



PICASSO AND APPROPRIATION

BY JOHN FINLAY

Pablo Picasso remains one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. Hailed and reviled at different times, he has been seen as a prodigy, bohemian, *agent provocateur*, conformist, classicist, primitivist, shaman, surrealist, dissident, matador, poet, communist, counterfeiter and even as someone who pastiches his own art. Picasso's work can also be situated within the context of the various idioms or art movements, as well as the social and political conditions, that shaped the different strands of twentieth-century Modernism: Post-Impressionism, Primitivism, Cubism, Futurism, Classicism and Surrealism. For many modernist artists, appropriation was a definitive tool, subject and creative mediator. Likewise, finding alternative methods to recreate radical forms – human or otherwise – was a major motivation behind the inventive character of Picasso's greatest artworks.

In this context, historians of Picasso have argued that the artist's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (1911, MoMA, New York), although not a Cubist painting in itself, nevertheless allowed for the dramatic break that made Cubism possible. It is now seen as the first twentieth-century painting that really encompasses complex discussions, including personal traumas (desire and death); anarchist sympathies; and colonialism relating to Picasso's appropriation of non-western (particularly Iberian) statuary, African masks and Egyptian hieroglyphs. The shock and force of experiencing tribal artefacts amassed from Oceania and Africa at the Musée d'Ethnographie in Paris had an effect akin to a supernatural encounter. Picasso recalled the impact that these 'magical masks', 'intercessors' and 'spirits' had on his painting: '*Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* must have come to me that day; not because of the forms but because it was my first exorcising picture, yes'. Although not exhibited until 1916, the work was nevertheless reproduced and discussed in 'The Wild Men of Paris', an article for the *Architectural Record* in 1910. Here the author made specific reference to Picasso's 'decadence and crimes' regarding the appropriation of tribal art in *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*: 'Monstrous, monolithic women, creatures like Alaskan totem poles, hacked out of solid, brutal colours, frightful, appalling!'

Interestingly, Georges Braque and Picasso would soon include sand, sawdust, metal filings, domestic commercial paint (particularly enamel Ripolin) and synthetic papers in their canvases and sculptures, thus rejecting conventional ideas of beauty in painting. Picasso's appropriation of modern commercial materials such as Ripolin seemed shocking to some, and Picasso expressed his concerns in a letter to the art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler on 17 June 1912: 'You tell me Uhde does not like my latest paintings with Ripolin and flags, perhaps we will eventually manage to disgust everyone as we have not said everything yet'.

Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912, Musée National Picasso, Paris) is customarily recognised as the first collage, apart from his pasting of a chromolithographic trade



Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez
Las Meninas, 1656
Oil on canvas
320.5 × 281.5 cm
Museo Nacional Del Prado, Madrid

[opposite] Pablo Picasso
Las Meninas, 1957
Oil on canvas
194 × 260 cm
Museu Picasso, Barcelona



card onto the drawing *Man Leaning against a Wall* (1899, Museu Picasso, Barcelona) and a magazine advert, 'Au Louvre, Paris', in the drawing *Bathers* (1908, Private Collection). The painted still life subject incorporates a sheet of commercial oilcloth, representing a caning pattern usually reserved for covering tables and chairs in restaurants. The decision to allow alien items pulled from other contexts into the sphere of traditional painting signalled a watershed in twentieth-century modern art. This seizure of the everyday, material object (alongside a real twisted rope for the frame) was a stunning and iconoclastic coup for Picasso and Cubism. Nor was the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, Picasso's great friend and the defender of the new, object-based Cubism, afraid to alert viewers to the down-market aspects of the materials used in Picasso's collages, *papiers collés* and assemblages. He argued in the journal *Montjoie*, in March 1913, that the cheapest materials or objects could only liberate the imagination if the artist introduced 'a two-penny song, a real postage stamp, a piece of newspaper, a piece of oil cloth'.

Now there was no going back, and the use of objects would become intrinsic to the creation of Picasso's work. The poet Louis Aragon discussed Picasso's 'surreal' 1926 *Guitars* (Musée National Picasso, Paris) in 'La peinture au défi' ('In Defiance of Painting'), which he wrote for an exhibition of collages at the Galerie Goemans in March 1930. In it he claimed, 'The principle of collage admits that painters had passed unaware from white to black magic. It was too late to go back. The new magicians had reinvented incantation.' Most famously, *Head of a Bull* (1942, Musée National Picasso, Paris) was created from a bicycle saddle and handlebars. Picasso's somewhat inconsistent recollection of how the



sculpture came into being is typical of his shamanistic attitude towards sculpture and art in his later years. The artist often recalled finding these objects by chance: one in a tip, another picked up on his way home from a funeral. Picasso frequently spoke about the role his work played in channelling things, forces and the surrounding elements, asserting that 'the artist is a receptacle for emotions that come from all over the place: from the sky, from the earth, from a scrap of paper, from a passing shape, from a spider's web'.

Picasso's cannibalisation even extended to the 'high' art of the past and present. Speaking of historic artists, in 1932 he told the Peruvian painter Felipe del Pomar, 'The secret of plastic beauty is located at a greater distance: in the Greeks at the time of Pericles'. As Picasso further explained to the art critic and publisher Christian Zervos in 1935, 'A picture comes to me from miles away: who is to say from how far away I sensed it, saw it, painted it'. As well as ancient arts, Old Masters were often the basis of Picasso's dialogue, including among his creative ancestry Raphael, Michelangelo, Cranach, El Greco, Velázquez, Goya, Rembrandt, Poussin, Le Nain, David, Ingres, Delacroix, Vermeer, Courbet, Manet, Renoir, van Gogh, Cézanne and Matisse. The list is almost endless, but is perhaps a guide to the most logical way of observing the artist's oeuvre, as a means of analysing the apparent discontinuity of styles that exists within it as a whole.

Picasso's paradoxical method of challenging artistic canons and referring back to his earlier inventions may appear incongruous to the viewer or art historian, but it undoubtedly led the artist to interpret the world around him in diverse ways and, as observers, we are all the richer for his rather obscure approach to making art. In discussing imitation and imitators, Picasso stated: 'I have a horror of copying myself.'

[opposite] Edouard Manet
Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe, 1865
Oil on canvas
208 × 264.5 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Pablo Picasso
Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe d'après Manet, 1960
Oil on canvas
130 × 195 cm
Musée National Picasso, Paris



But when I am shown a portfolio of old drawings, for instance, I have no qualms about taking anything I want from them.'

PICASSO AND PARICIO: APPROPRIATION IN CONTEXT

The modernist tendency to 'borrow' and appropriate is perhaps the best starting point for considering any connections between the practices of Picasso and Pedro Paricio. Paricio's *faux bois* (artistic wood imitation) renderings of the table and guitar in *Three Musicians* (2017) bring a touch of artificial illumination, and they point to the *matières premières* (raw materials) of Cubism. In this piece Harlequin's costume (traditionally Picasso's alter ego) is overlaid with Paricio's own brand of prismatic colours, indicating the artist at play. Here, and also in *Family of Artists* (2018), a role reversal has occurred: references to 'lowly' circus performers from Picasso's Rose Period paintings, Cubist *faux bois* and other 'uncultured' materials seem to fold back on themselves to reflect 'high art' and painterly concerns. In Paricio's hands, Picasso's *Three Musicians* (1921, MoMA, New York) – itself an annexation of traditional *commedia dell'arte* characters – seems to be invoked in order to revitalise the poetry of painting. In fact, it was Apollinaire who took the credit for sowing the seed of the circus 'in Picasso's soul ... whence it grew into marvellous works of art'.

Peter Read, author of *Picasso and Apollinaire: The Persistence of Memory*, has suggested that *Three Musicians* evokes Apollinaire's 'The Musician of Saint-Merry' in *Calligrammes*, where the music and poetry of an anonymous flautist entice a number of spellbound women to pass over into the place of the dead. Theodore Reff of Columbia University sees the work as a *memento mori* to Picasso's two lost friends (Apollinaire, who had died in 1918, and the poet and painter Max Jacob, who had retired to a Benedictine monastery). However, art historian Elizabeth Cowling alternatively argues that these fictional musicians represent real people from the world of music and theatre: Erik Satie (as the ill-tempered and mischievous Harlequin), Manuel de Falla (as the celibate and deeply religious monk) and Igor Stravinsky (as the radical composer). It is a sorrowful work that has an air of transience, meditation





and mourning. The ghostly Black Shuck sitting under the table is probably an omen of death, a devil dog meant to terrify. Thus the impact, mood and nostalgia of *Three Musicians* can credibly be associated with the campaign for a tomb to his departed friend Apollinaire. *Winter Blue* (2018) equally invokes the lowly subjects of Picasso's Spanish Blue Period, in particular his famous *Self-Portrait* (1901, Musée National Picasso, Paris). It is worth noting that this bluish obsession originated at a time of real crisis in Picasso's life and career. His down-at-heel circumstances – coupled with his constant travelling from city to city, place to place and studio to studio – perhaps triggered the melancholic outlook and atmosphere of 'Les bleus de Barcelona' (1963). Indeed, Picasso was so demoralised and penniless that he resorted to recycling his and others' outmoded canvases. As the artist's biographer John Richardson explains:

'In this Blue period self-portrait ... Picasso sees himself as an alienated expatriate devoured by self-pity, chilled by more than cold. Stylistically it harks back to the Golden Age of Spain ... [the artist] in the guise of an El Greco monk, an otherworldly ascetic.'

Paricio's engagement with the great Spanish master in *Winter Blue* is to some extent a re-imagining of this Blue Period blueness. But it's also a philosophical debate regarding painting itself – in our time and what has gone before – renewing the vigorous historical discussion that has gone on ever since the unveiling of insurrectionist 'ready-mades' by

[opposite] Pablo Picasso
Three Musicians, 1921
 Oil on canvas
 200.7 × 222.9 cm
 Museum of Modern Art, New York

Pedro Paricio
Three Musicians, 2017
 Acrylic on linen
 97 × 114 cm



Marcel Duchamp, the *pater* of conceptual art, to whom the supposed ‘death of painting’ has been ascribed. Thus a great deal of art-historical juggling takes place within Paricio’s painting. The replacement of key areas such as the face with swathes of multicoloured paint draws us back to the act of painting, to the ‘flat’ picture plane and to the modernist project *per se*. In Clement Greenberg’s view in his seminal essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ (1939), painting’s rapport with its own plane of representation was the great apex and triumph of Modernism.

Greenberg argued that the threatening invasion of ‘ersatz’ imitation – kitsch art for capitalism’s new man or woman – meant that ‘the arts [had] been hunted back to their mediums’ and that ‘to restore the identity of an art, the capacity of the medium must be emphasized’. His essay ‘After Abstract Expression’ (*Art International*, 1962) reiterated these concerns apropos the purity of medium and vision. Preserving art’s authenticity, identity and aspirations was, according to Greenberg, the stuff of Modernism. In describing his own work, Paricio has stated that he holds dear ‘art theory’ and ‘the ideas of Clement Greenberg’. ‘I love the freedom of abstraction and ... the power of materials and colour.’

Greenberg’s ‘high-art’ campaign was championed by the Expressionist goliaths Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and other abstractionists, for example, in the gestural drips and explosive patterns of Pollock’s *Autumnal Rhythm* (1950, Pollock-Krasner Foundation, New York) and the luminous ‘colour fields’ of Rothko’s *Orange and Yellow* (1954, Private Collection). Picasso, like other great modernists, believed in painting’s ability to convey the indispensable human emotions of tragedy, joy and death. As he later told the Catalan artist and writer Jaime Sabartès, he held a pessimistic view of art and believed that it emanated from sadness and pain. The philosophical musings of Picasso’s Blue and Rose Period works seem to insist on the relevance of spiritual hunger and need for intimacy in art. I think Paricio might agree.

[left] Pablo Picasso
Self-Portrait, 1901
Oil on canvas
81 × 60 cm
Musée National Picasso, Paris

[right] Pedro Paricio
Winter Blue, 2018
Acrylic on linen
81 × 61 cm

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