


Picasso and the Painting That Shocked the World

Miles J. Unger

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One of *The Christian Science Monitor's* Best Nonfiction Books of 2018

When Picasso became Picasso: the story of how an obscure young painter from Barcelona came to Paris and made himself into the most influential artist of the twentieth century.

In 1900, an eighteen-year-old Spaniard named Pablo Picasso made his first trip to Paris. It was in this glittering capital of the international art world that, after suffering years of poverty and neglect, he emerged as the leader of a bohemian band of painters, sculptors, and poets. Fueled by opium and alcohol, inspired by raucous late-night conversations at the Lapin Agile cabaret, Picasso and his friends resolved to shake up the world.

For most of these years Picasso lived and worked in a squalid tenement known as the Bateau Lavoir, in the heart of picturesque Montmartre. Here he met his first true love, Fernande Olivier, a muse whom he would transform in his art from Symbolist goddess to Cubist monster. These were years of struggle, often of desperation, but Picasso later looked back on them as the happiest of his long life.

Recognition came slowly: first in the avant-garde circles in which he traveled, and later among a small group of daring collectors, including the Americans Leo and Gertrude Stein. In 1906, Picasso began the vast, disturbing masterpiece known as *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Inspired by the groundbreaking painting of Paul Cézanne and the startling inventiveness of African and tribal sculpture, Picasso created a work that captured and defined the disorienting experience of modernity itself. The painting proved so shocking that even his friends assumed he'd gone mad. Only his colleague George Braque understood what Picasso was trying to do. Over the next few years they teamed up to create Cubism, the most revolutionary and influential movement in twentieth-century art.

This is the story of an artistic genius with a singular creative gift. It is filled with heartbreak and triumph, despair and delirium, all of it played out against the backdrop of the world's most captivating city.

Picasso and the Painting That Shocked the World Details

Date : Published March 13th 2018 by Simon Schuster

ISBN : 9781476794211

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Format : Hardcover 480 pages

Genre : Biography, Art, Nonfiction, History, Art History

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From Reader Review Picasso and the Painting That Shocked the World for online ebook

Chris says

An excellent read that flows along with the events of the period it covers. There is an art to writing about an event like Picasso's painting of Les Femmes d'Alger that simultaneously reveals the leading characters surrounding the event as well as the cultural and social environment of the time.

If you are intent on reading through the lives of the famous artists of the past then this book falls into the category of essential reading.

As an artist I am always intrigued when people ask if I teach art as if to be able just to hand over the capacity to paint in an instant. I see many paintings crudely produced as if to copy famous artists but the artists having never struggled like a Picasso or Van Gogh. From reading history written as well as found in this book, the truth is that greatness comes out of adversity and perhaps from no-where else. It is a good read.

Michael G. Zink says

The fascinating story of the young Picasso

This is a very interesting story about Pablo Picasso and his band of fellow travelers living in Paris during the first decade of the 20th century, as they sought - successfully - to change the course of modern art. In the early years these artists created an avant garde world of their own. They were talented, but also poor and unknown. They were bold, but also had to struggle with their doubts and demons. They were not always very nice to one another, but they feed off one another's talents and energy.

Picasso was at the center of it all - the most charismatic, the most talented, the most enigmatic, the most difficult to love. It is a fascinating story about the man and the genius before the rest of world knew about him.

The book is written by an author well versed in art and art history. Some sections can be a little tough for the general reader but it is well worth the effort, and the reader who perseveres will be well rewarded and better educated.

Cbphoenix says

I've never been a huge fan of Picasso's work, but I am a fan of great writing. To me, the author displays incredible insight and empathy for the events in Picasso's early life and how they affected the man and his art. I guess I identified with so many of the insights that I found the writing too pithy to be read in large doses.

The story itself, about the creation of and world's reaction to Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger," was new to me and quite interesting. The interrelationships of people, place, and historic moment that the author skillfully

laid out is an interesting and entertaining read.

I'm generally very skeptical of an artist's or art critic's use of a lot of flowery verbal gobbledygook to express and explain their intentions and inspirations for their artworks. To me, it usually sounds like a lot of BS used to obfuscate their lack of understanding as to where their art came from or where it's meant to go. I think Unger's explanations, while they may appear to be bordering on BS, are actually based on his research -- letters, journals, memoirs from Picasso's contemporaries that provide commentary and insight into the artist and his work at the time of creation -- and therefore are more credible and believable.

Richard says

This was not a great book, I found myself going to sleep while trying to read it. There are many interesting things that happened to, and during the life of Picasso, but the author fails to wrap me up in the story. There are some wonderful vignettes, but as a whole, I find the writing style lacking.

Additionally this book leaves me thinking of Picasso as a narcissistic bastard (figuratively) who only had people around who he could use. I find no redeeming qualities about the man behind the art. I will also note, the art is not of my taste either, but I was putting that aside for this book, hoping something about the painter would close the gap for me with his art. It failed.

Book Him Danno says

Picasso and the Painting That Shocked the World by Miles J. Unger is a well researched biography of Pablo Picasso's early life as well as his friendship and association with many great 20th century artists.

I was interested how he was more upset by what his colleagues thought of his art vs what the public thought of his art work.

The one painting they focus on the most and is considered controversial is Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. version) The Brothel of Avignon. It was a shock to most of the world during his time as an artist.

This book by Miles J. Unger gives a opening for people to talk about the famous artist and what became of him. Wonderful books for a book club.

Thank you to NetGalley and the publisher for the advance copy

Kristine says

Picasso and the Painting that Shocked the World by Miles J. Unger is free NetGalley ebook that I read in late February.

The painting of this book title refers to the Les Femmes d'Alger, a supposedly unfinished multi-subject Cubist piece by Picasso that was inspired by Iberian sculptures, African masks, and the lurid concept of his mind's own whorehouse - the main purpose of this book is to serve as a biography during Picasso's time in Montmartre and the artist enclave of Bateau-Lavoir, as well as the transition from art being expressed as Impressionism, Symbolism, Modernism, then Cubism with both Picasso and Braque.

Ted Daniels says

The author focuses on Picasso's early years in Spain and Paris, culminating around 1907 when, at the age of 25, he completes "Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)." This work is credited with ushering in Cubism. Calling it "the Painting that Shocked the World" seems to be a stretch. Picasso showed "Les Femmes d'Alger" to a few friends, fellow artists and collectors in 1907, and then tucked it away. Nine years later, at the height of World War One, it finally made its public debut at an exhibition in Paris. At this point Cubism had already been embraced by other artists and critics.

Mr. Unger delves deeply into Picasso's complicated psyche, and describes in detail his relationships with the other artists of his time. I never took an art appreciation course in school, so I found all this to be enlightening.

Katie Higgins says

This book was a lot of work -- it's incredibly dense (though not in a negative way) -- and I'm actually proud that I read the whole thing. Unger's passion for art is evident in the pages where his own analysis and particular use of exclamation marks come through. To be honest, I didn't know a lot about Picasso, but I was determined to read this one after a blurb about it in *The New Yorker*.

I'm still undecided on how I feel about him as a person, but his story is truly fascinating. His own belief in his genius, his ability to capture and enrapture people his gaze, most certainly makes him worthy of fascination. He did have drawbacks (he was erratic, controlling, self-isolating) but it made him incredibly human. Unger doesn't ask you to worship at Picasso's feet, but he does want you to understand the impact that Picasso had, and continues to have, on the art world and greater society.

I appreciated how Unger took time to really outline the players in the production that was Picasso's life. It's not enough to know Picasso was this or that, but you have to know everything about his friends and his enemies and his art dealers and his lovers and his wives. They all culminate in this radical painting on which the book centers, *Les Femmes d'Alger* and when you finally get there, you understand more fully how it came about than if the book had only focused on Picasso and his worldview.

The descriptions of women, especially Fernande, were a drawback for me. While Unger did once address that women in Montmartre had little means for advancing their own lives (often prostitutes or models for artists), he got a little repetitive. His descriptions of Fernande were often repetitive (I think he used the word "voluptuous" about twelve times) and I felt they were unnecessary and unfair. He blurred the lines between Picasso's perception and his own analysis in a way that took away from the book.

If you have little to know art knowledge (like me), this book will be difficult but not entirely inaccessible and that I appreciated. You can still learn a lot, whether or not you have an advanced art knowledge.

One aesthetic critique I want to make is that he often took time to painstakingly analyze many many paintings, not just Les Femmes d'Alger, so I would have appreciated more of the paintings in the book to go along with these analyses.

The ending moves quickly and has a rather haunting yet hopeful tone to it that makes the entire journey seem worth it. In the end, the book is not about Picasso, so much as it is about his work and its incredible impact on the world, much of which carries on today as we continue to try harder and harder to hold on to the past.

John Frazier says

Having recently viewed the Antonio Banderas docudrama "Genius: Picasso," I was sufficiently fascinated to ask a good friend and artist for his recommendations of a biography of the genius; this was one of two he suggested and I'm glad he did so.

Full disclosure: I am neither an artist nor sufficiently qualified to critique art with any real foundation (scholastic or otherwise) or sense of perspective, place or purpose. Like many fellow baby boomers, I have a sense of the names one is supposed to know and perhaps even the era/genre with which they're most closely associated. There is a handful of artists whose work I could recognize and attribute sans signature, with a critical vocabulary almost as limited.

Which is perhaps why I enjoyed "Picasso and the Painting That Shocked the World" to the extent that I did.

Author Miles Unger not only delves into Picasso's early and formative ages and stages, he does so with a keen and schooled eye and a syntax that informs without leaving the reader reaching for the dictionary and thesaurus every other page. While I'm reasonably certain that I could never reach the same conclusions when critiquing Picasso or any other artist, I could appreciate his and, when comparing them with the paintings themselves, occasionally see how he arrived at them. Surely, there is more than a modicum of psychoanalyst in every critic.

The bigger question for me is whether or not Picasso would agree with him.

To me, this book was as much a study in studying art as it was a study of art.

Centered around "Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)," the piece largely credited with introducing Cubism as a revolutionary art form that could and did turn the art world upside down while adding a third dimension to a sphere previously constrained to two, it answered myriad questions about Picasso's process and product while raising considerably more about their impact and interpretation.

Though created when he was but 27, Picasso had been a critical if not commercial success for several years, bouncing between his Spanish homeland and Paris with the frequency of a train conductor. (That Paris was the recognized art capital of the world cannot be overestimated as an influence and motivator in his professional life. Would we be having this discussion if he were born and cut his teeth in Chicago?)

Though he came from some means, he lived the seemingly-requisite life of the bohemian starving artist, paying his dues while living in squalor, drinking more than he ate, partying until sunrise and finding more than his share of female companionship at virtually every turn. Fortunately, he was not alone, often the center of a relatively tight-knit circle of friends who found themselves in similar circumstances. Not necessarily well educated, they were reasonably well informed, well lived and seemed to inspire as much as they depended on one another. Their lives were lived with ears and eyes open, subject only to their examination and explanation. Until it came to art.

That said, was it Picasso's intention to turn the art world upside down when he spent the better part of two years working and reworking "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)"? Was his self-described "series of non-sequiturs" more of an experiment in form and function or was it, as author Unger describes, an expression "personal rather than communal: he was concerned with lust rather than fertility, the extinction of his own consciousness rather than the survival of the community"?

Really, "the extinction of his own consciousness"? Suffice it to say that this is not what I see when I look at it, even after reading this book. (To summarize this quandary--among many--in one sentence when Unger has devoted an entire book to it is lazy and unjust at best.)

Bear in mind that the subject of debate, the impetus for revolution, the axis around which much of the art world has revolved and evolved for the subsequent 110 years, is a group of prostitutes lounging in a whorehouse. (Unger would've preferred "brothel.") Ahhhh, the power and pleasures of art.

I have known very few 27-year-olds, worldly or otherwise, artistic or not, who think in the terms attributed to Picasso by Unger. Which is not to say that Picasso wasn't one of them, it's just difficult to believe these (and countless other debatable and plausible interpretations) were what occupied the young Pablo's mind as he picked up his brush and faced the naked canvass before deliberately filling it with five naked women.

Did the oddly-turned head on the fifth woman turn the art world on its head and force it to more closely examine itself? Undoubtedly. Can I fully understand or articulate the reasons why, even after absorbing Unger's riveting analysis? Doubtful.

Does any of this make this biography anything less than fascinating? Not in the least. In fact, it may well change how I view art from this point forward.

And isn't that really the point? Enjoy.

Ellen says

Another book I'd really rather give 3 1/2 stars to.

Picasso and the Painting That Shocked the World by Miles J. Unger (Simon & Schuster, 2018) is a solid addition to long, long, long bibliography already in place. I have read all three volumes of the biography by John Richardson and a hefty number of exhibition catalogs and articles. In fact, when I started organizing the Cubism course, I was startled to realize just how much stuff is already on my own bookshelves. In some ways, Unger's exploration of Picasso youth and formative years is better than Richardson's—perhaps because Unger isn't speaking from the Mount Olympus of Picasso studies and goes to a great deal of trouble to detail the experiences that he will later use as evidence for his analyses of Picasso's art.

At one point my husband pointed out I was deeply into the book and still had not arrived at the Femmes. I wasn't surprised. I knew the Femmes had to provide the climax to the arc; my only question was how the author would bring the story to a close. He did that effectively by situating the Femmes d'Avignon (1907) as the beginning of the seismic shift that changed Picasso from a symbolist painter of dark, personal and angst-laden narratives to a revolutionary who abandons message in favor of pure expressive form.

And generally I like the book pretty well.

On the other hand, I find Unger, like many authors writing for the popular nonfiction market to be unreliable on facts. Another reader pointed out that Unger gives Georges Braque's birth year as 1892 instead of 1882. Yes it could be a typo, but it is an inexcusable one. I made a number of notes when I ran into his assertion on page 222 that "[Matisse's] *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*, completed in 1904 and exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants in 1905, a vision of a sensual paradise based on a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, features Neo-Impressionism's distinctive dots of pure color."

Well no. *Luxe* was emphatically not based on a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. It was based on the poem "L'Invitation au voyage" (Invitation to the voyage) from the collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* ("Flowers of Evil") by Charles Baudelaire. The relevant lines that I always share with my students are:

*L'à tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté
Luxe, calme et volupté.*,/i>

*There, all is only order and beauty,
Luxury, serenity and sensual delight.*

*This is not an inconsequential slip, a typo. Unger goes on to embed the error a few pages later while discussing the magisterial *Bonheur de vie* (1905-06) now in the Barnes Foundation collection.*

Mistakes like this bother me. I like to recommend readable books to my students, hoping that they will find such texts a pleasure rather than the burden they find most of things I assign. I don't, however, want my students learning things that are incorrect and casual readers, readers not familiar with content in a more scholarly way, are not in all likelihood going to recognize errors when they encounter them.

Generally Unger has excellent insights. What he has to say about works including the juvenilia, the Blue and Rose Periods and the transition to Cubism is interesting and thought-provoking. He also has a real knack for description. Unger is, however, "judgy." He dismisses the conclusions of various scholars, he makes assertions about what an artist thinks or intends, and when I look for citations that uphold his opinions either there are non or the sources are the words of the many not entirely reliable witnesses, many of them former partners, who subsequently wrote memoirs. And, while the painter Françoise Gilot Salk (b. 1921), who lives in San Diego, California, still recalls well her "life with Picasso," and her eponymous memoir has been repeatedly mined for films and other books, no single recollection, no single point of view ever tells a complete story.

Jeff Francis says

ERROR

Miles J. Unger's "Picasso and the Painting that Shocked the World," features an error on page 298. The birth year of French painter and Picasso collaborator Georges Braque is given as 1892, when a quick search shows that it was 1882... after all, the very next page has Braque "completing his military service in 1902," an impressive achievement for a boy just into the double digits.

For me, noticing that error had a deeper meaning than the admittedly smug dickishness that usually accompanies such a find. I.e., before I noticed that discrepancy, I was beginning to wonder if, with "Picasso," I was approaching an event horizon of reading a book and processing so little of it. Readers of any level know this feeling: you're unable to keep focused on the words and you're retaining so little you question if it would even be fair to say you read the book... so, noticing the DOB error gave me kind of a

confidence boost that, yes, this book wasn't getting the better of me.

Which isn't an aspersion on Unger or "Picasso," necessarily. I think I was expecting more a biography than an art book (a perception that should have been quashed by which section of the bookstore I found the book). So while Unger covers much of Picasso's early life, a good portion of the narrative goes instead to art-theory descriptions of Picasso's work, as well as many other painters from that era. In the process Unger more than makes the case for the 1907 "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," or "The Young Lades of Avignon" (crudely put, a painting of nude prostitutes), representing one of the most seismic shifts in a cultural endeavor the world has ever seen.

For me "Picasso" was at its best when it explained how the artist helped usher in modernism, and what that meant for the wider society. Unger credits Picasso and his painting with no less than separating the old century from the new one. However, as Unger shows in the exquisite last paragraph of the book, the separation was ultimately disappointing.

The hope of those years, the faith in progress—that humankind that would move forever onward and upward until we had reached a perfected future—died in the trenches on the western front, in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and in the Twin Towers in lower Manhattan. Remembering the promise with which the new century had begun made the betrayal seem all the more bitter. For Picasso, and for all who lived through these troubled times, the myth of a lost golden age has grown more powerful with each passing year, its distant glow casting ever-longer shadows on the age to come. (p. 405)

Jeff says

I am a big fan of historical non-fiction that slices off a piece of a larger story or longer life, and this is a fabulous example. Picasso was so long-lived and his career so multi-variant that it is almost impossible to sum him up, but, by focusing on the period of Picasso's career bounded by his earliest days up to his "invention" of Cubism, this book does an impressive job of helping the reader understand how Picasso came to understand himself as an artist and his place in the emerging-20th-century's avant-garde while also exposing the demons that both fueled his artistic genius and nearly destroyed him as a person.

Todd Hogan says

What a fantastic decade opened the Twentieth Century! Science and Math were transformed by the insights gained. Then came Picasso's huge canvas "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" challenging not only the few who originally saw the work but the other artists who were pushing the boundaries of Western art following the wave of Impressionism.

This book is a history of the young Picasso who left Spain to paint in Paris, living a Bohemian lifestyle with other artists of the time. They shared ideas, wine, space, women, and drugs. It was a crazy time and place, well captured by this book.

I'm not sure I understand the canvas Picasso painted, even after reading this excellent history, but I have a greater appreciation than I did of the changes that occurred. I was surprised how deeply African art affected Picasso, showing him that art can give life to the demons that surrounded him, but by being depicted are then controlled. A wild idea, just one more to help appreciate his art.

I thoroughly enjoyed the book, and I'm not an artist. But I do appreciate a well-researched, well-written history.

Gene Ripka says

The book examines Picasso formative years as an artist, culminating in his first "exorcism" painting in 1907. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* was an upset to his friends and patrons, but Unger explains how it formed a foundation for the work Picasso pursued for the rest of his career. Fascinating.

Wanda Boker says

It took me so long to read this book! Not because it isn't interesting, but because it's so densely detailed - if you don't already know the difference between impressionism and fauvism, realism and symbolism, the role of classicism and why cubism is deemed so revolutionary, this feels like an art history course and it's slow reading. Also, Unger introduces his reader to what must be every friend, lover and acquaintance Picasso ever knew from the age of 18 in his attempt to understand the artist's inspirations and progress. Oh, and the *Painting That Shocked the World* (title) isn't even mentioned until chapter 8, page 254, or discussed in detail until after page 300. I learned more than I wanted to know about art that I don't like, but it was interesting enough to carry me to the last page, even if I don't appreciate the genius of cubism or allure of the hedonism that made it possible. I did enjoy being carried into turn-of-the-century Montmartre and being offered a peek into what's behind the disturbing art of Picasso. Unger's writing is crisp and clear, and creates a multidimensional world for his reader to slip into with characterizations that allowed me to feel like I truly met the historical figures that he writes about.
