

<p><b>Pablo Picasso,</b> <b><i>Night Fishing at Antibes,</i></b> 1939, oil on canvas, 206 x 345 cm (81 x 136")</p>	<p>initial analysis mainly intrinsic</p>	<p>The painting is large measuring over eleven feet in width.</p>
	<p>In the centre largest section two figures who could be male apparently fishing from a black and blue boat on a pale green sea. The figure on the left dips his head down towards the water. His left foot has a thick black line drawn from it down into the water as if fishing. A fish has just passed by this. The figure has red hair. The second figure on the right wears a blue and white striped shirt and blue trousers. He has caught a large fish with a four-pronged trident-like fork. To the left of this a yellow triangular shape with green outlines. Inside the shape a small circle with yellow and green radii extending beyond it.</p>	<p>All the figuration in the picture has a discrepant or disruptive feel as if it was composed of cut out shapes glued onto a flat surface. Most of the painting, with the exception of the red in the sky and the blue-green water, is flat and without nuance. The overall conjecture would be that these are iconic shapes and do not directly represent reality, even if they have been derived from a visual memory of a past experience.</p>
<p>In the top left an arrangement in mauve shapes with thick black outlines. Down the left side a number of brown shapes with black outlines. In the bottom left corner what appears to be a crab drawn in a rudimentary manner. Superimposed onto the left side of the fishermen are green shapes with yellow outlines that could represent stars.</p>		<p>On the right side two figures standing on a grey ground. One figure in a green skirt and white top with a green head scarf and mauve arms. She has a light blue face. She has white legs which appear to be on tiptoe. A The second figure wears a mauve dress. She has a prominent bosom. She has grey legs, upper body and head. She holds what could be a double ice-cream dessert which she licks with a blue tongue. Her left hand holds steady a black image of a bicycle. The figures are standing on a grey and green stone wall with mortar indicated by thick black and grey lines.</p>
	<p>Above the righthand fisherman is a bright yellow circular shape with a black outline containing an orange spiral shape and green dots. The spiral has black rays darted from beneath it and a twisting line in yellow trailing from it towards the right side. There are similar but faded twists of line above this. To the left of these shapes is an area of red imposed on a black and dark blue sky. To the right of the second fisherman is a green shape with protruding yellow lines. The lines have blue, mauve and grey-mauve backgrounds.</p>	<p>The painting is owned by the Museum of Modern Art, New York.</p>

## initial analysis, extrinsic context

Jaime Sabartés, Picasso's secretary and biographer was present when the work was being factured. He wrote, 'Picasso shut himself up in his room and began to paint, for the time being covering the canvas on the largest wall with a single theme: a night scene in a corner of the little port ... On his after-dinner strolls through the town, Picasso had come across such scenes, to which he added old impressions. In other words, he captured a scene with his eyes and upon transferring it to the canvas he added something more.'<sup>1</sup> The room was in an apartment owned by the photographer Man Ray and occupied by Picasso in Ray's absence.

The Spanish Civil War had recently ended with the Nationalist troops, headed by Franco, crushing the government of Republican Spain in the Spring of 1939 (thus, just before Picasso went to Antibes). Picasso's loyalties were known to be with the Republican government, whose cause he championed both verbally and through his work. In May or June, 1937, he stated:

'The Spanish struggle is the fight of reaction against the people, against freedom. My whole life as an artist has been nothing more than a continuous struggle against reaction and the death of art ... In the panel on which I am working which I shall call *Guernica*, and in all my recent works of art, I clearly express my abhorrence of the military caste which has sunk Spain in an ocean of pain and death.'

The scene.

The painting locates the town and the medieval Grimaldi castle of Antibes, represented on the left. The central area is the harbour of Antibes with a stone jetty on the right. Antibes a resort town between Cannes and Nice on the French Riviera (Côte d'Azur).

Some care needs to be taken when Close-Viewing intricate parts of the scene; those involving interpretations of the central light in the sky and the figures on the right side can be very misleading. An example of this difficulty can be recognised in Albert Boime's viewing.<sup>3</sup> According to Boime, 'Central to the visual impact of *Night Fishing* is the bright light near the top of the painting. It is a decoy lamp used by fishermen in Antibes and is called a *fasquie*. A strong acetylene lamp, the *fasquie* was used to lure the fish to the surface of the water – a treacherous substitute for the sun. In addition to the fish, the two women on the jetty are also attracted to the light; a ray from the *fasquie* symbolically uncoils toward the sexual organs of one of them. Indeed, there is an entire system of lines converging from the left into this area. These lines further encompass the two fishermen in the boat. While the women stand on the jetty they in turn attract the men whom they catch in the network of lines. In French, women are said to dangle lines before men as in fishing, 'tendre des filets.' At the same time, it may be noted that a popular food fish in France is called *poisson de nuit*, a tiny fish caught at night close to shore in small boats.<sup>4</sup> While the women lure the men, the men seduce them by performing an

<sup>1</sup> Jaime Sabartés. *Picasso: An Intimate Portrait*, translated by Angel Flores, London: W.H. Allen, 1949, p.179.

<sup>2</sup> Statement by Picasso prepared for an exhibition of Spanish Republican posters in New York under the auspices of the North American Committee Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy. Quoted in Alfred H. Barr, Jr. *Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946, p.202.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Boime. 'Picasso's "Night Fishing at Antibes": One More Try', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 29, no. 2, Winter 1970, pp. 223-226.

<sup>4</sup> E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, Paris, 1869, 2: 1195.

aggressive act to demonstrate prowess.<sup>5</sup> Much of what Boime says here is incorrect and conjectural. What has been useful is his attention to the *fasquie*. The object he chooses to discuss is in fact an Apocalyptic symbol and the *fasquie* is the triangular lantern on the right of the boat over the water.

#### The figures.

According to Mary Gedo, the figure in green is wearing a mantilla seen in profile and is Picasso's conception of his wife Olga Khokhlova. 'Picasso had previously depicted her wearing ... a traditional Spanish headdress in his *Olga in a Mantilla* of 1917, a portrait that he gave to his mother. (Gedo 1980: 115) However, the woman in the mantilla also may have evoked for Picasso the presence of his mother, who died in Barcelona on January 13, 1939. The artist was unable to return for her funeral because of the Civil War, and when Barcelona fell to the Nationalists two weeks later, the two events may have merged in his mind to symbolise the death of Spain.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that Khokhlova was a dancer with Diaghilev's *Ballet Russes* and her posture in the painting could suggest that of a dancer.

The other female figure is most probably Dora Maar, Picasso's companion in 1939.<sup>7</sup> Maar accompanied Picasso to Antibes in July 1939. Some commentaries think the figure combines two figures, one suggests Dora Maar and Jacqueline Lamba Breton who were walking with Picasso in Antibes in August 1939.<sup>8</sup> Another commentator suggests a combination of Dora Maar with Marie-Thérèse Walter.<sup>9</sup> There is no evidence for these combinations.

#### The sources.

The fishing scene could have been derived from or encouraged by a number of examples: Rudolf Arnheim evokes Raphael's tapestry *The Miraculous Draft of the Fishes* in the Sistine Chapel, as a pictorial source for the painting.<sup>10</sup> (The cartoon for the tapestry is in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.) George Levitine adds two possible sources: John Singleton Copley's 1778 *Watson and the Shark* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and Nicolaes Maes 1655 *The Bathers* in the Musée du Louvre,

---

<sup>5</sup> Albert Boime op. cit. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Mathews Gedo. *Picasso, art as autobiography*, Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Dora Maar was introduced to Pablo Picasso in 1935 and she became his companion and his muse. She took pictures in his studio at the Grands Augustins and tracked the latter stages of his work, *Guernica*. She also later acted as a model.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Penrose. *Picasso: His Life and Work*, London: Gollancz, 1958, p. 289.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Anglin Burgard. 'Picasso's "Night Fishing at Antibes": Autobiography, Apocalypse and the Spanish Civil War', *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 68, no. 4, December 1986, pp. 657-672. Marie-Thérèse Walter was the French lover and model of Pablo Picasso from 1927 to about 1935 and the mother of their daughter Maya Widmaier-Picasso.

<sup>10</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, 'Picasso's "Night Fishing at Antibes"', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 22, no. 2, Winter 1963, pp. 165-167.

Paris.<sup>11</sup> Both of these sources describe very different scenes, but there are features in both paintings that visually connect to Picasso's work with respect to the activities and postures of the fishermen.

Timothy Burgard alerts us to Picasso's interest in illuminated manuscripts related to the *Apocalypse*. In particular he cites Georges Bataille, Picasso's colleague, whose essay 'L'Apocalypse de St Sever' appeared in the periodical *Documents* in 1929.<sup>12</sup> The principal text of the *Apocalypse of St Sever* (in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, MS Lat. 8878) is an eighth-century Spanish commentary on the 'Revelation' by Beatus, Abbot of Liebana, who composed his Apocalyptic commentary following the eighth century Umayyad invasion of Spain. In 1931 a second article on Apocalypse illustrations, 'Les miniatures des commentaires aux Apocalypses de Gerona et de Seu d'Urgell,' was published by Picasso's Catalan friend Joaquin Folch i Torres in *Cahiers d'art*, a periodical edited by Christian Zervos.<sup>13</sup> A third article, entitled 'The Apocalypse – St. John Speaks Anew' by Andre Soares, appeared in the French periodical *Verve* in the spring of 1938.<sup>14</sup> 'One of the clues that *Night Fishing at Antibes* depicts an extraordinary event can be found in the yellow, orange, and black form at the top of the painting: It functions on one level as a setting sun or a rising moon, but it can also be seen as a brilliant star or as a comet, as suggested by its spiralling interior and tail.<sup>15</sup> The star or comet often appears in Western culture as a portent of great events, the most famous example being the star that appears in Giotto's *Adoration of the Magi* in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua.<sup>16</sup> It may also have secular significance, as an omen of calamity or war,<sup>17</sup> as in the Bayeux Tapestry, where Halley's Comet

---

<sup>11</sup> George Levitine. 'The Filiation of Picasso's "Night Fishing at Antibes"', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 22, no. 2, Winter 1963, pp. 171-175.

<sup>12</sup> George Bataille (ed.) *Documents*, 1929, 74-84, reproduces six illuminations from the *St Sever Apocalypse* in black-and-white.

<sup>13</sup> Joaquin Folch i Torres, 'Les miniatures des commentaires aux Apocalypses de Gerona et de Seu d'Urgell,' *Cahiers d'art*, v1, 1931, 331.

<sup>14</sup> A. Soares, 'The Apocalypse – St. John Speaks Anew,' *Verve*, 1, May June, 1938, 63-84.

<sup>15</sup> Gedo, 191, identifies this object as a 'whirling moon – or is it a great falling star?' Rosenthal, 652, writes that 'the form has the position of a pictorial precedent in a colour lithograph by André Masson entitled *The Sun*. This print was one of four illustrating an article by Georges Bataille that appeared in the same issue of *Verve* as did Soares' article. The subject of Masson's work would have appealed to Picasso because of the cosmic nature of the Apocalypse, and both artists' celestial objects are rendered with yellow grounds, and superimposed orange / red and black lines implying motion. See Georges Bataille, 'Heavenly Bodies,' *Verve*, 1, May-June, 1938, 104. The other three colour lithographs are *Stars* and *Comets* by Kandinsky, and *The Moon* by Masson.

<sup>16</sup> It has been suggested that Giotto's fresco of the *Adoration of the Magi* in the Scrovegni Chapel depicts Halley's Comet as the star over Christ's manger. J.M. Olson, 'Giotto 's Portrait of Halley's Comet,' *Scientific American*, CCL, 1979, 160-70.

<sup>17</sup> J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*, London, 1978, 42.

foretells the defeat of King Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.<sup>18 19</sup> Nina Corazzio<sup>20</sup> noted, ‘A spate of writings on Catalan art, prompted by an exhibition of works dating from the tenth to the fifteenth century at the Jeu de Paume, Paris, from March to April 1937, and the exhibition itself may have rekindled Picasso’s interest in Spanish art of the Romanesque period at the time he was painting this picture.’<sup>21</sup> Pierre Cabanne wrote, ‘Picasso told me that it was [in 1902] he discovered and admired the masterpieces of Romanesque Catalan painting ... While the Barcelona intellectuals appreciated these works for their ‘Catalanism,’ Picasso was one of the first to understand their deep ties, across the centuries, with contemporary experiments.’<sup>22</sup>

Corazzo writes, ‘If a pictorial source exists at all for Picasso’s painting, closer thematic and stylistic affinities can be traced between his fisherman and those of a Catalan fresco of the Romanesque period depicting *St Peter’s boat*, in the Museo de Arte de Cataluna. Picasso could have seen it on several occasions – when he visited the museum in 1934, when it was shown in Paris in the 1937 exhibition of Catalan art, or in reproduction in a text on Catalan art written by his friend Christian Zervos.’<sup>23</sup>

Corazzio concludes, ‘As Sabartes recounts, posters were put up in public places in Antibes with instructions for mobilisation. After 25th August and despite Picasso’s attempts to go on with life as usual, ‘every thing around us gradually assumed a warlike tempo’:

“Troops, and more troops, kept arriving. schools, garages, and all the big buildings were requisitioned. For days, the roads leading to the Alps were filled with military formations. Tourists left the hotels, which automatically filled up with officers.”<sup>24</sup>

This invasion of Antibes served as a reminder of past atrocities and heralded a frightening premonition of what was to come.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> See F. Stenton (ed.), *The Bayeux Tapestry: A Comprehensive Survey*, London, 1957, pl. 35. For contemporary literary accounts of the cornet’s appearance, see William of Poitiers’ *Gesta Willelmi ducis normannorum et regis anglorum*, reproduced and translated in R. Foreville (ed.), *Guillaume de Poitiers: Histoire de Guillaume le Conquerant*, Paris, 1952, 208-09. Also see the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, reproduced in D.C. Douglas and G.W. Greenaway, *English Historical Documents 1042-1189*, 11, New York, 1953, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Bugard op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Nina Corazzo. ‘Picasso’s “Night Fishing at Antibes”’: A New Source,’ *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 132, no. 1043, February 1990, pp. 99-101.

<sup>21</sup> ‘The exhibition was called *L’Art catalan du Xe au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* and for this Christian Zervos wrote, ‘A l’ombre de la guerre civile; l’art catalan du X au XV siècle au Musée du Jeu de Paume des Tuileries’, Mai-Avril, 1937, Paris: Editions Cahiers d’Art, pp.213-16. Zervos et al. wrote *L’Art de la Catalogne: de la seconde moitié du neuvième siècle à la fin du quinzième siècle*, Paris: Editions Cahiers d’Art, 1937. An accompanying catalogue to the exhibition was published by the Jeu de Paume, listing the complete works exhibited.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Cabanne. *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times*, translated by H.J. Salemson, New York, 1977, p.77.

<sup>23</sup> Corazzo op. cit. 19. The fresco is illustrated in Zervos op. cit., plate lxxx.

<sup>24</sup> Sabartes op. cit. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Corazzo op.cit. 19.

## summary

The central figure in *Night Fishing at Antibes* is Picasso. He is watching himself catching a fish alongside a colleague who is trying but is less success. They are in the harbour at Antibes, the town and Grimaldi Castle are behind them on the left. On the right are two women, potentially they are persuading Picasso to join them. They are posing the question posed to Hercules at the crossroads of his journey, should he choose virtue or pleasure.<sup>26</sup> Around the scene an Apocalypse is occurring, confirmed by the comet and stars. This Apocalypse is exemplified by the Spanish loss of democracy and by the impending European war. Picasso is reminded of the circumstances: he is refused entry into Spain to attend his mother's funeral, he is in social conflict in his private life. He had married Olga Khokhlova in 1918 (after visiting Spain to see his mother who was worried that he should marry a 'foreigner'), but Khokhlova lived apart from him after 1935 on discovering Picasso's affair and love child with Marie-Thérèse Walter. That same year he met Dora Maar. In July 1939 Picasso was in conflict, he was in Antibes with Dora Maar, his wife, Olga Khokhlova, with their son Paulo, were in Cannes. Picasso's personal circumstances are part of his attention to a chaotic period.

The painting is factured on a large scale, it is beyond being about Picasso's personal life, it is about human plight and the European situation. Picasso reflects on the achievement of Goya.<sup>27</sup> Picasso's work like Goya's is allegorical of the human condition at the place and moment of its facture, but lifted into a more substantial set of attentions. The work stands in concert with Picasso's earlier larger work *Guernica* (1937) and puts Picasso in preparation for the paintings to follow such as *The Charnel House* (1944-45), *Massacre in Korea* (1951), and *War and Peace* (1952). *Night Fishing at Antibes* addresses the dilemmas of reserve and prowess, virtue and pleasure, at the beginning of another world war.

---

<sup>26</sup> The subject appears in Annibale Carracci's painting, *Hercules at the Crossroads between Virtue and Vice* (1596, now in the Capodimonte Museum, Naples). Nicholas Poussin painted the subject in the early 1600s, this painting is in the Stourhead collection, Wiltshire. The extensive moral and aesthetic discussion of the subject was written by Anthony Ashley Cooper in 1712 (in French, then in English 1713), 'A Notion of the Historical Draught of the Tablature of the Judgement of Hercules'. A copy of a 1732 searchable reprint can be obtained from <https://archive.org/details/characteristicks03shafiala> on pages 346-391.

<sup>27</sup> In particular Goya's *The Third of May, 1808*, (1814, Museo del Prado, Madrid), the central figure with outstretched arms, lit by a lantern on the ground at his feet, in front of the firing squad.