Science and Charity

Signed *P. Ruiz Picasso* in the bottom left-hand corner

Barcelona, 1897

Oil on canvas

197 x 249.5 cm

Donated by the artist, 1970

MPB 110.046

The work

Without any doubt, *Science and Charity* is one of the major works from Picasso’s early years of training. At just 15, Picasso felt mature enough to take on large, ambitious compositions as the culmination of his academic studies, that were in fact led by his father, José Ruiz Blasco.

*Science and Charity* falls within the realm of social realism so frequently found among the more conservative circles of the second half of the 19th century, both for its philanthropic feeling and its interest in scientific progress.

A large painting of classical composition, it is structured in such a way that all the characters contribute towards aiming to focus all our attention on the sick patient. The narrowness of the room, the treatment of the light and chromatic style all contribute to create an intimate and welcoming atmosphere.

Models for the characters

José Ruiz Blasco, Picasso’s father, was the model for the doctor. A beggar he came across in the street with a child in her arms, who he hired for 10 pesetas, were the models for the sick woman and the child. Picasso probably used for the nun an adolescent dressed in a habit lent to him by Josefa González, a nun from Malaga from the Order of Saint Vincent de Paul, a friend of his uncle Salvador, who was living in Barcelona at the time.

Studio

The warm reception by critics of *The First Communion* – presented at the Third Barcelona Fine Arts and Artistic Industry Exhibition in 1896 – spurred José Ruiz Blasco to rent what would be Picasso’s first studio at number 4, Carrer de la Plata, located near the family home in Carrer Mercè. He shared the studio with a friend from the Fine Arts School, Manuel Pallarès. That is where he painted *Science and Charity.*
Precedents

The source of inspiration for the chosen theme could possibly be *A Hospital Room during the visit of the Head Doctor* by the Sevillian painter Luis Jiménez Aranda (1845-1928). This monumental work won top prizes in Paris (1889) and Madrid (1892), played a defining role in the history of academic Hispanic painting both as the consecration of pictorial realism and as the archetypal social theme (as opposed to historical).

It is important to remember that the theme – also close to a composition by Enrique Paternina, *Mother’s Visit* shown at an 1896 exhibition – has a more direct precedent in a small panel on wood painted by Picasso in La Coruña in 1894 (*The Sick Woman*). The work was preceded by many notes and sketches, with the final title seemingly being given by Picasso’s father.

Sketches

The Museu Picasso conserves 6 sketches of *Science and Charity*, three of which are on display and one of which is on the reverse of the portrait of Joan Vidal Ventosa (MPB 70.802).

Prizes

*Science and Charity* was awarded an Honorary Mention at the General Fine Arts Exhibition in Madrid in Spring 1897 and the Gold Medal at the Provincial Exhibition in Malaga held afterwards. After receiving these prizes, Joaquín Martínez de la Vega – a painter from Malaga and a friend of the artist’s father– held a glass of champagne and, letting a few drops fall on Picasso’s head, baptised him a Painter.

Despite the success, described by Pierre Daix as the young Picasso’s ‘great academic trick’, this would be his last great work in this tradition: in a letter dated November 1897 and addressed to his friend and studio colleague, Joaquim Bas, Picasso was already very critical of the artistic training provided by the San Fernando Academy in Madrid. One of the few lessons he would value from his academic training was life drawing, but he would move away from all subordination to technique and theme in the academy’s correct style. The young Picasso left behind the intention, fostered by his father, to shape a career based on prizes and awards, to seek his artistic path outside and beyond the academy.

Location

Room 3