PICASSO'S DEATH OF A HARLEQUIN

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Pablo Picasso was one of the most innovative and dynamic artists of the 20th c tury and perhaps of all time. He constantly altered his style and sought out something m fulfilling in his artwork. As with any great artist, the inspiration for much of his work ca directly from his own experiences. The events in his life between 1900-1906 were no dif ent. His relationships with family, friends, Spain, and Paris were crucial to his works pr to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907, (fig. 2) which marked a sharp stylistic change in artist's oeuvre. Before this stylistically original work, Picasso painted in styles that wo become known as his Blue Period and his Rose Period. His gouache[1] of 1905, *Death o Harlequin*, (fig. 1) is an interesting piece done toward the end of his Rose Period, prior to break into cubism. This 26 by 33 ½ inch piece is symbolic of the end of one period throu the death of a figure with whom Picasso identified. *Death of a Harlequin* marks the death a socially unaccepted figure that embodied sorrow, loss and mourning. There are traces themes in this piece that reappeared in his later works. The style of painting with large blocks of color and mask-like faces, the use of emotionally void figures and self-represen tion through carious characters are motifs Picasso used in his later styles.

This gouache, which looks unfinished, is signed by the artist, signifying that the sired effect may indeed be for the work to appear unfinished. The sketchy quality of composition, coupled with the fading colors, exudes the feelings of loss and death. Th

[1] Gouache is a water-based paint typically made opaque by adding white paint or pigment. It is often thinly applied and resembles watercolor paint. *Grove Art Dictionary Online*. Oxford University Press. (Accessed 04/17/05).

are three figures: the dead harlequin lying horizontally across the board and two half-figures looking on. The larger on-looking figure is seen in half view from the waist up. The smaller on-looker is perhaps a young boy and he is seen only from the neck up. Both of these figures appear to be fellow *saltimbanques*, or traveling circus performers. Picasso used a pale blue to suggest the bed that the harlequin is laid on and white for the pillow his head rests upon. The only part of the harlequin's costume that is illustrated is the ruffled collar and four diamonds on his right arm. His hands are folded in prayer form across his stomach. The harlequin's face is rendered with the most detail – eyes closed, face pale from death. The larger of the two other figures is seen in three-quarter view, with a strong linear appearance. His face is mime-like and nearly completely white as if still covered in paint from an earlier performance. Behind his head is an area of white gouache which outlines his head and back with a halo-like effect. The young boy is seen in profile, his face the least detailed of the three, but also heavily outlined. The faces of the figures have a mask-like quality in that there is little expression and little individual detail. There also appears to be an unpainted dog in the foreground looking up at the harlequin. As there is no paint within this outline, without care it is easy to overlook this small detail. The suggestion of this dog is outlined only by the pale blue that forms the bed, which if looked at quickly, just appears to be various folds in the drapery.

Picasso's Blue Period (1900-1904), a dark, depressing period marked by the death of Picasso's sister, Conchita, and his friend Casagemas, was characterized by the use of a dark palette.[2] Picasso's progress from the Blue Period into the Rose Period was marked primarily by the use of line as opposed to dark, heavy colors. This "denial of strong color…does not reappear until the period of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*" and Picasso's new style becomes "the realization, the *détente*, of the drawing."[3] This element of design is evident in this particular composition. The faint colors, largely rose colored tones, are characteristic of this period, hence it being labeled the Rose Period. Within this period, Picasso focused on, among other things, circus entertainers – the harlequin becomes a prominent figure in these compositions. The harlequin represents someone who can easily "change his personality and slip into another's skin."[4] Therefore, by drawing lines Picasso was able to emulate that element of the harlequin's personality – his 'sketchiness.' Following the Rose Period, Picasso entered briefly into neo-classical style, followed ultimately with *Les Demoiselles* a short two years after this gouache. *Death of a Harlequin* illustrates the foundations of his cubist style, namely the focus on line and flatness, which in turn makes this composition 'modern.' There is no great detail and the figures are reduced to their basic shape and form, just as the cubist style would flatten objects and reduce them to their basic forms. The mask-like faces of the figures also foreshadow Picasso's later fascination with masks and disguises.

[2] Timothy Anglin Burgard, "Picasso and Appropriation," *The Art Bulletin* (September 1991), 480.
[3] Pierre Daix and Georges Boudaille, *Picasso: The Blue and Rose Periods*. (Neuchâtel: Editions Ides Et Calendes, 1966), 67.
[4] Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work*. (Harper & Row: 1971), 113.

The harlequin, as a member of the *saltimbanque* family, was a part of the greate theme of the social outcast. Known as bohemians, this group of socially unaccepted peopl also included gypsies, rag pickers, musicians, clowns and entertainers. Traditionally char acterized by their tragic existences, these figures became adopted by artists as representa tions of themselves. *Saltimbanques* specifically challenged "the boundary between crim and artistry, between fine arts and the popular."[5] Beginning in the 19th century, Frenc artists began to adopt the image of a bohemian as to "lead a creative life outside the main stream of bourgeois society, in order to assume an apparent freedom in a precarious, mar ginal life-style."[6] Hence, the idea of the artist as the bohemian had both social and cultura origins that ultimately led to the idea of the bohemian as both politically and culturall superior to typical bourgeois society.[7] Picasso's harlequin thus represents the mysterious and complex nature of life as an artist – a social outcast who walks the fine line of bril liancy and emotional disaster.

This symbolism had been carried on through the decades; examples would have been available to a young Picasso in Paris. Honoré Daumier's *Saltimbanques Changing Place* of 1855-65 (fig. 3) shows the harlequin figure in costume, hands full of his only be longings, turning a corner with a woman and a child. All three figures are sketchily drawn and appear exhausted. Their distraught expressions are reiterated by the tattered costumes they wear. These figures convey the delicate nature of their lives and the insecurities and instabilities that come with life as an artist and entertainer. The mask-like expressions ref erence the trying and tiresome life as a vagabond. Daumier's stylization of the harlequin's face can also be interpreted as a possible influence for Picasso's later interest in masks.

The harlequin is a figure that became popular again with Cézanne's *Mardi Gras* of 1888 (fig. 4). Picasso would have been aware of this painting and it is most likely from this source that he became so interested in this character. The harlequin is associated with Carnival, the Roman Catholic festival and celebration before the beginning of Lent. Char acterized by celebration, music, dance and costumes, Carnival's harlequin became an im portant part of the celebration. His costume mimics the flavor of the festival in its brightly colored, diamond patterned design. The harlequin is "a grotesquely comical figure" that "evokes laughter and gives some strange psychological satisfaction by an appearance and a behavior that elsewhere in society are repudiated, abhorred, and despised."[8] It is through this figure that people can laugh and escape the reality of their situation.

The harlequin serves as entertainment to people and it is often "doubt[ed] whether the clown is human."[9] Picasso's harlequins are "neither comical nor tragic, neither torn by

[5] Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 33.
[6] Marilyn R. Brown, *Gypsies and Other Bohemians: The Myth of the Artist in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 2.
[7] Ibid, 11-14
[8] Wolfgang M. Zucker, "The Image of the Clown," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. (March 1954), 310.
[9] Ibid., 311

passions nor amused" and simply seem to exemplify "bewilderment, loss, and homelessness."[10] This suggestion is true of Picasso's portrayals of the harlequin. Within the *Death* gouache, there is no valid suggestion of location, no background, no real mourners for him. There is a mask-like quality to the onlookers; they lack passion and emotion. They simply look at their dead comrade. They also seem to be without a real home or without any particular direction.

The image of the harlequin is one Picasso favored heavily, especially in his early years. He often considered himself to be a harlequin, "an illusionist...unsmiling jester,"[11] able to entertain people, yet still a social outcast. The harlequin is both comical and tragic. Picasso focused on this dynamic figure and often placed him in unique situations. For example, in the 1905 gouache entitled *The Harlequin's Family* (fig. 5), the harlequin is shown with his back to the viewer, face in profile, holding an infant while his nude wife adjusts her hair. The harlequin is the only figure in the composition in costume. He is not seen in the circus setting and therefore, Picasso attributes to him some sort of emotional dimension so that the viewer sees him as a person rather than an entertainer.

Picasso's harlequin is "infused with *fin-de-siècle* sorrow and melancholy,"[12] and within this particular gouache this sadness culminates with the dead harlequin. What can this mean for Picasso? Picasso chooses to represent this figure deceased, a figure he so closely associates himself with. Therefore, this gouache can represent the transition from Rose period to cubism with a notable change in the acceptance of the city of Paris, a comfortable socio-economic position and a support system of friends.

The idea of the mask is seen in Picasso's *Death*, as the expressionless faces gaze blindly over the dead harlequin's body. Masks become an important part of Picasso's later styles, especially in cubism. The early stages of this interest are exhibited in *Death* and the influences can be traced back to earlier renditions of *saltimbanques*, bohemians, vagabonds and gypsies. Cezanne, Daumier and Doré used these characters to project the ideals of bohemian life via the costumes and masks. For example, in Doré's *The Wounded Child* of 1854/74 (fig. 6), the harlequin is seen observing a wounded child who lies in the arms of his mother. These characters are typical vagabonds and *saltimbanques*; they are all dressed in costume. The harlequin is not only dressed in his costume, but his face is painted and his hair is styled. He is dressed the part of the harlequin. However, the situation with the child, coupled with the harlequin's expression allows emotion to be shown.

Masquerades are an important part of Carnival celebrations and harlequin masks have been, and continue to be, incredibly popular. In many rural masquerades, characters related

[10] Ibid., 316
[11] Denis Thomas, *Picasso and His Art*. (New York: Galahad Books 1975), 23.
[12] Jean Clair, "Picasso Trismegistus: Notes on the Iconography of Harlequin," *Picasso: The Italian Journey 1917-1924* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 18.

to the harlequin were used.[13] In the middle ages, "carnival linked the mythical motif of the return of the dead to the initiation of young males in an explicit, if complex, network of symbolic relations" and within *Death of a Harlequin*, the dead harlequin is being observed by a young boy, as well as another relatively young man.

Despite his preference for "more timeless and generalized subjects,"[15] Picasso chose the harlequin as a major character because he thought of himself as a harlequin-like character. Picasso's self-identification with the figure of the harlequin is based on the fact that they were both entertainers. Picasso's harlequin is not the hilarious jester, but rather a comedian who "speaks the truth and though he may be wearing a disguise we detect his identity by his mercurial nature and his elusive ways."[16] Picasso thought of himself in a similar way. He was the entertainer, an illusionist able to confuse and elude viewers through his art.

During his early years in Paris, insecurities, moodiness, instability, and unfamiliarity were factors in his art, as well as his personality. Traveling between Spain and Paris until 1904 was difficult, and "Picasso spent much of his time with two different groups of artists and writers."[17] The various groups of people with whom Picasso spent time influenced him; perhaps the lack of a familial or familiar setting made him feel like his homeless, bewildered harlequin. It is known that he often portrayed himself as the harlequin. In the painting *At the Lapin Agile*, 1905 (fig. 7), "Picasso shows himself as a disconsolate Harlequin at a bar."[18] The disconnected expression the harlequin/Picasso has is repeated throughout all of these harlequin compositions, and despite the harlequin being dead in *Death*, the other figures have the same disconnected quality.

Death of a Harlequin marks the end of one stylistic period for Picasso. His next period would take him briefly to other classical, traditional subject matter and styles before experimenting with the flattened out, opaque colors of the beginning of his cubist period. Picasso clearly favored self-portraits as the harlequin during this period. The harlequin's image was one that fascinated Picasso, especially during such an important period in his artistic development. It was during this time that Picasso became familiar with Paris and decided to ultimately make it his home. He relished in the neighborhood of Montmartre and its community of artists, outcasts, bohemians, and circus performers. Although this particular gouache is not one of Picasso's most famous works, it is important in that it is representative of the young artist. It is Picasso's experimentation and exploration of art and himself that is conveyed through *Death of a Harlequin*, and with the harlequin's death we are able to recognize Picasso as the great artist he would become.

[13] Grove Art Online, "Carnival: Symbolism" (9/27/99, accessed 04/17/05)
[14] Ibid.
[15] Phoebe Pool, "Sources and Background of Picasso's Art 1900-6," *The Burlington Magazine* (May 1959), 177.
[16] Penrose, 112
[17] Pool, 176
[18] Thomas, 28

FIGURES

Figure 1. Picasso, *Death of a Harlequin*, 1905

Figure 2. Picasso, *Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907

Figure 3. Honoré Daumier,
Saltimbanques Changing Place, 1855-65

Figure 4. Cézanne, *Mardi Gras*, 1

Figure 5. Picasso,
The Harlequin's Family, 1905

Figure 6. Gustave Doré,
The Wounded Child, 1854/74

Figure 7. Picasso, *At the Lapin Agile*, 1905