CHAPTER 3

THE THEMES OF ART

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE WORLD

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THE CRITICAL PROCESS
Thinking about the Themes of Art

Claude Monet’s *The Regatta at Argenteuil* (Fig. 39) is one of the great examples of Impressionism, a mode of painting that dominated late nineteenth-century art in the Western world, especially in France. Impressionism takes its name from its particular way of seeing—not the careful and exact gaze of a painter determined to represent every detail of a scene exactly as it appears, but a quick glance at a more fleeting or transitory scene. The impressionist painter captures the play of light on the surface of the world with a technique noted for its purposeful sketchiness. Impressionists do not paint things, so much as their impressions of things. Thus Monet would tell the
American painter Lilla Cabot Perry: “When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you—a tree, a house, a field, or whatever. Merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact color and shape, until it gives you your own naïve impression of the scene before you.”

Monet’s intentions, however, are far more complex than simply capturing his impressions of the scene. His purpose is to question the nature of representation itself. Notice how, in its reflection in the water, the shoreline scene disintegrates into a sketchy series of broad dashes of paint. On the surface of the water, the mast of the green sailboat on the right seems to support a red and green sail, but this “sail” is really the reflection of the red house and cypress tree on the hillside. Monet seems to argue that the relationship between his painting and reality is comparable to the relationship between the surface of the water and the shoreline above. Both of these surfaces—canvas and water—reflect the fleeting quality of sensory experience.

In these terms, it could be said that Monet’s theme is the very nature of art, a problem he approaches in three interrelated ways. First, The Regatta at Argenteuil embodies the relationship between the artist and the world around him, reflecting both. Second, even while it describes things as they are in the here and now, it suggests that through art the everyday world can be transcended, elevated by the artistic imagination to a different order of reality. And art accomplishes this transcendent feat, finally, by making something beautiful out of the ordinary—though, as we will see, the idea of the “beautiful” is more complex than we might at first suppose. In this chapter, we will consider all three of these interrelated ideas as “sub-themes” of the “grand” theme—What is the nature of art?—a question all artists ask themselves almost continually. What is the relationship between artists and the world around them? What is the artistic imagination and how does it impact our understanding of the world? And what, finally, is this idea we call the “beautiful”?
THE REPRESENTATION OF THE WORLD

It is difficult to say what drives us in the West to imitate the world around us in our art, an impulse that many other cultures do not share. In part, we admire and value the technical virtuosity of artists who are able to translate what they see before their eyes into true likenesses. Interestingly, this value, which dominated the civilization of ancient Greece, for instance, disappeared in Western culture for more than a thousand years after the birth of Christ. But beginning in the Renaissance and culminating in the great encyclopedic cataloguing of the world that marks the nineteenth century—an era marked by the invention of the greatest imitator of them all, photography—Western art seems to have been driven by a more general cultural quest for an ever more exact and specific knowledge of the world.

The desire to represent the natural world perhaps derives from our sense that our relationship to nature somehow defines us. As a culture, we claim to have “tamed” the wild, even as we know that nature is fully capable, in earthquake and storm, of wreaking havoc upon our works. We seek to protect the fragile ecology of the natural world in parks and wilderness areas, even as we plunder it to provide natural resources for our cities and states.

The tension and conflict between the uncontrollable forces of nature and the civilizing powers of human society dominated American art and literature in the nineteenth century. The “conquest” of the North American continent, particularly its western regions, provided a constant and compelling example of the impasse between nature and civilization. As early as 1834, the American painter Thomas Cole painted this theme in a series of five paintings called, collectively, The Course of Empire (Figs. 40–44). The paintings represent, according to Cole, “the History of a Natural Scene, as well as an Epitome of Man; showing the natural changes of Landscape and those effected by Man in his progress from Barbarism to Civilization—to the state of Luxury—to the vicious state or state of Destruction, etc.” In the first painting of the cycle, The Savage State,
prehistoric hunters chase a stag, smoke rising from their encampment in the distance. Next comes the Pastoral or Arcadian State, where shepherds tend their flocks while a plowman tills his field to the left. Smoke rises here from a stone temple in the middle distance. This is the ideal “middle ground,” half-way between wild nature and civilization proper, representing an ideal state of balance and harmony. The third painting of the series, The Consummation of Empire, is the largest of the five and was conceived to be surrounded by the other four. Here an emperor, robed in red and standing atop a carriage drawn by an elephant, returns to the city in triumph, but it is a triumph short-lived. In the fourth painting, Destruction, the Empire collapses in war. Finally, in Desolation, a scene reminiscent of the state of Greek and Roman ruins as the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tourists discovered them in Europe, nature reclaims the landscape.

The five paintings also represent the cycle of the seasons, beginning in spring and ending in autumn. They move, furthermore, from dawn to dusk, civilization reaching its apogee at high noon. The permanence of the natural world is symbolized by the rock-topped mountain that rises above each painting. As opposed to both the passing of time and the fleeting quality of human civilization, the promontory remains constant and enduring.

Cole’s cycle rehearses a whole range of relationships between humankind and nature. At its most balanced, in the Pastoral or Arcadian State, the relationship resembles the harmonious world of the garden. The garden not
only embodies the natural world, it reflects the sensibilities of its creator. In the tranquility of his own garden at Argenteuil, which he celebrates in painting after painting in the early 1870s (Fig. 45), Monet was able to find respite from the pressures of urban life. When he moved, in the 1880s, up river to Giverny, site of his famous water lily garden, he removed himself even farther from the kind of worldly turmoil he depicted in such paintings as *Le Pont de l'Europe* (Fig. 46). One of a series of paintings of the Saint-Lazare railroad station in Paris, it is strikingly similar in mood to Cole’s *Destruction* from the *Course of Empire* cycle. Both paintings reflect not just the reality of modern life, on the one hand, and war, on the other, but their artists’ feelings in the face of such smoke and storm. Both Cole and Monet depict the world as they do in order to tell us something about themselves, something about their own values and beliefs.
It is important to recognize, furthermore, that the transience of the natural world—not only its constant change from hour to hour, day to day, and season to season, but its very fragility—is answered by the relative permanence of the work of art itself. Nature changes, but the work of art endures, much like the promontory in Cole’s *Course of Empire* paintings. A work such as Albrecht Dürer’s *The Great Piece of Turf* (Fig. 47) documents the fertile density of a summer pasture in a manner that suggests an almost ecological interest in the environment. Here an ordinary patch of ground, the kind that we would never pause to observe carefully or might even trample down, is revealed to be as visually interesting as a magnificent sunset. Such closeness of observation would lead to the development of the biological sciences. Painting in 1503, Dürer was far in advance of his time—the word “biology” would not enter the English language in its modern sense until around 1819. Before then, the word meant the study of human life and character.

The representation of human life and character is, in fact, a sub-theme of the representation of the natural world. At some level, we desire to create likenesses of ourselves as if to counter our inevitable passing. In Roman times, for instance, it was a common practice to display portrait busts of one’s ancestors in the family home. The highly realistic *Portrait of a Roman* (Fig. 48) is just such a representation. The Roman sculptor was aided in his task by the fact that, shortly after death, wax masks were traditionally made of the deceased’s face. These masks could later be transferred to stone. Every detail of this man’s personal appearance is captured here, down to his sunken cheeks and furrowed brow. We know him, and we sense we know his character, in the same way that we feel we know the psychological reality of Leonardo’s *Five Characters in a Comic Scene* (see Fig. 30). Thus, in art, the man himself lives on.

We represent the world, then, because we see ourselves reflected there, literally in the case of a portrait, metaphorically in all of art. In the thousand years and more between the birth of Christ and the Renaissance, we longed to see something else—God or salvation. We
of modern life belied their emphasis on individual self-expression. Similarly, so-called “Minimal Art,” such as Donald Judd’s Untitled (Fig. 51), consisting of ten uniform stainless steel boxes spaced evenly on a wall, is mechanically impersonal. It seems purposefully devoid of any feeling or content. It insists on itself for itself. Frank Stella, whose singularly unexpressive painting is contemporary with Judd’s sculpture, put it this way: “You can see the whole idea without any confusion … what you see is what you see.”

But anyone who has ever fallen in love has experienced very real feelings that transcend the material presence of a soup can or a column of ten stainless steel boxes. There are many imaginative spaces that art has traditionally attempted to represent, from our spiritual or religious feelings, to our innermost desires and dreams, to our personal sense of what moves us emotionally. But the paradox is this: To represent the immaterial is to give it material form.

For example, the idea of daring to represent the Christian God has, throughout the history of the Western world, aroused controversy. In seventeenth-century Holland, images of God were banned from Protestant churches. As one contemporary Protestant theologian put it, “The image of God is His Word”—that is, the Bible—and “statues in human form, being an earthen image of visible, earthborn man [are] far away from the truth.” In fact, one of the reasons that Jesus, the son of God, is so often represented in Western art, is that representing the son, a real person, is far easier than representing the father, a spiritual unknown who can only be imagined.

Nevertheless, artists in all cultures have always tried to depict their gods. It is the power of their imaginations that has allowed them to do so. One of the most successful in Western culture was painted by Jan van Eyck nearly 600 years ago as part of an altarpiece for the city of Ghent in Flanders (Fig. 52). Van Eyck’s God is almost frail, surprisingly young, apparently merciful and kind, and certainly richly adorned. Indeed, in the richness of his vestments, van Eyck’s God apparently values worldly things. Van Eyck’s painting seems to celebrate a materialism that is the proper right of benevolent kings. Behind God’s head, across the top of the throne, are Latin words that, translated into English, read: “This is God, all powerful in his divine majesty; of all the best, by the gentleness of his goodness; the most liberal giver, because of his infinite generosity.”

God’s mercy and love are indicated by the pelicans embroidered on the tapestry behind him, which in Christian tradition symbolize self-sacrificing love, for pelicans were believed to wound themselves in order to feed their young with their own blood if other food was unavailable.

Fig. 52 Jan van Eyck, God, panel from the Ghent Altarpiece, c. 1432. St. Bavo’s, Ghent. Scala/Art Resource, New York.
Pedro Perez, an artist born in Cuba in 1952, who emigrated to the United States at the age of fourteen, imagines God in an entirely different way (Fig. 53). Perez’s God is caught up in the collision of two cultures. Here, the rich imagery of traditional Spanish Catholicism, embodied in the actual gold leaf that Perez has used to decorate the cross, is countered not only by his use of gaudy costume jewelry but also by the deeply satiric depiction of God at the work’s center. Perez’s God is not a conventional, dignified, white-bearded patriarch but a mellow, aging hippie, a gurulike and undeniably “cool” Santa Claus.

Both Perez’s and van Eyck’s Gods are extremely personal ones. They reflect each artist’s imaginative response to the question of who God is and what God might look like. Any act of imagination of this kind is necessarily subjective—that is, it exists in the mind of the artist, not in the world as we know it. One of the most interesting differences between Warhol’s Campbell’s Soup Can and Franz Kline’s Untitled is that the subject matter of the
first is obvious while the subject matter of the latter is mysterious, or at least vague. Warhol's painting presents an objective rendering of reality, however mundane, beside which Kline's painting seems wholly subjective, personal, and even private.

Abstract and nonobjective art have always been open to the charge of being so subjective that they are virtually inaccessible to the average person. This subjectivity is, nevertheless, fundamental to the history of modern art. Picasso’s portrait of Gertrude Stein (Fig. 54) is a case in point. The painting was begun in the winter of 1905–1906. Stein would visit Picasso’s studio nearly every day to pose for the portrait. But he had a terrible time with the face. Finally, after over eighty sittings, Picasso, in complete frustration, painted out Stein’s head and departed for Spain, leaving a great blank in the middle of the canvas. In the late summer he returned, stood before the canvas, and painted the face from memory. When, some months later, Stein’s friend Alice B. Toklas told Picasso how much she admired the painting, he thanked her. “Everyone says that she does not look like it,” Picasso said, smiling, “but that does not make any difference—she will.”

The story could be said to define a change in Western art that had slowly been transforming painting for nearly one hundred years. Painters like Picasso no longer felt compelled to represent the world as it is but instead found themselves free to paint what they felt or imagined it to be. In other words, for Picasso, his own subjective knowledge of Stein was more “real” than what she objectively looked like. This belief in the reality and power of the imagination dominates the history of modern art. In his 1928 book Surrealism and Painting, André Breton, the leader of the French Surrealists, asserted that the mistake of painters “has been to believe that a model could be derived only from the exterior world. . . . Painters must either seek a purely interior model or cease to exist.” Surrealism is a style of art in which the reality of the dream, or the subconscious mind, is seen as more “real” than the surface reality of everyday life. Its reality is a higher reality. The Surrealist Salvador Dalí called paintings such as The Persistence of Memory (Fig. 55) “hand-painted dream photographs.” The limless figure lying on the ground like a giant slug is actually a self-portrait of the artist, who seems to have moved into a landscape removed from time and mind.
Similarly, because he believed that he was directly presenting the reality of his own imagination on canvas, the abstract expressionist painter Robert Motherwell refused to admit that his paintings were abstract, let alone nonobjective—though certainly it is hard to see any recognizable forms in the painting above, *Elegy to the Spanish Republic XXXIV* (Fig. 56). Speaking of paintings such as this one, he wrote in 1955: “I never think of my pictures as ‘abstract’... Nothing can be more concrete to a man than his own felt thought, his own thought feeling. I feel most real to myself in the studio, and resent any description of what transpires there as ‘abstract’—which nowadays... signifies something remote from reality. From whose reality? And on what level?” The painting’s title refers to the Fascist defeat of the democratic Spanish Republican forces by General Franco’s forces just before World War II. It marks for Motherwell the terrible death of liberty itself, a reality he was unwilling to think of as being “abstract” in any sense of the word. He thought of the black forms and their lighter background as elemental “protagonists in the struggle between life and death.” Nothing, for him, could be more real than that struggle.

The imagination, in sum, is an instrument of transformation. For the artist, it is the means by which the subjective and abstract idea is given concrete reality in the work of art. For many artists, this simple fact—the transformation of idea into image—is beautiful in itself. It is this transformation that makes their work meaningful.
THE IDEA OF THE BEAUTIFUL

If life itself is a fleeting event, our experiences in life are even more so. Art has traditionally concerned itself with capturing these ordinary experiences, especially the more pleasurable ones. This is one reason we all photograph family get-togethers. In painting, such depictions of everyday life are called genre paintings. Auguste Renoir’s *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* (Fig. 57) depicts an afternoon gathering on the terrace of a restaurant near Chatou on the banks of the Seine north of Paris. So “real” is the scene that we can identify with some certainty many of the people in it. Standing at the left, with his back to the river is Alphonse Fonnaise, son of the restaurant’s proprietor. The woman seated below him, about to kiss the little dog, is Renoir’s future wife, Aline Charigot. The lushness of Renoir’s color, and the almost tangible quality of his impressionist brushwork, lend the painting an almost sensual reality. When the painting was first exhibited in 1882, one critic captured its spirit with particular accuracy: “It is a charming work,” he wrote, “full of gaiety and spirit, its wild youth caught in the act, radiant and lively, frolicking at high noon in the sun, laughing at everything, seeing only today and mocking tomorrow. For them eternity is in their glass, in their boat, and in their songs.”

The implicit theme of this painting is that the charming people it depicts have transformed ordinary experience into something special, something beautiful. They have turned ordinary life into “the good life.” One of the
season is short, a few weeks in late spring. White asparagus is, in short, a sign of the good life. And this single spear, sitting on the table, evokes all the sensual appetites of Parisian society.

In the West, we are used to approaching everyday objects made in African, Oceanic, Native American, or Asian cultures in museums as “works of art.” But in their cultures of origin, such objects might be sacred tools that provide divine insight and inspiration. Or they might serve to define family and community relationships, establishing social order and structure. Or they might document momentous events in the history of a people. Or they might serve a simple utilitarian function, such as a pot to carry water or a spoon to eat with, or, as in the case of the work by Kane Kwei of Ghana, illustrated here (Fig. 59), the object might be a coffin to bury someone in. Trained as a carpenter, Kwei first made a decorative coffin for a dying uncle, who asked him to produce one in the shape of a boat. In Ghana, coffins possess a ritual significance, celebrating a successful life, and Kwei’s coffins delighted the community. Soon he was making fish and whale coffins for fishermen, hens with chicks for women with large families, Mercedes Benz coffins for the wealthy, and cash crops for farmers, such as the 8½-foot cocoa bean coffin illustrated here. In 1974, an enterprising San Francisco art dealer brought examples of Kwei’s work to the United States, and today the artist’s large workshop makes coffins for both funerals and the art market.

Another purely practical piece that transcends its functionality is a coconut grater from Micronesia (Fig. 60). Practically speaking, one sits on the back of the horse-like form and grates the coconut across the serrated blade on the top of the animal’s head so that it falls into a bowl below. But the practicality of the “tool” is almost irrelevant. Its streamlined form, its almost austere simplicity, is beautiful in its own right.
Perhaps the object upon which cultures lavish their attention most is clothing. Clothing serves many more purposes than just protecting us from the elements: It announces the wearer’s taste, self-image, and, perhaps above all, social status. The Karaori kimono illustrated here (Fig. 61) was worn by a male performer who played the part of a woman in Japanese Noh theater. In its sheer beauty, it announced the dignity and status of the actor’s character. Made of silk, brocaded with silver and gold, each panel in the robe depicts autumn grasses, flowers, and leaves. Thus the kimono is more an aesthetic object than a functional one—that is, it is conceived to stimulate a sense of beauty in the viewer.

Almost all of us apply, or would like to apply, this aesthetic sense to the places in which we live. We decorate our walls with pictures, choose apartments for their visual appeal, ask architects to design our homes, plant flowers in our gardens, and seek out well-maintained and pleasant neighborhoods. We want city planners and government officials to work with us to make our living space more appealing.

Public space is particularly susceptible to aesthetic treatments. The great Gothic
churches of the late Middle Ages were, like the stained glass that adorned them, conceived to move the congregation's aesthetic, as much as their spiritual, sense. One of the most beautiful of these churches is the tiny chapel of Sainte Chapelle (Fig. 62), in the heart of Paris, near the great Notre Dame Cathedral. Built by the king to house religious relics he had purchased, including the Crown of Thorns and a piece of the original Cross, it was literally conceived as a giant jewel box, its windows sparkling like jewels themselves.

In fact, aesthetic considerations can sometimes lead to functional disaster, as is the case with Danish architect Jorn Utzon's Sydney Opera House (Fig. 63). Design flaws led Utzon eventually to resign from the project due to huge cost overruns, and the building's interior, which includes an opera hall, a theater, an exhibition area, a cinema, a chamber music hall, and restaurants, has never been suitable for opera. Still, the building is a source of great civic pride, and its sail-like roof is the city's landmark.
For many people, the main purpose of art is to satisfy our aesthetic sense, our desire to see and experience the beautiful. But as Robert Motherwell’s representation of “the struggle between life and death” in his Elegy to the Spanish Republic demonstrates, art often represents other truths, other realities that seem to have little to do with a purely aesthetic response to the world.

The central Crucifixion panel of Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece (Fig. 64) is one of the most tragic and horrifying depictions of Christ on the cross ever painted. Many people cannot bear to look at it. Rigor mortis has set in, Christ’s body is torn with wounds and scars, his flesh is a greenish gray, his feet are mangled, and his hands are stiffly contorted in the agony of death. The painting portrays suffering, pure and simple. It causes us to ask some difficult questions. Can the ugly itself ever be art? Can the ugly be made, by the artist, to appear beautiful, and if so, does that cause us to ignore the reality of the situation?

Grünewald painted this altarpiece for a hospital chapel, and it was assumed that patients would find solace in knowing that Christ had suffered at least as much as they. In this painting, the ugly and horrible are transformed into art, not least of all because, as Christians believe, resurrection and salvation await the Christ after his suffering. The line that runs down Christ’s right side is, in fact, the edge of a double door that opens to reveal the Annunciation and the Resurrection behind. In the latter, Christ’s body has been transformed into a pure, unblemished white, his hair and beard are gold, and his wounds are rubies.

Grünewald’s Crucifixion shows how beauty can arise out of horror. The horror of the scene is countered by the expressive drama of the scene itself. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, in fact, argued that painters should be exiled from his ideal Republic on just these grounds. To him, the painter’s ability to create an emotionally charged (and hence, he believed, illogical and irrational) scene was destructive to a society that should strive, instead, to attain truth, wisdom, and order. But for an artist like Grünewald, it is precisely the disjunction between the horror of what he depicts and the beauty of its implications that makes the work interesting. By making our relation to the painting so problematic, he creates a sense of tension that makes the work dynamic. Our feelings about it are not easily resolved. The painting demands our active response.

From a certain point of view, the experience of such dynamic tension is itself pleasing, and it is the ability of works of art to create and sustain such moments that many people value most about them. That is, many people find such moments aesthetically pleasing. The work of art may not itself be beautiful, but it
triggers a higher level of thought and awareness in the viewer, and the viewer experiences this intellectual and imaginative stimulus—this higher order of thought—as a form of beauty in its own right.

The vanitas tradition of still life painting is specifically designed to induce in the spectator a higher order of thought. Vanitas is the Latin term for “vanity,” and vanitas paintings, especially popular in Northern Europe in the seventeenth century, remind us of the vanity, or frivolous quality, of human existence. One ordinarily associates the contemplation of the normal subjects of still life paintings—flowers, food, books, and so on, set on a tabletop—with the enjoyment of the pleasurable things in life. The key element in a vanitas painting, however, is the presence of a human skull among these objects. The skull reminds the viewer that the material world—the world of still life—is fleeting, and that death is the end of all things. Such a reminder is called a momento mori—literally a “reminder of death.” In Philippe de Champaigne’s Vanitas (Fig. 65), the skull reminds us that the other elements in the painting are themselves short-lived. The hourglass embodies the quick passage of time. The cut flower will quickly fade, its petals dropping to the tabletop, its beauty temporary and conditional. Even the light in the room will soon disappear as darkness falls. Nevertheless, the vanitas is not about death, it is about the right way to live. It reminds the viewer that the material world is not as longlasting as the spiritual, and that spiritual well-being is of greater importance than material wealth.

Robert Mapplethorpe’s Self-Portrait of 1988 (Fig. 66) purposefully invokes these same themes, but with a certain irony. Mapplethorpe means to draw an analogy between his own face and the skull that tops the cane he holds. We are invited to see death in his face. When this self-portrait was taken, Mapplethorpe was HIV-positive. Soon after, in the spring of 1989, he died of AIDS. Mapplethorpe frankly acknowledges the vanity of his lifestyle in the Self-Portrait. He accepts death as the price of his pleasure, turning the vanitas tradition on its head. But he also means the Self-Portrait to be read as a mirror—as all photography is in some sense a mirror—a mirror that he holds up to us. He means us to see ourselves in its light.
Pablo Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon

Not long after finishing his portrait of Gertrude Stein (Fig. 54), Picasso began working on a large canvas, nearly eight feet square, that would come to be considered one of the first major paintings of the modern era—and one of the least beautiful—Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (Fig. 69). The title, chosen not by Picasso but by a close friend, literally means “the young ladies of Avignon,” but its somewhat tongue-in-cheek reference is specifically to the prostitutes of Avignon Street, the red-light district of Barcelona, Spain, Picasso’s hometown. We know a great deal about Picasso’s process as he worked on the canvas from late 1906 into the early summer months of 1907, not only because many of his working sketches survive but also because the canvas itself has been submitted to extensive examination, including X-ray analysis. This reveals early versions of certain passages, particularly the figure at the left and the two figures on the right, which lie under the final layers of paint.

An early sketch (Fig. 67) reveals that it was originally conceived to include seven figures—five prostitutes, a sailor seated in their midst, and, entering from the left, a medical student carrying a book. Picasso probably had in mind some anecdotal or narrative idea contrasting the dangers and joys of both work and pleasure, but he soon abandoned the male figures. By doing so, he involved the viewer much more fully in the scene. No longer does the curtain open up at the left to allow the medical student to enter. Now the curtain is opened by one of the prostitutes as if she were admitting us, the audience, into the bordellos. We are implicated in the scene.

And an extraordinary scene it is. Picasso seems to have willingly abdicated any traditional aesthetic sense of beauty. There is nothing enticing or alluring here. Of all the nudes, the two central ones are the most traditional, and their facial features, particularly their brows and oval eyes, are closely related to Gertrude Stein’s in his portrait of her. But their bodies are composed of a series of long lozenge shapes, hard angles, and only a few traditional curves. It is unclear whether the second nude from the left is standing or sitting, or possibly even lying down. (In the early drawing, she is clearly seated.) Picasso seems to have made her position in space intentionally ambiguous.
We know, through X-rays, that all five nudes originally looked like the central two. We also know that sometime after he began painting *Les Demoiselles*, Picasso visited the Trocadero, now the Museum of Man, in Paris and saw in its collection of African sculpture, particularly African masks, an approach to the representation of the human face that was extraordinarily powerful. As in his portrait of Gertrude Stein, the masks freed him from representing exactly what his subjects looked like and allowed him to represent his idea of them instead.

That idea is clearly ambivalent. Picasso probably saw in these masks something of the same "fear and darkness" that Kenneth Clark would find in them sixty years later in his book *Civilisation* (see the discussion of the African masks on pages 28–29). But it is also clear that he found something liberating in them. They freed him from a slavish concern for accurate representation, and they allowed him to create a much more emotionally charged scene than he would have otherwise been able to accomplish. Rather than offering us a single point of view, he offers us many, both literally and figuratively. The painting is about the ambiguity of experience.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the squatting figure in the lower right-hand corner of the painting. She seems twisted around on herself in the final version, her back to us, but her head impossibly turned to face us, her chin resting on her grotesque, clawlike hand. We see her, in other words, from both front and back. (Notice, incidentally, that even the nudes in the sketch possess something of this "double" point of view: their noses are in profile though they face the viewer.) But this crouching figure is even more complex. An early drawing of her (Fig. 68) reveals that her face was originally conceived as a headless torso. What would become her hand is originally her arm. What would become her eyes were her breasts. And her mouth would begin as her belly button. Here we are witness to the extraordinary freedom of invention that defines all of Picasso's art.

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*Fig. 69 Pablo Picasso.*
*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, 1907.*
Oil on canvas, 8 ft × 7 ft 8 in.
In the midst of these controversies, the remainder of Mapplethorpe’s work was ignored. The “X Portfolio” was meant to be seen, for instance, in conjunction with a “Y Portfolio,” a series of still lifes of flowers. Mapplethorpe’s many stunningly beautiful flower photographs, such as *Parrot Tulip* (Fig. 70), take on a special poignancy in relation to his other work. In what way is this photograph not merely a still life? In what particular ways does it acknowledge the *vanitas* tradition? You might want to consider more than just the vase and flower. What about the lighting? What does it suggest? How does it compare to Philippe de Champaigne’s *Vanitas*? Assuming, as well, that Mapplethorpe does have an interest in erotic, even pornographic imagery, how does this image reflect or represent that aspect of his mind? What, all told, contributes to the aesthetic beauty of this image? What tensions are created in the collision of erotic and *vanitas* themes?

Fig. 70 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Parrot Tulip*, 1985.
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