Theme 4: Picasso and the Avant-Garde

Lesson 5: Pablo Picasso

Part 1

The most important painter of the twentieth century, and the most famous, is Pablo Picasso.¹ He was born in 1881 in Málaga, on the southern coast of Spain. Since his father was an academic painter, Picasso was set to drawing and painting at an early age. He soon showed incredible talent. When Picasso was fourteen, the family moved to Barcelona, Spain’s second largest city. He went to art school and, in 1900, had his first show. That fall he went to Paris for the first time. A number of famous Impressionists and Postimpressionists were still active. In 1904 Picasso settled in Paris for good and became part of a circle of young artists, writers, critics, and hangers-on that included the Americans Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo. The painter became famous, some might say infamous, and was able to make a good living. Theater groups and ballet troupes wanted him to design their sets. Working almost nonstop, he created a huge corpus of paintings, drawings, etchings, engravings, and sculptures. In the early thirties he tried his hand at surrealist writing and finally discovered an art form he was not very good at. Read this online Time magazine article for insight into his personality and fame.

¹ See Great Masters of Western Art, pages 435–440.
Part 2

The First Communion, painted in 1895 when Picasso was only fourteen years old, shows amazing competence in traditional techniques of oil painting, not to mention considerable talent (at left). We begin here because it is important to see how well Picasso could paint in a naturalistic style. Which means that his revolutionary paintings some ten years later—for better or worse—had everything to do with intention and nothing to do with lack of talent. Consider his treatment of textures in this image: the carpeted stairs, the satiny brocade on the side of the altar, the heavy linen altar cloth, the brass candle holder, the soft flesh, the little girl’s diaphanous veil, the red velvet cushion under her knees. While not as obsessive as a Van Eyck or a Vermeer, Picasso renders forms and surfaces most convincingly. The First Communion is a naturalistic illusion of objects in space, captured in light and color. And remember, he was still a boy. In a self portrait from the next year, we find a different kind of painter (at right). At least in private, Picasso was almost as interested in the painted surface as Cezanne had been years earlier when portraying his father. In school and at his father’s studio, of course, Picasso was still painting altar boys in a fluid but naturalistic style.

The kind of genre painting we first saw in Vermeer’s time had evolved into conventional scenes like the First Communion, candid but safe glimpses of contemporary life. In Catholic countries all the sacraments were represented. The pathos of young mothers on their deathbed or in coffins was particularly popular. Picasso tried his hand at it in 1897, when he was sixteen (at left). The room belongs to a family of the poorer classes: the crude walls and shutters, like the rough blanket, stand in marked contrast to the rich surfaces of the First Communion. The title echoes the visual cliché: Science and Charity, two virtues personified here by a stereotypical doctor and a nun, neither of whom, unfortunately, can save the woman. Don’t we feel sorry for that poor little girl?
Part 3
Although perhaps not in the same league as the academic painter Ingres (discussed previously), whose seemingly effortless sketches strike the eye as near photographic in accuracy, Picasso was an excellent draughtsman. He never drew a boring line. Whether in pencil, pen, chalk, crayon, charcoal, paint, or graver, his lines stretch and bend and thicken and trail away with a nervous energy all their own. Consider this portrait of his first mustache, drawn in 1898 as he approached his seventeenth birthday (at left). The sinuous outline has little concern for the forms it supposedly describes; it is nearly an arabesque, as decorative in its own way as Botticelli’s delicately exploratory outline of the naked Venus in Theme 2. But Picasso also charges his line with dark energy: here it is shadow, there the fold of a lapel; now the thrust of an ear, and now a shock of hair. The handling of the bony face has surprisingly little modeling. Everything is line, sometimes sharp, sometimes smudged. This facility with line may have helped take Picasso in the direction he ultimately pursued to the end. In contrast to modern painters like Henri Matisse, large swatches of flat color rarely interested him if divorced from line.

A portrait of his first beard from 1901, drawn in sepia ink, shows how rebellious his line can be: the continuous zigzag on the left side of his head—our right—describes a flat plane, not a rounded skull or even the direction the hair is combed in. The energetic line scribbles off on its own, darkest at the top when the pen was full of ink, and most transparent at the bottom as the ink finally runs out. This, in fact, is the limit of the line: the amount of ink the pen can hold. The wild line behind the head—does it stand for a shadow, a halo, a wild hair?—seems unaware of the rest of the portrait; it has somewhere else to go.

What to make of a rather revealing self-portrait from 1902, when Picasso turned twenty-one? A quick glance at the many sketches from 1901–1902 show unmistakably, and sometimes comically, that he had discovered sex. However, what interests us here is his new vision of the image. The line is thicker and more independent than ever. It now simplifies—eliminates—as much as it reveals, if not more. It also wanders into the background as if hanging in the air. The line minimizes detail. Two eyes, a nose, a mustache, a hint of ears, a patch of hair, and voilà! it looks enough like a head. No need for the naturalistic illusion of a real head in real space. The underlying structure—those bones so important in the first mustache picture—is barely hinted at here. Modeling is minimal and rather arbitrary. In much of the body, natural proportion gives way to an odd pose in which the left arm (on our right) is out of whack. Not only does Picasso fail to use adequate foreshortening between shoulder and elbow, but the forearm is too thick and its angle is hard to read. The knees seem to be on the same level, and yet the left leg (on our right) also appears somewhat elevated and thrust forward. And what is that triangle on the thigh?

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2 See Great Masters of Western Painting, pages 429–434.
Part 4
Since we know that Picasso can draw perfectly well, the distortion—like the simplification and the odd pose—must have been done on purpose. Obviously, he is experimenting. But what is he after?

Eventually, these years will be labeled Picasso’s Blue Period by art historians. The painter himself denied any intention of painting in periods, especially the Blue and the Rose Periods, but we cannot always believe what people tell us. In any event, by 1903 he was painting blue figures like the old guitarist at right, or melancholy figures in a bruise-colored world like the ironing girl at left, from 1904. The odd, exaggerated poses and distorted limbs resemble those in the 1902 self-portrait, this time carried to an extreme. Although done in oil paint, Picasso’s line is everywhere, not only outlining, simplifying, and flattening forms, but exaggerating them. Consider the thrust of the ironing girl’s upper shoulder or the old guitarist’s long shank and foot. Bodies do not work this way, yet these images are not caricatures. They seem denizens of some zombie world missing heart and soul, capable only of melancholy. Is there any real attempt here to create naturalistic illusion through light, shadow, and color? Picasso is nearing the limits of naturalistic illusion, the centerpiece of Western painting since the Renaissance, but has yet to go beyond the limits of Postimpressionism.