What lies beneath: The link between Pablo Picasso's *Scene de Rue* (1900) and *Le Moulin de la Galette* (1900)

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Received: 21 December 2018 / Accepted: 4 November 2020 / Published online: 3 December 2020
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Abstract

The visual relationship between two works, both painted by Pablo Picasso in Paris in 1900, is explored. An obliterated, but almost complete, image of the interior of a dance hall was discovered by researchers under *Scene de Rue* (*Rue de Montmartre*) in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Its composition is closely related to a work of the same period, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's *Moulin de la Galette*, which has historically been considered the artist's first painting from his first visit to Paris. Traditional tools used for technical analysis of paintings were combined with digital technology in order to recreate an approximation of the hidden image in color. Similarities in the two compositions are presented, in a comparison of the two related works. The theory of the author is that the presumed short time between the application of the two layers of oil paint to one canvas did not allow for sufficient oxidation of the lower, unfinished, composition. The result of this layering is the network of drying cracks that allows the colors of the lower composition to be revealed through the upper layer of paint on the San Francisco painting.

Keywords Pablo Picasso · Conservation · X-radiography · Moulin de la Galette

1 Introduction

Historically, the first painting¹ to result from the premiere visit of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) to Paris, between October and December 1900, has been considered the Guggenheim's masterpiece *Le Moulin de la Galette* (Fig. 1). Arriving in the French capital from Barcelona on a date somewhere around his 19th birthday, he was a young man full of ambition, eager to make a name for himself in the art world of Paris. Picasso's main motivation was to view his painting *Last Moments* (1898, overpainted with *La Vie*, 1903, Cleveland Museum of Art) which was on display in the Spanish pavilion of the Universal Exposition at the Grand Palais. But another important destination was the Moulin de la Galette, a converted windmill that still stands on the hillside of Montmartre. The moulin had

been extended in the mid-nineteenth century into a dance hall, where the flour mill continued to process flour for the small brown cakes called galettes; hence the name. The dance hall was still a popular destination for Parisians at the turn of the century, although by the autumn of 1900 when Picasso arrived, it had become a somewhat tawdry place frequented by prostitutes.

Picasso was aware of this place for several reasons. One of his mentors in Barcelona, the Catalan artist Ramon Casas, had lived in a flat overlooking the dance hall, and it served as inspiration for several of his paintings, as well as the work of his roommate Santiago Rusiñol. Young Picasso would have been aware of these paintings and probably seen them in person in Barcelona. But beyond that, the Moulin de la Galette, like the nearby Moulin Rouge, was a frequent subject for important French painters of the

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Fig. 1 Pablo Picasso, *Le Moulin de la Galette*, Paris, ca. November 1900, oil on canvas, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Thannhauser Collection, Gift, Justin K. Thannhauser, 1978, 78.2514.34. © of the reproductions of works by Pablo Picasso: Pablo Picasso's Estate. VEGAP. Madrid, 2020. Permission to reproduce courtesy of VEGAP

generation before Picasso, most famously Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who painted its interior and its patrons several times in the 1880's, Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh, who painted the exterior around 1889, and before all of them, and perhaps most famously, impressionist Pierre-Auguste Renoir, whose view of the outdoor space of the Moulin, painted *en plein air* in 1876, is an icon of the era.

The audacity shown by the young Spaniard upon his arrival in Paris and in his first months there to challenge the masters of the generation before him is astonishing. His interpretation of the *Moulin de la Galette* is unlike any that preceded it, with its Spanish-inspired chiaroscuro palette, its blurred faces, its sinister overtones, and the hints of lesbianism in the foreground. Picasso ushered the dance hall, and Paris, and the art world into the 20th century with his *Moulin*, one of the jewels of the Thannhauser Collection and of the Guggenheim Museum.

But when exactly did Picasso paint it? The precise dates are not known for certain, but it was created at some point during his first Paris stay, which lasted almost exactly two months between late October and Christmas of 1900. Its immediate sale (through Berthe Weill to a Toulouse newspaper publisher) is well documented as a historic transaction, because the *Moulin* was the first work by Picasso to enter a French collection.² An illustrated page of correspondence with friends in Barcelona dated 19 November 1900³ mentions his excitement about a painting of

² Richardson, [2, p. 168]

³ Letter from Pablo Picasso and Carles Casagemas to Ramon Reventós, Paris, 19 November 1900, Dr. Jacint Reventós Collection, Barcelona.

Fig. 2 Pablo Picasso, *Scene de Rue (Rue de Montmartre)*, 1900, oil on canvas, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Bequest of Harriet Lane Levy, © of the reproductions of works by Pablo Picasso: Pablo Picasso's Estate. VEGAP. Madrid, 2020. Permission to reproduce courtesy of VEGAP

the Moulin de la Galette that he is working on.⁴ But was the Guggenheim painting really his first Paris painting? Another version of the dance hall scene, which almost certainly pre-dates the *Moulin de la Galette*, is the subject of this paper.

1.1 Examining *Scene de Rue*

I was head of conservation at SFMOMA during the time that this research first took place. Our early work by Picasso, referred to variously in the literature as either *Scene de Rue* or *Rue de Montmartre*, (Fig. 2) was usually on display, and minimal technical records existed about its structure. *Scene de Rue* is a low-key, quiet easel painting of modest dimensions, a competent, but not exciting, early work from the same period as the *Moulin*, autumn 1900. It shows three figures facing away from the viewer, surrounded by a townscape, apparently of Montmartre, with the palette suggesting that it was painted around sundown.

Routine examination of the painting in the Elise Haas conservation studio at the museum did not reveal anything extraordinary to the paintings conservators, but there had long been suspicions among the SFMOMA conservation staff that something laid beneath the visible composition. Raking light in particular revealed textural irregularities that gave away brushwork unrelated to the composition of the *Scene de Rue*, especially the curving ridges of paint near the man at the left (Fig. 3), and above the head of the woman (Fig. 4). Ultraviolet fluorescence

⁴ From conversations with Maria Teresa Ocaña, then-director of the Museu Picasso, Barcelona, at various dates 1998–99.

Fig. 3 Details in raking light, images courtesy SFMOMA Elise S. Haas Conservation Studio. © of the reproductions of works by Pablo Picasso: Pablo Picasso's Estate. VEGAP. Madrid, 2020. Permission to reproduce courtesy of VEGAP

Fig. 4 Details in raking light, images courtesy SFMOMA Elise S. Haas Conservation Studio. © of the reproductions of works by Pablo Picasso: Pablo Picasso's Estate. VEGAP. Madrid, 2020. Permission to reproduce courtesy of VEGAP

revealed some areas of retouching and suggested the presence of a natural resin varnish layer but did not yield much deeper information.

Even in normal light, however, with nothing but simple visual examination, wide drying cracks could be observed across much of the surface, and some of these were large enough to reveal unrelated colors through the linear openings in the upper paint film (Fig. 5). These visual clues, many of them made available to us because of the extensive pattern of drying cracks, were tantalizing, but it was not a priority for the SFMOMA staff to delve deeper into the structure of *Scene de Rue*.

That situation changed when the National Gallery of Art requested *Scene de Rue* as a loan for their 1997 exhibition *Picasso The Early Years*. In Washington, along with all of the loan works, the conservation team took a closer look at the SFMOMA painting. Infrared reflectography yielded more tantalizing clues about another composition, especially a ghostly vertical shape between the figures that was not visible in normal light. But it was the radiograph made by the National Gallery that began to reveal the astonishing hidden composition and to suggest its completeness. Ann Hoenigswald, who was then paintings conservator

Fig. 5 Detail of drying cracks, image courtesy SFMOMA Elise S. Haas Conservation Studio. © of the reproductions of works by Pablo Picasso: Pablo Picasso's Estate. VEGAP. Madrid, 2020. Permission to reproduce courtesy of VEGAP

at the National Gallery of Art, broke this news to us: that an extraordinarily complete composition lay beneath the SFMOMA painting. When the radiograph was adjusted to eliminate the stretcher bars, the scene became easier to

Fig. 6 X-radiographic image, digitally enhanced for clarity, of SFMOMA's *Scene de Rue*, courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. © of the reproductions of works by Pablo Picasso: Pablo Picasso's Estate. VEGAP. Madrid, 2020. Permission to reproduce courtesy of VEGAP

read. And further digital enhancement made the figures stand out in chiaroscuro (Fig. 6). Well dressed couples stood side-by-side on the left side of the canvas in an undefined interior scene, with a swirl of brushwork on the right side somewhat more difficult to interpret, but the frieze of heads and hats continued across the upper third of the painting. A large dark figure dominated the left side of the canvas.

With this exciting news, the paintings conservators (the author and Paula De Cristofaro) at SFMOMA began to look more in earnest at *Scene de Rue*. The treatment began by removing the surface grime and then having a closer look at the cracks through a binocular microscope in order to determine what could be learnt about the lower layer of paint. The abundance of color information that was semi-concealed made us feel certain that, given the opportunity, the hidden image could be revealed so obvious in the radiograph, and to apply the colors visible through the cracks to the black-and-white image so as to create, at least in part, a color version of the long-hidden painting.

Several years ensued, and a breakthrough in the research came when Paul Schwartzbaum, then head of conservation of the Guggenheim Museums, invited me to curate an exhibition on the hidden painting in Bilbao. The assumption was that the SFMOMA team would be able to produce a color version of the work to present to the public by the time of the opening. It was quite a challenge, but the conservators set to work, side-by-side with SFMOMA's producer of interactive educational technologies Tim Svenonius. After creating high-resolution digital scans of both the painting and the x-ray image, the team began morphing the two by first superimposing the figures of the visible painting on top of the hidden one (Fig. 7). Thus, a precise grid of x/y coordinates

Fig. 7 Linear outlines of three primary figures visible in SFMOMA's *Scene de Rue*, superimposed over the hidden dance hall image. © of the reproductions of works by Pablo Picasso: Pablo Picasso's Estate. VEGAP. Madrid, 2020. Permission to reproduce courtesy of VEGAP

was created so that we could view the exact overlap of the cracked image and its relationship to the shapes in the black-and-white radiograph could be identified.

The painstaking process then began of transferring the colors digitally from the cracks onto the black-and-white x-ray image. As Tim Svenonius and I worked systematically to apply colors to each shape, it was very helpful to have as reference points accurate color images of other works of similar subjects from Picasso's first trips to Paris. This was because some of the colors, particularly of the flesh tones, were unexpected, showing the experimental nature of his figurative work as he redefined flesh tones in the artificial light of the dance hall. So it helped us to know that we were on the right track as we created the color images, even if some of the faces were greenish. Gradually, piece-by-piece the colors were applied to the shapes, and although some guesswork was required, upon completion it was felt that about 80% of the palette was actually close to Picasso's intention, since in only less than 20% of the composition the shapes and/or the colors were ambiguous. He seems to have left the foreground unfinished, and the shapes of the background were suggested rather than completed. Some details of faces were unclear, although that may have been an intentional choice. With very little extrapolation required, the virtual recreation of the hidden color image complete was finally declared (Fig. 8). The Guggenheim Bilbao presented a popular exhibition around the discovery called "A Hidden Picasso," which included both the San Francisco and the New York paintings. (A didactic version was later mounted by the education and

Fig. 8 Colorized radiograph of the image beneath SFMOMA's *Scene de Rue*. © of the reproductions of works by Pablo Picasso: Pablo Picasso's Estate. VEGAP. Madrid, 2020. Permission to reproduce courtesy of VEGAP

curatorial departments of SFMOMA and presented to the public in 2007.)

So, what is this painting about? The first figure that stands out is the large woman in black who dominates the left edge of the composition. She faces the viewer but looks over her shoulder toward the action of the rest of the painting. Maria Teresa Ocaña, who was director at the Museu Picasso in Barcelona when I began my research, identified the woman in black as La Celestina, a figure from Spanish literature who was part witch, part procuress, and who was portrayed by Picasso in another painting: a large Blue Period work from 1904 now at the Musée Picasso in Paris, in which the figure is shown as a three-quarter-length portrait against a blue background.

Young Picasso had created a similar composition with a procuress on the left hand side of a seduction scene in a Barcelona brothel, in a pastel work owned by the Barcelona museum called *El Divan (The Couch)* from 1899. This was a thematic connection also made by Directora Ocaña when she viewed the x-ray image of the hidden painting. The placement of the woman in black, set off to the left from the central grouping of figures and observing the action, echoes her placement in the brothel scene. Picasso gave some significance to this figure, because when he returned to the dance hall theme in final version of *Moulin de la Galette* we also see a woman in black with a blue ribbon or other decoration on her black headgear, although she is more fully incorporated into the action of the scene. She dominates the foreground, although she is still an observer who faces the viewer and glances sideways at the action behind her. The elbow of her predecessor also juts out slightly to form a kind of triangle. Why was this Celestina-like figure removed from the final version of the

Moulin? Perhaps Picasso was advised—or he discovered himself—that she was too Spanish a reference for a French audience, and that she did not belong either in Paris or in the Moulin de la Galette.

The can-can dancers themselves are removed from the final version, which instead creates dancers of the paying guests, who are engaged in a more sophisticated cheek-to-cheek Brazilian *maxixe* for which the Moulin was well known at the time.⁵ Still it is clear that Picasso was drawn to the French can-can theme, as he devoted a single canvas to the dancers on his second trip to Paris (*French Can-Can*, oil on board, 1901, private collection). In that version he throws himself into the middle of the petticoats of the dancers rather than relegating them to the side of the painting.

And yet...he painted over all of these people. Why?

The relative scale of the paintings was certainly a factor. At 88.2 cm × 115.5 cm, the Guggenheim painting is roughly four times the size of the San Francisco canvas (47.63 cm × 66.68 cm). It is quite possible that Picasso liked the dance hall scene so much that he put the original composition with the can-can dancers aside, having decided to make a bigger statement with a different version of the dance hall interior. So he took the small canvas and painted it over, with something, perhaps, that he thought—or he was advised—would sell more quickly, the Montmartre street scene.

The research team did not make cross sections of the layers of the San Francisco painting, but there is no visual evidence of a continuous obliterating layer of paint or ground between the two layers of oil paint.⁶ This would be consistent with Picasso's lifelong tendency to use canvases more than once, not always for economic reasons, but as part of a game in which he evolved one image into another. This type of morphing was recorded most famously by French film director Henri Clouzot in 1956 when he observed the middle-aged Picasso turning, for instance, a fish into a rooster, as he painted on a clear piece of glass for the movie camera. This type of metamorphosis is visible on many canvases if the observer is vigilant enough. Ann Hoenigswald considers this a visual game for Picasso in which he leaves "clues" for the viewer about what lies beneath.⁷

⁵ Richardson, [2, p. 167]

⁶ Similarly, the research team limited itself to digital information that was readily available to us in 2004. Further data might be yielded through the use of an XRF macro scanner, a tool that might be considered as a desirable option in the future, as research on the hidden painting continues.

⁷ Hoenigswald, [1, p 308]

When considering the two overlaid works from 1900, it must be remembered that regardless of specific dates on which they were painted, the time frame was very short. Picasso's first stay in Paris lasted only two months, between late October and late December 1900. So the time between the creation of the earlier and the later painting on the San Francisco canvas must have been quite brief. And depending on many variables like the weather, and the possible additions of extenders and driers to the oil paint, the first painting was probably not completely dry, having not had sufficient time to oxidize, before another layer of paint went on top of it. This timing factor is quite likely the primary cause of the many drying cracks that allow us to peek through the top layer to the one below.

Why did Picasso choose the imagery in the San Francisco painting? The three people that can be seen in the street scene were the types of figures that appear regularly in his small *carnet* from this period, which is part of the permanent collection of the Museu Picasso in Barcelona. The palm-sized sketchbook accompanied him around Paris, and he used it to record figures and their gestures as he explored the city. In addition, he was being advised in these first months by gallerist Pere Mañach to paint local scenes and portraits that would be easy to sell.⁸ Some of the imagery that Picasso was painting over dictated the composition on top, such as, for instance, the flat frieze of shapes in the background, and the man with his hands in his pockets, who is seen in profile in the pose of a group of several dance hall patrons from the previous painting.

And although Picasso obliterated the painting, the dance hall imagery stayed with him. Anne Baldassari, who was then curator of photographs at the Musée Picasso Paris, provided me with a small photograph from the Paris photo archive of Picasso in his studio on Boulevard Clichy on his second trip to Paris in 1901.⁹ What is of interest in this image is a barely-visible piece of paper attached to the wall between Pere Mañach and visiting Basque artist Antonio Torres Fuster. Is it impossible to tell if it is a drawing, or a sketch by Picasso, or a clipping from a magazine, but the image is clearly one of a frieze of couples in motion in what appears to be a dance hall. So in the year after the creation of our 1900 paintings, young Picasso remained interested in this theme that first brought him to prominence in France.

2 Conclusion

Is it grave-robbing to revive a painting that an artist rejected? As previously noted, Picasso left clues about obliterated images in many works throughout his long career. In this case, our recovery of the hidden dance hall image contributes to a body of knowledge about young Picasso's fascination with this imagery. It also suggests the working process of his development of the theme—what he retained and what he rejected—that would be realized in his first major work in France. During the course of the reconstruction of the hidden painting, no attempt to make a physical mock-up of the painting was done, but rather only a transparency that is a compilation of digital information.

One by one the mysteries revealed themselves as the colors met the black-and-white image. The orange dress of the central figure is the shape that showed clearly through infrared reflectography. The swirling brushwork to the right of the woman's head in the Montmartre street scene turned out to be the hat of the central cancan dancer. And the brilliant red that shows through the overcoat of the woman in the street is the jacket of the same dancer. Thanks to the flaw in young Picasso's technique—or to his eagerness to get it right in a short period of time—it was possible to give new life, in a virtual way, to these long-hidden figures from 1900.

Acknowledgements The conservation, curatorial and education departments of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Musée Picasso Paris, the Museu Picasso Barcelona, the conservation department of the National Gallery of Art, especially Ann Hoenigswald, the curatorial department of the Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, and Marilyn McCully. Research was funded by the Museo Guggenheim Bilbao. Sponsorship from the Museu Picasso, Barcelona, to cover permission fees for the reproduction of works by Picasso is gratefully acknowledged

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest present in this research.

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⁸ Richardson [2, p. 168]

⁹ Anonymous, *Pablo Picasso, Pere Mañach et Torres Fuster dans l'atelier du 130ter boulevard de Clichy, 1901*, photo RMN-Grand Palais/Musée National Picasso – Paris).