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Picasso's "Affaire des Statuettes"

Everything around him was meant to signify manliness. He wasn't a tall man but he exuded the self-serious affect of authentic masculinity. A photograph at the height of his youth and verve in the early part of the twentieth century Paris is the semi-placid face of a confident rake, with a thick, side-swept dark shock of hair and a thin, barely there smile. Paris was by 1911 the established center of European art, having served as the nexus for the impressionists and now the post-impressionists led by him, Pablo. A man of many mistresses, who would become known for the many more to come, he was also at crux of a community of other men who looked to him for inspiration. Among them was Guillaume Apollinaire, a poet and Pablo's best friend who had crafted poetry in the cubist style.

The studio, his latest mistress—Fernande Olivier—his reputation, his cache, could all be taken away because of way lay in a bottom drawer in his studio.

Whatever was there was certainly *not* the *Mona Lisa*!

He wasn't used to this feeling. He had been a prodigy, out-painting the masters as a child. He was from then until this moment the envy of other artists. Once the DaVinci had gone missing, out of nowhere, the Louvre became the center of their investigation. And it wouldn't be long before the police knew all about the statues.

Two lumps of limestone, unremarkable to perhaps anyone else, lurked like guilty shadows in Pablo's sock drawer. He loved them, had taken inspiration from their ancient, worn faces and now they were like weights around his neck.

Not long after some burglar had merely walked out of the museum with the painting the newspapers had declared that the hunt was on. What visions he and Guillaume had conjured after that likely revolved around not merely imprisonment, but deportation. It was all under threat: the studio, the women, the men who admired him, and the city in which he was the soul of the world of modern art.

His panic on this hot August night rose up from that frenzy to retrieve the painting and the discovery of many more missing pieces. The police had already narrowed in on Guillaume's "adventurer" assistant, Honoré Joseph Géry-Pieret. Géry-Pieret had been brazenly stealing from the museum and sold the poet the pre-Roman Iberian statues four or five years earlier, then had run off to America only to return earlier in 1911 looking for money. He had sent some other pieces into *Paris-Journal* with an anonymous note which had prompted an article that no doubt turned Pablo's and Guillaume's livers to jelly.

This is because Géry-Pieret's letter mentioned two more statues which he sold to a client for a gift to an unnamed painter friend.

One can imagine their panic, the evaporation of the masculine calm of the jaunty, secure man staring out at us from that picture. Because it could all be taken away. It all stood on the statues in the drawer.

No doubt the two friends, the painter and the poet, argued in Pablo's studio: over Géry-Pieret, the trust Guillaume put in the strange Belgian, over Pablo's rabid patriotic need to own those forgotten, uncommon stone faces. And it's easy to imagine, with all they held dear in jeopardy that they bickered like petty, terrified boys, sweating in the late Paris summer. And what might Fernande have thought as their manly facades imploded before her?

It was normal, they might have argued, for the Louvre's many stored works to go missing. How could they trace them. The *Paris-Journal* hadn't printed the thief's name. Though they might, no? Certainly not; there were journalist standards! The police will find him, find you, Guillaume, then me. Géry-Pieret won't say anything. No, what about "painter friend?" They don't even know where he is. Fool, I'll be sent back to Spain. I should be so lucky, I'll be sent to Poland! If only the greedy madman kept quiet. But you went so many times back to see those statues; and the stamps on the bases all say "PROPERTY OF THE MUSEE DU LOUVRE."

And at some point, through the panic, and probably much browbeating from Pablo, they decided to get rid of the evidence. It wouldn't have been easy to get them into the valise but as they did we would see clearly their influence on Pablo's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (The Young Ladies of Algiers) in the hard planes of the women of the painting, their stone-like skin, and the quest for newer yet more primitive art. These pieces of stone were ties to a romantic Spanish past unclouded by Roman history. They were tribal and European at the same time, new and yet old. They were the source of Pablo's inspiration, his artistic tomorrow, his reputation, and his origin. And if they succeeded tonight the statues would be at the bottom of the Seine.

Did the bickering spread out with them into the night as they drug the valise full of evidence—thirty pounds of evidence—through the streets to the river? Did they take turns? Did Pablo make Guillaume do most of the work? Were they stealthy or loud? Did they get lost, go down blind streets, through alleys? Did they think the police were watching? Were the police watching? What about the stairs down to the river itself?

Questioned later, they admitted to this adventure through the streets, though not the quality or tenor. In the end they confessed they could not throw the statues into the river. But was it out of respect for history? Fear of reprisal over the permanent loss?

Perhaps they reprised their arguments there at the edge of the dark water where the city's effluvium washed past. Decorum won out, yet it must have been some kind of battle to reach the decision to take them back: they would have to retrace their steps, proof of their crimes in hand, all the way back to the *Bateau Lavoir*—the laundry boat. And likely that journey back was not so bitter, but rather cowed and quiet, full of the sounds of labor on a dank Parisian summer night.

They tried the same stunt as Géry-Pieret. Guillaume left the statues at the office of the *Paris-Journal* on the 5th of September of 1911 during the morning. He was known by the staff of the paper and yet hadn't bothered to conceal his identity, meaning that Pablo had bullied him into doing so. An "honorable individual" from the staff sent them right to Guillaume.

Upon the publishing of the article, the Louvre's curator recognized the statues. Soon, Guillaume was in custody. He pretended innocence at first but Pablo was eventually questioned as well, claiming loudly never to have seen the man known to be his best friend.

Guillaume, willing to be the man Pablo was not, confessed to the buying the stolen statues, risking the focus of the police who were more than willing to scapegoat him for the *Mona Lisa*'s theft. He pointed them to the real thief, Géry-Pieret. When it became clear the poet and his sniveling artist friend had nothing to do with the painting's disappearance, the police lost interest in their trafficking in two minor statues.

Guillaume Apollinaire, a native Pole raised in France, loved his adopted country enough to serve in the First World War. He was hospitalized for a headwound where he died of influenza.

Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* is nearly as valued as the *Mona Lisa*, both standing as pivotal examples of their respective periods in art history. He died in 1973 at 91 and was remembered, despite this incident, as an example of 20th century masculine identity.