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Beyond the Margins: Picasso and Company in Montmartre

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This paper examines how Paris' 18th arrondissement's marginality echoed the montmartrian artists' wish to distinguish themselves from the other artists and the bourgeoisie. This encounter between a group of artist and the district in which they lived from 1900 to 1914 had effects on the marginal identity the avant-garde of Montmartre built and on the works of art some artists created there, especially the ones of the cubists Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris and Henri Laurens.

Montmartre: a Marginal District

At the beginning of the 20th century, the 18th arrondissement was a marginal space in the capital, both geographically and sociologically. Untouched by the Second Empire urban transformation, the montmartrian hill had a different atmosphere to that of the rest of the city.

With its narrow unpaved streets, its modest buildings and unpretentious houses (slide 1), its small squares and its itinerant dealers (slide 2), Montmartre looked like a rural or a country town. Farming even remained a significant activity: the north of the hill was partly occupied by fields, windmills and kitchen gardens (slide 3). Thus, people who lived there still worked for themselves in traditional rural occupations such as family animal husbandry or farming (slide 4), natural resources exploitation (wood, hunting or fishing...) or domestic productions (needlework, weaving or fabrication of everyday life's objects...) long after the rest of Paris had experienced the Industrial Revolution.

Montmartre was also near the northern industrial suburbs of Paris and the memories of the avant-garde often talk about the humble ways of living: it is the "small jug of fresh wine"¹, the "cooking of [...] Bagnole's² Sundays³", or the café as a relaxing and sociable space. Furthermore, Montmartre was touched directly by the working class migration and the poverty that they experienced: on the north-west of the hill (slide 5), there was a shantytown named the Maquis.

¹ MAC ORLAN 2003 [1st ed. 1946], p.15-16. My translation for "petits cruchons de vin frais".

² Bagnole was an industrial town near Paris.

³ MAC ORLAN 2003 [1st ed. 1946], p.56. My translation for "la cuisine des dimanches de [...] Bagnole".

With its prostitutes, alcoholics, beggars and guttersnipes, the 18th arrondissement had an evil reputation. These character types were so commonly associated with the neighbourhood that the avant-garde regularly evoked them in their recollections and iconography (slide 6). At night, with the new urban entertainment scene (music-halls, taverns, night-clubs such as The Moulin Rouge...), the district life was busy and regularly disturbed by dramatic events. The gunshots, knife quarrels and fights in the *Zut* and the *Lapin Agile*, that the artists visited frequently, were among the most spoke about in the capital.

Thus, inside Paris, Montmartre and the 18th district were a diverse neighborhood, that brought together Paris' last peasant community, the industrial working class, artisans and craftsmen, as well as those suffering from the most abject poverty and the criminal element. In that sense, it was a popular⁴ district. This fringe area of Paris provided a refuge for the dispossessed: with the urbanization of the town, the boundaries between the poor and the rich increased and the first one were removed to the periphery. It was also a place where middle class men would come to find cheap entertainments of all kinds.

The Avant-garde's Precarious Life

Many young artists lived in the 18th district and they were part of this unconventional population. The avant-garde, unable to make a living, understood the precarious life of the poor from the inside.

Each earned a living through another trade: J. Gris, Fernand Léger and Kees Van Dongen sold humoristic drawings; Max Jacob was a salesman in a department store; H. Laurens was a cutter of stone on site; Maurice de Vlaminck was a gypsy musician. Despite of these multiples jobs, they had financial difficulty and were compelled to buy on credit, to pawn goods, and to barter. They were also sometimes short of food, clothes or heating. Fernande Olivier, P. Picasso's companion for example, remembers days of fasting, being forced to stay in bed in winter because they couldn't afford charcoal for the stove and not being able to go out because she was without of shoes for a two month period. They often stayed in humble or unhealthy habitations, living in poorly furnished rooms or in hotels without basic comforts (slide 7). H. Laurens even stayed in what was left of the Maquis. In

⁴ I have to explain my use of the word "popular": in French, it refers to rural, modest, working class and poor people, in other words, all the classes which do not belong to the bourgeoisie or the rich classes. As it has a wider sense than the traditional translation "working class", I will use the word "popular" in the French meaning in this paper. At the same time I would like to make a statement on the sense to give to the world working class: at the beginning of the 20th century it does not only refers to industrial workers but stand for all the manual workers: manufactory worker, artisans, craftsmen and makers of art objects.

the descriptions, the lack of furniture and decoration is striking: they had almost only useful objects, a few tools, a stove, a straw mattress for bed, one table, few chairs. Just as anyone of the poorest classes, they lived day to day, always in need of basic necessities. The Bateau-Lavoir apartments were among the most pitiful (slide 8-9): the building was described as a “filthy place⁵” with badly joined wood board walls from which hung shreds of wall paper and which dripped unidentified liquids. The doors were decaying and full of graffiti, the wood floors were half rotted and there were holes in the roof. It had a musty smell and was so cold in winter that water froze in jugs.

A Constructed Marginality

Although they shared the precarious life of the unfortunate, at the same time the artists of Montmartre enhanced their marginality by adopting transgressive patterns of behaviour. It is necessary to read their memoirs critically since the artists may have over exaggerated the poverty in which they lived. By being part of the avant-garde, the young artists expressed their rebellion against the traditional models. Living in poverty, at the margins, was a manner to draw a counter-model to the bourgeois way of life.

For example, they sought an original and eccentric clothing style to distinguish themselves from the uniformity of the male urban costume (slide 10). André Derain and M. de Vlaminck were dressed with large square patterned suits, bright coloured ties and M. Jacob preferred a London cabman’s style. Beyond peculiar dress, they also adopted shocking behaviours such as living at night or taking drugs. To increase what polite society would have seen as a reprehensible reputation, G. Braque and P. Picasso liked to espouse rough manners, crude and brutal gestures or coarse language associated with the working classes.

This kind of behaviour was certainly not new among artistic groups, but none had gone as far as the montmartrian avant-garde. They built an atypical identity entirely in opposition to the middle-class morality and its dominant model for behaviour. As everything they rejected was associated with the bourgeoisie, all their actions were intended to offend that social class. Everything that was in conflict with the rules of etiquette was used to construct a distinct group identity. Rural people, working class as well as those designated by the middle class as being of ill-repute were brought into play to put on view their difference. Embracing the lifestyle of these popular circles, taking on vulgar or scandalous behaviour was a game, a way to get into bad company while denying the bourgeois’ condemnation of it.

⁵ KAHNWEILER 1963, p.240 (« Les peintres modernes et l’art populaire », écrit en 1955). My translation for “pouillerie”.

How, then, was this constructed identity related to their neighbourhood? In what ways did the geographical boundaries of the city play a part in the creation of this marginal group of artists and its practices? The location of the young and penniless avant-garde in the north of Paris was not a coincidence: living in Montmartre was both a necessity and a choice for the artists. This district was cheap but it was above all an area physically and sociologically at the margins of the city, the precise position the avant-garde was seeking to occupy in wider society and the world of art. By choosing Montmartre as their quarter, P. Picasso and his friend expressed in a double way their marginality. They showed a spatial and a social difference which indirectly associated them with the humble, indeed poor rural or working class populations, with the deprived or even the peoples considered by the bourgeoisie as disreputable. Thus, they indicated their total separation from the traditional values in their life as in their works of art: sharing the marginal position of the fringing inhabitants of Paris who were pushed behind the city boundaries, guaranteed the radical novelty of their art and, at the same time, increased its nonconformity and its outrageous impact.

But, what is most remarkable about this parallel between their social, geographical and artistic marginality is that their neighbourhood influenced both their unconventional identity and the nature of Cubism itself, especially the work of G. Braque, P. Picasso, J. Gris and H. Laurens.

The Empathy for the Worker and the Popular

Belonging to the 18th district in turn affected the very nature of the rebellious identity they developed. For the first time, the poor and working class people with whom they lived became a model to follow for the artistic bohemia. Indeed, this new reference left its mark from the clothes to the politic opinions that P. Picasso and his friend embraced. Their singularity was due, in large part, to their imitation of the working class habits'. The regular return to points of reference from these communities seems to offer evidence that for some of them, this was an expression of a deep identification, not a superficial association exclusively meant to shock the middle class.

They enjoyed humbles ways of living and tasted the same entertainments: the circus, movie theatre, tavern or night-clubs, regarded as inferior by the wealthy classes. They also followed the trend for sports that affected the masses at the same time (slide 11) (biking for G. Braque and M. de Vlaminck, boxing for A. Derain, G. Braque and P. Picasso...).

For some of them the belonging to the working class was meaningful. H. Laurens considered himself as a craftsman sculptor. Both he and G. Braque came from modest families and received atypical art training—the former as a cutter of stone and the latter as a decorative painter. P. Picasso and G. Braque’s overalls and workers clothes (slide 12) showed their desire to embrace and emulate the work ethic of manual labourers. They also called, with J. Gris and H. Laurens, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, their art dealer, “boss”—a nod to their solidarity with the working class. G. Braque and P. Picasso even played workers one time, approaching the dealer, with their hats in hand, saying: “Boss, we come for our wages⁶”.

This attraction for modest living and working class values was particular to the montmartrian avant-garde. The 19th century bohemians had experienced a hard life and tried to establish a marginal identity, but they never leaned on popular classes’ standards as a place from which to build and exhibit their difference. This shift comes from socio-political context of the Belle Époque: montmartrian artists were not indifferent to the working class’ use of riots and strikes to make their demands heard. Some of them expressed leftwing political opinions: Guillaume Apollinaire and André Salmon wrote in political newspaper; A. Salmon and D.-H. Kahnweiler went to political meetings; M. de Vlaminck and H. Laurens were anarchists; P. Picasso, when in Barcelona drew for anarchists’ newspapers and during his blue period chose subjects related to contemporary social matters (slide 13). It seems clear as well that the geographical and social proximity with the marginal populations of Montmartre played a major part in the artists’ decisions to adopt working class and modest living values. Their choices stand in sharp contrast to many post-impressionists and symbolists, who were anarchist militants but would have never dreamed of being associated with manual workers.

Popular Elements in Cubism

If the particularities of the montmartrian avant-garde, their distinctive identity, reflected their marginal geographical localisation, the cubist works of art can also be related to the neighbourhood in which they lived. Their iconography depicts their everyday environment and its distractions: in opposition to traditional still-life painting, they showed common objects, jugs, glasses, tables, chairs, alcohol, tobacco, newspaper, fruit, cards, checker board table clothes (slide 14)... Some of these items, such as the novel *Fantômas*, the accordion, or the movie theatre program, were directly associated with mass entertainments (slide 15). They also used everyday materials: wood, metal, paper, newspaper, wallpaper or even food

⁶ KAHNWEILER 1998 [1961], p.60. My translation for: « Patron, on vient pour la paye ! »

tin (slide 16). Wallpaper along with fake wood or fake marble (slide 17) were typical of modest interiors that imitated—albeit with cheaper material (paint, paper)—the wall tissues, wainscoting and marble panelling of bourgeois decoration. Besides, some techniques they used were house painter practices, like stencilled typography or fake wood made by passing a comb in fresh paint (slide 18).

These characteristics reveal an artistic conception that differs significantly from those embraced in academic settings. Using poor materials, heteroclites techniques and depicting common subjects annihilated the traditional hierarchy in fine arts. It expresses their will to make an art closer to everyday life, in its iconography and its fabrication. *Papiers collés* and cubist constructions for example do not require artistic training as they are made with everyday skills (cutting, pasting, nailing) and tools (scissors, glue, hammer, nail, saw...). Thus the artist appears like a manual worker and his position in the society changes as a consequence. He and the product of his art are no longer considered as exceptional beings.

If all these interpretations are well-known for Cubism, the link with the environment in which the artists lived is rarely stressed, especially its relation to the more radical cubist innovations: *papiers collés* and constructions. As this unusual perception of art and artist is very similar to the craftsmen model, it was partly made possible because G. Braque, P. Picasso, J. Gris and H. Laurens embraced popular values, and the same can be said about their use of inartistic techniques and material. There were popular practices of self creating decorative objects that used inexpensive and garbage picked materials as well as heteroclites techniques. Therefore, the encounter of the avant-garde's search for new artistic means of expression and creation occurred because of their intimate relationship with the people and places of Paris' 18th arrondissement. Their identity and their art reflected Montmartre's marginality. They found in this milieu a support on which to lean in their quest to distinguish themselves from the dominant middle class model, a confirmation of the necessity to break tradition and an encouragement to their transgressive ideological and artistic choices. To remain outside bourgeois city life and the academic world of art, allowed them to be in contact with a popular culture that nourished their own work.

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