

# Picasso

JEAN-LOUIS FERRIER

TERRAIL



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**SELF-PORTRAIT AS A GENTLEMAN**

**WITH WIG**

1896, oil on canvas, 55,8 x 46 cm.

(22 x 18 in.)

Barcelona, Museo Picasso.

*Opposite*

**BULL'S HEAD**

Paris, spring 1942, bicycle handlebars  
and saddle, 33,5 x 43,5 x 19 cm.

(13 x 17 x 7 in.)

Paris, Musée Picasso.

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**NUDE**

1908-1909, oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm.

(39 x 32 in.)

Saint Petersburg, Hermitage Museum.

*Cover illustration*

**PORTRAIT OF MARIE-THÉRÈSE**

Oil on canvas.

Paris, Musée Picasso.

Photo. RMN / B. Hatala.

Editors: Jean-Claude Dubost and Jean-François Gonthier  
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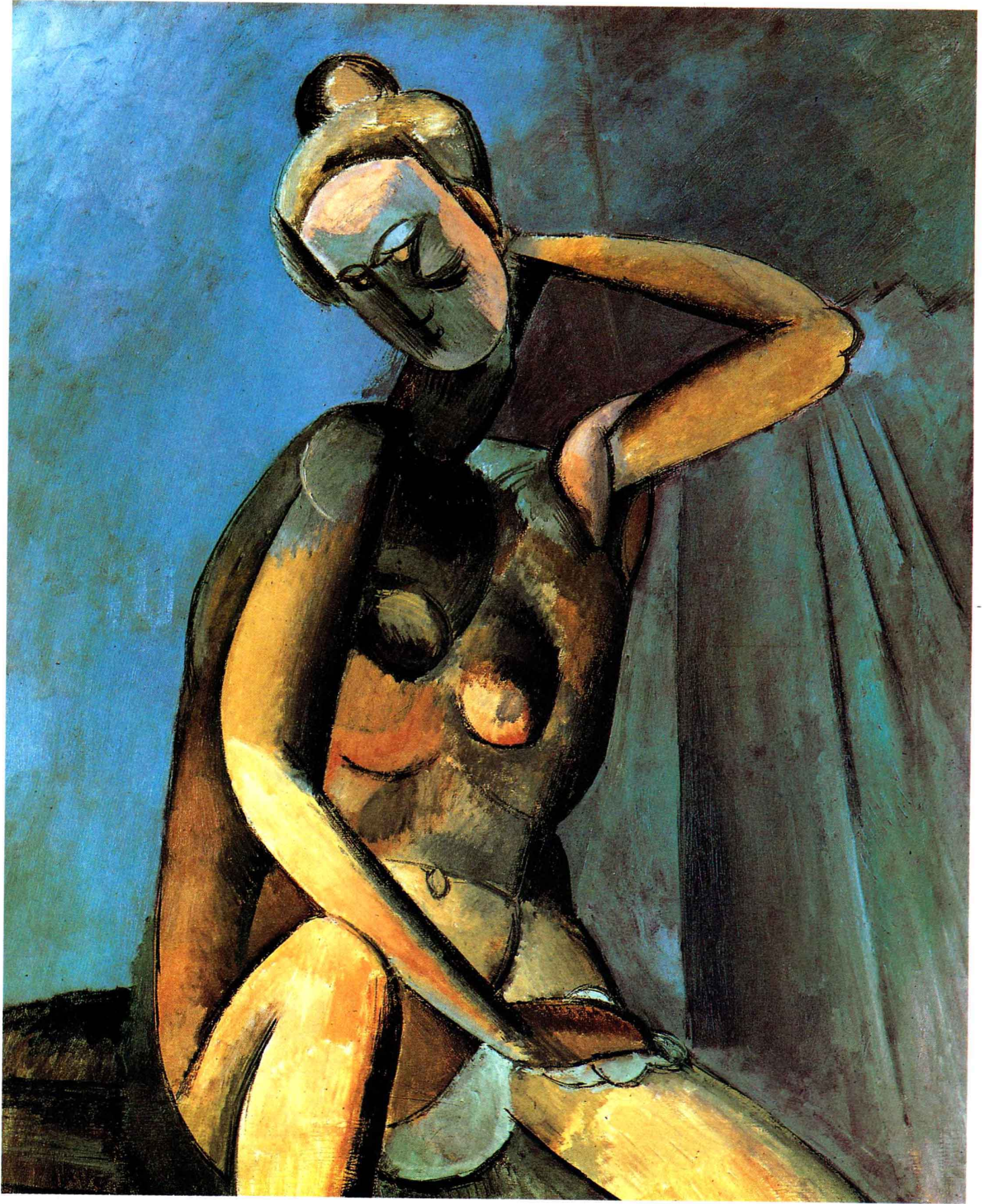
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## INTRODUCTION

# THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUATION-PAINTING

In October 1907, a short, stocky, black-haired young man with piercing eyes could be seen roaming through the narrow streets of Montmartre, visibly prey to an extreme loneliness. He was an artist, a painter, and he was living the most portentous hours of his life. His name was Pablo Picasso. It would have surprised none of his contemporaries to have found him hanging from the rafters of his studio at 13, rue Ravignan – self-judged and executed by his own hand for the crime of having killed Beauty.

During two sessions of intense work, in February and July of that year, he had painted a major eight-foot square composition entitled *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*. This picture, which depicted five ochre-coloured female nudes posed against a parted blue curtain, was so radically iconoclastic, so totally disconcerting, that even his closest friends could not help expressing disapproval when they first saw it. Because the subject matter had been inspired by the prostitutes in a brothel in the Carrer d'Avinyo – a street in Barcelona not far from where Picasso had lived as an adolescent – Guillaume Apollinaire, no less dismayed than the others, mockingly called it the artist's «philosophical brothel.» Braque, for his part, no doubt thinking of the brawny fire-eaters who exercised their skills along boulevard de Clichy, at the foot of Montmartre hill, told him: «Look,

### STANDING NUDE IN PROFILE

(detail)

1907, pastel and gouache,

62.5 x 48 cm. (25 x 19 in.)

Paris, Musée Picasso.

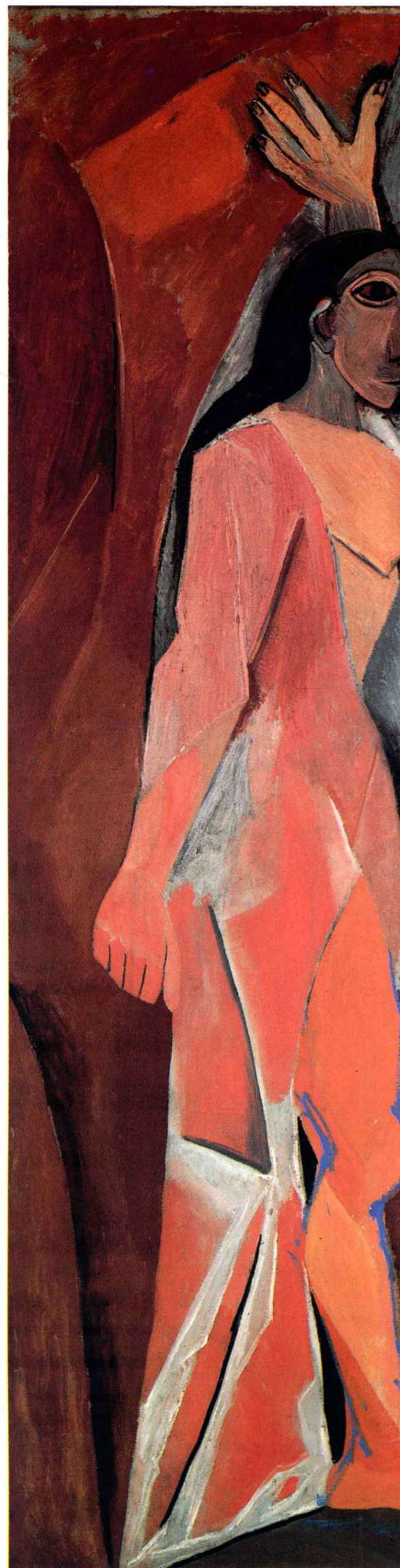
**LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON**

Paris, June-July 1907, oil on canvas,  
243.9 x 233.7 cm. (96 x 92 in.)

New York, Museum of Modern Art,

Donated by Lillie P. Bliss.

(detail p. 15).









Pablo, this painting of yours, it's like making us eat tow and drink petrol to spit fire!»

Even Matisse, whose Fauve extravagance had outraged the public and critics at the Salon d'Automne two years before, called for vengeance; in his opinion, Picasso had dishonoured painting. Meanwhile, writing from Moscow, the Russian collector Sergei Ivanovich Chtchukin, who already owned a number of the artist's works, asked concernedly: «Has Picasso really gone mad?»

After having long remained rolled up and stored in the artist's various studios, this landmark picture is today the pride of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which purchased it in 1939 for what was then the fabulous sum of 28,000 dollars. The composition was methodically prepared through scores of preliminary sketches and studies; in some of them, we see the women in the presence of a sailor and a medical student holding a skull, recalling the grim Vanitas and *memento mori* («Remember death!») paintings of the past. Ultimately, however, Picasso retained only the five female figures, yet the *Demoiselles* remains a powerful allegory combining sex, vice and death. In the final analysis, what shocked his friends and fellow-painters the most was not so much the subject matter of the painting as the way in which it had been painted.

The treatment was indeed primitive and archaic, the paint was applied in block-like masses. The five figures seemed to have been hacked and hewn into existence, standing defiantly with their massive chins, oversize ears and bulging eyes menacingly returning the viewer's gaze. They resembled the ill-fitting planks of a wooden fence through which an awesome emptiness could be glimpsed. The angular bodies pressed flat against the picture plane, overlapping like scattered playing cards, the oval faces shown frontally, yet with noses in profile, the denial of linear perspective, everything about this picture challenged the rules by which painters had been working since the Italian Renaissance. Who can blame Picasso's detractors? After careful preparation and with deliberate premeditation, he had perpetrated the perfect pictorial crime.

As we will see in his much later series inspired by Velázquez's *Las meninas* and Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Picasso often liked to measure his own capacities against the great masters of the past. Thus, his *Demoiselles* was the result of a dialogue with Ingres, who had recently been commemorated in Paris with a major retrospective. More specifically, he proffered his response to the tepid eroticism of Ingres' celebrated *Turkish Bath*.

This picture, which the master from Montauban painted at the end of his life, in 1862, was set in the baths of Andrinopolis as depicted by Lady Montagu, a famous eighteenth-century letter writer. She described in lavish detail the interior architecture, ornamentation, diffuse lighting, pools and water conduits, and marvelled at the beauty of the Moslem women, their noble bearing and their majestic movements. Ingres incorporated these various elements into his composition. Although considered lewd when it was first shown, the *Turkish Bath*, with its opalescent-skinned odalisques clothed only in scarves and pearls, was the finest display of indiscreet charms ever to have been put into paint. Picasso's *Demoiselles*, however, were something quite different. Not only had the scene shifted from a luxurious oriental harem to a cheap Barcelona brothel, but the genesis of the picture demonstrated both the artist's personal creative process and his disruptive methods.

The paths leading to this great synthesis were many. In the previous year, Picasso and Fernande Olivier, his mistress, spent the summer at Gosol, a sunbaked village accessible only by mule in the heart of the Pyrenees, overlooking the Valley of Andorra. The canvases he painted there showed the local peasants not as they seemed, but as they really were: with asymmetrical features, square jaws, sunken foreheads, cheekbones reduced to beige and ochre lozenges and triangles. Upon his return to Paris, Picasso bought two roughly-carved stone Iberian heads (which he would later learn had been stolen from the Louvre by Géry-Piéret, an adventurer who had become Apollinaire's secretary). The pictures from Gosol and the Iberian sculptures were major steps along the road that led to the *Demoiselles*.

There has been much debate over the role played by African sculpture: was Picasso influenced by it or not? For one thing, it was very much in vogue at the time in Parisian art circles, and the artist did not help matters much when, asked about this for the *n*th time, he declared irritably: «Negro art? Never heard of it!» But, if nothing else, the scars scoring the concave cheeks of two of the *Demoiselles* are clear proof of the opposite.

André Malraux, at the beginning of his book *La tête d'obsidienne*, quoted from a conversation he had had with Picasso in 1937, at the time when the latter was painting *Guernica* in his rue des Grands-Augustins studio. During the course of the conversation, Picasso recalled that, thirty years before, he had visited the Trocadero Museum, the future Musée de l'Homme, where haphazardly displayed collections of objects



Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres

**THE TURKISH BATH**

1859-1863, oil on canvas,

diameter: 108 cm. (43 in.)

Paris, Musée du Louvre.