

PICASSO: MASTERPIECES FROM THE MUSÉE NATIONAL PICASSO, PARIS

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Background information

BARCELONA AND PARIS 1901-05

Picasso was nineteen years old when he arrived in Paris in 1900 to attend the *Exposition Universelle* (World's Fair), where his huge academic canvas *Last Moments* was presented as part of the official Spanish section. After the shock of discovering the French avant-garde—Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Symbolism—all at once, Picasso abandoned his academic painting style and experimented with different forms of personal expression.

In the next several years he would move between Barcelona and Paris before settling in the French capital in spring 1904. He moved into a dilapidated studio in Montmartre amidst a circle of friends that included other Spanish artists, the poets Max Jacob and Guillaume Apollinaire, and colorful street characters.

THE ROSE PERIOD 1905-06

While many of his fellow painters such as Henri Matisse were using vibrant color schemes, Picasso continued to paint in muted tonalities; the Blue Period was succeeded by a palette of predominantly pinks and ochres. Some of this work reflects the environment in the Catalan village of Gósol, where Picasso spent a sun-drenched and productive summer in 1906.

Moving away from the bleak urban scene, Picasso developed an iconography centered on the world of itinerant entertainers—carnival performers and clowns, who lived a gypsy-like existence on the fringe of society. The *saltimbanques* (acrobats) raised their families and cared for each other, so that even within this alternative world we find classic pictorial themes and relationships.

BEFORE AND AFTER LES DEMOISELLE D'AVIGNON 1905-08

On his return to Paris from Gósol, Picasso began intensive work that culminated in his early masterpiece, *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. no. 146), now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Working toward this painting Picasso created at least a thousand preliminary studies and sketches, including fifteen notebooks. The warm ochre tones of the summer turned increasingly chalky, figures were hammered flat, and hollow-eyed faces became more mask-like than ever. The painting would be shocking not only visually but in its subject matter—a bordello with nude women displaying themselves to the viewer.

In spring 1907 Picasso saw African and Oceanic art for the first time at Paris' Ethnographic Museum. Inspired by the carved sculptures and what he felt was their power over evil spirits, he repainted two of the faces in the *Femmes d'Alger* as colorful masks and years later called the work "my first exorcism painting." He immediately began to collect African art and eventually amassed a sizable collection. Invigorated by this exposure, as well as by the powerful 1907 Cézanne retrospective, Picasso embarked on another body of ground-breaking work that explored sculptural form in two dimensions.

THE CUBIST YEARS 1907-15

By 1909 Picasso's work was avidly collected by several vanguard collectors including Americans Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo, and the Russian Sergei Shchukin. Two top dealers, Ambroise Vollard and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, bought most of what Picasso painted. No longer impoverished, the artist moved into a new studio in Montmartre and left his bohemian life behind. He and Fernande Olivier separated in 1911 and Picasso fell in love with Eva Gouel, who first appeared in his work through disguised messages, as Picasso and Georges Braque introduced type and fragmented language into their canvases. The couple intended to marry but Eva became ill and died in 1915.

The glorious period of experimentation between Braque and Picasso, which revolutionized the depiction of space in art, came to an end with the declaration of war on August 2, 1914. Braque, Apollinaire and numerous other friends served in the war but as a Spanish citizen and lifelong pacifist Picasso did not, spending most of the war years outside of Paris as he continued the Cubist explorations on his own.

DEVELOPMENTS IN CUBISM

Picasso and Braque worked so closely together between 1909 and 1914 that their early Cubist works are nearly indistinguishable. As Picasso later recalled, “To make pictures was less important than to discover things all the time.” The shimmering, monochrome canvases, whose faceted geometric forms seem to hover before the viewer, took a new turn when Braque introduced stenciled letters in 1911, followed by *trompe-l'œil* typefaces and then actual pieces of newspaper. These innovations reasserted the flatness of the canvas and led the artists to playfully introduce coded messages into their works.

As the artists tried out different materials—cut-out wallpaper, house paint, sand, sheet music, calling cards—they continued to challenge the traditional role of illusion in painting. Picasso extended the *papier collé* (collage) technique to sculpture, cutting and folding paper and then metal, into ingenious three-dimensional constructions. He reintroduced color and pattern and even the sinuous drawing of his earlier work.

By 1916, the possibilities of pictorial space were infinite. For the rest of his career Picasso would freely draw on a vast range of styles and techniques as he liked and continue to challenge old distinctions between visual media. Looking back on the two artists’ collaboration that started it all, Braque compared it to mountain climbers roped together, while Picasso called his partner “the wife who loved me most.”

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY 1918-24

In early 1917 the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev of the Ballets Russes invited Picasso to travel to Italy and design the sets and costumes for a new ballet, *Parade*, created by his friend Jean Cocteau with music by Erik Satie. Picasso fell in love with one of the ballerinas, Olga Khokhlova, and married her the next year. The couple moved into a respectable bourgeois apartment in Paris, and in 1921 their son Paulo was born. These momentous developments coincided with a stylistic shift in his work that included a surprising return to figuration. Some followers, who had embraced Cubism as the only valid rendering of form, considered this a conservative retreat; but Picasso wanted neither to be part of a crowd nor tied to a single movement. What remained constant for him throughout these stylistic shifts was the physical reality of the painting. As writer John Richardson observed, “He did not want a painting to be an abstraction any more than he wanted it to be a facsimile. He wanted it to constitute a fact, a very specific fact.”

MORE REAL THAN REALITY 1923-33

The sense of well-being that emanated from Picasso’s early images of family life all but disappeared in the last half of the decade. Tensions arising at home, complicated by Olga’s frequent health problems and hospitalizations, were manifested in troubling new imagery. Seeking pictorial expressions of his inner anxiety, Picasso was influenced by the new Surrealist movement, led by André Breton.

Though he consistently expressed ambivalence toward all movements, Picasso exhibited with the Surrealists and contributed to their publications. Their articles on anthropology and the importance of the unconscious impacted his imagery but he preferred the original use of the term “sur-realism” coined by Apollinaire in 1917, which retained a relation with the natural world. As Picasso explained, “I am always trying to observe nature. Likeness is important to me, a deeper likeness, more real than reality, to the point of being surreal. This is how I imagined surrealism, but the word was used in an entirely different way.”

In fact the most significant new stimulus to Picasso’s imagery was his 1927 meeting of Marie-Thérèse Walter, who would dominate his art for the next decade. The secrecy of their early relationship led to disguised imagery, where it found its greatest alliance with Surrealism.

MUSE AND METAMORPHOSIS 1928-34

Picasso’s infatuation with his young mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter, who was just seventeen when he met her in 1927, dominated his drawings, sculptures and paintings for a ten-year period. Although her first presence in his work was covert, her strong classical features, blond hair and languid body asserted themselves in his visual repertoire and he no longer could keep their relationship a secret from his wife. In 1935 Marie-Thérèse gave birth to the artist’s second child, a daughter, Maya.

Images of Marie-Thérèse sleeping or reading are among the artist’s tenderest and most beautiful images. But Picasso also likened her rounded forms to inert boulders or bones, creating sculptural paintings that found a counterpart in an extraordinary series of sculpted heads. The 1930 purchase of the Château de Boisgeloup, northwest of Paris, enabled the artist to set up a large sculpture studio where he did his most sustained body of three-dimensional work since the Cubist period.

THE WEeping WOMAN 1936-39

In 1935 the Surrealist poet Paul Eluard introduced Picasso to the photographer and painter Dora Maar. In contrast to the docile Marie-Thérèse, who “did whatever I wanted her to,” Dora Maar challenged Picasso, which he found invigorating. She soon influenced a new, keyed-up visual style of acidic colors and sharp angles, and Picasso was inspired to use her tear-streaked face as the sign for tragedy and grief in anguished images responding to the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and World War II (1939-45).

PICASSO AND WAR 1933-1951

Dora Maar’s involvement in left-wing political activities left its mark on Picasso, who had never made overtly political works. *Guernica*, an enormous painting commissioned for the pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the 1937 World’s Fair in Paris, expressed searing outrage over the bombing of the Basque village of Guernica on April 26, 1937. Exiled from Franco’s Spain, Picasso never visited his home country after 1934.

During the German occupation of Paris, which began in 1940, Picasso remained mostly in Paris in a large studio in the rue des Grands-Augustins, where he continued to work throughout World War II. With the liberation of Paris in August 1944, a Picasso retrospective was organized for the Autumn Salon. In October that year he surprised many by joining the French Communist Party.

A NEW START IN SOUTHERN FRANCE 1946-1961

After the war Picasso lived almost exclusively in southern France, buying a succession of homes that could accommodate working space and his by now enormous collection. Accompanying him was Françoise Gilot, a young painter he had met in 1943 and first lived with in 1945. Together they had two children, Claude (born 1947) and Paloma (born 1949). The presence of young children in the aging artist’s life invigorated him and brought a new playfulness to his art. Unfortunately, the relationship was not to last; Françoise left Picasso in 1953, taking the children back to Paris. In 1964, when she published a memoir of their life together, the artist cut the three out of his life entirely.

Picasso met Jacqueline Roque in 1952; she moved in with him two years later and would stay with him for the rest of his life. An old master now himself, Picasso confronted artists of the past in a very deliberate way, painting variations on past masterpieces by Cranach, Delacroix, Velázquez and Manet. He outlived many of his contemporaries, and was particularly moved by the death of his lifelong friend and rival Henri Matisse, whom he considered his only peer. He said many times, “All things considered, there’s only Matisse.”

LATE WORK 1961-1973

In his 1980s Picasso was unceasingly productive, following his own advice to “only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone.” The hundreds of paintings, drawings and etchings from his last years chronicle a race against the inevitable end. A dreaded ulcer operation in November 1965 compelled the artist to curtail his old habits. He told one friend that while age had forced him to give up making love and smoking, “the desire remains.” Indeed, carnal appetites were now sated voyeuristically, playing a starring role in Picasso’s late imagery. Because he equated sexuality with creativity, these late erotic images speak to his essence as an artist.

Picasso also introduced new characters of musketeers and matadors, inspired by seventeenth-century literature and the paintings of Rembrandt, Velázquez and Goya. Role-playing, costume, and performance—always an interest—find vigorous expression in these works. While his paintings of this period were initially dismissed by critics for hasty execution and vulgar subject matter, they are now celebrated for their urgent, gripping vitality and the fearlessness with which Picasso attacks new painting challenges.

Pablo Picasso died April 8, 1973. He is buried on the grounds of the château of Vauvenarges.