María Blanchard and the Ideology of Primitivism

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From a biographical perspective, the Spanish painter María Blanchard (1881–1932) can certainly be considered a genius, if the word is defined in terms of singularity and her achievement is measured against the social and artistic conventions available to Spanish women at that time. But genius is a contested category. It assumes both rank and originality, two concepts that appear to be at odds with each other. It depends on recognition and implies a consensus on matters of achievement, therefore making it dependant on its historical and geographical contexts. Yet, however circumscribed by the specificity of time and place, it is nevertheless perceived as timeless and universal. It is also a category from which women have traditionally been excluded. The history of the concept has been traced back to ancient Rome, and its gender bias exposed by feminist critics such as Christine Battersby in *Gender and Genius*, where she points out that while the paradigm of genius is male, the category itself is often conceived as feminine, at least within the sphere of artistic creativity.[1] Paradoxically, however, its attainment was considered to be beyond the reach of the female artist. Even when the struggle for the emancipation of women had already made some advances in the first decades of the twentieth century, the standards by which greatness was judged undermined the recognition of women's creativity.[2] The isolation and solipsism associated with the idea of genius still clashed with the socio-historical conditions of women under patriarchy. When, in 1929, Virginia Woolf stated that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction',[3] the individual autonomy of women was certainly not to be taken for granted, and even in those cases where the

1 Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

2 See the seminal essay on the topic by Carol Duncan, 'Virility and Domination in Early 20th Century Vanguard Painting', *Artforum*, 12:4 (1973), 30–39.

3 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, in *The Selected Works of Virginia Woolf* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2007), 561–634 (p. 565).

degree of independence necessary for the realization of creativity made it a possibility, there were other factors which prevented, if not achievement of excellence itself, at least its perception as such.

The phrase, 'a room of her own' is quoted in the exhibition catalogue *Mujeres en Vanguardia* dedicated to La Residencia de Señoritas in the centenary of its opening in 1915, highlighting the formative significance of this institution for the first generation of Spanish women who in the 1920s entered the cultural scene paving the way for social and political reform under the Republic.[4] However, only after 1926, when the Lyceum Club opened its doors, was the work of these women artists given public visibility. Following its lead, in 1928 one of the most prominent figures among the cohort of artists associated with the Residencia, Maruja Mallo, held a solo exhibition of her paintings in the premises of the male-dominated environment of the *Revista de Occidente*. The novelty of the event, noted in the reviews, reveals the time-lag of the Spanish cultural elite regarding women's emancipation.[5] One decade earlier María Blanchard had held her own individual debut exhibition in the Parisian gallery L'Effort Moderne, owned by the art dealer and collector Léonce Rosenberg, a leading promoter of *avant-garde* art. Nevertheless, not until 1936, four years after Blanchard's death, were her paintings to be shown beside the work of some of the members of the younger generation of women artists as part of the exhibition in Paris of the Sociedad de Artistas Ibéricos, which had been set up in 1925 for the promotion of the new artistic tendencies both in Spain and within the European context.[6] Neither before this event, nor afterwards, was the lineage between the two generations of *avant-garde* women publicly acknowledged by the artists themselves or by art critics. With regard to the former, the failure to mention a Spanish woman painter who is undoubtedly a strong precursor, may well suggest what Harold Bloom might view as a case of anxiety of influence. Among the reasons for this silence could be the aura of exceptionality that surrounded the figure of Blanchard in Spain and the fact that her professional career was established in France. Furthermore, Blanchard's participation in the controversial exhibition of *Los Pintores Íntegros* organized by the *avant-garde* champion Ramón Gómez de la Serna in 1915, was certainly not an encouragement for aspiring women artists to

4 Almudena de la Cueva & Margarita Márquez Padorno, 'La Residencia de Señoritas (1915–36): una habitación propia para las españolas', in *Mujeres en Vanguardia*, ed. Almudena de la Cueva & Margarita Márquez Padorno [exhibition catalogue] (Madrid: Publicaciones de la Residencia de Estudiantes, 2015), 24–79.

5 The exceptionality is reflected in the words of the critic Manuel Abril: 'La obra de esta *adolescente* ha sido la sorpresa de la temporada' [Mallo was twenty-eight at the time]; quoted by Fernando Huici in *Fuera de orden: mujeres de la vanguardia española—María Blanchard, Norah Borges, Maruja Mallo, Olga Sacharoff, Ángeles Santos, Remedios Varo* [exhibition catalogue] (Madrid: Fundación Cultural MAPFRE VIDA, 1999), 13–31 (p. 26; my italics).

6 See Javier Pérez Segura, *Arte moderno, vanguardia y estado: la Sociedad de Artistas Ibéricos y la República (1931–1936)* (Madrid: CSIC, 2002).

affiliate their work with hers. The show which introduced Cubism to Madrid audiences, was lampooned by the press and afterwards Blanchard left for Paris, where she had spent periods since 1909, this time to settle definitively. Even though in the 1920s, most *avant-garde* artists were working within the same figurative parameters of neo-Cubism, the singularity of Blanchard's experience and her alienation from the Spanish art scene were factors that placed her outside the tradition of women artists in Spain. Arguably any label that implies gender segregation is discriminatory but an awareness of a predecessor who had overcome societal constraints and gained international recognition with her work could have been without doubt enabling for other women. Whether or not Blanchard's legacy was acknowledged in some way by the younger generation of women artists is still unclear. In any case, a study of the factors that contributed to obscuring her achievement can shed light on the reason for this oversight.

While the combination of artistic achievement and isolation links Blanchard with the category of genius, one thing that becomes clear when surveying Blanchard's professional trajectory is that her artistic practice if anything worked precisely against the very idea of isolation. In her case, because her genius was predicated on feminine creativity, it also became identified with the idea of the primitive. In his influential essay of 1925, *La deshumanización del arte*, the philosopher and cultural critic José Ortega y Gasset states that the appeal of the primitive for the new art lies precisely in its quality of isolation, its lack of a tradition.[7]

A number of cultural and critical discourses combine to make it possible for an artist to emerge into the public eye. The primitivism that informed the *avant-garde* movements of the twentieth century had directed attention to women's creativity and was instrumental in the incorporation of women artists in their circles, even if in the public eye they were still considered epigones to their male counterparts. Eventually, though, the same primitivist ideology that authorized women artists was partly responsible for their subsequent marginalization. The discourse of Primitivism distances the woman artist from her artistic context and considers her work an example of spontaneous creation, of inspiration above intention, as the product of a creativity which reflects her interiority and is oblivious to history.[8] Federico García Lorca's poetic hyperbole in the 'Pequeña elegía' he dedicated to Blanchard on her death in 1932, is symptomatic of this discourse. His

7 'Lo que le complace de estas obras primigenias es—más que ellas mismas—su ingenuidad, esto es, la ausencia de una tradición que aún no se había formado' (José Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanización del arte y otros ensayos de estética*, prólogo de Valeriano Bozal [Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1987], 84).

8 Some of the arguments presented here find an earlier formulation in my monograph, *Primitivismo y modernismo: el legado de María Blanchard* (Oxford/New York/Bern: Peter Lang, 2007); also in my 'Tácticas de la mujer en la vanguardia: el caso de María Blanchard', in *María Blanchard,* ed. Carmen Bernárdez (Madrid: MNCARS/Fundación Marcelino Botín, 2012), 95–108.

emphasis on the grotesque in relation to Blanchard's physical appearance, the references to her 'delirio místico', and the final image of her mane of hair covering her whole body, all contribute to her relegation to the sphere of the primitive.[9]

The connection between a primitive state and artistic creativity had found its first systematic articulation in Giambattista Vico's *Scienza nuova* (1725), the *locus classicus* of Primitivism. His influence would inform Romantic and anti-positivist thought at the end of the nineteenth century. Even though Vico had excluded painting from the list of primitive arts, the same idea of revitalization associated with the primitive reappeared in pictorial experiments which contributed in a decisive way to challenge the classical canon, first in the work of the pre-Impressionists and, in the new century, in the aesthetic transformations of an *Avant-Garde* fascinated by 'tribal art'. By then, the constellation of the primitive had extended to include the peasant, the child, the urban working classes, the insane and, with the influence of Darwin's evolutionary theories, women. Subsequently, in Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, the primitive would be internalized as part of the human psyche. Within the artistic sphere the reaction against positivism and academicism endowed the idea of primitive art with the potential for radical change and renewal. Modernist artistic practice is characterized by what the art historian E. H. Gombrich describes as a 'deliberate regression', in other words, by its primitivism.[10] The ideology of this regressive vision of art is encapsulated in Baudelaire's phrase 'le génie n'est que l'enfance retrouvée à volonté', and would prominently inform the *avant-garde* tendencies in the visual arts of the twentieth century.[11]

The reception of Blanchard's work illustrates the impact of Primitivism on a whole generation of modern women artists. Born in Santander in 1881 and trained in Madrid, she settled in Paris early in the twentieth century where she established her artistic career. She earned the respect of her peers within the *avant-garde* circles of the international artistic community known as the School of Paris, as well as their art-dealers, gallerists and critics. As mentioned before, she was among the select group of Cubists attached to the gallery L'Effort Moderne in Paris run by Léonce Rosenberg, who from 1917 to 1920 bought all her work. Her paintings were exhibited in many of the major exhibitions where cubist art was showcased, among them the already mentioned exhibition of *Los Pintores Íntegros* in Madrid, *L'Art Moderne en France* (1916) in Paris, the *Cubisme et Neocubisme* in Brussels in 1920, and the 1921 *Exposició d'Art Francés d'Avantguarda* in the Galerias Dalmau in

9 Federico García Lorca, 'Pequeña elegía a Maria Blanchard', in *Obras completas*, 3 vols; ed.Arturo del Hoyo; prólogo de Vicente Aleixandre (Madrid: Aguilar, 1991), III, 301–05.

10 E. H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art* (London/New York: Phaidon, 2002), 236.

11 Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Marcel A. Ruff (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), 552.

Barcelona, together with works by Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso. After the dismantling of Cubism in 1920, Blanchard returned to figuration like most other Cubists even though she never abandoned its influence which was still manifest in the restricted palette, compressed space and formal architecture of her later paintings. After her death in 1932 her reputation gradually fell into virtual obscurity as her contribution was interpreted in terms of a feminine mystique, and her cubist period as something alien to her true feminine sensibility. As Gill Perry notes 'Blanchard's abandonment of Cubism in the late twenties in favour of more figurative and quasi-spiritual interests has encouraged a perception of her cubist works as somehow going against her nature'.[12] Likewise, the prominence given by biographers and art historians to Blanchard's physical appearance—she suffered from a congenital deformation of the spine—and to her personal circumstances, is something that needs to be understood according to the period's social and cultural gender stereotypes. The contribution of Blanchard to Cubism has only recently been reassessed and vindicated with a major retrospective in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (*En torno a María Blanchard: vanguardia e identidad*) and the exhibition of a large number of her cubist paintings by the Fundación Botín in Santander, both in 2012.

The exclusion of women from accounts of the artistic *Avant-Garde* in the first decades of the twentieth century on the part of traditional historiography is a phenomenon that has been contested by feminist criticism from the 1980s. In her study of female surrealist artists, Susan Rubin Suleiman underlines the presence in their work of a dialogue—often ironic and polemical—with the work of their male counterparts, as well as an element of mimicry which represents their strategy for introducing themselves into the predominantly masculine *avant-garde* circles.[13] According to Suleiman, this dialogical relationship has been interpreted negatively as imitative and derivative and has been used by art historians as an argument for the relegation of the female artist within the pictorial canon. This dynamic is not exclusive to the surrealist artists, for, as we shall see, a similar process can also be detected in relation to Cubism.

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12 Gill Perry, *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde: Modernism and 'Feminine' Art, 1900 to the Late 1920s* (Manchester/New York: Manchester U. P., 1995), 71.

13 Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge MA: Harvard U. P., 1990), 27.

Figure 1
María Blanchard, *Sois Sage: Juana de Arco* (1917), oil on canvas, 140 x 85cm.
Centre Pompidou—Musée National d'Art Moderne—Centre de Création Industrielle, Paris.
Photo © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Jacqueline Hyde.

In Blanchard's paintings we can often detect instances of mimicry—in the sense given to the term (*mimétisme*) by Luce Irigaray.[14] This is defined as a mode of discourse which deliberately appropriates traits of a stereotypical feminine as constructed by and perceived through the patriarchal lens, adopting an ironic tone in order to lay bare the mechanisms by which the subordination of women is established. We find an example in Blanchard's cubist composition of 1916–1917 entitled *Sois Sage: Juana de Arco* (Figure 1), in which the figure of Joan of Arc appears infantilized and protected by her shield. The phrase *sois sage* is written on the shield held by Joan of Arc, and it can be read as a metapictorial comment upon the discipline and internal conflicts within Cubism, with Diego Rivera breaking away from the movement in 1917. Here the phrase's inversion (*sage*/*sois*) alerts us to the work's subversive nature.[15] The phrase 'be sensible' written in French inevitably recalls Baudelaire's introspective sonnet 'Recueillement', whose first line is: 'Sois sage, ô ma Douleur, et tiens-toi plus tranquille'.[16] In Blanchard's painting, the phrase appears in the form of an anagram on a series of fragmented, concentric circles on the shield that covers the lower part of the figure's body. As well as foregrounding French nationalism, the invocation of the heroine of French resistance also introduces the question of gender, an issue further underlined by the range of pastel colours which make up the painting. In the upper section of the canvas, there are some patches of a paisley-like printed pattern with reds and pinks, creating the effect of *papier collé*. The figure thus seems to emerge from a feminized background associated with the decorative arts in a composition which invites a metaphorical reading. The technique of *papier collé*, which was considered part of the excessive experimentation of the pre-war period, had been one of the first victims of the war in an increasingly self-absorbed form of art practice which had also restored the primacy of oil on canvas and drawing. As in Blanchard's painting, the new cubist collage incorporates the

14 Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 131.

15 As with other idiomatic expressions the meaning may change according to context; here can also be translated as 'behave yourself' or 'be wise'.

16 Charles Baudelaire, 'Recueillement', in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Œuvres complètes* ed. Ruff, 101.

trompe l'oeil effect and, in this way, the illusion of reality takes precedence over the interference of the real implied by the use of materials normally incongruous with painting in earlier Cubism. In this sense, as Christopher Green demonstrates in his study of the developments in cubist poetics, the impact of the war on Cubism is perceived not only in the thematic adjustments imposed by the nationalist press (with an emphasis on French themes) but also in the progressive detachment of art from its surrounding reality.[17] Here, under the feminine image of self-sacrifice, and superimposed onto the figure of Saint Joan, we find the masculine affirmation of Cubism. The feminine style of the upper section thus becomes a subversive mask, an appropriation of cubist technique which deliberately adopts a feminine position and exaggerates it to the point of becoming parodic. It should not be forgotten that the figure of Joan of Arc is inherently linked to the idea of cross-dressing and, by association, of mimicry. However, the subversion brought about by the mimetic gesture is subtle and is therefore susceptible to being misinterpreted as a restatement of the conventions which dictate gender stereotypes. According to Gill Perry, 'critical representations of Blanchard's work, like those of Halicka, often represent a qualitatively different and gendered practice of Cubism'.[18] From this vantage point, Blanchard's painting would appear as a domestic or domesticated feminine version of Cubism, and it is not surprising that the political impact of the mimetic gesture has been called into question by feminist criticism. This risk is certainly made manifest in the very existence of the category of *femmes peintres*, a label whose currency has facilitated the segregation of the art made by *avant-garde* women even in recent times.

Before continuing, however, it is necessary to redefine the performance of *avant-garde* women in terms which differ slightly from the model presented by Suleiman. Where she refers to the strategies employed by female artists, here it would be more accurate to describe them as 'incursive tactics', adopting the terminology proposed by Michel de Certeau in his 1980 work *The Practice of Everyday Life*.[19] In this study, Certeau establishes a distinction between strategy and tactics that can be applicable to the *avant-garde*. Strategy, as a form of action which presupposes a location, a proper space from which relationships with a distinct exterior can be established, matches up with the politics of the cubist *avant-garde*, with their centres of activity in the studios of Montparnasse and La Ruche and in the galleries, as

17 Christopher Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies: Modern Movements and Reaction in French Art, 1916–1928* (New Haven/London: Yale U. P. 1987).

18 Perry, *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde*, 71.

19 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley/London: Univ. of California Press, 1984). My argument follows Bridget Elliott's use of Certeau's model in her lucid analysis of Laurencin's feminine aesthetic in ' "The Strength of the Weak" As Portrayed by Marie Laurencin', in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude & Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley/London: Univ. of California Press, 2005), 277–99.

well as their belligerent and provocative declarations. Tactics, on the other hand, lack space, or rather operate in a separate sphere, within a network of forces and pre-established representations, taking advantage of opportunities as and when they present themselves. For Certeau the tactic is the art of the dispossessed, and he compares this way of proceeding with that of a 'tenant' who makes himself at home by introducing his differences into the dominant text of the 'landlord'. Precisely because of her lack of power and her way of operating within the space created by others, the trajectory of the female artist is characterized by its uncertainty and defined by its tactical, adaptive nature, and consequently it is far removed from the strategies of modernity, which identify creativity with an individual artistic language. The logic of the tactic as described by Certeau is similar in many respects to the notion of mimicry developed by Irigaray. Both concepts are determined by an absence of power and produce indeterminate—or at least unpredictable—trajectories. From this perspective we can better understand the stylistic variations which characterize the work of Blanchard and of other female *avant-garde* painters, a trait which has at times baffled critics and art historians alike.

In Blanchard's case, artistic collaboration can be seen as a tactic of infiltration, established first through her friendship with Diego Rivera, then—coinciding with the Rivera's abandonment of Cubism—with André Lhote, and most importantly with Juan Gris, in whose house at Beaulieu-près-Loches she spent a period of eight months in 1918. With them, Blanchard would introduce herself into the artistic and professional circles of Cubism. In 1916, Léonce Rosenberg, the art-dealer of Rivera, Lhote and Gris began acquiring Blanchard's cubist work and in 1918 he offered her a contract with his gallery where in 1919 she held her first individual exhibition. Thanks to Rivera's extrovert nature, she made numerous contacts within the Parisian artistic and bohemian circles, sharing with him her first experiments in Cubism, as well as an interest in popular traditions and the art of the Flemish primitives. For long periods of time between 1909 and 1918, they would share the studio and sometimes a house both in Paris and in Madrid and occasionally, together with Angeline Berloff, Rivera's partner, they travelled together in France and abroad. Although few of Blanchard's pre-war cubist works have survived, connections with Rivera's style can be detected in the two versions of *Mujer con abanico* (1913–1916) (Figure 2). As in Rivera's contemporary cubist portraits, the human figure is made up of geometrical fragments layered as suggested in the 'abanico' of the title.

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Figure 2
María Blanchard, *Mujer con abanico* (1916), oil on canvas, 161 x 97cm.
Colección Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.
Photo © Archivo Fotográfico del Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

Upon the outbreak of war, Blanchard travelled to Spain where she would declare her affiliation with Cubism, participating in the *Exposición de los Pintores Íntegros* alongside Rivera. But on her return to Paris at the end of 1916, the artistic panorama was very different from that which she had left behind two years previously. As Green explains in his well-documented study of Cubism, many painters had been conscripted or had volunteered for the army, whilst a few others remained in exile. The aesthetic radicalism of the pre-war period had taken a step back towards a more sober, balanced style. At the same time, the prevailing oppressive atmosphere of bellicose patriotism had created an animosity towards Cubism, whose international character was viewed with suspicion and became the target of attacks in the press. Green argues that the social politics of collective action generated by the war fostered a reaction against the individualistic elitism attributed to part of the *avant-garde*. The pressure felt in artistic circles translated into tensions between the different branches of Cubism whose positions become polarized and ended in schisms. For Lhote, one of Blanchard's closest friends, the creative process which began in an abstract idea ran counter to the tradition of French painting, which had long been based on the study of nature. He consequently considered what he called 'a priori' or Synthetic Cubism, which he saw represented in the work of Gris, Lipschitz and Blanchard, to be alienating and in 1918 he abandoned the gallery of L'Effort Moderne.[20]

In this climate, Blanchard who had further distanced herself from the individual style of Rivera, gradually moved away from the analytical aesthetics championed by Lhote, in order to draw closer to the cubist orthodoxy of Gris and his circle, whose team spirit offered protection in her precarious situation as a foreigner and as a single woman without financial security, under the conditions of war. Even if the ideals of co-operation within the *avant-garde* community were set to disappear under the weight of market policy and the publicity which surrounded the reputation of individual figures such as Picasso, the theoretical principles developed during the war were applied to a greater or lesser degree by a number of cubists, among them those in the circle of Jean Metzinger and Gris, which included Blanchard.

20 Green provides a detailed account in *Cubism and Its Enemies*, 65 and 181–83.

The closeness between Gris and Blanchard in this period is suggested by the difficulties presented in the attribution of some of the paintings on which they often collaborated. One example is the painting entitled *Mujer a la mandolina* (Figure 3) whose authorship has provoked uncertainty among critics, having been catalogued in 1970 under the name of Juan Gris and later included in the list of Blanchard. The absence of a signature, a frequent feature in the cubist production of Blanchard and one which was introduced in the early works of Picasso and Braque, was a hallmark of the cubist discipline which sought to eliminate from paintings those aspects related to the individual personality in favour of a collective objectivity—a practice that reveals the influence of the first Marxist debates in France in which the role of the artist in society was discussed, and in which collective artistic activity was favoured.[21]

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Figure 3
María Blanchard, *Mujer a la mandolina* (1917), oil on canvas, 100 x 72cm. Colección Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.
Photo © Archivo Fotográfico del Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

These theories were vitally important for women artists, as the impersonality of a collective project protected them from a visibility which threatened their feminine identity in the eyes of society. The implicit risk of their incursions into a new territory of professional and social action could be stalled by hiding their individual identity within a group. At the same time, the concept of collaborative work was more attuned to their culture of conformity with social norms than that of the isolation and originality identified with the idea of the artistic genius. In addition, the experience of women in the field of the decorative arts as well as their role in the domestic sphere favoured their predisposition when it came to communal work. Moreover, the association with male artists provided them with access to bohemian environments such as those of the studios of Bateaux-Lavoir and Puteaux, as well as to the art market through the commercial circuit of gallery owners and exhibitions, and their accompanying critical and historiographical institutions. The broadening of possibilities offered by

21 Green, *Cubism and its Enemies*, 340, n. 47. For a documented survey of the debates surrounding Cubism, see also David Cottington, *Cubism and Its Histories* (Manchester/New York: Manchester U. P., 2004).

cubist practice would not, however, be sufficient to prevent inequality in the treatment of women inside and outside their circles.

If Cubism identified itself with the international community of expatriate artists known as the 'School of Paris', in the case of painters such as Picasso and Gris, from the second decade of the century we can observe a process by which institutions and critics assimilate their names into French culture. In the case of the women artists, however, their foreign status is reinforced in the chronicles and anthologies of the period. On the other hand, in Cubism as in other artistic movements between the wars, the majority of these women soon disappear from the list of artists in order to dedicate themselves to projects more closely related to the decorative arts (textiles, illustration and ceramics) and thus moving out of the pictorial canon. The same does not occur with male artists, who are permitted to practise different art genres and still keep their artistic credentials. Both Blanchard and Alice Halicka are exceptions to this pattern in the sense that their names are often cited in Cubist anthologies published before the 1980s, although both figure as epigones and appear in relation to their colleagues and mentors (Rivera, Lhote and Gris in the case of Blanchard). In general, and in contrast to male cubist pairings like those of Braque and Picasso or Gris and Matisse, the influence within Blanchard partnerships is not usually considered in terms of a mutual impact, but rather is seen to flow in one direction only, following a familiar pattern.

In this respect it is worth noting that the time Gris spent in the company of Blanchard and Lipschitz in 1918 has been described as an epiphany in the development of his cubist style, namely a synthetic creative process which runs from the abstract to the concrete. At least with respect to Blanchard, to judge by the similarities between their respective works, it is obvious that this development came about through dialogue with his peers. Arguably, Blanchard's treatment of space reveals a more radical application of cubist principles than her counterparts.[22] Aside from the cubist vocabulary they have in common (bottle, fruit bowl, coffee grinder, pipe, newspaper etc.), we can observe in their works a network of formal references which suggest a process of mutual fertilization. In her search for formal abstraction, one aspect which stands out in the work of Blanchard, and which has been emphasized by critics, is the exploration of colour as a constructive and expressive element thrown into relief, not only in the chromatic variations of the copies she customarily produced of her own paintings but also in the

22 For Eugenio Carmona, a leading scholar of Spanish Cubism, a distinctive feature of Blanchard's Cubism is the effect of spatial flatness, arguing that this is 'una planitud que existe en su obra desde 1916 y que en alguna medida es distinta del efecto de planitud en staccato que practicaría Juan Gris o a los efectos de desarrollo visual de lo objetivo a lo abstracto desarrollado por Lhote en su obra de 1917' ('María Blanchard y la segunda vida del cubismo 1916–1920', in *María Blanchard,* ed. Carmen Bernárdez [Madrid: MNCARS/Fundación Marcelino Botín, 2012], 41–66 [p. 55]).

relationship established between her artwork and that of others, as is suggested, for instance, in the comparison between her still life compositions and those by Lhote and Gris. This attention to colour, often interpreted as a difference associated with gender, has not gone unnoticed by critics. The dynamic quality of her art has also been pointed out, as well as a sobriety and an abstraction which reflects her adhesion to the purest principles of Cubism.[23]

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Figure 4
María Blanchard, *La comulgante* (1914), oil on canvas, 180 x 124 cm.
Colección Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.
Photo © Archivo Fotográfico del Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

With the presentation of *La comulgante* (Figure 4) in the Salon des Indépendants in 1920, Blanchard announced a radical change in her artistic trajectory. Her return to figurative art corresponds to the widespread 'return to order' characteristic of the *avant-garde* panorama of the postwar period. In our consideration of this process, we must bear in mind the role played by the forces acting upon the art market, particularly the effects of the economic recession of 1921–1922 on the devaluation of cubist art.[24] The crisis was deepened still further by the sale of the collections of Kahnweiler and Udhe, requisitioned by the French State during the war. The magnitude of this operation led to the collapse of the art market. In a context which appears to be the end of Cubism, Rosenberg auctioned whole lots of paintings, including those by Blanchard, in a manoeuvre which resulted in the drastic devaluation of cubist paintings. Given this state of affairs, we can understand that there were pragmatic reasons behind Blanchard's abandonment of Cubism, rather than simply attributing it to factors relating to her 'feminine sensibility', as it has often been explained.[25]

Despite this setback, Blanchard's interest in an artistic language which would subvert established aesthetic values manifested itself differently

23 See María José Salazar 'Maria Blanchard: la gran desconocida', in *María Blanchard*, ed. Bernárdez, 109–12.

24 See Malcolm Gee, *Dealers, Critics and Collectors of Modern Painting: Aspects of the Parisian Art Market between 1910 and 1930* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1981).

25 As Gill Perry states: 'Blanchard's abandonment of Cubism in the late twenties in favour of a more figurative and quasi-spiritual interests has encouraged perception of her Cubist work as somehow going against her nature' (*Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde*, 71).

throughout the course of her career. In an environment in which the *Avant-Garde* was being forced to adapt to the market's demands, Blanchard proposes in her work an ultimate subversion: that of taste. Even if a *kitsch* element is not present to the same degree throughout her career, the common denominator of many of her paintings is a diffuse but persistent sense of nostalgia fundamental to *kitsch* aesthetics. The *Avant-Garde*'s vindication of the work of Henri Rousseau ('Le Douanier'), which would reach its peak in the 1920s, especially after one of his paintings was incorporated into the Louvre's collection in 1925, signals the ascendency of a camp sensibility interested in *kitsch*. His fame would encourage the appearance of followers of naïve art as well as the discovery of a series of 'modern primitives' sponsored by the proponents of the *Avant-Garde*.

From the end of the war and throughout the 1920s, allusions to the non-academic French tradition had proliferated in the ranks of the *Avant-Garde*. For the expatriated community of artists in Paris, surrounded by an atmosphere of fervent patriotism, the need to associate their work with French tradition became more and more pressing, as the prevailing animosity towards the foreign extended into artistic circles. In this process of affiliation, examples of past French masters were subjected to a process of 'rejuvenation and transformation' with the technical methods of the modern aesthetic extolled in Cubism.[26] Blanchard seems to have taken this process ironically, in a literal way in the painting *Petit garçon au canotier*, in which we see a pupil seated at a desk, flanked by a blackboard with some geometrical figures drawn in chalk.[27] Here it is not difficult to recognize an infantilized replica of the protagonist of Manet's *Le Déjeuner dans l'atelier*, with which it shares an aura of mystery as well as a close resemblance, not only in the subject's facial features and even in the angle of the head, but also in the dress: the boater and the famous black jacket whose lustre would inspire Matisse. Both display a self-absorbed expression, although the offhand air in the young man has become one of dejection in the child. The two figures stand out almost identically against a brown background and the compositions show a marked contrast between dark and light tones. The literal rejuvenation of the original source, represented in the metamorphosis of a young man into a child, symbolically situates Blanchard's work before that of Manet, in the place of the primitive.

Finally, there is another aspect which stands out in biographies of Blanchard which plays a part in reinforcing the identification of her figure with the category of the primitive: the religious crisis experienced by the painter in the last years of her life. The poem 'Saint Tarsicius,' written by her friend, the poet and dramatist Paul Claudel in 1931, later included in his

26 Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies*, 193.

27 The painting is held in the collection of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. See <http://parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/musee-d-art-moderne/oeuvres/petit-garcon-au-canotier#infos-principales> (accessed 7 June 2018)

collection *Visages radieux* (1945), is dedicated to Blanchard and is based on one of her paintings.[28] Associating the painter with a symbol of childish innocence and sanctity, Claudel's poem contributes to the primitivisation of her image. The importance given to Blanchard's mystical crisis and spirituality is linked to the search for expressive values imbued with a timeless transcendence associated with primitive religiosity and inspired by the anti-rationalist doctrines and myths of national regeneration.[29] As in Lorca's elegy, religiosity combines with an insistence on her extraordinary capacity for sacrifice and self-denial, which fits a patriarchal notion of an essential female nature. In Simone de Beauvoir's words: 'Love has been assigned to woman as her supreme vocation, and with this vocation, her complete surrender to an entity considered superior in both human and divine terms is fostered'.[30] Accordingly, Lorca presents Blanchard's mysticism as the logical consequence of her nature. This interpretation, reproduced with impunity in characterizations of the artist, demonstrates the weight of stereotypes in social psychology and in Blanchard's case gives us a measure of the pressures exerted upon her personality. It is more than feasible that their destabilizing potential—studied by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their now classic work *The Madwoman in the Attic*—was the reason behind the existential and psychological crisis she experienced at the end of her life, and an example of the way in which women are subject to oppression through the discourses that define their femininity.[31]

From all of the above it can be argued that Blanchard's legacy goes beyond the aesthetics of her work to become a cautionary tale about the dangers of a primitivist ideology which, while authorizing women's creativity, creates a mystifying aura around them and is instrumental in their exclusion from a tradition from which later generations can learn. We can see this confirmed in the vicissitudes of the posthumous reputation of Blanchard, once she was relegated to the margins of Cubism and made practically invisible to subsequent generations of women artists within the tradition of the Spanish *Avant-Garde*.*

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28 Paul Claudel, 'Saint Tarsicius', *Visages radieux*, in *Œuvre poétique* intro., Stanislas Fumet (Paris: Bibliotheque de la Pléiade/Gallimard, 1957), 789–90. Blanchard's painting 'Saint Tarsicius' (*c.*1930–1931) is held in the Société Paul Claudel, Paris.

29 The dialectic between modernism and nationalism is explored in the essays collected in *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, ed. Matthew Affron & Mark Antliff (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1997); see, especially, the essay by Emilio Gentile 'The Myth of National Regeneration in Italy: From Modernist Avant-Garde to Fascism', 25–45.

30 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley; intro. David Campbell (London: Everyman's Library, 1993), 703, y ss. Also see the comments on religion and woman, 653–60.

31 Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven/London: Yale U. P., 2000).

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