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Portraits

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### Picasso's Portraiture

“At the beginning of the twentieth century, the word ‘portrait still presupposed a visual parallelism between a thing seen and its image.” Pablo Picasso’s lasting effect on the genre of portraiture is that he created a whole new definition of the portrait, defining it more as the artist’s “reaction” to the subject and “changing the portrait from an objective image to a subjective image” (Rubin 13-15).

Pablo Picasso was born on October 25th, 1881 in Malaga, Spain. He was born into a middle-class family, with a father who was a painter and a professor of art at the School of Crafts in Malaga. Pablo began drawing at an early age, and legend has it that one day Pablo’s father observed his son’s skill while he was drawing and vowed to give up painting forever because his son had surpassed his own skill. In 1895, Pablo and his family moved to Barcelona, where he passed his entrance exams into the Barcelona School of Fine Arts at the age of thirteen, and at age sixteen, he attended the Royal Academy of San Fernand in Madrid. The Academy proved to be a poor fit for Pablo though, and the conventional instruction lead to Pablo dropping out. Around 1900 Pablo set off on his own, moving to Paris where he struggled to make a name for himself as an artist, living in poverty, and around this time Pablo also began to use his mother’s name as his last name, dropping his fathers, and soon began to sign his painting simply as Picasso (Penrose 124).

Picasso’s artwork at the beginning of his career was a far cry from his artwork near the end of his career. In comparing a self portrait created in Paris in 1901, to a self-portrait created in 1972 a year before Picasso’s death, the differences are staggering. The self portrait created in 1901 is a very conventional approach to the human form: the face is realistic and the proportions of the body are true to life, there are areas of heavy brush strokes and perhaps an impressionist influence, but that’s pretty much the extent of Picasso’s questioning of realism in this image. The image created in 1972 is radically different, with an almost ape-like structure to the face, with

extreme simplification and distortion of features and bright, colors. Comparing these two images is an excellent example of what Picasso was, and what Picasso became, and essentially why Picasso was remembered, because he presented the world with a new way of looking at the world depicted through art.

### The Blue Period

Color was a very important aspect to much of Picasso's work, and so influential in defining it, that his first two periods were named after the colors which he mainly used (blue in the blue period and rose and orange in the rose period). Picasso was also famous for going through different periods in this artwork, periods that reflected his mood, physical location, and method of interpreting the world around him. In addition these periods often reflect certain aspects of previous periods, and build upon each other. (Stein 40). Picasso's first period was known as the blue period because because most of the paintings created during this period were shades of blue to blue green. During this time, Picasso focused mainly on portraits of prostitutes, beggars, and the poor, but also painted a few portraits of friends, as well as a few self portraits. The mood and expressions of the subjects reflected their glum, depressing and difficult positions in society. *Boy with a Dog* created in 1905 near the end of Picasso's blue period is an excellent example of Picasso's gloomy approach to portraiture during that time period. The very skinny boy, dressed in rags looks off into the distance with sunken eyes and a dog as his only companion. The background of this image is a blue and gray wash of color that enhances the feeling of emptiness. Influencing Picasso's decision to paint in this manner was a trip back to Spain, observing the depressed state the country was in, and a suicide of a friend. (Stein 6).

### The Rose Period

When Picasso decided to move in a new direction from the blue period, he launched himself into another aptly named period: the rose period. During this time he created a much lighter mood, utilizing brighter colors such as pink and orange, and merrier subjects for his portraits: mainly people of the circus such as acrobats and harlequins. Gertrude Stein interpreted this period as "the gentle poetry of France and the circus" (Stein 7) as compared with her description of the blue period as "the sadness of Spain and the monotony of Spanish coloring compared with Paris" (Stein 5). Images such as *Harlequin's Family with Ape, Hurdy Gurdy*

*Man and Young Harlequin, and Saltimbanque Family*, all created in 1905, reflect these aspects, but it's also interesting to note that though Picasso presents a lighter, happier mood with his use of color, the sitters present a contrasting feeling. Many of the members of the circus Picasso portrays are wearing lighthearted clothing associated with the fun and excitement of their profession, but the personal lives of these people were often wrought with difficulties and were looked down upon by much of society. The two sided lives of these people are very accurately expressed through their clothing and overall atmosphere of the painting combined with often somber expressions on the faces of the individuals. Another interesting thing that was born out of this period was Picasso's interest in the harlequin, whom transcends past the rose period, and appeared in later works, often as a self portrait. (Stein 20-21).

Near the end of Picasso's rose period, Gertrude Stein herself sat for Picasso over eighty times in the winter of 1905, and Picasso struggled to capture Stein on canvas during this time. Finally he remarked "I can't see you any longer when I look" (Penrose 124) and painted Stein's face from memory instead of from one-on-one observation. Many people were disappointed and critical of the portrait because it didn't resemble Stein exactly, and confused with why Picasso, whom was very much capable of creating an exact replication of Stein, depicted Stein in such a way. To the large amount of degrading criticism of the portrait with regard to the image not looking like Stein, Picasso famously responded: "it will" (Penrose 125). Gertrude Stein, on the other hand, was pleased with her portrait saying "I was and I still am satisfied with my portrait, for me it is I and it is the only reproduction of me which is always I, for me" (Stein 8). This portrait not only signaled the end of the rose period, but also raised questions of likeness, identity and essence of a sitter, and opened up the genre of portraiture to modern, more abstracted interpretations of the human form.

QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

### African Influence

After painting Gertrude Stein's portrait, Picasso left for Spain once again and became interested in African Art, especially African masks and their abstract approach to the human face. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* finished in 1907 is regarded as a transitional piece with areas containing somewhat conventional realism, areas of African mask influence, and areas of early cubist abstraction. (Penrose 125). Around this time Picasso also started painting landscapes of Spanish buildings in a whole new abstracted, cubist way, painting forms layered on top of each other, and creating a somewhat recognizable image, but abstracted in a way that hinted at a new artistic direction. Paul Hayes Tucker suggests in his article *Picasso, Photography, and the Development of Cubism* that photography of buildings in Spain may have also played a role, though not a very prominent role, in the development of cubism. Tucker points to the shocking resemblance of the photographs taken of these Spanish buildings and Picasso's early cubist interpretations of those buildings. (Tucker 288-289). Picasso was consistently drawn back to the human form, and he soon began applying these new cubist

techniques to portraits.

### Analytic Cubism

Over the next few years Picasso's use of this new way of depicting forms develops from *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. 1911)* into an increasingly abstracted appearance. If you examine the *Portrait of Clovis Sagot*, *Woman with Fan*, *Woman with Pears*, and *Woman with Mustard Pot*, all created from 1909 to 1910, it's easy to see how Picasso moved away from realism, and cubism soon took over. What Picasso had developed through these portraits, were a series of images resembling the *Portrait of Ambroise Vollard* in 1910, which is an image of the sitter not only made up of, but almost clouded by the geometric forms, and mainly monochromatic coloring was later defined as analytic cubism. Analytic cubism is considered the "rendering of three-dimensional objects by shifting viewpoints and volume or mass in terms of flat planes, stressing multiple viewpoints" ("cubism"). These cubists works were a radically different approach compared to his early works and from what most people were creating at the time. Maurice Raynal an art critic and supporter of the cubist movement remarked that because of the development of cubism "art was no longer merely a record of the sensations bombarding the retina; it was the result of intelligent, mobile investigation" ("cubism"). With the introduction of these new ideas, Picasso effectively challenged the conventions of portraiture, (and art as a whole), questioning the idea of likeness of a sitter, and opened up portraiture to a world of possibilities and questions.

### Synthetic Cubism

From analytic cubism Picasso moved into synthetic cubism, which "utilized large areas of cutout paper integrated into the paintings to create greater flatness and a more schematic representation of an object or person" to assist in "the desire to emphasize further the material identity of the art object and convey the subject-matter identity more lucidly" ("cubism"). *Man with a Pipe* created in 1915 and *Three Musicians* created in 1921 are excellent examples of "portraits" created under this different approach to cubism with their integrated use of paper, decreased amount of shading, and brilliant colors. In response to Picasso's use of paper in his paintings he replied: "paper lasts quite as well as paint and after all, later, no one will see the picture, they will see the legend of the picture, the legend that the picture has created, then it

makes no difference if the picture lasts or does not last. Later they will restore it, a picture lives by its legend, not by anything else” (Stein 27). At this point in Picasso’s career, he began to see success and was becoming a legend himself, in addition to his artwork.

#### Neoclassic Period

Once world W.W.I ended, Picasso and many other artists returned to a neoclassic style in their artwork, in an attempt to capture the sense of a restored order within Europe (Stein, 10). During this time Picasso began painting portraits of very large women which led to very detailed, realistic studies of portraiture. Picasso’s *Portrait of the Artist’s Wife*, whom was Olga at the time, is a very realistic reproduction of Olga’s visual likeness, and is similar to Picasso’s early works before the blue period, and yet another radical shift from the kind of portraits he was creating previously.

#### Later Artwork

Throughout 1927 Picasso began creating large still-lives that were very highly colored and had a large amount of calligraphic influence in the lines of the image, then for the first time in Picasso’s career, he created nothing for six months. In 1933, Picasso experimented very briefly with surrealism and explored different mediums such as sculpture, and in 1935 he stopped painting once again, this time for two years. (Stein 45-47).

As Gertrude Stein put it, the onset of the Spanish Civil War in a sense “woke Picasso up” and Picasso began painting once again. (Stein 47). What followed was a sort of mixture of past influences, his artwork became even more colorful and expressive, and he was later credited with creating almost neo expressionistic paintings before neo expressionism became a movement. Prime examples from this time period are *Weeping Woman* from 1937 and *Woman in an Armchair* from 1964. These works reflect aspects from both his analytic and synthetic periods, but in a more simplified and abstracted manner. Finally, all of these works lead back to the *Self-Portrait* created in 1972 which I mentioned earlier, and its almost haunting abstraction and simplification. At this point, Picasso knew he would soon be facing death, and in the spring of 1973 he passed away.

So once again, with Picasso’s development of cubism he redefined the very concept of a portrait, “some of his most abstract pieces were created from life, and some of his most realistic

were created from memory”. By challenging these conventions Picasso set the stage for modern artists in the future to struggle to define portraiture and depict the human form. (Rubin 13-16).

#### Annotated Bibliography

“Cubism.” *The Dictionary of Art*. 1996.

This reference text provides an accurate definition of analytic and synthetic cubism, and provides some background information and helpful quotes and analysis from scholars and art critics of cubism.

Lubar, Robert S. "Unmasking Pablo's Gertrude: Queer Desire and the Subject of Portraiture" March, 1997. *The Art Bulletin*.

This article examines Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein and attempts to understand all the different aspects of the portrait that played a role in the development of the image, including analysis from Gertrude Stein, Picasso, and art critics.

Penrose, Roland. "Picasso's Portrait of Kahnweiler. March 1974, *The Burlington Magazine Publications*.

This article gives a brief history of Picasso and the significant events leading up to Picasso's cubist period and the production of his portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler which the article gives an in-depth analysis of.

Rubin, William, *Picasso and Portraiture: Representation and Transformation*. 1996, The Museum of Modern Art.

This very large book is comprised of multiple essays examining many different time periods and aspects of Picasso's work with additionally providing a very large amount of large color and black and white images of Picasso's work.

Stein, Gertrude. *Picasso*. 1939, Charles Scribner's Sons London.

Stein, a good friend of Picasso describes Picasso's life and process through the years and offers her own interpretations of his work.

Tucker, Paul Hayes. "Picasso, Photography, and the Development of Cubism." June, 1982. *College Art Association*.

This article explores the development of cubism assisted with photography in Picasso's work by examining different artwork and historical writings from Picasso and friends of Picasso.