



The Lights of Migration: A Different Take on Old Paris

At the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the collection show “Chagall, Picasso, Mondrian, and Others: Migrant Artists in Paris” polished the art history of a century past with a gleaming, political immediacy. Matt Hanson reviews the show and its curatorial take on themes of increasing global concern.

Critique / Matt Hanson September 6, 2020

Paris in the early 20th century was in many ways what Istanbul is today, a crossroads for new multicultural interactions. Since the peak of the Syrian migration in 2015, an unprecedented degree of social intermixture has swept Eurasia by land and sea. The creative industries, led by first-generation immigrants, are just beginning to appear in the center spotlight on the world stage, despite being largely buried under the status quo of national privilege.

While recent waves of migration are continually represented, figuratively and symbolically, in countless artworks and exhibitions across the planet, the inclusion and rise of migrants as empowered leaders in contemporary culture are arguably still fresh and controversial to the institutional infrastructures of Europe and Turkey. This is, in a sense, what made the new collection show “Chagall, Picasso, Mondrian and Others: Migrant Artists in Paris” at Amsterdam’s stately Stedelijk Museum so important. It endowed the art history of a century past with a gleaming, political immediacy.

1. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam Migranten in Parijs.jpg



[1] Installation view of Chagall, Picasso, Mondrian and Others: Migrant Artists in Paris
Courtesy Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

The turn of the 20th century made definitive waves as artists migrated from across Europe to join the liberal salons and cafes of Paris, once famous for its beckoning lights has never been as inclusive as it appears. But as the curation by the Stedelijk's research staff member Maurice Rummens clarified, the strains of xenophobic, nationalist conservatism were heard even when visual invention and intellectual passion enjoyed some of its proudest days.

[3. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam Migranten in Parijs Mondriaan.jpg](#) [2]

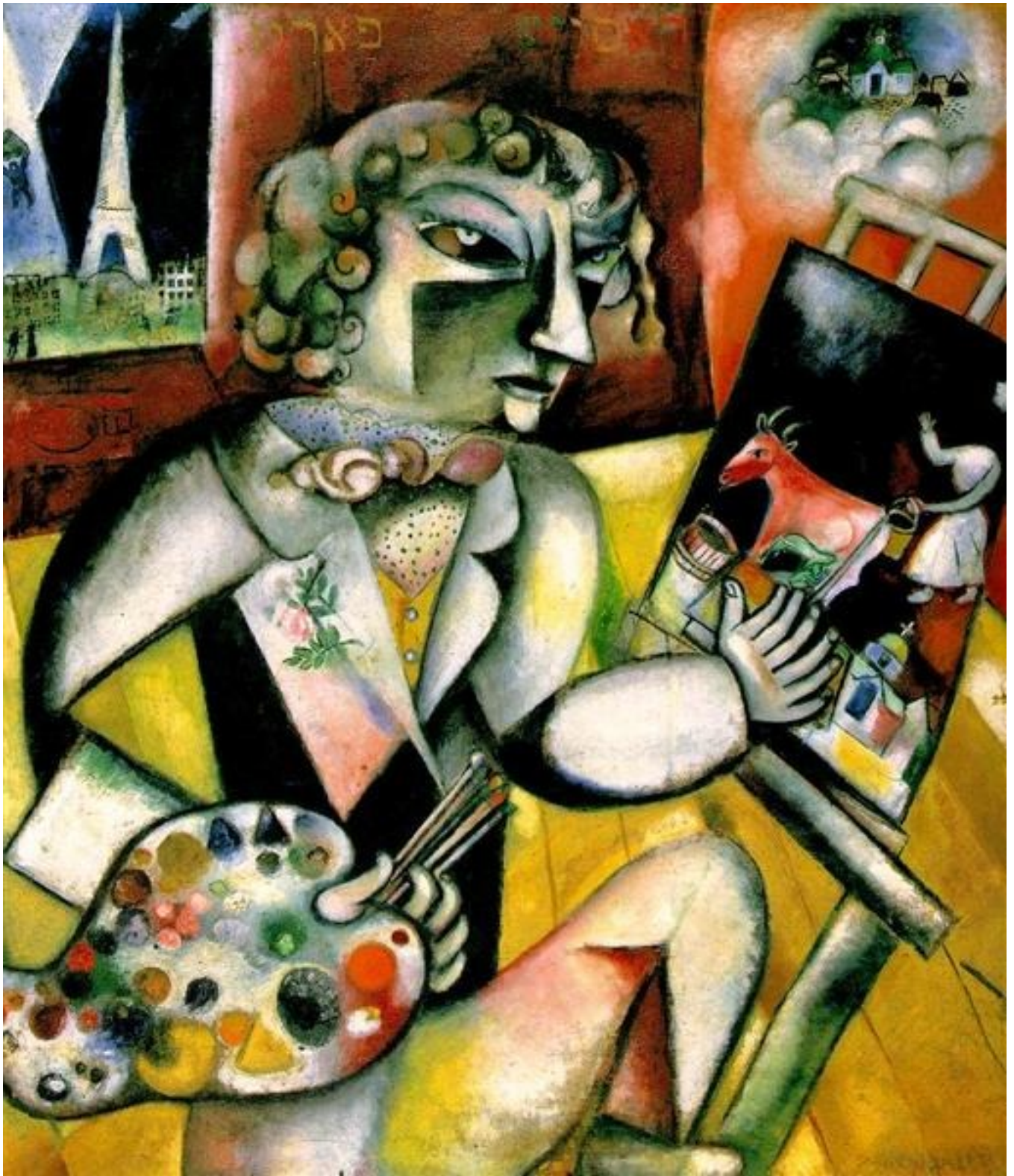


[3] Installation view of Chagall, Picasso, Mondrian and Others: Migrant Artists in Paris
Courtesy Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

The opening of “Migrant Artists in Paris” began with a keen curatorial statement: “The city [of Paris] was the center of a colonial empire in these years [in the first half of the 20th century]. A place where, not unlike the rest of Europe, anti-Semitism, nationalism and xenophobia were prevalent. Newcomers to Paris had to deal with this, too.” This is of singular relevance to current-day issues as concerns French national heritage and its inclusion of migrant communities past and present are the Islamic societies, predominantly of Africa, but also of the Near East.¹

The museum’s large collection of works by Marc Chagall (1887-1985), one of the more prolific stars of the show, emerged from the Stedelijk archives for the first time in 63 years. Chagall found solace painting themes inspired by his Russian-Jewish heritage. While his work is sometimes interpreted as a personal catharsis, it can be seen as an insistent political stance in which he has embraced the pain he had endured, profiled and stigmatized for his minority identity. Allied to a traditional faith, he demonstrated the specific beauty of ethno-religious diversity as most of his peers succumbed to the sycophancy of Western social norms in the name of secular modernity and universal humanism.

[Self_Portrait_with_Seven_Fingers.jpg](#) [4]



[5]

Marc Chagall, [Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers](#) [6], 1913, oil on canvas, 127x107 cm

Early pieces by Chagall in the exhibition, such as *The Motorist* (1922), of a surrealistic cartoonish figure crowned with the model of an early wagon car, and *The Black Sun Over Paris* (1952), of the iconic cityscape under a harsh, brooding sky, stand in contrast to canvases that express his roots,



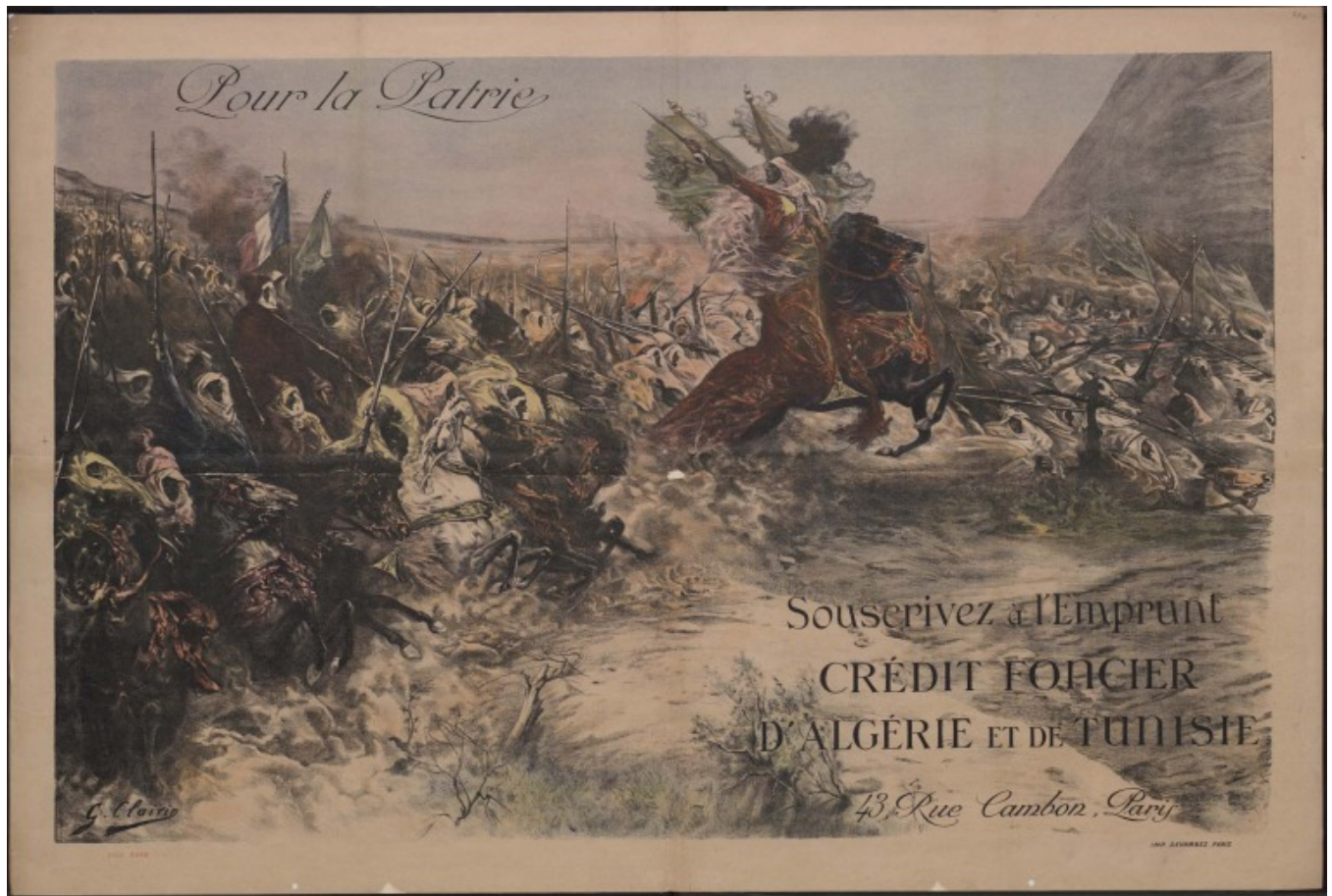
like, *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers* (1912-1913), featuring the words “Paris” and “Russia” in Hebrew/Yiddish letters against the top edge of the painting. The fading place names encircle the painter’s curly cubist mien as he finishes a pastoral canvas and contemplates the dual nature of his urbane Parisian yearnings neatly framed by his studio’s realist window with a bucolic, church-studded Russian village descending chimerically in a cloud-dream.

Chagall received criticism and praise after illustrating the free-verse book *Fables*, by Jean de La Fontaine, which is canonical to French literature. “When Chagall illustrated Jean de La Fontaine’s *Fables*, the epitome of French nationalist heritage,” the curatorial text states, “the nationalist press called it shameful. A foreign Jew with a style akin to folk art ‘squanders’ the Latin (read: French) clarity and subtlety! Other critics praised his ‘fresh interpretation.’” But by going ahead and tackling material co-opted by nationalists, the artist discovered a special relationship between his personal subjects and that of his host country. Likewise, the Stedelijk, in the context of “Migrant Artists in Paris,” emphasized the connection that France had had to the rest of the world through art history, linking three of the most famous artists who had ever worked in Paris, namely Picasso, Chagall, and Mondrian.

On Crescents and Croissants

French orientalist painter Georges Clairin (1843-1919) utilized his knack for realism and the brush, along with his knowledge of Moorish architecture, which was informed by visits to Egypt and Morocco in the service of his nation’s military, on the eve of the First World War.

[for-our-country-subscribe-to-the-loan.jpg](#) [7]



[8]

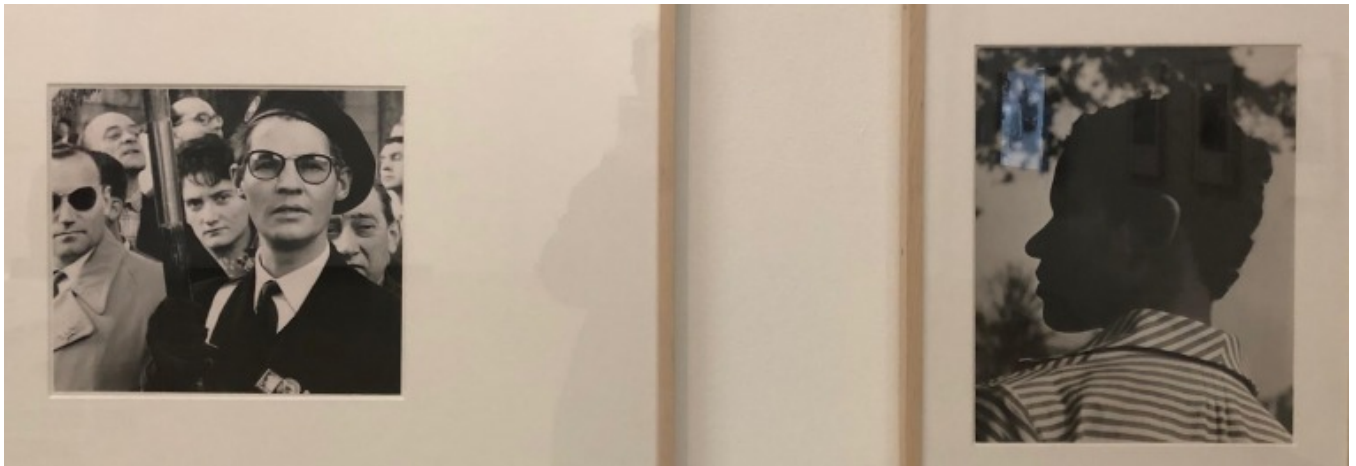
Georges Clairin, For our country - Subscribe to the loan - Crédit Foncier of Algeria and Tunisia, 1918, lithographic poster

Held by [British Library](#) [9], [public domain](#) [10]

A poster he has designed for the French military is shown at the “Migrant Artists in Paris” exhibition together with a photograph depicting a few dozen of the 300,000 soldiers recruited from the French colonies. Clairin’s poster is essentially an advertisement to fund the French military in the guise of archaic colonial glory, picturing a fantastical scene of Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian soldiers on horseback, charging into a melee of turbaned and robed swordsmen. The offset, printed in 1961 by Ralph Prins, promotes a coupon offer in support of Algerian refugee students.

Among the last works displayed by the exhibition’s exit hall were photographs by Dutch-Hungarian photographer Eva Besnyö (1910-2003). One of them, portraying a young North African woman in Paris, was placed by the curators next to a photograph of a right-wing French colonialist by Dutch photographer and filmmaker Johan van der Keuken (1938-2001). Taken in 1952 and 1956 respectively, before and during the Algerian War, which raged till 1962, the photos of Besnyö and van der Keuken have a potent subtext, framing the black-and-white contrast of the national debate.

[unnamed \(5\).jpg](#) [11]



[12]

Johan van der Keuken, *Manifestation d'extreme-droite, Arc de Triomphe*, 1959, Gelatin silver print (left), Eva Besnyö, *Paris*, 1952, Gelatin silver print (right)

Works on display at the show *Chagall, Picasso, Mondrian and Others: Migrant Artists in Paris*, at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Photographs by Matt Hanson

Besnyö's gelatin silver print, *Paris* (1952) shows a beautiful Black woman, obscured, however, in profile, strongly defined, yet alone, and in the dark of arboreal shade. Short-haired, with a softly symmetrical visage, her linear profile is accented by her striped shirt. The natural environment, and more abstract appeal of the piece, a homage to dark color, is juxtaposed with Johan van der Keuken's full-frontal capture of a group of pale-skinned rabble rousers in the bald, beaming light of day, suited, and tied, and gawking under the Arc de Triomphe.

Another aspect of the curation of "Migrant Artists in Paris" is the accent it puts on the surrealist focus on African ritual art as one of its chief muses beyond the pale of Eurocentric subjects, while platforming African diaspora artists who have reclaimed their self-representation, such as Haitian freestyle painters Robert Saint-Brice (1898-1977) and Gesner Abélard (b. 1922). The Abélard work on display, *Dining Room* (1949), is an oil on cardboard that employs the discipline of European standards in painting, yet explodes out from them with technical variations and color schemes wholly akin to visual motifs found in local food and design.

[unnamed.jpg](#) [13]



[14]

Gesner Abélard, Dining Room, 1949, Oil on cardboard

Work on display at the show Chagall, Picasso, Mondrian and Others: Migrant Artists in Paris, at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Photograph by Matt Hanson



As the first country to overthrow French colonialism entirely, Haiti became ground zero for the burgeoning Négritude movement, a proud, public affirmation of Black culture in the Francophone cultural milieu. Saint-Brice and Abélard held sway as chief proponents of its emergence in art. For “Migrant Artists in Paris”, the work of Saint-Brice *Composition* (1948) is an unusual choice, as the artist did not work in Paris, but lived, worked and died between Pétion-Ville and Port-au-Prince, Haiti. But his semi-figurative, avant-modernism rivaled that of his peers in Paris, who did visit his creative ecology in Haiti. *Composition*, although naturalistic, is charged with the pre-colonial animus of the artist’s passion for Voodoo rituals, lucid dreaming, ancestor cults and hallucinations of anthropomorphic plants.

What the flagship museum show missed was a reassertion of creative presence by artists from the Islamic lands of Turkey and North Africa on Europe’s fringes. Although these lands and their peoples inspired European artists since at least the 16th century, Orientalism had become unfashionably bourgeois by the advent of 20th-century modernism, particularly in the interwar period. Paris-based artists, many of them migrants, came to a city whose sense of taste wanted more novel, exotic influences not yet assimilated or readapted by Western eyes (the most famous example being that of Cubism’s origins in African sculpture).

[2. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam Migranten in Parijs Picasso Matisse.jpg](#)

[15]



[16] Installation view of Chagall, Picasso, Mondrian and Others: Migrant Artists in Paris
Courtesy Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

At the Stedelijk, two odalisque paintings were positioned side-by-side. Picasso's *Femme nue devant le jardin* (1956), and the famed *Odalisque* (1920-1921) by Matisse conveyed the lifelong friendship and rivalry that the two artists shared. The work by Matisse is simple and direct in its representational linear harmony with realism, projecting a sublime paragon of human beauty. Picasso, on the other hand, indulged his signature cubistic eye.

Matisse and Picasso were among the earliest artists to readapt the spirit and aesthetic of African art for their contemporary approach. But in the process, they also landed their sights on a motif drawn from Europe's exposure to the Turkish milieu. Picasso is quoted in the published notebooks and letters of his friend, the British artist Roland Penrose as having said, "Matisse left me his odalisques, and see here my picture of the Orient, though I have never been there."² Despite his reputation as an aesthetic iconoclast, Picasso reinforced the mainstream, ideological Western vision of Eastern lands, cultures and peoples as feminized objects to desire and possess.

[unnamed \(1\).png](#) [17]



[18]

Henri Matisse, [Odalisque](#) [19], 1920-21, oil on canvas, 61.4 x 74.4 cm, Stedelijk Museum

To Believe in Difference

“Migrant Artists in Paris” presents a wealth of literary material, encompassing publishing and writing efforts by creatives of infinite shades and stripes. One magazine by Galerie Maeght called “Derrière le miroir” documented the breakthrough Paris exhibition in 1947 by the Algerian artist Mahieddine Baya (1931-1998), who, at the age of sixteen, broke waves among surrealists, particularly André Breton. The art of Baya appears in the Galerie Maeght as a series of lithographs, together with an original story by her.

[unnamed \(2\).jpg](#) [20]



[21]

The cover of the November 1947 edition of “Derrière le miroir,” showing a painting by Baya

Work on display at the show Chagall, Picasso, Mondrian and Others: Migrant Artists in Paris, at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Photograph by Matt Hanson

Baya foregrounded women in her painting. The Stedelijk paid special respect to her art practice and its complex relation to her faith, adding in the curatorial note below the work, displayed at the museum, “As a Muslim in a culture where images of people were traditionally prohibited, she was a symbol of emancipation.”

The cover of the November 1947 edition of “Derrière le miroir” shows a painting by Baya. The rudimentary shapes of bodies, homes and plants, the floral design, and whimsical air of the figure precipitate an intuitive lunge toward freedom that her nation willed into being like paint into an artwork.

“Chagall, Picasso, Mondrian and Others: Migrant Artists in Paris,” The Stedelijk Museum, 21 Sep 2019 until 2 Feb 2020.

- [1.](#) The largest immigrant group in France is the Algerians, most of whom are Muslims. Their lives, in relation to French cultural production, define much of the country’s contemporary



political and cultural narrative with respect to the oppression and expression of citizen diversity and post-colonial reconciliation.

- [2.](#) Roland Penrose, Journal (16 February 1955), quoted in Elizabeth Cowling, *Visiting Picasso: The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose*, New York, N.Y: Thames & Hudson, 2006, 104

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