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## PEACH BUZZ

# Picasso in a dress

When you can see more of the whole,  
your perspective changes

by Kevin Isom

I used to think Picasso was a misogynist. Anyone who has seen *Les Femmes d'Alger* will understand what I mean. Women don't usually have breasts on their midriffs (though my grandmother came close, in her later years). I just assumed that Picasso hated women or—based on his other rather incomprehensible paintings—simply had a warped view of the world.

It wasn't until I went to a retrospective of his work in London years ago that my view was altered. I was a student in England studying art history, and I felt that it was my duty to see the historic presentation of Picasso's work even though I really couldn't give a flip for any of it. But when I saw the progression of his work from youth through old age, I saw in plain view that Picasso could easily paint in the conventional way—beautiful pieces that anyone could enjoy, even a non-Modernist cretin like me.

But Picasso went beyond the conventional, beyond the norm, developing his own manner of expression. He developed his own, more interesting language, into which he translated what he saw. Learning to appreciate Picasso required learning that new language. Like learning to speak French—though of course it required less spit. Once I had seen more of the whole of Picasso's work, I learned how to look at it. I began to develop some understanding, and I left the exhibit with a completely different perspective.

I had an experience recently that brought Picasso to mind. As a mostly politically correct individual, I have always espoused equality for all. I knew that "transgendered" people existed, but I just didn't get it. I knew, however, that they seemed different and a little strange to me. My typical response to seeing a transgendered person—like when I used to look at a Picasso canvas—was to go "huh?" Not, of course, that I would express the response to anyone. As a purportedly cultured individual I am supposed to understand these things, right? I never laughed out loud or contemplated throwing spoiled fruit at a Picasso painting, either. At least, not in an art museum.

I also didn't understand why transgendered people's rights were so often linked with lesbian, gay and bisexual people's rights. The only apparent explanation I could see for the linkage was a sort of "hey, the more the merrier" approach. But ultimately, transgenderedness made no sense to me at all, and I would probably have continued in the same vein, quietly closed-minded.

Then I joined an Atlanta public official's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons advisory commission. At our first meeting, there was a goodly number of gay men and a few lesbians gathered around a long conference table. Just before we started the meeting, two additional members walked in. They were big women, with splashy hair, tailored suits and perfectly manicured bright-red fingernails. I made a mental note to ask the woman in red where she had found her scarf (it would be perfect for Mom, and I always do my Christmas shopping months in advance). I smiled as the women sat down, thinking how they reminded me vaguely of relatives of mine

from Mississippi.

Then they said good evening, and their deep voices reverberated through the room. I stared, as comprehension dawned. I started to snicker to myself. (I later learned that I was not alone in this on the commission.)

As the meeting progressed, I listened to what our transgendered members had to say, and a curious thing began to happen. As we began to interact as people sharing ideas, I began to notice the appearance of our transgendered members less and less, though the resemblance of the woman in red to my Aunt Wadfur in Greenwood, Miss., continued to plague me. I wondered whether she crocheted odd things for her relatives as well.



Les Femmes d'Alger (1906-07) by Pablo Picasso

Over the course of the next several meetings, I developed a respect for Jamie, the more articulate of the two. I listened to the issues that were important to Jamie, and I began to understand more, little by little. What if you identified as a woman, for instance, but you were a man, and you couldn't always wear the gender-oriented clothes in which you felt like *you*? If somebody took away my cowboy boots and made me wear heeled pumps, I'd likely be a bit perturbed—though, come to think of it, so would half the lesbians I know. I began to learn how to look at transgenderedness, and my perspective began to change.

I'm not saying that I understand transgenderedness in its entirety, any more than I understand why Picasso's vision included women divvied up into cubes. But I don't sneer at a Picasso canvas anymore, and I don't snicker when I see a transgendered person. Unless, of course, the outfit doesn't work with the shoes.

Knowing transgendered people and learning about their issues was like seeing a retrospective of Picasso's work. When I could see more of the whole, I developed some understanding of transgenderedness and what it's all about.

I'm left with only one nagging question: If Picasso had painted a transgendered man in a dress, where would the breasts have gone?

Kevin Isom is an attorney and writer in Atlanta. He is a contributing columnist to gay and lesbian newspapers and magazines around the country.