

# THE PARADOX OF THE PICTORIAL IN PICASSO'S LATE SCULPTURE

Christine Poggi • Colloque Picasso Sculptures • 25 mars 2016

*“Modern sculpture — the painter Picasso, without in any way throwing away his brushes, is undoubtedly going to execute some important sculptural works.”*

André Salmon, *Paris-Journal*, 11 January 1912

*“Sculpture is the best comment that a painter can make on painting.”*

Pablo Picasso, as reported by Renato Guttuso in his journal, 1946<sup>1</sup>

**P**ainter/sculptor: this hybrid term has come to characterize Pablo Picasso, the artist who invented Cubist collage and relief construction, ironworks that function as “drawings in space,” and other forms of sculpture that explore the paradoxes of pictorial devices projected into three-dimensional space. As André Salmon noted in January 1912, in conceiving a series of new sculptures (which at that point existed only as drawings in his sketchbooks), Picasso did not plan to throw away his brushes. The three constructed *Guitars* that followed in the fall of 1912 include pictorial elements such as fragments of painted canvas and colored papers; drawing in the form of cut contours, folded edges, and taut strings; and paper and cardboard planes that in some cases serve as fields for further figuration. What allowed Picasso to traverse the mediums of painting (or drawing) and sculpture was an interest in the meta-languages of visual representation, in “laying bare the device,” to use a phrase coined by the Russian linguistic Viktor Shklovsky in 1917.<sup>2</sup> To stage, reconfigure, or materialize pictorial norms in sculpture was to displace them, to render these norms strangely

inoperative, and hence perspicuous; it also called attention to the ways in which sculpture, however much it occupied real or cubic space, remained an art of visual illusion addressed to a beholder who was also contingently situated in space.

Although Picasso’s interest in transgressing the planar dimension through a series of unorthodox translations occurs throughout his career, here I discuss five less well-known, but still paradigmatic sculptures. Rather than examine the relation of the artist’s preliminary drawings to these works, I focus on the ways they signify the pictorial as such. For in executing his sculpture, Picasso often seems to ask: what would happen if the devices of classical picture making — the production of illusion on a flat, delimited, window-like surface through single-point perspective, drawn contours, color and value contrasts, fictive shadows, and even the supplement of the frame — were transposed into the three-dimensional world of sculptural objects? What if the paper, wood, or sheet metal surfaces of a planar sculpture became supports for painting and drawing, causing real and depicted shapes and shadows to diverge? Or if the virtual space of the picture plane became real, transparent because it was in fact an open void? What if drawing — comprising lines that define virtual contours and internal edges, chiaroscuro, or even the free vector in illusory space — took on the mass, weight, and resistance of a specific material: string, wire, iron rods, a tree branch, or clusters of nails? Could the frontality, unity, and simultaneity of painting’s axial mode of address be paradoxically retained, but made to operate sequentially, in the round, through

a succession of planar, but folded and tilted, always partial views? And finally, what if the temporality of changing perceptions and the contingency of objects seen in variable conditions of light entered the viewer's experience, through a sculptural instantiation of painterly devices?

Picasso's interest in actualizing pictorial conditions and techniques of illusion emerges clearly in two of his earliest constructed *Guitars* of fall 1912 (*figs. 1 and 2*). These works, assembled out of intercut and cantilevered planes, hang on the wall from a loop of twine, like pictures or reliefs; they nevertheless destabilize the frontality, unity, and fictive transparency of the picture plane as the very ground of representation. Picasso treated his paper and cardboard elements as both depicted shape and literal support, subjecting them to cutting, folding, rolling, tilting, multiplication, notching, and perforation. He also pinned, nailed, glued, and sewed them together with often deliberately crude techniques, in order to emphasize their anti-illusory, handmade qualities and material contingency.

In one of these works, the artist drew and shaded an oblique, overhead view of a guitar onto a plane that continues to read as flat, with its own literal, cut contour (*fig. 1*). This oblique view emerges through the linkage of a larger, external cut profile with an interior, drawn profile, that is, from two discordant modes of drawing (cutting and wielding a pencil). But the drawn and shaded inner edge also alters the significance of the cut profile, throwing it back in space so that it registers as the distal contour of the guitar seen

in perspective. As such, the curve at the upper left of *Guitar* reads as slightly distorted, although this distortion becomes a material rather than purely visual fact. The longer we look at this doubled edge, the more two profiles fail to cohere, an effect emphasized by Picasso's illogical modeling (the crude shading at the top left of the projecting curve, a zone that should catch the light). The inner, drawn contour also makes the guitar seem to swivel to the viewer's right, exposing more of the left side of the work than a purely frontal view would provide; but this orientation is contradicted by the fact that the central projecting plane, bearing the guitar's cut sound hole traversed by three drawn strings, clearly tilts to our left. This projecting plane also undergoes a form of perspectival diminution, paradoxically rendered literal, as its sides recede toward the top, where it vanishes beneath a folded fingerboard that reverses this effect.

In the other small *Guitar* (*fig. 2*), Picasso made the four strings converge as they descend toward a pictorial vanishing point below the sound hole, again rendered actual; the strings literally disappear into the body of this inclined plane. Picasso also affixed two strips of blue laid paper, the kind usually employed as a support for fine art drawing, to either side of a split frontal plane of *Guitar*. In addition to introducing readymade color into the realm of sculpture, the blue strips of paper evoke a once unified pictorial ground that has been divided, displaced, folded, and misaligned. The blue laid paper strips also help to render visible the asymmetry of the guitar's right and left sides. The right side is a bit smaller; set further back, it is also bent more strongly out of frontal alignment.

The literally projecting, angled fingerboard, however, turns in the opposing direction, suggesting that the guitar has been represented as if from divergent, oblique views. Picasso also implies a vertical inversion by making the upper curves of the guitar larger than the lower curves. In both of these *Guitars*, figure and ground, literal and depicted elements, enter a zone of paradox and indeterminacy.

Picasso addressed a different set of pictorial devices in *Figure*, executed sometime between 1928 and 1931 (fig. 3). This small sculpture stands upright on what appear to be the angled components of a rectangular picture frame; broken in two, the intersecting pieces cannot, however, be reassembled. The discrepancy in the length of the sides of the framing elements implies that a section is missing, or that the parts came from different frames. Unusually tall, this cast iron frame now doubles as a pedestal, thereby effecting a paradoxically literal translation of a pictorial device into a more properly sculptural one. Yet by tilting this structure back and to the left, and by giving it a third leg, Picasso also turned it into an easel supported on a tripod. Tangled and knotted iron wires climb up, through, and around this armature. These wire lines function as a form of inspired, even delirious, drawing that suggests the emergence of a figure in the round, in defiance of the flat, delimited pictorial space constituted by the frame/easel. Unlike Surrealist automatic drawing, Picasso's muscular line never seems merely to register an unconscious or passive impulse on a neutral sheet of paper. Instead his line emerges as a willful force, one that enacts a charged relation both to its cast iron frame and to the void it marks.

In an account of his visit to Picasso in Dinard during the summer of 1928, Christian Zervos described the artist's process of working with metal wire: "Picasso picks up a wire lying on the floor and proceeds to twist it while chatting. Without doing anything specific, after a few minutes, the wire sustained the imprint of a great sensitivity."<sup>3</sup> The immediacy with which Picasso was able to manipulate the cold but highly pliant metal, without requiring any tools, is astonishing; the iron wire appears to offer no resistance to his twisting and turning, bending and knotting. In *Figure*, he employed several wires of varying gauge, including three thin rods left almost unaltered, as if to remind us of this element's industrial form.

If we follow the trajectory of a given line, starting at the lower right, we can note that it begins in mid-air, as an energized free vector that contrasts with the tectonic, leg-like strut of the frame/easel/pedestal, a static element resting on the ground. The surging line spirals around this tilted, vertical bar; then the line leaps across the empty space behind the upright frame to loop around the other leg, before springing upward, through and again behind the frame. To follow it further, we have to turn to the other side. But even from the front, we can see that thin wires wrap around the rising line, attaching it to the back end of the projecting bar/frame, so that at this juncture the thick line offers support to the angled bar and vice versa. Ascending further behind the frame, our seemingly animated line traces a body-evoking large oval, then descends back down and through to the front of the frame where it wraps around the left vertical leg/strut; finally it springs upward and hooks itself over

the top edge of the frame from the front, then breaks off. Throughout its course, the line operates as a transgressive force that defies containment or deductive rule by the tectonic frame. It begins by tracing lines in space that loosely evoke a body on two legs; eventually it transforms itself into a picture hanging wire that literally suspends itself from the front of the frame, as if it somehow found itself on the wrong side of the work. This line has no single function or identity and it does not even describe the contour of the figure its spinning trajectory intermittently calls into being. It moves freely and without definite rupture between allusive and literal, figurative and object-like operations. Open space permeates both the linear whorls and their frame/easel/pedestal, rendering figure/ground (or figure/environment) distinctions ambiguous. Other lines function similarly; at times they seem self-propelled, and even break off suddenly, as if flaunting their lack of completion. But at other times, they serve structural ends, calling attention to their tensile strength as well as their ponderability; or they may seem to revert to passive material, as when the artist wraps or bends them tightly into place. The longer one looks, however, the more difficult it becomes to make such distinctions. The wires gyrate and twist into whorls that are both figurative and structural, delineating virtual forms in space and simultaneously anchoring one another through loops, knots, and hooks.

The frame/easel itself can be read as a drawn contour, ironically positioned in an open, unbound space (as if it were a pedestal). It delineates a pictorial limit that

fails to contain the lines that flow around and past its edges, eventually clustering over the uppermost boundary in evocation of a head. But if the bundle of lines at the summit of the sculpture hints at a head, then perhaps we can also see the top of the frame as evoking shoulders and arms, or the whole framing, upright rectangle as the schematic outline of a torso. Some of the studies for *The Painter and His Model* of 1928 (Museum of Modern Art, New York) show a double-profile head — closely related to the painted metal sculpture *Head* of 1928 — rising from the left corner of a similarly vertical, tall rectangle representing a pedestal/torso seen in a complex relation to a curved-back chair presented from the side.

Could *Figure* similarly represent a painter caught up in his picture frame/easel even as he draws himself into existence, as well as a sculptor intertwined with, and escaping from, the quadrature of a pedestal — the artist becoming a work of art? Certainly the studies for *The Painter and His Model* of 1928 (as well as the painting) ask us to consider a series of perplexing metamorphoses: from an abstracted, planar model at left, to a more naturalistic, but purely linear profile on a canvas at center (which ironically evokes classical sculpture), to the painter (who resembles the model) converted into a sculptural head on a tripod at the right. *Figure* enacts a related metamorphosis of pictorial devices into sculptural terms in what may be seen as a humorous reversal of the well-known theme of the artist whose desire brings the beautiful woman he is painting or sculpting to life. A final reversal occurs when we attend to the shadows cast by *Figure*, which rotate the work's vertically rising, three-dimensional

lines onto a flat, horizontal register. Thus grounded, the iron drawing in space assumes new, condensed and displaced shapes that nonetheless read as indexical signs of the opaque sculptural elements that project them.

Picasso executed *Figure* and his other twisted, soldered, and welded sculptures at a time of renewed interest in iron as a material associated with a modern aesthetic sensibility. We can gain a sense of this interest from the publication of Sigfried Giedion's *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferro-Concrete* in early June 1928. In his book, Giedion celebrates the dense molecular structure, tensile strength, and pliancy of iron, which allows it to facilitate the construction of enormous spaces without heavy stone masonry, thereby opening architecture to the circulation of air and light, and to the interpenetration of interior and exterior. Whereas earlier, nineteenth-century debates on the aesthetic merits of iron had often centered on its lack of mass, and hence its inability to create corporeal, monumental architecture, Giedion saw possibilities for a new kind of beauty in iron's reduction of mass to surface and pure, linear scaffolding. Many mid- and late-nineteenth century critics opposed the use of iron precisely because the nature of the material — "its fleshless thinness" and "incorporeal lines" — precluded a clear expression of the distinction between weight-bearing post and load.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Giedion delighted in this overcoming of an obsolete tectonics, declaring that, "Instead of the rigid balance of support and load, iron demands a more complex, more fluid balance of forces."<sup>5</sup> Picasso's *Figure* enacts these new principles in its disruption

of the difference between supporting and supported elements, between framing structure/base and figure, between scaffolding and interpenetrating light and air. One might even see the thin straight wires in *Figure* as allusions to what were once regarded as unsightly tie-rods in earlier iron scaffolding. What better medium then, than the iron of the engineers with which to enact a translation of painting's virtual devices into the three-dimensional, but fluid and interpenetrating forms of the new building, the new construction?

Picasso, however, with his love of deviation and asymmetry, of inclined planes and non-orthogonal boxes, of forms that defy known functions, behaved more like a tinkerer or bricoleur than an engineer. In 1938 he executed a doll-like figure out of a series of found and repurposed objects, combined with drawn and painted wooden elements. From a distance, the girl's head appears to be an open, three-sided box, with the nose and right eye, the left eye, and the mouth inhabiting divergent planes. On closer inspection, the viewer realizes that the facial plane is flat; the illusion of depth arises from the cut shape of the "picture plane" on which Picasso drew the internal edges of a trihedron, painting each section a different color — blue, white, and yellow — to further distinguish their spatial positions. Cut edge and depicted edge function relationally, but they also yield different perspectival readings. If it is possible to see the box as an open volume, with the yellow plane at right paradoxically narrowing as it converges toward the observer, one can also see the box as closed, with the yellow plane receding into depth. If the box appears as a closed form, offering us its exterior walls, then the mouth

must be sited on its white, lower plane, projecting downward. It is the optical presence of the receding yellow side that Picasso acknowledges in setting the vertically aligned mouth, nose, and tuft of yellow rope for hair to the right of center within the blue section, as if these features too are further away, receding into depth. (Nose and mouth are nonetheless centered vis-à-vis the facial plane as a whole.) Yet the eyes, mouth, and nose, made of screws, wires, and the metal join of a paintbrush, remain rigidly frontal and pictorial in their mode of address, in contradiction with either of the illusory perspectival views.

While Picasso made the figure's nose out of the ferrule of a paintbrush, he constructed her arms and hands out of the fragments of two wooden paintbrush handles. He nailed the right arm, painted sloppily in bright purple and white, to the top back of the figure's cylindrical torso, whereas he affixed the left arm, in white, green, and purple further down and forward, using nails and wrapped string. Misaligned and attached with divergent techniques, the arms infuse the figure with a sense of anatomical disjunction and spatial rotation. Depending on how we read the volume of her box-like head, she appears to turn either to the right or to the left, but viewed in terms of her arms, she is turning to our left. (Of course, such interpretations are too literal, as her paintbrush arms defy anatomical norms altogether.) Signifying both childlike naiveté and sophistication, the brush handles also realize the metaphorical link between the artist's own arms and hands and the brushes with which he worked, even on his sculptures. A similar

metaphorical slippage occurs on the reverse, where Picasso placed the semicircular, severed parts of a push-bell, a sound-making device, on either side of the girl's head; they stand in for her ears, open to the world. Even the interior of each "ear" received pictorial treatment, one painted black, the other white. Painting appears everywhere, in the roughly and sometimes highly textured application of pigment to various surfaces, the decorative pattern on the girl's torso/dress, and on the base of the work, where a green hue evokes grass. Picasso covered the sides of the cut, wooden plane of the head with thick black paint, recoding it as a drawn contour; in contrast, he applied broad, loose swatches of white (the color of classical sculpture) to the back of the head, allowing the wood to show through what is by now, a thoroughly pictorial surface.

Indeed Picasso drew, painted, or otherwise worked on the sides and backs of most of his sculptures, often in humorous ways that bring out or multiply specific features. With *Bull* of 1958, the artist insinuated a back view of the bull's visage onto its front, by enclosing the face within a small, empty stretcher nailed down in reverse (*fig. 5*). This *mise en abyme* makes the bull's face into a picture within a picture, perhaps even a portrait. The cut shape of the bull's horns, one smaller than the other and set on a fictive diagonal, suggests they are forms turning in space, seen from behind.<sup>6</sup> Picasso makes the plane of the face and the back view, pictorial frontality and illusory depth, co-present in this internally divergent work.

Various kinds of wood and palm, affixed to the surface of both sides of *Bull*, function as modes of drawing

in shallow but real space: from the natural shapes of tree and palm branches, to the turned forms of furniture parts, to readymade lumber including simple boards and studs, some of which had a previous life (as can be seen by the presence of stenciled letters). Nails prove to be highly versatile elements; driven into the surface of *Bull* on both sides, they produce coloristic or atmospheric effects, the equivalent of mottled shading. At times they serve to affix one element to another. The artist also bends nails around branches, employing them almost like wire. And he lets them project as sharp points or lines that perforate the picture plane on both sides. Similarly, two long screws inserted into the bull's face become eyes, their drooping shadows evoking tears.

The head itself with its decentered features tilts slightly to the left; it seems precariously held in place by elements that read variously as drawn lines and supporting bars or branches that pass to the right, below, and before the reverse mounted stretcher/frame. Picasso represented the bull with four legs attached to a horizontal base, but he also added a fifth leg to inject it with a sense of forward movement, even as the bull turns his framed face toward us. Both sides of this sculpture are traversed by a crisscrossing pattern of oblique lines and tilted planes. Even the tail, constructed from a rectilinear plank and attached rod, does not so much hang down as rise up on a diagonal from the ground.

Many of Picasso's sculptures insist on being viewed from both sides, indeed from variable, sometimes intersecting angles. They take the conventional frontal address of the picture plane as a point of depar-

ture, transforming this plane into a material object in space. The picture plane and its stretcher or frame emerge as tangible, material elements, just as the drawn line, appearing in the form of twisted wires, curved branches, projecting nails, or cut edges, performs as both the trace of an action and as an object able to cast a shadow in its own right. These pictorial structures appeal to our sense of sight as well as touch. Moving around Picasso's sculptures, one often encounters a sequence of aspects that seem to effect their own, albeit always partial, mode of direct address. New alignments, interlaced profiles, and contradictory views emerge as others fade. One senses that these views are meant for us, that they acknowledge the temporally and spatially situated observer. Rendering a three-dimensional object as it is seen in perspective constitutes that object as mediated through vision. And it makes that visual mode paradoxically available to tactile sensations.

Finally, Picasso's sculptures bring to the fore his preference for the line of deviation, the angled plane, the tilted edge, the decentered element, the form that bends and swerves, slipping into, or out of, our line of sight. These anti-tectonic forms resist the axial planarity, stasis, symmetry, and unified coherence of the classically defined painting or bas-relief sculpture. In their place they offer a complex interplay of the fictive and the real, the visual and the tactile, illusory mastery of the objects of perception and its dispossession.



**FIG. 1 PABLO PICASSO**

*Guitar, fall 1912*

Cut cardboard, cut and pasted papers including newspaper, canvas, string, tape, and pencil, 22 x 14.5 x 7 cm

Musée national Picasso-Paris. MP245

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**FIG. 3 PABLO PICASSO**

*Figure, c. 1928-1931*

Iron and iron wire, 26 x 12.5 x 11.1 cm

Musée national Picasso-Paris. MP271

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**FIG. 2 PABLO PICASSO**

*Guitar, fall 1912*

Cut cardboard, cut and pasted papers including brown paper, blue laid paper, and newspaper, canvas string, several kinds of tape, oil, and pencil, 33 x 18 x 9.5 cm

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MP244

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**FIG. 4 PABLO PICASSO**  
*Figure, spring 1938*  
Painted wood, nails, and screws with string wire, paintbrush fragments, and push-bell hardware on an unfired clay and wood base, 5,8 x 2 x 1,1 cm  
Private collection  
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**FIG. 5 PABLO PICASSO**  
*Bull, April 1958*  
Blockboard (wood base panel), palm frond and various other tree branches, eyebolt, nails, and screws, with drips of alkyd and pencil markings, 144.1 x 117.2 x 10.5 cm  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Jacqueline Picasso in honor of the Museum's continuous commitment to Pablo Picasso's art. 649.1983  
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**FIG. 4**  
*Side view of Pablo Picasso, Figure, spring 1938*



**FIG. 5** **DETAIL OF HEAD OF PABLO PICASSO, BULL, 1958**  
© Photograph by Christine Poggi  
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## NOTES

1. Pablo Picasso, statement reported by Renato Guttuso, in Mario de Micheli, ed., *Scritti di Picasso* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964).
2. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" (1917), in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion Reis (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2006): pp.774 – 784.
3. Christian Zervos, "Picasso à Dinard, été 1928," *Cahiers d'art* 4, n°. 1 (1929): 5 – 6; cited in Ann Temkin and Anne Umland, *Picasso: Sculpture*, trans. Marion Tande (exh. cat. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), p.112.
4. Richard Streiter, *Architektonische Zeitfragen* (1898), cited in Sokratis Georgiadis, introduction to Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferro-Concrete*, trans. J. Duncan Berry (Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), 29. For an account of these debates, see Georgiadis, Introduction to Giedion, *Building in France*, pp.1 – 12.
5. Giedion, *Building in France*, p.102.
6. See *Study for Bull*, a sheet with six sketches executed from the front, back and side, in: Temkin and Umland, eds., *Picasso: Sculpture*, 255, fig. 11.