

Open Windows 8

Douglas Cooper: A Cubist Love Story

Clara Marcellán

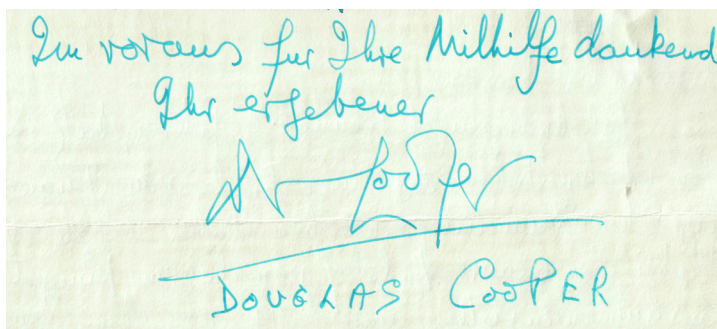


Picasso
Man with a Clarinet
(1911-12)

[\[+ info\]](#)

fig. 1

Closing of Douglas Cooper's letter to Baron Thyssen dated 18 March 1977



1

Letter from Douglas Cooper to Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza, 18 March 1977, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza Archives.

2

Cooper defined and exhibited his idea of "true" Cubism in the show *The Essential Cubism 1907–1920* at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1983, which he co-curated with Gary Tinterow. The Thyssen Collection lent two works for the occasion: Picasso's *Head of a Man* (1913) and Braque's *Woman with a Mandolin* (1910).

3

John Richardson. *The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Picasso, Provence and Douglas Cooper*. London: Pimlico, 2001, p. 75.

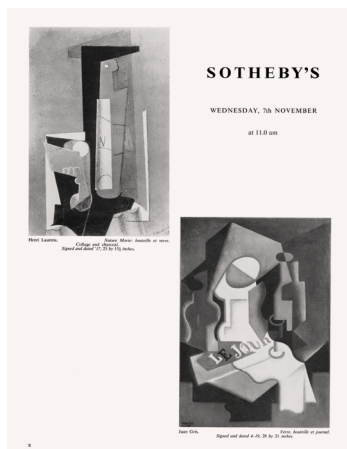
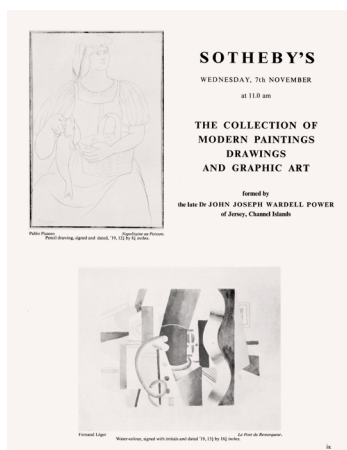
4

I would like to thank Carmen Giménez, Curator of Twentieth-Century Art at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, for generously helping me to understand the context of Douglas Cooper's relationship with Baron Thyssen and Spain in an email interview on 29 March 2017.

"My dear Baron! My friends tell me that in recent years you have acquired some paintings by Juan Gris for your collection."¹ So begins the letter that Douglas Cooper (1911–1984) penned to H. H. Thyssen on 18 March 1977, energetically handwritten in the greenish-blue ink that everyone in the art world associated with him [fig. 1]. A British art historian and collector, Cooper was considered one of the foremost authorities on "true" Cubism, which encompassed the works produced by Picasso, Braque, Gris and Léger between 1907 and 1921.² Through the exhibitions he curated, his monographs and his reviews published in *The Burlington Magazine*, a leading monthly art journal (in which he also owned stock), Cooper became the arbiter of Cubist taste in his time and fuelled countless controversies in the art world. But according to John Richardson, Cooper's partner from 1949 to 1961 and Picasso's most distinguished biographer, Cooper deserves to be remembered by his letters.³ Our museum archives contain three of these epistles which he wrote daily, to the delight of some and the terror of others. This article uses them as a springboard for exploring his relationship with the baron, the Thyssen Collection and Spain, as well as Cooper himself who, as Carmen Giménez recalls from her dealings with both men as director of the National Exhibition Centre from 1984 to 1989, "was anything but ordinary".⁴

fig. 3

Advertisement for the auction of John Joseph Wardell Power's art collection organised by Sotheby's. *Bottle and Fruit Dish* (1919) by Juan Gris, now in the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, is pictured at the bottom right



5

Douglas Cooper with Margaret Potter. *Juan Gris: catalogue raisonné de l'œuvre peint*. Paris: Berggruen, 1977.

The Expert on Juan Gris

In 1977 Cooper was putting the finishing touches on the most ambitious publishing project of his career, the catalogue raisonné of Juan Gris's paintings.⁵ The aforementioned letter to the baron continued: "It is possible, as I've been working on this for the past 40 years, that I have already seen your paintings in other hands and photographed them, but I would like to make sure that I don't end up omitting any authentic painting." Two weeks after this request was made, Sándor Berkes, curator of the Thyssen Collection in Lugano, sent him the histories and photographs of Gris's works.

One of them, *Bottle and Fruit Dish* [fig. 2], now on display in Room 41 at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, had not been exhibited or mentioned in any publications between 1919 and 1962; since Juan Gris painted and showed this work at Galerie L'Effort Moderne, it had effectively been missing until it reappeared on the art market 43 years later. The work was purchased in 1919 by Léonce Rosenberg, Gris's art dealer and owner of the aforesaid gallery, and later entered the collection of John Wardell Power, an Australian doctor turned painter and also represented by Rosenberg. Power divided his time between Paris, London, Bournemouth and Brussels from 1920 to 1938, the year he moved to Jersey in the Channel Islands for health reasons. His art collection went with him, and after the war began and the island was occupied by German forces in 1940, he decided to pack it up and hide it in the basement of a friend's house in Saint Helier, the capital of Jersey. Power died in 1943, and the artworks remained in storage until his widow's death in 1961. This hitherto unknown piece of information explains the silence surrounding the work during that period. In her last will and testament, Power's widow left instructions that the paintings should be sold at auction and the proceeds donated to fight cancer, the disease that had killed her husband. The reappearance of these works on the market was advertised in the Australian and British press, and Juan Gris's *Bottle and Fruit Dish* became one of the highlights of the auction at Sotheby's London [fig. 3].

After studying the history of *Bottle and Fruit Dish*, Cooper replied to Berkes in a letter that left no doubt as to his vehemence and authority, openly challenging the title assigned to the work in the baron's collection, *Le Journal*. Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño had given it this title in a 1974

monograph on Juan Gris published in Spanish, French, English and German. The *Juan Gris* exhibition at l'Orangerie des Tuileries, curated by Jean Leymarie, had also presented the canvas as *Le Journal*. Cooper's judgment of both was scathing:

In Léonce Rosenberg's records—in other words, in 1919—his work was entered as *Bouteille et Comptoir*. I stand by this title. Who came up with the title *Le Journal*? That idiot Gaya Nuño knows and understands nothing of Gris, and he's never even asked me for information. The same goes for Leymarie and the Paris exhibition. These two publications are not competent sources in the literature on Gris, only my catalogue. The source is Léonce Rosenberg, i.e. Gris himself.⁶

Oddly enough, the inventory of Galerie L'Effort Moderne, now in a private collection but transcribed in a publication devoted to the correspondence between Gris and Rosenberg,⁷ lists this work as *Nature morte*, using neither of the two previous options. In any case, Cooper had privileged access to records and other sources of information that lend substance to his assertions. Today, the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza continues to use the title that Cooper gave it in his catalogue raisonné of the artist's paintings.

This letter to Berkes contained one more curious thing. Before signing off, Cooper asked him to send a catalogue of the exhibition held in Kobe in 1976. He was probably referring to *The Origin of the 20th Century in the Collection Thyssen-Bornemisza*, which travelled to four Japanese cities that year. The show included a work by Juan Gris, *The Table in Front of the Window* (1921) [fig. 4], for which Berkes supplied the exhibition and publishing history, as it is part of the catalogue raisonné as Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection. The painting was sold at auction in 1989 and no longer belongs to the Thyssen. The catalogue, which we know was sent thanks to a note on the photocopy of Cooper's letter in our archives that reads "Katalog geschick", contained works by Picasso and Léger which would have interested the historian. In an odd twist of fate, when he received the book Cooper encountered a work by Klee, *Still Life with Dice*, which had actually been in his possession from 1945 to 1957 and now hangs in the galleries of the Museo Thyssen.⁸

6

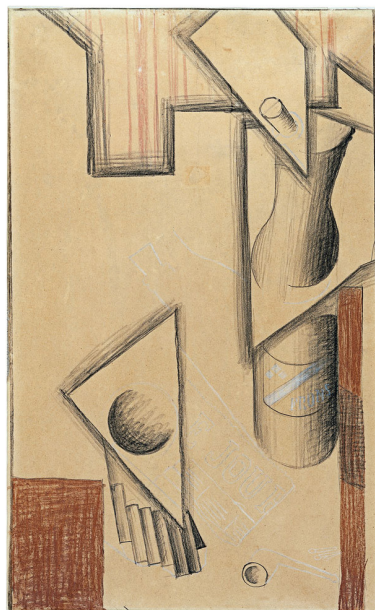
Letter from Douglas Cooper to Sándor Berkes, 12 April 1977, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza Archives.

7

Christian Derouet (ed.): *Juan Gris. Correspondances avec Léonce Rosenberg: 1915-1927*. Paris: Editions Centre Georges Pompidou, 1999, pp. 117-39.

8

Cooper assembled an important collection of Klee's works, in part thanks to his relationship with the artist's widow. He met her in Switzerland at the end of World War II while on a mission for the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives program, created by the Allies to retrieve and protect artworks looted by the Nazis.



figs. 2, 4 and 5
**Bottle and Fruit Dish (1919),
 The Table in Front of the Window
 (1921) and Still Life (1913)**
 by Juan Gris

Cooper knew of another recent acquisition made by the baron, which he omitted from his catalogue raisonné because it was not a painting: *Still Life* (1913) [fig. 5], a drawing made with graphite and coloured pencils on silk paper. The work had belonged to the aforementioned John Richardson, who bought it from Helena Rubinstein, the successful cosmetics entrepreneur, during the years when he and Cooper lived together at Château de Castille. The historian purchased this extravagant castle in Provence after World War II, thinking it would be the perfect place to properly hang the Picassos, Légers, Braques, Grises and Klees he had been acquiring since the early 1930s with the money inherited from his family. The castle, which Richardson presented in an article entitled “Au Château des Cubistes” for *L’Oeil* journal,⁹ illustrated with photographs by Robert Doisneau [fig. 6], became a kind of museum and mecca for artists, collectors and scholars of Cubism. When he and Cooper separated in 1961, Richardson left the castle and took only one work with him, this *Still Life*.

⁹ John Richardson. “Au Château des Cubistes”. In *L’Oeil*, 1955, no. 4, pp. 19-25.

Fifteen years later, Baron Thyssen purchased the drawing from the gallerist Alain Tarica, who also provided a certificate

 fig. 6

Douglas Cooper in the sitting room at Château de Castille. Behind him, three works by Picasso: *Compotier*, *bouteille et guitare* (1923), a drawing and a pastel



of authenticity issued by Cooper and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler on 22 July 1976,¹⁰ now in the archives of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. On the certificate Cooper added, "I've known this drawing since 1936", probably referring to the year in which he began working on the catalogue raisonné of Gris's oeuvre. In the early days of the project Cooper enlisted the aid of Léonce Rosenberg, who wrote him a long letter dated 6 August 1936 (now at the Getty Research Institute) describing the vicissitudes of the artist's output: most of his works had passed through Kahnweiler's hands, who represented Gris from 1910 to 1914, or through Rosenberg's gallery, his agent from 1914 to 1920. As a German citizen, during World War I Kahnweiler was forced to leave Paris and his assets were confiscated and sold off between 1921 and 1923. Rosenberg was brought in as an expert adviser for the auctions, and as a result he became thoroughly acquainted with Gris's work. The drawing currently in the Museo Thyssen probably came from Kahnweiler's gallery and shared the same fate as the rest of his confiscated property, as the aforementioned certificate of authenticity states that it was auctioned at the Hôtel Drouot on 7 May 1923 (lot no. 67) along with seven other works on paper.

 10

Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (1884-1979) was a man ahead of his time who began representing Cubist painters and collecting their works as early as 1907. Douglas Cooper saw his vision of Cubism as an example to follow.

Picasso and Cooper

fig. 7

Picasso***Harlequin with a Mirror*, 1923****Oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm****Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,****Madrid, inv. 709 (1979.87)**[\[+ info\]](#)**11**

Letter from Baron H. H. Thyssen-Bornemisza to Douglas Cooper, 29 April 1980, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza Archives.

12

Letter from Douglas Cooper to Baron H. H. Thyssen-Bornemisza, 5 May 1980, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza Archives. Although the baron made his request in English, Cooper gave his assessment in impeccable German. His fluency in this language and in French made it easier for him to mix with gallerists, collectors and artists in France from the early 1930s, when he bought his first works by Picasso, Braque, Gris and Léger.

13

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Shipman Payson of New York, who owned the work from 1961 until at least 1967.

14

Heinz Berggruen (1914-2007), a German gallerist and collector, published the Juan Gris catalogue raisonné and worked with Cooper on numerous exhibitions and catalogues. The *Harlequin with a Mirror* now in the Museo Thyssen had been part of his collection in the 1970s.

15

Cooper had studied this facet of the artist in his book *Picasso et le Théâtre*, a 1967 luxury edition which the baron had in his library at Villa Favorita.

“I hear that you like my new acquisition Picasso 1923 ‘Arlequin’, very much and I would appreciate it if you could write to me your opinion about it.”¹¹ On 29 April 1980, Baron H. H. Thyssen-Bornemisza appealed to Cooper’s passion for Picasso, fishing for a comment to place the final seal of approval on his recent purchase.

Cooper’s reply to the baron’s request is a letter that exudes erudition, delight and a very intimate understanding of the artwork in question.¹² In fact, he writes of *Harlequin with a Mirror* as if it were an old friend: “Our acquaintance goes back some years, to when it was with Payson¹³ first and later with Berggruen”.¹⁴ He goes on to explain his interest in Picasso’s relationship with the theatre,¹⁵ and situated this harlequin in the context of the artist’s second series of harlequins and Pierrots. Cooper imagines that the figure is backstage, in the midst of a wardrobe change. Beyond the traditional representation of the *Commedia dell’arte* character, he suggests that here Picasso was actually showing the human being, the actor who plays the role of harlequin, vainly admiring his own reflection. He then explains that Picasso painted from personal experience and, knowing that he lived among theatre people from 1917 to 1924, says that the work was probably based on the artist’s own memories.



fig. 8

The library at Château de Castille with Picasso's *Man with a Clarinet* (1911-12) in the centre of the wall

16

Simon de Pury. "Recently Acquired Twentieth-Century Paintings". In *Apollo*. London, July 1983, vol. 118, no. 257, p. 79.

17

Simon de Pury. "Acquis par Thyssen". In *Connaissance des Arts*. Paris, October 1983, no. 380, p. 68.

18

Richardson 2001, *op. cit.* note 3, pp. 131-32.

19

John Richardson. "Douglas Cooper (1911-1984)". In *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 127, no. 985, April 1985, pp. 230-32.

"Have I given you what you were looking for?" Cooper inquired of the baron before concluding his missive.

In 1982, Heinrich Thyssen acquired a new Picasso, adding to the nine already in his possession. This work was *Man with a Clarinet* (1911-12), which had belonged to Cooper himself from 1937 to at least 1977. The baron's latest acquisitions were analysed in articles published by Simon de Pury, then curator of the Thyssen Collection, in which he specifically drew attention to that aspect of its provenance with phrases such as, "This work formerly was in the possession of Douglas Cooper, a leading authority on Cubism"¹⁶ or "It is a painting that had belonged to Douglas Cooper, the great expert on Cubism and friend of Picasso".¹⁷ Not only had he owned the work but, as John Richardson recalls, it was once the pride of his collection.¹⁸ Thanks to the article and photo spread on Château de Castille, Cooper's aforementioned residence, we know that *Man with a Clarinet* was prominently displayed in the library [fig. 8], the indefatigable historian's workspace. In 1974, following the theft of approximately twenty-five of his Picassos, Cooper decided to leave the castle and move into an apartment in Monte Carlo. At that point, finding himself pressed for space, Cooper decided to sell some of the larger works, one of which was Picasso's *Man with a Clarinet*.¹⁹ In 1982 the baron bought it from gallerist Daniel Malingue, thus acquiring one of the most fundamental pieces in the Thyssen's collection of Cubist works.

Cooper and Spain

Cooper worked with Braque, Léger and Picasso for many years as a critic, dealer, collector, patron and historian, but they were also united by bonds of friendship. In Picasso's case, he even had a hand in bringing the artist's work nearer to Spain. In 1959 Cooper contacted Fernando Chueca Goitia, director of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Madrid at the time, to request the loan of *Woman in Blue* (1901) for an exhibition in Marseille, acting on Picasso's wishes. It was the Spanish museum's only work by Picasso, so to compensate for its temporary absence Cooper made arrangements to bring another piece by the artist, *Spring*, from the Kahnweiler Collection to Madrid for the duration of the Marseille show. Chueca travelled to the French city to meet with Cooper and Picasso, who in the course of their visit shrugged off the interest in exhibiting his latest creations in Spain with a careless "Oh, never fear! One of these days I'll show up in Spain with a lorry full of my paintings and I'll leave them there for you all to do as you please: keep them or toss them".²⁰ More practical conversations ensued with Cooper and Kahnweiler, who began planning an exhibition of his prints that finally opened in 1961 and was a huge success.²¹

In 1972 the national daily *ABC* announced an upcoming Juan Gris show at the new home of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, naming Douglas Cooper, "his most important collector", as the person in charge of its organisation. Yet the exhibition never materialised. Gris's first solo show in Spain was ultimately held at Galería Theo, run by Elvira González, in 1977. That same year, a work by Juan Gris entered the state collections for the first time when *Guitar in Front of the Sea* (1925) was purchased for the Museo Español de Arte Contemporáneo. Another was added in 1979 when Cooper donated *Portrait of Madame Josette Gris* (1916) to the Museo del Prado, a carefully calculated move made in collusion with his friend Xavier de Salas, director of the Prado until 1978. In his own words, he was paving the way for *Guernica* to return to Spain and doing his best to mitigate the remarkable dearth of Cubist art in Spanish public collections. Like Picasso, Cooper seemed to have waited until the political timing was right, and for him that moment arrived when Javier Tusell, with the Union of the Democratic Centre party, was appointed Minister of Culture. Cooper was rewarded for his efforts in 1980 when he became the first foreigner appointed to the Museo del Prado's board of trustees, a body chaired by his friend Xavier de Salas from that year until his death in 1982. Yet his

20

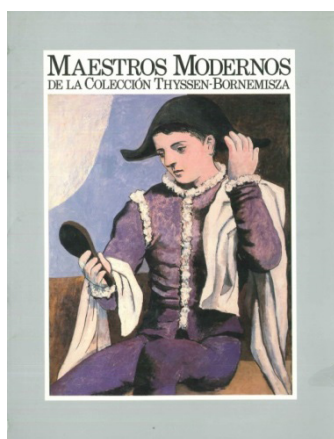
Julio Trenas. "Anécdota de una exposición". In *ABC*, Seville, 11 February 1961, p. 13.

21

Picasso, Museo Nacional de Arte Contemporáneo, 27 January–13 March 1961. That show, which comprised 177 graphic works, was the only monographic exhibition of Picasso's art ever held at an official Spanish institution in his lifetime.

fig. 9

Cover of the modern masters exhibition catalogue, *Maestros modernos de la Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza*, from 1986

**22**

Interview with Douglas Cooper by Juan Manuel Bonet, published in *El País*, 16 October 1979.

23

Juan Gris, *Violin and Guitar* (1913); Pablo Picasso, *Dead Birds* (1912); the palette used to paint *Les Déjeuners* (*The Luncheons*); and the book that Cooper wrote on Picasso's *Les Déjeuners* (1962) series with an original engraving and dedication by the artist.

24

Carmen Giménez was also able to meet with Douglas Cooper's adopted son, William McCarty, who decided not to support the Juan Gris exhibition in Madrid but was willing to consider selling part of the valuable Cubist collection he had just inherited. Unfortunately, the lack of resources in our country at the time made it impossible.

25

Tomàs Llorens. "Se quedan". In *El País*, 19 June 1993.

26

Tomàs Llorens in a conversation held on 3 April 2017.

involvement in the campaign to achieve recognition for Spain's Cubist masters went even further. He was part of the national committee created to celebrate the centenary of Picasso's birth in Spain, and he began working with Fundación Juan March to plan a major exhibition devoted to Juan Gris, "the only great painter Madrid ever produced",²² something the artist's country still owed him. Cooper lived to see *Guernica* in the Casón del Buen Retiro when it was installed there in 1981, but in April 1984 he died before the Gris show could become a reality.

After Cooper's death, the Prado received a bequest of works by Picasso and Gris,²³ augmenting the hitherto token presence of these painters in state-owned collections. Carmen Giménez, executive adviser to the Minister of Culture, picked up where Cooper had left off with the Juan Gris exhibition project, with Gary Tinterow as curator. After overcoming the legal and bureaucratic difficulties involved in accepting a bequest in Spain made by a British citizen living in Monte Carlo, the works by Juan Gris and Picasso were presented at the Casón del Buen Retiro in the summer of 1986. In the spring of that year, also at the initiative of Carmen Giménez, the modern masters in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection were exhibited in the Pablo Ruiz Picasso Rooms at the National Library in Madrid. And among them were Picasso's *Man with a Clarinet* and *Harlequin with a Mirror* and Gris's *Bottle with Fruit Dish* [fig. 9].

In 1992 these works returned to Madrid for good. When the Spanish government purchased the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection in 1993, Spain's cultural heritage was enriched by a first-rate representation of this avant-garde movement, whose presence in public collections had barely increased since Cooper's bequest due to the scarcity of available Cubist works or high market prices.²⁴ The director of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza at the time, Tomàs Llorens, celebrated the acquisition in these terms: "The adoring eyes of art lovers ignite a flaming halo around certain paintings that endures and grows brighter with each passing year. They are the great travellers, those whose names journey from city to city and from one age to the next".²⁵ For him, two works exemplify this condition: Caravaggio's *Saint Catherine* and Picasso's *Man with a Clarinet*, whose history in the Cooper collection he specifically mentioned, and which even today Llorens still considers the most important Cubist painting on display in Madrid.²⁶