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## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Art Review | 'Picasso: Mosqueteros'

### Going All Out, Right to the End



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

An exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea features works painted by Picasso in the decade before his death in 1973, including four from 1967.

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In the main, Picasso only got better. That's the take-away from the staggering exhibition of Picasso's late paintings and prints at the Gagosian Gallery.



Gagosian Gallery

"Head of a Matador," from 1970.

One of the best shows to be seen in New York since the turn of the century, it proves that contrary to decades of received opinion, Picasso didn't skitter irretrievably into an abyss of kitsch, incoherence or irrelevance after this or that high-water mark. For some, his decline began as early as 1914, when he and Braque went their separate ways after inventing Cubism. Others deferred until the arrival of the bourgeois Olga Khokhlova in 1917, or the pliant Marie-Thérèse Walter in 1927, or the end of World War II. But the mid-1950s have been generally accepted as the point of no return.

That stance has steadily eroded over the last 25 years, and should finally bite the dust here. The 50 paintings and 49 prints on view demonstrate that in the decade preceding his death in 1973 at 91, Picasso painted, as usual, for his life. But his life was drawing to a close, and pressure was mounting. He diverted it into paintings whose emotional rawness, physical immediacy and often wicked pictorial joyfulness were not quite like anything he had made before. They may not have changed the course of art, but give them time. First they deserve their due.

This is not the first big exhibition of late Picasso. But it may come at an unusually receptive time, when art is wide open, and the understanding of what it takes to be an

artist has gotten a bit fuzzy around the edges. Or perhaps this show represents an unusually rigorous sampling of the last decade, having been chosen by John Richardson, Picasso's formidable biographer, and superbly installed by him in the elegant, austere, sky-lighted galleries in Gagosian's West 21st Street space in Chelsea.

Like the retrospective of Piero Manzoni that recently filled Gagosian's West 24th Street emporium, "Picasso: Mosqueteros" should make any museum glow green with envy. And it looks better than just about any museum could manage. Free of wall texts and free of charge, it assumes that the public knows how to look at art and keeps distractions to a minimum.

As befits its title, the selection abounds with paintings of big-headed musketeers and matadors. Extravagantly clothed and mustachioed, they present an opportunity for excoriating self-portraiture disguised as caricature, while also dueling with past masters like Velázquez, Manet and Rembrandt.

There are thick-limbed figures of several kinds: entangled lovers whose mouths sometimes merge in desperate kisses; female nudes folded this way and that, with boxy feet and pebble-round toes; and a few male nudes that recall Cézanne's bather in the Museum of Modern Art or the kouroi statues of archaic Greece, here seen in a golden Arcadian light heated to a brash egg-yolk yellow.

In this show the late paintings often have a fierce, antic urgency that recalls "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon." Their scale and surfaces can be jarring, too close for comfort from any range. The figures have prominent black eyes that resemble those of the demoiselles, as well as of Picasso himself (as Mr. Richardson pointed out in a recent newspaper article). But this late style is softer and more fluid, a combination of painting, drawing and calligraphy that verges on automatism.

It makes as much sense to call it deconstructionist as Expressionist. The images disintegrate and recombine as you look, keeping every particle of paint and every scintilla of gesture in view while often cracking wise. In one of the show's most haunting

images, the terrified, seemingly flayed face of a matador is rendered in offhand smearings of lavender. The bullfighter may be looking at death; the surface laughs in its face.

In his catalog essay Mr. Richardson writes that Picasso said that technique was important, “on condition that one has so much ... that it completely ceases to exist.” But according to a short film playing in a small side gallery, Picasso also said that “unless your picture goes wrong, it will be no good.”

Some of the paintings are thickly built in caroming wet-on-wet strokes and stabs, as if aping the deft flourishes of the old masters. A prime example is the lavish “Portrait of a Man With Sword and Flower,” which reinterprets one of Velázquez’s dwarfs. His comic legs are so splayed that the soles of his nailed boots point in opposite directions; his undulant grisaille face, taut and knowing, has fish-skeleton eyebrows.

Other works are so sketchy as to be more bare canvas than paint. The light-to-heavy range is spelled out across four relatively pale gray and blue paintings on one wall; they offer female nudes, alone or not, and a bust of a beruffled court painter in profile. They culminate in an image of a nude accompanied by a musketeer and, behind them, a large phallic finger that may make you rub your eyes once or twice.

The gallery of etchings makes a perfect foil for the paintings. They show Picasso shaking this alchemical medium to its foundations, often by introducing a lithography crayon, while ransacking history even more actively. The frequently ribald costume dramas or studio scenes (or both) that result are rendered in a manner that can be as dainty and refined as the paintings are not.

Especially telling are two states of an etching at the end of a long wall. They depict an artist gussied up like Rembrandt working from the model; but the main effect is a dense squall of scribbles, spirals and scratches that nearly obliterates them. It is as if the pressure of Picasso’s final years generated its own weather system.

In “The Celestina,” a storyboard mosaic of 66 small impressions on a single, large sheet, Picasso offers a seemingly encyclopedic survey of mark making and printing techniques. Don’t miss the short man — naked, bald and quite Picassoesque — staring out at us from the crowded scene at the center of the bottom row.

Picasso worked in relative isolation during his last decade, but it is hard to believe that a competitive lifer like himself didn’t keep up to some degree. He must have known Dubuffet’s big-headed figures, vigorously scratched in paint, from the late 1940s; the CoBrA group’s colorful figurative shenanigans of the 1950s; or even Jackson Pollock’s last quasi-figurative works.

Closer to home, Picasso’s active involvement with ceramics in the 1950s could have contributed to the shorthand speed of these paintings. Until 1953 he also had direct contact with the art made by Claude and Paloma, his children with Françoise Gilot. And his paintings of them, like those from the ’30s of Maya, his daughter with Marie-Thérèse Walter, tend to have open, seemingly unfinished surfaces and a monstrous scale that points toward the musketeers.

This show should relieve doubts about the essential role of commercial galleries in a vital art scene. Anything this charged and unforgettable is bound to nourish anyone who sees it, but especially artists, regardless of affiliations of style or medium. It reveals one of their greatest going all out, providing a breathtaking reminder that art can be anything an artist wants it to be, as long as it is driven by inner necessity, ruthless self-scrutiny and a determination to make every attempt not to repeat the past.

In the end, such inoculations are the only real protection against the vicissitudes of opinion. Art that successfully internalizes them will in all likelihood come to be seen as part of its own time and retain a vigor that is capable of inspiring the art of the future. That is the feat of Picasso’s extraordinary final offerings.

“Picasso: Mosqueteros” remains on view through June 6 at the Gagosian Gallery, 522 West 21st Street, Chelsea; (212) 741-1717, [gagosian.com](http://gagosian.com).

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