Sometimes, the decision to add a book to Columbia's collection is as much about its context as its content. No one disputes, to pick an example at random, whether James Joyce's *Ulysses* belongs in a research library, but in addition to being a prime exemplar of the Modernist novel—a text to be explored for its story, its style, its influences and influence—it is also a locus for legal history and social history. Soon after its publication in serial form (from 1914-1921) *Ulysses* was banned for obscenity in both the United Kingdom and the United States, a state of affairs that remained in place, in the U.S., at least, until 1933.

While I make no similar claims for the monumental and influential nature of Nick Bertozzi's *The Salon*, it serves a similar double function in our collection. Not only is it a fascinating romp through one particular, singular, Modernist circle, it also has served as a bellwether for modern legal attitudes towards obscenity—at least in one community in the American south.

The book sweeps us back to Paris in 1907, where Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo preside over one of the most notorious salons in western cultural history (well, truthfully, I don't know much about Madame de Staël's salons in 18th-century France and England, but we'll just take it as read, shall we?). Gertrude embraced the avant-garde movement in art and literature, and she and Leo collected most of the great Modernist painters of their era: Matisse, Picasso, Cézanne, Braque, Gauguin, Bonnard... the list simply goes on and on. Stein was something of a monument of Modernism herself: a prolific writer of poems, novels, plays, and essays, whom you've actually quoted if you've ever said, of a place that
hadn't much to say for itself, "There's no there there." (Gertrude was referring to Oakland, California, which has since made great strides.)
modern art (Picasso appears to take the Katzenjammer Kids as inspiration for the strange, dark dots of eyes in his portrait of Gertude Stein), and sibling rivalry (Gertude's and Leo's differences come to a head with the introduction of Alice B Toklas, who would become Gertude's life-long companion). Picasso is the dominant figure here, as much for the force of his personality as for his artistic stature, despite the plot putatively revolving around the Steins. The little Spanish fireplug is depicted as arrogant, priapic, violent, and passionate, by turns, but your attention never strays while he's on the page. The color palette of the panels changes from section to section and sometimes page to page, but blue and pink feel predominant, as if in homage to Picasso's Blue and Rose Periods.

While Modernism turned its back on traditional influences in an attempt to create something wholly new, Bertozzi seems to dip into a post-Modernist pool of predecessors, whether intentionally or not. It's unlikely, perhaps, that Bertozzi knew of that Mary Poppins story, never having been a 10-year-old girl with an Anglophilic bent, but there are other echoes. At one point, for example, the Scooby Salonistes track down the addresses of other customers of the blue absinthe, hoping to locate the painting from which the suspect, Annah, is emerging. Trying to pry away the absinthe from one Parisian, they capitalize on the Gallic inclination towards anti-Semitism, implying that drinking the absinthe makes one want to convert to Judaism. That same inclination was exploited by the Baroness Orczy in her 1905 novel, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, when her 18th-century hero, a master of disguise risking all for one last rescue, masquerades as a Jew, knowing that no gendarme will thus come near enough to detect his fakery. (This crucial scene, unsurprisingly, is not included in the 1934 film starring Leslie Howard, who was himself Jewish.)

So this is the content. What about the context? Well, in 2002 an excerpt from *The Salon* was included in an anthology comic that was handed out on Free Comic Book Day by a comics store in Rome, Georgia, where the comic ended up in the hands of a young boy. The store owner, Gordon Lee, was arrested and charged with two felony counts and five misdemeanor counts of distributing material containing sexual conduct and distributing said material to a minor (interesting that the distribution to the minor is actually the lesser charge). The Comic Book Legal Defense Fund came to Lee's aid, and the case ended in a mistrial, but the threat of prosecution still hangs over Lee's head. (You can watch Bertozzi and Charles Brownstein of the CBLDF discuss the incident here, from the recent graphic novel symposium, SPLAT!)

The offending panels, which you can see in the video above—I won't jeopardize the good folks at Comixology by reproducing them—show Picasso with full frontal nudity. He has been interrupted while masturbating, which forms another commonality with the *Ulysses* case, since it was a passage about masturbation that led to that kerfuffle as well. The Rome D.A.'s office believed Picasso was shown with an erection, which, upon close examination, seems quite the insult to Picasso.

Nudity in art has become a more and more contested subject. When I was about 12, my parents took me to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see an exhibit of Picasso drawings, many of which featured detailed examinations of female genitalia. My mother hurried me past these, but chose not to prosecute the Met for distributing obscenity to minors. Just two years ago, however, a teacher in Texas lost her job for taking her students to an art museum, where they were exposed to an ancient Greek nude statue.

What is obscene? What is age appropriate? These are issues that plague the comics industry, as publishers claim both that comics aren't just for kids any more and also that comics are great for kids. Obscenity runs like a sly blue theme through *The Salon*, where Eadweard Muybridge is glimpsed trying to sell a motion study of a fairly decorous striptease, Apollinaire solicits saucy French postcard porn from Braque on their first meeting,
and brothels play a fairly prominent role.

So, *The Salon* manages to comment on both Modernist society and our own society, while itself representing a commentary on contemporary social and legal mores. That's a feat of triple perspective worthy of the creators of Cubism themselves.

Previous article: My Comic History, part one
Next article: ...Mea Maxima Culpa

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