

Synopsis

In 1924 the Parisian couturier-collector Jacques Doucet buys Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Soon afterwards the collector finds his wife Jeanne organising the removal of the giant 'brothel' painting from their home, deeming it obscene. For Doucet the painting's resonance is profound. He believes it has an ethereal connection with his former lover Mme Sonia Roux, who died 14 years earlier. His agony over this loss erupts. Jeanne also knows of Sonia's connection and walks out, vowing not to return until the painting has gone.

Doucet reflects on life in Paris 1900, as a celebrated couturier and when teenager Pablo Picasso arrived in Paris as a Spanish immigrant. The preeminent, if thwarted, society figure Doucet was engaged to catholic Jeanne Roger, but in 1906 they separated, (eventually marrying 12 years later). In the interim, married archaeologist Mme Sonia Roux became his secret lover and muse. She was a spirit medium and occultist with friends at Picasso's *Bateau Lavoir* studios. Sonia Roux opened Doucet's eyes to adventure.

Upon buying *Les Demoiselles*, Doucet pledges to Picasso to bequeath the painting to the Louvre upon his death, believing he can persuade the museum to accept avant-garde art. He seeks immediate approval from the museum to demonstrate the painting's merit to Jeanne. Unfortunately, the bequest is rudely rejected.

The controversy inflames Doucet's latent grief, triggering alarming psychological symptoms and obsession with the painting. He fervently seeks information about its origins and links to Sonia. Through a torturous endeavour, undertaken while seriously ill, he interrogates witnesses from the time, uncovering further tragedy. He clashes with Picasso in face-to-face confrontations and locates Sonia's husband Serville Roux (previously believed dead). Jacques discovers that Roux regarded his wife's love of disreputable art and occult practices as 'madness' or witchcraft and had treated her with a fatally poisonous medicine.

Doucet foregoes his quest with the Louvre and creates a private studio which becomes known as his 'Temple of Arts', around *Les Demoiselles*, balanced with other supreme contemporary and primitive artworks. It costs him his finances and health.

Approaching death Doucet hallucinates, conjuring the dead Sonia. He solves his enigma, connected with tragedies in the painter's life. Doucet pieces together the clues and disparate information. In a visionary revelation he uncovers Picasso's heart-rending anguish at the root of the picture. It seems Picasso's rage is so resonant it radiates from the work contaminating all around it.

On his deathbed Doucet lays to rest his own demons, realising he has toiled for an illusion. He is greatly sorry for his 'life unlived' and for not knowing himself (his homosexuality). He reconciles with his wife, and she with the painting, taking his secrets and discoveries to the grave.

He has found his answers as well as new self-knowledge and pride - from his quest into art's greatest moment in the modern era – and in the acquisition of possibly the most influential painting in the entire history of art.

The epilogue records how years later, MoMA in New York acquired Les Demoiselles d'Avignon – becoming No.1 in their collection of more than four million items.

Note: Picasso's story is told with due regard to the published history of his life. Doucet's story is partially fictionalised for dramatic purposes, as little is known about this period of his life. He destroyed all his papers and records before dying.