

LESSON THREE: Portraiture



IMAGE EIGHT: Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *Margot or The Wait*. 1901. Oil on cardboard, 27 ¼ x 22 ½" (69.5 x 57 cm). Museu Picasso, Barcelona. Plandiura acquisition, 1932. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE NINE: Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *Girl before a Mirror*. 1932. Oil on canvas, 64 x 51 ¼" (162.3 x 130.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

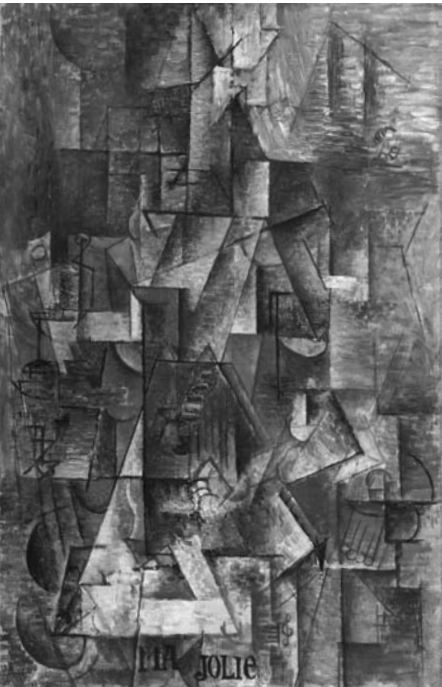


IMAGE TEN: Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *“Ma Jolie.”* 1911–12. Oil on canvas, 39 ¾ x 25 ¾" (100 x 64.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

INTRODUCTION

Portraits can represent individuals in many different ways. A portrait can be a literal representation or it can represent a person symbolically. It can capture a person's physical characteristics and/or attempt to represent his or her personality, ideas, or emotions. These three portraits by Picasso represent a range of styles, from representational to abstract.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand the conventions of **portraiture** such as **pose, gesture, expression, costume, and setting**.
- Students will examine three distinct styles in which Picasso worked.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Begin the conversation by asking your students to define "portraiture." Ask if they have ever sat for their portrait. Perhaps they have had their picture taken at school. Ask if they ever do anything special in preparation for having their picture taken. Ask them why or why not.
- Ask your students to describe what someone looking at his or her portrait could learn about the sitter from what he or she is wearing (the costume) or the expression on his or her face.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to take a moment to look at *Margot* or *The Wait*. Ask students to describe the woman's pose, her gesture, her expression, and her costume.
- Ask your students about the position of the woman's body. Ask them what they think her posture communicates.
- Ask your students what they can learn about the woman by examining her pose, gesture, expression, and costume.
- Direct your students to focus on the **background** of the painting. Ask them if the background can aid them in learning about this person. Ask them why or why not.

When Picasso was nineteen years old, he went to Paris. At the time, Paris was the center of the art world. Picasso was excited by the city's fast pace and diversity, and he began to include street scenes and scenes of Parisian nightlife in his work. It is likely that the woman in this picture was someone that Picasso saw on the street or met briefly in a music hall.

- Ask your students to think of descriptive words to characterize the style of this painting.

Leaning forward, with elbows crossed before her on the table, the figure looks directly at the viewer. She is most likely seated in a café frequented by Picasso and his friends. Picasso's style in this period was representational and defined by broad brushstrokes and the use of vibrant colors, which give the painting a mosaic-like pattern, particularly in the background.

- Ask your students to take a moment to look at *Girl before a Mirror*. Ask them to tell you what they see in this painting, referencing her expression, gesture, pose, and costume. Be sure to ask them to support their observations with visual evidence from the painting.
- Ask your students what they can learn about the sitter by looking at the painting.

The woman in this painting is Marie-Thérèse Walter, one of Picasso's girlfriends, who appears in many of his paintings from this time. In this portrait Marie-Thérèse, who was possibly pregnant at the time, looks at herself in a mirror. But Marie-Thérèse and her reflection in the mirror are not identical, suggesting a symbolic duality, that is, two different sides of her character. This painting is often interpreted as a young Marie-Thérèse transitioning from innocence to maturity. The diamond pattern in the background is reminiscent of the costume of a *harlequin*, a figure with whom Picasso often associated himself. In this way, Picasso is also symbolically present in the painting.

- Ask your students to consider similarities between *Margot or The Wait* and *Girl before a Mirror*. Ensure that students consider not only the subjects of the portraits, but also the ways in which they are painted, including the choices Picasso made with respect to the given subject's pose, position, and surroundings.
- Ask your students which painting reveals more about its subject in their opinion. Ask why.
- Ask your students to think about the stylistic differences between *Margot or The Wait* and *Girl before a Mirror*. Ask how these stylistic differences impact their interpretation of the figures.
- Ask your students to take a moment to look at "*Ma Jolie*." Let your students know that this is an image of a female figure holding a guitar. Ask them to look closely and try to make out the figure. Although the painting is predominantly in shades of gray and brown, making it hard to distinguish the figure from the background, the lines and geometric forms are concentrated toward the center, while the parameter of the painting appears to recede. At the top center, one can make out a head that appears to rest on tilting shoulders; diagonal lines sloping down to the left suggest an arm; in the bottom right corner, four fingers point downward. Other items, which connote music and a café setting, include a treble clef from musical notation and the words "*Ma Jolie*" from a popular song.

"*Ma Jolie*" was painted in 1911 to 1912, between *Margot or The Wait* (1901) and *Girl before a Mirror* (1932). Like the others, this painting depicts a female figure, and the sitter was a girlfriend, Eva Gouel, whom Picasso had nicknamed "*Ma jolie*" (My pretty one), a phrase from a popular song at the time. During this period, Picasso was working in southern France with fellow painter Georges Braque. Together they developed a new way to represent the world around them, which an art critic later pejoratively called *Cubism*. Braque and Picasso hoped to break down form into interlocking geometric shapes. Although their work seems abstract and is often rather difficult to decipher, Picasso and Braque felt that they were in fact depicting modern life, and hoped to involve their audience in the perplexing puzzle as they tried to sort out the imagery. For comparable works by Braque, such as his *Man with Guitar* (1911–12), please visit www.moma.org/collection.

- Picasso once said, "Cubism is an art of dealing primarily with forms." Its subjects, however, he continued, "must be a source of interest."¹¹ A subject that clearly interested Picasso was portraits of women.
- Ask your students if they see any stylistic relationship between *Margot or The Wait*, "*Ma Jolie*," and *Girl before a Mirror*. Be sure to have them back up their responses with visual evidence from the images. Ask your students to consider how these three examples of the many styles in which Picasso worked communicate in different ways. Ask which painting reveals the most about the subject. Ask which one reveals the least. Ask why.

11. Pablo Picasso, quoted in *Picasso in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art*. William S. Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 70.

ACTIVITIES

1. Organize your students into small groups of four or five. Give each group an object to sketch. Your students may sketch on plain or colored paper. Ask the students in each group to sit in a circle around the object so they each have a different perspective. After the students have made quick sketches, have them tear their drawings into four or five pieces. As a group, have students combine and layer the pieces into an abstract composition. Ask them to consider what has happened to the subject of their sketch. If they showed the finished product to someone not involved in the project, would the subject of their composition be recognizable?

2. Ask your students to plan a portrait of someone they know. Ask them to think about the costume, expression, pose, and background they intend to include in their portrait. Ask them to consider if they will create a portrait that is representational or one that is abstract. Ask if they will focus primarily on what the person looks like or attempt to include ideas the person might be contemplating, as Picasso did with Marie-Thérèse Walter in *Girl before a Mirror*.