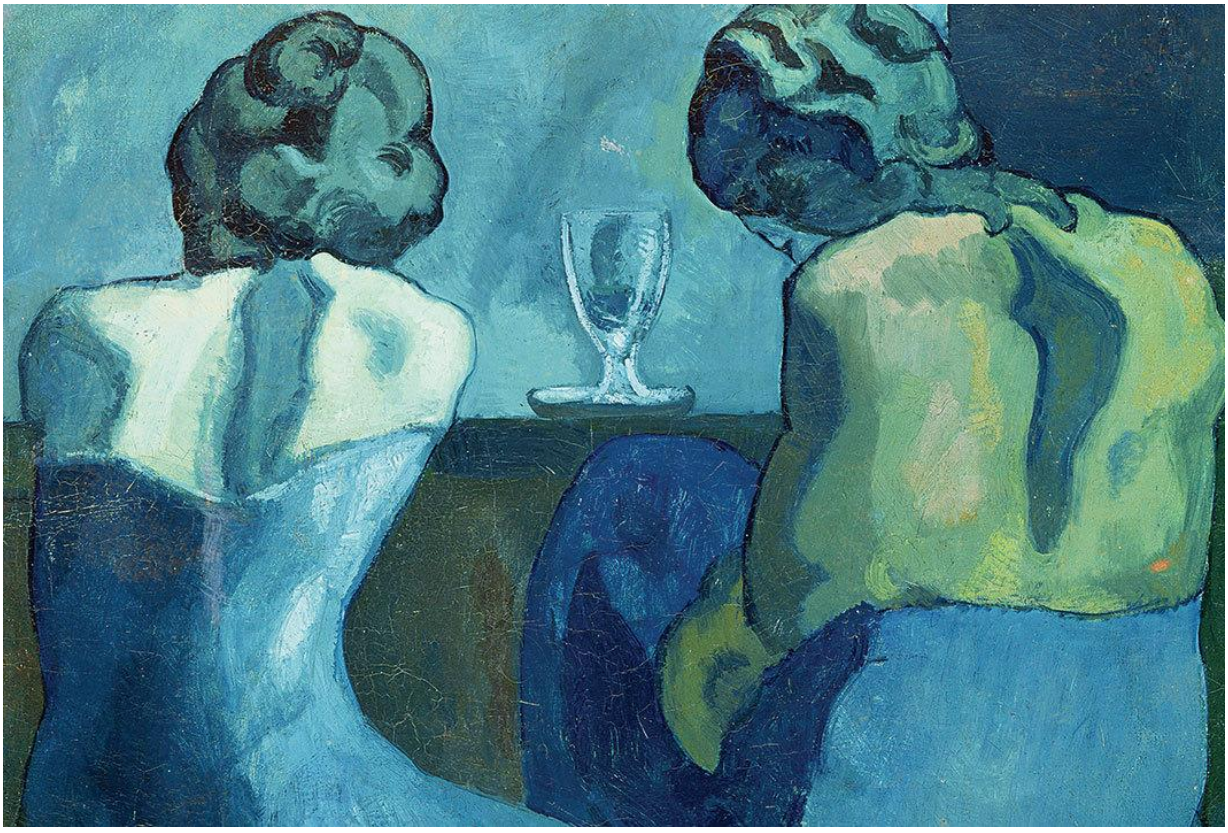


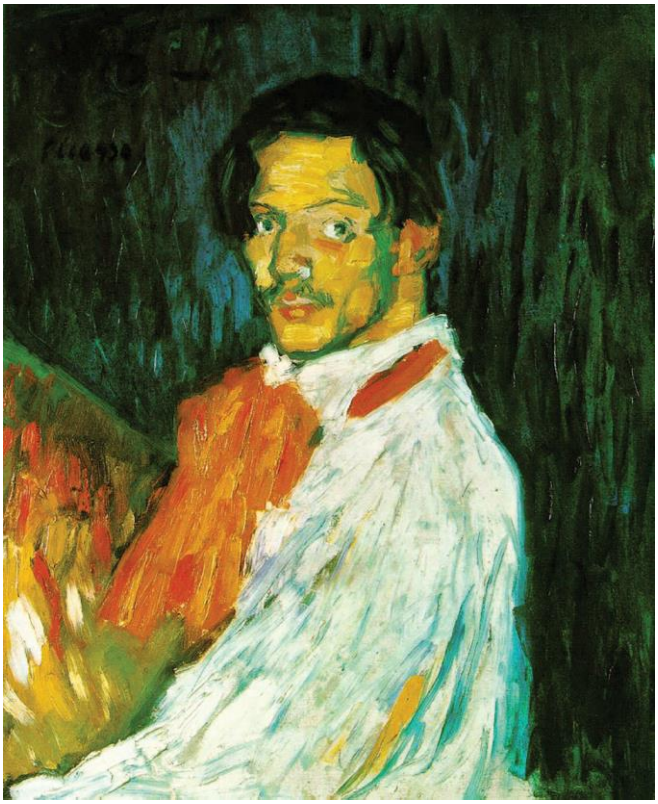
Pablo Picasso, *Pierreuses au bar* (Two Women at a Bar), 1902, oil on canvas, 31 1⁄2 × 36".

“Picasso: Blue and Rose”

MUSÉE D'ORSAY

IN AN OFT-CITED REMARK reported by Françoise Gilot, Picasso declared his mononym to have been predestined: “I wanted to be a painter, and so I ended up becoming Picasso.” This quotation decorates the exhibition catalogue accompanying “Picasso: Blue and Rose,” the Musée d’Orsay’s survey of Picasso’s formative years, establishing the tone for the exhibition as a whole. Yet the statement leaves much unanswered: What did it mean, precisely, to have become “Picasso” in becoming a painter? What form of personhood did art provide for Picasso, and was there ever a chance of his becoming something else instead?

Although never overtly posed, these questions loom large in “Blue and Rose.” Spanning the decade between 1897 and 1907, the Musée d’Orsay show traces the path of Picasso’s early career from fin de siècle Barcelona to the brink of modernism in microscopic detail, foregrounding the network of friends, family members, art dealers, and critical supporters who together abetted his meteoric rise. Assembling an extraordinary quantity of works by Picasso (they number over 230 in total), the exhibition, which was organized in collaboration with Musée National Picasso-Paris, and curated by Laurent Le Bon, Claire Bernardi, Stéphanie Molins, and Emilia Philippot, manages to lay the artist bare; yet this profusion of evidence reveals, if anything, an identity less, rather than more easily, comprehended. Confounding biographical coherence, “Blue and Rose” casts the whole meaning of “Picasso,” the proper noun, into doubt.



Pablo Picasso, *Yo, Picasso* (I, Picasso), 1901, oil on canvas, 29 × 23 3⁄4". © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

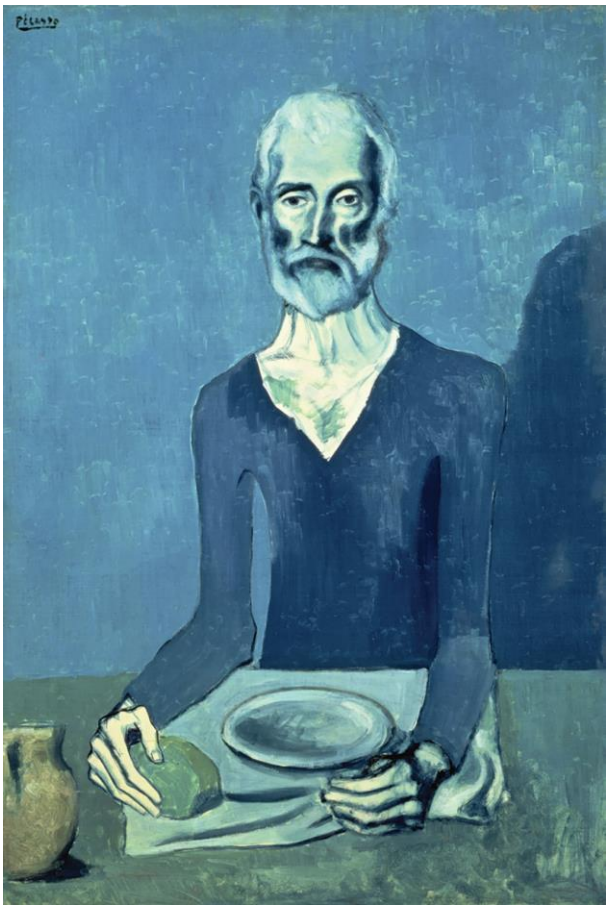
Consider the earliest work included in the exhibition, Picasso's self-portrait from 1898, a drawing made at Horta de Sant Joan, in rural Catalonia, following a near-fatal bout of scarlet fever. A document of Picasso's convalescence, the drawing depicts the seventeen-year-old's image as he saw it reflected in a mirror: Wide-eyed, he surveys a body—his own—reduced almost to skin and bones by illness, yet which appears oddly sensuous, and even faintly seductive, its contours and hollows accentuated by a wending shadow. The image is an arresting one, not least for its equivocations on matters of identity and difference. The long, lithe torso in the picture is unmistakably that of Picasso—the artist in the flesh. But it is flesh become unfamiliar, stripped of its former shape and sense, like an empty signifier.

Not coincidentally, it was at Horta that Picasso first began to consider a name change in earnest, testing variations on his mother's maiden name (as opposed to his patronymic, Ruiz), including Picas, Picaz, and Picazzo. This rebranding was no small matter: As the son of a middling painter (and less-than-inspiring art instructor) named José Ruiz y Blasco, Picasso had much to gain from the makeover. In February 1900, exhibiting at Els Quatre Gats, an artist-run café favored by the Barcelona avant-garde, the nineteen-year-old Pablo Ruiz Picasso publicly repudiated his father's academism, instead minting himself as a portraitist of his fellow bohemians. Soon thereafter, he sought to disentangle his career from the Barcelona modernists (and from Spanish provincialism), making his first trip to Paris in September of the same year. Nine months later, in June 1901, he was given his first major exhibition in the French capital, sharing a two-person show at Galerie Vollard with the Basque artist Francisco Iturrino, and thus securing his place as a vetted original, albeit not yet *EL REY* (the king), as he had already anointed himself in the pages of his ledger.

Pablo Picasso, *L'artiste dessinant et études de mains* (The Artist Drawing and Studies of Hands), 1898, conté crayon on paper, 13 1⁄8 × 9 1⁄4". © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Picasso's sense of exceptionalism was powerful indeed. At first, he sought to channel it through the available means of self-representation: Chief among the works Picasso presented at Galerie Vollard was the self-portrait *Yo, Picasso* (I, Picasso), 1901, a full-volume declaration of the artist's rude ambition. Against an inky background, the painter announces his presence with arresting frankness, his skin electric yellow, his palette consumed in a blaze of fiery brush marks.

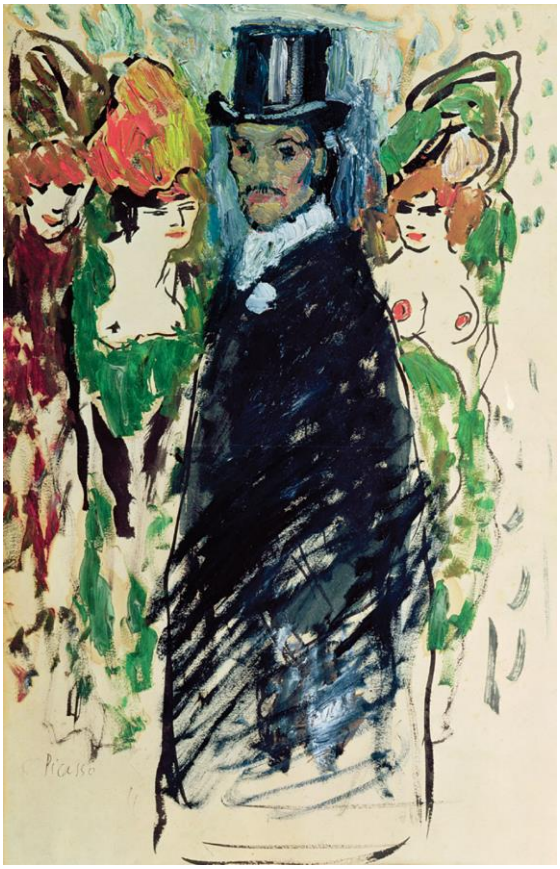
Yet this declaration of ardor is made strange by the inconsistency of the painter's gaze: Picasso's left eye meets our look dead-on, steely and self-assured, but his right eye veers off-kilter, as if tugged by a passing distraction. The inconsistency is reflected, too, in the painting's unalloyed pastiche of styles, which nod to the self-portraiture of Courbet and Van Gogh while at the same time merging the features of Picasso's countryman Velázquez with his own: his hair parted at the middle, a mustache dusting his upper lip. Signing his name in cursive in the painting's upper left corner, Picasso scrawls the capital letters *YO*—the first-person-singular pronoun in Spanish—just above. It is tempting to read this gesture as typical Picassian hyperbole, saying even louder what the self-portrait already spits in the viewer's face; but the crude inscription might equally be taken as parody, as if aggrandizing the first-person pronoun to the point of absurdity: *You doubt that this is really me, Picasso? As well you should!*



Pablo Picasso, *L'ascète* (The Ascetic), 1903, oil on canvas, 46 5⁄8 × 31 3⁄4". © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

IN THE MONTHS following his first Vollard exhibition, Picasso changed focus from portraiture to figure painting, and from the face to the body—a shift, per Rosalind E. Krauss's terminology, from the referent of selfhood ("I, Picasso") to its corporeal signifier. With his Blue Period canvases, painted in the winter of 1901, the human subject takes on a sculptural weight and heft for much the first time; while the face, demoted in status, becomes subsumed in the body's mute impersonality. Studies in self-enclosure, Picasso's absinthe drinkers and inmates (women he'd observed at the Saint-Lazare prison) exert the ultimate claim to personal autonomy, as heroes and heroines of a wordless world. After these early efforts, however, heroism turned quickly to irresolution, as Picasso hedged his bet on the body. In *L'ascète* (The Ascetic), 1903, the sitter's face, rugged and pockmarked, nearly saps the life from the body's fungible support; and in *The Old Guitarist*, 1903–1904, the body, bereft of apertures or orifices (save, perhaps, for the guitar's depthless mouth), closes in on itself.

By 1904, Picasso had arrived at an impasse: On one hand, as a committed bohemian, he valued personal autonomy over all else, trusting completely in the potency of the proper name "Picasso." On the other, however, he had already strained the machinery of self-representation beyond the breaking point, proposing impersonality in place of individuality and staking his claim to autonomy in the physical world and there alone. It was necessary that Picasso resolve this contradiction; but doing so required him to confront the question of gender, and specifically the issue—the myth—of gender *difference*.



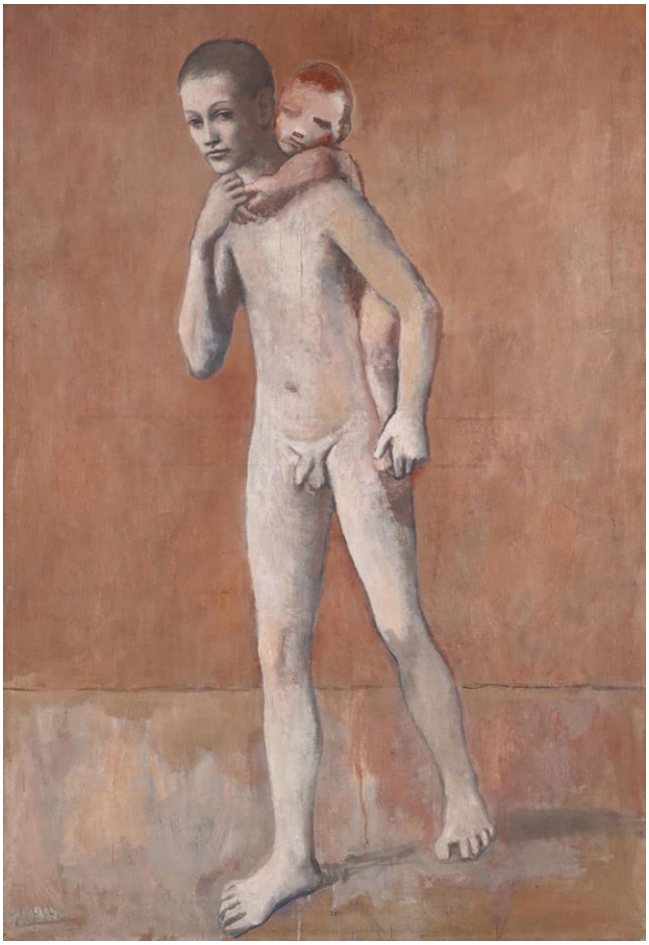
Pablo Picasso, *Autoportrait en haut de forme* (Self-Portrait in Top Hat), 1901, oil on paper, 19 3⁄4 × 13".

Gender mattered to Picasso's art in ways that had little to do with sex: At the turn of the twentieth century, just as today, to be marked as "woman" was precisely to lack autonomy, and to bear the burden not just of corporeality, but of mortality as well. This was the difference gender made, and makes, in nuce: "Woman" is our invented name for nonautonomy, the condition (the curse) men are taught that they might escape.

Although Picasso accommodated this fictive difference easily in life, his artistic pursuits left no obvious place for the category of "woman," except in the negative sense, as the *undoing* of figuration and personhood alike. Hence the difficulties he encountered in figuring men and women as such in engendering "male" and "female" subjects in mutual interaction. At intervals throughout his career, beginning with his first trip to Paris in 1900, Picasso attempted to conjure scenes of gendered coupling, forcing his lovers into a halting embrace. But to no avail: In one variation on this theme, dating from 1901, the couple's paired mouths evaporate on contact, leaving an empty space between; and in a later version, the male lover's hand coagulates into a fingerless stump. Each new attempt reveals gender as a frustrating mirage; yet the mirage had to be preserved, lest the whole framework of masculinity and femininity fall to pieces.

Although Picasso eventually came to profit from the spectacle of gender, mobilizing the signifier "woman" as a force of annihilation in *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, his choosing of this tactic was by no means preordained. To the contrary, Picasso's work from the Rose Period brushes the shores of a different gender politics, striking near to—if never quite arriving at—a nonbinary view of the human subject. Heterosexual farce is the overriding theme of his series

"*Saltimbanques*" (Acrobats), 1905, in which the signifiers of gender metastasize beyond anyone's control: Picasso's circus strongmen are human erections, self-glorying in their muscular physicality (yet leaving no one much impressed); likewise, his women acrobats strain the bounds of human flexibility, their poses mimicking—and parodying—the contortionism of Ingres's odalisques. In one particularly sharpedged (and allegorically overheated) version of this theme, a nude Salomé exposes herself before a bored Herod, while a bare-breasted servant offers up the Baptist's head on a plate—a spectacle that leaves heterosexuality looking like a macabre joke. The point is well taken: Gender is fiction not fact, a cruel, senseless masquerade. When men and women do find themselves engendered together in the "*Saltimbanques*" series, whether as husband and wife or as father and mother, their proximity sparks no intimacy, and nothing transpires. The difference makes no difference.



Pablo Picasso, *Les deux frères* (The Two Brothers), 1906, oil on canvas, 55 5⁄8 × 38 3⁄4". © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

"BLUE AND ROSE" CULMINATES with Picasso's sojourn to the Catalan village of Gósol in the summer of 1906, a turning point in his career marking the first strides toward *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*. It was at Gósol, too, that Picasso turned the question of gender back onto himself, painting several large-scale male nudes, culminating with the verision of *Les deux frères* (The Two Brothers) now at Kunstmuseum Basel (a smaller, preparatory study is also included in "Blue and Rose," as is *Jeune garçon au cheval* [Boy Leading a Horse], 1905–06, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which Picasso completed before departing for Gósol). *Les deux frères* depicts a young boy carrying his infant brother on his back, walking

unclothed through a vacant landscape. I say “young boy,” but questions of age and maturity are central to the painting’s ambiguous effect: Although the boy’s crotch is hairless, his look, calmly returning the spectator’s gaze, has all the pathos of adulthood—an expression that, tallied with the boy’s conspicuous nudity (and contrasted with the incoherence of his brother’s facial features), suggests an adult intelligence about sex, and about the ways his own sexual capacities might intersect with the beholder’s desires. The older boy is no child; but neither is he a full-fledged man.

Pablo Picasso, *Salomé*, 1905, drypoint etching on paper, 15 7⁄8 × 13 3⁄4". From the series “Saltimbanques” (Acrobats), 1905. © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The way he looks back at us—eyes steadied, gaze fixed—is likewise unreadable, neither communicating desire nor betraying his fear of self-exposure. It is tempting to call it a homoerotic look, just as it is tempting to think of our look, the one Picasso fashions for us, as equally complicit in the eroticization of the male body. But the framework of eroticism fits the picture awkwardly. Is the picture’s viewer presumed to be male or female? And is the older boy presented as subject or object of desire, or some-how both at once? What is the boy’s gender, really? (I mean gender, not sex.) Answers to these questions are hardly forthcoming. And that is just the point: The logic of gender requires clarity about positionality and perspective, yet *Les deux frères* vacillates, hesitating to identify with either position on offer.

In any case, the work represents a path not taken. Gender, like selfhood, was fictive, a matter of semblance and masquerade; but it was a masquerade Picasso could entertain only up to a point. The proper name “Picasso” was an abstraction, an empty signifier, whereas Picasso, né Pablo Ruiz, was just a man, the willing subject of his given gender. *Les deux frères* was among

the very few paintings he made in which he interrogated this contradiction, even if in doing so he recoiled from it in dissatisfaction. Perhaps Picasso felt the painting to be incompatible with his own gendered identity; or perhaps the pair of brothers came too near to resolving the tension at the core of his art, fashioning an image of autonomy's undoing—an image, finally, of love. If the fiction of "Picasso" was to be defended in earnest, then its conjurer would have to summon the powers of gender anew, bringing on Salomé front and center. Instead of brotherly love, he would offer a nightmare of seduction and castration, edging farce toward terror. He would build his philosophical brothel, and there he would remain.

"Picasso: Blue and Rose" is on view through January 6; travels to Fondation Beyeler, Basel, February 3–May 26.

Daniel Marcus *is the Roy Lichtenstein Curatorial Fellow at the Columbus Museum of Art.*