



## *Portrait of Sylvette David*

1954

by Pablo Picasso

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education

Division of Teacher Programs

The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

ART  
INSTITUTE  
CHICAGO

# Pablo Picasso

## (Spanish, 1881–1973)

### *Portrait of Sylvette David,* 1954

Oil on canvas

(51 7/16 x 38 1/16 in) 130.7 x 97.2 cm

Gift of Mary and Leigh Block, 1955.821

“Painting is stronger than I am; it makes me do what it wants.”  
— Pablo Picasso

While living in the small town of Villauris on the southern coast of France in the early part of 1954, Spanish artist Pablo Picasso encountered a young woman named Sylvette David, not yet twenty years old. Her stunning features fascinated Picasso so much that over the course of the next three months, he composed over forty paintings and drawings of her in a range of styles. In this particular image of David, her features are greatly distorted as Picasso examined her facial features and characteristics as closely and specifically as possible.

Even at an early age, Picasso demonstrated signs of great artistic ability. His father, realizing his son’s immense talent, gave him all of his own paints and brushes and supposedly never painted again. When Picasso was just sixteen, he entered and won an art contest for his painting *Science and Charity* (1897, Museo Picasso, Barcelona) while attending the School of Fine Arts in Barcelona. He then enrolled in the Royal Academy of San Fernando in Madrid but left after only a few months. He returned to Barcelona, where he met Carlos Casagemas, who would become his friend and roommate. After Casagemas’ suicide in 1901, Picasso was devastated. His mood and somber nature are evident in his work from that time period.



Picasso, Pablo. *The Old Guitarist*, 1903/04.  
The Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch  
Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1926.253.

The period immediately following his friend’s death is referred to as the **Blue Period** (1901–1904), which reflected his introspective mood and immense sadness. During this time, he composed great works such as *La Vie* (1903, Cleveland Museum of Art) and *The Old Guitarist* (1903/04, Art Institute of Chicago). He spent much of his time in Paris but was so poor that he shared a bed with his roommate and often could not afford canvas or oil paint. In the winter of 1904, he began introducing a greater range of color into his work, particularly pink, or *rose* in French. The period from 1904 to 1906 is referred to as the **Rose Period**. Throughout his life, Picasso continually looked for new ways to express himself, never staying with one particular style or idea for very long.

Picasso needed a creative environment and freedom from conformity to produce his artwork. These were missing from most other aspects of his schooling—the absolute nature of

math or the repetitive nature of writing. He proved to be a masterful draftsman by the age of twenty, but he continued to paint in a fashion that was indicative of his rebellious nature, using bold, crude lines and heavy brushstrokes thick with paint. The great energy he used in his style of painting allowed him to achieve lively moods and a sense of movement.

After viewing ancient sculpture and African art while traveling in Spain, Picasso became fascinated with the imaginative distortions that were given to figures, which he felt gave them a sense of power. Further influenced by fellow artists Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin, Picasso began experimenting with his paintings, breaking scenes up into series of planes and colors. Leaving the Rose Period behind him, Picasso created his controversial *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907, Museum of Modern Art, New York), which evoked hostile criticism due to its nontraditional representation of the human form. Sometimes called the first masterpiece of twentieth-century art, it represented a turning point in the history of modern art and set Picasso on a new course.

Picasso met artist Georges Braque in 1908, and soon afterwards both artists began breaking up their compositions into geometric shapes. This radical new form of painting drew criticism at first, but quickly drew admiration. Together, Braque and Picasso had invented a revolutionary style called **Cubism**, in which the world was broken down, analyzed, and reassembled in abstract form. Originally an intellectual exercise aimed at looking at the world to see how it could be reshaped, Picasso denied its connection to **abstract art**, remarking, “I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them” (Mason, 17). **Analytic Cubism** began the movement (1908–1912), reducing natural forms to their geometric elements and representing three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional plane. **Synthetic Cubism** soon followed, where Braque and Picasso began using physical objects in their paintings which marks the first time a form of **collage** had been used in modern art.

Later, Picasso’s evolving style of painting steered his interest towards a group of writers and artists who called themselves **Surrealists**. Their interest in the subconscious, spontaneity, and dreamy images piqued his creativity, and the result was a unique combination of Cubism and Surrealism such as *The Three Dancers* (1925, Tate Gallery, London). The works from this period are as magnificent as they are ambiguous; it is often difficult to discern what exactly the figures are doing.

Although he did not publicly show any sculptures until the 1960s, Picasso was also fascinated with three-dimensional art and had been experimenting with sculpture since 1906. Similar to his paintings, Picasso’s sculptures were highly original and innovative, often incorporating various materials and found objects. He would paint many of his sculptures, helping tie together all of his art.

The painting of Sylvette David was originally done on April 19, 1954, but was likely worked on again on May 22 and finished on October 4 of that same year, as all three dates are inscribed

on the back of the canvas. Unlike many of his other models, Picasso appears to have been interested in Sylvette solely as an object of artistic admiration, transforming her elegant form into art in an analytical manner that was devoid of the extreme emotions found in several of his other portraits of young women. Lydia Sylvette David was tall with striking looks. She began drawing during her sittings for Picasso to pass the time, and after moving to England years later with her husband, she began her own career as an artist. Unwilling to capitalize on the fame gained from Picasso’s paintings, she signed the works with her married name of Lydia Corbett. However, as her reputation as an artist grew, she began using the name Sylvette David as well.

At the time of the portrait, David was just nineteen. Picasso had requested several chairs for his studio from Toby Jellinek, a chair maker who lived a cross the street from his studio, and when Jellinek delivered them, he brought along his fiancée, Sylvette David. Several days later, Picasso presented a picture of the young woman drawn from memory and convinced David to model for him. The works created from these sittings were some of the most lively and explorative of Picasso’s career. Although he deconstructed and reconstructed his model in profile with her hair drawn high in a ponytail, his varied styles and forms of expression are readily evident. Sometimes she is painted in color, other times she is drawn; in certain portraits she appears realistic and beautiful; in others she is geometric, abstract, and grotesque; sometimes he tended towards Cubism and sometimes towards **flatness**. However, there is no pattern to his choice of stylization: chronology played no part, only the spirit of the artist and of the moment. It has been said that through this series of portraits, Picasso was affirming life while exploring his appreciation of beauty. He was seventy-four years old at the time.

This particular portrait is an abstract painting of David. The hand on the right is far larger than the hand on the left, her neck is elongated, and her facial features have been distorted in an attempt to present her features from more than one angle. Her nose appears to be backwards, which divides her face into angular shapes, giving her a geometric appearance. Each shoe has a different shape—one square, one triangular—and she appears to be sitting upright with her legs crossed. Her hair is painted as a series of straight lines, a feature that contributes to the geometry of the portrait, while the two patterns on her shirt stand out against the relatively flat nature of the rest of her clothes. Overall, the portrait appears to be a fragmented composition in restrained colors of azure, blue, violet, and green.

Eventually, the entire series of David portraits were published and became well known, to the extent that they even influenced female fashion. Notably, Bridgett Bardot, a French actress who gained popularity in the 1950s, wore her hair up in a ponytail in much the same way, helping to popularize the style for more and more women. Following one of his compositions of Sylvette and her subsequent departure, Picasso commented with a sardonic grin, “So you see: art is stronger than life” (Kelley).



# Glossary

**abstract art:** artworks that consist entirely of patterns and shapes and do not attempt to portray anything in the real world

**Analytical Cubism:** the first period of Cubism, from 1909 to 1912, in which artists were analyzing what they saw and reinterpreting its structure

**Blue Period:** the period of Picasso's artwork immediately following the suicide of his friend Carlos Casagemas in which Picasso began to paint increasingly in shades of blue, portraying melancholy subjects such as poverty, oppression, and loneliness

**collage:** the technique of pasting objects or pieces of material onto paper or canvas to create an image

**Cubism:** an art movement in which paintings and sculptures are broken up into geometric forms and distorted shapes, using muted colors and showing subjects from more than one angle

**flat:** in painting, refers to an area covered by a single color, without shading or varying tones, which might give the illusion of depth

**Rose Period:** the period of Picasso's artwork following the Blue Period (1904–1906) in which his palette lightens considerably, bringing in distinctive beige and pink tones, and the subject matter becomes less depressing

**Surrealism:** a movement of poetry and visual art inspired by the subconscious, dreams, and imagination and more interested in the realm of fantasy than reality

**Synthetic Cubism:** style of Cubism beginning in 1912, started by Picasso and Braque, in which objects and pieces of material were attached to Cubist paintings

# Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

- A lot of communication comes from body language, including gestures, postures, and facial features. How does Picasso present Sylvette David? What is communicated to us through her body language? Her facial expression? Confidentially assign students different emotions, such as excitement, sadness, fear, and distress. Have students act out these emotions without sound in front of the class and have the other students identify the emotion.
- Sylvette David is the subject and inspiration for Picasso's painting, referred to as a muse. Who do you draw inspiration from? Who motivates you to achieve, whether in school, in sports, or in life? Who is your muse?
- If you could paint or draw the portrait of someone you know, who would you choose? Why? Time permitting, have students compose the portrait of another student in class.
- According to the artist Paul Cézanne, nature should be viewed "in terms of the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone." After introducing each geometric figure to the students and providing an example, ask students if they agree or disagree with the statement. Why? Have them draw from specific examples in nature to defend their answers. (Ice cream is generally on an inverted cone with a sphere on top, soda cans are cylindrical, whereas buildings are a rectangular prism—still geometric, but not cylindrical, spherical, or conical.)
- What do you see in this painting that doesn't seem to make sense? Which of her features are exaggerated? Anything else? (Notice the continued line in the hand on the left and the faint line drawn from the raised knee on the left to the shoulder. Neither of these are part of David.)
- How do you think Sylvette David felt about her image as painted by Picasso? Was she pleased or displeased? Why? Do you think that she thought the painting actually looked like her?

## • Seeing All Angles

In Cubism, the artist presents the subject from several sides at once. Have students see how this works by using paper cutouts. Provide magazines that have several pictures of the same subject—a fashion model or sports event, for example. Then, instruct students to cut out the images, mix them up and rearrange them on a piece of paper. Have students experiment with the pieces at different angles until they arrive at the composition they like. How do their pictures differ from the original subject?

### • Silly Sentences

Cubists separated images into different shapes using planes and flat colors in an attempt to see how the world could be reshaped. Using this idea, have students divide sentences into grammatical parts in an attempt to reshape the meaning of the sentence. Begin with five sentences (or have students write sentences) that follow the format of article + adjective / noun / verb / adjective / noun, underlining each separate component (for example: The new / ball / broke / the old / window; An old / woman / was eating / a delicious / apple.) Then, have students exchange similar parts (i.e., “The new” for “An old”) to create sentences that may have new or nonsensical meanings (“An old ball broke the old window;” “The new woman was eating a delicious apple.”) Do the new sentences make sense? Do the students find their original meanings have been “reshaped”? Next, divide your students into groups of five and have each group create its own silly sentence by following these steps:

- Instruct one student in each group to write the first word or words of the sentence (article + adjective) at the top of a piece of paper. He or she should then fold the piece of paper over to conceal the written word and pass it to the next person.
- The next person should fill in the next part of speech (noun), conceal it, and pass the paper to the next person. Have the students continue this pattern until everyone has contributed and the sentence is complete.
- When the sentences are complete, instruct students to open the papers and share with the class, as the results are often strange and humorous. Finally, have each group swap grammatical parts, repeating the original activity!

### • Cubist Creations

Many Cubist paintings are very geometric. Ask students to identify the geometric shapes that can be found within the painting. Then, have students compose a picture using *only* geometric shapes. Provide rulers, protractors, compasses, and tangram pieces if possible to aid the students in their drawings.

### • Lights, Camera, Action!

Enlist volunteers from the class to perform a role-play. In teams of two, have one student act out Sylvette David during her sitting (holding the pose) while another pretends to be a local journalist, asking David any questions that come to mind. Provide a “microphone” to be used (perhaps a paper towel roll with a styrofoam ball on one end), encourage the journalists to be creative yet appropriate when interviewing, and remind the David impersonators to think about what she was thinking and feeling, if she was bored or excited, what she thought about Picasso, etc.

### • Puzzled?

Cut an enlarged reproduction of the painting into eight or ten large pieces. Give a piece to each student in a group and allow them to put the painting back together again. Make a “frame” on the chalkboard in tape or drawn on a piece of butcher paper the size of the enlarged image. Have each student come up to the frame and tape their piece where they think it belongs. Use trial and error with the students until they correctly assemble the image. Make several small puzzles of the painting by cutting up a paper-sized image of the painting. Have students work in pairs to put the image together properly.

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