

Picasso

Takes on the Masters

by Alison McLean, *Smithsonian*, October 1997

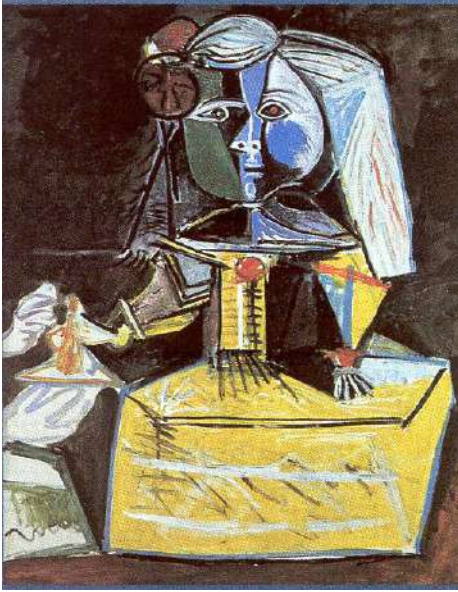
**A BOOK BY SUSAN GALASSI EXPLAINS WHY
THE ARTIST WITH AN EYE ON THE FUTURE
KEPT RETURNING TO THE ART OF THE PAST**

Gustave Courbet, whose provocative *Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine* (left) shocked the public when it was exhibited at the Salon of 1857, was, for Picasso, a model of an innovative artist. In his 1950 variation on the painting (below), Picasso makes linear patterns of Courbet's painterly drapery, while still emphasizing the earlier artist's use of thickly applied paint.



Picasso painted 45 variations of Velazquez's 1656 masterpiece *Las Meninas* (bottom, left). In one variation (right) the figures are swallowed by the pattern of the space around them; in another (next page) the princess grasps the disembodied hand of her maid.





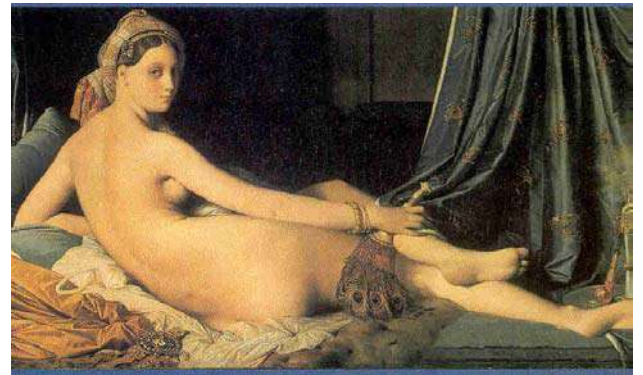
"THE PAINTER TAKES WHATEVER IT IS AND DESTROYS IT. At the Same time, He gives it another life."

---Pablo Picasso

"A painter's atelier should be a laboratory," said Pablo Picasso in 1945. "One doesn't do a monkey's job here: one invents." Picasso, the inventor of whole new systems of painting for the 20th century, never aped the accomplishments of past masters. Yet throughout his career he explored issues of style, structure and meaning by creating variations of works by other artists.

These explorations are the subject of a book by Susan Galassi, associate curator of the Frick Collection in New York and a Picasso scholar. Published by Harry N. Abrams, *Picasso's Variations on the Masters: Confrontations with the Past* documents the artist's lifelong use of his predecessors' work as a spark for his own creative processes, and as a way of demonstrating his own place in the tradition of European art.

In his early years, Picasso's occasional variations were fueled by a sense of competition with past artists. Picasso was fascinated by the work of the French Neoclassical artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. In *Odalisque, After Ingres*, an early variation done in 1907



when he was 26, for example, Picasso ignores the face and character of the woman in Ingres's *Grand Odalisque* (right), concentrating instead on defining her structure and surroundings. Taking Ingres's subtle distortions of the figure several degrees further, he translates Ingres's reclining nude into his own recently-developed Cubist style. Many of the variations are infused with the artist's sense of humor; in a parody of Manet's *Olympia*, Picasso inserts a portrait of himself into the scene in the role of the courtesan's client.



In 1957, at age 76, Picasso spent four intense months producing 45 variations of Velazquez's masterpiece *Las Meninas* from 1656. These works, Galassi points out, are a "process of continuous transformation." This transformation is most visible in the 14 works that focus on the central character of Velazquez's painting, the young Spanish princess. She appears in some as a series of refined Cubist abstractions and in another as a glow of expressionist energy; in a more naturalistic version the artist gives her the features of his daughter Paloma. In Picasso's mind there was no more truth in the last painting than the first; for him creativity involved constant change. "A picture," he had said to a friend in 1935, "lives a life like a living creature, undergoing the changes imposed on us by our life from day to day."

"When I paint I feel that all the artists of the past are behind me."

---Pablo Picasso



“What I really like about el Greco are his portraits of these gentlemen with their pointed hands.”

--Pablo Picasso

In his *Portrait of a Painter, after El Greco*, from 1950 (right),

Picasso transforms the direct gaze of the painter in El Greco's portrait of his son (above); Picasso's painter, whose profile is superimposed on his frontal face, could only have Cubist vision.

“Cubism is no different from any other school of painting. The same principles and the same elements are common to all.”

--Pablo Picasso



Picasso's work remains extremely popular. "I think we've stayed interested in Picasso because his work encompasses so much of the past," says Galassi. "Although he set up a whole new concept of art for the 20th century, he was working within the context of art history. The dialogue was always there."

By Alison McLean

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Excerpted from Kathleen Krull, *Lives of the Artists*, 1995, 54 – 59.

AT THE BULLFIGHTS PABLO PICASSO

BORN IN MALAGA, SPAIN, 1881
DIED IN MOUGINS, FRANCE, 1973

Spanish painter, sculptor, graphic artist, and ceramicist-
Considered the foremost figure of
Twentieth-century art

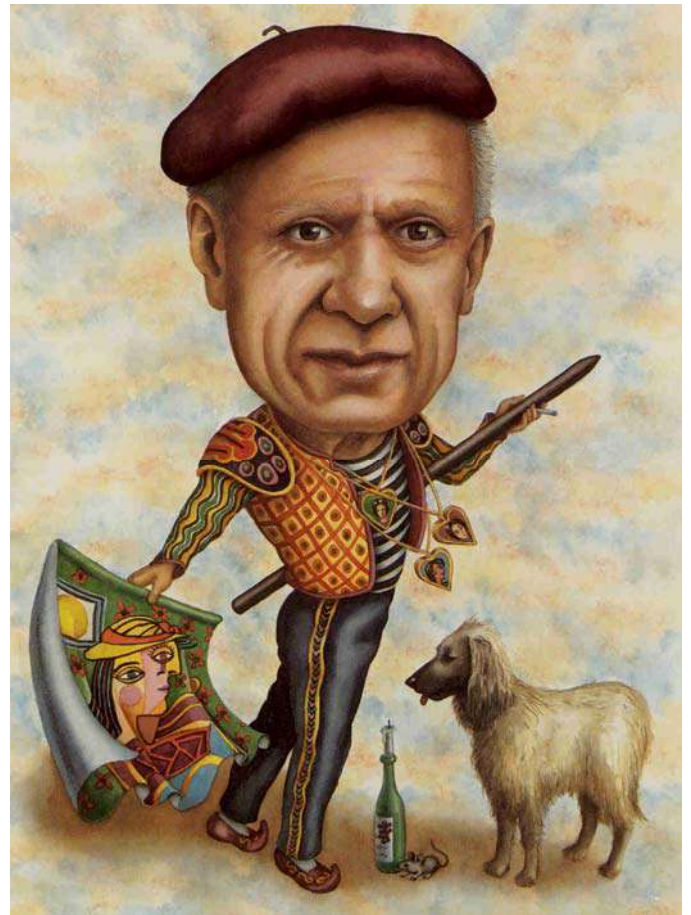
PABLO PICASSO grew up indulged by the five women in his household. He hated authority and was not a good student—possibly because of dyslexia, he had trouble learning to read and write. Instead of doing his schoolwork, he would bring a pigeon to class and spend his time drawing it.

He had his first exhibit at age thirteen, when he showed his paintings in the back room of an umbrella store. Later he hung out at the Cafe Four Cats and had an exhibit there, too, but the only works that sold were to people whose portraits he had done. He left for Paris at age eighteen, wearing his black corduroy suit. Just before his departure, he wrote on his most recent self-portrait: "I the king. I the king. I the king."

In Paris, though, he lived less than royally. His home was a garret; he worked by the light of a single candle he stuck into a bottle. Occasionally he could not even afford the candle. He used books for pillows, sometimes burned drawings to keep warm, kept a white mouse as a pet, and ate fried potatoes, beans, and omelettes.

When his place was robbed, thieves stole everything but his art. Whenever he had enough money he went to the bullfights, which he had loved as a child, fascinated by the bullfighters' lack of fear. One of his nicknames for himself was Eye of the Bull, and he liked to play his friends against each other, using one as a red flag and the other as a bull. Some thought Picasso was even built like a bullfighter, strong and powerful.

He did seem massive but was only five feet two inches tall. Although he never exercised, he was always fit and had unusual stamina. He could stand in front of a canvas for seven or eight hours at a stretch. "Work is the most important" was his favorite motto, and he was hugely productive.



A master of publicity, Picasso decided early on that the amount of money a painting sold for was directly related to the legend surrounding the artist: "It's not what an artist does that counts, but what he is." And so, with his penetrating stare and a lit cigarette constantly between his lips, he radiated self-confidence and cultivated a fiery image. He liked to be in absolute command of every situation.

Although usually he got the adulation he craved, sometimes it was too much; once when he was surrounded by a cheering crowd, he took out the gun he carried whenever he left his studio and fired it into the air. Within seconds the area around him was deserted.

Picasso knew everyone. He hid in air-raid shelters with the writer Gertrude Stein—a longtime friend—during World War I and gave her advice when her poodle died. He often walked the composer Erik Satie home, doffing his hat and saying, "Good night, Mr. Satie," and he drew a portrait of composer Igor Stravinsky that military authorities were sure was a secret map. Writer Ernest Hemingway came to visit immediately after World War II and brought him a box of hand grenades. Yet he was notorious for cruelty to friends, other artists, bystanders; it was said that living with him meant wearing armor twenty-four hours a day.

Some of Picasso's romantic relationships were with famous women (the ballerina Olga Koklova, the painter and photographer Dora Maar, the painter Francoise Gilot), and some were not. He would walk up to a woman and say, "I'm Picasso! You and I are going to do great things together." He was not good at making decisions and was sometimes involved with two or three women at the same time, preferring to let the women fight it out. Neighbors didn't always approve of his lifestyle and at least once threw stones at his windows in protest. Jacqueline, his second and last wife, was the only person he could stand to have around when he painted.

Picasso went to great lengths to entertain his four small children—dressing up in women's underwear, drawing on tablecloths, performing magic tricks with paper towels, preparing birthday dinners made up entirely of different kinds of chocolate desserts. As his children grew older, however, he lost some of his interest in them. His favorite clothes were

striped sailors' jerseys, baggy trousers, Turkish slippers, and berets (especially after he started losing his hair). He kept his wallet in the inside pocket of his coat, fastened with a safety pin for extra security; friends were amused at the trouble he had to go to every time he wanted to pay for something. He had certain suspicions—he believed, for example, that if his hair clippings fell into the wrong hands, they could be used against him. He didn't like the telephone and didn't get one until one son almost died when the family couldn't call for medical help. He threw nothing away, not even empty cigarette packs and the paper and ribbons from packages. He always locked his studio, and absolutely no one was allowed to dust it.

He kept to a diet of fish, vegetables, rice pudding, grapes, raspberries crushed in milk, large pieces of fresh ginger, carrot and pea soup, and mineral water. His mid-afternoon snack was lime-blossom tea and toast.

Restless, he moved often. He bought one of his three mansions in the south of France for the price commanded by one of his still lifes, which tickled him. In one chateau he covered the walls of the luxurious bathroom -where his wife would give him his bath—with wild jungle beasts. In his last villa, Notre-Dame-de-Vie, he was protected by electronic gates and guard dogs. There was hardly any tamable animal he didn't shelter at some point, including a monkey, Esmeralda the goat, reptiles, and numerous Afghan hounds. As soon as he could afford it he hired a chauffeur: "Driving a car is very bad for a painter's wrists!"



Picasso might have liked this book, or at least this chapter. After 1945 about six books on Picasso were published each year, and he enjoyed reading them. Knowing that anything he said would eventually show up in the papers, he subscribed to a service that clipped articles for him. At the public premiere of a documentary about him, he amused the audience by calling out for a second showing –and then a third.

Gradually he cut himself off from almost everyone except his fans; he even refused to meet his grandchildren. At his eightieth birthday party—for which four thousand invitations were sent—he arrived escorted by police. He remained vital and prolific and in his ninetieth year did two hundred paintings. He was still working the day he died, two years later, of heart failure. His last words were to his doctor: "You are wrong not to be married. It's useful."

He died without a will, and his estate, valued at hundreds of millions of dollars, was eventually divided between Jacqueline, three children, and two grandchildren.

ARTWORKS

Picasso's early days of Paris poverty are known as the Blue Period because everything he painted—self-portraits, beggars, harlequins, and musicians such as *The Old Guitarist* (right)—came out sad and blue.

Then followed the Pink Period, when Picasso began his first real romantic relationship (with a neighbor) and grew happier. Its first picture is considered to be *The Young Girl with a Basket of Flowers*, bought by Gertrude Stein. Paris papers called another Pink Period work, *Family of Saltimbanques*, "grotesque and infamous," but the spectacular price paid for the painting of six circus performers changed Picasso's life.

Guernica is Picasso's response to the German bombing of a Spanish town by that name, in which sixteen hundred civilians died. During the German occupation of Paris during World War II, Picasso kept a large photo of *Guernica* on the wall of his studio. A Nazi officer once saw it and said, "So it was you who did that," to which Picasso replied, "No, you did it."



The model for Picasso's famous peace dove, created for a Peace Congress held after World War II, was one of Matisse's birds. Posters of it were all over Paris when Picasso's daughter was born; he named her Paloma (Spanish for dove).