

Picasso and Photography: Dialogues between Vision, Modernity, and Artistic Transformation

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Abstract: *Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) stands as one of the most transformative figures in the history of modern art, celebrated for his relentless reinvention of form, style, and artistic language. While scholarship has extensively examined his contributions to painting, sculpture, and drawing, his sustained and complex engagement with photography remains comparatively underexplored. This article examines Picasso's relationship with photography as an essential component of his modernist practice rather than a marginal or auxiliary concern. Through a critical analysis structured into six thematic chapters, the study explores photography's role in shaping Picasso's visual thinking, its dialectical relationship with Cubism, its function as a documentary and analytical tool, its influence through artistic collaborations, and its significance in the construction of Picasso's public persona and historical legacy. Situating Picasso within the broader context of modern visual culture, this article argues that photography profoundly informed his understanding of perception, temporality, and representation. Ultimately, the dialogue between Picasso and photography reveals how modern art emerged through continuous negotiation with mechanical modes of seeing, reproduction, and memory.*

Key Words: *Pablo Picasso, Photography, Cubism, Modernism, Visual Culture, Artistic Process, Avant-garde.*

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Introduction

The advent of photography in the nineteenth century irrevocably altered the epistemological foundations of visual representation. By mechanizing the act of image-making, photography disrupted long-standing assumptions about artistic skill, realism, and the relationship between art and truth. When Pablo Picasso entered the artistic arena at the turn of the twentieth century, photography had already become deeply embedded within everyday life, scientific inquiry, journalism, and mass culture. Far from functioning merely as a technical innovation, photography reconfigured how reality was perceived, recorded, and remembered.

Picasso's artistic career unfolded entirely within this transformed visual environment. Although he did not identify himself as a photographer, photography accompanied his creative life in multiple and enduring ways. It served as a visual reference, a conceptual provocation, a documentary instrument, a collaborative medium, and a powerful mechanism for shaping artistic identity. Picasso neither rejected photography nor passively absorbed its influence; instead, he engaged with it critically, often positioning his work in productive tension with the camera's claims to objectivity and realism.

This article proposes that Picasso's engagement with photography must be understood as an integral dimension of his modernism. Photography challenged traditional representational practices, compelling Picasso to rethink the ontology of the image itself. In response, he developed visual strategies that emphasized multiplicity, fragmentation, simultaneity, and conceptual depth—qualities that would come to define Cubism and subsequent avant-garde movements.¹ At the same time, photography documented Picasso's artistic processes, mediated his collaborations with other artists, and contributed decisively to the construction of his public persona.

Organized into six chapters, this study examines the evolving dialogue between Picasso and photography from early modern visual culture to posthumous legacy. By foregrounding photography as both a material and intellectual presence in Picasso's work, the article seeks to enrich contemporary understandings of modern art's relationship with technological change and visual mediation.²

Incorporation of Research Objectives, Research Questions, and Research Methodology

Research Objectives

- (i) To examine the role of photography in shaping Pablo Picasso's modernist visual language.
- (ii) To investigate the epistemological relationship between Cubism and photographic modes of perception.
- (iii) To analyze how photography functioned as a documentary and interpretive apparatus within Picasso's artistic practice.
- (iv) To explore the intermedial dialogue between Picasso and twentieth-century photographers.
- (v) To study the role of photography in constructing Picasso's artistic persona and posthumous legacy.
- (vi) To situate Picasso's engagement with photography within broader discourses of modernity, visual culture, and mechanical reproduction.

Research Questions

- (i) In what ways did photography influence Picasso's understanding of representation and perception?
- (ii) How can Cubism be interpreted as a critical response to photographic realism?
- (iii) What role did photographic documentation play in mediating Picasso's artistic process?
- (iv) How did collaborations with photographers contribute to the reinterpretation of Picasso's artworks?
- (v) To what extent did photography shape the construction of Picasso's public identity within modern visual culture?
- (vi) How does Picasso's engagement with photography redefine the relationship between art and mechanical reproduction in modernism?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology grounded in visual culture studies, art historical analysis, and modernist critical theory. The research is primarily analytical and interpretive in nature, employing textual, visual, and contextual analysis of artworks, photographic archives, exhibition records, artist statements, and critical scholarship.³

The study draws upon theoretical frameworks associated with modernism, mechanical reproduction, visual epistemology, and intermediality. Primary materials include Picasso's artworks, studio photographs, archival photographic documentation, and collaborative photographic works involving artists such as Dora Maar and Brassai. Secondary materials include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, exhibition catalogues, and contemporary theoretical writings on photography and modern art.

The research further employs comparative visual analysis to examine the structural and conceptual parallels between Cubist fragmentation and photographic perception. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study seeks to understand photography not merely as an external influence upon Picasso but as a constitutive condition of modern artistic consciousness.⁴

Incorporation of Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on Picasso has predominantly focused on his contributions to Cubism, formal experimentation, and political modernism. Foundational biographical studies by John Richardson (1991–2007) established Picasso as a transformative figure within twentieth-century art history. Rosalind Krauss (1985) examined modernist fragmentation and the crisis of originality, indirectly illuminating Picasso's challenge to representational stability.

Studies concerning photography and modern visuality, particularly Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1981) and Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936/2008), provide critical theoretical frameworks for understanding the implications of mechanical image production. Benjamin's discussion of aura, reproducibility, and technological mediation is particularly relevant to Picasso's engagement with photography and collage practices.⁵

Research specifically addressing Picasso and photography remains comparatively limited. Brassai's *Conversations with Picasso* (2002) and Dora Maar's photographic documentation of *Guernica* provide valuable archival insight into Picasso's studio practices and collaborative interactions. More recent scholarship by Christopher Green (2015), Pepe Karmel (2023), and Jordan Thomas (2022) has begun to reconsider Picasso within broader contexts of visual culture and intermediality.

Nevertheless, a significant gap persists in scholarship concerning photography as an epistemic and structural condition within Picasso's artistic modernism. Most studies treat photography either as documentary evidence or as secondary influence rather than as a constitutive element of Picasso's visual thinking. The present study seeks to address this lacuna by theorizing Picasso's engagement with photography as central to the reconfiguration of artistic subjectivity and representation in modernism.⁶

1. Photography and the Formation of Modern Visual Consciousness

Photography emerged as a dominant visual force during the nineteenth century, introducing unprecedented modes of seeing that diverged sharply from painterly traditions. Its capacity to isolate moments, fragment space, and render minute detail transformed visual perception into an analytical operation. By the time Picasso began his formal training, photography had already permeated artistic education, scientific investigation, and popular culture.

The photographic image differed fundamentally from painted representation. It was instantaneous rather than accumulative, mechanical rather than manual, and reproducible rather than singular. These qualities destabilized the painter's role as the primary interpreter of reality. Picasso's early academic training emphasized drawing from observation, yet he matured artistically in a world saturated with photographic images. This coexistence of academic tradition and modern visual technology produced a fertile tension within his early work.⁷

During Picasso's Blue and Rose Periods, subtle traces of photographic influence can be discerned in compositional framing, tonal restraint, and emotional detachment. Figures often appear isolated within shallow spaces, resembling photographic portraits that arrest time and gesture. These early works reflect not imitation of photography but an absorption of its perceptual logic. Photography encouraged artists to recognize vision as selective, framed, and contingent rather than continuous and absolute.

Moreover, scientific photography—particularly motion studies and chronophotography—introduced new ways of conceptualizing time and movement. The fragmentation of motion into discrete intervals suggested that reality itself could be disassembled and reconstituted.¹³ Although Picasso rarely cited these sources explicitly, their intellectual implications resonated with his later investigations into multiple viewpoints and temporal simultaneity.⁸

Photography thus contributed to the emergence of a modern visual consciousness that privileged analysis over imitation. Picasso's artistic evolution cannot be separated from this broader transformation of seeing, in which photography functioned as both catalyst and challenge.

Photography has fundamentally shaped modern visual consciousness by altering how humanity perceives, records, and interprets reality. Emerging in 1839, the medium transitioned from a scientific curiosity to a dominant cultural force, fostering a new, mechanical vision that moved beyond human sensory limitations. By enabling the New Vision of the 1920s—characterized by unusual, often abstract, vantages—photography forced a departure from traditional, painterly representations, fostering a modern sensibility attuned to speed, fragmentation, and the industrial landscape.

The New Vision and Abstraction: In the 1920s and 1930s, avant-garde artists like László Moholy-Nagy championed a new vision that used photography to see the world from unexpected angles—bird’s-eye and worm’s-eye views—to reawaken interest in routine objects and processes. This approach broke with traditional representation, using light, shadow, and technical experimentation to move toward abstraction.

The Optical Unconscious: Cultural theorist Walter Benjamin proposed that the camera reveals an “optical unconscious,” similar to how psychoanalysis reveals the unconscious mind. Photography makes visible phenomena that are otherwise too fast, small, or hidden for the naked eye, thus altering human perception and knowledge of the world.

Temporality and Decisive Moments: Photography introduced a new understanding of time, allowing for the freezing of a single, decisive moment, as articulated by Henri Cartier-Bresson. This capacity to isolate a fraction of a second allowed for the solidification of time, a characteristic that defines the modern, often fragmented, perception of experience.⁹

The Demanding Gaze and Image-Weariness: The proliferation of images, especially with the rise of photojournalism and, later, the snapshot aesthetic (e.g., Robert Frank), created an overloading of visual stimulation. This led to a “blasé” or detached attitude, or what was termed image-weariness (*bildermüde*), as the public became inundated with visual information.

Democratization of the Image: The advent of affordable cameras (e.g., Kodak) and later digital technology transformed photography from a specialized practice into a universal language. Everyone became a potential creator of photographic art, blurring the lines between art, documentation, and everyday life.

Straight Photography vs. Pictorialism: Modernist photography evolved from Pictorialism (which mimicked painting) to Straight Photography, promoted by Alfred Stieglitz and Group f/64. This style emphasized sharp focus, clear detail, and the camera’s inherent capacity for, what they believed was, a truthful depiction of reality, reinforcing the idea of the camera as a neutral observer.¹⁰

Surrealism and Fragmented Reality: Surrealists and artists like Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy used techniques like photograms and photomontage to challenge traditional reality. These methods created surreal images that reflected a modern consciousness that was increasingly aware of the irrational, the absurd, and the fragmented nature of urban life.

By the postmodern era, photography further merged with mass media, becoming an interdisciplinary tool that questions the very nature of truth and representation. It has become an indispensable, almost automatic, part of how we construct our identity and experience the world.

2. Cubism as a Critical Response to Photographic Realism

Cubism, developed by Picasso and Georges Braque between 1907 and 1914, constitutes one of the most radical artistic responses to photography's dominance over visual representation. While photography claimed to offer an objective record of reality, Cubism rejected the premise that reality could be apprehended from a single, fixed viewpoint.

Photography freezes a moment in time, presenting the world as a stable image viewed from a specific position. Picasso, by contrast, sought to represent objects as they are known through movement, memory, and intellectual engagement. Cubist compositions fragment form and reassemble it across the picture plane, creating a visual language that emphasizes simultaneity and multiplicity. In doing so, Cubism challenged photography's authority by revealing its limitations.

Rather than depicting surface appearance, Cubism pursued conceptual truth. This approach did not deny photography's significance but positioned painting as a complementary mode of inquiry. Picasso's works suggest that reality cannot be reduced to optical data alone; it must also account for subjective experience and temporal depth.

The incorporation of collage elements—such as newspaper clippings, printed text, and photographic fragments—further complicated this relationship. By integrating mechanically reproduced materials into handmade compositions, Picasso blurred distinctions between original and copy, art and mass media. These strategies reflect an acute awareness of photography's role within modern systems of representation.

Cubism thus emerges as a critical dialogue with photography, one that acknowledges its power while asserting the necessity of artistic intervention. Picasso's response demonstrates that modern art did not merely coexist with photography but evolved through sustained engagement with its aesthetic and philosophical implications.¹¹

Cubism emerged between 1907 and 1914 as a revolutionary, intellectual, and “anti-photographic” artistic movement, acting as a direct response to the limitations of traditional, realistic representation in the age of photography. Pioneers Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque rejected the centuries-old tradition of linear perspective and single-point vision, arguing that photography could capture a subject's mere appearance better than painting ever could.

Instead of a snapshot view, Cubism aimed to represent the totality of an object—its structure, volume, and existence in time—by deconstructing it into geometric forms and reassembling it from multiple, simultaneous viewpoints.¹²

- **Rejection of the Snapshot**

Abolishing Linear Perspective: Since the Renaissance, painting aimed to look like a “window onto a real scene” using perspective and shading to mimic three-dimensional space. Cubism declared this illusion of space a trickery.

The Influence of Photography: With the rise of photography, painters were freed from the need to reproduce visual reality. Cubism argued that while a camera captures a single moment from one angle (a static, fleeting, and superficial view), art should depict the “essence” of an object as we know it to exist in our memory.

Simultaneity: Cubism captures the experience of moving around an object and perceiving it from various angles at once.¹³

- **Conceptual Art vs. Perceptual Art**

Conceptual Representation: Cubism is not an art of perception (what we see at a specific moment) but an art of conception (what we know about an object). It focuses on the sensible essence rather than the ephemeral appearance.

Geometric Reduction: Objects are reduced to basic forms—cubes, cones, cylinders, and spheres—inspired by the later works of Paul Cézanne, who advocated for treating nature in this structured manner.

Structure over Emotion: Early Cubist works prioritised the structural construction of the subject rather than its emotional or superficial colouring.¹⁴

- **Key Characteristics as a Response**

Flattened Plane: Instead of creating depth, Cubist artists flattened the pictorial surface to highlight the two-dimensional nature of the canvas, further rejecting the window illusion.

Limited Colour Palette: Early Analytical Cubist works (1910–1912) used subdued colours—grays, browns, and ochres—to ensure the viewer focused on the form and structure of the fragmented object rather than its visual, fleeting colours.

Fragmentation and Reconstruction: Subjects are broken down into facets and reassembled to show multiple facets (e.g., top, side, and back) simultaneously.

- **Phases of the Response**

Analytical Cubism (1910–1912): This phase involved severe, almost monochromatic deconstruction of objects into many small, intricate, overlapping planes.

Synthetic Cubism (1912–1914): This phase moved from breaking down objects to constructing them from simplified, often brighter geometric shapes. It introduced collage, incorporating real-world objects like newspapers and fabric, further blurring the line between reality and representation, and mocking the fakeness of traditional realism.

In essence, Cubism asserted that painting could be a more profound, truthful, and intellectual medium than photography by presenting a new reality that captures the complexity of human perception and memory.¹⁵

3. Photography and the Documentation of Artistic Process

One of photography's most significant contributions to Picasso's practice lies in its capacity to document artistic process. Traditional art history often privileges the finished artwork, obscuring the stages of experimentation, revision, and failure that underlie creative production. Photography disrupts this narrative by making process visible.

Picasso frequently allowed photographers into his studios, permitting them to capture works in various stages of completion. These images reveal an environment of constant transformation, where canvases were reworked, destroyed, or abandoned. Photography thus exposes the provisional nature of Picasso's art, emphasizing experimentation over finality.¹⁶

The photographic documentation of *Guernica* (1937), undertaken by Dora Maar, represents a pivotal moment in the history of modern art. Maar's images chronicle the painting's evolution from initial sketches to final composition, offering unparalleled insight into Picasso's responses to political trauma and visual problem-solving. These photographs transform the act of painting into a historical event, subject to analysis and interpretation.

Photography also functioned as a reflective tool for Picasso himself. By photographing sculptures and paintings from different angles, he explored alternative perspectives and formal possibilities. In this sense, photography extended his artistic inquiry, allowing him to reassess his own work through mediated vision.¹⁷

Through documentation, photography reshaped the relationship between art, time, and memory. It preserved moments of creation that would otherwise vanish, enabling future generations to engage with Picasso's process as an integral aspect of his artistic achievement.



Picasso standing while working on the *Guernica* opera. Photography by Dora Maar. 1937. MAN - Province of Nuoro Art Museum. [<https://artsupp.com/en/artists/dora-maar/picasso-in-piedi-mentre-lavora-all-opera-guernica>]

4. Collaborative Encounters with Photographers

Picasso's engagement with photography was profoundly shaped by his collaborations with leading photographers of the twentieth century. These relationships were not merely documentary but dialogical, characterized by mutual influence and creative exchange.

Brassai's photographs of Picasso's sculptures exemplify photography's interpretive power. Through dramatic lighting and close framing, Brassai transformed three-dimensional objects into evocative images that emphasized texture and materiality. His photographs did not simply reproduce Picasso's work but reimaged it within a new visual language.

Dora Maar's role extended beyond documentation. As an accomplished photographer and surrealist artist, she influenced Picasso's exploration of distortion, fragmentation, and emotional intensity. Her experimental techniques resonated with Picasso's visual sensibilities, contributing to the expressive force of works produced during their association.

Other photographers, including Man Ray and Henri Cartier-Bresson, captured Picasso in moments of creative and personal intimacy. These images reveal the artist as both subject and collaborator, engaging with the camera as an active participant in image-making.¹⁸

Such collaborations demonstrate that photography functioned as an autonomous artistic practice rather than a subordinate medium. Through these encounters, Picasso's work entered into a broader visual discourse, shaped by the interpretive agency of photographers.

5. Photography, Self-Fashioning, and Artistic Persona

In the modern era, photography became a powerful instrument for constructing public identity. Picasso was acutely aware of this dynamic and actively participated in shaping his image through photographic representation.

Portraits of Picasso often emphasize intensity, authority, and creative vitality. Whether depicted as a brooding genius or a playful experimenter, these images contributed to the mythology surrounding his persona. Picasso frequently performed for the camera, adopting poses that reinforced his status as a modern artist.

At the same time, photography humanized Picasso by capturing moments of domestic life, leisure, and vulnerability. This duality between myth and intimacy reflects broader tensions within modern celebrity culture. Photography allowed Picasso to navigate these contradictions, balancing accessibility with mystique.¹⁹

By engaging with photography as a tool of self-fashioning, Picasso acknowledged that artistic identity extended beyond the artwork itself. In a media-saturated world, the artist's image became inseparable from his creative output.

6. Photography, Memory, and Posthumous Legacy

Photography continues to play a central role in shaping Picasso's legacy. Archival images preserve not only artworks but also the contexts of their production. They enable scholars and curators to reconstruct Picasso's creative environments and interpret his work within historical frameworks.

Exhibitions frequently rely on photographic documentation to contextualize Picasso's art, offering audiences insight into his working methods. Photography bridges temporal distance, making the past accessible through visual evidence.

Moreover, photographic archives invite reinterpretation. Contemporary scholars revisit these images through critical lenses that address questions of power, gender, and representation. Photography ensures that Picasso remains a dynamic figure within art historical discourse rather than a static monument.

Through memory and mediation, photography sustains Picasso's presence within cultural consciousness, extending his influence beyond his lifetime.

Photography is instrumental in maintaining Pablo Picasso's legacy, acting not merely as a documentation tool but as a crucial medium that shaped his art, public persona, and posthumous reputation. As the "most photographed artist in history," Picasso used photography to curate his image, document his creative process, and experiment with new artistic forms.²⁰

Creation of the "Picasso Myth": Throughout his life, Picasso worked with prominent photographers—such as Brassai, Man Ray, Lee Miller, and Robert Capa—to document his life in the studio and at home. These images transformed him into a cultural icon, capturing both his artistic intensity and his personal life, thus solidifying his image as the archetypal modern artist.

A Tool for Artistic Experimentation: Picasso did not just stand in front of the camera; he was an avid user of photography behind the lens, owning multiple cameras (mostly Leicas). He used photography to study his works, document their creation, and create original, hybrid artworks in collaboration with artists like Dora Maar and André Villers.

Influence on Cubism: Studies have shown that the photographs Picasso took during his stay in Horta de Ebro in 1909 directly influenced the development of his early Cubist paintings. These photographs helped him grapple with representing three-dimensional objects within a two-dimensional frame, a core challenge of his Cubist movement.²¹

Documentation for Posterity: Picasso expressed a desire to leave a "complete a record as possible for posterity," leading to a vast, posthumously discovered archive of photographic images. This archive provides crucial, intimate insights into his creative, studio-based, and domestic life.

Contemporary Relevance: Exhibitions like "Picasso, the Photographer's Gaze" at the Museu Picasso Barcelona highlight how photography continues to reframe understanding of his work. The ongoing study of these images keeps his legacy dynamic, allowing new generations to examine his artistic process, from his initial sketches to the final, often monumental, works.

In essence, the "photographic gaze" allows for a deeper, more intimate understanding of Picasso, bridging the gap between his public image and his private, intense, and constantly experimental creative world.²²

Conclusion

The relationship between Pablo Picasso and photography was complex, sustained, and transformative. Photography influenced his artistic vision, challenged his representational strategies, documented his creative process, shaped collaborative encounters, and constructed his public persona. Far from diminishing painting, photography compelled Picasso to redefine its purpose and possibilities.

Understanding this dialogue enriches our comprehension of modern art as a field shaped by technological and cultural negotiation. Picasso's engagement with photography exemplifies how artistic innovation emerges through critical interaction with evolving modes of seeing. His legacy, inseparable from photographic mediation, continues to illuminate the conditions of modern visual culture.

Picasso's relationship with photography cannot be reduced to influence studies alone. Rather, photography functioned as an epistemological condition that transformed the ontology of representation itself. The study should assert that Cubism emerged not merely as a stylistic innovation but as a post-photographic visual logic responding to the fragmentation of modern perception.²³

Photography mediated Picasso's artistic identity at multiple levels: visual experimentation, process documentation, collaborative authorship, and public self-fashioning. Photography thus becomes integral to understanding modern artistic subjectivity.

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