

Introduction

ANDREW REYNOLDS AND BONNIE ROOS

Probably no Western work of high modernist culture has made more controversial use of the mask than Pablo Picasso's 1907 *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (figure 1). In this, Picasso's first work of analytic cubism, the artist paints five nude women, presumably "ladies" of Barcelona's Avinyó Street, which was known for its brothels. While the curtains of the background imbricate the backdrop of the artist's studio, the life-sized women posing for and visually engaging the spectator around a table of fruit suggest the spectator's presence in a brothel, situating him or her as a consumer of these bizarrely unwelcoming, sharp female bodies. In this overlay, Picasso connects the practice of buying and selling art to the practice of prostitution. At least two of the women wear African masks, a detail inspired by Picasso's visits to ethnographic museums. The other three women, one of whose masklike face (but not body) is darker than the others, are inspired by pre-Roman Iberian sculptures Picasso had seen at the Louvre.

As one of the masterpieces of the Western modernist canon, the work raises important questions about Picasso's use of the mask that invite a broader inquiry into the European modernist moment. For example, given the violent, imperialist practices that led to the display of "African" artifacts, such as masks in ethnographic museums, is Picasso's use of the masks on these women exploitative, endorsing a subversive cultural appropriation? Or is Picasso embracing the African influence, along with the Iberian, as characteristic of Spain's rich cultural heritage, developing within it something of Western Europe's own "primitive other"? Is Picasso's application of the masks on the prostitutes further mystifying and exoticizing the women, or making them more repellent for the viewer?



Figure 1. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K. Version)*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 243.9 cm. × 233.7 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2014 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 2. Emil Nolde, *Maskenstilleben III*
 [Mask still life III], 1911. Oil on canvas, 73 cm.
 × 77.5 cm. Nelson Atkins Museum of Art,
 Kansas City. © Nolde Stiftung Seebüll.

Do the masks suggest that Picasso condemns the women for the practice of prostitution, or the spectator/client for “engaging” in it? Is Picasso complicit with the spectator, admiring and potentially purchasing the women/art, or does he identify with the women, choosing to be bought and sold? Is Picasso pointing to the masks we all wear as products of a material, imperial, capitalist world—one made more conscience-free when we, as buyers, can ignore the humanity of those brutalized by our acts and when we, as those “sold,” can shield our true selves from the inhuman processes that exploit us? And in any of these cases, are the masks demonstrative

of sexism and/or racism in Picasso's work or an indication of Picasso's sensitivity to these issues?

Picasso was not the only modernist to find the mask a useful theme for his work. German Expressionism, to offer one example, perhaps most notably embodied in Emil Nolde's masklike faces and still lifes of masks (figure 2), reminds us that masks were interesting to a wide range of modernists. Nolde transforms the still life into almost terrifying, energetic images through his brightly colored depictions of the mask. Whether Nolde drew more on painterly examples like Picasso's or more on philosophical traditions like those of Friedrich Nietzsche is uncertain. But Nietzsche, too (among the inspirations for the German Expressionist group *Die Brücke*, of which Nolde was a part), wrote about masks as being a primary quality of modern experience in *Beyond Good and Evil*. For Nietzsche, the mask is transformed from physical icon into a metaphorical one. Nietzsche explains that while a mask's use is a display of "contrariety," modern man veils both cunning and goodness beneath its façade and that regardless of man's intentions, the mask is impossible to discard because of the falseness in which we live:

Such a concealed man who instinctively needs speech for silence and for burial in silence and who is inexhaustible in his evasion of communication, *wants and sees to it that a mask of him roams in his place through the hearts and heads of his friends. And supposing he did not want it, he would still realize some day that in spite of that a mask of him is there—and that this is well. Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely shallow, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives.*¹

Nietzsche suggests that the masks we wear serve as an almost subconscious but necessary covering for our true selves in the modern world, one that profits us given modernity's superficiality. In this sense, Nietzsche's mask speaks on the one hand to a changing world emerging into modernity and on the other to an ideological mask that is not necessarily to be distinguished from its wearer.

Significantly, Nietzsche's observation of the mask in service to performance highlights the opportunity it provides for manipulation. Zora