

Harlequin

Barcelona, 1917

Oil on canvas

116 x 90 cm

Donated by the artist, 1919

MPB 10.941



The work

Picasso produced this oil painting during his stay in Barcelona between June and November 1917, with the idea of presenting it at the Liceu Theatre with the ballet *Parade* performed by Serge de Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. It's the first of Picasso's works to enter the museum collections of our city.

The harlequin character – painted frequently by Picasso – appears here above a stage with a balustrade, partially covered by a large deep red curtain contrasting with the ochre flesh and the blues, greens and pinks of the typical diamond-shape clothes the character is wearing. The earthen colour of the skin and large fleshy hands reveal Picasso's interest in giving volume to forms.

The model for *Harlequin* was Léonide Massine (the artistic name of Leonid Feodorovic Miassin, Moscow, 1896 – Borken, Germany, 1979), the first dancer in Diaghilev's company.

Context

Picasso's work entered a period of great contrasts in artistic production towards 1917 – also due to a profound change in his life – which often disconcerted his contemporaries, as the so-called *classical* or *neo-classical* works ran parallel to creations with Cubist roots. This contrast is clearly evident in the front curtain and wardrobe of the ballet *Parade* – written by Jean Cocteau with music by Erik Satie – which Picasso started to create that year in Rome for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. In love with the ballerina Olga Koklova, Picasso travelled with the company on tour until the première of *Parade* at the Gran Liceu Theatre, Barcelona.

Living in Barcelona between June and November, he once again became involved in the local Noucentisme-dominated art scene which emphasised classical values in Art and Literature whilst advocating renovation. Although this new style seemed to clash head-on with earlier Cubism, Apollinaire recalled in the *Parade* programme that the clearly classical curtain and Cubist wardrobe coincided in attempting to interpret reality.

Picasso's cooperation with the world of ballet continued until 1924.



Picasso and the circus

Picasso's links with the circus world were ever-present throughout his life.

In Barcelona at the end of the 19th century, Picasso visited the circuses travelling to the city, although there is no reference to them in his work during this period.

The travelling circuses on the boulevards of Paris became spaces often visited by the young Picasso and his friends on their first trips to the city. In late 1904 and early 1905, the circus theme – specifically the Medrano – became a key reference in his life and work, the centre of his creations at the time.

The 'Picasso and the Circus' exhibition first shown at the Picasso Museum in Barcelona (16th November 2006 to 18th February 2007) and then at the Pierre Gianadda Foundation in Martigny (9th March to 10th June 2007) provided an extensive and stimulating journey through Picasso's representation of the circus world, running from his first youthful sketches to his last years of creativity.

The iconography of the Harlequin

The symbolic representation of the harlequin is a recurrent aspect of Picasso's work from around 1901 and, especially, from 1905 onwards. He is the real character of his so-called Rose period.

Just as with the Minotaur in the 30s, the harlequin became the artist's *alter ego*. The harlequin is a testament to human comedy – the beginner seeking out transgression and transcendence of earthly man's limitations.

In 1915, Picasso carried out a series of studies into the representation of the harlequin which came to culmination in the *Harlequin* work, owned by the MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) in New York, drawing his interpretation of the character to a climax, according to the artist himself.

Preliminary studies

Three preliminary studies are known of: a simple body drawing (Zervos 1949, no. 26), a study of the head which Picasso donated to the Museu Picasso in Barcelona in 1970 and a three-quarter drawing (June 1917) with the words in Catalan 'Visca Catalunya i els seus amics!' (Long live Catalonia and my friends!) captured in the gold book at the Barcelona gallery Galeries Laietanes and which Picasso drew for the banquet held in his honour in the cellars there.

Reception of the work

The art critic and painter Feliu Elias – commenting on the *Harlequin* painted by Picasso in Barcelona the previous year – stated in 1918 that it was clear how earlier speculations ('cubist and wild') had given Picasso 'a valuable refinement in objective vision' which thanks to the compositional simplicity, formal purification, volume emphasis and monumentality anticipated the classical paintings of the early '20s.

In 1918, *Harlequin* was the cover of the monthly art magazine *Vell i Nou* (no. 72).

In 1919, after presenting it at the exhibition held in the Catalan capital's Palace of Fine Arts, Picasso donated this work to the art museums of Barcelona, being the first Picasso work to be included in the city's museums.

Location

Sala 9