

## LESSON FOUR: Painting Modern Life



**IMAGE ELEVEN:** Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)*. 1907. Oil on canvas, 8' x 7' 8" (243.9 x 233.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



**IMAGE TWELVE:** Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *Three Women at the Spring*. 1921. Oil on canvas, 6' 8 ¼" x 68 ½" (203.9 x 174 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Allan D. Emil. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

### INTRODUCTION

There are a variety of reasons why artists choose the topics that they do. The subject of a work of art can be influenced by the historical moment in which the artist is working, and may reflect specific social, political, and cultural concerns as well as the artist's own perspective. The manner, or style, in which the topic is represented often helps to communicate a specific message. This lesson explores two large works by Picasso that represent female figures executed in two very different styles. *Les Femmes d'Alger* is informed not only by Picasso's own experiences but also by general social concerns of his time. While it does not depict contemporary events, *Three Women at the Spring* reflects contemporary social and cultural concerns, and demonstrates Picasso's ability to reinvent his painting style in light of such concerns.

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider the role of an artist in responding to or reflecting on contemporary issues or ideas.
- Students will explore the relationship between a work of art and the viewer, and artistic strategies for inciting a specific response.

## INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students what they think is the role of an artist. Ask what topics they believe to be important for an artist to consider.
- Ask your students to think about the impact of a work of art that presents social issues, such as poverty or disease. Ask if there are topics that they feel should not be represented in art. If they say yes, ask what they are and why they should not be represented in art.

## IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to take a moment to look at *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*. Ask them to each say one word that describes the painting. Make a list of these words on the chalkboard.
- Begin the discussion by asking your students to focus on the figures. Ask them to describe the figures' poses and expressions. Ask them to group the figures according to their visual similarities.

It is thought that the two figures on the right were completed after the rest of the composition. These two figures, with their masklike faces, reflect Picasso's interest in Iberian (ancient Spanish) and African art. When planning this painting, Picasso had originally thought of including two male figures: a sailor, who was taken out and replaced by the fruit in the center of the painting, and a medical student, now the figure at the far left, who has one arm raised, holding back a curtain, and the other clenched in fist.

- Direct your students' attention to the background of the painting. Ask if they can tell where this scene is taking place by looking at the background. Ask why or why not.

Picasso completed this work in 1907, but he did not show it publicly until 1916, the same year that a friend dubbed it *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)* (The women of Avignon). The title refers to a street in the red-light district of Barcelona. Many of the people who saw the painting in Picasso's studio, including painters and art dealers, had negative reactions to it. One art dealer even said, "It's the work of a madman."<sup>12</sup>

- Ask your students to consider why people might have had such a strong reaction to the work.
- Inform your students that the figures in the painting are life-size. Ask your students to imagine what it would be like to stand in front of the painting. Ask if they think they would feel welcome in this space. Ask why or why not.

Composed of fragmented, jagged edges rather than soft rounded forms, these five naked women stare at us with large asymmetrical eyes. The two central figures stand with arms raised, exposing their bodies to the viewer. The room they occupy, with brown and icy blue curtains, does not seem to recede in space the way one might expect.

- Ask your students to look at the figures in the painting again. Ask them to consider the role of the viewer in this work. Ask how they think Picasso engages the viewer.

The focus of this painting has been interpreted in many ways. It is often seen as marking a decisive shift in the way the world can be represented by artists. Rather than adhering to traditional rules about composition and painting technique, Picasso chose to break with convention to communicate his ideas. He distorted form, accentuating some details while leaving out others altogether, instead of faithfully trying to create likenesses. This fragmentation of form also suggests that Picasso was trying to represent his subjects from several angles at

12. Ambroise Vollard, quoted in María del Carmen Gonzalez et al, *Looking at Matisse and Picasso* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art), 21.

once. By offering multiple perspectives, he was perhaps encouraging us to think about how something might look from various angles—how information gathered and processed over time might reveal itself. Not only is the execution of the painting noteworthy, so is its subject: five nude women posing suggestively in a brothel, who confront us by returning our gaze.

- Now that your students have looked at and discussed the work, ask them again to each select one word that describes the painting. Make a list of the words. Discuss any differences between the ideas your students had when they initially saw the work and the ideas they had after discussing it as a group.
- Ask your students to look at *Three Women at the Spring*. Divide the students into groups of two or three, and ask them to come up with as many similarities as they can find between *Three Women at the Spring* and *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Then have your students share their lists. Encourage your students to listen closely to one another and not to repeat ideas that have already been shared. Encourage that your students support their ideas with visual evidence from the paintings.
- Now ask your students to describe how the paintings differ.
- Inform your students that *Three Women at the Spring* was made fourteen years after *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and two years after the end of World War I. World War I is considered to be the first modern war, and one in which civilians were targeted in huge numbers by tactics such as aerial bombing. Not only was there a severe number of casualties, but also homes, government buildings, bridges, and churches were reduced to rubble or mere skeletons. Immediately following the war, there was a political and social impetus to “return to order”—not only to clean up the destruction but also to return France to the glory it had enjoyed in classical times.
- Given this information, ask your students why Picasso may have chosen to modify his style. Why might paintings of angular and fragmented bodies, such as we have seen in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, have seemed inappropriate to the artist at this time?
- Inform your students that *Three Women at the Spring* references history, other painters, and a classical subject, and that unlike *Les Femmes d'Alger* there is no reference to anything contemporary. The painting depicts three women gathered around a well. They are dressed in classical robes and they seem to be surrounded by rich earth—even their stocky bodies appear to be made of clay.
- Ask your students to consider how a painting depicting an idyllic and classical scene made at this specific historical moment might be considered social commentary. Ask your students to consider the following quote by Picasso:

If the subjects I have wanted to express have suggested different ways of expression, I have never hesitated to adopt them. I have never made trials nor experiments. Whenever I had something to say, I have said it in the manner in which I have felt it ought to be said.<sup>13</sup>

Ask your students how this quote relates to their discussion of *Les Femmes d'Alger* and *Three Women at the Spring*.

## ACTIVITIES

Direct your students to research a topic that they consider to be of social importance. Ask them to consider how they would represent artistically what they learned about this topic. They should consider how they can get viewers' attention, and how they will get their message across. They can execute a work of art or just consider what they might create.

13. Pablo Picasso, *Statement*, in Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, 265.