *Les Femmes d'Alger* enjoyed the consideration of being the first Cubist work during the period when scant importance was being given to the content of the work, while the formalist discourse prevailed. Once this was displaced by the iconological, only when the content became the focus of the analyses, suspicion grew about its Cubist connections. Christopher Green (2001) considered that this was an important step towards no longer considering the work as a piece of history and beginning to see it for itself, in its own right and not for its links with the evolution of Cubism and the avant-garde. The moment came precisely in 1972 and was the result of applying “other criteria” to analysing *Les Femmes d'Alger* and the whole of modern art.

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