

## André Salmon, Pablo Picasso and the History of Cubism

André Salmon met Pablo Picasso at the very end of the Spanish artist's Blue Period (late 1904-early 1905) through their mutual friend the Spanish sculptor Manuel Hugué (known as Manolo). The poet was led to the painter's studio in a ramshackle building nicknamed the « Bateau Lavoir » at 13 rue Ravignan in Montmartre. The following afternoon Salmon met the poet Max Jacob as they both arrived to pay Picasso a visit. By then Salmon knew the poet Guillaume Apollinaire for almost two years. Apollinaire would meet Picasso shortly afterwards during the winter of 1905. These four men formed the symbiotic relationship known among their peers as « la bande à Picasso ».

### ***Salmon and Picasso***

The significant role these men played in each other's lives cannot be overestimated, particularly the friendship between Salmon and Picasso ; for Salmon not only reviewed Picasso's exhibitions but also inserted incidental references to Picasso's current activities into his newspaper columns on art. These brief remarks now provide invaluable biographical information which has helped date several of Picasso's Cubist works. Moreover, from his earliest descriptions of Picasso to his celebrated memoirs, Salmon helped to construct the artist's reputation as he championed all Picasso's avant-garde endeavors, regardless of their shockvalue. Most notably, Salmon was the first to praise *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* (1907) in his first book on art, *La Jeune Peinture française* (1912).

Although Salmon's first review of a Picasso exhibition at Ambroise Vollard's gallery in December 1910 introduces his *Paris-Journal* readership to the Malaguenian, his short paragraph about a visit to Picasso's studio at 11 boulevard de Clichy, published on 21 September 1911 tells us more. Salmon described Picasso dressed in aviator fashion, surrounded by paintings from the Blue and Rose Period: « Tout au plus se défend-il d'être le père du cubisme qu'il a simplement suggéré. À un cadet, lui demandant s'il fallait dessiner les pieds ronds ou carrés, Picasso répondit avec beaucoup d'autorité: « il n'y a pas de pieds dans la nature! » L'autre court encore, à la grande joie de son mystificateur».

The significance of this short profile is twofold. First, it illustrates Salmon's tendency to mythologize Picasso's personality by conjuring up a charismatic individual, who seemed intimidating, exceptionally brilliant, and mysterious on contact. Second, it establishes the Salmonien approach to understanding the Cubist movement. That is : although Picasso set forth the fundamental aesthetic for this direction in art, he remained outside its mainstream manifestations in the public salons and artists' studios where a core group dominated by Henri Le Fauconnier, Jean Metzinger and Albert Gleizes codified the Cubist idiom : geometricity, the intersection of planes (*passage*) and

depictions of simultaneity (the appearance of several viewpoints on one flat surface).

Here in his 21 September 1911 column, Salmon set the agenda for his famous « Histoire anecdotique du cubisme », the third chapter in *La Jeune Peinture française*. Six years later, Salmon added in his book *L'Art vivant* (1920) that Picasso was « l'animateur » of Cubism, and in the same year, he amplified his unshakeable confidence in Picasso in *L'Esprit Nouveau* : « La vie de ce grand artiste ne sera pas assez longue pour parcourir toute le chemin que son œuvre éclaire. L'Art présent et l'Art futur relèvent de sa bienfaisante tyrannie. Picasso a tout inventé ». Therefore, to fully appreciate « Histoire anecdotique du cubisme », one must consider Salmon's close friendship with Picasso at the time and his belief that Picasso's particular form of Cubism stood apart from and surpassed all other manifestations of this art movement from the beginning.

In addition, the title « Histoire anecdotique du cubisme » transparently declares its subjective criterion. Thus, we should not read this narrative as empirical reportage, but rather as a contemporary saga, wherein a remarkable hero quests, triumphs and almost single-handedly brings about the salvation of art.

### **« Histoire anecdotique du cubisme » in Art History**

« Histoire anecdotique du cubisme » is the best known and most controversial essay Salmon has contributed to the history of art. Many art historians believe that « Histoire anecdotique du cubisme » gives too much credit to Picasso for the development of Cubism, as if he alone invented the formulation. Certainly William Rubin and his followers, who believe that Georges Braque's 1908 *Estaque* landscapes deserve to be considered the first Cubist paintings, disagree with Salmon's assessment. On the other hand, Leo Steinberg and his followers find Salmon's perspective flawed but insightful because it acknowledges Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* as the generative Cubist exercise. Whether Salmon was right or wrong does not concern us here. Instead this paper considers the intersection of Salmon's literary personality and his relationship with Picasso as it was played out in story form (the anecdotal) — and whether this intersection can help us decode Picasso's painting *Le Jeune Homme à la Pipe* which Salmon specifically chose to set the scene and tone of his tale.

Salmon loved to tell stories. According to Fernande Olivier, Picasso's mistress from 1904 to 1912, he was entertaining too :

Merveilleux conteur, Salmon narrait les histoires les plus scabreuses d'une façon exquise. Bien différent de ses amis, Guillaume Apollinaire et Max Jacob, Salmon s'imposait par un esprit délicat, subtil, fin, délié, élégant. Caustique, aimable aussi, poète, il était peut-être plus sentimental que les autres. Rêveur d'une sensibilité toujours en éveil, grand, mince, distingué, les yeux pleins d'intelligence dans un visage trop pâle, il paraissait très jeune. Il n'a d'ailleurs pas changé. Ses mains longues et fines tenaient d'une façon très particulière la pipe de bois qu'il fumait toujours. Ses gestes un peu gauches, maladroits, le révélaient timide.

From this vivid description, we might imagine Salmon holding forth with his pipe in hand (in that « particular way »), weaving a dramatic narrative about artistic daring-do

and art world politics.

## **Salmon the Storyteller**

Salmon begins his minor epic with a hero, Pablo Picasso, who is young, admirable and a true genius : « Jamais l'épanouissement de son génie libre n'avait été aussi radieux ». It was the end of 1905, Picasso was twenty-four years old and « ses toiles commençaient d'être disputées ». At that time, Picasso's paintings were beginning to sell well and Apollinaire had reviewed his exhibition at Galleries Serrurier that spring.

In this introductory section, we learn that Picasso was prolific and mercurial, as he studied « des grands maîtres du Greco à Toulouse-Lautrec », trying to develop his own artistic direction. The artist was also capable of producing works that demonstrated considerable range both comic and tragic, « Shakespeariniennes et néo-platoniciennes » – base and ethereal – all « à la fois ». Above all, this rapid changeability came to him naturally, another extraordinary facet of his prodigious talent.

As the story progresses, Salmon has his artist-hero Picasso set out on his quest by leaving behind his comrades' chatter to return to his work, revisiting an abandoned canvas of a young artisan dressed in blue, « à peu près l'apparence de l'artiste lui-même aux heures de travail ». After setting aside the work for a month, « [Picasso] couronna de roses l'effigie du petit artisan. Il avait fait de cette œuvre un chef-d'œuvre, par un caprice sublime ». His journey begins.

But who is this young slender artisan, and why is this particular work, *Le Jeune Homme à la Pipe* (1905), Salmon's point of departure? From Salmon's perspective this fellow, created without a model, seems to be Picasso's alter ego, one who works hard with his hands like a common laborer, but suffers like a martyr for his artistic vision. The crown of roses, therefore, seems to replace the poet's laurels and Christ's crown of thorns. (One can image Max Jacob's reaction : « Encore trop symboliste! » in response to Picasso's sentimental gesture.)

Salmon tells us that after Picasso beatified *Le Jeune Homme à la Pipe*, he stopped painting and began an intensely obsessive period of drawing : « Durant de longs jours et tant de nuits, il dessina, concrétisant l'abstrait et réduisant à l'essentiel le concret ». Like a biblical hermit, Picasso seems to have set out on a path, isolated in his task, as if he entered a chastening wildness to achieve an artistic revelation : « Qui démontrera la nécessité, la raison supérieure esthétique de peindre les êtres et les choses tels qu'ils sont et non point tels que notre œil les reconnut, non pas depuis toujours, soit, mais depuis que méditerent des hommes à notre image? »

## **Les Demoiselles d'Avignon**

Indefatigable and determined, Picasso persevered without any guarantee of success « Jamais labeur ne fut moins payé de joies ». This period of intense work took

place in 1907. (It seems that Salmon skipped 1906 or remembered this period as a combination of 1906 and 1907.) We know that in 1907, Picasso drew precisely 809 preparatory sketches for his masterpiece *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* (a painting that was either completed or abandoned toward the end of the summer or early autumn in 1907). Salmon explained : « c'est sans le juvénile enthousiasme de naguère que Picasso entreprit une grande toile qui devait être la première application de ses recherches ».

Although Salmon incorrectly wrote that there are six figures in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)*, when in fact there are five, he quite correctly mentioned Picasso's two campaigns : the first in a completely Iberian Fauve style (spring 1907) and the second in an *art nègre* style (summer 1907) that covered three Iberian faces with African masks. Picasso's Iberian style began in 1906 and was quite austere, dehumanizing the first version of his brothel denizens as if they were « des chiffres blancs au tableau noir... c'était le principe posé de la peinture-équation ». At this point, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* displayed a touch of African and Oceanic art in its angularity : « Déjà l'artiste s'était passionné pour les nègres qu'il plaçait bien au-dessus des Égyptiens ». In this respect, Salmon characterized his adventurous hero as one capable of transforming naive, barbarian art into a rational western conceit : « Les images polynésiennes ou dahoméennes lui paraissaient « raisonnables. » Renouvelant son œuvre, Picasso devait fatalement nous donner du monde une apparence non conforme à notre vision apprise ». This first version of *Femmes d'Alger* was baptized *Le Bordel philosophique* by the members of Picasso's gang – mostly likely Guillaume Apollinaire, according to Max Jacob.

However, the « grande toile » of Picasso's Iberian period did not remain in its original state for long. Salmon explained: « Enfin, mécontent de ses premières recherches, il s'attaqua à d'autres nus, jusqu'alors épargnés, réservés par ce néronien – cherchant une statique nouvelle et composant sa palette de roses, de blancs et de grisailles ». During the second campaign, Picasso added masks inspired by *l'art nègre* which pushed the deformation of the human figure into new conceptual directions. And then, Salmon recalled that Picasso turned the canvas to the wall.

In a 1908 photograph of Salmon standing in front of Picasso's *Trois Femmes* (1908-9), we can see *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* on the left, covered by a cloth. With this photograph as evidence, it seems plausible that Salmon had not looked at the 1907 painting directly for quite a while and depended on his memory to write his first book on contemporary art in March and April of 1912. His mistake may be based on confusing the early studies with the painting. In Picasso's early sketches two male customers interact with five prostitutes, and in the painting, the five women arrive and pose, turning the painting's viewer into a potential client. Perhaps, Salmon's recollection of the sketches impaired his ability to remember the painting accurately.

*Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* remained in Picasso's studio from 1907 until 1916, when Salmon included the work in an exhibition of contemporary art. During those nine years, only Picasso's friends, dealers and visitors to his studio laid eyes on his bizarre creation. In 1908 an American writer Gelett Burgess interviewed several young artists in Paris for an article entitled « The Wildmen of Paris ». Published two years later in *Architectural Record*, the essay included a black and white photograph of Picasso's strange nudes without a title. This reproduction might have influenced a few American artists.

Then Salmon mentioned *Le B[ordel] philosophique* in *La Jeune Peinture française* in 1912. But, still, few people had seen the actual picture, and no French critics cared (or dared) to publish an opinion of the piece. Salmon alone, among his peers, supported this direction in Picasso's œuvre and published his views for everyone to see. He also remained unshakeable in this conviction. (Picasso and Braque's art dealer in Paris, the German Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, acknowledged the critical role of *Les Demoiselles* in his book *Der Weg zum Kubismus*, which he wrote in exile in Switzerland during World War I. This book was published in 1920.)

In July 1916, Salmon dubbed Picasso's five prostitutes *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, a coy reference to a bordello that reflected Salmon's taste for the arcane. (Picasso claimed several years later that Salmon's title always irritated him.) Then, these Modernist gorgons were taken out of Picasso's studio at 5 bis rue Schoelcher, and posed in the haut couturier Paul Poiret's private gallery, located next to his eighteenth-century mansion on the rue Faubourg-Saint-Honoré. The gallery's entrance, at 26 avenue d'Antin, determined this wartime exhibition's title Salon d'Antin, which was also called « L'Art Moderne en France ». However, by 1916, Picasso's radical deformation seemed to have lost its punch, provoking merely amused condescension.

### **In the land of the shamans**

In the « Histoire anecdotique du cubisme », Salmon astutely pointed out that « Picasso avait, lui aussi, médité sur la géométrie », which reassured his readers that Picasso followed the current fascination with non-Euclidean geometry. But Salmon believed that Picasso's true intellect lay in his appropriation of *l'art nègre*. Here, Salmon explains Picasso prodigious powers of conceptual thinking : « Seulement, il concevait logiquement qu'ils avaient tenté la figuration réelle de l'être et non point la réalisation de l'idée, le plus souvent sentimentale, que nous nous en faisons ». Salmon highlights Picasso's ability to transform the exoticism of *l'art nègre* into the « rational » (usually associated with math and science) in order to convince his readers that reason – not shamanism – controlled this shift from visual lyricism to harsh dissonance. Salmon also infers that Picasso sought out these non-Western tutors on his own, alone, without any help from his friends.

In reality, Picasso shared his voyage into the land of the « enchanteurs africains et océaniens » with Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Maurice de Vlaminck. Max Jacob recalled that the *bande's* first opportunity to examine African art occurred at Matisse's home. Matisse recalled that he showed Picasso and other friends a little African statue at Gertrude Stein's home at 27 rue de Fleurus. In « Histoire anecdotique du cubisme » Salmon does not give any credit to Matisse for introducing Picasso to African art, but in his pendent book *La Jeune Sculpture française*, the poet-critic corrected himself slightly by mentioning the other artists who shared an enthusiasm for *l'art nègre*.

### **The nudes from 1906 or 1908?**

After Salmon shines his light on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, the story becomes a bit foggy. Salmon claims that Picasso returned to « sa première manière », and he refers to two titles of works that may come from Picasso's 1906 Iberian period (or Gosol period): *Femme à sa toilette* and *Femme se peignant*. These works may have been exhibited in Picasso's 1910 exhibition at Ambroise Vollard's gallery. Unfortunately, no catalogue was produced to verify the show's contents. Salmon's review mentioned that Picasso's Blue period was in evidence but no important works from the « époque la plus lyrique . . . d'une funambulesque humanité » (the Rose Period). Apollinaire's review stated that early works were on view, but he did not specify which ones .

In Salmon's « histoire » Picasso completes these more traditional nude studies and sets off on vacation. This is not true. Picasso stayed in Paris during the summer of 1907 with Salmon and Fernande Olivier — according to a postcard sent by Olivier to Gertrude Stein who was in Italy. Picasso specialist Pierre Daix noticed this inconsistency and decided to investigate its meaning. Why would Salmon mis-remember an occasion when he was right there ? We know that Picasso spent the following summer in la Rue-des-Bois, just north of Paris, with Fernande Olivier. Daix concluded that Salmon confused the chronology of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* with *Les Trois Femmes*, which Picasso worked on from 1908 to the end of the year or to the beginning of 1909. This theory seems plausible. Or, Salmon the storyteller synthesized a few facts simply to construct a fluent narrative (as he combined events in 1905 through 1907), opting for poetic license rather than historical fidelity.

If we accept Daix's interpretation, then the studies of women combing their hair or dressing, which Salmon cites, may be Picasso's little known 1908 studies, such as *Nu aux bras levés* that is not too dissimilar from his 1906 nude studies. These 1908 studies also confirm Salmon's description of Picasso's palette : « Un peu délaissé, Picasso se retrouva dans la société des augures africains. Il se composa une palette riche de tous les tons chers aux anciens académiques: ocre, bitume, et sépia, et brossa plusieurs nu redoutables, grimaçants et parfaitement dignes d'être exécrés ». Indeed, these somber colors dominated Picasso's and Braque's works from winter 1908 through the early autumn 1912.

## ***Picasso and the Other Cubists***

Toward the midpoint of « Histoire anecdotique du cubisme » Salmon finally turns his attention to the other Cubists who exhibited in the Salon des Indépendants, Salon d'Automne, and salons abroad : Henri Le Fauconnier, Jean Metzinger, Robert Delaunay and Fernand Léger. In this context, Salmon explains that the origin of the term « cubisme » came from Matisse, who baptized it, and spread through Metzinger, who became known as the leader of the movement. The official story — apocryphal or true — states that Matisse sat on the jury of the Salon d'Automne in 1908 when Georges Braque submitted six or seven landscapes of Estaque rendered in a new Cézannesque style. Matisse quipped that the depicted structures looked like « les petits cubes ». The jury

rejected all the paintings. Incensed, Braque arranged for a solo exhibition at Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler's gallery, which took place in November. In a review of Braque's show, Louis Vauxcelles complained that the artist reduced everything — figures, houses and landscapes — to nothing but cubes. This version of Cubism's history favors Braque's exhibition as the true beginning of Cubism.

Other candidates for the official beginning of Cubism may be Louis Chassevent's review of the 1906 Salon des Indépendants, wherein the critic commented on the cube-like forms in Metzinger's and Delaunay's submissions for that year. However, it is believed that the first appearance of the word « cubisme » occurred in Charles Morice's review of the 1909 Salon des Indépendants published in the *Mercure de France*.

The true story seems to be of little interest to Salmon. Instead, the critic disparages the use of the term :

Les écoles disparaissent faute d'étiquettes commodes. C'est fâcheux pour le public, car il aime les écoles qui lui permettent d'y voir clair sans effort. Le public accepta très docilement le cubisme, allant même jusqu'à reconnaître Picasso pour chef d'école et n'en voulant plus démordre. Depuis, le malentendu n'a fait que s'accroître.

Salmon also disapproved of those who formulated a Cubist curriculum to further their careers, as he reported in *Paris-Journal* on 25 January 1912 : « Académisme : Le peintre cubiste Le Fauconnier succède à Jacques-Emile Blanche en qualité de professeur, chef d'atelier, à l'Académie de La Palette. Le cubisme en vingt leçons! Tous cubistes! Le cubisme tel qu'on le peint! »

In « Histoire anecdotique du cubisme » (completed three months later), Salmon adds : « Ergo: le cubisme est admirable parce qu'il n'existe pas, encore qu'il ait été inventé par quatre personnes. . . . On se croyait à l'Académie et l'on sort du Gymnase ».

Although Salmon criticizes the public Cubists' academicism, he applauds their rigor (which he clearly emphasizes in his portrait of Picasso):

Déjà des élèves des Fauves, sans les abandonner, s'allient aux cubistes pour d'importantes manifestations.

Le cubisme ne serait-il donc qu'une sous-école, une province du royaume fauve, royaume formé de peuples agités de besoins adverses et méconnaissant l'autorité du prince étranger que leur hasard leur impose?

Le cubisme aura au moins restauré le culte de la méthode.

## ***The Young Man with a Pipe : Picasso or Salmon ?***

From the beginning until the end of the « Histoire anecdotique du cubisme » Salmon ushers his exceptional artist-hero through the complicated history of an art movement that this maverick invents but does not lead. A true adventurer, Salmon's artist-hero delivers his treasures and then threatens to overthrow the current sovereign on the throne. Picasso is the « prince étranger » in this saga and Matisse is « le roi des fauves ». Salmon's final reference to an art « royaume » takes the reader back to the mysterious *Jeune Homme à la Pipe*, whom Picasso crowns with roses instead of laurels or thorns.

Remember that Salmon's hero Picasso begins as a worker — a diligent, focused artist — searching for a new visuality that ultimately becomes the salvation of art. This artist-hero is also « le créateur fécond, ingénu et savant d'œuvres d'humaine poésie ». To Salmon's mind, *Le Jeune Homme à la Pipe*, an ethereal figure crowned with roses and dressed in the French labor's blue that Picasso wore in his studio, signifies Picasso, a painter of visual poetry.

Picasso reported later in life that this figure was based on a strange young fellow known as P'tit Louis, who frequented his studio in Montmartre and would watch him work for hours. John Richardson cited this recollection and theorized that Paul Verlaine's poem « Crimen Amoris » inspired the crown of roses : « Or le plus beau d'entre tous ces anges/Avait seize ans sous sa couronne de fleurs ».

However, Verlaine's poem does not describe a young worker holding a pipe in a most peculiar way. Based on Picasso's sketches of Salmon from this period, it seems that holding a pipe between the first two fingers – rather than between the thumb and forefinger or in the mouth (as we find among the sketches of Apollinaire) – characterized Salmon, for most of Picasso's drawings caricature the poet holding his pipe in this odd fashion.

Moreover, Max Jacob recalled that « en ce temps-là (il s'agit de l'époque 1905-7) le grand poète de la bande, aux yeux de tous, c'était André Salmon ». Salmon in 1914 described what he believed occurred in this artist-poet relationship :

Le poète obéit-il docilement à ce souci de suggérer à l'artiste plastique la réalisation de formes vierges et authentiques. Prisonnier des mots, il s'enivre à la pensée de favoriser la naissance de petits univers dont il connaîtra la mesure en en faisant le tour, l'esprit éclairé de la flamme des horizons auxquels l'auront conduit ses méditations.

Parfois, l'artiste plastique le devance. Alors, la mission du poète est assez grande, son rôle est assez fier : il assure son complice en inhumanité de la parfaite vertu de ses desseins.

This description of the reciprocity within the *bande à Picasso* may help us understand Salmon's interpretation of the young man with his pipe — that it may be Picasso in the guise of a poet (the pipe associated with his poet friends). But Picasso may have intended a different signification. His image of a young, slender, rather delicate fellow may pay homage to « le grand poète de la bande » Salmon, whose avant-garde poetry inspired his peers, and who at times may have been this artist's muse.

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