PICASSO
& ABSTRACTION

Musée Picasso Paris
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium
Lannoo
Picasso Célébration — 1973.2023

CONTENT

FOREWORD

Pablo Picasso and abstraction. This is a difficult, almost contradictory subject, given the artist's reticence and indeed his complete rejection of pure formalism unconnected to reality. On the contrary, Pablo Picasso never tired of exploring representation, and the endless relationship to the motif or the model. Yet, his poet friend Guillaume Apollinaire articulated the idea of a "pure painting" based on the cubist experiments of the artist: 'What differentiates Cubism from the traditional way of painting is that it is not an art of imitation, but an art of conception that aspires to creation.[...] It will be pure painting, just as music is pure literature.'[1]

Picasso's gallerist, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, drew this same parallel with poetry and music, citing Paul Cézanne and Stéphane Mallarmé as the founders of Cubism and "pure form" as the Kantian, aesthetic horizon. Clement Greenberg, who advocated American abstract expressionism, believed that cubism had to lead to abstraction along the trajectories of Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee and Joan Miró. But as the founder of Cubism, Pablo Picasso, whose work inspired a plethora of the most prominent figures in abstract art – such as Wassily Kandinsky, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, etc. – always resisted.

In this respect, this exhibition is both completely unique and fascinating. Essentially, it questions the genesis of Pablo Picasso's oeuvre and experimentations in the studio. In this way, it also lifts the veil on the close link that the artist cultivated with the principle of abstraction as part of his creative process, which is epitomised by the collections of the Musée national Picasso-Paris. Built upon several successive gifts in lieu, today our museum has since become one of the major repositories of the artist's oeuvre. With more than 5,000 artworks and 200,000 archival documents, our collection forms one of the most extensive testimonies of Pablo Picasso's oeuvre, both in terms of periods and techniques. Built upon the artist's studio collection, the museum offers a rich and detailed reflection of Picasso's artistic life and working practices.

The first gift in lieu, which dates from 1979 and which was organised as part of the succession of Pablo Picasso's estate testifies to the desire to produce a cohesive ensemble that reflects the artist's creative process. Dominique Bozo, the museum's first director, chose the pieces in consultation with Jean Leymarie and the artist's family according to three criteria: exhaustiveness, multidisciplinarity, and respect for the ensembles. This first corpus, which is made up of works that Pablo Picasso had kept with him throughout his life, this first corpus is at the origin of the museum that opened its doors in 1985. In 1990, Jacqueline Picasso's collection made its way into the museum, followed in 1992 by the artist's own archives, thus completing an unprecedented corpus of material. The latest gift in lieu by the artist's daughter Maya Ruiz-Picasso completed and complemented this collection in 2021.

The museum's collection thus offers an unparalleled insight into Pablo Picasso's studio life. It constitutes a privileged area to discover Picasso's artistic approach, which was made up of the decomposition and recomposition of the various forms that he gleaned, transformed, and reused. Some rare pieces that are preserved by the museum and displayed in this exhibition serve as crucial reminders of the abstract radicalism achieved by the artist's visual research. They include *L'Arbre (The Tree)* (summer 1907), painted at the height of his Cézanne period, *L'Homme à la guitare (Man with a Guitar)* (autumn 1911), and *La Cuisine (The Kitchen)* (November 1948), executed just after the war, are some of these. In 1936, in a ground-breaking exhibition, Alfred Barr, the first director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, placed Cubism and Pablo Picasso at the root of abstraction in a ground-breaking exhibition. Later, Pierre Daix revisited the subject on several occasions and identified the first body of work attesting to these similarities. We should also refer to the writings of Yve-Alain Bois, who focused on the subject and presented an introduction within the framework of the 2015 international symposium "Revoir Picasso" that was organised by the Musée national Picasso-Paris. For all intents and purposes, the complex and ambiguous relationship Picasso maintained with abstraction throughout his life has never been explored in a comprehensive exhibition. Today, this exciting and inventive initiative was made possible by the desire and vision of the Director General of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Michel Draguet, whom I would like to commend, and the rich and exclusive collections of the Musée national Picasso-Paris.

This exhibition, which was made possible by an exceptional loan of artworks from the collections of the Musée national Picasso-Paris, reflects the fruitful partnership between our two institutions, the MRBAB and the MNPP. I would like to salute the close collaboration between the two curators, Michel Draguet and Joanne Snrech, conservator at the MNPP, for this event. I would also like to praise the excellent work of the teams of the two museums and Quentin Ougier and Orane Stalpers in particular, and the precious contributions of the writers of this catalogue.

Finally, I am delighted that our two European institutions have embarked on this seminal scientific and amicable partnership as part of the *Célébration Picasso 1973-2023*, which marks the fiftieth anniversary of the artist's death. In 2023, this anniversary will be commemorated worldwide in more than 50 different events devoted to this pivotal figure and pioneer of modern art.

Cécile Debray
President of the Musée national Picasso-Paris

1. Guillaume Apollinaire, "Du sujet dans la peinture moderne", *Les Soirées de Paris*, February 1912.

INTRODUCTION

Pablo Picasso has always shown a remarkable talent for presenting his life and work in the light of a constantly growing myth. Yet there are some myths that the painter did not wish to endorse. This was the case for abstraction. In the early 1910s, this ambiguous term that usually conjured up the trilogy made up of Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich who were later joined by Robert Delaunay, František Kupka, Fernand Léger, Mikhaïl Larionov and Vladimir Tatlin, conveyed a radical transformation of pictorial representation. Although Picasso's cubist experimentations (and, to a lesser extent, Georges Braque's) were at the root of the "passage of the line" of all the "pioneers of abstract art", history has left behind Kandinsky, whose approach fed from other sources[1].

Despite a manifesto text of the exhibition organised by Alfred Barr in 1936 at New York's Museum of Modern Art, *Cubism and Abstraction* enjoy a strange and paradoxical[2] relationship. And Pablo Picasso seldom emerges in the coveted position of Founder of Abstraction, insofar as the latter is defined not as a capacity to abstract plastic or signifying elements from reality, but as a systematic affirmation of a form of painting released from mimetic objectivity. Since Cubism is commonly included in the category of "realism", the supposed rupture with reality that abstraction represents thus falls under a form of the unthinkable that includes the intrusion of illusionist objects, letters, fragments of physical objects, and signs that all participate in establishing a new perception of the pictorial space. Which signals the emancipation of the painting[3]. In his *Dictionnaire Picasso*, under the entry "abstract art", Pierre Daix added another argument to the idea of a deliberate anchoring in reality. According to this expert on Picasso, the new pictorial system that the founders of Cubism developed from 1908 onward by shunning "the form and appearance of objects[4]", formed the basis of what would become abstract art. However, Picasso and Braque would always keep their distance for fear of lapsing into the decorative, an argument that Picasso himself would eventually corroborate.
Our purpose does not consist in forcing Picasso into a position he always refused to assume, i.e., that of an abstract painter or a theoretician of an abstraction erected as a system. Instead, the aim of the exhibition and of this book consists in exploring, through a collection of works, the path that, at certain moments and in particular contexts, prompted Picasso to overstep the line of abstraction by producing artworks that – in the eyes of popular opinion – were unintelligible, hermetic, or that represented a rupture with mimetic illusion. Although specialists generally shun this sort of abstraction, it might

1. Mark Roskill's text for the exhibition *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century; Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline* (New York, Guggenheim Museum, 1996) focuses on Picasso's cubism, while the catalogue for the exhibition *Aux origines de l'abstraction* 1800-1914 (Paris, Musée d'Orsay, 2003-2004), under the guise of its synaesthetic perspective, gives no space to cubism.

2. Alfred Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* [1936], Cambridge-London, The Belknap Press, 1986.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

4. Pierre Daix, *Dictionnaire Picasso*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1995, p. 47.

allow us not so much to say something but to formulate it in a different way. Our objective here does not involve a step-by-step analysis of the relationship between Picasso's œuvre and abstraction, which began in 1907 with the landscape painting *L'Arbre (The Tree)* and represents one of the first European formulations of conscious and deliberate non-figuration and culminated in his final explorations, characterised by a form of gestural criticism of action painting. While he resolutely distanced himself from abstraction, Picasso closely kept a close eye on non-figurative painting and sculpture, and openly analysed and exploited them, while simultaneously laying the foundations for new questions that other artists would adopt in his wake. We shall only partially dress this unusual cross-fertilisation here, and we shall focus on Picasso himself.

Far from the objectless, Picasso magnified a kind of sensibility which, beyond the object, refers to a vital expressive – if not expressionist – aspiration. This would certainly explain why Picasso's most overt dialogue with abstraction – notably in the two versions of *La Cuisine (The Kitchen)* in 1948 – took place at a time when abstraction was gaining a foothold in French culture and did not represent a dangerous invasion. Such was not the case in 1912-1914, or during the inter-war period. Through his unshackled imagination and creative force, Pablo Picasso laid down foundations without ever planning to take part in a system that nowadays unfolds behind a terminology that must be clarified from the outset.

Picasso and abstraction: this relationship is more a matter of analysing the œuvre than the artist's intention, forged in the inter-war period. Picasso's approach developed through texts in which Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler bore witness[5] to the experience in which he participated, and secondly, through Alfred Barr's subsequent interpretation of its historical context in the wake of his 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*.[6] Between both positions, the pivotal moment that Cubism represented became clear. From 1908 until 1914, on several occasions, Picasso's experimentations culminated in pieces on several occasions where the presence of the object seemed to have been replaced by something new, which contributed to the new autonomy of painting: the dynamics of sensation that fused form and space; the fragmentation of form and its recomposition into a hermetic architecture; the treatment of autonomous planes magnified by papier collé; the autonomy of the form that becomes a sign in the wake of primitive art… Whether lightly touched upon or further explored, these many decisive moments were handed down to the twentieth century avant-garde through the nebulous interpretation of "Cubism".

5. During the First World War, Kahnweiler was forced to give up his business as a dealer and undertook studies in philosophy, which were to form the basis of his personal analysis of Cubism. As early as 1915, the last chapter of his manuscript entitled *L'Objet de l'esthétique (The Object of Aesthetics)* laid the foundations for an analysis that he would take up a year later in *La Montée du cubisme (The Rise of Cubism)*. For Kahnweiler, who was clearly echoing Picasso's and Braque's reflections, the aspiration to decoration – as exemplified by the evolution of Monet's later paintings such as the *Water Lilies* cycle at the Orangery – constituted the point of dilution of abstraction.

6. By removing Picasso from a national perspective and using him as the focal point of a universalist modernist dynamic, Barr positioned Cubism as the foundations for a language proper to the twentieth century avant-gardes. Barr sees abstraction as more than just geometric thinking driven by an ideal of order. It is the place to assert a "psychological power" that the artist had removed from his hermetic Cubist works (*Painting in Paris from American Collection*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1930, p. 37) [cat. exp.]. In this way, he introduced a form of surrealist abstraction that he would not theorise until later and that would serve to establish a link between Picasso and Pollock.

Up until the inter-war period, Picasso said very little – if anything – about abstraction. The first mention – in 1923 – of Picasso's words – dating from before the First World War – can be attributed to Marius de Zayas, who reported that the painter stated that "from the point of view of art there are no concrete or abstract forms, but only forms which are more or less convincing lies".[7] Five years later, Tériade reported on a visit to the studio in *L'Intransigeant*. Evoking the "abstract" character of the Cubist pieces of the summer of 1910, the critic observed that the painter stiffened before saying, sententiously: 'I have a horror of so-called abstract painting…When one sticks colours next to each other and traces lines in space that don't correspond to anything, the result is decoration.'[8]

But the painter shared the essence of his reflections on abstraction with Christian Zervos. In his opinion, 'there is no abstract art. You must always start with something.', which retains the trace of an experience, albeit in a minimal form. And Picasso concludes: 'Afterwards you can remove all traces of reality. There's no danger then, anyway, because the idea of an object will have left an indelible mark.'[9] The painter's "concrete" art can only be abstract insofar as he does not follow the visual aspect of nature as it appears to him visually but anticipates it by becoming one with it. Hence, Picasso was close to what Kandinsky termed *abstraktia* in Russian, i.e., a symbolist process of decanting reality to condense its subjective significance inscribed in the sole experience of the memorised action and the pictorial gesture[10]. This is the opposite of Malevich's "objectlessness", a term that the avant-garde artist and art theorist coined to define a non-figuration – such as Mondrian's – which is intended as a form of ultra-representation of a reality tantamount to principle.

Conceived as a process of distancing oneself from the material reality by transcending the object – something that both Malevich and Mondrian sought to achieve – abstraction represented an experiment turned *against* nature for Picasso. Not to confront nature, as the Spaniard wished, but to cancel its very existence. Once returned to the order of its obviousness, enshrined in tradition and in thought through mimesis, nature is not to be evicted – indeed, no other type of abstraction expressed such a nihilistic aspiration in that era – but instead, should be confronted in the tauromachic sense, which is rather well depicted in the photographs representing the painter in his studio. Emancipation from the order of representation demanded a release of the image that permeated the fin-de-siècle. Picasso opposed the *transparency* of classical representation[11] with the *opacity* of a presence that only revealed itself *by* and *for* painting as an act. Which explains the regularly recurring condemnation of all manner of purely decorative painting in Picasso's discourse.

For Picasso, painting is a way of interiorising the universe and producing a unique form liberated from the classical opposition between subject and object. The artist could not bring himself to be abstract because he wanted to incarnate nature through his oeuvre: 'I don't work from nature; I work like nature'[12], he famously said. In Picasso's eyes, the subject of painting is nothing less than the "inner impulse" – and he also referred to "creative dynamism" – that Bergson defined[13]. But it is not expressed as an absolute imperative *per se*, concurrently unreal and inorganic, embodied in geometrical forms. Instead, it only appears to function completely when it violates the conventions inherent to traditional painting – and to any recognised style – in the most individual sense of the term.

7. Pablo Picasso cited in Marius de Zayas, "Picasso speaks" [1923] in Pablo Picasso, *Propos sur l'art*, edited by Marie-Laure Bernadac and Androula Michaël, Paris, Gallimard, 1998, p.18.

8. Picasso quoted in Tériade, "Une visite à Picasso" [1928], in *Écrits sur l'art*, Paris, Adam Biro, 1996, p. 162.

9. Picasso quoted in Christian Zervos, *Pablo Picasso*, Paris, Cahiers d'Art, 1935, p. 177 (English translation published in A. H. Barr Jr, Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art. New York, 1946). Formulated in 1935, the concept overlaps with Kandinsky's contemporary approach, when the latter equated abstraction with a form of concrete representation of experience through painting.

10. On this subject, see Kandinsky's text *Réflexions sur l'art abstrait* published in Zervos' *Cahiers d'Art* in 1935 precisely (in Vassily Kandinsky, *Correspondance avec Zervos et Kojève*, Cahiers du Musée national d'Art moderne [Hors-série/ Archives], 1992). On the notion of concrete art, see the text by Alexandre Kojève, *Les Peintures concrètes (objectives) de Kandinsky* in *ibid.*, p. 177-193.

11. Rosalind Krauss situated the acme of this rejection of transparency in the invention of the relief. R. Krauss, *Passages : une histoire de la sculpture de Rodin à Smithson*, Paris, Macula, 1997, p. 53-56.

12. Picasso quoted in Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Vivre avec Picasso* [1964], Paris, 10/18, 2006, p. 253.

For Picasso, abstraction, as an inner necessity, should thus be situated in the tauromachic perspective that the painter methodically explored in the orbit of surrealism and its reinterpretation of classical themes brought back to their Mediterranean roots. Abstraction is a combat with the unconscious, a refusal to surrender oneself without resistance to its uncontrollable forces and a desire to violate the visible world with the aim of expressing the sensitive singularity of the creator…

While Picasso rejected abstraction as a system, he unswervingly used it experimentally. For him, abstraction was more than a dogma. It constituted a position that governed – in his own words – the 'struggle between [his] interior life and the exterior world as it exists for most people'[14]. Essentially, abstraction – in the sense that he practised it more than he meant it – could not be systematic since it reflected an inner tension. Abstraction is always the expression of an experience that refrains from any conceptual fixation. It bears witness to an individuality that was created as the artwork took shape and whose meaning is directly connected to the place that witnessed its articulation: the studio.

True to himself and to his personality, Picasso devised a personal approach that rejected the prevailing debates of the era. Be it the condemnation of an abstraction deemed bourgeois by the communist authorities or the quarrel between realisms. In his eyes, abstraction was the fruit of an individual experience whose limits arise from a sum of negations which, when composed in thought, affirmed the reign of the individual over conventions. These negations ranged from the negation of the understood meaning, the order of reason, the supremacy of the visible, the mimetic tradition, etc. In his eyes, abstraction was "hermetic" insofar that it obeyed a baring of oneself in opposition to social, cultural, and even political codes of representation. Reverting to the "indelible mark" left by all objects, the painter achieved this ultimate goal, which would merge with that other essential form that represent for André Breton 'a few words fallen from the "mouth of shadows".'[15]

Michel Draguet
Director General of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts
of Belgium and co-curator of the exhibition

13. On the impact of Bergson's thought on Cubism, see Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson. Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993.

14. Picasso quoted in F. Gilot and C. Lake, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

15. André Breton, *Les Pas perdus*, [1924], in *Œuvres complètes I*, Paris, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1988, p. 275.

PICASSO AT THE PERIL OF ABSTRACTION

Michel Draguet

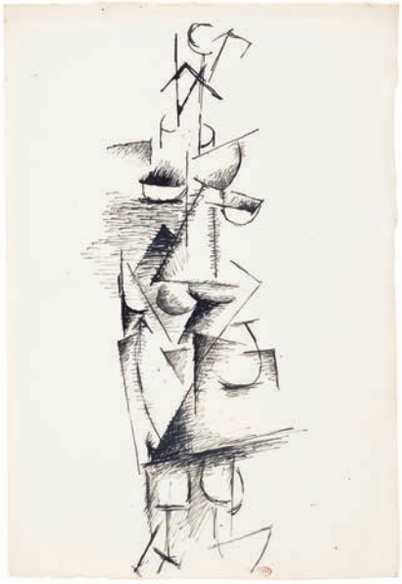

Fig. 1
Pablo Picasso, *Standing Female Nude,*
Summer 1910
Pen drawing, Indian ink, green paper,
31.6 × 21.5 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris,
Pablo Picasso Gift in Lieu, 1979, inv. MP645

The experiment of abstraction, which was traumatising after the summer of 1910, consistently recurs in Picasso's oeuvre with a regularity that is all the more remarkable in that the painter will never cease to stigmatise what, in his eyes, is an aberration. By telling Tériade that abstraction was a mistake and a gratuitous expression[1], the painter took aim at a system that was doomed to futile decoration. And yet, the experiments found in his work also appeal to him when others practise them and reveal new artistic possibilities.

In 1910, Picasso's initial rejection of abstraction as a system resulted from a series of experiments which always led to such an "amplification" of the representation that the preservation of the object appeared problematic. Sometimes even in the form of the trace that the painter would later regard as a necessity for every image [fig. 1]. During the period between *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and the First World War, three fundamental stages seemed to materialise in the development of a form of abstraction: immediately after the production of the large painting of 1907, with the opening up of the figure to the space around it to assert the unity of the pictorial surface; in the summer of 1910, with the disintegration of the presence of the object in favour of an orthogonal grid structured by shadow-light contrast; and in 1912-1913, in the wake of the upstream hermeticism employed, with the reduction of the object to the bare presence of a sign in tension with forms liberated from any representational obligation. Without yielding to geometric arbitrariness, planes of pure colour will lead to the emergence of collages, *papiers collés* et other assemblages that will set free an imagination that sublimates sensitive reality.

In this sense, it makes little sense to isolate Cubism from surrealism. The latter owes a great debt to the mental revolution incarnated by the invention of collage. In its very foundations, cubism reflects a desire to transcend the limitations of reality considered as a given, that is to say, as an experiment conditioned by the truth assigned to the subject as it is seen globally and uniformly by the human eye. For Picasso, the very notion of the sign that the art critics have placed at the very heart of the Cubist adventure never achieves the obviousness proper to the automatic translation of the signifier into the signified. While the principle of the sign remains evident, it is definitely in its graphic immediacy. This immediacy is not synonymous with a meaning that is simultaneous thereto. It only provides a possibility of legibility that is enshrined in a space solely intended for visibility.

Relinquishing the limpidity of a depiction understood as the representation of a pre-existing text constitutes a major undertaking on the part of Picasso in the silence of his studio. The artist is intent on asserting the opacity of this depiction. But we must be clear about the term. The opacity sought is defined as a necessity to make the form meaningful in itself: through its line, its materiality, its facture, and the texture of its planes and surfaces. The aim is to convey a content that is no longer transposed from legible to visible, but that depends on the actual conditions of its visibility.

Femme aux mains jointes [Woman with Clasped Hands]

Cat. 1
PABLO PICASSO
Femme aux mains jointes (étude pour "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon") (Woman with Clapsed Hands [study for "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon"])
Paris, Spring 1907
Oil on canvas, 90.5 × 71.5 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris,
Pablo Picasso Gift in Lieu, 1979, inv. MP16

This painting is part of the vast corpus of preparatory studies for *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (June-July 1907, Museum of Modern Art, New York, inv. 333.1939) which are preserved at the Musée national Picasso in Paris. Executed in the spring of 1907, *Femme aux mains jointes* (Woman with clasped hands) is not one of the five main characters featuring in the final work, but still illustrates Pablo Picasso's work on the archaisation and petrification of forms during this period. The monolithic character of the figure is reminiscent of the Greek *kouroi* that Picasso admired in the Louvre and recalls the stiffness of the wooden figures that he carved during his summer trip to Gósol in 1906. The use of the direct carving technique clearly reflects an abandonment of conventional figuration, which Picasso would extend to his painting the following year. The of chalky colours and thick, raw paint emphasise the sculptural aspect of the model, imbuing the picture with an ancestral beauty. This frontal, beautifully simple *Demoiselle* captivates with her intense presence and the incantatory force that emanates from her, on par with extra-Western fetishes. This new aura, this "magical" dimension, struck Picasso when he saw the artworks at the Trocadero a few months later. Here, the unearthliness of the figure is reinforced by its closed eye and empty pupil, a formula borrowed from Paul Cézanne and re-discovered in the hollow-eyed masks from other parts of the world. Picasso, Henri Matisse, Amedeo Modigliani, and André Derain were some of the artists who revisited this archetypal human figure motif. Like an assertion of a return to an ancient aesthetic, the mask transforms the model into an intercessor, suggesting a hidden presence. The several studies of *Femmes aux bras levés* visible in the background, as though they were drawn on the walls of a painted cave, further reinforce the ghostlike character of the painting. Between painting and sculpture, this work of art shows the first signs of a representation of the invisible, the cornerstone of the emergence of pictorial abstraction. **JPz**

Cat. 2
PABLO PICASSO
Petit Nu de dos aux bras levés (étude pour "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon")
(Small Nude from the Rear, with Raised Arms [study for "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon"])
Paris, May 1907
Oil on wood panel, 19.1 × 11.5 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris, Pablo Picasso Gift in Lieu, 1979, inv. MP11

Cat. 3
Abron fertility statuette
Ivory Coast, second half of the 20th century
Wood, height: 19 cm
Braine-le-Comte, Richard Dams collection

L'Arbre
[The Tree]

Cat. 11
PABLO PICASSO
L'Arbre (The Tree)
Paris, Summer 1907
Oil on canvas, 94 × 93.7 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris,
Pablo Picasso Gift in Lieu,
1979, inv. MP21

When Pierre Daix asked Pablo Picasso about the naturalistic nature of a series of paintings executed in the spring of 1907, he replied: "I hadn't used a model since I was in Gósol. And it was precisely during this period that I was working outside of any form of model. I was searching for something completely different..."[1] It would seem that, in the height of the summer of 1907, Picasso also painted *L'Arbre* in his studio. The motif of the tree can thus be found in several other studies executed by the artist during the same period, including *Paysage lié aux "Moissoneurs" : arbres* (cat. 10), which is linked with another piece by the artist. By combining the tree with its surroundings and by simplifying its shapes into a series of curves, the young Picasso reinterpreted the principles of Paul Cézanne's painting. Although the Provençal painter died in October 1906, just under a year before this piece was completed, he was still very topical at the time. In June 1907, Picasso went to the Bernheim-Jeune gallery to see an exhibition of Cézanne's watercolours, while the 5th edition of the Salon d'Automne devoted a major retrospective to Cézanne. The painter's belief to "treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone"[2] finds a particularly radical continuation in this piece, which was produced several years before Vassily Kandinsky's first abstract study (*Untitled*, 1913; Pompidou Centre, Musée national d'Art moderne, Paris, AM 1976-863). In fact, this is what prompted Pierre Daix to claim that Kandinsky's painting was the first abstract work in the history of modern art. [3] And yet, *L'Arbre* remained hidden for a long time in the privacy of the painter's studio. It took almost sixty years for this painting to reach the public for the first time in a retrospective exhibition held at the Petit Palais in Paris in 1966. Made at a time when abstract art was not yet fully recognised in the history of modern art, the radical nature of *L'Arbre* also reflects the experimental approach of Picasso's art. **OS**

1. Pierre Daix, 'There is no African art in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Paris, October 1970, p. 267.

2. Paul Cézanne confided as much to Émile Bernard in a letter dated 15 April 1904. See: Émile Bernard, *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne et lettres*, Paris, La Rénovation esthétique, 1921, p. 72.

3. Pierre Daix, *Le Nouveau Dictionnaire Picasso*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 2012, p. 266-267.

1907

20 March – 30 April: 23rd Salon des Indépendants. André Derain – whom Picasso met the previous year – displays *Les Baigneuses (The Bathers)* while Henri Matisse shows the *Nu bleu (souvenir de Biskra)*. In his review of the exhibition published in *Gil Blas*, Louis Vauxcelles belittled Derain's painting as 'barbaric simplifications', condemning a 'movement I consider dangerous' led by two 'disdainful priests, Mr Derain and Mr Matisse', whose 'dogma amounts to a wavering schematicism that proscribes model and volumes in the list of I-don't-know-what graphic abstraction.'

Spring: Picasso works on his painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* for which he executes many preliminary studies. These studies illustrate his research into the geometric synthesis of the body and the conditions for fusing a figure with the space.

Summer: Picasso produces a series of paintings on the theme of foliage, including *The Tree* (cat. 11), which illustrates his reflections on pictorial rhythm and the synthesis of forms.

1-22 October: 5th Salon d'automne. A major retrospective is dedicated to Paul Cézanne, who died the year before. During this exhibition, his correspondence with Émile Bernard is made public. In a letter dated 15 April 1904, Cézanne wrote: 'May I repeat what I told you here: treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything in proper perspective'.

Late November – early December: Georges Braque visits Picasso's Bateau-Lavoir studio with Guillaume Apollinaire. He sees *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and a preliminary version of *Three Women*. This episode marks the beginning of the dialogue between the two artists, and Braque begins his *Grand nu (Large Nude)* in reaction to the pictures he has seen in Picasso's studio.

1908

1 October – 8 November: 6th Salon d'automne. František Kupka exhibits *La Gamme jaune* (1907). In an article in the newspaper Mercure de France dated 1 November, the art critic Charles Morice evokes the "danger of abstraction" in view of the proliferation of Fauvist paintings at the Salon d'Automne.

9-28 November: Braque's first solo exhibition, held at Galerie Kahnweiler, features twenty-seven recent paintings, landscapes, and still lifes. In *Gil Blas*, Louis Vauxcelles writes that Braque 'despises form and reduces everything – places, shapes and houses – to geometric diagrams, to cubes' (14 November). Over the following winter, Braque and Picasso enjoy increasingly frequent exchanges and meet every day to discuss their work.

1909

June – early September: Picasso and his lover Fernande Olivier stay in Horta de Sant Joan (Spain). That autumn, Picasso produces the plaster casts of *Tête de femme (Fernande) (Head of a Woman, (Fernande))* (cat. 32), whose volume is split into facets and geometric volumes. This is considered to be the first Cubist sculpture.

Wassily Kandinsky undertakes his series of "improvisations". Using memory and imagination as the starting points for his compositions, the artist breaks free from the natural referential. That same year, Kandinsky begins writing *The Spiritual in Art*, which he publishes in December 1911.

1910

End of June – early September: Picasso stays in Cadaqués, Spain. In his paintings from this period, such as *Guitar Player* (cat. 41), the titles alone ensure that the reference to reality is maintained. After returning from this stay, frustrated, he reinstated signals allowing the identification of the distinct elements of the composition: this marked the start of analytical cubism.

79. Anonymous countertype of an anonymous print featuring Pablo Picasso seated on a sofa with a cat in his hands, in the studio at 11 Boulevard de Clichy, Paris, December 1910. Gelatin silver print, 23.2 × 17.1 cm. Musée national Picasso-Paris, inv. MPPH15330

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