



# **‘I do not seek, I find’: The Postmodern Picasso and his Cubist Imagination**

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Since I have set myself a task of a discussion and celebration on the contribution of as varied an artistic persona as that of Pablo Picasso, the Spanish painter, sculptor, printmaker, ceramist, stage designer, poet and playwright, I wonder whether I could do without trying my hand, at the very inception, at describing to a certain extent, the ‘philosophy of aesthetics’ – an idea that is so seminal to the assessment of any work of artistic worth. To begin with, the category of the ‘aesthetic’ may be identified both on the affective and on the cognitive levels. It entails a mental activity that the viewer engages in – a process that leads him to ratiocinate and, then, intellectualize. Whether such a quality as the ‘aesthetic’ lies inherent in the object of art or, for that matter, in the art itself or not may be a subject of debate, but this much can be inferred as to say that it is an essence that is not only palpable, but becomes evident through traces. These traces may be identified and read by the sensitive and conscientious reader and, hence, may be taken as a kind of subjective experience that is brought into play by him to act upon the work of art. In case of a consideration of the finer arts, particularly paintings, this subjective experience is relative and, thus, categorically differs from one viewer to the other. Language has a ‘subtle lexicon’ (1) here that is very different, of course, from that of literature or the film, and that needs to be registered, for that reason, in wholly different ways. Another question that may be of importance here is, whether the question ‘What is art?’ may be understood in isolation of the question as to what makes us consider a piece of work as a work of art. To whatever extent we theorize the category of the ‘aesthetic’, how do we afford to distance ourselves from the idea that such a quality is irreducibly contingent upon a particular work that we set ourselves to assess or evaluate. Hence, I would like to consider the process of such an assessment or

evaluation as a deeper act of cognition that initiates at the level of the affective or the immediate emotional responses or the Kantian sense-perceptions and later seeks to achieve or grasp the inherently woven strokes of colours and other fine lines that need, I would say, a ‘cultured’ response that comes from cognition entailing the translation of the sense-perceptions to Kant’s second category which is ‘perception’. And, when this takes place, sensations come to generate knowledge. What a work of art does, perhaps most importantly, is to provide an experience that is conspicuously different in nature from the rest, in the sense that something so far unknown becomes ‘visible’. (2) This element of visibility is primarily internally felt, shaped and, thereafter, organized and expressed. Though the response elicited by art objects happens to be essentially aesthetic and deeply valued, it is more often than not decidedly subjective. This value lies in their ability to evoke this kind of a response which is perceivably different from responses evoked by objects that may be considered as being non-art. Hence, their ‘aesthetic value’ is their artistic determinant, however may such a determination lie, or may depend on the reader’s subjectivity. The difference in the nature of subjective responses very positively charts out the difference between art and, as I said before, non-art. Such subjectivity may comprise one’s ‘training, education, and expertise’ (3) along with one’s ‘aesthetic education’, and this is where evaluations of works of art may be understood to depart from critical estimations of works of literary art. In case of the finer arts, the responses may be affectively evaluated, whereas in case of literature, such responses are not necessarily judgemental and, even if they are, they are much more textually critical. But, irrespective of the nature of responses that different forms of art generate, there is needed a certain appreciable level of ‘seeing, hearing or reading’ on the part of the viewer for the finer arts and the reader for the art of literature, a certain “background” or expertise, training in the ear, or whatever might be helpful with respect to any artwork by attending to our “affective response”. (4) The way in which such a specialized perception is developed may be a different question altogether, but a certain level of realization of the ‘subliminal’ in art is undoubtedly called for when it comes to the appreciation of works of art – be such an appreciation judgemental, evaluative, affective, historical or critical.

With those ideological perceptions in mind, I would now proceed to a discussion, that I aspire to make, on the art of Pablo Picasso who was not only one of the most popularly known artists in the history of art but one of those most fearless *avant-garde* artists who was not in the least hesitant to innovate and adapt

himself to the gradually changing art world. Not for no reason was he considered to be a major contributor to the development of Cubism as a revolutionary 20<sup>th</sup>-century art movement that saw its conceptual inception in George Braque and that revolutionized European painting, sculpture and itself inspired and influenced related movements in architecture, literature and music. Influenced by primitivism, Iberian and African art, and by way of using natural forms, such as cylinders, spheres and cones, the Cubists broke up, analyzed and re-configured objects in their abstract forms, depicting them from a multiplicity of viewpoints. Hence, Cubism was, in some ways, consciously trying to construct a 'counter-architecture' to the newly evolving modernity which was intricate and nebulous, sometimes even dichotomous, undecipherable and challenging. This 'new modern reality' (5) was not only complex and ambiguous, but it itself was gradually being shaped by new inventions in technology, varied scientific discoveries, philosophical speculation and cultural diversity. A certain form of restlessness in the human condition was being created particularly by the radically changing pace of life and the way in which the society perceived the nature of things. There evolved a remarkable dynamism in man's experience due to the newly evolving notions of time, space and motion. Furthermore, he came to be thus 'thrust in a world of expanding vision and horizons, of accelerated tempo and mobility and of fluctuating perspectives'. (6) This heightened motion was effectuated by the theory of relativity that evolved through F. H. Bradley, Frederick Whitehead, Einstein, and the new mathematics. The era thus came to be characterized by not only an ambiguity, but also a 'sense of uncertainty' (7) that was 'generated by this new rush of stimuli'. (8) Cubism as a newly evolving style in art had to, almost compellingly as it were, respond to this unprecedented speed and a cultural radicality that sought to challenge conventional forms of perspectivist classical and Renaissance representation. A 'new way of seeing' was needed that would foster an expansion in the possibilities of art in a similar way as technology was extending the boundaries of travel and communication. This new way demanded fresh, new strokes, lines and shapes that were still then unconceived, in other words, shapes that would be multi-perspectivist enough to be multi-semantic. The singularity of the 'grand narrative' of truth suddenly came to be jolted and the world needed to be experienced relatively.

It was these dynamicities that heightened the challenge of the Cubists who had to represent the ‘flux of time, motion and space in a medium that lent itself to the mere capture of the fleeting moment’, (9) and to alter the ‘tired and trusted traditions’ of art that had a dominating cultural presence for several centuries. A significant headway in photography had to be countered by radical artistic perspectives. In other words, art had to give expression to several simultaneously existing truths. Cubism was a response to this condition, and Paris, considering its ‘artistic legacy’, (10) became the major point of its emergence and development.

Perhaps it can be said that Pablo Picasso’s proto-Cubist work *Les Femmes d’Alger (O.J. Version O)* ushered in a revolutionary way of depicting reality. This landmark painting had broken all traditional rules that artists at the time followed, especially the one that defined art as an imitation rather than creation. Picasso had decided to turn his back on a fixed point of view and harmonious proportion, concepts that had been religiously practised since the Renaissance. Instead, he replaced these with multiple perspectives and distortions, if it may be so called by the term. Furthermore, he incorporated into his painting references to primitive art, a practice that ran counter to the ceremonious adulation of the whole continuum of Western art. For most people, *Les Femmes d’Alger* was a desecration of everything that had been held as sacred. But fortunately, Picasso’s rebelliousness cleared the air for what was to come – a freedom to create rather than imitate and to construct a new pictorial language.

Cubism was born out of the interaction and collaboration that occurred between Picasso and Braque right after they met in 1907. When Braque saw *Les Femmes d’Alger* for the first time, he went into a state of shock. However, many months after this initial encounter and much reflection, Braque reconsidered his initial reaction and responded with *Large Nude* (1908), in which he follows Picasso’s lead and combines several points of view in one image. Soon afterwards, an artistic partnership developed between the two artists that would define the nature of painting for years to come. At first, Picasso was concerned with the formal and technical freedoms that African art and masks had inspired while Braque experimented with the revolutionary innovations in *Les Femmes d’Alger*. Picasso’s *Dryad* (1907) captures the tribal stance as well as the formal distortion of primitive art. But Braque, by dint of his rather tempered artistic consciousness, functioned towards neutralizing Picasso’s artistic savagery by incorporating it into Paul Cézanne’s more conservative formal legacy of reducing reality to fundamental and geometrically interconnected shapes.

Out of this artistic reconciliation, Analytical Cubism – the first phase in the evolution of Cubism – was born.

‘In the beginning of their artistic partnership, Picasso and Braque had become consumed with Cézanne’s feeling for the “architecture” that underlies nature and with his statement that “everything in nature is based on the sphere, cone, and cylinder”.’ (11) Cézanne’s work also bore for Picasso the suggestion that art was rather “a new kind of reality” than an “imitation” of such a reality, created by means of a “new ‘language’ of forms”. For Cézanne, each portrayal is significant in its own right. Hence, the objective of a painting is not to offer the viewer a mirror view of the art, but to make him “aware of the picture surface itself as well as the subject matter it depicts”.

For Picasso, the portrayal of the complexities of reality was of paramount importance, while, for Cézanne, reflection on the nature of the object was a point of concern. The element of relationality in the lived reality of our being was what Picasso was trying to capture in his art and the multiplicity of relations that objects in nature share. For him, it is these relations that form our knowledge of the world since it is on the way in which we see them that they find expression in art and life. Picasso conceived of the Cubist art object as emerging from the very thought about the object and the “sense impressions’ that the object gives birth to.

A Cubist by thought and practice that he was, Picasso considered Cubism to be gradually confronting a condition of stalemate, by 1909, when he considered reviving the school from paling into insignificance and, finally, oblivion. He envisages presenting objects in a fragmented way where aspects that normally remain hidden from vision could be brought out “through a grid-like scaffolding system”. As its name implies, the paintings associated with the Analytical Cubism phase show evidence of a methodology through which Picasso used to “break down” the surface of the objects being represented into basic, geometrical shapes’. (12) Picasso’s *Woman with a Fan* (1908) is a volumetric study of a woman whose features are

simplified into spheres and triangles and suggests a sculptor at work, as indeed was Picasso himself. In *Woman with Mandolin* (1910), ‘Picasso, always the sculptor, fragments the girl’s body into facets that are modelled to simulate their projection out of the flat picture plane toward the viewer and that portray her in movement as she strums her mandolin. What Picasso is trying to depict here is the fourth dimension, the space/time continuum.’ (13)

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), Henri Bergson argues that human consciousness experiences space and time as being ever-changing and heterogeneous. An individual, with the gradual progression of time, comes to acquire a repository of perceptions on certain given objects in the world around him, and these perceptions, in their turn, take the shape of conceptions about such objects. These conceptions are formulated in relation to the two ‘modes of perception’, that is, time and space. Bergson argued that intellectual perception led to a fundamentally false representation of the nature of things, and that in nature nothing is ever absolutely still. Contrarily, the universe remains in an interminable process of change which is its truth. All objects in nature are in an inseparable relationship and, thus, are correlative to each other, and what metaphysics does, ‘according to Bergson, is to find ways to capture this flux, especially as it is expressed in consciousness. To represent this flux of reality, Picasso began to make references to the fourth dimension by “sticking together” several three-dimensional spaces in a row’. (14)

These new ideas about a reality that is in a state of ‘flux’ injected the element of doubt in the ongoing debate about the nature of the artistic process. How does one, they asked themselves, capture the ethereal and shifting quality of reality, where object and environment become inseparable? In what way can a possible resolution between ‘intellect’ and ‘intuition’ be made possible given the fact that they are apparently almost oppositional? What then is the relationship between the coherent artifice of traditional ‘realistic’ art and the incoherent processes by which we experience our environment, between the Renaissance perspective and multiple points of view that arise as a result of the acceleration of the pace of modern life? Where does the spectator and the object stand in relation to each other? The result of these rhetorical questions, that is, the paintings of 1910-11, probe further into the nature of realistic illusions and gradually refine the balance in which the spectator was poised, between the internal world of the painting’s structure and the external world of its references to reality. Now, the concern of Picasso shifted to creating a new artistic language that would express the multiplicity and complexity of these relationships and, at the same time, suggest stability. What Picasso and Braque jointly developed was a new kind of painting – one that emphasized pictorial configuration rather than motif, thus moving in the direction of abstraction. To achieve this new pictorial structure, Picasso replaced the traditional perspective by a shallow space in which there is little distance between a figure, its foreground and its background. Consequently, the eye is not led back into an imaginary distance but is held on the painting’s surface and yet, at the same time, is invited to experience three-dimensionality in a new way. The artist is now free to break apart the object into small facets or pieces and distribute them about the canvas as the composition requires. The painter can show the back, front or side of an object simultaneously. Art historians refer to this phase of Cubism as ‘facet Cubism’ or ‘high analytic Cubism’.

By the end of 1910, Picasso further explores this new phase of Analytical Cubism in the *Portrait of Ambrose Vollard*, although he was still committed to the rendering of the particulars of his subject matter. Picasso's great power as a caricaturist is demonstrated in this painting, in which a powerful floating bald head, the defining characteristic, emerges as the product of several combined viewpoints from the muted monochromes of an angular maze. In this painting, the figure of Picasso's famous art dealer has dissolved into the cubist grid, with only his facial structure, protruding jawbones, pug nose, the colour and texture of ruddy flesh and light-brown hair, beard and moustache. Vollard is seated facing us; behind him is a table, on which is a bottle, on his right, and a book, perhaps a ledger, on his left. Picasso has even included the handkerchief in Vollard's pocket. The famous dealer is portrayed as being very cerebral as he gazes downward at a rectangular shape, which judging from his expression of shrewd critical discernment may be a work of art. The whole surface of the painting is a series of small, intersecting planes, any one of which can be interpreted as being both behind and in front of other adjoining planes.

This reductive, fragmenting process is taken even further in *The Accordionist* (1911), where the figure has been so fragmented that it is no longer apparent what is being represented, and so the title purveys the clue as to the nature of its subject matter. The triangular scaffolding grid provides the structure on which to suspend the almost unrecognizable fragments of this musician. The only recognizable vestiges of the accordionist's instrument are the keys and bellows shown fragmented from multiple viewpoints, located centre left of the painting. More than an analysis, this painting is an assembling of parts. The consequence of Picasso's experimentation was true liberation from the Renaissance concept of conceiving the world from stativity of a geometrical perspective and of portraying painting as an act of imitation. This break with the past entitled artists to all kinds of new possibilities.

The experimentation with the very concept of constructing a work of art led Picasso and Braque into the final phase of Cubism, that was called, Synthetic Cubism. As its name implies, Synthetic Cubism worked on the premise of assembling out of separate parts certain new forms. What they were trying to recreate in this phase of Cubism is how modern urban street life appears to the onlooker. Whereas in the Analytical phase Picasso and Braque were deconstructing and then reassembling bits and pieces to suggest objects as seen from multiple angles, in this latter phase they were interested in superimposing fragments one on top of the other to simulate walls plastered with posters as well as stacked newspaper displays at kiosks. Furthermore, they no longer concerned themselves with the representation of space because now the emphasis was on assimilating multiple layers of information and shapes. The end results were compositions that were simpler, brighter, and bolder accomplished through the following techniques:

- bringing together familiar scraps and unfamiliar forms in order to give shape to a particular sense of urban life
- exploring the individual experiences associated with public spaces and urban recreation
- using the language of publicity and commerce in an ambiguous manner to suggest a multiplicity of contradictory meanings, especially through puns, and
- capturing the new sense of simultaneity of diverse experiences-the fusion of objects, people, machines, noises, light, smells, etc.

How was it that Picasso and Braque decided to change the way in which they were depicting reality? While Picasso preferred the more traditional subject matter of portraits, Braque oscillated to forms of still life and landscapes. Nevertheless, it is around this time that they

began to paint like twins, their work becoming indistinguishable from one another. Colour, texture, and linear structure were almost the same. But Braque, ever the pragmatist, nudged Picasso by reminding him that their work was becoming so abstract that subject matter was no longer recognizable. In order to bring painting back to reality, Braque introduced a new element to their work – visually realistic objects taken from popular culture. Even before this point in the evolution of Cubism, Picasso had already pasted a small piece of paper on the centre of a drawing to make what was the first *papier collé* or ‘collage’ in 1908. As early as 1910, both artists had been incorporating words, letters and numbers into their paintings. ‘Collage’ and *papier collé* gave Picasso the opportunity to pursue the element of estrangement as well as that of diversity of modern life. Furthermore, the introduction of real objects into their paintings allowed them to remove the distinctions between what is real and what is created by the artist, between art and mass-produced objects, and between painting, drawing, and commercial art. As Picasso himself said: ‘Art is a lie that helps us understand the truth.’ By re-instating recognizable elements from everyday life into his paintings, Picasso was asking a very important rhetorical question about the very nature of art: What is more real, art or reality? Through his further exploration of this question, Picasso seemed to be implying that they are both just as real for they can co-exist on the same plane, on the same canvas. All of a sudden these artists introduced bits of observed nature onto the canvas, as well as products of the modern industry: sheet music, newspaper, playing cards and restaurant menus. As in music, Picasso was employing scraps of reality as counterpoints to the abstract structures created through paint. Again, Picasso had revolutionized the world of art. This new phase in the evolution of Cubism came to be known as ‘collage’.

Picasso’s first collage is *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1911-12), on which he embeds a piece of oilcloth that simulates chair caning. What Picasso seems to be suggesting here is that there are many different levels of reality, for the oilcloth itself is a manufactured representation of another craft – caning. Looking closely at this collage, it appears that the painted parts of the work depict a glass in the centre, behind which lies a copy of the newspaper *Le Journal* (hence the letters JOU) and a white clay pipe. To the right are two lemon slices and a knife, and below them is what might be an oyster shell. The shadows or refractions from the glass lie across the oilcloth, and towards the bottom edge of the canvas a brown strip seems to represent the front edge of the table. Finally, the oval shape of the painting is ‘framed’ by a piece of real rope. What Picasso has sought to do here is, to remind us that manufactured materials, words, and, even, art are all similar in that they are means of representing reality and that, furthermore, by including them together in his work he has challenged the traditional demand that artists should strive for artistic unity. Thus, their juxtaposition in the same picture makes the point about the nature of language but also blurs the distinction between them. Even the oval shape of the canvas signifies something else, that is, the seat of a chair or the surface of the café table on which the objects sit. Since the French word for an easel picture is *tableau*, Picasso delights in the joke that his picture is a vertical *tableau* which is also a horizontal table.

Probably Picasso’s most famous work, *Guernica*, is certainly the his most powerful political statement, painted as an immediate reaction to the Nazi’s devastating casual bombing practice on the Basque town of Guernica during Spanish Civil War. The work shows the tragedies of war and the suffering it inflicts upon individuals, particularly innocent civilians. This work has gained a monumental status, becoming a perpetual reminder of the tragedies of war, an anti-war symbol, and an embodiment of peace.

*Guernica* portrays a frenzied tangle of six human figures (four women, a man, and a child), a horse, and a bull; the action transpires within a claustrophobic, low-ceilinged interior, below an overhead lamp that appears to burst with light. While Picasso never made explicit to the public the symbolism behind each of *Guernica*'s figures and objects ("It's up to the public to see what it wants to see", he once said), much of it has the danger of being taken at its face value. At the same time, art historians have, for decades, split hairs over the intentions behind nearly every brushstroke. Most direct, perhaps, are the contorted expressions of the women, suffering physical agony and mental anguish. The artist conveys their desperation through sharp, pointed tongues, and sorrow through tear-shaped eyes.

The bull and horse have drawn varying interpretations. Most trace back to the animals' roles in the traditional Spanish bullfight, where horses can become collaterally damaged, and the bull is wounded to the point of death. In contrast, though, some have theorized that the bull, which lacks the emotional and physical expression of the rest of the figures, is an emblem of fascism. Still others believe that the bull is a representative of Spanish heritage – a stoic and unwavering witness to the tragedy.

Interpretations of *Guernica* vary widely and contradict one another. The work is also seen as an amalgamation of pastoral and epic styles. The discarding of colour intensifies the drama, producing a quality of reportage as in a photographic record. The work is in blue, black and white, 3.5 metre (11 ft.) tall and 7.8 metre (25.6 ft.) wide, a mural-size canvas painted in oil. It is needless to say that the painting is an icon of modern art and should be seen as the artist's comment on what art can actually contribute towards the kind of self-assertion that liberates every human being and protects the individual against overwhelming forces such as political crime, war and death.

Just as Picasso, through his art, sought to explore the philosophical ideas of Bradley, Whitehead, and Bergson, he nonetheless also experimented with the possibility of inclusion of verbal and musical language in his works. At the turn of the century, linguists in Europe and the United States had begun to wonder what language really was and how to describe it, leading to a new appreciation of the importance of structures and codes to linguistic meaning and the arbitrary accidental nature of the way language describes reality. These ideas became the basis of the study of signs known as semiotics. Although Picasso could not have been more removed from these academic studies, his work of this period, nevertheless, is a testament to his questioning of the relationship between art, language and representation. His 'eclectic style' remarkably brought together the aesthetic nuances of both tradition and modernity. His artistic imagination, his 'free spirit' and his 'eccentric style' can thus be said to be heralding not only a new body of textuality, but also possibly, at the same time, founding a still-then-unconceived praxis of 'Neo-Expressionism' leading to a postmodern discourse of creativity.

## References

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