THREE MUSICIANS

Who are the three masked musicians staring out at us from this painting? Luckily, their costumes and the objects they hold provide some clues. The Spanish artist Pablo Picasso has portrayed himself and his close friend, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire (gee-OHM ah-po-lee-nair), as popular characters from European theater and carnival traditions. Apollinaire, who had recently died of wounds he received in World War I and an illness, appears in the center as Pierrot (pee-air-oh), a mime, playing a clarinet. On the left, Picasso depicts himself with a violin under his chin, wearing a Harlequin (clown) costume covered with bright red and yellow triangles, the colors of the Spanish flag. A third friend, the poet Max Jacob, is dressed in the traditional brown robe of a monk, holding an accordion in one hand and a glass in the other. Picasso painted Three Musicians soon after the men’s close friendship ended due to Apollinaire’s death and Jacob’s decision to enter a monastery.

This abstract style of painting, known as Cubism, resulted from Picasso’s innovative experiments depicting people and objects from different angles while using simple shapes. In Three Musicians, he painted the shapes to look like layers of cut and pasted paper, a technique known as collage. He placed the figures in a shallow, stagelike space, perhaps influenced by the theater sets and costumes he was designing at the time. Like memories, some shapes are filled with dark, dull colors or are partially hidden, while others are bright and bold, perhaps expressing the artist’s longing for the happy, fun-filled days that he, Apollinaire, and Jacob had spent together.