

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Picasso Fends Off Death With Bullfighters, Lovers at Gagosian

Interview by Katya Kazakina



May 18 (Bloomberg) -- Pablo Picasso in his 80s battled infirmity and terror of death with a creative surge that can be seen in the museum-quality exhibition “Mosqueteros,” at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea, New York.

The 53 paintings and 39 prints done between 1962 and 1972 depict lovers locked like wrestlers in a kiss; female nudes whose features are mixed with Cubist abandon; and invented characters that blend musketeers, bullfighters and Knights of Malta.

“They were a race against death,” said John Richardson, in an interview at his spacious Manhattan apartment on Fifth Avenue. The rooms overflow with works by Picasso, Warhol, Matisse and Ingres, marble busts on pedestals, Asian vases and countless books. A former head of Christie’s in the U.S. and the curator of “Mosqueteros,” Richardson wrote the magisterial three-volume biography “A Life of Picasso.”

While the “mosqueteros” of the exhibition’s title pay homage to Alexandre Dumas’s novel “The Three Musketeers,” the word can also refer to the ruffraff that gathered in the back of open-air theaters at the time of Goya (1746-1828).

“There used to be a pimp, a prostitute, a pickpocket, a soldier on leave,” Richardson said. “Mosqueteros was a slang word for those people.”

Dismissed as inferior and garish at the time, these works constitute the artist’s “great late phase,” Richardson said.

A painting from the series depicting a pipe-smoking musketeer fetched \$14.6 million at Christie’s in New York this month. It was sold by Jerome Fisher, co-founder of footwear company Nine West Group, who was a victim of Bernard Madoff’s Ponzi scheme.

Three Stages

Three of the most impressive paintings in the Gagosian exhibition were created shortly before the painter (1881-1973) celebrated his 90th birthday, Richardson said. The canvases depict a male figure holding a stick on a beach as a child, an adult and an old man.

“There is a series of five or six paintings, all done within a week,” on the theme of the three stages of man, Richardson said. “And they are huge, sort of 7-feet-tall. He was quite small and he shrunk a bit. He didn’t have an assistant. He did every single thing.”

Picasso’s last decade was marked by a striking burst of energy following major ulcer surgery in the winter of 1965-66, when he was 84.

“Most other people at that age would have lapsed into invalidism,” Richardson said. “For Picasso, it was a challenge.”

At the time, the artist and his second wife, Jacqueline Roque, lived at a villa in the southern France town of Mougins. Richardson and his friend Douglas Cooper, a collector of Cubist art, lived nearby in a tumbled-down chateau they bought for \$12,000. They visited Picasso monthly and hosted dinner parties for him at the chateau.

Dancing Gypsies

“We would get Spanish gypsies to come and dance for Picasso,” said Richardson, a patrician, London-born 85-year-old with a pocket square in his blue blazer and bee-like yellow-and- black socks beneath his khakis.

Bullfights at the nearby towns of Nimes and Arles were one of the artist’s favorite pastimes, and bullfighters appear frequently in the late works.

At Gagosian, one matador portrait looks like a death mask. Another depicts a torero with an orange braid wearing a bright- green suit speckled with yellow dots.

“Many of the paintings in the show constitute self- portraits by virtue of the eyes,” Richardson said. “They have his eyes.”

Picasso had “mirada fuerte,” a strong gaze, the eyes that want to outstare death, Richardson said. “The Andalusians believe that eyes can be a sexual organ, that you can have people with your eyes.”

Fearful Eyes

In many late paintings, the eyes are full of fear.

“He was so preoccupied with death and frightened of death that you could not mention it to him,” Richardson said.

Once at lunch with Picasso in a room with several birdcages, Richardson heard a little plop: One of the birds had fallen off its perch dead.

“He was deaf and he didn’t hear it,” Richardson said. “So Jacqueline took the birdcage, sneaked it into the kitchen and sent the driver to get another bird. By the end of lunch it was replaced. And typical Picasso, he said later, ‘You know, my birds are immortal.’”

([Katya Kazakina](#) is a reporter for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

