

1919

Pablo Picasso has his first solo exhibition in Paris in thirteen years: the onset of pastiche in his work coincides with a widespread antimodernist reaction.

When Wilhelm Uhde, the German collector and dealer of French avant-garde art, entered the Paul Rosenberg Gallery in 1919, he was stunned. Instead of the powerful style he had witnessed Picasso developing in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War I—first Analytical Cubism, a major example of which was Picasso's 1910 portrait of Uhde himself, then collage, and finally "Synthetic Cubism" (the form that collage took when rendered in oil paint on canvas)—Uhde was confronted with a strange mixture.

On the one hand there were neoclassical portraits, redolent of the manner of Ingres, Corot, late Renoir, indeed the whole panoply of nineteenth-century French artists influenced by the classical tradition, all the way from Greek and Roman antiquity up through the Renaissance and into the work of seventeenth-century French painters such as Poussin [1]. On the other hand there were Cubist still lifes, but now of a compromised form: impregnated with vistas of deep space, prettified by a decorative palette of pinks and cerulean blues. Uhde remembers:

I found myself in the presence of a huge portrait in what is known as the Ingres manner; the conventionality, the sobriety of the attitude seemed studied, and it seemed to be repressing some pathetic secret.... What was the meaning of this and the other pictures I saw on that occasion? Were they but an interlude, a gesture—splendid but without significance ...?

Wanting to see what he viewed as Picasso's self-betrayal as merely a parenthesis, the momentary flagging of his true creative energies, Uhde nonetheless had suspicions that the artist had capitulated to something more sinister, to the fear inspired by the xenophobia unleashed by French nationalism during the war, a hatred of everything foreign that had already manifested itself in a prewar cultural campaign in which Cubism was linked with the approaching enemy and affixed with the label "*boche*" ("kraut"). Accordingly, Uhde continues his speculations on the cause of what he has seen:

Or was it that at this time when men were ruled by hate ... [Picasso] felt that innumerable people were pointing their fingers at him, reproaching him with having strong German sympathies and accusing him of being secretly in connivance with the enemy? ... Was he trying definitely to range himself on the French side, and did these pictures attest to the torment of his soul?

Among the many things that emerge from this scene, the two most obvious concern the enormity of the break that Uhde sensed in Picasso's art and, given this, his conviction that its explanation had to be found in a cause outside the inner logic of the work itself.

Uhde has since been joined by many historians in seeking this explanation, even though not all of them agree with him about the nature of this external cause. Yet for the ones who side with Uhde in looking to politics for an answer, that explanation is linked to the *rappel à l'ordre* (return to order), a widespread postwar reaction against what was seen as the avant-garde's promotion of anarchic and antihumanist expressive means and an embrace instead of a classicism worthy of the French ("Mediterranean") tradition.

Was Picasso, the avant-garde leader, now following in the wake of this massive “return,” his ship unable to hold its own against the flood tide of historical reaction? To some scholars the actual date of Picasso’s conversion makes the postwar *rappel à l’ordre* dubious as an explanation. For Picasso had already begun to embrace a classical style during the war, as, for example, in his 1915 portrait drawings of Max Jacob [2] and Ambroise Vollard. So, instead, these scholars look to the circumstances of Picasso’s personal life. They cite his isolation, with close artistic allies like Braque and Apollinaire away at the front, and Eva Gouel, the companion of his prewar years, dying of cancer; they mention his growing restlessness with a Cubist style that had become increasingly formulaic and, in the hands of lesser followers, banal; they see his excitement at being swept up in the glamour of the Ballets Russes, with its eccentric personnel such as Sergei Diaghilev, its elegant ballerinas, and its glittering clientele; finally, they see his succumbing to the charms of Olga Koklova, the dancer in the corps of the Ballets Russes whom Picasso would marry in 1918 and whom he would allow to integrate him into that world of wealth and pleasure for which the avant-garde was just another form of *chic*.

But if these two explanations—one sociopolitical, the other biographical—are at odds with each other, they agree about looking for the reason for this change outside the limits of Picasso’s actual work. In this they share a common understanding about the nature of causal explanation. As a consequence they are opposed to another position, which insists that the postwar manner can be logically deduced from Cubism itself and thus, like the growth of an organism, its genetic coding is entirely internal to it and more or less impervious to external factors. The principle that this side sees at work—internal to Cubism itself—is collage: the grafting of heterogeneous material onto the formerly homogeneous surface of the work of art. If collage could paste matchbooks and calling cards, wallpaper swatches, and newsprint onto the field of Cubism, they reason, why cannot this practice be extended to the grafting of a whole range of “extraneous” styles onto the unfolding oeuvre, so that Poussin will be redone in the manner of archaic Greek sculpture, or the realist compositions of the seventeenth-century painter Le Nain will be presented through the gay confetti of Seurat’s pointillism? Ultimately, the defenders of this position argue, there is no need to explain the change in Picasso, since nothing in fact changes; the collage principle remains the same—only the “extraneous” matter shifts a little.

Contextualists versus internalists

The radical division between these two camps of scholars brings us face to face with the issue of historical method. The contextual explanation sets itself against the theory of the internally determined growth of the creative individual, each position feeling the other is blind to certain facts. The contextualists, for example, see the other side as refusing to face up to the reactionary content unleashed by neoclassicism and the need to find the source of such reaction; the internalists see themselves vindicated by the early date of Picasso’s move, showing that it must be motivated by something native to his creative will and unproblematically continuous with his previous concerns with Cubism.

The positivist historians among us (or the positivist impulses within each of us) would like to cut the knot of this argument by coming up with a document that will solve the debate: a letter by Picasso, for example, or a statement in an interview in which he says what this change in style meant to him or what he intended by it. However, there rarely is such a thing in relation to Picasso (or to most other artists for that matter), and even in the few instances where it does exist, we *still* have to interpret it. In this case, for example, Picasso seems to have sided with the internalists when in response to the Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet’s question, put to him in Rome in 1917, about why he engaged

simultaneously in two totally opposite styles (Cubism and neoclassicism), Picasso merely quipped: “Can’t you see? The results are the same!”

But there are art historians who cannot accept this answer, seeming as it does to act out its own blindness to the difference between modernism and pastiche, or between authenticity and fraudulence. Modernist art, of which Cubism was a fundamental example, stakes its claim to authenticity on its progressive uncovering of the structural and material (and thus objectively demonstrable) realities of a given artistic medium; while pastiche—the flagrant imitation by one artist of the style of another—shrugs off this notion of an inner pictorial logic to be revealed, one that puts certain options out of bounds, and maintains instead that every option is open to the creative spirit. Thus Cubism and the pastiche of neoclassicism cannot be “the same,” and we should rephrase our historical problem by asking what could have made Picasso, as early as 1915, imagine that they were?

At this point it is important to realize that a fight had already begun, just before the war, over the legacy of Cubism, which is to say, over the future that Cubism itself had made possible. On the one hand there were artists—such as Piet Mondrian, or Robert Delaunay, or František Kupka (or in Russia, Kazimir Malevich)—who believed that this legacy was pure abstraction, the next logical move after the ascetically reduced grid of the Analytical Cubism of 1911–12. On the other, there were those, such as Marcel Duchamp and (briefly) Francis Picabia, who saw Cubism opening up to the mechanization of art in an obvious extension of collage into the readymade. Picabia’s own development of Cubism in this latter direction took the form of what he called “mechanomorphs,” industrial objects (such as spark plugs or turbine parts or cameras) coldly rendered by means of mechanical drawing and declared to be portraits (whether of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, the critic Marius de Zayas, or “a young American girl in a state of nudity” [3]). The date of most of this output, interestingly enough, was 1915, and it appeared in the magazine *291*, which Picasso would certainly have seen.

Now, if these two options were what the avant-garde saw as the logical next step of Cubism, they were not the possibilities that Picasso himself found acceptable as the fate of “his” brainchild. Always vociferously against abstraction, he was also opposed to any mechanization of seeing (as in, according to some, photography) or of making (as in the readymade).

Thus, if the precise onset of Picasso’s embrace of classicism—1915—argues against the externalist notion of cause and for the idea of something internal to the work, that same date opens up an internalist explanation that, far from repressing the antimodernist, reactionary form of his pastiche, will explain both its continuousness with Cubism *and* its total break with it. For the summer of 1915 confronted Picasso with Cubism’s own logical consequences in the form of Picabia’s published, mechanomorphic portraits: mechanically drawn, coldly impersonal, readymade. But in styling his own rejection of such consequences as neoclassicism, Picasso embarked on a strange campaign of portraiture of his own, in which he began to churn out image after image, each startlingly like the other in pose, lighting, treatment, scale, and, in particular, the handling of line, which, bizarrely invariant and graphically insensitive, seemed to be produced more as an act of tracing than as a record of seeing [4].

It is possible, even preferable, then, to describe Picasso’s neoclassicism with the exact same words as were used for Picabia’s mechanomorphs: mechanically drawn, coldly impersonal, readymade. There is no reason why classicism might not be adopted as a strategy to rise above the industrial level of the mass-produced object, which the readymade extolled and in which abstract painting and sculpture participated in their own way by adopting the principle of serial production, for example, or by lowering the level of technical skill needed to execute the forms. But in Picasso’s deployment of it the strategy

backfires. For in his hands classicism ends by repeating those very same features of the position he despised, a position—we have to repeat—that was being claimed as continuous with Cubism, inside it as it were, rather than coming from the outside.

Other models of history

There is a naive belief that historical explanations are simply a record of the facts that the historian extracts from the archive. But facts need to be organized, analyzed, weighted, interrogated; and to do this all historians (consciously or not) have recourse to an underlying model that gives shape to the facts. We have seen the contextualists' model assuming, with greater or lesser sophistication, that cultural expression will be the effect of causes external to what the aesthetic sphere (erroneously) promotes as the "autonomy" of its own site of production. We have also seen the internalists cutting their model to the shape of an independent organism—whether that be the creative will of the artist or the coherent development of an artistic tradition.

The case we might call "Picasso-pastiche" suggests the usefulness of another model, one most clearly outlined by Freud in the psychoanalytic theories he was developing right at this moment. This model, which Freud called "reaction-formation," was meant to describe a curious transformation of repressed urges, a transformation that seemed to deny those low, libidinally charged impulses by substituting for them something that was their exact opposite: behavior that was "high," laudable, upright, proper. But this opposite, Freud points out, is in fact a way of continuing the prohibited behavior by smuggling it in under its cleaned-up, sublimated guise. The anal personality transforms the explosive urge toward dirtiness into the retentive features of obsessive thrift or conscientiousness; the infantile masturbator ends by being a compulsive hand-washer, whose gestures of stroking and rubbing carry on the earlier desires under a newly acceptable (albeit out-of-control) form. Further, says Freud, reaction-formation carries with it a "secondary gain." Not only is the subject able, furtively, to carry on his or her impulses, but now this behavior becomes socially commendable.

There are two advantages of using reaction-formation as a model for Picasso-pastiche. First, it explains the dialectical connection—which is to say, the togetherness in opposition—between Cubism and its neoclassical "other." Second, it produces a structure that helps to account for the shape of many other antimodernist practices throughout the century, including the *rappel à l'ordre* production, but also reactionary painting from Giorgio de Chirico to later Picabia. It shows, that is, the degree to which those anti-modernisms are themselves conditioned by exactly those features _in the modernist work they wish to repudiate and repress.

To the cases of de Chirico and Picabia (as well as that of *pittura metafisica*), one must add that of Juan Gris, Picasso's fellow Spaniard, who emigrated to Paris in 1907, encountered Picasso, and soon devoted himself to Cubism. His *Portrait of Picasso* (1912) manifests his understanding of the new style as a matter of imposing a geometric grid over a relatively realistic representation so as to splinter its contours and fragment its volumes. Instead of the orthogonal grid favored by Picasso and Braque, Gris adopted a diagonal one, which implied the receding lines of the perspective Cubism had abandoned. The broken strokes of paint that Gris employs in his portrait reflects Analytical Cubism's own stippled surfaces, as does Gris's palette, which is limited to the muted colors of the painter's modeling and shading of volume. This stippled surface soon yielded to a far more enameled one paralleling metallic forms. The hardened surfaces of Gris's style during the teens echo Picabia's concern with the mechanomorph, the world seen as a collection of industrially wrought mechanical parts. And Gris's style gravitated to the industrially wrought aesthetic surface as well. In his *Newspaper and Fruit Dish* [5], textures such as wood-graining and reflected light are translated into the repetitive, mechanical language of

commercial illustration. Gris himself thought of this hardened, aloof manner as a form of classicism, and it was in this way that Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the greatest contemporary interpreter of Cubism, also read his work.

Rappel à l'ordre

The *rappel à l'ordre* issued a call for a return to the presumed classical roots of French art, in the course of which its proponents opened an attack on Cubism. The beginnings of this return are assigned various dates, a late one being the 1923 essay by Jean Cocteau "Le Rappel à l'Ordre," a much earlier one being *Après le Cubisme*, published in 1918 by the painter Amédée Ozenfant and the architect Charles-Édouard Jeanneret. But what all these calls to order have in common is the idea that the prewar period was defined by chaos, by a decadent sensuality that needed to be replaced by the purity of classical rationalism, and by the barbarization of French culture by German influences. In fact, Ozenfant and Jeanneret called on artists to focus on the golden section and other ideas of classical proportion, making it possible for there to be a "new Pythagoras." "Science and great Art have the common ideal of generalizing," they wrote. Arguing that if "The Greeks triumphed over the Barbarians" it was because they sought intellectual beauty beneath sensory beauty.

Two versions of this classicism are represented by these two tracts, however. The first, Purism, has a modern, streamlined look, and speaks the language of science and of general laws, such as proportion. It argues that the artist-designer should dedicate himself to industry, producing for it the generalized types associated with classical forms. The second has a reactionary, Old Master character and recycles the themes and genres of the neoclassical art it wishes to revive. The mother-and-child theme became a preferred one—taken up by former Cubists such as Gino Severini as well as modified ones such as Albert Gleizes—as did the tradition of the *commedia del'arte*. Severini's clowns and harlequins, painted in the early twenties in the hard outlines and licked surfaces of the most academicized classicism, are determined examples of the latter.

FURTHER READING

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," *October*, no. 16, Spring 1981

Rosalind Krauss, *The Picasso Papers* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998)

Kenneth Silver, *Esprit de Corps* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989)