

In 1928 Picasso, who had no experience of working in iron, asked his friend Julio González to help him with the creation of a funerary monument to the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. Over the course of four years the two artists collaborated on a project of dematerialised sculpture inspired by Picasso's choice of a passage from Apollinaire's novel *Le Poète assassiné* [The murdered poet].

Art history has traditionally considered this collaboration between the two artists as the moment that saw the "invention" of abstract iron sculpture. However, a tendency towards dematerialisation in the medium and the birth of sculpture in this material was in fact a lengthy process which began with Cubist sculptural practice and involved the participation of various artists in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s.

Picasso and González's careers were relatively different although culturally close. Friends from a very young age, both lived in the *modernista* Barcelona of the early 20th century, worked in Paris in the first three decades of the century and always remained in contact until González's death in 1942. This exhibition's analysis of their artistic collaboration takes those early years and shared artistic concerns into account, as well as the influence this collaboration had on their respective works. In the case of González the joint endeavour gave rise to a series of dematerialised sculptures, a creative direction which "allowed him to develop fantasy and imagination as key aspects of his personal aesthetic", in the words of Tomàs Llorens. For Picasso it implied the chance to learn about the potential of wrought iron and of iron soldering while also leading to the creation of one of the most important sculptures of the 20th century: *Woman in the Garden*.

Julio González, Pablo Picasso and the dematerialisation of sculpture was the last major project of Tomàs Llorens: one of the most lucid and eminent of Spain's art historians, who died in June 2021. Jointly curated with his son Boye Llorens, this exhibition concludes a line of research to which he devoted a central part of his work throughout his career.

Picasso 1942: homage to Julio González

Julio González died suddenly at his home in Arcueil on 27 March 1942. The only artists who attended his funeral were Pablo Picasso and Luis Fernández. The context was an unprecedented one, with Paris occupied by the German forces and artistic life almost entirely inexistent. Barely a week later Picasso produced a series of still lifes which, in his own words, represented “González’s death”. One of them, *Bull’s Head*, opens this exhibition. It is both a *vanitas* – a genre that offers a reflection on the transience of life – and a posthumous homage to his friend and his work. This is clearly evident in the structural purity of the painted skull, which echoes González’s sculptures.

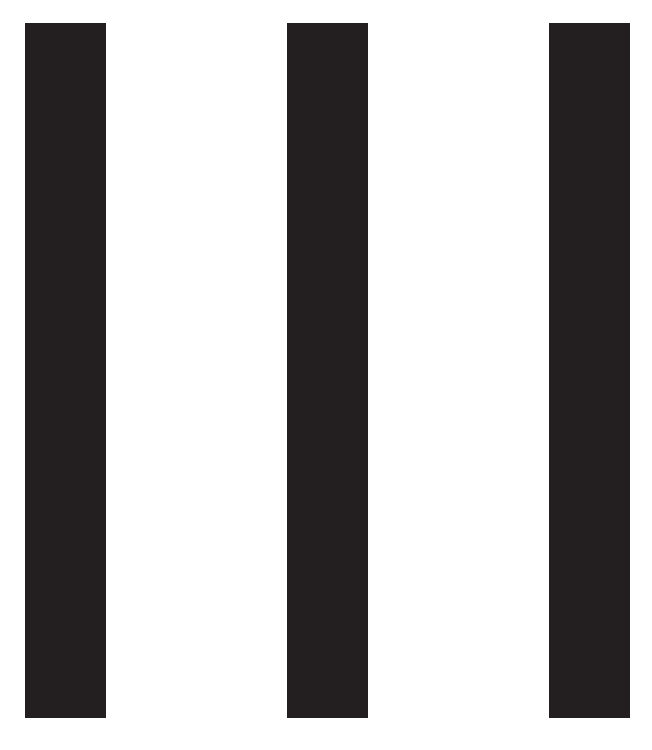
Furthermore that skull, with its evident connotations in Spanish culture, leads on to another, slightly later homage: the assemblage of a bicycle handlebars and saddle also entitled *Bull’s Head*. The two works function to evoke not only the friendship but also the mutual respect and admiration that existed between the two artists and led to a collaboration which constitutes one of the most interesting episodes in modern art.



Picasso, González and late Catalan *modernisme* (Barcelona, ca. 1896-1906)

Julio González and Pablo Picasso met in fin-de-siècle Barcelona in the context of late *modernisme*. The city at that time was the setting for various artistic debates which had a significant impact on their respective careers and on those of other artists of their generation, such as Isidre Nonell, Joaquim Mir, Pablo Gargallo, Ricard Canals and Carles Mani. Firstly, the imprecise line that separated the fine and the decorative arts began to be questioned, with a consequent revival of the latter, particularly wrought iron. It should be remembered that craft skills associated with construction and interior design flourished at this period in parallel with the emergence of *modernista* architecture.

Secondly, the defence of an art that responded to the social needs of the time resulted in an evident concern on the part of creative figures and intellectuals for the social problems of modern society. As a result, many of these artists involved themselves in the situation of the most unprotected, poor and marginalised. In aesthetic terms, almost all of them soon moved away from the emerging Symbolism and opted for a naturalism and type of primitivism which resonated with echoes of Puvis de Chavannes, Gauguin, Auguste Rodin and particularly El Greco. This is evident in Nonell's gypsy women, Picasso's "Blue period" works, Mani's *The Degenerates* and González's *Small hooded Mother and Child*.



Precedents for the dematerialisation of sculpture: Crystal Cubism and Purism (Paris, ca. 1918-1925)

It has traditionally been considered that González arrived at the dematerialisation of sculpture through Picasso's Cubism. This has led to the idea that while he could have seen seen Picasso's Cubist sculptures of 1912 to 1914, which reveal a move towards a certain dematerialisation, it was in fact the influence of the late Cubists – grouped together as the so-called Purist movement which emerged in 1918 and included Amédée Ozenfant, Albert Gleizes, Henri Laurens and Juan Gris – that encouraged him to investigate metal sculpture and the dematerialisation of volumes.

González's first reliefs made with sheet iron around 1927 are excellent examples of this artistic exploration. The quest for visual harmony and transparency in the sense of the denial of materiality, as well as the preference for the "object-type" characteristic of Purism, such as bottles, jugs and fruit dishes – as in Ozenfant's *The white jug* on display here – have clear parallels with these early works by González, for example *Still Life II*.

IV

Dematerialisation in the Cubist tradition (Paris, ca. 1924-1930)

The quest for “transparency” was one of the principal concerns of the modern movement in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In the field of metal sculpture numerous artists associated with the Cubist tradition were pursuing that direction prior to Picasso and González. Pablo Gargallo, a great friend of the latter, early Giacometti and Jacques Lipchitz moved from three-dimensional Cubism to the creation of works in which the volumes are reduced to an interplay of lines and planes and in which the void has a key role.

Picasso’s *Guitar*, the quintessential Cubist sculpture created in 1924 (the same period as the commission for the Apollinaire monument), reveals this tendency towards the dematerialisation of the volumes. It is also to be found in González’s *The Harlequin* (ca. 1930), the most Cubist of his sculptures and a work devoid of mass and closed volumes.

V

González's collaboration with Picasso (Paris, 1928-1932)

“How do you give form to nothing?” Picasso asked when he was commissioned to create a monument to commemorate his friend the poet Guillaume Apollinaire after his death in 1918. This question, to which Picasso would not find an answer for another ten years, was inspired by a passage in *Le Poète assassiné* [The murdered poet], a more or less autobiographical novel by Apollinaire. When the poet Croniamantal (who is in fact Apollinaire himself) dies, the “Bird of Benin” (who is in fact Picasso) announces that he will be putting up a statue to him. “A statue made of what”, asks Tristouse, the dead man’s fiancée, “Marble, bronze?”, “No”, the Bird of Benin replies, “I must sculpt him a profound statue out of nothing, like poetry, like glory.”

In order to give form to nothing Picasso conceived the idea of making a transparent, iron sculpture. He turned for help to a friend from his youth, Julio González, “in whose hands metals became as malleable as butter”. Their collaboration during various sessions from 1928 to 1932 gave rise to a group of metal sculptures in which Picasso’s creative drive took shape thanks to González’s technical mastery.

The variety of ideas and experimentation brought to the Apollinaire project is evident in the sculptures on display in this gallery. They include *Head*, *Head of a Woman*, *Head of a Man* and *Figure: project for a monument to Guillaume Apollinaire*, the work that most closely reflected the commission. *Woman in the Garden* is the most important of these collaborations; it was never installed in its intended location and Picasso kept it at the château de Boisgeloup together with another version that he requested from González made of wrought bronze.

VI

González: exploring metal sculpture (Paris, 1930-1932)

While Picasso and González shared the general tendency towards dematerialisation, their respective aesthetics and sculptural languages were very different. The experience of working with Picasso left a profound impression on González but his creative development was completely independent, as evident in the work he produced between 1930 and 1932 at a time when the two artists were still collaborating.

In his individual output González continued to investigate the dematerialisation of sculpture but never entirely focused on abstraction, in contrary to art-historical opinion. In fact, in the 1930s his explorations combined a certain realism – present in his peasant women and his subsequent evolution towards *La Montserrat* – with a certain tendency towards the dreamlike and fantastical (evident, for example, in his iron masks) and with what he had assimilated from late Cubism. When fused together these aspects would give rise to a body of work which, as Tomàs Llorens noted, “intensified the tendency to dematerialisation as the necessary condition for freeing the creative imagination, which he formulated as ‘drawing in space.’” This is the concept represented by dematerialisation taken to its extreme, expressed through volumes that are described or suggested by the interplay of flat or linear forms executed in metal.

The approach to abstraction

Julio González's work has frequently been associated with the abstract art being created in Paris in the 1930s. This was the period that saw the emergence of groups such as Cercle et Carré, Art Concret and Abstraction-Création, among others, characterised by their intention to continue the modern movement through abstraction and in opposition to the emerging Surrealism. González was introduced to Cercle et Carré by one of its founders, Joaquín Torres-García, who had been a close friend since their youth in Barcelona and with whom he would also work in Paris. When Torres-García founded the group he invited González to become involved and the sculptor attended some of the preliminary meetings.

In the context of these artistic concerns *The Kiss I* represents the highest degree of abstraction achieved by González. Two ovals made of sheet iron and representing abstract faces fuse together in a kiss. A series of superimposed rectangles cut through each other to create a composition of open, aerial volumes devoid of any mass. The work may have been intended for inclusion in Cercle et Carré's only exhibition, held in 1930, but González decided not to participate in it. This decision points to his desire to remain unaffiliated with any artistic doctrine in a reflection of his practice at this period of pursuing various different directions at the same time.

The primitive, the grotesque and the fantastical: masks

The mask was one of Julio González's preferred sculptural forms. When he embarked on the adventure of creating a new type of sculpture in iron in the late 1920s masks became his principal focus of attention for two or three years.

In a letter of 1927 to the art historian Feliu Elias, González said that in addition to modern French sculpture he was also interested in archaic sculpture. In the context of the series of masks that he was producing at this period the term "archaic" should be understood as the art of so-called primitive cultures which was so closely associated with the evolution of modern art.

Inspired by African and Oceanic sculpture, González's masks reveal his first use of a fantastical and grotesque language that has come to be considered one of his most distinctive contributions to modern art. Created from just a single sheet of cut-out and split iron with holes made in it, these masks generate a strikingly fantastical effect through the sculptural dematerialisation. Shown alongside them are two works from Picasso's collection: a figure from New Guinea and a Venetian mask of Punchinello, both of which have similar connotations of the fantastical, the dreamlike and the grotesque.

The primitive, the grotesque and the fantastical: heads in depth

Julio González continued to explore the motif of the human head in the early 1930s. The fantastical, grotesque language of his masks is still notably present in the works known as “heads in depth”. These are sculptures entirely made of planes and lines located some distance from each other and with no volume or mass. When seen from a particular viewpoint and under the correct lighting, this type of composition “in depth” allows the viewer to perceive features which suggest the appearance of a human head. As such, they can be seen as a type of “virtual” work in which it is entirely the spectator’s movement that makes the immaterial image appear or dissolve like a mirage.

Particularly notable among these heads, which clearly reveal González’s interest in the potential of sculptural dematerialisation, is *Head called “The Swiss Woman”*, perhaps the most abstract of the group. *Head in depth* and *Head with large Eyes* have similar compositions but in the case of the latter the large hole of the eyes creates an area of shadow and thus introduces the void as an additional expressive device.

New fantastical heads: the play of light and shade

Dating from 1932 to 1933 is another series of works on the head, a theme González had already studied some years earlier. Once again he investigated volume, now using the contrast of light created by the flat forms and empty spaces as his principal expressive resource.

Within this group *The Lovers II* makes most emphatic use of this contrast. On the front face of a cylindrical structure which creates a dark background is a cutout metal sheet of broken outline that suggests two faces joined in a kiss. The line of the profile and the volume of the head are thus removed from their natural context but they poetically evoke it in their new and unexpected combination. *Head called "The Tunnel"* again relates to the theme of the kiss but here the fusion of the faces is suggested by two floating triangles located in front of the dark interior of the "tunnel". In this work González was also exploring the expressive potential of light through the treatment of the iron, alternating hammered and softly polished textures on its surface, an effect similarly visible in *Head known as "The small Trumpet"*.

Femme à sa toilette: metamorphosis and dematerialisation of a classical motif

Julio González depicted the theme of the female toilette on numerous occasions throughout his career. The subject is taken from the work of Edgar Degas whom he profoundly admired. Like that Impressionist master, what interested González was capturing the uniqueness of the gesture. His earliest depictions of the theme date from the first decade of the 20th century in the form of a series of drawings that focus on the gesture of a woman arranging her hair, her arms raised and her hands behind her head.

Two decades later González returned to this subject in a very intensive manner, as evident in the group of drawings on display in this gallery which clearly reveal the process behind the creation of one of his most important works, *Woman arranging her Hair I*. In these drawings the figure is subjected to a process of increasing geometrical simplification. The final result is a sculpture which employs the language of dematerialised volumes and empty planes defined by lines which constitutes González's greatest stylistic innovation and one of his most important contributions to 20th-century iron sculpture.

Peasant Women

The theme of peasant women located in rural scenes or presented as single, isolated figures is probably the most recurrent one in González's oeuvre, inspired by a tradition that originated with Jean-François Millet and Camille Pissarro.

The drawings of peasant women displayed here tend to flatness and geometrical simplification while the figures, which are treated as silhouettes, anticipate the sculpture *Woman called "The three Folds"*. A cutout iron sheet creates the frontal silhouette of a woman wearing the traditional long peasant skirt. The figure is devoid of a head, arms and legs. Its material textures, the cuts into the iron and the soldering left "*en brut*" coexist with the figure's primitivist rigidity of archaic or vaguely Egyptian origin.

González's use of this subject matter, which originated in Catalan *modernisme* and *noucentisme*, has ideological connotations, implying the rejection of the artist's academic training and studio-based work in favour of the quest for a "living" reality. It also denotes an idealised vision of nature and can be seen as a response to the impact of a ruralist nationalism that saw the Catalan countryside and its peasants as the bedrock of its strength as a nation. All these concepts are essential for an understanding of González's subsequent work in relation to *La Montserrat*.

Drawing in Space

In order to achieve the dematerialisation of sculpture González tentatively pursued various different directions. The last and most fruitful was the one he himself called “drawing in space”, referring to a type of work with volumes that are described or suggested through the three-dimensional play of flat or linear forms executed in metal, principally iron.

Resplendence, which once again corresponds to the theme of the woman arranging her hair, is the first fully realised example of “drawing in space” in González’s output. In other works, including *Small Head of the Triangle* or *Head called “The Fireman”*, he returned to his investigation of the human head using this new sculptural language.

The most important work within this tendency is *Large Mother and Child*, inspired by Gothic Virgin and Child groups, notably the Virgin that presides over the entrance to the cloister of Notre-Dame in Paris. In González’s sculpture a large, slightly bending arc evokes the luminous glow around the head. The shift of the vertical axis in the centre of the figure suggests the *contrapposto* of the Gothic Virgin while a narrow, oblique cone made from four metal rods schematically imitates the folds of her mantle. At the top is the place for the absent Christ Child, an echo of the damaged state of the medieval original.

VII

Picasso: the sculptor's studio (Boisgeloup, 1930-1932)

During the years of collaboration between the two artists Picasso, like González, continued to work independently. In 1927 he made the acquaintance on the street of a young woman called Marie-Thérèse Walter. Three years later he bought a château in Boisgeloup near Gisors in Normandy. This 19th-century stone building offered the artist the space he needed to install a range of studios for both sculpture and printmaking. It was at this point that he abandoned the issue of dematerialisation which he had worked on with González in order to focus on a different line of artistic research in which volume and the rotundity of the forms and material were the principal elements. This was the period of the free-standing sculptures with their echoes of the Neolithic inspired by Marie-Thérèse, of which *Head of a Woman* is displayed here.

VIII

Picasso and González: testimonies of war (Paris, 1937-1944)

The Spanish Civil War and World War II inevitably marked turning points in the work of many European artists including Picasso and González, both of whose art was always characterised by its commitment. This was the period of Picasso's *Guernica* and his "weeping women", and also of his great sculpture *Man with a Lamb* made in Paris under the German occupation. For González these were the years of *La Montserrat* and his "cactus men". The dialogue between the two artists' individual aesthetics is now even more evident. Both *Man with a Lamb* and *La Montserrat* have primitive, monumental traits as well as human and heroic ones while above all both works maintain a powerfully Mediterranean character. Like *La Montserrat*, the weeping women are the image of the Pietà and of the Dolorosas of the Christian tradition. Clearly reflecting the spirit of the times, these works seem to wish to offer some type of response to the barbarity.

Small frightened Montserrat is the last known sculpture completed by González, created during some difficult months when he lacked materials for soldering iron due to the war. He thus turned to making numerous drawings in parallel to his sculptural practice. In addition to the different versions of this motif, which represents the "firmly planted", archetypal Catalan woman, he worked on a series of "cactus men". These are figures which transmit a spirit very close to that of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a subject matter notably present in Picasso's oeuvre during those years.