

DAVID HOCKNEY
WALLACE STEVENS
PABLO PICASSO

AN INTRODUCTION TO HOCKNEY'S 'BLUE GUITAR'
SERIES BY DAVID CLARKE

INTRODUCTION

In 1977 the English artist David Hockney published a series of twenty etchings inspired by the American poet Wallace Stevens. The images he produced were a response to Stevens's poem 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', which in its own turn had been inspired by a 1903 painting by Pablo Picasso. Hockney's etchings are both images about (Stevens's) words, and images about (Picasso's) images, and it is the latter relationship which will receive the greatest attention in the following pages. This consideration of Hockney's involvement with Picasso will however be embedded in a more general discussion of six selected etchings from the series, in an attempt to provide an introduction to its complexities.

THE OLD GUITARIST

David Hockney read Wallace Stevens's poem 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' in the summer of 1976, whilst staying at Fire Island, near New York. He did so at the instigation of American museum curator, Henry Geldzahler. Hockney thought the poem 'was absolutely wonderful' and although he admits that he 'didn't quite understand it' he felt that 'the ambiguities seemed right... its as though they're clear'. When Hockney chooses to react to literature by making visual images his response tends to be an immediate one. There was no exception to the pattern on this occasion. After having read the poem through a few times he produced a sequence of ten drawings. Since he had only paper, coloured inks and crayons at hand these were the materials with which he worked. Hockney later attempted to produce paintings based on these images, but without success. The paintings were abandoned and instead the ten drawings were to provide the basis for a series of twenty etchings, created in the Autumn of 1976 and the Spring of 1977.

Hockney himself can be said to have encouraged us to consider his etchings in relation to Wallace Stevens's poem, since he published a book in which these images and words were brought together. It is important to understand, however, that the prints were originally created to stand independently of the text. Many works of Western art have been intended as visual representations of a pre-existing text, but Hockney emphasizes that his Blue Guitar prints 'were not conceived as literal illustrations of the poem but as an interpretation of its themes in visual terms'.

By reading the poem and examining the prints one can discover various ways in which Hockney has responded to Wallace Stevens. It is possible to argue, however, that Hockney is at least as interested here in Picasso as in Stevens.

In the etching 'The Old Guitarist' [illustration 1] Hockney quotes in its entirety Picasso's oil painting of the same name,

thus revealing for us the visual image that provided the starting point and key metaphor of Wallace Stevens's poem. That the interest in Picasso is Hockney's as well as Stevens's is perhaps indicated by the further (albeit more partial) references to Picasso's art that are made in the margins of the print. Here (as elsewhere in the series) he not only mimics the style of Picasso but makes references to particular works by that artist. Details from Picasso's 'Crucifixion' (1930) and 'The Enamel Saucepan' (1945) can be identified. These works are of a later date than Picasso's 'The Old Guitarist' since Hockney's own interest is particularly in Picasso's Cubist and Post-Cubist art.

Hockney's involvement with Picasso's art is long-standing and many-faceted. Recent photographic and painted pieces by Hockney (such as 'Christopher with his Glasses on' of 1984) combine information from a multiplicity of viewpoints in a manner reminiscent of Cubism, indicating that he is still drawing sustenance from a dialogue with the pioneer modernist. For Hockney, Picasso's achievement is not something which can be relegated to history: when he gave a lecture at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art entitled 'Important Paintings of the 1960s' he apparently chose to discuss only 1960s works by Picasso.

Visual evidence of Hockney's interest in Picasso from outside the Blue Guitar series can be found in his 'Artist and Model' of 1973-4. In this print (begun in the year of Picasso's death) Hockney portrays himself seated opposite that artist, in a manner which recalls Picasso's own etchings from the Vollard suite depicting artists and models in a studio setting. In other plates from that suite Picasso makes Rembrandt appear, just as Hockney invokes the presence of Picasso in 'Artist and Model'. Even if it is Hockney who (shown nude) adopts the role of the model, it is clear that Picasso is a 'model artist' for him.

Although the Blue Guitar series of etchings is art about (a particular piece of) literature, it is also art about art. All art draws upon previous art - both in style and imagery - but much modern art has done so in a self-conscious way, making open reference to other paintings or visual images. We can see this process occurring in Manet's 'Olympia' (which makes an obvious reference to Titian's 'Venus of Urbino'), in Duchamp's 'LHOQQ' (the famous defacement of the 'Mona Lisa' with a moustache), and in Lichtenstein's versions of Monet's 'Rouen Cathedral'. Hockney had made works prior to the Blue Guitar series in which he juxtaposed styles - a work of 1962 is entitled 'The First Marriage (A Marriage of Styles)' - but it is worth noting that he was inspired to do so by visiting a large exhibition of Picasso's paintings at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1960.

This exhibit contained 58 canvases produced by Picasso in 1957 having Velazquez's painting 'Las Meninas' as their subject. Not only were they paintings about that painting (which itself, by the way, has painting as its subject) but some of these works incorporated several styles, making a reference to Picasso's stylistic history in a way which Hockney imitates in his Blue

Guitar etchings. We can tell that these paintings were still in Hockney's mind when he created this series since one plate ('Discord merely magnifies') quotes in reverse Picasso's representation of Velazquez's representation of a dog.

Hockney learnt from Picasso a degree of ironic detachment from style. Inspired by that artist's ability to shift with rapidity from style to style - from Cubism to meticulous realism and back again - Hockney is able to state that 'style is something you can use, and you can be like a magpie, just taking what you want. The idea of the rigid style [Hockney says] seemed to me... something you needn't concern yourself with, it would trap you'.

FRANCO-AMERICAN MAIL

The creative process which gave rise to the Blue Guitar etchings seems to have involved a lot of free association, verbal as well as visual. Below is an attempt to throw some light on the workings of Hockney's mind through a partial unravelling of the multitude of allusions conjured up by both the imagery and the title of 'Franco-American Mail' [illustration 2]. Some of the connections made may seem obvious, whilst others may appear contentious or even wildly bizarre. You can decide for yourself where to draw the line, if indeed it is necessary to do so at all:

-Mail / Male.

-It's an airmail letter: look at the design around the borders of the print and the colours used for it.

-You can 'frank' mail instead of putting stamps on it.

-'Estampe' in French means 'print' or 'engraving'. Does this look like an etching 'stamped' on a letter?

-The Italian word for 'stamp' is 'francobollo'.

-American (and Hong Kong) airmail letters are already 'Franco-American' in that they have writing in French on them ('Par Avion'). Furthermore, their red, white and blue colours are those of both the French and American flags.

-Picasso was an expatriate Spanish artist who became closely associated with his host country France, whilst Hockney is an expatriate English artist who has lived for a long time in America. Is this his (expat's) letter home? Or his (or the American poet Wallace Stevens's) transatlantic letter to Picasso?

-'An American in Paris' is a film about an artist, and of course this has music by Gershwin, who wrote 'Rhapsody in Blue'. From here it is just a short train of association to 'Nocturne in Blue

and Silver' by Whistler, who at one time was an American artist working in Paris.

-Hockney is no more American than Picasso was 'Franco-' (or El Greco was Hispanic for that matter). Franco, however, most certainly was Spanish, and Picasso attacked the Spanish fascist leader in two works entitled 'The Dream and Lie of Franco'. These works are like 'Franco-American mail' in being etchings, and are further comparable in being divided into nine subsections by vertical and horizontal lines. They were created in 1937, the same year that Wallace Stevens wrote 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'.

-The image in the bottom right-hand section of 'Franco-American Mail' looks rather like a sculpture by the English artist William Turnbull. Hockney had already depicted one of his piled stone sculptures in a painting of 1968: 'American Collectors (Fred and Marcia Wiseman)'. Was the inclusion of a Turnbull prompted by the BULLfight imagery that appears in 'The Dream and Lie of Franco'? Such a rebus-like quality would be appropriate to a print inspired by a poem, and a rebus characteristically consists of a sequence of images such as we meet here.

-Magritte is perhaps the first modern painter who springs to mind when we start thinking about the connections between words and images. He produces compartmentalized images which could bear comparison with 'Franco-American Mail' in general terms, and his painting 'This is not a pipe' may be specifically recalled in the image on the centre-left of Hockney's etching:

'Franco-American' is the name of a brand of American spaghetti. Despite having a transatlantic name it's about as American as apple pie or (Andy Warhol's) Campbell's soup ...or French fries, frankfurters, etc. As Hockney would have known, Franco-American spaghetti had entered the iconography of modern art when James Rosenquist (an American Pop artist) started including images of it in his paintings. 'I Love You With My Ford' of 1961 is but one example.

A PICTURE OF OURSELVES

The 'monster' within the frame in 'A picture of ourselves' [illustration 3] may be a reference to Wallace Stevens's monster (mentioned in section XVIII of the poem) which the poet intended to stand for 'the chaos and barbarism of reality'. If Hockney is indeed interpreting Stevens here, then he has certainly turned to Picasso for help in doing so, perhaps approaching that artist's work with insights gained from reading a Roland Penrose article on it entitled 'Beauty and the Monster'. The theme of a nude woman in front of a mirror appears in Picasso's 'Young Girl Before a Mirror' of 1932, where the reflection similarly differs from its source. The actual source of Hockney's monster is in

fact Picasso's 'Two Nudes on a Beach' of 1937. Although the figure (which Hockney reverses from its painted original) is female, it is given strongly phallic attributes. Phallic imagery is not too deeply hidden in 'Girl before a Mirror' either.

The female nude in 'A picture of ourselves' is directly quoted from an etching in Picasso's Vollard suite, albeit reversed. Since the process of printing (rather like the action of a mirror) reverses the design on an etched plate, the image Hockney presents us with is the one Picasso would himself have seen when working. Behind the nude is a 'surrealist' sculpture of the kind Picasso depicts in the Vollard suite and elsewhere. Such objects are seen in Picasso's etchings being contemplated by nude models, and the works in which they appear are part of a meditation in images on the creative process that Hockney is echoing in the Blue Guitar series.

THE POET

In the etching entitled 'The Poet' [illustration 4] there are several differently coloured patches which appear to be just marks upon the surface of the paper rather than depictions of three-dimensional forms. Yet paradoxically they cast shadows, thus indicating mass. Despite being of different colours they follow our expectation in only casting shadows of the same colour - black. However, the black cross-hatched shapes in the row below cast (differently) coloured shadows.

Similar games are played in other plates: the blue and red striped string suspended in 'It Picks Its Way' casts a blue and red shadow, for instance. Whilst the shadows of the coloured patches in 'The Poet' are printed with black ink, in 'In a Chiaroscuro' the black of the shadowy figure appearing from behind the curtain is created by overprinting red and green - that is, created from two colours.

'Chiaroscuro' is a word used to describe the use of light and dark in paintings. Its appearance in the title of a Blue Guitar etching is further evidence of the interest Hockney shows throughout this series in techniques of shading and in the problem of representing three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface. This interest could be seen in part as a response to Stevens's text, since shadows feature in the imagery of the poem in several places (V, IX, XXI). Similar imagery to that in 'The Poet' can however be seen in earlier works by Hockney, and the feeling that he is self-consciously demonstrating a 'palette' of crosshatching techniques brings Hogarth's 'Analysis of Beauty' (plate II) to mind. Hockney's first etching series was a parody of Hogarth's series 'The Rake's Progress', and in 1974-5 he had worked on sets for a production of the Stravinsky opera of the same name. Both his sets and the opera itself drew inspiration from Hogarth's prints.

In the top left of the etching is the blue guitar. It takes a schematic form, similar to the guitars and violins of Picasso's Cubist period. A symbol of the imagination for Stevens, it makes an appearance in almost every print and is seen here in conjunction with an image of the poet himself, copied from a photograph.

Although the image of Stevens that Hockney gives us here is a relatively naturalistic one, in fact the Blue Guitar etchings were created at a time when Hockney was having difficulties with the realist style. These difficulties led him to abandon unfinished the large double portrait 'George Lawson and Wayne Sleep' on which he had worked from 1972 till 1975. A renewal of his acquaintance with Picasso's Cubist and Post-Cubist art seems to have confirmed for him the conventionality of all modes of representation. It also seems to have led to his decision to draw attention to the medium itself in these etchings, to make art not just the means but the subject. 'Etching is the subject' as one title states, echoing Stevens's statement (XXII) that 'poetry is the subject of the poem'.

Wallace Stevens seems to share with Picasso an awareness of the hiatus between art and life. When he talks in this poem about the guitar not playing things as they are ('things as they are / are changed upon the blue guitar') he seems to show an awareness of a famous statement by Picasso. According to Picasso 'Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand ... through art we express our conception of what nature is not'. Even if Stevens is not speaking in Picasso's voice here, in a later part of the poem he chooses to do so explicitly. In XV (just after the only mention of Picasso's name in the entire poem) he presents the phrase 'hoard of destructions' in quotation marks, admitting elsewhere that the phrase comes from a statement by Picasso.

ON IT MAY STAY HIS EYE

Hockney is often interested in depicting the surface of something as well as that which lies beneath the surface. Just as he depicts both the glass and the guitar beneath it in 'On it may stay his eye' [illustration 5], so in 'Play Within a Play' he depicts both his dealer Kasmin and the window in front of him. The window is represented by an actual sheet of perspex, and Kasmin's hands pressing against it from behind are (perversely) represented by paint on top of that sheet. In the many swimming pool scenes which he paints Hockney takes delight in describing the surface of the water (he lets it 'stay his eye'), as well as in showing the distorted forms of swimmers underneath. In his 'Paper Pools' the pigment itself is beneath the surface of the paper instead of resting on top.

A hardground etching is created using a metal plate whose surface has been coated with an acid-resistant substance ('the ground'). The design is drawn onto the surface with an etching needle. Sufficient pressure is applied to scratch away the protective covering, so that when the plate is bathed in acid lines will be bitten ('etched') into the metal in those areas. When the rest of the protective layer has been removed by a solvent and the plate cleaned, ink is applied and allowed to collect in the lines. The surface of the plate is wiped clean, and the plate is then printed under high pressure. The dampened paper is forced into the lines and receives the ink. The resultant image will be a reverse of the original design (a fact which Hockney often chooses to draw to our attention rather than to conceal). It will also contain lines which stand out sharply in actual relief from the surface of the paper, unlike the lines of a drawing.

There are endless subtleties that can be introduced into this basic technique of hardground etching, and multi-colour printing in any case requires the use of more than one plate. Other distinct techniques are also available. Hockney makes use of several of them in the Blue Guitar series, often combining more than one technique in the same etching.

The forms at the top of the glass sheet that echo the fringe of the carpet below and in other plates were executed in a softground technique. One can assume that the intention in creating a 'crayon' effect here was to mimic something achieved with a real crayon in the original drawing. As the name suggests, softground etching is executed with a softer ground. This does not need to be removed with an etching needle, and can record marks made through paper with a crayon, or a variety of other textured imprints.

Hockney also makes use of aquatint, which is of service in creating tonal areas rather than linear effects. In hardground etching tonal effects can only be achieved through overlap of lines ('cross-hatching') but aquatint enables a granular finish to be created. This is possible because the aquatint ground is applied in a powder form (which is then bonded to the surface of the plate by heat). 'The Old Guitarist' shows an extensive use of aquatint technique. The differing intensities of tone are created by exposing areas of the plate's surface to acid for shorter or longer periods of time. In 'A picture of ourselves' the irregular tonal areas of the background are achieved by 'painting' acid directly on to the plate, rather than by submerging the whole plate in an acid bath.

A further technique employed by Hockney is called sugar lift. A design is drawn onto the plate with a sugar solution mixed with ink. This is covered with a varnish, and the original design is then exposed by dissolving away the sugar in hot water. The bare areas are then given a coating of aquatint.

Even on the level of technique, Hockney is still following in the footsteps of Picasso. He first learnt to do sugar lift properly in Paris under the guidance of Aldo Crommelynck. Picasso had often used sugar lift, and Crommelynck had been Picasso's etching printer for twenty years. Crommelynck had learnt from Lecourier, who had taught Picasso himself to etch. Crommelynck taught Hockney a coloured etching technique which he had invented for Picasso, but which that artist had not been able to use before his death. Appropriately, since Picasso's presence hovers over the Blue Guitar series, that technique was used in its production.

WHAT IS THIS PICASSO?

Curtains often appear in Hockney's images. They can be seen in 'Tick it, tock it, turn it true' and 'Etching is the subject' amongst other works in this series, but they also appear in paintings from as far back as the early 1960s, such as 'Two Friends and Two Curtains' of 1963.

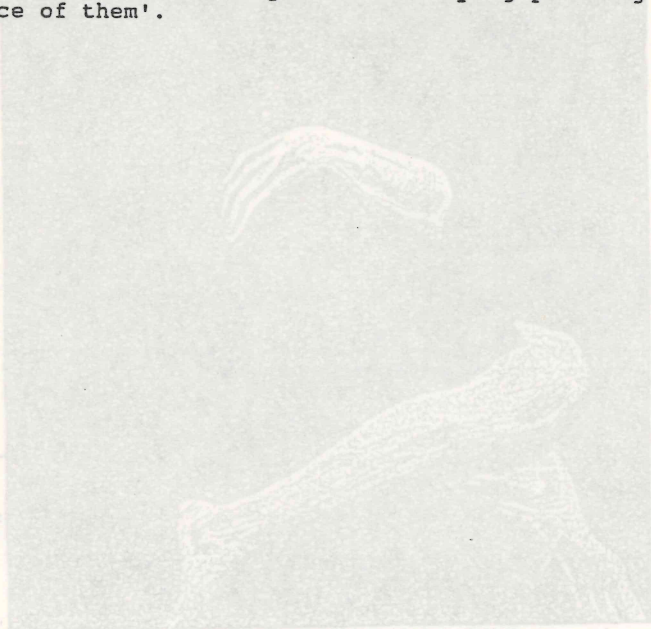
Whilst the curtain in 'What is this Picasso?' [illustration 6] bears a striking similarity to its ambiguously positioned counterpart in Vermeer's 'Girl reading a letter at an open window', the most obvious way in which we can interpret this curtain motif here is to identify it as theatrical. In 'In a chiaroscuro' Hockney seems literally to depict a stage, but elsewhere he uses the curtain as a framing device, a way of giving a sense of theatricality to the events which take place behind it. Hockney has had a long involvement with the theatre as a designer of stage sets. Around 1980, for instance, he was to create sets for the ballet 'Parade', the name of which had apparently provided the title for one of the Blue Guitar etchings a few years earlier. Hockney was again in dialogue with Picasso: Not only did his designs draw upon motifs from Picasso's curtain for the original production of the ballet in 1917, but the whole production showed a self-conscious concern with the period of early modernism.

In the middle of 'What is this Picasso?' is another of the quotations from Picasso which are scattered throughout this series of etchings. We see a head of Dora Maar, probably cited from a portrait that can be dated to 1937, the year 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' was written. As the curtain is drawn back, it is not so much Dora as Picasso himself who is revealed. In the 'Closing Scene' of Hockney's play (to quote one of his own titles) Picasso is centre stage again, as he was in 'The Old Guitarist', the first print after the title page. Wallace Stevens is nowhere to be seen.

Fruit bowls have appeared in two earlier etchings and on both occasions they were quotations from Picasso paintings. Given the fact that it is placed upon a table - and the general prevalence

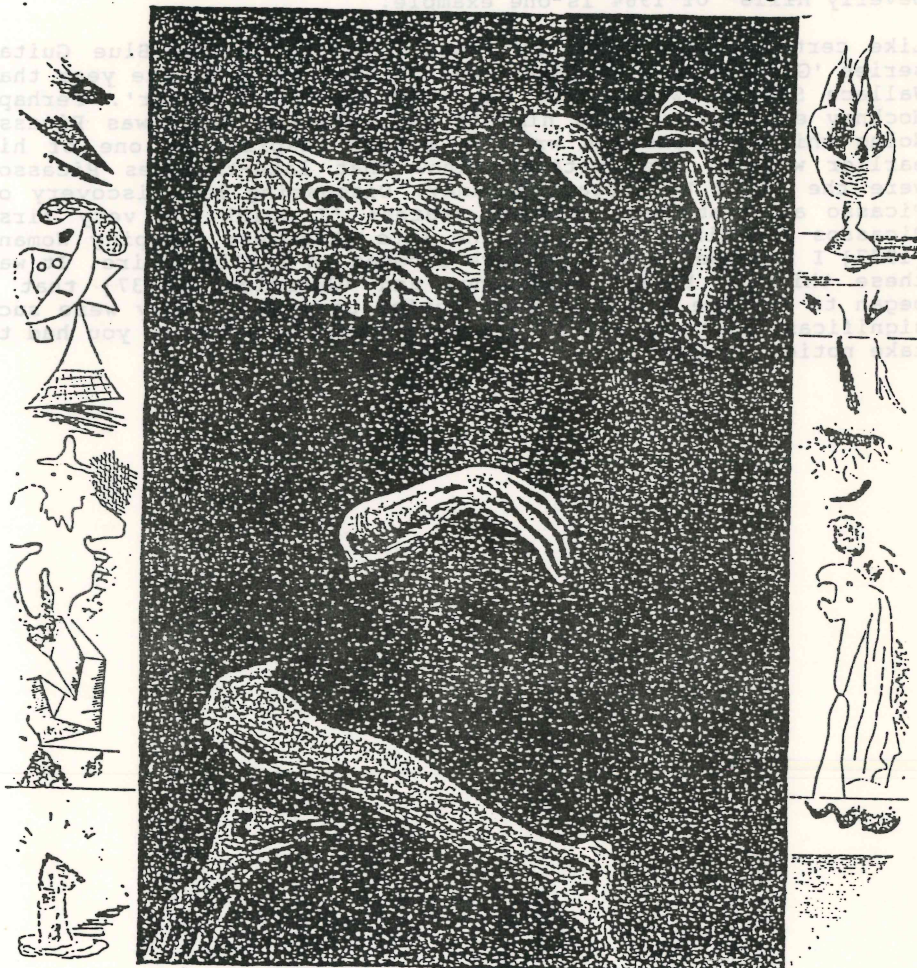
of still life objects in this sequence of images - the shape half-hidden by the curtain could be read as a further fruit bowl. At the same time, however, it should also be read as a schematic head, based upon an image in Picasso's 'Girls With a Toy Boat'. The facial features are already small in the Picasso and Hockney has introduced a further (deliberate) ambiguity by eliminating the mouth. If the intrusion of a bather at this point seems inexplicable, we should remember that bathers have often been a subject of Hockney's art and that they are frequently depicted in juxtaposition with (shower) curtains. 'Man Taking a Shower in Beverly Hills' of 1964 is one example.

Like certain other works by Picasso quoted in the Blue Guitar series 'Girls With a Toy Boat' was painted in 1937, the year that Wallace Stevens wrote 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'. Perhaps Hockney explicitly asked himself the question 'What was Picasso doing while Stevens was writing a poem inspired by one of his earlier works?'. We certainly know that late-thirties Picassos were the first to attract Hockney. Discussing his discovery of Picasso as a student, Hockney states: 'I think the very first Picassos I'd liked were from the late thirties: 'Weeping Woman' [1937] I remember, was a picture I began to really admire. It was these thirties Picasso paintings and 'Guernica' [1937] that I began to realize I had to take notice of myself. They were such significant pictures and if you were studying painting you had to take notice of them'.



THE OLD GUITARIST 1903

PABLO PICASSO Spanish 1881



THE OLD GUITARIST 1903

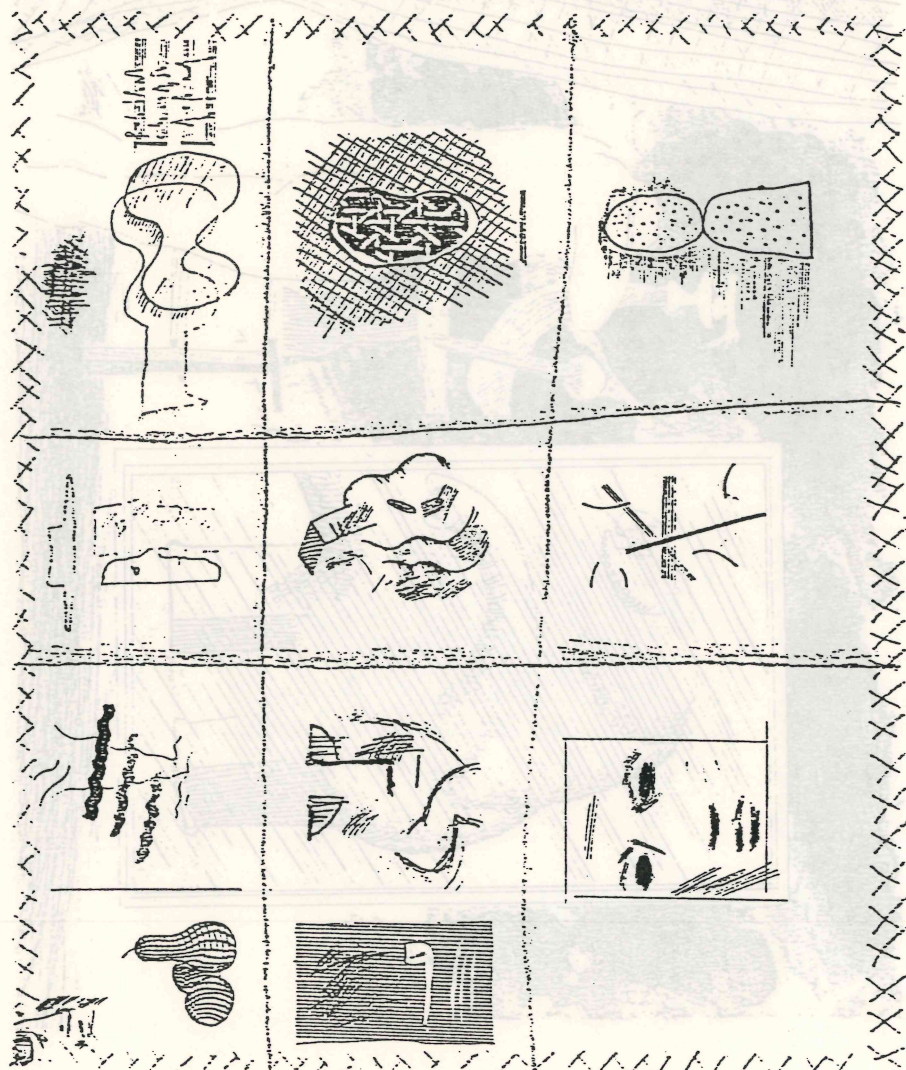


Иллюстрация 2 FRANCO-AMERICAN MAIL

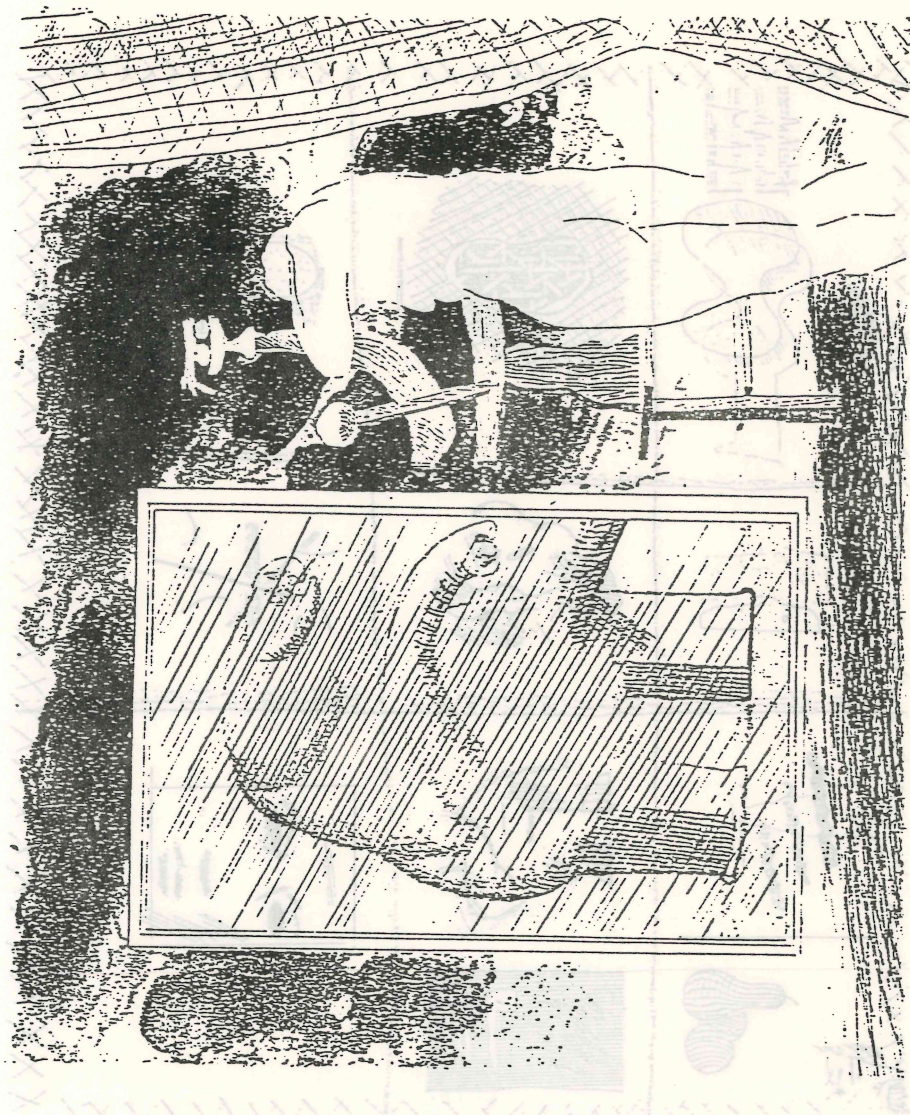


Иллюстрация 3 А PICTURE OF OURSELVES

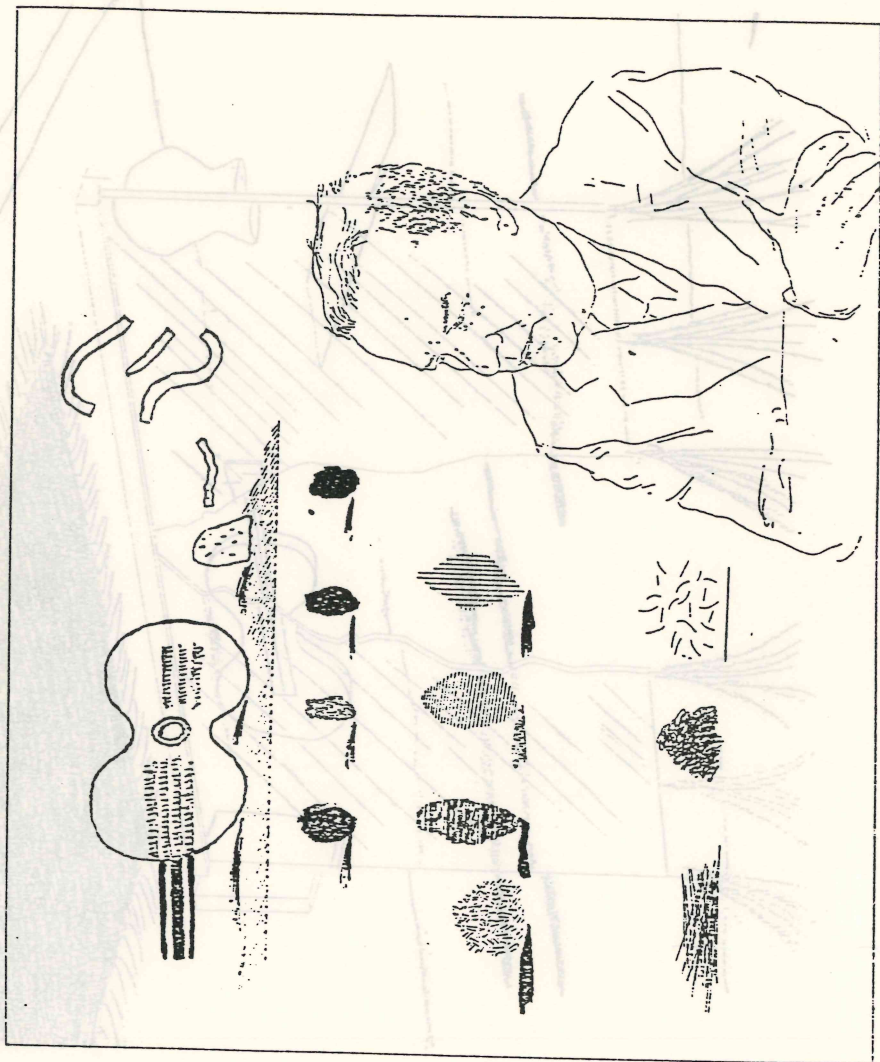


Illustration 4 THE POET

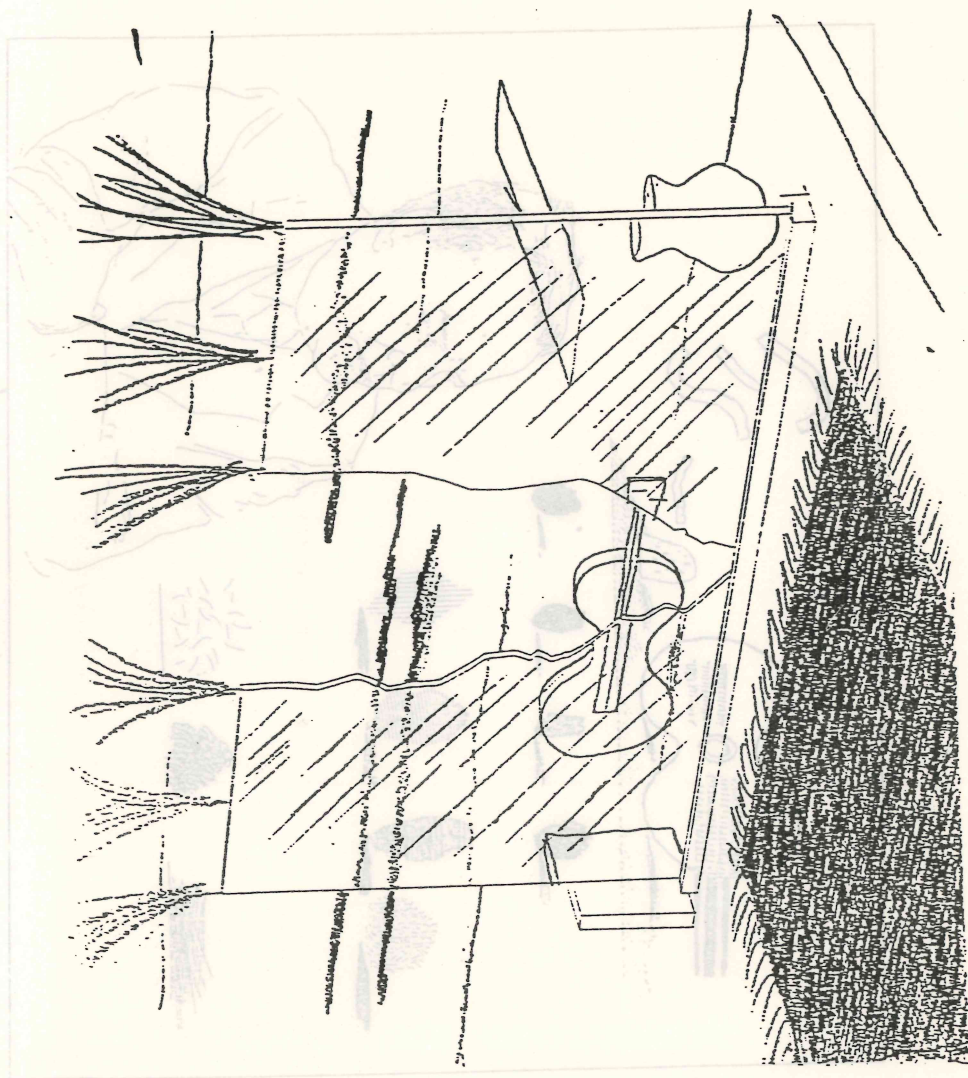
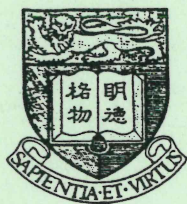




Illustration 6 WHAT IS THIS PICASSO?



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