

MoMA Audio

Picasso in Fontainebleau

Final Transcripts

377 *Guitar*. 1919

Curator, Anne Umland: This show takes a deep dive into a moment in Pablo Picasso's long career. It looks at the works that he produced in a very unconventional studio—in a garage—in the town of Fontainebleau in France in the summer of 1921. This work dates to 1919, so before Fontainebleau, but this motif, the guitar, foreshadows the theme of music and performance that you'll see in Fontainebleau.

Guitar is a collage. At its center, on this cutout sheet of paper, are painted a black dot with three lines above and below that. Those are Picasso's signs for a guitar. It has strings and it has a round hole. The paper is mounted on top of a long, skinny diamond shape with multicolored panels.

Conservator, Erika Mosier: There's a fake pin that seems to be holding the paper. But the paper is actually held by four straight pins. You see his sense of humor here. Below this guitar is another piece of paper—that's newsprint, that's very brown—and it acts as a shadow.

Conservator, Anny Aviram: I always saw that piece of paper was the support, almost like sitting on an easel.

Erika Mosier: Yes, it could be a table. It could be a shadow.

Anne Umland: Picasso is among the artists whose works have come to define Cubism, a new form of art pioneered in the second decade of the 20th century. And Cubism was this moment where there is an insistence that marks don't have to be tied to some visual resemblance, that it's the context that gives it meaning.

378 *Harlequin. 1915*

Curator, Anne Umland: I'm Anne Umland. I'm senior curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture here at MoMA.

This work was painted in 1915. At its center is this elongated figure wearing a Harlequin costume, identifiable by its diamonds. Harlequin is a character from a type of Italian theater called *commedia dell'arte*.

The head and neck emerge from the flat top of the harlequin's costume. The little, round head is tiny, the neck is really long, but has a single eye and then this very toothy smile that has floated off the face and overlaps onto the white shape behind it. The legs end in this tilted white rectangle. Nothing is stable in this picture.

Theater Director, Patricia McGregor: As a theater artist, I think of this as a performer emerging from the void.

My name is Patricia McGregor. I am the Artistic Director of New York Theatre Workshop.

I see the big black surround as the theater space that this figure is emerging from, clearly engaging with the audience. I feel like these eyes are looking at me, smiling and trying to make me smile.

Harlequin is zany, funny, mischievous—somebody who the world might see as not having power, but through his plots will find a way to move his agenda forward.

Anne Umland: Harlequin is the figure of the trickster, a character of multiple identities that Picasso identified with. I think in the Fontainebleau moment, this idea certainly plays a role in the different visual styles that Picasso's using.

379 *The Spring*. 1921

Curator, Anne Umland: This charcoal drawing is titled *The Spring*. It's a female figure reclining in a landscape. And the figure holds an amphora that's tilted and that water is pouring out of.

Professor, Cassandra Tran: There's this sort of serene stillness that makes me think of a statue.

I'm Dr. Cassandra Tran. And I'm an assistant professor in the Department of Classics at Wake Forest University.

When I tried to pinpoint what made this image classical, the first one is the reclining position, which is suggestive of guests reclining together at dinner parties in ancient Rome. Her simple dress is, perhaps not historically accurate, but harkens back to Greek and Roman dress.

The fact that the setting is a spring and it's a woman at leisure, I was thinking of water nymphs. Nymphs are female divinities who have a relationship to the natural world, usually young women in perpetual youth and beauty.

So, it seems classical, but we're talking about multiple cultures throughout multiple time periods.

Anne Umland: For Picasso, to use the word "classical" can connote visual references to Greco-Roman antiquity. But in his own time, people also talked about classicism in terms of classical training and making a work of art using shading and representations of volume and creating an illusion of space.

380 *The Salon of the Home in Fontainebleau: Olga at the Piano. 1921*

Curator, Anne Umland: Why did Picasso go to Fontainebleau in the summer of 1921? Getting away, a retreat. He and his wife, the former ballerina Olga Khokhlova, found a house to rent. They were parents for the first time. Their new baby son Paul was born in February. They struck a balance between a work life, a family life, and socializing.

This house, that the Picassos rented, is still standing. And this very detailed drawing is remarkably faithful to the space.

Conservator, Erika Mosier: When I look at this work, I see this controlled riot of line.

I'm Erika Mosier. I'm a paper conservator at MoMA.

A detail I really like about this work is that if we look at the carpet, he's given us an indication of the pattern, but he hasn't drawn the pattern overall. The same thing's going on with the pictures above the piano. We have the frames, but we don't have the images. He's chosen to leave out certain details. I feel like he's giving our eye the room to process this drawing.

Anne Umland: I love how if you get up close and compare the quality of line that he uses to render Olga Picasso relative to that that he uses to depict the inanimate objects in the room, you can see he's used a very delicate, much lighter touch in her figure. It's very intimate. It feels very private. She's seated at the piano. She's in the process of turning the sheet music. Her right hand is playing on the keys. And he captures her likeness with just that single profile and the hairstyle and the beads.

381 *Three Women at the Spring*. 1921

Curator, Anne Umland: We're standing in front of one of two enormous images that depict three women gathered around a rocky structure or spring. And if you turn around, you can see on the wall across the way the large red chalk version of the same subject.

Conservator, Anny Aviram: He came to this final version by doing many preparatory paintings and drawings where he moved the women in different positions. Then he comes back to this final version where the focus is the play of hands in the center of the painting.

My name is Anny Aviram. I'm a paintings conservator.

The other interesting thing is that you would think that the woman in the center has her palm up so that water flows into her hand, but we took an x-ray, and we saw that there was no water.

Anne Umland: I think that really heightens the mystery of the work.

If you let your eye wander down below the hands, there's rivulets and pools and drips. Just look at the seated figure on the right and the lower half of her body, how the knee on the right side is opaque and then the outstretched leg to the left, that garment is translucent.

Anny Aviram: The bottom feet almost appear to be like they're inside water. They have no shape.

Anne Umland: It's as though Picasso is not representing water, he is creating the effect of water with the way that he manipulates his paint.

23 Verbal Description: *Three Women at the Spring*. 1921

Narrator: The artist Pablo Picasso painted *Three Women at the Spring* in 1921, using oil on canvas. The painting measures about seven feet tall and five-and-a-half feet wide. In metric units, the work is about 204 centimeters tall and 174 centimeters wide.

In this large, vertically-oriented painting, three women gather around a spring of water in a rocky landscape. The women resemble ancient Greek or Roman statues, wearing grayish-white, sleeveless pleated tunics that fall to their ankles. Their skin is painted with earthy peach tones and their hair is dark brown. Their facial features are statuesque, with straight noses, heavy-lidded eyes, and small mouths. Together, their bodies form the shape of a pyramid.

Picasso has given each of the women thick, rounded bodies and limbs, so that they appear solid, weighty, and monumental. They fill almost the entire canvas. Apart from their gray gowns, the color palette is mostly warm, dominated by the women's peach skin, as well as the oranges and browns that make up the roughly painted rocky background. Picasso uses thick, dark lines to outline many of the forms and features depicted. At the center of the canvas, a small stream of water trickles into a clay jug. The three women sit and lean around it.

For a more detailed description, continue listening.

Moving from left to right, let's take a closer look at each of the women. On the left side of the painting, the first woman stands, her body filling the canvas from top to bottom. With dark eyes beneath thick brows, she wears a neutral facial expression. Her wavy hair is pulled back. Her gray gown hangs loose. The strap on her right shoulder has fallen, exposing her right breast. Her left arm and knee are bent, resting against heavy blocks protruding from the rocky landscape. Her right hand hangs at her sides, and a small earthenware jug dangles from her index finger, nearly brushing her bent knee. Her bare right foot, with its roughly defined toes, is firmly planted on the ground. Her gaze tilts to the right, and it is unclear if she is gazing into the distance or at the seated woman nearby.

Now let's move to the second woman, who is at the top center of the painting. She leans her upper body over a rock which blocks her lower body from view. Using the rock as a support for her left elbow, she rests her cheek on the backs of her curled fingers. Her dark hair is long and loose, falling down her back. Like the first woman, her gown slips down her shoulder to reveal her right breast. She looks down at the upturned palm of her right hand, each thick finger clearly defined. A faint stream of water—suggested by painted black lines—runs over her open hand and down into the clay jug at the center of the canvas. The jug is nearly identical to the one held

by the first woman, but is about twice its size and painted in a darker shade of red-brown.

The third woman sits upon a rocky step, turning her body and head toward the right to face the other two women. Her hair is pulled up and back so that her face, with its straight triangular nose, is seen in profile. Her left arm rests on her lap, and her right arm stretches out to clasp the handle of the jug collecting water beneath the spring. Her gown extends to her ankles and is cinched at the waist. Its pleats follow the curve of her seated legs, the fabric losing definition as it stretches out to cover her casually extended right leg. The woman's peach-pink feet are roughly sketched-in, appearing blocky and unfinished.

510 *Three Musicians*. 1921

Curator, Anne Umland: We know from photographs that during his time in Fontainebleau, Picasso painted two mural-sized versions of the subject of three musicians. Each featured these very colorful, collage-like musicians seated behind a table in this shallow, stage-like space.

In the version of the picture that we're facing, the leftmost figure can be identified as a *commedia dell'arte* character, known as Pierrot, who is known for his melancholy. Here he sits next to a Harlequin figure, known as a trickster. On the right is a monk, dressed in a very abstract version of a Benedictine robe.

But just pivot, what's behind you? *Three Musicians* across the way.

You can go back and forth to identify both the similarities and the differences. In the version of the picture behind us, the Harlequin and the Pierrot figures have switched places. They've switched instruments. And the monk wears a brown Franciscan robe as opposed to the black Benedictine one.

Picasso designed the sets and the costumes for two ballets performed in Paris in the six months or so before he leaves on vacation. And so notions of performance and stage and scale, working big—those are all things that must have been on his mind.

Theater Director, Patricia McGregor: *Three Musicians* feels very theatrical. They're in masks. Their costumes feel very intentional, very bold. These tiny little hands, these jagged fingers attached to these instruments, just vividly makes me think of the music that is being played.

Anne Umland: The two *Three Musician* canvases and the *Three Women at the Spring* canvases are facing each other across the room in the way that they were positioned in the Fontainebleau studio.

Patricia McGregor: With *Three Women at the Spring*, none of them are looking directly at me. It feels like they are being observed. We are getting to glimpse into their world. Even though they are together, it feels they are not connected, they are not in concert with each other.

Whereas with the *Three Musicians*, they are playing to us. We call that breaking the fourth wall. It feels like they are there to burst into our world. It feels like jazz. It feels like, you play that note, I play this note, and together the collective is bigger than the individual.

25 Verbal Description: *Three Musicians*. 1921

Narrator: The artist Pablo Picasso painted *Three Musicians* in 1921 using oil paint on canvas. The painting is about six-and-a-half feet wide and seven feet tall. In metric units, the painting measures 201 centimeters wide by 223 centimeters tall.

This square-shaped painting—only a few inches larger than a king-sized mattress—depicts a group of three costumed musicians holding instruments and sheet music. The setting is a bare, dark brown space—like the inside of a box or a stage set. The floor is a lighter brown color than the walls.

The three musicians occupy the majority of the canvas. They look out to the viewer as if mid-performance. The first two figures on the left are dressed as characters from commedia dell'arte, a form of Italian comic theater that was popular in Europe between the 1500s and 1700s. The figure on the far right is dressed as a monk.

None of the figures are painted naturalistically. Instead, Picasso renders them using flat, overlapping shapes. On some of these solid-colored geometric planes of brown, blue, grey, white and black, brushstrokes of paint remain visible.

For a more detailed description, continue listening.

Moving from left to right, let's take a closer look at each musician. The figure on our far left represents Pierrot, a sad clown. He wears a cone-shaped white hat and a black eye mask. Fixed between his lips is a long grey clarinet. With the pointy fingers of his tiny brown, paw-like hands, Pierrot clutches the clarinet by its sides. His hands are disproportionately small in size compared to the rest of his body—a feature that all three musicians share.

Pierrot sits behind a brown table, the white square legs of his pants visible beneath. On top of the table is a stack of black, brown, blue, and white geometric shapes—objects the artist identified as a pipe, a package of tobacco, and a pouch.

Let's turn now to the figure in the middle. He wears a red and gold diamond-patterned costume reminiscent of that worn by the trickster character called Harlequin. With his small hands, the Harlequin plays a guitar. The instrument has an ochre body with black and brown rectangles of varying sizes to represent the neck and strings. His face is like a puzzle: a large expanse of royal blue paint is punctured by two brown holes, creating an eye mask. The mask spreads to the left, covering various parts of the first figure's face and body. Below it, a beard is suggested by a mesh of white criss-crossed lines against a rippling black shape, and bordered by white fuzzy brushstrokes. The Harlequin's head is topped by a black semi-circle resembling a skullcap.

The figure on the far right is dressed as a monk in a long black hooded robe. His rectangular face peeks out from the garment's diagonally pointed hood. It's made up of a long gray block with slanted sides. It looks as if two holes have been cut for brown eyes with a square hole for a brown nose underneath.

The lower two-thirds of the rectangle is composed of a brown hourglass shape. Wavy vertical gray lines resemble a stylized beard over a mouth. Two tiny brown hands emerge from the black robe to hold a wide, rectangular page of sheet music. The white sheet faces the viewer to show black staves and musical notes.

There's another character who almost disappears into the painting's dark brown background. At the bottom left, hidden on the floor behind the Pierrot's legs, is a large brown dog with wiry black hair. It stretches out onto its stomach with its legs facing the left side of the canvas. The dog's back legs with long black claws graze Pierrot's foot. It's small, curved, jaunty tail flicks upwards between the Harlequin's legs.

About halfway up the left edge of the canvas, another shape hovers above the dog's front paws. It is the black silhouette of a dog's head with two pointy ears, a long snout, and an open mouth. This could either be the shadow of the first dog or another dog in the background.

382 *Studies. 1920–1922*

Curator, Anne Umland: This picture is covered by a series of mini paintings. In the upper left corner is a Cubist vignette of a glass and cards. Immediately next to that is a couple dancing on a beach. They have shading and modeling, so they have a physicality that is very different from their Cubist companion at left. And that kind of alternation of ways of representing things and people continues across the surface of this canvas.

The effect is of a collage or an artist's studio. And in fact, you can see a relationship between this image and how Picasso arranged the pictures on the walls in the Fontainebleau garage.

Theater Director, Patricia McGregor: We often look at the final presentation of something, whether that's a painting or a performance, there sometimes feels like an inevitability about it. And actually, the studio is the place where all the thinking, all the glorious revelations, and the painful failures that is that sacred space that holds all of it.

Anne Umland: I think this picture sums up the way, in Fontainebleau, Picasso does seem very intent on demonstrating how past and present, Cubism, classicism, abstraction, representation, figures, geometry not only coexisted, they were created in dialogue.