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INK AND IRON : REVISITING PICASSO'S METAL MONUMENTS TO APOLLINAIRE

Peter Read • Colloque Picasso Sculptures • 24 mars 2016

Constantly subverting precedents and contradicting expectations, Picasso's work is equally characterized by persistent, long-term research and development. The metal sculptures he produced between 1928 and 1932 were startlingly innovative, but they resulted from a line of graphic and metallic creativity reaching back at least as far as 1912. Much of the vocabulary of the late 1920s metal sculptures already appears in a series of ink drawings from 1912–1913, which look like blueprints for metal constructions (MP698-705). *Études : guitariste et guitare* (MP702), for example, includes two sketches of a schematic guitarist made of struts and flat rectangles, seated above a graphic counterpart of Picasso's sheet-metal and wire *Guitar*. Similarly, in *Trois études de tête* (MP705r), lines fan out towards a circle or sphere, representing a head, placed on a precarious body of tubes, wire rods and rectangular plates. These drawings already confirm the artist's persistent, radical strategy to redefine the terms and identity of modern sculpture. They presuppose the use of metal rods, struts and sheets to make empty space and transparency integral parts of sculptural representation.

After 1918 and for over a decade that strategy would be energized by plans for a monument to the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, Picasso's late friend and ally, who in May 1912, surveying contemporary art and design, declared that "Les chefs d'œuvre de style moderne sont en fonte, en acier, en tôle."¹ According to Apollinaire, a new artistic Iron Age had already dawned. While in his journalism he often expressed his admiration for Picasso's sculptures, in two major works of fiction he ostentatiously threw down a challenge to Picasso the

sculptor. *Les Onze mille verges*, Apollinaire's first book, signed only with his initials, published early in 1907, closes with the construction of a monumental marble tomb for its martyred hero, Prince Mony Vibescu. Standing on a bleak battlefield strewn with bones, the tomb is surmounted by an equestrian statue and includes a frieze depicting some of the hero's exploits, including his escape from a besieged city in a hot-air balloon, like Gambetta during the 1870 siege of Paris: this is an entirely virile and vertical monument. Apollinaire presented Picasso with a signed copy of *Les Onze mille verges*, dedicated with an acrostic poem, of which the last line is the most important:

“O Pable sois capable un jour de faire mieux !”²

Apollinaire's novella "Le Poète assassiné", completed by July 1914 and published with other stories in October 1916, similarly ends with a commemorative sculpture, dedicated to the poet Croniamantal, a fictional version of Apollinaire himself, built by the Benin Bird ("l'oiseau du Bénin"), an avatar of Picasso. Croniamantal's monument is a hole in the ground, two metres deep, sculpted in his image and then lined with reinforced concrete. Described as "une statue en rien, en vide", it matched Picasso's interest in the use of space as the material of sculpture. It is also the inverted, symmetrical, concave opposite of Mony Vibescu's monument: together they form a conceptual diptych. Once complete Croniamantal's empty monument is

filled with earth and has a laurel tree planted upon it. It thus becomes a counterpart to the grave described by the Marquis de Sade in his will, which stipulates an unmarked grave, in a wood, scattered with acorns so it will eventually leave no trace on the face of the earth.³ Reputation and writing need no solid marker, for both are as intangible as empty space. The Benin Bird significantly chooses to make his revolutionary sculpture in a wood or, more precisely, in the Forest of Meudon—in other words, near Auguste Rodin’s house, the Villa des Brillants, and its adjoining workshops. Sculpting empty space, inventing land-art and predicting the artistic use of reinforced concrete, Apollinaire thus challenged Picasso to outstrip Rodin as the greatest sculptor of the century.

At the end of 1927, thinking about the Apollinaire tomb project, Picasso contacted his old friend Julio González. On 2 January 1928, González invited Picasso to meet him at his workshop in Rue Médéah (a street now demolished), in Plaisance, near Montparnasse. González was a skilled jeweller, metalworker and welder, so he could help make the radically innovative metal monument Picasso envisaged for Apollinaire. Michael Fitzgerald, Christa Lichtenstern, Werner Spies and other historians have documented the collaboration between Picasso and González and all more or less agree that Picasso’s designs were underpinned by his understanding of the Benin Bird’s use of empty space in his sculpture for Croniamantal.⁴ The model offered by *Le Poète assassiné* was indeed reasserted by the second edition of the novella, published by Sans Pareil in November 1926, illustrated

by Raoul Dufy, and by a cheaper edition with a larger print-run which followed in April 1927. Then in 1930, a new edition of *Les Onze mille verges* appeared, with a preface by Louis Aragon, which quoted Picasso as saying that this erotic adventure story was Apollinaire’s greatest masterpiece.⁵

It seems likely that González knew Apollinaire. In a letter to Apollinaire, dated 18 November 1913, the poet Jack Mercereau wrote: “J’apprends à l’instant que Gonzalez—que tu connais, je pense—a 2 vitrines de bijoux exposés. Veux-tu être assez gentil pour en parler dans une de tes prochaines chroniques ? Merci d’avance, en attendant de t’aller réveiller un matin je te tends ma main amie / Jack Mercereau.”⁶ If González did know Apollinaire, this will have reinforced his commitment to the commemorative project.

During their four-year partnership, from 1928 to 1932, Picasso and González constructed a series of sculptures based on ideas and blueprints established in Picasso’s sketchbooks. During autumn 1928 they produced four geometrical, wire maquettes that Kahnweiler would call “drawings in space”⁷ and that Picasso defined as models for a monument to Apollinaire.⁸ The designs for these models were developed from drawings of bathers on a beach, stripped down to schematic, linear patterns, each with a head denoted by a disc or a solid sphere. Confronted from a fixed position, the stance of each wire maquette seems hieratic. When the spectator moves around any one of them, however, lines and angles shift and slide against each other, in life-affirming mobility.

The maquettes always nevertheless retain a stark intensity and their skeletal minimalism also instils the space they enclose with intangibly metaphysical, Pascalien unease. That baleful impression may have been exacerbated had Picasso proceeded with his intention to cover the maquettes with sheets of metal.⁹ Walls and a roof would have left each of the figures staring out from within a dark cabin or funeral vault. The works that followed, *Tête d'homme* (MP269) and *Tête de femme* (MP270), are more heterogeneous, constructed from hammered, shaped and welded metal sheets, struts and scraps, as well as some found objects, all of which makes them more assertively material than the wire maquettes. *Tête de femme* in particular remains strikingly transparent, but in both sculptures, the connotations of empty space are now leavened by cartoonish humour, in the man's pointy nose and moustache, in the woman's puckered lips and the punning use of two colanders to represent both the back of her head and her round, expectant belly. Head and body are conflated, and the colanders also wittily crystallize the essential principle of perforated metal sculpture. Picasso is clearly starting to enjoy himself, hammering and welding, with sparks flying, in González's little smithy. The rejection of solid, opaque, sculptural mass is, however, most powerfully asserted in the two versions of the larger-than-life *Femme au jardin* (MP267). This asymmetrical construction looks tangled, wild and windswept. Just as the Norwegian artist Edvard Diriks, master of the Nordic seascape, was once defined as "le peintre du vent",¹⁰ so Picasso here seems to be sculpting the wind. The iron wom-

an's imposing stature, sharp profile, man-trap mouth and crest of hair, scything the air, give her a fierce presence that is certainly indebted to the riveted iron figure dedicated to Gou, god of war and metal, made by Akati Ekplekendo in the Kingdom of Dahomey (Danhomè in the language of the Fon people), Republic of Benin. One hundred and sixty-five centimetres tall, wielding a club and a machete, crowned with sharp and jagged points and blades, this sculpture now stands in the Musée du Quai Branly, but was previously held in the Trocadéro ethnographic museum. In a long article on that museum, published in September 1912, Apollinaire emphasized the artistic value of its sadly neglected treasures, particularly highlighting, "cette perle de la collection dahoméenne : la grande figure en fer représentant le dieu de la guerre, qui est, sans aucun doute, l'objet d'art le plus imprévu et un des plus gracieux qu'il y ait à Paris. [...] La figure humaine a certainement inspiré cette œuvre singulière. Et toutefois, aucun des éléments qui la composent, invention cocasse et profonde – ainsi qu'une page de Rabelais –, ne ressemble à un détail de corps humain. L'artiste nègre était évidemment un créateur."¹¹ If Apollinaire knew this Fon statue well, Picasso certainly did too, and indeed it seems likely that the two men visited the Trocadéro museum together.¹² As a sentinel made to guard the poet's grave, the *Femme au jardin* shares much of the Fon warrior's strange and fearsome charisma. *Tête de femme*, *Tête d'homme* and *Femme au jardin*, shaped by Picasso's interest in African sculptures, all pay tribute to Apollinaire's campaigning in favour of tribal arts.

André Salmon, Julio González and Christian Zervos all confirmed that Picasso built *La Femme au jardin* as a monument to Apollinaire.¹³ An iron sculpture, subject to rust, was not, however, weather-resistant, so Picasso commissioned González painstakingly to construct a welded, patinated bronze facsimile. The two versions stood side by side in the 2016 *Picasso sculptures* exhibition at the Musée Picasso in Paris, as close as they were in Picasso's major retrospective at the galleries Georges Petit in Paris in June and July 1932. Such proximity allows detailed comparison, which confirms the skill and physical effort González invested in making a complex facsimile in hard and resistant bronze. The two works are very similar in size, as the iron version measures 206 × 117 × 85 cm, and the bronze 209.6 × 116.8 × 81.3 cm. It also becomes apparent, however, that the iron sheets in the original sculpture, painted white, are uniformly thin and often a little bent or buckled, whereas in the bronze version, as dark as Gou, some sheets are considerably thicker, notably at the sculpture's triangular base and in the middle, as well as in the leaves of the rhododendron branches rising beside the female figure. González has bevelled the edges of these thicker sheets, to lighten the effect of their solidly weighty presence. The angles in the hard and rigid bronze are also more cleanly, mechanically cut, and flat planes have remained flat, so there are less of the irregularities and imperfections that humanise the iron version. González brilliantly replicated the layering of random metal fragments on the woman's foot and neck, for example, but his bronze creature has less teeth and they are stubbier, less sharply chiselled, than those of her iron sister. Overall, the bronze version looks

stronger, as is appropriate to its intended role as an outdoor, all-weather sentry. It was nevertheless damaged, probably by high-spirited GIs billeted at Boisgeloup, Picasso's Normandy mansion, during the Liberation.¹⁴

The long stem of the plant has become detached and twisted away from its supporting strut and these two elongated elements have been roughly bound back together with electrical wire encased in dark insulating rubber, now showing wear and tear. Shouldn't this branch be restored to its original 1932 condition?

Picasso kept three of his 1928 wire maquettes (MP264, 265, 266), which vary in height between 38 and 60.5 cm. The fourth one, unfinished, probably disintegrated. In the early to mid-1950s he ordered three enlargements of two of them (MP264, 265), made of welded metal rods, painted dark red and brown. In 1972 he gave the most beautiful enlargement (Spies 68B)¹⁵ to MoMA in New York. One hundred and ninety-eight centimetres tall, it stands on a rectangular steel plate, which measures 74.08 x 159.08 cm. In other words, the original 1928 wire maquette was ideally proportioned for its intended purpose: scaled-up to this height, it is exactly the right size to cover a tomb. MoMA, however, wanted that 198-cm enlargement as a model for a much bigger version, over four metres tall, made of steel rods (Spies 68C). William Rubin kept Picasso informed with photographs, discussing with him the materials and scale of the work. A similarly gigantic version, based on wire maquette MP265, was then built in 1985 by the *Ecole de Maîtrise des Ouvriers Métallurgistes* in the French steel-town of Longwy, for the garden of the new Picasso museum in Paris.¹⁶

Picasso had a long-standing interest in architecturally scaled sculptures and in 1963, when a group of American architects asked him for such a work, to be placed outside a new civic centre in Chicago, he suggested they should make “an enlargement of the wire ‘space’ sculpture of 1928”.¹⁷ In 1965, with Carl Nesjar, Picasso made for a Marseilles high school a very tall, reinforced concrete sculpture, known as *Profiles*. It remains true, however, that the gigantic versions of the wire maquettes in New York and Paris were commissioned by curators. The initiative came from them, not from the artist. Should these giant versions be listed, catalogued and exhibited with 1928 wire maquettes or with the intermediate enlargements, independently commissioned by Picasso himself? I would at least argue that the optimal size for an enlargement is realized in the artist’s own 198 cm version, exactly scaled to cover a tomb and calculated to look life-size when raised above the ground and viewed at an angle. That version is also perfectly scaled to function as a sundial, casting complex, moving patterns on the ground. The shadows they cast are an essential element of the 1928 wire models, and that quality accentuates their conceptual affinity with Apollinaire’s writing, which often associates a human shadow with mortal destiny: “Une épouse me suit c’est mon ombre fatale”, he declares in “Signe” (*Alcools*). Apollinaire also presents shadows as a kind of solar script, as in the poem “Ombre”, from *Calligrammes*: “Ombre encre du soleil / Écriture de ma lumière.” Picasso’s own intermediate enlargements of the wire maquettes cast shadows that resem-

ble kinetic calligrammes, whereas the shadows cast by their architecturally scaled steel-rod counterparts may be impressive in an urban environment, but they achieve a very different effect.



PABLO PICASSO
Études: guitariste et guitare, 1912-1913
ink drawing, 21,2 x 13,2 cm,
Musée national Picasso-Paris. MP702
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée Picasso de Paris) / Jean-Gilles Berizzi
© Succession Picasso, 2016



PABLO PICASSO
ink drawing: "Trois études de tête", 1912-1913. MP705verso
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée Picasso de Paris) / Thierry Le Mage
© Succession Picasso, 2016



PABLO PICASSO
Head of a Woman, 1929-1930
Fer, tôle, ressorts et passoires peints, 100 x 37 x 59 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris.
Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979.
MP270
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée Picasso de Paris) / Mathieu Rabeau
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PABLO PICASSO
Femme au jardin, Paris, printemps 1929-1930
Fer soudé et peint en blanc, 206 x 117 x 85 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris. Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. MP267
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée Picasso de Paris) / Adrien Didierjean / Mathieu Rabeau
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PABLO PICASSO
Femme au jardin, Paris, printemps 1930-1932
Bronze, 209,6 x 116,8 x 81,3 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid. DE00547
© Succession Picasso, 2016.

NOTES

1. Guillaume Apollinaire, “La Renaissance des arts décoratifs”, *L’Intransigeant*, 31 May 1912, in Apollinaire, *Oeuvres en prose complètes*, vol. 2, eds Pierre Caizergues and Michel Décaudin (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p.467.
2. Picasso and Apollinaire, *Correspondance*, eds Pierre Caizergues and Hélène Seckel (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p.199. For a study of *Les Onze mille verges*, see Peter Read, “Apollinaire’s voluptuous calvary: Lexical Fields, Generic Conventions and Narrative Space in *Les Onze mille verges*”, in *Narratives of French Modernity: Themes, Forms and Metamorphoses, Essays in Honour of David Gascoigne*, eds Lorna Milne and Mary Orr (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), pp.47–66.
3. Apollinaire, *L’Oeuvre du Marquis de Sade* [1909], in Apollinaire, *Oeuvres en prose complètes*, vol. 3, eds Pierre Caizergues and Michel Décaudin (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), pp.796–797.
4. Michael C. Fitzgerald, *Making Modernism Picasso and The Creation of the Market for Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995); Michael C. Fitzgerald, “Pablo Picasso’s Monument to Guillaume Apollinaire, Surrealism and Monumental Sculpture in France 1918–1959” (New York: Columbia University PhD thesis, 1987), Ann Arbor, UMI, 1988; Christa Lichtenstern, *Pablo Picasso Denkmal für Apollinaire Entwurf zur Humanisierung des Raumes* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988); Peter Read, *Picasso et Apollinaire. Les métamorphoses de la mémoire* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1995); Werner Spies, *Pablo Picasso on the Path to Sculpture, The Paris and Dinard Sketchbooks of 1928 from the Marina Picasso Collection* (Munich: Prestel, 1995).
5. Louis Aragon, preface to Apollinaire, *Les Onze mille verges*, (preface signed “***”) (Monte Carlo: Les Ygrées, 1930); reprinted in Apollinaire, *Les Onze mille verges* (Paris: Régine Deforges, 1970), pp. XI–XXII (p. XXI).
6. Department of Manuscripts, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Jack Mercereau was the brother of the better-known Alexandre Mercereau (information provided by Étienne-Alain Hubert). No mention of González’s display of jewellery at the 1913 Salon d’Automne has so far been found in Apollinaire’s writing.
7. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Les Sculptures de Picasso* (Paris : Éditions du Chêne, 1948).
8. E. Tériade, “Une visite à Picasso”, *L’Intransigeant* (27 November 1928): 6.
9. Christian Zervos, “Picasso à Dinard été 1928”, *Cahiers d’art* 4, n°. 1 (January 1929): 11; Christian Zervos, “Projets de Picasso pour un monument”, *Cahiers d’art*, 4, n°s 8–9 (1929), p.342.
10. Marius-Ary Leblond, “Le Peintre du vent: Diricks [sic]”, *La Grande France* (October 1902): pp.203–207.
11. “Exotisme et ethnographie”, *Paris-Journal*, 10 September 1912, in Apollinaire, *Oeuvres en prose complètes*, vol. 2, 473–476. Apollinaire’s interest in the sculpture dedicated to Gou was highlighted, with a photo of the work, in *Apollinaire critique d’art*, eds Béatrice Riottot El-Habbib and Vincent Gille (Paris: Paris-Musées / Gallimard, 1993), p. 231, and in Francine Ndiaye, “Guillaume Apollinaire, Paul Guillaume et l’art ‘nègre’ : défense et illustration”, *Apollinaire critique d’art*, pp. 228–237. See also Maureen Murphy, “Apollinaire et l’Oiseau du Bénin (Picasso): le primitivisme en question”, in *Apollinaire Le regard du poète*, eds Laurence des Cars et al. (Paris: Musées d’Orsay et de l’Orangerie / Gallimard, 2016), pp.82–95.
12. See Murphy, “Apollinaire et l’Oiseau du Bénin” pp.88–89.
13. André Salmon, “Vingt-cinq ans d’Art vivant”, part 2, *La Revue de France* (1 March 1931): 112–134; Julio González, “Picasso sculpteur”, *Cahiers d’art*, n°s 6–7 (1936): 189; Christian Zervos, *Pablo Picasso* (Paris: Éditions des Cahiers d’art, vol. 7, 1955), p.8.
14. Bernard Picasso confirmed this possible explanation in conversation at Boisgeloup on Saturday 26 March 2016.
15. See Werner Spies, *Picasso The Sculptures, Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculptures*, in collaboration with Christine Piot (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2000).
16. Musée Picasso also holds another enlargement (241 × 60 × 130 cm), made by Haligon in 1984 as a model for their monumental version.
17. Roland Penrose, *Picasso His Life and Work* (New York: Icon Editions / Harper and Row, 1973), pp.454–55.