

PAUL STOLPER

PABLO PICASSO – ‘A PAINTER’S STUDIO SHOULD BE A LABORATORY’

Friday 1 December 2023 – 3 February 2024

Spanning half a century, the works in this exhibition epitomise the diversity of subjects, styles and genres that Picasso mastered and made his own, from portraits and unilinear drawings to collages, cut-outs and ceramics, using methods he invented or helped originate.

Three pen and ink drawings here demonstrate his matchless skills as a draughtsman. Made in Barcelona at the height of his Blue Period, often marked by a profound sense of melancholy, ‘Femme Nue Assise’, from 1903, is a compassionate drawing of a seated woman, whose contemplative features are viewed in profile. Picasso’s concise linear style perfectly defines volume, enhanced by pentimenti which introduce gestural movement and reveal the artist’s working process.

‘La Sirène’ from 1907 is a virtuoso example of the unilinear graphic style Picasso had recently developed. His pen moves fluidly in a single, uninterrupted line, without lifting from the surface of the paper, as if drawing in space, to achieve pure and lyrical figurative clarity. Made on the verso of a Montmartre business card, the drawing was a gift to Picasso’s close friend Guillaume Apollinaire, who had asked him to illustrate his first published collection of poems, *Le Bestiaire ou Cortège d’Orphée*. Picasso made numerous small unilinear drawings for the bestiary, but Apollinaire pushed him to try instead the ancient, but time-consuming art of woodcut illustration. Picasso obliged with unilinear woodcuts of a chick and an eagle, but by then he had started work on ‘Les Demoiselles d’Avignon’, a project that soon became all-consuming. As a result, their *Bestiaire* partnership petered out and Apollinaire had to settle for woodcuts by Raoul Dufy.

Picasso’s 1912 drawing, ‘Tête. Étude Pour Une Sculpture’ is a cubist blueprint for a potential sculptural construction, and indeed it features in the catalogue for the Tate Gallery’s 1994 exhibition *Picasso: Sculptor/Painter*. Influenced by an Ivory Coast Grebo Mask in Picasso’s collection, it is one of a series of drawings associated with his Spring 1912 canvas, ‘Violin, Wineglasses, Pipe and Anchor’. Where the initial drawings in that series depict an accordion player metamorphosing into a guitarist, ‘Tête. Étude Pour Une Sculpture’ is a more radically innovative redesigning of human anatomy, fusing the sculptural and the pictorial, setting a sphere and inter-connected diagonal planes and panels within minimal linear scaffolding. A related pencil drawing, also from 1912, depicts a clearly identifiable guitarist and deploys a similar vocabulary of semi-abstract signs, including a sphere for the head and two intersecting diagonal lines that run from the neck to the ground.

“The goal of the *papier collé* was to show that different materials can enter into a composition to become, in the picture, a reality, able to compete with nature. We’ve tried to dispense with *trompe-l’oeil* so as to discover *trompe-l’esprit*” (Picasso). Picasso established his own, handy collection of paper cut-outs in the shape of pipes, drinking glasses, cups, pears, lightbulbs and other everyday items, which he could collage into cubist café scenes and related still-life compositions, fixing them with dress-making pins, so he could always detach and experimentally reposition them. ‘Pipe découpé’ has pin-holes in the bowl of the pipe, clearly showing how it was once attached to a paper or canvas support. It may be read as a conventional representation of a pipe, with two apertures and shading along the stem that creates a three-dimensional, sculptural quality. Its cut-out silhouette also figuratively represents a pipe, but the angle of the mouth aperture does not correspond to the conventions of single-point perspective, and it contrasts with the angle at which the bowl of the pipe is viewed. This apparently playful item thus materialises the precepts of cubism, providing simultaneously two different views of a single object, contradicting laws of single-point perspective that had been applied in Western European painting since the early 15th century.

In contrast, Picasso’s ‘Nu à La Serviette’ is a 1915 drawing of a nude woman in profile, holding a towel above her knees. Delicately naturalistic, it prefigures the monumental classicism that would characterise much of Picasso’s work in the early 1920s.

By 1950 Picasso had moved from Paris to Vallauris in the South of France. In 1946, at the Madoura Pottery Workshop, run in Vallauris by Suzanne and Georges Ramié, he made an initial group of ceramics, returning the following year to re-visit his works. Excited by what he saw, he realised ceramics was a medium that could synthesise sculpture, print-making and

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painting. He could decorate flat plates, transform oval-shaped platters into bull rings, and paint in the round on jugs, achieving effects impossible on canvas. Manipulating wet clay, he could turn a jug into a bird and enjoy all the transformative possibilities this material offered. He was similarly enthralled by the alchemical mystery of the firing process, waiting each time to see his painting and glazing affected in ways beyond his control. Picasso also spotted the expressive potential of broken and discarded fragments, all the potter's detritus. 'Masque', a unique and brilliantly simple, anthropomorphic clay sculpture, exemplifies Picasso's ability to respond spontaneously to any object he sees and touches, however ordinary it may seem. Picking up a redundant, broken piece of pottery, he transformed two existing holes into a pair of eyes just by adding a mouth and nose, creating a face or a magical mask. In the ceramics workshop, Picasso breathed life into inert matter and constantly revelled in his limitless powers of metamorphosis.

Picasso's 'Tête de Taureau' is an emblematic piece from 1958. Its status is confirmed by the prominence Picasso gave it in the drawing room of La Californie, his 1920s villa in Cannes where he long displayed it against a wall, resting on the back of a couch. Photographs show that beneath it, lying on the couch, he placed an amphora, given to him by Jacques-Yves Cousteau, France's celebrity oceanologist. Around 'Tête de Taureau' were placed many paintings, including 'Intérieur avec Femme dans un Rocking-Chair' and 'Nature Morte au Compotier', both from 1956, and a bullfight painting by Claude Picasso, dedicated "Pour Mon Papa Cheri Claude". A potent symbol of his Spanish identity, the cardboard bull's head became an integral part of his domestic interior. Measuring 82.8cm x 76.2cm, it was certainly made by Picasso as a maquette for "Bull", his construction in plywood and other materials, also created in 1958. The shape of the cardboard cut-out follows the still-visible outline of Picasso's black crayon drawing of a bull's head. He kept both the maquette and the wooden sculpture for the rest of his life. The cut-out was inherited by his grand-daughter Marina, while in 1983, marking the tenth anniversary of Picasso's death, his widow Jaqueline donated the wooden sculpture to New York MoMA. Picasso's 'Bull' had previously remained an intimate secret, never exhibited, never published. William Rubin, who had known Picasso well and was then Director of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA, was quoted in one of the museum's press releases, dated October 11, 1983, declaring, "I was amazed when I saw this piece among the objects in Jaqueline's share of the estate, and I thought it absolutely extraordinary."