

Why does Pablo Picasso still matter?

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Introduction

Pablo Picasso, one of the 20th. centuries greatest artist, how should his continuous relevance be discussed? One alternative is to discuss the continuing relevance of Picasso by discussing cubism, which he fathered together with Braque, and its influence of contemporary art. The discussion would include his influence on contemporary artists like George Condo (adds sheets of paper, as the *“paint does not dry fast enough”*), Jasper Jones (On *“mise-en-scène”* he takes us to the adventure of The Wright Brothers, i.e. Picasso and Braque), Francis Bacon (discussing Matisse and Picasso’s influence of his work *“---for me there is very little realism in Matisse. I think it’s the reason I have always been so much more interested in Picasso. Because Mantises never had the? - what can one say – the brutality of fact which Picasso had and I think he turns fact into lyricism.”*) David Hockney (e.g. pictures like *“Christopher without his glasses on”*, *“Christopher with his glasses on”* 1984), Roy Lichtenstein (e.g. *“Abstraction”* 1975 and *“Femme dans un fauteuil”*), Markuz Lupertz and more subliminal artists like Matthew Barney, Richard Serra (he often emphasized the role of the absent, or the outside space, in conjunction with his sculptures, as Picasso’s figures in the series *“Ballets des Champs Elysées”*), Cindy Sherman (uses props and postiches in portraying herself as ourselves), Philip Taaffe (he restitutes retinal imprints such as the Picasso heads he has inserted into a crowd picture of simili pop figures) and others. Picasso has influenced the different techniques used in modern art, in painting, collage, drawing, photo and not least sculpture. Picasso has also influenced other art areas like e.g. architecture, graphic design, and literature.

Or Picasso’s continuous relevance could be discussed based on the fact that art critics are still discussing his relevance such as Robert Hughes in Time Magazine. There are few artists that have so many articles published about themselves and their work as Picasso has e.g. on the internet.

Picasso is also proving his relevance by the fact that he is represented in all major and influential museums all over the world, and that still many collectors buy his work as well as his continuing popularity by the public.

All the above is evidence of Pablo Picasso relevance today. However, to present a **case**, I have interpreted as presenting a contemporary artist and thereby showing Picasso's relevance today. The case chosen is David Hockney.

Pablo Picasso – A short presentation

Before presenting David Hockney as a case showing Picasso relevance of today, Picasso is shortly presented as a background for comparison with Hockney.

Picasso was born in Malaga, Spain, on October 2, 1881. He had always been an art genius and had been painting since he was ten. A precocious draftsman, Picasso was admitted to the advanced classes at the Royal Academy of Art in Barcelona at 15. His power is revealed already in his very early works, some of which were influenced by Toulouse-Lautrec (such as "Old Woman" (1901).

Picasso's artistic production is usually described in terms of a series of overlapping periods. In his "blue period" (1901–4) he depicted the world of the poor. Predominantly in tones of blue, these melancholy paintings such as "The Old Guitarist" (1903) are among the most popular art works of the century. Canvases from Picasso's "rose period" (1905–6) are characterized by a lighter palette and greater lyricism, with subject matter often drawn from circus life, and he began to work in sculpture during these years.

From 1906 his new works were influenced by Greek, Iberian, and African art. He began to use more geometrical figures in his artwork. During this time he also used other objects like fractured glass that was, at the time, a very radical idea.

In 1907 Picasso painted “Les Femmes d’Alger (O.J.)” a radical departure from the artistic ideas of the preceding ages and now considered the most significant work in the development toward cubism and modern abstraction. The influence of Cézanne and of African sculpture is apparent in its fragmented forms and unprecedented distortions. The painting heralded the first phase of cubism, called analytic cubism. This severe, intellectual style was conceived and developed by Picasso, Braque, and Gris. Picasso’s “Female Nude” (1910–11) is a representative painting and his “Woman’s Head” (1909) a representative sculpture of this style.

Between 1908 and 1911 Picasso and George Braque painted landscape paintings in the new style. They created this style by breaking down and analysing a object. The main colour scheme was browns and other muddy colours (monochromatic colour).

Cubist style emphasized the flat, two-dimensional surface of the picture plane, rejecting the traditional techniques of perspective, foreshortening, modelling, and chiaroscuro and refuting time-honoured theories of art as the imitation of nature. Cubist painters were not bound to copying form, texture, colour, and space; instead, they presented a new reality in paintings that depicted radically fragmented objects. The key concept of Cubism is that the essence of objects can only be captured by showing it from multiple points of view simultaneously.

“When we invented Cubism, we had no intention of inventing Cubism. We simply wanted to express what was in us” (Picasso in Chipp, 1968)

In 1912, Picasso began to paste paper and pieces of oilcloth to his paintings and then paint either on them or around them. These were his first collages. This technique is called synthetic cubism. This is a more decorative, colourful style of art.

In the synthetic phase of cubism his forms became larger and more representational, and flat, bright decorative patterns replaced the earlier, more austere compositions. “The Three Musicians” (1921) exemplifies this style. Picasso’s cubist works established firmly that the work of art may exist as a significant object beyond any attempt to represent reality.

During both periods of cubism experiments by Picasso and others resulted in several new techniques, including collage and papier collé.

In the 1920s he drew heavily on classical themes and produced magnificent monumental nudes and monsters that were reminiscent of antiquity and rendered with a certain anguished irony. These works appeared simultaneously with synthetic cubist paintings. Picasso was for a time saluted as a forerunner of surrealism, but his intellectual approach was basically antithetical to the irrational aesthetic of the surrealist painters.

In his later years Picasso turned to creations of fantasy and comic invention. He worked consistently in sculpture, ceramics, and in the graphic arts, producing thousands of superb drawings, illustrations, and stage designs. With unabated vigour he painted brilliant variations on the works of other masters, including Delacroix and Velázquez, and continued to explore new aspects of his personal vision until his death. His notable later works include “Rape of the Sabines” (1963) and “Young Bather with Sand Shovel” (1971). Picasso died April 8, 1973 in Mougins, aged 92, and he left 1.885 paintings, 1.228 sculptures, 7.089 drawings, 30.000 prints, 3.222 ceramics and 150 notebooks.

A case showing Picasso's relevance: David Hockney

"There was one painter working in the sixties and it was Pablo Picasso."

David Hockney, in the lecture

"Important paintings in the sixties", Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1984

It can be discussed whether the most extraordinary innovation of 20th-century art was Cubism or Pop Art. Pop Art emerged in the mid 1950s in England. The term "Pop Art" was first used by the English critic Lawrence Alloway in a 1958 issue of *Architectural Digest* to describe those paintings that celebrate post-war consumerism, defy the psychology of Abstract Expressionism, and worship the god of materialism. Both Cubism and Pop-art arose from a rebellion against an accepted style: the Cubists thought Post-Impressionist artists were too tame and limited, while Pop Artists thought the Abstract Expressionists pretentious and over-intense.

Pop Art brought art back to the material realities of everyday life, to popular culture (hence "pop"), in which ordinary people derived most of their visual pleasure from television, magazines, or comics. In Pop Art, the epic was replaced with the everyday and the mass-produced awarded the same significance as the unique; the gulf between "high art" and "low art" was eroding away.

David Hockney, born in Bradford, Yorkshire in 1937, is associated with Pop-art through his early paintings like "Tea Paintings" and "Love Paintings" as well as his series of paintings based on his swimming pool paintings from California (e.g. "Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)"), and to Cubism by the influence from among others Picasso.

Hockney has however always denied being a Pop artist.

Moving from a distorted, semiexpressionist form of pop-art Hockney developed a highly personal realistic style, producing images that are saturated with colour, witty, and uniquely in-the-moment. Much of his work is also informed by his long-time residence in Southern California, for instance his many joyous paintings of swimmers in undulating, light-struck pools. Hockney's superb draftsmanship is evident in his drawings, paintings, illustrated books, and several series of prints, notably *The Rake's Progress* (1961–63). Hockney is also known for his photographs, his mosaic like photomontages, and his imaginative stage sets for ballets and operas. His customary subjects include still lifes, portraits, and aspects of homosexual life.

Establishing himself with his clean, flat style of rendering people and landscape, Hockney is a realist painter of pleasing portraits and exotic landscapes that are, for the most part, simple compositions in bright clear colours, and he is the most highly publicized British artist since the Second World War.

The similarity with Picasso can immediately be observed, not only by his artwork and the theoretical basis, but also life itself. By the time Hockney won a scholarship to Bradford Grammar School at the age of eleven he had already decided that he wanted to be an artist. At sixteen he managed to persuade his parents to let him go to the local art school and from 1959 to 1962 he studied at the Royal College of Art in London. For him figure-painting seemed "anti-modern" and he began to include words in his paintings as a way of humanizing them, but these were soon joined by figures painted in a deliberately rough and rudimentary style.

David Hockney's Picasso fascination began in 1960, when he visited a large retrospective exhibition of Picasso's work at the Tate Gallery eight times. Hockney was impressed by

the brilliance of Picasso's draughtsmanship as well as by the scope of his inventions, and recalls it as a very liberating influence. The most important discovery for Hockney was that the artist need not limit himself to one kind of picture, but that he could move in any direction he wished. A large section of the exhibition was devoted to the series of fifty-eight canvases executed in 1957 on the theme of *Las Menias* by Velásquez, all of which are characterized by an audacious mixture of styles, pictorial conventions and conceptions of space. The major canvas of the series, dismissing any pretence at stylistic homogeneity, consists of a confrontation of a number of figures each in an unrelated idiom: an outlined diagrammatic figure, a cartoon character, and figures reflecting different stages of Picasso's own development. The result is coordinated rather than visually indigestible not because it is unified in style but because it reveals a consistent attitude towards style. Hockney learned that "*Style is something you can use, and you can like a magpie, just taking what you want. The idea of the rigid style seemed to me then something you needn't concern yourself with, it would trap you.*" In Hockney it produced a feeling of exhilaration and limitless possibilities.

Hockney's first pictorial references to Picasso occur almost ten years later in two paintings: "Three Chairs with a Section of a Picasso Mural" (1970) and "Chair in Front of a Horse Drawing by Picasso" (1971). Hockney was deeply moved when Picasso died in 1973, and he contributed to the portfolio "Homage to Picasso" and thus declared his admiration and love for the deceased master. Hockney recalls "*..... that it was only with Picasso's death that one could begin to see the consistency of his life's work, making sense of the apparent stylistic breaks as the result of a unified attitude towards style and content.*" The importance of Picasso as a model of creative freedom was firmly anchored in Hockney's self-awareness as an artist. In consequence he found it easy to express his feelings for Picasso with unaffected modesty, wit and candour. In the print "The Student:

Hommage to Picasso” (1973) Picasso is represented as a giant sculptured head resting on a column and Hockney is carrying a portfolio of his drawings evidently in order to submit them to the master’s inspection. In “The Artist and Model” (1973-74) the old master and his young admirer are united in a situation of comparative familiarity.

In 1973 Hockney went to live in Paris for a while. He took the opportunity while he was there to work with Aldo and Piero Crommelynck, who had been Picasso’s master printers, and produced a series of etchings in memory of Picasso. In 1974 there was a large exhibition of Hockney's work at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

Hockney was experimenting with Cubism devices for some time, and in 1976 Wallace Stevens’s poem “The Man with the Blue Gituar”, itself inspired by Picasso, struck him by its exposition of the conflict between the artistic imagination and the world. Hockney did a series of ten drawings in coloured crayons published in 1977 first as a portfolio and then as a book. In “A picture of Ourselves” (1976-77) Hockney associates the monster in the poem with Picasso’s female monsters like e.g. “Two Nudes on the Beach”. Hockney has many Picasso borrowings in these etchings.

Hockney used the two paintings “Massacre in Korea” (1951) and “Portrait of Emilie-Marguerite Walter, “Meme”” (1939) as evidence for an attack on photography, whose claims of truthfulness and documentary he aimed to demolish. Hockney’s critique of photography led to his own collages photographs with multiple viewpoints like “Kasmin Los Angeles 28th March 1982” (1982) and “David Graves Pembroke Studios London Tuesday 27th April 1982” (1982). Picasso’s “Portrait of Emilie-Marguerite Walter, “Meme”” gave Hockney the idea of portraying his friend Christopher Isherwood both with and without glasses (1984), and a comparison shows that Hockney’s appropriation is a

truly creative one in which he adopted Picasso's method without merely mimicking externals. Compared to Picasso Hockney moves much more smoothly from one vantage point to the next. He achieves the same truthfulness as Picasso, even if Isherwood's head appears in his renditions more pear shaped than it really was due to the fact that the focus moves most widely in the lower part of the face. In two lithographs of 1985, "An Image of Gregory" and "An Image of Celia" Hockney carries the portrait with a moving focus a step further, from Cubism into Futurism, in both cases the sitters are shown in widely divergent poses so that their arms and legs are multiplied.

Hockney's lucid and impassioned deductions in his Guggenheim lecture ("Important paintings in the sixties", 1984) played a major role in the battle for the acceptance of Picasso's last work

Both Picasso and Hockney are, in one aspect of their works, painters of sunny countries and of leisurely life around their beaches and swimming pools. The Los Angeles lifestyle and landscape became important features of Hockney's work. He expressed his love for his adopted country with much vigour in the grand epic landscape called, after the road leading to his house, "Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio" (1980) – the most ingenious use of Hockney's ideas about Picasso and Chinese landscape painting. "A Bigger Splash" (1967) was painted in California, and is a record of a typical warm, sunny and cloudless day. Hockney applied the paint to the various geometric divisions with a paint roller, and gave each area two or three layers, but not all the canvas is painted. There were other important changes in his work as well: he started using acrylics rather than oil paint and he made increasing use of photography for purposes of documentation.

Hockney is instinctively gregarious, and he has always been interested in the full spectrum of the arts, not merely in painting. It was therefore natural that he should be drawn into

designing sets for the theatre, like Picasso. His first commission of this sort was for a production of Jarry's *Ubu Roi* at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1966. In 1983, a large touring exhibition, *Hockney Paints the Stage*, showed a selection of his designs for opera and ballet. He later designed sets for a Stravinsky triple bill at the Metropolitan Opera, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in Los Angeles, Puccini's *Turandot* in San Francisco and Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten* at Covent Garden.

Hockney was also experimenting both with large composite photographs and with works made of paper pulp impregnated with colour - the Paper Pools. From 1982 Hockney explored the use of the camera, making composite images of Polaroid photographs arranged in a rectangular grid. Later he used regular 35-millimetre prints to create photo collages, compiling a 'complete' picture from a series of individually photographed details. After working with master printer Ken Tyler in the 1980s on making etchings and lithographs, in 1986 Hockney explored ways of creating work with with colour photocopiers. "*The works I did with the copying machine ... were not reproductions,*" he said later, "*they were very complex prints.*" Subject to the same curiosity about new technical methods, he began to experiment with the fax machine, and in 1989 even sent work for the Sao Paulo Biennale to Brazil via the telephone line. Experiments using computers followed, composing images and colours on the screen and having them printed directly from the computer disk without preliminary proofing.

A major retrospective of Hockney's work opened in February 1988 in Los Angeles, and visited New York and London. Technical experimentation has continued to influence his work, without taking it over. His easel paintings made during the 1980s show the influence of Matisse and Picasso.

In 1998 Hockney had an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston where he showed British Landscapes and his Grand Canyon paintings for the first time.

“I see more colour in the landscape than most” says Hockney. *“The Road Across the Worlds”* (1977) combines honeyed yellows, golden oranges and lush greens into a patchwork quilt of British countryside. *“The Road to York Through Sledmere”* (1977) quite literally places the viewer in the driver's seat, speeding by red brick houses toward rural areas outside the city's center. The great size of these works (like 4' x 5') heightens the intensity of the experience. Two Grand Canyon works are each created from a mosaic of small canvases placed together to form the finished product. Nine canvases form one painting which measures 3' X 5.5', and fifteen canvases create the 5.5' x 5.5' painting.

The Picasso retrospective held at Tate Gallery in 1960, and in particular the later works shown, (Hockney's lucid and impassioned deductions in his Guggenheim lecture (*“Important paintings in the sixties”*, 1984) played a major role in the battle for the acceptance of Picasso's last work), revealed to him the possibility of using apparently conflicting idioms and of making reference to a variety of sources within a single picture so long as they were held together by a consistent attitude towards style.

Conclusion

Cubist relief constructions helped to create the climate in which it was possible for an artist, such as David Hockney, to fabricate emblems of ordinary objects and deem them worthy of contemplation. Picasso accessed us to a vision: he made things manifest – and by doing so he gave art a virtuality, which conveyed it into the future. He was in fact the precursor to today's “anything goes” process. As we stand here now in the present future of Picasso's art, with contemporaries he never met, Picasso at the same time reminding us that it must stick: that technique, perfection and work are still driving forces of creation.

As Picasso David Hockney demonstrates versatility in an extended area – painting, drawing, photography, stage design and illustrations.

Hockney's colourful personality, like Picasso's, has made them recognizable figures to people not particularly interested in art. A film about David Hockney entitled *A Bigger Splash* (titled after the painting "A Bigger Splash") from 1974 enjoyed considerable popularity in the commercial cinema.

Hockney as a contemporary artist look to Picasso not as a father to be subjugated, but rather as a brother and soul-mate. For Picasso's work opened doors and allowed, rather than reigned: his everyday vocabulary opened his art to a shared moment rather than a lofty esthetic experience. Hockney's experiments in fragmentation and planar assemblage are performed in a true spirit of admiration and camaraderie, and in an attempt to pierce the hermetic core of creativity.

Picasso himself said:

"All I have ever made was made for the present and with the hope that it will always remain in the present... When I have found something to express, I have done it without thinking of the past or of the future."

"To me there is no past or future in art. If a work of art cannot always live in the present it must not be considered at all. The art of the Greeks, of the Egyptians, of the great painters who lived at other times, it is not an art of the past; perhaps it is more alive today than it ever was".

Picasso's work is still considered, and Hockney has had a lifelong dialogue with Picasso.

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