

Julio González First Master of the Torch

in dialogue with

Pablo Picasso
David Smith
Eduardo Chillida
Anthony Caro

González: First Master of the Torch

David Smith, *ARTnews*, February 1956

The Bull in its symbolic action has stood for many things in Picasso's history, things Spanish and things noble. The Bull has been the artist, the people of Spain, the open-eyed conscience of free men, the disemboweler of the lie of Franco, the aggressive protector of women, and among other symbols, the lover of woman.

But after the death of Julio González, Picasso's friend of forty-five years, the Bull becomes a skull on a green and blue fractioned table before the window curtained in violet and black.

Coming home from the funeral Picasso had done this picture of a bull's skull and dedicated it: "En homage à González."

To the wall of his studio was tacked a snapshot of his friend. For Picasso all source of life becomes the nature of painting.

On what peaks did memory ride – for they were friends from youth, from the days of the Barcelona café, *Els Quatre Gats*. In 1901 Picasso shared González's living quarters in Paris until he found a studio. Throughout the succeeding years they remained on good terms, visiting each other, even working together; and then, the end at Arcueil in March of 1942.

The youngest of four children (the others, his sisters Pilar and Lola, his brother Juan), González was born in Barcelona in 1876. Both Juan and Julio were apprenticed in their father's metal shop, becoming third-generation smiths. With other ideas in mind, the brothers studied painting at night at the Barcelona School of Fine Arts, which Miro was to attend fifteen years later. They knew *Els Quatre Gats*, the Spanish counterpart of the Parisian *Chat Noir* and gathering-point of the local avant-garde. Here the youthful Picasso had decorated the walls with twenty-five portraits of writers and artists who frequented the café.

During the 1890s the tension between the impoverished multitudes and the wealthy few of prosperous Barcelona manifested itself in a series of strikes, reprisals and acts of anarchy. Dispossessed refugees pouring in from Cuba increased the degree and extent of the economic problem.

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The intellectual reaction to the social distress and rebellious temper of the times was to revolt against tradition and authority and embrace the attitudes of *modernism*. Thus Barcelona awoke to the romanticism of the age, Art Nouveau, the Gothic Revival, Wagner's music, Lautrec's presentation of Paris and the Bohemian life, Maeterlinck's drama, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the climaxing monument to the new art, Gaudí's cathedral.

I feel González coming from Barcelona and looking back lovingly at Gaudí's cathedral of the *Sagrada Família*, respecting Gaudí's source in nature and the unities of iron and stone.

González's notebook contains statements about the new art which seem almost parallel ideals for the Catalonian Gaudí's cathedral: "To project and draw in space with new methods... Only the pinnacle of a cathedral can show us where the soul can rest suspended... These points in infinity were the precursors of the new art." In another reference to a cathedral he speaks of "the motionless arrow" which to me seems more the arrowhead *Excelsis Hosanna* towers of *Sagrada Família* than the Gothic or Romanesque spires which he loved in France. His notes several times speak of form by established "points or perforations." There is a marked unity in his stone bases and the iron sculpture, a sensitive feeling for material and proportion. I feel the kinship with Gaudí's stone angels, their iron trumpets and iron arm supports, in the feeling of flying form and unorthodox balance. Work by the González shop may even be in the cathedral. I can find no verification for this, but José de Creeft, who worked on it as a plasterer's helper at the age of twelve, says that every craftsman in Barcelona did.

The craft work of both brothers progressed so well that it was shown at the Chicago World's Fair, 1893, and in the same year took a gold medal in the *Barcelona Exposition*.

The period from his arrival in Paris around 1899 until 1927 did not show strong sculptural conviction. This, perhaps the most difficult and dramatic period of his life, was the least fruitful. Unproductive months followed the death of his brother. Then, repoussé masks, drawings, and paintings proceeded out of his struggle for some fifteen years.

There seems to have been conflict between the divided identities of painter and metalsmith.

When a man is trained in metal-working and has pursued it as labor with the ideal of art represented by oil painting, it is very difficult to conceive that what has been labor and livelihood is the same means by which art can be made. (Perhaps I am basing this more on sympathy than fact in González's case, because it is a reconstruction of my own experience. Before I had painted very long I ran across reproductions in *Cahiers d'Art* of González's and Picasso's work which brought my consciousness to this fact that art could be made of iron. But iron-working was labor, when I thought art was oil paint.)

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In this period of groping, González felt the need of men strong and firm in their destiny, like Brancusi and Picasso. Undoubtedly their encouragement played a part in his slow battle with himself. At the same time the very closeness to these two titans personally could not permit any influence in his own work.

It seems true that something kept his painting from flowering. At the same time he pursued metal work, which apparently represented the sculptural part of his nature before it had asserted its singular self. From the chronology of his life and from the knowledge of friends, as soon as he accepted his true identity as that of the sculptor, his expression became more challenging and his works more prolific. Concurrent to this came the use of the acetylene torch which was not, I think, a part of his early apprenticeship or of the metal-craft period.

He was past fifty when he accepted the sculptor's identity, discarded the silversmith's scale and purpose and abandoned oil painting formally, accepting drawing as the complement of sculpture.

Some of the fine parts of craftsmanship were dropped, a casual approach technically developed with the dominance of conceptual ends. Craft and smithery became submerged in the concept of sculpture. The *aesthetic* end was not dependent upon its mode of travel.

The period in which González worked for Picasso has not been determined by the statement of either as far as I can learn. It does not seem important. The technical collaboration made neither change nor influence in the conception of either artist. During the several years it existed, each pursued his own work in his own way, Picasso with his concepts for Mediterranean monument houses, the elongated bronze stick figures, etc.; González reaching his prolific period with *Don Quixote*, a number of still-lives, the best of his masks, and a large number of flying iron drawings, like *Standing Personage* and *Woman Combing Her Hair*. The possible dates of this intermittent collaboration lie somewhere between 1928 and 1932.

González was encouraged by Picasso to continue and expand; something very definite was gained by their union, but it was more abstract than a recognizable influence.

The best of González is in his abstract work, but existing concomitant is a socially conscious theme of realism. These are the *Montserrat* or her variations. They start in 1932 with a small head, *Montserrat*, continue to the full-sized figure in 1936 and end with a bronze head in 1942. La Montserrat is the symbol of Catalonian woman in her nobility, her cries against injustice, her suffering. She is the symbol of things noble and things Spanish, analogous to Picasso's bull.

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Of the two unfinished plaster works begun in 1941, one was abstract; the other a screaming woman on her knees, which parallels the *Montserrat* series in its realism and sympathy.

I have learned of no notes relating to the realist approach. There are no poetic “directions to carve space,” no “motionless arrows pointing towards the stars where the soul can rest suspended or indicate points of hope,” as he gives his ideals for sculpture. These are volume sculptures, arrived at with great love and patience. They show the tremendous urge to speak out in the way the quiet man and artist could best present his statement.

A man as withdrawn as González was ordinarily not given to fraternizing. An exception was his attendance at weekly meetings held at the studio of Torres-Garcia in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties. To these discussion evenings came an interesting group, mostly young, almost exclusively expatriate: Mondrian, Arp, Bissière (later Héliou), von Doesburg, Seuphor, Daura, Xceron, John Graham, Vantongerloo, Queto, Charchoune, Cyaky, Brummer and others. From the same address was published the magazine *Cercle et Carré*, edited by Garcia and Seuphor. The painter Xceron, then writing art reviews for the Paris edition of the Chicago Tribune, was probably the first American to write about González's work, which he did most favorably and understandingly. Graham, another painter-member of the group, was probably the first American to buy González's sculpture. The three pieces he bought in 1930 were, as far as I know, the first in this country.

A.B. Gallatin, who was known to most of this group, in 1934 bought a silver sculpture done two years earlier and a drawing for his Museum of Living Art. Graham describes the noted sculptor as he remembers him in 1930: “Small, dignified, dressed in black like a real Mediterranean, lean, graying, a quiet and modest person, dreamy and detached, in the way of many thoughtful Spanish men, an attractive person looking more in than out. He commanded sympathy and respect.”

One of those who knew him best during the last years of his life was Henri Goetz, an American painter living in France. In 1937 Goetz became acquainted with González, his wife and sisters through Hans Hartung, who married the sculptor's daughter Roberta. A strong family friendship developed, with Sunday dinners at Arcueil in the house González had built according to his own plans, and drives through the countryside to look at Gothic churches in an old Citroën González bought in 1938. Indicating the sculptor's gentle humor, Goetz recalls the way he used to pass the weekly dish of carrots and slyly say, “Do take a wing.”

González was not much given to art talk or theory and in these family discussions of abstraction, Mondrian, Kandinsky, etc. he was at aesthetic odds with Hartung and Goetz, who took the favorable view.

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In one of his infrequent confidences of an aesthetic nature he told Goetz that he sometimes used the *Gold Section* (1.6180). This mathematical ideal of the relationship of the diagonal with the side of the square may be homage to Cézanne and the *1912 Section d'Or* exhibition or something very personal from his painting period. The *Golden Section* has always been a constant in the eye of man. It may have been a personal method of evaluating, but it is certainly not the inspiration.

Regarding his own work González was adamant in pointing out the relationship between his sculpture and the real elements – such as hair, teeth, eyes – which in a very indirect way composed them. Goetz recalls his buying what was for his circumstances a very costly tool – possibly a shearing tool – to work on the teeth of a sculpture. The beautiful head of 1936 which Alfred Barr acquired in 1937 from Christian Zervos for the Museum of Modern Art collection clearly illustrates his preoccupation with features.

González was extremely prudent. Early in the war he gave up welding, fearing that if bombs dropped his oxygen and acetylene tanks would blow up, although the lorry factory less than a hundred yards away had many tanks in constant use.

González never became a French citizen. He was Spanish, but insisted on the distinction of being a Catalanian.

Critical accent has been placed upon who was first in iron or welding. This speculation is no more valid than the Renaissance oil paint controversy. González was an apprentice in his father's shop, his work with metal starts in childhood. It is not innovation that makes art but inspiration. On the relationship with Picasso, Xceron recalls that he came to González's studio in rue de Médéah around 1928 to work on the statue for the tomb of Apollinaire. In Picasso's iron sculpture the concept and the forms were strictly his, as are González's in his own work. With Gargallo, whom González instructed, the technique becomes developed in a spectacular way, but the concept remains essentially academic.

The Cubists used iron (i.e., Lauren's *Composition*, 1941) as did the Constructivists (Tatlin in 1917, Meduniezky in 1919, etc.). De Creeft made an iron stovepipe *Don Quixote* in 1925; Lipchitz told me of a 1928 iron sculpture he exhibited in his 1930 Paris retrospective show. No one was first. All materials have properties by which they are shaped, art lies in the concept, not the technique. You can find more art in paper scraps than in crafted gold.

Wrought metal sculpture goes back to the Bulls of El-Ubaid (3000 B.C.) and the life-sized figure of Pepi I from Heirakunpolis (2300 B.C.). A whole age of iron welding and forming flowered in Syria in the eleventh to ninth century B.C. The iron head-rest of Tutankhamen (1350 B.C.), believed to have come from Syria, was welded. In Genesis, Tubal Cain, husband of Zilah, is referred to as the instructor of every artificer in bronze and iron. Iron welding and working has been in evidence in almost every period of culture in both art and function.

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Smith's original typescript of his article concluded with the following paragraphs. They were eliminated by *Art News* from the published version of his essay due to space constraints.

González's workshop in rue de Médéah and late at Arcueil was equipped with the simple tools for hand-working – hammers, shears, chisels, hand-powered forge, anvils, vise, liures (circles with chain-tackle) various smaller tools and two oxygen acetylene torches. Space was close, with paintings and drawings interspersed among odd iron pieces, plaster casts, an easel and a number of unfinished works hung on the wall or stacked in corners with finished work.

González's welding technique was not of commercial efficiency. It appears to have been developed by caution and artistic need. There was no effort to produce an outstanding welding bead, only a natural, untutored seam, rather casual and slow, as if the need to join parts was the only concern of the man and the torch. In the best work nothing in technique stood out as Spanish iron-working, this had been left behind for the aesthetic end.

On some sculptures the iron is forged and personalized as if it had been wrought and reduced from ore before its final shape. His greatest work is the most abstract, especially those which perch on their bases (often stone) trumpeting out sharp points to cleave space. Here volume is discarded for directions which challenge tradition, and a lyrical synthesis of utmost economy becomes the new element to displace form. Like a painting, every minute part bears the caress of the artist. No other hands have touched this work, there are no production marks, no caster's errors nor shrinkage from pouring.

Innumerable directions pointed this way but González became the catalyst for many of us in the negation of form for new elements.

It is a pity that González did not live to see his catalogues and exhibitions.

The origin and evolution of Smith's essay on González and his appreciation of the Spanish artist and his work is analysed in: Susan J. Cooke, "Lighting the Torch: David Smith on Julio González," in *Julio González, David Smith: un diálogo sobre la escultura* (exh. cat.), IVAM Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2011, pp. 427–435.

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