

Record: 1**Title:** Which Is the Most Influential Work of Art Of the Last 100 Years?**Authors:** Plagens, Peter**Source:** Newsweek. 7/2/2007, Vol. 150 Issue 2, p68-69. 2p. 5 Color Photographs.**Document Type:** Article**Subjects:** PICASSO, Pablo, 1881-1973
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ART & society**Abstract:** The article poses the question of the most influential work of art in the twentieth century. Five choices are offered, including "Black Square," by Kazimir Malevich, "One (Number 31)," by Jackson Pollock, and "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon," by Pablo Picasso. The author contends the answer is Picasso's painting, and also discusses its impact and influence.**Lexile:** 1190**Full Text Word Count:** 963**ISSN:** 0028-9604**Accession Number:** 25545235**Database:** Middle Search Plus**Section:** ART**Which Is the Most Influential Work of Art Of the Last 100 Years?**

- A. 'Black Square' by Kazimir Malevich
- B. 'One (Number 31)' by Jackson Pollack
- C. 'Fountain' by Marcel Duchamp
- D. 'Campbell's Soup Can' by Andy Warhol
- E. 'Les Demoiselles D'Avignon' by Pablo Picasso

ANSWER: E

When Matisse saw Picasso's just-completed, eight-foot-square painting "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" in the Spaniard's studio in a ramshackle Paris building nicknamed "The Laundry Boat," he was shocked at how raw, cacophonous and nasty it looked. Another modernist, André Derain, figured that Picasso had gone so far off the deep end that he'd soon commit suicide. Even Picasso's loyal patron Gertrude Stein deemed the picture a "veritable cataclysm." And you know what? It's still pretty ugly. Well, maybe not ugly-ugly, but certainly hard to take. Even with generations of artists trying mightily to out-rad it, a permanent place on the walls of the august Museum of Modern Art in New York and an entire century for art lovers to digest it--"Demoiselles" was finished exactly 100 years ago, in the summer of 1907--the painting refuses to go down smoothly. That's only one reason, though, why "Demoiselles" is the most important work of art of the last 100 years.

"Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" depicts five nude women in a brothel. But the subject matter--which never seems to bother the busloads of schoolkids taking field trips to see it--is hardly where the shock comes from. In fact, "nude" here means only that the painting has lots of chalky, peachy pink in it; genitals are either abstracted or

hidden by the poses. Even the paint application is art-school normal: two or three opaque coats, the kind of treatment a senior might give to a two-week project for a final classroom critique. What sticks in our esthetic craw, though, is Picasso's merciless mishmash of styles: a bit of Matisse (the older guy he was trying to dethrone as king of the avant-garde), some appropriation from African masks, a dash of casual realism in one of the hands and a fruit arrangement down in front, and a whole lot of cubism 1.0.

That last one is the deal breaker as far as any conventional esthetics goes. Everything in the painting is broken and then squished, like a face pressed against a window, into a sharp, shallow space that looks as if it's about an inch deep. Only two of the five heads are painted in the same style as their bodies. During the next several years, Picasso took cubism further, breaking up his figures and still lifes into little pieces, twisting them back to front and top to bottom, and reassembling them every which way. Without cubism, there would have been no 1920 dada photomontages or 1930 surrealist fantasies. Without those, there'd be no dizzying James Bond title sequences, "Matrix" movies, those animated promos in the corner of "The Closer," or even some of the ads and layouts in this magazine. Sure, any high-school kid with a laptop can shape-shift more wildly than Picasso ever could. But Picasso's pioneer painting retains an undeniable power through what the sculptor Richard Serra has called "the crudity of initial effort." "Demoiselles" is all discovery and no polish. And 64 square feet of uncompromisingly direct brushwork does carry a whole lot of wham! with it.

When the 25-year-old Picasso began "Demoiselles" in 1906, Monet's impressionism (generally realistic landscapes translated into flecks of dappled color) and Matisse's brand of fauvism (scenes and portraits in simple shapes and bright hues expressing the artist's emotional enthusiasm) were painting's cutting edge. But the restless Picasso was looking at African masks in the Paris ethnographic museum and in little shops that were starting to deal in goods brought out of the continent. He saw Africa's "savagery" as a multicultural artistic revitalizer.

The painting didn't have a title until Picasso unrolled it after several years of hiding it from shockable eyes, to show it in the 1916 Salon d'Antin. One of the artist's friends then named it after the street in Picasso's hometown of Barcelona where sailors went to find a little professional female company. But "Demoiselles" was immediately stashed away again until 1924, when the surrealist poet André Breton persuaded an adventuresome French collector to buy it. The collector kept the picture until MoMA's director tracked it down and purchased it for its "Art in Our Time" exhibition in 1939.

Between then and now, of course, interpretations of the masterpiece have changed considerably. When MoMA acquired it, "Demoiselles" was regarded as a quantum leap in modern art's straight-line "progress" from impressionism to pure abstraction. Its clash of styles was seen as Picasso's groping his way to the halfway point of cubism. More recently, however, sex has reared its political head. Modernism stands revealed as a chauvinist, mostly guy thing, with Pablo-the-womanizer leading the laddies. Originally, "Demoiselles" was to have depicted a couple of male customers, but its testosterone quotient devolved to a de facto self-portrait of Picasso on the face of the woman in the center, looking accusingly out at the viewer. "Demoiselles," some art historians point out, is a picture of bare-naked ladies meant to be gazed at by men. And several scholars claim that its very compositional harshness implies sexual violence. That doesn't make the painting a very pretty picture. But a full century after its creation, "Demoiselles" looks as if it's still itching to start another artistic revolution, or two.

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?

PROBABLY. AND LOOKING EXACTLY LIKE THIS. WARNER SALLMANS 1940 OIL PAINTING "THE HEAD OF CHRIST" IS BELIEVED TO BE THE MOST REPRODUCED RELIGIOUS WORK OF ART. ITS BEEN

COPIED A BILLION TIMES, IF YOU INCLUDE LAMPS, CLOCKS AND CALENDARS.

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By Peter Plagens

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