Les Demoiselles d'Avignon
Pablo Picasso. 1907 C.E. Oil on canvas

- Video at Khan Academy
- Originally titled The Brothel of Avignon
- 96 x 92 inches
- Content:
  - five nude female prostitutes from a brothel in Barcelona
  - 3 on the left have Iberian style faces from Picasso’s native Spain
  - 2 on the right are shown with African mask-like features
- Form:
  - angular and disjointed body shapes
  - The racial primitivism evoked in these masks, according to Picasso, moved him to "liberate an utterly original artistic style of compelling, even savage force."
  - In this adaptation of Primitivism and abandonment of perspective in favor of a flat, two-dimensional picture plane, Picasso makes a radical departure from traditional European painting
  - This proto-Cubist work is widely considered to be seminal in the early development of both Cubism and Modern art
- Context:
  - Les Demoiselles was revolutionary and controversial, and led to wide anger and disagreement, even amongst his closest associates and friends. Matisse considered the work something of a bad joke, yet indirectly reacted to it in his 1908 Bathers with a Turtle. Braque too initially disliked the painting, yet perhaps more than anyone else, studied the work in great detail. And effectively, his subsequent friendship and collaboration with Picasso led to the Cubist revolution. Its resemblance to Cézanne’s Les Grandes Baigneuses, Paul Gauguin’s statue Oviri and El Greco’s Opening of the Fifth Seal has been widely discussed by later critics.
  - At the time of its first exhibition in 1916, the painting was deemed immoral. The work, painted in the studio of Picasso at Le Bateau-Lavoir, was seen publicly for the first time at the Salon d’Antin in July 1916; an exhibition organized by the poet André Salmon. It was at this exhibition that André Salmon, who had already mentioned the painting in 1912 under the title Le Bordel philosophique, gave the work its present title Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (in preference to the title originally chosen by Picasso, Le Bordel d’Avignon) to lessen its scandalous impact on the public. Picasso, who had always referred to it as mon bordel (my
brothel)\textsuperscript{[8]} or Le Bordel d'Avignon,\textsuperscript{[9]} never liked Salmon’s title, and as an edulcoration\textsuperscript{[11]} would have preferred Las chicas de Avignon instead.

- Picasso painted this after establishing himself in Paris with his “Blue Period” (poverty and desperation themed) and the “Rose Period” (hopeful and joyful depictions of Bohemian life) paintings including works considered to be “masterpieces” – inspired by other famous painters
- At a gathering at Gertrude Stein’s home/gallery, Picasso met Matisse (who became his rival and later close friend) who was considerably more successful
  - Les Demoiselles d’Avignon was vying with Matisse for the preeminent position of being the perceived new leader of Modern painting. Upon its completion the shock and the impact of the painting propelled Picasso into the center of controversy and all but knocked Matisse and Fauvism off the map, virtually ending the movement by the following year
  - a response to Matisse’s Le bonheur de vivre (1905–1906)
  - It has been argued by critics that the painting was a reaction to Henri Matisse’s Le bonheur de vivre and Blue Nude.
  - Influences: The work is believed by critics to be influenced by African tribal masks and the art of Oceania, although Picasso denied the connection; many art historians remain skeptical about his denials. Several experts maintain that, at the very least, Picasso visited the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro (known today as Musée de l’Homme) in the spring of 1907 where he saw and was unconsciously influenced by African and Tribal art several months before completing Les Demoiselles.
    - Picasso acknowledged the importance of Spanish art and Iberian sculpture as influences on the painting.

In 1907, when Picasso began to work on Les Demoiselles, one of the old master painters he greatly admired was El Greco (1541–1614). At the time El Greco was largely obscure and under-appreciated. Picasso’s friend Ignacio Zuloaga (1870–1945) acquired El Greco’s masterpiece, the Opening of the Fifth Seal, in 1897 for 1000 pesetas. While Picasso was working on Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, he visited his friend Ignacio Zuloaga in his studio in Paris and studied El Greco’s Opening of the Fifth Seal. The relation between Les Demoiselles d’Avignon and the Opening of the Fifth Seal was pinpointed in the early 1980s, when the stylistic similarities and the relationship between the motifs and visually identifying qualities of both works were analysed.
El Greco's painting, which Picasso studied repeatedly in Zuloaga's house, inspired not only the size, format, and composition of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, but it inspired its apocalyptic power.

- Gaugin (primitivism – “Oceanic” and Cezanne influence this painting (posthumous exhibits in Paris)
- Not cubist – but “is the logical picture to take as the starting point for Cubism, because it marks the birth of a new pictorial idiom, because in it Picasso violently overturned established conventions and because all that followed grew out of it.”
  - “In the foreground, however, alien to the style of the rest of the painting, appear a crouching figure and a bowl of fruit. These forms are drawn angularly, not roundly modeled in chiaroscuro. The colors are luscious blue, strident yellow, next to pure black and white. This is the beginning of Cubism, the first upsurge, a desperate titanic clash with all of the problems at once.” (Kahweiler, 1920)
- Influenced by mathematics (a book by Jouffret): his sketchbook is evidence
- Impact (not immediate, but later!!) on Modern art – not exhibited until 1916 - and not published until 1920s
- **Henri Matisse** was fighting mad upon seeing the *Demoiselles* at Picasso's studio. He let it be known that he regarded the painting as an attempt to ridicule the modern movement; he was outraged to find his sensational *Blue Nude*, not to speak of *Bonheur de vivre*, overtaken by Picasso's "hideous" whores. He vowed to get even and make Picasso beg for mercy. Just as the *Bonheur de vivre* had fueled Picasso's competitiveness, *Les Demoiselles* now fueled Matisse's
- It has been analyzed a great deal . . .
- Feminist interpretations: it (prismatically mirrors her many opposing faces: whore and deity, decadent and savage, tempting and repelling, awesome and obscene, looming and crouching, masked and naked, threatening and powerless.”
- In July 2007, *Newsweek* published a two-page article about *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* describing it as the "most influential work of art of the last 100 years"
Le Bonheur de vivre, Henry Matisse, 1905-6
Blue Nude, Henry Matisse, 1907

Nus (Nudes), Picasso, 1905

The Opening of the Fifth Seal, El Greco, 1608-14

The Moon and the Earth, Paul Gaugin, 1893

Oviri (Sauvage), Paul Gaugin, 1894