

MODERN ART
PRACTICES AND DEBATES

Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction
The Early Twentieth Century

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collage is akin to developments in semiotics, it is 'the first instance within the pictorial arts of anything like a systematic exploration of the conditions of representability entailed by the sign' (Krauss, 'In the name of Picasso', p.16).³ What meanings are systematically encoded in Cubist collages? Are they fixed and ahistorical (like the lexical meanings of words) or variable and contingent on specific social and historical conditions?

Representation: language, signs, realism

As is commonly the case in the twentieth century, the status and dominant interpretation of Cubism was entrenched by exhibition, particularly by *Cubism and Abstract Art*, at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York, in the spring of 1936. In terms of curatorial validation and the production of a 'classic text' of interpretation, the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue represent a discernible shift in the discussion and display of modern art and its conventional history. Both were largely the work of Alfred H. Barr Junior, the first Director of the new and prestigious museum, which had been established in 1929 and was funded by the financial élite of East Coast capitalism. On the cover of Barr's guide and catalogue to the exhibition appeared a diagram of lines of influence in the development of Abstract Art (Plate 86).

Barr rightly draws attention to an important aspect of art in the early years of the twentieth century – its technical radicalism. It's easy to place, in chronological order, a Bouguereau, a Cézanne, a couple of Picasso's Cubist paintings and a Mondrian from just before the first World War (Plates 98, 101, 1, 114, 167) and posit a progressive abandonment of attempts to imitate natural appearance and a disengagement from 'descriptive' functions which leaves the 'language' of artistic representation concerned with the expressive possibilities of 'pictorial configurations' of colour, shape and line, and the artist's own compositional sensibility. Such a proposal would be consistent with Roger Fry's privileging of 'disinterested intensity of contemplation' ('An essay in aesthetics', 1909, p.32) and Clement Greenberg's notion of modern specialization in the production and the 'authentic' reception of *modern* works of art.⁴ In such accounts, we encounter assumptions about the *language* of illusionistic representation and claims for the gradual refinement of the 'language', until, devoid of external visual associations and social and intellectual allusions, it reaches a state of 'purity' through 'self-criticism'. In this view, the technical and expressive potential of the *formal* elements of modern art are the most significant measure of their function as representations.

However, here we come across the mistaken distinction which many Modernists make between 'representational' or 'realistic' and abstract works of art, disputed by Schapiro in his critique of Barr's catalogue:

The logical opposition of realistic and abstract art by which Barr explains the more recent change rests on two assumptions about the nature of painting, common in writing on abstract art – that representation is a passive mirroring of things and therefore essentially non-artistic, and that abstract art, on the other hand, is a purely aesthetic activity, unconditioned by objects and based on its own eternal laws ... These views are thoroughly one-sided and rest on a mistaken idea of what a representation is. There is no passive, 'photographic' representation in the sense described ... All renderings of objects, no matter how exact they seem, even photographs, proceed from values, methods and viewpoints which somehow shape the image and often determine its contents.

('Nature of abstract art', pp.85–6)

³ For Yves-Alain Bois, see 'Kahnweiler's lesson'.

⁴ Greenberg, 'The pasted paper revolution' and 'Modernist painting'.

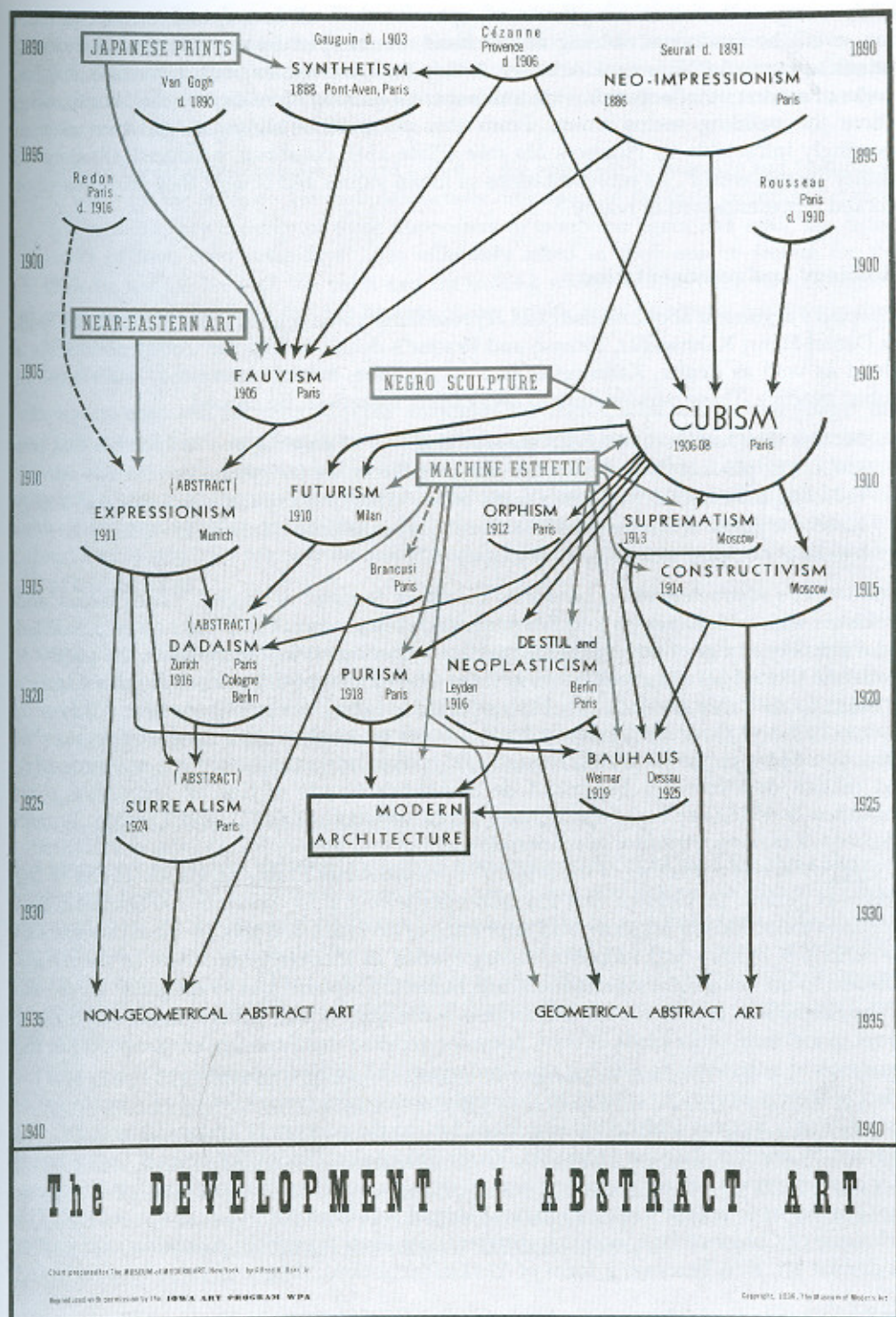


Plate 86 'The Development of Abstract Art', chart prepared by Alfred H. Barr Junior for the jacket of the catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art* published by The Museum of Modern Art New York, 1936. Photo: courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Schapiro argues that *all* art is a practice of representation: 'all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience and by non-esthetic concerns' ('Nature of Abstract Art', p.86). As we saw with Chardin's *Rayfish*, works of art do not reflect or provide a transparent illusion of 'reality' or the 'world', even where the painting seems iconic. From this perspective all paintings, even one as seemingly intractable as Picasso's *Ma Jolie* (Plate 114), constitute produced allusions to 'reality' or the 'world'. As representations of ideas, values and beliefs, they are *mediated* or worked representations of reality.⁵

'Realism' and representation

Schapiro's argument about realism and representation was echoed a decade later, in 1948, by Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, Picasso and Braque's dealer during the Cubist period. As a friend as well as dealer, Kahnweiler had an intimate, though interested, knowledge of Cubist practice. These painters turned away from 'imitation', he argued,

because they had discovered that the true character of painting and sculpture is that of a *script*. The product of these arts are signs, emblems for the external world not mirrors reflecting the external world in a more or less distorting manner. Once this was recognized, the plastic arts were freed from the slavery inherent in illusionistic styles.

(quoted in Y.-A. Bois, 'Kahnweiler's lesson', p.40)

Kahnweiler's characterization of works of art as 'scripts' or 'signs', raises issues and problems with which Picasso and Braque engaged in *practice*. Their techniques paralleled the word play and grammatical and syntactical experiments in, for example, the poetry of Mallarmé (Plate 142) and Apollinaire, and the absurd juxtapositions used in Alfred Jarry's writings to dislocate the familiar. However, it is highly unlikely that either Picasso or Braque had any theoretical interest in the linguistic analysis that formed the basis of semiotics. Some contemporaries, though, did make connections between one formative text in that development, Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, (first published in 1916, but based on lectures given between 1906–11), and Cubism. Roman Jakobson, a major contributor to modern linguistics and literary theory, was one of these.

Jakobson was a member of the influential Moscow and Prague linguistic circles of the inter-war period. He claimed that his encounter with Cubist works in the Shchukin and Morozov collections in Moscow was important to his work and that of other members of the school of literary and linguistic theory known as Russian Formalism. In their commitment to the analysis of art and literature, including modern and avant-garde work, one of the Formalists' concerns was 'literariness' – the quality that differentiated the literary 'work of art' from other kinds of texts. Jakobson recalled that Saussure emphasized not the meanings of individual words but the similarities and differences between them, and the effect of their *combination* rather than their individual appearance.⁶ Saussure's treatment of language as a 'system of differences' relates, too, to the concept of 'defamiliarization', put forward by another Russian Formalist, Victor Shklovsky. Shklovsky argued that a novel way of *saying* surprises us into a new way of *seeing*; a novel *medium* (rather than the message) enables us to realise what is familiar, habitual and expected in any given context. The technique of Cubist collage, one that differentiates itself from both Academic and earlier modernist art, thus becomes a form of 'defamiliarization'. (Many of these linguistic and

⁵ On Barr, Schapiro, Greenberg and the 'Barr paradigm' see F. Frascina, introduction to *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*.

⁶ See 'Structuralisme et téléologie', 1975, in *Selected Writings*, vol.7, 1985, quoted in Bois, 'Kahnweiler's lesson', p.49.

semiotic ideas were taken up in Paris after the Second World War, by theorists such as Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who became known as 'structuralists'.⁷

For Jakobson, both Saussure and the Cubists seemed interested in the nature of the relationship between 'signifiers' (words and visual forms) and their significance (what they stand for, or what is signified by them):

Perhaps the strongest impulse toward a shift in the approach to language and linguistics ... was – for me at least – the turbulent artistic movement of the early twentieth century. The extraordinary capacity of these discoverers to overcome again and again the faded habits of their own yesterdays ... is intimately allied to their unique feeling for the dialectic tension between the parts and the uniting whole, and between the conjugated parts, primarily between the two aspects of any artistic sign, its *signans* and its *signatum* [signifier and its signified]

(quoted in Bois, 'Kahnweiler's lesson', p.64)

Both Kahnweiler and Jakobson discuss analogies between Cubist art and language: the view that artistic signs, ranging from a conventional symbol (such as the cat for licentiousness) to a brush mark, function in the same way that words do within a sentence; the sentence corresponds to the united whole of a picture. In interviews first published in 1961, Kahnweiler argued that something which is fundamental 'to the comprehension of Cubism and of what, for me, is truly modern art [is] the fact that *painting is a form of writing* ... that creates signs':

A woman in a painting is not a woman; she is a group of signs that I read as 'woman'. When one writes on a sheet of paper 'f-e-m-m-e', someone who knows French and who knows how to read will read not only the word 'femme' ['woman'], but he will see, so to speak, a woman. The same is true of paintings; there is no difference. Fundamentally, painting has never been a mirror of the external world, nor has it ever been similar to photography; it has been a creation of signs, which were always read correctly by contemporaries.

(Kahnweiler interviewed by F. Crémieux, *Mes galeries et mes peintres*, p.57)

Contemporary responses indicate that *not* all contemporaries could read the signs and references in Cubist works. Yet there is evidence that Picasso and Braque desired to produce a form of 'realism' (which had traditionally been thought of as a paradigm of legibility). The issue of realism and legibility is explicitly expressed in *Du 'Cubisme'*, a pamphlet written by two painters, Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, published in 1912. Towards the end of their essay (which is indebted to Nietzsche's notion of the 'superman'), the authors claim:

That the ultimate end of painting is to reach the masses, we have agreed; it is, however, not in the language of the masses that painting should address the masses, but in its own language, in order to move, to dominate, to direct, and not in order to be understood. It is the same with religions. The artist who abstains from all concessions, who does not explain himself and who tells nothing, accumulates an internal strength whose radiance enlightens all around ... For the partial liberties conquered by Courbet, Manet, Cézanne, and the Impressionists, Cubism substitutes a boundless liberty.

(*Du 'Cubisme'*, pp.74–5)

At the start of their argument, they invoke Courbet, who 'inaugurated a realist aspiration in which all modern efforts participate' (p.38). Why Courbet? One critical element of his 'Realism' lay in the implicit claim that those types of Academic or official paintings which

⁷ On Barthes, see p.119; for Lévi-Strauss on Cubism see G. Charbonnier, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*; on this whole development see J.G. Merquior, *From Prague to Paris*.

glossed over the divisions of class society were *ideological* and therefore *false* representations of reality. He was allying himself to contemporary notions of Realism in art and literature (including Baudelairean *Modernité*) and to positivism, the philosophical movement of the mid-nineteenth century which accepted as knowledge nothing but matters of fact based on the 'positive' sense data of experience (not on metaphysics, theology, uncritical speculation or any 'transcendent' knowledge). His notion of Realism in *art* was concerned with the problem of truthfulness and the ways in which artistic traditions and conventions could generate misrepresentations of the subjects of images. It was an aim of Realism in general to expose the workings of such traditions and conventions.

The view of realism proposed in *Du 'Cubisme'*, however, is not a notion influenced by positivism. Rather it is a reaction *against* it. Gleizes and Metzinger split 'realism' into 'superficial realism' and 'profound realism': the former belongs to Courbet and the Impressionists and the latter to Cézanne. Gleizes and Metzinger claim that reality exists essentially as *consciousness*. Whatever exists is known to individuals through and as *ideas*. Cézanne's work they saw as an example of *modern* traditions and conventions in art *mediated* by his 'individual consciousness', or as they so obscurely put it, 'the art of giving our instinct a plastic consciousness' ('plastic', here, means physical).

'Realism', then, is a changeable concept, and underwent cultural transformations in the nineteenth century. The notion of 'realism' in *Du 'Cubisme'* is closer to that of Plato, who held that the properties of objects, such as redness or squareness, existed independently of the objects in which they were perceived. Further, these properties or 'Ideas', were 'more real' than the objects in which they were found, and they constituted the 'essence' or underlying reality that knowledge seeks to grasp. This is close to many Cubist critics' emphases on 'universals', 'essences' and the 'underlying reality' of objects and experiences. Such a view is more consistent with a form of what we now call Idealism and is different from the meanings which 'Realism' developed in the nineteenth century.

Realism in art and literature had been used by, for example, Courbet, to characterize new theories about the independence of the physical world from mind or spirit; this was an attitude or method that favoured a demonstration of things 'as they actually existed'. As we have seen, such representations are referred to in semiotic terminology as *iconic*. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, there were several objections to this view of realism. One, often associated with Symbolism, was that what is described or represented is seen only superficially, that is, in terms of its outward *appearance* rather than its inner *reality*. Another was that there are many *real* forces, from inner feelings and psychic states to underlying social and historical movements, which are neither accessible to ordinary observation nor adequately, if at all, represented in how things appear. With different emphases, the theories of Marx and Freud, who both stressed social conditioning, underpinned many of these objections. A third objection was that the medium in which the representation occurs (painting, collage etc.) is radically different from the objects *represented* in it, so that the effect of 'life-like representation', 'the reproduction of reality', is at best a particular artistic convention, or at worst a falsification, making us take the forms of representation as *real*.

Art and semiotics

It is in the context of these wider cultural transformations of the concept of realism that we find the parallels which Jakobson identified between Cubism as a practice of representation and the development of semiotics. We began to explore some of these parallels with respect to Picasso's collages. In order to continue this exploration and to

examine the explanatory potential of semiotics, I want to look at some exemplary cases beginning with Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (Plate 1).

This painting provides a useful case study partly because it enables us to examine critically a work designated as canonical in dominant histories of modern art. In such histories the painting is itself a sign with a particular value – equal to other 'canonical' works and superior to 'non-canonical' works. *Les Femmes d'Alger*'s status was secured by a further catalogue and exhibition of Barr's *Picasso Forty Years of His Art*, of 1939, which coincided with MOMA's acquisition of the painting in that year. *Les Femmes d'Alger* is displayed in the Museum as a canonical work, a token not only of its Modernist collection but also of the Museum's curatorial representation of the development of Cubism. The painting is a sign in a powerfully influential set of official and unofficial rules which constrain the reception of 'high art'.

Another reason is that, from what we know of the planning and production of the painting, it was designed to be a 'major' intervention in contemporary practice. As such, it is revealing about the painting as a sign within rules constraining production. Although not exhibited until 1916, it had a considerable impact within a particular group c.1907, when small-scale, brightly coloured Fauvist depictions of themes such as coastal towns and the imagined and actual sites of pleasure were in vogue among self-styled 'progressives' (Plate 87 and Plates 41, 43). The production and display of these works were also wrapped up in the politics of 'independent' Salons and the developing



Plate 87 Georges Braque, *Petite Baie de la Ciotat* (*The Little Bay at La Ciotat*), 1907, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 cm. Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1993.

entrepreneurial dealer network. In scale and theme, *Les Demoiselles* evoked different traditions: that of the major official Salon work on a legitimated subject such as the 'harem' theme of Ingres's *Bain Turc* (Plate 55), and, by contrast, that of modernist versions of traditional subjects such as the more sexually ambiguous depiction of a group of nudes in the 'open air' (e.g. Cézanne's 'bathers' series).

For this project Picasso ordered, as many Academic artists had done, a large specially made wooden stretcher of unconventional dimensions (standard mass-produced ones, used by the Impressionists and Fauves, only went to about 190 centimetres). During the autumn of 1906 through to 1907 he followed what seems like normal Academic preparatory procedures for a Salon 'set piece' with numerous sketches and studies on paper, canvas and wood, often in colour. There are dozens of these, both individual works and *carnets*, or sketchbooks. Though there were significant exceptions, this procedure was at odds with many modernist or avant-garde practices of the late nineteenth century which valorized 'directness' and 'spontaneity'. It was thus equivalent to, but different from, perhaps a token of exchange with, Academic 'history paintings' (Plates 97 and 98) and modern history paintings such as those by Seurat.

Since 1900, Picasso, who was Spanish, had been working in Paris establishing himself within the social networks of the art world. He exhibited in private galleries, including Vollard's, and made contacts with critics such as Apollinaire and with collectors such as Gertrude and Leo Stein (North Americans who were soon to have the most renowned collections of contemporary paintings in Paris). Politically and socially his community was rooted in the leftist 'bohemian' legacy of the nineteenth century; the themes of Picasso's work in the early years of the twentieth century can be linked to those aspects of Baudelairean modernity which highlighted the social outcast or marginalized activity: the prostitute, circus artist or absinthe drinker, the 'heroic' poor.

An example is *Two Sisters* (Plate 88) which signifies interest in the representation of poverty, psychological depression and prostitution. Picasso wrote to the French poet Max Jacob that a preliminary drawing for this picture was of a 'whore of St Lazare and a mother'. St. Lazare, in Paris, was a hospital-prison for prostitutes suffering from venereal disease. This disease and the risk of contracting it was both a personal concern for Picasso and, like AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, a wider issue in medical and social discourses. In format, though, the painting signifies an earlier pictorial schema: it resembles a Renaissance fresco of the 'visitation', with the child in the arms of the woman on the right.⁸

The representation of a contemporary theme of prostitution combined with the use or the evocation of earlier sources and formats is also central to his large painting *Le Harem* (Plate 89) which draws on the legacy of Ingres's famous example (Plate 55). In Academic terms the painting can be read as a representation of Classical 'nymphs', or an idealized harem, watched over by a male figure in the pose of a Classical river god. Here, the amphora, the large water vessel, is both a reference to the Classical world and a symbol of the uterus with the traditional associations of sexuality and *vanitas*. However, it's possible to read contemporary Spanish references, perhaps even to Gosol, the town where Picasso worked on this and other paintings. The amphora was a common everyday utensil in the area, as was the carafe held by the male figure (Picasso had depicted both in various images). The woman in the background, too, is probably modelled on his painting of *Celestina, The Procureess* of 1904. *Le Harem*, therefore, can be said to evoke two discourses – one on the Academic representation of the harem, and another on a 'contemporary' theme, brothels and prostitution, with its roots in alternative nineteenth-century images.⁹

⁸ On the issue of medical discourses and Picasso's work see M. Léja, "Le vieux marcheur" and "les deux risques": Picasso, prostitution, venereal disease, and maternity, 1899–1907". See, too, W. Rubin 'La Genèse des *Demoiselles d'Avignon*'.

⁹ See F. Frascina, 'Picasso's art: a biographical fact?'



Plate 88 Pablo Picasso,
Les Deux Soeurs (*Two Sisters*), 1902, oil on canvas,
152 x 100 cm. The Hermitage,
Leningrad. © DACS 1993.

With *Les Femmes d'Alger* Picasso adopted a similar 'Baudelairean' theme, this time ambitiously envisaging a monumental painting in the 'great tradition', something that would be on a par with the Salon set-pieces of Ingres or Bouguereau, but which would also provide some critical distance from the subjects and techniques of Fauvism. This ambition was also related to psychological and social concerns, in particular to Picasso's morbid fascination with prostitution and venereal disease; his interest (shared with contemporaries) in the images and meanings of 'primitive' sculpture, and his experience of existence in a bohemian community textured by ethnic difference, anarchism, philosophical ideas and notions of sexual liberty.

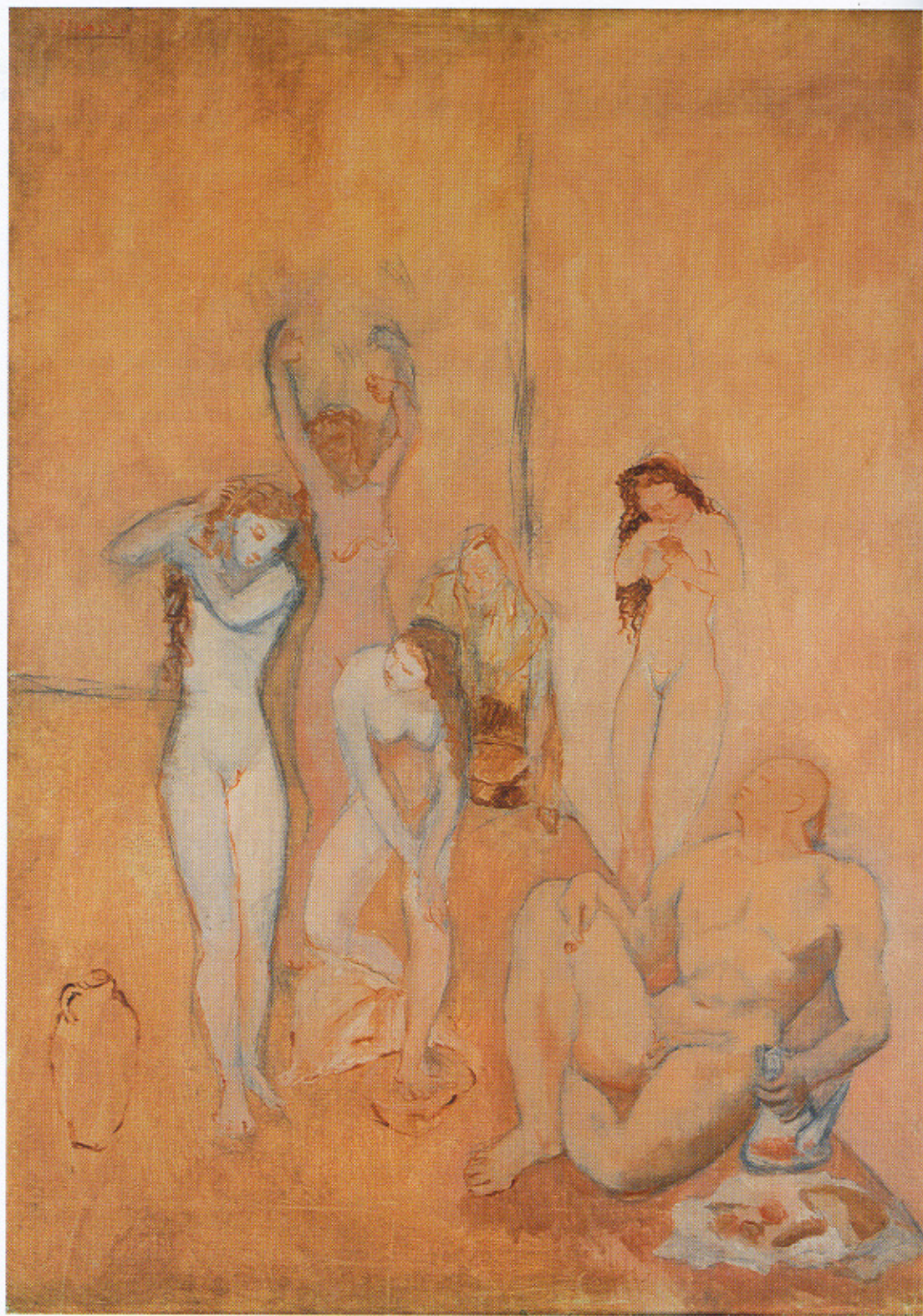


Plate 89 Pablo Picasso, *Le Harem (The Harem)*, early summer 1906, oil on canvas, 154 x 110 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Bequest of Leonard C. Hanna Jr 58.45. © DACS 1993.

In 1933 Picasso talked to Kahnweiler about the theme of the painting:

Les Femmes d'Alger, how that title irritates me! You know very well that [André] Salmon [poet and art critic] invented it. You know very well that the original title from the beginning had been *The Brothel of Avignon*. But do you know why? Because Avignon has always been a name I know well and it is a part of my life. I lived not two steps from the Calle d'Avignon [Carrer d'Avinyo, a street in the notorious red light district of Barcelona, the city where Picasso attended art school], where I used to buy my paper and my water-colours and also, as you know, the grandmother of Max [Jacob] came originally from Avignon. We used to make a lot of jokes about the painting. One of the women was Max's grandmother. Another Fernande [Olivier, his partner at the time], another Marie Laurencin [the painter], all in a brothel in Avignon ... According to my original idea, there were supposed to be men in it, by the way – you've seen the drawings [Plate 90]. There was a student holding a skull [a *memento mori*, Plate 91]. A sailor too [Plate 92]. The women were eating, hence the basket of fruit which I left in the painting. Then I changed it, and it became what it is now.

(quoted in Kahnweiler, 'Huit entretiens avec Picasso', p.24)

The first plans for the painting may have originated in Picasso's drawings and paintings of two sailors on shore leave going into a brothel (Plate 93). However these and all male figures (Plates 91, 92, 94) were omitted from the final composition, which focuses on five women and the bowl of fruit, traditionally symbolic of abundance, of summer (one of the four seasons), of taste (one of the five senses) etc. In this arrangement, the envisaged viewer is male with the final painting consistent with the available representations of actual brothels and erotic photographs (Plates 95 and 96).



Plate 90 Pablo Picasso, study for *Les Femmes d'Alger*, spring 1907, pencil and pastel on paper, 48 x 63 cm. Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel Kupferstick Kabinett. © DACS 1993.



Plate 91 Pablo Picasso, study for *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, also known as *Student with a Skull in his Hand* (sketch-book page), winter-spring 1907, pencil on paper, 24 x 19 cm. Musée Picasso, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique. © DACS 1993.



Plate 92 Pablo Picasso, study for *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (also known as *Sailor Rolling a Cigarette*), winter-spring 1907, gouache on paper, 62 x 47 cm. Berggruen Collection on loan to National Gallery, London. © DACS 1993.



Plate 93 Pablo Picasso, *Marins en bordée* (*Sailors on Shore-leave*), winter-spring 1906-7, pen and ink on paper, 20 x 14 cm. Heirs of the Artist. Picasso Estate. Photo: by courtesy of Ediciones Poligrafa S.A. from Joseph Palau i Fabre *Picasso 1887-1907*, 1980. © DACS 1993.



Plate 94 Pablo Picasso, study for *Les Femmes d'Alger*, spring 1907, oil on wood, 19 x 24 cm. Heirs of the artist.
© DACS 1993.



Plate 95 François Gauzi, *Les Salons de la rue des Moulins*, c.1900 Photograph © 1987 Sotheby's Inc.



Plate 96 Anonymous photographer, c.1900. Reproduced from *Le Nu 1900* by Philippe Julian, André Barret, Paris.



Plate 97 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Vénus Anadyomène*, oil on canvas, Musée Condé, Chantilly. Photo: Lauros-Giraudon.

The 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose: the 'langage' of representation

The central figure of *Les Demoiselles* follows the conventions associated with numerous representations of the female nude in the nineteenth century. Ingres's *Vénus Anadyomène* (Plate 97) was widely regarded as exemplary by those who held the traditional view that the representation of the female nude entailed the production of a declassified and personified version of the feminine, one which enabled the male artist to display his power to transform the 'decadence' of the female body into either 'ideal beauty' or 'sensual love'. 'Vénus Anadyomène' (Venus rising from the sea) represents the Roman goddess of love and fertility after her mythological birth. This pose was found in Classical sculpture and thought to derive from a lost work by Apelles, who was regarded as the greatest painter of Greek antiquity. Ingres used the pose to particular effect in the mid-nineteenth century. T.J. Clark makes the following observation:

Most writers and artists knew that the nude's appeal, in part at least, was straightforwardly erotic ... the body was attended and to some extent threatened by its sexual identity, but in the end the body triumphed. To make the language less metaphorical: the painter's task was to construct or negotiate a relation between the body as particular and excessive fact – that flesh, that contour, those marks of modern woman – and the body as a sign, formal and generalized, meant for a token of composure and fulfilment. Desire appeared in the nude, but it was shown displaced, personified, no longer an attribute of woman's unclothed form.

(*The Painting of Modern Life*, pp.123–6)

Ingres's 'Vénus Anadyomène' is a paradigm of 'the body as sign ... formal and generalized'. 'Venus' is in a contrapposto pose, long hair trailing down her back and both arms held up to display her unblemished body. Several artists, including Bouguereau, used it in their paintings (Plate 98). It was also used in quasi-pornographic photographs and colonial postcards (Plates 96 and 112, 113). Picasso 'quotes' the pose in the central nude (the nude to her right is a variation), just as he 'quotes' from a small Cézanne, *Three Bathers*, in the squatting figure to the right, which also evokes Degas's use of similar figures in his 'keyhole' views of women washing themselves (Plates 99 and 100). In terms of Picasso's immediate community of discourse, it is significant that variations of the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose were used by Cézanne in his *Five Bathers* (Plate 101), by Matisse in *Le Bonheur de Vivre* (Plate 43), and Derain in *Bathers* (Plate 102).

In at least one crucial relationship, all these paintings encode a gendered commercial exchange – between men with the relative socio-economic freedom to purchase or take their pleasure where they wished, and women whose relative lack of social and economic choice is evidenced in the sale of their bodies, actually or in representations. Implicit in such a commercial exchange is the existence of a control mechanism or system specific to the culture, a system of thought in which the exploitation of women is normalized – made to seem unexceptional, normal, familiar. Implicit, too, are the words, images, or discourse through which the thought is presented. Ingres's 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose is a 'token' of that exchange. It presupposes two encounters, an imaginary one, which is pictured, and an actual one between viewer and image. Both rely on an acceptance of particular class and gender relations and meanings.



Plate 98 William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *La Naissance de Vénus* (*The Birth of Venus*), 1863, oil on canvas, 300 x 217 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

Plate 101 Paul Cézanne, *Cinq Baigneuses* (Five Bathers), 1885–87, oil on canvas, 65 x 65 cm. Oeffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.



Plate 102 André Derain, *Baigneuses* (Bathers), 1907, oil on canvas, 132 x 195 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. William S. Paley and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Funds. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 1993.

The legitimation of the representation of naked women in these ways – ways which suggest or specify 'harems' or brothels and imply the voyeuristic gaze of a male viewer – relies on a system of rules. These rules prescribe the conditions for both the production and reception of meanings: they specify who can claim to produce and communicate meanings or know, receive and understand them; what topics may be introduced, under what circumstances and with what modalities (how, when, why). The rules of such a system are underpinned by a set of classifications: of people, topics, subjects, themes, circumstances, and so on. But these classifications ultimately derive from the interests and ideas – from capitalism and patriarchy, for example – of dominant or powerful groups. This means that a set of supplementary messages arises out of the interaction between viewers and between object and viewer, which indicates the status of relations between dominant and dominated viewers and groups. For instance, when a system 'allows a statement offensive to women to be read as "joke", this signifies a particular structure of gender relations, one in which males are dominant as a group in relation to females but need to mask their hostility and aggression towards them' (R. Hodge and G. Kress, *Social Semiotics*, p.5). It might be countered by those keen to preserve the autonomy of art that the connotations of a 'joke' are not the same as those of a visual image, a 'painting' doesn't operate like a 'joke'. But despite the differences of the particular signs (a statement understood as a joke and a painting of naked women), a set of messages and assumptions, which are part of an ideological complex, may permeate, if not govern, both of them. The social and psychological processes of power and domination seek to legitimate and to ameliorate – disguise and make acceptable – feelings such as hostility and aggression and actions such as exploitation. Similar ideological meanings are generated through a range of forms which make up everyday life. To neglect or to deny this may be to collude with a dominant power system.

The 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose, as a paradigm of the body as sign, may vary in some of its formal characteristics in the Ingres and Picasso paintings. But does it have a similar moral function within a signifying system? For many Modernists, for whom the visual experience is a special category, these variations of the pose are primarily 'aesthetic' and largely autonomous. But this is a view that attracts criticism such as that based on Max Weber's observation on the 'refusal of modern men to assume responsibility for moral judgements of taste ([things are designated] 'in poor taste' instead of 'reprehensible')'. He continues, 'the inaccessibility of appeal from esthetic judgements excludes discussion' ('Religious rejections of the world and their directions', *From Max Weber*, p.342). How, then, might we explain the variations of the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose in terms of the social and moral organization of the participants involved (producers and viewers) and by the immediate conditions, including gender relations, of their interaction?

'Langage' and 'langue'

We can start by applying a linguistic model to the practice of art, as proposed by Kahnweiler. In theory, all of the elements, conventions and rules of picture making in the Western tradition were available to Picasso in 1907. This was the pictorial language that Picasso had culturally inherited and systematically practised in early training. In semiotic terms, the possibilities for visual representation available at any one time equate with *langage* ('language'), Saussure's term for the biologically inherited capacity for language. In his terms, it is distinct from *langue* ('a language'), which is a particular language system, such as English or French. In visual art it may be equated with, say, an Academic system of pictorial representation which is distinct from, for instance, the 'language' of 'folk' art.

In his original lectures, Saussure emphasized that the words which constitute language are verbal signs. These have two sides, an acoustic image or sound pattern and a concept ('Nature of the Linguistic Sign', pp.65–70). These two elements are intimately linked and each triggers the other. The image or sound pattern he called the *signifiant*,

signifier, and the concept he called the *signifié*, the signified. Saussure's basic insight was that the connection between signifier and signified is not natural but arbitrary. There is no 'natural' reason why the sound-image 'tree' or its shape on a page must stand for the concept of a tree (after all, in French it is 'arbre', in Italian 'albero' and in German 'baum'). But it *does* stand for that concept in English because there is a convention among speakers of the language that it *will* stand for that concept. It is only because we have such a convention that we can talk to each other about trees at all. Conventions are social arrangements, sets of rules. To learn them is to enter into, or to accept, a 'collective contract' with other speakers of the particular language. We 'contract' to abide by the rules in order to communicate. So our individual acts of communication, or utterances, which may have the character of spontaneity and inventiveness, rest upon or presuppose sets of social conventions which the lone individual can *apparently* do little or nothing to change (I'll return to this problem in the next section).

Just as there are innumerable words in a language, so too there is a huge range of linguistic conventions. But what ensures that they relate to one another and don't 'get in each others' way'? And how are we to grasp them all? Saussure claims that language has a



Plate 103 Georges Braque,
Grand Nu (Large Nude),
December 1907–June 1908, oil
on canvas, 140 x 100 cm.
Collection Alex Maguy, Paris. ©
ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London
1993.

systematic structure. As the French semiologist Roland Barthes put it in *Elements of Semiology* in 1964, verbal or other signs are like different coins in a currency. Signs, like coins, form a system of values. A fifty pence piece has the value of a certain amount of goods which the individual can buy, but also has a value in relation to other coins, in this case equal to five ten pence pieces, or more or fewer other coins. Linguistically, the signs 'rational animal', for instance, can be exchanged for the signs 'human being'. There are, though, other systematic relations of value between signs, unlike relations between coins. In particular, there are relations of difference and exclusion: black/white, cultural/natural, female/male, active/passive, for example (see 'Language (*langue*) and speech', pp.81–3).

These ideas can illuminate Picasso's use of the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose in at least two ways. Firstly, with respect to art as a 'language', Picasso entered into a 'collective contract' in which there was a given set of rules (including those governing what constituted 'meaningful' signs), which he learned in order to communicate with others. (Academies, art schools and Salons are institutions for the maintenance of the rules in such production regimes; peer groups – Academicians, Fauves, Cubists – perform a similar function.) The 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose is one of these learned 'meaningful signs' within Academic discourse. But, as we have seen, by 1907 it was also used by non-Academicians, by Cézanne and by Matisse, Derain and Picasso. And by late 1907, Braque had abandoned Fauvism (reportedly after seeing *Les Femmes d'Alger* in Picasso's studio) to produce paintings such as *Large Nude*, a particular variation of the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose (Plate 103).



Plate 104 Pablo Picasso, *Reclining Nude (Fernande)*, spring-summer, 1905, gouache on paper, 47 x 61 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Gift of Mr and Mrs Michael Straight. 54.865. © DACS 1993.

Secondly, each of the elements of this language, such as the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose, has a value within a particular system of values. The value of the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose, as sign, is equal to other signs in the same system of tokens ('like a coin'), for which it can be 'exchanged'; in other words there is a currency of signs within a system. The totality of modifications of the body, *can* be considered as a language, a 'system'. For instance, we have identified the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose, as one element. Another one with equal 'value' is the 'odalisque pose', used in Picasso's portrait, *Fernande* (Plate 104). It is used by Ingres in *Le Bain turc* and a variation of it in Matisse's *Blue Nude* (Plates 55 and 54). Like the Venus pose, the odalisque pose is a gendered signifier of unblemished availability. As a token of possession, a colonization of the 'other', it was also used in photographic representations from the colonies (Plate 110). Significantly, in *Le Harem* this signifier is rendered specific through difference: the body and pose of the male 'river god' is differentiated from that of an 'odalisque' by the artist depicting the arms down, not in the position of *display*.

The 'Vénus Anadyomène' and 'odalisque' poses can be considered as elements of the 'language' system known as 'the body': each has particular meanings within that language. Or they may be versions of 'the body' which is itself a sign in other systems such as 'woman', 'the feminine' or 'Classical myth' or 'history painting'. In history painting, for example, the 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose signifies the mythical birth of the Roman goddess of love and fertility. In Greek poetry (Hesiod, *Theogony*), Gaea (Mother Earth) and her son Uranus (Heaven) coupled and produced the first human race, the Titans. Uranus threw his sons into the underworld but Gaea in revenge gave the youngest of them, Cronus, a sickle with which he castrated his father. Venus was born of the sea from the foam produced by the genitals of the castrated Uranus when they were cast upon the water. Venus floated ashore on a scallop shell. 'Vénus Anadyomène' is a variation where she is represented standing and wringing water from her hair.

Parole: the 'act of speech' and its context

An artist's *use* or articulation of this 'Vénus Anadyomène' pose (or one of its variations) in an image, may be compared with a linguistic utterance (a statement), an instance of *parole*. *Parole*, or speech, is the act of an individual speaker or artist, an act of selecting signs from the *langue*, or the particular language system, and combining them for specific purposes. The meaning of the 'utterance' or work of art depends not only on the meaning of the signs in the 'code' of the language, but also on the context in which they are used. For instance, the identical sign 'woman' can recur in different 'acts of speech', where it may be combined with other signs; within each combination it will evoke different ideas, perhaps different individual women, specific to the context of a particular utterance.

There is a difference in the *use* of the language in the Ingres, the Bouguereau and the Picasso. Technically and formally, however, the difference between *Les Demoiselles* and the Venus paintings appears relatively major. This is not to say that we can lump Ingres and Bouguereau together: their paintings were produced in specific circumstances, as were the meanings of their paintings as signs.¹⁰ For my purposes (introducing semiotics), despite

¹⁰ However, I want to distance myself from those who argue for a distinction between Ingres and Bouguereau on grounds of 'quality', between Ingres as an inheritor of the elevated ideals of 'high art' and Bouguereau, a *pompier* artist (this term was used for those 'official artists' of the nineteenth century who enjoyed great public popularity, gained prestigious government commissions and were favoured by the Academy and Salon juries). For Modernists, *pompier* artists produced *kitsch*, by which they mean debased, fashionable, tugging-at-the-emotions versions of 'real art' (see Greenberg 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' and the critical discussion of such a view in Frascina, *Pollock and After*). Thus, Ingres is regarded as having high ideals and major talent, however ideologically compromised his paintings were, whereas Bouguereau's ideals are considered to be debased by fashion and his talent minor. We have to be wary of such distinctions, which may be ideological impositions of retrospective evaluations.