

# The many faces of Pablo Picasso

Without Picasso, modern art simply wouldn't be the same...



(Clockwise from bottom left) Man with Mandolin, Woman Reading and After Manet's Dejeuner sur l'herbe



**CREATIONS**  
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I was in New Delhi at the beginning of the New Year and, naturally, visited the Picasso exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Modern Art (Ministry of Culture, Government of India) and the Embassy of France in India, at the National Museum. I have seen Picasso's paintings before — in Paris, New York and elsewhere. This one was brilliantly curated by Marie-Laure Bernadec of the Musee Picasso in Paris and Saryu Doshi of the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai. Put together as a retrospective, it turned out to be a crash course on the life and work of Picasso.

*Metamorphoses 1900 — 1972* is the title of the exhibition, an apt one since much of Picasso's life and work is about change and transformation. He dominated the art scene in the twentieth century, spanning the period from 1900, when he held his first show, to 1973, when he died at the

age of 92. It is a tribute to a great artist who changed the art scene of the last century.

Picasso was greatly influenced by Cezanne whom he described as "the father of us all". Impressionist painting had already overturned traditional art, but Cezanne, even as he respected the classical painters, used paint to model, and created a new genre now termed as Post-Impressionism. He investigated form and space, using geometric forms to situate objects and crossing the space bar, a path to be followed by Picasso. Later, Picasso became part of the Cubist revolution in art, along with his friend and alter ego Georges Braque. It may be of interest to recall that Le Corbusier, creator of Chandigarh, used Cubist ideas to decorate his new city.

Picasso's early paintings, between 1900 and 1904, are known as the Blue Period, tinged with melancholy and influenced by the suicide of his friend Carlos Casagemas. He painted hundreds of sad faces without even a smile, where blue is the dominant colour. This was followed by his Rose Period, when he abandoned sentiment for "beauty, balance and serenity". Paintings such as *Nude Youth* and *Head and Shoulders of a Woman* are stylized in touches of pink and ochre with grey for depth. Picasso painted harlequins and acrobats and lively circus scenes.

The change came in 1908, after the Cezanne retrospective in Paris in 1907. Picasso and Braque launched Cezannesque Cubism, by reducing forms to simple geometric volumes. The favourite subject was the still life, the simplicity of the everyday objects enhanced by focusing on plastic pictorial effects. From this he evolved towards the

fragmentation of volumes into multiple facets, anticipating the period of Analytical Cubism. Space was depicted from various angles.

But Picasso combined various idioms; both geometric and naturalistic figures coexisted in the same painting. His *Man with Mandolin* was the most powerful of his Analytical Cubism period. Outlines were shattered and figures could no longer be distinguished from the background. Picasso chose subjects with a tall format, leaving an unfinished lower section, which contained part of the original sketch.

Although abstraction was a possibility, Picasso remained rooted to reality through the introduction of paper collages. From Analytical he went on to Synthetic Cubism, reintroducing colour and using flat simplified shapes and interplaying real, patterned paper and wood with its painted imitations.

Picasso resolved the problem of representing real three-dimensional objects on a flat surface by alternating flat surfaces with physical relief, juxtaposing different views, playing with different textures and materials through various artistic techniques, thereby sculpting his paintings to produce a new genre.

His *Glass, Pipe, Ace of Clubs*, and *Die* (1914) sets out his new Cubist statement. His idea was that things are not what they seem to be. Not many people may be aware that the habit of "camouflage" for vehicles and people, invented by Guirand de Scevola before World War I, was inspired by Cubism. De Scevola copied

their methods to "totally deform objects" so that things were not what they seemed.

But Picasso did not restrict himself to Cubism. His *Studies* (1920-1922) combines classical figures and Cubism, by bringing together different tones, colours and styles of painting on one canvas. Between 1925 and 1937, Picasso dabbled with Surrealism. He produced a series of

tars by transforming a variety of materials — string, cardboard, wood, and fabric. Yet another influence on his painting was African tribal art to which he had been exposed and had developed great fascination for.

Picasso was greatly influenced by the women in his life — and there were many. The first was Fernande Olivier whom he met in 1904. She provided several studies for his Rose Period paintings. In 1911 Eva Gouel became his girl friend, but died in 1915. This was the period he began experimenting with Cubism.

In 1918 he married Olga Kokhlova and produced a series of portraits of Olga on the lines of heavy antique Iberian statuary. In 1927 Picasso met 17-year old Marie-Therese Walter, whose full figure inspired volume and heavy modeling. In 1936, the Yugoslavian Dora Maar entered his life. Picasso used angular shapes and black and red for the brunette Dora, in contrast to the rounded forms and the blue and yellow used for the blonde Marie-Therese. In these paintings we find the use of different angles to view the face and body on one canvas, to suggest mood and movement.

In 1937 he met the American Lee Miller whom he depicted with a startling combination of humour and viciousness. In 1946 he started living with Francoise Gilot who was depicted by him with curves, arabesques and simple lines linking geometric shapes. The last woman to enter his life was Jacqueline Roque in 1954. This time he separated the limbs and juxtaposed them on the same plane, reducing and simplifying the anatomy, with codified graphic signs to convey the nude body. This was Picasso's late idiom. The next year his legal wife Olga died, and he married

Jacqueline in 1961.

Some of Picasso's oeuvres have played major roles in art history. One such is *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.K. Rue) (1911-19), which Leo Steinberg analysed elaborately, in a monograph. It consists of five figures, "each singly encapsulated". Picasso broke with traditions of form and continuity, even time and space, bringing tribal African and Western forms within a single frame.

In 1937, shocked by the viciousness of the Spanish civil war, he painted *La Guernica*, his largest canvas, created in shades of black, white and gray. It awoke the conscience of Europe to the horrors of war. Between 1959 and 1962, he produced 27 paintings and 140 drawings, besides lines and maquettes, devoted to Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*.

This was a dialogue between two artists, Picasso and Manet, between a traditional representation of landscapes and the human form and Picasso's application of Cubism. Returning to landscapes, Picasso fitted into these paintings this dialogue between artist and model, surrounding them with festoons and suggesting stylization through Cubism. It was a classical theme set in a modern idiom.

The period 1933 to 1939 was one of engravings produced for the art dealer Ambrose Vollard. The central figure was a Minotaur — half-man, half-bull — with whom Picasso identified himself. The Minotaur is shown in a variety of situations, from the company of innocent children to orgies with models. Finally, Picasso punishes the creature, and thereby himself, by blinding him, as he stands bellowing in despair. Picasso was terrified of blindness, yet, he said, "They should put out painters' eyes, the way they do to goldfinches to make them sing better".

Picasso produced some large and dramatic bronzes, and painted ceramics some of which are on display. He was also an amateur photographer, and his photographs are an interesting documentation of his life and times.

The 122 works on view — depicting all the various stages mentioned above — are from the Musee Picasso in Paris and from his son Claude and the Picasso family. The selection of oeuvres is an excellent documentation of the history of Picasso. *Metamorphoses* is all that I have written and more, and a wonderful opportunity for us to see the work of the greatest and most important artist of the previous century. From Delhi the show travels to Mumbai. My only complaint is that none of the South Indian cities will be honoured by Picasso's art. I am told (unofficially) that the reason for this obvious omission is the lack of good galleries and security in the Government Museums. How shameful!

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