Pablo Picasso’s monumental painting Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (The Young Women of Avignon), completed in 1907, is one of the most important paintings of the 20th century, representing, as it does, the beginnings of modern art. It constituted a decisive assault on the past, on representations and the traditional conception of pictorial space, to establish a new aesthetic. Picasso (1881-1973) disliked this title, which was given by his friend André Salmon for its first public showing in 1916. For Picasso, it was Le Bordel d’Avignon, or simply mon bordel (my brothel), and the women filles (a term used for prostitutes at the time). Les Demoiselles or maidens was misleadingly euphemistic. When he showed his 8-foot-square canvas to fellow painters, critics, and friends, he was met with indignation, shock, and outrage; they were repelled by the ugliness of the women. At first, Henri Matisse laughed and considered it a hoax. Georges Braque (1882-1963) suggested that Picasso had been drinking turpentine and spitting fire, and André Derain reportedly predicted, “One of these days [we shall] find Picasso hanged from a rope behind his big painting...” Initially, for them the painting was brutal and incomprehensible.

During the past century, considerable effort has gone into making it comprehensible. The painting has been enriched from being viewed from many perspectives: art historical, philosophical, transcultural, and especially experiential. A longstanding question has been: is the painting finished? It may be unfinished in the traditional sense according to John Richardson, Picasso’s biographer. Its completion may reside in its psychological impact on the participant viewer. In Leo Steinberg’s classic analysis, he wrote, “without the mutual dependency of the aroused viewer and [Picasso’s] pictorial structure there is no picture.” It is finished only in the mind of the engaged participant. Picasso simply stopped working and eventually allowed it to be shown publicly; he never signed it.

Surprisingly, for many years, art historians ignored its subject matter, emphasizing instead its role in ushering in Picasso’s and Braque’s collaborative experiments in cubism. It was only when Picasso’s preparatory drawing notebooks came to light that renewed attention was given to the prostitutes themselves. In the notebooks (epigraph), the viewer can witness the transformation of a brothel scene. In an early compositional drawing (Figure), all faces turn toward a young man, identified by Picasso as a medical student (possibly based on his friend Cinto Reventós, who studied gynecology). The student enters the brothel from the left, carrying papers or a book (in other versions, he carries a skull). A sailor sits in the center surrounded by 5 nude prostitutes near a bowl of fruit. In the foreground stands a bowl with flowers. As the imagery evolved, Picasso eliminated the 2 men to find a more powerful means of expression, but he did not abandon his original pictorial purpose (epigraph). The impressionists, for whom prostitution was a genre, may have influenced Picasso’s choice of subject matter. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec painted a single file of prostitutes, gowns raised, standing in line for a medical inspection, and Edgar Degas painted others in their daily lives. However, for Picasso, a more likely source is the writings of the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), who proposed subjects suitable for a “painter of modern life.” Baudelaire, who himself had syphilis, seemed to anticipate Picasso when he wrote of the prostitute who represents “a perfect image of savagery in the midst of civilization...” He wrote,

In this foggy chaos, bathed in golden light, undreamed of by indigent chastity, gruesome nymphs and living dolls, whose childlike eyes have sinister flashes, move and contort themselves.

Baudelaire found beauty in the traditionally ugly and describes 2 ways of seeing, natural and surnatural. The surnatural involves a heightened perception and engagement, resulting in a sense of greater emotional connectedness. Art, deep prayer, and drug use can elicit it. Baudelaire sought the surnatural in viewing art. (Still he advised a friend against the use of drugs that lead to a distorted sense of space and time.) Picasso’s painting may be analogous to Baudelaire’s poetry. Friedrich Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy, popular among avant-garde artists in Barcelona, may have been another influence. Nietzsche wrote of a sense of primal unity that results from the shock of confrontation with stark reality. Picasso followed Nietzsche in creating a “piece of wild naked nature with the bold face of truth.” Such immersion in art seeks to bring about the sense of primal unity, the excorcism that Picasso proclaimed (epigraph).

In Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, 5 nude women, clearly prostitutes in a brothel, face the viewer; they do not interact with one another. The leftmost woman, shown in profile, draws back a curtain to reveal the others. The second and third women face the viewer and stare straight out of the canvas. The woman in the middle stands upright, but the one adjacent, shown with left leg bent, appears to be reclining if viewed from above. The portrayal of these 3 women is influenced by Ancient Iberian sculpture (third to sixth century BCE), which captured Picasso’s attention a year earlier in the Louvre. The mask faces of the 2 women on the right, one emerging through the curtains, the other squatting in the foreground on an ottoman or a bidet, resemble African sculptures or masks in the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris that so intrigued Picasso. The women’s bodies are rendered as flat, angular planes of color with little shading or modeling. A bowl of fruit—melon, grapes, pear, and apple—juts out from the center. The Iberian faces and African mask-like faces lend a menacing archetypal quality. The composition clearly emphasizes Picasso’s sexual intent. If a vertical line is drawn along the contour of the body of the leftmost woman to demarcate the...
prostitutes as a group, diagonal lines drawn from corner to corner across the redefined borders meet exactly at the genitals of the middle prostitute.

Fear of disease, disfigurement, and death from syphilis is believed to have played a role in motivating Picasso's painting.1 In 1907, syphilis was a frightening disease, much as AIDS is today. All adults were made familiar with its symptoms through health campaigns. Nineteen-year-old Pablo Picasso is said to have visited the Hospital Saint-Lazare in Paris, a special hospital for diseased prostitutes.2 There syphilis was evident in all its manifestations, including the dreaded and face-disfiguring congenital syphilis. It was a disease that most believed originated in the French Congo (Ivory Coast), lending a note of fear and caution about the African colonies.7 At the time, French imperialism in Africa was at its high point, and gunboats and trading steamers brought back ritual carvings and masks from Africa to France.

Ritual masks that were carved in Africa depicted syphilitic deformities to serve as magical protection against the disease, to frighten it off.7 Picasso himself had a bout of nonspecific urethritis8 in Barcelona that some have interpreted as venereal disease. Prostitution was tolerated in France, and there were a variety of establishments. Maison de tolerance was the term used for brothels that housed registered prostitutes who received regular medical inspections. Unregistered ones resided in a milieu de passe. Men higher up the social scale visited the more genteel maison de rendez-vous.8 Art historians have wondered whether the medical student entering the brothel (all eyes are turned toward him) may have come as a venereal disease inspector.9 However, Picasso’s stated goal was far broader than illustrating a brothel scene. The painting was acclaimed not for its subject matter but for its innovation and vitality; through its modernizing perspective, it seemed to re-energize art.

Art historians looking outward emphasize influences on Picasso’s work, pointing to the art of Paul Cézanne (Five Bathers), El Greco (Apocalyptic Vision—with its elongated limbs, arresting colors, and mystical quality), and prehistoric Spain and Africa. However, in his commentary on Picasso, Carl Jung looked inward.10 Viewing a series of Picasso’s paintings, he set them in the context of an inner journey, a confrontation with Picasso’s inner life. If so, Picasso draws the viewer into confrontation with what he faced within himself. Both approaches have merit. Art historians situate Picasso as a founder of modernism while Jung considers the ongoing psychological processes involved in finalizing his paintings. Picasso is known to have been driven to finish this painting and to have experienced considerable anxiety as he did so. His preoccupation with it ruptured his relationship with his mistress, Fernande Olivier, who moved out. But Picasso’s sources apparently were not the spontaneous archetypal images that Jung might seek in dreams. Instead he incorporated visual elements that captured his imagination on visits to art galleries and museums. Overall, his use of active imagination to incorporate these museum images does not diminish the painting’s visual and emotional force; indeed, it is strengthened by it. Interpretations emphasizing the importance of the painting in the history of modern art, the artist’s psychology, and its emotional impact on the participant viewer each offer legitimate critiques. But what of the inner lives of the prostitutes shown themselves? Although not Picasso’s stated intention, the painting may read as a commentary on the drastic lives of his 5 subjects. Prostitution is most often a desperate choice; it is not uncommon among drug addicts12 and others who are destitute. Despite literary efforts to romanticize the lives of prostitutes, prostitution is a leading cause of violence against women. Emotional dissocation is a common response to their daily lives, with reported increased rates of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression,13 and childhood sexual abuse.14 Regulation of prostitution has had limited success, and attempts to do so require considerable surveillance. The Swedish government’s approach, which criminalizes the behavior of the clients rather than that of the women, is gaining considerable attention because it has resulted in reductions in the rate of prostitution when combined with public education and victim support.15 Finally, what is the long-term impact of continuous sexual contact and abuse over many years? Research is needed into the neurobiologic consequences of prostitution. A starting point may be in studying the physiology of long-term interpersonal bonds in prostitutes.16 Are there long-term neuroendocrine changes that are correlated with prostitution? If so, do they differ from those associated with isolated sexual abuse?

For Picasso, sexual themes persisted in his art throughout his life. In his 80s, he completed a series of etchings of “La Celestina,” the aging procress, a reminder of the sexual solicitation of men that spreads syphilis anew.

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REFERENCES