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Masterpiece

Crucifixion (1930) by Pablo Picasso

A Surreal Rendering of Our Salvation

Pablo Picasso never sold 'Crucifixion' (1930), proving that even though he declared himself an atheist he couldn't escape his religion.

Far from being un-Christian, the distorted figures are little different from those in earlier religious art. Photo: SUCCESSION PICASSO/DACS LONDON/Bridgeman Images

by E.A. Carmean, Jr.

Pablo Picasso's "Crucifixion" (1930), an oil-on-plywood composition in the Musée Picasso in Paris that measures just 20 by 26 inches, is one of his most confounding works. Created using the artist's distinct Surrealist-influenced vocabulary, it has been the subject of important scholarly discussions and has appeared in major Picasso exhibitions, beginning with Alfred H. Barr Jr.'s landmark "Picasso: Fifty Years of His Art" at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1946. Barr, who had studied with Christian iconographer Charles Rufus Morey at Princeton, was the first to fully address the painting's difficult imagery.

Measures of its importance can be seen in the way Picasso never sold the "Crucifixion," and in how Barr asked Picasso to extend his loan long past the exhibition's close, into the 1950s. While it was at MoMA, Jackson Pollock, then at the peak of his own creative powers, made a large variation on it.

In the "Crucifixion," the principal figures of Christ and Mary Magdalene are in white at the picture's center. Christ's simple "ball" head reuses forms from Picasso's 1915 Cubist portraits. The Magdalene is rendered in the organic forms found in Picasso's contemporaneous Surrealist works, her open mouth screaming the unspeakable horror of the execution.

Such distorted heads first appear in his art the year before "Crucifixion," the gaping mouth reflecting conflicts with his rapacious first wife, Olga. Under Picasso's pictorial alchemy, this sign is transformed to express Mary's deep spiritual suffering, her witness to the killing of God's son.

Mary Magdalene faces a second figure with a gaping mouth on the immediate left. Her other side holds two mysterious characters; the identity of the strange "red-eyed" image garners readings ranging from an eschatological St. John to a man with his trousers down.

The figure at the right margin is Christ's mother, Mary, identified for the viewer by her symbolic blue mantle. Mary's bone-construction head is shared with Picasso's Surrealist works, especially his large "Seated Bather" of the same year as "Crucifixion," now in MoMA. Mary's yellow arms lifted in agony and supplication recall both the Virgin and Mary Magdalene of the "Crucifixion" in Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (1512-16). Tellingly, two years later Picasso traveled to Colmar, France, to see this painting, leading to his variations on the masterpiece.

In Picasso's "Crucifixion," the lower right depicts an event from the first minutes of Crucifixion—one Roman soldier rolls dice on a drum top, playing for Jesus' seamless tunic held on the arm of a second soldier wearing a crested helmet. The Gospels reported that this occurs shortly after 9 a.m., during "the third hour" of a day that began at dawn.

Six hours of the Gospels' account have passed on the opposite side, reaching "about the ninth hour," or 3 p.m. Picasso declares this by showing the dead bodies of Dismas and Gestas, the two thieves crucified next to Christ and killed by the Romans at that hour. Their empty Tau-shaped crosses on the left and right horizons also set the painting in the minutes around Christ's death and the initiation of the Deposition.

Details support this. Above left—as in a Medieval Arma Christi—is the vinegar-soaked sponge offered to Christ before he "breathed his last." Christ's torso is posthumously pierced by a tiny, mounted Longinus. A ladder traversing the composition has a small figure at the top; although he swings a hammer, Christian pictorial convention holds this figure to be Joseph of Arimathea taking down the body of the dead Christ.

Symbolic colors underscore this recital. The white of Christ and Mary Magdalene proposes radiant holiness; the black ground behind them describes the "darkness over all the land" until Jesus "yielded up his spirit." The right side's red ground is more speculative; the liturgical color of martyrs, a red ground in Russian icons stands for eternal life.

The yellow background areas seem less symbolic than a reference to the gold ground of late Medieval paintings. In this, Picasso's modest oil-on-wood narrative composition recalls the smaller predella panels of early Renaissance altarpiece pictures.

To some, the distorted spaces, the Surrealist figures and a conflicting chronology offer puzzling or un-Christian readings. Scholars have variously seen a parody of Christianity, a Freudian sexual scene and a depiction of Christ's hallucinations from the cross.

Yet Picasso's Surrealist characters are surely little different from the bizarre figures in earlier religious art, from Gothic church gargoyles to the strange symbolic populations in the pictures of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

Picasso had declared himself an atheist, but his widow, Jacqueline, once said Picasso "was more Catholic than the Pope." This argues that, far from being eccentric or anomalous, Picasso's "Crucifixion" belongs within the Christian tradition.

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