

An abstract painting by Juan Gris, titled 'Nature Morte, 1916'. The composition is a complex arrangement of geometric shapes and patterns. A large, dark brown triangular shape dominates the upper right. Below it, a black triangular shape points downwards. To the left, a blue triangle with a pattern of small yellow dots is visible. In the center, a white, rounded rectangular shape, possibly representing a piece of bread or a bowl, is set against a brown background. To its right, a black semi-circular shape is visible. Further right, a pinkish-brown shape and a green shape with yellow dots are present. A blue shape with yellow dots is also visible on the right side. In the lower left, a blue shape is partially visible. A circular shape with a pattern of small yellow dots and two horizontal black lines is located in the middle left. The overall style is characteristic of Cubism, with a focus on geometric forms and a rich, varied color palette.

JUAN  
GRIS

NATURE MORTE, 1916



Fig. 1. Juan Gris, 1922,  
photograph by Man Ray

# JUAN GRIS

*NATURE MORTE, 1916*

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JUAN GRIS (1887 – 1927)

NATURE MORTE, 1916

signed and dated upper left *Juan Gris 7-16*

oil on cradled panel

65.5 x 81.5 cm. (25 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 32 in.)

PROVENANCE

Léonce Rosenberg, Paris.

Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, by 1936.

Mrs Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman, acquired from the above, 10 Oct. 1951;

Her sale; Sotheby's, New York, 15 Nov. 1989, lot 56 (\$2,640,000).

Private Collection, Germany, acquired at the above sale.

LITERATURE

J. T. Soby, *Juan Gris*, exh. cat., The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1958 (illus. p. 66).

D. Cooper, *Juan Gris*, Paris, 1977, vol. 1, p. 266, no. 178 (illus. p. 267).

W. S. Lieberman, *An American Choice, The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection*, exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1981 (illus. p. 19).

EXHIBITED

(Probably) Hollywood, Stanley Rose Galleries, *Exhibition of Modern French Painting*, Jan. – March 1937.

New York, The Museum of Modern Art, *Juan Gris*, 9 April – 1 June 1958; this exhibition then travelled to Minneapolis, The Minneapolis Museum of Arts, 24 June – 24 July; San Francisco, The San Francisco Museum of Art, 11 Aug. – 14 Sept.; and Los Angeles, The Los Angeles County Museum, 29 Sept. – 26 Oct.

New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *An American Choice, The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection*, 21 May – 27 Sept. 1981.



Fig. 2: Juan Gris, *Paysage à Beaulieu*, Oct. 1916, oil on panel, 55 x 38 cm., Private Collection

Fig. 3: Juan Gris and his wife Josette in a studio at the Bateau-Lavoir, Paris, 1914, photograph by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler

INTRODUCTION

**Here is the man who has meditated on all things modern, here is the painter who wishes to invent only new compositions, who would draw and paint only materially pure forms** (Guillaume Apollinaire, 1913)

Formerly in the collection of renowned American philanthropist Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman, *Nature Morte* was painted in the summer of 1916 at the height of Juan Gris's engagement with Synthetic Cubism. *Nature Morte* was conceived during the First World War against a backdrop of significant professional change for Gris and the beginnings of modernity in France. With Paris under siege by the German forces and his dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler in exile in Switzerland, Gris settled in the Southern French village of Beaulieu-lès-Loches with his wife Josette (figs 2-3). Commencing a new contract with Léonce Rosenberg, one of the foremost dealers in Cubism, Gris ushered in a new era of unprecedented productivity and exceptional artistic innovation of the Cubist genre. Incorporating Pointilist dots and a striking arrangement of planar forms, *Nature Morte* captures all of the boldness and richness of Gris's conception of the still-life theme during this period.





Fig. 4: Pablo Picasso, *Bouteilles et Verres*, winter 1911–12, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 64.4 x 49.5 cm., Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (ref. 38.539)

Fig. 5: Juan Gris, *Bouteilles et Couteau*, 1911–12, oil on canvas, 54.6 x 46 cm., Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands

#### 1916 AND SYNTHETIC CUBISM

**Gris had come to maturity [in 1916] and was in full possession of the resources of an art which he had also mastered intellectually** (Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler)

By 1916 Gris was already experimenting with geometric forms in a Synthetic manner. Synthetic Cubism is considered the successor to Analytical Cubism, the first phase of Cubism which ran from 1910–14 and was characterised by a fragmentary appearance of multiple viewpoints and overlapping planes rendered in mainly monochrome tones. Alongside Picasso and Braque, Gris had painted in the Analytical style from its very inception, but his style already displays a contrasting attention to surface effect and tonality as opposed to angular form (compare figs 4 and 5) Synthetic Cubism, which has been dated to 1914–1918, was marked by a move away from fragmentary description, and is characterised by brighter colours, simpler lines and shapes and the incorporation of collage, both real and illusory, alongside paint.

After creating hybrid *papier-collé* oil paintings on the advent of the First World War, Gris began working in rich and varied colours between 1915–16 in an unusually productive period, seeking to make his painting ‘less dry and more plastic’ while developing ‘the sensitive and sensuous’ side of his art (Gris, quoted in D. Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch*, exh. cat., The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1970, pp. 223–24). In 1916 Gris painted fifty-five works in oil, as well as many gouaches and drawings. Christopher Green has written of Gris’s inventiveness in this period; ‘perhaps the most remarkable demonstration of how the open-endedness of Gris’s working practice, its endless generation and withdrawal of possibilities carried through in the proliferation of his Cubisms, is the sequence of changes in his work over the fifteen months between June 1915 and October 1916. In that brief time, he set up a more and a less “conceptual” Cubism as clear alternatives... generating not one, but two “lines” of development’ (C. Green, *Juan Gris*, exh. cat., Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1992, p. 45).



Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Gris's dealer until the outbreak of the War, pointed to 1916 as the beginning of 'one of the most fruitful and beautiful [periods] in the whole of Juan Gris' work' (D.-H. Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris: His Life and Work*, London, 1947 p. 91). The lively arrangement of planar form and colour in this still life illustrates what Kahnweiler describes as 'flat coloured architecture', where objects become 'emblems' which 'rise one above the other architecturally' (*op. cit.*, p. 91). The tilted perspective and overlapping planes are familiar, but what this kaleidoscope of forms represents is strikingly elusive; its configuration approaches the abstract.

#### TECHNIQUE IN NATURE MORTE

A rich pictorial harmony is achieved through the juxtaposition of circular and angular forms; at the centre of the composition a white zig-zag line intersects a cloud-like shape made up of black and purple, creating a strong visual energy, while to the right a dotted orange circle is intersected by two blue lines. The image is redolent of a roadside stop sign, introducing an image of modernity that situates Gris's still life in the vibrant urban metropolis. This is complemented by the fender-like shape to the lower right of the circle suggesting the chassis of an automobile. As well as invoking the contemporary urban landscape, Gris also introduces domestic themes into his composition: the dappled overlapping planes of colour suggest bright table cloths or wallpaper, while to the far left appear dado rails, which float dynamically in the picture. The rich and varied still life imagery is harmonised by Gris, exemplifying the artist's mastery of the Cubist genre in this period. As Green has discussed, there is a 'shift away from a still-life imagery of abundance late in 1915 and through 1916 and 1917, and there is detectable in Gris's painting of objects a re-orientation from the convivial social space of the café back into the studio and the home' (C. Green, *Juan Gris, op. cit.*, p. 152). Focusing on homogenous surfaces of oil paint between 1916–17, Gris displayed a growing commitment to compositional cohesion. *Nature Morte*, with its elaborate arrangement of form and Pointilist ornamentation, illustrates this perfection of the artist's visual language, moving away from the profusion of imagery towards pure, monumental form.

POINTILISM

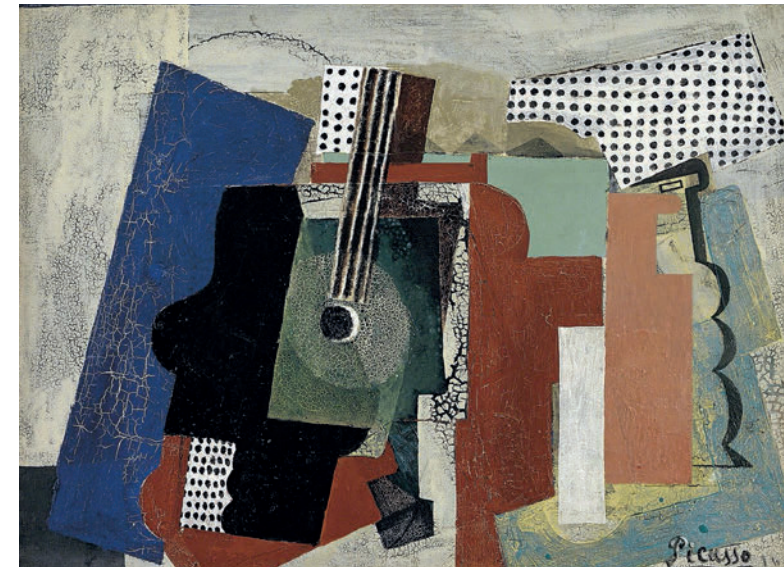
The paint surface of *Nature Morte* is enlivened by the adaptation of Pointilist dots, a sensuous confetti of blue, purple and yellow touches which create powerful visual vibrations across the overlapping planes in the composition. Gris finds here a perfect balance between the weighty colour planes and the lightening effect of dotted passages. Gris's use of the Pointilist style is closely related to the contemporaneous work of Picasso and Braque, who first developed the technique in this period in homage to the work of Seurat, Signac and the other Pointilists (figs 6–8). Gris had visited the Seurat retrospective at Bernheim-Jeune in the summer of 1908, and on 14 December 1915 the painter wrote to Kahnweiler of the artist's 'meticulousness'. In this letter Gris describes his own struggle to 'find any room in my pictures for that sensitive, sensuous side which I feel ought always to be there'. *Nature Morte* is a striking iteration of this search for a rich and sensuous balancing of colour and form, inflected with delicate Pointilist texturing. Rebecca Rainbow has discussed the application of Pointilism by Gris and his contemporaries as 'Confetti Cubism'; this refers to the poet Albert Aurier's description of Pointilist art at the time as a 'blinding shower of multicolour confetti' (quoted in R. Rainbow, 'Confetti Cubism', in *Cubism: The Leonard A. Lauder Collection*, exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2014, p. 161).



Fig. 6: Georges Seurat, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, 1884, 1884/86, oil on canvas, 207.5 x 308.1 cm., Art Institute of Chicago (ref. 1926.224)

Fig. 7: Pablo Picasso, *Nature Morte avec Porte, Guitare et Bouteilles*, 1916, oil on canvas, 152.4 x 205.7 cm., Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

Fig. 8: Juan Gris, *Lampe*, 1916, oil on canvas, 81 x 64.8 cm., The Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection (ref. 1950-134-96)



In 1913 and 1914 ‘Cubist Confetti’ was the height of chic [and] the Cubists’ colourful stippling during the immediate prewar years may be considered a sophisticated means of introducing formal qualities of texture and light into their art while simultaneously referencing recent artistic movement and, in certain instances, jubilant and rowdy popular culture

(R. Rainbow, *op. cit.*, p. 163)



#### MEDIUM

*Nature Morte* is executed on panel, a support which Gris found ideally adapted to his artistic technique. In a series of letters written from Gris to Rosenberg in June 1916, the month in which our painting was composed, the artist discusses the importance of the medium in depth: ‘Je travaille maintenant sur des panneaux de bois contreplaqué. On peint mieux et c’est plus solide et meilleur marché que la toile’ [I am currently working on plywood panels. I paint better and it is more solid and performs better than canvas] (11 June 1916, in *Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne: Juan Gris*, Paris, 1999, p. 30).

Je travaille surtout sur panneaux car décidément on peint mieux sur bois que sur toile [I work especially with panel because one paints decidedly better on wood than on canvas]

(Juan Gris, 27 June 1916)

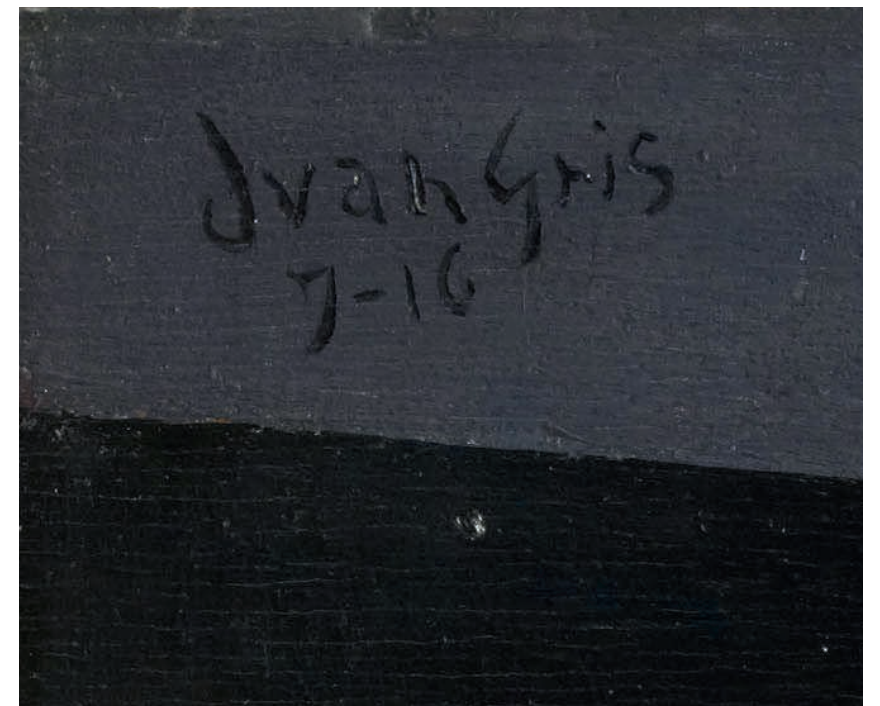


Fig. 9: *Nature Morte*, 1916, detail of signature



EARLY PROVENANCE

*Nature Morte* was first owned by Léonce Rosenberg, who was instrumental in taking up the Cubist cause in Kahnweiler's absence (figs 10–11). Alongside Gris, Rosenberg represented such artists as Gino Severini, Jean Metzinger, Albert Gleizes, Henri Laurens and Fernand Léger. By the end of the war in 1918 he had opened the *Galerie de l'Effort Moderne*, staging a series of retrospectives of each artist's Cubist *oeuvre*. With Rosenberg's support Gris was able to recommence his painting in early 1915, after a time of financial destitution following Kahnweiler's exile in 1914, and the artist embarked on a period of unprecedented productivity. This culminated in Gris's first major solo show at the *Galerie de l'Effort Moderne* in Paris in 1919. *Nature Morte* was subsequently owned by Pierre Matisse, the youngest son of Henri Matisse, who established himself in New York as one of the foremost dealers in modern art in 1924. Having launched his own gallery in the Fuller Building on the corner of Madison and 57<sup>th</sup> Street, shortly after the Museum of Modern Art opened, Pierre held a significant position in the New York art world until his death in 1989.



Fig. 10: Jean Metzinger, *Portrait de Léonce Rosenberg en uniforme de soldat*, 1924, graphite on paper, 50 x 36.5 cm., Centre Pompidou, Paris (ref. AM 2000-195)

Fig. 11: Standing: Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Juan Gris (left and centre); André Simon (right); seated: Lucie Sodon, Kahnweiler's wife (centre), Maurice de Vlaminck (left) and Alfred Flechtheim (right), all at Galerie Simon, Paris



MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN

*Nature Morte* was acquired by Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman, one of the most esteemed and prescient American collectors of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (figs 12–13). Born in Chicago, Muriel Newman first studied painting at the School of the Chicago Art Institute, and went on to become an accomplished portraitist. New York, which Newman first visited in 1933 as a teenager, would have a formative influence on the collector. Visiting the city with her first husband, Chicago businessman Jay Z. Steinberg, she would make friendships there with the noted Abstract Expressionists Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko and Franz Kline.

Records from the Pierre Matisse Gallery Archives show that Muriel and her husband acquired *Nature Morte* on 10 October 1951, along with two other significant works by leading modern artists: Giacometti's 1950 *The Forest (Composition with Seven Figures and a Head)* and Joan Miró's 1927 *Circus Horse* (fig 14). Her grandson Peter Steinberg recalled her passion for collecting:

**She truly let works of art change her life [...] She was an aesthetic polyglot with an enormously gifted eye**

(James Rondeau, President and Director of the Art Institute of Chicago, interview, 2008).

‘She knew the artists and would tell us of how one day she ran into Mark Rothko on the street [...] Rothko asked her to come see a painting he’d just finished. And she bought it right there. The way she embraced the scene was very powerful and romantic’ (interview, ‘Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman’, *New York Times*, 4 Sept. 2008).

With her second husband, Albert Newman, whom she married in 1955, Mrs. Newman travelled extensively, adding Asian, African and Oceanic pieces to the collection. In 1980 Newman made a promised bequest to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a major exhibition of the collection was held at the Museum in 1981 (fig. 15). Newman died on 22 August 2008, aged 94, leaving behind one of the finest collections of Modern Art in the United States. That *Nature Morte* was formerly part of this collection of modern masterpieces is testament to its historical significance as well as its museum-quality status. The work has not been on the market for 27 years since its acquisition at auction in 1989 when it was consigned by Muriel Newman herself, a year after the death of her husband.

CONCLUSION

Fresh to the market after 27 years in a private collection, and before that in the Newman collection for over half a century, *Nature Morte* is an exceptionally rare work with prestigious provenance. It exemplifies Gris’s mastery of the Cubist genre during ‘one of the most fruitful and beautiful [periods] in the whole of [his] work’ (D.-H. Kahnweiler, *op. cit.*, p. 91). In its exploration of Pointilism, unique to Gris’s style in 1916, the picture measures up to museum-quality masterpieces painted the same year, such as *Lampe* (fig. 8). Its bold palette and lively brushwork, enhanced by an excellent state of preservation, embody Gris’s search for ‘the sensitive and sensuous’ side of art.



Fig. 12: Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman with *Number 28, 1950* by Jackson Pollock



Fig. 13: Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman seated in front of *1947-h No. 1 (PH-265)* by Clyfford Still, 2003, photograph by Suzy Poling

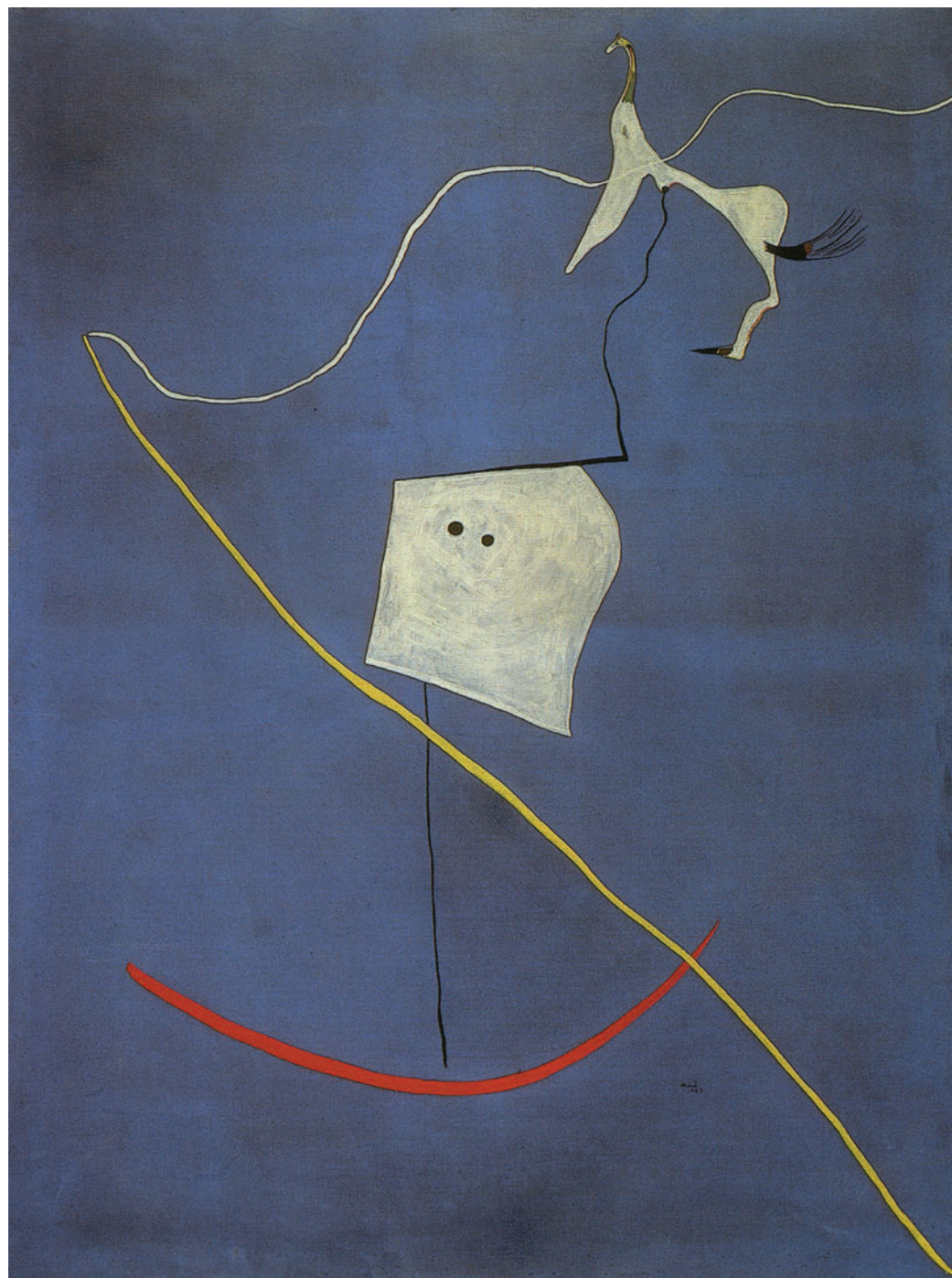


Fig. 14: Joan Miró, *Circus Horse*, 1927, tempera on canvas, 130.5 x 97.2 cm., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection



Fig. 15: Installation shot from *An American Choice: The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 21 May – 27 Sept. 1981, photograph by Al Mozell

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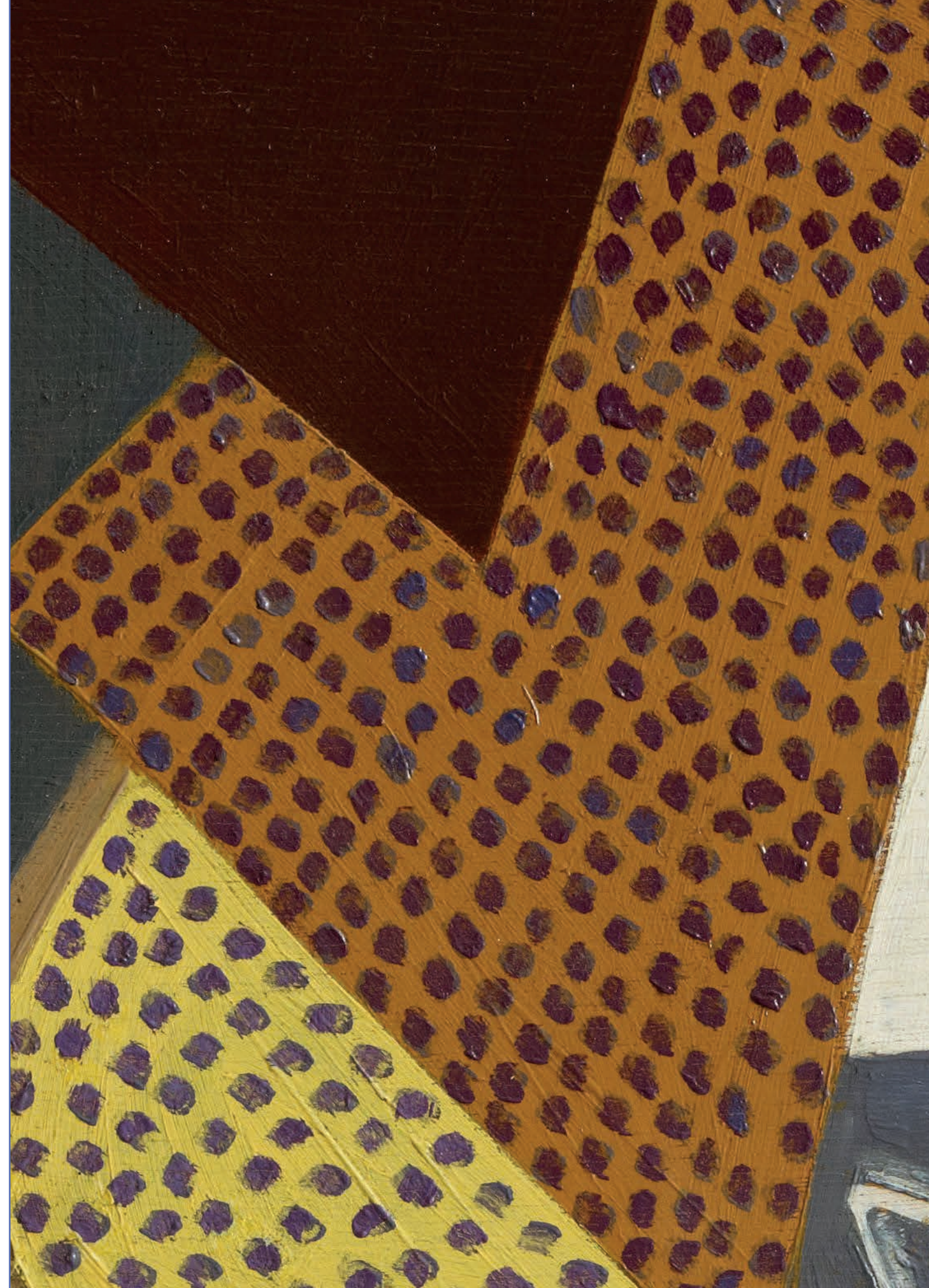
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7-16

An abstract geometric artwork featuring various shapes and patterns. The composition includes a large dark blue shape at the top, a green patterned band, a brown shape, a large orange shape with purple dots, a yellow shape with purple dots, a white and grey geometric shape, a blue shape with yellow dots, a green shape with blue dots, a brown shape, and a dark blue shape with white dots at the bottom left. The background is a mix of these colors and patterns.

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