

LOOK AT EXHIBIT A (frontispiece). As art historians we feel we should be able to say something significant about this image: to find a meaning in it, to explain why it looks the way it does. Most of us would assume that it is our specialised art historical knowledge and training that allows us to do this, and this is certainly true. But it is worth reminding ourselves that much of our understanding of art depends on our more general experience. This experience in turn is a product of our particular historical and social situation: our culture, our status, our gender and so forth. In other words, we should remember, in practising art history, that we are historical subjects too. An obvious example of this is the very fact that we see Exhibit A as a work of art. This is by no means a self-evident description. We take Exhibit A to be an artwork because we are part of a world which accepts Western aesthetic values. Yet, although we are part of that world, or have experience of its cultural products, and, therefore, immediately comprehend that Exhibit A is an artwork, there is still no certainty that we shall understand the image. After all, what do we see here? Five apparently unfriendly naked women with weird features and stylised body parts inhabit a shallow, fragmented and distorted space. Some viewers might turn away from the image, dismissing it as childish and not worth attention. Others of us might want to look at it more closely in order to see if we can make it meaningful, and it is at this point that a little art-historical knowledge comes in handy.

As it happens, Exhibit A is one of the icons of modern art. Surely every art historian, as well as very many interested non-art historians, knows that it is a painting by Pablo Picasso and that it is called *Les Femmes d'Alger*. It was painted in 1907. Some may also know that it is to be found today in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Let us pretend, however, that we do not know any of this. Assuming ignorance in this way is a reminder that, if we are to understand this work historically rather than passing an aesthetic judgement on it, our first move must be to identify and date it. Only when we have done this and put it in some kind of relationship to other works of art can we start to address what is particular to this image. So, the first thing that any art historian does is to give a picture a place in a historical sequence. We might do so by its formal characteristics or by its content, or, more likely, both. In this case, we might

compare Picasso's use of space, line and colour or his treatment of the female nude with that of other pictures. In order to come up with these comparisons we need to be familiar with a significant range of artists, yet the comparisons themselves need no more than close visual attention. Indeed, many art historians will perform this kind of operation seemingly instantaneously, given their mental archive of images and styles. So, let us make some comparisons.

There is, for example, a certain similarity to the all-over design of angular planes in paintings by El Greco, who worked in Spain in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Yet the narrative in our image bears little relation to the biblical and religious subjects that concern El Greco and formally the differences are greater than the similarities; the colours are less hallucinatory and the angularity more intense. The figures' character and composition have more in common with a Turkish bath scene painted in the mid-nineteenth century by the French artist Ingres, but while it is thematically similar it lacks Ingres' suggestive eroticism. This lack of sensuality and its formal approach brings the picture closer to the turn-of-the-twentieth-century French artist Paul Cézanne. So could it have been painted by him?

In Cézanne's pictures figures and background are fused for the first time since the so-called discovery of the perspectival illusion in Renaissance art. Cézanne does this in a way that indicates his knowledge of the illusionistic rendering of space (so we are never in doubt that his works belong to the history of art since the Renaissance invention) yet he does not use it as the structuring device for his pictures. Instead Cézanne's figures are woven into the picture plane like patterns in a tapestry. In our picture, however, the painter has gone even further than Cézanne in abandoning the sculptural modelling of his figures. They are represented by straight lines and overlapping planes in a way that makes them flat and weightless. The high keynotes of the colours in the picture are reminiscent of Cézanne's French contemporaries, for example Paul Gauguin, and of his successors, such as Henri Matisse. The image's background changes from the browns, pinks and terracottas that dominate its left-hand side via grey in the centre to blue with accents of green and orange at the right. The image, however, has nothing of the harmoniousness of colour and form achieved in pictures by Gauguin and Matisse. The fierceness of the figures and the spatial dislocations suggest quite the reverse.

There can be no doubt: the image was created at the turn of the twentieth century, and is related to the fashion for paintings of groups of naked figures that we see in the paintings of Cézanne, Matisse and Gauguin. It also shares their abandonment of the illusionistic rendering of nature in

favour of abstract figure and form. We now have an approximate date but no artist. One particularly striking feature of the image may allow us to get closer to finding a name. While the painting resembles a classical figure composition, there is nothing classical about its appearance. Many artists around 1900 used non-classical means to convey classical themes, such as showing human beings naked and in a state of nature, but this image is different. The right half of the picture differs markedly from the left. Not only are its colours cooler, the planes are smaller and are more jagged and dynamic in appearance. Most striking, however, is the difference in the depiction of the women. While the three figures on the left and centre are shown in monumental, classical-type poses and their faces are depicted in simplified archaic forms, the two on the right seem to be wearing masks. Their faces are simplified – one might say, distorted – into the most basic sign languages. Small ovals are used for their mouths; they have massive, flat-ridged noses with dramatic shading and their eyes are out of line. The daemonic character of the figures and the sign language of the masks has been seen as an echo of sub-Saharan masks while the women's faces on the left resemble archaic Iberian stone sculptures. This incorporation of forms to be found in artefacts from primeval and non-Western cultures points to Picasso. Other artists of the period were fascinated by these artefacts (which were starting to appear in museum collections following France's colonial conquests) but it was Picasso who, more than anybody else, tried to use their conventions in his pictures. The subject matter suggests Picasso, then. Does a formal analysis bear this out?

Formally, it is the radicalism with which natural forms, be they figures or spaces, are broken up into semi-abstract, shallow, shifting and tilting planes and this confirms the artist as Picasso. In 1909 Picasso and his friend Braque launched a modern style of painting that they called 'Cubism', and this painting clearly anticipated it. The figures and spaces are not yet disassembled, nor are the colours as monochrome as they would later become. The noses of the two women in the centre of the picture are drawn in profile although the faces themselves are frontal – a device which was to become a hallmark of Cubist depictions. Picasso began to develop this way of representing figures in 1906 and 1907. We have now come pretty close to making an attribution for the painting and giving it a date. Once they have got as far as they can in placing a painting by its style and subject matter, art historians use whatever documentary evidence they can find to identify artist and the date. Naturally, this tends to be more difficult the older the work of art is. From the nineteenth century, most works are signed and dated. Bills, letters and account books also help. In the case of the *Demoiselles* we have many accounts by visitors to Picasso's studio (for

example, the writer Gertrude Stein) that confirm the origin of the painting in Picasso's studio, and that he worked on the painting between 1906 and 1907.

What we have accomplished at this stage is the work of the connoisseur. We have an artist's name and a date for the picture. The connoisseurial process was empirical, involving close visual analysis and comparison; although it also revealed certain assumptions evident in the kind of judgement made, such as whether an image was harmonious or sensual or erotic. The most important assumption, however, was that there would be something particular to an artist and to his work, and this in turn presupposes a conception of art as specific to its time and place. But simply to register this is insufficient. Changes from one historical moment to another are not random, and so have to be explained systematically. The fullest articulation of such a system is to be found in Hegel's aesthetics which we introduce in Chapter 3.

For now let us return to Exhibit A. We have an identification, but does this mean we have uncovered a meaning in the work? The answer to this question will vary from person to person. Quite often those who engage in the connoisseurial task of identifying and attributing works of art take a biographical approach to their meaning. In the Western world we often hold the deeply ingrained belief that whatever the fruits of our labour, they will bear the traces of our unique individuality and this belief implies that the way to gain understanding of the meaning of a work of art is to relate it to an artist's personality and experience.

Many have tried to explain Picasso's *Demoiselles* in this way. It has often been described as an act of personal exorcism. Biographers have pointed to Picasso's anxiety about women at that time as the source of the painting's power. Picasso's original title was 'The Brothel of Avignon'. Thus Picasso practised his formal techniques not on representations of classical Venuses but on hardbitten prostitutes looking for clients. Biographers have pointed out that at the time the painting was done Picasso was afraid that he had contracted a venereal disease while visiting brothels in Barcelona's red-light district. The distortions of the faces of the women were a response, it has been argued, to the artist's anxiety and echoed the horrific facial disfigurements that people suffering from syphilis develop in its advanced stages. Other biographers have pointed to Picasso's strained relationship with his mistress, Fernande Olivier. 'How could he wrestle the whole tradition of European art to the ground with his mistress sitting lazily by, fussing over her toilette, spraying herself with Chypre, doing precious little housework (visitors were horrified by the mess), distracting Picasso with her maddening "little ways"?' asked Picasso's most thorough English biographer, John

Richardson. Richardson concludes from diaries, statements and letters, as well as from his own later personal acquaintance with Picasso, that Fernande was trying to get Picasso's attention by making him jealous: 'All the more cause for the misogyny that fuelled this *chef d'oeuvre*' (John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, vol. 2, London, Jonathan Cape, 1996, pp. 19–20).

For a formalist, like Alfred Barr, for example – who as director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York did more than anybody to make the painting into a twentieth-century icon – this kind of explanation would not do. For the formalist, an artist's personal experience is no more relevant to the significance of a work of art than the trees from which our simian ancestors descended are to the evolution of human beings. What matters to the formalist is where the picture is to be placed in the progressive development of art. The formalist focuses on its technical radicalism. For Barr, who put the *Demoiselles* on display in New York in 1939, the picture (together with Matisse's very different *Joie de Vivre* of 1906) marked 'the beginning of a new period in the history of art' (Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1946, reprinted 1974, p. 56). According to Barr, the *Demoiselles* mattered because it was the start of a shift in interest from using painting for the imitation of natural appearances to realising the expressive potential of art's formal aspect.

If asked to agree with either the connoisseurial/biographical interpretation or the formalist one, you may feel that you would want to reply: neither. On the one hand, to say that the painting does no more than reflect Picasso's private experience with women seems rather banal. On the other hand, the formalist approach seems to tell us nothing of historical interest. Surely a work of art has a wider significance? What about the meaning of its subject matter? This is what art historians who take an iconographical approach are committed to. Although they do not doubt that the formal appearance of a work is significant, they argue that a change in style indicates a change in content. It is not so much that Picasso changes the form in which his subject – the nude female – is depicted, but that his conception of female nudity itself has changed and it is that which generates the technical radicalism of the painting, according to an iconographer. Look, for example, at the two figures at the centre of the picture with their arms raised. They are represented in the pose of a very old classical image of female beauty, the pose of Venus Anadyomene. If we were to trace the history of this image in texts and pictures it would bring us closer to the meaning that female nudity has in this picture, the iconographers believe. Again, it is a matter of establishing a background – in this case the theme of the Venus Anadyomene – in order to fix what is different and distinctive about its use in a particular case.

The image Venus Anadyomene is based on the myth of Venus's birth. In his anger for being thrown into the underworld, Uranus's son, Cronus, severed his father's genitals. The severed genitals were thrown into the sea, which caused the water to foam, and from that foam Venus emerged. Thus her birth is not from a mother's womb, but she emerges beautiful and fully formed. The depiction of Venus's birth became popular in nineteenth-century French painting as a symbol of ideal female beauty. But in the images by Ingres and others her horrific origins are forgotten and Uranus' mutilated body has disappeared. Venus appears as a universalised, unspecific, unblemished female figure emerging from sea foam, with her arms raised, ostensibly to wring water from her flowing hair but also displaying her perfect form all the better to the viewer. In Picasso's *Demoiselles* the two central figures are presented to the viewer by the woman on the left who draws a curtain back to reveal them. Francis Frascina has argued that they call up the idea of the female body as the embodiment of beauty and pure desire. Yet no woman appears unblemished in this picture; far from it. All have more or less horrific bodily distortions (Francis Frascina, 'Realism and Ideology', in C. Harrison, F. Frascina, and G. Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 112–33). Knowing the traditional meaning of the pose of Venus Anadyomene allows us to become aware of Picasso's deviation from the tradition. His violation of the traditional ideal of feminine beauty seemed like a violent assault to his contemporaries. In contrast to the formalist interpretation of the picture as a point of origin for modern art, this iconographic reading interprets it as an act of fierce, daemonic destruction. The meaning you ascribe to the picture depends on the direction from which you approach it and that, in turn, depends on your interests.

You may still feel unsatisfied with our interpretation. While an iconographical approach explores the way that changing style is symptomatic of a changing conception of the female nude, it may seem a rather disengaged or impersonal conclusion. What, after all, is the point of all this intense study if works of art have nothing to say to us personally? To ask how works of art can help us find answers to contemporary questions is a dominant theme in art history today and approaches which start from such a position are the concern of the second part of this book.

Marxist and social art historians led the way in rejecting the idea that art requires disinterested contemplation, or that history can be practised from a neutral, objective stance. This was simply impossible, they argued – all interpretations are made from a standpoint and informed by particular experiences and interests. Instead, their own engagement with art gave priority to their concern with social inequality and exploitation. In relation to Picasso's *Demoiselles*, for example, such critics have drawn attention to

the role of prostitution in capitalist societies. The proliferation of prostitutes in the growing cities of the late nineteenth century were visible indicators of the way in which commodification and alienation were entering all areas of life, even the realm of love. The prostitutes in Picasso's image were also the focus for considerable social anxiety. Rather than being high-class courtesans of the kind represented as glamorous and tragic in Verdi's opera *La Traviata*, Picasso's *Demoiselles* are at the bottom of society: 'Picasso's subjects are humble brothel denizens, women who would have been on call, if not always on their feet, from noon until three o'clock in the morning, available to any passerby with a modicum of disposable income' (Anna C. Chave, 'New Encounters with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*', in *Art Bulletin*, vol. 76, no. 4, December 1994, p. 601). A generation before Picasso, Edouard Manet had painted a courtesan, *Olympia*, but while she catered for bourgeois clients, *Les Demoiselles* plainly serve a poorer class. Social historians emphasise that part of what made the image so disturbing is its suggestion of social slippage: the prostitutes undermine the traditional boundaries between work and sex, and their appearance in Picasso's work also mixes their lower-class clientele with the bourgeois elite who constitute the public for such works of art.

Marxist and social art historians' interpretations see injustices of past and present societies inscribed in the artworks produced in those societies. Feminists have taken this further to explore these injustices as they relate to women. Anna Chave's discussion of Picasso's *Demoiselles* is a good example of how feminists bring together a number of different approaches in order to address this concern. Chave's starting point is the horrified reaction that the picture received from male spectators. In her view, 'prostitutes and femme fatales admittedly make less than perfect feminist heroines'. Although 'the demoiselles can never function successfully as models of empowerment, they have, nonetheless, already functioned effectively as lightning rods for fear of the empowerment of women and people of color' (Chave, 1994, p. 610). Chave argues that the social slippages implicit in the picture trigger anxiety in male viewers. She also uses an iconographic approach in order to mount her feminist argument. According to Chave, the Venus Anadyomene motif in the two central figures means that a buried subtext of the image is 'the story of a woman coming to power at the expense of a patriarch whose authority was unexpectedly and irretrievably revoked. From a masculinist vantage point, this is certainly a horror story, but from a feminist one it could be, to the contrary, a fable or even a good omen of vengeance won against male tyranny' (Chave, 1994, p. 604).

The theme of castration then provokes a psychoanalytic development. A central theme of psychoanalysis is male castration anxiety. According to Freud, the female body appears in men's fantasies as a castrated version of

their own. Thus the female body inspires anxiety, provoking the unconscious fear in the male viewer that he too could potentially be castrated. In order to assuage this fear the female body can be fetishised, that is made unblemished, ideal and separated from any particular woman or social situation. Yet in Picasso's image recognition of this fear coexists with the strategy of disavowal implicit in the image of Venus Anadyomene. While the monumental posture of Picasso's prostitutes makes them phallic in appearance, and thus disavowing castration anxiety, the picture's formal characteristics cancel this fetishistic effect. 'The type of space', Chave argues, 'that *Les Femmes d'Alger* inaugurated or, rather, prognosticated is a shallow space where voids seal over, becoming solid, while solids flatten and fragment' (Chave, 1994, p. 602). The faceting of forms is a reminder to the viewer of the cutting edge of the knife. It forbids the penetration of the depth of the canvas's space on pain of castration. The significance of Picasso's painting, read from this perspective, lies in the way that it registers male anxiety about female power.

Postcolonial theorists also develop their interpretations from a contemporary concern. In their case it is not primarily the inequality of classes, or sexes, but of nations and peoples, the legacy of European colonialism. Postcolonialism in art history is not simply about non-Western artefacts; nor is it the straightforward tracing of non-Western influences on Western artists, but it is the telling of history from the perspective of the margin rather than the centre. So a postcolonial account of the West's use of non-Western art would discuss it as part of the colonial enterprise, since it is about the appropriation of other cultures and their misinterpretation in Western discourses, aesthetic or anthropological. Postcolonialists might also use other approaches addressing their historical question, but for the most part they turn to social history in order to explore the function of images and artefacts from non-European cultures in European art.

Patricia Leighton, for example, is concerned to reconstruct the forgotten meaning of 'Africa' in turn-of-the-century France in relation to *Les Femmes d'Alger*. She argues that the Iberian faces of the central figures in the painting allude to Picasso's own self-image as a 'primitive' Spaniard coming from outside the French classical tradition. The African masks worn by the figures on the right, however, summon up 'an imagined ruthless barbarity that the male modernist makes it his mission to confront' (Patricia Leighton, 'Colonialism, L'Art Nègre, and *Les Femmes d'Alger*', in Christopher Green (ed.), *Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 93). According to Leighton, 'Picasso simultaneously condemns the colonial policies that brought such masks to Europe, yet embraces the very stereotypes that would see African culture as a

recuperative cure to degeneration "at home" rather than abroad' (Leighton, 2001, p. 96). This ambivalence is symptomatic, she claims, of Europeans' attitude towards non-European cultures. Picasso valued non-Western artefacts as a primitive source for the regeneration of European forms and exploited it for his own ends; he shared the colonial discourse and attitudes of his day.

So, in Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic and postcolonial approaches the painting is viewed in relation to specific psychic or political interests. A semiotic account of our image would allow all of these interpretations discussed so far, however much they might seem to contradict one another. Its starting point is that images have no objective significance in themselves but acquire their meaning in the context of the sign systems within which they circulate. In other words, meaning is not simply there in the image waiting to be excavated, but is produced in the act of viewing. It is not the artist who creates the significance of his or her work, but those who look at it. This argument was advanced by Rosalind Krauss in her seminal essay 'In the name of Picasso'. Picasso's collages, she argued, provided the first systematic investigation in art of 'the indeterminacy of the referent, and on absence', and thus one of the works' pleasures was what she called 'hospitableness to polysemy', to multiple readings (Rosalind Krauss, 'In the name of Picasso', in Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1985, p. 39).

A strict semiotic reading, like Krauss', avoids interpreting art from a committed standpoint, such as a concern with class, or gender inequality. Instead it focuses on the conventional character of the individual elements that make up the image and the ways in which they acquire their meaning from the rules and conventions of representation. Christine Poggi has provided such a reading for *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Picasso's Cubism was impelled, she argues, by an urge to highlight 'the conventional rather than the imitative nature of representation' (Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 45). *Les Femmes d'Alger* quotes from disparate sets of symbolic images, such as the Venus Anadyomene, African masks, Cézanne's bathers and Degas' squatting dancers without unifying them into a single, coherent new meaning. Like Krauss, Poggi concludes that what Picasso is seen to be doing is providing a meta-discourse on art's language and significance. This is art about art, an image that reveals the way in which meaning is derived not from references to the world, but from other representations and the possible readings these present to the viewer.

In different ways, all these contemporary approaches share certain convictions. First, they all believe that artworks do not develop in an

independent and neutral world of their own, but are determined by their contexts, whether that be political and social (as it is for Marxism and feminism) or linguistic (as it is for semiotics). Second, these different methods all begin from a personal perspective. There is no authoritative vantage point from which we can, like gods, survey history and find an immanent meaning. Our own interests will always play a part in our interpretations. This means that it is not only legitimate to interpret artworks in the light of contemporary concerns, but obligatory. As we have seen, many contemporary approaches to art history can be applied in conjunction with each other. Feminist, psychoanalytic or postcolonial enquiries are often combined with Marxist and social art history, for instance. However, they can also be associated with a radical semiotic approach. In that case, the link to social art history is attenuated and the focus turns to the relationship between the image and the contemporary viewer. Most of today's art historians acknowledge that connoisseurial, biographical, Hegelian, formalist, iconographic and orthodox Marxist approaches have useful, often indispensable, contributions to make. Yet they refuse to accept that any of these analyses are fully adequate and they dispute some of their most basic assumptions about art and its history. This comes, as we argue in Chapter 7, at a price. The gain, however, is that there is no closure to the range of interpretations that can be brought to Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* — or, indeed, to whatever other images art historians turn their attention to. The one requirement, we hasten to add, is that there should be committed viewers with some sense of what constitutes a rigorous enquiry similar to, if not the same as, those encountered in the following chapters.

Hegel and the birth of art history

ART HISTORY in its modern form originated in Germany in the nineteenth century. People had thought about the art of the past before, of course, but they did so in a way which we would now say was unhistorical: namely, they looked, not for what makes particular works significant in their own right, but how far these works realised what were thought to be universal aesthetic norms. Art theory was taught in the European academies which had been established in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for the training of artists, and included discussion of the art of the past; but individual artists and schools (that is, works of art grouped according to their country of origin) were judged according to whether they had achieved a representation of ideal beauty.

The Italian artist, **Giorgio Vasari** (1511–74) is often called the first art historian. His *The Lives of the Artists*, first published in 1550, provided an influential model for the understanding of past art. Vasari's art history was not historical in the modern sense, however. In his view, art's development over time was cyclical, and he discussed the achievement of individual artists with respect to their place in this cyclical process. According to Vasari, art achieved its first highpoint in the golden age of ancient Greek art, declined in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, was revived by Giotto in the thirteenth century, improved by Masaccio, Piero della Francesca and Mantegna in the fifteenth, and brought to new heights by Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo in Vasari's own time. But while Vasari saw art change during each cycle, approaching ever nearer to an aesthetic ideal, he did not understand these changes as a result of particular historical or social conditions at work at the time when each artist lived. A historical understanding of art in the modern sense did not start to develop until the end of the eighteenth century; until that time, history was thought to be extrinsic to art in the way that earthquakes are extrinsic to it. Art's value lay in striving to achieve timeless aesthetic norms, norms that were elaborated systematically by such French art theorists as **André Félibien** (1619–95) and **Roger de Piles** (1635–1709) in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. When the University of Göttingen in Germany founded the first chair in art history in 1813, this was not the dawn of art history as we now know it. The man appointed, Johann Dominicus Fiorillo, was a drawing master and his lectures followed the tradition of academic art theory.