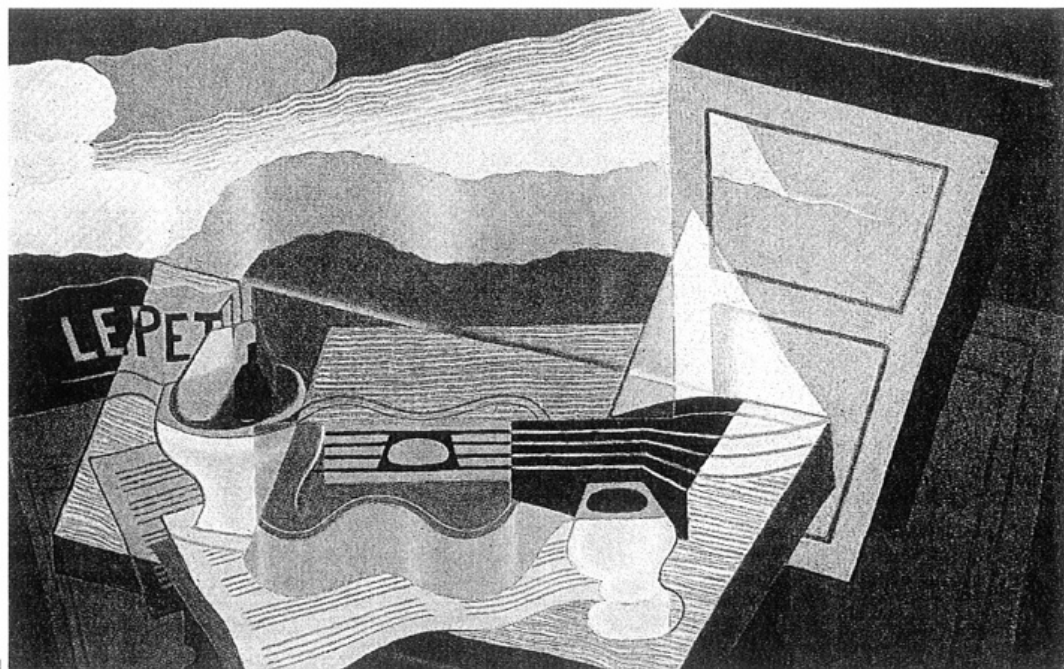


James Dunnett  
**On the sadness of  
 Juan Gris**



# THE EMOTION THAT CORRECTS THE RULE

**1987 is the centenary not only of Le Corbusier, but also of Juan Gris, a major painter of the School of Paris and much admired by Le Corbusier, on whom he was arguably a dominant influence. Gris is once again popular and influential, his collage composition, colour palette and use of marbling and woodgraining all being found in Post-Modernism. The most comprehensive exhibition ever of his work was held last year in Madrid.**

If Spain is sometimes represented in European eyes by the subjectivism and fantasy of Catalan art, there is also the Spain of Castile, the Spain of austere fanaticism, of dour solemnity and anguished introspection. This is the Spain of Juan Gris, who alone of the major Spanish figures of twentieth-century art made no contact with Barcelona, but went straight from his native Madrid to Paris in 1906, at the age of 19. There he witnessed from close up, but did not participate in, the first development of Cubism: it happened that very year in Picasso's studio across the landing from his own in the Bateau Lavoir, the ramshackle block in Montmartre where both lived. Gris did not begin to paint seriously until five years later, but was to continue the development of Cubism further than any of his contemporaries right up until his early death at the age of 40 in 1927.

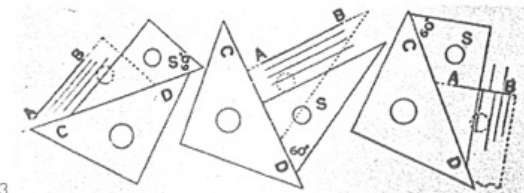
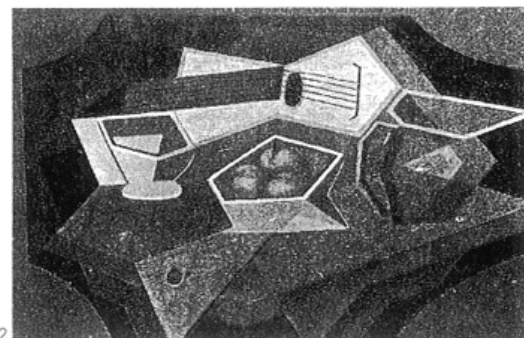
Maurice Raynal (the critic closest to Cubism after the death of Apollinaire) wrote: 'no Catalan artist has been a Cubist . . . Cubism is French, and the nationality of Picasso is purely accidental'. But it is arguable that Cubism, and particularly Gris' Cubism, picked up themes of Castilian and Andalusian art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the intense and mystical still-lives (*bodegones*) of Zurbarán and Cotán, and the interest in geometrical symbolism reflected in the treatise written by Juan de Herrera, architect of the Escorial, entitled *Discurso sobre la Figura Cúbica*, which concludes by glorifying the geometrical perfection of a die. Now, nearly 60 years after his death, Spain has acknowledged and honoured the achievement of perhaps the least known of her great artists with a major exhibition in Madrid and the publication of a magnificent catalogue. It may be time to learn from his work.

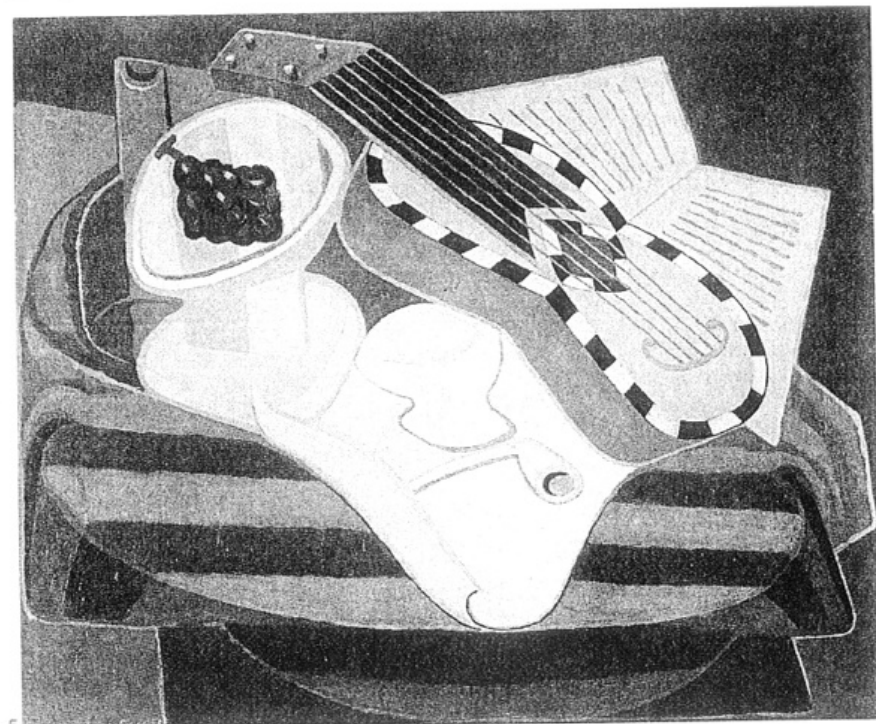
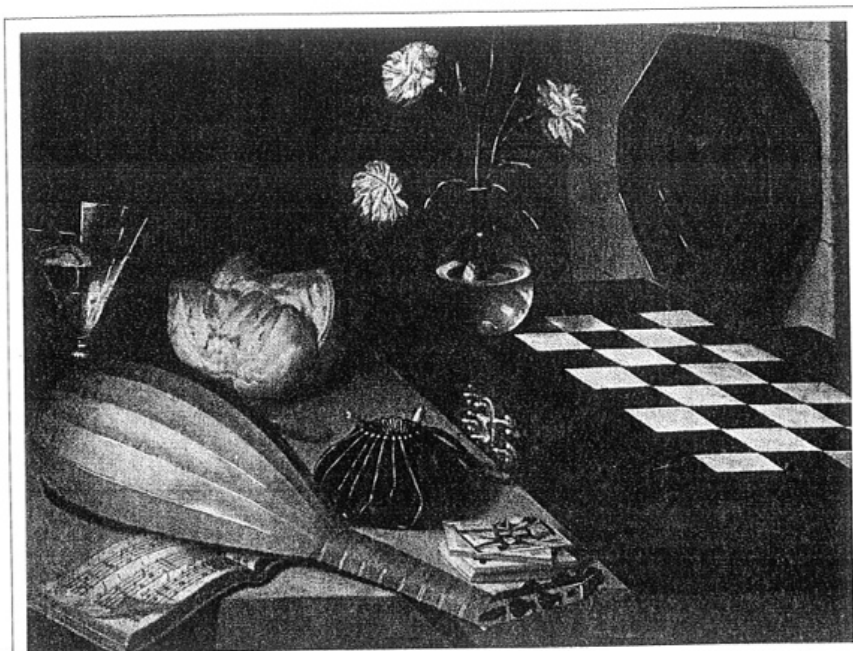
Apollinaire called Gris 'a demon of logic', and it is in the application of an apparently logical and rational method to lyrical and almost mystical ends that the special character of Gris' painting lies. Perhaps because of its clear geometrical basis it has often

appealed to architects. Le Corbusier famously wrote of Gris as 'the strongest and most noble of the Cubist painters' and of 'the unique pictorial phenomenon, manifested in our age above all by Seurat, Cézanne and Gris, themselves "phenomena" of the art, the fundamental and essential painters'. William La Riche claims that passages from Gris' paintings reappear in Le Corbusier's plans, and the present author has argued (AR October 1985) that Gris' work represented a model of intellectual achievement for Le Corbusier which influenced his conception of the ideal city. More recently Michael Graves' work, particularly his painting, reflects an interest in Gris. The word *architecture* in turn had a powerful emotive appeal for Gris, for whom it signified a sense of indissoluble unity. He wrote: 'I would even say that the only true pictorial

1, 'View over the Bay', 1921. A view out of a window above a still-life in the foreground is a recurrent theme in Gris' paintings.

2, 'Guitar and T-square', 1926.  
 3, plate from D. A. Low and A. W. Bevis 'A Manual for Machine Drawing and Design', 1902, a technical drawing manual typical of the period when Gris was training in draughtsmanship. (Reproduced in 'Mathematics in Early Abstract Art' by Lucy Adelman and Michael Compton in 'Towards a New Art', London, 1980.)





4. Lubin Baugin (1610-63). 'The Five Senses'. The elements of the still-life symbolise the senses of taste, touch, smell, hearing and sight. Gris, an habitu  of the Louvre, would have been familiar with this painting and other still-lives of the period.

5. 'Guitar with Inlay', 1925. Mark Rosenthal has demonstrated that Gris' still-lives frequently reflect the symbolic practices of the seventeenth century, particularly in evoking the five senses.

6. 'Fruit Bowl and Carafe', 1914. Gris' extensive use of marbling, woodgraining, collage and apparently arbitrary dislocation are all a probable source of Post-Modernism, through the interest in Gris of such architects as Michael Graves.

technique is a sort of flat coloured architecture'. His interpretation of the term architecture was very personal, but he does appear to have used techniques that would be familiar to architects. Analysis of a number of his paintings has convincingly demonstrated their foundation in simple geometrical schemata based on a grid and the use of standard set-squares—45-45-90 degrees, 30-60-90 degrees, and the Golden Section. The set-square is even brought in as a component of his still-lives, an emblem of the artist, like the brush and palette. Gris' first instruction had been in technical drawing, and he was familiar with its methods.

The geometrical framework of Gris' paintings and his own assertion that he added the representational element only in the final stages, have sometimes given rise to an interpretation of Gris as a rationalist and almost abstract painter. But in his hands his seemingly rigid methods became tools for the expression of a most

subtle poetry, and one in which the imagery played an important role. Gris once likened the representational and formal elements of painting to the warp and weft of a cloth, and he wrote to his friend and poet Vicente Huidobro of 'that lyricism and poetry that is so rare to find and that is all that interests me'. His poetry was one of indubitable sadness, but with an inner fire that is never hopeless or self-indulgent. Though he passionately wished to identify with the tradition of French art, his temperament had nothing in common with the wistfulness of Watteau or the *froid ur* of the arch-exponent of French Rationalism, Poussin. Parallels can be found only in the art of the Golden Age in Spain.

In his earliest paintings, between 1911 and 1915, his colouring has a metallic harshness that defies personal contact and seems like a tragic denial of human warmth, just as the deliberation of his technique seems a rejection of the possibility of spontaneity. But his Cubist dislocation of appearances has an elaborate wit. In the following few years his paintings become dominated by areas of sombre black. In the final phase of his work, approximately from 1920 until his death in 1927, his colouring assumes much warmth, and his subject matter, which by this time has become more 'legible' with the virtual abandonment of planar dislocation, takes on a more clearly expressive role.

A convincing interpretation of the symbolism of Gris' paintings is advanced by Mark Rosenthal in the catalogue of the Madrid exhibition. The objects assembled in the still-lives often seem to follow seventeenth-century convention in symbolising the five senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell, or alternatively portray the simple antithesis *ars longa, vita brevis*. They retain an element of wit to the end in the powerful distortion of outline, but stillness pervades them. The guitars lie unplayed, the newspapers unread. The books lie open, not as though they have just been put down, but as though to emphasise the absence of a reader. In the background of his earlier paintings a commonplace decorative strip of dado or border is often contrasted with the austere planar construction of the still-life itself (Gris may here have remembered Seurat, and have in turn legitimised Le Corbusier's choice of decorative lyre-backed garden furniture for the terraces of his Purist houses). But later, open windows more frequently allow a glimpse of distant landscape evoking a powerful sense of yearning so different from the bright sunlight that streamed in when they were opened by Matisse. The spirit is visible above all in the figures—harlequins, Classical female types—who now appear as a major theme in Gris' paintings and have a studied and remote gaze, as though deep in contemplation. As Rosenthal says, they take on the personality and soul of Gris himself, and wear an expression of total resignation and vulnerability.

But the effect of Gris' painting is to raise the spirits. It appears to offer the hope of achieving poetic expression through rational means. The tension generated by an attempt to reconcile rational theory with subjective response seems able to endow a work of art with greater depth of meaning; reason and feeling are after all both essential elements of the human make-up. D. H. Kahnweiler said of Gris that he would have reversed Braque's claim to love the rule that corrects the emotion: he loved the emotion that corrects the rule.

If Gris' work has a significance for architecture today, it is in the importance of rhythm, harmony, proportion—considerations now almost wholly neglected in favour of obvious historical allusions or technological wizardry.

