

Modern art : pablo picasso

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Pablo Picasso, one of the most renowned European painters of the 20th century, has passed through various stages in his art reflected in numerous paintings. Two of his paintings, “ Girl with Mandolin” (1911) and “ Les Demoiselles d`Avignon” (1907), refer to the Cubist period in Picasso’s art. The two works are in many ways similar as they have been painted by the same artist, carrying traces of Picasso’s crisp and thoughtful style, and refer to the same period in Picasso’s life and same artistic movement – Cubism. At the same time, the artist does not repeat himself in his paintings over and over again, so the two works are different in many ways.

The earlier work, “ Les Demoiselles d`Avignon”, is a group portrait of five prostitutes from this French town. They are naked, and their postures indicate that they are trying to be seductive. Even so, the women are represented in grotesque manner: their shapes are distorted, their faces are just a combination of features inadequately fitting one another, and two of the women look as if they put on rather intimidating masks on their faces. In fact, the painter here implied a connection to the traditional African masks that fascinated him at the moment when this picture was created. Picasso himself named “ Les Demoiselles d`Avignon” “ first exorcism painting” (MoMa).

The prostitutes are depicted as ugly, intimidating creatures that have little femininity despite their obvious wish for attraction. The specific Cubist forms serve to underscore this brutality of their looks. The setting of the brothel, as will become typical of Cubist works, is not explored in depth. Rather, it serves as a pale background for the picture that is simply there in order not to leave the girls hanging in the air by themselves. The background then

serves mostly as framing for the figures that take on the primary importance in the picture. The fruits on the table, the walls – all of this is only secondary to the group in the foreground.

“ Girl with Mandolin” (1911) is a much more Romantic image. Here the Cubist manner begins to converge with Abstract art, a tendency that is yet to assert itself. The form disintegrates even further, the surroundings are unclear, and only the girl’s figure stands out from the background of the picture, appealing to the viewer with its elegant, shapely form. The girl, much like Avignon prostitutes, is presented as a set of cubes, but these cubes unite to create a simple and elegant whole rather than a disgusting shape.

The mandolin, a musical instrument, is represented in a much more realistic way, but the whole environment in which it is placed creates a light air of surreal music. The viewer is seeing a picture that creates the impression of uttering a sound so that the audience can feel the sounds emanating from the work. The Cubist shapes are there not to make the girl lose her feminine shape and look ugly; on the contrary, they make her look like a celestial creature that is too elevated and unreal to be depicted in gross, realistic terms that will depict in detail the texture of her dress, color of the hair, etc. Instead, the artist presents a generalised picture of nearly pure femininity.

Thus, the two pictures are similar in the first place through their Cubist method. Among the styles developed by Picasso, Cubism is perhaps the best known, focused on dealing “ with envisioning objects from multiple vantage points at the same time” (Pablo Picasso). The composition of the painting as

an object consisting of several perspectives of the same object creates the peculiar angular form that is present in both “ Girl with Mandolin” and “ Les Demoiselles d`Avignon”.

At the same time, the later “ Girl with Mandolin” is in a sense even ‘ more Cubist’ as it completely leaves out the traces of realism, such as depiction of fruits on the table in “ Les Demoiselles d`Avignon” that are not broken down into the Cubist multiple shapes. The message of “ Girl with Mandolin” is totally different from that of “ Les Demoiselles d`Avignon”, as the first picture is a hymn to ethereal femininity, while the second is the grotesque portrayal of the five prostitutes who strike the viewer with their awkward forms.

Thus, viewers of the two paintings can trace in them the evolution of Picasso’s style as he progresses from the initial conception of Cubism to the well-developed idea of that style that has in itself become a certain canon for other artists. Cubism, with its emphasis on the sculptural form of the objects, is also focused on the unexpected representation of the portrayed figures. Like in many classical works, the artist strives for generalization of either attractive or unattractive womanhood, portraying its different poles.

The two paintings are a vivid example of how an artist can use the same method to convey two different messages, that of glorifying and denigrating an object, and be successful in both cases. Picasso in each case creates a vivid and memorable image that chimes in with the reader’s innermost ideas and perceptions.

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