**Viewing Texts: An Art-Centered Representation of Picasso’s Writings**

Neal Audenaert, Unmil Karadkar, Enrique Mallen, Richard Furuta, Sarah Tonner

Center for the Study of Digital Libraries
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX 77843-3112
USA

**Introduction**

The *Picasso Project* is a web-based, dynamic *catalogue raisonné* currently containing digital images and descriptive metadata for more than 11,000 of Picasso’s works (Mallen, 2006). The catalogue includes commentary for many artworks, along with notes detailing sales of the item, exhibitions in which it has been displayed, and scholarly literature in which it has been cited. In addition to these works, the catalogue also provides extensive biographical information including nearly 7,500 entries. The biography is linked to artworks, photographs of key people, maps of the various places Picasso lived and worked, and related documents (for example, Picasso’s birth certificate). Tools are provided to support side-by-side comparisons of two artworks and to build custom sub-collections from which an illustrated, color catalogue can be automatically generated for printing. Within this context, we have become increasingly interested in exploring Picasso’s writings which have, until recently, been largely neglected in favor of his more well known work in painting, sculpture, and collage.

Picasso, first and foremost an artist, wrote texts that are strikingly visual, both in terms of the design of the texts themselves, as well as the decorative elements that adorn the pages on which these texts are found. These intensely visual writings present his editor with significant challenges—challenges that exemplify the TEI consortium's guidelines for when TEI should not be used (Lavagnino, 2006). As Lavagnino points out, "to make the [TEI] edition work as intended it is generally necessary to interpret features and not merely reproduce their appearance." Picasso's writings do not readily yield to a single fixed interpretation that can be understood by an editor and transcribed in some definitive form. Indeed, their interest stems, in part, from their complex and indeterminate nature. Furthermore, transcription involves the selection of relevant features of a work and production of a digital (text plus encoding) description of them. In cases where this digital description has little value for analysis, alternative forms of presentation must be pursued. The two examples of this cited by Lavagnino, "works intended as mixtures of words and images, and very complex draft manuscripts in which the sequence of text or inscription is difficult to make out," are both characteristic of Picasso's writings.

Despite these difficulties, there have been a number of efforts to produce transcriptions of Picasso’s writings as published books (Bernadac, 1998; Michaël, 2005). This approach gives primacy to the textual content of these works, at the expense of losing almost all of the visual elements. To remedy this, most editions include facsimile reproductions of illustrative samples of his writings alongside the transcriptions. While this is helpful in conveying a sense of the original context of these works, it remains inadequate for many purposes. Beyond limitations of scale (it is only feasible to include a limited number of facsimiles), this approach treats the literal textual elements of Picasso’s writings as
primary, bringing in the images of the original, visually constructed pages in order to illustrate and elaborate. This approach to remediate the writings of Picasso divorces Picasso the writer from Picasso the artist, limiting the productive interchange of ideas that might result from a blending of literary and art history-based approaches.

While Picasso’s writings provide a compelling example of the limitations of a purely textual approach to representing manuscripts and other documents, this problem is not unique. Within the digital textual studies community there is an increasing recognition of the need to pair robust text encoding with access to images of the original source material (Dicks, 1997; McGann, 2001). Over the past decade, a number of projects have focused on presenting documents as images while providing additional support via transcriptions (McGann, 1996; Viscomi, 2002). Others have supplemented textually-oriented systems by providing access to digitized images of the original documents in a variety of formats (Furuta, 2001; Robinson, 1996). Image based representations of documents have placed particular strain on hierarchical methods for representing and encoding the features of a text and alternative formal models have been proposed (Dekhtyar, 2006; Renear, Durand, and Mylonas, 1993).

**Approach**

Within the *Picasso Project*, we have encountered the problem of developing digital representations of texts from a different perspective than that found in either print based transcriptions or in digital textual projects—namely, we have treated Picasso’s writings,
first as works of art, and secondarily as art that contains text. By conceiving of and contextualizing the writings of Picasso in a form common to traditional approaches to art (that is, the catalogue raisonné) we are able to reap immediate benefits for understanding these texts in ways not readily supported by the tools grounded in a textual approach to these works. This approach to visualizing Picasso's texts places them squarely within the context of the other works that he was painting and thinking about at the same time. This helps inform our understanding of both the artworks that Picasso produced as well as his writings. For example, Figure 2 shows a typical thumbnail view of the last fifteen items in the catalogue for the year 1935. In the poem in the center of the last line (OPP.35:004), Picasso refers to a small girl. In the context of drawings made by Picasso around the same time we see connections with Picasso’s daughter, Maya, at three and three and a half months old (OPP.35:031 and OPP.35:032), followed by Marie-Thérèse, Maya’s mother (OPP.35:034). Similarly, using the comparison tool to compare a text dated 28 November 1935 with a painting made earlier that year highlights possible connections between verbal imagery of the text and the visual imagery of the painting. References in the text to "tongue of fire," "stabbing," and "the eye of the bull" take on new meanings when seen in this context.

In addition to visually contextualizing writings in relationship to Picasso’s other works, the digital catalogue raisonné (unlike a corresponding print version) allows us to make accessible images of Picasso’s writings suitable for reading and analysis. Closer examinations of the text enables scholars to consider multiple states of a text, to see annotations, deletions, and additions to a text, to explore Picasso’s use of color to provide structural divisions or graphical bars rather than traditional punctuation to divide conceptual segments of the text. These tasks, which are difficult or impossible to perform

Figure 2: "la petite fille" with drawings of Maya and Marie-Thérèse
using transcriptions alone, are encouraged by the online presentation. To further enable access to the textual component of these works, we are initially adding transcriptions of these texts to the biographical section of the catalogue. Since the online catalogue presents the biographical text in parallel with the artworks, this technique permits easy cross-referencing between the transcriptions and images while we investigate more sophisticated means for encoding and presenting the content of these writings.

Implications and Future Work

Framing our approach to Picasso’s writings in terms of artworks that contain text, encourages us to look for text in artworks in general. Like many other artists of his day, Picasso began incorporating words into his artworks in a variety of ways and forms, notably in the newspaper clippings pasted into his papiers-collés. These works reinforce our conviction that we need develop tools for working with text in art grounded to the needs of the artistic disciplines rather than those of the traditional textual studies community.

Picasso’s unique works offer fertile ground for exploring the techniques and tools that can be applied to visually constructed texts but much work is needed—both in terms of understanding the needs of the scholars and other readers interested in Picasso’s writings as well as formulating new models for representing and working with these texts in a digital environment. We are currently investigating the potential for techniques based in spatial hypertext research for interpreting and presenting these texts. In spatial hypertext,
nodes of information that are connected by visual elements (for example, text style, 2-D position, color) rather than by explicit links (Shipman, 1999). Our current efforts are focused in understanding how the texts might be sub-divided into their constituent parts and manipulated in a 2-D space in ways that enhance understanding. We are also looking at how formal relationships between these parts can be incrementally added as an expression of an editor/reader's evolving understanding. In addition to purely image based approaches, we are interested in studying methods of encoding the textual content of Picasso's works to support content based retrieval, enable automatic processing, and facilitate reading.

Summary
By translating a traditional print-based approach for working with a large corpus of artworks, the catalogue raisonné, into a digital format, we increase the level of support provided for three scholarly primitives (Unsworth, 2000): comparing (either two works side by side, or many works in a thumbnail view), sampling select artworks from the collection as a whole, and representing the artworks not merely as thumbnails, but also with higher resolution images. With these enhancements, the digital catalogue raisonné, though not its printed counter-part, provides a natural medium for presenting the writings of Picasso. In this context, his writings are presented against the backdrop of other artworks while enabling the textual elements of these artworks to be read and carefully studied as texts. In addition to the immediate benefits that this approach brings in terms of accessing Picasso’s writings, it also offers a new paradigm for working with these texts that suggests several promising directions for further work.

References


