

Episodic yet revolutionary: Picasso's engagement with sculpture

Disparate states of being

ANDREW BUTTERFIELD

PICASSO SCULPTURE
Museum of Modern Art, New York,
until February 7, 2016

The magnificent show *Picasso Sculpture* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York is one of the most revelatory exhibitions of the artist's sculpture ever mounted. Containing 172 works and occupying the entire fourth floor of the museum, the exhibition gives a sweeping overview of the artist's protean career as a sculptor, from the first clay statuette he formed in 1902 to the last metal models he cut and painted in the 1960s. Picasso's engagement with sculpture was episodic, occurring about once a decade, each time for just a few years. Nevertheless, what he made were some of the most revolutionary and influential sculptures of the twentieth century.

The show is arranged chronologically, with one or two rooms for each decade. This division of the material highlights the artist's inexhaustible capacity for reinvention – of both himself and the art of statuary. Moving from one room to the next, the viewer is dazzled by the constant changes of theme, material, scale and process as Picasso compulsively devises, explores and then abandons one set of new possibilities after another. So distinct are the various styles that each room almost seems to be a separate exhibition. No other artist in history conceived so many different ideas of what sculpture could be.

The shadow of the past is visible only in the first room, representing his earliest sculptures, made in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century. Here Picasso's small figures in clay and wood recall the totemic statuettes of Gauguin, while the turbulent surfaces of his bronzes betray the towering influence of Rodin. Yet even these early works have an eerie emotional power that is all his own. Take, for example, the haunting and sardonic "Jester", a small bronze bust Picasso made in 1905. Since the revival of the portrait in the Renaissance, most earlier busts had been celebratory; but this work, with its crumpled cap, sunken eyes, and rictus grin, is a figure of fearful pathos. Nevertheless, despite the anxious melancholy expressed by many of the pieces in the room, the overall impression is one of confident experimentation – a young artist hurrying towards a breakthrough – and the latest works here include his two earliest Cubist sculptures, the mesmerizing bronze "Head of a Woman" and the delightful plaster "Apple", both from 1909.

The breakthrough is on triumphant display in the second gallery of the show, dedicated to works he made between 1912 and 1915. In these years Picasso completely liberated himself from past conventions and invented a wholly original manner of sculpture. The centre of this space is occupied by all six casts of the small bronze "Glass of Absinthe", brought



"She-Goat", 1950

together here for the first time since they were executed in 1914, and the walls are hung with his Cubist still-life reliefs of guitars, violins, newspapers and other objects. Picasso's collaborator in the creation of Cubism, Georges Braque, said in these years, "There is a temperature at which iron becomes malleable and loses the sense of itself. That is the kind of temperature I search for". Similarly, the objects in this room seem to hover and shift between disparate states of being. Composed of layered and pigmented planes, the reliefs partake of elements of both sculpture and painting, while the "Glass of Absinthe" tries to depict translucent substances in the opaque and impenetrable material of bronze. The works of these years look nothing like any sculpture ever made before.

The next section, dedicated to the statues of the late 1920s, is even more astounding in its unfettered inventiveness. Seeking to memorialize his dead friend Guillaume Apollinaire, Picasso invented at the same time three radically new conceptions of sculpture. Apollinaire had written of "a statue of nothing, of a void", and to honour him Picasso wanted to make an anti-monument, a statue that would undercut the basic assumptions of sculpture. One early attempt at this was to design sculptures composed entirely of wire lines welded together in a kind of geometric cage. Evocatively called "drawings in space" by Picasso's dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, these small graceful statues embody emptiness. Another conceit was to violate public decorum by presenting a shockingly alien figure: a monstrous lump of protoplasm, all but inhuman except for distorted indications of breasts, mouths and

vaginas. Finally, Picasso imagined yet another novel approach: welding large pieces of metal, including found elements, into Surrealist objects; these are among the first assemblages in modern art.

Change came again in 1930 when Picasso bought the large Château de Boisgeloup, 45 miles north-west of Paris, and converted the stable into a sculpture studio, enabling him to work on a large scale for the first time. In this period he was particularly obsessed with his young muse and mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter, modelling many images of her in gleaming white plaster. She looks like the idol of a wild and exotic religion, one whose votary was Picasso himself. Made for his private delectation, these are deeply tender images, but their intimacy is lost when the room is crowded with visitors, as it is most of the day. Only near closing time, after the gallery empties out, do the figures come to life and reveal their warmth and poignancy.

It was in Paris during the German Occupation that Picasso made his most powerful sculptures. Undoubtedly inspired by the war, his work of this time has a grim and sombre intensity. Perhaps his greatest statue is "Man with a Lamb", a bronze modelled in 1943. It shows a tall, rigid and remorseless figure who holds in his arms an animal that twists and bleats in fear. André Malraux compared this sculpture to "Guernica", and certainly the turn of the lamb's head recalls that of the horse near the centre of the painting. Picasso made this over-life size statue in just one or two days (accounts vary) after months of sketching preparatory drawings. Other works from this period on view

include his "Head of a Woman", perhaps the most touching of all the sorrowful sculptures of women he ever made, and the celebrated "Bull's Head", composed simply of the handlebars and seat of a bicycle.

Following the war Picasso moved to the South of France, living first in Vallauris and then Cannes. He adopted a new medium, ceramics, making hundreds of small painted statuettes and figurines, often of animals. He also took special delight in assembling sculptures from seemingly random elements – pebbles, bones, bits of discarded trash, such as old forks or wicker baskets – whose shapes suggested to him the forms of a figure. Probably the most famous example of this is "Baboon and Young", a bronze from 1951 whose head was moulded from a toy car. Whereas before his sculptures often showed Picasso to be haunted by death and tormented by passion, his sculptures from these years are joyful and whimsical. He made many of them to decorate the home he shared with his new young lover and their children, and a main theme of these statues is domestic happiness. Now, instead of modelling a sculpture of a terrified lamb about to be slaughtered, he cast a bronze of a contented "She-Goat", the family's beloved pet.

Picasso's last sculptures are in painted sheet metal, cut and folded in large and simple forms. Nearly twenty of these, such as "Maquette for Richard J. Daley Center Sculpture", served as models for monumental public statues, which were later erected in Chicago, New York and other cities.

Walking through the show, the viewer is often filled with wonder at the artist's unbridled joy of creation. Gazing at his works, one can feel, at least for a moment, his pleasure at conceiving and forming something that had never existed before. Nevertheless, there are limits to his art as a sculptor. One is that he was only truly comfortable working on the small scale of the model. When he tried to go up in size, his lack of technical training in sculpture is often manifest and some of his large statues, such as "Woman with Vase", simply seem inept. More importantly, there is an emotional restriction to his art. Picasso once said to Malraux, "The painter takes whatever it is and destroys it. At the same time he gives it another life. For himself". Picasso made sculptures for himself, they are private works in a private language, and even when creating public statues on commission, he was tempted to depict only his own personal obsessions. For example, at one point he planned the monument to Apollinaire to portray his own mistress, and the colossal statue in Chicago conflates the features of his own wife and dog. Sculpture is fundamentally a public medium, made to be shared with a community or an audience, but like his paintings, drawings and engravings, Picasso's statuary is resolutely autobiographical and lyrical. As Malraux remarked, Picasso's sculpture can be "a closed world"; it is marvellous to behold, yet ultimately, a private realm.