PICASSO'S *TÊTE DE FEMME* AND THE BETOGRAVE SCULPTURES

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The Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection in Dallas contains over three hundred works of modern and contemporary sculpture, including seven by Picasso, one of which is the monumental concrete-and-gravel *Tête de femme* *(fig. 1* ; Spies 493A). Raymond Nasher purchased the work in 2001, and it has been on display in the garden of the Nasher Sculpture Center since the museum opened in 2003. The origins of the Nasher's sculpture lie in a visit made to Picasso in January 1957 by the Norwegian artist Carl Nesjar, who came to the South of France to ask Picasso to make a lithograph for the Aktuell Kunst society, started by the Workers' Party of Norway to offer prints by subscription at reasonable prices. Introduced to Nesjar through a mutual acquaintance, the artist Eugène Fidler, and appreciating the democratic impulse behind the concept, Picasso readily agreed. Their conversation took an unexpected turn as Fidler encouraged Nesjar to show Picasso photographs of the new government building in Oslo with wall engravings that Nesjar had executed in Betograve, a new artistic process developed by the building's architect, Erling Viksjø, and the engineer Sverre Jystad.[1]

In Betograve, forms packed tightly with gravel are filled with concrete ; upon drying, the concrete surface can be sandblasted to reveal the underlying aggregate. The artistic possibilities were considerable, as the sandblasting could range from large areas to narrow lines. Picasso was intrigued, and on Nesjar's next visit, Picasso agreed to allow him to use the Betograve technique to make monumental engraved drawings based on his work on walls of the Oslo government building. Picasso would make four drawings for the project, and gave Nesjar permission to base another wall on figures from his 1946 painting *Triptych*. Picasso's enthusiastic response led Nesjar to make another proposal : to use the Betograve technique to create a large sculpture by Picasso. If the results failed to satisfy the artist, it was agreed that the sculpture would be destroyed.

The outcome was the three-meter-high *Tête de femme*, now in the Nasher collection. Nesjar's photographs of it *(fig. 2)* so pleased Picasso that the sculpture became the first of more than a dozen monumental Betograve sculptures by Picasso made in collaboration with Nesjar.[2] *Tête de femme*'s experimental status as the first sculpture in the Betograve technique sets it apart somewhat from the collaborations that would follow.[3] Nesjar's letters to Picasso, held in the Musée Picasso's archive, show the surprising speed with which the two men developed a working relationship and friendship after their introduction in January 1957. Three months later Nesjar wrote of his plans to return to France to continue their lithography project.[4] His visit to Picasso at La Californie in the summer proved momentous : not only would Nesjar secure drawings for the Aktuell Kunst lithograph as well as the Oslo government building wall engravings, but he would also begin to talk seriously with Picasso about the possibility of using the Betograve technique to make a monumental sculpture.

That their engagement expanded so profoundly turned on two important factors. The first of these was a change in Picasso's work since he and Nesjar first met at the beginning of the year. At the time of their introduction in the winter, Picasso was drawing and painting various subjects, including portraits of his

companion Jacqueline Roque, *corrida* scenes, and fantastic heads and figures. By the time Nesjar returned in late June, Picasso had returned to making sculpture, with a small group of planar sculptures and a number of related paintings based on the motif of the head of a woman. From this body of work would come *Tête de femme à la chevelure noire frisée,* [5] the painting selected as the source of the Aktuell Kunst lithograph. Nesjar would take a drawing based on this painting to the printer Fernand Mourlot in Paris after leaving the South of France, and a photograph of Nesjar and Picasso with the drawing subsequently circulated in the Norwegian press as news of Picasso's involvement in the government building project spread.[6]

Lately revived in depictions of Roque, the motif of a woman's head poised atop a long, slender neck was a subject with an extensive history in the artist's oeuvre.[7] Predecessors include the 1913 charcoal *Personnage (Figure)* of 1913; the brass-and-iron *Tête (Head)*, 1928; 1943's *Buste de femme*, made from wire, string, and pencil on cardboard; and *La Femme à la clé (Woman with a Key)*, 1954 – 57, constructed from fired clay and a real key, then cast in bronze. The last of these, with its elongated, tubular neck and life-size scale, may have particularly prompted Picasso to undertake a further exploration of the motif.

In the spring and summer of 1957, Picasso made five sculptures featuring a woman's head atop a long slender pole *(figs. 3 and 4)*.[8] Rather than being folded, as in the heads inspired by Sylvette David that preceded them, or punctuated with cut-out plays of positive and negative space, as in the sheet-metal sculptures that would follow, the 1957 heads feature discrete planes slotted into place atop a vertical cylinder — or, in the case of *Tête de femme* (Spies 495), one of Joseph-Marius Tiola's angular metal tubes. Spurred by Picasso's portraits of Roque, the sculptures in turn fed the artist's explorations of the motif in painting.[9]

The second factor steering Nesjar's summer conversations with Picasso toward discussion of monumental Betograve sculptures was photography. In Nesjar's letter of June 28, 1957, he mentions a conversation with Picasso of the day before and makes plans to visit the next day: Nesjar's visits with Picasso thus coincided exactly with David Douglas Duncan's photography sessions in Picasso's studio, documenting, among other things, Picasso's engagement with the two planar sculptures that would soon become the dual sources of the Betograve *Tête de femme*: a steel *Tête de femme* also now in the Nasher Collection, and the lone wooden version of the five heads, now in the Musée Picasso.[10] Several of Duncan's photos show Picasso painting the Nasher's steel *Tête de femme*; as the other heads are visible in his photographs of the studio from this visit, it seems likely that this was the last of the group of five, and Picasso's last sheet-metal sculpture until he took up the process again with Lionel Prejger some three years later.

The likely coinciding of Duncan's and Nesjar's visits introduces another reason for the selection of these heads as models for the first Betograve sculpture. As other scholars have noted, their kinship with Picasso's previous work includes their relation to compositions such as the 1928 *Head* (mentioned above) that are in turn associated with Picasso's work on the *Apollinaire*

monument, the artist's years-long attempt to create a large public sculpture. A 1929 painting[11] merges a ferocious head with a gray monolith, with tiny figures beneath creating an impression of enormous scale. The parallels with such works heighten in the context of what are perhaps the best-known photographs from Duncan's session, namely Picasso's creation of a mise-en-scène for the Musée Picasso's pole sculpture, with cut-out figures, a feather-duster palm tree, and a sketched backdrop on a blank canvas behind, transforming the sculpture into a veritable maquette for an enlarged, monumental piece.[12]

Photography was also an important part of Nesjar's work — he used it extensively for documentation of the Betograve projects, and his correspondence with Picasso includes frequent mentions of photographs enclosed with his letters.[13] Although Duncan does not mention Nesjar in his accounts, the photographer's shots of Picasso's studio make it possible to establish Nesjar's concurrent presence.[14] Several photographs taken by Nesjar, usually dated to 1964 or 1965, show Picasso at La Californie, bare-chested and sporting a distinctively patterned pair of shorts or swimming trunks. Picasso wears them in the photograph with Nesjar and the Aktuell Kunst drawing, and in photos taken in the studio that show Picasso alongside, or gazing at, various pole sculptures; in one, Picasso poses with the Nasher's steel head, then still unfinished. The sculpture is surrounded by the small cut-out figures from the mise-en-scène with Duncan, and the lightly sketched backdrop on the blank canvas is still visible behind him.[15]

Did Picasso's exchanges with Nesjar about Betograve and the architectural project in Oslo spur his playful fantasies before Duncan's camera? Or did Picasso's ongoing immersion in the "Tête de femme" motif during the spring and summer of 1957 revive thoughts of monumental sculpture? However the idea emerged, less than three weeks later, Nesjar was writing to Picasso from Norway, "Il serait très interessant de faire une sculpture en béton d'après une de vos sculptures en fer…. Nous avons parlé de cinq à six metres environ. Il s'agirait de trouver une dimension qui s'harmonise avec celle de l'être humain. (Voyez photo, sculpture no. 2.)" [16] He proposes that on his return to France in the fall to bring Picasso a proof of the lithograph from Paris to approve, he will make more photos of this sculpture he and Picasso have chosen, as well as drawings of it for the enlargement. In late August, however, he explains that an experiment in already underway: "Actuellement, nous sommes en train de faire le coffrage d'une 'sculpture épreuve'en demi-taille (3 mètres d'hauteur environ) d'après les photos que j'ai fait chez vous." [17]

In the garden of the architect Viksjø's home outside Larvik and perhaps at his urging, Nesjar took advantage of the milder weather before winter's onset to proceed, using the photos of Picasso pole sculptures that he made during his previous visit as points of reference. He built wooden frameworks to contain the gravel-and-concrete slab forming the planes of the figure's head, and mounted scaffolding to "souffler" the head's details *(fig. 5)*.[18] The experimental nature of this trial run is apparent from photos of the fabrication in the Musée Picasso's photo archives. In one, the facial features sketched on the proper left side of

the wooden form actually belong to the proper right profile of the source maquette, a reversal corrected in the final sculpture.[20] In another photo, the treatment of the cylindrical supporting post has been sketched in differently than seen in the final result. By October 27th 1957, work on the sculpture was likely complete, as Nesjar wrote to Picasso that he had a collection of photos of it to show him on his upcoming visit.[21] Nesjar was reportedly unhappy with the sculpture and had to be dissuaded by Viksjø from destroying the work, but when he showed Picasso the photos, the artist was delighted.[22]

The timeline reconstructed here from Nesjar's correspondence and photos suggests that the Betograve *Tête de femme* should be dated 1957 rather than 1958. (In fact, after Nesjar's letters from the fall of 1957 and his visit to Picasso with photos of the work, all mention of the sculpture vanishes from his correspondence.) *Tête de femme*'s status as an experimental "sculpture épreuve" may also account for its composition, which combines aspects of the Nasher's steel *Tête de femme* with those of the Musée Picasso's wooden *Tête de femme*, both of which were made from the same cardboard maquette, seen near the two heads in the photographs Duncan took of Picasso's studio at the time of Nesjar's visit.[23] Disassembled, the cardboard maquette shows three components that fit into the slits cut in the top of the tube. In assembly, the trapezoidal shape is placed squarely straight onto the pole, and the profile face is perpendicular to it, but the "back" of the head slots on at an angle.

Despite their structural similarities, the two heads are painted very differently from each other, and from the cardboard maquette. In the Musée Picasso's wooden head, the proper left side of the sculpture is a simple black or dark gray silhouette, recalling Picasso's inclusion of many such profiles in his two-dimensional works. On the proper right — Nesjar's source for the proper right profile of the Betograve *Tête* — a great staring eye gazes out at the viewer, but as the viewer moves around the sculpture, a second, frontally oriented eye quickly comes into view, and in addition to the profile, the countenance resolves into a staring skull. In the Nasher's steel sculpture, Picasso became more elaborate with the proper left side, spreading a combined profile and fully frontal face across the abutting sheets. The result is a series of often contradictory views that nonetheless evoke a single head, with the back of the sculpture conflating rear of the head and profile, hair pulled back and both ears improbably occupying the same plane. The virtuoso left profile, which Nesjar would use for the proper left profile of the Betograve work, contrasts strongly with the more perfunctory, even childlike rendering of the right profile, a dichotomy previously deployed in the folded steel busts of Sylvette David.

Although Nesjar's letter of July 18 refers to "sculpture no. 2" as the model for a proposed Betograve sculpture, it is not clear which sculpture he meant. "Sculpture no. 2" may refer to the Nasher's steel head, as it was the second sculpture to be made from the templates of the cardboard maquette, and Picasso was completing it at the time of Nesjar's visit. Instead, the resulting "sculpture épreuve" combines aspects of both this and its wooden sibling — the proper left

profile of the Nasher's head and the proper right profile and banded pole of the Musée Picasso's — and adds a few unique elements. The back view of the Betograve head, a contrast of smooth concrete and exposed gravel, is not seen in either of the smaller sculptures, and the four planes of the head meet in the concrete version at right angles, whereas in the smaller versions, the back plane, with the figure's gathered hair, is set at an angle.

Since Betograve was initially used on the flat surfaces of walls, it was logical that Picasso's planar sculptures would be selected as the starting point for a sculptural collaboration, since these sculptures shared with the Norwegian technique a creative combination of material, line, and flat image. In the sheet-metal sculptures, Picasso used planar surfaces to generate works confounding expectations of the continuous three-dimensional contours typical of much modern sculpture. Each version of the *Tête de femme* sculptures presents sharply delineated glimpses of individual forms, which can pass quickly from one anatomical reference to another, an eye reconfiguring into an ear with a slight shift in point of view.

Nesjar unquestionably used the more striking of the profile views from each of the smaller sculptures, and moving the back plane to a 90-degree position would have undoubtedly simplified construction of the sculpture as well as Nesjar's sandblasting of the requisite areas. His manipulation of *Tête de femme*'s composition paralleled his procedure with the Oslo wall engravings : when Nesjar transferred the figures from *Triptych* onto the wall of the government building, he determined that three figures were too many for the wall, and so he removed one of them.[24] Picasso approved of his decision after the fact, but he always had the option to reject Nesjar's efforts.

As many observers have noted, with their staring gazes and disembodied heads poised like trophies atop poles, the 1957 *Tête de femme* sculptures have a strongly totemic character. Their atavistic character lends them an intensity belying their modest size, and interestingly, Picasso's further forays into monumental works included attempts to render all the pole sculptures at larger sizes. In 1965, Nesjar succeeded in executing a monumental version of *Tête de femme* (Spies 650) in Sweden, and he likewise secured Picasso's approval for Betograve versions of two of the other heads (Spies 494 and 495), although neither project went forward.[25]

Picasso never saw any of the Betograve sculptures Nesjar made : their collaboration had its origins in photography, and their working relationship would continue to be negotiated with and through photographs. From the first, Nesjar worked from photographs of Picasso's sculptures, as Picasso did not want him to remove the works from his studio. Nesjar would then use photographs of the sculptures and of the prospective site to create a photomontage, showing the small work scaled up, for Picasso to approve with a signature and date. Nesjar would base his fabrication on photographs and measurements of the maquette made during visits to Picasso, then send the artist photos of the resulting sculpture in situ for his final approval. The printmaking project that initially brought them together served as a

conceptual model for Picasso, who approved some of Nesjar's photomontages with a notation usually reserved for prints : "bon à tirer." [26]

Tête de femme spent four decades in the garden of Viksjø's summer house, and today still resides in a garden at the Nasher. In 2012 it underwent conservation. Due to concrete's porosity, the metal armature inside the sculpture had begun to rust and swell, causing the concrete and gravel to pop off in two small areas. Fortunately, the Nasher's then-conservator John Campbell was able to stop the rusting and put the detached pieces back into place. Considering all its years outdoors in the disparate climates of Norway and Texas and its status as the first attempt to make a monumental sculpture using a newly developed process, this "sculpture épreuve" has aged quite well.

FIG. 1 PABLO PICASSO
Tête de femme, 1958
Gravel and concrete, 305.1 x 109.9 x 141.9 cm
Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas. Spies 483A

FIG. 2 PICASSO'S
betograve Tête de femme in the garden of Erling Viksjø's summer home, Larvik, Norway, ca. 195

FIG. 3 PABLO PICASSO
Tête de femme, 1957
Painted steel, 77.2 x 34.9 x 25.7 cm
Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, Texas. Spies 492

FIG. 4 PABLO PICASSO
Tête de femme, 1957
Cut wood and paint, 78.5 x 34 x 26 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris, Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. Spies 493. MP350

NOTES

1. The first complete account of Nesjar's collaboration with Picasso is Sally Fairweather, *Picasso's Concrete Sculptures* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, Inc., 1982), which was based in part on extensive interviews with Nesjar; her account of his meeting Picasso and their first work together is on pages 25 – 39. According to Sylvia A. Antoniou-Nesjar, who has subsequently published extensively on Nesjar and Picasso, Viksjø heard of Nesjar's mission to secure a print for Aktuell Kunst and asked him to show Picasso photographs of the concrete work being done in the government building. Antoniou-Nesjar, "Sylvette in Concrete," in *Sylvette, Sylvette, Sylvette: Picasso and the Model* (Munich: Prestel, 2014), p.198.

2. For a list of projects by Picasso and Nesjar, see Antoniou-Nesjar, "Sylvette in Concrete," p.203.

3. Although Nesjar took photographs of (and, according to Sylvia A. Antoniou-Nesjar, filmed) its fabrication, there nonetheless remains less documentation of this first effort than of the sculptures that followed. Sylvia A. Antoniou-Nesjar, "Picasso dans l'espace publique," in *Picasso Sculptures* (Paris: Musée national Picasso-Paris, 2016), p.276.

4. In his letter of 20 March 1957, Nesjar writes that he is planning to leave Norway on June 5; he also reminds Picasso of the details of the lithography project, adding, "Je peut chercher vos dessins chez vous et les amener à Mr. [Fernand] Mourlot pour arranger les formalités d'imprimerie." Letter from Carl Nesjar to Pablo Picasso, May 20, 1957, Box 107 (Nesjar) ARPECB1040, Archives Picasso, Musée Picasso, Paris.

5. Private collection; Zervos, XVII, p.344.

6. The archives of the Musée Picasso's correspondence file for Nesjar includes a Norwegian newspaper clipping dated December 3, 1957 showing this photo, which is also reproduced in Fairweather, p.28. October 27.

7. See especially Elizabeth Cowling's exploration of the motif's history in Cowling, "Picasso's Late Sculpture: *Woman,*" in *Picasso's Late Sculpture: "Woman". The Collection in Context* (Malaga: Museo Picasso, 2009), pp.28 – 137.

8. The works, all titled *Tête de femme*, are as follows: Spies 492 (Nasher Sculpture Center); 493 (Musée Picasso); 494 (private collection), 495.II (Musée Picasso), and 650 (private collection).

9. Vérane Tasseau discusses the interplay of the sculptures and paintings, including Picasso's use of a spotlight in his studio to project shadows of these sculptures onto blank canvases in her essay "Picasso ou l'utopie des sculptures-architectures," in *Picasso: In the Studio* (Paris: Cahiers d'art, 2015), p.240.

10. Spies 492 and 493; Tasseau pinpoints Duncan's photo sessions involving these works as occurring between June 27 and July 3, based on the photographer's schedule and the paintings visible on the easels in his shots, one of which was *Tête de femme à la chevelure noire frisée*, the source for the Aktuell Kunst lithograph and dated June 27, 1957. Tasseau, "Picasso ou l'utopie des sculptures-architectures," 240. The Nashers acquired their painted steel *Tête de femme* in 1997.
Duncan published a group of the resulting photographs in *The Private World of Pablo Picasso* (New York: The Ridge Press, 1958). The Cahiers d'art publication also includes previously unpublished photos from these sessions.

11. Michael and Judy Steinhardt Collection; Zervos VII, p.290.

12. Duncan, pp..142 – 145 ans p.157.

13. At some point, Nesjar's photographs were separated from his letters and are now located in the Musée Picasso's separate photo archives, but there does not seem to have been a record made of which photographs accompanied which letters. As Nesjar's photographs are largely unannotated apart from indications of copyright, this makes the precise dating of photographs related to the first two years of their collaboration difficult.

14. It is entirely possible that Nesjar and Duncan met during Nesjar's visit, as two letters from Nesjar in the following months include salutations to Duncan as well. Letters from Nesjar to Picasso, November 14, 1957 and March 4, 1958, Box 107 (Nesjar) ARPECB1040, Archives Picasso, Musée Picasso, Paris.

15. The photo of Picasso and Nesjar is in Fairweather, *Picasso's Concrete Sculptures*, n. 5; the photo of Picasso with the Nasher's steel head, unfinished, was published in Antoniou-Nesjar, "Sylvette in Concrete," 201. Other published photos of Picasso by Nesjar from this same session, showing the artist with other pole sculptures, include: Nesjar, *Pablo Picasso with his maquette* [Spies 650] *for Kristinehamm*'s Head of a Woman," in *Picasso's Late Sculpture: "Woman". The Collection in Context*, p. 154; and "Picasso with maquette of *Head of a Woman* [Spies 495]," in Fairweather, 29. There are likely additional photos in Nesjar's archive in Norway, which I was not able to consult; the photograph of Nesjar and Picasso was perhaps taken by Roque using Nesjar's camera, as she did on other occasions referenced in Nesjar's letters.

NOTES

16. Letter from Nesjar to Picasso, July 18, 1957, Box 107 (Nesjar) ARPECB1040, Archives Picasso, Musée Picasso, Paris.

17. Letter from Nesjar to Picasso, Box 107 (Nesjar) ARPPHBT0118, Archives Picasso, Musée Picasso, Paris.

18. Nesjar used the term “souffler” in his letters to describe the sandblasting process.

19. Photo box ARPPHBT0118, Photo Archives, Musée Picasso, Paris.

20. Ibid., photo 5452.

21. Letter from Nesjar to Picasso, October 27, 1957, Box 107 (Nesjar) ARPECB1040, Archives Picasso, Musée Picasso, Paris. The visit was imminent : Nesjar was flying to Nice on the 28th.

22. Fairweather, pp.38 – 39.

23. Spies 640, collection Musée Picasso ; see Duncan, p.138, and *Picasso : In the Studio*, ill. 14.

24. Fairweather, p.34.

25. In addition, in a project not connected with Nesjar, a large version of the Musée Picasso’s wood *Tête de femme* was fabricated in 1993 in acrylic and installed at a ski resort in Les Cluses, Flaine, Haute-Savoie, France.

26. See photomontages in Fairweather, p.118, 127, and 139.