

PICASSO'S CELESTINA KNITTING

Carol Salus
Kent State University

The iconographic richness of Picasso's *Celestina Knitting* (1903) (fig. 1) has been only cursorily treated in the scholarly literature. John Richardson, a longtime friend of the artist and author of the best and most thoroughly researched biography to date, stated that the pen drawing portrays the notorious Celestina in two of her six *oficios*, as seamstress and procuress.¹ I would like to analyze this work more in order fully to recognize Picasso's use of symbolism and to hypothesize that another of Celestina's trades is indicated. An examination of Picasso's likely artistic sources and the significance of various images seen in this genre scene supports such a contention.

Picasso depicts the cunning Celestina knitting in the company of a protégée, one of the young women who goes to her house to practice her sewing under the direction of the master seamstress.² The young protégée, with an amphora balanced on her head and her back toward the viewer, appears to be carrying in her arms loaves of bread to her mistress. The room is humbly furnished; a painting of an indecipherable female figure hangs on the back wall, while a *porrón* rests on a table behind Celestina. In full-length profile view she appears, seated on a chair, wearing a kerchief, a shawl and a long skirt. As in his Blue Period

¹ John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso, 1881-1906*, I (New York: Random House, 1991), pp. 288-290.

² Manuel da Costa Fontes, "Celestina as Antithesis of the Virgin Mary," *Journal of Hispanic Philology* 15 (1990-91), p. 12.

portrait, *La Celestina* (1904), Picasso, we will see here, now at an earlier date, deviates from Rojas's text.³ She appears without her rosary beads, an emblem of the hypocritical nature of her services and her devotion, and knits as a ball of yarn lies on the floor next to a cat. While Celestina neither knits in the work, nor does a cat serve at her side, Picasso's image recalls in synoptic form her sinister activities. The artist conflates in this scene symbols indicative of her operations through the careful usage of various pictorial puns: some derived from the language of art history; some based upon vernacular speech. The depiction of the go-between knitting, the first of these puns, serves as a quintessential image in that it symbolically recalls the very nature of her countless maneuverings throughout the narrative. Other significant elements, to be discussed, reveal more information about Celestina's character and her devices.

Scholars have pointed out in detail the significance of her actions in the text in terms of the vocabulary of knitting — she metaphorically casts a huge net over the city with her needles and yarns.⁴ Javier Herrero, who points out the centrality of her needles and threads to the structure and meaning of the text, summarized her knitting activity as one in which a web is formed in which all the characters of the *Tragicomedia* are caught and devoured; even she will finally fall victim to her own grim craft.⁵ Her instruments represent the extensiveness of her involvement in manipulating and ultimately weaving together the lives of unmarried couples in the city.

These items symbolized the operations of the diabolical seamstress from her selling of them as pretext of gaining entry into the homes of her innocent victims, to her responsibility for the defloration

³ Carol Salus, "Picasso's Vision of *Celestina* and Related Issues," *Celestinesca* 15.2 (noviembre 1991): 3-17.

⁴ Javier Herrero, "Celestina's Craft: The Devil in the Skein," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 61 (1984): 343-351. For an analysis of Celestina's skein and its crucial role in a series of exchanges central to the narrative, see Alan Deyermond, "Hilado-Cordón-Cadena: Symbolic Equivalence in *La Celestina*," *Celestinesca* 1.1 (mayo 1977): 6-12; id. "Symbolic Equivalence in *La Celestina*: A Postscript," *Celestinesca* 2.1 (mayo 1978): 25-30.

⁵ Javier Herrero, "Celestina: The Aging Prostitute as Witch," in *Aging in Literature*, eds. Laurel Porter and Laurence Porter (Troy, Michigan: International Book Publishers, 1984), p. 32. For more discussion of this subject, see also Herrero (n4).

and subsequent "restoration" and "repair" of their damaged maiden heads by means of "sewing," to her curing Melibea with the workings of her choice needle, to her helping virgins set up shop with their first yarn and needles. As she knits together threads of yarn, Picasso's image recalls the enormous efforts of this sharp businesswoman, who recorded the birth of each baby girl in the town into her registry, as their future defloration became a source of potential income for her. *Celestina Knitting*, laden with sexual symbolism, to be further discussed here, serves as metaphor for her extensive business transactions as detailed in the narrative.

The artistic sources of inspiration for Celestina's knitting activity and its iconographic import need exploration. Picasso found art historical precedent in Goya's characterizations of Celestina. Among Picasso's juvenalia is a drawing which is directly based upon one of Goya's many portrayals of Celestina. Already in 1898, the seventeen-year-old Picasso had made a copy after one of Goya's Celestina images, part of his *Caprichos* (1793-1796), for a set of eighty aquatint etchings, whose aim was the censure of human error and vice.⁶

Through his study of the series of the *Caprichos* in which Celestina appears,⁷ Picasso saw *Mejor es holgar* (Idleness is preferable) (fig.2) in which she presides at matchmaking/procuring rites with her ball of yarn and spindle in her hand. Goya's vignette is filled with erotic symbols and suggestive body language as Celestina, seated between a couple, holds the knitting tools, the tools of her trade, that connect them. These elements all contribute to bring out the kind of relationship that binds the three figures together.

Gestures and facial expressions underline the lewd nature of the scene. While the young woman's expression unambiguously conveys her sensual emotion, the young man's rather ape-like visage reveals signs of

⁶ For Picasso's copy after Goya's *Capricho*, "Ruega por ella," see Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *Picasso: Birth of a Genius* (New York: Praeger, 1972), fig. 110.

⁷ José López-Rey, *Goya's Caprichos: Beauty, Reason and Caricature*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953). For illustrations of Goya's treatment of the Celestina theme, see vol. 2 for the following *Caprichos* and preliminary drawings: 15, 17, 19, 20, 28, 31, 73.

man's baser nature.⁸ The woman grasps the ball of yarn significantly against the level of her genitalia. Celestina, with a knowing smile on her face, is winding the yarn with a spindle such that the threads are loosely tied around the man's arms.

Examination of the vernacular tradition leads to clearer interpretations of the well-established emblems found in Picasso's drawing and Goya's etching as linguistic puns are transformed into pictorial terms. Manuel da Costa Fontes has analyzed the euphemistic readings of Celestina's tools, her *madejas* (balls of yarn=testicles), *hilado* (thread=semen), *aguja* (needles=phallus) and other sewing-related terminology in regard to the narrative and meaning of the text.⁹ Goya scholar Teresa Lorenzo de Márquez has also examined the double meanings of the activity of spinning, its tools and their sexual overtones in her discussion of the artistic, literary, and popular antecedents and traditions that comprise sources for Goya's iconic imagery indicating that *huso* (spindle) is a metaphor for the phallus, although *huso* can sometimes mean the female sex.¹⁰ *Ovillo* (ball of yarn, literally little egg) can refer also to testicles, as elucidated by Camilo José Cela.¹¹ Celestina's holding the spindle in her hands, as the thread links the man to the young woman, who grasps the *ovillo* at the too obvious location in front of her straddled legs, makes explicit the reference to sexual intercourse. In addition, Goya's witty texts in the *Caprichos* served as moral commentary for the visual images, because the verb *holgar* (to be idle) was one of the most employed to denote the sexual act and sexual pleasure. The meaning of this *Capricho* could not be clearer.¹²

⁸ For information on contemporary interest in the physiognomical characterization of human passions in Goya's time, its literary sources and Goya's caricatural use of physiognomic analogies between social types and animals, see López-Rey (n7): 52-72, 75-86.

⁹ Manuel da Costa Fontes, "Celestina's *Hilado* and Related Symbols," *Celestinesca* 8.1 (mayo 1984): 3-13; id., "Celestina's *Hilado* and Related Symbols: A Supplement," *Celestinesca* 9.1 (mayo 1985): 33-38.

¹⁰ Teresa Lorenzo de Márquez, "Carnival Traditions in Goya's Iconic Language," in *Goya and the Spirit of Enlightenment*, eds. A. E. Pérez Sánchez and E. A. Sayre (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), pp. lxxxvi, xciii.

¹¹ Camilo José Cela, *Diccionario Secreto*, I (Madrid-Barcelona: Alfaguara, 1968), s.v. 'cojón'.

¹² Lorenzo de Márquez, xciii

Picasso's selection of images for *Celestina* is informed by both these pictorial and linguistic traditions. The knitting elements with which she is portrayed, symbols of her vices, reflect this familiarity. Their appearance in Picasso's drawing recalls their importance in Rojas's text and elaborates the erotic verbal puns Picasso understood.

Picasso's interest in the *Celestina* theme may have been influenced by various other artistic sources. His knowledge of the 1903 publication of the text of *Celestina*, an opera by Felipe Pedrell, may have inspired him, as noted previously.¹³ Also the image of the *Celestina* even appeared in the Catalan puppet theater, a testament to her ubiquity. Audiences of all classes in turn-of-the-century Barcelona knew the plots and characters of most of the puppet plays and derived pleasure from their predictability. These beloved theatrical events were communal rituals that reaffirmed shared traditions. *La Cascarria*, one of the two recurrent female leads featured in the plots of the puppet plays, an older woman who took on different roles in her frequent interactions with Marieta and others, sometimes assumed the aspect of the menacing, witchlike *Celestina*. Rojas's literary figure had become as seen in this popular art form a "cultural archetype."¹⁴

By the inclusion of select images—the young protégée, the *porrón* and the cat—Picasso has added to his depiction of *Celestina*, who, Richardson interpreted, is cast in her professions of procuress and seamstress. The young woman in Picasso's drawing is ostensibly a worker in *Celestina*'s cottage industry; it is, however, a cover for her apprenticeship under the tutelage of the old whore. The folkloric bawd under the guise of her more noble role of master seamstress with her symbolic phallic needle and accompanying thread initiated such innocent maidens in the ways of love.

The *porrón* behind *Celestina*, with its suggestive spout through which wine and other liquids are poured recalls her passion for wine.¹⁵

¹³ Salus, 15-16. For more information on the opera, see J. T. Snow, "La *Celestina* of Felipe Pedrell," *Celestinesca* 3.1 (mayo 1979): 19-32.

¹⁴ Temma Kaplan, *Red City, Blue Period: Social Movements in Picasso's Barcelona* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 45-49, 89.

¹⁵ Fernando de Rojas, *La Celestina: Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*, ed. D. S. Severin (Madrid: Alianza, 1986), 82, 93, 144. All page references are to this edition.

It is also an appropriate still life element for a brothel setting as seen in further examples of this vessel in Picasso's oeuvre. The *porrón* in *The Harem* (1906) (fig. 3), a bordello scene, is held by a nude eunuch, who lounges in the right foreground. It appears in the corner of the scene along with an array of loaves and a phallic sausage. The massive male is seated against the wall in a room filled with nude women in various activities and poses; one of them is washing her feet, another is eating. Importantly, an old greying Celestina-type bawd in a corner has a basin of hot water for the girls to wash in. The appearance of the *porrón* in a brothel setting in *Celestina Knitting* seems to be reiterated here three years later. Because of its erect design, the *porrón* is depicted in other Picasso paintings and even furthered his anthropomorphic concept of still life as a metaphor for sex.¹⁶

Like the image of Celestina involved in the activity of knitting, the appearance of the cat is without textual precedent. The cat in *Celestina Knitting* seems to underline Celestina's role as witch. Celestina's purported demonic powers are most evident in her conjuration of the devil, a turning point which bears on Melibea's possession and ultimately affects the fates of all of the major characters in the *Tragicomedia* including her own. Picasso chose to reveal her malefic arts, not by symbolic bottles as allusions to her pharmacy of magic potions, "room full of alembics, little vials, pots some of earth, some of glass" (61), which her vocations as "perfumeress, maker of cosmetics, mender of cracked maidenheads, bawd, and something of a witch" (60) make necessary, but by the inclusion of the witch's most favored animal companion. Cats were familiars; they embodied demons who performed the witches' tasks of *maleficia* against their neighbors.¹⁷ The coupling of witches and cats, is one long established in folklore and documented in the history of art.¹⁸ Because of the depictions of her knitting activity and the *porrón*, the cat serves also among Celestina's emblemata. It indicates her strengths from the black arts of witchcraft and thus cannot be regarded as a mere house pet of Celestina.

¹⁶ Richardson, 440-441, 447-449.

¹⁷ Rosemary Guiley, *Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft* (New York: Facts on File, 1989), s.v. 'cats'.

¹⁸ Fernand Mery, *The Life, History and Magic of the Cat*, trans. Emma Street. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1967.

Furthermore, the iconic significance of the cat, an animal associated with prostitutes, must be considered in its role at Celestina's side. Discussion of visual and linguistic examples will establish this bond. The word "cat" has served as a slang term for prostitute for several centuries,¹⁹ and could thus be interpreted as a signifier of her former profession. Furthermore, "cat" and "pussy," the latter term still related to the procuring industry, designated in the *Dictionnaire érotique moderne* (1864) as "the name that women give to the divine wound they have below their bellies"²⁰ fortifies the implications of Picasso's image. The cat can be read as more than a symbol of her magical prowess, her contacts with the spirits of evil as vividly described in the text; like the knitting trinkets which Celestina uses, it functions in this context as a symbol of lust.

Historical precedence for the pairing of prostitute and cat is manifest in Manet's famous *Olympia* (1863) (fig. 4) in which a black cat with an erect tail stands next to a recumbent nude richly-paid prostitute, as she is waited upon by a black maid bringing her flowers from a lusty client. Manet's cat, with its roots in nineteenth-century French literary sources as well as art historical references, reinforces the lascivious nature of the scene. Manet had taken an ideal model, inspired by Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (c. 1538) in which a white lap-dog, a symbol of marital fidelity, rests at the feet of a nude, and worked back to an individualized image. The cat clearly stood for promiscuity.²¹

¹⁹ See both of these sources for its early application: Richard A. Spears, *Slang and Euphemisms: A Dictionary of Oaths, Curses, Insults, Sexual Slang, Metaphor, Racial Slur, Drug Talk, Homosexual Lingo and Related Matters* (Middle Village, NY: David Publishers, 1981); the entry for 'cat' notes that the term goes back to the 1400s and exists still in England; also Eric Partridge, *Macmillan Dictionary of Historical Slang* (New York: Macmillan, 1974); the entry for 'cat' indicates the term became obsolete in the English language in the nineteenth century.

²⁰ Alfred Delvaux, *Dictionnaire érotique moderne* (Freetown: Imprimerie de la Bibliomaniac Society, 1864), s.v. 'chat'; also J. de la Rue, *La langue verte* (Paris, 1894), s.v. 'chat'; Theodore Reff, *Manet: Olympia* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 98.

²¹ For a remarkable synthesis, reviewing almost all the documentation available, plus various literary, art historical sources and French popular speech, relating to the painting, see Theodore Reff (n20). Reff (76) notes Manet was familiar with the *Caprichos*, which were widely admired at the time and that this is clear from his use of them in several works of the 1860s.

Other depictions of cats as companions to prostitutes further this association; also the double meaning found in "pussy" is evident in popular erotic prints of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which this playful feline appears near the pudenda of recumbent harlots.²²

Picasso's awareness of this association is apparent in his 1901 drawing, *Parody of Olympia* (fig. 5), in which the prostitute has been replaced by the negress and Manet's negress with a naked man carrying off a bowl of fruit. He has placed beside the bed a second man who points ambiguously; this is Picasso himself, while the first is his friend Sebastià Junyer-Vidal. The dog and cat on her bed reinforce with humor the similar sexual natures of cat and prostitute.

Until now, these images in *Celestina Knitting* have not been accurately observed, identified and commented upon. The various artistic and linguistic sources discussed for Picasso's figure and her activity in the bordello setting, as she symbolically knots threads into union, provide supportive evidence that his scene with its iconographic complexity portrays Celestina, the legendary sexual impressaria, in several of her *oficios*—as seamstress, procuress and witch. In particular, the cat's relevance to the scene, as well as the fuller nature of Picasso's selection of images, these verbal and pictorial puns now confirmed and enriched by this knowledge, can be clearly understood. *Celestina Knitting* indicates the famed literary figure, busy with her craft, the real and symbolic activity that defines her sway over so many lives, prepares for future transactions.

²² For discussion and illustration of the conflation of cat and prostitute, see Reff, 72-74, fig. 42; for discussion of illustrations of prostitutes with cats near pudenda, see Reff, 98-99, fig. 56.



Fig. 1 Pablo Picasso. Celestina Knitting, 1903
Private Collection, © 1995 ARS, New York/SPADEM, Paris

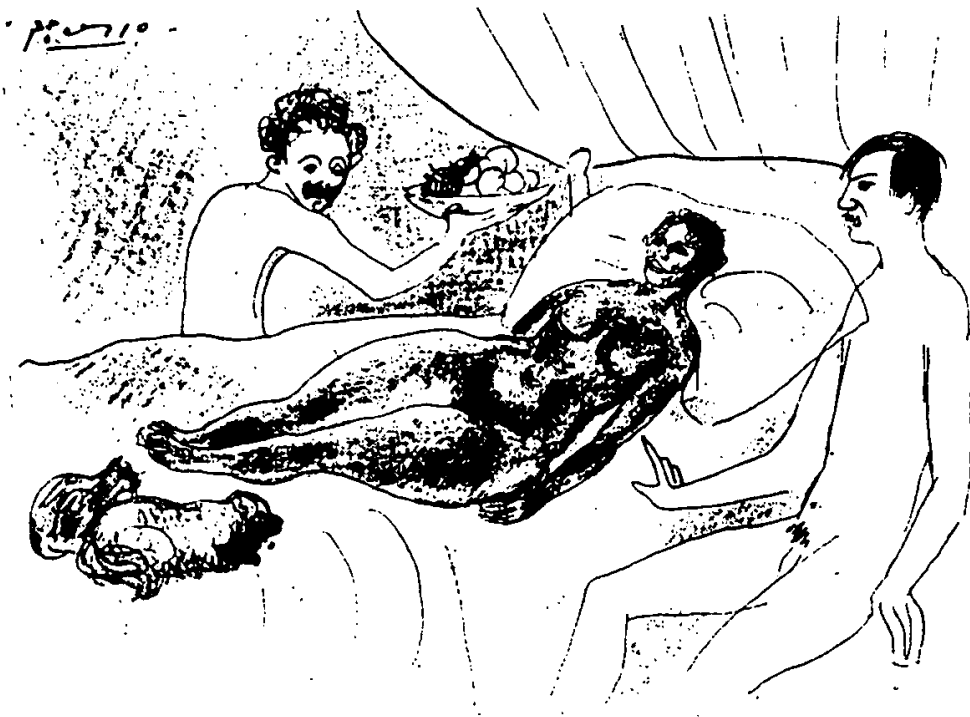


Fig. 5 Pablo Picasso, Parody after Manet's 'Olympia',
Private Collection; © 1995 ARS, New York/SPADEM, Paris.



Fig. 2 Francisco Goya, Mejor es holgar, 1793-1796
Collection Torello, Ampliaciones Reproducciones MAS, Barcelona

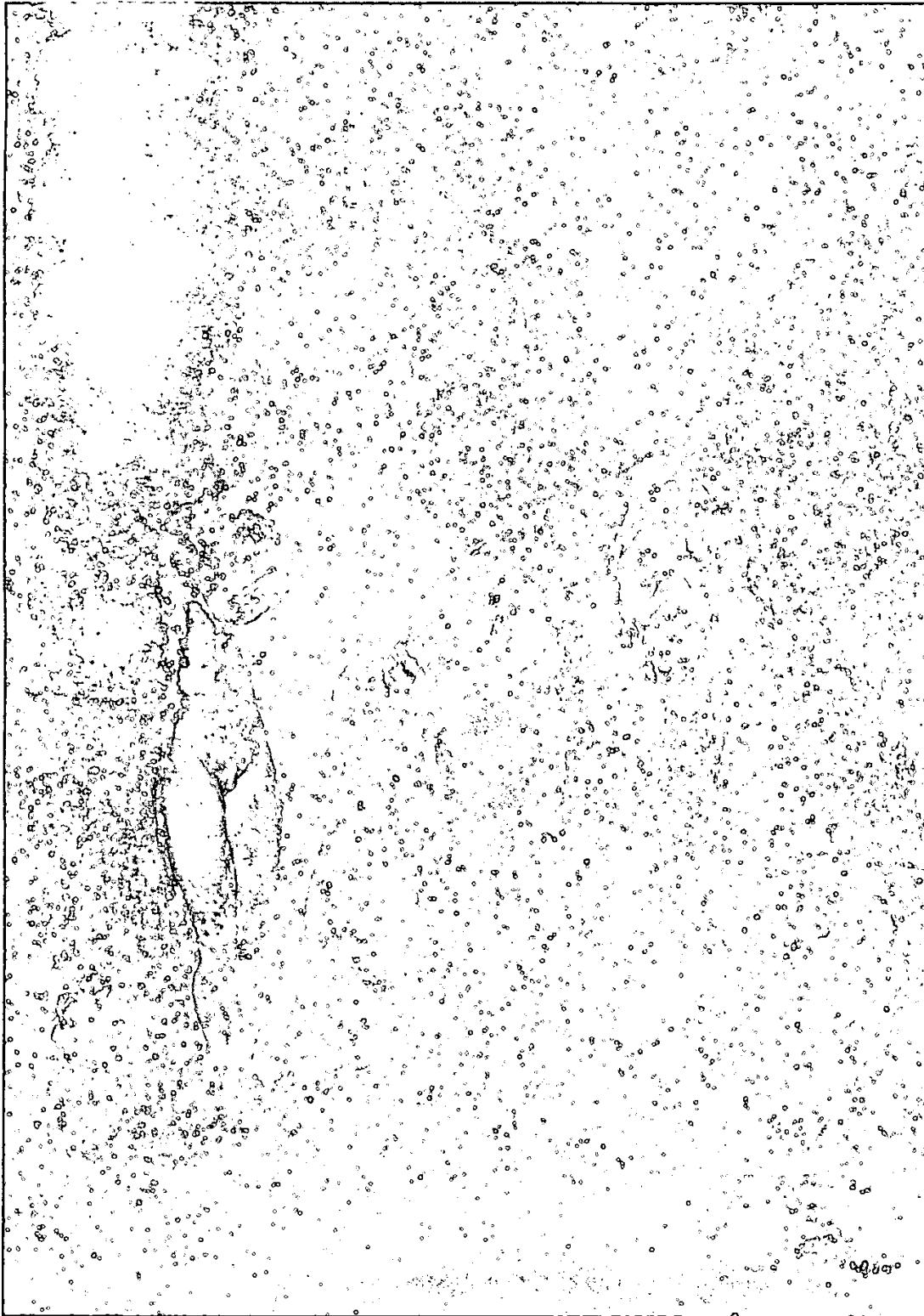


Fig. 3 Pablo Picasso, The Harem, 1906.
Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Collection

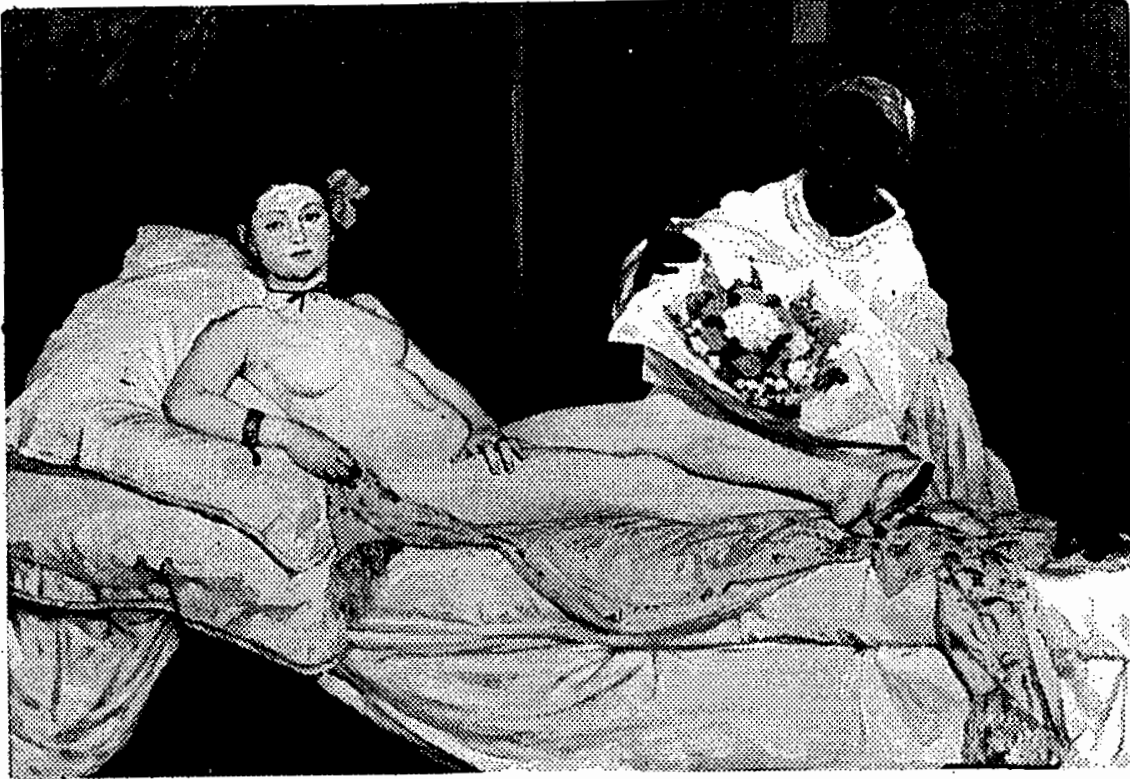


Fig. 4 (above) Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Musee d'Orsay, Paris; © Giraudon/Art Resource, New York; (below) computer enhancement to clarify the cat

