

# WASHBURN



## A Brief Encounter: Picasso's Cup



*Pablo Picasso , Tasse et Bananes, 1908 , Courtesy of Washburn Gallery, New York.*

*"That is how it all began. Just through me getting a little piece of grit in my eye" -- Laura Jesson in David Lean's, Brief Encounter (1945) adapted from Noel Coward's play, Still Life: A Play in Five Scenes (1936)*

**By DAVID AMBROSE**, February 2022

Tucked away in the backroom at [Washburn Gallery](#) is an art chalice. At slightly more than 10 by 8 inches, it is a crisply painted white cup facing left in profile on a tabletop with only a single ripe banana as company. Not much different from the one shared by Dr. Alec Harvey and Laura Jesson in the refreshment room of the Milford Junction train station in Brief Encounter. Something about this modest cup announced its importance at a distance of about ten paces.

WASHBURN GALLERY

Lindsay & Thomas Inc., 177 Tenth Ave, New York, NY 10011 (212) 397-6780  
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I spotted the cup while looking at a show of the torn paper collage poetry of Anne Ryan (up until April 2<sup>nd</sup> and recently reviewed by Jonathan Goodman for Whitehot Magazine). The Washburn Gallery specializes in 20th - century American artists, yet this still life felt somehow out of place as if it was an interloper.

As I was about to leave the gallery to begin my journey to Penn Station for my train home, I politely asked at the front desk, "Who made that lovely still life in the backroom?" I was surprised by the response. Two words that if you are of a certain age – and I am - made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, "Pablo Picasso". I asked if I could take a closer look and the velvet rope was lifted (literally, they have a velvet rope).



*Dr. Alec Harvey (Trevor Howard) and Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson) in Brief Encounter (1945).*

The brim of the cup is painted at eye level. At its base -oddly also at eye level – is a murky umber form; wrapping around the cup's bowl like a lover's arm: the banana. Until I learned of the title of the painting - listed in Christian Zervos's Picasso Catalogue from 1932 - *Tasse et Bananes (Cup and Bananas)* - I hadn't noticed *the banana* at all. It is only partially visible, eclipsed by the cup; a cup that felt somehow self-illuminated as if a lightbulb had gone off inside it. The banana both buttresses it and echoes its form. Diagonal green dashes against the two ends of the peel vibrate like rustling leaves in a tree, hinting at a burgeoning kinship with another artist, Paul Cezanne. Above the cup, a burnt sienna cloud hovers as if the cup's contents were evaporating; realizing that its purpose had now shifted from beverage holder to the much loftier ground of art history. The cloud is halted in space by the horizontal line of a cast shadow of a cupboard against the wall; a compositional device used by Picasso to prevent our early exit. Closer inspection of that wall revealed a "small piece of grit," not much bigger than the one retrieved by Dr. Alec Harvey's handkerchief from Laura Jesson's right eye. An act of kindness in that train station café. One that led these two seemingly happily married people on their ill-fated affair.

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*Dr. Alec Harvey (Trevor Howard) and Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson) in Brief Encounter (1945).*

The painting was executed in the autumn of 1908 in Paris during Picasso's earliest engagement with Cubism; so, its small dimensions belie a much grander course. I would imagine that Picasso had dashed it off as part of a series of similar still lifes from the autumn of 1908 confirmed in Zervos. None are quite so sparse as *Tasse et Bananes*. It is as if Picasso had begun distilling his subject to its core. He had just turned twenty-seven. *Demoiselles d'Avignon* was a little over a year old. In October of that year, a major Cezanne memorial retrospective had just opened at the Salon de Automne staggering the art world from its moorings. Perhaps this simple still life of a cup had provided Picasso with a vessel for his journey to Cubism?

After studying this small gem of a painting; a still life in five parts: cup, banana, tabletop, cupboard, and wall, I called it a day. Exiting the gallery, I began my walk up Tenth Avenue to the train station. Picasso's small morning cup had served as a nightcap. A day of wandering the galleries in Chelsea had led me to this brief encounter. All the artwork I looked at from earlier in the day seemed to evaporate, much like the contents of that cup. Pablo Picasso can still do that. No matter how brief the encounter.

A casual glance at ten paces. That is how it all began. **WM**

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