

A UNIQUE COLLECTION

Pablo Picasso's personal collection is an extraordinary one. Comprising more than 100 works, it includes some 40 paintings by Georges Braque, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Henri Rousseau, among others. Amassed over a lifetime, together these works of art paint in their own way a revealing portrait of the artist who collected them.

Moreover, the character of this collection is unique. Picasso wasn't driven by the traditional collector's overwhelming desire to acquire and, importantly, he did not deliberately set out to create a collection. These art works were introduced into the clutter of his successive studios, left on the floor, framed or unframed, in the midst of his own paintings or hung on the wall, haphazardly and without intention to display them. The collection can be thought of as forming part of Picasso's studio resources.

'Friends of mine' is how Picasso referred to his collection. As he remarked one day to his art dealer Kahnweiler:

After all, why shouldn't one inherit from one's friends? What is a painter in the end? A collector who creates a collection by making for himself the paintings that he likes by others.

Creation was always more important than possession for Picasso. Through his collection, he opened a direct creative conversation with other artists, past or present. The exchange was intimate, lively and non-reverential.

'For me, there is no past or present in art', Picasso stated. 'If a work of art can't live in the present, it's futile to spend time on it.' His remark is reminiscent of Baudelaire's definition of modernity formulated in 1863: 'Modernity is transitory, fugitive and contingent; it is half of art of which the other half is eternal and immutable. Every old master experienced a form of modernity'. Picasso was attuned to modernity in ways that are more or less evident. On the other hand, this collection underlines a classical dimension in Picasso's art. Far from the image of the modern artist making a clean break with past and present – persistent though mistaken – Picasso appears here to be quite consciously climbing onto the shoulders of giants.

Jean Cocteau observed in 1923:

Here then is a Spaniard conversant with the oldest French recipes (Chardin, Poussin, Le Nain and Corot) and who can cast a sorcerer's spell. He's able to make objects and faces follow him wherever he wants them to go. A black eye devours them and, between the eye through which they enter and the hand through which they emerge, they undergo a unique form of digestion.

Picasso expressed desire to donate this collection to the French State was conditional on it remaining intact. Upon his death, Picasso's heirs respected his wishes. The musée national Picasso in Paris is home to this donation, expanded subsequently with the addition of other works from Picasso's heirs donated in payment of death duties due on their inheritance.

MASTERS OF REALITY

One wouldn't initially expect to find works by old masters such as Louis Le Nain (1593–1648), Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779) and Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875) in the collection of a modern artist like Picasso, as they seem to belong to another age. Yet, for Picasso, these works are very much alive: neither coldly academic nor simply illusionistic, they are the palpable and unaffected strivings of committed artists, and because of this, in a sense, they are also expressions of *pure* painting. The absence of artifice or virtuosity imbues them with a candour sometimes tinged with awkwardness. Picasso commented about the Le Nain brothers:

They certainly had ideas about composition but they didn't follow them through to the end. They lost sight of them along the way. Perhaps it is that very clumsiness that gives them their charm.

He could equally have been speaking of Georges de La Tour, Francisco de Zubarán and even Velázquez.

Picasso's modernity then perfectly accommodates the legacy of the old masters, displaying neither servile allegiance nor obligatory radical departure. As Jean Cocteau noted in 1919:

Artists like Derain, Picasso and Braque don't think about being modern and their audacity greatly bothers the *nouveaux riches* who don't feel that a Derain nymph, a Picasso pipe or a Braque fruit bowl are as modern as a typewriter.

Above the fray, Picasso stated, 'From the point of view of art, there are no concrete or abstract forms, only forms that are more or less convincing deceptions'. To be anchored in the real does not rule out the greatest possible freedom.

In fact, the works by Le Nain, Chardin or Corot each in their own way attest to an open and inventive contact with reality to which Picasso remained attached: 'I have never been outside of the real. I was always in the heart of the real'. Guitars, pipes, tables, bottles are his universe in the most abstract phase of Cubism, indeed especially at this time. So it is quite natural that his collection should include a Gustave Courbet (1819–77), that emblematic painter of nineteenth-century Realism; a Balthus (1908–2001), a painter strongly associated with figuration*; and two works by Joan Miró (1893–1983), worthy of the old masters in the meticulous attention with which they have been painted.

* The work by Balthus is not included in the exhibition.

MODERN MASTERS

This section features works that embody the origins of the modernist movement, by artists who precede Picasso by one or two generations. There are no impressionists amongst them, but rather painters – Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat, Edouard Vuillard – who sought to dissociate themselves from the movement here conspicuous by its absence. This absence is telling. Picasso belonged to a generation of artists who rejected Impressionism, and its subsequent permutations, sharing Apollinaire's sentiments when the latter stated in 1908 that, 'It is time for an art that is nobler, more measured, better ordered and more cultivated'.

Already in 1888, Gauguin had heralded the advent of Synthetism (characterised by clearly outlined areas of flat, pure colour), a style adapted by the Nabis and here exemplified by Vuillard's *La berceuse: Marie Roussel au lit* (*The lullaby: Marie Roussel in bed*). At the same time, Gauguin was being drawn to the charms of the primitive: 'I love Brittany and find there the wild and primitive', he enthused. 'When my wooden clogs resonate on that granite ground, I hear the muted, matte and powerful sound I'm looking for in painting'. This austerity and force were diametrically opposed to the spontaneous daubs of the impressionist brushstroke. Seurat also shared this concern for pictorial order. In 1913, Apollinaire admired his technique which 'imparted order to the innovations of Impressionism'.

Among his elders, Picasso admired Vincent Van Gogh (who died in 1890), emblematic of the figure of the unhappy genius (with which Picasso identified during his first years in Paris). Van Gogh's impassioned transpositions of reality presented a contrast to the serene imagery of the impressionists. While there are no works by Van Gogh here, Kees Van Dongen's *La vigne* (*The vines*) fills this gap with its vigorous, expressionist presence. As for Degas, his virtuosic line allows itself expressive distortions and his subjects emerge directly from the brothel to bring to light a raw, modern reality. What every one of these artists has in common is the renunciation of pictorial illusionism in favour of the 'subjectively organised vision' advocated and sought by Picasso.

CÉZANNE AND RENOIR: POLES OF MODERN ART

Although there are no impressionist works in Picasso's personal collection, Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) are well represented and, in many ways, can be considered 'dissidents' of Impressionism.

At the time of Cézanne's death in 1906 Picasso became interested in his approach, which rejected too great a concern with imitation or too immediate a vision. With his sense of volume and the importance he placed on geometric structure, Cézanne opened the way for new formal developments, and the cubists – Picasso and Braque in particular – took this to its logical conclusion, inventing a new visual language where primacy is given to relationships of shape leading to abstraction. Picasso only eventually acquired work by Cézanne in the 1930s and 1950s, showing his strong and long-lasting attraction; he even declared himself 'the grandson of Cézanne'.

Renoir's painting, which Picasso had initially dismissed – 'We were twenty-five years old, Renoir was at his height and we had to do something else' – became a model for him towards the end of the 1910s. In 1919, Picasso even undertook a portrait of the aged man. Renoir brought to life a classical vein in art free of dry formalism. His robust and sensual nudes rose up like a rampart against the abstract leanings of the most radical avant-garde artists of the era. Matisse thus stated in 1918, 'Renoir's work, after that of Cézanne, whose great influence on artists was felt first, saves us from the dryness of pure abstraction'. In reviving the art of Renoir, Picasso, the incontestable herald of modern art, once again shows his singular vision and independence.

Each of them in their own manner – Renoir with his fleshy nudes and Cézanne with his landscapes and solidly constructed figures – celebrated the order and authority of form. In the face of the late impressionist's easy solutions and also the violent transformations of reality by the most intransigent modern artists – Francis Picabia (1879–1953) and Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) among others – they appear as the doyens of a certain 'modern classicism' that came into its own in the 1920s. This can be seen most emblematically in the many *Bathers* and other solid female figures that Picasso painted during this period.

THE PRIMITIVE IN ART

The extent to which the impressionist movement, 40 years after its inception, produced its own academicism – which swept through turn-of-the-century studios like ‘late St John’s fires’ (in writer Charles Morice’s words of 1905) – is now little recognised. A host of artists whose names are largely forgotten exploited these reliable recipes ‘to whip together tones and froth up nuances’, as Marius-Ary Leblond wrote in 1904.

For those resisting these routine and hackneyed formulas it was necessary to make oneself anew and to return to the origins of art, considered more authentic and pure. Already in the eighteenth century at the time of the Enlightenment, a taste for Gothic art – together with that for Chinoiserie and Turkish or ‘Oriental’ objects – offered some freedom from what was considered too regulated and constraining within classical values. This marks the inception of an interest in the early ‘primitive’ painters, which developed further in the nineteenth century (with the ‘Barbus’ around 1800 in David’s studio in Paris, the German Nazareans in Rome from 1809, and the British Pre-Raphaelites in 1848), and which took a more radical turn during the twentieth century. Artists drew from many and varied sources – the art of Gauguin and his taste for the sauvage, Roman art, African art (brought to the attention of young painters around 1905 by André Derain and Henri Matisse), and the painting of Douanier Rousseau (1844–1910). Critic Adolphe Basler emphasised the influence of the latter in 1926:

The cult of Rousseau, which took root at the beginning of this century, signalled a reaction against all the mannerisms, all the lies, all the facetiousness and all the mechanical formulas of a style of painting that was as empty as it was artificial.

Picasso became a great collector of Rousseau and of African and Oceanic art – he came to own more than 100 ‘black’ sculptures, of which ten are shown here. They open the way, in the words of Derain, to ‘a new intelligence of forms’, that is, to an art liberated from convention. The works collected together in this section, each in their own way, testify to this concern for simplification and authenticity, which is also fundamental to Picasso and modern art.

ADMIRATION AND RIVALRY

At the time when Picasso arrived on the Parisian art scene, Henri Matisse (1869–1954) was at the height of his celebrity in advanced artistic circles. Respected as a master and haloed by prestigious associations, ‘the king of the Fauves’ (André Salmon’s phrase) allowed himself extraordinary formal and chromatic liberties. Picasso, for his part, as the rising star of his generation was not excluded from consideration, but he did not yet enjoy the same recognition as the older artist.

Their meeting in 1906 marks the beginning of a relationship based at once on reciprocal admiration and on rivalry. Writer and collector Gertrude Stein – at whose residence could frequently be found both Matisse and Picasso – would later state: ‘The two men each showed great enthusiasm for the other, without actually liking each other much’. Similar in innovation but also profoundly individual, they admired each other silently, while also being influenced by the artistic climate of the period. As Matisse reflected in 1952:

It was a time of new achievements. Fauvism, the exaltation of colour; Cubism’s legacy of precision in drawing; visits to the Louvre and exotic influences channelled through the ethnographic museum at the old Trocadéro; all of these shaped the landscape in which we lived, through which we travelled and from which we all emerged.

But, if each of them kept an eye on the other’s advances in a form of emulation that pushed them towards radical simplification, they never actually copied each other. The stakes were rather invention itself, invention without end, as Picasso underlined in 1945: ‘A painter’s studio must be a laboratory. It is not about aping but about invention. Painting is done in the mind’.

What Picasso particularly admired in Matisse’s work was his exceptional understanding of colour and decoration. An echo of this can be seen, for example, in Picasso’s *La Villa Chêne-Roc* 1931. His seductive *Nu dans un jardin* 1934, with its sinuous lines, seems to confirm the younger painter’s statement after the death of his respected rival: ‘Matisse bequeathed me his odalisques’. In fact, from the time of the Second World War, the two men became closer. Their rivalry diminished over the years, and the increasing exchange of works testified to their friendship in advance of their spoken acknowledgment. ‘No-one has ever looked at Matisse’s painting as closely as I have’, Picasso would later confide.

The exhibition ends with Picasso’s *Le Vieil homme assis* 1970–71, a disguised self-portrait of which the brilliant colours speak in memory of Matisse, and for which the pose is drawn from the photograph that Picasso had used to make his drawing of Renoir 50 years earlier. Through this dual tribute to disappeared masters, the greatest living painter gave substance to the long line of predecessors to whom he owed so much and from whom he hoped that his successors would be able to draw their own lessons. Before his death, he expressed his wish that his collection be donated to the French state for the benefit of ‘young painters’.

SURREALISM

It was poet Guillaume Apollinaire who first coined the word 'surrealist' to describe his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (*The Breasts of Tiresias*) 1917. 'I make no claim to having founded a school, but rather first and foremost to having protested against the *trompe l'oeil* theatre, so prevalent in today's theatrical arts', he declared, adding that he wanted to leave behind the 'familiar conventionality that in *trompe l'oeil* theatre accompanies naturalism'. Picasso had also already seen himself for a number of years as expressing a less ordinary, more poetic, reality. 'I'm interested in a deeper level of resemblance, more real than reality, which reaches the level of the surreal.' Cocteau expressed this in other words:

His still lifes seem, at first, as far from the model as clowns are from our dress and language – but, if one looks carefully, the truth appears, strikingly and unexpectedly, like another level of *trompe l'oeil*.

The 'school' that Apollinaire denied founding was finally put in place at the beginning of the 1920s by writer André Breton, who even formulated its doctrine in the form of the *Manifeste du Surréalisme* (*Surrealist Manifesto*) 1924. Picasso participated in the surrealist painters' first exhibition at the Galerie Pierre in 1925 alongside Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico, Joan Miró, Hans Arp and Paul Klee. His limitless inventiveness seemed at that time to be grafted onto an unbridled realm of the imagination: 'I believe that at the origin of all painting one finds a subjectively organised vision or else, in the vein of Rimbaud, flashes of insight', Picasso said in 1926. His words echo those of Breton advocating 'the dictates of the thought' and defining Surrealism as 'a means of freeing the mind'. Picasso nevertheless refused any form of regimentation. By not affiliating with the movement, he retained his freedom while also not diminishing the high regard in which the surrealists held him. He remained for them, as Victor Brauner put it in 1953, 'a great initiator'.

FRIENDSHIP

From his youth onwards, Picasso attracted the admiration of his classmates and colleagues, who recognised in him an artist promised the most extraordinary future. In Barcelona he associated with numerous artists, forming a boisterous group of friends (Angel Fernández de Soto, Manolo (Manuel Hugué), Carles Casagemas, Jaume Sabartés, Ramon and Cinto Reventos, Ricard Canals and Manuel Pallarés, among others). In the enthusiasm of those years, the group often exchanged drawings as markers of friendship and esteem.

From his first years in Paris, Picasso similarly kept works on paper given to him by his new friends, like the poet Max Jacob (with whom he shared lodgings for a while), the painter André Derain (who was very close to Picasso from late 1906), the writer André Salmon (a privileged witness to the creation of *Les Femmes d'Alger* 1907) and also notably Guillaume Apollinaire. These portraits of Picasso by his friends, displaying various degrees of proficiency, testify to the eminent place he held within Montmartre artistic circles. Much later, the British artist and critic Roland Penrose (husband of American photographer Lee Miller), or the American painter Mark Tobey, would similarly mark their admiration for the master through gifts of collages in the first case and, in the latter case, gifts of prints.

Picasso, who kept everything, also preserved a series of extraordinary caricatures by Jean Cocteau made in the course of their February 1917 stay in Rome (during which they created the sets and costumes for the Ballets Russes production of *Parades*), which have rarely been seen since that time.