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## Medieval sources in the early work of Pablo Picasso

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MEDIEVAL SOURCES IN THE EARLY WORK  
OF PABLO PICASSO

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The School of Art

by  
Erin Elizabeth Horton  
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## **Abstract**

Pablo Picasso drew inspiration from diverse artistic traditions. This thesis argues that the medieval art and heritage of Catalonia was among his earliest influences and that it proved instrumental to Picasso's development of that revolutionary approach to painting, known as Cubism. The topic has amazingly received little attention over the past decades and this thesis is an attempt to fill the glaring gap in Picasso scholarship. My work combines formal analysis with an investigation of the broader cultural context in which Picasso was operating in order to demonstrate how the young artist was influenced by the figurative and stylistic execution of Catalan medieval art. Although the Blue Period (1901-1904) is the focus of the thesis, because it constituted Picasso's first major moment of impact with medieval art, I trace the progression of Picasso's relationship with medieval imagery throughout his early career, from subtle references in the 1890s to more direct appropriation between 1902 and the dawn of Cubism 1907.

## Chapter One: Introduction

Pablo Picasso is unquestionably the most influential artist of the twentieth century and his conception of revolutionary new figurative styles revolutionized the world of modern art. Throughout his career, he sought inspiration from a variety of artistic styles, a search that was ignited by his early interest in the medieval art and heritage of Catalonia. This topic has amazingly received little attention over the past decades and this thesis is my attempt to fill this glaring gap in Picasso scholarship. I will combine formal analysis with an investigation of the broader cultural context in which Picasso operated in order to demonstrate how the young artist was influenced by the figurative and stylistic execution of Catalan medieval art. This task requires a discussion of key instances in which he chose to exhibit these influences and a postulation of possible reasons why he would want to incorporate this seemingly “primitive” style into his work. My writing focuses on Picasso’s first major moment of impact with medieval art that occurred during his Blue Period (1901-1904), while also briefly touching on other earlier and later stages of particular interest.

The first certifiable instances of medieval influence appeared in Picasso’s work in 1901, and can be distinguished in several of his brightly colored “Proto-Fauvist” style paintings, which immediately preceded the Blue Period. Here, selective medieval elements—such as overly elongated limbs, heavy outlines, two-dimensional flatness, and rectilinear, geometrically rendered facial features—were subtly incorporated into his more simplified figural style. These formal characteristics were magnified significantly during the Blue Period, as Picasso further began to incorporate medieval references in his

paintings through both palette and subject matter. I will discuss how—stylistically, coloristically, and symbolically—Blue Period works such as “The Two Sisters” of 1902 (Fig. 1) bear striking resemblance to Romanesque and Gothic representations of “The Visitation” (Fig. 2) between the Virgin Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. Like “The Two Sisters,” most

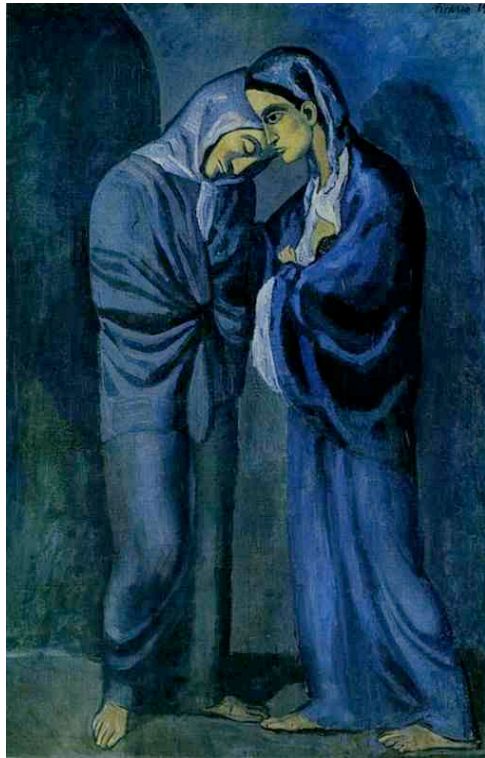


Figure 1: Pablo Picasso, “The Visitation,” 1902. The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia.  
(<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/>)



Figure 2: “The Visitation,” detail from the Lluca Altarpiece, 13<sup>th</sup> century. Museu Episcopal de Vic, Spain.  
(*Picasso: The Early Years, 1892-1906*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1997)

other Blue Period works are simplistic in composition and only provide minimal background information, a characteristic that also holds true for medieval imagery. Picasso’s heavily outlined, elongated figures and exaggerated facial features further evoke the flatness and abstraction that is definitive of the medieval period. Medievally fashioned clothing appeared, along with the elongation and flattening of human forms. The

backgrounds of these paintings were also drastically simplified in a manner that closely mimicked centuries-old altarpieces and frescos.

It is my belief that at key points during his early career, Picasso chose to incorporate this specific Catalan style into his work for a number of reasons; therefore, one of the primary objectives of this thesis is to demonstrate how the artist's different motivations collectively led to the production of medieval-inspired imagery. Chronologically speaking, Picasso's first obvious motivation was the rejection of strict academic ideals that had been forced upon him during his formal artistic education. The work that immediately followed this break with academia revealed an inner genius longing to break free with new ideas. The artist sought abstraction as the antithesis of classicism, surveying a large number of sources, including medieval art, as springboards through which to express more innovative ideas. Almost simultaneously, Picasso adopted many of the more radical, cutting-edge ideas of the avant-garde, which further motivated his appropriation of medieval imagery. Furthermore, a medieval revival was in vogue among Barcelona's avant-garde artists and architects at the turn of the century, and Picasso was well aware of their activities, often sharing in their camaraderie at the Four Cats Café. It was only a short matter of time before elements of the medieval style began appearing in his work, and they consequently became more obvious as his involvement in these artistic circles grew.

A growing sense of nationalism also served as a major component in the increase of Catalan medieval style in Picasso's work. Picasso strongly identified with the culture of Catalonia even though it was not his native province. He proudly voiced his patriotism even during the periods in which he lived and worked in Paris, developing sentiments that followed him throughout his entire life. Many of Barcelona's avant-garde artists were also

motivated by Catalan nationalism, and through the previously mentioned revival, they attempted to emphasize their region's medieval origins. Great efforts were made in preserving Catalonia's cultural and artistic heritage. Medieval paintings and objects had been almost completely forgotten for centuries, but because of the region's cultural revival movement, they took on significant new value as symbols of nationalism. Murals, panel paintings, and sculptures were removed from remote locations and brought into cities, many of which were seen by Picasso, undoubtedly provoking the medieval characteristics in his work.<sup>1</sup>

Artistic problem solving was perhaps the most significant motivation for Picasso's medieval appropriation. Throughout his early career, he experimented with abstraction in his search for personal identity as an artist. He undoubtedly sought out multiple styles, particularly those that might have qualified as "primitive" because of their abstract nature, and he used them as points of departure for his own ideas. I argue that Picasso drew from an environment that was saturated with medieval art, and that he eventually defined himself in part through this regional artistic style. His search for answers resulted in two separate resolutions, the first coming during the Blue Period. At this stage in his career, medieval art provided a simplified style that emphasized the internal as opposed to the external and figurative representations that did not detract from, but instead magnified the meaning and power of his paintings.

My discussion of Picasso's motivations additionally poses questions about his intentions as an avant-garde artist. An obvious appropriation of medieval imagery occurred, but was it the result of an active search, the visual materialization of his

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see: Manuel Castiñeiras, Jordi Camps, and Joan Duran-Porta, *Romanesque art in the MNAC collections* (Barcelona: Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya and Lunewerg, 2008).

subconscious, or a mixture of both? I do not endeavor to identify a definitive answer within the confines of this thesis, but instead strive to impart what I believe to be logical explanations at particular moments in time. Here I offer only a brief synopsis of the more detailed explanation that follows. It appears that all three intentions hold true at different times in Picasso's early career, and that they varied along with his stylistic development. The artist was first introduced to medieval imagery at an early age, and spent his formative years copying the architectural details of Barcelona's Gothic churches as part of his formal training. It is likely that at this point in his career, any appropriation that occurred was the result of his subconscious processes. I believe that the introduction of the Blue Period marked the beginning of Picasso's active search for artistic solutions in the medieval style, a development that directly corresponded to his increasing association with avant-garde colleagues and participation in the revival movement.

### **State of the Scholarship:**

Questions concerning Picasso's creative intentions raised several important points of concern, which additionally create potential for more unresolved scholarly conflict. Throughout the course of my research, I have noted numerous problems with the practice of labeling stylistic periods as a means of classifying and organizing art works, and before entering into a lengthy explanation of Picasso's stylistic periods in later chapters, I feel that it is important to discuss the problems that have arisen with past treatments of this subject. Perhaps the most significant downfall of this system is the way that grouping similar styles under highly specific labels implies that artists work through sequential development with obvious breaks between periods and few overlapping similarities from one period to the next. These expectations are not realistic for many artists, especially those who use rapidly

evolving, experimental styles. For artists like Picasso, grouping related bodies of work beneath broad headings results in gaps where styles overlap, sometimes leaving out crucial, experimental works that reveal far-reaching creative processes. Such a method of classification makes artistic development seem very cut and dry, when in fact, an idea from one phase could inspire another at a later stage, and then the two can be carried out simultaneously. In simple terms: Picasso did not know in 1902—at the start of the Blue Period—that the influence of medieval art would lead him to abstraction in 1907, otherwise it is conceivable that he would have skipped the process and moved directly into Cubism.

Despite these discrepancies, continuing the practice of labeling stylistic periods seems nearly unavoidable, which poses the question of where scholars should place outlying works that do not clearly fit in with styles that are associated with specific periods? In the case of Picasso, one particular work immediately comes to mind: “The Frugal Repast” etching of 1904 (Fig. 3). Like other outlying works from his early career, “The Frugal Repast” is often overlooked in scholarly research and rarely appears in retrospective catalogues. It most nearly fits with the Blue Period style, however, its black and white rendering apparently disqualifies it from this category.<sup>2</sup> There appears to be no simple answer to this complex problem, especially with regard to such a prolific artist as Picasso, but perhaps the addition of new classifications would be helpful for filling in the gaps left by the previously established periods.

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<sup>2</sup> Even though copies of “The Frugal Repast” exist at a handful of major museums, including Madrid’s Thyssen-Bornemisza, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the etching receives little attention. According to MoMA’s website, the copy owned by the museum is even currently “not on view” to the public, and no information was given indicates that this was a temporary situation.





Figure 3: Pablo Picasso, "The Frugal Repast,"  
1904, (<http://www.metmuseum.org/>)

Other possible solutions for this dilemma include the use of the concept of parallel development, which emphasizes overlapping patterns of cause and effect and a more fluid development of artistry. In contrast with sequential development, this method acknowledges that experimentation occurs across the boundaries of defined periods. The adaptation of this system of organization would be extremely helpful for the study of



Picasso's early career, as he relied on experimentation during these years as a means of finding his identity as an artist. Because the parallel method of organization is not absolutist, artists are allowed room for variation in style and color, which, in the case of Picasso, would provide a more definitive place for works such as "The Frugal Repast." Parallel development also recognizes that artists can blend characteristics of one period into the next, carrying over stylistic elements that they deem successful and appropriate to their overall goals.

Despite the downfalls of the method, I have chosen to organize my study of Picasso's early career in a sequential manner because it not only allows me to build upon historical events, but because it also enables the reader to more clearly envision the timeline of Picasso's parallel creative progressions. At times, I have also chosen to retain the use of period labels, mainly because it allows for a more coherent argumentation, but also because the titles are generally valid descriptions of specific styles of work.

The second major problem that I have encountered during the course of my research deals with the common occurrence of vague or non-descriptive terminology on the part of scholars, primarily in their discussions of Picasso's early influences. This issue is less common in more recent scholarly research, owing to the fact that a greater understanding of the artist and his work had been developed over the course of his lifetime. Despite such advancement, the term "primitive" residually appears as the description of both Picasso's paintings and the works that inspired him. This implies non-advanced thinking on the part of historical craftsmen, when in fact, most were pivotal members of highly complex societies. Furthermore, the term "primitivism" has been used to bundle works that span continents and hundreds of years under the guise of one

heading, a mistake that is especially problematic when reading scholarship discussing the advent of Cubism. In the introduction to his 1998 dissertation entitled “Primitivism and Picasso’s Early Cubism”, Ruben Cordova also discussed at great length the problems associated with the term “primitivism” and how grouping art under such broad labels leads to confusion in art historical discourse.<sup>3</sup> He elaborated on how in many art historical publications, the label “primitive” is used to encompass a broad range of artistic styles that spanned various regions, nationalities, and periods of time. It appears that archaic Greek and Iberian sculptures, Catalan Romanesque sculpture and imagery, African and Oceanic artifacts, and other non-Western objects have all been amassed under the “primitive” heading, along with works by more modern painters such as El Greco, Gauguin, and Cezanne.<sup>4</sup> It has been my experience that the repeated use of this vague term has made it extremely difficult for me to distinguish between the specific types of art that influenced Picasso, and furthermore, it has encouraged a disheartening vagueness in previous scholarly treatments of the questions posed here.

Indeed, perhaps the ambiguity of earlier scholarship is one reason the topic of Picasso’s medieval sources has so rarely been studied. His resourcefulness as an artist created a complexity that will remain as long as scholars find it difficult to distinguish between his “primitive” sources. In order to actively progress with new research and by means of creating a better understanding of Picasso’s sources, it is essential for scholars to clarify their terminology. This task proves to be exceedingly difficult as most Picasso scholars do not have a background in medieval Catalan art, and in turn, most medieval

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<sup>3</sup> Ruben Cordova, “Primitivism and Picasso’s early Cubism” (Ph. D. diss., University of California Berkeley, 1998)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

scholars do not study Picasso. I do not profess to be an expert in either discipline, but it is my hope that this thesis will begin to bridge the gap that divides medieval and modern scholars.

After such a lengthy discussion of vague scholarship, I find it necessary to recognize several important instances of research concerning medieval influences on Picasso that have proven to be a foundation for my argument. With the exception of Cordova, no previous scholar has entered into an in-depth discussion of Picasso's medieval sources; instead, they have only briefly alluded to the subject through general comparisons of stylistic analysis. Anthony Blunt and Phoebe Pool were perhaps the first Picasso scholars to publish explicitly indicative text along with pictorial comparisons that connected the artist to medieval works. Even though their presentation appears to be based solely on formal analysis, the two-page spread that was included in their 1962 book, "Picasso, The Formative Years," could possibly have been a catalyst for subsequent scholars.<sup>5</sup>

Josep Palau i Fabre expanded on these comparisons in his lengthy 1981 study entitled "Picasso: The Early Years; 1881-1907."<sup>6</sup> While Blunt and Pool focused almost solely on the Blue Period, Palau i Fabre made connections that concern later periods in the artist's career, including examples from Picasso's visit to Gosol in the summer of 1906, which I will discuss only briefly toward the end of this thesis. He seems to be the first scholar to recognize not only the importance of Barcelona's Ancient Art Exhibition of 1902 and its influence on works from the Blue Period, but also the first to cite the obvious similarities between the Gosol Madonna and Picasso's portraits from 1906. Additionally,

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Blunt and Phoebe Pool, *Picasso: The Formative Years; A Study of His Sources* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1962)

<sup>6</sup> Josep Palau i Fabre, *Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907* (New York: Rizzoli, 1981)

Palau i Fabre introduced rarely published studies of medieval architecture that were completed by the artist in 1896 during his formal training in Barcelona, and he included a detailed analysis of several works that he considered to have been inspired by medieval art.

In the first volume of his series, “A Life of Picasso” from 1991, John Richardson further expanded on the research of Palau i Fabre, providing a great deal more information about Picasso’s activities in Gosol.<sup>7</sup> His comprehensive illustrated biography has proven to be a fundamental source for the historical background of Picasso’s formative years, and it also gave detailed introductions to the lives of the artist’s closest associates. Most significantly, Richardson discussed the character of Joan Vidal Ventosa, saying that his close friendship with the artist “opened Picasso’s eyes to the hieratic drama of Catalan Romanesque.”<sup>8</sup> Richardson obviously understood the important role that medieval art played in both the Blue Period and again at Gosol, and he supplied his readers with a great deal of factual information to support his argument.

In his 1998 dissertation, Cordova essentially synthesized much of this previous scholarship, and he created one large compilation that sought to differentiate between Picasso’s “primitive” sources.<sup>9</sup> Throughout his chapters, Cordova recognized the medieval examples that had been discussed by previous historians, but he also made innovative comparisons that greatly expanded scholarship on this subject. I believe that his explanation of the term “primitive”—which I discussed above—is both logical and accurate, and that it relates clearly to Picasso’s unique situation. In his introduction, he also

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<sup>7</sup> John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*. Vol. 1. (New York: Random House, 1991)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 246

<sup>9</sup> Cordova, “Primitivism and Picasso’s early Cubism”

discussed how the issue of definitively labeling periods in an artist's career can prove controversial, and additionally noted inconsistencies with the starting and ending dates of Cubism.

Finally, in her 1993 book entitled "Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona," Temma Kaplan provided essential historical details that vividly set the cultural scene of Barcelona in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Her accounts of parades and festivals were strong evidence for nationalism and Picasso's participation in patriotic activities, and my thesis is extremely reliant upon her insightful analysis.

### **Methodology:**

In light of prevailing trends, my approach strives to move beyond previous scholarship by making more in-depth, direct comparisons between Picasso's work and medieval Catalan objects and images. These comparisons will explain not only the formal but also the ideological connections between them. However, I do not believe it is necessary to identify specific objects that aroused Picasso's interest in medieval art. Instead, I will suggest how repeated exposure to Catalan medieval art during his formative years inspired his early artistic style. After the turn of the century, Picasso's stylistic choices quickly became incrementally more conscious, and soon thereafter, he actively looked to medieval works in order to explore his personal artistic directions. Like Cordova, I have been resourceful in seeking out new information that solidly supports this argument, but I frame my observations in terms of nationalism, cultural revival, and societal events.

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<sup>10</sup> Temma Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona* (University of California Press, 1993)

During this study, I also plan to pose a series of questions that perhaps may never be resolved by any amount of scholarly research. I do so in the hope that such questions might inspire additional investigation on this underdeveloped topic. My ultimate goal for this thesis is to add a new layer of understanding to the vast amount of knowledge regarding influences on Picasso's early career that has been assembled in previous decades.

### **Overview of Chapters:**

The second chapter of this thesis reveals the details of this historical framework and explains Picasso's turn of the century transition from a student at Madrid's Royal Academy to his position as a young avant-garde artist. Along the way, I will touch upon the significance of his break with academic tradition and set the stage for the subsequent chapter by introducing the Catalan modernist movement that shaped Picasso's identity during his search for artistic definition. Finally, to conclude the second chapter, I will discuss Catalonia's medieval preservation efforts and the lasting impact of this movement on Picasso's early work. Such historical facts prove to be a key component of my research, providing hard evidence to back up visual speculations and comparisons.

Throughout chapter three, I will discuss in great detail the nuances of Blue Period imagery and how it created both visual and symbolic parallels with examples of Catalan medieval art. I illustrate these parallels through the stylistic analysis of direct comparisons and project possible reasons as to why Picasso chose this particular style, palette, and subject matter. Here too, I will argue that the artist was strongly motivated by both nationalism and a personal drive to address questions of representation. Medieval art offered both a tie to cultural heritage and an opportunity to experiment with abstraction.

Medieval sources disappeared almost entirely from Picasso's art during the Rose Period, which followed the Blue Period. This inspired a significant shift in both the tone and appearance of his work. In the brief, final chapter, I do not extensively discuss how changes in the artist's personal life possibly inspired this transformation; but instead, I simply focus on how this break with the medieval style ironically allowed Picasso to recognize its importance during his summer in Gosol, which proved to be the turning point on his road to abstraction.

## **Chapter Two: From Academic Classicism to Avant-garde Expression, a Historical Background to Picasso's Early Career**

### **Introduction:**

In this I explain Picasso's turn-of-the-century transformation from a student at Madrid's Royal Academy to a young avant-garde artist. This period of the artist's career was defined by major stylistic changes that resulted from his break with classicism and the academic tradition—which had been stressed during his years of formal training—and his adoption of modernist avant-garde ideas. This chapter also examines how Picasso's lifestyle and art were directly affected by both the historical events that permeated his daily activities and the immediate circle of friends with whom he chose to associate. In particular, I will provide a brief historical overview of the medieval revival movement that began in the late nineteenth century in Barcelona and spanned the years that Picasso lived and worked in the city. This revival was greatly indebted to a surge of Catalan patriotism, a politically based movement that promoted the region's separatist goals. Its participants sought to redefine Catalonia's unique cultural identity through references to its medieval history, an unquestioned golden age for the region. The accompanying movement infiltrated many aspects of Catalan life and encompassed everything from medieval church renovations to themed parades and festivals. Picasso was vividly aware of these activities, witnessed their imagery, and even regularly participated in their production alongside Barcelona's avant-garde artists and architects. Despite his family's Andalusian roots, Picasso chose to identify himself with this Catalan culture, and until his death, he remained an ardent nationalist in both his art and in his lifestyle, a topic that will be discussed in



much greater detail in Chapter Three. Finally, I shall conclude this historical background by elaborating on the ways in which other modernist artists and close associates of Picasso strove to both preserve and promote their cultural patrimony.

### **Early and Academic Work:**

Before entering into my discussion of Picasso's transition from academic to avant-garde, it is essential to provide a brief synopsis of the years prior to the beginning of his formal artistic training. Art became an integral part of the young artist's life thanks to the efforts of his father, Don José, who was fully involved in all aspects of the art scene in Málaga, the small Andalusian town of Picasso's birth. At this time, Don José was not only a painter and teacher at Málaga's provincial School of Arts and Crafts, but he also served as the director of the local museum.<sup>11</sup> The young Picasso exhibited a natural talent for painting, and from an early age, Don José encouraged his son's talent. Even though he was only a mediocre painter of still life and nature who worked in a highly realistic and detailed style, the father's profession left a lasting impression on the adolescent artist. Picasso passionately desired to follow in his footsteps, and he quickly began to absorb and record everything in his immediate surroundings—he let nothing go unnoticed.<sup>12</sup>

Picasso's relationship with medieval art actually began during this period. His friend and avid collector, Roland Penrose, noted that up until 1895 when Picasso made his first visit to the Prado in Madrid, the young artist had not seen any paintings beyond those of the churches, art museums, and art schools of Málaga and Coruña, the Galician town where

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<sup>11</sup> Pierre Daix, *Picasso* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Cabanne, *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times* (New York: Morrow, 1977), 22.

his family relocated in the fall of 1891.<sup>13</sup> The architecture and religious imagery of Coruña is especially notable because it was perhaps Picasso's first experience with distinctly medieval forms.<sup>14</sup> The city's peninsula area is known as the early medieval town because its lively streets boast well-preserved examples of Romanesque design. Two twelfth-century churches, the Church of Santiago and Santa Maria del Campo, serve as the architectural highlights and their interiors contain significant examples of medieval religious art.<sup>15</sup> Picasso was further surrounded by religious art upon his family's subsequent transfer to Barcelona in the fall of 1895. Here, the fourteen-year-old began his formal artistic education at La Lonja, the city's School of Fine Arts, where his father held a teaching position. Throughout the course of his studies there, the artist completed a handful of works, which demonstrate that he had experienced medieval settings during his youth, and therefore, he had undoubtedly witnessed their imagery and decoration.

As early as 1896, Picasso was studying the Romanesque and Gothic elements of his local Barcelona architecture. He completed three small painted sketches of structural details during that year, presumably as part of his formal training at the School of Fine Arts. All represent select portions of well-preserved medieval churches whose interiors contain figural imagery that could possibly have inspired his later work. Even though such

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), 33.

<sup>14</sup> The three major churches of Málaga were built later with construction spanning the fourteenth through eighteenth centuries. Even though they all contain Gothic elements, none is pure in form. Because the cathedral was built over the course of 250 years, the finished structure was a mixture of three distinct styles—a Gothic foundation, Renaissance façade, and Baroque towers. The other two, the Sagrario church and the Santiago church—where Picasso was baptized—were more cohesive in construction, however their Gothic foundations were heavily blended with Elizabethan and Mudéjar (Arab) styles respectively.

<sup>15</sup> The church of Santiago's nave featured a thirteenth-century polychrome sculpture of Saint James and Santa Maria del Campo built such a large collection that it now even has its own museum of twelfth- to fifteenth-century works.

compositions were not the subject of the 1896 studies, one can reasonably assume that they would not have been overlooked by the highly observant artist. The first example, entitled “Detail of the Cloister of Barcelona Cathedral” (Fig. 4) is a small painting on canvas that has the appearance of a quick, but detailed, sketch that emphasizes highlight and

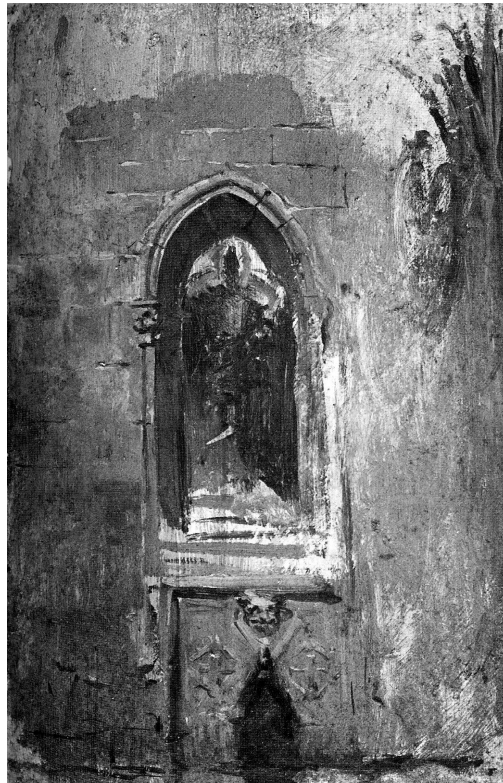


Figure 4: Pablo Picasso, “Detail of the Cloister of Barcelona Cathedral,” 1896.  
Museu Picasso, Barcelona, Spain.  
(*Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981)

shadow. It was not refined to an academically finished state, but all of the characteristics of a Gothic pointed arch window are easily discernable. A similar panel, “Corner of the Cloister of Sant Pau del Camp” (Fig. 5), also details a pair of medieval windows, but in this particular case, they are Romanesque and characteristic of the Moorish lobed-arch



Figure 5: Pablo Picasso, "Corner of the Cloister of Sant Pau del Camp," 1896.  
Museu Picasso, Barcelona, Spain.  
(*Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981)

style. It appears that the third study, "Man Leaning Against a Gothic Doorway" (Fig. 6), could have also been painted at the Sant Pau del Camp cloister. An ogee arch, a shape that is indicative of Moorish architecture, is the central focus of this ambiguous panel. Because

this style is rare in northern Spain, evidence points to Sant Pau as Picasso's most likely source.<sup>16</sup>

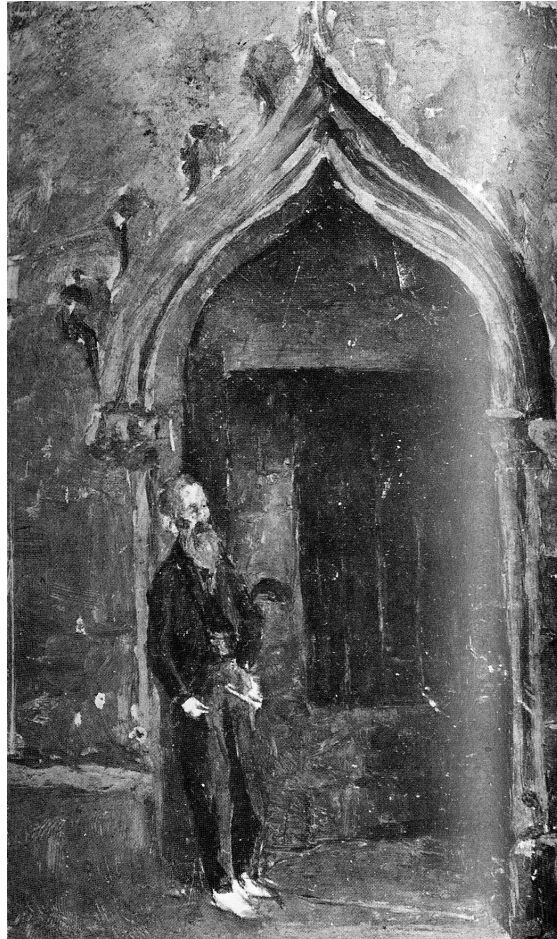


Figure 6: Pablo Picasso, "Man Leaning Against a Gothic Doorway," 1896.  
Museu Picasso, Barcelona, Spain.  
(*Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981)

In the spring of the same year, Picasso completed one of the most significant paintings of his adolescent career, a large salon-style work entitled "First Communion" (Fig.

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<sup>16</sup> These three sketches are currently part of the permanent collection of the Museu Picasso in Barcelona, where they are displayed alongside many of the artist's early masterpieces. According to the image labels, Picasso donated them from his personal collection in 1970. It appears significant that he held on to these seemingly elementary exercises for almost seventy-five years, but perhaps they contained more sentimental value than has previously been assumed.



7). During his early years of study in Barcelona, he primarily investigated religious subjects, which were favored by his traditionally pious family.<sup>17</sup> Knowing that he could



Figure 7: Pablo Picasso, "First Communion," 1896.  
Museu Picasso, Barcelona, Spain.  
(*Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981)

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<sup>17</sup> Norman Mailer, *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man: an Interpretative Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995), 13-14.

make a comfortable living as a painter of religious subjects, Picasso's wealthy and devout uncle, Don Salvador, encouraged his nephew's interests, while Picasso's father, Don José, mentored the execution of this first major work. The detailed and strikingly naturalistic painting was completed in 1896 when Picasso was merely fourteen years old; it exhibits great maturity on the part of the young artist and reveals a certain sentimentality toward Catholicism, noticeable through his careful rendering of religious objects, fabrics, and light.<sup>18</sup> This early display of attention to religious details, combined with an increased understanding of the significant place held by religious subjects in the history of art, foretold of Picasso's subsequent desire for appropriation from religious subjects. It is apparent that the young artist responded to and absorbed the Catalan religious imagery that surrounded him while executing works like "First Communion" as well as the simple, formal exercises previously mentioned. This background in religious art would provide an essential point of departure for Picasso's later work and would continue to reveal itself over the course of the following decade.

Throughout 1897, Picasso continued his artistic education at La Lonja, but quickly began to show signs of complacency in his schoolwork.<sup>19</sup> In the fall, the director of the academy and Don José decided that the time had come to supply their student with a greater challenge, so they sponsored his move to Madrid, where they helped him gain acceptance to the San Fernando Academy.<sup>20</sup> However, Madrid apparently offered no greater challenges than Barcelona because once again, Picasso was taught to paint and

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<sup>18</sup> Inanimate religious objects included in the painting, such as the candelabrum, prayer book, and altar cloth, were given as much attention as the actual communicant, showing how, at this point in his life, Picasso valued his family's faith.

<sup>19</sup> Cabanne, *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Cabanne, *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times*, 40.

draw according to academic tradition. This was the common practice of art schools all across Europe at this time, as they tried to sustain the style and techniques that are now considered to be the “official” art of the nineteenth-century<sup>21</sup>. A strong emphasis was placed on classicism and realism and the artist’s technical ability to accurately render forms according to these expectations.<sup>22</sup> Picasso and his peers were expected to model their work based on forms from the past, and in their classes, they typically copied plaster casts of ancient Greek and Roman sculptures or made realistic renderings of live models. Because of his accelerated technical proficiency, Picasso was not especially challenged by this method of study, and quickly grew bored of its repetition. When recalling his entrance examination for La Lonja in Barcelona, he mentioned how it took the other candidates an entire month to complete their classically based drawing portfolio and then boasted: “I finished mine the first day. I studied it for a long time, and I carefully considered what I could still add to it, but I couldn’t see a thing. Absolutely nothing.”<sup>23</sup> Quite simply, Picasso had outgrown his surroundings.

### **Picasso’s Relationship to the Academic Tradition:**

It soon became apparent that Picasso preferred the unique Spanish variation of classicism to the international style that was taught in formal academic settings. During the months he spent in Madrid, Picasso became especially interested in the three Spanish masters, El Greco, Velasquez, and Goya, and consequently spent hours at the Prado copying

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Barlow, “Fear and loathing of the academic, or just what is it that makes the avant-garde so different, so appealing?,” in *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. R.C. Denis and C. Trodd (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Leighton: the aesthetic as academic,” in *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. R.C. Denis and C. Trodd (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 34.

<sup>23</sup> Daix, *Picasso*, 16.



elements of their paintings. He quickly replaced his schoolwork with these studies and filled five sketchbooks that demonstrated both a deviance from the academic tradition and an interest in experimentation with style and composition.<sup>24</sup> Picasso channeled the mindset of his Spanish predecessors as he began working in a counterclassical vein, a trend that can be traced in Spanish art as far back as the fifteenth century. The nuances of this variation are best described by the words of Jonathan Brown in his book *Picasso and the Spanish Tradition*:

The painters of Spain adopted an independent stance towards classicism, which they regarded as an option, not as an imperative. Thus, some ignored it, others combined it with different stylistic currents and still others purposely altered or discarded it as irrelevant to their purposes. The result, which might be characterized as provincial by many upholders of the classical cannon, is better defined by the term counterclassical.<sup>25</sup>

Self-imposed exercises in counterclassicism posed greater challenges for Picasso than his classically-oriented academic assignments because they allowed for more freedom and opportunities for expression. The adoption and assimilation of this unique style during his student days in Madrid perhaps signaled the beginning of Picasso's forthcoming break with the academic tradition, and it would later help define his role within the ranks of the European avant-garde.<sup>26</sup>

### **Picasso's Break with the Academic Tradition:**

By the late fall of 1897, Picasso had obviously grown weary of the scholarly regimen and began to act rebelliously in his classes. His attendance was merely sporadic, and it was

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<sup>24</sup> Cabanne, *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times*, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Brown, *Picasso and the Spanish Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

only a brief matter of time before he left the San Fernando Academy altogether.<sup>27</sup> Working with classical forms was no longer challenging because they could only be replicated and perfected, never allowing opportunities for creative ingenuity. After dropping out of the program, Picasso's newfound freedom allowed his creative genius to break free with new ideas. He began painting in a more simplified, expressive style, as he was able to seek inspiration from a less restricted network of sources. This early period was a time of problem solving, adapting, and searching for a unique artistic style.

### **Horta de Sant Joan:**

Noticeable shifts occurred in Picasso's work throughout 1898, possibly as the result of his lengthy visit to the small village of Horta de Sant Joan, located in the Pyrenees of northern Catalonia.<sup>28</sup> Sometime during the spring of that year, Picasso contracted scarlet fever in Madrid and was forced to return home to Barcelona and his family in June, but he only stayed there briefly before leaving for Horta de Sant Joan, the home of his schoolmate Manuel Pallares.<sup>29</sup> The young artists arrived in the village in late June, and after recuperating from their initial trek into the mountains, they visited the Monastery of San Salvador and the Santa Barbara Mountain that rose above it.<sup>30</sup> Picasso completed several

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<sup>27</sup> The exact date that Picasso left the Academy is unclear, but it is estimated that he had stopped attending classes altogether by the winter or early spring of 1898. The artist claimed that he in fact never set foot inside the institution, a statement that has since been proven to be one of his great exaggerations.

<sup>28</sup> The village of Horta de Sant Joan has also been referred to as Horta d'Ebre and Horta de Ebro. At the time Picasso first visited in 1897, it was called Horta *tout court*, but Manuel Pallares gave it the title Horta d'Ebre in order to distinguish it from another Horta in the Barcelona district. The current name, Horta de Sant Joan was not put into place until 1910. (Palau i Fabre, *Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*, 145)

<sup>29</sup> Cabanne, *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times*, 42.

<sup>30</sup> Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 102.

renderings of this particular scene, including one entitled “Procession to the Monastery of San Salvador” (Fig. 8). This small painting was completed in a much looser style than



Figure 8: Pablo Picasso, “Procession to the Monastery of San Salvador,” 1899.  
Collection of heirs of the artist.  
(*Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981)

was characteristic of his earlier work, and the scene appeared less three-dimensional and more abstractly flattened by heavy outlines. The meticulous attention to detail that was seen in paintings like “First Communion” (Fig. 7) had disappeared, replaced by the mere suggestion of specific features. Finally, the tone of his imagery had also evolved into one that was more whimsical and lively, reflecting his newfound freedom as an independent artist.

Pallares and Picasso spent a lengthy summer of painting and sketching in the wilderness before returning to Horta, where they remained for the next six months, until February 1899. In the village, they were expected to spend their time working, earning their keep through peasant chores.<sup>31</sup> Picasso appears to have greatly enjoyed this experience because it allowed him the opportunity to perfect his Catalan, an essential element of his new identity. In the years that followed, Picasso insisted that this period served great significance to his later work; however this interval in his career is often overlooked by scholars because very few paintings survived the harsh weather conditions and rugged terrain of the artists' expeditions.<sup>32</sup> What can be determined from the works that remain is that Picasso—through the careful observation of his surrounding landscapes, architecture, and villagers—had developed an intimate relationship with the culture of Catalonia. This would later emerge in a quasi-nostalgic guise to play an integral role in his appropriation of medieval forms.

In his 1965 biography of Picasso, Pierre Daix mentioned that during the Horta expedition the artist began to “capture and put to use the lessons of Catalan Romanesque art.”<sup>33</sup> Daix questioned whether Picasso, during one of his strenuous summer outings in the hills, saw the Romanesque frescoes of Taull, Ripoll, and Montbui that were all near the village of Horta de Sant Joan. I shall have opportunity to discuss my hypothesis of these connections in the following chapter. Although there remains no conclusive evidence on this matter, Daix stated that “Picasso’s work was to be unmistakably influenced by [Catalan Romanesque art]” and that such appropriation stood as “a measure of his independence

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Daix, *Picasso*, 25.

and curiosity.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, later in his life, Picasso even proclaimed: “All that I know, I learned in Pallares’ village.”<sup>35</sup>

### **“The End of the Road”**

After returning home to Barcelona in the spring of 1899, Picasso demonstrated his recently discovered independence and curiosity as he began to experiment with a variety of different artistic styles. Even though he had been absent from Madrid for almost an entire year, he continued to gravitate toward the styles of the Spanish masters of the Prado. He showed a heightened affinity for El Greco, who had fallen out of favor at this time. As Penrose explained, a love for the unpopular would become a common theme in Picasso’s life.<sup>36</sup> He stated: “The styles that attracted him, whether they belonged to the past or the present, were those which were unknown or despised in academic circles.”<sup>37</sup> Upon a thorough examination of Picasso’s sketches, drawings, and paintings from 1899, one can deduce that El Greco heavily influenced him during this period in his life. Men with elongated faces, pointed features, and long facial hair appeared throughout the course of the year. The young artist executed a series of studies for one of his most famous El Greco-inspired works, entitled “The End of the Road (The Final Walk and Redemption)” (Figs. 9 & 10). The final version, a watercolor and chalk on paper, displayed selective characteristics of El Greco’s Gothic inspired imagery, and it featured a long line of hunched, medieval-style

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Jaime Sabartes, *Picasso: an Intimate Portrait* (1949): 43, quoted in Marilyn McCully, *Picasso: The Early Years, 1892-1906*, (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1997), 28.

<sup>36</sup> This appropriation of art that falls outside of academic and bourgeois taste perhaps shows the beginning stages of Picasso’s movement toward the avant-garde, a topic that will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>37</sup> Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work*, 58.



Figures 9 & 10: Pablo Picasso, studies for “The End of the Road,” 1898 or 1899.

Museu Picasso, Barcelona, Spain.

(The Picasso Project, *Youth in Spain II - 1897 - 1900, Barcelona, Madrid, Horta de Sant Joan and Málaga*. San Francisco: Wofsy Fine Arts, 2008)

cloaked figures, who were walking to meet their pitiable fate at the end of an abstracted road (Fig.11). The composition was void of depth and perspective, due to the appearance of large blocks of solid color and a lack of shadow—features that were also a standard characteristic of medieval art. Picasso was most likely drawn to these elements in El Greco’s work because they provided possibilities for abstraction and expression that could not be made possible through classically-oriented academic art.





Figure 11: Pablo Picasso, "The End of the Road (The Final Walk and Redemption)," 1898 or 1899. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Collection, New York.  
*(Pablo Picasso: Watercolors and Gouaches. London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1984)*

The completed painting is chronologically the earliest of Picasso's works to have received some scholarly acknowledgement of its medieval style, albeit of a second-hand nature. In this particular case, scholars that make the association also recognize medieval

characteristics in the work of El Greco, which, of course, can be attributed to the Post-Byzantine artistic context of his birth in sixteenth-century Crete. Gothicism was prevalent in the El Greco paintings that Picasso examined in the Prado, such as “The Adoration of the Shepherds” (Fig. 12) from 1605, and because the young artist appropriated from El Greco rather indiscriminately, medieval aspects were transferred into works like “The End of the



Figure 12: El Greco, “The Adoration of the Shepherds,” 1605.  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain.  
(<http://www.museodelprado.es/en>)

Road.” El Greco’s dark, mysterious tones and multi-leveled composition were apparent in Picasso’s painting, and his dramatic emphasis on shadowy drapery folds would subsequently appear over the course of the following years. Even though “The End of the



Road” is commonly dated to 1899, John Richardson argued that the watercolor and chalk sketch for this painting was actually completed in 1898, most likely after Picasso’s serious bout with scarlet fever in the early summer.<sup>38</sup> This theory actually places the work during the Horta de Sant Joan excursion, and he claims that other known drawings from summer 1898 further support this date because they are executed in a similar style. Richardson stated that these works share what can be described as a “‘Gothic tendency’, one that recurs in many of the mournful and mannered studies of 1898.<sup>39</sup> This tendency which also reflects the influence of El Greco re-emerges a few years later in the etiolated and wraith-like figures of the Blue Period.”<sup>40</sup> Richardson further argued that Picasso and his Catalan contemporaries, both artistic and literary, were familiar with current intellectual developments from all parts of Europe, but “what these young Catalans yearned for above all was the Gothic.” In the case of “The End of the Road,” this justifies and partially explains, in the eyes of Richardson, Picasso’s inclusion of elongated Gothic style figures that could possibly have been derived from the flattened imagery of Catalan medieval art. Regardless of whether he actively sought out medieval references for this specific work or relied on second-hand appropriation through his interest in El Greco, the young artist soon began showing signs that he was becoming increasingly more aware of the advantages of drawing inspiration from his medieval surroundings.

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<sup>38</sup> John Richardson, *Pablo Picasso: Watercolors and Gouaches* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1984), 16.

<sup>39</sup> In her MA thesis, “Allegories of Picasso’s Blue Period,” Sung-Ja Kim of Pennsylvania State University stylistically related Picasso’s 1899 painting “The End of the Road” to the Gothic style, while also implying that El Greco was medievally oriented.

<sup>40</sup> Richardson, *Pablo Picasso: Watercolors and Gouaches*, 16.

## **Picasso and “Proto-Fauvism”:**

Over the course of the following year, Picasso continued his appropriation of earlier art forms, and his sources became more visibly varied as his exposure to different types of art continued to increase. Traces of the medieval style appeared again in 1901, but this time, instead of being confined to the centuries-old tradition of El Greco, they were inspired by more contemporary artistic movements. Picasso was especially interested in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism during this period, which was most likely a direct result of the art he saw during his first trip to Paris in October 1900.

While visiting the city, Picasso embarked on a comprehensive tour of modern French art, including the Musée du Luxembourg, which exhibited a large bequest of Impressionist paintings.<sup>41</sup> There, his eyes were opened to an entirely new artistic experience as he witnessed the work of Renoir, Manet, and other revolutionists, whose work undoubtedly heavily influenced his own over the course of the following year. In 1901, Pere Mañach, a Catalan native who was working as a Parisian dealer of modern Spanish painting, offered Picasso a joint exhibition with another Spanish artist that was scheduled to open in Paris in late June.<sup>42</sup> Picasso frantically rushed to produce a large collection of work during the intervening months. Because he so desperately needed to sell, the young artist chose to emulate styles that were already popular in Paris at the time; however, he endowed them with a distinctively Spanish flavor.<sup>43</sup> Many of the resulting paintings exhibited resemblance to those of the up-and-coming Fauvist movement, most of

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Cowling, *Picasso: Style and Meaning* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2002), 70.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-75.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-80.

whose forbearers were the Impressionists that Picasso so greatly admired.<sup>44</sup> Picasso utilized the artists' unrestricted opportunities for innovation, expression, simplification and abstraction—all of which were qualities that appealed to his developing personal style.

Whether or not it occurred to Picasso at this time, scholars have since recognized a preponderance of medieval elements in Fauvism. In his book *Romanesque Art*, Andreas Petzold suggested that, during the twentieth century, this period of medieval art became better understood and appreciated for its aesthetic qualities through Fauvism and other subsequent movements.<sup>45</sup> He stated:

The Fauves radically challenged the academic tradition of illusionistic painting, dominated by the convention of one-point perspective, which went back to fifteenth-century Tuscany. Their work was characterized by formal dislocations in the use of space and the rendering of areas of light and shade by means of pure, highly saturated color. There are obvious parallels between these aims and the use of color and form in Romanesque art.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, André Derain, one of the leaders of the Fauvist movement, closely emulated elements of the French Romanesque style, especially the flattened human form and ornamental linear patterns found in the exaggerated drapes and folds of clothing. In his 1906 painting entitled “Dance” (Fig. 13) Derain directly appropriated the unnatural position of Eve, the central figure of the work, from the sculpted form of the prophet Isaiah (Fig. 14), located at Souillac church in southwest France.<sup>47</sup> Even though “Dance” was executed five years after Picasso’s “proto-Fauvist” phase, earlier, less direct examples were

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<sup>44</sup> A number of Modern artists in Europe worked in the Fauvist style between 1900 and 1910, but Fauvism as a movement lasted for only three years (1905-1907).

<sup>45</sup> Andreas Petzold, “The Legacy of the Romanesque,” *Romanesque Art*. (New York: Abrams, 1995), 161.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

standard in the years prior to his own appropriation. Once again, it was possible that Picasso could have relied on second hand appropriation through the work of artists such as Gauguin, whose “primitive” style paintings and religious subject matter referenced medieval imagery.



Figure 13: André Derain, “Dance,” 1906.  
Private Collection, Switzerland.  
(<http://library.artstor.org>)

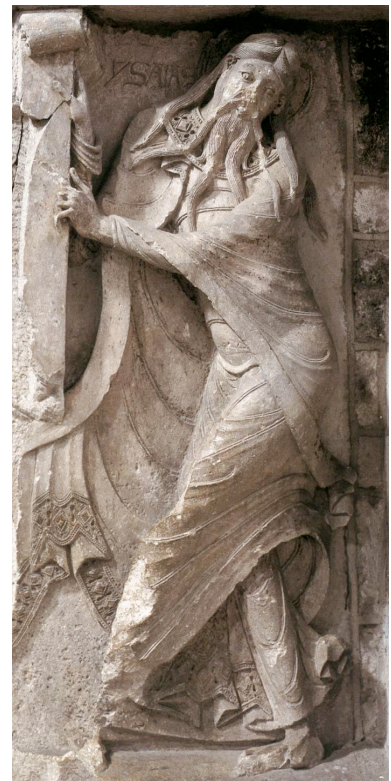


Figure 14: “Isaiah,” (c. 1135).  
St. Marie Church, Souillac, France.  
(<http://www.wga.hu>)

Picasso had unlimited access to Gauguin’s work during 1901 through the resources of their mutual dealer, and he admitted to borrowing from the artist’s colorfully abstract style.<sup>48</sup> In her book *Picasso: Style and Meaning*, Elizabeth Cowling noted the similarities between Picasso’s work and Gauguin’s “The Vision after the Sermon” (Fig. 15) from 1888. She characterized this work as both “archaic” and “primitive” in regards to both its abstract

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<sup>48</sup> Cowling, *Picasso: Style and Meaning*, 81.

style and religiosity, and mentioned that both of these qualities inspired interest on the part of Picasso.<sup>49</sup> I see Picasso's "Proto-Fauvist" paintings, which I shall discuss momentarily, as being drastically simplified, partially appropriated versions of this Gauguin example; however, it now seems likely that the rapidly maturing artist would not only have been aware of any medieval characteristics in Gauguin's work, but he would have also deliberately chosen to incorporate medieval elements from his own Catalan oeuvre.



Figure 15: Paul Gauguin, "The Vision after the Sermon," 1888.  
National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.  
(<http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection>)

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 99.



In many ways, Picasso's paintings from 1901 paralleled those of the early Fauvists as he began simultaneously venturing into abstraction through his own appropriation of Spanish medieval imagery. I associate the "Proto-Fauvist" style paintings of this period most closely with the illustrations of medieval Spanish manuscripts, specifically the Codex Vigilanus Albeldensis from the tenth century (Fig. 16).<sup>50</sup> Richardson noted that Picasso was



Figure 16: "The People of Toledo," Codex Vigilanus Albeldensis, 976.  
Collection of El Escorial, Spain.  
(<http://www.vallenajerilla.com/albeldense/toledo.htm>)

familiar with such illuminated manuscripts because they were considered to be some of the earliest and most important treasures in the history of Catalan art; however, it is unknown as to whether he saw this specific example.<sup>51</sup> In the case of my argument, I intend only to use the Codex Vigilanus Albeldensis as a possible model for explaining the correlation I see between Picasso's "Proto-Fauvist" style paintings and medieval imagery.

Characteristic elements of medieval appropriation akin to Fauvism first appeared in Picasso's work soon after the turn of the century in an eerie portrait entitled "Woman with

<sup>50</sup> Three monks at the Riojan Monastery of San Martin de Albelda worked to compile this manuscript. It was completed in 976 and named after Vigilia, its illustrator. The original manuscript is currently housed in the library of El Escorial, the historical royal residence of the King of Spain, located 45 km northwest of Madrid.

<sup>51</sup> Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 246.

Chignon" from 1901 (Fig. 17). Fittingly, the painting's lone subject was rendered with only minimal detail through heavy outlines and unnaturally bright, highly saturated colors—her yellow-green skin sharply contrasted with the dark background of the composition. The same woman was repeated again through a brighter palette in "The Absinthe Drinker" (Fig. 18). In both paintings, the slender dark haired subject was distinctly characterized by her chignon, the knot of hair arranged at the crown of her head.

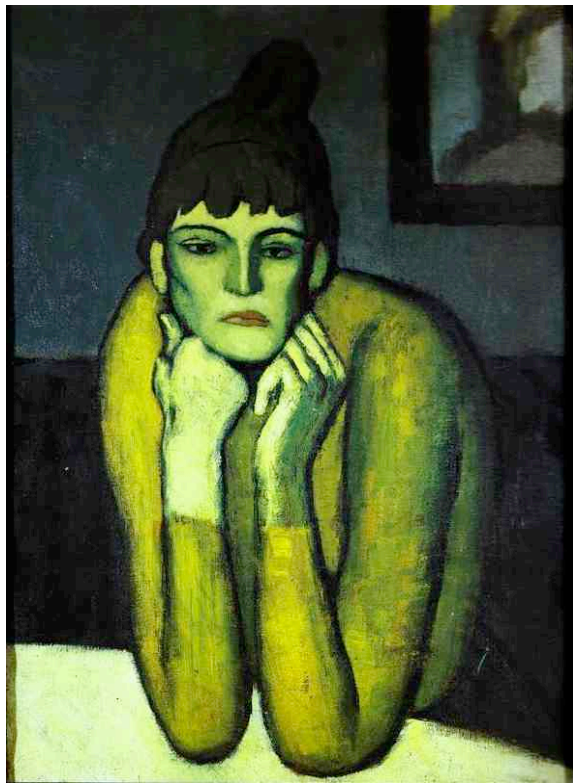


Figure 17: Pablo Picasso,  
"Woman with Chignon," 1901.  
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.  
(<http://www.abcgallery.com>)

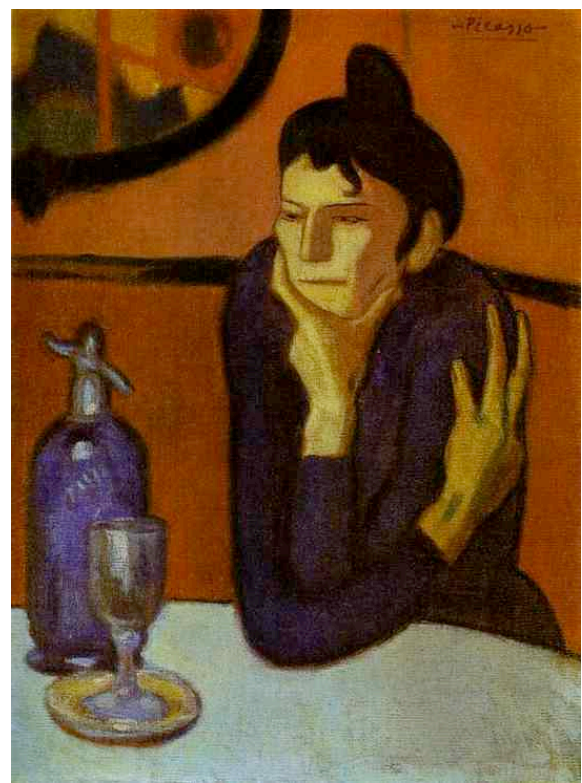


Figure 18: Pablo Picasso,  
"The Absinthe Drinker," 1901.  
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia.  
(<http://www.abcgallery.com>)

Similar to the illustration of the scribes (Fig. 19) in the Codex Vigilanus Albeldensis, Picasso's paintings created form and background through the use of heavy outline and large blocks of solid color; even though the modern portraits have an actual bar or café



Figure 19: "The Scribes: Serracino, Vigila, and García," Codex Vigilanus Albeldensis, 976. Collection of El Escorial, Spain.  
(<http://www.vallenajerilla.com/albeldense/escribas.htm>)

type setting, the artist's simplification of stylistic elements radically negates the sense of space in a manner comparable to the way that the groundless abyss surrounding the scribes flattens the manuscript illustration. Picasso also implemented a geometrical construction of the human form by the way he used strange proportions and unnaturally elongated features, which was similar to the mannered figures in the manuscript. In both of Picasso's portraits, the woman's face is awkwardly square in shape, accentuated by narrow eyes and lips that form a thin straight line beneath a triangular nose. This emphasis on geometry is more obviously exaggerated in "The Absinthe Drinker," along with abnormally long, uncomfortably arranged fingers that closely mimicked those of the figures in "Noah and His Children" (Fig. 20) from the Codex Vigilanus Albeldensis; however, in "Woman with Chignon," Picasso instead elongated the torso of the subject, which made her body more massive and bulky in comparison to her small, slender face.





Figure 20: "Noah and His Children," Codex Vigilanus Albeldensis, 976.  
Collection of El Escorial, Spain.  
(<http://www.vallenajerilla.com/albeldense/noehijos.htm>)

To my knowledge, the medieval elements of Picasso's "Proto-Fauvist" paintings have never before been discussed in scholarly discourse, but it appears reasonable to deduce that Picasso, like the Fauvists, strove for simplification and abstraction in both his figures and backgrounds. To this end, medieval art—like that of the Codex Vigilanus Albeldensis—could have provided an obvious source of inspiration. Whether any similarity to medieval art was a conscious response to a specific object or the result of the subconscious recollection of previous childhood images must remain an open question at this stage. Little—short of new archival evidence—could firmly establish a particular medieval work (or body of works) as a model for Picasso's artistic innovations. Instead, I suggest that to achieve his artistic goals in these works from 1901, Picasso selectively incorporated the

lessons of abstraction and composition so clearly present in medieval sources, perhaps inspired by the Fauvists or by his studies of El Greco. Nonetheless, from this point forward, it will be increasingly obvious that the young artist would become overtly aware of his adopted medieval Catalan heritage.

### **Picasso in the World of Els Quatre Gats:**

This fauvist stage of early 1901 represented an important turning point in Picasso's early career because it exemplified his completed transition toward the avant-garde. According to the modernist scholar Tyrus Miller, the European avant-garde that emerged at this time was based upon a distinct domain of new, experimental ideas concerning social practices and values, especially in the arts.<sup>52</sup> The general population typically misunderstood avant-garde art because its subject matter often corresponded to little-known intellectual theories. This was not the art of the bourgeoisie or of the academy, but instead it was considered to be the art of revolutionists. The stylistic shift that would follow in the early stages of Picasso's Blue Period (1910-1904) appeared to be the direct result of both his continued rejection of the staunchly conservative practices of traditional academic painters and his adoption of these avant-garde ideals.

Picasso and his associates in both Barcelona and Paris were members of the most cutting edge avant-garde circles of their time. By 1900, he was already fully immersed in the avant-garde lifestyle and the world of Els Quatre Gats—or The Four Cats—a Barcelona café and art gallery that was housed within a medieval revival building located in the heart of the city's Gothic Quarter (Figs. 21-23). The café, whose doors only remained open from

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<sup>52</sup> Tyrus Miller, "Avant-Garde and Theory: A Misunderstood Relation." *Poetics Today* 20, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 556.



Figure 21: Entrance to Els Quatre Gats, Barcelona, Spain.  
(<http://www.4gats.com/>)



Figure 22: interior of Els Quatre Gats, Barcelona, Spain, 1899.  
(*Els Quatre Gats : Art in Barcelona around 1900.*  
Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978)





Figure 23: modern interior of El Quatre Gats, Barcelona, Spain.  
(<http://www.4gats.com/>)

1897 to 1903, was known for its promotion of avant-garde art and ideas. Artists and artisans mingled harmoniously, and together they promoted the latest Parisian styles alongside ancient Catalan crafts and long forgotten artists such as El Greco.<sup>53</sup> In her book *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona*, Temma Kaplan described the café's impact on the young artist:

Just as one who arrives in the middle of a performance may or may not understand the play, the young Picasso, who came to Barcelona in 1895, may or may not have understood that he was witnessing a community in the making... Not just a bastion of lost arts, the Four Cats functioned as a clearinghouse where budding artists like Picasso learned about the artistic trends of the time in a community free of snobbism about artistic hierarchies. Breaking with Western traditions in which the aristocracy, the high clergy, and the wealthy determined value in the arts and decoration, Barcelona's new artistic movement was based on the union of bohemians and artisans and on their recognition both of the merits of past artistic styles and of crafts and entertainments popular among common people but never before considered art.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona*, 37-38.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

Picasso embraced the atmosphere and community of The Four Cats, and it was there that he was granted his first exhibition in 1900. Through his café connections, he became aware of other individuals in Barcelona who found inspiration in the city's rich historic past. These individuals were modernists—artists, architects, preservationists and scholars—who participated in Catalonia's nationalist cultural heritage movement. This period in Barcelona's history was marked by preservation and restoration that occurred concurrently with revival efforts, all of which shared a common goal: strengthening regional morale through ties to the medieval origins of Catalonia.<sup>55</sup>

Picasso's lifestyle and art became intimately connected with both the historical events that permeated his daily activities and his immediate circle of Four Cats associates who engaged him with the exchange of artistic ideas. He was vividly aware of the medieval revival that was in vogue in Barcelona and he interacted with not only the participating avant-garde artists and architects, but preservationists as well. For Picasso and his

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<sup>55</sup> Between the years 1888 and 1939, the citizens of Barcelona struggled to reclaim their Catalan heritage, a tradition that uniquely defined the region from the rest of Spain. Catalonia had autonomously governed itself beginning in the thirteenth century and citizens prided themselves on having their own ruler, parliament, and democratic legal system (Kaplan 6). During the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Catalans even expanded into the Mediterranean by conquering areas in modern day Italy and Greece (Zervos 6-7). However, the region began to lose its power after the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile in 1469. Catalonia was ruled from Madrid under the guise of the Spanish monarchy and subsequently as part of the First Federal Republic and a constitutional monarchy. During these drastic shifts in power, "the Spanish government ruled autocratically and relatively successfully over a highly centralized state in which cities like Barcelona lacked any decision-making rights over collecting taxes, hiring police, organizing museums, or building schools (Kaplan 6)." The Catalan peoples revolted unsuccessfully against this rule and martial law was imposed. The once independent region was eventually reduced to a captive nation with little semblance of common law. The use of Catalan language was forbidden in official documents because it was considered "uneducated," and Castilian was imposed as the language of the intellectual (Kaplan 15-16). At the turn of the century, revival activities were enacted as an attempt to "wipe the Bourbon stain from the face of Barcelona (Kaplan 16)."

contemporaries, there evolved the paradox of a “retrospective avant-garde”—those who looked to the past in order to move forward into the future.

### **A "Retrospective Avant-Garde":**

By the turn of the century, medieval revival efforts could be seen throughout the city of Barcelona. Avant-garde architects such as Antoni Gaudí, Josep Puig i Cadafalch, and Lluís Doménech i Montaner helped to popularize the revival movement. They sought inspiration from the recently rediscovered Catalan medieval style, further promoting its popularity by implementing Gothic ideas into their ultra-modern designs. Specifically, Montaner and Cadafalch had a great appreciation for the rich Catalan heritage of the Vall de Boi, a sparsely populated region of the northern Pyrenees, and after their visits between 1904 and 1907, this appreciation would manifest itself in their individual Barcelona building projects.<sup>56</sup> Their cutting-edge designs would help to popularize the cultural revival movement by modernizing the medieval ideas they adopted from the region’s churches, ultimately transforming them into art and architecture that was more accessible to twentieth-century Catalans.

Altogether, these three architects created more than a dozen Modernist edifices in Barcelona that ranged from chic private homes to impressive public spaces. Between 1898 and 1906, they each accepted building or renovation projects along the Passeig de Gràcia in the city’s modern Eixample district. The competition that ensued led the locals to label the corresponding section of the street the “Block of Discord.” The facades of three Modernisme mansions looked as if they were trying to outdo each other through their

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<sup>56</sup> Manuel Castiñeiras, Jordi Camps, and Joan Duran-Porta, *Romanesque art in the MNAC collections*, 21-22.

creative use of texture, color, and materials, and their unique designs each incorporated medieval elements in different ways. The first mansion, Casa Batlló (Fig. 24 & 25), renovated by Gaudí, featured an attic filled with floor-to-ceiling parabolic arches and a



Figure 24: Antoni Gaudí, exterior of Casa Batlló, Barcelona, Spain.  
(© Pere Vivas, Ricard Pla)



Figure 25: Antoni Gaudí, Casa Batlló, Barcelona, Spain.  
([http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3619/3373192603\\_dd00ef705a.jpg](http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3619/3373192603_dd00ef705a.jpg))



garlic-shaped turret that appears to have been modified from the façade of a medieval castle. Its neighbor, Casa Amatller (Figs. 26 & 27), designed by Cadafalch,



Figure 26: Josep Puig i Cadafalch, Casa Amatller, Barcelona, Spain.  
(<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/39/Casa-Amatller-detail.jpg>)



Figure 27: Josep Puig i Cadafalch, Casa Amatller, Barcelona, Spain.  
([http://1.bp.blogspot.com/\\_qraTkyDI6N8/St30cfUo9HI/AAAAAAAAAk0/2cm3f9jmLCA/s640/Casa+Amatller.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_qraTkyDI6N8/St30cfUo9HI/AAAAAAAAAk0/2cm3f9jmLCA/s640/Casa+Amatller.jpg))



incorporated a mixture of Moorish and Gothic inspired architecture, ironwork, and decoration into both its interior and exterior. Further down the street, Muntaner's Casa Lleó Morera boasted fanciful Neo-Gothic ornamentation and colorful stained glass windows (Figs. 28-30).<sup>57</sup>



Figure 28: Lluís Doménech i Muntaner, Casa Lleó Morera, Barcelona, Spain.  
(© Christophe Van Hulle)

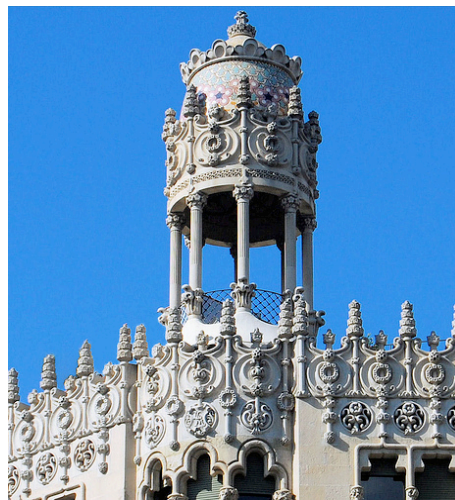


Figure 29: Lluís Doménech i Muntaner, Casa Lleó Morera, Barcelona, Spain.  
([http://farm1.static.flickr.com/182/472234939\\_09e060004b.jpg](http://farm1.static.flickr.com/182/472234939_09e060004b.jpg))

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<sup>57</sup> The information for this paragraph and the following two, unless otherwise noted, was collected in July 2009 through personal, on-site observation and whenever possible, through the aid of guided tours.



Figure 30: Lluís Doménech i Muntaner, Casa Lleó Morera, Barcelona, Spain.  
(© DK Images)

More publically oriented revival structures were also constructed by these “retrospective avant-garde” architects throughout the city of Barcelona at the turn of the century. Kaplan described this revolutionary trend, saying that the Modernisme architects and their colleagues “transformed the district [Barcelona’s Gothic Quarter] into a virtual museum of art nouveau architecture...The architects either reproduced natural forms, swirling their wrought-iron and stucco leaves, flowers, and mushrooms over doorways and windows, or chose historic designs from the backgrounds of medieval Catalan paintings.”<sup>58</sup> Kaplan did not list specific examples, but she did later specifically mention that Cadafalch actively sought inspiration from medieval Catalan art when drawing designs for new buildings.<sup>59</sup> It is likely that she could be referring to the manner in which the intricately intertwined vegetation in both interior and exterior ironwork décor of the Casa Amatller

<sup>58</sup> Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

(Fig. 31) referenced the scrolling floral borders that were typical of Catalan altar frontals, such as the twelfth-century example from Sant Martí d'Ix (Fig. 32). This unique medieval appropriation can also be witnessed in the decorative stuccowork of the upper



Figure 31: Josep Puig i Cadafalch, Casa Amatller, Barcelona, Spain.  
(<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Puig.i.Cadafalch.Casa.Amatller.Barcelona.Balco.I>  
PG)



Figure 32: Altar frontal from Sant Martí d'Ix, Spain, twelfth-century.  
Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain.  
(<http://www.mnac.es/index.jsp?lan=003>)



story windows at Cadafalch's Casa Martí (Fig. 34), where the Four Cats Café occupied the first floor. It is unknown whether Picasso, during his frequent visits to the local gathering



Figure 34: Joseph Puig i Cadafalch, Casa Martí, Barcelona, Spain.  
(*Els Quatre Gats : Art in Barcelona around 1900*.  
Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978)

spot, would have made connections between the window décor and medieval altar frontals; however, the artist would undoubtedly have understood the Gothic flavor of the architecture and the region's contemporary revival movement.

Perhaps the most imposing of all the public revival structures is Gaudí's massive, and still to this day unfinished, Sagrada Família, or Church of the Holy Family that was begun in 1883 (Fig. 35). The façade is overwhelmingly Gothic in form, from the repetition

of sharply pointed arches to the execution of multiple spires; however, his nineteenth-century design put a whimsically modern spin on Gothic architecture by manipulating its traditional appearance. Gaudí replaced crisp straight lines with organic curves that were inspired by nature, implementing the type of multi-faceted appropriation that would become common in Picasso's work.



Figure 35: Antoni Gaudí, Sagrada Família, Barcelona, Spain.  
(<http://derekgrasman.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/sagradafamilia00002482731jpg.jpeg>)

Even though the construction of the Sagrada Família was only minimally completed during the years Picasso lived and worked in Barcelona, similarities existed between Gaudí's designs and Picasso's medieval sources of inspiration. This poses an interesting parallel between Picasso and the "retrospective avant-garde" architects; it appears that both

parties would not only make use of the medieval style, but ultimately manipulate it in order to meet their needs, before incorporating it into their modern designs in innovative new ways.<sup>60</sup>

### **Barcelona's Preservation efforts:**

Preservation efforts also occurred simultaneously alongside revivalist construction during the nineteenth century, as citizens strove to protect their region's unique heritage. Medieval religious buildings and their corresponding decorative objects were explicitly acknowledged as symbols of Catalonia's cultural patrimony and thus elevated to new levels of importance within the community. Unlike Modernisme revivalist construction, this preservation was not exclusive to the avant-garde. The bourgeoisie, who were becoming increasingly aware of the importance of their medieval heritage, also participated through the restoration of structures such as Barcelona's cathedral. The original structure of the city's cathedral was built during the Gothic period with construction spanning the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. The façade was typically Catalan, that is more modest in style when compared to the ornate and elaborate exteriors found throughout much of Western Europe. The interior of the building was preserved during the nineteenth century and a Neo-Gothic façade was added that more closely reflected the international

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<sup>60</sup> The concept of medieval revival was further reinforced during Picasso's short time in the Spanish capital, even though this revival was not connected to the nationalistically based Catalan movement. The Cathedral of Almudena, adjacent to Madrid's Royal Palace, was built between 1883 and 1993 in a style that is essentially a contemporary mixture of elements from earlier periods. The interior is modern Neo-Gothic in both plan and ornament. The planning and construction of this cathedral had already progressed for almost two decades by the time Picasso moved to Madrid to study at the San Fernando Academy in the fall 1897. Even though he did not live to see its completion, he would obviously have been aware of its size and importance.



Gothic style (Fig. 36). This restoration was completed shortly before Picasso's arrival in Barcelona and it could not have gone unnoticed to the young artist.

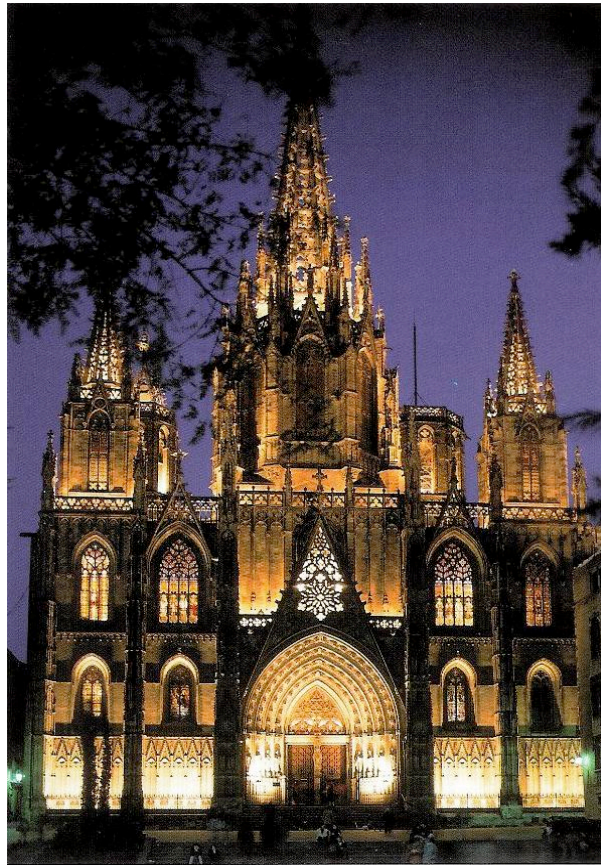


Figure 36: Cathedral of Barcelona, nineteenth-century Neo-Gothic façade.  
(©Postals Tretzevents)

A combined effort was also made between Catalan nationalists and Barcelona's modernist artists to preserve the artistic patrimony of rural churches throughout Catalonia. The medieval religious décor of these small buildings had been forgotten for centuries, but with the advent of the Catalan "return to roots" movement, they took on great new value as symbols of cultural heritage. Panel paintings, altar frontals, and sculptures were removed from remote locations in northern Catalonia and brought into the cities as museums were created to house these cultural treasures in both Barcelona and Vic. Long-forgotten

Romanesque murals were also reintroduced to the public during this period, after they were uncovered inside small parishes in the northern portion of the region. These narrative illustrations had once vividly decorated the apses of churches and interiors of monasteries, but their decor had been extensively modified during the intermittent centuries. Most cycles were found hidden beneath layers of whitewash and behind large altarpieces; however, at the turn of the twentieth century, these murals could once again be viewed within their original context after the removal of this more modern decoration.<sup>61</sup>

Collectively, ardent nationalists and prominent members of the “retrospective avant-garde” founded organizations that served to promote awareness of this artistic patrimony, and the value of defining the region’s identity through its medieval cultural heritage.<sup>62</sup> They arranged group excursions that introduced curious citizens to the artistic wealth of Catalonia, and created publications in the form of yearbooks and guides that publicized information on Romanesque art and monuments.<sup>63</sup> Picasso even became familiarized with images of the Romanesque murals and painted panels of rural Catalonia thanks to similar articles in journals such as *Hispania* and *La Ilustracio Llevantina*, which were made readily available during his visits to The Four Cats.<sup>64</sup> Barcelona’s “retrospective avant-garde” additionally aided in popularizing the movement through both the documentation and promotion of their rediscovered artistic patrimony. Lluís Domènech i Montaner researched Romanesque painting in Catalonia, and personally traveled to many sites in order to describe, photograph, and sketch—first hand—the recently uncovered

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<sup>61</sup> Castiñeiras, Camps, and Duran-Porta, *Romanesque art in the MNAC collections*, 14.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Leighten, Patricia. *Re-ordering the Universe : Picasso and anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 79.



murals. He organized his findings into a book entitled *Historia de l'art romanic a Catalunya*, but sadly, this work was never published.<sup>65</sup> Montaner's rival Josep Puig i Cadafalch was also instrumental in efforts to protect Romanesque murals. Upon hearing that foreign art dealers had purchased a series of apse paintings from the church of Santa Maria de Mur in 1919, he attempted to prevent their export by asking the government to declare the church a historical and artistic monument. Even though this effort was unsuccessful, it greatly raised the public's awareness concerning the preservation and retention of ten other painting cycles from the region.<sup>66</sup>

In the decades following their discovery, a large number of these remotely located murals were removed from their original locations and transported to Barcelona, where they became emblematic images of Catalan nationalism.<sup>67</sup> Today, the greatest cycles of Romanesque paintings from the Pyrenees region are prominently displayed in the extensive galleries of the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (commonly referred to as MNAC). This impressive collection, now located inside Barcelona's Palau Nacional de Montjuïc, displays the combined contents of several older Barcelona museums, including the Museu d'Art i Arqueologia in the Parc de la Ciutadella. Catalonia's most famous Romanesque fresco, the 'Pantocrator' of San Clement de Taüll (Fig. 37), was relocated to the Parc de la Ciutadella over a four-year span between 1919 and 1923.<sup>68</sup> According to the MNAC's guidebook to its permanent collection, this well-preserved image of Christ immediately "became the masterpiece of Catalan Romanesque art and, thanks to the admiration of avant-garde artists like Picabia, Picasso, Breton and Tapies, an undisputed

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<sup>65</sup> Castiñeiras, Camps, and Duran-Porta, *Romanesque art in the MNAC collections*, 21.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



Figure 37: Apse fresco of San Clement de Taüll, early twelfth-century.

Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain.

([http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&tl=en&u=http%3A%2F%2Fes.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FIglesia de San Clemente de Ta%25C3%25BCll](http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&tl=en&u=http%3A%2F%2Fes.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FIglesia+de+San+Clemente+de+Ta%C3%B9ll))

icon of universal art.”<sup>69</sup>

The museum also recognizes that Picasso, during the first decade of the twentieth century, “had already shown clear signs of his interest in Romanesque figurative art.”<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, while living in Barcelona, he developed a close friendship with Joaquim Folch i

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 208.

Torres, who was the first director of the Museu d'Art i Arqueologia and the curator of its initial instillation of Romanesque murals. Torres apparently shared Picasso's interest in the connection between Catalan medieval art and contemporary figurative compositions, and when the murals moved from the Museu d'Art i Arqueologia to their current residence at the Palau Nacional in 1934, Torres gave the artist a personal tour.<sup>71</sup> During his visit, museum officials said: "The great artist acknowledged the undeniable debt that avant-garde art owed to the Romanesque tradition, which was to be seen as a great lesson for contemporary artists."<sup>72</sup> An article in Barcelona's newspaper *La Publicitat* also made similar remarks:

'As he went from one room to another, Picasso, before those incomparable fragments of early Catalan art, admired their power, intensity and skill; the sureness of vision and execution, the aplomb and the conviction with which the hand of the ignorant artist had expressed on those walls the ideas and the feelings that filled his spirit, and he agreed unhesitatingly that our Romanesque Museum would be unique in the world, an essential document for those wanting to understand the origins of Western art, an invaluable lesson for the moderns.'<sup>73</sup>

Even though we are uncertain as to whether Picasso saw these murals before they were moved to Barcelona, the influence of these examples on his later work cannot be denied. It is my belief that the lessons of medieval art began to exert their power over the young artist as early as the turn of the century, when Picasso was first beginning to break away from the academic regimen during the months he spent in Madrid and Horta de Sant Joan. Even though the medieval figurative style was then a mere subconscious reflection of his immediate surroundings, it soon began to visibly manifest itself in the form of second-hand

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

appropriation through the work of El Greco, and was further strengthened during the “Proto-Fauvist” period thanks to his associates at the Four Cats Cafe.

Picasso’s subsequent immersion into the world of the Barcelona avant-garde had a major impact on the young artist and his work. As cultural heritage revival and preservation efforts dramatically increased in the first decade of the twentieth century, so did his awareness of Catalan national identity, which rooted itself in the medieval history that marked its former independence and power. Picasso became deeply inculcated in the retrospective brand of avant-gardism being espoused by the élite Barcelonan society. By 1901, as his palette began fading into monochromatic shades of blue, he reached a major turning point in his early career. It is here that we encounter Picasso's first explicit appropriation from medieval art.

## **Chapter Three: The Blue Period and a "Medieval" Brand of Nationalism**

### **Introduction:**

Picasso's turn-of-the-century indoctrination into both the experimentation of the European avant-garde and the retrospective tendencies of his associates at Barcelona's Four Cats Café led to significant changes in his painting, and by mid-1901, the young artist had entered into the early stages of his first definitively unique body of work. The resulting Blue Period was also Picasso's first key moment of impact with medieval art. More direct and obvious references to medieval style began appearing in his work, and they intensified throughout the following three years, until the advent of the Rose Period in 1904. Even though a significant number of the Blue Period paintings were executed during visits to Paris, their subject matter and overall appearance were obviously inspired by Picasso's beloved Catalonia. Many elements of the artist's composition, perspective, palette, and figural renderings can be formally compared to well-known examples of medieval Catalan sculptures, altar frontals, and frescoes. In this chapter, I will not only make these formal comparisons, but I will also provide a societal background for the period and explain why, more generally, the citizens of Barcelona experienced a heightened appreciation for medieval art during the years that Picasso lived and worked in the city. I will also continue my previous discussion of medieval sources of inspiration, in light of Picasso's first instance

of direct appropriation from medieval art—a major turning point that took place following his viewing of Barcelona’s Ancient Art Exhibition of 1902.<sup>74</sup>

For the purpose of this thesis, Picasso’s painting of “The Two Sisters” serves as the quintessential medieval-style painting of the Blue Period. Here, two heavily cloaked



Figure 38: Pablo Picasso, “The Two Sisters,” 1902.  
The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.  
(<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/>)

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<sup>74</sup> This exhibition did not actually focus on what is typically categorized as “Ancient Art” in art historical terms, but instead, showcased all types of Catalan art from religious panels of the Romanesque period through the paintings of El Greco and Zurbarán from the seventeenth century.

women are depicted through heavy outlines in an abstractly flattened, minimalistic composition, and the painting's monochromatic, dark blue palette reflected the destitute existence of Barcelona's working classes. The appearances of this painting and those of Picasso's other Blue Period examples, differ significantly from the brighter, more upbeat tones of his "Proto-Cubist" style. The three major shifts that occurred between these phases of Picasso's career—in style, palette, and subject matter—are therefore all clearly demonstrated within the confines of this singular image, and these elements can be easily connected to numerous examples of Catalan medieval art.

Soon after the onset of this new period, Picasso moved into a much more obvious medieval style that was reflected not only in anatomical features, but also in the old-fashioned style of the figure's clothing and the composition of the imagery. In the case of "The Two Sisters," the solemn female figures are both cloaked from head to foot in heavy mediievally-inspired robes; however, the folds and lines created by the draping fabric are much more naturalistic than the schematic patterns found in medieval religious art. The stiffly rendered blue mantle of the San Clement de Tahüll 'Pantocrator' (Fig. 37) does offer some similarities to Picasso's stylization in both color and design, as the dark lines in the women's sleeves and skirts exhibit the same sweeping movements. The young artist also continued to incorporate the elongated limbs, heavy outlines, and geometrical features that were prevalent in his "Proto-Fauvist-style" portraits (Figs. 17 & 18), but he pushed medieval flatness as he broke almost entirely with perspective and spatial depth. This absence of depth is especially prevalent in "The Two Sisters" at the point where the heads of the women meet; it is difficult to determine if they are meant to be leaning on each other, or if the head of the woman on the right is supposed to be crossing in front of the woman to

the left. The only convincing areas of distance and space included in the painting are supplied by the darkened doorway at the far left of the composition and the hazy shadow near the bottom that denotes the separation of the wall from the floor.

"The Two Sisters" also displays the more radical changes that occurred to Picasso's palette during the Blue Period. The bright, highly saturated colors of his Fauvist style paintings of 1901 disappeared, and, as its name suggests, they were replaced by dark, monochromatic shades of blue and blue-green that were only slightly warmed by occasional dabs of yellow or sometimes red. In "The Two Sisters," almost everything from the darkest shadows to the brightest highlights was represented in various shades and tones of blue, a palette that is reminiscent of the interior of stained-glass gothic cathedrals. The only other color that appeared in the painting was the greenish-yellow of the women's skin, which could be glimpsed on their bare feet sticking out from under their long robes or peeking out from beneath their head coverings.

Finally, Picasso's scope of subject matter narrowed drastically and he began to consistently repeat compositions that focused on impoverished and emaciated figures, many of which suffered physical disabilities such as blindness. This third major shift corresponded cohesively with his paintings' overwhelmingly blue atmosphere, and together, they set a somber, almost depressing tone throughout the entirety of the period. In a July 13, 1902 letter from Barcelona to his friend and colleague Max Jacob, Picasso described a sketch for "The Two Sisters" as the meeting of a St. Lazare whore and a nun.<sup>75</sup> He witnessed this scene while sketching prostitutes outside of the Paris hospital during the

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<sup>75</sup> Marilyn McCully, ed. *A Picasso Anthology, Documents, Criticism, Reminiscences*. (London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1981), 38.



summer of 1902.<sup>76</sup> Even though the initial inspiration for this work was derived from his experiences in the French capital, Picasso successfully transposed the grave imagery into a key work inspired by the Catalan medieval style. This can be witnessed in the women's triangularly pointed feet, large almond-shaped eyes, and dark, thickly arched eyebrows—key elements of the region's unique tradition that were exemplified throughout all artistic mediums, from scenes on painted altar frontals, like those from Solsona (Fig. 39), to carved wooden crucifixions, such as the example currently preserved at the Vic Museum (Fig. 40). Additionally, Picasso's subject matter and composition strongly referenced Catalan



Figure 39: “The Visitation,” 13<sup>th</sup> century.  
Detail from the altar frontal of Solsona.  
Museu Episcopal de Vic, Spain.  
(*Catalan art from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries*. London: W. Heinemann, 1937)

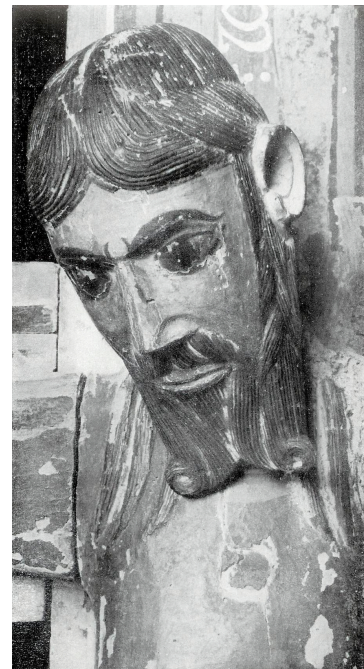


Figure 40: Wooden Crucifixion,  
(date unknown).  
Museu Episcopal de Vic, Spain.

<sup>76</sup> In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, St. Lazare was a prison for Parisian women—mainly prostitutes—that also contained a hospital wing and a chapel. Nuns who were attempting to protect the city from disease and sin administered the services of the establishment. Conditions there were harsh and it was often hard to differentiate malnourished prisoners from patients receiving medical services.

examples of medieval “Visitation” scenes, which portray a meeting and embrace between the Virgin Mary and her sister Elizabeth. Because it appears to have been directly appropriated, scholars most commonly recall “The Two Sisters” when identifying medieval sources in Picasso’s early career—this topic, its possible sources, and related scholarship will be analyzed in detail later in this chapter.

### **Picasso’s purpose: Why did he choose this particular style, palette, and subject matter?**

This discussion of “The Two Sisters” poses a significant question about Picasso’s purpose during the Blue Period—why did he choose to incorporate this particular style, palette, and subject matter in his painting for an interval of almost three years? I will explain Picasso’s motivation, and how his artistic decision-making clearly reflected his nationalistic tendencies. This was strongly reinforced by the Catalan cultural heritage revival, which was prevalent in Barcelona during the advent of the Blue Period. The varied components of this movement collectively saturated numerous aspects of daily life in Barcelona and Picasso’s observant nature could not have possibly overlooked such obvious displays of both patriotism and medievalism. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Barcelona proudly embraced its medieval origins, and its sentiments were made visibly apparent through the work of the retrospective avant-garde. The majority of their preservation and revival efforts were nationalistic, as they sought to reclaim Catalonia’s unique identity through the popularization of medieval art and architecture. The final compelling component of this revival directly involves the Barcelona bourgeoisie and the cultural events that defined life in the city during that era. I turn now to the parades, festivals, exhibitions and public performances that promoted both this regional patriotism

and a medieval revival, which in turn, significantly influenced the style and subject matter of Picasso's Blue Period paintings.

### **Cultural Events in Barcelona:**

Barcelona's various parades and festivals served a vital role in redefining and unifying the identity of the entire region, as they blatantly displayed patriotism and pride throughout popular public forums. Their annual repetition was considered ritualistic in the eyes of citizens because many of the signature components dated back to the time of the city's medieval founding. Kaplan, whose study focused on the intricacies of Barcelona's social movements at the turn of the century, explained these gatherings in more political terms, stating:

From 1888 to 1939 the politics of region, class, and gender expressed themselves in terms of assorted communal manifestations of Barcelona's civic culture. Festivals and other street gatherings were prominent, providing a means to vent officially repressed aspirations as well as officially sanctioned sentiments. The same festivals or public events could serve divergent purposes at different times. They could express or encourage either local solidarity or internal struggle, celebration or opposition. Thus, civic forms could and did evolve over time, providing a rich and flexible political language that, in turn, gave rise to new strains of thought and new political options. This process both influenced and was reflected in the works of artists like Pablo Picasso, who came of age in Barcelona during this period.<sup>77</sup>

For Picasso and his contemporaries, these gatherings served an equally significant purpose. Because most of the city's major cultural events were tied to the revival movement, their numerous medieval components fueled the inspiration of the retrospective avant-garde.

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<sup>77</sup> Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona*, 1-2.

This created an interesting parallel, where for once, the goals of both the avant-garde and the bourgeoisie seemed to be working simultaneously in a similar direction.

### **The Annual Floral Games:**

In 1859, a group of people who were dedicated to the preservation of Catalan heritage restored the Floral Games—or *Jocs Florals*—as a yearly May tradition.<sup>78</sup> This late medieval pageant promoted history, poetry, and writing in an authentically Gothic setting. The participants, accompanied by public observers, gathered inside the Saló de Cent (Fig. 41), the great hall where the city’s Council of One Hundred met between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, and together they listened to “odes extolling the ancient achievements of Catalans and poetry proclaiming the marvelous powers of different



Figure 41: Saló de Cent, Barcelona, Spain.  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consell\\_de\\_Cent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consell_de_Cent))

Madonnas.”<sup>79</sup> The chief officiator of the pageant was enthroned before a banner of the Virgin of Mercy, the symbolic patron of the games, and it was his duty to present awards to the winners, just as kings had done during the High Middle Ages. These games were held

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

consistently in Barcelona for almost a century, including the years that Picasso lived and worked in the city.<sup>80</sup> Their importance was described by Kaplan as “a cultural spring rite comparable to Easter” which “signaled the rebirth of Catalonia as a cultural entity.”<sup>81</sup>

### **Corpus Christi Day and the Bombing of 1896:**

Another equally significant cultural event was Corpus Christi Day, an annual folkloric procession dating from the fourteenth century, which maintains the reputation of being one of the oldest rites celebrated by the citizens of Barcelona. People of all social classes marched in the late spring procession that honored a fragment of the True Cross, which the city claimed to have acquired in the late Middle Ages.<sup>82</sup> The processions departed from the multiple participating churches and snaked through the streets, re-grouped at Barcelona’s cathedral and advanced, together, to Santa Maria del Mar. The individual churches that helped to put on the spectacular event each competed to have the most elegant and stylish *gegants* (Fig. 42 & 23), a Barcelona tradition that dated back to the late Middle Ages. These giant folk figures—who were actually men on stilts—led the parade, wearing life-like papier-mâché heads and ornate designer costumes that referenced the dress of medieval kings and queens.<sup>83</sup> A great deal of time and effort was put into the construction of these doll-like forms, and their appearance greatly impacted contemporary fashion. “The *gegants*’ hair and beards were modified annually and changed completely every five years for the day. Dressed in the latest fashion, the female *gegants* set the

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<sup>80</sup> No documentation exists of Picasso attending the Floral Games; however, because of his frequent association with writers and poets, it seems likely that he would have at least been aware of such an event.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 20.

standard for women's spring styles, keeping Barcelona's dressmakers working at a ferocious pace the week before Corpus."<sup>84</sup> Thus, as average citizens rushed to take part in medieval-inspired festivities, observant artists like Picasso—in his effort to document everyday life in the city—would have implemented selective elements of cultural events into his compositions.



Figure 42: *Gegants* dressed as a medieval city-councilman and a queen.  
Barcelona, Spain, early twentieth-century.  
(*Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona*. University of California Press, 1993)

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 32.





Figure 43: Women modifying *gegants* in preparation for an annual parade.  
Barcelona, Spain, early twentieth-century.  
(*Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona*. University of California Press, 1993)

Corpus Christi Day was held annually in Barcelona throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and one of the infamous processions occurred the year after Picasso and his family moved to the city. The 1896 parade, which was celebrated on the evening of June 7, was marred by the explosion of two bombs that were placed near the church at the end of the procession route. It is believed that they were meant for the captain general and the participating church officials, but instead, six innocent bystanders



were killed, including two small children, and forty others were seriously injured.<sup>85</sup> An elaborate funeral procession was organized by the city in an effort to restore the civic ritual that had been destroyed. An extensive entourage, which included the army regiment band and both the religious and civic leaders of the city, accompanied the funeral coaches of the deceased through the heart of Barcelona's Gothic Quarter. More than two thousand silent mourners witnessed the solemn event, and despite their calm and reverent demeanor, the captain general proceeded in placing the city under martial law.<sup>86</sup> Hundreds of men and women were arrested and detained for more than a year for matters unrelated to the bombing, and five suspects were eventually rounded up by the end of the summer. According to the government's official story, the suspects were anarchists who had gained support from workers in the city's Parallel district, and even though no motive could ever be determined, the men were executed in November in the courtyard of Montjuic Castle.<sup>87</sup>

### **The General Strike of 1902**

Picasso embraced the culture of Barcelona despite constant reminders of the city's harsh political conditions. While the history and pageantry of games and processions would have influenced his artistic style, tragedies like the Corpus Christi Day bombing of 1896 would later significantly affect his subject matter. Another such monumental tragedy also occurred during the heart of the Blue Period as Picasso witnessed the extreme brutality associated with Barcelona's general strike of February 1902. The apparent

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

In their effort to retain control of the Catalonia, the government in Madrid went to great lengths in order to suppress regional patriotism. Police and soldiers often resorted to violence and torture, and thus martial law had become a common occurrence in Barcelona by the end of the nineteenth century.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 35.

helplessness of working-class Catalans provided obvious inspiration for Blue Period subject matter. It appears that Picasso, who was also living in a destitute situation, used his work as a means of propaganda, bringing attention to citizens who desperately needed to improve their quality of life. Even though his quiet protests remained unanswered, the artist's work from these years stands as moving historical documentation of a dark time in the history of Barcelona.<sup>88</sup>

### **Virgin of Mercy, 1902**

The turning point of the Blue Period occurred only months later, shortly after Picasso witnessed Barcelona's 1902 Virgin of Mercy celebration and its accompanying exhibition of Romanesque and Gothic religious art. Throughout the duration of the two-week festival, which ran from September 23 to October 5, Picasso was bombarded with reminders of Catalonia's medieval heritage. Revivalist activities had infiltrated the city, and could be witnessed anywhere from church services to street decorations and newspaper cartoons—the symbolic image of the festivities was also no exception. A fourteenth-century carved polychrome wooden statue, known as the “Santa Maria of Cervallo,” served as the emblem of the festival's events, and she was paraded during civic ceremonies to remind citizens of both the Virgin of Mercy's lengthy association with the city and her coronation as its patron saint in the fall of 1888.<sup>89</sup>

Despite its religious origins, the 1902 Virgin of Mercy Day was mainly celebrated in carnival fashion and more than 165,000 Catalan citizens excitedly attended its fireworks,

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<sup>88</sup> For more information on the general strike of 1902, see Temma Kaplan's *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona*.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 15. (Because of the generally poor documentation on medieval Catalan sculptures, I was unable to find a photograph of the “Santa Maria of Cervallo.”)

bullfights, parades, and exhibition.<sup>90</sup> Grand processions traveled all throughout the Gothic Quarter—the parade route began at the cathedral and passed along the Gracia Pass, the Main Street, the Rambla and through the Plaza of Catalunya.<sup>91</sup> The fashionably dressed *gegants* of the Corpus Christi Day celebrations appeared once again, but this time they were accompanied by dwarf-sized grotesques known as *nans* (Fig. 44), who performed vulgar



Figure 44: *Gegants* and *nans* in an annual parade.  
Barcelona, Spain, early twentieth-century.

(*Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona*. University of California Press, 1993)

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 18.

dances for the entertainment of parade goers, and also *tinbaleros*, who were equestrian percussionists dressed in medieval-style costumes.<sup>92</sup> In addition to these carnival festivities, the Church held a mass in honor of the Virgin of Mercy, and during the service, the presiding cardinal expressed his approval on how the traditionally religious holiday had been interwoven into the cultural fabric of the entire city.<sup>93</sup>

Citizens of all social classes joined in the Virgin of Mercy festivities despite the anxieties that resulted from the February general strike and the subsequent period of martial law. Picasso and other Barcelona artists also actively participated in such public festivals that promoted Catalan identity and a shared sense of community. The residents of New Street, the location of Picasso's studio in the fall of 1902, adorned their exterior surroundings in the style of the late Middle Ages.<sup>94</sup> They also utilized the celebration to protest the civic grievances of the working-class community, and Picasso even documented festival life and his sympathies for Barcelona's poor with a Blue Period-style newspaper cartoon in the October 5, 1902 publication of *El Liberal* (Fig. 45).<sup>95</sup> This rarely published line drawing is extremely significant because it stands as substantial proof that Picasso was in fact utilizing the medieval elements in his surroundings. It was composed in three layers, each depicting a different view of the Virgin of Mercy festivities. A parade of medieval *gegants* and floats tower over the composition from its festive background, and below them, rows of onlookers enjoy the spectacle. In the foreground, the typical Blue Period style mother and child made their first pronounced public appearance, and their

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.



Figure 45: Pablo Picasso, newspaper cartoon published in *El Liberal*, October 5, 1902.

obvious poverty was juxtaposed against the lavishly dressed middle-class women standing in front of them.<sup>96</sup> While these women's clothing appeared more structured and fashionably form fitting, the poor mother's dress more closely resembled the robe like costumes of the medieval-style *gegants*. Could this imply that Picasso specifically related Barcelona's impoverished lower classes to medieval imagery?

<sup>96</sup> Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 247.

### Barcelona's exhibition of Ancient Art, 1902:

Picasso's interest in Catalonia's medieval art and architecture was additionally encouraged by an exhibition devoted to "Ancient Art" that accompanied the Virgin of Mercy celebration. This show, which was held at Barcelona's Palace of Fine Arts, encompassed a broad spectrum of Spanish history, from paintings by El Greco to Catalan Romanesque and Gothic statues and altar frontals (Fig. 46).<sup>97</sup> Rural churches, convents, and monasteries



Figure 46: Display at the exhibition of Ancient Art, Palace of Fine Arts, Barcelona, Spain, 1902.

donated their long forgotten treasures, and these objects helped to comprise the first significant reappraisal of an artistic movement that had been forgotten for several centuries.<sup>98</sup> Objects of all kinds, both two-dimensional and three-dimensional, packed the

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<sup>97</sup> The previously mentioned modernist architect Josep Puig i Cadafalch helped to organize this exhibition, and his active participation undoubtedly attracted the attention of other members of the retrospective avant-garde.

<sup>98</sup> In her book *Picasso: Style and Meaning*, Elizabeth Cowling noted that 1,890 items were exhibited, and they ranged in date from the Byzantine era to the mid-nineteenth century (footnote 70: 650).



exhibition spaces. Paintings, tapestries, and altarpieces were displayed on the walls while sculptures on pedestals filled the intermediary spaces. Glass cases that contained ceramics, religious robes, and hand-held fans were placed in open spaces in the centers of rooms and silver plates could be seen lining the interior arches of doorways. The exhibition was a grand affair, held in a large, elaborately decorated palace setting. Garlands were hung from interior balconies, wreaths surrounded some of the framed paintings, and patterned carpets covered the floors. The event was by far the largest and most impressive display of Catalan heritage to date, and it undoubtedly impacted Picasso's Blue Period compositions and figurative style.

The citizens of Barcelona and its surrounding areas praised the event, and "waves of self-congratulatory patriotism enhanced the art-historical importance of the occasion. Henceforth a taste for Catalan primitivism would be obligatory for the bourgeois intelligentsia."<sup>99</sup> Almost immediately, dealers of medieval art appeared all throughout the region in order to accommodate the growing number of collectors and Catalan "connoisseurs." Several of Picasso's friends and associates made their living as dealers, including the Junyer Vidal brothers who commissioned his festival cartoon for the cover of their paper *El Liberal*. These men proudly claimed to be rescuing their region's artistic heritage, when in fact, many of the pieces had been excessively restored or faked in order to gain greater profits.<sup>100</sup> Richardson noted that: "More of this Catalanist fervor rubbed off on Picasso than one might have expected. For all the reservations he had come to have about the state of contemporary art in Barcelona, he was still fanatically loyal to his Catalan friends and their cause. By identifying with them and playing the role of *Catalanista*, he

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<sup>99</sup> Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 246.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 246-247.

could feel less Andalusian.”<sup>101</sup> This adoption of Catalan identity also enabled the young artist to further connect with the members of the “retrospective avant-garde” that he so greatly admired, but most importantly, it allowed him to fully and empathetically associate himself with the plight of his Blue Period subjects. Because he embraced their culture and patriotism, the young artist was able to successfully convey the sentiments of an entire region through his canvases, and he visually enhanced the medievalism that they so strongly desired in his own attempt at restoring Catalonia to the splendor of its medieval origins.

The religious community also embraced the exhibition of Ancient Art, despite the clergy’s concerns over several potentially problematic issues. Sizeable quantities of medieval religious sculptures, frescoes, and altar frontals had been removed from churches during this period in Catalan history and repurposed under secular, artistic terms inside museums and exhibition halls.<sup>102</sup> This reappropriation unintentionally deprived the objects of some of their spiritual significance; however, their importance to the general public increased significantly as the 1902 exhibition both elevated what was once considered religious paraphernalia to the status of fine art and transformed the imagery into elements of popular culture. “By legitimating folk and religious artifacts as art, Catalan nationalists and artists had inadvertently initiated their removal from church control. As the images and practices that had united a Catholic community became more and more part of secular popular culture, urban culture was transformed.”<sup>103</sup> Occasions such as Virgin of Mercy Day and the exhibition of Ancient Art thus encouraged Catalonians to

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>102</sup> Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona*, 59.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

associate medieval religious traditions and imagery with civic pride, which in turn promoted Catholicism and ecclesiastical power in civil matters.<sup>104</sup> High-ranking church officials hastily became patrons and promoters of medieval religious art, and Josep Morgades, the bishop of Vic, even founded his city's Episcopal Museum, which preserved many rural examples of the region's unique artistic heritage.<sup>105</sup>

For Picasso, the exhibition of Ancient Art more clearly emphasized the formal and compositional characteristics of the featured Romanesque and Gothic works, and his interaction with these objects closely coincided with and most likely resulted in his first direct appropriation from medieval art in his painting "The Two Sisters" (Fig. 47). Many aspects of its design mirror the "Visitation" (Fig. 48) detail of the thirteenth century altar frontal from Lluçà (Fig. 49), which was most likely shown at the exhibition.<sup>106</sup> In her book *Picasso: The Early Years, 1892-1906*, Picasso specialist Marilyn McCully was the first to juxtapose these two images, implying how despite the obvious differences in palette, these two works have many similarly rendered characteristics. Compositionally, they are almost identical, from the centralized location of the women to the three-quarter profile positioning of their heavily outlined bodies. Both images also lack depth and perspective, and their figures are flattened almost to the point of abstraction; however, Picasso did not

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>106</sup> The Lluçà altarpiece is currently part of the collection of the Museu Episcopal in Vic, which was inaugurated in 1891. Reviews of the exhibition mentioned that an altarpiece from Vic was one of the event's outstanding highlights. It is likely that they were referring to the well-preserved example from Lluçà, which was actually completed in the Vic workshops.

yet push his two-dimensionality to the extreme of the Lluçà master. While the “Visitation”



Figure 47: Pablo Picasso, “The Visitation,” 1902. The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia.  
(<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/>)



Figure 48: “The Visitation,” detail from the Lluca Altarpiece, 13<sup>th</sup> century. Museu Episcopal de Vic, Spain.  
(Picasso: *The Early Years, 1892-1906*. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1997)



Figure 49: Altar frontal from Lluçà, thirteenth-century. Museu Episcopal de Vic, Spain.  
(*Les col·leccions del Museu Episcopal de Vic*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Vic: Eumo, 1992)

detail merely suggested depth though darker toned lines in the folds of drapery, Picasso provided fairly naturalistic shadows both on and around his figures, and attempted to ground their bodies within some semblance of space. Additionally, the two artists incorporated only minimalistic backgrounds. In the case of the Lluçà detail, the artist utilized the altar frontal's rough panel texture as his background, which only further detracted from the image's three-dimensional space. Picasso created a similar texture with different shades of blue paint, but he also included the hint of a rounded arch doorway, a feature that denied his complete flattening of the scene. Finally, this appropriation was defined through his similar rendering of shrouded Madonna-like figures. Even though the robes of "The Two Sisters" possess softer, less schematic linear qualities than those seen in the Lluçà "Visitation," the St. Lazare whore and nun have pronounced eyebrows, sharply pointed noses, thin lips and almond shaped eyes that are directly comparable to this and many other examples from the Catalan medieval tradition.

This association of "The Two Sisters" to medieval Catalan "Visitation" scenes is relatively common in scholarly research; however, most historians offer only general observations as opposed to direct comparisons based on biographical documentation of Picasso's travels. John Richardson also compared Picasso's work to medieval Catalan altarpieces, and he emphasized the rarely mentioned fact that "The Two Sisters" is painted on panel instead of canvas, a practice that was uncommon for Picasso, but standard in medieval times.<sup>107</sup> He explained how the scale and bas-relief appearance of the panel simulated the texture of a carved altarpiece and further stated:

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<sup>107</sup> Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 224.

There may also be faint echoes of the two altarpieces Picasso did for the Barcelona convent, both of which seem to have portrayed a miraculous confrontation, one with Christ, one with the Virgin. If Picasso now drew on his apprenticeship as a devotional painter – his iconographical knowledge of such subjects as the Visitation and Annunciation – it was not in a devotional spirit; it was because he wanted to use a traditionally hallowed image, subliminally, as it were, to endow his whores with an air of universal relevance and mystic power.<sup>108</sup>

Here, Richardson poses an interesting question as to the greater meaning behind this appropriation. Even though this topic will be discussed later in the chapter, it is important to recognize that, in terms of subject matter, one of Picasso's main goals in the Blue Period was to emphasize the internal turmoil of the Catalan people through the simplified external appearance of its working classes. Medieval artists provided a format for this visual translation, because for centuries, they had successfully conveyed the spiritual sentiments of the Church through simplified, two-dimensional imagery. Because viewers were not distracted by lavish displays of naturalism, they were clearly able to connect the image with its intended meaning. By associating the pitiable subjects in "The Two Sisters" with the Virgin Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, Picasso magnified their humble plight with a sense of power and importance that they could never have achieved through their own accord.

In their book entitled *Picasso: The Formative Years, A Study of His Sources*, Anthony Blunt and Phoebe Pool also discussed the medieval nature of Picasso's work in comparison to sculpted "Visitation" figures. They reference the famous pair from the portal of Chartres Cathedral; however, despite his three previous visits to France, it seems more likely that

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

This citation from Richardson is the only reference to Picasso's apprenticeship as a devotional painter that I have come across during my research. It is a topic that would have deserved further investigation had time permitted.



Picasso would, at this point in his career, have been looking at Spanish examples, such as the capital from Cathedral of Lleida (Fig. 50). They noted that:

This is perhaps the earliest instance of Picasso's habit of turning to the art of a much earlier period for formal and sometimes iconographical inspiration. It is typical of his attitude towards his art that he should be attracted not by naturalistic styles but by those which had been used to convey certain religious ideas by means of a system of stylized symbols.<sup>109</sup>



Figure 50: Sculpted "Visitation" capital from the Cathedral of Lleida.  
(*Catalan art from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries*. London: W. Heinemann, 1937)

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<sup>109</sup> Blunt, Anthony, and Phoebe Pool. (*Picasso: The Formative Years; A Study of His Sources*. Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1962), illustrations 109, 110 and caption.

This statement additionally supports Richardson's ideas concerning the meaning behind the artist's appropriation; however, Blunt and Pool's suggestion of Picasso using the sculpted portals of Chartres as a direct source of inspiration is not as clearly developed. Formally, it appears more likely that the imagery of "The Two Sisters" was derived from a two-dimensional altar frontal because of its extreme flatness and abstraction, and Picasso's clever use of panel board further supports this type of object as his direct source of appropriation.

In his book *Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*, Josep Palau i Fabre noted that the composition of "The Two Sisters" appears to be successful because of its elegant simplification and reliance on geometrical design.<sup>110</sup> Several sketches exist that trace the evolution of shape and form in the composition, especially in the positioning of the central figures (Fig. 51). After a series of slightly awkward attempts, Picasso ultimately arrived at the final design, one that is significantly more fluid and naturally pleasing to the eye. Palau i Fabre suggested that the positions of the two females form the rough shape of a Gothic arch, which was reinforced by the heavy outline that surrounded their bodies and the appearance of the second Gothic arch in the shadowy background.<sup>111</sup> For this reason, Palau i Fabre said that the Gothicism in the painting was unmistakable and that throughout the rest of the Blue Period, "Picasso was constantly playing with the concepts of Romanesque and Gothic, and very often mingling the two; for at that time Catalonia was reveling in the rediscovery of these two styles."<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Palau i Fabre, *Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*, 295.

<sup>111</sup> Palau i Fabre, *Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*, 295.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 295-297.



Figure 51: Pablo Picasso, preliminary sketch for “The Two Sisters,” 1902.  
Musée Picasso, Paris.  
(*A Picasso Anthology, Documents, Criticism, Reminiscences*. London: The Arts Council of  
Great Britain, 1981)

Regardless of whether Barcelona’s 1902 exhibition of Ancient Art provided this direct source of medieval appropriation for the young Picasso, its lavish display of regional heritage stirred his patriotic sentiments. The imagery that he witnessed in the galleries at the Palace of Fine Arts was not quickly forgotten and the artist continued to work in the unique style of his Catalan predecessors. In November or December of 1903, Picasso moved into a new studio in Barcelona, No. 28 in the Carrer del Comerç; this new environment inspired a temporary change in the artist’s work. The Palace of Fine Arts was very near this new studio, and Picasso painted the structure as it appeared from his window. The painting stands as a fine memorial to a monument that has since been torn

down. It stands out among the somber tones of the Blue Period, boasting a much more optimistic cityscape enlivened with rusty autumn hues (Fig. 52).<sup>113</sup>

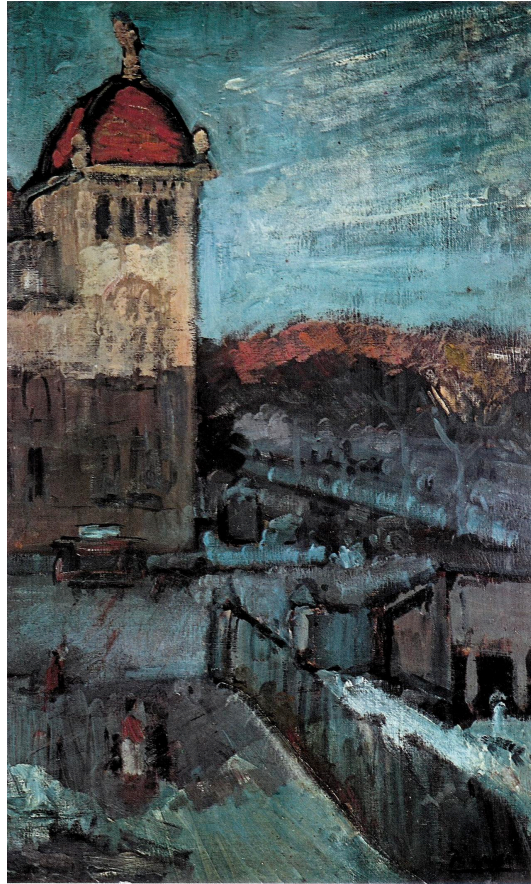


Figure 52: Pablo Picasso, “The Palace of Fine Arts, Barcelona,” 1903.  
Private Collection, England.  
(*Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981)

### **Gatherings at the Four Cats Café:**

In addition to Barcelona’s annual cultural events, two of Picasso’s frequently reoccurring social interactions significantly increased his exposure to Catalan medieval art throughout the Blue Period. The first of these involved the previously mentioned Four Cats Café and Gallery, which served not only as a place of interaction with other members of the

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<sup>113</sup> Palau i Fabre, *Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*, 360-361.

retrospective avant-garde, but also as a forum for the exchange of modernist ideas. Picasso visited the café on a daily basis, and quickly developed an intimate circle of friends, colleagues, and admirers. Many of these individuals helped to fuel the young artist's interest in Catalonia's unique medieval artistic style as they sought to both create and promote new forms of regional identity. They enriched the culture of Barcelona by repopularizing forgotten arts such as puppetry, Visigothic ironwork, medieval Catalan painting and the work of El Greco.<sup>114</sup>

Puppet plays came into vogue in Barcelona at the turn of the century as a form of popular entertainment thanks to a new creative spin provided by the puppeteers at the Four Cats Café. Gradually, puppetry and other forms of popular entertainment gained the distinction of art.<sup>115</sup> Many of the plays that were performed at the café retained traditional themes that had been passed down from the late Middle Ages, and their wooden accompaniments were also fashioned according to medieval styles.<sup>116</sup> Kaplan explained:

At least subliminally, the hand puppets of Barcelona resembled religious statues, for they were made by the same artisans. Breaking with the *commedia dell'arte* tradition of giving puppets exaggeratedly caricatured faces, artisans fashioned their Catalan puppets with the same realistic expressions they gave to both devotional objects and *gegants*. As we have seen, civic rites, religious celebrations, and artistic rituals borrowed characteristics and performances from one another. The consequent repetition of familiar patterns undoubtedly contributed to a sense of continuity and tradition in religion, social relations, and art.<sup>117</sup>

This repetitious intermingling of traditions inadvertently encouraged the positive exchange of artistic and cultural ideas between the avant-garde and the Catalan bourgeoisie. For

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<sup>114</sup> Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona*, 56.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*



Picasso and his Four Cats associates, this helped to promote their modernist art and architecture as integral components of popular culture. Their work shared many of the same goals as the cultural events sponsored by Catalan patriots, and when these efforts were combined, the two dynamically different groups helped in forming a new independent regional identity for the citizens of Catalonia.

### **Excursions with Joan Vidal Ventosa:**

The second of these reoccurring social interactions began in 1902, when, during one of his more lengthy residences in Barcelona, Picasso befriended Joan Vidal Ventosa (Fig. 53), an educated young man who had an exuberant passion for Catalan Romanesque. Like Picasso, Vidal Ventosa also studied art at La Llotja, except he concentrated in sculpture, which later led to a career in restoration, particularly in the area of Gothic altarpieces. He also worked as a documentary photographer of ancient Catalan monuments and the official

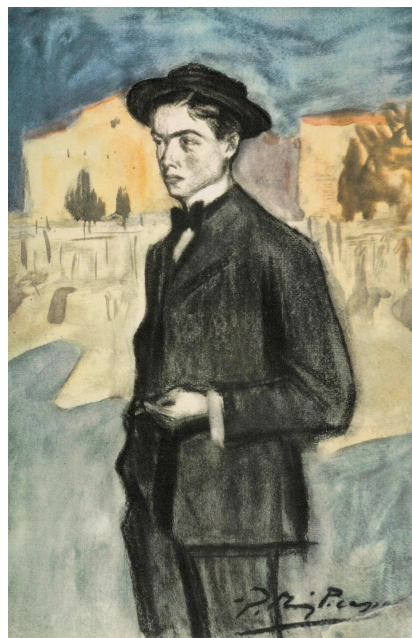


Figure 53: Pablo Picasso, "Portrait of Joan Vidal Ventosa," 1900.  
Maurice Rheims Collection, Paris, France.  
(*Pablo Picasso: Watercolors and Gouaches*. London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1984.)



photographer of the Barcelona museums.<sup>118</sup> Picasso, usually accompanied by Jaime Sabartes and other friends, would often visit Ventosa's small family home, located on the corner of the square of the Isglesia del Pi, the Church of the Pine (Fig. 54). Vidal's father was



Figure 54: The Church of the Pine, Barcelona, Spain.  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa Mar%C3%ADa del P%C3%AD, Barcelona](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Mar%C3%ADa_del_Pi%3%AD,_Barcelona))

the sacristan of the fourteenth-century Gothic church, a profession that had inspired his son's interest in medieval art and architecture. On Sundays, the group would regularly meet after mass for visits to the latest exhibitions at the Sala Pares.<sup>119</sup> Richardson noted:

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<sup>118</sup> Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 245.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 245-246.

“More than anyone else, Vidal Ventosa opened Picasso’s eyes to the hieratic drama of Catalan Romanesque.”<sup>120</sup> It appears highly probable that the photographer may have also asked Picasso to join him in his travels throughout Catalonia in 1902, as he documented altarpieces, sculptures, frescoes, and ecclesiastical buildings for the Barcelona museum. Many of these were located in the remote wilderness; most notably, the pair may have visited the Valley of Boí, which contained the small village churches of San Clement de Tahüll and Santa Maria de Tahüll, which contained two of the finest surviving examples of Catalan Romanesque murals.<sup>121</sup>

Similar to the way “The Two Sisters” can be described as the quintessential medieval style painting of Picasso’s Blue Period, the murals of these churches can be labeled as the archetypes of all of Catalan Romanesque art. Their abstract two-dimensionality, brightly colored compositions, and religious subject matter were typical of their time period, but their quality could be surpassed by none other. The mural of San Clement featured Christ enthroned as Pantocrator inside a mandorla, surrounded by angels, saints, and the symbols of the evangelists (Fig. 55). The artistic focus of the scene resided in its detailed linearity, from individual strands of hair, to folds in the drapery and ornamental decorative lines that mimicked the architectural features of the church.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

Sabartes maintained a close relationship with Picasso throughout his early career and he became the artist’s personal assistant, a position that he held for more than fifty years. Vidal Ventosa was the greatest mutual friend between Sabartes and Picasso, even though he only saw them sporadically over the course of the next six decades. Sabartes felt that Picasso was greatly indebted to Vidal Ventosa, and after Picasso’s rise to fame, he often used the artist’s influence to obtain work for the struggling photographer. In the fall of 1934 during his final trip to Spain, Picasso met Vidal Ventosa for a visit to the Museum of Catalan Art and its recently installed galleries of Romanesque painting.

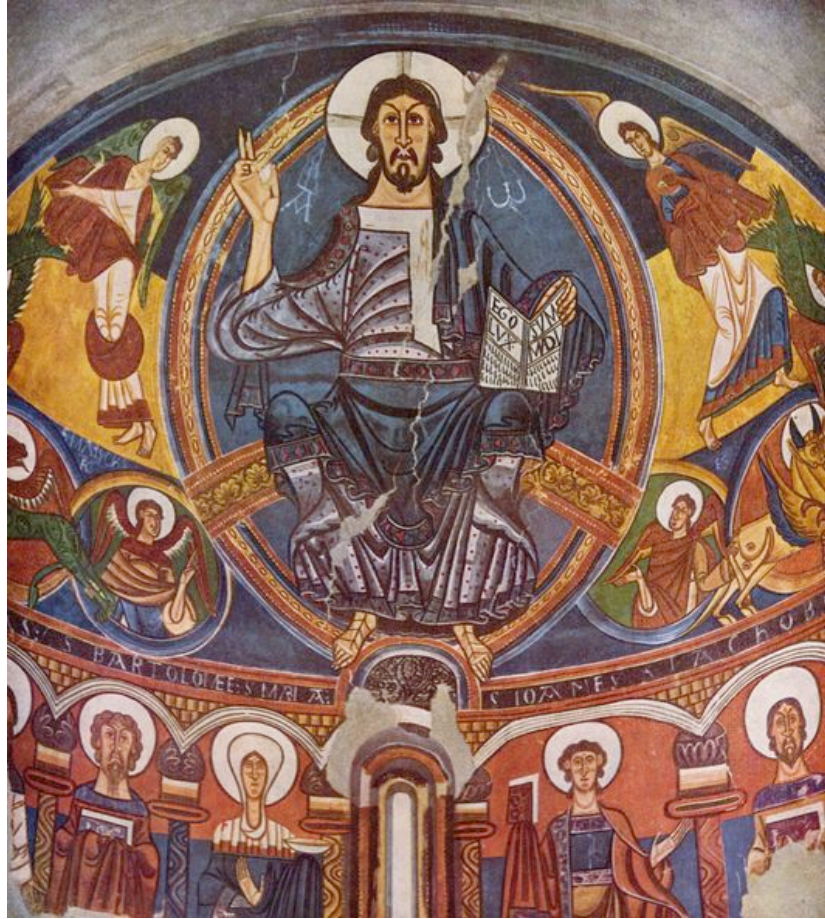


Figure 55: Apse fresco of San Clement de Taüll, early twelfth-century.

Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain.

([http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&tl=en&u=http%3A%2F%2Fes.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FIglesia\\_de\\_San\\_Clemente\\_de\\_Ta%25C3%25BCll](http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=es&tl=en&u=http%3A%2F%2Fes.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FIglesia_de_San_Clemente_de_Ta%25C3%25BCll))

These lines were rendered in a variety of different weights and thicknesses, and were used to define form, space, pattern, movement and minimal depth throughout the composition. There was also an emphasis on geometry that can be seen through the symmetrical format of the composition and the repetition of similar shapes and colors. The apse mural of Santa Maria de Tahüll (Fig. 56) is strikingly similar in composition and style, except instead of the Pantocrator, its imagery is focused upon an enthroned Madonna and Child. The artists there were more selective in their use of extremely detailed, ornamental patterning, and





Figure 56: Apse fresco of Santa Maria de Tahüll, circa 1123.  
 Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain.  
*(Romanesque art in the MNAC collections. Barcelona: Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya and Lunwerg, 2008)*

more liberal with their variation and juxtaposition of warm and cool colors. Both murals however similarly displayed all of the figural characteristics that are unique to Catalan Romanesque art—large almond shaped eyes, pronouncedly arched brows, thin lips, disproportionately large hands with elongated fingers, and sharply pointed, foreshortened feet. Each of these features was also present in Picasso's Blue Period work, and his sources of inspiration can most likely be greatly attributed to his close relationship with Joan Vidal Ventosa.

## **Picasso's Blue Period artworks:**

Even though Picasso may not have witnessed all of these historical events firsthand, he most certainly would have felt the lingering effects they imparted on the people and culture of Catalonia. Those he did see left a memorable impression on the young artist during the peak of his artistic development and strengthened his nationalistic ties to the region. The culmination of all of these factors, both seen and unseen, directly influenced the subject matter of the Blue Period, and characteristics of the Catalan medieval style could be seen in his work for more than three years. The rediscovered and newly popularized medieval art provided many solutions for Picasso. Through the remainder of this chapter, I will trace the steps of Picasso's search for artistic identity and explain how his style, palette, and subject matter reflected both Catalan nationalism and the region's unique artistic history.

## **Style:**

During the Blue Period, Romanesque and Gothic painting provided solutions for Picasso's artistic problem solving because its simplified style emphasized both the internal emotions as well as the external plight of his impoverished subjects. Medieval art in Picasso's surroundings was characterized by its flatness, geometry, and linearity, as well as heavily outlined, unnaturally elongated figures that were juxtaposed against solidly colored backgrounds. Such a simplified formal presentation of religious figures did not detract from, but instead magnified the importance of their intended meaning. By incorporating these characteristics into his Blue Period paintings, Picasso increased the power and expression behind his imagery through references to Catalonia's medieval origins and renewed cultural identity.

In works such as “Breakfast of the Blind Man” (Fig. 57) and “L’ascete” (Fig. 58) of 1903, the young artist utilized elements of medieval style to create a somber tone, as he

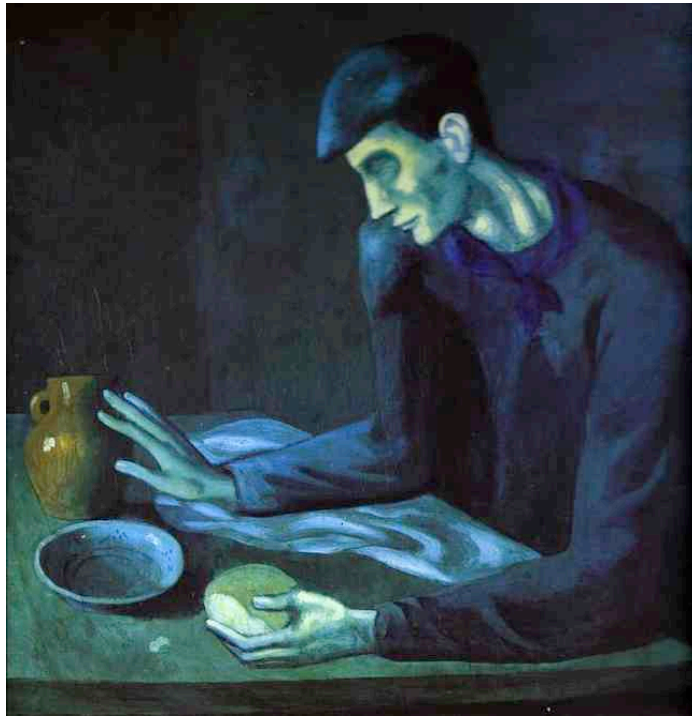


Figure 57: Pablo Picasso, “Breakfast of the Blind Man,” 1903.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

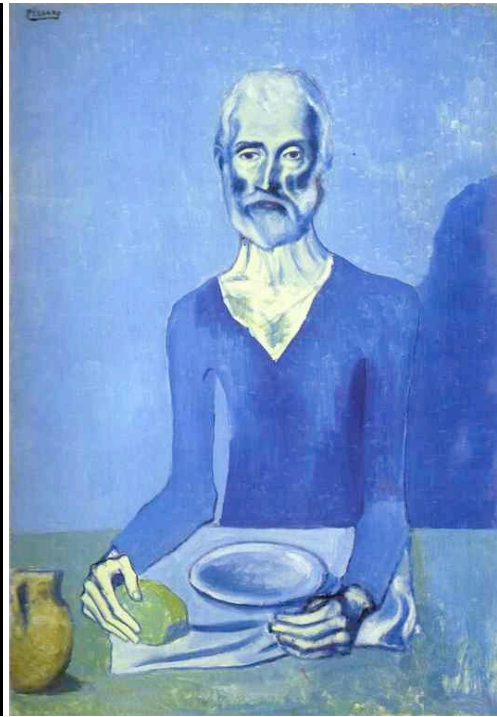


Figure 58: Pablo Picasso, “L’ascete,” 1903.  
Barnes Foundation, Merion, PA.

<http://www.abcgallery.com/P/picasso/picasso.html>

he depicted the repasts of two different male figures, each contemplating an empty bowl and a meager serving of bread. The flat, elongated appendages of the starving men brought attention to their poverty and fragility, and made their bodies appear even more brittle and lifeless. Their disproportionately long, unnaturally thin fingers were styled in a manner similar to those of the angels and saints in the lower registers of the San Clement de Tahüll



apse fresco (Figs. 59 & 60), which Picasso most likely saw on one of his excursions with Joan Vidal Ventosa.<sup>122</sup> The overly exaggerated two dimensionality of “L’ascete” is also



Figures 59 & 60: Apse fresco of San Clement de Taüll, early twelfth-century.  
Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain.  
(*Catalogne Romane*. 3rd ed. Saint-Leger-Vauban: Zodiac, 1994)

reminiscent of medieval painting. Its extreme flatness makes it difficult to separate the man's body from the wall behind him, and therefore suggests a fragile, almost paper-thin torso, trapped between the table and the wall. Illustrations of this characteristic are plentiful throughout Catalan medieval art, and can be witnessed in both frescoes and painted altar frontals. One striking example is the twelfth-century “Altar frontal from La Seu d’Urgell” (Fig. 61) where the figures appear similarly flattened upon solid red and

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<sup>122</sup>I do not suggest that Picasso used this specific fresco as a direct source of appropriation, but instead, I want to point it out as just one of the many possible examples of this uniquely Catalan feature.



Figure 61: “Altar frontal from La Seu d’Urgell,” twelfth-century.  
 Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain.  
 (<http://www.mnac.es/index.jsp?lan=003>)

yellow blocks. Because there is a lack of shadows and background information, the haloed apostles in the two side panels appear to all be of equal distance from the viewer. Their bodies seem to be floating in space, conjoined as one unit. This created a visual illusion of flatness and two-dimensionality, which was even more extreme than the one that Picasso incorporated in “L’ascete”—little did the young artist know that these medieval characteristics were helping him to push the boundaries of complete figural abstraction.

### **Palette:**

Throughout this period of his career, Picasso also used his monochromatic blue palette to make patriotic connections with both his fellow Catalonians and their medieval heritage. This choice of color in association with his female imagery can be linked to the medieval style because blue is commonly related to the iconography of Mary. Several of



Picasso's Blue Period compositions can be compared to medieval "Madonna and Child" scenes, as they depict similarly cloaked, youthful mothers who are lovingly cradling their swaddled infants. His "Seated Woman and Child" of 1901 (Fig. 62) displays many



Figure 62: Pablo Picasso, "Seated Woman and Child," 1901.  
Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.  
(<http://www.artinfo.com/media/image/110606/PicassoMotherAndChild72.jpg>)

traditionally medieval characteristics such as stiff, bulky figures, the disconnection of anatomical features, and lifeless mask-like faces. These elements, along with the blue color of the mother's draped outer robes reference Madonna imagery from all parts of Catalonia, including the elaborate apse fresco of Santa Maria de Tahüll (Fig. 56).

During these years, the color blue also served as an outward visual manifestation of his internal turmoil. Picasso was struggling to find an individual artistic identity through his Blue Period style, and he also wanted to protest against the horribly impoverished conditions of the people of Barcelona. In portraits such as “Femme aux Bras Croises” of 1902 (Fig. 63), the monochromatic blue palette sets the mood of the work. It reinforces

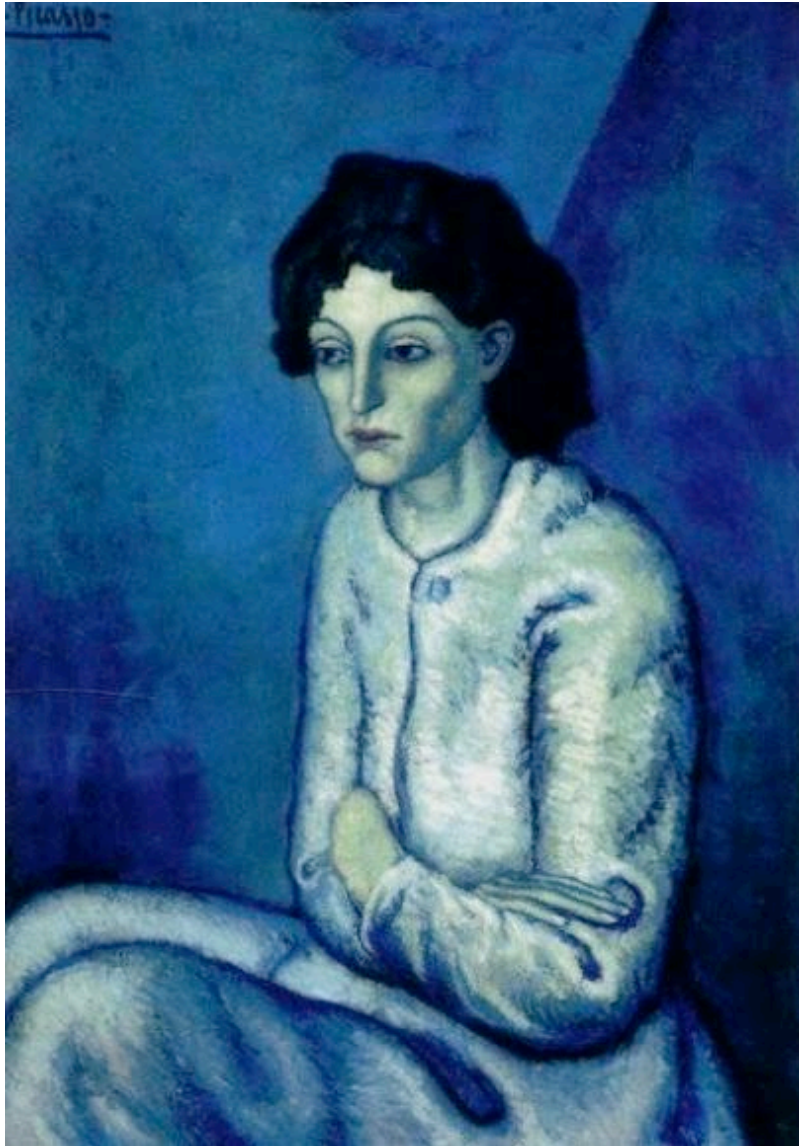


Figure 63: Pablo Picasso, “Femme aux Bras Croises,” 1902.  
Private collection.

([http://www.etoday.ru/2007/08/12/femmeauxbrascroises\\_pablocicasso.jpg](http://www.etoday.ru/2007/08/12/femmeauxbrascroises_pablocicasso.jpg))



the woman's somber facial expression and encourages the viewer to sympathize with her destitute situation. The same can be said for "Poor Woman by the Sea," also of 1902 (Fig. 64). In this striking image, a shrouded Madonna-like mother and her infant are seemingly drowning in a dark blue abyss of sea and sky. The only major contrasts in color are highlighted in the light skin tones of the woman's praying hands and solemn face, both of which emphasize the dismal plight of the isolated pair.

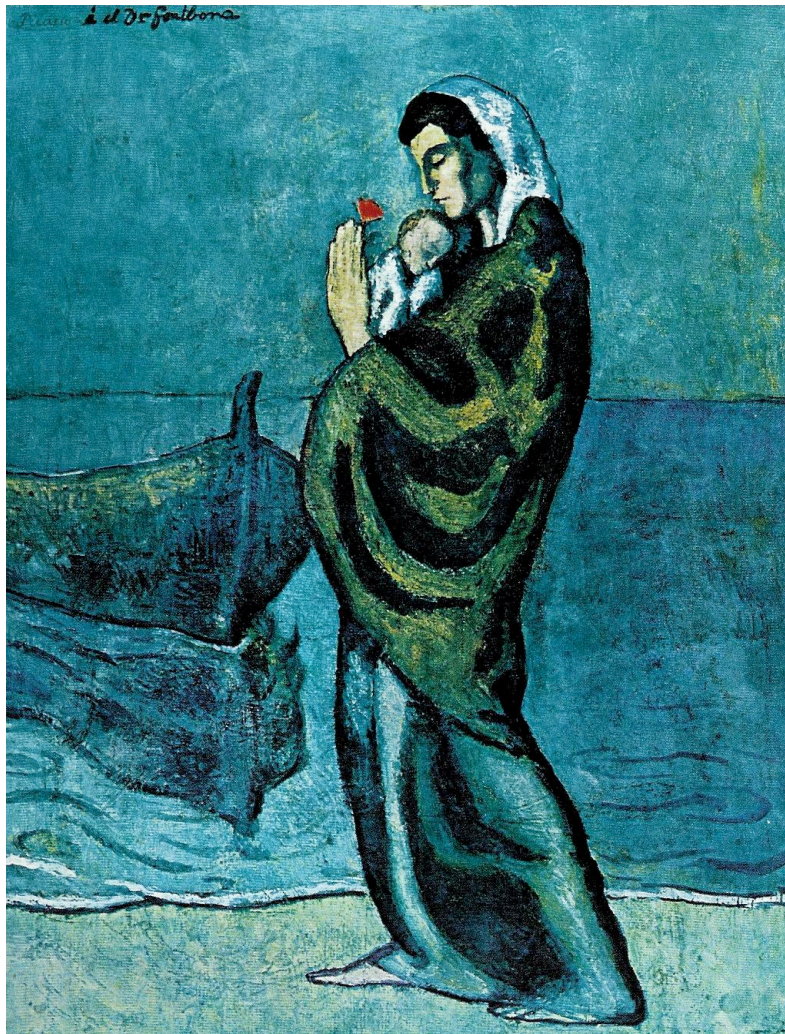


Figure 64: Pablo Picasso, "Poor Woman by the Sea," 1902.  
Beyeler Collection, Basel, Switzerland.  
(*Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981.)

## Subject Matter:

The somber tone of Picasso's blue palette was also inseparably connected to the cultural significance behind his subject matter. During this phase of his life, the young artist attempted to exploit the grave situation of impoverished Catalonians as they fought against cultural repression. Picasso emphasized the misfortune of others with the hope of also alleviating his own destitute situation, as he too was living in poverty during the years he struggled to make a name for himself in the art world. Throughout the Blue Period, he visualized these sympathies through depictions of isolation, hardship and sorrow, which were exemplified by the painfully hunched postures of decrepit figures in "The Soup" (Fig. 65) and "The Old Beggar" (Fig. 66) of 1903 and "Woman Ironing" (Fig. 67) of 1904. Each of



Figure 65: Pablo Picasso, "The Soup," 1903. J.H. Grang Collection, Toronto, Canada. (*Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981.)

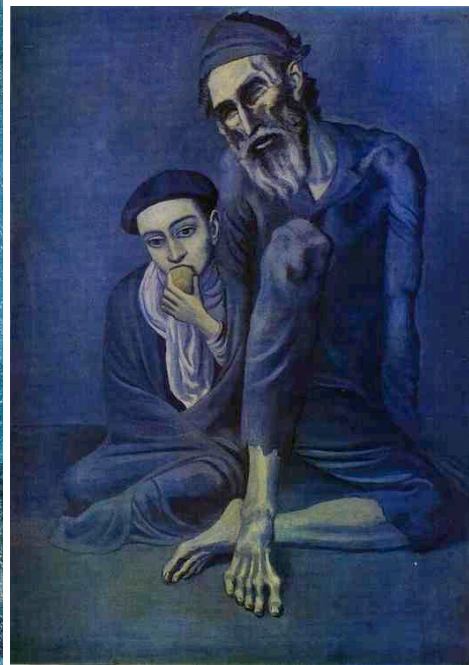


Figure 66: Pablo Picasso, "The Old Beggar," 1903. Pushkin Museum, Moscow, Russia. (<http://www.abcgallery.com>)



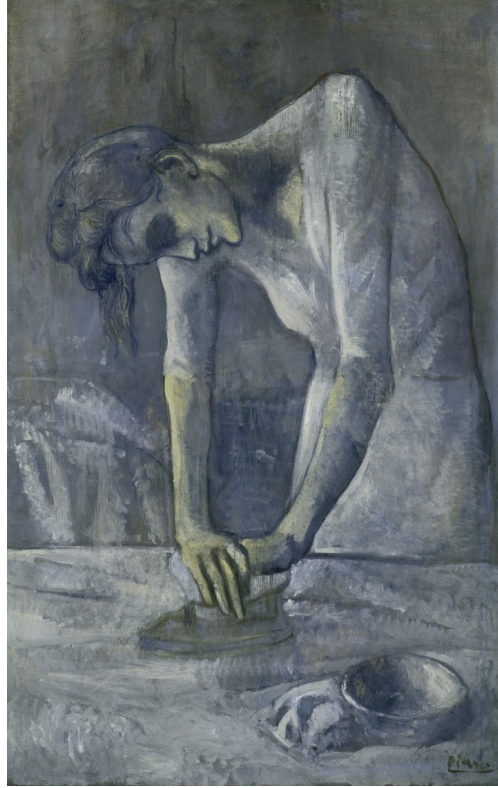


Figure 67: Pablo Picasso, "Woman Ironing," 1904.  
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.  
(<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections>)

these three works placed strict emphasis on its human subjects and their individual destitute situations. Generic backgrounds, minimal detail information, and medieval style two-dimensionality force the viewer to focus on faces that externalize the subject's internal hardship and emotion.

### **Conclusion:**

Even though they were relatively unsuccessful at the time, in due course, these somber blue paintings had a much greater impact than the young artist could have ever anticipated. The Catholic Catalan audience was conditioned to respond empathetically to church art, and because many of Picasso's images—such as "The Two Sisters" or "Poor

Woman by the Sea”—are akin to religious iconography, they also had the ability to evoke a response from their viewers. The parallels that he created with religious art brought his avant-garde paintings down to a level where average citizens could understand their intended meanings. Picasso elaborated an artistic language that resonated with people of all social classes, as he made obvious references to both nationalism and Catalonia’s medieval cultural heritage. Collectively, the “retrospective avant-garde” artists and architects helped drive Catalonia’s quest for regional identity, and along the way, these men assisted in amassing what is quite possibly the largest and best preserved collection of medieval art in all of Europe. Today, Picasso’s medieval-style Blue Period paintings are also famous throughout the world, but for the citizens of Catalonia, they hold additional layers of meaning—serving as striking reminders of the value inherent in preserving emblematic symbols of national origin.

## Closing Observations

Characteristics of the Catalan medieval style disappeared almost completely from Picasso's work in late 1904, when his dark blue palette brightened into the more naturalistic pastels of the Rose Period, which spanned from 1904 to mid-1906. Definitively warm colors persisted throughout the period, creating a cheerful change in palette that can in part be attributed to Picasso's budding romance with his soon-to-be longtime mistress Fernande Olivier. During this two-year span, his paintings also underwent a major change in subject matter, as he shifted his focus from the poverty of Barcelona to more French inspired harlequins, circus performers, and children. This festive assortment of subjects was rendered in a much more classicizing style than typically seen from Picasso, and the absence of medieval features was possibly the result of a turn in his artistic problem solving. Picasso was returning to his classical training in an effort to clear his mind and begin again on his quest for a new, individual artistic identity.

Picasso, however, had not forgotten the lessons he learned from his appropriation of medieval art during the Blue Period, and during the summer of 1906, he once again began to work in the medieval vein when he visited the small Catalan village of Gosol, located in the Pyrenees Mountains of northern Spain.<sup>123</sup> Richardson noted that at this particular point in his career, Picasso "wanted to repeat the purifying experience that he had

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<sup>123</sup> Gosol is not usually referred to as a distinctly separate stylistic period but it can easily be defined by the time interval that Picasso spent in the rural community. This transitional time period is unfortunately often overlooked in survey books because most of the works that survive are sketches and small drawings; however, Gosol figures significantly into my argument because it provided for Picasso a second key moment of impact with the Catalan medieval style.

undergone at Horta in 1898.”<sup>124</sup> It appears that the combination of such a remote location and being surrounded by his native culture—after almost two years spent in Paris—instilled a calmness and serenity in Picasso that was essential to his creative process. The simplicity of life in Gosol helped Picasso tackle artistic problems in an innovative manner. In her journal, Fernande Olivier described a change in Picasso that became evident during this journey:

Pablo is quite different in Spain. He’s more cheerful, not so wild, more sparkling and animated, and takes a calmer, more balanced view of things. He seems to be at ease. He glows with happiness, so unlike the kind of person he is in Paris, where he seems shy and inhibited, as if the atmosphere is alien to him.<sup>125</sup>

Later in the summer, she again noted: “The atmosphere of his own country seems to inspire him, and there is much stronger emotion and sensitivity in these drawings than anything he has done in Paris.”<sup>126</sup> It appears that Picasso’s return to his beloved Catalonia brought back sentiments that had doubtlessly originated in the nationalism that accompanied the Barcelona’s turn-of-the-century cultural revival.

During the couple's lengthy visit in Gosol, the young artist studied the landscape and people that surrounded him. He retained the warm palette of the Rose Period and incorporated more ochres and earth tones. In contrast to those of the Blue Period, medieval influences during his Gosol phase proved to be less a direct appropriation, but instead, more a sampling of certain specific regional characteristics. Picasso primarily focused on facial features, and he incorporated many of the medieval elements that were seen in his Blue Period works. Elongated faces and structures appeared in both his male

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 434.

<sup>125</sup> Olivier, *Loving Picasso: The Private Journal of Fernande Olivier*, 182.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 184.

and female subjects, beginning almost immediately upon his arrival in Gosol. Palau i Fabre noted:

Picasso, who had learnt through Romanesque and Gothic that it is the theme that has to adapt to the composition or the material structure rather than the other way round, now discovered that everybody around him, regarded plastically, had to adapt to his creative needs and desires. It was this great lesson of freedom that was to permit him, from now on, to go as far as he liked on any adventure and in whatever direction he fancied.<sup>127</sup>

It is possible that by this point, the artist had come to view medieval characteristics—large almond shaped eyes, thick arched eyebrows, and thin lips—as being the most natural way of representing native Catalonians.

Picasso was once again further inspired by his cultural experiences. While in Gosol, the couple's entertainment was usually limited to religious festivals, which occurred once or twice a week.<sup>128</sup> The principal festivals held annually by the village also occurred during their visit. July 20<sup>th</sup> brought about the feast of Margarida, the second of these two major religious holidays. During this festival, Picasso attended mass at Santa Maria del Castell, Gosol's striking Romanesque church, and later witnessed a procession and dancing in the square. He was inspired by these events and made sketches that were later developed into full-scale compositions.<sup>129</sup> He first saw the emblematic image of the twelfth-century polychrome and wood Gosol Madonna (Fig. 68) at the Romanesque parish church of Santa Maria del Castell. Richardson noted how "this [Madonna] left more of a mark on Picasso's work than is generally allowed" and that her thick, arched eyebrows, enlarged almond-shaped eyes, and heavy linear outlines became a standard feature of his paintings during

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<sup>127</sup> Palau i Fabre, *Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*, 460-461.

<sup>128</sup> Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 451.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.





Figure 68: Gosol Madonna, twelfth-century.  
Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain.  
(*Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981.)

the months he spent working in Spain.<sup>130</sup> These distinctively Catalan features—along with medieval style flatness, geometry, and abstraction—were vividly exaggerated in both his self-portraits of the period and also in the caricatures he made of both his friends and acquaintances.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 452.

Two paintings from Gosol that display these unique medieval features are “Self-Portrait with a Palette” (Fig. 69) and “Woman with Loaves” (Fig. 70), which depicted Fernande in the guise of a native Catalanian. Picasso’s composition of these faces closely resembled that of the Gosol Madonna through both geometrical shape and the structure of the facial features. He also included the formerly appropriated Blue Period prominent eyes and arched brows. Here, the artist additionally placed an emphasis on sharpness and angularity in the jaw line and chin, and gave his figures almond-shaped heads, new features that later translated into his Cubist style. These two paintings therefore represent the beginning stages of medieval characteristics transitioning into Picasso’s forthcoming ultra-modern style.



Figure 69: Pablo Picasso, “Self-Portrait With a Palette,” 1906.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Figure 70: Pablo Picasso, “Woman With Loaves,” 1906.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art.

(*Picasso: The Early Years, 1881-1907*. New York: Rizzoli, 1981.)

The medieval style of rendering facial features that Picasso “rediscovered” in Gosol remained an integral part of his work throughout the fall and winter of 1906, a time span that is sometimes referred to by scholars as the “Iberian Period.” Picasso’s work at this time exhibited “primitive” qualities that have been attributed to an exhibition of Iberian art that opened at the Louvre in late summer 1906; however, these elements also bear a striking resemblance to medieval art, and would therefore logically be a continuation of his previous Gosol experimentation.

There are many discrepancies among scholars concerning the sources of Picasso’s inspiration during this phase of his career, and adding to the confusion is the argument for an “African Period,” a title that along with “Iberian Period” is often used to encompass his time in Gosol, even though he was only exposed to medieval art during this interval in his career.

The medieval characteristics that became a standard feature of Picasso’s Gosol imagery were carried through into the months that followed his return to Paris, and are further exemplified in the “Portrait of Gertrude Stein” (Fig. 71). Prior to his departure for Gosol, the young artist had worked on the painting extensively, but despite Gertrude’s claim that she allowed almost ninety sittings during the winter of 1905, he was never satisfied with his rendition of her face.<sup>131</sup> His experiences in Gosol allowed Picasso to see her in a new light, and once he returned to Paris in August of 1906, Picasso quickly completed the portrait without ever setting eyes on its subject. The finished image in fact looked almost nothing like Gertrude Stein, but instead more closely resembled the medieval-style portraits of Gosol.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 403.



Figure 71: Pablo Picasso, "Portrait of Gertrude Stein," 1906.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  
(<http://www.metmuseum.org/home.asp>)

In the months that followed, Picasso successfully transposed the Middle Ages into modern art through the creation of a radically new figural style, finally finding resolution in the artistic experimentation of his early career. He pushed the lessons of medieval art to new extremes as he entered into the early stages of Cubism, the movement that would eventually define his artistic identity. Through appropriation of medieval geometry and two-dimensionality, the artist was able to break the boundaries of complete figural abstraction, and in the summer of 1907, he completed "Les Femmes d'Alger" (Fig. 72), the painting that would ultimately be defined as the first purely Cubist work. Many of the medieval facial features that Picasso "rediscovered" during his time in Gosol were transposed onto the faces of these women through a more extreme, planar visual language.



Large eyes, almond-shaped heads, prominent eyebrows, and areas of form defined by heavy outlines transitioned into this painting, creating an ironic modern medieval experience. He also incorporated a more drastic linear style of drapery that appears to be modified from the more schematically patterned style of medieval figurative imagery, such as the frescos of San Clement de Tahüll (Fig.55).



Figure 72: Pablo Picasso, “Les Femmes d’Alger,” 1907.  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
([http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?object\\_id=79766](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=79766))



With this conception of Cubism, Picasso forever changed the course of modern art by creating a revolutionary new way of looking at the world. In the months and years culminating in “Les Femmes d’Alger,” the artist meticulously and innovatively collected elements from the past and combined them to create the art of the future. I recognize medieval art to be one of the many sources of appropriation utilized by the artist during his pre-Cubist career. Even though the idea has only been sparsely mentioned by scholars throughout previous decades, I believe that medieval art should be commonly acknowledged not only as a valid source of inspiration, but more importantly, distinguished as a key component of Picasso’s early work.

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## **Vita**

Erin Elizabeth Horton was born in Monroe, Louisiana, in December of 1984, and grew up in its neighboring town of Bastrop. During her childhood, she traveled extensively with her father, who is an artist, and was introduced to the art of many diverse cultures. This led to an interest in photography, which she later pursued at Louisiana Tech University. Erin graduated with her Bachelor of Fine Arts in photography with a minor in art history during the Spring of 2007. After a summer internship at the Masur Museum of Art in Monroe, Louisiana, she became intrigued by careers in the museum world and decided to seek a master's degree from Louisiana State University. Erin is a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in art history for the Spring semester of 2010. Upon completion of her degree, she plans to pursue a career as a museum curator or fine-art photographer.