

PICASSO'S DEFENSIVE *HEAD OF A WARRIOR*

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It is tempting to consider *Head of a Warrior*, a plaster sculpture that Pablo Picasso created in his Boisgeloup studio in 1933, as a humorous one-off, comically jabbing at the image of the hero (*fig. 1*)¹. As is so often the case with Picasso's work, however, this sculpture cannot be taken in isolation within his oeuvre. Despite the prominent crest and ambivalent smirk, it relates closely in form to the series of plaster sculptures of a woman's head that Picasso made over the previous two years. And conversely, the figure of the helmeted warrior proliferates in Picasso's illustrations for Gilbert Seldes's translation of Aristophanes's Greek comedy *Lysistrata*, published in 1934². These contexts internal to Picasso's work suggest a point of entry but do not exhaust *Head of a Warrior's* connotations. Instead, they allow us to see the sculpture as a response, and a staunchly defensive one at that, to shifts in the artistic and political spheres taking shape beyond the walls of his studio.

Picasso began his series of volumetric plaster heads with a fairly simple depiction of his then-lover, Marie-Thérèse Walter. From there, he moved in two directions: on the one hand, he played with the bust's features, elongating the nose and in turns bulging and recessing the eyes, pushing the face into phallic territory that culminated with a nearly abstract series of bulbous forms in *Head of a Woman* of 1931. On the other hand, he moved the plaster heads toward greater clarity and figural simplicity, melding the figure's nose into its forehead and forming the hair into a separate volume while still explicitly maintaining the work's representational qualities. This latter direction yielded the sculptural type that Picasso would employ

as a synecdoche for the artist's craft in the *Vollard Suite* prints. Like the Minotaur images from the suite, the "Sculptor's Studio" prints are classical in setting.³ Throughout, the sculptor and model/muse, bedecked in laurels, gaze upon a bust like *Head of a Woman* (1932) that sits atop a Greek column.

Head of a Warrior thus unites the themes Picasso was exploring elsewhere in print and plaster. The expanding volumes of the eyes and nose coupled with the Greek-style crest combine the formal play of the more abstract set of plaster heads with the classicizing characterization of the other plasters and the prints. The warrior figure itself incorporates yet another of Picasso's projects from the time, namely the illustrations for Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, as mentioned above. Even at the level of materials, *Head of a Warrior* emphasizes incorporation and unification. The plaster literally holds together tennis-ball eyes, a chicken-wire crest, a spine made of twisted wire and piping, a crowbar at the back of the neck, and nails that support the top curve of the nose. It is this sense of unity and stasis, combining and incorporating elements from a range of Picasso's works as well as diverse materials, that allows this sculpture to function as a statement of Picasso's practice. A statement made in opposition to the emerging model of Surrealist sculpture exemplified by Alberto Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* (1930) (*fig. 2*). Giacometti's sculpture was first shown at Pierre Loeb's gallery in Paris in the fall of 1930. Even if Picasso did not see it then, he was certainly aware of it soon afterwards. It became instantly important to the Surrealists. The historian Maurice Nadeau would later write, "Everyone who saw the hanging, slit ball in motion

over the blade felt a strong and indescribable excitement, not without its portion of subconscious sexual arousal... Now the door was open for a whole series of such objects.”⁴ Within the next year, *Suspended Ball* appeared in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* as part of Giacometti’s drawings “objects mobiles et muets” and in Giacometti’s first solo show at the Galerie Pierre Colle in May 1932. Upon the opening of that exhibition, Giacometti wrote to his father proudly proclaiming that Picasso was among the first visitors.⁵

Picasso and Giacometti have long been thought to have influenced one another. Reinhold Hohl argues that Picasso’s club and sphere forms found in his 1930 drawing *Project for a Monument* first informed *Suspended Ball*, while Picasso’s anatomy drawings of 1933 are undeniably related to the “objets mobiles et muets.”⁶ The question here is not who more forcefully influenced whom, but what form that interaction took. In this context, *Head of a Warrior* stands as a purposefully differentiating counter-response within this artistic dialogue. Picasso defended himself against the onslaught of Surrealism and its artists’ appropriation of his forms by breaking with and transforming a shared formal vocabulary.

As early as 1930, Carl Einstein argued in *Documents* that Picasso’s “answer to the fatality of the unconscious is a prodigious wish for clearly intelligible figuration.”⁷ At the most basic level, *Head of a Warrior* performs this shift into intelligible figuration. *Suspended Ball* couples a sphere hanging from the top of a metal cage-like space with a larger crescent-shaped reclining form; contact between the two is continuously held on the edge of fulfillment. The

sphere, with its darkly shadowed crescent cutout, hovers over the wedge form; it is both testicular and feminine, actively biting and passively being cut, moving with gravity and air and symbolically isolated from the surrounding space through the metal armature.⁸ *Head of a Warrior*, in turn, unites the two abstract elements and internalizes the support structure. Picasso transforms crescent into crest; he collapses the sphere’s cutout into the thin, smirking mouth; he distorts the clarity of Giacometti’s two forms into a misshapen head, leaving the tennis-ball eyes as duplicated, caricatured echoes of the elegant suspended sphere, freezing both the gender play and the literal movement of Giacometti’s shapes.

Picasso’s figural response to Giacometti came while the Surrealists were seeking him out. André Breton in particular was attempting to claim Picasso for his artistic cause. The first issue of the journal *Minotaure* appeared in May 1933 with Picasso’s artwork on the cover and his anatomy drawings inside. Brassai’s photographs accompanied Breton’s essay on Picasso “in his element.”⁹ Even as Picasso willingly participated in *Minotaure*, he fought his full incorporation into the Surrealist narrative. *Head of a Warrior* does more than just turn to figuration and Picasso’s other work from the period in order to counter Giacometti’s powerful forms and Breton’s insistent prose. In it, Picasso replaced the straightforward classical unity of some of the other plaster heads, which Brassai was already recouping for Surrealism through the *Minotaure* photographs, with the further clarity of the profile and the stasis of the relief and the type.

The flat plane of the *Warrior*’s crest and the protruding left eye pull the viewer to one side to see the sculpture

in profile. Its less finished right side further emphasizes the priority of the singular side view. Indeed, taken together, the crest and the triangular, corrugated section at the base of the neck describe a flat plane that bisects the head vertically such that the sculpture best reads as a profile in relief built out from a suggested ground plane. Throughout art history, the profile has served to simplify and thereby strengthen the immediate resonance of images, from rulers' profiles imprinted on coins to Kara Walker's stark and gruesome caricatures of the antebellum American south.¹⁰ Picasso was well aware of the clarity and immediacy of the profile: he employed it to differentiate between the inorganic sculptures and the living, breathing sculptor and model throughout the *Vollard Suite*. For *Head of a Warrior*, Picasso also employed the device of the profile to achieve the effects of relief in a work in the round. He separated out the various degrees of relief and enumerated them alongside one another: from the straight cut of the mouth to the pupil's shallow indentation, from the deeper holes and ridge of the crest's decoration all the way to the intricate, petal-like folds of the ear and the eyeball's absurd protuberance, the viewer sees depth always in relation to a series of parallel planes. Even the bulge of the cheek and nose read as if they were built out from the common ground. The relief, as traditionally understood and discussed in the nineteenth-century aesthetic theories of Adolf von Hildebrand, unifies through its pictorial address: "The thousand-fold judgments and movements of our observation find in this mode of presentation their stability and clearness..."

In this way the visual content is universally arranged, bound together and put in repose."¹¹ Not only is the visual content "bound together and put in repose," but the sculpture also projects its own viewing conditions, inviting the viewer to stand still and view it from one vantage point. Where the viewer of *Suspended Ball* circles it, seeing it move within the same space as the viewer herself, the warrior sets up a pictorial distance. Even on a figural level, *Head of a Warrior* emphasizes clarity and stability. A single attribute — the helmet that is in fact just a fanning crest connected directly to the figure's head — defines him as a generic "warrior." This figure has neither backstory nor developmental potential, and the translation of the French title *Tête casquée* (Helmeted head) into the English *Head of a Warrior* makes this equation between attribute and identity all the more apparent.

Rosalind Krauss describes *Suspended Ball* as engaging a metaphysics of sexual difference entirely structured by the gendered connotations of the sphere and the crescent as they interact. She compares it to the intersecting chains of metaphors in Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* — those related to the shape of the eye and those related to its fluid interior — such that the two are "deprived of a point of origin in the real world, a moment that would be anterior to the metaphorical transformations... the story has no privileged term."¹² Each leads into and is structured by the other. In contrast, Picasso's visual metaphors in *Head of a Warrior* move in one direction. He equates a tennis ball with an eye, grounding the equation in a material similarity that, beneath the plaster, simply becomes part of the sculpture's structure. Once transformed,

the everyday materials making up the warrior's head and crest stabilize into their figural referents.¹³ If the top portion of *Head of a Warrior* halts *Suspended Ball's* literal and metaphorically ungrounded movement, compressing it into the pictorial univocality of the profile, the relief, and the type, the relationship between the top and bottom sections of the sculpture asserts Picasso's own power of material transformation.

The face of the imprinted cardboard box at the bottom of the work juts out on just enough of a diagonal to break away from the relief's ground. This slight torque brings the base into the three-dimensional space opened up between the metal pipe and the pseudopod-like plaster "column." Split between bottom and top, *Head of a Warrior* thus displays the transition that Picasso facilitates from the raw space and materials of life into the unified, constructed forms of art. And plaster here, with the imprint of the corrugated cardboard and the box, functions as the prime material in which he can literally embed his transformational process. Within the year, the transformation of raw material texture into figural representation would be the central concern of his plaster work, as with *Woman with Leaves* (1934) (fig. 3). While the form and construction of the warrior defend against Surrealism, the figure, with its bulbous nose and sheepish grin also serves as a defensive belittlement of the soldier in the face of rising militarism in Europe. Picasso was well aware that world politics presented as much of a threat to his conception of artmaking as Giacometti and the other Surrealists did.

Between his appointment as Chancellor at the end of January and his blood purge of the SA leadership in June, 1934, Hitler solidified his position of power

in Germany.¹⁴ That year the Nazi party also began to publicly claim Europe's Hellenistic inheritance as its own, as a means of legitimizing the future of the Third Reich.¹⁵ By the end of 1933, they would inaugurate the construction of the "Temple of German Art" in Munich with a highly publicized parade in which a bust of Hercules and a gilded statue of Pallas Athena symbolized "sculpture" amongst classicizing allegories for the other arts.¹⁶

As these new political and propagandistic realities took shape, Picasso was working on the illustrations for *Lysistrata*, a Greek comedy mocking and disparaging war. In it, the women of Athens and the women of Sparta agree to withhold sex from their husbands and lovers until the men end the Peloponnesian War. The women eventually succeed and the men, hungry for sexual satisfaction, reach the truce that eluded them through many years of battle. Gilbert Seldes, the publisher and translator of this new version, introduced and staged the text as a "rowdy farce."¹⁷ Yet, taking a more serious turn, he also argued that this farce succeeds precisely because Aristophanes romanticized neither love nor war but instead treated them both with "hard-headed intelligence, with realism."¹⁸ Seldes later specifies that this realism is the realism not just of ancient Greece, but also of the early 1930s. Aristophanes lived through the Peloponnesian War, and witnessed the fall of Athens. Seldes writes, "He saw, in effect, what many people think we are seeing today — the downfall of civilization — and that is probably another reason why he is so sympathetic to us."¹⁹ The Greek soldiers were not the ultimate warriors that the Nazis embraced, but simply lonely, horny men. Seldes cast *Lysistrata* as a

parable for his time, a deadly serious farce written in the face of impending violence that did not end with the conclusion of the Great War.

In his illustrations, Picasso caricatured Aristophanes's helmeted warriors, depicting them with pouting lips, prodigious, curling beards, and ever-changing decorations on their highly visible crests while also honoring the text and following the narrative quite closely (fig. 4). As in the text, the men are shown as at once highly ridiculous and highly serious; Aristophanes mocks them but cannot disregard them since war was an ever-present reality for him. This same tone applies to *Head of a Warrior*. The warrior is quixotic — propped up on his pipe with his bulbous nose and slight smirk, yet adorned with the real vestments of battle.²⁰ This pathetic quality, like that of the sex-starved soldiers Aristophanes imagined from within his own war-torn country, stands defensively against the serious increase of military force that accompanied Hitler's ascent. It is the soft-bellied reality of war leavened with humor — militarism neither ignored nor attacked outright, but undermined. Both Seldes's introduction and Picasso's sculpture were regrettably prescient. By 1937, Athena's helmeted profile would introduce the "Great German Art Exhibition" paired with the infamous "Degenerate Art" show and the war would follow shortly thereafter (fig. 5). Picasso kept *Head of the Warrior* around his studio for years; it is visible in Henri Cartier-Bresson's photographs of his studio in 1944. In amongst his other work, it stood, and continues to stand, as Picasso's assertion of his artistic vision even as he mocked the figure of the warrior in the face of mounting disaster.



FIG. 1 PABLO PICASSO
Head of a Warrior (1933)
Plaster, metal, and wood, 120.7 x 24.9 x 68.8 cm
Collection MoMA, New York. 268.1984
© Succession Picasso, 2016



FIG. 2 ALBERTO GIACOMETTI
Suspended Ball (1930 – 1931) (version of 1965)
Originally painted wood, ficelle, and metal, this version plaster, painted metal and ficelle
Dimensions 23,85 x 14,01 x 14,21 in.
Collection Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti
© Succession Alberto Giacometti (Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti, Paris + ADAGP, Paris) 2016



FIG. 3 PABLO PICASSO
Woman with Leaves, 1934
Plaster, 38.5 x 27.5 x 21 cm
Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte. Spies - 1571 (Femme au feuillage)
© Photo: Eric Baudouin
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PABLO PICASSO
Lysistrata d'Aristophanes, 1933
Estampes, 20,7 x 13,9 cm
Paris, musée national Picasso - Paris MP2425
©RMN-Grand Palais (musée national Picasso - Paris) / Thierry Le Mage
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FIG. 5
Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1937 Im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu Munchen [The Great German Art Exhibition in the House of German Art in Munich] (1937).
Published by Verlag Knorr & Hirth G.m.b.H., Munchen, height : 21 cm ; width : 15 cm ; depth 1 cm

NOTES

* This article grew out of my research for the 2015 Museum Research Consortium Study Sessions at the Museum of Modern Art. The original text can be found in *The MRC Dossier 2*.

1. Roland Penrose describes it as just such a jab. See Roland Penrose, *The Sculpture of Picasso* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1967), p.26.
2. Some prints are dated 1934, but Picasso dated the plate with his signature to 1933. See Aristophanes, *Lysistrata: A New Version by Gilbert Seldes*, trans. Seldes (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1934). The helmeted form also appears in Picasso's sketches of the crucifixion. See Werner Spies with Christine Piot, *Picasso: The Sculptures, Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculptures* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2000), p.195.
3. Picasso turned to classical subjects and images in a number of his print projects from the early 1930s including his illustrations for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, sections of the *Vollard Suite* including the Minotaur images and the "sculptor's studio," as well as his illustrations for Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*. See Lisa Florman, *Myth and Metamorphosis: Picasso's Classical Prints of the 1930s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000) for an analysis of this body of work.
4. Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du Surréalisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1945), p.215, quoted in Reinhold Hohl, Alberto Giacometti (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p.249. Georges Sadoul similarly said (quoted in Hohl) that it "started the fashion for Surrealistic objects with symbolic or erotic overtones, and it became the duty of every self-respecting Surrealist to make them."
5. Giovanni Giacometti, quoted in *ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 81. Rosalind Krauss cites Hohl's comparison as a counter example to her own argument that Giacometti's sculpture functions not at all like Picasso's. My understanding of *Suspended Ball* follows Krauss's. See Krauss, "No More Play," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p.57.
7. Carl Einstein in Documents 11.2 (1930). Quoted in Markus Müller, "The Work in the Age of its Stylistic Convertibility; Pablo Picasso Between Classicism and Surrealism," *Pablo Picasso and Marie-Thérèse Walter: Between Classicism and Surrealism*, ed. Müller (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2004), p.14.
8. Yve-Alain Bois describes these last two characteristics — the incorporation of literal movement and thus literal time and the ambivalence about literal space — as inherently Surrealist. See Bois, "The Sculptural Opaque," trans. Kimball Lockhart and Douglas Crimp *SubStance* 10.2.31 (1981), pp.23 – 48, and p.36.
9. Breton discusses the plaster heads in "Picasso dans son élément," *Minotaure*, no. 1 (1933): pp.4–27 accompanied by five pages of Brassai's photographs of them. By this time, Giacometti was more closely associated with Bataille than with Breton, but *Suspended Ball* was heralded by the orthodox Surrealists as well. See Krauss, "No More Play."
10. David Joselit taps the history of the profile image in his analysis of consumer and social media profiles. See David Joselit, "Profiles," *Texte zur Kunst* 73 (March 2009): pp.141–144.
11. Adolf Von Hildebrand, *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*, trans. Max Meyer and Robert Morris Ogden (New York: G.E. Strechert & Co., 1907), p.83.
12. Krauss, "No More Play," p.63.
13. Some of these have dual connotations — like nose and penis — but this comparison isn't part of a larger metaphoric system the way it is in *Suspended Ball*. If anything, it relates out to Picasso's illustrations for *Lysistrata* and to the broader political sphere. See below.
14. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "SA," accessed June 17, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/SA-Nazi-organization>.
15. On the uses and abuses of classical art in Nazi Germany see: Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art under a Dictatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954) and Alex Scobie, *Hitler's State Architecture: The Impact of Classical Antiquity* (Pennsylvania, PA: Penn State Press, 1990).
16. Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp.101–102.
17. Seldes, "Introduction," *Lysistrata* 5. A production of Seldes's translation toured the United States beginning in 1930.
18. *Ibid.*, p.6.
19. *Ibid.*, p.11.
20. Spies argues that it is the contrast between the undistorted headdress and the distorted face that allows us to interpret him "as a clown condemned to war." Spies and Piot, *Picasso: The Sculptures*, p.206.