

Exhibition November 15, 2023 – March 4, 2024

Sabatini Building, Floor 2

Picasso 1906

The Turning Point



Pablo Picasso, *Nude with Joined Hands*, 1906. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
The William S. Paley Collection, 1990. © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023
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The project *Picasso 1906: The Turning Point* aims to look at Picasso's first major contribution to modern art through contemporary eyes. Picasso took the language and imagery of visual art and came up with a new figurative reduction. We're dealing with nothing less than a reinvention of the artistic experience. With Picasso, to say 1906 is not simply to cite a date. It is to identify a true "moment" in his long and complex career, one that has previously been overlooked.

Typically viewed as an epilogue to his Rose Period or a prologue to *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1906 was really neither of these. Everything is mixed up with Picasso, everything flows and converges, but in 1906 a personal poetics developed quickly and emerged from within itself.

Picasso's creative activities that year were undertaken in three successive times and places—Paris, Gósol (a village in the Pyrenees), and Paris again, offering more of a sense of continuity and self-reference than rupture—though offshoots and echoes of the Picasso of 1906 spilled over into the first months of 1907.

Picasso's visual language was in a state of constant process throughout 1906. A brief classical foray at the start of the year made way for another approach, one informed by El Greco, Camille Corot, Paul Cézanne, and, of course, his own inventive tendencies. Picasso's relationship with so-called primitive art first became evident in Gósol and the connection became more concrete and radical upon his return to Paris. At the same time, in pursuing a dialogue with art history and mass media, Picasso experimented with the idea of the scopophilic drive, while his interest in anthropometry enabled him to produce

figures that were gender-fluid, and to give sensuality to both feminine and masculine forms.

Picasso had previously approached the nude according to conventional artistic practices, but in 1906 he came up with the idea of the "body in representation." The relationship between body and culture—between the body and "transculturality"—was fundamental to his 1906 poetics.

This exhibition suggests eight ways to broach Picasso's work. First, by tracing his linguistic use of the body prior to 1906. Second, by considering his treatment of the "Golden Age" as an allegory for a new beginning. Third, by reflecting on the relationship between the scopophilic drive and the heritage of art history. Next, and meriting a section all of its own, by looking at the particularities of Gósol in relation to Picasso's stylistic innovations. A fifth vantage point comes from images of Fernande Olivier, Picasso's companion at the time, a signifier that changes significance. A sixth explores the idea of depicting facial expressions through the koine of "the primitive." A large room then affords expansive space to a seventh proposition, that "transformation" is in itself paradigmatic. A brief epilogue



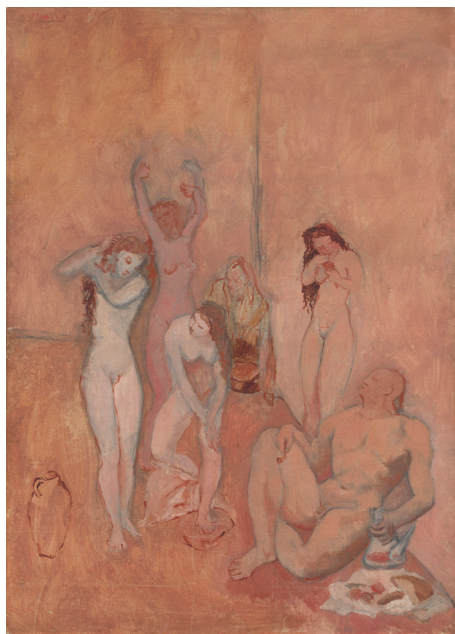
Pablo Picasso, *Les adolescents* (The Adolescents), 1906. Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris. Collection Jean Walter et Paul Guillaume.
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 © RMN-Grand Palais (musée de l'Orangerie) / Hervé Lewandowski

follows, identifying those elements of the Picasso of 1906 that lived on through the rest of his career.

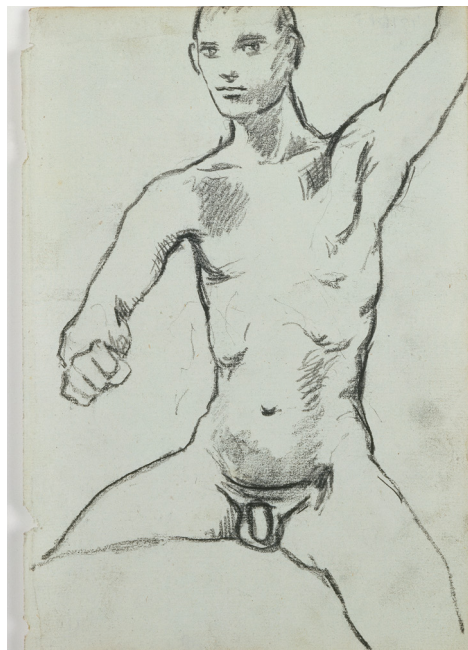
Works by Picasso are displayed throughout the show alongside items from different periods of European culture and various examples of material culture taken from African societies and cultures, objects that are now treated as “works of art.” None of these items were seen by Picasso himself, but they are representative of others that would have held his gaze and stirred his imagination, prompting the establishment of connections, references, appropriations, and dialogues, both formal and intellectual. The bringing together of these pieces is designed to show that the artist’s cultural and creative process in 1906 was a complex one.

Picasso in 1906

Picasso was still a young artist in 1906, turning twenty-five in April, though mature in terms of his aesthetic thinking. The new year found him torn between continuity and change. He’d left behind his fin-de-siècle bohemianism and negative thinking but remained attached to libertarian ideas that called for radical change to social relations, morality, and self-awareness. Expansive, sensual, and full of vitality, he wanted to redefine the artistic experience, a yearning for change he shared with the major creative figures of the time. He was still living in Bateau-Lavoir, in Montmartre, Paris. His relationship with Fernande Olivier had become increasingly intense and he continued to fall back on his poet friends, Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, and André Salmon, involving them in his creative evolution. He could count on the support of merchants such as Ambroise Vollard and important collectors like the Stein family and their cohort of North American friends. Picasso and Gertrude



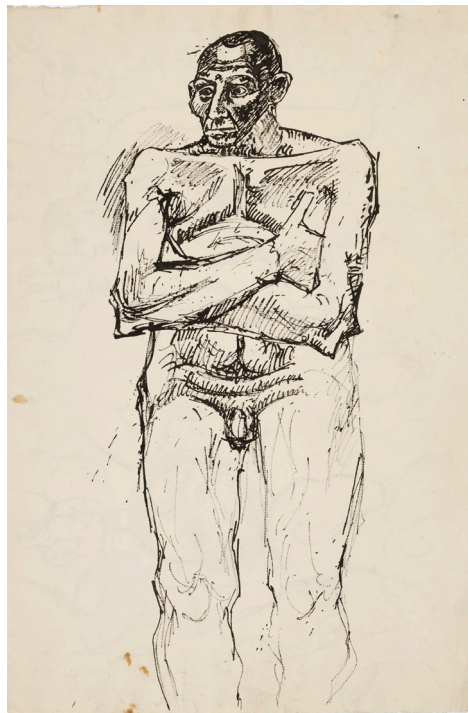
Pablo Picasso, *The Harem*, Spring-Summer 1906
 The Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. 1958.45
 © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023
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Pablo Picasso, *The Young Rider*, 1905–06
 Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso, Madrid.
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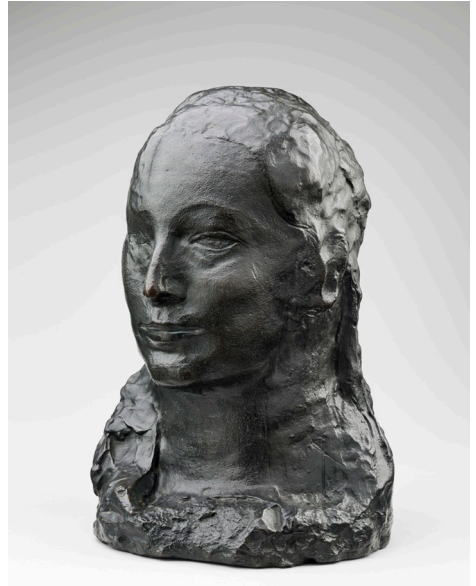
Pablo Picasso, *Two Nudes*, 1906
 Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum Berggruen.
 © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023.
 Photographer: Jens Ziehe © Photo Scala, Florence/bpk, Bildagentur
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Pablo Picasso, *Josep Fondevilla*, Fall 1906
 Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso, Madrid.
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Pablo Picasso, *Buste de jeune femme* (Head of a Young Woman), Fall 1906
 Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
 © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023.



Pablo Picasso, *Tête de femme (Fernande)* (Head of a Woman [Fernande]),
 1906. Musée national Picasso – Paris.
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 © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée national Picasso-Paris) / Mathieu Rabeau

Stein's relationship was transformative for both parties. They had intense discussions and embraced the notion of there being "intrinsic" value in a work of art. It marked the beginning of modern art for Picasso. He met Henri Matisse for the first time at the Steins' house. The Fauves had, from 1905, begun to nurture a relationship with so-called primitive art and develop an artistic language free of mimesis in the conventional sense. Picasso was still, in many ways, attached to conventional forms of figurative representation. But in 1906 he would find an alternative path.

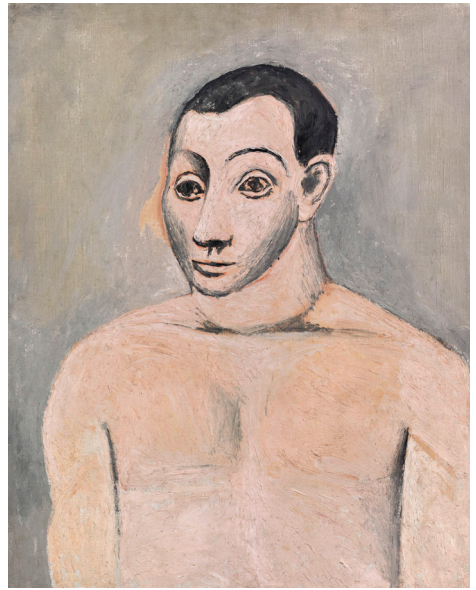
Picasso: A Sum of Cultural Parts and Otherness

The Picasso of 1906 was a seductive presence, but he was still, in the words of Fernande Olivier, a *desaxé*; that is, he was a disruptive character who retained all

the traits of an immigrant. Nevertheless, Picasso had absorbed numerous cultures over the years. While keeping his Spanish mother tongue and his Malagan Andalusian accent, he adapted thoroughly to Catalan ways in Barcelona, his first artistic context. He then fine-tuned his artistic temperament to Paris in two senses: as the capital of French culture and as the capital of the avant-garde. To this he would add the world of the Steins, expatriate North American intellectuals. Picasso's "transculturalism" was, then, a product of his biographical background and the nature of his work cannot properly be understood without acknowledging the number of different registers and references he'd acquired by 1906. Picasso based his relationship to the heritage of art history on the sum of his own cultural heritage and the principle of "art in and of itself," prompting an intense dialogue with "primitive art." None of the other Parisienne artists, Matisse included,



Pablo Picasso, *Gertrude Stein*, 1906. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Gertrude Stein, 1946.
 © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023
 © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence



Pablo Picasso, *Autoportrait (Self-Portrait)*, Fall 1906. Musée national Picasso – Paris.
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made their first incursions into modern art from a similar lived experience.

On another note, critics of recent decades have highlighted the importance of Picasso's personal relations, around the time of 1906, with artists and intellectuals who were homosexual and conscious of their identity. This gave him a different perspective on individuality compared to other artists of the Parisian avant-garde. When Picasso first explored modern art in 1906, he therefore did so from a position informed by otherness.

“Primitive Art” and Modern Art

The concept of “primitive art” was fundamental to the birth of Western modern art. However, the concept itself is actually an “invention” of European modernity, connected to the emergence of capitalism

and the implementation of colonialism. Rather than describe the cultural entity it seeks to define, it expresses a linguistic and cultural construct on the part of the person using the term and notion.

The apparent essentialism of concepts like “primitive” and “primitive art” is misleading. In reality, “primitive” can only be understood in opposition to “civilized,” and both concepts are cultural constructs rather than true existential absolutes. Nevertheless, the notion of “primitive art” was decisive in shaping the central poetics of modern art and, therefore, we must seek to understand it and put it in context.

With the “conquest” of America as a precedent, the myth of the “good savage” helped shape erudite thinking in the eighteenth century. From the mid-nineteenth century, with the birth of the fields of anthropology and ethnography,

any cultural arrangement that felt alien to the paradigms of advanced capitalism, industrial production, and “scientific thinking” was judged to be “primitive.” Peering through an evolutionary lens, art history considered all pre-Renaissance manifestations of European culture to be “primitive,” as well as any artistic expression related to popular culture; post-Renaissance, notions of “primitivism” and “primitive art” were collaterally attached to ideas of “exoticism.” Such thinking applied to Eurocentric conceptions of the “Oriental” and to ethnic minority or underdeveloped cultures within Europe itself. As colonization advanced through Sub-Saharan Africa, societies—some of them tribal—were deemed “primitive” regardless of their degree of complex cultural development, for the West’s belief in the “myth of progress” had them lumped in with prehistoric European cultures. From the perspective of colonial self-justification, such cultures had to be considered as “savage” or stuck in the past and thought of as immutable, collective, and anonymous; beholden to rituals, the “irrational,” the instinctive, the natural, and, by extension, “the feminine.”

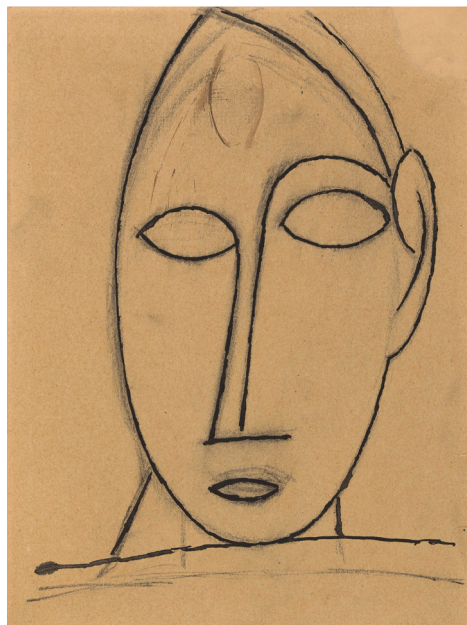
But many of the principles identified in the material culture of these societies were seen by avant-garde artists in France and Germany as manifestations of a primordial art that was not dissimilar to what they aspired to themselves. According to the colonial discourse, the material culture of these peoples had no aesthetic value whatsoever, other than within the aesthetic category of “the hideous.” In contrast, the first modernists—perhaps wrongly, but with apparently good intentions—considered objects in the material culture of these societies to be “works of art,” even when the concept did not exist in the original context in which they’d been produced.

Artists who merely appropriated the formal techniques of these objects have been reproached. Every case is different, but it’s worth recalling that in 1910 Apollinaire was already aware of the dangers of turning African “fetishes” and masks into “works of art,” calling for better knowledge of who made them and what function they served in the societies they came from. Picasso, albeit retrospectively, denied that his interest in so-called primitive art had been merely formalistic. Despite not knowing much about the original purpose of these items, he always ascribed to them a sense of the transcendental; he saw them as “intercessory” figures, something between individual subjectivity and an awareness of one’s place in the world.

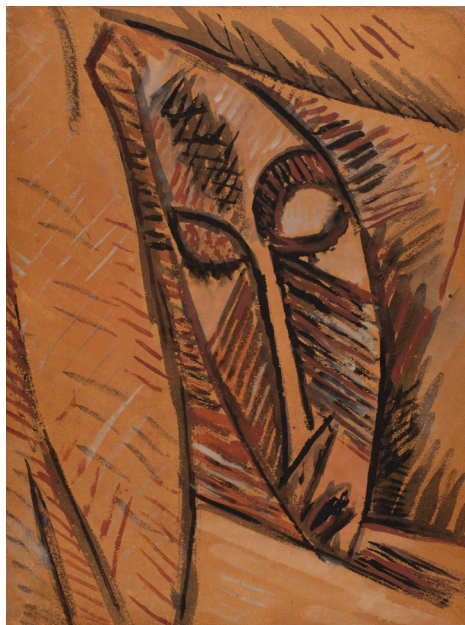
Nowadays, many scholars see a sense of antagonism toward colonialism in the way that certain modernists appropriated “primitive art.” Some of these artists, Picasso in particular, moved in circles where libertarian and anarchist thinking held sway, whether intuitively or pragmatically. The inspiration these artists took from their relationship with “primitive art” rested on an implied sense of subverting the established social order, despite the fact that they themselves lived in an environment immersed in the doctrine of the imperialist powers. Finding “authenticity” in “primitive art,” Picasso and his contemporaries hoped to push Western art in a new direction and thus reinvent the artistic experience.

Picasso, “Primitive Art,” and the Sense of Process in the Artistic Experience

When it comes to Picasso’s relationship with “primitive art”—and with what the early modernists called *art nègre* in particular—his trip to the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro (now the



Pablo Picasso, *Étude pour Femme aux mains jointes: Tête de femme* (Carnet 5) (Study for Woman with Crossed Hands: Woman's Head [Carnet 5]), 1907. Private collection. © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023 © Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art



Pablo Picasso, *Estudio para la cabeza de "Desnudo con paños"* (Study for the Head of "Nude with Drapery"), 1907. Museo Nacional Thyssen Bornemisza, Madrid. © Succession Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023 © Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Musée de l'Homme) in the early summer of 1907 is traditionally labeled the epiphany moment. But we now have access to more information, and it points back to 1906.

For a start, we know from Picasso himself that he made other, possibly earlier, trips to the Trocadero museum, alongside André Derain for example. Furthermore, when Picasso first arrived in Paris in 1900, the Andalusian pavilion at the Universal Exposition was located right beside the pavilions of Sudan and the Ivory Coast. He became acquainted with Iberian art long before the Louvre displayed some in 1904 and 1905, having been introduced to it in Madrid in 1901 by Azorín, a writer friend interested in the Cerro de los Santos sanctuary. Picasso first encountered Paul Gauguin's work around the same time, through the sculptor and designer Paco Durrio. Gauguin had just published

Noa Noa (1901), a journal relating his experiences in Tahiti, and Picasso's first portrayal of faces with the simplified facial features of masks appeared that same year. From 1901 to 1904, that's to say during his Blue Period, Picasso's relationship with Egyptian art is plain to see, with faces as masks appearing once again. The writer and painter Ardengo Soffici's recollections of leading Picasso around the ethnography rooms of the Louvre possibly date to those years, with Picasso said to have been drawn to not only Egyptian but Phoenician and Mesopotamian art as well. In the late summer or early fall of 1905, the Fauvist painter Maurice de Vlaminck had his eyes opened to *l'art nègre*. The sense of revelation soon spread among the Fauvists, with whom Picasso had begun to associate, and in late 1905 Vlaminck acquired a Fang mask that would prove particularly influential to the early Parisian

modernists. Vlaminck ended up giving the mask to André Derain, and we can only speculate as to whether Picasso saw it in Derain's studio in April or October of 1906, in other words before or after his stay in Gósol. We do know that while in the Pyrenees, from late May to mid-August 1906, Picasso reacquainted himself with Catalan Romanesque art. In early 1906, Henri Matisse acquired a Nkisi Vili figure from the Congo and a drawing by Picasso of a figure suggestive of *l'art nègre* is dated to the early fall of that year. People's ability to distinguish between "art" produced in Africa and Oceania was limited at the time, for the expression *art nègre* referred to both. Nevertheless, all these factors suggest that Picasso's relationship with so-called primitive art played a decisive role in his making his first incursions into modern art in 1906. It was indeed a dialectical relationship.

Expanding on symbolist transformation principles, Picasso was striving to make art that was essential and primordial. The sense of process in his work sometimes led him to solutions that resembled "primitive art." On other occasions the reverse occurred and "primitive art" served as a stimulus or source of inspiration. It has often been suggested that Picasso was fixated on one form or another of "primitive art." Nowadays we can better see that Picasso appreciated an aggregate of forms and liked to absorb and be in dialogue with a number of different registers of "primitive art" at the same time, ultimately deciding on more of a synthesis or digestion of common traits—what might be called a koine—of "primordial art."

Eugenio Carmona, curator of *Picasso 1906: The Turning Point*

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