

Books at the Borders of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that Picasso's landmark 1907 painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, is full of images of books and pages, especially at the borders of the canvas. The curving shapes which are traditionally seen as "curtains" can alternatively be interpreted as the white pages and brown paper wrappers of open books, rotated 90 degrees. This "visual marginalia" supports the interpretation of Picasso's famous brothel scene as a semiotic construction, befitting the painting's early title (devised by Picasso's writer friends), "The Philosophical Brothel". The painting also contains iconographic representations of textuality. A slightly open book can be perceived in the middle of the painting, and along the bottom border, an open envelope and writing paper can be seen laid atop the tipped-up table, under the fruit. I claim that Picasso's images of texts derive from his acquaintance with the text-driven, monumental novel, *Don Quixote*. I give special attention to the narrative Author's Preface to the Spanish literary classic, in which the author describes assembling quotations from diverse sources to compose the first and last pages of his book. Picasso visually represents this allusion by depicting pages at the left and right "ends" of his canvas. Other texts and images are considered as sources for the bibliographic imagery, which generally reframes this canvas as a fictive tissue of quotations, akin to the overabundance of texts that *Don Quixote* is reading in Cervantes's novel. Picasso's painted image of a blank leaf of writing paper and its envelope, finally, encourages viewers to see the painting as a letter of communication, for which we ourselves must provide the writing that would represent our interpretations.

THOUGH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO READ ALL OF THE SCHOLARSHIP devoted to Pablo Picasso's landmark 1907 painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (see Fig. 1), some conventions in the criticism remain remarkably consistent. The painting's basic scene is invariably described as a depiction of five women in a brothel, and it is generally repeated that the *demoiselle* on the left is holding back a curtain to give the viewer access to the nudes that occupy the brothel's interior space. I see the curtain also as a piece of brown paper, however, and this view occasions a thorough reconsideration

of the painting's imagery. Positing the plausibility of this single piece of paper makes it possible to perceive many images of pages and books in the painting, especially at its borders. I propose that this imagery derives from Picasso's deliberate reference to *Don Quixote*, a novel thoroughly shaped by texts, and that the textual imagery suggests new layers of meaning for the painting.



Figure 1. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)*, 1935–36, oil on canvas, 148 × 219 in. (243.9 × 233.7 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Picasso's “curtain” shape has venerable precedents in the history of the female nude, in paintings that Picasso certainly knew: compare the curtains, also pushing up to one side, in Manet's *Olympia* (1863, <https://>

commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edouard_Manet_-_Olympia_-_Google_Art_ProjectFXD.jpg) and Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque* (1814, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean_Auguste_Dominique_Ingres,_La_Grande_Odalisque,_1814.jpg). These paintings were showing alongside each other at the Louvre in January 1907 (MAHON 2005, 89), during the time that Picasso was engaged with his monumental canvas.¹ In these earlier paintings, however, the curtains are green or blue; a more fitting comparison for the palette and overall narrative context of the curtain could be Charles Willson Peale's famous 1822 painting, *The Artist in His Museum* (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:C_W_Peale_-_The_Artist_in_His_Museum.jpg).² And an even more likely precedent, in which the palette is even brown like in the "curtain" shape in the *Demoiselles*, is that of the curtain in the back doorway of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Las_Meninas_\(1656\),_by_Velazquez.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Las_Meninas_(1656),_by_Velazquez.jpg)). Picasso had surely studied this Spanish national treasure during his many visits to the Prado in the 1890s.

In any case, all of these curtains are more curvaceous than Picasso's. The contour of the "curtain" in the *Demoiselles* contains a curious corner, to the left of the hand, which does not look like part of a seamlessly flowing fabric. It is too sharp, and it seems to stay upraised in defiance of gravity. The overall shape functions, instead, like the corner of a piece of brown paper that is curling back as it is held open.

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1. Scholars tend to agree that Picasso had two main "campaigns" of work on the canvas: Amidst hundreds of studies in 1906 and 1907, he began painting in late 1906, and he returned to the canvas with gusto in March 1907.
 2. The precedent of the Peale painting enables us to imagine that it corresponds with Picasso's legendary visit to the Trocadéro Museum, where he had a powerful encounter with African sculptures in the spring of 1907. Also, some of Picasso's preparatory sketches include a skull, akin to the bones present in Peale's painting. Perhaps Picasso knew about this painting from books of American art owned by Gertrude and Leo Stein, whom he had befriended in Paris in 1905; the siblings became his close confidantes and even rented him a second studio in which he could work on the *Demoiselles* (RICHARDSON 1991, 474). Apart from such a direct connection, the painting could have been part of Picasso's art school curriculum, as it was the most renowned painting by this prolific American artist: While "the name Charles Willson Peale is not one immediately familiar to those outside the circles of American art history [. . .] it would be difficult to overstate his artistic prominence in the United States during the decades surrounding the turn of the nineteenth century" (ZYGMENT 2015).

Brown Paper

What could a piece of brown paper be doing in this painting? There are many possible interpretations. Paris merchants would wrap foods and other purchases, then as now, in brown paper. So, in accordance with the standard narrative of the painting as a brothel scene, a brown paper wrapper could indicate an appetizing and/or economic aspect of an encounter with a prostitute. In this interpretation, the leftmost *demoiselle* — who sometimes appears in sketches as a male figure (first analyzed in detail in STEINBERG 1988) — could be peeling back the wrapper (like the outer clothing?) from the other four human commodities soon to be consumed.

This framework of human commodification signals the enslavement of Africans, especially as in the colonialist, *fin-de-siècle* Paris brothel context. Some prostitutes who Picasso would have known [of] were from Africa. Many critics have discussed Picasso's participation in the colonialist zeitgeist and his likely exposure to photographs of African women in *fin-de-siècle* Paris as well as African figurative masks and sculpture.³ I have not seen comparable treatment of the interactions Picasso may have been having with Black and Brown women.⁴ The brown paper could signify a “wrapper” of skin as much as of clothing.

3. See especially CHAVE 1994, 606–8; FOSTER 1985, 45–6; BALDASSARI 1997; COHEN 2015; BLIER 2019, 193–221.

4. A possible source for such narratives is the fictionalized history set in 1907, *La Négresse de Sacré-Coeur* (translated as *Black Venus*), by Picasso's close friend from this period, poet-critic André Salmon; Picasso figures as the character Sorgue. In that novel, the title character is of mixed race, and while the narrative contains many disturbing racial dynamics, it foregrounds several characters of color and ends with a (parodic?) ceremony abolishing slavery. The details demand closer analysis. In the painting, the wrapper is being pulled back to expose the four figures, whose racial identities also could be said to be mixed. Two faces look Caucasian, and two faces look African (BLIER 2019, xii), but the darker-toned faces most often associated with African masks belong to lighter-toned bodies, and the second lighter-toned face has dots over one eyebrow as in the photographic postcard of scarification on a dark-skinned person from the Belgian Congo (PIERCE 2018, np; COHEN 2015, 69; thanks to librarian Ronald Murray for bringing the latter article to my attention). I am interested in how this complication of racial identity relates to Joseph Deniker's *fin-de-siècle* “objections to the concept of immutable racial categories” and his ideas in *Races of Man* about racial mixing as an indicator of “advanced” or “civilized” cosmopolitanism (DENIKER 1900, 4). These are tentatively discussed in Peter Read's

Brown paper alternatively could signify the commodity status of the painting itself: at that time, paintings were wrapped in brown paper for transport. Documentation of this practice can be found in a 1906 report of a “distinguished art collector of Paris and New York who for many years has had a virtual monopoly of the sale of the works of some of the foremost of modern artists” — the man brought “a large Daubigny” to a Boston dealer for authentication “wrapped in brown paper under his arm” (COBURN 1906, 312). Perhaps Picasso is pointing out the commodity status of this painting — or any painting — which would get wrapped up after sale. Or he could be symbolically peeling back the outer layer of the painting — that layer being the painted foreground and/or a physical, paper wrapper — to give viewers access to more recessed layers of the painting’s illusory space. Such a gesture reminds us that the brothel scene is, after all, only a painted representation of such a scene.

While I find these all of these possibilities intriguing, here I interpret this paper primarily as part of a book: a flyleaf, a dustjacket, or a piece of wrapping paper around a book that has been purchased or is to be mailed. This gloss is supported by the tradition of finding semiotic themes in the canvas.⁵ The interpretation occurred to me when I learned that Picasso’s writer friends published a literary journal in which each issue was bound in a dark cover.⁶ It was strengthened by my perception of other curling shapes, which I now interpret as signifying the pages of open books, at the sides of Picasso’s canvas. To see these images, one must be willing to reconsider other lines that have previously been assumed to be curtains or the borders

study of intellectual contexts for Picasso’s years leading up to the *Demoiselles*. Read concludes, “This [. . .] makes it all the more likely that [. . .] *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* [. . .] was aimed not only against traditional, Western canons of beauty, but also, to some extent, against philosophical and political systems which are racially hierarchical and culturally divisive” (2011, 173).

5. See KARMEL 2003 for a thorough overview of this tradition, starting with Daniel Kahnweiler’s early assertion that Picasso recognized that “Painting and sculpture are *forms of writing*” (202, n122) and, in the chapter “Signs”, linking key writings by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois to their historical conceptual contexts.
6. Guillaume Apollinaire founded and edited *Le Festin d'Esope*, which existed from 1903 until the summer of 1904, and which featured a “handsome brick-red cover” (RICHARDSON 1991, 332–33); André Salmon also published in this journal (*ibid.*, 319). I believe that I also read about other literary journals of the time being wrapped or bound in brown paper, but due to the COVID pandemic, I cannot verify this at the library.

of the room's interior space, when they have been given any figurative significance at all.

If we consider the brown shape of the first “curtain” as being connected to the rest of the brown curves on the left side of the canvas, we can make out the shape of a large book(s) with pages curving open, rotated 90 degrees so that the book covers double as the left edge of the painting. Similarly curving forms can be seen on the right side of the canvas, forming two books — now the lines are in white, as in the color of a book's pages. Viewed together, these upended, open books make the painting look “bookended” by texts (see Fig. 2). The shapes more obviously resemble books when they are oriented as if they are resting on a horizontal table (see Fig. 3). The images in the painting should be regarded in their proper orientation, however, as they make the scene now appear “between covers”

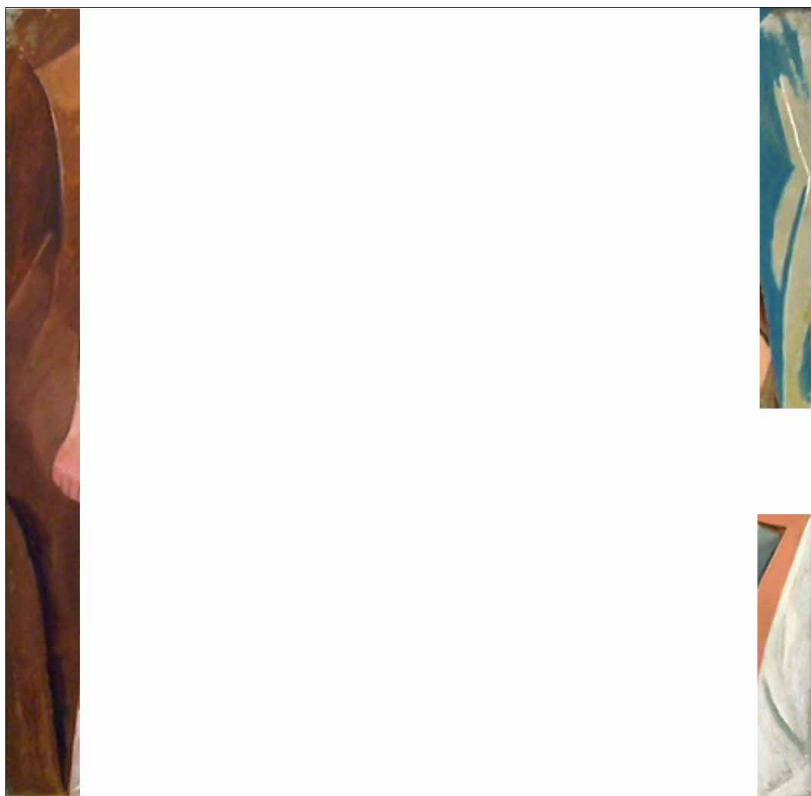


Figure 2. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, selective view.

Left border, open book(s) in *Les Femmes d'Alger*



Right border, open books in *Les Femmes d'Alger*



Figure 3. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, details.

— the ambiguity in this phrase between bibliographic material and sexual innuendo is appropriate. This sexually charged pictorial space becomes a narrative space, or a semiotic field. Perhaps this is why André Salmon wrote of Picasso's figures as “ciphers”⁷ — the *demoiselles* become fictional characters when they are between book pages, and as such they function as semiotic signifiers.⁸

7. “[T]hese figures are neither gods, Titans, nor heroes; they are not even allegorical or symbolic. They are naked problems: white ciphers on blackboard [Ce sont des problèmes nus, des chiffres blancs au tableau noir]” (English: SALMON 2005, 51; French: SALMON 1912, 43). Blier misquotes Hélène Seckel in saying that this characterization was from Max Jacob and suggests that this comment had to do with an emphasis on math and science because Jacob [sic] also dubs the figures “referents to the ‘principle as equation’” (2019, 238). But Blier leans on the “equation” while neglecting the “principle”. The philosophical idea of the “cipher” is not just about numerical digits, but also about a written code. A “chiffre” (translated here as “figure”) can be semiotic or scientific.

8. In this light, it makes sense that one of the titles that Picasso's poet friends created for the painting was *Le Bordel Philosophique*. The people in this brothel are ideas, or ideas of people. Indeed, Picasso claimed not to have used models

Literary Life

In general, Picasso is known to be “a literary painter” (BELL 1936, 532).⁹ He began spending time with writers as an adolescent, and curator Alfred Barr observed in 1946 that “his close association with writers, especially poets, which began in Barcelona, recurred in Madrid, and continues down to this day in Paris” ([1946] 1974, 11). Starting in 1904, and over the next three years as he was preparing for *Les Femmes d'Alger*, the tight *bande à Picasso* brought the avant garde poet-critics Max Jacob, André Salmon, and Guillaume Apollinaire to Picasso’s Montmartre studio. These were the writers publishing in the experimental journals, as well as in other Paris periodicals. Picasso’s door was marked “*Rendez-vous des Poètes*”, and he preferred their company to that of other visual artists. Picasso biographer John Richardson concludes that all of Picasso’s fraternizing with writers “enabled the artist to become vicariously a poet — a poet in paint” (1991, 333).

Gertrude Stein also spent many hours in Picasso’s studio, starting soon after they met in 1905. Picasso wanted to paint her portrait, so she came to his studio 80 to 90 times over a few months. As the two became close confidantes, Picasso also attended Stein’s Saturday night salons with other artists and writers (RICHARDSON 1991, 400). She and her brother, Leo, were known for wearing loose, brown wraps. Given that Picasso claimed this leftmost figure to have been a “medical student” in sketches (STEINBERG 1988, 40), and that Gertrude had studied medicine at Johns Hopkins University (RICHARDSON 1991, 394), it is possible to conceive of the leftmost figure as a conflation of the taller Leo and his medical student sister, removing their characteristic wrap (to reveal what about themselves?). Gertrude

while making this painting; the figures were purely ideational constructions (see BLIER 2019, 25).

9. Bell goes on to specify what he means: “again and again his pictures express an emotion that did not come to him through the eyes alone” (1936, 532). Cataloguer Christian Zervos accounts for Picasso’s literariness with reference to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s classic 1766 treatise, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*: “Picasso has been able to prove wrong the opinion of Lessing, which expressly restricted the task of description to painting and sculpture, in order to entrust to poetry the double task of evocation and animation” (ZERVOS 1951, xvii). Picasso’s strategies for animating the still image of *Les Femmes d'Alger* merit a separate article; here, it is important to note that Zervos is crediting Picasso with generally redefining art’s role by upending historically accepted, canonical prescriptions.



Figure 4. Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, 1905–6, 39 × 32 in. (100 × 81.3 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

had worn one while posing for Picasso's portrait of her (see Fig. 4). Now, the siblings-as-one could be pulling back the wrap on the painting they had made possible, by renting Picasso his studio and by buying his paintings.¹⁰

10. Blier suggests that the Steins were the likely intended patrons for *Les Femmes d'Alger* (2019, 343n20); she identifies Gertrude Stein as “the person that

Aside from befriending writers, Picasso collected, made drawings about, and discussed their books. In 1907, Picasso wrote the name of a Zola novel, *Germinal*, across a sketch page that also contained schematic compositions of the *Demoiselles* (see Fig. 5); he had made a sketch of the author himself in 1900.¹¹ He often had books in the studio: “Picasso’s small library at the Bateau Lavoir [his studio building in Montmartre, starting in 1904] ran the gamut from dime-store westerns about Buffalo Bill and Nick Carter detective stories to books by Verlaine, Rimbaud and Mallarmé” (MILLER 2001, 99). And in a postscript to a 1905 letter to his friend Jacinto Reventós, he wrote from Paris: “Tell me if you know Rabelais — [his] Gargantua you might know in Spanish, but what a difference. [. . .] *La Bruyère* and all these other classics from here. One of these days I’ll send you a book by Pascal that you might not know” (McCULLY 1982, 51).¹² In the time leading up to the *Demoiselles*, Picasso was clearly thrilled by the works that his new friends were recommending.¹³ This biography gives some context for my inclination to emphasize the interpretation of the “paper” in the painting as a cover being peeled back from a literary work. The painting itself then becomes the visual version of such a text. But which text?

One possibility comes from the convention of wrapping pornography in brown paper; this genre certainly correlates well with the brothel scene. Picasso’s most treasured book, in the time leading up to the *Demoiselles*, was the pornographic novel, *Les Onze Mille Verges ou les Amours d’un hôte-podar*, written in 1906 and published in 1907 by his friend Guillaume Apollinaire (RICHARDSON 1991, 464–65). Its details were likely the subject of much conversation between the friends. Apollinaire’s title is based on the Marquis de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*, which its recent translators declare

Picasso most likely envisioned to be its owner and principal viewer” (2019, xiv). The two dark-clad figures who “drop out” of the painting from sketches — see the link in the text below — could represent Leo and Gertrude Stein, standing and seated, respectively.

11. This sketch is archived at the Museu Picasso Barcelona, item number MPB110441. Picasso inscribes the image with Zola’s name, though he doctors the initial letter so that it could also read as an “L” and the subtitle therefore also can be read as Picasso’s sister’s name, Lola.
12. 22 February 1905, translated from Spanish by Francesc Parcerisas and Marilyn McCully.
13. Max Jacob reportedly “opened up Picasso’s mind to the beauty of the French language by putting him through an intensive course in French literature” especially championing Verlaine, and Guillaume Apollinaire later convinced him to admire Rimbaud above all (RICHARDSON 1991, 205).

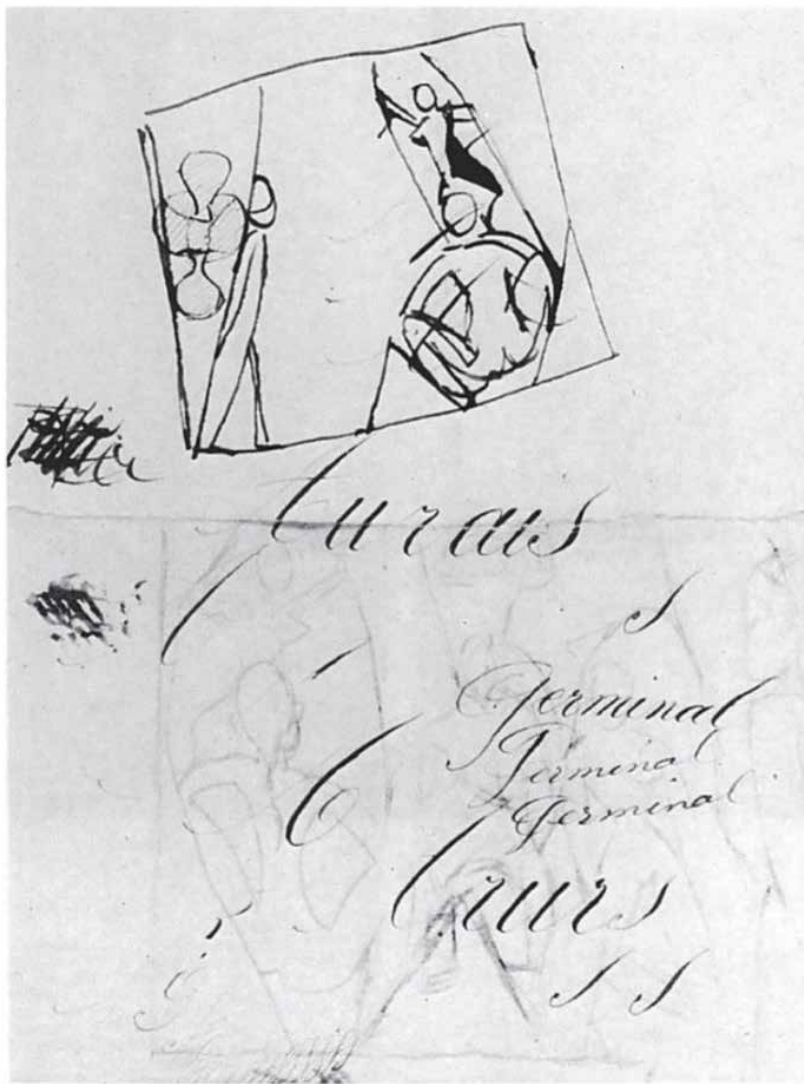


Figure 5. Pablo Picasso, *Three Figures with Lettering*, February–March 1907, Carnet 4, VIII R, private collection opp.07.478.

to be his “most extreme [. . .] uniquely disturbing [. . .] most obscene work of fiction” (McMORRAN 2016). Apollinaire’s novel perhaps even exceeds this precedent: at least one translation refrains from publishing significant

passages.¹⁴ The book's violent content makes it an appropriate foil for the *Demoiselles*, where the fracturing of bodies and the confrontational gaze toward the viewer have inspired some commentators to describe the painting as "a tidal wave of female aggression" (STEINBERG 1988, 14) and "a primal attack" (ROSENBLUM 1973, 45). Also, certain details of Apollinaire's novel appear illustrated in Picasso's painting. But this reference cannot account for the painting's imagery of multiple texts.¹⁵

Don Quixote

A more fitting source for the many books in the *Demoiselles* is *Don Quixote*, a single work dear to Picasso which itself signals a multiplicity of texts. The book imagery can be seen to illustrate the Author's Preface of *Don Quixote*, and to echo famous illustrations for the beginning of that novel.

It is certain that Picasso was thinking about this text when he was deeply engaged in making the *Demoiselles*, as evidenced by a postcard that he sent to "Monsieur Señor Don Guillaume Apollinaire" on 29 March 1907.¹⁶ Aside from the address, the card contains only Picasso's drawing of Don Quixote astride his horse, Rocinante, with a windmill in the background.¹⁷ The date of this postcard falls exactly in the time frame that Suzanne Preston Blier identifies as the most likely period of Picasso's most frenzied work on the canvas.¹⁸

Don Quixote is a novel of books; Susan Sontag sums up the title character's plight as "He thinks the world is the inside of a book" (2001, 109). The way I have already described the canvas as a semiotic field, owing to

14. "Certain passages in the later part of *Les onze mille verges* could be considered exceptionally violent. In order not to jeopardize the publication of the book as a whole, these have been omitted" (APOLLINAIRE 2001, 22). Some of these passages are summarized in footnotes, such as "Cornaboeux has unnatural and violent intercourse with the dead Mariette. Mony watches stupefied" (APOLLINAIRE 2001, 62 n).

15. An entire article could be devoted to the ways that Picasso's painting illustrates this key text.

16. The Spanish additions of "Señor" and "Don" to Apollinaire's French name confirm the identity of the drawing.

17. The postcard is reproduced in READ 2008, 43.

18. While she suggests 26 March 1907 as the probable date on which Picasso began his final major campaign of work on the painting, she is more sure of the period between 20 and 31 March, and also suggests that Picasso made further changes to the canvas between 26 March and 27 April (BLIER 2019, 74–5).

its enclosure between the pages of open books, could be seen as a visual representation of the world of the novel, or of Don Quixote's mind, being completely permeated by texts.

When the images of the open books are viewed in their original positions on the right and left sides of the painting, they can be interpreted as illustrating the Author's Preface to Cervantes's novel. In this short, engaging text, the author confides to the reader his distress as he seeks quotations to insert at the beginning, in the margins, and at the end of his book.¹⁹ He laments that he lacks quotations for the beginning of his book by authors beginning with "A, B, C" and also for the end of his book beginning with the last letters of the alphabet (ORMSBY 1885, np). Picasso depicts texts — visual representations of the Preface's quotations — at the left and right sides of his canvas: The "beginning" and "end" of the canvas represent the beginning and end of the alphabet.

To figure these books as analogous to the Author's ends of the alphabet is to make the canvas represent the comprehensiveness of the dictionary, which contains the words that make up all other books. This makes Picasso's project akin to Cervantes's, as "*Don Quixote* is an inexhaustible book, whose subject is everything (the whole world)" (SONTAG 2001, 110). And while Picasso was working on his *Demoiselles*, Gertrude Stein was formulating her equally ambitious project, *The Making of Americans*, about which Stein wrote, "There are millions always being made of every kind of men and women, every kind there is of men and women" and "This is now a history of every kind of them" (STEIN [1925] 1995, 200). She started working on this project in 1906, the year that Picasso finished his portrait of her and started focusing on the *Demoiselles*. The book's totalizing, universalizing impulse — to catalogue "every kind of men and women" — correlates to the global political vision that Blier posits as a motivator for the *Demoiselles* (2019, 1).

In the Preface to *Don Quixote*, an "unexpected" interlocutor — "a certain lively, clever friend" — reassures the author that he can still move forward, by inventing the texts he feels he needs, and by writing "musically, pleasantly, and plainly" without worrying about asking others to supply quotations.²⁰ Though this is a verbal prescription, it is described with a

19. I do not identify this "author" as Cervantes, as the narrator of the preface is a character who is a creation of Cervantes as much as, say, Don Quixote is.

20. The edition of *Don Quixote* cited here is the John Ormsby translation published in London in 1885 by Smith, Elder & Co., and generally considered the first scholarly edition of the work in English. The work is available through Proj-

visual metaphor: The friend's ready prescription will help "in the opening and shutting of an eye" (ORMSBY 1885, np). While the author claims to be calmed by this, he nonetheless narrates the encounter with the very name-dropping that is deemed unnecessary, and by including all of the passages quoted by his friend as meriting being omitted. The friend's advice about plain diction, moreover, is elaborated at such length that it teeters on sounding comically overblown: "take care that your style and diction run musically, pleasantly, and plainly, with clear, proper, and well-placed words, setting forth your purpose to the best of your power, and putting your ideas intelligibly, without confusion or obscurity" (Ibid., np). The author then follows his narrative preface with a series of poems — "Some Commendatory Verses" — that follow his friend's original prescription for composing epigraphs to legitimate the work. The author is even writing a preface against prefaces; he claims that "My wish would be simply to present [my book] to thee plain and unadorned, without any embellishment of preface or uncountable muster of customary sonnets, epigrams, and eulogies, such as are commonly put at the beginning of books" (Ibid., np).

In sum, the preface slyly works against itself, supplying exactly what it claims to be both lacking and unnecessary, yet doing so in a way that comes off as unaffected and good-humored. Picasso illustrates this witty, self-contradictory effect by rendering his images of texts difficult to decipher. The books are embedded in the painting with the sly wink of an inside joke. And all of Picasso's texts are, like the author's in the preface, both quoted and invented: Picasso models his books after *Don Quixote* just as Cervantes's author quotes his interlocutor. Picasso's books are fictions, wholly fabricated in paint, like how the author creates quotations fabricated in words.

The "Author's Preface" also can be compared to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the amount of effort that it cost its creator. Picasso is known for having made an enormous number of preparatory studies for this work — between 400 and over 800, depending on who is counting and how — in any case, more than for any other of his creations. Curator William Rubin even claims that this output is "without parallel, for a single picture, in the entire history of art (1994, 119). Cervantes's character of the author, for his part, claims that "I can tell thee, though composing [this book] cost me some labour, I found none greater than the making of this Preface thou

ect Gutenberg @ <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/996/996-h/996-h.htm> (unpaginated) and is notable for "Ormsby's decision to make his translation as close as possible to Spanish" (JONES 1981, ix)..

art now reading. Many times did I take up my pen to write it, and many did I lay it down again, not knowing what to write" (ORMSBY 1885, np).

The ambition that grips the title character, in the rest of the book, can map onto Picasso's goals as he embarked upon this project. "Crazed by reading (as so many of us still are), the knight is in quest of a new self, one that can overgo the erotic madness" (BLOOM 2003, xxxiv). Picasso, too, was striving for a new incarnation, a breakthrough that would finally establish him in the Paris art scene. And Picasso's work habits as he was wrestling with this mammoth canvas resembled Don Quixote's reading practice: Don Quixote "so buried himself in his books that he spent the nights reading from twilight to daybreak and the days from dawn till dark; and so from little sleep and much reading, his brain dried up and he lost his mind" (qtd. in SONTAG 2001, 109). In this period, especially, Picasso was known for working feverishly through the night, and "[w]ork on the *Demoiselles* condemned the twenty-five-year-old Picasso to a life of seclusion" (RICHARDSON 1996, 17). The preparatory period in late 1906 resembled the haze of engagement described in *Don Quixote*: André Salmon reported that Picasso "turned his canvases to the wall and threw down his paintbrushes. For many long days and nights, he drew. [. . .] Never was labor less rewarded with joy" (qtd. in RICHARDSON 1996, 15).

Though the superlatives associated with *Don Quixote* make it a fitting text to match Picasso's ambition — it is often referred to as "the first modern novel" (SCHMIDT 2011, ix) and the most translated or popular work after the Bible (STAVANS AND WILSON 2016, 1) — Picasso did not have to be a thorough student of the book for it to serve his purpose. The novel was associated strongly with Spanish national pride²¹ — Picasso "remained a Spaniard at heart" (RICHARDSON 1991, 295) — and he surely would have remembered it from his schooling. In Paris in 1905, the tricentenary of the text was celebrated as an international event, and the occasion was

21. The book gained special prominence in Spain after the challenges the nation had faced in 1898: "Spanish thinkers began to search desperately for the soul of Spain, and writers of all shades of opinion chose *Don Quixote* as the symbol of their country" (HILTON 1947, 315). Miguel de Unamuno called the novel "the Spanish Bible" (BLOOM 2003, xxiii) and Bloom expands upon the reference: "For Unamuno, [the aspect of the main character called] Alonso Quixano is the Christian saint, while [his manifestation as] Don Quixote is the originator of the actual Spanish religion, Quixotism" (xxi). Unamuno himself expands upon his thoughts, in his tricentenary book *Life of Don Quixote and Sancho* published in 1905.

marked by the publication of many new editions in several languages.²² French publishers were perhaps even more devoted to editions of the novel than Spanish ones, often publishing new editions in Spanish (HILTON 1947, 315), so Picasso could have encountered editions in Paris in Spanish and French. He could have refreshed his memory of the text by reading the Author's Preface and studying the illustrations.

Canonical Illustrations

The most famous illustrations for *Don Quixote* were — and still are — by Gustave Doré, for the 1863 Hachette edition. These became instantly famous and were used in many translations, including an 1875 large folio edition published by Pablo Riera in Barcelona.²³ Some editions, such as the Biblioteca Salvatella edition published in Barcelona in 1895, created images based on Doré's illustrations.²⁴ "Although the images had a few detractors, many of his contemporaries considered Doré's illustrations to supersede all other illustrations of Cervantes's masterpiece" (SCHMIDT 2011, 13). By 1870, even a small New York typographic journal was proclaiming, "The greatest work produced by the pencil of Doré is universally acknowledged

22. See MATTZA 2007, 165, n 1 for an admittedly incomplete yet still copious compendium of tricentenary publications in Madrid, Paris and Lisbon.

23. See URBINA 2005, <http://cervantes.dh.tamu.edu/dqiDisplayInterface/doSearchEditions.jsp?ftMode=phrase&ftFields=publisher&freeText=&year1=1500&year2=2100&places=All&languages=All&volumes=all&sizes=all&libraries=all&page=26&orderBy=1>.

24. Ibid., <http://cervantes.dh.tamu.edu/dqiDisplayInterface/doSearchEditions.jsp?ftMode=phrase&ftFields=publisher&freeText=&year1=1500&year2=2100&places=All&languages=All&volumes=all&sizes=all&libraries=all&page=30&orderBy=1>. This book could have been of interest to Picasso's family, as Picasso's father was then teaching at the same Barcelona art school where his son was studying, and this edition of the classic work included images from many famous artists, as it proclaims on the title page: "*Ilustrada con gran número de grabados y reproducciones de cuadros famosos de autores contemporáneos*" (Illustrated with a great number of drawings and reproductions of famous paintings by contemporary artists). The book's image of the priest and barber visiting Don Quixote in his covered bed (to see if he is sane or mad), on p. 16 of Vol. II (<http://cervantes.dh.tamu.edu/dqiDisplayInterface/displayMidImage.jsp?edition=602&image=1895-Barcelona-Administracion-01-006.jpg>), moreover, could be a precedent for the theme and composition of Picasso's prize-winning painting *Science and Charity* of 1897.

to be his series of illustrations to *Don Quixote*" (CONANT 1870, 1).²⁵ Over time, these images contributed to a softening of the perception of the book's cruel humor: "One wonders to what extent [. . .] the world knows not Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, but rather Doré's" (SCHMIDT 2011, 12).

Two Doré images from the original Paris Hachette edition are filled with books. One is the image often paired with the Author's Preface: It has books strewn all around the bottom half of the frame (see. Fig. 6). The other is the book's frontispiece, which was one of the most famous of Doré's images (SCHMIDT 2011, 14) (see Fig. 7). It epitomizes the novel with a portrait of Don Quixote sitting amidst his books, surrounded by the chivalric fantasy characters to which his reading has given rise.



Figure 6. Gustave Doré, illustration for the Author's Preface of *Don Quixote*, 1863, engraving by Héliodore Pisan, Paris: Hachette.

Beyond being an example of books at the borders of the image, this frontispiece shares various details with the *Demoiselles*. Note the "curtain" pulled back at the left. This fabric also has a double identity — not as a piece of paper, but as the hair coming from an oversized head on the floor (or at least it is contiguous with the hair). The overall image is as full of motion as Picasso's canvas. And the central seated character resembles the

25. This article is illustrated by a large image of Doré's frontispiece.

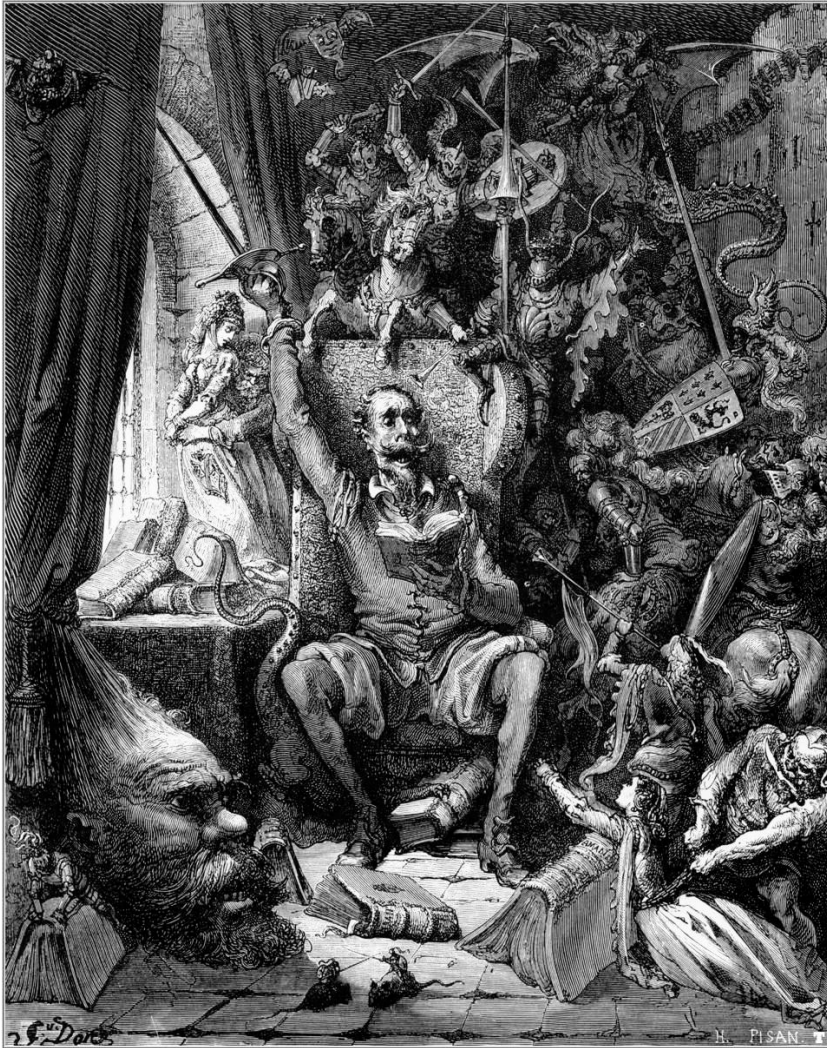


Figure 7. Gustave Doré, illustration for the frontispiece of *Don Quixote*, 1863, engraving by Héliodore Pisan, Paris: Hachette.

“sailor” that Picasso originally had seated at the center of his composition, in sketches (see <https://twitter.com/pablocubist/status/1179946009637654531/photo/1>). In this particular sketch, the *porrón* (spouted Spanish wine decanter), in front of the sailor, looks like a visual echo of the angles of the

open book in Don Quixote's lap. Don Quixote's activity of reading a book perhaps correlates to the sailor's perusal of the semiotic fantasy scene.

There is also an open book in the final version of Picasso's painting, akin to the one in Don Quixote's lap in Doré's illustration — it appears to be falling open in the middle of the canvas, slightly to the right, in blue and white (see Figs. 8–9). This appears as a still image amidst a highly dynamic visual field. This perhaps gives visual form to the idea that the author in *Don Quixote* can use textual allusions to help him “reduce to order this chaos of perplexity” (ORMSBY 1885, np) in which he finds himself. Alternatively, the act of staying still and reading, as Don Quixote is doing, can give rise to wildly dynamic and active flights of imagination.

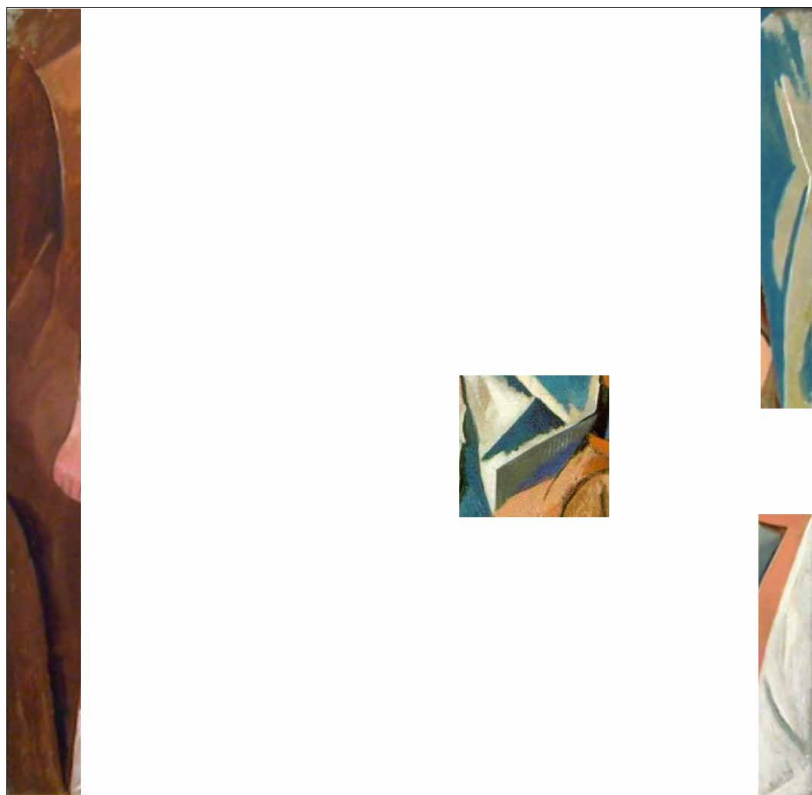


Figure 8. Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, selective view.

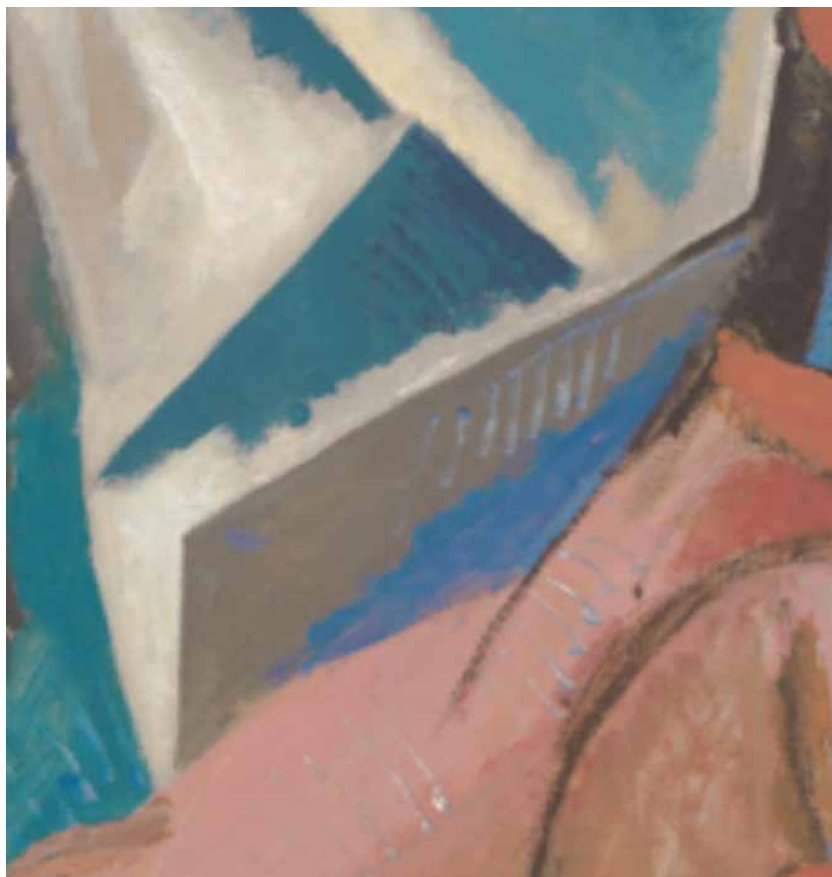


Figure 9. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)*, detail.

Because the position of this last book in the *Femmes d'Alger* appears slightly to the right of center, it does not totally correlate with the position of the central book in Doré's frontispiece. A central book does appear slightly to the right in Goya's image of a similar scene (see Fig. 10); the image was published in France in 1860, and Doré is thought to have used this image as a model (SCHMIDT 2006, 14). Perhaps Picasso knew Goya's illustration, too. Certainly this additional book in his painting is also positioned — as in Goya's scene — so that the book opens toward the central character, who looks out at us.

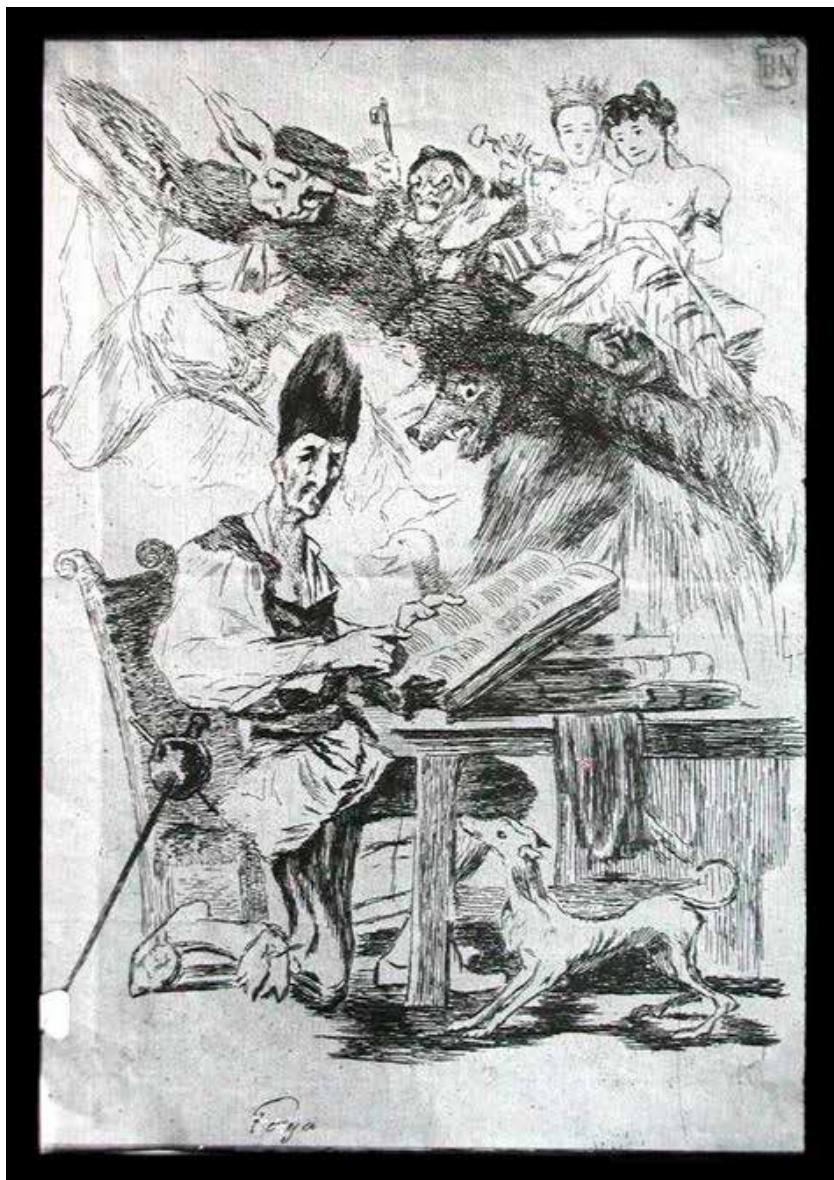


Figure 10. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, illustration of *Don Quixote*, 1860, engraving by Félix Bracquemond after a Goya drawing from c. 1812–1820.

A Final Text

One more textual image can be seen in Picasso's painting, and it reframes how all the others could be interpreted. An open envelope and writing paper can be perceived, under the fruit, atop the tipped-up table along the painting's bottom border (see Fig. 11). All of the scholarship I have read sees the white color on the table simply as a tablecloth; no scholar that I have found has perceived the form of an envelope opening toward the fruit, and a piece of writing paper directly beneath it (see Fig. 12). Picasso has not made it easy for this image to be detected, to be sure: He renders the contour lines of these forms incompletely, so that they stop just short of being solid or continuous. And the top corner of the table is still covered in what looks like a white tablecloth, which can interfere with the detection of the stationery. These details do not invalidate my claim; it in fact makes this part of the painting consistent with other parts. The hand of the *demoiselle* clutching a sheet, for instance, is rendered with deliberate gaps in the outline (see Fig. 13). This visual strategy could be seen as a correlate to the self-interruptions in the first "Commendatory Poem" after the Author's Preface in *Don Quixote*. There, many words are truncated after a few letters, leaving readers to guess the remaining, implied letters.²⁶

For this image of the envelope and writing paper, I can suggest several possible sources.²⁷ Yet I would prefer to interpret it here within the general

26. In the Edith Grossman translation, this is skillfully rendered as, for instance, "If to reach goodly read- / oh book, you proceed with cau-, / you cannot, by the fool-, / be called a stumbling nin- /" (2003, 11).

27. One is the letter writer in Thomas Hardy's 1894 short story, "On the Western Circuit". In this story, a man and two women create a deceptive love triangle through letters, perhaps like how Picasso's two central *demoiselles* relate to the painter, who was at the time of this painting entertaining mistresses in one studio while he lived with his girlfriend Fernande Olivier in another studio one floor away. Another is the "Davignon Letter", a piece of documentary "evidence" in the government's fabricated Secret Dossier for the incredibly controversial 1894 trial of Alfred Dreyfus. Such a reference would give previously unexamined political impact to the painting, and it would give new (political) dimensions to one of Picasso's preferred titles for it, *Le Bordel d'Avignon*. The colloquial meaning of "*bordel*" is a highly vexing, hot-and-holy mess; this word aptly sums up the atmosphere of the Dreyfus Affair. Having the name "Davignon" encoded in the painting's title is akin to the image of the envelope with the incomplete contour: Both are hidden in plain sight. An equally political potential reference is the note (and the tipped-up table) in Jacques-Louis David's famous *The Death of Marat* (1793), a painting to which Picasso paid direct hom-

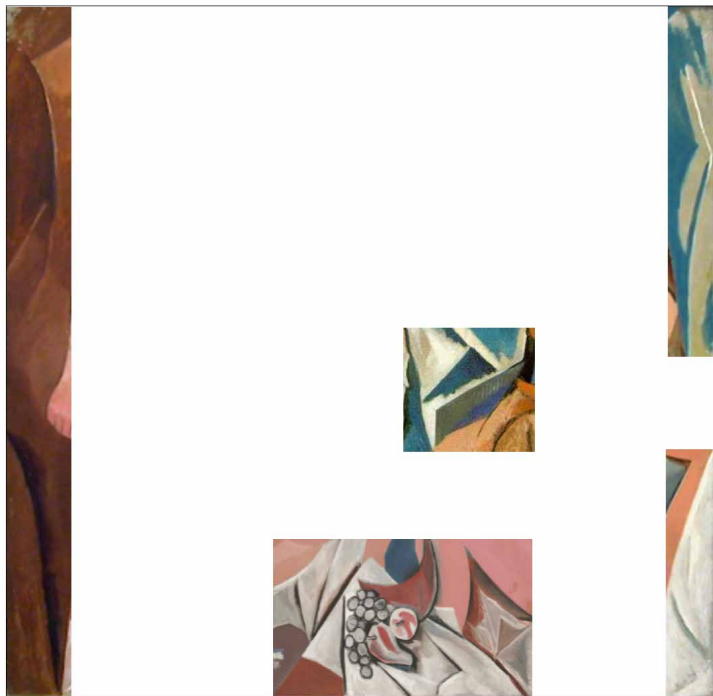


Figure 11. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1906–1907, selective view.



Figure 12. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1906–1907, detail.

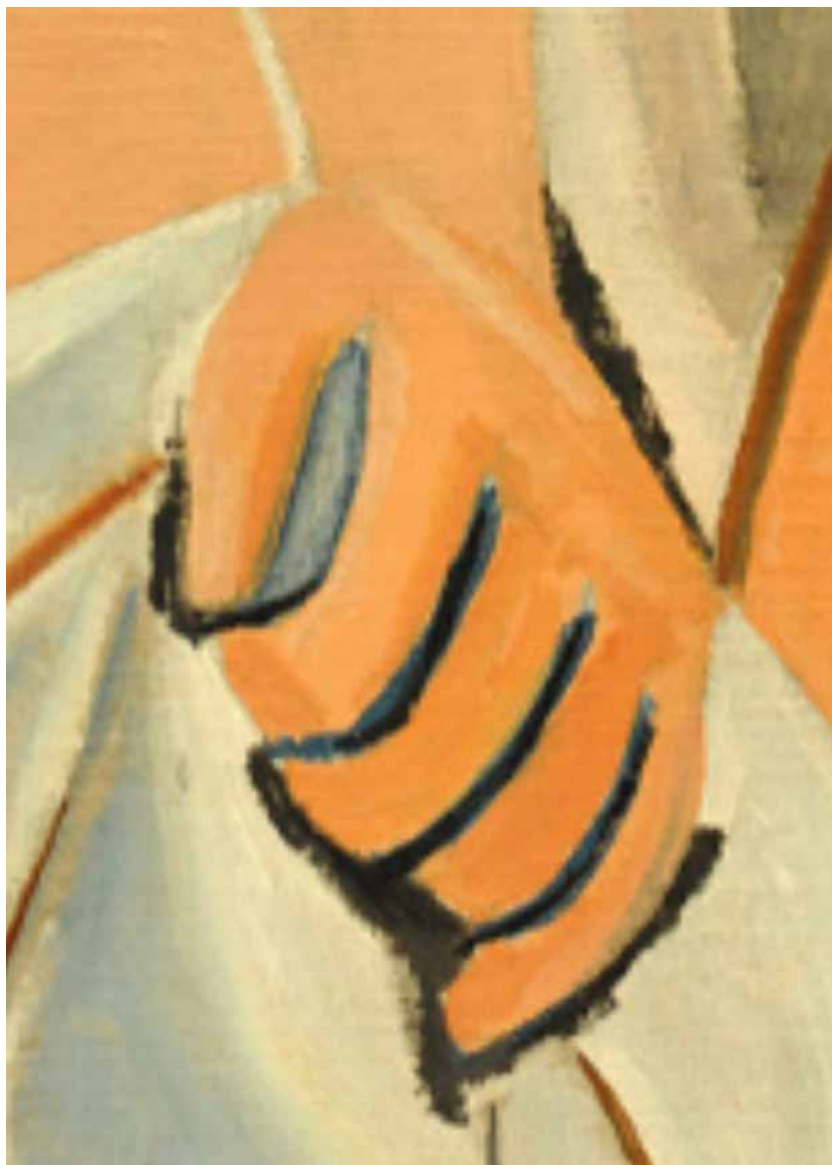


Figure 13. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1906–1907, detail.

age in a drypoint frontispiece in 1934. Another possible source is the blank note on the desk in Goya's "The Sleep of Reason" (1796) the most famous image from Goya's series of *Caprichos*.

schemes that I have already laid out. The writing paper in its envelope could serve, again, as a metaphor for the painting in its wrapper. By figuring his painting as a letter, Picasso may have been striving to connect his work even more overtly with the writings of his literary friends. And it could serve as the evidence of an “Author’s Preface” in the sense that Picasso is “writing” this painting to send a communication to viewers.

The most intriguing question about the image, finally, is the nature of this communication. Who is writing to whom? And what is being said? The paper is, as far as we can see, blank.

To fill in this blank, to write this text and thereby “read” this painting, we would have to come into contact with this paper — not cognitively, but physically at close range, as we would handle stationery. We would have to put pen to paper, touch what is in front of us. And then we would presumably fold the paper and tuck it into the envelope. Such invitations of physical intimacy make sense for a painting that is supposedly depicting a brothel encounter.

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