

Artist: Marlene Dumas (born 1953)

Title: 'The Woman of Algiers'



Key facts

Size: 200 x 100 cm

Material: Oil on canvas

Date: 2001

Location: Los Angeles,
private collection

Marlene Dumas, *The Woman of Algiers*, 2001, oil on canvas, 200 x 100 cm. Collection The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University (2005.39). Digital image courtesy of Marlene Dumas / The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, Gift of Blake Byrne

Art Historical Terms and Concepts

Subject matter: A nude female stands facing the viewer. Her right arm is forced up by an unknown figure while her left hand is held down by what appears to be a man cropped from the edge of the canvas. She is a young Algerian prisoner of war, her captors are French soldiers. She is presented to us as if she is a prize. Her nude body contrasts with the clothed figure on her left. Dumas has derived this image from a newspaper report from the 1960s relating to the Algerian War (1954-1962), during which time Algeria fought for its independence from France.

Colour: Discuss the artist's use of colour.

Composition: Analyse the composition of the work.

Figure handling: Discuss the artist's treatment of the subject's figure.

Line: How has line been used in this work?

Depth: Analyse the treatment of space and depth

Political and Cultural Context

Since 1830 Algeria had been a colony of France. Despite numerous attempts at gaining independence in the intervening years, it wasn't until 1945 when a major uprising involving Muslim Algerians against the French occupancy of Algeria led to the beginning of ongoing conflict. The Algerian War of Independence ran from 1954 to 1962. The Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) used guerrilla warfare in an effort to defeat French troops. Such acts of hostility were met with ferocious retaliation from France and a civil war raged between those seeking independence and loyalists who favoured an Algeria ruled by France. There was widespread international support for those Algerians wanting independence including from the United Nations and by 1960 French President de Gaulle entered into negotiations with the FLN. Despite peace and independence being realised there were major repercussions, including torture and death, for those who had fought on behalf of France and had supported a French Algeria.

Dumas' painting is derived from a photograph she saw published in a Dutch newspaper from the period. The full photo shows what appears to be an adolescent girl captured by two French troops who tower over her. She may be wearing the cap of a guerrilla soldier; in the painting this is made more prominent. How she has come to be nude is unclear, but this lack of clothing is in stark contrast to the uniformed figures either side of her. An estimated 11,000 women are reported to have participated in the Algerian War in various roles, the majority of these on the side of the FLN. Thus this photograph and the painting it inspired might possibly show a female guerrilla.

Give a definition for the terms below

Colonisation	Guerrilla warfare	Objectified
Prisoner of war	Independence	

Dumas titled this work '*The Woman of Algiers*', which reminds us of numerous paintings by male artists from the nineteenth century onwards who depicted Algerian and North African women as 'exotic', sexualised and subservient. The most famous example is Eugène Delacroix's '*Women of Algiers*', which shows three women in a harem. Renoir would do his own interpretation of this theme and more famously Picasso would recreate Delacroix's original in a series of paintings. Dumas might have deliberately chosen this title to indicate that despite the subject in the photograph being a century later and showing a woman willing to fight for freedom, in reality little had changed for women who were still being objectified in both gender and ethnicity, and notions of 'imperialism' still thrive in modern society.



Eugène Delacroix, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, 1834, oil on canvas, 180 × 229 cm. Collection Musée du Louvre, Paris, on loan to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

Q: Looking at the painting by Delacroix, what is the overall implied effect of this work?

Q: Can any thematic and/or visual links be made between this painting and Dumas'?

Dumas would return to the same subject in 2008 with a painting called '*The Trophy*', which was closer in content to the original photo and created during the height of conflict between the West and Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.



Marlene Dumas, '*The Trophy*', 2013

Marlene Dumas, *The Trophy*, 2013, oil on canvas, 200.5 × 180.3 cm. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and The Edlis Neeson Foundation. Digital image courtesy of Marlene Dumas / Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and The Edlis Neeson Foundation

Ways it has been used by past and present societies

Dumas is a South African artist who moved aged 23 to the Netherlands, where she still lives, to study art. Her experiences and memories as a white girl growing up in apartheid-era South Africa resonate in this painting: two 'outsiders' holding a 'local' person captive. Dumas views herself as an outsider and her work is strongly influenced by her interest in the female gender, both in art and historically. This work is a combination of references relating to male painters in art history but more importantly the treatment of women at the hands of men in times of conflict. Dumas here politicises a nude female body, she "blocks out breasts and genitals with slabs of black paint - metaphor for history's silenced voices".

Q: Are there obvious links between Dumas' biography and the work she creates? Does she need to have experienced an event first hand to then give an accurate account of it?

Q: Looking at the original photograph, analyse the decisions and approaches Dumas has taken and made when reinterpreting it in 'The Woman of Algiers'.

Further reading and viewing

- *Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave*. Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2008
<https://art.utexas.edu/sites/aah/files/documents/download-richard-shiff-2.pdf>
- Algeria and War 1954-62, <http://www.fsmitha.com/h2/ch23algeria.htm>
- **(Film)** *The Battle of Algiers*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzuFQtjQZMc>