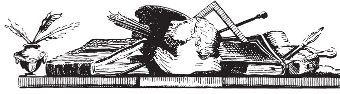

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Interview
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The long and fruitful relationship between Picasso and portraiture: Interview with curator William Rubin

The Director Emeritus of the Museum of Modern Art, New York and leading Picasso scholar in American museums discusses the exhibition he has curated opening this month

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31 March 1996

New York

Among curators who have dealt with Picasso's work, William S. Rubin is the presiding master.

The world enjoys a constant stream of Picasso shows: think of "Picasso and things", "Picasso and sculpture", "Picasso and the Weeping Woman", to name only the largest examples of recent vintage. None, however, has surpassed in magnitude or importance those organised by Mr Rubin. As director of the Museum of Modern Art's department of painting and sculpture (since 1988 Director Emeritus), he mounted the landmark 1980 exhibition with the then embryonic

Picasso Museum, Paris, and the exhaustive overview "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism" in 1988-89. In addition, he wrote the authoritative study of "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" for the monographic show in 1988 at Barcelona's Picasso Museum.

His latest enterprise is "Picasso and Portraiture: representation and transformation", which deals with Picasso's portrayals of known individuals, a theme previously addressed neither in a book or a comprehensive museum show. Numerous loans from the artist's heirs and family that have never been seen in America are among the 130 paintings, one hundred drawings, and one sculpture on view. Arranged by sitter, and roughly chronologically, they are juxtaposed with biographical texts and photographs of featured subjects such as Jaime Sabartés, Max Jacob, Fernande Olivier, Olga Koklova, Marie-Thérèse Walter, Jacqueline Roque, Dora Maar, and various self-portraits, collectively spanning more than eight decades. Five years in the making, the exhibition's only US venue is MoMA (28 April to 17 September), after which a slightly abbreviated version will be presented at the Grand Palais under the auspices of the collaborating Picasso Museum, Paris (mid October to late January 1997). The Art Newspaper spoke with William Rubin about his personal contact with Picasso and about the ideas behind the exhibition.

Let's begin with your personal relationship to Picasso. When and in what circumstances did you meet him?

William Rubin: I first met Picasso at his villa at Mougins on the Riviera near Cannes early in 1970, a little over three years before his death. Our meeting had to do with the Museum of Modern Art's efforts to obtain the epochal sheet-metal "Guitar" of 1912 with which, like his other Cubist constructions, Picasso had always refused to part. I suggested the possibility of exchanging for it a small Cézanne that we didn't hang. In the end he didn't take the Cézanne, but gave us the "Guitar" anyway. That was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

I saw Picasso on about fifteen or sixteen occasions all told. I would usually come at five in the afternoon and stay until midnight or come at noon, have lunch, and stay until six. Picasso lacked visitors with whom he could have serious discourse about art; his former painter and critic friends were largely dead. He couldn't really relax and talk shop with art dealers either, as he had a notable chip on his shoulder as regards them. I came as somebody with no personal axe to grind. When he first saw me I was something like forty-three. Yet he joked about a "young boy" replacing someone like Alfred Barr!

He was in remarkable condition for a man in his nineties. Except for being a little hard of hearing in one ear and a little vagueness—but not much—for the names of recent visitors, his memory was tremendously sharp, especially concerning things years ago. He was still very strong physically. When he showed me big paintings in the studio, I wanted to help him move them around. But he wouldn't hear of it. He'd get behind these big canvases and lift them.

Knowing that we were going to empty the museum for construction, I proposed to him that we fill it for a while entirely with a "definitive" retrospective of his work. He was amused, and agreed. The last time I saw him he was still game for the project. But then he died, and there was no hope of doing anything until the heirs settled their dispute. Immediately after they did, and after the French government got a large number of works in lieu of death duties for the yet-to-be-opened Picasso Museum of Paris, we did the 1980 retrospective of nearly 1,000 works. It can never happen again because pictures such as "Guernica" and "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" can never again leave their respective countries.

This is the first major exhibition about Picasso's portraiture. Why do you think that is?

It's ironic that with the virtual library of literature on Picasso, you will not find a single book on that aspect of his work, let alone such an exhibition. There's never been a slice through the oeuvre from this perspective. It's a very complicated subject to approach. Picasso's work contains a great number of pictures that are portrayals inspired by particular people, but which are abstract, surreal, or expressionist rather than literal. There is a problem of what constitutes a portrait in Picasso's work. He himself thought of all kinds of pictures as portraits. It's a word he used, but very inconsistently.

Why is the show titled "Picasso and Portraiture" and not "Picasso's Portraits"?

I chose not to call it "Picasso's Portraits" in order to leave definitions open. That word is very heavily freighted with Renaissance and Baroque conventions. It implies a certain level of verisimilitude. But in Picasso's work, nothing is ever accepted as given. It is Picasso-ised, that is, transformed in varying degrees and ways. We will, for example, show a portrait of his wife Olga that is very abstract; you wouldn't dream of thinking that this was a picture of her. But we have X-rays that show a more realistic, clearly recognisable, Olga underneath. And the final abstraction comes right out of those contours. Then there is the transvestite, indeed transsexual, portrait of his friend, the poet Paul Eluard, who is shown with breasts and an Arlesienne hat. In some instances, there are portrayals that hover between two or even three

individuals. This sort of migrating persona has much to do with Picasso's improvisational approach, and with the fact that his portraits were mostly made from memory. As he ruminated, people got associated with one another; for example, the occasional conflation of Dora Maar and Marie-Thérèse.

Whereas many of Picasso's figure pictures are generic, every picture in our show is unquestionably associated, if sometimes only elliptically, with known individuals. It's called "Picasso and Portraiture" in order to let the spectator decide whether he wants to consider a given portrayal a "portrait" or not; that is basically a semantic question and not of primary interest.

Were any of Picasso's portraits commissioned?

Only when he was young. There is a fundamental resistance to the commissioned portrait on the part of modern artists in general. They make portraits of people in their own world, not strangers. So almost all the pictures are of people who in one way or another were very important in Picasso's life: his children, wives, mistresses, and friends.

For the most part you've excluded portraits of individuals who do not recur in his imagery.

That's just practicality. In a 230-image show we could not possibly do justice to the whole of Picasso's portraiture. Picasso was the most productive painter in the history of art. Cézanne lived a long life and has a pretty big oeuvre; all told, there are about 1,800 Cézanne drawings and watercolours. There are 18,000 works on paper by Picasso. If you are going to define portrayals of known individuals as portraits, you are talking about something near 20% of his total work. The most interesting perspective is to have many portraits of the same person—comparing the differences in conception. It is better to have fifteen Dora Maars than try to have all the major "one-shot" subjects he painted, finding yourself with room for only two or three Dora Maars. Still, there are some "one-shotters" that are crucial and we've put a number of them in the show.

Was the decision to exclude sculpture based primarily on space considerations?

Yes. Each sculpture takes the place of two or three paintings in terms of gallery space. Moreover, I think the sculpture is less revealing for Picasso's portraiture than the painting and drawing. I'm showing only one sculpture, actually a very pictorial plaster relief; it's approach is unique, and it has never been seen in this country. I've also included some paintings and drawings of

sculptures which do not exist as such.

Did portraying a sitter in a Cubist idiom, rather than, say, in an Ingresque classical mode, itself have special significance?

After 1914, everything Picasso had done (as well as what he had yet to do) became part of an a priori working vocabulary which was always available to him and was used as it fit the emotional and pictorial needs of a situation. Picasso often tended to project his own mood into the sitter rather than respond to him or her—a characteristic of modernism since van Gogh. Some of the styles he used were more inherently objective than others. Each of those modes made certain things possible at the cost of others, and all carry particular emotional assumptions and art historical baggage with them.

The issue of objectivity versus subjectivity is interesting in relation to self-portraiture. Does that subgenre play an important part in the exhibition?

Apart from his many images of alter-egos, Picasso projected so much of himself into landscapes and still lifes, not to say portrayals of other people, that I don't think he felt the need to make many self-portraits. There are some great ones, mainly in the early and late years. But he didn't paint many. After the 1907 self-portrait [Prague] you don't get another self-portrait on canvas until the one he left as a charcoal drawing in 1938. But, of course, every Minotaur is, in some sense, a self-portrait. There are many surrogates for Picasso as he projects himself into the dramas he constructs in his narrative pictures. We haven't considered these "self-portraits" for the purposes of the exhibition. They form a category of their own. Picasso's energies went into self-portraiture far less than that of most other great painters. I find myself more struck by the absence of self-portraits as opposed to such "masks" as the Minotaur or harlequin. The show actually ends with self-portraits, in part because I think some of the greatest images of his career are the last self-portraits, done when he was ninety-two or ninety-three years old. They are uniquely and frighteningly direct.

Are there secret codes in Picasso's portraits?

Certainly. You could say that secret codes are the portraits in some cases. For example, his relationship with Marie-Thérèse Walter was kept totally secret for about seven years. Even later in his life, very few friends knew of her existence. Only when she became evident in the 1932-33 pictures, such as "Girl before a mirror", did Picasso's friends recognise that there was someone else after Olga. Prior to those pictures, Marie-Thérèse's initials had been assimilated into the

shapes of guitars and other objects. Picasso's art is full of secret codes that amused him. He loved that sort of play. In fact, "play" is a good word for much of Picasso's art.

What do you hope visitors will take away from this show?

I think they will be challenged and, hopefully, fascinated. One imagines that a show like this has more "human interest" than some others. If you take it simply as a show that has a lot of Picassos you haven't seen, most of which are terrific, that ought to be enough. After that, it's a show that opens up challenging questions about the nature of portraiture in the twentieth century. Both the invention of photography, which nullified the need for painters to make simple memorialising images, and the rise of abstraction, which in some respects contradicts the purposes of veristic portrayal, constituted challenges for portraiture as a genre; it might have gone the way of the Dodo bird, like history painting and religious art. But modernist artists used abstraction to enlarge and give new life to the genre. If such questions interest you, then you're cut out for this show. I'm personally most curious about whatever repercussions shows have on artists, and hence, on art history. To the extent that the public gets caught up in them, so much the better.

Are you planning another exhibition?

No. This is my swansong. I've been retired already for eight years, and if I do any show at all it will be a small one.

"Picasso and Portraiture" opens at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on 28 April and continues until 17 September.

Originally appeared in The Art Newspaper as *'Picasso and portraiture: a long and fruitful relationship'*

Interview Curators Museum of Modern Art New York Pablo Picasso Portraits

COOKIE SETTINGS