INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

LEADERS & SUCCESS

Modern-Art Titan Pablo Picasso Invented Cubism

MARY O'NEILL 10/29/2012 2:55 PM EST

Reprints

American GIs, upon entering Paris at the close of World War II, reported their top sightseeing goals: the Eiffel Tower and Pablo Picasso.

One is more than 1,000 feet tall.

The other was 5 feet 3 inches.

Yet Picasso's stature extended far beyond Paris to command worldwide attention — as the greatest modern artist.

Due in part to his personal charisma — he tagged himself The King in an early painting — but primarily due to his defiant overthrow of 500 years of tradition, Picasso changed the course of 20th century art.

He knit the modern century — its energy, shifts, confusion and novelty — together with an almost supernaturally creative drive to produce works emblematic of the new age.

The Pablo Way

Experimentation, abundance, spontaneity, any kind of rule breaking in any art form, became possible after the force of Picasso.

It was a force that innovated not only in painting, but also in sculpture, printmaking and ceramics, and remained ceaseless through an 84-year career.

Born in Malaga, on the southern coast of Spain, Picasso (1881-1973) displayed what he called a "frightening" aptitude for art from his earliest days. His first word was not "mama," but "pencil," and, though not quite accurate, he claimed with characteristic bravado that even as a kid he could draw like Raphael.

His father, an art teacher, moved the family north. After leapfrogging over even senior students at the local academy, Pablo exhibited with adults, won national medals and garnered commissions, becoming one of the most distinguished painters in Barcelona by age 15.

Yet Pablo Picasso quickly recognized those early achievements in conformity as akin to a death threat. His parents' hopes for regional recognition for their son, maybe even a professorship, were dashed when he left the prestigious Royal Academy of San Lorenzo in Madrid after only one year.

"One must learn not to paint," he later said. The conventions of his predecessors had to be subverted; they were no match for the shape-shifting reality of contemporary life.

According to William Robinson, curator of modern European art at the Cleveland Museum of Art, "Picasso's idea was to strip away that veneer of elegant and pretty, of things that are taught, and to paint in a more direct, emotive manner."

Part of that directness was to openly acknowledge that the pre-eminent value in art had become obsolete.

Since the 15th century, a painter's aim was to create the appearance of the natural world, an illusion of three-dimensional depth, on a flat canvas. Perspective lines must cohere at a single point, and hues must be shaded to mimic distance.

Picasso knew that this was no longer a proper goal, not in a world with movies, radio, recordings, telephones, cars and escalators.

The spectator was not still but moving, alive! How could one have a single point of perspective even as Einstein declared that reality itself is not fixed and stable, but relative and changing?

New Direction

Science didn't use 500-year-old methods. Why should art?

No, these inventions and discoveries and accelerations needed expression. After his now-famous Blue- and Rose-period works got the attention of in-the-know collectors and critics during his first hungry years in Paris, Picasso was ready to start the revolution.

He revealed "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" — his 1907 oil painting — slowly, only to friends, at first.

Even they, members of the Parisian avant garde, recoiled, judging Picasso to be suicidal and comparing the experience to drinking gasoline.

The single-point fix on reality was gone, split into broken shards and overlapping, confounded space. Multiplied perspectives meant that art would no longer slavishly imitate the natural world. Brand-new images could be valid.

Big Approach

In the painting, even the most reliable subject of the old aesthetic — beautiful women — had been turned into five unidealized, primitive nudes, an 8-foot-high confrontation with the unfamiliar.

Hidden in his studio for a decade, "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" is now acknowledged as the cornerstone of modern art.

Picasso refined this ingenious outlook into cubism — reassembling subjects into fragmented shapes — the first formal movement of the 20th century and its most

influential.

But by the time other artists caught up, Picasso had moved on to his next experiment.

"He never wanted to be caught or trapped or associated with any movement or style or group," Robinson told IBD.

If Picasso had only invented cubism, his place in art history would be secure, but more triumphs were in store.

In 1937, a small, undefended town named Guernica was bombed during Spain's civil war.

Picasso was so incensed by the destruction in his native country that he created a 26-foot-long indictment on canvas — titling the painting "Guernica" — for that year's World Exhibition.

"It was Picasso's interpretation, his translation into the medium of a painting, that gradually turned it into an event of the century," wrote Ingo Walther in "Picasso." "The picture is not so much about a historical fact, but rather its effect on Picasso's innermost being."

Every viewer would feel, with the artist, the tragedy of war at close quarters.

This is a clue to the staying power of Picasso's art. He could ricochet between personal and formal, naive and political, topical and timeless, all in a single work. The viewer can settle on no final meaning.

"He wants an image that provokes thought. He doesn't want any easy answers," Robinson said. "This is what sets him apart from a lot of other artists. You can come back, and the work slowly unveils a deeper and deeper meaning."

Picasso became so sought-after — he once paid for a chalet with a still-life painting — that he had to create his own retreats. "Of all these things — hunger, misery, being misunderstood by the public — fame is by far the worst," he said. "This is how God chastises the artist."

The sheer volume of his work indicates no laurel-resting. The most accomplished artists have a catalogue raisonne, an exhaustive list of all works in one or two volumes.

Picasso's is 33 volumes.

Paintings of all sizes, engravings, etchings, watercolors, illustrated books, ceramics, set designs, costumes, drawings, even jewelry — "the range is astonishing," said Robinson.

With sculpture, his inventiveness turned everyday odds and ends — toy cars, curved pipes, broken pottery, bicycle parts — into lithe women or powerful animals.

"His fundamental preoccupation was in reshaping the human body," said Pepe Karmel, professor of art history at New York University. "It's one thing to break the rules, but it's better to replace the rules with something inventive."

It's Not Garbage

Picasso's instinct was to see things, even junk, fresh and to challenge the viewer to do

the same.

"If he had only been a sculptor, he would have been the best sculptor of the 20th century," said Karmel. "If he had only been a printmaker, he would have been the best printmaker of the 20th century. Decade after decade, he kept putting himself in the history books."

Said Picasso: "People who try to explain paintings are usually barking up the wrong tree."

Too much analysis kills what he wanted: the viewer's visceral, alert response. What better release from the stagnant past into a fluctuating, vital future?