

Four Points of View about Picasso's *Maquette for Guitar*, 1912

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Art 1B

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PABLO PICASSO, *Maquette for Guitar*, 1912, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Bibliography

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During the years 1912-1914, Picasso created a series of mixed media Cubist collages and sculptures which transformed the art world. Picasso was in the habit of making maquettes, or sketches, for his paintings and sculptures, and in 1912 he created a revolutionary *Guitar* sculpture out of paperboard, paper, string and painted wire. This *Guitar* was like nothing which had ever been created, and was a break with the past traditions of sculpture. Picasso used the cardboard *Guitar* in many ways. He took pictures of it surrounded by collages (Fig. 2), attached a part of a box made to represent the edge of a table and created still life arrangements with it (Fig. 3). In 1914 he created a more permanent, sheet-metal version of the Cubist *Guitar*, (Fig. 4) which he hung in his home, and in 1916 he disassembled the cardboard *Guitar* and packed it in a box where it stayed for 64 years until after his death when The Museum of Modern Art in New York had a show and reassembled it. *Maquette for Guitar* was never shown in public until 1980, but a picture of it was published in *Les Soirées de Paris* in 1913 (Fig. 3), and it was a scandal success.

Points of View

In his article “Picasso, Cubism, and Reflexivity,” Edward R. Fry discusses the reflexive view of Cubist art, and describes the role *Maquette for Guitar* 1912 played in that history. He says “the special achievement of Cubism, and above all of Picasso, was to reinvent classical, mediated representation, and that in that reinvention also to transform it so as to reveal its central conventions and mental processes. This achievement of Picasso...was that of the classical mind’s becoming aware of its means for thinking and

representing the world even as it carries out that representation. This is an event that may be called reflexive.”¹ Fry believes that the most exciting techniques employed by cubists surrounded “a reflexive transformation of classical draftsmanship...through the negation or inversion of means used for the representation of organic forms: straight lines were substitute for the curved contours of a still life object.”² Regarding the cardboard *Guitar* he says that “this construction incorporates an interchange between mass and volume in which virtual volumes, all projecting equal distances from a rear plane, may be read with a certain necessary degree of contextuality as signs for the various parts of a guitar. In this work there is no longer an inside and outside of an object, nor is there a central core or point of reference.”³ “This *Guitar* is a reflexive transformation of the classical tradition of sculpture.”⁴

Fry goes on to claim that Picasso used “*Guitars* or violins as alter egos of women.”⁵ He compares the collage *Au Bon Marché*, 1913 (Fig. 1) with *Still Life with Guitar and Bottle*, 1913 (Fig. 3), claims that they are linked, and interprets both works to represent a promiscuous woman seated a café table with a bottle and glass.⁶

Ruth Markus covers a tighter view in her article, “Picasso’s *Guitar*, 1912: The Transformation from Analytical to Synthetic Cubism.” Her intention is to prove that *Maquette for Guitar* 1912 was a bridge between Analytical and Synthetic Cubism, and that although its exact date of creation is disputed, it must have been created after Analytical Cubism was fully explored and before the beginning of Synthetic Cubism. She argues that Picasso created the cardboard *Guitar* as a problem-solving activity, to explore new ways to represent objects because Analytical Cubism had hit a dead end.⁷ “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."⁸ She considers *Maquette for Guitar* to have been Picasso's most significant work in the phase of his transition from Analytical to Synthetic Cubism, argues that it includes characteristics of both, and determines that it was a way to solve "the difficulties of the cubists... a way to break away from their dependence on the visual aspects of the object."⁹

After she completes her main arguments, Markus takes a paragraph to give her broader opinion about the historical importance and innovative aspects of Picasso's groundbreaking constructed sculpture, including the introduction of the use of a negative void, the types of "low" materials he chose to use, and the way that these materials, with their very thin edges, introduced the element of line into the composition of sculpture. She states, "*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."¹⁰ "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 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."¹¹

Anne Umland's book *Picasso: Guitars 1912-1914* presents a wider view than that of the previous two authors. She focuses her attention on the way Picasso's cardboard *Maquette* changed the history of art and specifically, of sculpture. Her thesis is that "Picasso's cardboard construction...announces a crucial rupture in modern art's history."¹² Umland discusses the different roles played by the cardboard *Maquette* and the following sheet-metal model. She argues that the cardboard *Guitar* was a "repositionable player with various possible roles"¹³ and was "considered a secondary, less important work"¹⁴ while the metal one was valued more highly. She goes on to say that "the cardboard *Guitar*, with its variant positions and states, can be said to symbolize the fragile, papery, performative character of the work Picasso made in this period."¹⁵

However, the 2005 rediscovery of the original tabletop from the assemblage *Still Life with Guitar and Bottle*, 1913, (Fig. 3) changed her opinion of the value of *Maquette for Guitar*. "With the tabletop attached, the cardboard *Guitar*'s significance expands from maquette or model for the sheet-metal version, rendering it a more complete and complex work. To reunite the two elements, using the tabletop to drive a literal, material wedge of difference between it and its sheet metal counterpart, guided by Picasso's pinholes, is to recognize the cardboard *Guitar*'s distinct identity and individual history."¹⁶ Umland finishes her discussion of the artwork with the statement that Picasso's cardboard *Guitar* influenced the art of artists from the Russian avant-garde, to Dadaists, to artists working today.¹⁷

All three authors seem to agree that Picasso's *Maquette for Guitar*, 1912, represents a schism between past and present modes of creating sculpture. It is my opinion that while

Fry's and Markus' views on the *Guitar* are relevant and credible, the most interesting point of view is given by Umland.

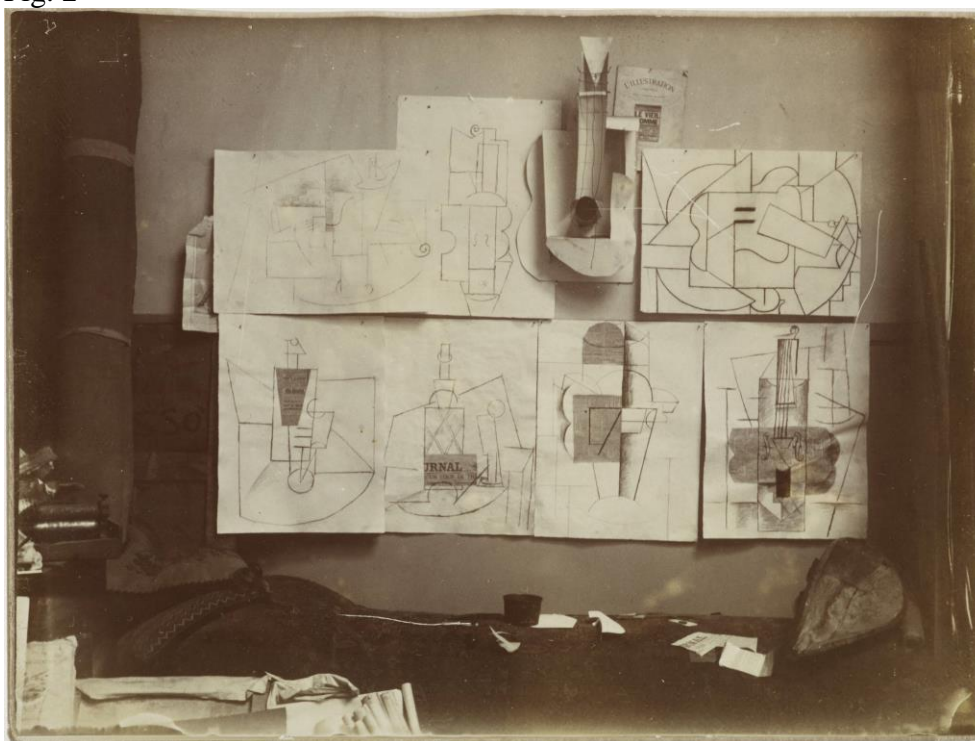
My opinion about *Maquette for Guitar*, 1912 is that although Picasso created it as a sketch, it was much more influential than the sheet metal one which followed it. The historically important aspects of these guitars were not the material differences between them, but the new ideas with which Picasso generated them, and the ideas expressed in the creation of this amazing cardboard "sketch" were the force for the biggest change in sculpture since man began to create carved and cast metal works in Ancient times. Like the invention of the electric guitar which revolutionized music two decades later, this cardboard *Guitar* absolutely revolutionized sculpture. I agree with sculptor Richard Serra who is quoted in Umland's book, saying "Picasso's *Guitar* brackets casting and modeling as conventions...The *Guitar* is probably one of the most radical moves in sculpture in the entire century. Picasso seems to be actually more inventive in sculpture than in painting."¹⁸

Fig. 1



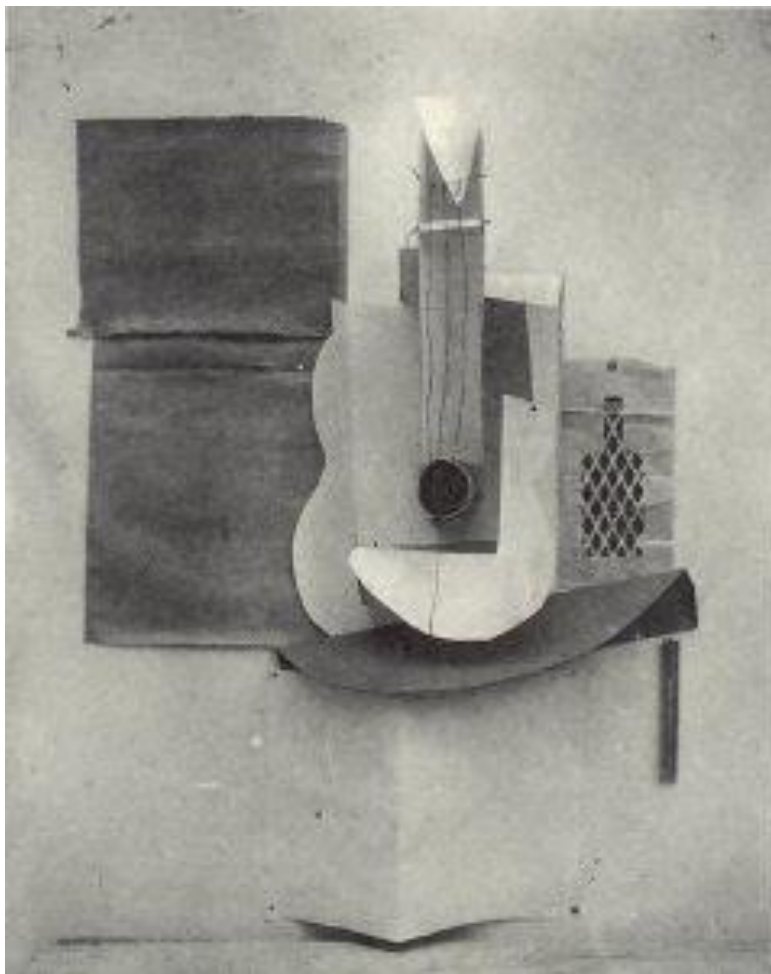
PABLO PICASSO, *Au Bon Marché*, 1913, Neue Galerie, Aachen

Fig. 2



PABLO PICASSO, Installation in the artist's studio at 242, boulevard Raspail Paris, December 9, 1912, or later, Private Collection

Fig. 3



PABLO PICASSO, *Still Life with Guitar and Bottle*,
Published in *Les Soirées de Paris*, no. 18 on November 15, 1913,
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library,
Yale University, New Haven

Fig. 4



PABLO PICASSO, *Guitar*, 1914, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Notes

¹ Edward R. Fry, "Picasso, Cubism, and Reflexivity," *Art Journal* 47 (1998).

² Fry, 298.

³ Fry, 300.

⁴ Fry, 300.

⁵ Fry, 297.

⁶ Fry, 301-302.

⁷ Ruth Markus, "Picasso's Guitar, 1912: The Transition from Analytical to Synthetic Cubism," *Assaph, Section B, Studies in Art History*, 2, (1996) 235.

⁸ Markus, 235.

⁹ Markus, 237.

¹⁰ Markus, 241.

¹¹ Markus, 242.

¹² Anne Umland, *Picasso: Guitars, 1912-1914*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011) 17.

¹³ Umland, 19.

¹⁴ Umland, 31.

¹⁵ Umland, 33.

¹⁶ Umland, 33.

¹⁷ Umland, 34.

¹⁸ Umland, 34.