Juan Gris (1887-1927)

Sarah Moss

The Spanish artist Juan Gris (born José Victoriano Carmelo Carlos González Pérez) is widely recognized, alongside Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, as one of the key pioneers of Cubism. Despite a career overshadowed by Picasso and Braque, Gris developed a style of Analytic and Synthetic Cubism quite unique to that of his contemporaries.

Born in Madrid, he studied at the *Escuela de Artes e Industrias* between 1902 and 1904, where he is believed to have studied mathematics, the natural sciences and engineering. Deciding to devote himself to art, he cut short his studies to study with the academic painter José Moreno Carbonero, which he did from 1904 to 1905.

In 1906, he moved to Paris, where he met Picasso and Braque and became acquainted with the artistic and literary ideas of the French avant-garde. Although it was not necessarily always reciprocated, Gris is known to have respected Picasso and Braque enormously. Gertrude Stein, a friend and collector of his work, recalled that when he first arrived in Paris and was living with Picasso, Gris would call Picasso his *cher maître* and in his 1912 painting of Picasso, the phrase ‘Homage to Picasso’ can be clearly seen in the bottom right hand corner.

During 1907-1914, he earned a living, and then an extra income, as an illustrator and caricaturist for various poets and magazines of the time including the popular French magazine *L’Assisette au beurre*. In 1910 he began to paint seriously and in works such as *The Eggs* of 1911 (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart) the influences of academic art and of Cézanne can be seen. Whereas it seems Picasso and Braque used the traits of academic art to further their status as innovative and revolutionary artists, and so to move modern art further away from classical art, Gris adopted its means to bring the two together, taking him in a very different direction from his fellow Cubists. Classical influences and sympathies are evident throughout his career and indeed in a 1921 edition of the Purist journal *L’esprit nouveau*, Gris wrote, ‘I do not want to break away from the Louvre. Mine is the method of all times, the method used by the old masters’.

In 1912 Gris showed his work in important exhibitions such as the *Salon des Indépendants* and *La Section d’Or*, where he exhibited *Man in the Café* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia) and *The Watch* (Private Collection). The artists, known as the ‘Puteaux Group’ or the ‘Salon Cubists’, who organised the exhibition, shared an interest in mathematics and would frequently meet at their suburban studios in Courbevoie and Puteaux. At this time Gris was most preoccupied with geometrical compositions, regularity, and precision.

In 1913, Gris signed a contract with the art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and subsequently became a full-time artist, working principally, at this time, in the medium of *papier collé*. Rich in colour and detail, his collages contain the contradictions and puns so common to Cubist collage as well as an inventive incorporation of texts. Excellent examples include *The Table* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia) and *The Bottle of Anis del Mono* (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid).

*The Table*, for example, created during the height of his *papier collé* period, presents us with a well-balanced amalgamation of the various compositional techniques that crop up in his other *papiers collés*: controlled arrangements of both curved and straight intersecting lines, lines which have a clear and very definite function; overlapping, partially transparent planes; varying perspectives; carefully chosen and restricted palettes of colours; papers pasted neatly onto the canvas; and charcoaled outlines of, and around objects. Despite *The Table*’s seemingly complicated pictorial structure, when compared with a Picasso or Braque *papier collé*, the work oozes with clarity and order. Gris once wrote in a letter to Kahnweiler, ‘My mind is too precise to allow me to tone down a blue or twist a straight line...One must after all paint as one is oneself.’

Due to the outbreak of World War I, Kahnweiler was forced to flee France in 1914 leaving Gris in much financial difficulty, and so in 1916, Gris signed a contract with Léonce Rosenberg. At Rosenberg's *Galerie l'Effort Moderne*, Gris’ first major solo exhibition was held in 1919. Gris was to renew his relationship with Kahnweiler in 1920 when he returned to Paris and subsequently became his dealer again.

1916 also saw the beginning of Gris’ ‘architectural’ period. In paintings such as *Portrait of Madame Josette Gris* (Museo del Prado, Madrid), a portrait of his wife, we see Gris’s forms become larger and flatter with fewer viewpoints. The clarity of line, construction and form that was evident in works around this time as well as in what is known as his ‘poetic’ period of the early 1920s made Gris very attractive to the emergent Purists, who celebrated his work in their journal *L’esprit nouveau*. Over the course of the next few years, however, his style became more intuitive and fluid and in paintings such as *Guitar with Sheet of Music* (Saidenburg Gallery, New York), completed just before the artist’s death in 1926-27*,* we seean emphasis on correspondences between colours and shapes.

During 1922-1924 Gris worked as a stage and costume designer. He designed the sets and costumes for Charles Gounod’s opera *La colombe*, for Emmanuel Chabrier’s *L’éducation manquée* and for Michel de Montéclair’s ballet *Les Tentations de la Bergėre*, the latter produced by Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in Monte Carlo in January 1924. In the same year, Gris delivered his famous lecture ‘Des Possibilités de la Peinture’ at the Sorbonne. Gris rarely discussed his work in public and is reported by Kahnweiler as once saying, ‘I consider that no man should talk of his own profession except with extreme caution or, better still, not at all,’ so the lecture gave a crucial insight into his life and thoughts about art. Here we learn that Gris did not consider his work to be abstract. In the lecture, he states,

‘Painting for me is like a fabric, all of a piece and uniform, with one set of threads as the representational, aesthetic element, and the cross-threads as the technical, architectural, or abstract element. These threads are interdependent and complementary, and if one set is lacking, the fabric does not exist. A picture with no representational purpose is to my mind always an incomplete technical exercise, for the only purpose of any picture is to achieve representation.’

In 1927, following a long string of illnesses spanning seven years, he was diagnosed with uremia. He died on 11 May 1927 and was buried two days later in the cemetery of Boulogne-sur-Seine, where he and Josette had lived during the latter years of his life. Gris was never to return to Spain due to the risk of imprisonment for evading national military service.

Major Works:

'Guitar with Sheet of Music (1926-27)' is in a private collection now.

- Homage to Picasso (1912) - Art Institute of Chicago

<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/8624>

- The Eggs (1911) - Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

<http://onlinekatalog.staatsgalerie.de/detail.jsp?id=80CB6E8F44CDFCBA21026CA50049D7E5&img=1>

- Man in the Café (1912) - Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/51698.html>

- The Table (1914) - Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/53918.html>

- The Bottle of Anis del Mono (1914) - Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

<http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/bouteille-danis-bottle-anis>

- Portrait of Madame Josette Gris (1916) - Museo del Prado, Madrid

<http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/portrait-madame-josette-gris-portrait-madame-josette-gris>

Further Reading

1. Antiff, M. & Leighten, P., (2001) *Cubism and Culture*, London: Thames & Hudson.
2. Cooper, D., (Trans. and Ed.), (1956) *Letters of Juan Gris (1913-1927)*, London and Bradford: Percy Lund, Humphries and co.
3. Green, C., (1992) *Juan Gris*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
4. Gris, J., (1989) *Des Possibilités de la Peinture*, Caen : Ed. L’Échoppe.
5. Kahnweiler, D.H., Cooper, D. (Trans.), (1969) (first pub. 1947) *Juan Gris: his life and work*, London: Thames & Hudson.
6. Moss, S., ‘*Le Vrai et le Faux’ in Juan Gris’s ‘The table’ (1914),* The Burlington Magazine, September 2011, Vol. 153, No.1302, pp.574-578.
7. Poggi, C., (1992) ***In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage*, New Haven: Yale University Press.**