

Decolonising the Curriculum: Department of Modern Languages and Visual Arts, Durham University

**The truth behind the masks: Humanising Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K. Version)* (1907), decentring colonial narratives in 'primitive' artworks**

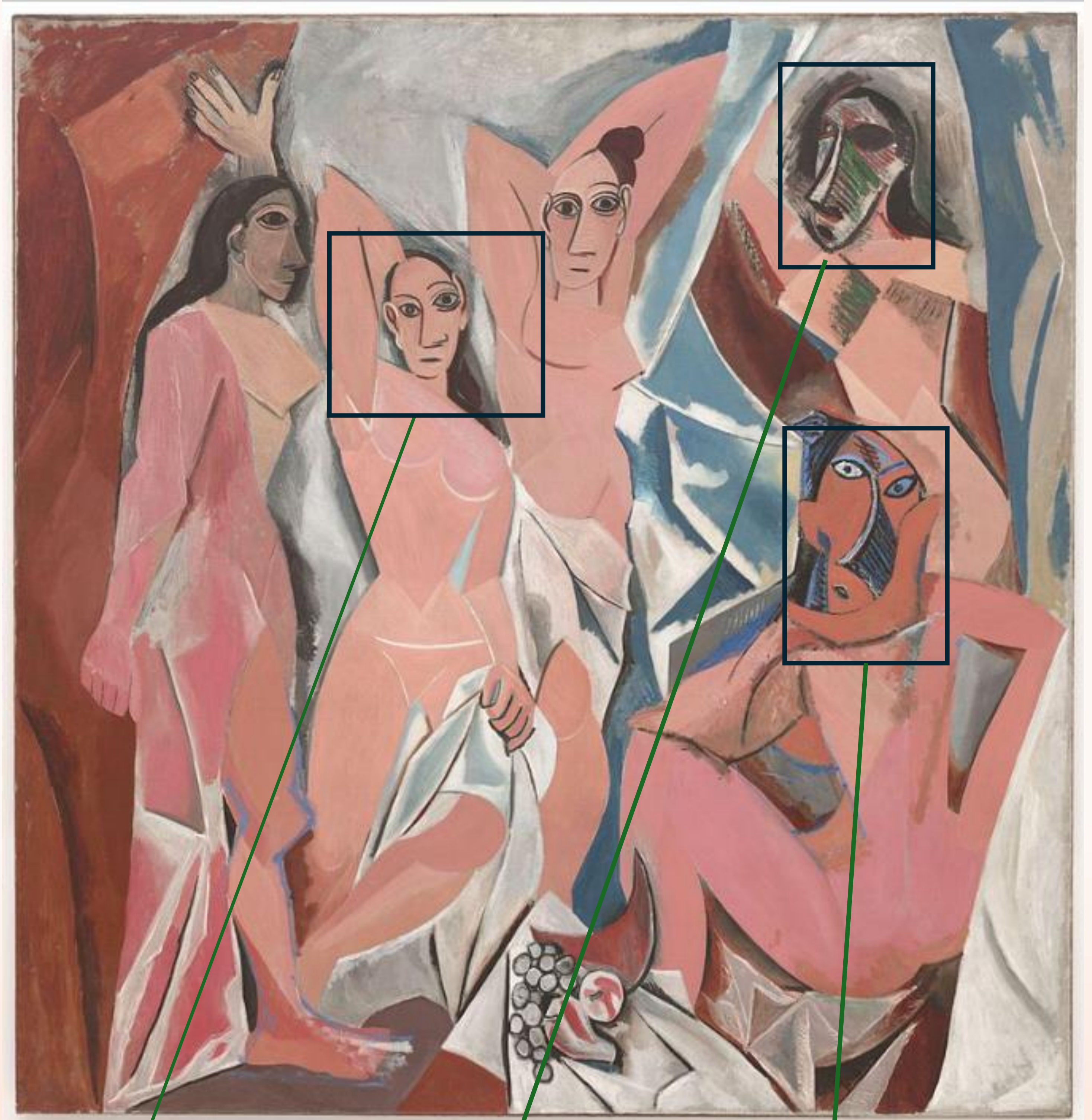
**Picasso, Pablo (1907) *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K. Version)*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, oil-on-canvas, 243,9 x 233,7 cm**

*Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K. Version)* is a Cubist painting by Pablo Picasso (1907). It represents five sex workers presenting themselves to the audience in front of two sets of curtains, one blue, one terracotta. The work is Cubist in style, combining a series of flattened, geometrical forms, as well as flesh-toned pinks to represent the bodies and faces of five female figures from a brothel in Carrer d'Avinyo in Barcelona's red-light district, one which Picasso frequently visited.

**How does this project decolonise the curriculum?**

By decolonising a Spanish artist whose works are deemed as seminal in Hispanic culture first year modules. These modules largely consider what 'Spanishness' means in the arts, but most of the time forget to apply it to big names such as Pablo Picasso and Joan Miro.

TSPAN1161, SPAN1171, SPAN1141, SPAN1131 (SEE BELOW FOR FURTHER INFO).



Two identical masks are inspired by Iberian female head sculptures.



An mbangu sickness mask, from the Pende region of the current DRC. Used to represent the physical deformities caused by illness.



A woodcarved 'Mahongwé' mask from the Etombi region, Congo. wood, 40x17cm, 0,85kg.

**Current exhibition label:**

**On view**

MoMA, Floor 5, 502  
The Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Galleries

**Pablo Picasso has 1,250 works online.**

**There are 2,442 paintings online.**

Central to Picasso's practice was his predilection for borrowing, combining, and transforming references from Western art history, popular visual idioms, and the material culture of colonized peoples from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. In *Les Femmes d'Alger* the stylized, geometric features of the two rightmost figures evidence the artist's keen interest in the formal innovations of African masks and sculpture, which were imported into France via colonial channels, and which Picasso and his peers avidly collected. The stylistic disjunction between these heads and those of the other figures intensifies the painting's psychological charge and raises questions about cultural difference.

Gallery label from 2024



**OUTPUT (1): Challenging the set ideals...**



You would think scholars would have caught on that there was something not quite right about this painting. Wrong! There is only one academic article by **Patricia Leighton from 1990 (see QR code below)** that talks about the **problems behind the Western aesthetic appropriation of Central African masks**. So, how can we humanise, and build a narrative for this painting that is both respectful and honest?

**DO'S:**

- **Use inverted commas** for terms with negative, colonialist, and/or racist connotations (decentre language). E.g: '**primitive**'/ '**primitivism**' both define the artistic movement which, by qualifying primitive or chronologically early cultures as superior to those of contemporary civilization, resulting in an essentialising/ Orientalist process.
- **Be precise, and avoid homogenization (Tenbroek 2022: 6):**
  - To talk of the processes behind colonisation, & the **different types of colonialism (settler, exploitation, surrogate, internal)**. These variations means that the resistance to such experiences cannot be all homogenised underneath the term '**decolonisation**'.
  - When dealing with art forms, use term '**cultural**' and/or '**aesthetic**' **appropriation** when talking about the ways in which the **masks** (or stolen artefacts) were used in the painterly process.

**Don't's:**

- **Be vague** when talking of an artefacts' origins. E.g: Using the word 'Africa' to designate origins of an artefact found in the era of colonialism. Africa is a continent, not a country.
  - Pinpoint exploitation **by using terms such as 'looting' or 'stealing'**.
- **Make assumptions**. There is no fact of savageness & uncivilised, just as there is no fact of blackness (Fanon 2000). We are all complex human beings with mutable identities.

**Vision for the next steps:**

- I will be **continuing the translation (in Spanish & French)** of the current exhibition label for *Les Femmes d'Alger*, using feedback from the worksheet.
- Continuing visual research of three other masks in the painting (far right fig.).
- **Searching for the voices behind the masks: inviting Congolese, Fon (Benin), Kru, Mande, Gur, Akan (Ivory Coast) speakers to read the exhibition labels in their languages and discuss the decolonisation of this painting.**

**FEEDBACK FORM**



**How to decolonise an exhibition label exercise + Listen to the decolonised label!**



**OUTPUT (2):**

