

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### Picasso's happy period makes for a great show

By Brian Sewell, Evening Standard 17.06.10

PICASSO: THE MEDITERRANEAN YEARS, 1945-62

Gagosian Gallery, WC1

WOMEN IN PICASSO'S PRINTS

Marlborough Gallery, W1

When I was young and many of London's art dealers were as much interested in the history of art as in the profit to be made from it, their frequent exhibitions were an invaluable resource to all who wished to expand their knowledge and experience of historic painting.



Garlanded: Musicien assis, a cut-out and painted sculpture of 1956 in which he looks back to classical subjects of his work in the Twenties

Then, half a century ago and more, it was possible for dealers to mount, for example, exhibitions that distinguished Rembrandt from his pupils or defined every painter in the Brueghel family, and to show off their stock in the company of masterpieces borrowed from great country house collections.

Rembrandts and Brueghels in the 1950s were, if not quite two a penny, tiny fractions of their prices now, and it has been the rise in these prices and associated costs that put an end to this wholly beneficial private enterprise and brought about a shift of interest into fashionable contemporary art and the celebrity artists who are now the subjects of their exhibitions. These are the fields in which the art dealer still has the active role of exhibition organiser, education now playing second fiddle to bewilderment.



Prickly subject: In *Vase aux chardons et assiette de gâteaux*, sometimes known as *Still life with a bouquet of flowers*, 1951, Picasso mixes found objects with invented forms

Where does Picasso stand in this? Old Master or Fashionable Modern? In the four decades or so since his death at 91, his reputation has inexorably shifted from that of outrageous old playboy so long fooling in the antechamber of death that all respect for him had withered, the Blue, Pink and Cubist Periods seeming to belong to an altogether other being, to that of a man of such extraordinary coherence and infinite complexity that we feel compelled to see virtue in everything he did. The youthful prodigy developed into the persistently enquiring and pragmatic intellectual; then, equally ingenious and ingenuous, he set on a course that seemed to mock academic traditions and ancestral art, and yet he constantly exploited them, often borrowing their beauty to redeem his deliberate ugliness.



Sexual mastery: Faune dévoilant une femme, 1936, one of the technically richest and most beautiful masterpieces from his suite of prints produced for Vollard, his dealer, in the Thirties (Marlborough Gallery)

Driven by the playful as much as by the selfish compulsions of his libido, eroticism was a lifelong and conscious obsession in his work, subtly haunting in the beginning, crudely dominant at the end, ever-present in between. In subject and painterly attack he tried his hand at the whole range of erotic response, from the playful to the selfishly compelling, from tenderness to rape, to such an extent that the sane man must wonder whether image-making stimulated him to copulation or copulation inspired and animated his images, and consider the possibility that these activities were interchangeable. In

simple terms, did he draw, paint and respond to his own pornography, or did he purge his imaginings by making art of them? Or is he, for our amusement, informing us of the dilemma confronted by a painter who is constantly eye-to-eye with the vulva?

With a working life of more than seven decades and general agreement on his eminence, Picasso might now be expected to be exclusively the property of such great institutions as Tate Modern and the National Gallery and something of an Old Master rather than a New, yet this most expensive and prolific of 20th-century painters is currently the subject of an exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, one of the most powerful international dealers in contemporary art. With little hesitation I dare describe it as the most exciting and enjoyable exhibition of the summer, aesthetically challenging and satisfying in equal measure, instructive and enlightening in its concentration on what is, if not the least studied period of Picasso's work, the most easily ignored.



Magnificent obsession: in *Anatomie féminine*, 1946, Picasso drew on a door, with exquisite precision, lifesize scale, the outline of a woman who seems both clothed and naked. For him keys and keyholes were sexual symbols

This formidable commercial space is filled with paintings, sculptures, drawings, ceramics and a handful of prints from what we must now call the Mediterranean Years, 1945-1962, the period in which Picasso was able to throw off the melancholy of his isolation in a wartime Paris occupied by the German army, move to the Riviera — Antibes, Cannes, Vallauris and Vauvenargues his bailiwicks — and, treating it as the pilgrimage site of a living thaumaturge, be worshipped as the greatest, the richest, the most revered and most political artist of the day.

With hardly a care in the world to affect his work, we sense in it, above all other things, the joy, freedom and contentment of the period. The exhibition is by no means an encyclopaedic survey of these years — nothing illustrates Picasso's obsessive multiple revisions of great paintings by Velázquez, Delacroix and Monet, nor hints at the gigantic scale of his Head for the Civic Centre of Chicago — but it perfectly expresses the comparative calm of his imagery, his willingness to be frivolous, to abandon high intellectual seriousness, to indulge in humour or express unsentimental and amused affection for his grandchildren.

This was a period when, for Picasso, there seemed no barrier between the arts; he drifted easily from painting into painted sculpture, from the sketch and linecut into ceramics, from the immaculate intricacies of etching and lithography into the blunt silhouettes that he drew as examples for his grandchildren (even in these crudely simple profiles the degree to which he catches character is quite extraordinary). The line of a lithograph he could write much larger on a door to construct the simple life-size figure of a woman, and from clay his fingertips could squeeze a figurine as enchanting as any from Tanagra; a skipping child could be untidily accumulated from the rounded forms of wicker baskets and real shoes cast in bronze, and he could take a toy model of a motor car and make a monkey's skull of it. The sheer inventiveness, the playfulness, the wit of seeing one form in another quite unrelated, still astonishes — perhaps now more than when, half a century ago, those great Academic painters, Winston Churchill and Alfred Munnings, vied to be first to kick Picasso's arse.

In these Mediterranean Years, Picasso was on a plateau. In his serious paintings he looked back to the Thirties, and in the grisailles, he seems still to be brooding on the even earlier mysteries of Cubism, so that one may reasonably argue that all that is fulfilled by the mellow old Picasso was forecast by the young. Beyond these blissful years, however, the decline was steep, the imagery increasingly angry and ugly, as though raging against obstructive impotence both as an artist and a man; of this the earliest destructive signs are evident in portraits painted in the first years of the Sixties — later, when it was easier for him to paint a woman's genitals than penetrate, the rage is palpable.

The exhibition, marvellous in itself, is supported by the grandest of catalogues, in which the principal essay is by John Richardson, its curator. Richardson, I should perhaps remind the young, was very much out and about with Picasso in this period, and he writes as a witness, with expressions of warmth and sympathy that befit a memoir; but he is also the author of *A Life of Picasso*, the third volume of which, published three years ago, reached only as far as 1932, and warmth is tempered by the discipline of the cool biographer. The essay is important in that it may be interpreted as a synopsis of what is intended for much of the fifth volume and, should Richardson not have time to write it, might stand in its stead. It is not only illustrated with all the exhibits, but with photographs of Picasso, his family, his printers, and his various houses and studios, giving them context; a detailed chronology supports the text, and extracts from the diaries of Jean Cocteau, Picasso's queer sidekick and scaramouche, are exquisitely revealing — “with his prodigious gift for imagination ... everything that he touches deforms the world yet resembles it better than any photograph”.

A second, shorter-lived, Picasso exhibition is to be found at the Marlborough Gallery. Devoted to some two hundred prints from 1905 to 1968, in which women appear, *Celebrating the Muse* could be more vulgarly titled *Variations of the Vagina* or *Views of the Vulva*, for it is eminently clear that peering at and into women's genitals was an early and lifelong obsession.

Here it begins in 1905 with a Salomé who adopts a pose that both Degas and Rodin could easily have employed, and Herod, the only man in the composition, stares directly into her. It ends in 1968 with the final plates of Suite 347, an extraordinary sequence of sexually-charged, picaresque narratives that conclude with Picasso himself as the voyeur while Raphael copulates with La Fornarina, a variation on a theme of Ingres — pornography purified by Picasso's style and reputation.

The only counter to this sequence of man as sexual master of woman is to be found in a group of four sketches of a woman painter with a naked male model, included in the Gagosian exhibition; in these a very Bloomsbury spinster at last has courage enough to touch the tip of her model's penis with her brush and breaks into a maniacal cackle of glee — but even in this the imagery of the brush may easily be interpreted as pubic hair (always abundant about the vulvas of Picasso) and the spinster thus ultimately the willing recipient.

Together these two exhibitions combine to provide a wealth of pleasure, information and insight, not only for those for whom Picasso could do no wrong, but for those who knew him well and still harbour misgivings.

*Picasso: The Mediterranean Years is at the Gagosian Gallery, 6-24 Britannia Street, WC1 (020 7841 9960, gagosian.com) until August 28. Tues-Sat 10am-5.30pm. Free.*

*Women in Picasso's Prints is at the Marlborough Gallery, 6 Albemarle Street, W1 (020 7629 5161, marlboroughfineart.com) until July 2, Mon-Fri 10am-5.30pm, Sat 10am-12.30pm. Free.*