

UNIQUE MULTIPLES : THE TRANSLATION OF THE BOISGELOUP PLASTERS IN CEMENT AND BRONZE

Silvia Loreti • Colloque Picasso Sculptures • 25 mars 2016

Pablo Picasso's 1932 retrospectives at the Galeries Georges Petit in Paris and at the Kunsthaus Zurich were largely commercial enterprises. The Paris leg of the show was unofficially so: Wilhelm Wartmann, the director of the Kunsthaus, had to annotate prices by hand in his copy of the Georges Petit catalogue. Wartmann's expanded version of the exhibition, on the other hand, was openly intended for profit. The only four sculptures that travelled from Paris to Switzerland — *Jester* (1905), *Kneeling Woman Combing Her Hair* (1906), *Head of a Woman, Fernande* (1906) and *Woman's Head, Fernande* (1909), the latter in the Zurich catalogue as *Bust of a Man* — were all presented as *verkäuflich* (for sale). These works, then still being cast in bronze by Ambroise Vollard in an unnumbered edition, represented a selection of Picasso's earliest sculptures. Also included in the Georges Petit, but absent from the Kunsthaus retrospective, were three unique pieces that Picasso had made in collaboration with Julio Gonzáles at the turn of the 1930s: the painted iron sculptures *Head of a Woman*, 1929 – 30 (Spies 81) and *Woman in a Garden*, 1929 – 30, and Gonzáles's bronze replica of the latter of 1930 – 32. Impressed by Picasso's metal sculptures and acknowledging their absence at the Kunsthaus, Wartmann noted in his catalogue: "Picasso is a sculptor from time to time... like in his painting, here too he attains to technical processes, materials and forms that share little with the millennial tradition of the [sculpture] studio. This is why he would not let this part of his work slip away from his hands." What Wartmann seemed to ignore was that Picasso's most jealously kept sculptures, absent from both the Zurich and Paris

retrospectives, were in fact his numerous and most recent works in modelling and carving in the round within the traditional space of the studio (*fig. 1*). In autumn 1930 Picasso had begun to model larger than life, disproportionate sculptures in plaster in the converted stables of his recently acquired château in Boisgeloup, Normandy. There, he again modelled figures as he had for the clay sculptures that he had sold to Vollard in 1910.

It has often been said that Picasso did not exhibit the Boisgeloup sculptures at the 1932 retrospectives for fear of his wife Olga's reaction to the place that his lover Marie-Thérèse was now occupying in his life and work. This seems to be largely a myth: not only did Picasso exhibit paintings unequivocally inspired by Marie-Thérèse, some of them referencing the Boisgeloup sculptures, in Paris and Zurich; recently discovered photographs of Olga posing in front of the Boisgeloup sculpture studio reveal that she was fully aware of her husband's work prior to the exhibitions.¹ Tellingly, Olga was among the party that Picasso drove from Paris to Boisgeloup that famous day in December 1932 when Brassai photographed the sculpture studio for the first issue of *Minotaure* (*fig. 2*). It was through Brassai's photographs, as well as those taken by Bernès-Marouteau et Cie in winter 1934 and published in a special issue of *Cahiers d'Art* two years later, that the Boisgeloup sculptures, and Picasso's studio, became widely known². As they retained the intimate reclusiveness of Picasso's creative environment while projecting it to the outside world, the photographs created the myth of the sculptor's secrecy while effectively replacing the traditional function of plaster and

bronze for the reproduction and dissemination of the sculptures. That Picasso himself took suggestive photographs of his sculpture studio in 1931 – 32 supports Catherine Chevillot’s thesis that “the use of plaster as a reproductive material dwindled with the increased use and sophistication of photography”³.

More generally, Picasso’s choice of media in the presentation, dissemination and preservation of the Boisgeloup sculptures reflects a modernist impulse towards experimenting with the categories of unique and multiples and private and public, and the possibilities offered by both traditional and modern materials and processes. Auguste Rodin had freed plaster from its traditional status as a substitute for absent originals when he began to exhibit his workshop’s large but fragmentary plasters as independent works of art in the Alma pavilion at the 1900 World’s Fair. The autonomy of plaster as a sculptural material in its own right was to be further defended by the modernist theory of “Truth to material”⁴. Sharon Hecker has demonstrated how Medardo Rosso drew metaphorically on plaster’s ambivalent status as a material expressing, at once, stability and fragility for its capacity to harden quickly, but also, once dry, to be easily shattered into pieces⁵.

Picasso’s plasters transmitted this modern mystique of the material which Brassai’s work vividly captured. Clearly influenced by Rodin’s presentation of plasters in his studio at Meudon and through photography, Picasso and Brassai drew on both the haptic and visual effects of plaster. Dramatically lit and encountered in the inside-outside space of the studio or

through black-and-white photography, the sculptures inspired by Marie-Thérèse were transformed into goddesses as white as marble and as luminous as ivory. The effect achieved was one of a spiritual encounter with sculpture in line with classical interpretations, such as Herder’s *Pygmalion* (1778) essay, which theorized the origins of ancient Greek statues in the massive cult images emerging out of darkness in the inner sanctuary of temples⁶.

Alfred H. Barr Jr could not visit the Georges Petit show, but he promptly annotated the installation images that his wife brought back from Paris with titles, dates and owners for each work⁷. He had plans to bring the retrospective to MoMA but these fell through in favour of the more financially profitable exhibition in Zurich⁸. When Barr finally mounted his own Picasso retrospective in 1939, he did not dare to ask for the Boisgeloup plasters, conscious as he was of their sacred status and fragile nature. Instead, he put all his efforts into persuading Picasso and his associates “to secure... a representative group of his recent sculptures”⁹, and to make sure that Picasso would follow through with “having some of his sculptures cast especially for the exhibition”¹⁰. Eventually, Barr only managed to show a handful of sculptures up to 1930.

Yet, research that I conducted in MoMA’s archives in preparation for *Picasso Sculpture* suggests that Barr’s wish may have been taken into consideration. In a letter to Barr ahead of the opening of *Picasso: Forty Years of His Art*, Christian Zervos mentions *Cock* (1932) and expressed his regret that this and “other sculptures by Picasso cast in bronze... magnificent pieces that would have looked wonderful in your museum and

would have enriched your exhibition” could not be sent to MoMA due to the outbreak of the war and Picasso’s sudden departure for Royan. These and other works had been cast by Valsuani in 1939 and were to be collected in summer 1940, together with a few of the artist’s plasters, for fear that the foundry may be bombed¹¹.

In spring 1940, prior to the German Occupation, Picasso had commissioned a different Paris founder, Guastini, to cast at least three other Boisgeloup sculptures¹². A list was provided in correspondence¹³. Judging from their titles and approximate dimensions, the works may have been three of the Marie-Thérèse inspired Boisgeloup heads and busts. The first sculpture is actually listed as *Head of a Man*, but something similar had happened with the title of the 1909 *Woman’s Head (Fernande)* at the 1932 Zurich show.

Three large Boisgeloup heads and busts — the two 1931 *Head of a Woman* (Spies 132 and Spies 133) and *Bust of a Woman*, also 1931 (Spies 131) — had already been cast, in cement, together with *Woman with a Vase* (1933), for the Spanish Republic Pavilion at the 1937 Paris World Fair (fig. 3)¹⁴. Cement was then a medium more closely associated with the origins and development of modern architecture for its industrial origins, low production costs and rapidity to set. Its hybrid nature, at once liquid and rock solid, seemed to reflect the fluidity of modern identity¹⁵. Picasso aptly chose the material to translate his private goddesses into public monuments in defence of democracy’s ideals.

The original Boisgeloup sculptures, modelled and carved in plaster, resisted the aesthetic and commercial logic of traditional sculpture, in which plaster

functioned as a transitory step towards the reproduction of forms in more solid and durable materials (marble or bronze). This logic had become by then associated with the post-industrial surge of bronze statuary in the second half of the nineteenth century¹⁶. In the private sphere, this took the form of commodities, the so-called mantelpiece statuettes that were cast in series by editors-dealers such as Vollard, and whose bourgeois aesthetic was embraced by Olga and mimicked by Picasso in their respective Rue de la Boétie apartments¹⁷; in the public arena, bronze sculpture was reflected in a vertiginous rise in state commissions during the Third Republic, a “statuomania” which came under attack, in the late 1920s and early 1930s among Picasso’s Surrealist friends.

The Surrealists entertained an ambivalent attitude towards public monuments. On the one hand, they celebrated public sculpture for the imaginative possibilities that it offered to a surrealist experience of the modern city, as evidenced in the key texts of Surrealism, particularly André Breton’s trilogy *Nadja* (1928), *Communicating Vessels* (1932) and *L’Amour fou* (1937) that make extensive use of photography (fig. 4). On the other hand, the Surrealists antagonized the conservative ideological function of monuments¹⁸. In their view the individualized bronze statues and busts of Paris conveyed a falsely unified and positivist idea of history, against which the Surrealists approach to the past was being constructed¹⁹. To bronze, which they criticized as a dead, unnatural material, they opposed modelled sculpture in malleable media such as plaster and clay²⁰. Bronze has a long associative history with the expression of power, both military and civil, having been

used since prehistoric times for the making of weapons and, since the Middle Ages, for the casting of town bells and cannon balls. A manmade, shape-shifting compound, the material has a mythical dimension for its plasticity and association with the human capacity to modify nature. A case in point is Benvenuto Cellini's histrionic account of the casting of his Perseus, in which bronze is endowed with life-giving powers²¹. Aptly, bronze was the material chosen in classical antiquity for the representation of heroes²².

The translation of the Boisgeloup plasters into unique bronzes, before and during the war, extended the associations of the material, leading to the transformation of a traditional sculptural medium, and the processes involved in its making, into subtly subversive acts. For Picasso, who, like most post-industrial sculptors, painters in particular, relied on highly skilled casters to make his bronzes, the creation of unique pieces reflected the will to rely on the collaboration between artists and craftsmen in order to preserve his sculptures: "plaster is perishable", Sabartès reminded him during the Occupation, "bronze is forever"²³. At that point, bronze allowed Picasso to resist the enemy while keeping his work close and experimenting with it²⁴. As a painter, he was interested in the ability of different bronze patinas to enliven the sculptures' surfaces. He sometimes intervened in this process, although in unskilled, untraditional and even irreverent ways — he later repeatedly and proudly reported his attempt to improve the appearance of his bronzes by peeing on them.²⁵

Insight into Picasso's relationship with bronze is pro-

vided, once again, by the photographs that Brassai and others took of his studio, this time in Paris, at the Rue des Grands-Augustins (*fig. 5*). Having left Boisgeloup as part of his separation settlement with Olga, and under surveillance as a degenerate artist during the war, Picasso surrounded himself with his cherished sculptures that, once translated into bronze, performed the function of a defensive army in the face of hostilities. Contrary to the ominous Third Republic pantheon of individualized portrait heads and busts scattered around Paris and shaping the country's collective memory, the Boisgeloup bronzes presented themselves as a crowd of anonymous, if familiar heroes. United in their material "uniform", they emphasized sameness in substance over difference in appearance²⁶. At the same time, their transmutation from the white plasters of the bright Boisgeloup stables to the dark bronzes hidden in the sombre Grands-Augustins studio engendered a sense of estrangement and defamiliarization akin to the effects sought by Surrealist theories of the object.

For the Surrealists the most mundane, everyday objects could activate unconscious desires when displaced from their usual contexts. The 1936 exhibition of Surrealist objects at the Charles Ratton Gallery, to which Picasso contributed some of his pre-1930s sculptures, celebrated domestic objects and found materials for their ability to transfigure reality, and marked the high point of the Surrealists' theoretical engagement with sculpture. At first, Picasso's use of traditional sculptural processes and media in the 1930s and early 1940s may seem to contradict the Surrealists' avant-garde approach to sculpture. Yet, the translation of

the Boisgeloup sculptures into metaphorically charged materials attests to the dynamics of desire, engagement and resistance that underlie the artist's reinvention of serial sculpture into ever-unique works.

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FIG. 1
Indoor view of the Boisgeloup sculpture studio, Château de Boisgeloup, 1932
Gelatin-silver print, 6.8 x 11.3 cm
Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte
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FIG. 2 BRASSAÏ
Atelier de Boisgeloup, December 1932
Gelatin silver print, 49 x 33,6 cm
Musée national Picasso-Paris.
MP1986-3
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée Picasso de Paris)/image RMN-GP
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FIG. 3 PABLO PICASSO
Head of a Woman, 1931
Cement, cast by July 1937
(Musée Picasso, Antibes)
Photographed outside of the Spanish Republic Pavilion at the 1937 Paris World Fair
Musée national Picasso-Paris. MP301
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée Picasso de Paris)/Droits réservés
© Succession Picasso, 2016



FIG. 4 ANDRÉ BRETON
Nadja, 1928, Paris, Gallimard, p. 26-27

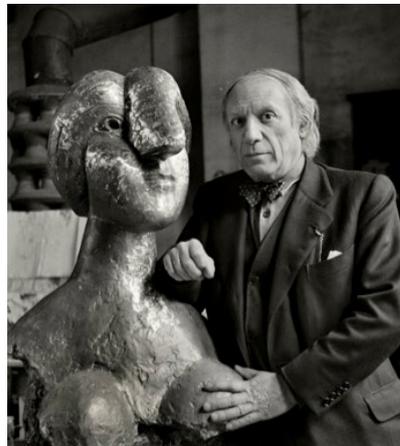


FIG. 5 HERBERT LIST
Picasso with Bust of a Woman, 1931
(Musée national Picasso - Paris),
photographed in Picasso's studio at 7, rue des Grands-Augustins, 1944
© Herbert List/
Magnum Photos

NOTES

1. Reproduced in John Richardson, *Picasso & the Camera* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2014).
2. *Cahiers d'Art, Pablo Picasso 1930-1935*, nos 7 – 10 (January 1936): p.167 and 170.
3. Catherine Chevillot, “Nineteenth-Century Sculpteurs and Mouleurs: Developments in Theory and Practice”, in *Revival and Invention. Sculpture Through its Material Histories*, eds Sebastien Clerbois and Martina Droth (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), pp.201 – 230.
4. On this topic, see Alexandra Parigoris, “Truth to Material: Bronze, on the Reproduction of Truth”, in *Sculpture and Its Reproductions*, eds Anthony Hughes and Erich Ranfft (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp.131 – 151.
5. Sharon Hecker, “Shattering the Mould: Medardo Rosso and the Poetics of Plaster”, in *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, eds Rune Frederiksen and Eckart Marchand (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 319 – 330. On the metaphorical aspects of plaster, see also Michel Leiris, “Alberto Giacometti”, Documents, 1 – 4 (July 1929): pp.209 – 215.
6. Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp.28 – 31.
7. Simonetta Fraquelli, “Picasso’s Retrospective at the Galeries Georges Petit, Paris 1932: A Response to Matisse”, in *Picasso by Picasso: His First Museum Exhibition* (Munich: Prestel, 2010), pp.83 – 84.
8. Michael C. FitzGerald, *Making Modernism: Picasso and the Creation of the Market for Twentieth-Century Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), pp.204 – 214.
9. Letter from Alfred H. Barr in New York to Dora Maar in Paris, 16 August 1939, MoMA Archives, New York, REG, Exh. #91.
10. Letter from Alfred H. Barr in New York to Meric Gallery in Saint-Raphaël, 16 July 1939, MoMA Archives, New York, REG, Exh. #91.
11. “1938-1944”, in *Picasso. Sculptures*, eds Virginie Perdrisot and Cécile Godefroy (Paris: Musée Picasso, 2016), 1p.93.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Head of a Man*, c. 80 cm; *Bust of a Woman*, c. 80 cm, *Head of a Man on Foot*, c. 130 cm: Guastini to Picasso, 9 May 1940, in Anne Temkin and Ann Umland, eds, *Picasso Sculpture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), p.183, fig. 2.
14. With thanks to Carmen Giménez, assisted by Josefina Alix, for information on the cement cast of *Woman with a Vase*.
15. Jean-Louis Cohen and G. Martin Moeller, eds, *Liquid Stone: New Architecture in Concrete* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006), 6; Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012).
16. Martina Droth has highlighted the political dimension of bronze after the industrial revolution, when “the mystique power of metals... was reframed through national aspirations and invested with political meaning”: Droth, “Introduction”, in *Bronze: The Power of Life and Death*, ed. Penelope Curtis (Leeds Henry Moore Institute, 2005), 14; see also Rosalind Krauss, who has drawn attention to the “fading of the logic of the [19th century] monument” within modernism: Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, October 8 (Spring 1979): pp.33 – 34.
17. See Brassai’s 1932 photographs of Picasso reflected in the mirror of Olga and Pablo’s Rue La Boétie apartment and of the mantelpiece in Picasso’s studio, respectively published in Brassai, *Conversations with Picasso*, trans. Jane Mary Todd (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 6 and in André Breton, “Picasso dans son élément”, *Minotaure* 1 (1933): pp.12 – 13.
18. Raymond Spiteri, “Surrealism and the Irrational Embellishment of Paris”, in *Surrealism and Architecture*, ed. Thomas Mical (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.191 – 208.
19. Simon Baker, “Statuephobia! Surrealism and Iconoclasm in the Bronze Age”, in Baker, ed., *Surrealism, History and Revolution* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp.147–230.
20. See for instance Breton’s defence of Picasso’s use of plaster in Breton, “Picasso dans son élément”, pp.16 and 20 and Maurice Raynal’s celebration of clay, in Raynal, “Dieu-Table-Cuvette”, *Minotaure* 3-4, December 1933, pp.39-53.
21. Frits Scholten, “Bronze, the Mythology of a Metal”, in *Bronze: The Life and Death*, pp.23 – 24.
22. Andrew Stewart, “Why Bronze?”, in *Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World*, eds Jens M. Daehner and Kenneth Lapatin (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2015), pp.34 – 47.
23. Reported by Picasso, in Brassai, *Conversations with Picasso*, p. 58. On the collaboration between modern sculptors and founders in France: Elisabeth Lebon, *Dictionnaire des fondateurs de bronze d’art* (London: Sladmore Editions, 2005).
24. On Picasso’s casting during the war, see Clare Finn, “Fondre en bronze pendant la guerre”, in *Picasso Sculptures*, pp.200 – 204.
25. Picasso to Françoise Gilot, in Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 316, and to Roberto Otero, in Otero, “Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man”, in J. Kelley Sowards, ed., *Makers of the Western Tradition: Portraits from History* (Newtown: St Martin’s Press, 1987), p.316
26. “The marvellous thing about bronze is that it can give the most heterogeneous objects such unity that it’s sometimes difficult to identify the elements that compose it. But that’s also a danger: if you were to see only the bull’s head, and not the bicycle seat and handlebar that formed it, the sculpture would lose some of its impact”, in Brassai, *Conversations with Picasso*, p.60.