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FOR RELEASE:
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NATIONAL GALLERY ANNOUNCES ACQUISITION OF MAJOR SYNTHETIC CUBIST PAINTING BY GRIS

WASHINGTON, D.C. December 14, 1976. A key work of synthetic cubism by Juan Gris, one of the major figures of modern painting, has been acquired by the National Gallery of Art. Entitled Fantômas after the subject of a highly popular mystery series that began in Paris in 1911, the picture was purchased through the Chester Dale Fund.

The painting will go on view December 17 in a gallery of other cubist paintings in the collection, including Picasso's Nude Woman, acquired in 1973, and Braque's Still Life: Le Jour.

Fantômas, painted in Paris in the summer of 1915, is a still life, incorporating a pipe, a newspaper masthead, a bowl of fruit, a glass, and the cover of one of the Fantômas books on a table top. Fantômas, a master criminal who relied on illusion and surprise in his exploits, fascinated Gris. The novels were also celebrated by Picasso and the cubist poet Apollinaire for the authors' ability to create mystery out of an ordinary setting. In 1913, Fantômas became an aesthetic cause célèbre when Apollinaire proposed raising the detective stories to the status of the classics and founded the Société des Amis de Fantômas to promote the idea. The series was written by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain.

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The still life, as well, is crucial in the development of the synthetic cubist style, characterized by translating the expressiveness which had matured in the collage technique of earlier cubist works into paintings in oil. The composition marks the beginning of the later synthetic cubist style. Beginning in the summer of 1915 Gris introduced movement into his compositions, and in Fantômas, this movement is directed by two arrow-shaped planes. In Fantômas, such details as the woodgraining and wall paper have a painterly finesse of rich color combined with clear design typical of Gris' collages.

In Fantômas, an important change occurs in the cubist style by defining volume through the use of solid black areas around the objects, giving the effect of lifting entire planes from the surface. In this painting, the dark block produces an effect of relief stronger than that seen in Gris' earlier collages, with the result that black as a color becomes a part of the composition.

The use of lettering in the painting--for the book title as well as for the masthead of Le Journal, the major French newspaper of the day--is part of the cubist tradition of creating abstract puns like those read in the works of poets Apollinaire and Max Jacob. Such elaborate puns in Fantômas, created by dividing the letters into colors and numerous plane levels within the picture, mark one of the last times they appear in cubist painting.

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Gris, born José Gonzalez in Madrid in 1887, moved to Paris in 1906, where he lived until his death in 1929. He worked with Matisse in the fall of 1914, which must have influenced his use of bold color. Gris worked as an illustrator for newspapers in Paris until 1911 when he began to devote his time to painting in the cubist style.

The Chester Dale Fund was created in 1965 under the bequest of the former president of the National Gallery for the purpose of making possible further acquisitions of French paintings. This is the third time that the fund has been used for a purchase. The other paintings acquired through the fund were Trumpeters of Napoleon's Imperial Guard, by Theodore Géricault in 1972, and Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains, by Eugene Delacroix in 1966.

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Note: The size of the painting is 60 cm (23 5/8") by 72 cm (28 3/8").

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