

MERGING AND EMERGING IMAGES METAMORPHOSIS OF PICASSO'S PAINTINGS IN A BROADER CONTEXT

Ann Hoenigswald • Revoir Picasso's symposium • March 25th, 2015

PAINTINGS UNDER PAINTINGS

Close examination of the works of Pablo Picasso reveals his fascination with the process of painting throughout his long and productive career. He frequently invited the viewer to follow the development of a work of art by leaving clues on the surface to intentionally draw attention to alterations. There are numerous examples of Picasso painting a composition over an existing one, but he is not unique in this sense; artists are often too poor to be able to afford another canvas and choose to rework a painting, or sometimes it is simply dissatisfaction with the initial work. However, for Picasso it was neither an issue of being unable to purchase additional supports nor that he lost interest. His mistress, Fernande Olivier, romanticized Picasso's reuse of canvas by evoking the image of the needy artist, and she chose to remember that Picasso had so little money that he was obliged to paint over existing pictures.¹ However, if we are to take her at her word, it makes it difficult to account for many paintings done later in the artist's life—when he was financially secure and more than able to afford new canvases—which overlay earlier compositions. Picasso's need to repaint was motivated elsewhere. The initial composition somehow informed a new work, and often visible *pentimenti*, or embedded impasto, the slivers of color peeking through from beneath at the intersection of forms, drying cracks etc., remained as evidence of the earlier composition. Although the primary intention was not to expose the process of painting, it is likely that he was quite taken with the effect once it became apparent that the alterations were not necessarily a rejection of his composition as much as a need to move in another direction. A color, a shape, a form, or an idea lingering from the initial work often reemerged in a new context. It was as if Picasso could visualize and anticipate the metamorphosis as he was painting. It is well known that he was averse to throwing things away, and it may also have been an efficient means of keeping all of his compositions in his possession—even the ones he discarded.

Picasso himself, in discussing the 1901 *Mother and Child*, (Harvard University Art Museums) recalled that the picture was painted over a portrait of his friend, the poet Max Jacob, and he suggested in 1955 that if someone examined the picture with x-radiography, perhaps the earlier painting could be seen.² However, he also left a clue on the surface: the impastoed contour of Jacob's head emerges through the blue paint layer. Similarly, Picasso acknowledged painting over an existing work when wide cracks in the paint layer exposing colors from an earlier composition were brought to his attention on the 1925 *Dancers*. (Tate Modern) The artist explained

that “some people might want to touch them out but I think they add to the painting. On the face you see how they reveal the eye which was painted underneath.”³



1. PABLO PICASSO
Family of Saltimbanques
1905
Oil on canvas, 212,8 x 229,6 cm
National Gallery of Art
Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.190
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Over the head of the gentleman on the left of the 1905 *Family of Saltimbanques*, (fig. 1) similar drying cracks suggested artist's changes, and infrared imaging revealed a top hat exactly as the artist rendered the figure in a related watercolor sketch.⁴ Subsequently, Picasso reconfigured the fellow into a self-portrait and among many other changes morphed the image of a girl and a dog into the girl and a basket in the final composition. (fig. 2 and 3) In addition to this layer, one of the compositions that Fernande feared lost was also discovered. Again a watercolor and a drypoint etching (?) examined together with the X-radiograph confirmed what she didn't recall: the lost *Circus Family* was embedded deep beneath two compositions.



2. Detail of The Family of Saltimbanques (1905) by Pablo Picasso
© 2016 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



3. PABLO PICASSO
Young Girl with a Dog, 1905
Pastel and gouache on paper, 70,5 x 47,5 cm
Private collection
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It is important, however, to point out that the same attention went into small and less imposing works as well. Picasso had remarked that “a picture used to be the sum of additions. In my case the picture is the sum of destructions. In the end nothing is lost...the red I took away from one place turns up someplace else.”⁵ In many pictures this is what happened. The thin red line defining the chin of the *Woman in a Cap*, (Musée Picasso, Barcelona) for example, emerged from the lower composition, and the source of the highlights in *The Portrait of Sabartes* (Pushkin Museum) similarly materialized from the energetic brushwork of an earlier painting of a small boy that lies under the visible composition.⁶

The Tragedy, (fig. 4) although not on the scale of the *Family of Saltimbanques*, was a significant investment for Picasso because it was painted on a large wooden panel.⁷ It dates to 1903, but Picasso began working on the substantial support much earlier.⁸ Visual clues on the surface of the painting—impasto that cuts across the drape of the garment, and vibrant yellows, oranges and reds unrelated to a blue period painting emerging from underneath—suggested that there was a paint layer beneath the three figures on the beach.⁹



4. PABLO PICASSO
The Tragedy
1903
Oil on wood, 105.3 x 69 cm
National Gallery of Art
Chester Dale Collection. 1963.10.196
© 2016 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York



5. X-radiograph of The Tragedy
(1903) by Pablo Picasso
© 2016 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York

The X-radiograph (fig. 5) revealed a horse at the lower left corner, with his contorted head stretched back unnaturally and his legs twisted awkwardly around the body, as well as a series of arches on their side along the right edge. These mimicked the tortured horse in a small 1901 painting of a bullfighting scene, and the arches in the background and the sweeping arc recalled the architecture of the arena and the definition of the bullring in a similarly dated sketch. Particularly significant is that the palette of the bullfight pictures was dominated by the same strong bright tones that were revealed through the cracks of the *Tragedy*. Clearly a composition related to the two bullring pictures existed under the *Tragedy*. Although the bullfight painting, which was so intimately connected to Barcelona, was abandoned—and the reason remains unclear—it was not forgotten by Picasso. Technical imaging clarified the arches and the horse at the bottom left. In addition, the legs of a harnessed horse with a constricted tail and a bridled muzzle, as well as the legs of a runner, appeared.¹⁰ The horse was followed by a smaller figure brandishing a whip, and two other heads emerged in front of the horse. Once again, drawings exposed the source and the metamorphosis of the composition. The image represented the *Arrastre*, (fig. 6) a subject depicted by Picasso twice in 1902. Apparently, Picasso painted a richly colored bullfight scene in 1901 and added the *Arrastre* in 1902 directly on top of this before shifting the panel to a vertical position in 1903 to paint the *Tragedy*.



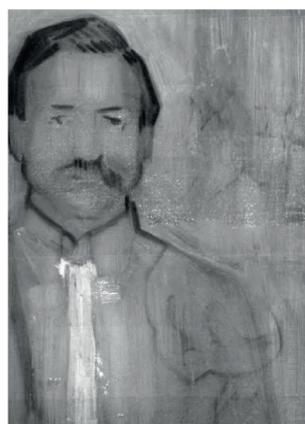
6. PABLO PICASSO
Corrida de toros: El Arrastre (Course de taureaux : l'arrastre)
Barcelona, 1902
Pencil on paper, 32, 5 x 46, 8 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris
Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. MP445
© Paris, RMN - Grand Palais / Thierry Le Mage
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These layers are embedded into one another because of the nature of the opaque layers of paint, but if one follows Georges Henri Clouzot’s film, *Le Mystère Picasso*, which captures Picasso at work seamlessly transforming elements, it clarifies how shapes and forms are incorporated from layer to layer. Careful examination of the *Tragedy* reveals that Picasso did not simply need a new surface on which to work, but that each composition had a clear bearing on the following one.

The horse that lay writhing in the arena of the 1901 layer was the same one who was attached to the harness as it was dragged out of the bullring in the 1902 *Arrastre*. Similarly, the arches that defined the back wall of the 1901 stadium were transformed into the fan-shaped headdresses of the 1902 horses, and subsequently the contour of the boy's head in the visible 1903 composition absorbed the same lingering shape. Ultimately the horse's head from the 1902 *Arrastre* merged into the silhouette of the head and shoulder of the stooped man. Picasso was manipulating a palimpsest as elements of one composition reappeared into the next one.

more substantial. What comes out in the end is the result of the discarded finds.”¹¹ Picasso discarded most of the original composition, but retained just enough to remind himself and his friend of their shared Spanish roots and the bullfight scenes Mañach encouraged the artist to paint.

One must be reminded that Picasso painted over paintings throughout his life, and in some cases the relationship between layers was even more complex. In Antibes in 1946, Picasso took a portrait by an unknown artist and painted the figure of an urchin eater directly over a military officer.¹² (fig. w9) The X-radiograph (fig. 10) exposed the 19th century figure, and careful examination revealed that the shoulder of the officer reemerged as the raised knee of the urchin eater, and the hand ceremoniously placed on the sword became the fist clutching the knife. Essentially, Picasso was using the earlier portrait as a found object.



7. PABLO PICASSO
Pedro Mañach
1901
Oil on Canvas, 105,5 x 70,2 cm
National Gallery of Art
Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.53
© 2016 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York

8. Detail of Pedro Mañach (1901) by Pablo Picasso, Infrared image captured with Kodak 310-21X PtSi IR camera, configured to 1.5-2.0 microns © 2016 Estate of Pablo Picasso/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

9. PABLO PICASSO
The Urchin Eater, 1946
Oleoresinous enamel paint and charcoal on canvas, 130,5 x 81 cm
Musée Picasso, Antibes
1946.1.10
© Musée Picasso, Antibes
© Succession Picasso, 2016

10. X-radiograph of *The Urchin Eater* (1946) by Pablo Picasso
© Musée Picasso, Antibes
© Succession Picasso, 2016

To some extent, Picasso's superimposed layers of paint represent an extension of his lifelong obsession with masks and costumes. In both cases, it is a means to cover and redefine an element, but not eliminate it completely. Hiding under drapery allows the reinvention of meaning or identity, but not to the extent of complete obscurity. In the *Portrait of Pedro Mañach*, (fig. 7) for example, Picasso repurposed the sitter, yet at the same time retained the original persona. Infrared imaging (fig. 8) exposed epaulettes and the outline of the short jacket and sash, which immediately recalled a bullfighter's costume, but in the end, although Picasso repainted the jacket, he retained one very critical element. The narrow orange-red tie remained untouched from the lower layer. By preserving a detail of the first composition, Picasso maintained Mañach's identity as a bullfighter and reinforced it by borrowing the characteristic pose: the hand positioned confidently on his hip mimicking the classic stance of the bullfighter, and the bold lettering across the top patterned on bullfight posters. Picasso remarked that "when you begin a picture you often make some pretty discoveries. In each destroying of a beautiful discovery the artist does not really suppress it but rather transforms it, condenses it, makes it

THE FOUND OBJECTS : WORKS ON PAPER, PHOTOGRAPHY, CERAMICS AND SCULPTURES

Identifying the impetus for repainting his works and leaving clues on the surface is explained not only by studying related paintings but, of equal importance, by looking carefully at other media. Studying Picasso's prints, collage, photographs, ceramics and sculpture enhances one's understanding of the development of paintings, and often clarifies the ambiguity which presents itself. Paintings, literally as well as figuratively, embed and obscure the information that Picasso hides, but other media expose the process more readily because of the nature of the materials. It is not surprising that Picasso would explore all the manifestations of printmaking: it is inherently developmental and explicitly about process. His

habitual and wholesale re-working of intaglio plates, and especially lithographic stones, leave critical traces of direction. Each print remains an object in itself, numbered, identified by state and often exhibited in sequence to emphasize the development. The states of a painting exist in much the same way, but buried under subsequent paint layers, they can only be disentangled from one another by X-radiography and infrared imaging.

Collage similarly provides a clear opportunity to observe the evolution of a work of art. Using materials from other sources, such as wallpaper or newspaper, which retain their own identity and are not conventional artists' materials but rather found objects, exposes the process in its conspicuous layering. In collage, the elements are distinct and their physical attachment to one another is clearly apparent. Drawing attention to these as works in progress is particularly clear, for example, in cases where Picasso leaves empty pin holes as a clue that an element has been moved (and could be adjusted further). Looking closely at Picasso's collages significantly enhances the viewer's understanding of Picasso's paintings and is a reminder that process was frequently something to be revealed and not obscured.

Picasso used photographs in several ways to draw attention to the development of a work of art, and the inherently reproducible nature of the medium was something he exploited fully. There are a number of photographs of the artist in his studio, but of particular interest are the ones where he intentionally records the creation of a painting. Perhaps the most ambitious documentation is the series of photos he had Dora Maar take over a period of six weeks in 1937 to witness the process of *Guernica* (Reina Sofia, Madrid). Somewhat more veiled than this series is a sequence of photos of the *Man Leaning on a Table* (Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin, Italy) (fig. 11 and 12) revealing the many states of the painting. A hyphenated date, 1915-16, below the artist's signature emphasizes the ongoing nature of the process. Similarly, the 1911 photograph of Marie Laurencin posed in front of the *Man with a Mandolin* (fig. 13 and 14) in progress exposes a cross section of the painting. The top two thirds of the painting are complete, whereas the bottom third is simply the prepared canvas marked with the most preliminary sketch.¹³ The subject of the photograph is the development of a painting; it is not an image of Laurencin and Picasso clarified this by mentioning that:

"It would be very interesting to preserve photographically not the stages but the metamorphoses of a picture. Possibly one might then discover the path followed by the brain in materializing a dream. But there is one very odd thing—to notice that basically a picture doesn't change, that the first version remains intact in spite of appearances."¹⁴

Picasso's manipulation of photographs and negatives—superimposing and toying with existing images to create something new—captivated him. The initial photograph was a found object, but because it was reproducible, its multifaceted identity could be altered but never lost. It existed as an object in its own right and possessed its own character, but was redefined in a new context. Similarly, Picasso must have



11. PABLO PICASSO
Self-portrait with *Man Leaning on a Table* in his studio on the Rue Schoelcher, Paris, 1915-1916
Gelatin silver print, 18 x 11,8 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris
Don succession Picasso, 1992.
APPH2859
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12. PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN
Pablo Picasso in front of *Man Leaning on a Table* in his studio on the Rue Schoelcher, Paris, 1915-1916
Gelatin silver print, 18 x 11,8 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris
Dation Dora Maar, 1998. MP1998-135
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13. PABLO PICASSO
Portrait of Marie Laurencin in front of *Man with a Mandolin*, Boulevard de Clichy studio, Paris, Autumn 1911
Original glass negative, 12 x 9 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris
Picasso Private Archives
Don succession Picasso, 1992. no 42
© Paris, RMN - Grand Palais
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14. PABLO PICASSO
Man with a Mandolin
Paris, Fall 1911
Oil on canvas, 162 x 71 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris
Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. MP35
© Paris, RMN - Grand Palais / René-Gabriel Ojéda
© Succession Picasso, 2016

been drawn to the possibility of altering the transparency of images and negatives that inherently revealed a layering structure.

This process became more playful when Picasso took commercial images or photographs and reconfigured or redefined them by adding crayon or ink. In these cases, it was not merely the reinvention that he enjoyed; drawing attention to the act itself must have had appeal. Added color to a black and white photo, the play of a waxy medium against the gloss of a photo, or ink against the coated advertisements from a magazine all emphasized the incompatibility of materials and drew attention to the embellishment. (fig. 15 and 16) It was not merely that Picasso thought he could improve an existing image, but that he believed he could expand the levels of meaning and interpretation. Undoubtedly, Picasso took particular pleasure in the use of advertising and newspaper images because of their populist role. Just as he incorporated stencils (or mimicked stencils) into his work, by taking something that was not associated with the fine artist but only with the industrial or commercial artist, he was able to move an element from one context and make it doubly effective in the second.

Moving industrial materials out of context continued as Picasso began to work with the industrial house or boat paint, Ripolin, and here he was not only incorporating a found object, he was painting with a found object. Ripolin was lifted from its conventional role and the artist intertwined the real

originally housed conventional Lefranc tube paints.¹⁵

Ceramics was another medium that afforded Picasso the opportunity to expose process and development of a work of art. In many cases, a functional form turned into something decorative, but the initial classic shape never disappeared. Traditionally, potters often take two thrown forms and attach



17. PABLO PICASSO

Figure, 1935

Wood, metal, plastic, nails, screws, paint, twine, paper, and concrete, 63,5 x 18 x 13,7 cm

The Art Institute of Chicago

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one to another to create a new object (this is particularly common with large pieces) but in the end the join—both in terms of the literal seam and the two distinct shapes—disappears and the unique object emerges. Picasso, however, always allowed the original vase or pouring vessel to remain as an identifiable form, but simultaneously it became a bird or a female figure by a simple twist or indentation. The viewer was encouraged to experience the creation on more than one level.

Picasso's exploration of photos, ceramics, collage and printmaking was often dependent on the reinvention of an object in a new context, but his sculptures were perhaps the most expressive and often playful examples of his reuse of found objects because there was less ambiguity about the original source. Picasso deliberately put demands upon the viewer to read the objects in several ways. When he bent a dinner fork or attached an industrial gas valve to his sculpture of a *Crane*, (fig. 18) he allowed the viewer to select what they chose to see first: the dinner fork or the bird's feet, the gas valve or the comb? Similarly, taking just two common elements—the bicycle seat and the handlebars—out of context to create the *Head of a Bull* (1942, Musée national Picasso-Paris) forced the viewer to struggle a bit as well, which caused Picasso to remark that "I find the bicycle seat and handlebars on the street and I say 'well there's a bull...everybody who looks at it after I assemble it says, well there's a bull until a cyclist comes along and says, well there's a bicycle seat and he makes a bicycle seat and a pair of handlebars out of it again. And that can go on, back and forth, for an eternity."¹⁶

Interestingly, this resonated with something he had seen in his own father's work. Roland Penrose recalls Picasso mentioning:

"...a Virgin which had been painted black by his father... The Virgin herself had been made from the plaster cast of the head of a Greek goddess that his father had painted over...



15. DAVID DOUGLAS DUNCAN

Pablo Picasso and Manuel Pallarès Cannes, 1960
Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin
© Succession Picasso, 2016



16. PABLO PICASSO AND DAVID DOUGLAS DUNCAN
Picasso and Manuel Pallarès Cannes, 1960
Colored crayons on gelatin silver print
Marina Picasso Collection (inv O783)
Private Collection
© Succession Picasso, 2016

with the illusionary. He often used this material, alongside traditional artists' materials on the same canvas and it was the contrast of surface effects—the glossy, buttery effect next to the matte—that appealed to him. He continued to develop this idea by fabricating the face of the woman in his 1935 sculpture *Figure* (fig. 17) from the lid of a Ripolin can, which in itself is a clever reuse of a found object, but he carried the pun further by mounting the body on a wooden box which



18. PABLO PICASSO
Crane
 Vallauris, 1951-53
 Metal (spade, forks, gas valve),
 willow branch and plaster on a
 wooden base, 76,5 x 29 x 43,5 cm
 Musée national Picasso – Paris
 Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979. MP343
 © Paris, RMN - Grand Palais / Béatrice
 Hatala
 © Succession Picasso, 2016

giving it eyelashes and a look of sorrow with golden tears stuck to her cheeks.¹⁷ P. was delighted with this forerunner of collage and admired the way the two round lamps had been placed where breasts might be giving the virgin a new form of illumination.”¹⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Whereas the term “found object” has long been used in the context of Picasso’s sculptures, it should now be recognized that the paintings buried under subsequent paintings are also found objects, but their original identity is so concealed that the relationship sometimes seems impenetrable. Picasso’s work *Still life with Chair Caning* (1912, Musée national Picasso-Paris) was very much a transitional object, and his first work that merged painting and sculpture. Using traditional artists’ paints as well as found objects, Picasso chose to incorporate rope to emphasize the three dimensionality of the work and literally confine the painting within an everyday object. The cane seat was represented by printed oil cloth, not real caning, in contrast to adjacent areas where the colors were applied in a very painterly manner. Picasso was acknowledging that he was moving beyond traditional painting when he observed the intersection of materials and meaning that emerged, and yet it is not a *trompe-l’œil*, although it bears some of those characteristics. Perhaps that was precisely what prompted him to remark that “I’m out to fool the mind rather than the eye.”¹⁹ Many paintings, however, do not merge painting and sculpture and yet still incorporate found objects. Painters generally do not define themselves by that moniker; instead they refer to themselves as artists and do not tailor their working methods to accommodate different materials. The viewer learns so much more about the artist if he is seen in the context of his entire oeuvre. Picasso

approached his paintings precisely as he did other media. Indeed, if it is most obvious to isolate and identify the found object in a sculpture, it is most difficult to recognize it in a painting because it is physically embedded. Consequently, additional tools are needed to decipher the metamorphosis: x-radiographs, cross sections, infrared and spectroscopic imaging and written, spoken and photographic documentation are all essential to clarify the process, and to fully interpret the development of a painting, one must consider it in a larger framework.

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1. Olivier, Fernande, *Loving Picasso: The private journal of Fernande Olivier*. Translated from the French by Christine Baker and Michael Raeburn with notes by Marilyn McCully; epilogue by John Richardson. New York, Abrams, 2001, p.162.
2. Seckel, Hélène. *Max Jacob et Picasso*. Paris, RMN, 1994, p.3.
3. Notes made by Sir Roland Penrose after conversations with Picasso at Mougins on 29-31 January, 1985 in Tate Gallery Report (1964-1965), P.49-50.
4. For a more extensive investigation of *The Saltimbanques* see Carmean, E.A. Jr. *Picasso, The Saltimbanques*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980.
5. Ashton, Dore, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, New York, Penguin, 1977 p. 38. Zervos, 1935.
6. The X-radiograph is published in Podoksik, Anatoly, *Picasso: The Artist's work in Soviet Museums*. New York, Abrams, 1989.
7. There has been some discussion focusing on whether this was a panel made for artists' use, but identification of an archival photograph in the National Gallery of Art Conservation files reveals the stamp of the Barcelona color merchant, Planella, on the reverse of the panel, which confirms that it was not a discarded piece of wood.
8. Pencil and wash sketches identified with reflectance spectroscopic imaging, which date stylistically to 1899, are clearly visible under all of the paint layers. Unless there is a painted layer or a sketch which is not apparent, it is interesting to observe that Picasso allowed a gap of two years to pass before he returned to the panel to paint the bullfight scene. The wooden support may have represented a type of talisman—always revisiting it when he returned to Barcelona.
9. The identification of the compositions under the tragedy was first made by the author and E.A. Carmean. Information about the layering and the metamorphosis is detailed in Mc Cully, Marilyn (ed), *Picasso: the early years 1892-1906*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1997, but further examinations with recent spectroscopic imaging have augmented the initial discoveries.
10. X-ray fluorescence spectroscopic imaging determined that this composition was not just a drawn sketch but fully realized in paint.
11. Ashton, Dore, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, New York, Penguin, 1977 p. 9. Zervos, 1935.
12. This X-radiograph was first published in Giraudy, Danièle, *A Travers Picasso: L'oeuvre de Picasso a Antibes*. 1982
13. Even in its finished state, the viewer's attention is emphatically drawn to the construction. The support is made up of two separate pieces of fabric overlapping one another and a line of impastoed paint running horizontally across the picture with cross-hatched strokes imitating a stitched seam and distinguishing the "finished" from the "unfinished" elements while preserving the painting almost as an artifact.
14. Ashton, Dore, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, New York, Penguin, 1977 p. 8. Zervos, 1935.
15. One can only speculate whether Picasso knew that the business establishments Ripolin and Lefranc merged in 1897 and formed a new company, *Le Ripolin*. (See Raeburn, M. *La Marque Ripolin* in Andral, Jean Louis. *Picasso Express*, Musée Picasso, Antibes, 2011, p. 3). I am grateful to Allison Langley for sharing information on *Figure*.
16. Gilot, Françoise and Lake, Carlton, *Life with Picasso*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964, p. 321.
17. Pablo Picasso and his father undoubtedly were familiar with traditional Spanish religious figural sculptures which incorporated rope and fabric or glass tears.
18. Cowling, Elizabeth, *Visiting Picasso, The Notebooks and Letters of Roland Penrose*. London, Thames and Hudson, 2006, p. 107-107.
19. Gilot, Françoise and Lake, Carlton, *Life with Picasso*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964, p.321.