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## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### A Personal Lesson in Late-Period Picasso



Michael Appleton for The New York Times

John Richardson, a friend of Picasso's and his biographer, helping with the installation of his subject's works for a show at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea.

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What was Picasso thinking during the final years of his life, when he was living in Notre-Dame-de-Vie on the French Riviera, obsessively producing images of musketeers and matadors, twisted couples and haunted women laced with obvious art-historical references or simply drawn from his fertile imagination?

"He was trying to outwit death," the writer John Richardson said. "In this late body of work the eyes are nearly always Picasso's eyes."

Mr. Richardson should know. The author of a critically lauded, multipart biography of the artist, he became a friend of Picasso's — and got to know his bohemian circle — during the 1950s, when Mr. Richardson lived in the south of France with the scholar and collector Douglas Cooper.

Now 85 Mr. Richardson is at work on the fourth and final installment of the biography and for the past year has been advising Gagosian Gallery. Fueled by boundless energy and a lifetime of stories about the artist, he has helped organize a show that allows viewers to see Picasso as he does.

Late Friday afternoon at Gagosian Gallery's 21st Street space in Chelsea, Mr. Richardson was standing in a labyrinth of wooden packing crates as crews scrambled to install "Picasso: Mosqueteros" (or musketeers). The exhibition, which opens Thursday, includes some 45 paintings and more than 50 prints, all dating from around 1962 to '72.

Hanging on the walls that afternoon was a combination of oil paintings and photocopies of oil paintings, stuck there with bright blue tape. Their vibrant colors and strong brush strokes, haunting characters and bizarre, jumbled bodies were the unmistakable hand of Picasso.

These works were created when Picasso was married to Jacqueline Roque, his second wife and one his many muses. He was ostensibly living in retirement, surrounded by a small group of old friends. While his output was immense, even his dealer, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, was skeptical about the work. "People thought he had lost it," Mr. Richardson said. "But this was actually an amazing burst of volcanic energy. He wanted to somehow assimilate the whole Western figurative tradition and Picasso it."

At Gagosian Mr. Richardson was working on the show with Valentina Castellani, a gallery director. The two were staring at a back wall with a selection of small paintings. Nearby hung the only still life in the gallery: "Vase of Flowers on the Table," dated Oct. 28, 1969, just three days after Picasso turned 88.

Intently examining the canvas, Mr. Richardson said it was actually a still life treated as if it were a self-portrait. “Look, the curlicue eyes, the stalk of a nose and tufts of leafy hair,” he said, then pointed to the wall of smaller paintings. “I think we should move it here. Let’s try it bang in the middle to break up the group.”

The staff generally works from a cardboard model of the space, determining where everything will go using postage-size images of the works. But because Mr. Richardson has failing eyes, the paintings and prints were blown up into life-size photocopies.

About 10 percent of the show is for sale, Ms. Castellani said. Prices range from \$2 million to \$20 million for the paintings and \$6,000 to \$40,000 for the prints. Family members have lent works. (A grandson of the artist, Bernard Ruiz-Picasso, also had a hand in organizing the show.) And there are loans from institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the Foundation Beyeler in Basel, Switzerland, as well as private collectors like the hedge-fund billionaire Steven A. Cohen and his wife, Alexandra.

That the show is being held in one of Gagosian’s Chelsea spaces rather than its uptown site might at first seem curious, but the decision was deliberate. “To have it in a contemporary art area in Gagosian’s most contemporary space is to show Picasso as if he were a young artist,” Mr. Richardson said. “You suddenly see him in a new light.”

Before the economy soured this fall, late Picassos were all the rage. They were considerably cheaper than his earlier works, and contemporary art collectors found their quirkiness appealing. But during the years he was producing them, even Picasso’s own circle thought differently.

Mr. Cooper pronounced them “incoherent scrawls done by a frantic old man in death’s antechamber.” But the remark, Mr. Richardson said, had more to do with Mr. Cooper’s banishment from the artist’s home when he appealed to Picasso to recognize his estranged son Claude and his two other illegitimate children.

“Everyone knew if you wanted to stay friends with Picasso, this was something you just didn’t do,” Mr. Richardson said. “The only point of recognizing those children was a testamentary one. Picasso never made a will for the same reason. He couldn’t face the fact of his own death.”

Many of these late paintings have references to old masters like Rembrandt (Picasso had slides of Rembrandt’s “Night Watch” in his studio, Mr. Richardson said), as well as Velázquez, Goya and even obvious nods to van Gogh and Manet. A film buff, Picasso was thought to have seen the 1961 movie “Vengeance of the Three Musketeers,” and its characters perhaps inspired some of his musketeer canvases.

Yet the paintings also reflect the artist himself and his wife, whose red nails, one of her signatures, appear in different guises — on toes, musketeer uniforms and in backgrounds.

“I think this is my favorite,” he said of “Buste,” a 1970 painting of a black-faced figure in a red costume with one eye oddly outlined in red. “It’s very spooky, almost ghoulish. At the time Picasso had been working on a painting of a black bullfighter, but this is a self-portrait. He clearly intended to have a magic element in his work.”

The way the figure is looking out of the canvas, Mr. Richardson said, makes it seem “as though he is outstaring death.”

Nearby is “The Kiss,” a 1969 painting of an intertwined couple. “Picasso was a tremendous voyeur,” Mr. Richardson said. “Look at the eye to the left,” oddly placed as if it were the artist staring at the scene. He said that the kissing couple, with their squished faces, is “what you see when you keep your eyes open during a kiss.”

“Do you keep your eyes open when you kiss?” he asked with a twinkle. “I always do. I don’t want to miss a thing.”

Perhaps the wall Mr. Richardson is proudest of has three large paintings, nearly six and a half feet by four and a half feet, known informally as the Three Ages of Man.

“One of the discoveries I made a year or two back was that just before Picasso’s 90th birthday he did six paintings in less than a week, and they’re huge,” Mr. Richardson said.

Despite his age Picasso was able to fill these large canvases by laying them flat and painting on a table. The setting of all but one is a sandy beach, perhaps inspired by his childhood in Spain. “When he was a kid in Malaga, he used to draw in the sand with a stick, and here he still is,” Mr. Richardson said.

Passing a painting of a reclining nude playing with a cat, he paused and remembered that Picasso always had dogs but usually a cat as well. “Around the studio he’d made these bronze sculptures of cats, and we’d all sit on them.”

The show will also include one wall of prints. And even though Picasso’s output of drawings was considerable, none are in this exhibition.

“There were just too many,” Mr. Richardson said. “I’m saving them for the next show.”