

Recreating Picasso

Andrew Butterfield

A Life of Picasso:

The Triumphant Years, 1917–1932

by John Richardson.

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Volume three of John Richardson's *A Life of Picasso* has now appeared and, like the first two installments of the biography,* it is a work so rich with information and insight that it will forever change our understanding of the artist. The book opens in 1917 when Picasso was thirty-five and closes in 1932 when he was fifty-one; it was during this span that he became the richest and most famous painter on earth. Yet the volume's subtitle, "The Triumphant Years," refers more to his sustained artistic success than to his worldly prosperity.

Throughout this period, in a rush of ceaseless creativity, Picasso devised and explored one new experiment in style after another, shifting back and forth between many different modes of representation at a rate of speed and with a measure of confidence unmatched in the history of art. It was for Picasso a time of innovation nearly as bold and original as that of the first Cubist period that began with *Les Femmes d'Alger* in 1907, but the very diversity of his experiments has made them difficult for historians to grasp or explain. Revealing himself to be a master of criticism as well as of biography, Richardson not only casts new light on each of the innovations Picasso discovered, he also shows, better than anyone has before, how the various experiments were interrelated.

The book starts with Picasso's trip to Italy in the spring of 1917 in the company of Jean Cocteau, Sergei Diaghilev, and Léonide Massine, three of his four collaborators on the ballet *Parade* that they were then planning. Erik Satie, the composer of *Parade*, stayed home in Paris, but Igor Stravinsky joined the group in Rome and swiftly became close friends with Picasso. Stravinsky and Picasso studied the Sistine Chapel and the museums of Rome, and with Massine and Cocteau explored the ruins of Pompei and Herculaneum. In Rome they went to the puppet theater, and in Naples they attended performances of *commedia dell'arte*, experiences that not only helped shape *Parade* but later directly inspired the ballet *Pulcinella* which Stravinsky, Massine, and Picasso created in 1920.

The trip to Italy lasted a mere ten weeks but with it nearly everything changed in Picasso's life and work. The encounter with classical sculpture in Rome and Naples helped the artist begin a new style, one that often featured large and volumetric figures, either nude or wearing Greco-Roman drapery, and seemingly set on the shores of the timeless Mediterranean sea. These works are dreamy and poetical as if illustrating scenes from an unknown idyll by Virgil or Ovid. After

*The first two volumes, *A Life of Picasso: The Prodigy, 1881–1906* (1991) and *A Life of Picasso: The Cubist Rebel, 1907–1916* (1996), have just been reissued in paperback by Knopf.



Pablo Picasso: The Dance, 1925

Picasso's nearly ten-year engagement with the flat and angular planes of Cubist still lifes, portraits, and harlequins, it was a major departure in both style and subject matter. For Picasso throughout much of the 1920s classical imagery was to remain a vital alternative to his ongoing experiments with Cubism. As Richardson explains:

For Picasso, far and away the greatest revelation of Naples was the incomparable Farnese collection of monumental Greek and Roman sculptures, which are the principal glory of the Museo Nazionale. The influence of these marbles would take three years or more to percolate fully into Picasso's work. Signs that their three-dimensional monumentality would alternate with the flatness of synthetic cubism first occur in his 1920 figure paintings. From then on the gigantism of the Farnese marbles will make itself felt in the increasingly sculptural look of his paintings as well as in his actual sculptures. Indeed, one might say that Picasso's rebirth as a great sculptor was a direct consequence of the revelation of the Farnese galleries. The marbles would give Picasso back the sense

of scale that cubism had denied him by limiting the image to the size of the subject. They would classicize his work far more effectively than the antiquities he had studied in the Louvre. And they would embody the sacred fire—in this case the sacred fire of Olympus—for which he was always searching.

Another consequence of the trip was the beginning of his long association with the theater. Over the next seven years, Picasso created the costumes and settings for several major ballets, not only *Parade* and *Pulcinella*, but *Tricorne* and *Cuadro Flamenco*, all for Diaghilev's company, the Ballets Russes. In addition, he designed Satie's ballet *Mercure*, made the drop curtain for another Diaghilev ballet, *Le Train bleu*, and conceived the sets for Cocteau's adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Work for the theater enabled him to design on a larger scale than he ever had before, and, more importantly, to collaborate with three of the greatest modern composers, de Falla, Satie, and Stravinsky. The hours he spent watching dancers also profoundly affected his art: during the 1920s for the first time figures in motion became an impor-

tant part of his imagery. According to Richardson, Picasso's 1925 masterpiece, *The Dance*, owes some of its demonic energy to memories of women shimmying to ragtime in Massine and Vladimir Dukelsky's ballet *Zéphire et Flore*.

It was on his trip to Italy, too, that Picasso first met Olga Khokhlova, a dancer with the Ballets Russes. At the outset of 1917 Picasso was determined to get married; he had recently proposed to and been rejected by two women in quick succession. He now set his sights on Olga. Her appeal for Picasso mystified his friends and continues to puzzle historians. More than one contemporary described her as a "nothing," and about the best anyone could think to say of her was that she had good taste in clothing. Picasso's earlier girlfriends had all been bohemians; the woman he had proposed to just a few months before was a high-spirited, bisexual nymphomaniac. By contrast Olga was the proper and snobbish daughter of a Russian colonel and still a virgin. Picasso's early portraits of her have a tender and melancholy air and Richardson plausibly suggests that it was Olga's vulnerability that attracted the painter to her. He argues, too, that her social ambition appealed to Picasso's secret bourgeois streak.

With his marriage to Olga in 1918 Picasso entered into what his friend Max Jacob called his "époque des duchesses." Picasso shed his espadrilles and overalls and started wearing bespoke suits instead. He moved to Paris's fashionable eighth arrondissement, taking an apartment next door to the gallery of his principal dealer, Paul Rosenberg. He discarded and estranged old companions from his early days in Paris, and lost his closest friend, Guillaume Apollinaire, who died in the influenza epidemic. That Picasso told Gertrude Stein in the same letter of his move and of Apollinaire's death shows how quick was the break from his former way of life.

Picasso joined the heady world of high society in Paris. He became a friend of Étienne de Beaumont, Winnie de Polignac, and the Vicomte de Noailles, characters literally out of the pages of Proust (another acquaintance of Picasso in this period). Richardson is astonishingly successful at recreating this lost world. He lovingly describes one of those rare periods when genius, wealth, and fashion all aligned in the creation of art that was both startlingly new and of permanent value. It was a world in which the premiere of Louis Buñuel's film *L'Âge d'or* was held in the magnificent *hôtel particulier* of the Noailles, the film's patrons, in a room with gilded and mirrored walls and beneath a gigantic baroque painting on the ceiling; a world where Coco Chanel collaborated with Cocteau on creating an avant-garde play, where Gerald Murphy and John Dos Passos helped paint the sets for a new Stravinsky ballet, and where Beaumont commissioned Picasso, Satie, and Massine to devise an entertainment, *La statue retrouvée*,

for the delight of the guests at one of the many costume balls he gave.

Richardson makes it clear that the seemingly endless rounds of parties, premieres, and happenings were amusing for the beau monde and vital for the avant-garde of Paris in the 1920s. Picasso was an observer and participant at many of these affairs. For example, just a few days after Beaumont's ball, Picasso attended a private performance of Stravinsky's new work, *Les Noces*, given at the *hôtel particulier* of Winnie de Polignac. The following night he went to the public premiere of the ballet, and later attended a party to commemorate the occasion, hosted by Gerald and Sara Murphy on a barge in the Seine. As Richardson describes it:

In the annals of social history, the Murphys' party rates almost as high as the Rousseau banquet in 1908. Stravinsky switched the place cards; Gontcharova read palms; Marcelle Meyer played Scarlatti; and, as usual, Cocteau tried to steal the show.... As dawn broke, Kochno and Ansermet (the conductor of *Les Noces*) took down the gigantic laurel wreath, inscribed "*Les Noces—Hommages*," which Sara had put in the main saloon, and held it like a hoop for Stravinsky to take a running jump through.

Two weeks after that celebrated affair, Picasso attended another legendary event, Tristan Tzara's *Evening of the Bearded Heart* at the Théâtre Michel. The night began peaceably enough with music by Stravinsky, Georges Auric, and Darius Milhaud, but it soon degenerated into a violent brawl between the Dadaists and the Surrealists, and the police had to intervene. Picasso thoroughly enjoyed that evening.

When not working in his studio, Picasso had a nearly inexhaustible need for social and intellectual stimulus, and he fed off the energy, and sometimes the ideas, of friends and acquaintances. According to Coco Chanel, "Picasso did a great job of hoovering up anyone in his path." Others used more violent metaphors. Friends of the painter, especially fellow artists, sometimes compared him to a vampire, cannibal, bandit, or thief. Nonetheless many were drawn to the painter not so much because of his fame but because of his extraordinary vitality. To be in his presence was to be filled with expectation that something important or magical still could happen. Hence Gerald Murphy, for example, said of one gathering in 1923, "[Gertrude Stein] and Picasso were phenomenal together, each stimulated the other to such an extent that everyone felt recharged witnessing it." In 1929 Léonide Massine wrote to Étienne de Beaumont, "Picasso will help us.... I am full of enthusiasm.... We will take another direction—there are so many beautiful things to be done—discuss all of this with Picasso."

A staggering number of poets, painters, critics, patrons, collectors, and socialites cross paths with Picasso in Richardson's book. The author is a portraitist of uncommon skill and in a page or two he is able to sketch with vivid detail each of these many characters. He dashes off short and memo-

vable biographies of Jean Cocteau, Coco Chanel, Michel Leiris, Léonide Massine, and dozens of other remarkable figures. Richardson is especially good at keeping track of how the personal lives of all these men and women were interrelated:

On August 6, shortly after returning to Paris, Picasso had a visit from Jean Hugo and his fiancée Valentine Gross—portraitist, balletomane, bluestocking, muse—who had kept the peace when Picasso and Satie were working on *Parade* and having problems with Cocteau's pop gimmicks. Valentine was famously *à la page*. She knew everything that was going on in contemporary art, literature, music, and ballet as well as society. She kept Picasso, who relished gossip, abreast of Cocteau's capers, Satie's witticisms, and the sayings of the "new Rimbaud," the barely sixteen-year-old writer Raymond Radiguet, nicknamed "Monsieur Bébé." Radiguet had been discovered by the writer André Salmon, passed on to Max Jacob, seduced by Picasso's former fiancée, Irène Lagut, and served up to Cocteau, who would fall obsessively in love with him. Picasso would soon take him under his powerful wing.

Richardson's pleasure in recounting such stories is evident, and yet there is a serious purpose to his method. It is a principle of the study, announced in the introduction of the first volume, that Picasso must be seen in relation to his *tertulia*, the large and ever-changing circle of friends who gathered around the artist.

In 1912 the poet Josep Junoy wrote that "an irresistible force pushes [Picasso] relentlessly towards new unknown horizons." This force was still at work in the 1920s. By the middle of the decade Picasso had become increasingly impatient with the often frivolous atmosphere of high society. He began to avoid the company of the Murphys, the Beaumonts, and the other grandees whose friendship he previously had enjoyed. Although Picasso still went about town in a chauffeur-driven car, he posted a sign, "*Je ne suis pas un gentleman*," on his studio door. Furthermore, his relationship with Olga steadily deteriorated. Whereas once he had portrayed her as a sensitive soul, already by 1923 he regularly depicted her as anxious and distant, and by 1925 he had begun to represent her as a monster with a vagina dentata for a mouth.

During 1925, Picasso started painting in a new and shockingly original style, featuring extreme and grotesque deformations of the human face and body. The breakthrough in this new approach came with *The Dance*, a work Picasso made to commemorate the death of his old friend Ramon Pichot. Painted in jagged blocks of garish color, this large canvas depicts three

giant nudes—maenads fresh from the murder of Orpheus, in Richardson's eloquent description—who flail and gyrate with wild abandon. This picture is frequently cited as a turning point in Picasso's career almost as radical as that of *Les Femmes d'Alger*. From this point on, he invented fantastic mutations of the human body with ever greater freedom and expressive power. Writing of these works in 1928, Christian Zervos, the painter's friend and biographer, said that Picasso was attempting "to attain art's extreme visual limits."

It is common to speak of this phase of Picasso's output by referring to Sur-



Pablo Picasso: Large Bather (Olga), 1929

realism and its emphasis on dream imagery and "convulsive beauty." Indeed, in the mid-1920s André Breton and the other Surrealists did everything they could to win Picasso over to their side. They proclaimed him to be the indispensable precursor of their movement; with his permission, they published his photograph with that of other members of the group, and used his paintings and drawings, including *The Dance*, to illustrate articles in *La Révolution surréaliste*, a leading journal of the movement.

But Richardson cautions that Picasso's relationship with Surrealism is easily overstated. He stresses that, unlike the Surrealists', Picasso's art was always rooted in some concrete reality, no matter how unreal the imagery may seem; even his most hallucinatory pictures are representations of the people in his life and of his emotions for them. He cites Picasso's opinion that automatism, a Surrealist technique for generating pictures or texts without conscious control, was a fraud; he quotes the painter's statement to Dora Maar that "the sources of Surrealism are a rather dubious mixture"; and he points out that Picasso himself did not lend any pictures to Breton's exhibition "Surrealist Painting" in the

fall of 1925. In Richardson's view, Picasso differed fundamentally from the Surrealists and generally went his own way.

After the revolutionary works of 1925, the artist produced relatively little the following year. It was something of a fallow period for Picasso: he was looking for a new path in painting and for a new *raison d'être* in life. On January 8, 1927, he found it. Cruising the streets of Paris in search for *l'amour fou* he came upon a seventeen-year-old girl standing outside the Galeries Lafayette. Intrigued by her looks, he asked to do her portrait and announced, "I am Picasso." She had never heard of him; he took her to a bookstore and showed her a book about his work to prove that he was a famous artist. Thus began his affair with Marie-Thérèse Walter, one of the great loves of his life.

Over the next eight years Picasso's passion for Marie-Thérèse inspired a furor of creativity in the artist unmatched since the invention of Cubism. The twinned themes of his new works were his erotic rapture for his mistress and his anger and loathing for his wife. To capture the absorption he felt for Marie-Thérèse he invented a new figure type that combined her breasts and his penis in a biomorphic fantasy, a hybrid Richardson calls the *femme-phallus*. Picasso also regularly depicted her in the throes of passion, most memorably in the series of orgasmic paintings he made of her in 1931 and 1932, including *The Dream* (see illustration on page 16) and *Girl Before a Mirror*. At the same time, he made demonic images of Olga as a kind of tortured and murderous monster, all teeth and claws and octopus limbs. Whether moved by love or by hate, in these images Picasso attained a lyrical intensity and a freedom of invention the likes of which had rarely been seen in European art. Richardson summarizes the new dynamic:

Like many another two-timing husband, Picasso soon found himself leading two separate lives: as an overtly respectable *père de famille*—weekends at smart Normandy resorts—and as a secluded Bohemian with a mistress, whom none of his friends, except possibly for Leiris and Tzara, was allowed to meet. This pattern would be reflected in Picasso's imagery. Marie-Thérèse's images would be suffused with errant sexuality; whereas those of Olga, who appears far more often in his work than people realize, would be suffused with fear, anger, and despair—the consequences of Picasso's shamanic effort to exorcise her psychological as well as physical maladies....

Desire for Marie-Thérèse would engender some of his most romantic and erotic works, but by virtue of their Goyesque darkness, the images fueled by Olga's

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problems would be more disturbingly powerful.

With the arrival of Marie-Thérèse, the character of Richardson's book changes. In the first two thirds, Richardson is at pains to balance the account of Picasso's life with a description of his work, and he sometimes seems even more interested in the biography than the art. By contrast the last third of the book is a kind of extended essay in critical interpretation, and it is among the most deeply inspired accounts of an artist's work that I have read. Consider, for example, the following passage:

Unlike the *Large Nude in a Red Armchair*, which is very much a painting, the next tragic portrayal of Olga, the *Large Bather* (May 26, 1929) [see illustration on page 14], is a conceptual sculpture—a monument that Picasso treats with the dignity and solemnity due to a sacrificial victim. It is dusk. A naked Olga stands, like a pillar of chalk carved from the cliffs of Pourville, staring numbly out to sea, her angular arms clasped in the fifth position above her head. Her skinny body—note the protruding ribs—is cloaked in a dark shroud, whose *craquelure* is certainly intentional. The light is northern, the sky a thunderous gray, the beach is the color and texture of coffee grounds. And yet, despite the gloom, this portrayal of Olga is one of the few of the great late denunciations in which Picasso shows a glimmer of mercy....

For all the violence of his imagery and his cult of Sade, Picasso deplored physical violence. To fight back at Olga, he used his paintbrush, and only resorted to force to protect himself. These cruel paintings acted as lightning conductors, and they apparently worked. Home movies Picasso made two years later, around the time he was working on the convulsively cruel *Repose*, reveal a seemingly united family at play in the garden at Boisgeloup.

Not only is the language here decisive and fresh; Richardson writes about Picasso, Olga, and Marie-Thérèse with a degree of empathy rarely found in discussion of the visual arts. Richardson does not idealize Picasso, showing how he could cruelly turn against people once close to him, as if to exorcise any lingering hold they might have on him.

Picasso was omnivorous in his interests and Richardson is excellent in tracking down the texts and images that the painter assimilated into his work. Richardson shows, for example, that some of the most seemingly fantastical images had their inspiration in the plates of Gray's *Anatomy* and

Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica*. He also convincingly suggests that the artist derived the bizarre and interlocking forms of his painting *Figures on the Seashore* from an illustration of a pile of phallic ex-votos in the eighteenth-century text *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*. In a similar manner, Richardson demonstrates that the legs of the *Nude Standing by the Sea* are a visual pun on the famous cliffs of Etretat, celebrated in the paintings of Monet and Courbet. Of course Picasso's pictures can be enjoyed and interpreted without knowledge of such references; but by revealing these sources Richardson takes us one step closer both to seeing how his mind worked and to understanding the often private code of his art.



Pablo Picasso: *The Dream*, 1932

Richardson is especially judicious in the use of quotations by the painter and his friends to explicate aspects of Picasso's art. For example, seeking illumination of Picasso's free manipulation of human proportions, Richardson cites the artist's memory of a dream:

When I was a child, I often had a dream that used to frighten me greatly. I dreamed that my legs and arms grew to an enormous size and then shrank back just as much in the other direction. And all around me, in my dream, I saw other people going through the same transformations, getting huge or very tiny. I felt terribly anguished every time I dreamed about that.

Obsession with Marie-Thérèse helped inspire Picasso to make sculptures again for the first time in many years. The chapters Richardson dedicates to this undertaking are among the finest ever written on Picasso as a sculptor. Picasso wanted to make a monument for the grave of Guillaume Apollinaire, one that would be sufficiently outrageous to celebrate the revolutionary spirit of his iconoclastic friend.

The new *femme-phallus* figure type seemed fitting for this task.

At the same time, Picasso also began making wiry constructions out of welded iron—sculptures not defined by their mass, but rather by the way that they "partake of space and air," as the critic and publisher Tériade said in 1928. The first culmination of this new endeavor was Picasso's *Woman in the Garden*, a joyful image that resembles something like a large bouquet of swaying and unfurling flowers. As Richardson surprisingly establishes, this sculpture was Picasso's response to Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne* at the Villa Borghese in Rome. In the end the oversight committee for the Apollinaire monument rejected this and all of Picasso's other

proposals. But in the course of making these sculptures, Picasso dispensed forever with the ideal of representational sculpture he had inherited from Rodin, replacing it instead with something more totemic and fetishistic. Picasso continued to pursue this new concept of statuary in the figures and heads of Marie-Thérèse that he made at his studio at Boisgeloup.

To celebrate his fiftieth birthday in 1931, Picasso published a set of his new engravings illustrating scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The painter loved Ovid's poem, and as Richardson suggests, the first line of the text comes astonishingly close to Picasso's own view of his art: "My soul would sing of metamorphoses./But since, o gods, you were the source of these/bodies becoming other bodies, breathe/your breath into my book of changes." To seek divine inspiration both for

and through the transfiguration of the body is a fundamental principle in his work.

For over one hundred years, nearly all the fundamental accounts of Picasso have been by the poets and critics who frequented for a time the artist's inner circle. Guillaume Apollinaire, Gertrude Stein, André Malraux, Roland Penrose, and Michel Leiris are among the distinguished figures who have written about Picasso and together these texts constitute something like a group portrait of the artist. John Richardson's *A Life of Picasso* is the last work that will ever be written by a friend of the painter, and it is the culminating effort in this series of biographies. It is a magnificent achievement. Sixteen years ago in a review of the first volume in *The Burlington Magazine*, the historian, painter, and critic John Golding said that when completed *A Life of Picasso* might prove to be the most remarkable biography of an artist ever written. Now that three volumes have been published, this prediction seems likely to be true. That the fourth and final volume will include the years in which Richardson knew Picasso makes the reader hope all the more that it will appear before long. □

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