

Representations of Blindness in Picasso's Blue Period

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The Spanish painter Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) was the most important artist of the 20th century. It is impossible to consider the development of modern art without him. A unique, highly productive artist who created more than 20 000 works in more than 75 years of activity, Picasso was the most frequently exhibited and critiqued artist of the last century. Best known as a painter, he also worked in sculpture, prints, ceramics, and theater design. Blindness was a theme that played an important role in the artist's first distinctive style, known as the Blue Period.

Picasso's earliest work was done in a naturalistic manner and gives few hints of the future direction his art would take. While still a teenager, Picasso made several visits to Paris, the capital of the artistic world, where he exhibited paintings and drawings at the gallery of Ambrose Vollard, who represented postimpressionists and younger members of the French avant-garde. The exhibition was a modest financial success and brought him further commissions. One art critic saw in this show the debut of a "brilliant newcomer," but wrote that "Picasso's passionate surge forwards has not yet left him the leisure to forge a personal style."¹ During his early years Picasso developed a strong personality and envisioned himself a sort of artist-hero, akin to a Nietzschean superman. He had encountered philosophy and art theory a few years earlier but remained a studio artist and never considered abstract thinking important to the way he worked. He found this type of discussion irrelevant and distracting, and even used the word "blinding"² to describe such activity.

In late 1901 his work took a dramatic turn when he developed his first distinctive style, the nearly monochromatic works of the Blue Period (1901-1904). These works are instantly recognizable by their overwhelming use of blue colors and melancholy figures. Several oil paintings

and a print from this period have blindness as a theme. The sad, brooding mood of these works may have been a reaction to the suicide of his close friend and fellow artist, Carlos Casagemas (1880-1901), which followed a failed romance.

Images of blindness may be traced back to Greek antiquity, where the blind poet Homer is a familiar figure. In Spanish art and literature, the blind poet evolved into the blind guitarist. Blind beggars were a common sight on the streets of Spain for centuries. Francisco Goya (1746-1828) created several paintings and prints of this subject. Picasso painted and engraved works based on the theme of blindness several times during his Blue Period. Occasionally he returned to images of the blind later in his career, such as his depictions from the 1930s of a blind minotaur, an ancient Greek mythological figure who had the head of a bull and the body of a man.

Pervasive use of blue pigment was not invented by Picasso, for there is a long history of working this way. His immediate predecessors in this manner were symbolist painters of Spain and France, who used blue to emphasize the emotional sensations of sadness and despair. Many works in the Art Nouveau style created toward the end of the 19th century also have an overwhelming blue tone, with one good example being Emile Galle's work in glass entitled *Blue Melancholia*.^{3(p216)} Throughout his career Picasso incorporated the methods of other artists into his work. Oth-

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ers have put it more sharply—he stole from everyone, from the old masters to his contemporaries. According to Françoise Gilot, one of his many mistresses, Picasso said, “When there’s anything to steal, I steal.”⁴ The blue works show a particular debt to El Greco which is evident in the elongated hands and faces. He found working in blue highly compatible with his subject matter—the poor, disabled, and downtrodden.

Some have suggested the poverty-stricken subjects reflect his lifestyle at the time. Picasso was certainly not as rich then as he was to become later, but he was not greatly different financially from the rest of his artistic and literary circle. He had financial support from home and had exhibited successfully by this time. Some have suggested he used blue primarily because he could only afford cobalt blue paint. This is incorrect. He could certainly afford to purchase whatever paints he wanted. He was still in his youth, testing a technique that proved to be effective for him and that had been explored previously by others.⁵ Perhaps Picasso identified with the unfortunate individuals he painted. His ambivalent comments about Paris are evident in a letter he wrote that same year to his friend, the poet and artist, Max Jacob:

My dear old Max, I think about the room on the boulevard Voltaire and the omelets, the beans, and the brie and the fried potatoes. But I also think about those days of misery and that’s very sad. And I remember the Spaniards from the rue de Seine with disgust.⁶

If Picasso ever told anyone precisely why blindness was important to him, we have not been able to find a description. We do know that his father’s vision was deteriorating from an unknown cause at this time. Inevitably, psychoanalytic approaches have been attempted. The psychiatrist Carl Jung saw “incipient psychic dissociation” and even schizophrenia in Picasso’s paintings.⁷ Blindness is a most serious problem for a painter. In a recent, highly acclaimed biography of Picasso, Richardson noted that Picasso was at home in Barcelona with his parents when he painted some of the blind figures from his Blue Pe-



Figure 1. Pablo Picasso. *La Celestine*, 1903, Spanish. Oil on canvas, 81.0 × 60.0 cm. Musée Picasso, Paris, France, 2003 Estate of Pablo Picasso.

riod, and that by depicting “the prospect of what he most feared in life, was not this a way of protecting himself against it?”^{3(p279)} The closest Picasso came to discussing blindness is this cryptic quotation from the mid 1930s: “There is in fact only love that matters. Whatever it may be. And they should put out the eyes of painters as they do to goldfinches to make them sing better.”⁸ Roland Penrose, who recorded these words, also wrote “The allegory of the blind man pursued Picasso throughout life as though reproaching him for his unique gift of vision.”⁹ These quotations give a hint that Picasso was confronting and naming his fears but do not clarify the meaning of his portraits of the blind.

Picasso’s depictions of the blind are too stylized for us to diagnose precisely the diseases being delin-

eated. Although the name of the model for *La Celestine* (Figure 1) is known, we do not know what caused her cornea to become opaque. Her white eye contrasts markedly with the blue that dominates the rest of this painting. She is the one-eyed procuress described in the drama of the same name written by Fernando de Rojas (first known edition, 1499) that is considered second in importance in Spanish literature only to Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. Picasso knew Rojas’s story from his adolescent years, if not earlier.^{3(p288)}

The cause of the atrophic orbit of *The Old Guitarist* (Figure 2) also remains obscure. Picasso engulfed the region of the eye in a dark blue shadow in his paintings of the blind, a characteristic that can be considered an archetypical

stylistic feature of the Blue Period. Similarly, we cannot identify a cause for the poor vision of the figure in *The Blind Man's Meal* (Figure 3). Picasso described what he was creating in this work succinctly in a letter: "I am painting



Figure 2. Pablo Picasso. *The Old Guitarist*, 1903/1904, Spanish. Oil on panel. 122.9×82.6 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Ill, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection.

a blind man at a table. He holds some bread in his left hand and gropes with his right for a jug of wine."¹⁰ This is one of his few remarks about works made at the time, but reveals nothing.

Picasso did not depict figures in great detail, but tended to idealize them in these Blue Period works. He took the elongated arms, hands, torsos, and heads of El Greco and placed them in an early 20th century setting. Some critics have seen a "spiritual inner vision" in the blind figures Picasso created in this way.¹¹ The figures are isolated and do not interact well. Other observers have felt this is a reflection of Picasso's own isolation at that time.¹² Despite nearly a century of critical comment on these works, the full meaning is still unclear. The artist himself did not offer any help in deciphering them. When asked, he responded dismissively, terming the Blue and Rose Period works as pure sentiment.⁴

But we would argue that the blind characters in the Blue Period paintings were not created simply to

make the viewer feel sorry for them. Picasso found an intensity of other senses in his depiction of the blind. In *The Old Guitarist* and *The Blind Man's Meal* different senses appear to be enhanced as compared with the lack of sight. The fact that the figures are blind might, in and of itself, indicate that other senses are more acute, but Picasso emphasized other senses by elongating forms and was influenced by El Greco. In particular, the long, thin hands of the figures in both these works are fundamental to an enhancement of the senses because they are direct actors in creating music in the case of *The Old Guitarist*, and in touching the food in *The Blind Man's Meal*. Picasso explored the "power" of blindness in *La Celestine*. By depicting an eye with an opaque cornea next to an apparently normal eye, Picasso juxtaposed vision and blindness. Paradoxically, it is the blind eye that draws the gaze of the viewer. The fact that the opaque cornea blocks vision is the very element that attracts vision on the part of the viewer.

The style of the Blue Period may be thought of as a kind of meditation on blindness, or at least impaired vision. In these works the artist explores the expressive possibilities of a radical reduction of color. Picasso surrounded the environment with a dark blue veil and used flat, simplified backgrounds that threaten to disappear altogether. An obscuring of traditional vision is the fundamental expressive component of these works. In investigating blindness Picasso chose a style that deemphasizes objective sight in favor of a deeper vision.

The figures are recognizable as people, which is more than can be said for some paintings from his Cubist period. The fractured cubist portraits, which depict individuals from a multitude of directions, confuse many museum goers. The public is interested in the Blue Period paintings from his youth because of what he created later. Early Picasso is not as pleasurable to view as Impressionism, to cite just one example. Some of the reverence for these works comes from the fact that



Figure 3. Pablo Picasso. *The Blind Man's Meal*, 1903, Spanish. Oil on canvas. 95.3×94.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, Mr and Mrs Ira Haupt Gift, 1950.

experts say they should be seen, enjoyed, and respected for what Picasso was to become, the epitome of modernism. The most important art may be difficult to understand, even disturbing, while art that is superficially appealing may be overly saccharine, lack any meaning after the first glance, and remain totally unimportant.

Picasso made evaluating his work difficult. He treated with scorn attempts at analysis and said he just painted what he saw, the things that moved him:

When I paint, my object is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for. . . . What one does is what counts and not what one had the intention of doing. . . . There are no concrete or abstract forms but only forms which are more or less convincing lies.¹³

He denied any evolution in his style even if others separated his work into radically different phases: "Whenever I had something to say, I have said it in a manner in which I have felt it ought to have been said . . ." since

different motives inevitably require different methods of expression. This does not imply either evolution or progress, but an adaptation of the idea one wants

to express and the means to express that idea.¹³

These statements reaffirm the common observation that an artist is inherently biased when it comes to evaluating and interpreting his own work. Picasso actually admitted as much in saying, "The connoisseur of painting gives only bad advice to the painter. For that reason I have given up trying to judge myself."¹⁴

Picasso's colors and subject matter brightened by the end of 1904 as he entered the next major phase of his art, the Rose Period (1905-1906). The change to warmer colors and more pleasant themes is linked to the happiness he shared with his first long-term liaison, Fernande Olivier. The works of the Blue and Rose Periods have certainly achieved critical acceptance, but if Picasso had stopped painting at this point, he would be remembered as a second- or third-rank artist who had not reached full artistic maturity. The next phases of his career, particularly cubism (1906-1915) brought Picasso fame on the international level and made him the single most important figure in 20th century art.

Accepted for publication October 14, 2003.

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