



CHRONICLES OF A MASTERPIECE

By Estela Nieto, Giovana Edid and Federico León de la Vega

What might Picasso's *Young Ladies of Avignon* have in common with Rembrandt's *Night Watch*? Perhaps, for the untrained eye, there is no similarity between them. They do not have the same style, nor do they have the same theme. Perhaps the most obvious observation could be that they belong to very different historical periods and artistic movements. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that both of them represent, in their own way, iconic artworks that never fail to amaze every generation, i.e., they are both “masterpieces.” An artwork that possesses the title of “masterpiece” is representative in both substance and form. It links artistic and aesthetic factors to cultural and historical meaning. Such artworks are usually considered by credible art critics to be sublime in expression and technically superior.¹

Javier Lumbreras, in *The Art of Collecting Art*, mentions that “a “masterpiece” emerges when the artist's temperament and the academy –his time– is reflected as faithfully; when the artist does not forget his condition, culture or the taste of his time. This parameter is *sine qua non* condition. [...] Furthermore, a “masterpiece” appears when it is innovative and implies great aesthetic coherence and unity, that is, consistency. [...] Actually, they both operate simultaneously. Without innovation, art stagnates and gets old; and without consistency, art becomes frivolous. The most important artworks of our era are those that bring innovation consistently, so they are able to influence the thinking and creativity of later artists.”² While masterpieces, as any other artworks, are restricted in terms of *what* they represent, *when* they were created and *who* their authors are (as well as the times and circumstances surrounding the latter), they have the power to trespass time barriers, expand intellectual frontiers, and claim a place as main witnesses of human civilization.

The concept of “masterpiece” has its formal origins at the end of the Eighteen Century. Under the precepts of the Academia, art was studied as a scientific and rational discipline. Emmanuel Kant, along with Friedrich Hegel, developed the principles of authenticity, authorship, beauty, composition,

¹ Javier Lumbreras' *The Art of Collecting Art* book points out that the role of the art critic fully developed during the 19th Century, around the impressionist movement. Lumbreras adds that the practice of holding art exhibitions helped establish the function of the art critic in the format that we know today. The author explains that the purpose of art criticism is not only to encourage the viewer to see a display, but to make certain elements stand out under the light of academic expertise. The erudite critic covers broad aspects, which include historical references, as well as the contributions of philosophers and theorists. See: Lumbreras, Javier. "¿Qué es una obra maestra?" *El Arte De Coleccionar Arte*. Fomento Cultural Banamex, 2011. p. 68

² See: Lumbreras, Javier. "¿Qué es una obra maestra?" *El Arte De Coleccionar Arte*. Fomento Cultural Banamex, 2011. p. 65-67



veracity, spirituality and immortality as foundations that would serve to establish the essence and the intellectual power of an artwork.³ Interestingly, the notion of masterpiece evolves together with art and the changing of times. For example, Neil McGregor has argued that, presently, recognizing such status implies a “collusion” between the artist and the public and, also, that the “masterpiece” could very well be the subject (i.e. the artist) himself and not the painting. Traditionally however, we instinctively associate masterpieces with the best expression of an artistic genre, the greatest manifestation within the production of an artist, or the flawless materialized example of an aesthetic theory. Masterpieces have been synonymous to words such as excellence, perfection, and again, even immortality.⁴ The *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo Da Vinci is, in this latter sense, a great example of the enhanced power that an artwork can hold in the collective memory through the passing of time and generations.

Much has been written on how a masterpiece comes into being from the academic point of view. But how does an artwork move through art history until it arrives at the highest rank of the present day art market and onto the block of a prestigious auction house or on the wall of a museum of great renown? Let’s take for example, Picasso's *Young Ladies of Avignon*, where this article began. Perhaps the most representative example of pre-cubist art, Picasso’s brothel scene abandoned all previously known forms and traditions, representing what is considered a breaking point in the genesis of modern art. How did *Young Ladies of Avignon* become an icon of our century? How did the specific transactions in the life of this painting lead to its recognition amongst one of the most influential works of art in the last 100 years?⁵

Young Ladies of Avignon, painted in 1907, took nine months to be created and hundreds of preliminary sketches and studies. Although it had an enormous and profound influence on modern art, its impact was not immediate, as the painting remained in Picasso's studio for almost 17 years after being finished. *Young Ladies of Avignon* would not be exhibited until 1916, when it was put on display at Salon d'Antin, an exhibition run by the French poet, art critic and writer, André Salmon, who changed the name of the painting from *Le Bordel d'Avignon* (*The Brothel of Avignon*) to *Ladies of Avignon* in order to reduce its shocking effect on the society of the times.⁶

³ "A Masterpiece is one that can be appreciated and valued by all nations in every century because it possesses a universal spirit". G.F.W. Hegel, *Lecciones de Estética*, Trad. Raúl Gabás, Edicions 62, Barcelona, 1989, p. 355.

⁴ Please refer to Danto, Arthur, *et. al.*, *What is a masterpiece?*, Spanish version, Ed. Crítica, Paris, 2000, p. 7.

⁵ According to Newsweek: Plagens, Peter. "Which Is the Most Influential Work of Art Of the Last 100 Years?" Newsweek. 26 June 2007. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.newsweek.com/which-most-influential-work-art-last-100-years-102269> .

⁶ Please refer to "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon." Spanish Masterworks: Pablo Picasso: (1907). *Spanish Arts*, 2011. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.spanish-art.org/spanish-painting-les-demoiselles-d-avignon.html>

The painting was not then fully appreciated as a masterpiece, like it is today. In 1924, André Breton persuaded the artist to display the work at the famous theorist's house, where it was sold in February of that year for 25,000 francs (and in installments) to the fashion designer and art collector Jacques Doucet. Just a few months later, Doucet had the painting valued at a range of 250,000 to 300,000 francs.⁷ The enormous price difference seems to be explained by the fact that Doucet promised Picasso that *Ladies of Avignon* would go to the Louvre under his will.⁸ Picasso, by 1924, had already made it to the top of the art world and did not have any need to sell the painting at such a low price to Doucet.

After Doucet died in 1929 however, he did not leave the painting to the Louvre in his will.⁹ His wife, Madame Doucet (Jeanne Roger), inherited the work. In 1934, and at the end of her life, Madame Doucet sold most of her collection to the Jacques Seligmann & Co. Gallery, thereby breaking (again) the pledge originally made to Picasso calling for the painting to be donated to the Louvre Museum.¹⁰



Jacques Doucet's hôtel particulier, 1929, photograph by Pierre Legrain

The Jacques Seligmann & Co. Gallery held an exhibition in New York City during November 1937 entitled "20 Years in the Evolution of Picasso, 1903–1923" that included *Ladies of Avignon*.¹¹ "Jacques Seligmann & Co is considered one of the foremost dealers and galleries in fostering appreciation for the collecting of contemporary European art. Many pieces purchased through Jacques Seligmann & Co. now reside in the collections of fine art museums and galleries worldwide, donated to those institutions by private purchasers of work from the dealer."¹²

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon, 1907 by Pablo Picasso." *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon by Pablo Picasso*. Pablo Picasso Org. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.pablocicasso.org/avignon.jsp> .

⁹ One might imagine that, under today's standards, the transaction between Picasso and Doucet would be considered to violate the principle of *arm's length*, as it appears to have been nothing but a casual bargain between acquaintances where the seller relied on a promise by the buyer in exchange for a price well below fair market value.

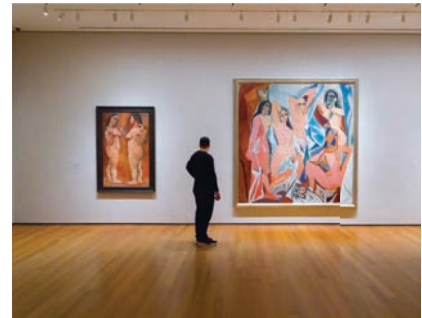
¹⁰ "Pablo Picasso. Les Demoiselles D'Avignon. Paris, June-July 1907." *The Collection*. MoMA. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/79766> .

¹¹ "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon, 1907 by Pablo Picasso." *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon by Pablo Picasso*. Pablo Picasso Org. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.pablocicasso.org/avignon.jsp> .

¹² "Jacques Seligmann & Co. records, 1904-1978, bulk 1913-1974". Finding Aid. Archives of American Art. 2010. Retrieved 5 Jul 2011. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/jacques-seligmann--co-records-9936/more>

The Museum of Modern Art in New York City purchased the painting from Seligmann, through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest, in 1937 for \$24,000 USD.¹³ “The museum raised \$18,000 USD towards the purchase price by selling a Degas painting from the original Lillie P. Bliss Bequest and the rest came from donations from the co-owners of the gallery, Germain Seligman and Cesar de Hauke.”¹⁴

This last transaction, where the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest became a vital part for acquiring *Ladies of Avignon*, has an interesting twist. Raised in New York City, Bliss was an accomplished pianist whose interests included not only music, but also art collecting. In fact, she is partly responsible for the existence of the Armory Show. Her collection was valued at nearly \$1.14 million and, in a complete surprise to the staff and trustees at the Museum, including Mr. Rockefeller and Director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., it was revealed after her death that she had bequeathed the largest and most important part of it to MoMA.¹⁵



Today's final location of *Ladies of Avignon* at the MoMA.

Bliss' will included the Degas painting that was later sold in order to acquire Picasso's *Ladies of Avignon* to its final destination. However, it also provided two stipulations: first, that three specific works (the Degas painting was originally one of them) could never be sold or otherwise disposed of (the rest could be deaccessioned provided that the proceeds be used to acquire other artworks) and, second, that MoMA should have raised \$1 million USD to endow the bequest.¹⁶ Neither of these two stipulations were in fact fulfilled. The Degas painting was compromised and sold in order to buy Picasso's masterpiece. On the other hand, as this transaction was made during the Great Depression, the Museum could only raise \$600,000 USD and not the \$1 million USD that was originally stipulated. It is worth noting that, even though neither of the two original stipulations in the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest were fulfilled, it established the foundation of MoMA's present collection. Nevertheless, under today's

¹³ "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon, 1907 by Pablo Picasso." *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon by Pablo Picasso*. Pablo Picasso Org. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.pablocicasso.org/avignon.jsp>.

¹⁴ Fluegel, Jane. "Chronology." *Pablo Picasso*, Museum of Modern Art (exhibition catalog), 1980. William Rubin (ed.). p. 309 in https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/5820/releases/MOMA_1980_0023_25.pdf?2010

¹⁵ "Bliss, Lillie P. (1864–1931)." *Modern Women / A Partial History*. MoMA. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. http://www.moma.org/explore/publications/modern_women/history#lexicon4.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.



standards, the relationship between the Lillie P. Bliss request and the MoMA would represent serious conflicts of interest against the museum.

Picasso's *Ladies of Avignon* rapidly climbed to the collection of one of the most recognized modern art museums as a result of theorists and private collectors seeing beyond the aesthetic rupture that this artwork represents for modern art. André Breton's connection with high society, Picasso's ambition of having the work displayed at the Louvre, the eccentricity of designer Mr. Doucet and the pragmatist capitalist in Madame Doucet, as well as the passion of collector Lillie P. Bliss, all played a role -as did the legal quality of the deals (or lack thereof) between these players in each change of hands of the painting- in putting Picasso's *Ladies of Avignon* in the pedestal where it stands today as a consolidated masterpiece.

Bibliography:

- "Bliss, Lillie P. (1864–1931)." *Modern Women / A Partial History*. MoMA. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. http://www.moma.org/explore/publications/modern_women/history#lexicon4.
- "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon." Spanish Masterworks: Pablo Picasso: (1907). *Spanish Arts*, 2011. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.spanish-art.org/spanish-painting-les-demoiselles-d-avignon.html>
- "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon, 1907 by Pablo Picasso." *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon by Pablo Picasso*. Pablo Picasso Org. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.pablopicasso.org/avignon.jsp>.
- "Pablo Picasso. Les Demoiselles D'Avignon. Paris, June-July 1907." *The Collection*. MoMA. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/79766>.
- "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon, 1907 by Pablo Picasso." *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon by Pablo Picasso*. Pablo Picasso Org. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.pablopicasso.org/avignon.jsp>.
- "Jacques Seligmann & Co. records, 1904-1978, bulk 1913-1974". Finding Aid. Archives of American Art. 2010. Retrieved 5 Jul 2011. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/jacques-seligmann--co-records-9936/more>
- "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon, 1907 by Pablo Picasso." *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon by Pablo Picasso*. Pablo Picasso Org. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.pablopicasso.org/avignon.jsp>.
- G.F.W. Hegel, *Lecciones de Estética*, Trad. Raúl Gabás, Edicions 62, Barcelona, 1989, p. 355.
- Danto, Arthur, *et. al.*, *What is a masterpiece?*, Spanish version, Ed. Crítica, Paris, 2000, p. 7.
- Lumberras, Javier. "¿Qué es una obra maestra?" *El Arte De Coleccionar Arte*. Fomento Cultural Banamex, 2011. p. 65-70.
- Plagens, Peter. "Which Is the Most Influential Work of Art Of the Last 100 Years?" *Newsweek*. 26 June 2007. Web. 7 Aug. 2015. <http://www.newsweek.com/which-most-influential-work-art-last-100-years-102269>.
- Fluegel, Jane. "Chronology." *Pablo Picasso*, Museum of Modern Art (exhibition catalog), 1980. William Rubin (ed.). p. 309 in https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/5820/releases/MOMA_1980_00_23_25.pdf?2010