

CUBISM AND PICASSO'S CONSTRUCTIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Picasso's death has been a revelation.

Witness, if you will, the plethora of requial publications, tributes and treatises dedicated to his memory. I recall the city of Minneapolis during the period of its Picasso exhibition festooned with the banners of the Minotaur, his signature emblazoning the window of Frank's grill and the entire north face of the Walker Art Center. Picasso's celebrity is ubiquitous. In life he became a legend; in death he has been cannonized!

However, in the aftermath of death another, more objective, process has begun; one in which Picasso's contribution will be re-evaluated and set in an accurate historical context. Both processes--that of mythologizing and that of analysis--have been greatly assisted by the posthumous release of Picasso's private collection, containing as it does hitherto vague or obscure works, the most surprising of which are his constructions of the Cubist period.

Executed between 1912 and 1915 and comprising perhaps as few as twenty-six in number, the constructions directly contributed to Modernism in two distinct areas. They contain embryonic formal and technical innovations which effected an entire line of development in Twentieth Century sculpture. Moreover, the constructions represent, albeit in

rudimentary form, the emergence of a medium which was without historical precedent.

The motivating impulse for this paper was provided by my experience of the Picasso From the MuséePicasso, Paris exhibition at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in February 1980. Culled in its entirety from the private collection, the exhibition contained several dozen Cubist works, including three constructions. Indeed, it was in the Cubist section that I most clearly sensed what I consider to be the embodiment of the heroism of early Modernism and it was to that section that I consistently returned.



## I. PARADIGMS AND PRECURSORS: IMPRESSIONISM AND CEZANNE

The development of Cubism was extraordinary in terms of its rapidity, breadth of invention and comprehensive transformation of Western art. This influence and achievement was to a great extent contingent upon a compelling spirit of optimism which drove the Cubists, Picasso and Braque in particular, to greater and greater heights of pictorial innovation and renovation.

Many precedents, achieved by illustrious forbears in the nineteenth century, had established a ground upon which the Cubist advance was established. One cannot speak of Cubism without at least slight mention of the accomplishment of advanced nineteenth century painting and the manner in which it so succinctly manifested a perceptual shift in European culture.

Indeed, by the end of the eighteenth century the paradigm of traditional Western culture was exhibiting evidence of decline. In an extremely simple distillation that paradigm could be said to have been predicated upon an assumed reality which asserted distinctions between phenomena. The world was manifestly full but its constituent components were unique, discernible and detached. This detachment was most clearly evident in Man, separated as he was from nature and his fellow-beings.

The ubiquitous metaphor used to describe traditional Western painting and its illusionistic pictorial space is that of the window. The analogy is extremely appropriate, for the painting born in the Renaissance presented the world as a separate reality, distinct and detached from the viewer. In looking through a window we are contained by the "otherness" of the room, protected and removed from the environment beyond the glass. The viewers of traditional painting, in the age in which it was made, experienced art in much the same manner; the picture plane dissolves, replaced instead by a senses-shattering, idealized perspectival space.<sup>1</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century the traditional European cultural continuum and its art were rapidly losing ground to evidences of a new paradigm characterized by an interpretation of reality as a series of instantaneous complex interrelationships in which all things, including Man, are indissolubly united.

Impressionism was perhaps the first art to reflect the new paradigm. In their pursuit of natural light, the Impressionist painters left the confines of the studio to paint directly from the land. In so doing they identified themselves as integral parts of the natural order rather than its detached observers. Moreover, the desired qualities of natural light, in all its optical clarity and purity, proved to be fleeting and in a perpetual state of flux. In the attempt to capture that ephemera, the

Impressionists' method became increasingly rapid and spontaneous.

Color, released from the "brown gravy" of chiaroscuro, became less descriptive and more evocatively self-assertive. While much has been made of the influence of optical theory, I would suggest that the "revolution of the color patch" had more to do with an improvisational response to nature than it did to pseudo-scientific programs.<sup>2</sup> In time the speed of the method served to release media from subservience to an orderly pictorial gestalt; accentuated surface, accompanied by slightly projective brushstrokes, became a primary feature of Impressionism.<sup>3</sup>

The Impressionist contribution to Modernism was more significant than is usually conceded. The net pictorial effect was a de-emphasis of traditional illusionism through the development of a more shallow pictorial space which, due to the projective nature of color and brushstrokes, fluctuates between surface and depth. Their method became an improvisational quest for "instantaneity" and "simultaneity", a direct reflection of the new paradigm.<sup>4</sup>

While the inheritors of Impressionism contended that too much differentiated structure and formal clarity had been lost, they were compelled to act within the new painterly context established by Impressionism.

Paul Cézanne, the greatest of the inheritors, wished to record a structure and order which he believed existed beneath surface appearances, yet he also acknowledged the

new reality which the Impressionists had revealed. The manner in which Cézanne gave order to "Instantaneity" formed the basis of his vast contribution to painting.

Although a high degree of ambiguity still surrounds the critical understanding of Cézanne's achievement, several discernible factors may briefly be mentioned here. The first concerns the simple observation that our understanding of any given thing is based upon multiple experiences over time and from various points of view. Cézanne rendered that insight by combining the multiple perceptions into single composite images which assume a distorted, non-perspectival form. Thus in the still-lives an apple may be positioned as seen from above while the table upon which it rests is presented frontally. Similarly, in the later landscapes we encounter a magnificent stability coupled with a stacatto repetition of line and form which imparts a resonant, vibrant energy throughout the pictures.

A second factor concerns Cézanne's understanding of human vision: the visual field is without discernible limits, its elements dispersed; our vision selects a focus toward which all sensation is directed. Cézanne described vision as a "cone", its center more distinct, its periphery more distorted. To evoke this direct retinal experience, he organized forms into areas which correspond to the focus and periphery of vision. The promontory in Mount Saint Victoire Seen From Bibemus (figure 1), for example, is much larger than it is in reality. The bluffs at the edge of the

painting are explicitly exaggerated and seem to buldge at their outer limits. These distortions, in consort with composite imagery, in time yielded a geometric quality in Cézanne's art.



Figure 1. Paul Cézanne, Mount Saint Victoire Seen Seen From Bibemus. 1898-1900.

The third factor concerns the manner in which Cézanne's form was developed through color.<sup>5</sup> He described the process as "modulation", a cumulative massing of patches of pigment which slowly and patiently "realized" the planes and volumes of a chosen motif. The separate, unblended daubs of color function as tone and volume; however, in their intensity, they are also both spatially projective and anchored to the

picture plane. Thus color both describes depth and affirms the actuality of the painting as a two-dimensional surface. In Cézanne there is a remarkable balance struck between illusionistic space and the flatness of the picture plane.

The dialectic of surface and depth was further refined through Cézanne's passage, the running together of planes or volumes which would otherwise be separated in space. Through its usage a contour will abruptly end, one edge of a plane will be excluded; through closure the viewer may complete the form or may, in a perceptual shift, unite the various spatial levels. The area between the upper left hand bluffs and mountain in Mount Saint Victoire Seen From Bibemus is a prime example; neither explicitly modelled nor contained by a contour line, the area functions as a zone of transition in which both bluff and mountain merge; the two become one thing, occupying the same space.

Cézanne's method was not in any sense arbitrary, nor was it preconceived. He strikes an astonishing middle ground between conscious planning and unconscious improvisation. The whole arises simultaneously but is construed from minutely adjusted parts. The end is never conceived a priori but is the result of a methodical intuition. This vital balance required the staying of both intellect and emotions but in realization imparted an intellectual purity greater than that of Seurat and an emotional fervor which, while less pronounced, is more compelling than that of Van Gogh.

This is, I believe, the most amazing paradox in Cézanne: to realize the intellectual and the emotional in their full capacities, he had first to sacrifice them, to eliminate their indulgences. This phenomenon of sacrifice, the suppression of the preferred to the needed, is characteristic of much of the best in Modernism.

## II. MIRACULOUS ASCENT AND THE ANGLES: THE CUBISM OF BRAQUE AND PICASSO. 1907-12.

Cubism was established through a similar spirit of incandescent sacrifice. Pablo Picasso, a youthful conduit of Post-Impressionist sensibilities, arrived in Paris in 1901. Influenced by sources as diverse as El Greco, Gauguin, Lautrec and Iberian sculpture, his rather mannered and sentimental evocations of the abased and noble poor of the Blue and Rose periods had established him as a painter of merit. There seems no doubt that Picasso could have achieved a high degree of material success, perhaps even minor historical significance, had he continued on that path. Amazingly, he chose instead to obliterate, to strip bare, his early achievement in a phenomenal process of transformation which culminated in Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.) (fig. 2) in 1907.

Although the Femmes d'Alger was a compendium of earlier influences, its primitive vitality and formal inventiveness was effected by two new sources: from Cézanne, Picasso liberally borrowed both passage and composite imagery; from African carving he adopted a geometric reductivism which presents the figure as a non-specific emblem. Through a synthesis of the two influences Picasso mounted a direct assault on the stasis of linear perspective.





Figure 2. Pablo Picasso, Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, 1907.

The figures, particularly those on the right, represent an accentuated and severe use of composite imagery. Picasso's treatment of space is even more radical. Extreme passage is used throughout, particularly in the offset section of blue drapery between figure groupings. The planes of that area are orchestrated in such manner as to induce a spatial ambiguity; in one glance the drape is a neatly resolved area of recessive, albeit shallow, space; in another glance the entire section loses its stability and apparently buldges outward, its space moving toward the

viewer, attempting to seize the territory which exists in front of the painting. The refinement of this pulsating, oscillating pictorial space was to be one of the central victories of Cubism.

The full implications of Les Demoiselles d'Avignon were to remain dormant for a time. Indeed, doubt remains as to whether Picasso could have developed in isolation. Initially an outsider in Paris, he became affiliated with a supportive group of painters, poets, intellectuals and associated hangers-on who were very much affected by the age in which they lived.

By the turn of the century the evidences of the new cultural paradigm had become pervasive. Virtually all aspects of Human endeavour were affected: the founding of modern physics; new psychological insights; mass and private spiritual revivals; mass communications and transit; the beginnings of electronic technology and new means of industrial production had all occurred by 1906. A climate was established in which geometrically progressive rates of change were effected and anticipated. While response to those circumstances was highly varied, the Cubists were one of many groups who regarded their age with a high degree of optimism, anticipatory of a future in which a new world order seemed imminent. This assertion is supported by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler:



Figure 3. Georges Braque, Pitcher and Violin, 1909-10.

Indeed, the persisting fascination of this and other "analytical" Cubist paintings . . . is precisely the result of an almost unbearable tension experienced by the viewer. He is delighted by the intellectual and sensuous appeal of an internally consistent pictorial structure, yet he is also tantalized by the unavoidable challenge of interpreting this structure in terms of the known visual world.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 4. Pablo Picasso, Portrait of Ambroise Vollard,  
1909-10.

The formal concerns developed by 1910 were to occupy Picasso and Braque for the next two years. The paintings from 1910-12 were to become increasingly formalistic. The images of early Cubism were separate and discernible, retaining a residual illusionism which maintained the phenomenological distinctions evident in traditional Western art. After 1910 the interconnected forms in Cubist painting generated a new kind of pictorial space which, while shallow and complex, was neither decorative nor

chaotic. The eye moves into the picture, is immediately engaged in its complexities and, through the extreme passage of interconnected planes, is encouraged to move within a highly fluid and ambiguous space; inevitably, the eye returns to the surface of the painting and indeed is often absorbed in a space which appears to bulge outward into the room. The viewer may repeat the process again and again, discovering new revelations with each trip into space. Anton Ehrenzweig provides this further insight:

The fragmented, violently condensed picture plane of a ripe Cubist picture is held and animated by a dynamic pulse. It draws the spectator into itself. Again, this space experience does not lack a hypnotic, almost mystic quality.<sup>9</sup>

Cubism was an art which, in its revelation of dynamic processes, may be regarded as the culmination of the discoveries of the Impressionists and Cézanne, the most mature and succinct means yet conceived of recording the interconnected reality posited by the new cultural paradigm achieved in this century.

Despite that achievement, by the spring of 1912 Cubism reached an impasse, its overt formalism yielding an increasingly incomprehensible imagery. It has been suggested that Picasso and Braque realized that they were on the verge of a non-objective art and that they regarded the prospect as antithetical to their original precepts,

which had always been concerned with the means of depicting the world, however non-illusionistic those means became. As a result Picasso and Braque withdrew from complete abstraction and elected another option.

While often construed as a rationalist progression, Cubism could more accurately be described as an intuitive evolution, a formal survival of the fittest in which elements possessing the greatest innovative and transformative capacities often first appeared as humble and random inadvertencies which in effect entered through the back door of the main formal sequence.<sup>10</sup> This was certainly true of the three formal means utilized by Picasso and Braque to de-emphasize non-objectivity and to return a greater semblance of the visual world to their painting.

The first of these means, typographical elements, had been used in an extremely rudimentary form by Picasso in Hommage to Gertrude Stein, 1909. Braque began to use fragments of numbers and letters in 1911 and in the same year Picasso included them in Ma Jolie (fig. 5). The stencilled words refer to both Picasso's lover, Marcelle Humbert, and to the words of a popular song. The insertion of this scrap of popular culture into an imagistically indiscipherable painting represents the cohabitation of an art of easy access with an art of overt difficulty--the inclusion of the commonplace in the "high art" of painting.

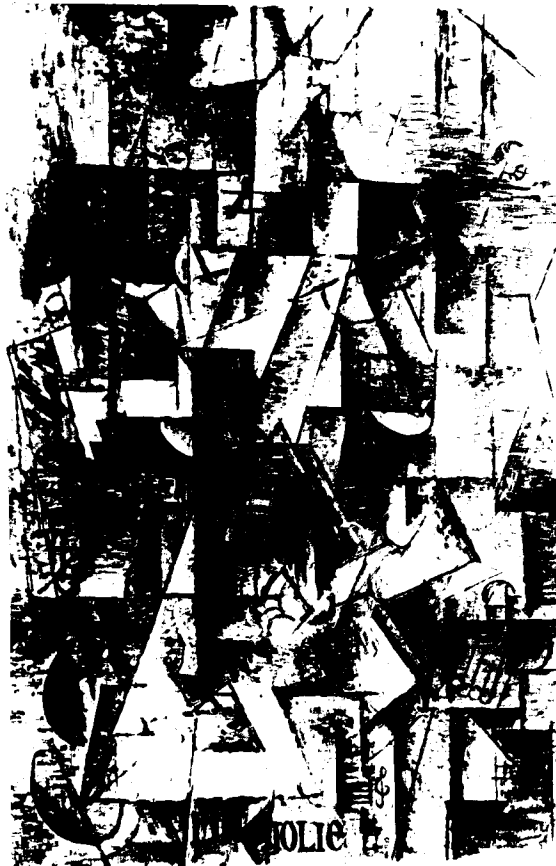


Figure 5. Pablo Picasso, Ma Jolie, 1911-12.

The typographical elements in Cubist painting are, on one hand, signs which identify the essential characteristics of a thing without the need to make reference to secondary or tertiary features. On the other hand, they are evocative ciphers whose fragmentary nature implies a vast complex of visual and verbal associations.

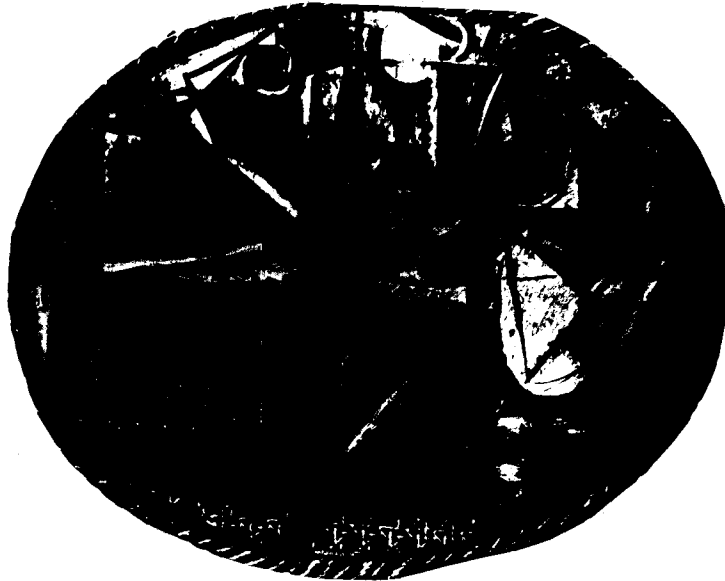


Figure 6. Pablo Picasso, Still Life With Chair Caning, 1912.

This magnificent work is highly evocative, containing as it does a complex of multiple, ambiguous identities. The oval configuration and rope frame, itself a snide pun on popular kitsch memorabilia, clearly identify the painting as a self-contained, self-assertive object. The collage element, a piece of oilcloth printed to resemble caning, is a fragment seized from the everyday world; its presentation of a literal fact (oilcloth) is countered by its simultaneous illusionism. The cloth is literally opaque yet it is so completely integrated into the picture as to deceive us; we are prompted to gaze through the mesh of caning to fantasize a deep, recessive space beyond its surface. Moreover, the painting suggests a multitude of



environments: it could be a chair seen through the glass of a tabletop; it could be the tabletop itself; it could even be a mirror. It could be many other things, many other places. This lack of assignable, descriptive certainty allows the viewer to participate in the work, to complete its subjective content.

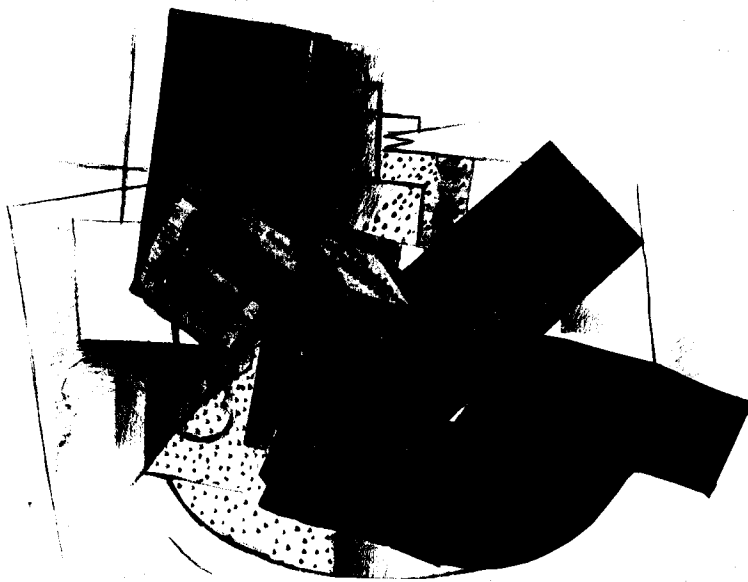


Figure 7. Georges Braque, Composition with Guitar, 1912.

From the end of 1912 through 1913 collage became a dominant concern. As papier collé, it most effectively eliminated vestiges of illusionism yet at the same time allowed discernible images to be incorporated within the pictorial structure. As well, collage afforded a much greater organizational freedom. Conventional painting

proceeds through a process in which an element, once developed, becomes determinate; it is there, fixed and physically integral within the matrix of the work. Once established these elements may of course be modified, embellished or eliminated but that manipulation requires the disguise or destruction of the element and a potential disruption of the entire painting. The problem of fixity is largely eliminated in collage, particularly if elements are not immediately adhered to the surface. Collage allows "extended manipulation", a process wherein a pictorial component may be quickly formed, placed into the matrix and immediately evaluated. If its inclusion is inappropriate, the component may be adjusted, re-formed or discarded with an ease, flexibility and speed which is not possible through conventional methods. The processional freedom of collage was, I believe, largely responsible for the emergence of an entirely new medium.



Figure 8. Pablo Picasso, Guitar, 1912.

confirms the paper Guitars as being the first in the series.



Figure 9. Pablo Picasso, Guitar, 1912.

Spatial interplay was furthered in the sheet metal Guitar, a work which I believe is a subsequent refinement of the paper pieces. In it Picasso applied virtually the same method of construction, but with one vital difference: paper was supplanted by sheet metal. This material and conceptual shift was of extreme importance for the metal components, while possessing the planar characteristics of

paper, required the adoption of the completely new technical lexicon of joinery, soldering and welding. The technical innovation in the sheet metal Guitar may be considered an appropriation of the new materials and techniques of modern industry; the work may thus be construed as involving the same inclusive attitude which in collage and the typographic elements had allowed the entrance of the everyday world into the context of art.

The Guitars contain a certain pictorial residue. They are frontally oriented and are intended to be hung on the wall; their three-dimensional components are affixed to a flat sheet which is a remnant of the picture plane. However, the essential quality of the Guitars is decidedly sculptural and this is particularly true of the work in sheet metal. Picasso seems to have intuitively understood the capabilities of the metal, for the planes, rather than being rigid and inert as one would expect in a first effort, are treated in a highly dynamic manner, allowing the work to become more spatially active than its paper precursors.

The neck of the sheet metal Guitar is an inverted, folded rectangle which contains a volume of actual space. The body, which reads as a metal collage in three dimensions, is composed of four distinct spatial zones, the first of which is the flat residual picture plane. A second metal sheet, its edges bent to form an open ended box, is mounted atop the primary plane. A stove pipe

inserted into the center of the box represents a third zone. A flat partial silhouette of the guitar body, attached to the edges of the box, represents a fourth zone. This cut and incomplete plane allows actual space to penetrate into the center of the work while simultaneously suggesting continuity across the surface. The deep central spaces of the neck and body are accentuated by strongly cast shadows.

Although the Guitars could easily be misconstrued as inadvertent adjuncts to the main body of Picasso's Cubism, the embryonic potentials which they contained were to have enormous importance. Prior to these constructions space had been conceptualized in sculpture as it had been in traditional painting--as a container for immutably separate objects. Sculpture existed in space but did not partake of it. In the Guitars space enters into the core of the work and the volume of traditional sculpture is replaced by space itself. Moreover, the Guitars ephemeralized the mass of traditional sculpture to a planar skeleton which itself furthered the free association with actual space. These factors would significantly influence two subsequent modernist developments: Constructivism and planar welded metal sculpture.

The Guitars also marked a satisfactory solution to Picasso's earlier attempts to translate the pictorial concerns of Cubism into three dimensions. In one glance the sheet metal Guitar is an autonomous and self-assertive object. In another glance, through the active interplay

between space and constructed components, that autonomy shatters and the construction merges with the room in which it is placed. This integration of art object and environment may be considered the sculptural equivalent of the extreme fragmentation and passage of Analytical Cubism. In the sheet metal Guitar passage occurs not only in the interrelationships within the art object, but between the art object and the world as well. I would suggest that this marks a sophisticated refinement of the transformative functions previously discussed in relation to the typographic elements and collage. With the exception of the stovepipe, none of the elements comprising the sheet metal Guitar are transformed fragments. Rather, the entire construction is transformed: a material and technical process appropriated from industry is used to generate an art object which, in its self-assertion and relationship with actual space in turn becomes an evocative, metamorphosed part of the same external world. What was illusion in Still Life With Chair Caning became concrete in the sheet metal Guitar and the pulsating, projective space of Cubism reached a culmination of sorts. As Anton Ehrenzweig said:

It is another commonplace to say that while traditional realism burrowed into the picture plane and, like a window, revealed a hidden space beyond, Modern art builds space into the space in front

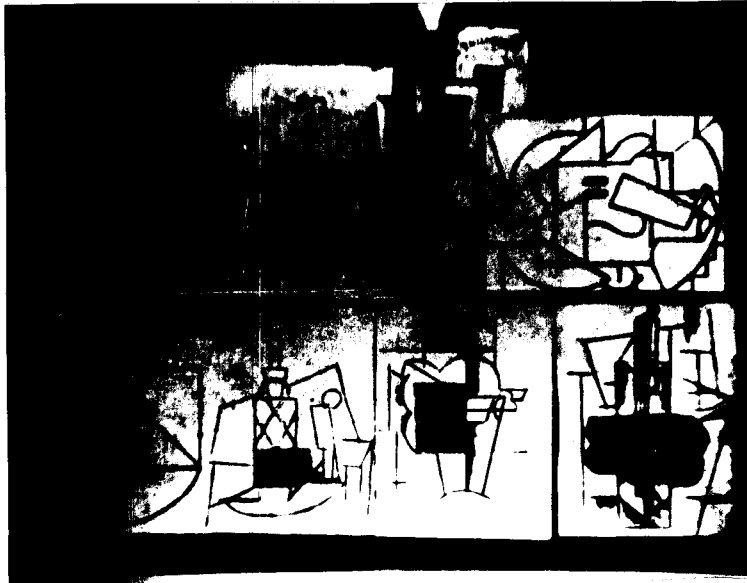


Figure 10. Picasso's studio, Boulevard Raspail Paris, late 1912 or early 1913.

While the sheet metal Guitar marked a significant sculptural achievement, there is little evidence to suggest that Picasso ever fully acted upon its possibilities. He did not, for example, execute a series of sculptures which would have extended and refined its potential. Rather, in the months to follow Picasso turned his attention to a quite different formal problem: the development of constructions which attempted to integrate the qualities of two and three dimensional art. For want of a better term, I shall use the word "hybrid" to designate those works.



The motivating impulse for the "hybrids" may possibly be seen in several photographs of Picasso's Boulevard Raspail studio taken in late 1912 or early 1913 (fig. 10). In each photo the sheet metal Guitar (or its cardboard replica) is hung directly on the wall, surrounded by a grouping of drawings and papier collés. Although this is highly speculative, I would suggest that these groupings are not merely arbitrary placements, for in each one there is a minimal sense of order, as if Picasso had spontaneously, perhaps unconsciously, attempted to unite the two disparate media. Whether this had a seminal influence is debatable but it is significant that the constructions which immediately follow the Guitars all involve an attempt to integrate a sculptural object within a two-dimensional, papier collé context.

This is apparent in Guitar and Bottle of early 1913 (fig. 11) in which a cardboard replica of the sheet metal Guitar is placed on a wall and surrounded by large, minimally rendered paper sheets. Another more extreme and deliberately ludicrous example from the same period was the Construction With Guitar Player which was comprised of several wall-sized sheets of paper upon which was placed a minimal drawing and papier collé. The central motif was a real guitar, suspended in front of the wall and clasped by two cut-out newspaper hands.

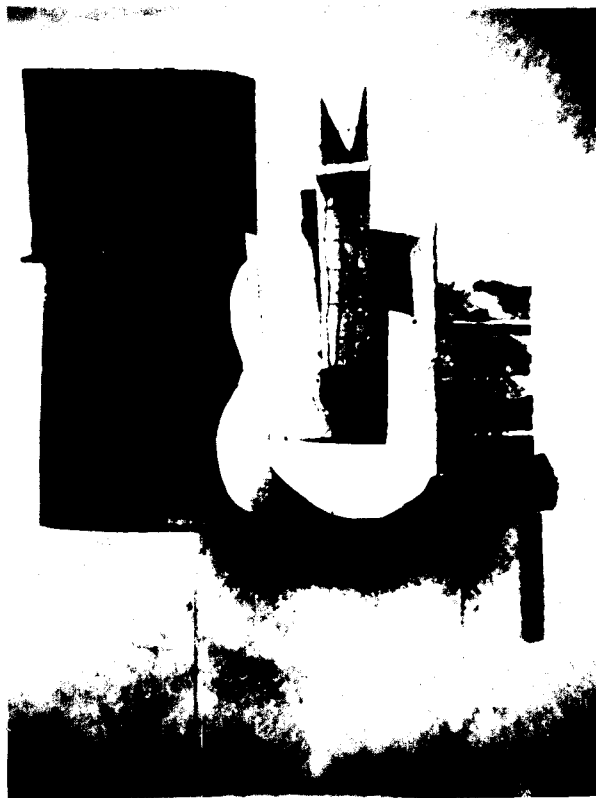


Figure 11. Pablo Picasso, Guitar and Bottle,  
early 1913.

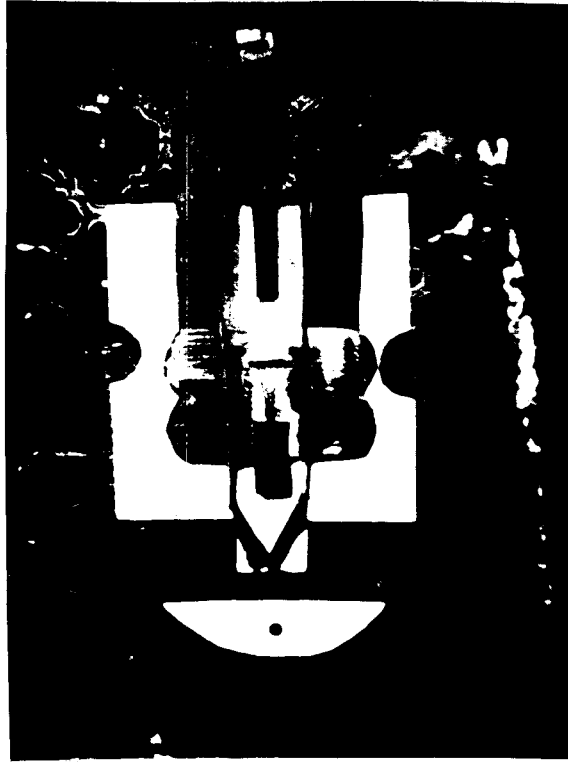


Figure 12. Pablo Picasso, Construction With Violin, 1913.

Perhaps the most representative example of the early "hybrids" is another work from 1913, Construction With Violin. Picasso intended that it exist in two distinct incarnations: as a sculpture (fig. 13) and as a sculpture placed in a papier collé (fig. 12). As sculpture, the Violin is a direct but inferior descendant of the sheet metal Guitar. It also incorporates an interplay between constructed components and actual space yet relies excessively on but one of the features of its

predecessor--the open-ended box. Singularity of construction, together with a use of cardboard rather than metal, tends to produce a rather timid manipulation of planes and space. As well, the Violin contains a number of components which are so literally rendered as to suggest origination in an actual instrument. Thus the work occupies an uncomfortable intermediary position between the descriptive and the signatory.

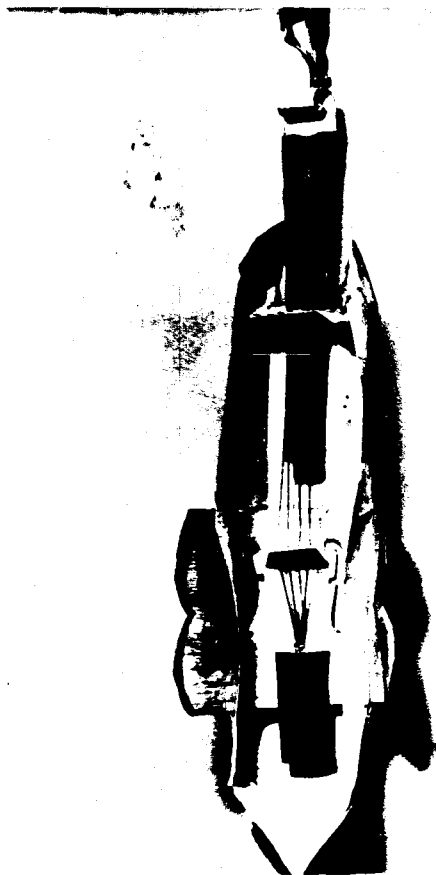


Figure 13. Pablo Picasso, Violin, 1913.

In its alter-ego, Construction With Violin (fig. 12), the slightly modified sculpture is placed into a collage of tasteless "rococo" wallpaper. The attempted integration is ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful. Picasso treats the sculpture as a fragment in a larger, essentially pictorial whole. Unfortunately, the Violin is too self-assertive to accept a subjugated role; it competes with the collage and resolution does not occur; it is impossible to force the object back into a neat and orderly pictorial gestalt.



Figure 14. Pablo Picasso, Bottle and Guitar,  
1913.

Picasso evidently recognized the problem evinced in Construction With Violin, for from that point onward he made a clear distinction between constructions which were sculptural and those which were "hybrid". In the latter he de-emphasized three-dimensional dominance by shattering the autonomy of sculpture into fragmentary components which, while spatially projective, were more closely affiliated

hieratic, yet its material honesty exudes a certain warmth and charm akin to that found in an ancient toy or naive carving.

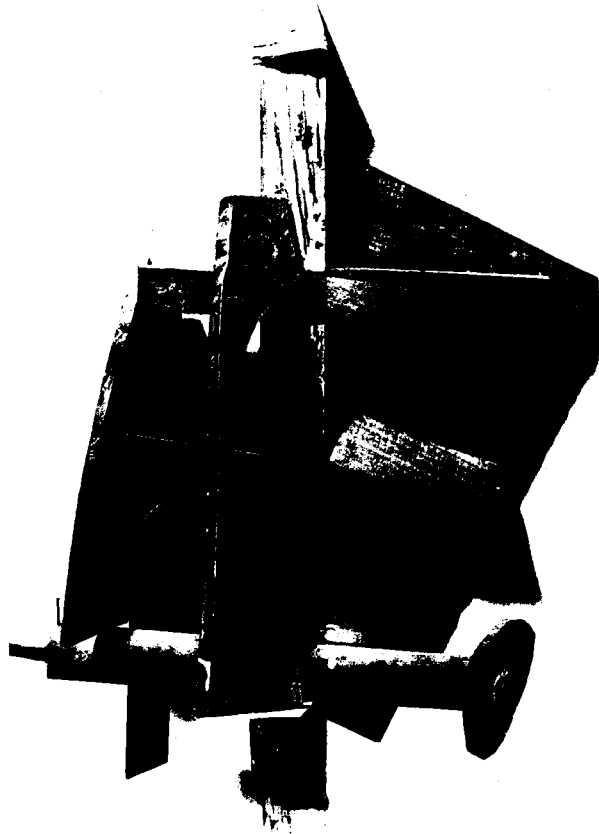


Figure 15. Pablo Picasso, Mandolin and Clarinet,  
1913.

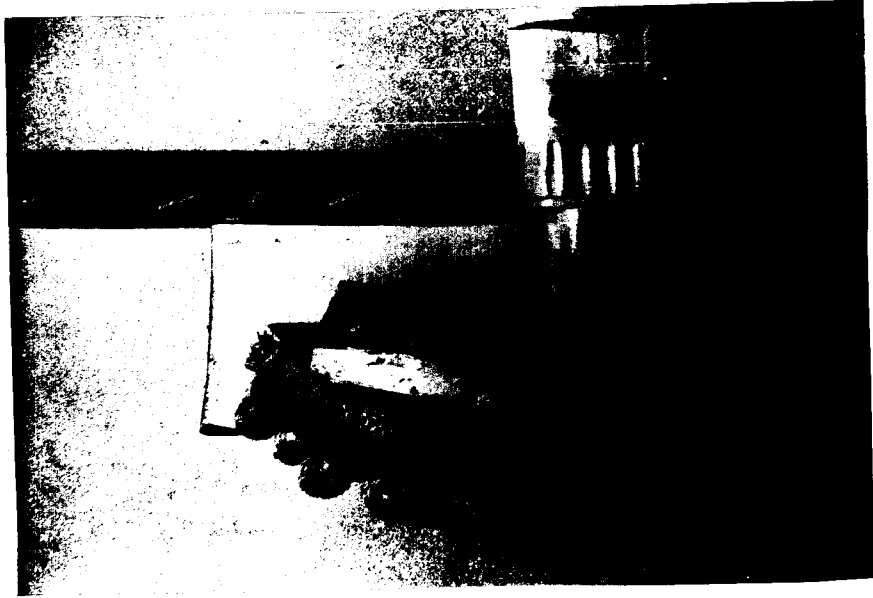


Figure 16. Pablo Picasso, Still Life, 1914.

With the exception of one small Violin it was not until the spring of 1914 that Picasso returned to constructions, executing a series of seven in rapid succession. These works continued the two tendencies established in 1913 yet marked a fundamental shift in attitude which may be considered a retreat from sculpture.

The most celebrated of the series, the Still Life in the collection of the Tate Gallery, London, (fig. 16) is



quintessentially "hybrid". The whole relies upon an evident picture plane, but pictorial dominance is checked and balanced by the extension of elements beyond the confines of the plane and by the three-dimensional projection of the knife, glass, tabletop and sandwich. The glass is the most fascinating component for it presents a spatial inversion common to Cubist painting: the water in the glass, in reality a tangible volume, is rendered as a void; the water level, in reality an intangible abstraction, is rendered as an elliptical volume.

Despite its successful resolution of painting and sculpture, the Tate Still Life presents a number of questionable incongruities, the most obvious being a cloying literalism which renders the work far less formally potent than many of the earlier constructions. The problem is based in a number of factors. The first is a descriptive rendering of still life elements which imparts a personalized quality. We sense that these objects are specific things rather than signs; thus specificity diminishes the evocative and associative qualities evident in the sheet metal Guitar and the early papier collés.

A second factor related to descriptiveness concerns the manner in which Picasso fashioned the still life components. For the first time since the inception of the constructions a traditional sculptural method, the subtractive process of carving, is used to delineate form. Material, rather than being transformed detritus and scrap, is now shaped by the



Figure 17. Pablo Picasso, Glass, Die and Newspaper, 1914.

Of the other notable works in the series, two are distinctly "hybrid" and two are more expressly sculptural. The former, titled Glass, Newspaper and Die and Glass, Die and Newspaper (fig. 17) are virtual twins. Both make explicit reference to the picture plane through the use of obvious framing devices and through a thick, often gross, handling of paint which obscures the physical qualities of constructed materials. Extravagant use of media



Figure 18. Pablo Picasso, Glass, 1914.

To a great extent this series may be regarded as the beginning of the end of the promise held by the early constructions. Through the application of a painterly bravura, nascent in his painting at that time, Picasso either converted the constructions into pictures or crippled their sculptural identity in a veneer of paint. He was

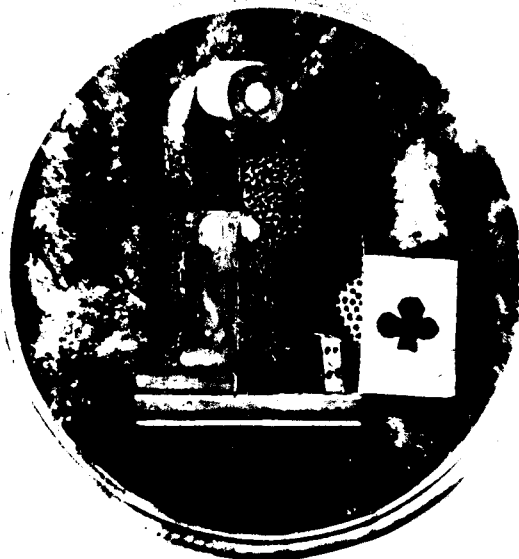


Figure 19. Pablo Picasso, Glass, Pipe, Die and Ace of Clubs, 1914.

Glass, Pipe, Die and Ace of Clubs is the most resolutely pictorial of all the constructions and in this Picasso is unabashed. His use of media is an exquisite and opulent compendium of techniques appropriated from Impressionism onward. In seizing those preceding methods, Picasso both lampoons and transforms them. The Pointilliste dots of Seurat were a means of imparting formal unity; here they assert an irregular diversity. Through media the work presents a number of startling ambiguities; at distance it appears to be a painting, two-dimensional and flat; upon closer scrutiny one is surprised, even shocked, to discover its three-dimensional elements.

As well, another visual double-entendre is discovered at close range: surfaces are so elaborate, glossy and patinated as to completely obliterate the materiality of relief components and the evidence of their fabrication. So effective is the disguise that one could be deceived into believing that the whole of Glass, Pipe, Die and Ace of Clubs is glazed ceramic.

This tiny work has a compulsively powerful presence and integrity. Picasso's painterly indulgence was so extravagant, so decadent, as to render the work effective through its extremity. It is, I believe, a minor Cubist masterpiece. Ironically, that status has very little to do with the fact that Glass, Pipe, Die and Ace of Clubs is a construction; while beautiful, it presents further evidence of Picasso's capitulation. It is essentially a picture.

The last Cubist constructions were executed in 1915 and several mark the revival of sculptural emphasis. Bottle of Anise From Mono and Compote of Grapes (fig. 20), relies on the mounting devices of painting and sculpture--a wall plane and a pedestal. With its "found" bowl, plain wooden surfaces and subtle drawing the work seems in effect to be a three-dimensional collage.

Closely related to Bottle of Anise is another wooden construction from 1915, Violin and Bottle on a Table (fig. 21). It is a complex work comprised of staggered planar components which induce a relatively dynamic spatial interplay. Viewer attention is initially attracted by an

emblematically rendered violin on the left side and is subsequently directed to the lower right, into a horizontal wooden plane which radically extends beyond the central confines of the construction.

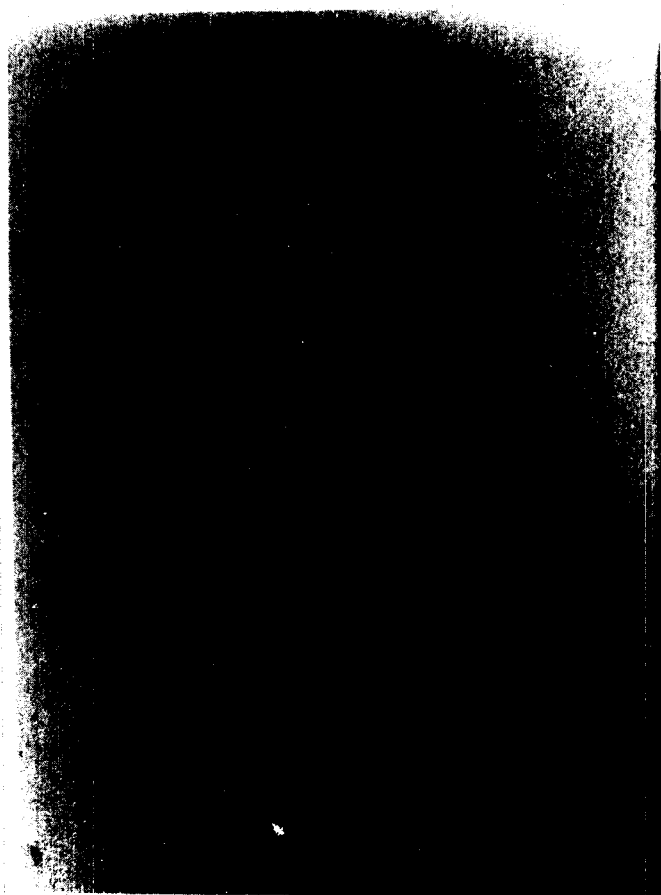


Figure 20. Pablo Picasso, Bottle of Anise From Mono and Compote of Grapes, 1915.

Violin and Bottle on a Table is very nearly free-standing yet is, in its frontality, still oriented to the wall. Although this work does not extend formal possibilities, it is the most well-ordered and successful "hybrid" since Bottle and Guitar (fig. 14). That integrity is contingent upon understatement and a subtle handling of media which enhances rather than diminishes the properties of constructed materials. However, the work breaks no new ground and its formal significance is rather inadvertant; we sense that Picasso could have given it a better effort.

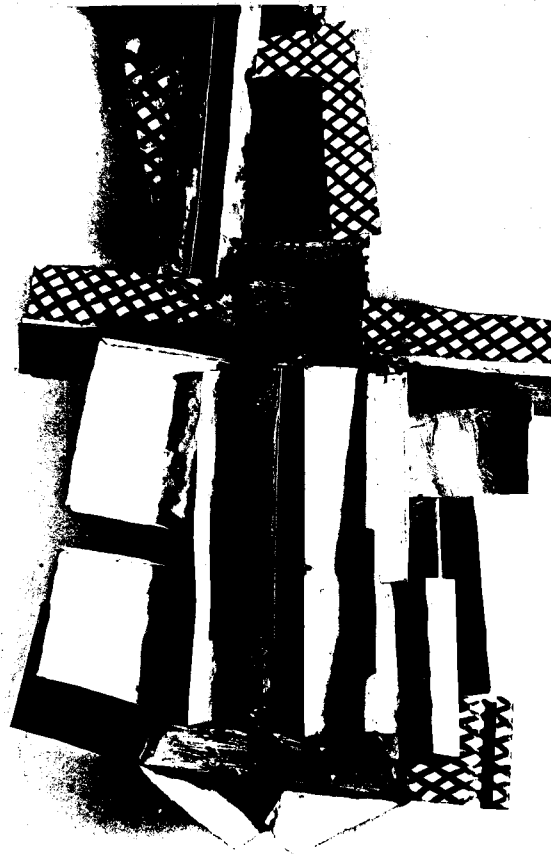


Figure 22. Pablo Picasso, Violin, 1915.

Inadvertancy is certainly not evident in the Violin of 1915, the work that is generally considered to be Picasso's final Cubist construction. If this is indeed the case, the Violin may be considered an indication of the problems evinced within the whole of the later constructions. From that point of view, I wish to discuss the Violin at some length for I believe that Picasso intended it to be a heroic summation and resolution of the unfulfilled potentials



exhibited by the "hybrids". Its large scale and complexity support that speculation. So too does the fact that it is, in its obvious sculptural and pictorial components, Picasso's most ambitious attempt to integrate the qualities of the two forms.

Despite its ambition, the Violin manifests several crucial difficulties. It is, for example, excessively formalistic. Margit Rowell referred to this work in these terms:

The parts and the relationships between the parts no longer pretend to translate the morphology of the original subject except in the most emblematic way . . . . The Violin is a pretext for assembly of colored planes in space.<sup>16</sup>

This formalism presents two problems. The first simply involves structural integrity, for the Violin is not visually coherent. The upper section, with its flat planes and dominant cross-hatching, seems detached from the lower section. The second problem bears upon content and emotional substance. In viewing the Violin one is impressed only by what it is, that abstract collection of colored planes. It provokes none of the subtle and multiple associations which were a source of power and enrichment in the papier collés, mid-period Cubist painting and the early constructions. The sheet metal Guitar, as a prime example, certainly exhibited Edward Fry's "unbearable tension"<sup>8</sup>

between formal structure and the structure in relationship to imagery. Through a formalism which obliterates imagery and reduces it to an expediency, Picasso loses that fascinating tension. Moreover, he also loses the vitality of the sign, the evocative reduction of the qualities of an entity into one essential feature. There is nothing in the Violin which characterizes a class of instruments. Through these reductions, Picasso nullifies the balance which he had previously established between the descriptive and the evocative. I am not, of course, condemning formalism; but I believe that Picasso was unable to establish and sustain a work, particularly one as complex as the Violin on that basis alone.

A second set of problems afflicting the Violin concerns the manner in which Picasso effected the integration of sculptural and pictorial elements. Relative to most of the constructions, this work is materially ambitious. Entirely fabricated in complex metal planes, tubes and ducts, the Violin has a capacity to yield an even greater sculptural potential than that evinced by the sheet metal Guitar or Mandolin and Clarinet yet oddly it does not. I do not believe that Picasso conceptualized the Violin as sculpture; rather, he treated it as a "hybrid". To retain and affirm pictorial qualities, the metal components were controlled, in effect "flattened" to align with the wall. While the Violin is at least as deep as Mandolin and Clarinet, it does not radically command a position in the room; the potential

for an exchange between actual space and constructed components is effectively neutralized.

That particular problem is compounded by Picasso's use of media. As in so many of the constructions from 1914 onward, paint is used to assert pictorial qualities, in the process concealing the materiality of the metal and reducing its already diminished spatial capabilities. Further, there is an arbitrary carelessness in the use of media and method of fabrication. Metal is thrown together in an expedient manner, without finesse or elegance; paint, indeed color itself, is pallid and slipshod. While a laissez-faire process was a spontaneous asset in many of Picasso's works, here it serves only to diminish the Violin's vitality. Materially, the work stands between the polarities of austerity and opulence established by the sheet metal Guitar and Glass, Pipe, Die and Ace of Clubs. There is perhaps too little of either extreme in the Violin; in viewing it I wished for more extravagance or more purist reduction, for materials and media tend to cancel each other.

The Violin is a highly formal work of art which attempts to break new ground as a medium which combines the attributes of both painting and sculpture.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, the very ambition of the effort defeats Picasso's intention, for the qualities of each medium tend to negate each other, leaving little but an arid neutrality.

The problems evident in the Violin may be considered symptomatic of a general malaise which affected the final

stages of Cubism. Indeed, from that time onward Picasso's method became increasingly circular, even random. By 1915 he was doubly alone: the fragile Marcelle Humbert, his lover since 1909, was dead; both Braque and Apollinaire had been mobilized and sent to the front. I do not wish to dwell on the melodramatic; Picasso quickly found new loves in Olga Koklova, Neo-Classicism and Surrealism, but the intensity and fertility which he and Braque had maintained in Cubism were never to be repeated. The later constructions were, I believe, associated with that general decline. I have suggested that the first constructions, the Guitars, represented Picasso's unique sculptural response to collage. In them he eschewed traditional techniques, reduced mass to a planar skeleton and allowed actual space to become a dynamic element. The new sculptural potential was never to be refined, for as early as 1913 Picasso sublimated his achievement into "hybrid" constructed works which attempted to function as a new medium. After 1913 Picasso asserted distinctions between sculptural and "hybrid" constructions but did not achieve a sustained maturity in either medium.

Although the lack of development in the constructions is a central mystery in Cubism, I believe that the answer is simple enough. Picasso primarily conceptualized himself as a painter; throughout his life three-dimensional activity was always an auxiliary means of expression. During the Cubist epoch both he and Braque were engaged in an epic process of pictorial change that was incredibly rapid and urgent,

Picasso's response to those exigencies was to behave as a painter; he simply did not have sufficient time to fully explore the potentials of the constructions. In fact, his painterly bias eventually diminished even those constructions which he was able to produce. From 1914 onward his increasingly self-indulgent use of media went too far, in effect either reducing sculptural qualities or, in such extreme cases as Glass, Pipe, Die and Ace of Clubs, of converting the constructions into pictures. The extravagance was an outgrowth of Picasso's virtuosity; after 1914 Cubism had essentially become established, its method assured; Picasso was no longer compelled to "stammer and stutter" through the difficult process of trial and error which previously had elicited both refinement and unexpected insight.

I think it would be naive to assert that Picasso was unaware of the possibilities to which he had alluded in the constructions; in fact, he reserved most of them for his private collection. In a photo taken in 1971, Picasso holds the sheet metal Guitar as one would coddle a lover. Picasso seems to have held the constructions in a constant state of reserve, to be acted upon at another time.

This speculation is corroborated by the appearance, in 1924, of another constructed metal Guitar. Although entirely painted, this work (fig. 23) was the most successful sculpture since the sheet metal Guitar of 1912. Why this particular work arose when it did, during a time in

which Picasso's working method was highly eclectic, and why no similar works followed it is an unanswerable paradox. It is as if Picasso, in looking at the first Guitar, suddenly remembered its promise and acted again. Perhaps he was even sufficiently satisfied with his effort to let it stand. Ironically, the Guitar of 1924 does have about it a sense of summation, an anachronistic climax.



Figure 23. Pablo Picasso, Guitar, 1924.

#### IV. PLAYERS IN THE F-HOLE SHADOW: REMARKS ON THE INFLUENCE OF PICASSO'S CONSTRUCTIONS

While Picasso did not fully act upon the implications of his constructions, their challenge was taken up by many of his peers and inheritors. In the brief time and space of this paper, it is not possible to enumerate the myriad influences effected by the constructions upon the development of Modernism; the interrelationships are ultimately too complex to fully analyse. However, if we bear in mind that the constructions represent a new kind of sculpture on one hand and the emergence of an entirely new medium on the other, a very few of the artists who responded may be mentioned here.

The constructions immediately affected Cubist sculpture. Archipenko, Lipchitz and Laurens were all to a great extent indebted to Picasso and for a limited time each of them engaged in both sculptural and "hybrid" forms. Laurens' treatment of space was more considered and sensitive than was Picasso's. He employed eclectic materials, each of which elicited an appropriately unique means of encompassing actual space: metal generated fluid curvilinear forms; wood yielded a geometric angularity; random bits of scrap produced startling incongruities (fig. 24). Laurens' use of color was also highly sophisticated and his polychromed sculpture was a means of exorcising the ephemeral effects of light and shadow. Lipchitz, while

utilizing more conventional techniques, also employed skeletal forms.

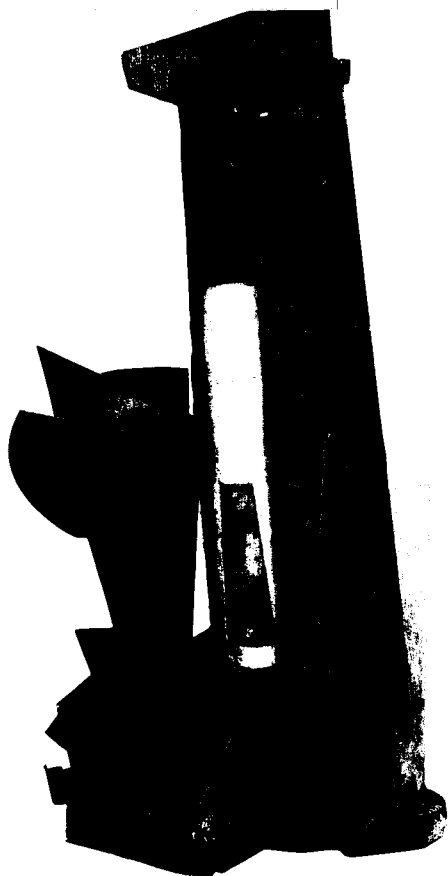


Figure 24. Henri Laurens, Bottle and Glass, 1918.

The Cubist sculptors eventually returned to traditional techniques and their dalliance with the new forms was surprisingly brief. Artists involved in the Modern movements which arose out of Cubism were more directly responsible for the refinements of the nascent potentials of



the constructions. The "hybrid" medium discovered by Picasso has been assigned many names over time; the terms "assemblage" and "constructed relief", the most frequently used, are reflections of particular artistic ideologies, for the "hybrids" were taken up by the apparently disparate forces of Dada and Constructivism.



Figure 25, Jean Arp, The Forest, 1916.

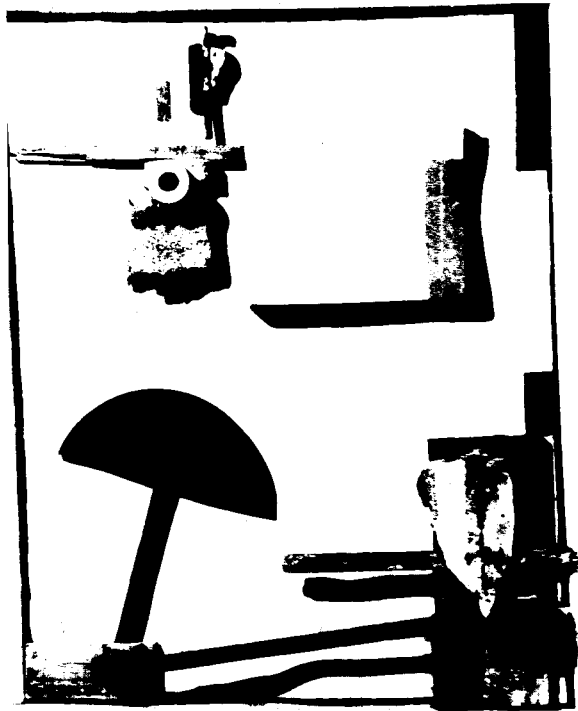


Figure 26. Kurt Schwitters, Merzbild,  
Kijkduin, 1923.

The Dadaists who most fully acted within the parameters of the new medium were Jean Arp and Kurt Schwitters. Arp's early constructions contained various levels of biomorphically rendered wooden planes which were either attached to a primary plane or, as in the case of Forest from 1916

(fig. 2), were allowed to assume an autonomous, shaped configuration, exhibiting an exuberant form and color which arose through an "organic" working method. Arp's constructions were essentially pictorial in nature.

Schwitters, one of the great synthesizers in Modernism, firmly established the "hybrid" construction as a mature and lasting form. Schwitters had worked with the new medium as early as 1919 and his term "assemblage" was an accurate description of the manner in which he delightfully, fetishistically, transformed the detrius of urban Man into some of the most evocative art of our age (fig. 26).

Shwitters' "assemblages" make a convincing case for the efficacy of the new medium. They are neither painting nor sculpture but something else, elusive entities of a new artistic reality. Despite his having received a rather low level of acknowledgment in his lifetime, Schwitters' influence and transmission of Cubist methodology has been pervasive. We need only look to the impact which his work had upon the Americans Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, whose neo-Dadaist works of the 1950's are the direct progeny of Schwitters and the bastard grandchildren of Picasso's Bottle and Glass (fig. 14).

A second, more classical response to the "hybrids" occurred in revolutionary Russia. Whereas Dada capitalized upon the spontaneous empiricism of Cubism, the Russians were more attracted to its formalism. By 1920 the competing



Figure 27. Ivan Puni, Suprematist Construction, 1915.

Figure 28. Vladimir Tatlin, Counter Relief,  
1915.

Constructivism was initiated by Vladimir Tatlin who had, as previously mentioned, visited Picasso in 1913. Tatlin's constructions, particularly the Counter Reliefs, bear a striking resemblance to the sheet metal Guitar; they are roughly fabricated--literally bound together with wire--and thus possess a frank, primitive directness. The manner in which Tatlin positioned the Counter Reliefs out from the wall, in the midst of the space of the room was a

more radical extension of Picasso's concerns. Tatlin's "Faktura and Tecktonika", related to the spartan materiality of the sheet metal Guitar, was a direct and honest striving toward an unencumbered presentation of the "natural" qualities of materials. The Counter Reliefs were a brilliant transposition and extension of Picasso's discoveries and their original position in Modern art has yet to be fully explored by other artists, including Tatlin himself; after the Revolution he became immersed in the production of utilitarian projects in the service of the new proletariat.



Figure 29. Naum Gabo, Constructed Head  
Number Two.

Tatlin founded an entire Modernist tendency predicated upon an implicit faith in technology. Within the promise of a new social order proffered by the early stages of the Revolution, the Constructivists were motivated to establish entirely new artistic forms. They took to the "hybrid" medium with obvious zeal and, as a group, did much to extend its potential. Gabo, Pevsner, Rodchenko, Lissitsky and Moholy-Nagy significantly altered and refined the new medium. Gabo's initial constructions were sculptural

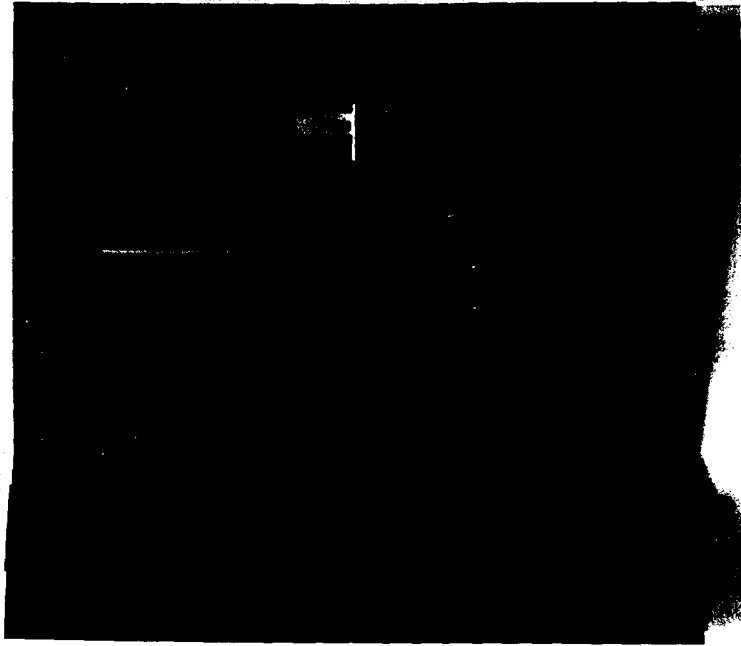


Figure 30. Eli Bornstein, MSR II no. 3 (sky-earth summer series) 1977-1979.

As the embodiments of a new kind of sculpture, Picasso's constructions must now be recognized as the forbears of the entire Modernist tradition of planar, welded metal sculpture. Thus the sheet metal Guitar stands not only as a Cubist masterpiece--the most refined of Picasso's constructions--but as one of the most influential works of art in the twentieth century.





Figure 31. Julio Gonzalez, The Kiss,  
1923

In the formal sequence which issued from the sheet metal Guitar, Julio Gonzalez must be acknowledged as its fundamental inheritor and as the translator of the capacities which it contained. Gonzalez was that true pioneer of welded sculpture, whose work refined the planar qualities and advanced the appropriated technical processes touched upon by Picasso. (fig. 31) It is one of the wonderful ironies of Modernism that Picasso himself was influenced by Gonzales; their collaboration in the late

1920's enabled Picasso, in such works as Woman in a Garden (fig. 32), to briefly revive his interest in planar welded sculpture.

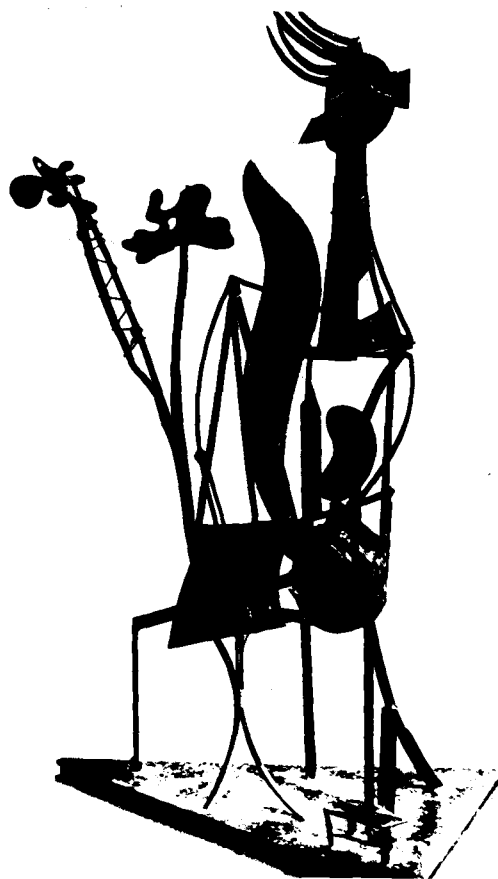


Figure 32. Pablo Picasso, Woman in a Garden,  
1929.

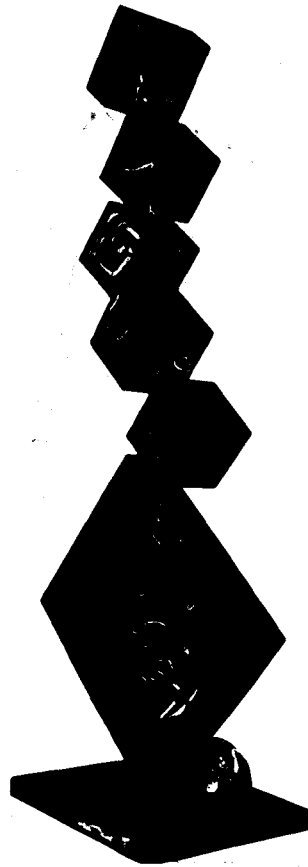


Figure 33. David Smith, Cubi I, 1963.

Gonzalez inspired the early development of David Smith and it was Smith who elevated welded steel to a position of prominence, thus popularizing the promise of the sheet metal Guitar and establishing the ground for the proliferation and ascendancy of welded, constructed steel sculpture as the prime three-dimensional medium of the past three decades.



Figure 34. Anthony Caro, Veduggio Sun, 1974.

The present Internationalism in constructed steel sculpture, represented by Anthony Caro (fig. 33) is thus seen as a direct evolution out of Picasso's earliest constructions. Referring to Picasso's regard for his private collection, William Rubin shares this insight:

He prized above all his Cubist constructions, of which only two--both gifts--were allowed to depart his studio in his lifetime. . . . In retaining virtually his entire output of Cubist

sculpture, Picasso confirmed his recognition of its unique position within his oeuvre. By making sculpture through construction rather than through carving and modelling, the methods employed since ancient times, he changed the art more radically than any other artist in history. In painting, his revolutionary Cubism had been developed in consort with Braque and had been adumbrated by Cézanne; the radicality of his sculpture owed nothing to forerunners or contemporaries.<sup>18</sup>

In the fullness of the evidence presented by these influences, Picasso cannot in any way be faulted for an inability to act upon what he had discovered in the constructions. Their appearance alone was sufficient to establish Picasso as the progenitor of the best in Modern sculpture and as the prophet of the new medium. The constructions were a signal victory, a victory which ironically arose only through the aegis of Cubist pictorial achievements. This is, I submit, a testimony to the remarkable vitality of the Cubist epoch: that an adjunct feature could have so lasting and transformative an effect upon our times. That vitality and its animating inventiveness would not have been possible had Cubism not been founded within a condition of visionary faith in the future of Mankind. We, the inheritors of Cubism, can do no less than to continue the conviction of that optimism.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The extremity to which the metaphor of the window may be taken is exemplified in the following statement by Erwin Panofsky:

We shall speak of a treatment of space in the full sense when, and only when, there is not merely a foreshortening of single objects such as houses and furniture, but the entire picture . . . is transformed into a window as it were, through which we look into the space beyond. When wherefore [sic] the material surface of the painting is negated as such and becomes simply a "picture plane" on which is projected the whole of that space seen beyond it and containing all separate objects.

Cited by John Clair, "Duchamp and the Classical Perspectivists", Artforum, March 1978, pp. 40-49.

- <sup>2</sup> For example, Ostwald's instruments for precisely matching local color were soundly rejected by artists. It is difficult to visualize Monet, in the fury of the Haystacks, pausing to consult a little gauge.
- <sup>3</sup> A case can be made, of course, for the overt manipulation of media evident in much traditional painting from Titian

onward. At distance a Titian or Rembrandt resolves into distinct figure/ground relationships, but at close range this orderly gestalt dissolves in a calligraphic welter of brushstrokes. This quality constituted what Anton Ehrenzweig has called the "nervous pictorial handwriting" of the artist, a particularly appropriate description in that it implies a personalized and intimate feature not intended for "general consumption". It was, I believe, accepted practice to view traditional painting at a range appropriate for the apprehension of distinct relationships and inappropriate for the apprehension of intimate surface. Surface then, was a secondary feature in traditional art which, while appealing to modern sensibilities, was not generally accepted by viewers as a central experience of the paintings in the age in which they were made.

- 4 The emergent cultural continuum may be said to have been inclusive rather than exclusive. Witness, for example, the incredible pervasiveness of non-European cultural sources which began to exert explicit influence upon the art and thought of Europe in the nineteenth century. It was as if the entire cultural history of Mankind became accessible and profoundly inspirational at that time. This was an indication of the first signs of an "internationalism", a nascent global civilization. Given this context the "simultaneity" and "instantaneity"

of the Impressionists assume a broader meaning than that of simple depiction of multiple events in painting.

- 5 Cézanne expressed it in these terms: "When color has its richness, form has its plenitude."
- 6 Daniel Henri Kahnweiler, Cubism (Paris Editions, 1950). p. 53.
- 7 In this adaptation of passage and composite imagery both Picasso and Braque seem to have been more influenced by Cézanne's painting from 1880-1900; his later works became less differentiated and geometric.
- 8 Edward Fry, Cubism (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964-66) p. 20.
- 9 Anton Ehrenzweig, The Hidden Order of Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 117-18.
- 10 In The Cubist Painters and Poets, Apollinaire stated that during the Cubist period, Picasso abandoned his prodigious skills to "stammer and stutter" through a difficult process of intuitive investigation.
- 11 The typographic elements brought a sense of humor into the increasingly formal and potentially arid matrix of Cubism. The ubiquitous fragment "jou", for example, may refer to a



disembodied newspaper; to "jouer" or to the sexual slang "to come". In his excellent treatment of the subject Robert Rosenblum notes:

Surprisingly such Cubist still-lives can be thought of not only as inhabiting the private, cerebral world of the artist's ivory tower, but also as exploring the most ordinary painted, handwritten, stencilled typographic facts experienced by twentieth century Man. Not only do the words that proliferate in Cubist art enrich intellectually the ambiguous formal language of Cubism with equally ambiguous double-entendres, but they also . . . establish Cubism's connection with the new imagery of the Modern world. (Robert Rosenblum. "Picasso and the Typography of Cubism", in Picasso 1881-1973 ed. Roland Penrose (London: Paul Elek, 1973), p. 75.

12 Henceforth designated "the sheet metal Guitar", to distinguish it from similarly titled works.

13 Ehrenzweig, p. 172.

14 1913. End of the Year--Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin arrives in paris to see Picasso whose Cubist works he knows from the Shchukin collection in Moscow. Spends month, paying frequent visits to

Picasso's studio where he sees constructions. Makes own first constructions upon returning to Moscow. (Jane Fluegel, "Chronology" in Pablo Picasso, A Retrospective, ed. William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), p. 153.

- 15 The Glass was in fact the only entirely free-standing construction.
- 16 Margit Rowell, Planes: the Art of the Planar Dimension (New York: the Guggenheim Museum, 1980).
- 17 As we have seen, one of the primary motives in developing collage and, by extension, the constructions, was a desire to de-emphasize non-objectivity and to return a semblance of imagistic clarity to Cubism. The Violin of 1915, in its severe formalism, may be seen as a return to the obscure imagery of 1910-12.
- 18 Rubin, Pablo Picasso, A Retrospective, p. 11.

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