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Picasso: angel and monster



Andrew Lambirth talks to John Richardson, biographer and friend of the artist

John Richardson has spent a lifetime in the company of great art and artists, and is justly celebrated for his ability to evoke, explain and evaluate their work in beautiful prose. Best known as the biographer of Picasso, he has written about many other artists, including Manet and Braque, and has curated a number of seminal exhibitions since the Picasso retrospective he staged in New York in 1962. For the past 50 years he has lived in New York, though born in England in 1924. He was in London recently for the installation of his major new curatorial excursion, Picasso: The Mediterranean Years 1945–62 at Gagosian Gallery (6–24 Britannia Street, WC1, until 28 August). I found him on site, giving a genial but informative tour to gallery staff.

His command of the minutiae of his subject is enviable, and it's difficult to believe that this charming and elegant man is 86. Although he must be exhausted from organising this extraordinary exhibition, co-curated with Picasso's grandson Bernard Ruiz-Picasso, Richardson is still apparently full of energy and enthusiasm. To start us off, I ask him the inevitable question — why choose the Mediterranean period? 'Because it had never been covered before as a totality. It's a very complex period because so many different things are going on. Picasso revolutionises ceramics and engraving techniques — linocuts, for instance, in which he gets these extraordinary delicate effects — and the endless printing processes he works on with the Crommelynck brothers and the lithographer Mourlot in Paris. And then he tries a completely new way of sculpture, putting it together out of bits and pieces. The surrealists had done that a bit, but Picasso does it in the interests of reality.'

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Here Richardson digresses into a passionate diatribe about Picasso and surrealism. It's this passion that fired his determination to be a writer on art, although to begin with he wanted to paint. 'I didn't enjoy school at all, but when I went to Stowe [1937–9] I was very lucky that there was a lively art teacher and his wife there. This Canadian couple took Cahiers d'Art, Verve, Minotaure, Vingtième Siècle [the cream of avant-garde art magazines], which I should think was unique in school art departments, and I got obsessed by Picasso. I didn't particularly understand it then but it blew me over and I found it enormously exciting.' Subsequently, Richardson studied painting at the Slade. 'Fairly early on I realised that if I wanted to become a good painter I was going to have to sacrifice everything and become completely absorbed into it. I was detached enough to realise that I wasn't capable of doing that. And I'm glad I didn't because I love writing about painters.'

He made his living for a time as an industrial designer before moving into journalism. From there he graduated to writing monographs and organising exhibitions, worked on the other side of the fence in the commercial world, first for Christie's in New York and then as vice-president of Knoedler's. Since 1980 he has devoted his time to writing. Besides the monumental Picasso biography, Richardson has been a regular contributor to the New York Review of Books, the New Yorker and Vanity Fair. A volume of his articles was collected under the title of Sacred Monsters, Sacred Masters in 2001, and in 1999 he published an enthralling memoir entitled The Sorcerer's Apprentice. Richardson not only marshals and deploys his facts to unusually telling effect, but writes in a lucid and beguiling style that draws the reader effortlessly on. How did he come to write so well?

'It's not false modesty, I still think I'm a beginner, but I did have one enormous advantage. The first remotely serious writing I did was for the New Statesman. V.S. Pritchett was the literary editor and his right hand was somebody called T.C. (Cuthbert) Worsley. Cuthbert would give me 200-word unsigned pieces to do. I'd do them and he'd throw them back to me saying, "You write like a train shunting. Have another go." Still the train was shunting. He was tough as they come, but it worked. I ended up reviewing art and fiction under my own name, and as the ballet critic under another name, Richard Johnson.' Then at the beginning of the 1950s he went to live in a château in the south of France with the great collector and art historian Douglas Cooper, and a new era opened in his life. He became friends with Picasso and Braque, and laid the real foundations for a life of connoisseurship.

Cooper was a monstrous egotist but a superb teacher with an unparalleled collection of Cubist art. Richardson learnt an enormous amount and through him came to know Picasso well from 1953 onwards. 'Virtually every time there was a bullfight in Arles or Nîmes, we'd have lunch, go to the bullfight, then he'd come and have dinner with Douglas and me and we'd get in some gypsies from the Camargue.' It is this personal knowledge that underpins and makes sense of the meticulous research of Richardson's books.

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Was Picasso really as monstrous as his detractors claim? Richardson is emphatic: 'Whatever you say about Picasso, the reverse is equally true. When we say Picasso was an angel, it was perfectly true — he was angelic in certain circumstances — but he was also a monster. The sweetness wasn't sentimental. For instance, after the Spanish Civil War, there was a huge number of Spanish refugees. Any Spaniard who said he was a painter, Picasso would help with brushes or paint. He was enormously generous to people, but never drew attention to it. He was a wonderful friend. He was very physical and would give you huge hugs or stroke the side of your head. And then he was incredibly funny — anything obscene or sexually outrageous he enjoyed.'

The fourth and final volume of Richardson's biography of Picasso will cover an extended period, from 1932 until the artist's death in 1973. Richardson is remarkably sanguine about the future of his masterwork. 'I've got Gijs van Hensbergen who is my collaborator and a brilliant Spanish scholar. If I drop dead tomorrow, Gijs will take over.' Let's hope John Richardson stays around to enjoy the well-earned plaudits of a huge project successfully completed. In the meantime, there's the magnificent exhibition at Gagosian to enjoy.

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