

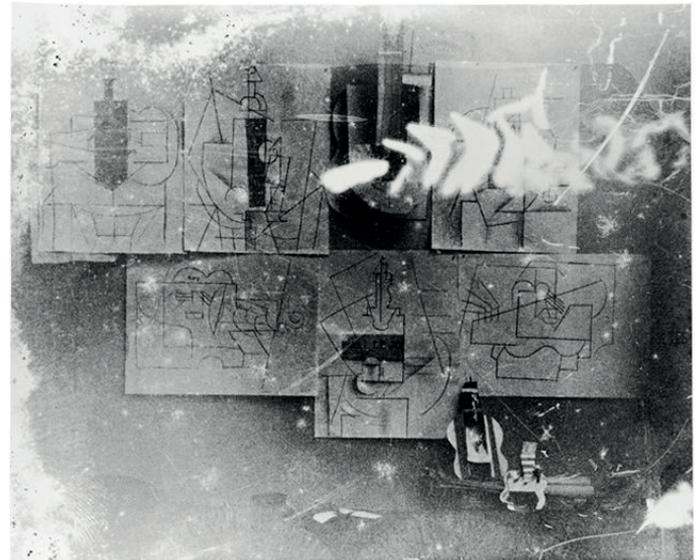
‘NOTRE AVENIR EST DANS L’AIR’: PICASSO AND THE INVENTION OF CUBIST SCULPTURE, 1912-1914

John Finlay • colloque Revoir Picasso • 25 mars 2015

Shortly before noon on the 4th of September 1909, in the presence of a large and expectant Parisian crowd, Louis Blériot’s *oiseau glorieux* was displayed and photographed. Its left wing yet to be attached, the fragile, half-built structure hovered above the heads of rapt spectators. The feebleness of that single-winged structure, its rickety mechanical framework buoyed by ropes and wooden struts, evidences the sheer *bricolage* traits of early aircraft. The photograph is conspicuous in its reference to rudimentary aircraft, the foreground figure to the right (probably a popular *homme-sandwich*) ostensibly hauling the displaced wing. The monoplane had famously crossed the channel on the 25th of July, and subsequently perched outside the windows of the *Le Matin*’s headquarters for about two weeks. The paper’s front page proclaimed that “*Paris a défilé hier devant le Blériot*” (“Yesterday Paris filed past Blériot’s aircraft”), the poet Guillaume Apollinaire later describing the plane “bearing the weight of humanity, of thousands of years of endeavour triumphantly paraded through Paris to the Arts-et-Métiers museum.”

1908-9 was a pioneering chapter in aviation history and French newspapers were littered with the feats of intrepid aviators—their flying machines capturing the public’s interest in a way previously unimagined. As Robert Wohl, an expert on early aeronautical history has observed: “A poll taken [in 1909] in France among six hundred secondary students revealed that those who responded admired aviators more than any other historical or contemporary figure. Napoleon was less popular among these *lycéens* (secondary-school students) than Blériot.”

It comes as no surprise therefore to find Picasso and Braque’s love of aviation’s tumbledown contrivances corroborated by the Spaniard’s words to Roland Penrose: “...we were very interested in the efforts of those who were making airplanes. When one wing was not enough to keep them in the air they joined on another with strings and wire.” Pierre Cabanne also observed that aviation fascinated both Braque and Picasso, stating that they attended early flying meets at Issy-les-Moulineaux and even attempted to build their own aeroplanes, applying to their cubist works what they knew about aerodynamics. Picasso and his circle must have instantly perceived that piloting a monoplane like Blériot’s, and indeed all powered flight, was as much an aesthetic as a scientific display—the new aviator and his strange contraption encapsulated the creative spirit of the age. A review in the newspaper *Gil Blas* on November 14th, 1908 of Georges Braque’s exhibition appeared beside a photograph of Wilbur Wright’s record breaking flight a day earlier at Le Mans, headlined “*La Conquête de l’air*” (The Conquest of the Air), a juxtaposition which suggests a parallel between feats of aviation and contemporary artistic creativity, particularly Cubism. The perception of flight as an epic spectacle was, as Picasso’s *Scallop Shell* and other flag paintings of 1912 announce, definitely “*dans l’air*” (in the air).



1. PABLO PICASSO

Installation in the artist studio at 242 boulevard Raspail Paris

Mid-December 1912 or February 1913

Original glass negative, 9 x 12 cm

Archives privées de Pablo Picasso

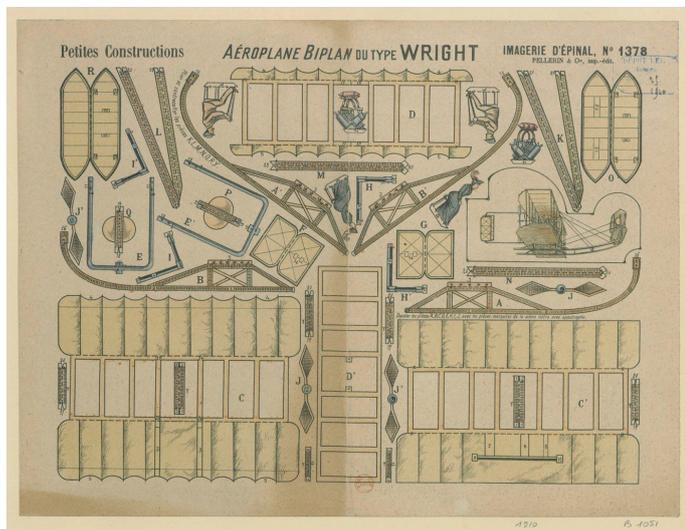
Musée national Picasso-Paris

No. 112

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This popular idea of the aviator as a “poet of the skies” may be used to throw light on the wall arrangements in Picasso’s 242 boulevard Raspail studio in 1912-13, and particularly the famous cardboard *Guitar*, mounted centrally among drawings and *papiers-collés*. In one of the boulevard Raspail assemblages (fig. 1), Picasso’s flimsy paperboard, string and wire *Guitar* is wryly portrayed as the fulcrum in the whole structure. *Guitar*, situated between a set of *papier-collé* “wings,” perhaps apes, or stands-in for the engine and tail of a jerry-built aircraft. Taking the idea a step further, the wall assemblages are, to a greater or lesser degree, conceptually and visually similar to the Wright brothers’ earliest gliders: they are flat and flimsy. In Picasso’s studio arrangement with large *papier-collé* extensions, fragility and a general sense of unsteadiness are very salient features. The wall assemblage, featuring an off-center copy of the magazine *L’Illustration*, tucked behind the construction, leans somewhat to the right in one photo, but then rolls to the left in another. Add to the

experience the upturned or swivelled newspaper clippings used in Picasso's papiers-collés, then instability and inverted sensations start to appear as fundamental characteristics of this composite work. Paradoxically, the cut-out and built cardboard *Guitar* (1912, Museum of Modern Art, New York) appears in comparison to be a rather solid, gravity-bound object. The thread, string, twine and coated wires operate, however, as a type of drawing in space and add a light and airy quality to the object. Recent technical analysis of the *Guitar* by Christine Poggi indicates that Picasso's construction is made obliquely and intentionally out of kilter, its lopsidedness calculated to visually convey the viewer from one side of the sculpture to the other (and back again presumably). These aspects add a vertiginous and rickety quality to the *Guitar* and tend to counter any appearance of stability it may bring to the large wall assemblage.



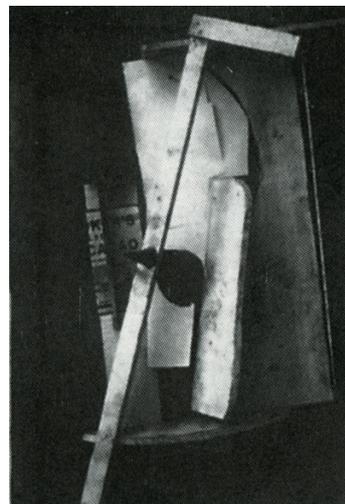
2. 'Petites constructions': N° 1378, Aéroplane-biplane du type Wright, imagerie d'épinal, 1910
Pellerin et Cie, imp.-édit. [Epinal, 1910], 23 x 30 cm
Bibliothèque nationale de France

Guitar and the wall arrangements may be compared to self-assembly kits for making small paper models of monoplanes and biplanes flown by illustrious aviators (fig. 2). These popular, widely-distributed kits featured wings, engines, propellers, even a pilot and passengers, spread out flat and ready for fabrication. Did Picasso meld knowledge of ramshackle airplanes with references to these paper templates, or toy planes playfully created out of odds and ends; soapboxes, paper, string and flags, and celebrating the homespun nature of modern flying contraptions? One visitor who came to see Wilbur Wright's machine fly at Auvours observed that the aviator's airplane was also a type of do-it-yourself construction, cobbled together with commonplace junk: "[His airplane] looked like the work of an amateur... It is rough, almost makeshift. The two tiny seats...seemed to be made out of biscuit boxes. There were many people on the ground who could have improved it, and said as much."

Descriptions of these "rustic," "rudimentary" and "dangerously unstable" flying machines—the rough-and-ready nature of the Wright's flyers repeatedly emphasised in the popular French press—are certainly applicable to Picasso's fragile wall assemblages and to cubist constructions such as *Bottle and Guitar* (fig. 3). The connection is irresistible, given that the parts of *Bottle and Guitar* replicate revolving motor or propeller blades, its set square-like element made from flat pieces of wood, so that it gives the impression of rotating on the cone-shaped section of modeling clay. So *Bottle and Guitar* and the boulevard Raspail assemblages might privately and wittily have suggested that the Cubist innovators Braque and Picasso were counterparts and rivals of American and French aviation pioneers. As William Rubin has suggested, this aeronautical correlation is tacit in the nickname "Wilbour Braque" and also in Picasso's and Braque's shared awareness that they were not only high-flying inventors, but also brothers, the Spaniard christening his compatriot "Wilbour," inferring that he was "Orville." These points are worth further investigation.

Photographs of Picasso's studio show him feigning the part of a manual worker (fig. 4) who has temporarily downed tools. His atelier is thus presented as a place of industry and the space of the new artist-operator. Picasso sports a popular "Vilbour"-style cap (the public bought replicas of Wright's fashionable green beret), a roofer's jacket and a pair of worker's trousers turned up, labourer-style, at the bottom. Although Picasso's Sunday-best shoes somewhat undermine the operative-inventor image, the artist's hand-in-pocket stance and his worker outfit mimic the dress and operational habits of the Wrights and Louis Blériot. Picasso's bravado before the camera, standing proudly in his workplace, similarly parodies the practices of the famous "mécanicien et marchand de bicyclettes" (mechanic and bicycle merchant) Wilbur Wright, who was renowned for his dedication to labour, for fabricating his own mechanical parts and tools, cooking his meals and sleeping beneath the wings of his plane.

New dating for the *Notre avenir est dans l'air* series indicates that Picasso's flag imagery is unlikely to be an overt homage to Wilbur Wright, who died in Ohio on May 30th



3. PABLO PICASSO
Bottle and Guitar
1913

Wood, glued paper, plastilline cone, dimension unknown
Probably destroyed
© Succession Picasso, 2016

that year. Yet this group of works with the accompanying aeronautical logo unquestionably celebrate the Wrights' achievements and pay great honour to the burgeoning era of aviation. The appropriation of the letters "est dan[s]" in *The Scallop Shell* and what has been called the "diagonal verve of the typography" mimic flight, as the words launch themselves from the surface of the painted flag. As Linda Nochlin judiciously observes:

"This sense of élan and vigor is emphasized by the... way [the typography] 'takes off' from its place on the tricolour surface and sweeps across the picture plane, an effect underscored by the blurring of the "a" and "n" in "dans" and the way the lively letters darken the white of the tricolour as they in effect skim over the white stripe."

Hence the implied logo "notre avenir est dans l'air" celebrates in 1912 the inventors and new age of aviation, but also Cubism as a similarly pioneering art form. Picasso highlights the importance of aeronautics for his cubist oeuvre by juxtaposing in all instances Michelin's slogan with the mastheads for [Le] [M] 'a' [rtin] and [Le] 'JOU' [rnal], where aviators and their flying machines were routinely photographed and discussed, rendering these sources especially topical.

Can it be chance that the final work in the series, the famous *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912, Musée national Picasso-Paris), also includes out-of-kilter letters, spelling "JOU," while the still life and its trailing shadows resemble aerial landmarks, "a landscape seen from the air," and evoke the perspective of a pilot, parachutist or "vertical invader?" Essential compositional elements in Picasso's first collage include the printed imitation wicker oilcloth and the rope frame, which also suggest pre-war planes, fitted with lightweight cane seating, their framework covered in flimsy stretched canvas, secured by ordinary rigging. As with the related flag compositions, the oval table with pipe, glass and lemon, newspaper and wicker chair all intimate a bar or bohemian worker's café (smoking, drinking and reading), but where the "tabletops seem no more than points of departure for a world beyond their edges" and which parallel "the airborne expansiveness of the *Scallop Shell*." Gertrude Stein, moreover, compared Picasso's Cubism to looking down from an airplane:

"When I looked at the earth I saw all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane. I saw there on the earth the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves ... and once more I knew that a creator is contemporary ... [and] sees the earth as no one has ever seen it."

Picasso's Cubism therefore functions in direct and insufficiently acknowledged correspondence with early flight. The artist's early constructions and assemblages reflect a concept that was literally "dans l'air," Picasso's Cubism, like other



4. 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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artistic idioms, attempted to record the new experience of flight. As Robert Wohl has however astutely observed, representations of flight took place "almost always from the point of view of someone watching from below ... with a handful of exceptions ... the artistic avant-garde remained resolutely earthbound." Picasso's empathy with aviation pioneers, seen as inventors, engineers, artisans and operatives, and his personal assimilation of that identity, also demonstrates that his early Cubist sculpture was in close negotiation with the protocols and spectacles of the age, establishing a creative interaction that was more intimate and significant than has hitherto been suggested, particularly in Cubist works he produced between 1912 and 1914. Rudyard Kipling's reaction to the Wright brothers' development of a flying machine in 1903 is equally applicable to the astonishingly inventive period when cubist sculpture was first developed. Kipling stated: "We are at the opening verse of the opening page of the chapter of endless possibilities." In other words, "notre avenir est dans l'air."

The ideas and opinions expressed in the videos and publications of this seminar are those of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or position of the Musée national Picasso-Paris, nor does the Musée national Picasso-Paris assume any responsibility for them.

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1. 'Le Blériot devant *Le Matin*': *Le Matin*, Septembre 6 1909.
2. 'Paris a défilé hier devant le Blériot': *Le Matin*, Septembre 5 1909.
3. G. Apollinaire: *The Cubist Painters*, in *The Cubist Painters: Guillaume Apollinaire*, translated with a commentary by Peter Read, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, California, 2002, p. 75.
4. R. Wohl: *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908-1918*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1994, p. 69.
5. R. Penrose: *Picasso: His Life and Work*, 3rd ed.: Berkeley, University of California Press 1981, p. 171.
6. P. Cabanne: *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times*, William Morrow and Company Inc., New York 1977, p. 142.
7. Although Picasso was away from Paris until 13 September of that year (at Horta de Ebro and Barcelona), and Braque probably at Le Havre (for twenty-eight days of military service) from September 7 to October 6, both could, in theory, have witnessed the open-air display of Blériot's aircraft, Picasso in the final days and Braque before his departure. In any case, French newspapers reported aeronautical feats on an almost daily basis and both undoubtedly absorbed the latest events from Apollinaire and others immediate to the bande à Picasso.
8. Braque also signed himself 'Your Wilburg [sic] Braque' in a letter to Kahnweiler dated August 16, 1912. Picasso makes reference to 'Wilbourg [sic] Braque...settling in' on August 15. See W. Rubin: *Braque and Picasso: Pioneering Cubism*, exh. cat., with a 'Documentary Chronology' by J. Cousins, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1989, p. 402. See Rubin (p. 33) for the reference to Louis Vauxcelles' article 'Exposition Braque' in 1908. Francis Francina also associates the lettering 'BO' and 'WS' in *Violin, wineglass, pipe and anchor* (Narodni Galerie, Prague) with Picasso's nickname for Braque, 'Wilburg', in C. Harrison et al.: *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London 1993, p.152.
9. The three paintings, reproduced in Daix (see note 14), include: *Notre avenir est dans l'air* (whereabouts unknown, Daix 465); another of the same title (Musée National d'art moderne, Paris, Daix 463); and *The Scallop Shell* (Lauder Collection, New York, Daix 464). For discussion of the tricolour works, see K. E. Silver: 'Picasso and Patriotism', in E. Braun and R. Rabinow, eds.: exh. cat. *Cubism: The Leonard A. Lauder Collection*, New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art) 2014, pp.180–86.
10. Picasso was an enthusiastic reader of the illustrated paper *L'Excelsior*, but evidently he also bought the magazine *L'Illustration*. The magazine issue, with the cover page entitled 'Le Vieil Homme' ('The Old Man'), is dated 21 January 1911.
11. See C. Poggi: 'Picasso First Constructed Sculpture: A Tale of Two Guitars', *Art Bulletin* (June 2012), volume XCIV, no. 2, pp. 276–298 (especially pp. 284–288). Poggi states that: 'The right side of *Guitar*, at its lowest end where it is narrowest, measures 4½ inches (11.4 centimetres), whereas at the top it measures 5 inches (12.6 centimetres). The left side reverses the implied vanishing point, so that beginning at 2¾ inches (7 centimetres) at the bottom, it converges to 2½ inches (5.3 centimetres) at the top.'
12. Archibald Marshall: *Daily Mail*, 21 December 1908, cited in R. Wohl, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 291 (and note 43).
13. *Le Matin*, 19 September 1908, *ibid.*, p. 23.
14. Reproduced in P. Daix and J. Rosselet: *Picasso: The Cubist Years, 1907–1916—A Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings and Related Works*, Thames and Hudson, London 1979 (no. 631).
15. Rubin, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 50.
16. A. Baldassari: *Picasso and Photography: The Dark Mirror*, Flammarion, Paris 1997, p. 126.
17. According to those who saw him fly, Blériot was kitted-out in a very similar 'aviator's suit...a short blue workman's blouse drawn in at the waist.' Wohl, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 203.
18. F. Peyrey: *Les Premiers Hommes-Oiseaux*, Paris, Guiton, 1908, p. 46, and cited in Wohl, *ibid.*, pp. 25–27.
19. R. Rosenblum follows the conventional timeline of May for the the *Notre Avenir est dans l'air* series, assuming that the canvasses must predate the artist's June 5 1912 inventory sent to Kahnweiler, where the trio of works are listed. Subsequently, in 'Picasso and the Typography of Cubism', *Picasso in Retrospect*, J. Golding and R. Penrose (eds.), Icon Editions, Harper & Row, New York [1973], 1980, pp. 38–47 (p. 35), Rosenblum interprets the *Notre avenir est dans l'air* paintings as a homage to Wilbur Wright. However, Nicholas Sawicki's new findings make this connection highly unlikely. Sawicki provides evidence that the Czech collector Vincenc Kramár saw among other works (including *Still Life with Chair Caning*) the three 'flag' paintings on May 2 1912, which he described to his wife as 'several works in...the French red, white and blue tricolour...' N. Sawicki: "Ripolin, Flags and Wood: Picasso's 'Violin, Wineglass, Pipe and Anchor' (1912) and Its Cubist Frame", *The Burlington Magazine* 1342 (January 2015), pp. 18–26. In J. Claverie et al.: exh. cat. Vincenc Kramár: *Un théoricien et collectionneur du cubisme à Prague*, Paris (Musée Picasso) 2002, p. 219, with a transcript of the Czech template on p. 307, note 38. If one takes into account Kramár's letter, it is clear that Picasso began work on his flag paintings before May. The three oval works must, nevertheless, postdate the February 1, 1912 publication of the Michelin pamphlet that, along with the typography for *Le Journal* and *Le Matin*, was Picasso's inspiration for the various fragments of lettering. Sawicki's research confirms that the traditional date of May for the *Notre avenir est dans l'air* paintings and for *Still life with chair caning*, should be pushed back to February–April. The new dating indicates also that Picasso's famous collage is not a stand-alone work but intimately connected to the entire oval series of early 1912.
19. J. Rosselet was first to identify that Picasso's tricolour specifically refers to the Michelin brochure, which promotes France's military aviation campaign. See P. Daix and J. Rosselet, *op.cit.* (note 14), p. 278.
20. See L. Nochlin: 'Picasso's Color: Schemes and Gambits', *Art in America* 68, no. 10 (December 1980), pp. 105–123 and 177–183 (p. 110).
21. K. E. Silver: 'Picasso and Patriotism', *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 182 and p. 184.
22. J. Berger: *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, Readers and Writers Publishing Cooperative, London, 1965 [1980], p. 40 and p. 49.
23. Silver, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 185.
24. G. Stein: *Picasso*, Dover Publications, New York, 1938 [1984], pp. 49–50.
25. Wohl, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 272–273.
26. R. Kipling's letter to Air Commodore E. M. Maitland, 1903, in 'Airisms from the Four Winds', *Flight*, January 20, 1921, p. 44.