

## REVOIR CÉZANNE

Lisa Florman • Revoir Picasso's symposium • March 27th, 2015

In celebration of the re-opening of the Musée national Picasso-Paris, I thought it might be appropriate to revisit the first major exhibition the museum staged after its inauguration in 1985. I'm referring, of course, to the 1988 show organized by Hélène Seckel around Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon*.<sup>2</sup> For those of you who missed it, let me briefly describe the installation. The exhibition was divided into three sections, leading up to the great canvas itself. The first room displayed various "prodromes," that is, works (such as the *Two Nudes* from the autumn of 1906 that were done by Picasso in the months immediately prior to the *Demaiselles*). The next rooms contained the core of the exhibition: the numerous studies for the painting, including nine of the artist's 16 sketchbooks from the winter and spring of 1907. These were then followed by a room of *choses vues*, works by other artists that seem to have mattered to Picasso—from Iberian sculptures to African masks to paintings by the likes of Cézanne, Derain, and Matisse—and that likely shaped, in one way or another, Picasso's thinking about the *Demaiselles*.

Although the exhibition itself was exceedingly well received, the section of *choses vues* came in for a certain measure of negative criticism. On the one hand were those who felt the room amounted to little more than a demonstration of "source-hunting," of that parading of compositionally similar works that art history has all too frequently (mis)taken for an end in itself. On the other hand were those scholars who objected to the inclusion or omission of particular works. In fact even William Rubin's contribution to the exhibition catalogue can be read in this light, in that he complains there of what he feels is the overemphasis on Cézanne in the critical literature concerning the *Demaiselles*. "Of the many prototypes or 'influences' proposed in the literature," Rubin wrote, "the one that emerges as the most exaggerated—precisely because of its absence at this critical juncture [he's speaking specifically about the artist's work on the large canvas itself]—is that canonically attributed to Cézanne... What could be less Cézannean than Picasso's compacting and abutting of his whores in a space that is compressed as much laterally as it is in depth? Such a formulation has relatively little to do with the comparatively relaxed spatial distribution of the figures in pictures such as *Five Bathers* [Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel], which has traditionally, since Golding, been identified as the Cézannean prototype for the *Demaiselles*."<sup>3</sup>

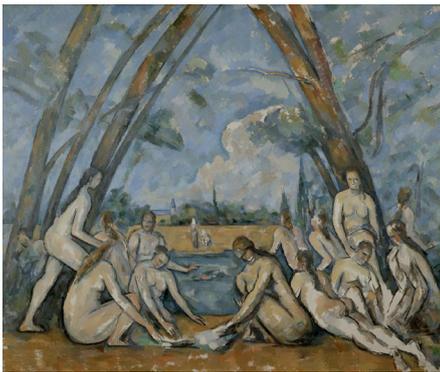
In his defense, Rubin was trying to dissociate Picasso's 1907 painting from the Cubism to come, which he felt was produced wholly under the sign of Cézanne. In this regard he

and I agree: the *Demaiselles* is *not* the first Cubist painting. However, I hope to persuade you over the course of this essay that the *Demaiselles d'Avignon* was still very much affected by Picasso's encounter with Cézanne. In contrast to Rubin, my complaint with the existing literature on the subject is that it hasn't made *enough* of the painting's relation to Cézanne, and especially of its relation to the late *Bather* paintings on which Cézanne had been working at the time of his death (fig. 1). In some sense my talk today is simply a bid to have those late Cézanne *Bathers*—as well as the artist's 1870 *Olympia* (fig. 2)—be retroactively included in the *choses vues* section of the Musée national Picasso exhibition. My claim is that those works were absolutely central to both the original conception of the *Demaiselles*, in February 1907, and the major revision the painting underwent in June or July of that year.

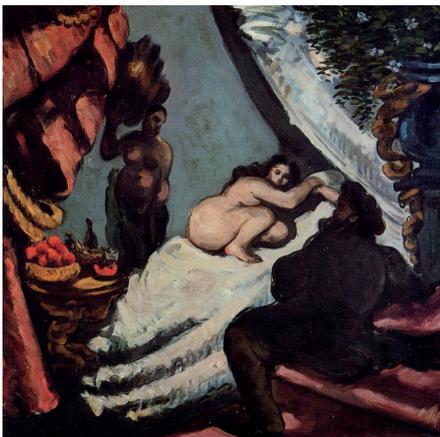
Conventional wisdom has it that Picasso could not have seen any of those late Cézanne *Bathers* before the opening of the Salon d'Automne in 1907, by which time the *Demaiselles* had already been completed. I will soon discuss some evidence suggesting that that conventional wisdom is wrong. First, though, I would like to turn back briefly to the prodromes from the 1988 exhibition—in particular, to the *Two Nudes* from the autumn of 1906, which I believe is a fairly explicit *hommage à Cézanne*. Recall that it was on October 6 of that year—coincidentally, just two days before Picasso's 25th birthday—that Cézanne, who had been caught in a rainstorm while painting, died of the pneumonia he'd contracted. In may be worth recalling, too, just how much Cézanne's reputation had been growing over the previous several years. Forty-two of his paintings had been included in the Salon d'Automne of 1904, and another ten were shown each of the following two years. In fact, the 1906 Salon was only halfway through its six-week run when Cézanne died, turning the ten paintings then on display into a sort of miniature memorial exhibition, a prelude to the much larger retrospective that would be staged the following year as the main event of the 1907 Salon d'Automne.

I am inclined to see Picasso's *Two Nudes* as in some sense an interpretation of the *Trois Baigneuses* now in the Petit Palais:<sup>4</sup> the *profil perdu* of the nude on the right seems especially reminiscent of her seated counterpart in the Cézanne. No doubt that work had made a particularly strong impression on Picasso in that it both had been included among the forty-two Cézanne paintings shown at the 1904 Salon d'Automne and was owned by Matisse (who had purchased it in 1899).

In their solidity, however, and in the enigmatic quality



**1. PAUL CÉZANNE**  
*The Large Bathers*  
 1900-1906  
 Oil on canvas, 210,5 x 250,8 cm  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art, Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach Fund, W1937-1-1



**2. PAUL CÉZANNE**  
*Olympia*  
 1870  
 Oil on canvas  
 Private Collection

of their gestures, Picasso's nudes seem perhaps even closer to the figures of the *Cinq Baigneuses* now in Basel.<sup>5</sup> Picasso may have known that work either from reproduction—there's a well-known photograph from 1908 showing the painter André Derain in his studio, with a reproduction of the *Cinq Baigneuses* clearly displayed on the wall behind him—or possibly first-hand. In the fall of 1906, the *Cinq Baigneuses* was in the possession of Ambroise Vollard, who both represented Cézanne and had recently begun acquiring the work of Picasso.

Prodrome or prelude though it may be, the *Two Nudes* still belongs to a very different world than does the *Demoiselles*. As Leo Steinberg long ago pointed out, “the contrast between the two paintings is absolute. The *Demoiselles* is all actuality, a clash of the sexes and a reciprocal shock,” whereas in the *Two Nudes* “all is privacy and anticipation.”<sup>6</sup> How, then, are we to account for this difference? If both paintings are responses to Cézanne, where did the explicit sexuality of the *Demoiselles* come from? The evidence provided by Picasso's sketchbooks suggests that the transformation was fairly abrupt. Throughout the late fall of 1906 and into the winter of 1907 Picasso continued more or less in the vein of the *Two Nudes*: carnets 1 and 2 contain page after page of substantial female figures, sometimes in isolation, sometimes coming together in pairs. The first sketches directly related to the *Demoiselles* appear only in February or March of 1907.<sup>7</sup> The beginnings of the project are marked by a sudden massing of figures and the vague suggestions of a room—followed shortly thereafter by the arrival of two male figures (specifi-

cally, a sailor and medical student (fig. 3).<sup>8</sup>

We might, I suppose, imagine that somewhere during the winter months Cézanne simply fell out of the equation—that, when the nudes became prostitutes, the *Bathers* were left behind. But the so-called “squatter,” the *Demoiselle* in the lower right-hand corner, suggests otherwise. As both John Golding and John Richardson have argued before me, her pose—however indelicate it may have become—still reads as a reference to the back-turned bather of the *Trois Baigneuses* owned by Matisse.<sup>9</sup> Still, the composition clearly underwent major changes between March and mid-July. Perhaps most noticeably, the male figures disappeared and the composition as a whole was reoriented—the action turning ninety degrees outward so that we, the viewers, were suddenly implicated in the work. Here I'd like to point out (as I have elsewhere at greater length) that, when the sailor and medical student were eliminated, *both* of their roles devolved upon us.<sup>10</sup> Although the *Demoiselles* now turn toward us, just as earlier they had turned toward the medical student, we are now also assigned a seat at the table, in the place once occupied by the sailor; note the re-appearance of the melon slices on the table at the bottom edge of the canvas. The polarity of external knowledge and initiation that had been given iconographic representation in the earlier studies is now handed off to us. We take it up in our own ambivalence—our simultaneous attraction and repulsion—to the solicitations of the *Demoiselles*.<sup>11</sup>

All of this is already present in the watercolor sketch now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.<sup>12</sup> But, of course, one other dramatic change still awaited the composition. Work on the canvas was apparently almost complete when, sometime in June, Picasso painted out the features of the women on the right and added in their place new, terrifying faces modeled after African masks. Almost any textbook will tell you that the precipitating event for these changes was the



**3. PABLO PICASSO**  
*Compositional Study for Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*  
 March/April 1907  
 47,7 x 63,5 cm  
 Kunstsammlung Basel, Kupferstichkabinett  
 Dépôt de la ville de Bâle  
 1967. Don de l'artiste à la ville de Bâle. Inv. G 1967.106  
 © Succession Picasso, 2016  
 © ProLitteris, Zürich

artist's visit that month to the ethnographic collections at the Musée du Trocadéro and his encounter with African art there. Apparently struck by the force of the objects on display, Picasso determined to invest the *Demoiselles* with a similar power, principally by giving mask-like faces to the two women furthest to the right.

I have no quarrel with that explanation, except that it leaves several questions unanswered. To those we asked earlier about the explicit sexuality and brothel setting of the early sketches, we might add these queries about the final

painting: Why did only the *masks* at the Trocadéro leave their mark on the *Demoiselles*? And why did they leave it only on the women *to the right*? We are, I think, no less entitled to ask why—given that Picasso had already seen examples of African art previously—the visit to the Trocadéro should have affected him in quite the way it did, or why he felt he needed to register its impact immediately, in the all-but-completed painting on which he had been working over the past several months.

I want to suggest that there was *another* precipitating event—one that occurred on or about June 3, 1907—which equally determined the course of the *Demoiselles*, particularly there on the right-hand side. According to the gallery's record books, now housed in the Archives Vollard at the Musée d'Orsay, it was on June 3rd that Vollard took possession of the last of Cézanne's three large Bather paintings, the one now in the Barnes Collection (fig. 1).

The other two *Grandes Baigneuses*—those now in the National Gallery, London, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art—had been part of a group of 17 paintings sold to Vollard by Cézanne's son four months earlier.<sup>15</sup> On *that* day, February 13, 1907 (all of this again according to the gallery's records), Picasso happened to be at Vollard's, delivering a batch of his most recent paintings and drawings. (On the ledger page, we can see that Vollard wrote a check to Picasso in the amount of 2500 francs for a group of paintings and drawings, and then shortly thereafter paid out much larger sums to Cézanne's son for a group of 17 paintings, all of which are carefully itemized.) I find it hard to imagine Picasso *not* having stayed to look at the Cézannes, perhaps especially the two Bather paintings, which, in their size (but also in their very oddity), are unlike anything by the artist that Picasso would have seen before. It hardly seems a stretch, either, to imagine him returning to the gallery to see the remaining *Grandes Baigneuses* when it finally arrived in early June.

Let me recap, then: throughout the fall of 1906 and early winter of 1907, Picasso had been thinking quite a bit about Cézanne's *Bathers*, but conceiving of them as figures of sculptural solidity and implacability, each of them more or less solitary, even when appearing alongside another. Then, in the middle of February, he sees two of Cézanne's late *Bather* paintings when they are brought from Aix to Vollard's gallery—and suddenly work on what will become the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* begins to take shape.

I think it worth mentioning, too, that Cézanne's early *Olympia* (fig. 2) was also in that batch of 17 paintings that arrived at Vollard's in mid-February. Knowing that helps us, I think, to understand how and why, in Picasso's hands, the bathers came to inhabit a brothel—note the curtained interior of the *Olympia* and the table with fruit (including a melon slice) there on the left-hand side—as well as to make sense of the demoiselles' association in the preparatory sketches with male figures who are fully clothed.

It's possible too that on one of his visits to Vollard's gallery, Picasso also saw Emile Bernard's photograph of the aging Cézanne in his studio, seated (rather uncomfortably) in front of the third *Grandes Baigneuses*—that is, the last one to make

the trip to Paris.<sup>14</sup> A copy of that photo exists in the Archives Vollard, and I think it likely that Bernard gave it to the dealer shortly after it was taken, in the spring of 1904, since Bernard had his first solo exhibition at Vollard's in April of that year, not long after returning from his visit with Cézanne.

Although I have no real proof for this part of the scenario, I like to imagine Picasso seeing Bernard's photograph in February of 1907—Vollard pulling it out during the arrival of the first two *Grandes Baigneuses* in order to give Picasso a glimpse of the third painting, the one that still remained in Aix. Whether or not that actually happened (or happened then), I am convinced that Picasso returned to Vollard's to see that third canvas when it did finally arrive in early June. Picasso's interest in Cézanne's *Bathers* is likely to have been all the more intense by the spring, since Henri Matisse and André Derain had exhibited works at the Salon des Indépendants—the Blue Nude<sup>15</sup> and *Bathers*,<sup>16</sup> respectively—which multiple critics had described as being at once “primitivizing” (specifically on the model of African art) and even more thoroughly indebted to Cézanne.

I hardly need emphasize that that third *Grandes Baigneuses* (fig. 1), the one now in the Barnes Collection, is the strangest of the lot. Among the many bizarrely painted and proportioned figures assembled on the canvas, two in particular stand out: the phallic-headed creature striding in from the left, a cascade of drapery trailing behind her, and the highly androgynous and no less facially ambiguous nude leaning against the tree on the opposite side. The first of those figures stands in close proximity, I feel sure, to the “curtain-raiser” at the left of the *Demoiselles*, whose face and body both appear to have been re-worked during Picasso's second campaign on the canvas. The *grande baigneuse* leaning on the tree to the right seems to have made an even deeper impression, perhaps in part because her raised elbows already echoed the poses of the centermost demoiselles. Framed by her arms in that way, the dark, disfiguring strokes of paint that substitute for the figure's face (even as they more nearly resemble the bark of the tree behind) must have struck Picasso with the force of revelation. In that moment, I imagine, he suddenly saw the point—if also the ineffectualness—of Matisse's and Derain's attempts to marry Cézanne's *Bathers* to the “fetishes” of *art nègre*. The two were not, after all, unrelated phenomena, one wholly unlike the other. Rather, Picasso must have felt, *both* entailed an encounter with otherness, with something deeply and disturbingly unfamiliar.

I am inclined to think that Picasso made his first trip to see the masks at the Trocadéro after seeing the odd, mask-like faces and other peculiarities in that third of Cézanne's *Grandes Baigneuses*. It hardly matters, though, which of the two events transpired first. The point is that both must have determined the final appearance of the *Demoiselles*. There would be no “African” elements to the *Demoiselles* had Picasso not seen the masks in the Trocadéro; yet I want to argue that he would have had no cause to re-work the painting were it not for the de-faced nudes of Cézanne's *Grandes Baigneuses*. Just as had the two other Bather paintings that were brought from Aix before it, the Barnes canvas forced

Picasso to reconsider his understanding of Cézanne. If the claustrophobic space and direct address to the viewer were already significant modifications to (and improvements upon) the initial, seven-figure composition of the *Demoiselles* (fig. 3), even they were insufficient to convey the intensity of the encounter—part fantasy, part nightmare—staged by that third *Grandes Baigneuses*. To rival *that*, Picasso seems to have felt, only something on par with the apotropaic masks at the Trocadéro would do.

“Cézanne’s anxiety is what interests us,” Picasso later explained to Christian Zervos, “—that is his lesson.”<sup>17</sup> I have tried to show that the artist’s separate campaigns on the *Demoiselles d’Avignon* were, among other things, successive attempts to get that lesson right.

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\* Some of this material was published previously in a special issue of SOURCE: *Notes in the History of Art* (Summer-Fall 2012) in memory of Leo Steinberg. See Lisa Florman, “Insistent, Resistant Cézanne: On Picasso’s Three Women and *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*,” 19-26.

1. The exhibition ran from January 26 until April 18 that year, and then traveled to the Museo Picasso in Barcelona, where it was on view from May 10 until July 14, 1988. It was accompanied by a two-volume catalogue, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1988).

2. Rubin, “La Genèse des *Demoiselles d’Avignon*,” in Seckel et al., *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, vol. 2, 463. As will become clear, I believe there are clear precedents in Cézanne’s œuvre for the “compacting and abutting” of figures in a space “compressed as much laterally as in depth.”

3. <http://www.petitpalais.paris.fr/fr/collections/20/trois-baigneuses>

4. <http://www.cezannecatalogue.com/catalogue/entry.php?id=541>

5. Leo Steinberg, “The Philosophical Brothel,” *October 44* (Spring 1988), 77. For the French ver-

sion, see Steinberg, “Le Bordel philosophique,” in Seckel et al., *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, vol. 2, 344.

6. The first sketch directly related to the composition of the *Demoiselles* appears on 32R of Carnet 2; see Seckel, et al., vol. 1, 133.

7. On the identities of the two male figures in Picasso’s early sketches, see Steinberg, “The Philosophical Brothel,” 34-43 [334-339 in the French version of the text]. Steinberg sees the pair as allegorically embodying an opposition between “the involved and the uninvolved in confrontation with the indestructible claims of sex” (43 [339]).

8. See John Golding, “The ‘*Demoiselles d’Avignon*,’” *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 100, no. 662 (May 1958), 154-163, esp. 159.

9. See my essay, “The Difference Experience Makes in ‘The Philosophical Brothel,’” *The Art Bulletin*, LXXXV, no. 4 (December 2003), 769-783.

10. In his extended review of the exhibition (as well as of Steinberg’s seminal essay), Yve-Alain Bois spoke of an oscillation between “proten-tion” and “retention” that “apes the sexual [act] and regulates the entire spectator-picture relationship” in regard to *Les Demoiselles*. By referring to the simultaneous attraction and repulsion

engendered by the painting, I am in some sense extending Bois’s terms. See Bois, “Painting as Trauma,” in Christopher Green, ed., *Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 45.

11. <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/53852.html>

12. For an image of the painting in London, see: <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/paul-cezanne-bathers-les-grandes-baigneuses>. For the painting in Philadelphia: <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/104464.html>

13. [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-musee-dorsay/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more.html?zoom=1&tx\\_damzoom\\_pi1\[showUid\]=2329&-cHash=5d6cbc3be8](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/events/exhibitions/in-the-musee-dorsay/exhibitions-in-the-musee-dorsay-more.html?zoom=1&tx_damzoom_pi1[showUid]=2329&-cHash=5d6cbc3be8)

14. <http://collection.artbma.org/emuseum/view/objects/asitem/search@/7/title-asc?t:state:flow=da594851-df0f-42af-b842-a80b79554521>

15. [http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=80246](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=80246)

16. Picasso, quoted in Christian Zervos, “Conversations avec Picasso,” *Cahiers d’art* 10, 1935, 178.