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Ceramics

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Pablo Picasso: The Ceramic Artist

Background

Perhaps there is no artist more widely known than Pablo Picasso. Picasso is primarily known for his painting; however, he did use clay as a medium for expression in his later years. Picasso's mother, Maria Ruiz Picasso, had been praying for a son for some

time. Pablo Ruiz Picasso was born on October 25, 1881, in Malaga Spain. He was the first born to Don José Ruíz and María Picasso (Richardson, 2009). His father is remembered as an unsuccessful artist; however, he was a very good art teacher who took time to foster an appreciation for art in the young Picasso. Pablo's first word was "lapiz", which is the Spanish word for pencil. Pablo began to sign his work with his mother's name Picasso, at an early age, rather than his father's, Ruíz, which is a very common Spanish name. He felt that he was anything but ordinary. Pablo liked the name Picasso, which comes from the Spanish word "pique", meaning, "to arouse or provoke". The name Picasso would become a common household name and would accompany him to global fame as he became the first living celebrity artist (Beek & Bazalgette, 2010). Picasso's ascension to the status of celebrity artist happened rather quickly. His first oil painting, done when he was only eight years old, was of a bullfighter. When Picasso was sixteen, his father sent him to The Madrid School of Arts where he studied great classical painters. Picasso was drawn to Spanish painter Diego Velázquez and made several successful copies of his works. Feeling that he had gleaned everything that the school could offer him, he became bored with his education and decided to return to his father in 1899. His father was then a professor in Barcelona. He continued his studies there before moving to Paris at nineteen years of age.

Witnessing the violent suicide of a close friend in 1901 devastated Picasso. He began to paint in an unconventional style. This began his Blue Period, which is widely known as his first major breakthrough. This was the beginning of Picasso's rise to artistic fame (Beek, 2010). He went on to produce some of the most widely known and most valued paintings in the world. He and his friend [Georges Braque](#) developed a new style, known as Cubism, in 1907. Cubism involved tearing down the subject to the bare elements and putting them back together with multiple viewpoints. The two thought it more important to communicate how they thought and felt about a subject than to represent the subject itself (see Figure 35) (Beek & Bazalgette, 2010).

In 1914, World War I began to devastate and obliterate many European cities. Tanks, planes, and other technological instruments of war brought carnage to the landscape. By the end of World War I, people were weary with destruction and yearned for order, safety, and simplicity. In light of this, Picasso and other painters of the day participated in a movement called Return To Order (see Figure 36). The movement is characterized by a harmony achieved by natural depictions of subjects in a style

reminiscent of Classical Greek or Roman styles of painting and architecture. Order was restored for a brief period before World War II presented yet another issue that Picasso had to grapple with. The Neo Classical style of painting that was popularized by the Return to Order movement became associated with the Nazis. The Germans held the market on Neo Classical architecture and paintings. The Nazis had tarnished the classical styles of art in the eyes of a world that hated them for the death and destruction they were causing. In response, Picasso focused on reuniting with the earth and getting away from materialism through craft. He advocated for peace, and not war, and made a conscious decision to simplify his life. This was when he found the medium of clay (Nasher Sculpture Center, 2015).

Medium

Picasso had shown an interest in clay early in his art career, but he felt he was unsuccessful at that time. Twenty years later, in 1946, he attended an annual pottery exhibition in Vallauris. He was impressed by the quality of Madoura Pottery. The owners, George and Suzanne Ramie, invited him to their studio and offered to aid him in his quest to express himself through the medium. The collaboration between Picasso and the Ramies lasted 25 years. He produced without limit in their studio and let them reproduce select pieces in numbered series. Many of his initial pieces were simply his designs on forms they were already producing (see Figure 37). However, he did go on to produce hundreds of original forms of his own. His desire was to put his art in the hands of a new, larger audience who would not have been able to afford one of his canvases (Lakoubay, 2013).

Picasso, unlike many other artists working with clay, had extensive experience working with other mediums. The act of creating works in clay satisfied different needs for Picasso. He used the material to take a hiatus from his canvases, with which he had grown weary. Through his initial inexperience with the medium, he found excitement, as if he were in uncharted waters. With the new material, he found a new energy and creativity that broke new ground and opened up new doors over the whole body of his work. (McCully, 1999).

Creative Process

When Picasso found clay, he was already a world-renowned painter and also had experience working in other three dimensional materials. As a result, he approached the material as he would any other material, searching for the inherent qualities that he could probe and then utilize in his arsenal of tools to express himself. Picasso was eager to explore clay's unique qualities and soak up those experiences. In 1949, a visiting friend noticed that Picasso was being forced to preconceive the final piece like never before. Picasso loved this new challenge and the unsettling type of anticipation that came with working with clay. He often knew what he wanted, but, for once, didn't always have the tools to make it a reality. He had to learn processes and techniques (McCully, 1999). With little effort, Picasso had an uncanny way of absorbing the essence of whatever he wanted to know (Huffington, 1988). He often worked clay mindlessly, as if finding himself in the material, but there were also times when he chased down an idea. He sketched extensively at times, refining his visions and working to make his original forms speak (see Figure 38). It is also apparent that Picasso enjoyed playing with the fourth dimension offered by clay, which his canvases lacked. He loved the way that the form slowly revealed itself as the viewer walked around it. Obviously the viewer cannot

see through one side of a three dimensional piece to view the other side. As a result, the viewer must walk around or turn the piece around to see what discovery is in store for them. Picasso loved to toy with the anticipation that the viewer experiences going from one view to the other (McCully, 1999). Within a year of working at Madoura, Picasso made over a thousand pieces (McCully, 1999). Through the sheer volume of his production, Picasso was able to develop and master many of his own unique techniques, entertaining himself trying to resolve any visual challenges that he found.

Message

Picasso never considered himself a potter. In fact, he often relied on Madoura potter, Jules Agard, to throw his more complicated forms. Picasso wasn't interested in mastering the studio techniques of a seasoned potter. He was interested in creating new life by tearing down the components of traditional forms and then rearranging them into new creations of his own making. Picasso's grandson, Bernard Ruíz-Picasso wrote about his grandfather's work in clay in the book *Picasso: Painter and Sculptor in Clay*.

I sense intuitively that my grandfather, with wisdom of his years wanted to work matter itself- life itself between his fingers: to give life to matter, just as his wife gave life to his children. (McCully, 1999).

Picasso sought self-renewal that he found only through the act of reconstructing a reality of his own through his art. Picasso loved to be in the moment, following his impulses and creating art that would redefine his reality by bridging the chasm between his inner subconscious and the visual reality that all humans share in the real world (McCully, 1999). Picasso's disdain for truth derived from his objections to societal realms that he felt were wrong. He empathetically saw the suffering, and pain of the world around him and could not help but confront what he felt was to blame (Nasher Sculpture Center, 2015).

Picasso's message was not a specific declaration or suggested virtue of which he felt all should take heed. Instead, it was a response to the strife and heartache of his time. He connected with the human condition and made his work as a representation of the condition he saw in the world around him. Arianna Huffington, author of *Picasso: Creator and Destroyer*, when talking about Picasso's legacy, said, "He was, in fact, a time-bound genius, a seismograph for the conflicts and turmoil and anguish of his age" (Huffington pg. 473).

1. When and where was Pablo Picasso born?

- a. 1834 in Paris
- b. 1881 in Spain
- c. in Munich
- d. 1845 In New Orleans

2. What was Picasso's first word?

- a. "Lapiz" spanish for pencil
- b. "Perro" spanish for Dog
- c. "Arte" spanish for art

3. Why did Picasso choose to take his mother's name instead of his father's name Ruiz?

4. How old was Picasso when he completed his first oil painting?

- a. 6
- b. 7
- c. 8

5. What was Picasso's father's profession?

- a. Lawyer
- b. Art Professor
- c. Salesman

6. Where did Picasso move when he was 19?

- a. Paris
- b. Amsterdam
- c. The Virgin Islands

7. How did WWI and WW2 change people's perception and acceptance of Cubism art?

8. Where did Picasso rediscover clay in 1946?

- a. A pottery workshop with the Archie Bray Foundation
- b. While visiting Paris
- c. A pottery exhibition in Vallauris

9. What was Picasso's main motive in producing hundreds of ceramic forms?

- a. able to afford one of his paintings.
- b. Picasso was mostly concerned with the therapeuticness that clay gave him
- c. Picasso used clay to heal after the war.

10. What was different for Picasso about working with clay? How did his process have to change from what he was used to with painting?

11. There are 3 dimensions in our physical world. Height, width, & Depth are the normal dimensions that people refer to. Picasso talked about a fourth dimension. What is he referring to? Please explain his concept of the fourth dimension.

12. Within a year of working at the Madoura Pottery Picasso had made over a _____ pieces of pottery?

- a. 200
- b. 500
- c. 1000

13. To the best of your ability describe Picasso's message behind his artwork. What was he trying to say to his viewer? What was his work a response to?

