Constant Change: The Life And Styles Of Pablo Picasso Essay, Research Paper

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The Life and Styles of Pablo Picasso

Now is the time in this period of changes and revolution to use a revolutionary manner of painting and not to paint like before. – Pablo Picasso, 1935. (Barnes)

Undoubtedly Pablo Picasso is one of the most famous and well-documented artists of the twentieth century. Picasso, unlike most painters, is even more special because he did not confine himself to canvas, but also produced sculpture, poetry, and ceramics in profusion. Although much is known about this genius, there is still a lust after more knowledge concerning Picasso, his life and the creative forces that motivated him. This information can be obtained only through a careful study of the events that played out during his lifetime and the ways in which they manifested themselves in his creations (Penrose).

Pablo Picasso was born in 1881 in Malaga, Spain, to an artist and museum curator, Jose Ruiz Blasco. As a young child he surprised his elders with his astounding artistic abilities; and, as Rachel Barnes points out in her introduction to Picasso by Picasso: Artists by Themselves, there seemed to be no doubt that Picasso would become a painter. In order to better hone his prodigious abilities, Picasso attended the Academy in Barcelona for a brief period of time. He spent most of his early years painting in Paris, where he progressed through various periods – including a Blue period from 1900 to 1904 and a Rose period in 1904 – before creating the Cubist movement that lasted until the beginning of the First World War.

Picasso initiated Cubism at the age of twenty-six after he already had established himself as a successful painter. According to Souch‚re, Picasso led the evolution towards cubism in order to “escape the tyranny of the laws of the tangible world, to fly beyond all the degradations of the lie, the stupidity of criticism, towards that total freedom which inspired his youth.” As Barnes notes, Cubism was an art that concentrated on forms, and an artist’s job was to give life to that form. Until this goal is accomplished, the Cubist painter has not fully realized his purpose.

After his initial Cubist period, Picasso moved through various other stages. He experimented with sculpture and still lifes, and by his death at the age of ninety-two, could be considered “the most famous and talked about painter in recent history.” (Barnes). After progressing past Cubism, Picasso frequently came back to this style of painting because, as stated by Souch‚re, Picasso felt liberated and powerful when painting this way and believed Cubism to be the best way to speak out against the scandalous outer world. As Picasso pointed out Cubism “is the attitude of aggression” that could give him complete control over himself, his emotions, and his surroundings.

This logically leads to a brief discussion of what Picasso felt was art and what he considered the duty of the artist to be. In a brief conversation with one of his biographers, Picasso commented that he saw art as something not to be understood or interpreted.

Everyone wants to understand art…. In the case of a painting people have to understand. If only they would realize above all that an artist works out of necessity, that he himself is only a trifling bit of the world, and that no more importance should be attached to him than to plenty of other things, things which please us in the world, though we can’t explain them (Barnes).

Picasso painted for himself, as a release from the pressures of his society and as a way to express his thoughts and problems in tangible form. For this reason, the events happening around the time of any Picasso work must be understood before the true meaning of any resulting art can be understood.

In the time period directly before the painting of Bull’s Skull, Fruit, Pitcher, many hardships befell Picasso. As William Rubin explains, during the winter of 1938, Picasso was bedridden with a severe attack of sciatica. Two other tragic events happened to Picasso during the month of January 1939. On January 13, Picasso’s mother died. On the 26th, Franco’s army completed its victory over the Spanish republic and set up its fascist regime. These two events had a profound effect on Picasso. He thereafter openly expressed his negative feelings towards Franco’s regime and used his paintings, especially his great mural Guernica to “clearly express [his] abhorrence of the military caste which”, he believed, had “sunk Spain [into] an ocean of pain and death.” (Barnes)

The way Picasso set about painting has been well documented by many people. Roland Penrose, in writing about a photographic study of the artist at work, eloquently describes the conflicting influences seen in Picasso’s method of creation.

The first is the positive clarity with which the idea is born. Picasso, particularly when he begins to draw on a virgin surface, seems to trace the outline of a vision which is already there but visible only to him. For a time he continues with complete conviction but as the drawing materializes a second phase begins which is like a dialogue between him and the image to which he has given birth. The image has already been given a personality of its own which can provoke surprises that demand to be taken into account. Picasso ‘the finder’ can now interpret the impatient demands of his offspring and with a parent’s insight he guides his child as it grows in stature or rescues it if it stumbles. The artist and his creation during this time are inseparably linked; they reciprocate, and rise or fall together. He is the product of his own work. (Barnes)

Furthermore, as Picasso pointed out to Christian Zervos:

I see for others, that is to say, in order to put on canvas the sudden apparitions which come to me, I don’t know in advance what I am going to put on canvas any more that I decide beforehand what colours I am going to use. While I am working I am not conscious of what I am putting on the canvas. Each time I undertake to paint a picture I have a sensation of leaping into space. I never know whether I shall fall on my feet. It is only later that I begin to estimate more exactly the effect of my work (Barnes).

Many argue, among them Barnes, that Picasso was strongly and greatly influenced by Paul C?zanne and, to a lesser extent, by his friend Henri Matisse. These influences can be seen in some of his earlier Cubist paintings and their color schemes and in others that concentrate on the African mask. But, as Picasso himself pointed out to Zervos:

It is not what the artist does that counts but what he is. C?zanne would never have interested me a bit if he had lived and thought like Jacques Emile Blanche, even if the apple he painted had been ten times as beautiful. What forces our interest is C?zanne’s anxiety – that’s C?zanne’s lesson… – that is the actual drama of the man. The rest is a sham (Barnes).

Although these artists did not stylistically influence Picasso, they spiritually influenced him. It also shows that it was essential to the evolution of his own style that Picasso preserve his independence and solitude so that his paintings come from his own feelings. For this reason, too, Picasso built up many walls around himself in order to protect his art; and, as a sign of his true genius, he constantly changed styles and media because he refused to be satisfied with any of his achievements and wished his art to be fresh, original, and uninhibited. This is the reason that Picasso pushed the extremes in art. He constantly looked for new territory to explore, searching for something that would better express what he wanted. This shows the true genius of Pablo Picasso.

Social Conscience:

The Work of Pablo Picasso

One must speak of problems in painting!… I never do a painting as a work of art. All of them are researches. I search incessantly and there is a logical sequence in all this research. – Pablo Picasso, 1956 (Barnes).

In paintings typical of his work during the late 1930’s, Picasso concentrated on subjects that reflected the troubled times in which he lived. Indeed, these were troubled times for all of Europe. Economic hardships, moral turpitude, and the rise of fascism were all too common. The personal life of Picasso, too, was just as turbulent. During the months of December, 1938 to January 1939, Picasso was confined to bed with severe back problems, lost his beloved mother, and witnessed the fall of his homeland, Spain, to the regime of Franco. Picasso’s still life Bull’s Skull, Fruit, Pitcher is typical of his mature Cubist paintings of this time period in that he uses various symbols to express his inner feelings, especially towards his country, his family, and himself, while at the same time representing the feelings of a whole nation and telling his fellow countrymen that, despite all of their hardships, they must still have hope.

Bull’s Skull, Fruit, Pitcher is clearly a Cubist painting. None of the forms portrayed in the painting is as it should be. All of the objects are seen, seemingly, from varying viewpoints simultaneously, a Cubist perspective. There are only five clearly discernible objects in the painting: a large bull’s skull, two pieces of fruit, a pitcher, and a pink tree.

The bull’s skull, which lies on the left-hand side of the canvas, is grotesquely malformed. All over the bone are various cracks and places where the skull has been chipped away. Nothing about the skull is as it should be. For example, although both eyes stare at the viewer, the jaw points to the right. Furthermore, the jaw is drawn in such a way as it never could be; the left side of the jaw connects to the right side of the face and thus creates a paradoxical image. The nostrils are chipped and ‘bleed’ into the mouth; in other words, one cannot tell where the nostrils end and the mouth begins. The bull has no upper teeth but has four lower ones. They are straight and in the center of the mouth and would look like a perfect set of teeth were they not cracked and chipped. The only other physical feature of the bull’s skull is the two short horns that rest upon its head. There is one basic color used for the most part in the skull and that is white. This white fades into yellow in some places and goes all the way to brown in others, but on most of its surface, the skull has a muted white or yellow tone. The shape of the head is, on the whole, triangular. The horns are triangles as are the shapes formed by the jaw and the mouth. Even the varying shades are applied in triangular regions.

The two pieces of fruit are scattered about on the canvas. One is situated between the skull and the pitcher and the other is on the right side of the painting. Both pieces are circular in form and consist of the colors red, yellow, and green. There is a definite skin around both pieces but the viewer can still see the middle of the fruit. The shapes inside, which are set off by the varying colors, are both circular and triangular. The only noticeable difference between the two, besides the different patterns on the inside, is that the fruit in the middle has an awkwardly shaped stem that makes the piece of fruit look almost like a stopwatch.

The pitcher is situated between the two pieces of fruit. Unlike the fruit and the skull, the pitcher has no sharp edges formed by contrasting colors in its interior. This gives this object a certain flow that is lacking in the others. The colors used to paint it, too, contrast sharply with the rest of the painting. Rich oranges, yellows, browns, and reds are used with a deep black swirled in to give it texture. The pitcher is somewhat ornate, having a curved handle, an upturned spout, a fancy lid with a ball on the top, and a tented base extending from its bottom.

The tree that can be seen in the dead center of the painting is a bright pink. It has a brown trunk and brown branches as well a few scattered white and green leaves. Its leaves (predominantly pink) form a halo in the center of the canvas and suggest a cherry tree in full bloom.

There are a few less defined objects in Picasso’s work as well. The aforementioned objects (excepting the tree) rest on a table that is mostly a dark brown. The edges are warped and, because of this, the viewer is unable to be certain where the table ends and its base or the background begins.

In the background, there are four black bars evenly spaced on the canvas. They are all half of the length of the painting except the one on the right which runs from top to bottom. These bars are painted somewhat three-dimensionally and add the only discernible aspect of perspective to the otherwise flat piece. This perspective allows the viewer to see that the tree is outside while the table and the objects resting on the table are inside.

The only other noticeable objects in the painting are the shadows created by each of the main objects. They are all triangular in shape and, because of this and their sizes, they do not naturally fit with the objects creating them at all. They are not pointing in the same direction, suggesting either multiple light sources or the cubist theory of viewing objects from varying viewpoints. This is exemplified in by the pitcher, which has two shadows of different colors.

The background of the work is painted using pink, green, white, and blue. These colors are applied in triangular forms in apparently random order. There seem to be two different light sources emanating from the top of the two innermost bars.

Overall, the painting is similar to most other cubist paintings. Picasso used one basic form throughout, the triangle. He did this using straight and circular brush strokes. There is no real perspective with a traditional vanishing point although the viewer can tell that the tree is outside the rest of the painting. The viewer, too, can easily tell what Picasso wishes him to look at because of the thick layering of paint on the main objects in comparison to the light layers of paint on the background. All of these things, in combination with the colors used, come together to create the eerie feeling of sadness and doom one gets when looking at this painting.

As is typical in most still life, Picasso’s work is intended to have a deeper meaning than simply being a study of various forms (Harwood). The most obvious story Picasso might have been telling is that of his own life at this time. As mentioned before, many hardships had befallen Picasso during the late 1930’s and, in order to deal with the feelings associated with these hardships, Picasso painted.

The bull’s skull sitting on the left side of the canvas is probably the most obvious symbol in the painting. Picasso had a special love for the bull. In Spain, as in most of the world, it has been the subject of myth and legend. The Spanish tradition of the running of the bulls is one of the most beloved in Picasso’s homeland (Marrero). This special mysticism of the bull found its way into many of Picasso’s works in many different ways, mainly as a symbol of pride, strength, power, and nationalism (Chipp). These otherwise up-beat symbols are sharply contrasted by the fact that the bull portrayed in this work is dead and decaying. This most likely directly correlates to the dismay that Picasso felt after learning of the fall of the Spanish republic.\*

Picasso’s still life, however, must be seen as a whole in order to completely understand it. By doing this, two different ideas arise. The first is supported by the belief that during this time the bull became a “precise moral symbol of the forces of darkness which fascism had loosed in Europe” (Packard). This would lead one to believe that Picasso was warning of the eminent rise and aggressions of the totalitarian regimes in Europe. He does this by placing the symbol on the table along with other everyday objects, the fruit and the pitcher. He furthers this idea by placing the bars behind the table but in front of the outside. This allows for a sense of entrapment to all that view this work and serves as a parallel to the entrapment of Europe with the fascist governments.

The other idea derived from studying the picture is based on the many contrasting elements present – the skull, the fruit, and the tree, the gloomy foreground and the bright background – which fit nicely into Picasso’s belief in the oviform\*, also known as the Yin-Yang in oriental cultures. This symbolizes the opposing principles of life, good and evil, light and dark, man and woman, and all other contrasting dualisms in life (Marrero).

Specifically in this work the contrasting ideas of light and dark are seen in the opposing color schemes used in the background and foreground. The background is painted using pastels exclusively while in the foreground darker browns and reds are used.

Life and death are also present in this work in the bull’s skull and the fruit and tree. The skull, an obvious representation of death, sharply contrasts with the fruit, a symbol of nourishment and life, and the tree, in full bloom despite the gloomy surroundings.

As Herschall B. Chipp points out in his study of Guernica, Picasso held the view that “death is omnipresent and that life is a constant struggle, balancing precariously on the precipice between survival and annihilation”. This is indeed a bleak outlook on life, but in keeping in line with his belief in the oviform, Picasso must have known that for all the bad things in the world, there must be an equal amount of good. This is most likely the reason that Picasso included the cherry tree, in full bloom, in Bull’s Skull, Fruit, Pitcher. Set in the background and omitted from the title, this beautiful object can easily be overlooked. Once noticed, however, it is an important part of the painting. It gives this otherwise depressing work a hint of hope, a hope for something better.

\*It is widely recognized that Picasso was an extremely patriotic Spaniard. This patriotism is easily seen in any of his historical paintings of this time, most notably Guernica, in which he vividly depicts the horrors and atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. In Guernica, a massive mural painted on commission, Picasso uses the bull and other animals as well as screaming human forms to express his contempt for Franco’s regime as a overall feeling of death is felt from this painting (Chipp).

\*The oviform, as Marrero explains, “is obtained by describing a circumference and then drawing a diameter, followed by a semi-circle on each radius, on one side and the other of the original diameter.” By then erasing the diameter, the circle has been in half in the only other possible way. This can be interpreted as being symbolic of the contrasting dualisms in life. Picasso often used this concept in his paintings, especially after 1937.

Bull’s Skull, Fruit, Pitcher

Tete de Taureau, Fruit, Pitchet

Pablo Picasso

Spanish(French School), 1881-1973

Oil on canvas, 1939

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