



María Blanchard, history and geography of a Spanish artist in Paris

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Title: María Blanchard, history and geography of a Catalan in Paris

Abstract : We will deal here with the influence of the work of the Spanish artist María Gutiérrez-Cueto y Blanchard (1881-1932) within the group of Cubist painters living in Paris. Discovered by the Spanish public in 1915 thanks to Ramon Gómez de la Serna, Maria Blanchard lived the Cubist adventure, even influencing Picasso in 1919. We will study both the reasons for this exclusion and a set of his most significant works such as: *Composición cubista* (1916-1919), *Femme à la guitare*, (1917), *Mujer con abanico* (1916), *La comulgante* (1914). We will support our analysis with the notions of the All-World (Tout-Monde) and the archipelago (Archipel) developed by the Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant.

Keywords : Spanish avant garde, cubism, female artist, modern art

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Career

María Blanchard is a Spanish painter born in the port city of Santander on the Cantabrian coast in the north of the country in 1881.

Born into a Franco-Polish bourgeois family by her mother and Spanish by her father, María Blanchard, whose real name is María Gutiérrez-Cueto y Blanchard, suffered from a serious back deformity and dwarfism from childhood.

His relatives encouraged her to go to Madrid to study painting. She became a pupil of Emilio Sala y Francès, Fernando Álvarez de Sotomayor, then Manuel Benedito. In 1909 she obtained a scholarship from her hometown to continue her training in Paris (Fig.3).

She moved to Montparnasse. Before joining the Vassiliev Academy, she studied with the Spanish painter Anglada Camarasa and Kees Van Dongen at the Vitti Academy.

María Blanchard was into contact with Diego Rivera installed at 26 rue du Départ and Angelina Beloff who has taken up residence on the terrace of La Rotonde. The latter will introduce Diego Rivera to the Slavic community. María Blanchard already has it through her friendship with Marie Vassiliev. In 1909 and 1910, she saw her work rewarded at the National Exhibitions of Fine Arts in Madrid.

It was in 1912, through Kees Van Dongen that she met Juan Gris. This meeting is essential, her painting is getting closer and closer to cubism.

She returned to Spain where she participated with Diego Rivera but also with Cubist and Futurist painters in the exhibition *Pintores íntegros* ["Integral painters"] organized by the writer Ramon Gomez de la Serna in 1915. The reception of the critics will be very bad.

Despite the bad reviews, she obtained a drawing chair in Salamanca (Fig.2). In this school, she suffered the bullying and mockery of her own students and this decided her to leave her native country for good, joining Paris in 1916.

It was in the summer of 1916 that she joined Diego Rivera and Angelina Beloff and came into contact with the art dealer Léonce Rosenberg, to whom she sent some paintings. She will become a protegee of the gallery owner, she befriends Juan Gris and André Lhote. At the time, she mainly painted cubist still life.

In April 1918, she went to Juan Gris in Beaulieu-lès-Loches in the company of Jean Metzinger and Jacques Lipchitz. In contact with these cubist artists, she deepened her technique of construction, and adopted a more sober colored range, more in line with the foundations of cubism.

In October 1918, she signed a contract with Léonce Rosenberg, who was now director of the Galerie de l'Effort Moderne. She will also have a personal exhibition in this gallery in December 1919.

In 1916, when she returned to France, she moved to 21 avenue du Maine where she neighbored the Russian-born artist Marie Vassiliev. Both leading a precarious and laborious life, they were quickly nicknamed the "two Marias of painting and moose"¹. In 1920, his relations with Rosenberg darkened, his painting operated a return to classicism.

After the "Cubism and Neocubism" exhibition, organized by the magazine *Sélection* in Brussels, María Blanchard met new art dealers: Jean Delgouffre, Frank Flausch and Jean Guimar who were responsible for distributing her work.

¹ Frédéric Vincent, *Villa Marie Vassiliev*, Paris, Chemin du Montparnasse, 2022.

In 1921, during the Salon des Indépendants, she triumphed and caused a scandal with a painting painted in 1914, *La Communiant*. This "almost scandalous success" to use the term of André Lhote will encourage Paul Rosenberg to buy all the works of María Blanchard exhibited. She will be successful for many years. Her painting will oscillate between back and forth between classicism and cubism. Her favorite subjects will be maternity and portraits of children. She often produces several versions of her works.

Very affected by the death of Juan Gris in 1927, at the age of 40, she sank into depression and sought a remedy in deep religiosity. One of his last works, *San Tarcicio*, will be the subject of a poem by Paul Claudel. She died of tuberculosis in 1932, at the age of 51.

Analysis of works

We will study both the reasons for this exclusion and a set of his most significant works such as: *Composición cubista* (1916-1919), *Woman with guitar* (1917), *Mujer con abanico* (1916), *La comulgante* (1914). We will continue our analysis on the notion of Poetics of the relationship developed by the Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant.

Composición cubista (*Cubist Composition*) (Fig.3) is a Cubist composition completed in three years between 1916 and 1919 is an oil and collage on canvas measuring 154 x 114 cm. This work has been part of the collections of the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid since 1997. Painted in vertical format, a geometric decoration of the frame of a mirror painted in black line on a white background stands out from a green background for the first upper half of the painting.

In the center a tangle of shape, pink half circle, black half circle crossed by a dark blue tubular shape, a yellow angle continuing towards the bottom of the painting also in dark blue. The right part of the painting offers other geometric shapes, sometimes decorative, sometimes purely abstract.

The play of color is very subtle, for Paloma Esteban Leal, this canvas "in particular, participates in the poetics of synthetic cubism and, by removing superfluous planes, the painter condenses the possible points of view of the object represented, thus reducing to a balanced synthesis²". It is undeniably the balance and serenity that emerges from this painting.

La Femme à la Guitare (*The woman with the guitar*) (Fig.4) is painted in 1917, it measures 100 x 72 cm. María Blanchard has been permanently settled in Paris for a few months, a city that has become unrecognizable. Raúl Martínez rightly points out that cubism does not escape a certain restoration to classicism "and gets rid of the experimentation that had characterized its origins³". This woman with the guitar is represented according to a tangle of shapes intersecting with each other.

The palette is sober, dark green, olive green, black, a little off light blue, two large dark red tints and a few hints of light pink. Raúl Martínez adds that this painting "corresponds to a period of collaboration and friendship between Blanchard and Juan Gris which sees her, like Gris, revising a classic theme of the French pictorial tradition: the character as a musical instrument⁴".

Mujer con abanico or *The Woman with a Fan* (Fig.5) from 1916 measures 161 x 97 cm. This painting corresponds in its realization to the chromatic principles with bright tones established by Juan Gris in 1915. This woman with a fan really seems to be waving her yellow fan, she is painted with a red dress on a very marked purple background.

The succession of triangular, square and diamond shapes gives a slight impression of movement, all accentuated by the colors chosen by the artist. Note that María Blanchard made two versions of this canvas, a habit with the artist. A second version, also dated 1916, belongs to a private collection in the city of Santander.

La comulgante (Fig.6) a painting from 1914, it is the largest in size (180 x 124 cm). If this work was painted in 1914, it will not be presented at the Salon des Indépendants until 1921, where a sensation is created. This return to classicism resonates in a terrible way for visitors. This young girl who looks straight into the eyes of the spectators, a young girl trapped in her dress, alone symbolizes the symbolic system that traps and infantilizes women. Not only prisoner of a clothing straitjacket, a social straitjacket but also a religious straitjacket.

² Paloma Esteban Leal, *Composición cubista*, fact sheet, in Museo Reina Sofia, <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/composicion-cubista>

³ Raúl Martínez, « *Femme à la guitare* (*Woman with Guitar*), 1917 », in <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/femme-guitare-woman-guitar>

⁴ *Ibid.*

Reception

The work of María Blanchard will assert itself in contact with cubism, that is undeniable.

How she who rubbed shoulders with Juan Gris, André Lhote, Jean Metzinger and Jacques Lipchitz is not recognized today as one of their equals? Perhaps this terrible sentence written by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler sums it all up: "There were certain minor Cubists, María Blanchard for example, who only copied it"⁵.

Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler distinguishes two types of descendants of Juan Gris, the "legitimate descendants" that are in his eyes Ozenfant and the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz who was one of his friends. And the minor cubists of which María Blanchard would be a part. Why such exclusion on the part of a dealer and collector when a large part of these artists rub shoulders, appreciating each other? Visits to each other's workshops are so many encounters and objects of stimulation for creation.

Several factors may come into play. The first of them, María Blanchard is a woman. The second, she is disabled. As Caroline Legrand points out, the story of María Blanchard: "It's the story of a woman in a man's world, of a cripple in a world that is often intolerant"⁶. For the exhibition curator Maria José Salazar, it is clear "that the difficulty for María Blanchard was not to be a man"⁷.

French museums have a total of twenty-nine works by María Blanchard, distributed as follows: twenty-one in the city of Paris museum of modern art, five in the national museum of modern art Center Pompidou, two in the Grenoble museum, one at the Nantes art museum and one at the La Piscine in Roubaix. In comparison, her friend and studio neighbor Marie Vassilieff is very little represented in French public collections, so only four works have been listed, two at the Center National des arts Plastiques, one at the Fonds d'Art Contemporain, and one at the Grenoble museum.

María Blanchard is absent from the famous exhibition "women painters 1550-1950" organized by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art⁸. However, a certain number of women artists whose work is in the same line are present in this famous exhibition, think of the Danish Franciska Clausen, the Swiss Sophie Taeuber-Arp, the Russians Liubov Serbeevna Popova, Olga Vladimirovna Rozanova, Nadijda Andreivna Udaltsova, Alexandra Exter, or the French Sonia Delaunay and Marie Laurencin.

The catalog of this exhibition has become a reference work, it has been translated into several languages, it is a pity that María Blanchard is once again one of the great forgotten ones. Once again, most recently for the great exhibition on cubism, we were finally waiting for a rehabilitation of the Spanish cubist artist María Blanchard. This exhibition organized at the Center Georges Pompidou in Paris is the first exhibition devoted to Cubism in France since 1953.

It had the bias of wanting, as the press release announced, to "renew and extend to other artists the vision traditionally focused on its two inventors, Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso"⁹.

What a good idea, finally, we will be able to discover the whole not of a movement, of a style but of a system of thought, cubist thought. This rich exhibition of three hundred works articulated in fourteen chapters, presented chronologically, leaves you speechless. And yet, looking carefully in every corner of the rooms, not a single work by María Blanchard, not a single one. Terrible observation, once again, here in 2019, Maria Blanchard is absent. Can we talk about a curse?

Despite her absence from the Center Pompidou exhibition, she appears in the Dictionnaire du Cubisme¹⁰ co-published on the occasion of the exhibition by this same Center Pompidou. Anne Lemonnier devotes two pages to it.

⁵ Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris, sa vie, son œuvre, ses écrits*, Paris, Gallimard, 1946, p.166

⁶ Caroline Legrand, « L'enfance selon María Blanchard », in *La Gazette Drouot*. <https://www.gazette-drouot.com/article/l-enfance-selon-maria-blanchard/18321>

⁷ Interview with Maria José Salazar during the exhibition María Blanchard cubista, fundacion botin, from June 23 to September 16, 2012. Curator: Maria José Salazar.

⁸ Women Artists: 1550-1950 is an art exhibition dedicated to women artists, initially presented at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from December 23, 1976 to March 13, 1977. This international event is organized by the historians of the art Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris.

⁹ Press release for the exhibition Le Cubisme, Paris, Center Georges Pompidou, from October 17, 2018 to February 25, 2019. <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/programme/agenda/evenement/c7Edeyk>

¹⁰ Brigitte Leal (dir.), *Dictionnaire du cubisme*, Paris, Bouquins, Robert Laffont, Centre Pompidou, 2018, pp. 90-91.

What makes an artist present in various exhibitions alongside other Cubist artists so ignored? Is it because his work is so bad? Why not? Let's ask the question. Or is this once again an oversight or even ignorance, because the great Parisian exhibition announced that it would: "appear the place of women and their sometimes significant influence in the history of Western art"¹¹.

Fortunately The Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid devoted a major retrospective to her in 2012. This exhibition divided into three sections showing all the talent of this artist. Spectators could discover his formative stage (1908-1913), with his earliest works. The so-called consolidation phase (1913-1919) with her cubist works and the last stage (1919-1932) where she returned to figuration and performed some of her most famous works.

Poetics of relationship

Yet the cubist sphere in Paris is of the order of a poetics of the relationship dear to Édouard Glissant. We must understand here Poetics of the relationship as a constitution of a social and political space. We can see cubism not as a movement whose genesis would be of a single origin, not as a univocal discourse after all in the classical tradition, but rather as an intercommunity and plural relationship. With Édouard Glissant "identity is not in the root, but in the relationship"¹², specifies Aliocha Wald Lasowski.

The idea of multiple periphery thus crosses the work of Glissant but it also crosses that of the cubists and more precisely the work of María Blanchard. She is a Spanish emigrant, rejected because of her infirmity and yet friends of artists, an artist herself and recognized as such. Which brings us back to Édouard Glissant and the idea of multiple periphery.

As Patrick Chamoiseau explains, Édouard Glissant's "All-world" is an "accelerated interaction of peoples, cultures, men, traditions, etc. [...] that changes everything, we are obliged today, whatever the place in which we live, [...] we are forced to take into account other languages, other cultures, other positions, other traditions. We have left the old absolutes"¹³.

Édouard Glissant refuses to "reduce a place or elect it to a closed center"¹⁴. Bertrand Westphal recounts an interview between star curator Hans Ulrich Obrist and relational artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. The curator asks the artist if the centers are multiplying. The artist after having agreed, gives "to his interlocutor a surprising answer"¹⁵, "I think it would be better to speak of multiplication of the periphery, because from this angle you realize that your center is in fact located outside"¹⁶.

Which brings us back to Édouard Glissant and the idea of multiple periphery. Moreover, the thought of Édouard Glissant is a creolization, is a mixture. Already in *Le discours antillais* (1981), he wrote "the Being that poses, let us show the being that affixes itself"¹⁷.

So why is María Blanchard still absent from major exhibitions?

We are gradually, slowly but surely witnessing the rehabilitation of María Blanchard, as evidenced by this major retrospective in Madrid in 2012 but also the work done by the Aware association in Paris which since 2014 under the impetus of art critic Camille Morineau to make women artists visible in Producing content in French and English on the internet. Camille Morineau curator of the pioneers exhibition at the Luxembourg Museum in Paris, which includes in this exhibition the Maternity painting from 1921 (on loan from the Center Pompidou)¹⁸. Let's hope that María Blanchard (Fig. 7) will not be forgotten at an upcoming Cubism exhibition.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Aliocha Wald Lasowski, « Édouard Glissant », in Mathilde Lequin et Albert Piette (dir.), *Dictionnaire des anthropologies*, Paris, Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2022, p. 433.

¹³ Patrick Chamoiseau, « Patrick Chamoiseau parle de la notion glissantienne de "Tout-monde" » (Voyage au pays du Tout-monde, RFO, 1998). In <http://www.edouardglissant.fr/toutmonde.html>

¹⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde. Poétique IV*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997, p. 177.

¹⁵ Bertrand Westphal, *La Cage des Méridiens. La Littérature et l'Art Contemporain face à la globalisation*, Paris, Minuit, 2016, p. 234.

¹⁶ Rirkrit Tiravanija, Hans Ulrich Obrist. *The Conversation Series 20*, Cologne, Walter König, 2010, p. 19.

¹⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, Paris, Gallimard (1981), coll. Folio essais, p. 1997, p. 21.

¹⁸ Maria Blanchard, *Maternité*, 1921, collection Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais.

Maria Blanchard is referenced in the famous *Dictionnaire universel des créatrices*¹⁹, the biographical sheet is written by Mathilde Assier.

Lilianne Caffin-Madaule, a former student of the Ecole du Louvre, had the courage to publish Maria Blanchard's catalog raisonné²⁰ in three volumes. A feat that will be rightly rewarded with the Houlewigue prize from the School of Fine Arts in Paris (Institut de France) in 1992 and 1994 that of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

Let us think of the research work of Isabel García García who defended a doctoral thesis entitled: *Orígenes de las vanguardias artísticas en Madrid (1909-1922)*²¹, where María Blanchard is here an avant-garde artist like her male counterparts.

Recently, paintings by María Blanchard have been presented in public sales and have aroused great interest, such as in 2020, *La Fillette à la soupe*, from 1924, an oil on canvas and *La Couturière* from 1923, both offered at a price of €80,000. each. They were first in the collection of Jean Delgouffre from Brussels, then in that of Pierre Mouex (France), they had been exhibited several times in France and Spain. On February 25, 2021, a small canvas, most likely the first version of *La Toilette* from 1924, is presented for sale at Boisgirard - Antonini (M. Kasznia), it will be sold for €38,640. Could this be a first sign from the art market for a rehabilitation of María Blanchard?

Periphery in the process of multiplication, multiple periphery, mixture, accelerated interaction of peoples and cultures, is this a fact, is this a dream? Be that as it may, the profusion of Cubist works throughout the world, not only the formal richness but also and above all the great inventiveness and the abundance of this movement is the realization of a thought in motion with a rhizomatic character (Deleuze) but also multiple and peripheral. An accelerated interaction of peoples, cultures, and genres that today resonate and interact in a positive way in order to put the work of María Blanchard in its rightful place.

¹⁹ Béatrice Didier, Antoinette Fouque, Mireille Calle-Gruber (dir.), *Dictionnaire universel des créatrices*, Paris, des femmes, 2013.

²⁰ Lilianne Caffin-Madaule, *María Blanchard 1881-1932, catalogue raisonné : le plus grand peintre femme espagnol du XX^e siècle, le plus grand peintre femme cubiste [...]*, Londres, Editions Liliane Caffin Madaule, 1992-2007.

²¹ Isabel García García, thèse de doctorat, *Orígenes de las vanguardias artísticas en Madrid (1909-1922)*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Facultad de Geografía e Historia, 2002, 1137p.

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Images



Fig. 1. María Blanchard young, 1909.



Fig. 2. María Blanchard giving a painting lesson to her student Jacqueline Rivière. Michael Houseman.



Fig. 3. María Blanchard, *Composición cubista*, 1916-1919, oil and collage on canvas, 154 x 114 cm, Collection Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, inventory : AD00176



Fig. 4. María Blanchard, *Femme à la guitare* (*Woman with Guitar*), 1917, oil on canvas, 100 x 72 cm, Collection Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, inventory : AS01051

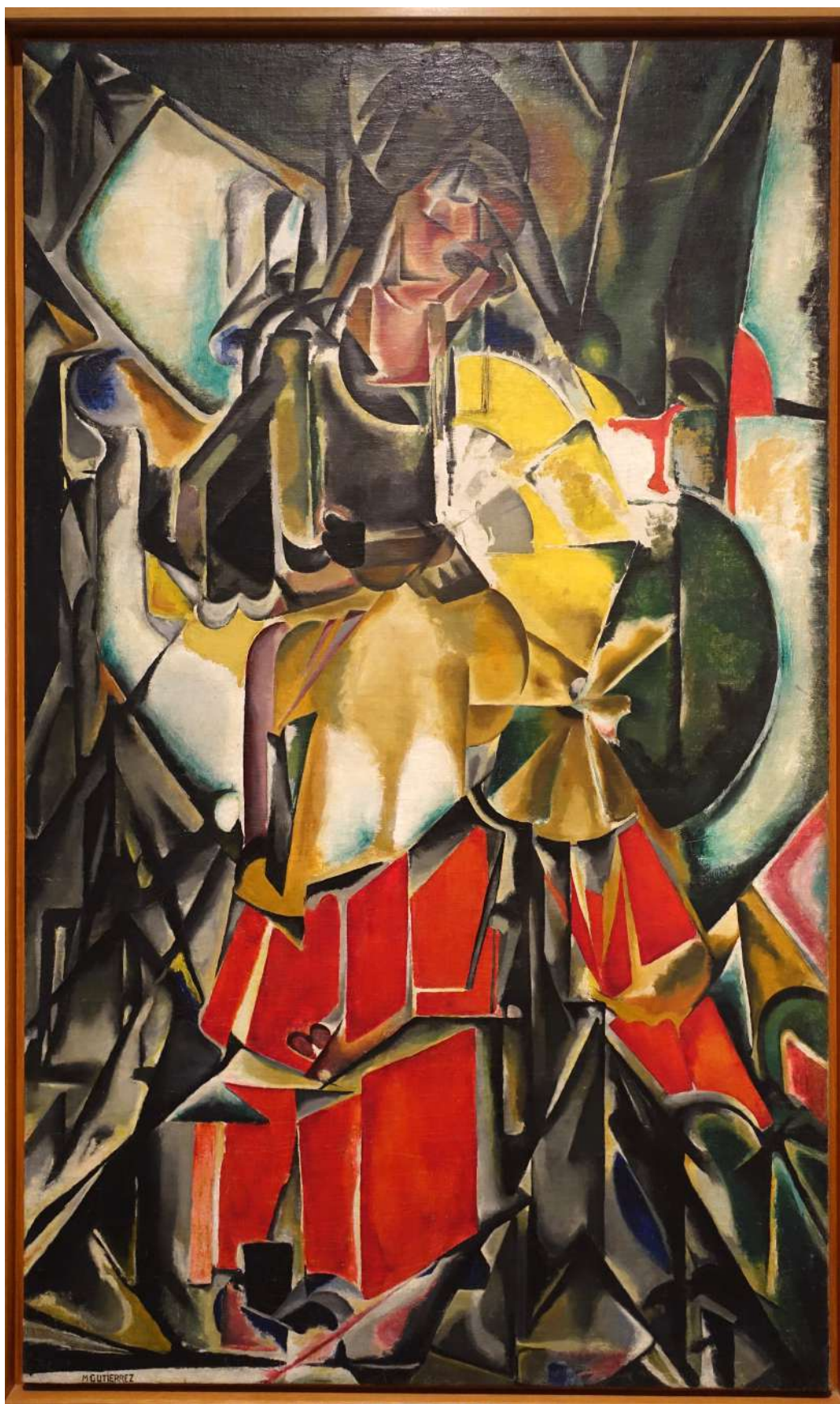


Fig. 5. María Blanchard, *Mujer con abanico*, 1916, oil on canvas, 161 x 97 cm, Collection Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, inventory: AS01353



Fig. 6. María Blanchard, *La comulgante*, 1914, oil on canvas, 180 x 124 cm, Collection Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, inventory: AS07281



Fig. 7. Portrait of María Blanchard. Circa 1930.