The Passion of Picasso

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Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) was the most influential visual artist of the 20th century.[1] Whether he was also the *greatest* artist of the century can perhaps be disputed. However, having visited the huge exhibition "Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective," which ran this summer at the Museum of Modem Art in New York, I would offer no argument against a claim for Picasso's supremacy. The shows sheer volume (over 900 works), together with the incredible quality and diversity of Picasso's art, virtually bludgeons one into granting the most extravagant praise for the artist.

Diverse Styles

The exhibition was a marvel. That so much of the Picasso corpus and all of his masterpieces *could* have been-gathered for the occasion is a tribute to the influence of the Museum of Modern Art. Also, the circumstances were all but perfect. Some examples: The Picasso heirs are still in possession of a large body of Picasso's works. The Musée Picasso in Paris has not yet opened, and so its vast collection was available. The enormous and famous *Guernica* has not yet been sent to Spain, whence it has been in exile since the Franco years. So comprehensive an exhibit is unrepeatable.

The whole artistic biography of Picasso was sumptuously documented. From the Picasso Museum in Barcelona came many of the formative student works. When Pablo was only 13, his artist father gave his own painting utensils to the boy and said he would never paint again, for his son had already surpassed him. By his 16th year, Picasso had achieved the style (but of course had not attained the artistic accomplishment) of such masters as Van Dyck, Velasquez, and El Greco.

In his early 20s, Picasso began the development of his many personal styles, which followed one after another in rapid succession: the Blue Period (1901-04), the Pink Period (1904-06), the Iberian Period (1904-07), the African Period (1907), Analytic Cubism (1907-12), Synthetic Cubism (1912-21), Neo-Classicism (1918-24). By 1924 he had returned to Cubism with a rather decorative form of that style, and by 1925 this

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decorativeness yielded to a violent, expressionistic Cubism that would dominate much of his work from then on. Also, in 1925 some of his work began to reflect his alliance with Surrealism.

Further, at every stage of his development, Picasso paralleled his abstract art with realistic works. The man could, when he chose, draw with the realistic precision of a camera. Picasso never did works of pure abstraction. There was always an object that provided his initial inspiration.

Any one of Picasso's many periods would have provided a stylistic frame of reference on which to build a reputation as a major modem artist. It was his peculiar genius to have developed them all. Picasso has been criticized for having resorted to imitating himself in his later years, or for having been content merely to "delight" his audience. However, even in his last years, in his 80s, works of great power and tragic estrangement continued to come from his brush.

The Cubist 'Lie'

It is ironic that Picasso, a man of towering ego and deep individualism, should have made his first gigantic impact on Western art not as a solitary artist working in romantic isolation but in intimate artistic partnership with another great artist, the Frenchman

Georges Braque. Together they "invented" Analytic Cubism, a profoundly restrained, disciplined style that rendered the subject in what has been called a "vocabulary of dismembered planes." Analytic Cubism reduced the object to its geometric forms, with these forms rearranged so that the work could more fully explore the multifaceted character of the concrete object. Multiple points of view were combined to create a wholly new form.

Some critics saw Analytic Cubism as an artistic counterpart to Einstein's theory of relativity. The real world is not as it appears to the naïve eye. The permanent laws of Newtonian physics do not reflect the world as it really is. In fact, in the atomic substrata, all is relative.

Picasso rejected such a "scientific" understanding of his purpose. Analytic Cubism was not an experimental means to discover the truth in the world as it "really" is. A cubist painting is not some allegedly "truer" understanding of the world. Rather, as Picasso put it in 1923: "We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth. At least the truth that is given us to understand."

Since the Renaissance, Western painting has attempted to create the illusion of space by the technique of perspective. The two-dimensional canvas surface is made to *appear* three-dimensional. But in Analytic Cubism, the two-dimensionality of the canvas is not denied. Space and volume are expressed by geometrical form alone. This means that an object can be spatially represented without a rigid commitment to the appearance of the visible world. The "lie" of illusionist, perspective need not be the only way to express space. There was now the cubist "lie" that expressed space geometrically. Cubism enabled Picasso and Braque to solve certain basic problems left to them by 19th century artists, especially Cezanne, by moving into abstraction; but also, having achieved an abstract art, they were able to open the door to the whole abstract movement in the 20th century.

Revealing the Essence

Nonrealistic art is not unique to the modern world. It is in fact the modern world's return to the mainstream of art. In the history of art the attempt to achieve realism virtually as an end in itself is a minority report, Greco-Roman classicism and the Renaissance being the lone examples. The great mainstream of humankind's art has been nonrealistic, often abstract, usually expressionistic and deeply related to religion.

To judge from the history of art, it would, appear that the "natural" style of religious art is nonrealistic. This is understandable, for religion probes beneath the surface of existence as it *appears* to us, in order to uncover the meaning of life in religious myth and symbol (Tillich). An art associated with the religious enterprise will inevitably express meaning in a manner stylistically paralleled to religious myth and symbol.

Certainly classical and Renaissance art dealt with religious themes; however, these realistic styles developed at periods in their respective cultures when traditional religion was under attack and eroding. Having lost faith in the capacity of religion to reveal truth, the culture and its artists sought to find meaning in the only place that was left - the world as it appears.

Modern art, reflecting modem culture, finds itself in a painful dilemma. The world *as it appears* has proved to be not the full truth of things. The *essence* of things can be revealed only abstractly and expressionistically; however, the abstracted "lies" of modern art, the myths and symbols of our time, are, with few exceptions, devoid of specific religious doctrine or even subject matter.

Modern art reveals to us the religious void of a modern world came of age. Human beings cannot live by realistic bread alone. The so-called "real world" itself contains illusions. There is no "meaning" in brute empirical perception grounded in a

materialistic world view. Thus, the materialistic Picasso, and most modem art with him, can express an essentially nonreligious love of the world in all its materialistic carnality only within the framework of a highly "spiritual" - i.e., abstract - style. Religious need remains even when religious belief lies dead or dormant. The very fact of the dominance of abstract art in the hedonistic Western world reveals the profound estrangement - indeed, contradiction - of Western post-Christian civilization.

A Terrible Prophecy

Analytic Cubism, a highly intellectual phenomenon, is an art of muted color, deliberately lacking in emotionalism. It is remarkable that Picasso should have curbed his passionate nature for some four or five years to work in a style so foreign to his essentially expressionistic, passionately Spanish temperament.

Curiously, the painting that launched Picasso in the realm of Analytic self-restraint, the work that suggested the possibilities which Analytic Cubism sought to explore, was not itself dispassionate but was one of the most violent - indeed savage - works he was ever to accomplish. This work is, I believe, the single most important painting of the 20th century: *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907).

This proto-cubist work pictures five nude prostitutes ironically called "Les Demoiselles." Bridging Picasso's Iberian and African periods, it portrays the nudes in a blatantly unsentimental way. Their barbaric, masklike faces look out soullessly from a world in which the reliability of sense experience has eroded. A new sense of space is demanded in a world where such "demoiselles" can take shape. The painting is a terrible prophecy of the transvaluation of all values which Nietzsche proclaimed and which World War I was soon to visit upon Europe.

It was in such powerfully brutal expressionism that Picasso's truly modern work began, and it is to such expressionism that the mature Picasso would return. Analytic Cubism proved the breadth of Picasso's talent and the greatness of his painterly intellect. It also proved his capacity for artistic self-discipline, a discipline also manifested in the purity of his Neo-Classicism.

Yet above everything, he was a passionate talent, His periods of self-restraint are fully matched and, on balance, overwhelmed by his moments of reckless self-indulgence. He is perhaps the most unabashedly sexual and violent painter in Western art.

A Personal Outcry

Sex, violence, and finally death dominate his mature art, but his true subject is always his own feelings, his passions about his themes. His Cubism finally proves to be not the means of self-restraint, but a powerful tool whereby he can allow his personal response to his world a reckless, almost limitless expression.

Perhaps Picasso's most famous work is *Guernica,* a painting regarded by Paul Tillich as the most "protestant" of all modern paintings. It was painted in outrage over the bombing of civilians in Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. It is a masterpiece of expressionistic Cubism and, as such, it is above all a personal outcry against the Franco-Nazi atrocity, the point being that always Picasso was a subjective, not a political, artist. The Marxist Picasso critic John Berger, in his not altogether successful book *The Success and Failure of Picasso,* is certainly correct in this observation. Though Picasso painted *Guernica, The Charnel House* (a 1945 work in response to Hitler's death camps), and *Massacre in Korea* (1951), he was not providing the basis for a political art (notwithstanding the fact that he joined the Communist Party in 1945). There is no social program in these paintings; there is only a very personal, "autobiographical" expression of horror. The "subject" is really Picasso's anger, Picasso's imaginings as to what these slaughters must have been like to those who experienced them.

The essentially apolitical character of Picasso's art is not simply in the work itself. After all, his work from 1914 to 1918 simply ignores the war. In 1917 when the carnage was three years old, Picasso was doing set and costume designs for the Ballets Russes as if nothing were happening. Juan Gris described the 1917 cubist ballet *Parade* as "unpretentious, gay and distinctly comic." Similarly, during the years of World War II, his art does not reflect world events. Of the war paintings, Berger remarks:

> To find these subjects Picasso scarcely had to leave his own body. It is through the experience of his own body that he painted erotic pictures, and it is through his own physical imagination, heightened by sexual experience, that he painted the war pictures. (It is interesting to note that in the latter almost all of the figures are women.) The choice of his subject was limited to what was happening to him at a very basic level *(The Success and Failure of Picasso* [Penguin, 1966]).

Berger finds this a distressing failure of "revolutionary nerve." He is ultimately critical of Picasso's having squandered his genius on the merely subjective and of the way in which Picasso's work ends in personal despair. As Berger stresses, much of the later work, in which deformed old men look leeringly at beautiful women, symbolizes Picasso's outrage over the impotence of old age. Ironically, Berger the revolutionary would censure Picasso for the very reason that he finds Picasso lacking in what our courts call "redeeming social value."

Lust and Despair

Picasso was not above simple pornography, but even in his serious works there is a strong emphasis on the sex act: Cubist sex. Surrealistic sex. Realistic sex. It's all there in abundance. His nudes are, very often, manifest objects of sex. One can understand the anger of many feminists, for what Picasso is painting is sex *as he experienced it,* women as they aroused *him.* What is it that aroused Picasso at that moment, in that woman? The belly? The buttocks? The breasts? His cubism permits him to exaggerate and juxtapose these various parts of the female body.

Even in those paintings in which the emphasis is on the psyche of the woman, the mystery is often in Picasso's own mystification: *his* realization that in understanding another person, one can go only so far; *his* realization that in understanding oneself, one can see only "through a glass darkly" This is reflected profoundly in his famous 1932 painting *Girl Before the Mirror.*

While Berger finds in all this subjectivism the reason for Picasso's "failure," I find in it simply Picasso. Berger contends that Picasso's great success blunted his revolutionary zeal and made his work decadent. In fact, Picasso's "decadence" is his own. Even had he been a worldly failure, left to paint freely, he still would have found his way to his true subject - himself.

The violence, the lust, the despair and finally the darkness of his art are the passion he finds in himself. It is for the viewer to generalize: Does this view of things awaken in me a larger view of reality in which I share? Even though I may not wish to share it, does it convince me of its power?

Glittering Brokenness

There is another period in Western art which shares Picasso's finally dark vision of the human possibility: Romanesque art of the 11th and 12th centuries. An art of almost cubistic distortion, it is drastically expressionist. It confronts human frailty directly and, like Picasso, portrays the passion of human existence without the least trace of prudery. It is an art which embraced the Augustinian view of humanity reflected in the *Confessions,* but without Augustine's incessant moralizing.

Yet there is also a fundamental difference in perspective. Though Picasso occasionally portrayed the crucifixion, such works were always remarkably devoid of religious conviction. His interest in the crucifixion was an interest in anguish. Picasso's only answer to the problem of suffering was beauty.

Romanesque art is, of course, beautiful, but since it is finally religious art, it speaks to the suffering it portrays in terms of the redemption it also presents. Just as Picasso makes use of drastic juxtapositions, so the Romanesque artists placed fall and redemption in drastic tension. It is not unusual to see in the sculpture of a Romanesque church such a thing as the graphic portrayal of lust placed alongside a saint contorted by the ecstasy of revelation. The darkness is always controlled by the light of redemption.

In Picasso, finally, we find only the glittering brokenness, a brokenness which can be reconstructed solely by the beautiful "lies" of art. But finally, the artist himself must die. For Picasso, the hope is in the beauty of now; the rest is darkness.

I do not intend to close on an eristically apologetic note; i.e., "See, oh moderns, how even the greatest genius of our age saw that the only reasonable response to the human dilemma without Christ is despair." It would be a betrayal of the sheer beauty of Picasso's art to use it in such a dishonorable fashion. Surely Christianity is not in such bad shape that it must resort to using great art merely as a tool with which to tear humanity down so that we can later use Jesus to build it up again.

I am trying to understand why I respond so powerfully to Picasso. I don't share his ultimate vision. I sometimes don't even approve of him – his glorification of rape, for instance, or his reduction of atrocity to merely subjective outrage. And yet I am grasped. My response is not unrelated, I hope, to my confidence that humanity reflects so truly and completely the glory of God that there is glory even in the fragmentation of the human.