
The lesson to be drawn from the imperfections of computer software, Littlewood and Strigini conclude, is that, especially in situations where concern for safety is paramount, software should not be given "too critical" a role. Either the assigned role should be so modest that the reliability of the software can be demonstrated beforehand, or else independent backup systems using different tech-

nology or taking a different approach should be used. An industrial plant whose operations are controlled primarily by computers, for example, could be equipped "with safety systems that do not depend on any software or other complex design." In short, despite the dazzling technical achievements of the past two decades, "being skeptical is the safest course of action."

ARTS & LETTERS

Barbershop Dustup

"Play That Barber Shop Chord: A Case for the African-American Origin of Barbershop Harmony" by Lynn Abbott, in *American Music* (Fall 1992), Univ. of Ill. Press, 54 E. Gregory Dr., Champaign, Ill. 61820.

Mention *barbershop quartet*, and a Gay Nineties image of dapper white barbers and their patrons harmonizing together comes to mind. The impression that barbershopping is a white tradition was fostered for decades by the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America, founded in 1938 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Abbott, an independent scholar, strikes a dissonant note. Like jazz and rock music, he says, the "barbershop" style probably originated with African-Americans.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American black men frequently lifted their voices in harmonious song. In Kansas City during the late 1880s, recalled vaudevillian Billy McClain, "about every four dark faces you met was a quartet." Dr. Laddie Melton, who began harmonizing in schoolyard quartets in New Orleans around 1910, said that whenever "three or four Negroes [got] together," they'd say, "Let's crack up a chord! Let's hit a note!"

"The art of 'cracking up a chord,'" Abbott says, "was born in unabashed celebrations of the 'weird,' organically blended harmonies that first distinguished the group-singing traditions of plantation slavery." Although heard in many places, from lodge halls to barrooms, the unique sound came to be especially associated with black barbershops, which served as places for socializing and for rehearsing and performing music, and so it came to be known as "barbershop harmony." The father of the famous Mills Brothers—who began singing in the 1920s, made successful recordings in

the '30s, and had a spectacular national hit in 1943 with *Paper Doll*—had taught his boys harmony in his barbershop in Piqua, Ohio.

"In the days when such a thing as a white barber was unknown in the South," black lyricist James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1925, drawing on his memories of Jacksonville, Florida, in the 1880s, "every barber shop had its quartet, and the men spent their leisure time playing on the guitar . . . and 'harmonizing.'" Their style, Johnson added, "gave a tremendous vogue to male quartet singing, first on the minstrel stage, then in vaudeville; and soon white young men, where four or more gathered together, tried themselves at 'harmonizing.'"

Pablo Picasso, Classicist

"Picasso: In the Beaux Quartiers" by Michael C. Fitzgerald, in *Art in America* (Dec. 1992), 575 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.

During the years after World War I, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) suddenly shed the image of bohemian Cubist and assumed the role of fashionable Classicist. He even did some paintings that very much resemble society portraits. At the center of this re-creation of himself, according to Fitzgerald, an art historian at Trinity College, Hartford, is *Studies* (1920–22), a painting that looks like an intriguing puzzle picture and that until recently was little known.

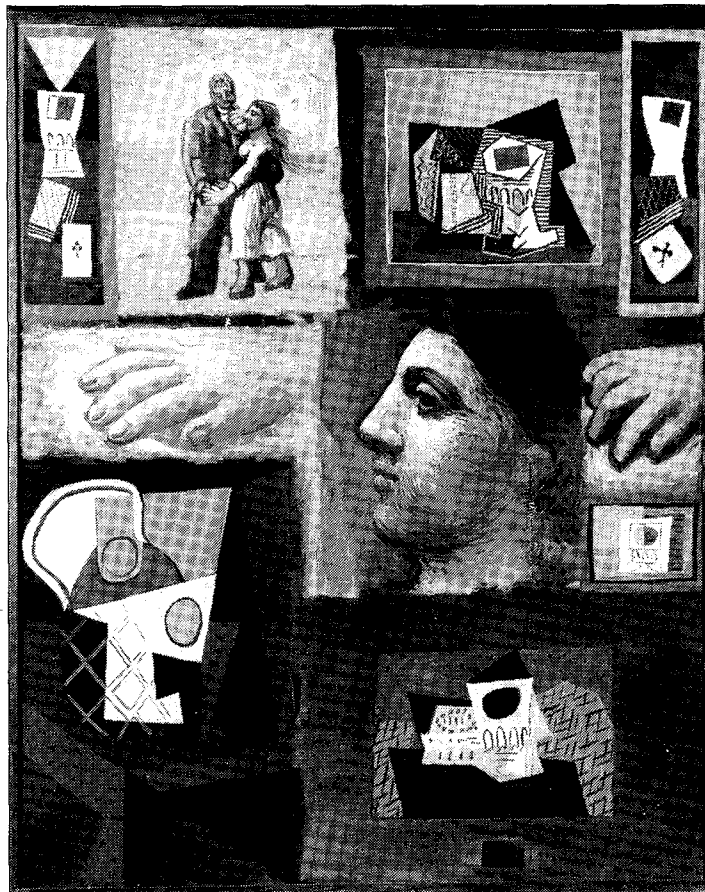
"At first glance," Fitzgerald notes, "one might dismiss *Studies* as merely a chance assemblage of unrelated sketches." But the images have a distinct order. "Highly finished miniature Cubist still lifes at the outer edges frame the canvas, while figures

rendered in a sketchily classicizing style nearly crisscross its center." The dancing couple in everyday clothes, as Brigitte Léal, a curator at the Musée Picasso in Paris, has noted, is "straight from Pierre Auguste Renoir."

The influence of Renoir (1841–1919) provides the key to *Studies*, says Fitzgerald. The Cubists reviled Impressionism, and Renoir himself was widely condemned by the early-20th-century avant-garde for having embraced academicism. Picasso, however, took a different view of the older master. "Renoir's struggle during his last decades to bridge the gap between his early work and the Western classical tradition without jettisoning his pioneering contributions to Impressionism," Fitzgerald writes, "provided a model for Picasso's own effort to broaden his art without turning his back on Cubism."

The strange pattern of Picasso's *Studies* is tied to Renoir's late style, Fitzgerald says. "During his years of searching for this new style, Renoir developed an unusual practice of sketching on canvas." As one critic explained in 1920, Renoir "multiplied his sketches, throwing numbers of them on a single canvas, here and there, heads of girls and children, flowers, fruit, fish, game—whatever he had in reach at the moment." This let him evaluate not only different subjects side by side but also different styles. In *Studies*, Picasso adopted Renoir's strategy, Fitzgerald says, and created "a painting whose coherence depends on his self-conscious inquiry into the same problem that Renoir had addressed before him—the relationship between avant-garde and traditional styles."

By the mid-1920s, Picasso was ready to move on to a new phase of his career. In search of "another path for reviving the avant-garde," Fitzgerald notes, he began to address "the budding movement of Surrealism. Picasso turned from the soothing glamour of 'things' to consider instead their capacity to shock."



In *Studies*, "a summa of Picasso's esthetic position in the years after World War I," the artist applied both realism (to figure) and Cubism (to still life).

When Hollywood Wooded the Censors

"Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies Before the Production Code" by Francis G. Couvares, in *American Quarterly* (Dec. 1992), Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2715 N. Charles St., Baltimore, Md. 21218-4319.

Today's liberal-conservative clashes over the arts and public morality are hardly the first such conflicts in American history. The Roman Catholic Church's Legion of Decency in 1934 launched a campaign of movie boycotts and edged the film industry into self-censorship. The conflict, however, was not just a case of artistic freedom versus repressive moralism, contends Couvares, an Amherst College historian. The struggle between Hol-