

# Case Study 1

## *Parade: A Union of Symbolism and Cubism*

### Background concepts:

#### 1) Symbolism

- truth can be found in either the spiritual realm or within oneself, not through observation of the physical world
- the symbolist writer wants to be free from the imposition of the formal or emotional patterns that come with a realist approach
- to achieve this “freedom” or autonomy, the artist must examine the materials and methods of making art; for a writer this means an interest in how language relates to its subject; for a visual artist, it means an examination of the communicative properties of color, shape, and line; in both cases, it is a relationship with the real world in which the objects we see have no value in themselves; their value lies in their role as hieroglyphics or clues to some transcendent meaning
- also for both, this means an emphasis on the most distinctive elements or properties of the real world or thing being described; detailed description works against the suggestive quality of objects—the risk is hermeticism but it is a risk which these artists are willing to take. Something to note and which raises the possibility of a contradiction in terms of Picasso is the symbolist refusal of “quotidian” reality or the mundane world. Yet, symbolist writers themselves, by the 1900s, are ambiguous about this rejection as they begin to merge the quotidian with the dream, and as they begin to make poetry a part of ordinary journalistic life. In a sense, by doing this, they are negating (dematerializing) the importance of the object and emphasizing the priority of the idea that the object generates. This may be part of the reason why Féneon, a symbolist art critic, thought Seurat was more of a symbolist than Gauguin.

#### 2) Mallarmé

Mallarmé, the French symbolist poet, wrote that words had lost their power to evoke mystery because people were accustomed to using them in ordinary circumstances. The issue for him is how to return this power and evocativeness to the word. Like music, he says, words have power when they are surrounded by space. Also like music, literature has movement. Sometimes it moves towards obscurity and sometimes it moves towards luminescence. This *movement* of words, bending, twisting, sinuously wrapping around themselves, is the source of the idea in the work of literature (the poem). This is important, because we usually think the “idea” has to do with meaning of the words, but Mallarmé is trying to say something else – the idea comes from how the words are used, with that “how” being a matter of sound and image. We might say this is an act of affirmation and negation at one and the same time, just as the title of his book is: *A Throw of the Dice will never Abolish a Throw of the Dice* (see Figure one for an example of what the text looks like and the corresponding importance of the visual effect in his poetry).

statistics about his book:

- 7 type sizes and 3 type faces
- 8 pages have the same number of lines on them; 2 pages have the same number of lines in the same type face
- sometimes text reads across the fold; sometimes it reads vertically on a single page; sometimes one phrase continues for several pages
- there is no single correct way to read the book, although most people look for ideogrammatic and symbolic meaning—finding meaning in the constellation of words and lines as well as in the words themselves. Most people believe that on one level, at least, the poem is about the poet's act of creation—an act which cannot be random yet is always subject to the tyranny of chance

### ***Picasso and Symbolism***

In Barcelona, Picasso had been a frequent visitor to the café called Els Quatre Gats—where Catalan artists, anarchists and poets hung out (see figure 2 for the menu, designed by Picasso). His early paintings tell us that he was interested in symbolist themes, that he looked at the work of Spanish symbolists and their exaltation of the primitive and of childhood, and that he studied the post-impressionists—especially Seurat and Redon. In Paris he became friendly with the French symbolist poet, Max Jacob. By 1905, he was painting circus and acrobatic artists, wandering minstrels, clowns and saltimbanques. [Compare Figure 3, Toulouse-Lautrec: *At the Moulin Rouge*, 1892-5 and Figure 4, Picasso: *Harlot with her Hand on her Shoulder*, 1901. The subject matter is bar life in both cases and in this example, Picasso's style demonstrates the lingering influence of a broad neo-impressionist brush combined with the line quality of Toulouse-Lautrec. Other examples demonstrate a much closer relationship to the work of Toulouse-Lautrec.] Typically, these figures are rarely identifiable as a single type, so the Harlequin, for example, is often fused with the Clown, and together (or alone) they represent the experience of isolation, or of being an outcast. Picasso, of course, was an outcast so he identified with the clown, but the acrobat was an artist, and Picasso also identified with him. [See figure 5 for Picasso's painting of a family of circus "outsiders": *The Family of Saltimbanques*, 1905.] These figures are not unique to Picasso's repertoire—they are everywhere to be found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the work of Manet, Degas, Cézanne and Seurat, among the painters, and Baudelaire and Verlaine, among the poets.

When Picasso becomes a more permanent part of the Paris scene and his style begins to change, at first glance it appears that he has left behind the vocabulary of symbolism and pictorial icon of the clown or saltimbanque as an outsider. Certainly, we don't find these figures in the cubist paintings of Braque and Picasso, although we do find solitary figures in a bar. When Picasso takes the next step by incorporating real elements into his painting, the entire fabric of cubism is suddenly changed and irrevocably altered. The *papier collé* fundamentally recasts the nature of the painting and makes it an object. Obviously, both artists had already begun to assert the materiality of the painting before this: the introduction of letters into the painting was the first evidence. Letters are flat, two-dimensional objects which reinforce the flatness of the surface. But the introduction of real materials is a more

radical step and in particular, we need to recognize how the introduction of newspaper changes the cubist painting – it is here that we truly confront the question of shifting meanings and the role of context, and we do it in more than one way. The pieces of newspaper in *Violin* [Figure 6, 1912] are inserted into a charcoal drawing and performing two roles in this context which exist in inverse relationship to one another just as the shapes do. One piece becomes part of the violin (the foreground object in the painting) while the other piece becomes part of the background. Yet we know that these are both pieces of newspaper; they look alike, and they structure the composition in a diagonal sweep across the canvas. Identical, but their meanings are entirely different; and this is how Picasso moved away from the traditional goal of using elements in a painting which “look like” what they represent to using elements which can only be understood through a contrast with other elements. The meaning of these elements is determined by place, position, and the oppositions made with the other elements. The arbitrary and constructed nature of meaning is thereby illuminated by this act, just as the nature of the role of the sign in language is illuminated by a text.

As Picasso and Braque continue in this format, they begin to add pieces of newspaper, matches, other items and fragments which could be found on any table in the cafe. These real materials have several implications: first, the use of newspaper or other "detritus" was a challenge to the "belle peinture" tradition or the cult of fine materials; second, the collage became an ironic commentary on traditional means of representation, especially the creation of illusion. The collage is a new type of realism as well as a new conception of pictorial reality as consisting of different layers of material reality. This leads to the idea and the method of starting not with the object itself and then dissecting it (which Picasso and Braque never really did in their paintings but they did do it in the collages), but starting instead with the pictorial elements and letting the composition give them objective significance.

The collages in a very fundamental way call attention to the nature of art as a language. Given a sufficient number of collages, you begin to recognize recurring forms which indicate parts of the object represented: a blue rectangle in the violin collages, indicating the body of the instrument, a white trapezoidal form which seems to indicate the neck of the instrument; a double curve which may be a sign for the shape or the presence of the holes cut into the body of the instrument, or both; a semi-circular form indicating the very base of the instrument. Once these forms are recognized, it can also be noted that there is no consistent sequence for their arrangement. This is a vocabulary of sorts, but it is a vocabulary in which *arrangement is less important than presence*. [Compare Figures 7 and 8: *Violin*, 1913, and *Table with Violin and Glasses*, also of 1913.]

By 1913, Picasso has dissected his musical instruments and created an idiosyncratic vocabulary of parts in his collages, while in his works with newspapers, he has chosen and isolated words which provide a meta-level commentary on his own position in society and in the world of art. The newspaper, in other words, part of quotidian culture, has not lost its recognizability but it cannot really be understood. It has been taken out of its banal existence and revitalized with a new power.

But here we come to an argument which says that if we interpret the *papiers collés* as an attempt to challenge the boundaries between high and low art, or conversely, if we interpret them as political statements made in the guise of this ambiguous entity in the art world, then we've basically DE-radicalized the most radical aspect of what Picasso had done. This radicalism was the deliberate attempt to deprive the sign in the painting of any consistent meaning and to do this by using these elements in a manner in which their meaning is continually fluctuating or changing, dependent on the sets of oppositions created by the individual art work. But this is where I see the most emphatic example of how Picasso does this to be not in a single work of art but in his role as stage designer for the 1917 production of Jean Cocteau's play, *La Parade*.

### ***Parade***

Performed by Diaghilev's Russian Ballet in 1917, *Parade* was a collaboration between Cocteau, Satie and Picasso, with choreography by Leonide Massine. Satie's working habits are interesting because he kept small notebooks in which he recorded all sorts of boring facts (how much he spent on food) as well as his observations on whatever caught his eye, made sketches, and developed musical exercises. He was a member of the Rosicrucians in the 1890s and his music had been symbolist and impressionist at that time; by the 1900s it was becoming more of a musical parallel to Picasso's style of fragmenting the world, and like Picasso, he had a habit of inserting things into his music – such as text, but these were not words which would be sung. They would be seen by the performer. His music for *Parade* incorporates sounds from real life, whether appropriate or not. [Listen to the music sample on the class web site.]

The scenic action: The story involves three characters called Managers, two acrobats, a Chinese conjurer, an American girl. The scenes are bizarre, combining magic tricks and improbable events without a real sequence to them, performed against a musical background consisting of the sounds of sirens, of typewriters, of other real sounds, and performed by characters wearing costumes which looked like cubist constructions and the advertising sandwich boards worn by street vendors in the Paris streets, looking like the harlequins and acrobats of Picasso's earlier paintings from his years before formulating cubism, and looking like the harlequins and acrobats of his cubist years, as well.

When the Chinese conjurer comes on stage, this is what happens (in the words of Cocteau):

The Chinaman pulls out an egg from his pigtail, eats and digests it, finds it again in the toe of his shoe, spits fire, burns himself, stamps to put out the sparks, etc....

The little girl mounts a race-horse, rides a bicycle, quivers like pictures on the screen, imitates Charlie Chaplin, chases a thief with a revolver, boxes, dances a ragtime, goes to sleep, is shipwrecked, rolls on the grass, buys a Kodak, etc....

The harlequin had never completely disappeared from Picasso's work and had made a notable return in 1915, somewhat in the guise of cubism but still recognizable. He returns again in the curtain for *Parade*. The stage curtain seems at first sight to represent a return to Picasso's early symbolist and more naturalistic style of painting. But it is more whimsical and fantastical

than the early paintings, just as the cubist costumes are more whimsical and fantastical than Picasso's cubist paintings. The curtain is important in this context because it provides one level of artistic reality; it becomes an almost literal "backdrop" against which the cubist characters become something torn out of another level of reality. "Pasted" against the curtain, in visual terms the performance is a three-dimensional montage or collage. But what precisely is this character who is "pasted" against the curtain?

The costumes are the true invention of the play. Essentially, Picasso has taken his earlier fusions of guitars and humans, put a living person inside them, and they come to life. Picasso spoke of his intentions: "How effective it would be to exploit the contrast between these characters as 'real' as pasted 'chromos' in a canvas and the more solemnly transposed unhuman, or superhuman, characters who would become in fact the false reality on stage, to the point of reducing the real dancers to the stature of puppets."

*[Chromos refers to the magazine illustrations which Picasso might have torn out of newspaper or magazine and inserted in a collage; some of the characters in the play had more fantastic and unreal costumes than others, so he is comparing the look of the different characters when he talks about some looking "real" and others looking "superhuman"; the ballet dancers who would look most human would actually seem to be puppets in this rather bizarre mixture of visual realities.]*

The ballet as a whole becomes a ballet of relationships between real pieces and imaginary pieces, between "floating" events related to the real-life world of popular culture and cabarets and the high art world of ballet and painting. The use of sounds and noise taken from real life does the same thing with the auditory environment of the ballet, and when all of it is put together—street noises, a human being wearing a skyscraper on his back, the apparent randomness of everyone's actions—the effect is comparable to a newspaper which has come to life. The actions of the characters, which seem random and unplanned, as they might seem at a fairground or carnival, calls into question the meaning of the idea of a composition, whether it is a play, a ballet, or a work of art. Finally, the existence of a real audience for the play, an audience who must somehow make sense of all these relationships, takes the puzzles offered by the stage to the world beyond the stage and more emphatically questions the relationship of inside to outside, of front to back, of foreground to background, of spectator to actor. Not only is this a performance where Picasso's cubist constructions have come to life; it is also a world in which the shifting dialectics and puzzles of modernism appear to exist in a living, three-dimensional form.

[See Figures 9 - 14 in the Case Study Image Group for examples of costumes and the curtain design for *Parade*.]

## 06. Case Study on Parade



- Creator** Mallarmé, Stéphane
- Title** Un Coup de Des N'Abolira le Hasard (A Throw of the Dice will never Abolish a Throw of the Dice)
- Date** book first published in 1879
- Commentary** Figure 1. Two page spread from Mallarmé's poem.



- Creator** Picasso
- Title** Menu for El Quatre Gats
- Date** 1899-1900
- Commentary** Figure 2.



- Creator** Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri de, French
- Title** At the Moulin Rouge
- Date** 1892-1895
- Commentary** Figure 3.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso
<b>Title</b>	Harlot with her Hand on her Shoulder
<b>Date</b>	1901
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 4.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso
<b>Title</b>	Family of Saltimbanques
<b>Date</b>	1905
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 5.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso
<b>Title</b>	Violin
<b>Date</b>	1912
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 6.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso
<b>Title</b>	Violin (1913)
<b>Date</b>	1913/14
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 7.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso, Pablo
<b>Title</b>	Table with Violin and Glasses
<b>Date</b>	1913
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 8.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso
<b>Title</b>	Parade stage curtain
<b>Date</b>	1917
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 9. Compare the style of the curtain with the Family of Saltimbanques.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso
<b>Title</b>	French Manager
<b>Date</b>	1917
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 10.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso
<b>Title</b>	actor as French Manager
<b>Date</b>	1917
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 11.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso
<b>Title</b>	American Manager
<b>Date</b>	1917
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 12.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso
<b>Title</b>	Chinese Man: costume for Parade
<b>Date</b>	1917
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 13.



<b>Creator</b>	Picasso
<b>Title</b>	Parade, stage set
<b>Date</b>	1917
<b>Commentary</b>	Figure 14.