Who was the greatest artist of the 20th century? A teacher once asked this question in a class I was taking. Half the room answered Duchamp, the other half Picasso. I remembered this question while taking in the Museum of Modern Art's magisterial survey of Picasso's sculpture. If Duchamp was the ego of the 20th century, than Picasso was the id — intuitive, sensual, impulsive. And yet the show reveals that Picasso may have been more in tune with Dada than history suggests.

Unfolding chronologically and episodically, dividing Picasso's works into sections based on his location, collaborator, or muse, the exhibition delves into the artist's life. It slowly reveals the compulsive personality who lived to make things (4,500 in total and some 700 sculptures, according to the exhibition catalogue), and thus did not always take himself or the things he made terribly seriously. Picasso rarely exhibited his sculptures and liked to keep them close.

The show opens with several sculptures made from wood. The origin story of Picasso's visit to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris and its result in his making the landmark Les Demoiselles D'Avignon (1907) is well known; less known is that the show also encouraged him to take up wood-carving. Influenced by African and Oceanic sculptures, Picasso whittled pieces of wood into jagged figures, moving sharply away from realism. What did he see in primitivism? Aside from a jittery iron-wire sculptures, composed in response to a request for a monument to his friend, the writer Apollinaire. (None of his proposals were accepted.) The culmination of these many attempts is Woman in the Garden (1929–30; Fig. 1), a seven-foot-tall assemblage of scrap metal painted white, which resolves into an image of a figure wandering among immense tropical plants. Picasso worked on this and several sculptures at this time with his friend, the metalworker Julio González, who enabled him to work on a larger and more ambitious scale.

In 1930, Picasso purchased the Château de Boisgeloup outside Paris, where he had ample space to make work as large as he liked. For the next several years, he experimented in plaster, making rounded, sensual figures such as Head of a Woman from 1932, considered by many to be one of several representations of his secret mistress, Marie-Thérèse Walter. He continued to experiment with found objects as material, using cardboard to imprint a textured pattern, or using screws and nails to stand in for body parts. When his then-wife, Olga Ruiz-Picasso, got the property as a result of their separation agreement in 1936, Picasso moved back to Paris. He remained in the city during the German occupation, despite being deemed a 'degenerate' artist by the Nazis, working in his studio bathroom (it was the only room with heat), churning out numerous animals and figures, such as Man with a Lamb in 1943, a poignant composition of a male figure protectively cradling a lamb, made in a single day. Ever active, when he wasn't sculpting or painting, he was ripping amusing shapes from paper, such as a small dog for his mistress, Dora Maar, after her lapdog disappeared. This seemingly tossed-off work, along with similarly made shapes of a skull and goat, appear surprisingly contemporary in our age of 'deskilling'.

The show climaxes with the cheerful ceramics and raucous assemblages of the late 1940s and 1950s (Fig. 3). Here his penchant for incorporating junkyard finds into his work comes full circle — the claws of a bird from 1958 are made from forks; a series of tall batters, arranged in a group as though watching the waves roll in at the beach, come magically to life, made merely from stray pieces of wood. During this period, Picasso was also working on public art, such as the immense sculpture in Daley Square in Chicago, supposedly a portrait of his mistress at the time, and which is represented here by maquettes. Yet it is the smaller, ad hoc pieces, that have more impact, pushing aside the mantle of 'genius' and 'master' and allowing viewers a close look at one man's restless, antic creativity.

Claire Barliant is a writer and curator who lives in Brooklyn.
1. Woman in the Garden, 1929-30, Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), welded and painted iron, 206 x 117 x 85cm. Musée Picasso, Paris

2. Glass of Absinthe, 1914, Pablo Picasso, painted bronze with absinthe spoon, 21.6 x 16.4 x 8.5cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York

3. Vase: Woman, 1948, Pablo Picasso, white earthenware, painted with slips, and iron wire, 47.5 x 16.5 x 11cm. Musée Picasso, Paris