The work

The Portrait of Aunt Pepa is one of the milestones in young Picasso’s portrait work. The model is Josefa Ruiz Blasco (1825-1901), his father’s sister. The undated oil was painted in 1896 during one of Picasso’s study trips to Malaga with his family.

The play of light highlighting the face from the dark clothes and shadow backdrop, and the more outlined treatment of the latter to favour concentration on the facial expression, make this work a surprisingly deep psychological portrait. The raw realism of the face, as well as the chromatic and light treatment, denote a clear influence from Spanish portrait tradition (e.g. Ribera and, especially, Velázquez).

The freedom and expressive fluidity of the lines, based on very free and flowing brushstrokes, also reveal both a quick and a virtuoso creation: Sabartés even stated that the portrait was done in less than an hour, fanning once more the legend of young Picasso. In any case, the swift execution seems equally likely to be related to a more prosaic reason – Josefa Ruiz did not like people painting her and her initial refusal, accompanied by Picasso’s lack of motivation, delayed the work’s production for a year – a work commissioned by his uncle Salvador.

History

Josefa Ruiz had already been portrayed by Picasso in 1895 in a crayon drawing (Portrait of Aunt Pepa sitting on a chair) which is a clear precedent to this oil portrait. With the new portrait, Picasso chose to vary the frame and have it side on so as to give absolute concentration on the face and, in this way, the model’s psychology.

Portrait of Aunt Pepa sitting in a chair
Signed P. Ruiz and dated in the lower right corner
Malaga, 1895
Lead pencil and Conté pencil on paper
12 x 8 cm
MPB 111.174

Belonging to a 36-page 1895 album (MPB 110.913, dated by the artist in 1970) containing drawings done in Malaga and Barcelona with studies and sketches of family portraits and two copies of works by Velázquez.
Recepció de l'obra

According to his friend and personal secretary, Jaume Sabartés, this portrait certifies the great perceptive ability Picasso had developed from the age of 14, allowing him to capture thoroughly everything he saw.

In this way, Picasso biographer Josep Palau i Fabre considers the Portrait of Aunt Pepa a masterpiece ‘where virtuosity rivals profundity, as if both wanted supremacy’.

Location

Room 2