

Picasso's Guitar, 1912: The Transition from Analytical to Synthetic Cubism

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Controversy continues as to the dating of Picasso's first cardboard *Guitar* (fig. 1) and its role in his artistic development. The two questions are interconnected, since the exact date could indicate whether *Guitar* resulted from Picasso's two-dimensional synthetic works¹ or was created after his first *papier collé*². The problem was still considered unresolved even after Picasso himself claimed that *Guitar* had preceded his two-dimensional works.³

The debate was resumed by William Rubin, in his introduction to the catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) exhibition *Picasso and Braque*.⁴ Although Rubin changed the dating of *Guitar* from *early 1912* to *October 1912*, he still supported Picasso's own claim.⁵ However, Rubin's revised dating was based on Edward Fry's conclusions, rather than on any new evidence.⁶

I believe that it is possible to understand the role of *Guitar* and its place in Picasso's artistic development, even in the absence of its exact date, by determining whether it belongs to the analytical or to the synthetic phase. I consider *Guitar* to have been Picasso's most significant work in the phase of his transition from analytical to synthetic cubism, and that it includes characteristics of both. It was an artistic experiment that turned out to be a solution to the dead end reached by analytical cubism in 1912. If, indeed, *Guitar* was Picasso's first attempt to find a new way to represent the object, it can be assumed that it was created before the *papiers collés* and the collages.

By 1912 cubism had clearly reached a cul-de-sac. Between 1910 and 1911, with the development of analytical cubism, forms had become increasingly fragmented and transparent, contours had opened up and dissolved into space. This development finally prevented the spectator from placing the parts of the object in a specific location. While it might still have been possible to reconstruct a single object by "assembling" its parts, it was no longer possible to do so

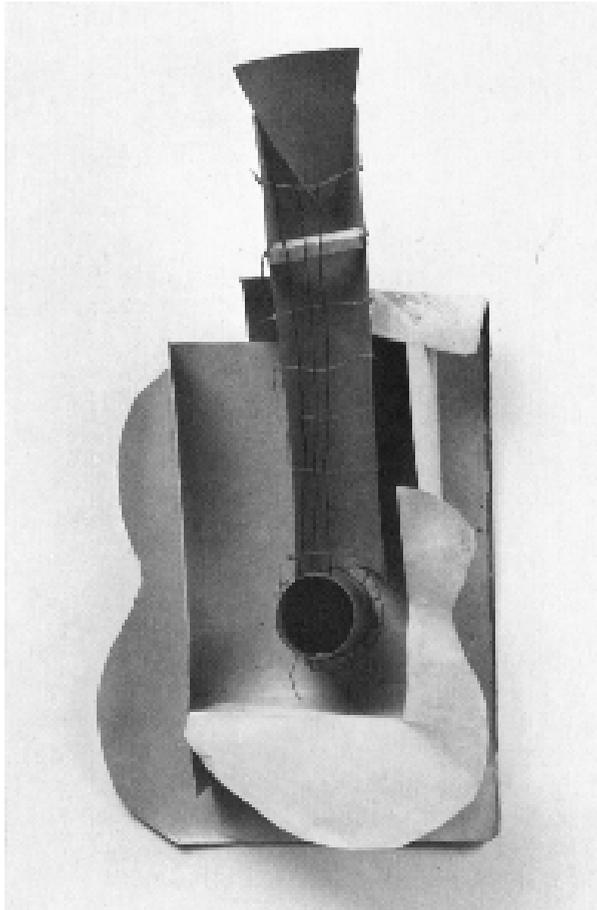


Fig. 1: Picasso, *Guitar* (maquette), 1912, Cardboard and string, 66 x 33.7 x 19.3 cm, MOMA, New York.

when fragments of several objects were scattered about the painting. And once the objects could no longer be identified, the painting became practically abstract – a result that completely negated the aim of the cubists, since the object was the subject matter of their art.

This development appears to have been a direct result of the way the analytical cubists represented the object. Assuming that the senses, although essential, were insufficient in themselves to clarify the essence of the object, they employed the following three aspects of simultaneity:

a. *Comprehensive simultaneity*, expressing the need to present the spectator with the most obvious visual characteristics of the object, seen from several

points of view. This was achieved by fragmenting the object and rearranging the parts in the pictorial space.

b. *Simultaneity of interior and exterior*, expressing the awareness that the object's external aspects do not clarify its essence. The need to expose the inner structure of the object demanded the use of transparent facets.

c. *Simultaneity of object and space*, expressing the modern concept of substance, in which mass, as a function of time and space, is equal to energy and therefore not necessarily solid.⁷ The result was a reversal of characteristics as between solid and void, and the penetration of space into substance. These were achieved, as before, through the use of transparent facets and also by the opening up of contours.

Paradoxically, this process – whose original aim was to clarify the essence of the object – was also the reason for the dead end reached by analytical cubism. The breaking of the object into too many parts, the opening up of contours, and the excessive use of transparent facets led to the disappearance of the object itself, as noted earlier. The main difficulty of analytical cubism seems to have resulted from a dependence on the perceptual aspects of reality, by which the identification of the object essentially involved its visual characteristics. When the eye was no longer able to locate familiar forms, it could not identify the object. Hence a new way to represent the object was needed – one that would not depend on a reconstruction of its appearance.

Those were the circumstances in which *Guitar* was created. Picasso was often known to solve pictorial problems by sculptural means. Since his main problem was the dissolution of the object's parts into the pictorial space, it is reasonable to suppose that he tried to solve it by examining the interrelationship among sections of the three-dimensional object in real space. That being the case, some aspects of the analytical concept should reveal themselves in *Guitar* – as this was the reason for Picasso's search for a solution – as well as some clues to the synthetic concept, to which it would eventually lead. If both approaches appear together in *Guitar* we can assume that it represents a transitional stage, a first step in the changeover from analytical to synthetic cubism.

All the aspects of simultaneity that characterize analytical cubism can indeed be found in *Guitar*:

a. *Comprehensive simultaneity*: The *Guitar* is represented simultaneously from several angles. Although the observer is limited to one perspective he can see sections of both the front and the rear: the sections of the front contain the neck, the strings and the hole of the sounding board; the sections of the rear are the part protruding beyond the side contour (this part could at the same

time represent the silhouette or profile) and also the part reflected through the negative void – the opening of the front plane.

b. *Simultaneity of interior and exterior*: In analytical painting simultaneity of interior and exterior is achieved by using transparent facets. No comparable solution had been found thus far in sculpture, however, because of the traditional concept of sculpture as mass surrounded by space and because of the use of the traditional solid materials, stone or bronze.⁸ By using a new kind of material in the front plane of *Guitar*, that of void representing solid (negative void), Picasso also succeeded in overcoming the problem of transparency.

c. *Simultaneity of object and space*: Use of the negative void enabled both the interaction of object and space and the reversal of characteristics between the two. Here Picasso was using not only negative forms, such as void instead of substance, but also positive forms, such as the hole in the sounding board represented by a cylinder. The solid material of the cylinder thus supplies the concept of a nonsolid form in the visual reality. At the same time it assists the viewer in penetrating the interior of the guitar, serving as a point of reference by providing an idea of the depth of the various planes and their relationship to one another.

Some aspects of the analytical phase, however, are missing in *Guitar*, the most obvious being the facets. Picasso, instead of using facets, breaks up the object into planes, each indicating a different level of depth, and each appearing to have a different color because of a different intensity of shadow. None of the planes gives the complete shape of any part of the guitar; but by using the most characteristic features and by defining each plane with clear contours, the artist gives us enough clues to complete the form in our mind.

The existence of all aspects of simultaneity in *Guitar* shows that while creating it Picasso was still involved in his earlier concept of reality – one belonging to the analytical phase. However, the missing facets and the breaking up of the object into planes already indicate a change. This technique was later to be applied by Picasso in his two-dimensional works of the synthetic phase, by using a different color to denote each plane.

Guitar contains not only the technique but also the conceptual approach of synthetic cubism. This approach can be clarified by examining its connection to the development of European epistemology, which indicated a shift from one concept of reality to another. Christopher Grey, for example, sees a similarity between the perception of the object by analytical cubism and its perception by Kant – a synthesis of *a priori* knowledge and of information perceived through the senses.⁹ However, in the synthetic phase the artist no longer wishes to analyze the sense stimuli; he prefers instead to convert the work of art into

an independent reality that exists according to its own autonomous rules. The emphasis therefore shifts from the senses to intuition, and the artist leaves out such visual aspects as depth and volume. According to Grey, this approach is close to the ideas of Hegel.¹⁰

Edward F. Fry regards the transition from analytical to synthetic cubism as a shift from the Bergsonian concept of duration to Husserl's phenomenism.¹¹ In analytical cubism the object was perceived by a continuous accumulation of impressions.¹² In the synthetic phase the object is conceived through a synthesis of one's impressions and the meanings (*intentions*)¹³ one gives them. This synthesis does not require the accumulation of all the visual aspects; it can be created by reducing the object's characteristics to certain essential clues (*reduction*).¹⁴

Were the various phases of cubism inspired by Kant or Hegel, Bergson or Husserl? It is difficult to ascribe such a direct philosophical influence to either analytical or synthetic cubism, but the transition mentioned above indicates that the perception of reality had changed and the emphasis had shifted from the visual to the conceptual.¹⁵ This transition was an answer to the difficulties of the cubists – a way to break away from their dependence on the visual aspects of the object.

Picasso achieved that break through during the creation of his first cardboard *Guitar* by using only the few characteristics that were essential to transmit its concept. A guitar can be perceived through a set of associations, formed by assembling such signs as strings and pegs, a silhouette of the profile, the contour of the neck, a piece of wood and some musical notes. By synthesizing these signs a new guitar is created – one that does not imitate any existing guitar. The spectator can therefore identify it without depending on its visual aspects. The artist, thus, presents a concrete object – one that does not represent another object but is an object in itself. This concept brought about the cubist term "tableau-objet,"¹⁶ or, in this case, "sculpture-objet." Picasso's 1912 *Guitar* is, indeed, such a new object.

Nonetheless, *Guitar* is not a complete synthetic construction. To be that, it would have had to integrate two dimensional aspects into the three-dimensional construction, so as to create an ambiguity in the mind of the viewer. For if *simultaneity* is the key word in analytical cubism, it is *ambiguity* that characterizes synthetic cubism. Instead of creating comprehensive and descriptive simultaneity, synthetic cubism creates a more complex reality, that of contrasting and simultaneously existing situations. Ambiguity was in fact already present in the analytical phase, in the exchange of roles between solid and void, as well as in the unrealistic use of color, light, and shadow. All these cause the

spectator to experience a contradiction between the visual reality and the reality of the work of art. In synthetic cubism, however, the use of ambiguity is more complex. Since the painted or sculpted object no longer represents an existing object but is instead an object in itself, a contradiction arises between the two realities: that of the "conventional" object, which exists in one's mind, and that of the new one, created by the artist, which exists both as the subject of the creation and as the creation itself.

That contradiction is intensified when "non-artistic" materials borrowed from the world of visual reality are introduced – as in the case of pasted paper, collage or assemblage. The contradiction between reality and illusion is further intensified in three-dimensional works when real volume, partly disguised by color, appears two-dimensional and is placed side by side with illusionary volume, and it is no longer clear what is painted and what is real. According to Penrose, Picasso willfully disturbs us by combining various degrees of deception, which together set up a play of complementary meaning, a metaphysical pun.¹⁷ Thus Picasso himself used the term *trompe l'esprit* rather than of the traditional *trompe l'oeil*.¹⁸

By using ambiguity, synthetic cubism offers an enigma and not a solution.¹⁹ It offers a statement that contradicts all the traditional techniques based on illusionism, because illusion is a lie. According to Gombrich, if illusion is created by an interrelationship of clues and a lack of contradictory facts, then in order to abolish it one must cause the clues to contradict one another.²⁰ Any attempt to follow the clues will lead to a dead end; on the other hand, the presence of the clues invites the viewer to reconstruct the object, and the failure to do so serves only as an incentive to try anew. Thus the spectator becomes involved in the creative act; both spectator and artist alike are stimulated into repeatedly examining the essence of the object as well as the meaning each gives to it. Every work of art presents a concept of an object that is right for a given moment only but that serves also as one more step toward the absolute object. This process can also be described as dialectical. In fact, it is possible to regard the synthetic work of art as composed of a thesis and an antithesis. Their simultaneous existence creates ambiguity and forces one to reach a synthesis.

The need to use means as complex as possible to create ambiguity led Picasso to combine paint and other materials (as he did in his *papiers collés* and collages) or two and three dimensions (as he did in his later constructions). Since such a combination does not exist in the first cardboard *Guitar* of 1912, it cannot be considered an actual synthetic work. It is a sculpture, but not in the traditional sense; it is rather an object, and as such it does not need a pedestal or a frame or any sort of background, because these would only isolate it from the world

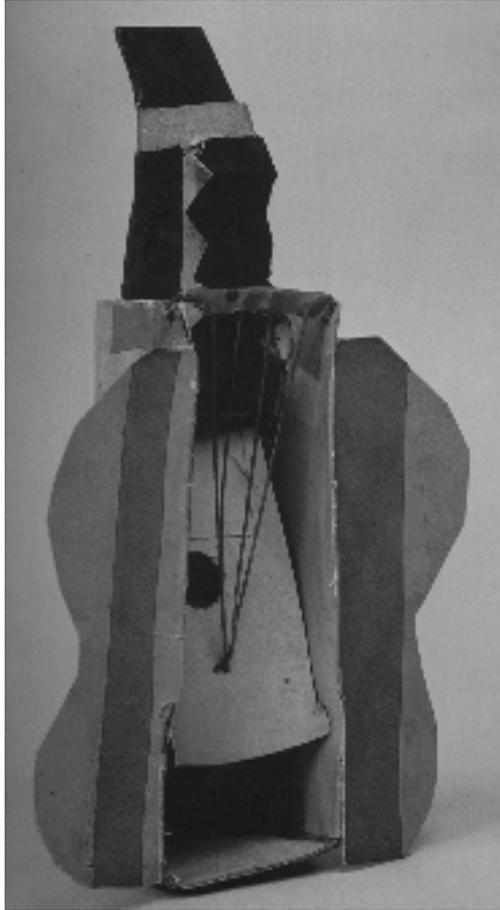


Fig. 2: Picasso, *Guitar*, 1912, Cardboard, pasted paper, canvas, pencil and string, 22.8 x 14.5 x 07 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris.

of other objects. It can, therefore, be suspended in the air or placed directly on a table.

In the same year, 1912, Picasso already used color in his two other *Guitars* (fig. 2)²¹ and thus combined real and illusory depth and space. He also created two-dimensional works (pasted papers and collages) in which he translated into color the differing shadows caused by the different depths of planes. (sig. 3, 4)²² This technique could not have been applied to his two dimensional works before the creation of *Guitar*.

It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the 1912 cardboard *Guitar* was indeed created in the transitional phase between analytical and synthetic

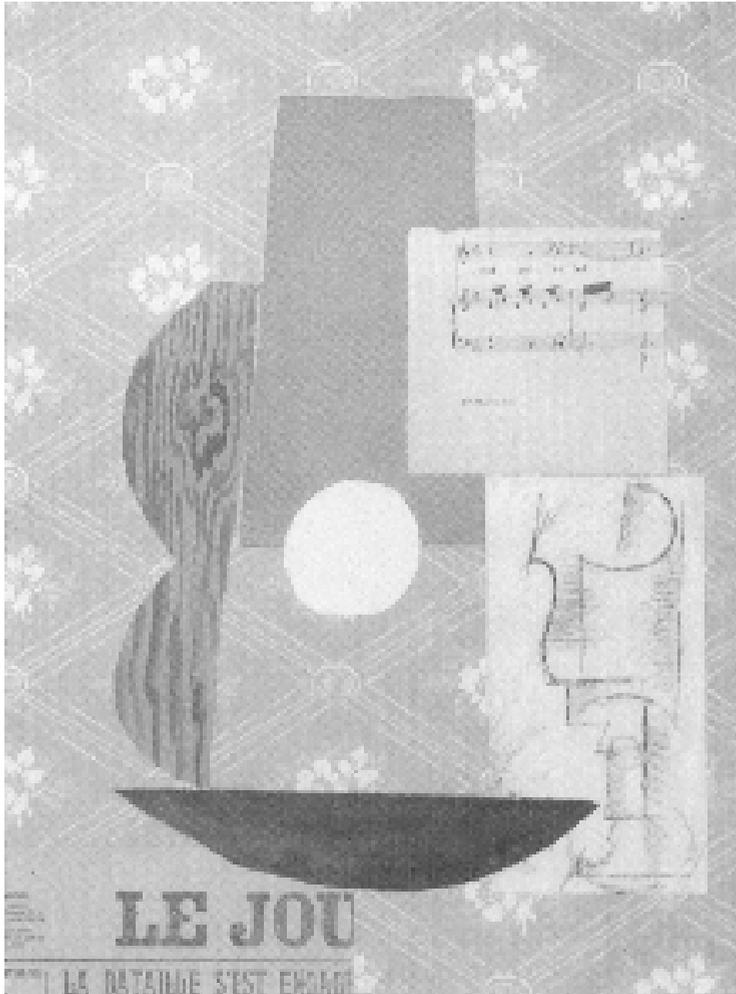


Fig. 3: Picasso, *Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass*, 1912, Charcoal, gouache and pasted paper, 62.5 x 47 cm, The McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas.

cubism, since it contains both approaches – that which creates the object anew by using its external characteristics, and that which creates a new object by means of conceptual associations. I believe that *Guitar* was the "laboratory specimen" through which Picasso analyzed the problems he had encountered in the analytical paintings. There he reached his novel concept of the object and created a new visual language, one that he later applied to his synthetic constructions and paintings. The *papiers collés* could not have been created before *Guitar*, since they already express Picasso's renouncement of the analytical

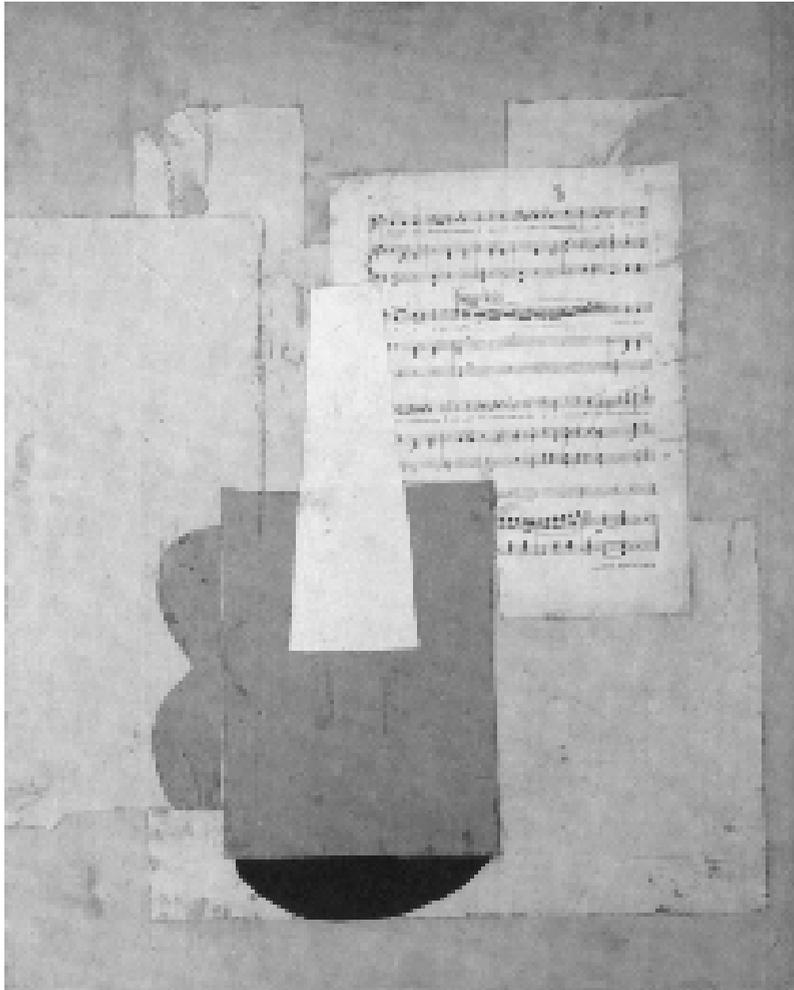


Fig. 4: Picasso, *Violin and Sheet Music*, 1912, Pasted paper on cardboard, 78 x 65 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris.

perception of the object, a solution that he had found during the creation of *Guitar*.

Guitar was not only a significant factor in the transition from analytical to synthetic cubism, it was also a major contribution to the development of modern sculpture. Prior to its creation the cubist sculptors had struggled with the application of analytical concepts to three dimensions: Comprehensive simultaneity could not be reached in sculpture because of the density of the traditional material, which prevented any comprehensive view without a

change of perspective.²³ The nature of the material also prevented a simultaneous viewing of interior and exterior, as well as the possibility of penetration by the void into the solid, or an interchange of roles between the two. In *Guitar*, Picasso introduced a new kind of material, the negative void, which increased the range of sculptural means. He also revolutionized sculpture by using such two-dimensional materials as paper, cardboard and sheet metal – which were not considered as "noble" as the traditional stone or bronze. Viewed in profile, these flat materials looked like lines; Picasso thus imparted a new role to the line, turning it into a sculptural element that both defined form and contained the negative void.

These innovations, which appeared for the first time in *Guitar*, provided a momentum to cubist sculpture, which from 1912 began to flower. However, the most important development derived from the synthetic concept of reality, by which the cubists were free from dependence on the visual aspects of the object and were, therefore, able to abandon the use of descriptive simultaneity. This new concept, together with the use of new materials, enabled the cubist sculptor to employ a new sculptural language. This new language was introduced into modern sculpture and was to be used by the artists of a variety of movements, among them futurism and constructivism.

NOTES

- 1 This was the commonly accepted position. Rubin believes that it was first put forward by C. Greenberg in his essay "The Pasted Paper Revolution" (1958), reprinted as "Collage" in *Art and Culture*, Boston, 1961 (see Rubin, 1989, 57, n. 51). I would like to stress that Picasso himself made the following comment to Julio Gonzales: "It would have sufficed to cut them up – the colors, after all, being no more than indications of differences in perspective, of planes inclined one way or the other – and then assemble them according to the indications given by the color, in order to be confronted with a 'sculpture'" – a description that proceeds from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional state (Penrose, 1967, 19).
- 2 H. Kahnweiler, in *Le Sculpture de Picasso*, 1949, was the first to claim that Picasso's synthetic paintings were a two dimensional translation of his constructions (see Daix, 1979, 118). This approach was also supported by Daix himself (*Ibid.*) and was especially insisted upon by Johnson (Johnson, 1976, 115). Cooper also described the 1912 constructions as the "forerunners" of *papiers collés* (Cooper, 1976, 234). He claimed that Picasso and Braque had both created constructions during the same period but that those of Braque were lost. (*Ibid.*, 58). The accepted belief today is that Braque was the first to work in pasted papers and paper sculptures (Rubin, 1989, 30). However, that is a matter that lies beyond the scope of the present paper.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 31. Rubin explains that he cannot recall whether the term Picasso used was

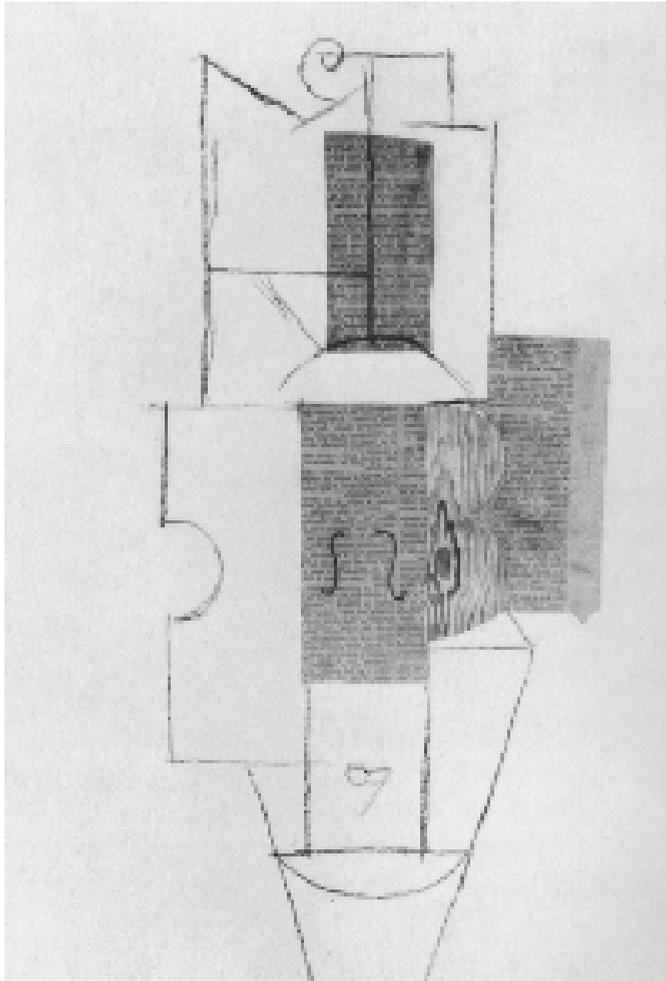


Fig. 5: Picasso, *Violin*, 1912, Pasted paper, charcoal and watercolor, 62.5 x 48 cm, Alsdorf Foundation, Chicago.

collage or *papier collé*. Because in the past Rubin had believed the word to be *collage*, he had dated the work as early 1912, before *Still Life with Chair Caning* (May 1912, Collage of oil, oil cloth, and paper on canvas surrounded with rope, 27 x 35 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris). Now, however, he has become convinced that Picasso meant *papier collé*. Whatever Picasso meant, we have to remember that it was said in 1971, many years after the work's creation, and that he himself never indicated an exact date for the work.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.* The date "early 1912" was given by Rubin ,1980, 156: "*Guitar*, maquette, early 1912, Cardboard and string, 66.3 x 33.7 x 19.3 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New

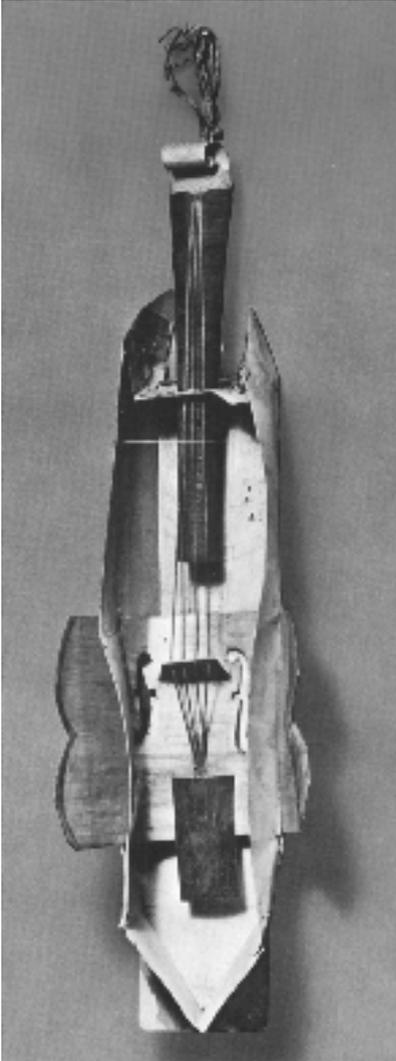


Fig. 6: Picasso, *Violin*, 1913,
Cardboard and string, 58.5 X 21
X 7.5 cm (Spies no. 35).

York." This work is a reconstruction of the original cardboard *Guitar*, which was later used by Picasso for his 1914 assemblage *Guitar and Bottle* (Spies, 1972, cat. no. 48).

- 6 Rubin, 1989, 31-32. Rubin's argument is based on a letter written by Picasso on 9 October 1912 and also involves stylistic reasoning that is derived from Fry, 1988, 296-310. See also Rosenblum, 1982, 6 and n.1; and Fry, 1981, 93-95. In that review Fry concluded that the MOMA *Guitar* must be related to a period no earlier than Sorgues in the summer of 1912, or more likely to Paris, Boulevard Raspail, in the fall of 1912, and that the cardboard version served as a maquette and preceded the final, metal version. I would like to point out that Rubin omitted the very convincing

evidence, although circumstantial, to be found in the words of André Salmon, published in the *Paris Journal* of 11 January 1912: "The painter Picasso... is undoubtedly going to execute some important sculptural works... Until now Picasso has only made known some busts" (quoted in Johnson, 1976, 115). We know that Picasso had not worked in sculpture since 1909-10, so it is possible that Salmon is referring here to the first constructions. Any discussion on the date of *Guitar* must therefore take his words into account.

- 7 Comprehensive simultaneity and simultaneity of object and space are connected also to the idea of the fourth dimension. It is impossible to expand on that concept within the limits of the present context, but it should be pointed out that the cubists accepted the term in its simplified meaning of time, although the term is used only as a symbol in mathematical equations and has neither an illustrative nor a perceptual significance. See also Fry's comment on Gleizes and Metzinger (Fry, 1966, 105-112).
- 8 Picasso's experiment with *Head of a Woman* (Fernande, Autumn 1909, Bronze, 41.3 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York) was unsuccessful. He later told Penrose that he had originally intended to penetrate into the interior with wire strings but gave up the idea as it seemed too intellectual (Penrose, 1967, 19). A more successful solution may be found in Gabo's constructed heads of 1915; but Gabo would probably not have reached his solution had it not been for the use of the negative void in Picasso's *Guitar*.
- 9 Grey, 1967, chap. 10.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 129, 135. We draw this conclusion from Grey's comment on Gris' claim that he works with the elements of the intellect and the imagination while trying to illustrate that which is abstract.
- 11 Fry, 1966, 38-39.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.* Regarding my use of Husserl's terms in the text, see Hintikka, 1974, 144. (This article in Hebrew is based on the Hebrew translation of a lecture given by Hintikka during his visit to Israel in 1974; an English summary of the article is provided on pp. 238-240.) Hintikka also observed a similarity between cubism and Husserl's phenomenalism although, as he pointed out, there could have been no possible connection between the two at the time. Unlike Fry, however, Hintikka believed that the similarity was there from the start, even in the analytical phase.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 This problem was explored in greater detail in Markus, 1984, 33-38.
- 16 Cooper, 1976, 234-235. Cooper claims that the constructions gave reality to the idea of the "tableau-objet".
- 17 Penrose, 1962, 172.
- 18 Johnson, 1976, 122.
- 19 This idea is also discussed in Krausse, 1977, 51.
- 20 Gombrich, 1972, 281.
- 21 *Guitar*, December 1912, Cardboard, pasted paper, canvas, pencil and string,

- 22.8 x 14.5 x 07 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris; *Guitar*, December 1912, Cardboard, pasted paper, canvas, oil and pencil, string, 33 x 18 x 0.95 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris.
- 22 For example: *Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass*, Autumn 1912, Charcoal, gouache, and pasted paper, 62.5 x 47 cm, The McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas. This work is also accepted by Rubin as "one of the first *papiers collés* - if not the very first" (Rubin, 1989, 28). There are other examples illustrating the direct connection between the two-dimensional works and the constructions, one being *Violin and Sheet Music*, Autumn 1912, Pasted paper on cardboard, 78 x 65 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris. Another interesting example that seems to illustrate a reverse process is *Violin*, 1913, Cardboard and string, 58.5 x 21 x 7.5 cm. (fig. 6. Spies, cat. no. 35). This three-dimensional violin looks as if it might have been preceded by a two-dimensional version – *Violin*, Autumn 1912, Pasted paper, charcoal and watercolor, 62.5 x 48 cm, Alsdorf Foundation, Chicago (fig. 5). A sketch that might have been a "plan" for the 1913 work appears in a photograph of a wall of Picasso's studio in the Boulevard Raspail (see Rubin, 1989, 34-35).
- 23 This problem was solved at a later stage by the linear sculpture, where the creation of a transparent grid made it possible to view several sides of the object simultaneously.

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