

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The Rutting Bull

An exhibition devoted to Picasso and a mistress-muse is soaked in sex.

By **Jerry Saltz**



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'Picasso and Marie-Thérèse: *L'Amour fou*,' the rapturous, vagino-maniacal show of more than 80 Pablo Picasso works at Gagosian, is a love story. It tells a tale of a devouring monster, a goddess and doormat, frenzied sex, and abject cruelty. The woman of the show's title is Marie-Thérèse Walter, called "the greatest sexual passion of Picasso's life," "endlessly submissive and willing," the sumptuous voluptuary who surrendered to his sadomasochistic demands. He himself once called her "a slice of melon," and she said of herself, "I always cried with Picasso. I bowed my head in front of him."

"*L'Amour fou*" was curated by John Richardson and Diana Widmaier Picasso, granddaughter of the artist and Marie-Thérèse. Widmaier Picasso once told a British paper that her grandmother talked of their "secrets," some of which have been widely reported. Richardson (in his acclaimed three-part Picasso biography) says that Picasso enjoyed "the perverse pleasure of denying [Walter] the release of orgasm." Yet Walter herself rhapsodized, many years later, that sex with Picasso was "completely fulfilling," describing him as "very virile."

For decades, no one knew of Walter or that she was Picasso's mistress from 1927 until around 1937. Not only was she his submissive sexual conquest, artistic muse, psychic victim, and mother of his daughter; she's the fleshy subject of some of his juiciest paintings. Picasso said she saved his life. And it's true that from the moment she appears in his work, in early 1927, his art gets plusher and more immediate, catapulting him out of Cubism, paving the way for all his subsequent efforts. Marie-Thérèse is the fertile inspiration that made Picasso Picasso after Cubism.

They met on January 8, 1927, when she emerged from the Paris Métro to shop for a blouse with a Peter Pan collar. (You can see that collar represented in a number of the paintings here.) Picasso "accosted me," she said. Then he hit her with the pickup line, "I'm Picasso! You and I are going to do great things

together.” He was 45. She was 17 and had never heard of him. Yet days later, she went to his studio, and they began their mad love.

At Gagosian, Walter is recognizable by her shock of blonde hair, her classical Grecian profile, shaved pudenda, blouse falling off rounded shoulders, lavender skin, ample breasts, and curving form. In some works, she holds a key to a cabana; in others, a beach ball. Often we see her asleep, head thrown back in postcoital stupor, cheeks flush, body supple, blissed out. Sometimes this sleeping Venus looks like an extraterrestrial squid, legs and arms splayed, hair standing like antennae. The Marie-Thérèse paintings show Picasso creating a topography of desire. (In one work that’s not on view here, she pulls a flower from her anus.) Strip away the feminine mystique and macho narrative, however, and you see Picasso reinvigorating his work, reaching within himself, and turning, once again, to do battle with his friend Matisse.

These paintings are entirely Picasso’s. Yet Marie-Thérèse is a quintessentially Matissean woman—Picasso’s way of responding to the erotic odalisques and sequestered *Arabian Nights* hothouse seen in Matisse’s extraordinary Nice paintings. She inspires Picasso to infuse his art with color, pattern, decoration, arabesques, solidity, lyricism, gentleness, and sensuality. Of course, Picasso being Picasso, he brings the sex as well. He once complained, “I can’t understand how Matisse can manage not to lose his head in front of a model.” (Speaking of Matisse, he certainly knew where the rich new twists that appeared in the Marie-Thérèse paintings originated. After one studio visit from Picasso, Matisse wrote, “He saw what he wanted to see ... He will put it all to good use in time.”)

At Gagosian, don’t miss Picasso sneaking Marie-Thérèse’s initials into a guitar painting as soon as he meets her, hiding her presence from his intensely jealous wife, Olga. In the first gallery is an early drawing of the very young Walter, from the year he met her. (She’s a Lolita played by Kate Winslet.) In the next, you can see Picasso working out how to depict her, turning her nose into a phallus, sewing her mouth shut to indicate the close-lipped secrecy of their affair, and rendering her mouth a hairy slit that turns into a vagina. The largest gallery finds Picasso bursting forth into a wanton carnality rarely seen in Western art.

As sensational as it is, “Picasso and Marie-Thérèse” isn’t as out-there and unexpected as Gagosian’s 2009 show of Picasso’s late Mosqueteros paintings. This show is focused on one subject, is more familiar, and is therefore less flabbergasting. Some of the paintings borrowed from major museums—does anyone say no to Larry Gagosian these days?—are oft-seen classics. But it does allow us to witness the manifold stylistic, psychic, and sexual leaps that led to Picasso’s arguably most powerful work: the faces and figures, anguish and ecstasies, that would become the “weeping women” and *Guernica*, in which Marie-Thérèse appears three times.

As I left, I was overwhelmed one last time, in front of the littlest painting in the show. It’s next to the exit, and it’s part final love letter to his muse, part final act of domination: a blue vase with three lavender flowers representing Walter, with a large *P* atop her initials on the vase. After the two split up, Walter never married, and she killed herself in 1977, just a few years after Picasso’s death. As Walter herself said, “You don’t resist Picasso ... a woman doesn’t resist Picasso.” See this show; heed her words.