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Introduction

Pablo Picasso was the most dominant and influential artist of the 1st half of the 20th century. Associated most of all with pioneering Cubism, he also invented collage and made major contribution to Surrealism. He saw himself above all as a painter, yet his sculpture was greatly influential, and he also explored areas as diverse as printmaking and ceramics. Finally, he was a famously charismatic personality, the leading figure in the Ecole de Paris. His many relationships with women not only filtered into his art but also may have directed its course, and his behavior has come to embody that of the bohemian modern artist in the popular imagination.

Early life

Pablo Picasso was the son of José Ruiz Blasco, a professor of drawing, and Maria Picasso López. His unusual adeptness for drawing began to manifest itself early, around the age of 10, when he became his father's pupil in A Coruña, where the family moved in 1891. From that point his ability to experiment with what he learned and to develop new expressive means quickly allowed him to surpass his father's abilities. In A Coruña his father shifted his own ambitions to those of his son, providing him with models and support for his first exhibition there at age 13.

The family moved to Barcelona in the autumn of 1895, and Pablo entered the local art academy (La Llotja), where his father had assumed his last post as professor of drawing. The family hoped that their son would achieve success as an academic painter, and in 1897 his eventual fame in Spain seemed assured; in that year his painting *Science and Charity*, for which his father modeled for the doctor, was awarded an honourable mention in Madrid at the Fine Arts Exhibition.

The Spanish capital was the obvious next stop for the young artist intent on gaining recognition and fulfilling family expectations. Pablo Ruiz duly set off for Madrid in the autumn of 1897 and entered the Royal Academy of San Fernando. But finding the

teaching there stupid, he increasingly spent his time recording life around him, in the cafés, on the streets, in the brothels, and in the Prado, where he discovered Spanish painting. He wrote: “The Museum of paintings is beautiful. Velázquez first class; from El Greco some magnificent heads, Murillo does not convince me in every one of his pictures.” Works by those and other artists would capture Picasso’s imagination at different times during his long career. Goya, for instance, was an artist whose works Picasso copied in the Prado in 1898 (a portrait of the bullfighter Pepe Illo and the drawing for one of the Caprichos, *Bien tirada está*, which shows a Celestina [procuress] checking a young maja’s stockings). Those same characters reappear in his late work—Pepe Illo in a series of engravings (1957) and Celestina as a kind of voyeuristic self-portrait, especially in the series of etchings and engravings known as *Suite 347* (1968).

Picasso fell ill in the spring of 1898 and spent most of the remaining year convalescing in the Catalan village of Horta de Ebro in the company of his Barcelona friend Manuel Pallarès. When Picasso returned to Barcelona in early 1899, he was a changed man: he had put on weight; he had learned to live on his own in the open countryside; he spoke Catalan; and, most important, he had made the decision to break with his art-school training and to reject his family’s plans for his future. He even began to show a decided preference for his mother’s surname,

and more often than not he signed his works P.R. Picasso; by late 1901 he had dropped the Ruiz altogether.

In Barcelona Picasso moved among a circle of Catalan artists and writers whose eyes were turned toward Paris. Those were his friends at the café *Els Quatre Gats* (“The Four Cats,” styled after the *Chat Noir* [“Black Cat”] in Paris), where Picasso had his first Barcelona exhibition in February 1900, and they were the subjects of more than 50 portraits (in mixed media) in the show. In addition, there was a dark, moody “modernista” painting, *Last Moments* (later painted over), showing the visit of a priest to the bedside of a dying woman, a work that was accepted for the Spanish section of the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in that year. Eager to see his own work in place and to experience Paris firsthand, Picasso set off in the company of his studio mate Carles Casagemas (*Portrait of Carles Casagemas* [1899]) to conquer, if not Paris, at least a corner of Montmartre.

Discovery of Paris

One of Picasso's principal artistic discoveries on that trip (October–December) was colour—not the drab colours of the Spanish palette, the black of the shawls of Spanish women, or the ochres and browns of the Spanish landscape but brilliant colour—the colour of Vincent van Gogh, of new fashion, of a city celebrating a world's fair. Using charcoal, pastels, watercolours, and oils, Picasso recorded life in the French capital (*Lovers in the Street* [1900]). In *Moulin de la Galette* (1900) he paid tribute to French artists such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and the Swiss Théophile Alexandre Steinlen as well as his Catalan compatriot Ramon Casas.

After just two months Picasso returned to Spain with Casagemas, who had become despondent about a failed love affair. Having tried unsuccessfully to amuse his friend in Málaga, Picasso took off for Madrid, where he worked as an art editor for a new journal, *Arte Joven*. Casagemas returned to Paris, attempted to shoot the woman he loved, and then turned the gun on himself and died. The impact on Picasso was deep: it was not just that he had lost his loyal friend and perhaps felt a sense of guilt for having abandoned him; more important, he had gained the emotional experience and the material that would stimulate the powerful expressiveness of the works of the so-called Blue Period. Picasso made two death portraits of Casagemas several months later in 1901 as well as two funeral scenes (*Mourners* and *Evocation*), and in 1903 Casagemas appeared as the artist in the enigmatic painting *La Vie*.

Blue Period

Between 1901 and mid-1904, when blue was the predominant colour in his paintings, Picasso moved back and forth between Barcelona and Paris, taking material for his work from one place to the other. For example, his visits to the Women's Prison of Saint-Lazare in Paris in 1901–02, which provided him with free models and compelling subject matter (*The Soup* [1902]), were reflected in his depictions of Barcelona street people—blind or lonely beggars and castaways in 1902–03 (*Crouching Woman* [1902]; *Blind Man's Meal* [1903]; *Old Jew and a Boy* [1903]). The subject of maternity (women were allowed to keep nursing children with them at the prison) also preoccupied Picasso at a time when he was searching for material that would best express traditional art-historical subjects in 20th-century terms.

The move to Paris and the Rose Period

Picasso finally made the decision to move permanently to Paris in the spring of 1904, and his work reflects a change of spirit and especially a response to different intellectual and artistic currents. The traveling circus and saltimbanques became a subject he shared with a new and important friend, Guillaume Apollinaire. To both the poet and the painter those rootless wandering performers (*Girl Balancing on a Ball* [1905]; *The Actor* [1905]) became a kind of evocation of the artist's position in modern society. Picasso specifically made that identification in *Family of Saltimbanques* (1905), where he assumes the role of Harlequin and Apollinaire is the strongman (according to their mutual friend, the writer André Salmon).

Picasso's personal circumstances also changed when at the end of 1904 Fernande Olivier became his mistress. Her presence inspired many works during the years leading up to Cubism, especially on their trip to Gosol in 1906 (*Woman with Loaves*).

Colour never came easily to Picasso, and he reverted to a generally more-Spanish (i.e., monochromatic) palette. The tones of the Blue Period were replaced from late 1904 to 1906 in the so-called Rose Period by those of pottery, of flesh, and of the earth itself (*The Harem* [1906]). Picasso seems to have been working with colour in an attempt to come closer to sculptural form, especially in 1906 (*Two Nudes*; *La Toilette*). His *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* (1906) and a *Self-Portrait with Palette*

(1906) show that development as well as the influence of his discovery of archaic Iberian sculpture.

Collage

By 1912 Picasso and Braque were gluing real paper (*papier collé*) and other materials (collage) onto their canvases, taking a stage farther the Cubist conception of a work as a self-contained constructed object. That Synthetic phase (1912–14) saw the reintroduction of colour, while the actual materials often had an industrial reference (e.g., sand or printed wallpaper). Still lifes and, occasionally, heads were the principal subjects for both artists. And in Picasso's works the multiple references inherent in his Synthetic compositions—curves that refer to guitars and at the same time to ears, for instance—introduce an element of play that is characteristic of so much of his work (*Student with a Pipe* [1913]) and lead to the suggestion that one thing becomes transformed into another. *Absinthe Glass* (1914; six versions), for example, is in part sculpture (cast bronze), in part collage (a real silver sugar strainer is welded onto the top), and in part painting (Neo-Impressionist brush strokes cover planes of white paint).

But the work is neither sculpture nor collage nor painting; planes refer to two-dimensionality, while the object indeed possesses three dimensions. The work of art thus hovers between reality and illusion.

By 1915 Picasso's life had changed and so, in a sense, had the direction of his art. At the end of that year his beloved Eva died, and the painting he had worked on during her illness (*Harlequin* [1915]) gives testimony to his grief—a half-Harlequin, half-Pierrot artist before an easel holds an unfinished canvas against a black background.

The 1930s

The privacy of his life with the undemanding Marie-Thérèse formed a contrast to the hectic pace of life kept by Olga and her bourgeois circle of society friends. Once in Boisgeloup, Picasso lived secretly with Marie-Thérèse (with whom he had a child, Maya, in 1935), and she became the subject of his often lyrical, sometimes erotic paintings, in which he combined intense colour with flowing forms (*Girl Before a Mirror* [1932]).

Picasso never completely dissociated himself from the women who had shared his life once a new lover occupied his attention. That is evident in his work, in which one woman often turns into another; for instance, in a private sketchbook

(number 99 [1929]) Picasso's portrait drawings betray his double life, for the pictures of his then secret mistress evolve into horrific images of screaming Olgas. In 1936 he began a relationship with the French photographer Dora Maar. That change in his own life coincided with a period of personal preoccupation with the Spanish Civil War, which had begun in that year.

Although Picasso never returned to his native country after a visit in 1934, his sympathies always lay with Spain (the short-lived Republican government named him honorary director of the Prado), and in early 1937 he produced a series of etchings and aquatints (*Dream and Lie of Franco*) to be sold in support of the Republican cause. His major contribution, of course, was the mural painting *Guernica* (named for the Basque town bombed in 1937 by the Fascists), commissioned by the Republican government for the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris. As compensation Picasso was provided with a studio in Paris on rue des Grands Augustins large enough to accommodate the enormous canvas. Dora Maar assisted him in the completion of the final work, which was realized in just over three weeks. The imagery in *Guernica*—the gored horse, the fallen soldier, and screaming mothers with dead babies (representing the bullfight, war, and

female victims, respectively)—was employed to condemn the useless destruction of life, while at the same time, the bull represented the hope of overcoming the unseen aggressor, Fascism.

World War II and after

The expressive quality of both the forms and gestures in the basically monochromatic composition of *Guernica* found its way into Picasso's other work, especially in the intensely coloured versions of *Weeping Woman* (1937) as well as in related prints and drawings, in portraits of Dora Maar and Nusch Éluard (wife of Picasso's friend the French poet Paul Éluard), and in still lifes (*Still Life with Red Bull's Head* [1938]). Those works led to the claustrophobic interiors and skull-like drawings (sketchbook number 110 [1940]) of the war years, which Picasso spent in France with Maar as well as with Jaime Sabartés, a friend of his student days in Barcelona. Thereafter Sabartés shared Picasso's life as secretary, biographer, and companion and more often than not as the butt of endless jokes (*Portrait of Jaime Sabartés* [1939]; *Retour de Bruxelles*, sketchbook number 137 [1956]).

After the liberation of Paris, Picasso resumed exhibiting his work, notably at the Salon d'Automne of 1944 ("Salon de la Libération"), where his canvases of the preceding five years were received as a shock. That plus the announcement that Picasso had just joined the Communist Party led to demonstrations against his political views in the gallery itself. At the same time, Picasso opened up his studio to both new and old writer and artist friends, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Pierre Reverdy, Éluard, the photographer Brassai, the English artist Roland Penrose, and the American photographer Lee Miller, as well as many American GIs.

Already in 1943 a young painter, Françoise Gilot, had presented herself at the studio, and within months she became Picasso's mistress. In 1946 Picasso moved to the Mediterranean with Gilot (with whom he was to have two children, Claude

in 1947 and Paloma in 1949). First they stayed near Antibes, where Picasso spent four months painting at the Château Grimaldi (*Joie de Vivre* [1946]). The paintings of that time and the ceramics he decorated at the studio in nearby Vallauris, beginning in 1947, vividly express Picasso's sense of identification with the classical tradition and with his Mediterranean origins. They also celebrate his new found happiness with Gilot, who in works of that period is often nymph to Picasso's fauns and centaurs.

The Picasso myth

After World War II an aura of myth grew up around the name of Picasso, and in the last decades of his life his work had, in a sense, moved beyond criticism. Although there were few critics able to keep pace with his latest work, there were few who attacked him. One exception was the British critic John Berger (*The Success and Failure of Picasso* [1965]), who raised questions about Picasso's economic motives and speculated about his inflated public reputation. Picasso's enormous output (especially in printing and drawing) kept his name before the public, even though his work seemed at the time to be far-from-mainstream nonfigurative imagery. For example, in the series that characterized the working methods of his late years, he used figurative imagery to weave a kind of narrative within each series' numerous variations.

In 1953 Françoise Gilot with their two children left Picasso, and he spent several years as a bachelor, dividing his time between Paris and his home at La Californie, near Cannes (from 1955). In 1953 he met Jacqueline Roque, who worked in the pottery shop in Vallauris, and from 1954 (they married in 1961) she not only became his steadfast companion, but also, as his muse, she became the principal image and source of inspiration for practically all of the late work. They are both buried in the castle at Vauvenargues, which Picasso purchased in 1958. But the years from their marriage to Picasso's death they spent in the villa Notre-Dame-de-Vie at Mougins.

History of art

In his late work Picasso repeatedly turned toward the history of art for his themes. He seemed at times obsessed with the need to create variations on the works of earlier artists; thus, in his many prints, drawings, and paintings of that period, reference is made to artists such as Albrecht Altdorfer, Édouard Manet, Rembrandt, Eugène Delacroix, and Gustave Courbet. Repeatedly Picasso did a complete series of variations on one particular work, the most famous being perhaps the series on *Las Meninas* of Velázquez consisting of 58 discrete pictures. At times Picasso reworked a specific work because he identified personally with it. For example, he was attracted to Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger* because the figure on the right bore resemblance to Jacqueline. More often he seemed moved by the challenge to rework in his own way the complex pictorial and narrative problems the older artists had originally posed for themselves. In a sense Picasso was writing himself into the history of art by virtue of such an association with a number of his predecessors.

There is a renewed sense of play in the work of Picasso's later years. He transformed paper cutouts into monumental sculptures, and in Henri-Georges Clouzot's film *Le Mystère Picasso* (1956), the artist, the sole star, behaves like a conjurer, performing tricks with his brush. And finally, just as he turned to the paintings of earlier masters, redoing their works in many variations, so he turned to his own earlier oeuvre, prompted by the same impulse. The circus and the artist's studio became once again the stage for his characters, among whom he often placed himself portrayed as an old acrobat or king.

Death

Pablo Picasso died on 8 April 1973 in Mougins, France from pulmonary edema and heart failure, while he and his wife Jacqueline entertained friends for dinner. He was interred at the Château of Vauvenargues near Aix-en-Provence, a property he had acquired in 1958 and occupied with Jacqueline between 1959 and 1962. Jacqueline Roque prevented his children Claude and Paloma from attending the funeral. Devastated and lonely after the death of Picasso, Jacqueline Roque killed herself by gunshot in 1986 when she was 59 years old.

Conclusion

Picasso is not just a man and his work. Picasso is always a legend, indeed almost a myth. In the public view he has long since been the personification of genius in modern art. Picasso is an idol, one of those rare creatures who act as crucibles in which the diverse and often chaotic phenomena of culture are focused, who seem to body forth the artistic life of their age in one person. The same thing happens in politics, science, sport. And it happens in art.

Sources

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