

# Gender complexity in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*: The precedent of the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* sculpture\*

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay visually reinterprets details of the two central figures in Picasso's breakthrough, epochal painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), to propose that these bodies, long presumed female, also can be interpreted as «gender-flexible» and genderplural. Such a strategy is shown to be connected to Picasso's lifelong interest in bi-directional figures, as analyzed by Leo Steinberg. The connection is explored in depth with reference to Version B of Picasso's *Women of Algiers* series. All of this material is then recast as deriving from the precedent of the famous classical *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* sculpture, which Picasso likely saw at the Louvre and at the Prado (in its copy, commissioned by Velázquez), and as allusions in works by other artists. The essay concludes with speculations about reasons for this precedent not having been considered until now, and about its current implications. These include finding fresh and contemporary relevance in a canonical painting whose imagery and gender dynamics seem well known and have been deemed stereotypically regressive.

**KEYWORDS:** Picasso; Gender; Art history; *Les Femmes d'Alger*; Hermaphroditus; Hellenistic art; Trans studies; Intersex studies; Genderfluidity.

## Complejidad de género en *Les Femmes d'Alger* de Picasso: el precedente de la escultura del *Hermafrodito Durmiente*

**RESUMEN:** Este ensayo reinterpreta visualmente detalles de las dos figuras centrales en la pintura revolucionaria de Picasso *Las Señoritas de Avignon* (1907) para proponer que estos cuerpos, usualmente asumidos como femeninos, puedan verse como «género-flexible» y géneroplural. Se muestra tal estrategia como conectado con el interés constante de Picasso por las figuras bidireccionales, según lo analizado por Leo Steinberg. La conexión se explora en profundidad con referencia a la Versión B de la serie *Mujeres de Argel*. Luego, todo esto se reformula como derivado del precedente de la famosa escultura clásica, *Hermafrodito durmiente*, que Picasso probablemente vio en el Louvre y en el Prado (en su copia, encargada por Velázquez), y como alusiones en obras por otros artistas. El ensayo concluye con especulaciones sobre las razones por no considerar este precedente antes, y sobre implicaciones actuales. Estas incluyen encontrar una relevancia fresca y contemporánea en una pintura canónica cuyas imágenes y dinámicas de género parecen bien conocidas y han sido juzgadas estereotípicamente regresivas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Picasso; Género; Historia del arte; *Les Femmes d'Alger*; Hermaphroditus; Arte helenístico; Estudios trans; Estudios de intersexo; Género fluido.

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What might Pablo Picasso's landmark 1907 painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger* [1], contribute to today's conversations about gender and sex? The curators of *It's Pablo-matic*, the memorial-year Picasso Celebration exhibition at The Brooklyn Museum (June 2-September 24, 2023), would probably answer: «Not much». While that response mirrors some factions

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1. Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, 1911-12, oil on canvas. 243,9 x 233,7 cm (96 x 92 in.) © 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

of public opinion on Picasso, especially in our post-#MeToo era, it also aligns with the critical history of this artwork's gender dynamics. Almost as soon as Picasso finished painting the *Demoiselles*, critics started identifying all of its figures as cisgender, heterosexual females<sup>1</sup>, and often as prostitutes appearing monstrous and fearsome to a male implied spectator/client<sup>2</sup>. The most recent scholarly book on the *Demoiselles* tries to undo this demonization and to expand the painted figures' roles beyond sex work, yet it still insists on their femaleness, «broadening the identities of the female subjects to be lovers, mothers, sisters, and daughters» (Blier, 2019: XIV).

With the gender of the *Demoiselles* long since settled and consistently reified, much recent criticism of the painting has focused on the two figures on the right, whose complex racialized constructions involve masks and the appropriation of African artifacts. The faces of the two central figures have the same basic color as their bodies, so they are assumed simply to depict white women. Yet they too have features

that mask—that is, complicate—their visual presentations, including areas of inconsistent skin tones; some features also can serve to «masc» or masculinize these bodies. Elsewhere, I have shown that viewers can «flex» specific details in the painting to construct appearances of stereotypically male as well as female physiologies in the two central figures (Schiff, 2022). In this essay I point out other details that expand these figures' gender presentations, and I argue that these specific visual strategies derive from a precedent that has not been previously considered—the famous classical sculpture, *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* (2nd c. CE)<sup>3</sup>.

Though a few critics mention «doubly sexed» figures in relation to Picasso's early 1900s work (Poggi, 2019: 98)<sup>4</sup>, none ties this sculpture to the *Demoiselles*. It is more common to find analyses of gender play in slightly earlier works by Picasso (Poggi, 2014; Werth, 1997). As for the *Demoiselles*, scholars do discuss preparatory sketches of masculine figures (Steinberg, 2022: 43-45; Bois, 1988: 37-40; Rosenblum, 1986: 58-59), yet they often claim that these

figures definitively «disappear» from the final painting or completely transform into feminine figures (Steinberg, 2022: 92-93, 96; Bois, 1988: 37-38)<sup>5</sup>. One recent critic notes only «androgynous silhouettes» in the painted *demoiselles* (Loreti, 2020: 233).

Gender as a theme in the *Demoiselles* became more important with the original publication of Steinberg's 1972 essay «The Philosophical Brothel». This essay, lengthened in 1988 and reprinted with minor editorial amendments in 2022, remains the most important single work of criticism on the *Demoiselles*. It effectively shifted critical discourse on the painting from objective formalist analysis to the psychoanalysis of a sexually charged, intensely subjective face-off between nude females (lower-class prostitutes on display in a brothel receiving room) and us (the spectator standing in the gallery who poses as their client). As I reorient the visual perception of Picasso's two central figures away from categorical and fixed gender presentations and toward a connection with the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*, sometimes I will use Steinberg's own observations to help unravel the certainty of affixing femaleness to figures that are not necessarily just «demoiselles»<sup>6</sup>.

When I analyze images in detail, however, I do not intend a forensic, medicalizing gaze that seeks to assign to these bodies fresh or «true» gender identities. Instead, I bring forward arrangements of signs whose visual significance can be continually reinterpreted to resist gender closure and categorization, playing with conventional expectations of figuration<sup>7</sup>. The *Demoiselles*, one of Picasso's most canonical works which has long been regarded as a revolutionary break from established aesthetic and art historical norms, now also will include a dimension of gender revolution. At this moment, when we are revisiting entrenched narratives about art history (and Picasso), a thorough exploration of the two central figures and their gender-plural, classical precedent can compel us to rethink what has been said about the *Demoiselles* and its cultural impact, from the *fin-de-siècle* through today.

### Twisting the central *demoiselle*

The most direct reworking of the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* pose is found in the right central figure (occupying the painting's prime meridian). The torso of this figure can be seen as



2. Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)*, detail, 1907 © 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

if in rear view [2]: when the slightly browner triangle on the left side of the torso is regarded as negative space, the dark lines of the figure's breasts can be seen as shoulder blades, and the line of the thigh crease at the groin can represent the cleft in buttocks turned sideways<sup>8</sup>. The reinterpreted figure





3. Pablo Picasso. *Women of Algiers, Version B*, 1954, oil on canvas (reproduced in black and white; the painting is in grisaille). 60 x 73 cm (23½ x 28¾ in.) © 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

has a twisting spine and a slightly raised left leg. The head still faces forward, swiveling 180° from the body; a sloping line of color distinction at the neck facilitates the disjunction between torso and head. This rear view still may initially appear female-coded, though the waist may be narrowed simply from torsion; I will address gender after giving context to the 180° twists of the torso and neck.

A 180° twist at the neck also appears in the crouching figure nearby, whose head critics often discuss as facing the viewer while the body faces the scene's interior. Steinberg accounts for the croucher's 180° swiveled head by observing that in some of Picasso's works, as early as 1906, necks no longer necessarily look like they are connecting body parts<sup>9</sup>. Though the central figure in the *Demoiselles* has a neck, its flesh does not look volumetric. Instead, its two vertical outlines appear as a spatially flat, schematic neck-sign, presumably facing forward like the head (though this cylindrical body part actually can be oriented in any direction). The sloping line of color distinction then can serve to connect the head to the reversible torso, creating a joint of planes that swivel against each other.

This swivel –and even more, the possibility of seeing the central figure's torso as a back– is consistent with what Steinberg calls «Picasso's lifelong obsession with the problem of simultaneous front and back representation» (2022: 216, n. 51). This problem also became Steinberg's obsession: he explored it in three essays that first appeared in the early 1970s, all of which he revised and republished<sup>10</sup>. The most thorough of these connects early instances in 1907 (the year of the *Demoiselles*) to later variations on the theme, focusing on Picasso's *Women of Algiers* series of paintings (1954-55) after Delacroix's paintings of the same name<sup>11</sup>. Considering figures from one of Picasso's *Women of Algiers* paintings will help to expand my discussion of the central figure in the *Demoiselles*, because this later series presents more legible versions of what I have pointed out so far in the *Demoiselles*<sup>12</sup>.

### Gender complexity in the *Women of Algiers*

In many figures of the *Women of Algiers* paintings [3], breasts and buttocks are visible simultaneously and without any spe-

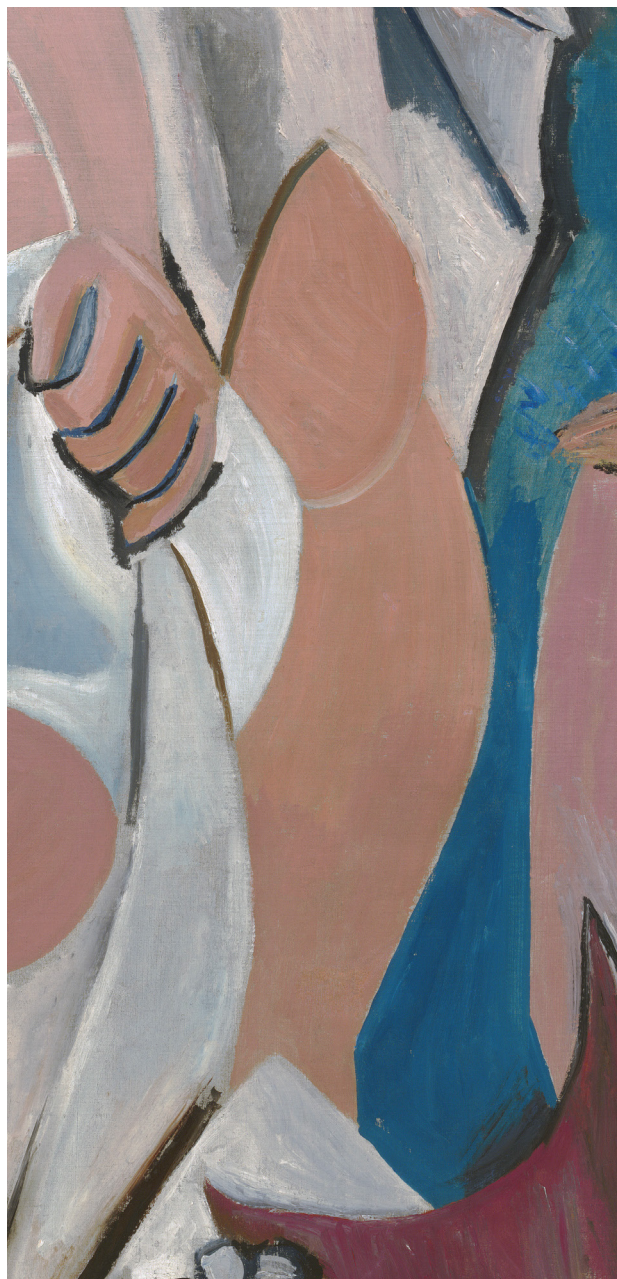
cial effort to «flex» the viewing angle (or the depicted body) from one side to the other<sup>13</sup>. Of one of these –a figure that is both «coming and going», twisting to face front while walking back– Steinberg writes, «Hellenistic art had a type and a word for her kind of action – *Venus respiciens*, ‘she who looks back.’ In ancient art... it was felt to be adorably feminine to cast backward glances» (1972: 138-39). It is easy to identify the looking-back pose in the walking figure in the middle of the scene<sup>14</sup>.

Though this Hellenistic framework codes the bi-directional motif as «feminine», many figures’ heads in the *Women of Algiers* series look decidedly phallic. Steinberg notes that the left figure’s «erected head» in Version B rhymes with the «phallic» niche in the background, and that the woman’s buttocks and/or upper legs can be read as testicles (1972: 126-27). Yet this figure’s breasts also can double as testicles connected to that same head, and shapes of male genitals also can be perceived elsewhere in the canvas (as in several other Versions in the series). For example, the walking figure’s breasts can double as testicles beneath the phallic neck and head which rise beyond this figure’s outstretched arm. The phallic niche shape is repeated in the curious miniature at the bottom margin, along the painting’s central meridian<sup>15</sup>. This erection –topped by a diamond that recalls the similarly positioned «tabletip» in the *Demoiselles*<sup>16</sup>– appears far forward in pictorial space, and visually echoes a forward-projecting, centrally aligned erection in the *Demoiselles*.

### Phallic imagery in the central *demoiselles*

The foreleg of the central bi-directional figure in the *Demoiselles* can also be seen as an erection [4]. A solid, dark contour line on the left makes this phallic form jut out in space to appear distant from the sketchier, draped thigh and the rest of the body. Anomalously smooth brushstrokes also make this area of the painting distinct from the rest of the painting.

I am not the only critic to claim that the *Demoiselles* contains this phallic image, though when I perceived the visual polyvalence I was not aware of these other instances. George Baker notes in passing «the erect phallus that the artist would otherwise have us believe is really the knee and lower leg of the central *demoiselle*» (Baker, 2011: 15), as part of a list of neglected gender-bending iconography in the



4. Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger*, detail, 1907 © 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

*Demoiselles* (in his larger argument about gender-complexity, focusing on the squatting figure). George Smith lingers longer over this «tumescient penis» as part of a Freudian image of castration, especially when he reads this sign alongside a reinterpretation of the still life on the table below it (Smith,





5. Pablo Picasso. *Composition Study with Seven Figures for «Les Demoiselles d'Avignon»*, 1907, graphite on paper. 19.3 x 24.2 cm (7 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 9 in.) © 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



6. Pablo Picasso. *Five Nudes (Study for «Les Demoiselles d'Avignon»)*, detail, 1907, watercolor on paper 17.5 x 22.5 cm (6 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 8 $\frac{7}{8}$  in.) © 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

2022: 161-62). This particular phallus is not remarked in other psychoanalytic criticism, however, including Tom Ettinger's exhaustive catalogue of phallic imagery in the *Demoiselles* (Ettinger, 1989: 164-82). Yve-Alain Bois explores the Freudian framework of castration anxiety yet, after sketching out an iconography of erections other than this one, arrives at a Lacanian analysis of the painting's oppositional conceptual structure, akin to Baker's framework (Bois, 1988: 42-45). Smith conjectures that this persistent blind spot among critics «has to do with the dazzling, shocking, and indeed traumatic effect of the painting as a whole»; he also suggests that it is difficult to recognize a non-representational phallus that is «much, much bigger than the anatomical penis» (Smith, 2022: 161, 162)<sup>17</sup>.

This painted phallus does look typological, even mythic, instead of representational. Though it appears far forward enough to «belong» to the implied spectator, its ideational (or fictional) status does not require that this viewer have a penis<sup>18</sup>. Its separateness and symmetry suggest a dildo, or a sculptural phallus as is common in diverse art historical, cultic, and cultural traditions. Moreover, because it can be seen as emerging from the body of the often feminine-coded central figure, it can remain also as part of that gender-plural or gender-complex figuration.

In Picasso's later sketches for the *Demoiselles* [5] y [6], this idealized phallic form seems to evolve from a flower vase and/or from a transposed client/sailor figure that is displaced from the center of the composition and whose head could become the glans of the penis<sup>19</sup>. These evolutionary paths suggest layers of significance beyond the narrowly sexual. Based on Picasso's sketches of vases of flowers and figures holding funeral urns, the phallus could represent the conflation of opposing forces of vitality and death – an agonistic theme discussed by Steinberg (2022: 115-16) and especially by Rubin (1994: 36, 49, 58, 114-15)<sup>20</sup>. Or it could presage for the phallus of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the signifier of power which anyone can want but no one can ever thoroughly possess. In any case, this phallic image does not appear alone. And when seen part of the visual language of the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* sculpture, it suggests a different set of meanings.



7. Unknown. *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*, 2nd c. CE, dorsal view, marble. 46.5 x 173.5 x 90.5 cm (18¼ x 68¼ x 35½ in.)  
© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, New York

### The *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* as precedent

The central figure's hidden-in-plain-sight phallus –along with the twisting torso, swiveled head, bent and raised left leg, and elbows-up pose seen from the rear– all correlate to the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*. This sculpture also accounts for all of the features I have discussed in Picasso's *Women of Algiers* figures, and ultimately for the entire «problem of simultaneous front and back representation» in Picasso's work<sup>21</sup>.

There are three main stages of viewing the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*. First, the viewer approaches the sculpture in dorsal view [7]<sup>22</sup>. From this perspective the torso is twisting (as are the abstracted torsos in the walking figure of the *Women of Algiers* and in the reinterpreted central *demoiselle*)<sup>23</sup>. The head turns to face backward –and toward the approaching viewer– in that characteristically Hellenistic «feminine» gesture that Steinberg identifies (which can be seen in both paintings)<sup>24</sup>. This gender categorization appears to correlate with a female sexual identity – a rounded breast is partially visible (from some angles) beneath the upraised arm (so that both breast and buttocks can be seen simultaneously, as in the *Women of Algiers*)<sup>25</sup>. The head rests on this arm, though the sharp twist of the neck (cf. the swivel joint in the *Demoiselles*) intensifies a restlessness in the pose<sup>26</sup>.

Walking around the sculpture reveals that restlessness also characterizes the figure's sex/gender: in full ventral view

[8], a penis is visible as well as another rounded breast<sup>27</sup>. The head facing away allows for a more probing, depersonalized gaze, and the surprise of seeing male genitals on a body previously perceived as female motivates the viewer finally to circle the sculpture again and discover cues for the initial misgendering. Long horizontal lines in the drapery draw the eye (and therefore the body) toward the ends of the sculpture, «always offering a return to the rear [dorsal] view and an invitation to linger there, to look again and again» (Trimble, 2018: 20)<sup>28</sup>. The genitals remain in the mind and unsettle the initial female categorization. It now becomes clear that the sculpture's feminizing «looking back» pose has contributed to the narrative arc of an gender assumption and subsequent rethinking.

The body of the sculpture, now seen afresh from all angles, can look sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine; the same physical structures can be «flexed» into approaching either gender category, yet never fully or fixedly occupying it<sup>29</sup>. Viewing the sculpture with an agenda-free curiosity can lead to the ambiguous forms and contours of the sculpture unsettling –and even obviating or emptying– gender designations. Binary codes lose their distinctions and soon seem irrelevant as flesh (i.e., stone) becomes unfathomable. One translation of Ovid's rendition of the now best known Hermaphroditus myth, from *Metamorphoses*, sums up the situation with an unexpectedly current pronoun (plus a poignant contradiction about whether Hermaphroditus is





8. Matteo Bonuccelli. *Hermafrodito* (copy of *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*), 1652, bronze. 36 x 160 x 90 cm (14 x 63 x 35 in.), (E000223) Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado © Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado

regarded as animate or inanimate, a gendered human being or an «it»: «nor could you say it was a boy or a girl, but they seemed neither – and both» (qtd. in Garland, 2010: 101)<sup>30</sup>.

This plural, inscrutable gender scheme is infused into the painted physiology of Picasso's central *demoiselle*. One corresponding detail merits special mention: the foreleg/phallus in Picasso's painting, when it juts forward in pictorial space, calls to mind the bent leg and flexed foot of the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*. This lower limb also projects toward the viewer in the dominant dorsal view, where it can symbolically represent (and thereby hint at the existence of) the penis that is out of sight on the other side of the sculpture. The foreleg of the classical precedent only alludes to a phallus, while the central figure's foreleg in the *Demoiselles* visually resembles a phallus. Still, both body parts contain the ambiguity of the «foreleg/phallus». As we perceive and interpret these body parts, as with the process of viewing the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* and the central *demoiselle* altogether, our growing awareness of their ambiguities makes us realize how we are constructing and gendering our perceptions of these bodies.

### Picasso and the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*

Picasso could have seen two versions of this sculpture easily. In the early 1900s, he likely saw the Louvre's white marble

version [7], when he was «haunting the halls» of the antiquities galleries at the Louvre<sup>31</sup>. This version, long known as the *Borghese Hermaphroditus*, was and is the most famous of all the copies of the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* that exist worldwide (Ajootian, 1990: 82)<sup>32</sup>. Picasso also likely saw in the Prado's sculpture hall the copy in dark bronze [8] that Velázquez commissioned for Spain (1652)<sup>33</sup> – the teenaged artist spent long hours in that museum instead of attending art classes in Madrid in 1897 (Palau i Fabre, 1981: 135-38)<sup>34</sup>. Picasso's well-known interest in sexual matters, plus his artistic interest in figural representation, make it likely that this sculpture would have captured his attention.

The *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* sculpture also was in the art news of Paris, about a year before Picasso began painting the *Demoiselles*: André Gide, in reviewing the 1905 Salon d'Automne, writes that Pierre Bonnard's painting *La Sieste*, then called *Sommeil* (i.e., «slumber», a title that more directly corresponds to the sculptural figure's liminal condition between sleep and wakefulness), features «the pose that's quite close to the Borghese Hermaphrodite»<sup>35</sup>. Gide's use of the definite article «*la pose*» instead of the more vague «*une pose*» suggests that any art-savvy viewer would have recognized the combination of bent leg, obscured genitals, spinal twist, and twisted head leaning on a flexed elbow (with a rounded breast partially visible beneath) as the visual echo of the sculpture. Leo and Gertrude Stein bought Bonnard's painting from that exhibition, so Picasso could have studied



the allusive pose not only at the public Salon, but also in the Steins' private salon, where at that time he often attended Saturday night dinner gatherings<sup>36</sup>.

Picasso's main artistic rival, Henri Matisse, also attended those gatherings and would have seen the Bonnard painting. Though the *Demoiselles* is often tied to Picasso's having seen Matisse's *The Joy of Life* (1905-06) and *Blue Nude (Souvenir of Biskra)* (1906-07) –both also displayed on the Steins' walls– it has not been considered that these works, too, could be regarded as reflecting on the visual and gender ambiguities of the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* sculpture<sup>37</sup>. This connection becomes more pronounced when *Blue Nude* is considered in relation to the similarly posed sculptures that Matisse was making alongside that painting, such as *Reclining Nude I (Aurora)* (1906-07), alongside that painting. Critics occasionally see a phallic image in the iconic hip of Matisse's *Blue Nude* (Kuspit, 2006: sect. 2)<sup>38</sup>, yet this and the *Hermaphroditus*-like poses in *The Joy of Life* are often interpreted through the lens of male heterosexual desire, especially a colonialist desire that sexualizes and exoticizes a «primitive» female «other».

These frameworks also have governed recent criticism about another famous painting that Picasso surely saw, soon before embarking on the *Demoiselles* –*La Grande Odalisque* (1814) by Ingres<sup>39</sup>– which was exhibited at the Louvre in 1906 next to Manet's *Olympia* (1863)<sup>40</sup>. In the summer of 1907 Picasso made *Odalisque after Ingres* (MP545), in which the body appears to be orienting toward both directions at once. *La Grande Odalisque*, too, could be reinterpreted as formally related to the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*<sup>41</sup>. While *Olympia*, painted roughly halfway between *La Grande Odalisque* and *Blue Nude (Souvenir of Biskra)*, is now being discussed in terms of gender complexity (Getsy 2022)<sup>42</sup>, the depiction of the courtesan *Olympia* is not as straightforwardly connected to the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*<sup>43</sup>.

## Both central figures

The features and gender implications of the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* most clearly correlate to the most central figure in the *Demoiselles*, yet it is also possible to apply this expanded view to the painting's left central figure. Given the «sibling resemblance» between these two figures<sup>44</sup>, it is rea-



9. Pablo Picasso. *Study for «Nude With Drapery»*, 1907, watercolor and pencil on tan paper laid on canvas. 31 x 23.9 cm (12 1/5 x 9 2/5 in.) © 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo © Christie's. Images/© Succession Picasso/DACS, London 2022/ Bridgeman Images

sonable to seek references to the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* in both, much like we have found the allusion distributed among figures in the *Women of Algiers*.

Many features of the sculpture's iconic pose appear in Picasso's studies for *Nude With Drapery* (1907); two of these studies (Z.II/1.45 and Z.II/1.47) have been discussed also as preparatory to the left central figure in the *Demoiselles* (Rabinow 2011: 40, 268). In these studies, as in another [9], only one arm is raised, and one leg bends so the forelegs cross – a pose that also directly resembles the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* sculpture. Other features of this figure recur in Picasso's right central *demoiselle*: the front of the pelvis can double as buttocks, breasts can double as shoulder blades, the outstretched forearm looks like an erection, and the torso twists prominently<sup>45</sup>.



10. Pablo Picasso. *Bather*, 1908-09, oil on canvas. 129.8 x 96.8 cm (51 1/8 x 38 1/8 in.) © 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In the left central figure in the *Demoiselles*, the sloping color shift at the neck recurs, so this head too can be seen as swiveling 180° to face the viewer. The unusually rounded breasts can then double as buttocks to create another type of dorsal view. Though the buttocks appear higher on the torso than in the right central figure, this surprising placement is consistent with the radical rearrangement of features that Steinberg observes in Picasso's work beginning in 1907<sup>46</sup>. This extraordinary mobility of position offers a visual correlative for the potentially abrupt malleability of sex/gender.

Phallic imagery also appears: the left central figure's only upraised arm emerges from a white «v» of the armpit, and a very similar white «v» signifies this figure's vulva (the only exposed genital area in the painting). The illusion of the upper arm as a penetrating phallus is more prominent in sketches (including fig. 9. [9] where the elbow sprouts a

testicle); the final painting retains a testicle-like shape in the bulb of flesh near the tip of the upraised elbow. Picasso's slightly later painting of *The Bather* (1908) [10] shows this illusion of –or allusion to– sexual penetration more vividly. The raised upper arm of this bi-directional figure (whose pose again evokes an upright *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* sculpture) stands out in the painting as a volumetric, engorged form that emerges from and/or enters the rounded, engorged crescent-lips forming the armpit.

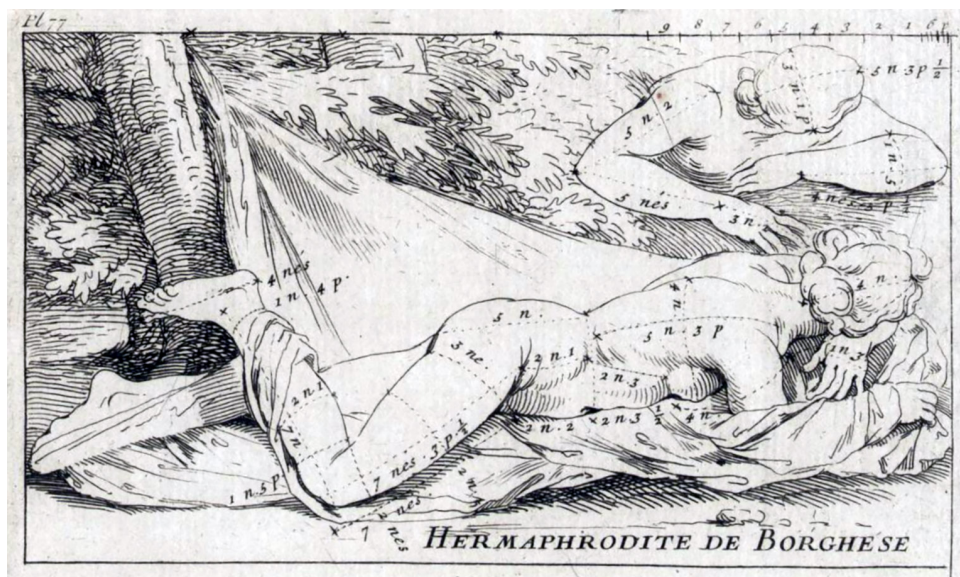
### Interpreting the allusion

The consistency of *Hermaphroditus*-related imagery in these figures implies that the two central *demoiselles* now share a structural concept with the other three *demoiselles*: conflating «opposite» identities within a single body. While the three «marginal» figures are racially bifurcated (because their faces have such different coloring from the rest of their bodies), the two «central» white-appearing figures combine binary gender cues. (Both of these bodies contain many shades of their skin tones, which suggests a racial ambiguity as in the earlier odalisques). This general conceptual scheme of conflating «opposite» identities relates closely to Baker's argument that the equivocal pose of the squatting *demoiselle* (conflating dorsal and ventral views, and folding together vectors of upward and downward motion) represents «the body proclaiming that all structural oppositions are off». This formal strategy has a conceptual valence, as it «seems to call into question oppositional thinking itself» (2011: 31, 28). Baker also articulates this as «a 'making multiple' of the body» which serves as «the exact opposite of totalization» (2011, 24). I propose that this non-totalizable multiplicity he finds in the squatter's body, and its inherent critique of categorical identifications, can be found in all of the *demoiselles*, most immediately visible through the signs of plural racial identity, and now also in the representation of plural gender. The latter has a powerful precedent in the third stage of viewing the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*.

It makes sense that the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* has not been proposed as a precedent for the *Demoiselles* – hiddenness accompanies the sculpture at every turn. When the penis is initially concealed from the viewer, and is not even visible from all angles of the ventral perspective, this invisibil-



11. Charles-Antoine Jombert. *Méthode pour apprendre le dessein*, 1755. Plate 77, ventral view. Drawn by Charles Nicolas Cochin. Public domain, [https://archive.org/details/gri\\_33125008513083/page/n329/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/gri_33125008513083/page/n329/mode/2up)



ity gives it more impact once glimpsed. An eighteenth-century drawing manual pictures the sculpture from both sides (Jombert, 1755: plate 77) but with the figure drawn to shield the penis from view [11], though other classical sculptures of male nudes in the same manual are not similarly censored. By completely obscuring the sexual surprise, this manual simultaneously desexualizes the sculpture and implies that its physiology is too transgressive to view, even through the mediating technology of a book. Another book – a late nineteenth-century Baedeker travel guide, often reprinted – says that the sculpture is «too sensuous in style», a judgment that directs attention to formal qualities and sublimates sexual content while also sounding discouraging to tourists<sup>47</sup>. The phallic imagery in the *Demoiselles*, which may remain obscure unless the viewer looks for it, reproduces the history of hiddenness associated with the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*, both in the sculpture itself and in the literature about it.

Why bring this comparison out of hiding now, especially at a moment when the centrality or even presence of the *Demoiselles* in art historical narratives is being reassessed? The current art historical project of decolonizing the canon inspired Coco Fusco's ultimate question to Suzanne Preston Blier, in a 2020 interview about Blier's 2019 book on the *Demoiselles*: «What would you say about the importance of still returning to 'European masters' in an era in which some are thinking that perhaps they take up too much space?»

(Fusco 2020: 50:21-51:42). While I inevitably add to the already enormous literature on Picasso, I seek not to reinscribe his genius but to claim that this still influential painting's gender complexity troubles assumptions of a patriarchal gaze associated with those «masters». If we can redefine that gaze in both Picasso's work and the narratives built around this painting, what other rewritings might become possible?

This direction could occasion another type of pushback which also merits attention. Decades ago, Carol Duncan accused Steinberg of trying «to save [one of the] art-historical 'greats' whose phallic obsessions have lately gotten embarrassing by fitting them out with new, androgynous psyches» (1990: 207). I am not trying so «save» Picasso. I am indeed interested in recontextualizing historically pivotal artworks that now are reductively sidelined as politically regressive. This is not to «save» a classic artwork either, but to open possibilities for ourselves as observers and critics. Those writing in a Freudian tradition may still choose to interpret the *Hermaphroditus* allusion as underscoring «Picasso's fear of the empowered phallic woman» (Poggi, 2014: 35); I am more interested in this imagery's potential effects on viewers.

Finally, I am aware that references to the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* do not necessarily imply a challenge to conventional sex/gender systems<sup>48</sup>. In the eighteenth century, Horace Walpole reported that his aunt, Lady Dorothy Townshend, regarded her nephew's bronze miniature of the sculp-

ture as the emblem of a harmonious heterosexual marriage<sup>49</sup>. Yet in the mid-nineteenth century, Swinburne's poem «Hermaphroditus», written in the presence of the sculpture at the Louvre, helped to spark a British literary scandal<sup>50</sup>. One reviewer denounced the poem's unsettling effect, saying it would «produce in the the reader... a 'physical commotion in the frame – a flutter of the blood'» (Seagroatt, 2002: 41). Here the *Hermaphroditus* threatens an inner sense of order, though it is not clear whether this agitation leads to a welcome of new paradigms, a reification of old ones, both, or total breakdown.

These contradictory responses to the sculpture seem typologically consistent with the gender-plural imagery in both Picasso's painting and its classical precedent. Gender remains mobile and inconclusive, both in its visual manifestations and in the viewer's responses to these provocative artworks. From today's standpoint, the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* allusion at least offers alternative frameworks for thinking through gender in the *Demoiselles* and in other paintings of «female» nudes by Picasso and by others. Current discours-

es of genderfluidity, intersexuality, transsexuality, and genderqueer and transgender identity perhaps have facilitated the perception of this gender complexity, and they also can help to expand its interpretation<sup>51</sup>. The *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* and Picasso's gender-plural, semiotically assembled figures, while mythological in origin, do evoke the physical bodies that are now associated with these identities, and hopefully others can explore what this evocation might mean. Meanwhile, within the visual mechanics of these artworks, the very iconographies that cue us to identify bodies using stereotypically binaristic sex/gender codes also can serve passages where that binary system unravels and dissolves.

Deconstructing and continually reconstructing the central figures' gender is a very different activity from what viewers of the *Demoiselles* have long been assumed to be doing while looking at a painting of female-presenting bodies arrayed in a brothel. The spectator now can play the role not just of a client or visual consumer of female bodies, but also of a philosopher of sex and gender.

## Notes

\* This essay is part of a larger project. Thanks especially to Michael Brenson, Valentin Diaconov, Mary LeClère, Kirstin Ringelberg, Sheila Schwartz, Richard Schiff, Sindhu Thirumalaisamy, and Sandra Zalman for their generous input.

1 Gelett Burgess, who first published an image of the painting in 1910, likely referred to this canvas while describing Picasso's figures as «Monstrous, monolithic women», «ogresses» and «pyramidal women» (408). André Salmon, however, who was Picasso's frequent studio visitor during the painting of the *Demoiselles* –and gave the painting its enduring, mono-gendered title in 1916– wrote of the figures in 1912 as «naked problems» and «ciphers» (2005: 51; «*problèmes nus*» and «*chiffres*» in 1912: 43).

2 The implied spectator is a fiction created by the painting; the embodied spectator (of any identity) steps into the implied spectator's imaginary position and role. This formulation is similar to Richard Wollheim's idea of the posited body of the «internal spectator» who is located «in the picture» (1987: 102), especially when the implied spectator of the *Demoiselles* is conjured as a client in the brothel's receiving room. Wollheim separates the gaze of the «internal spectator» from the embodied gaze of the actual, physical, «external spectator», yet their roles are related: «The function of the spectator in the picture is that he allows the [external] spectator of the picture a distinctive access to the content of the picture» (1987: 129). Wollheim's use of «he» here fits for the often-presumed male spectators of the *Demoiselles* (see esp. Chave, 1994); more recently, Richard Schiff perceives an implied «pansexual viewer» (2022: xii), positing «that the image is, so to speak, available and intelligible and illuminating to all types of sexed beings» (qtd. with permission from email to the author, January 31, 2024). Thanks to Roger White for pointing me toward Wollheim's book.

3 I use «Hermaphroditus», italicized in a title, instead of «hermaphrodite»: the latter is now considered an offensive, outdated term for an intersex person, though in the nineteenth century it had various meanings (Liming, 2017: 314). The Latin version also distinguishes the mythological origin of this fictional figure's body from the chromosomal origins of some similar-looking intersex bodies and from the hormonal/surgical origins of some similar-looking trans bodies.

4 Poggi draws from Pool (1965: 122, 125); Norman Mailer further observes that Picasso «added a phallus» to «a nude of a woman» in early 1907 sketches (1995, 207-08).

5 It is curious that this masculine gender history does not enrich canonical interpretations of the painted figures' generally feminine presentation, given that iconographic analysis of preparatory works strongly informs Leo Steinberg's widely accepted theory of the *gisante* (2022: 85-90, 107).

6 The version of the title containing the word «*demoiselles*» was attached to the painting by Picasso's close comrade André Salmon, on the occasion of a 1916 group exhibition he organized in which the canvas was exhibited, possibly for the first time. In 1933, Picasso complained, «*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* – how that title irritates me» (qtd. in Steinberg, 2022: 215, n. 35; originally «*ce que ce nom peut m'agacer!*». See Kahnweiler 1952: 24).

7 Thanks to David Getsy for guiding me toward this semiological framework, in response to my concern about the ethics of the critical gaze in this project (in conversation, New York, February 17, 2023).

8 The browner tone of this area in the torso, along with other colors used to create a patchwork of skin tones, opens the possibility for a more complex racial identity than simply «Caucasian» (Blier 2019: XII and passim).

9 «[T]he neck, the very type of a link form, disappears» from, for instance, a 1906 self-portrait (Steinberg, 1972: 164). See also Steinberg's analysis of a figure sketched on the back of a study for the painting's full composition, in the two essays that deal directly with the *Demoiselles*: «Is the lady facing or backing away?



Are we seeing her front or her rear with turned head looking over her shoulder?» (2022: 104; cf. 1972: 167). These questions, which he applies to the painting's crouching figure, also apply to the body of the central *demoiselle*.

10 One of them became «The Philosophical Brothel» (2022), which even in its original version published in *ArtNews* (September and October, 1972), before the 1988 addition of a long «Retrospect» for the essay's republication on both sides of the Atlantic in three languages, quickly became the most influential essay on the *Demoiselles*. The longest («The Algerian Women and Picasso at Large», anthologized in *Other Criteria*, 1972) includes material that became the third («Drawing as If to Possess», *Artforum*, October 1971); the latter was revised and republished in 1977 (then reprinted in the 2022 volume of Steinberg's essays on Picasso).

11 Steinberg finds instances as far back as 1902 (2022: 216, n. 51).

12 As Steinberg explains this methodology: «The best commentary on a Picasso is another Picasso. The artist tends to anticipate and repeat his inventions, so that the most enigmatic of them usually turn up in simpler contexts» (2022: 82).

13 All versions are pictured in Steinberg, 1972, foldout after 234, and in the catalogue (ed. Gabriel Montua and Anna Wegenschimmel) for the exhibition «Picasso & Les Femmes d'Alger» at the Museum Berggruen, May 21-August 29, 2021.

14 Steinberg writes about the *Venus respiciens* with respect to version H (1972: 139), where the pose is very clear; it also appears here in version B.

15 Other examples include the hookah held on the left and the *porrón*-like spout of the pitcher on the walking figure's tray. See Steinberg's discussion of the «unmistakable phallism of the *porrón* in two works just preceding the *Demoiselles*» and the recurrence of this Spanish wine decanter in studies for the *Demoiselles* (2022: 91-92).

16 This word's odd spelling is deliberate, as Steinberg calls attention to the acute angle at the tip of the tabletop. He interprets this shape also as phallic and notes its «inward thrust» (2022: 84).

17 Smith's phrasing, in his latter observation, suggests a response to the actual dimensions of the phallic image in the original, large painting (the canvas measures 8' x 7' 8" / 243.9 x 233.7 cm). To make this claim account for the absence of commentary on this image altogether, given that smaller-scale reproductions of the painting circulate widely, it could be read in terms of relative dimension: it would be unexpected for a penis to be the size of an adult's foreleg.

18 This point has been hotly debated. When Carol Duncan objected that Steinberg's interpretation implied that «women are anatomically unequipped to experience the work's full meaning» (1989: 178, n. 11), Steinberg responded that his argument «was written for people undeterred by dearth of equipment» (1990: 207). Duncan then doubled down: «Everything about the *Demoiselles*, and most of all the brothel situation it forces on the viewer, designates that viewer as male» – this reading is based on presumptions that Picasso's figures are indubitably «women», that the «brothel» is an absolute, exclusive, and literally representational reference, and that «the work's phallocentricity» (as an underlying motive, thematically related to yet without regard to the specific phallic image now at issue) can only further the patriarchies of artists' canons, art criticism's discourse, and social relations (1990: 207).

19 This figure often was drawn seated in the center of the composition, and «disappears» (Steinberg, 2022: 92) from the same watercolor study in which the phallic shape [6] most closely resembles the one in the final painting.

20 The March-April 1907 sketch of a classical figure holding forward a vase/funeral urn (Rubin, 1994: 121, fig. 228) visually correlates to Picasso's 1933 *Woman with the Vase* sculpture that marks his grave – a site where the living (visitors) meet the dead (artist).

21 Steinberg offers many antecedents for Picasso's «obsession» in his essays yet despairs, «Nor can one pin down the representational reference of Picasso's front/back simultaneities» (Steinberg, 1972: 148). Many works by Picasso thought to be depicting females can be regarded as containing not just phallic imagery but also allusions to the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* sculpture.

22 «The dimensions of various parts of the body were carefully worked out to emphasize the buttocks... So the focus of the viewer is drawn first, by the proportions of the sleeping figure and by the pose, to the buttocks» (Ajoonian, 1990: 96).

23 The twisting torso is part of a general, and typically Hellenistic, capture of the figure in movement. Though the eyes are closed, the slumber is fitful: a leg breaks free from the drapery, and the head position looks unsustainable.

24 Though the sculpture was made in the classical Roman era, it (and all other copies) are thought to be renditions of an earlier, Hellenistic original that no longer exists (Ajoonian, 1990: 85-90).

25 In this carefully, discreetly angled photograph, the view of the breast is partially blocked by the drapery. The bedding was added in 1620 by Bernini.

26 In some versions (including version B) of Picasso's *Women of Algiers*, the head of the seated figure on the right rests on a similarly upraised elbow.

27 Is this penis erect? This question is debated in the literature; the most careful and thorough cataloguer of Hermaphroditus sculptures calls it «erect, or partially erect» (Ajoonian, 1990: 90), though it may simply be resting at an angle on the drapery. Though the glans is showing, the penis may be circumcised, so this too is an inconclusive detail; altogether the sculpture's naked body ironically becomes another kind of mask, one that may never be removed. In any case, the visible manifestation of the penis here is more important than its condition.

28 Though Trimble analyzes a copy of the sculpture that does not have a mattress, these observations apply to all versions. I use «dorsal view» instead of «rear view» because of the potentially confusing polyvalence of «rear» – the ventral view could also be the «rear view» because it is seen second and remains less prominent.

29 «[T]he viewer cannot make the woman and the boy resolve into coherent figures» (Trimble, 2018: 26).

30 Some writings on Hermaphroditus use pronouns such as «hir» and «ze» (as in von Stackelberg, 2014); Trimble refrains from this practice because it removes the «tension and contradiction» that activate the sculpture (2018: 18, n. 14). The shift into «it» signals discourses of monstrosity attached to trans, intersex, and manufactured (e.g., Frankensteinian) bodies.

31 Ardeno Soffici, who lived in Paris from 1900 to 1907, witnessed Picasso wandering there «like a hound in search of game» (qtd. in Green, 2011: 126).

32 The sculpture was unearthed in Rome (c. 1608-18) and came to the Louvre (1807) from the Villa Borghese, where a room had been devoted to it. This version has been exhibited in Paris almost continuously since 1811.

33 Its exhibition and probable position were confirmed via email (January 10, 2022) by curators from the Prado (see Matilla and Portús, 2004: 113, fig. 84).

34 Picasso first visited the Prado with his father briefly in 1895, and likely returned when he lived in Madrid in early 1901 (Palau i Fabre, 1981: 72, 214–22).

35 «*Sur un lit houleux et défait, chaud d'une chaleur animale, une incertaine créature humaine est couchée, dans la pose à peu près de l'Hermaphrodite Borghèse*». André Gide, «Promenade au Salon d'Automne», *Gazette des beaux-arts* 34, n.º 582 (December 1905): 482.

36 Rebecca Rabinow's remarks during a lecture accompanying the exhibition *The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso, and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 28-June 3, 2012), which claimed that Leo Stein recognized the *Hermaphroditus* allusion in Bonnard's painting, catalyzed my research (2012: 17:10+). Rabinow cites Gide's review in the exhibition catalogue (2011: 46, n. 72), but it is not clear if Stein read this review.

37 It may be significant that the Steins bought *Blue Nude* as an «aggressive, edgy... replacement» for Bonnard's painting, which they had recently sold from their collection (Rabinow, 2011: 40). Rubin notes other places where Picasso could have studied *Blue Nude* (1994: 118, n. 1).

38 Kuspit was «surprised» other critics had not noted this imagery (in conversation, New York, May 5, 2018). The phallic imagery in both *Blue Nude* and the *Demoiselles*—doubling as part of a leg, and located along the painting's central meridian—may help to account for why Matisse, alone among Picasso's artist friends, laughed and then turned angry when he first saw the painting in Picasso's studio (see Rubin, 1994: 118, n. 2). He would have been primed to see the visual pun and could have noticed that the hidden erection, though it occupies less space in Picasso's canvas than does the thigh and hip of *Blue Nude*, is a more cunning and powerful phallic image: it can function as a compositional center around which the figures appear to circle, in a surprisingly coherent illusion of spherical pictorial space.

39 As with *Blue Nude*, this *odalisque* appears racially indeterminate, a liminality that corresponds to the liminal gender identity that I am proposing by tying these works to the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*. *Olympia*, as a foil to both paintings, could figure the racial liminality of those paintings' *odalisques* as bifurcating into the exceedingly pale courtesan (*Olympia*) and the dark-skinned maid to the right.

40 The 1906 pairing was a major art event because it had not been certain that Manet's relatively recent painting would be accepted for exhibition at the historically oriented Louvre.

41 My paper for the 2023 College Art Association annual conference, «Gender Flexibility: The Queer Potential of the *Sleeping (Borghese) Hermaphroditus* in Paintings of Nudes during the Long Nineteenth Century, in Paris», focused on this painting and its closely related, smaller version, *Odalisque in Grisaille* (c. 1824-34).

42 Getsy rereads the critical history of *Olympia* in light of transgender studies, yet concentrates on outlining pedagogical strategies rather than reinterpreting the painting itself.

43 A more complete exploration of the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* paradigm in the formation of the genre of the «female» nude would range beyond the examples mentioned in this essay, reaching at least as far back as Cranach's many *Nymph of the Spring* paintings and including some paintings just after the *Demoiselles* such as Georges Braque's *Large Nude* (1908), which looks «as much male as female» (Brenson 1989, C30).

44 Günther Bandmann writes of «geschwisterlichen Ähnlichkeit» (1965: 6).

45 Radically twisting torsos also appear in sketches such as *Study for the Standing Demoiselle on the Right (the«curtain-Parter»)*, Carnet 3, 12V, Paris, March 1907 (Z.XXVI.81; see Rubin, 1994: 82, fig. 156).

46 Steinberg calls this an «abrogation of pre-structured intervals in the human anatomy» and he notes that it reappears in the *Women of Algiers* series when «an entire three-quarter backview moves in on a woman's chest» (1972: 165). Though this image (from Version A) does not position the buttocks as high, it is still a relevant visual experiment.

47 If that was not enough discouragement, the description continues, «The pedestal is an unhappy idea of Bernini» (Baedeker, 1891: 103).

48 See, for example, the cis-heteronormative deployment of Hermaphroditus sculptures, which were used in classical Roman times to promote «domestic harmony... heterosexual union and political concord» (von Stackelberg, 2014: 395).

49 She reportedly declared the sculpture to be «the only happy couple she had ever seen» (Ajoatian 1997, 220).

50 Swinburne's «Hermaphroditus», written in 1863 as a response to viewing the sculpture at the Louvre, became «one of the most controversial and frequently discussed poems» of 1866 when it was published in his collected poems (Østermark-Johansen, 2010: 24).

51 The coincidence between the appearance of this essay and the ascendance of trans visibility as an issue raises a question about whether critics during the decades when the figures were all seen as categorically female were affected by a mainstream suppression of queer and trans visibility following the agitations of second-wave feminism and the 1969 Stonewall rebellion (Beemyn, 2014: 23-27).

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