

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

VANITY FAIR ART

# Picasso's Erotic Code

A major new exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery tracks the affair between Picasso and Marie-Thérèse Walter, who became his mistress at 17, bore him a child, and committed suicide after his death, 50 years after they met. John Richardson tells the love story behind Walter's encoded appearances in some of the 20th century's most important artworks, including Picasso's anti-war masterpiece, *Guernica*.

By John Richardson  
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Left, *Marie-Thérèse Leaning on One Elbow*, 1939 (oil on canvas, 25 1/2 in. by 18 1/8 in.). Right, a 1933 photograph by Cecil Beaton of Picasso with *Nude, Green Leaves and Bust*, which sold for \$106.5 million in 2010. Photographs: left, © 2011 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; right, from the Cecil Beaton Studio Archive, Sotheby's; for details, go to [vf.com/credits](http://vf.com/credits).

Adapted from the exhibition's catalogue, this material is part of the upcoming Volume Four of *A Life of Picasso*, by John Richardson; adaptation © 2011 by John Richardson Fine Arts Ltd.

Marie-Thérèse Walter is the subject of "Picasso and Marie-Thérèse: L'Amour Fou," a major exhibition opening at the Gagosian Gallery on West 21st Street, in New York, this month. Marie-Thérèse was Picasso's love and principal muse from the time he came upon her—she was 17, he was 45—outside the Galeries Lafayette department store, in Paris, in January 1927, until 1941. Art historian Diana Widmaier-Picasso, Marie-Thérèse's granddaughter, who is preparing a catalogue raisonné of Picasso's sculptures, has made this retrospective possible. As the guest curator, she has been instrumental in obtaining rarely seen works as well as archival material from the Picasso family and loans from important collections and museums.

Marie-Thérèse was an easygoing but respectable bourgeois girl who lived in Maisons-Alfort, a suburb southeast of Paris, with her mother and two sisters. She was at the Galeries Lafayette that day to buy a *col Claudine*—a Peter Pan collar—and matching cuffs. “You have an interesting face,” Picasso told her. “I would like to do a portrait of you. I am Picasso.” The name meant nothing to Marie-Thérèse, but the fact that an artist found her beautiful thrilled her.

Although she always claimed to have resisted Picasso for six months, she was sleeping with him a week later. They needed to be very discreet, for she was six months under the conventional age of consent. The absence of a legitimate father facilitated Picasso’s seduction of the girl. At first, her mother made a show of parental propriety, but soon she was welcoming her daughter’s seducer as a friend. “Pic,” she and the girls called him, and she allowed him to use a shed in her garden to paint in and be alone with Marie-Thérèse.

The first time Marie-Thérèse went to the artist’s studio on Rue la Boétie (January 11, 1927), on the floor above the apartment he shared with his wife, Picasso did little more than observe her face and body very closely. As she left, he told her to come back the following day. “From then on it would always be tomorrow; and I had to tell my mother that I had got a job,” she later said. “He told me that I had saved his life, but I had no idea what he meant.” She had indeed saved him: from the psychic stress of his marriage.

Picasso’s Russian wife, Olga, a former ballerina and the mother of their son, Paulo, had begun to suffer from a nervous disorder that her pathological jealousy, resulting from her husband’s nonstop infidelities, made infinitely worse. Picasso would have to keep Marie-Thérèse hidden. Since Olga was always on the lookout, Marie-Thérèse’s first appearances in his work are in somewhat erotic code: as a guitar waiting to be played, as the boomerang-shaped collar and cuffs she bought the day they met, and as her initials, bifurcated by his. Picasso was more in love than he had ever been.

The following summer, he rented a house in the fashionable Breton resort of Dinard—the perfect place for his wife, son, and nanny. The perfect place, too, for Picasso, who arranged for Marie-Thérèse to have a room in a nearby summer camp for girls, where he would pick her up every morning and take her to his rented cabana on the beach. In one painting from 1929, Picasso depicts Marie-Thérèse opening the door of a cabana and finding Olga waiting angrily in the ballet dancer’s fifth position.

Marie-Thérèse’s voluptuous form was also the inspiration for Picasso’s greatest sculptures, including the *Metamorphosis II* in the current exhibition, a maquette for a monument to the best friend he ever had, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire. Her body also inspired some of his finest figure paintings, such as the magnificent *Nude Standing by the Sea*, lent for the show by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Tired of summer rentals, Picasso decided in 1930 to buy a house of his own in the country, where his wife could hold sway and he could get together whenever possible with Marie-Thérèse. He found the ideal place 45 miles northwest of Paris, hidden away and well off the beaten track. Over the centuries, the Château de Boisgeloup had undergone many changes and had ended up as an elegant country estate.

Picasso told Marie-Thérèse that he had bought Boisgeloup for her. He told his wife the same thing. Olga had never felt at home in avant-garde milieus, but here she could play at being a châtelaine and have suitable guests to tea. However, after she drove off to Paris at the end of each weekend, Picasso would stay on, and Boisgeloup would become Marie-Thérèse’s realm. She would materialize on a bicycle, and Picasso would paint and sculpt her as Daphne, the nymph who was metamorphosed into a bush by her father to prevent Apollo from raping her. He set up his great welded sculpture of her as Daphne (*Woman in the Garden*, 1932) in a glade on the château’s grounds. The most celebrated works that Picasso executed at Boisgeloup are a series of hieratic, phallus-nosed busts of Marie-Thérèse; one of the finest is included in the show.

Although aware of her husband’s affairs on the side, Olga seems not to have known specifically about Marie-Thérèse for several years. She did, however, find out about a Japanese model and had her thrown

out. Might Picasso have used this other woman as a decoy to distract attention from Marie-Thérèse? The Japanese girl actually appears in several portraits of the mistress, sometimes wearing the bathing suit (yellow triangles on a mauve ground) that Marie-Thérèse wears in one iconic image of her, bouncing out of a cabana like a beach ball.

In October 1932, Paris finally granted Picasso a full-scale retrospective, at the Galerie Georges Petit. An immense success, it effectively established him as the most famous and controversial artist in the world. A major revelation of the show was the series of sensational portraits of Marie-Thérèse; she is naked in all of them, and in most of them she is seated, three-quarter-length, looking out at the beholder in a mockery of a convention that goes back to Titian. One of these, *The Dream*, with its hidden reference to sex on the brain as well as between the legs, leaves us in no doubt as to the nature of her dream. After its owner, the American casino mogul Steve Wynn, jabbed it with his elbow just as it was about to sell for \$139 million, in 2006, *The Dream* became the most famous painting in America. Another, *Nude, Green Leaves and Bust*, fetched a record price of \$106.5 million last year. Portrayals of Marie-Thérèse finally opened Olga's eyes to the appearance, if not the actual identity, of the woman who had taken over the leading place in Picasso's iconography as well as his heart. For the rest of her life, she would be in and out of clinics.

Shortly after Picasso's 50th birthday, disaster struck. Marie-Thérèse nearly drowned while kayaking on the river Marne. Promptly rescued, she nevertheless caught an infection from the river's rats, which left her sick and temporarily hairless. Picasso was devastated. He commemorated the accident in a succession of wonderful meditative paintings of water nymphs slithering in and out of one another's lifesaving arms.

By 1934, Olga's rage had become so violent that doctors moved her out of the Paris apartment into a hotel. This, however, did not enable Marie-Thérèse to move in with Picasso. Since he had recently filed for divorce, his lawyers would not let them cohabit, so Marie-Thérèse continued to live mostly with her mother.

The longed-for divorce, which would have enabled Picasso to marry Marie-Thérèse, turned out at first to be unobtainable. Although the Picassos had been married in Paris, foreigners suing for divorce in France had to abide by the laws of their native country. In Spain, divorce had been unthinkable, but the overthrow of the Spanish royal family, in 1931, changed all that. Newly elected liberals passed legislation giving Spaniards the right to divorce.

Visits to Spain in the summers of 1933 and 1934 rekindled Picasso's passion for bullfighting. In two intensely moving engravings, *Minotauromachy* and *Girl Leading the Blind Minotaur*, he reveals how closely he identified Marie-Thérèse with his beloved kid sister, Maria de la Concepcion, known as Conchita, who died from diphtheria when he was 14.

To celebrate Christmas Eve of 1934, Marie-Thérèse told Picasso she was pregnant. "Tomorrow I will get divorced," he promised, but six months went by before his lawyers were able to file a plea of non-reconciliation. Meanwhile, his affair with Marie-Thérèse had to be kept secret from all but a very few close friends.

Olga was given ownership of Boisgeloup and custody of their son, who would be packed off to Switzerland, where he attended a succession of schools. Paulo would have a troubled life, but he remained passionately devoted to his father.

Marie-Thérèse's pregnancy left Picasso agonizingly in need of her, so he rented an apartment for her a few doors away from his. Marie-Thérèse's daughter was born on September 5, 1935. She was named Maria de la Concepcion—Maya, for short—after his dead sister Conchita. Picasso proved to be a surprisingly good, hands-on father; he even did the cooking and housekeeping. But domestic bliss did not last long. He was soon off on the prowl.

Two months after the baby's birth he attended a movie opening, where the poet Paul Éluard introduced him to Dora Maar, a radiant-looking, exceedingly gifted photographer out to make a reputation as a hip Surrealist and a *mondaine* intellectual. Part French, part Yugoslav, Dora Maar (née Markevich) had grown up in Argentina, where her father was an architect. To Picasso's delight, she spoke perfect Spanish. In addition, she had been the mistress of an old but never very close friend of Picasso's, the Surrealist writer, thinker, and editor Georges Bataille.

To console Marie-Thérèse for his ever more frequent absences, Picasso took her and his newborn daughter to stay at a villa at Juan-les-Pins. While there, he revisited the subject of his 1932 painting of Marie-Thérèse being rescued from the river—this time by him.

In August 1936, Picasso left Marie-Thérèse in the Paris apartment he had rented for her and went off with Dora to Mougins in the company of Paul Éluard and his wife, the British Surrealist Roland Penrose and his wife, and the American Surrealist Man Ray and his mistress.

Knowing the extent of Picasso's anguish at losing Boisgeloup, his former dealer Ambroise Vollard came up with a solution. In September 1936 he sent Marie-Thérèse a formal letter offering her his country house at Le Tremblay-sur-Mauldre, 28 miles from Paris. Picasso loved the place. Over the next three years, as long as he was based in Paris, he led a double life. His chauffeur would drive him down in his prized Hispano-Suiza every weekend to Le Tremblay to be with his family, Marie-Thérèse and Maya. Lyrical paintings of two girls, one blonde, one dark, reading or writing together in front of an open window, testify to the presence there of Marie-Thérèse's favorite sister, Geneviève. The Le Tremblay still lifes—most of them featuring fruit dishes, flowers, and candles that stand for Marie-Thérèse and jugs that stand for him—reflect tranquillity and togetherness.

By the beginning of 1937, the Spanish Civil War had galvanized Picasso politically. The *Luftwaffe's* bombing of the small Basque country town of Guernica that April, which killed hundreds of civilians, provided him with the perfect subject for his commission to decorate a wall of the Spanish pavilion at the World's Fair, which would open in Paris in July. Arguably his greatest masterpiece, *Guernica* would transform Picasso into the very icon of anti-Fascism throughout the world.

Marie-Thérèse's image permeates this supreme indictment of war. For Picasso, a lifelong pacifist, she stood for peace and innocence at the mercy of the forces of evil. Just as he had envisioned her as the little girl who leads the blinded Minotaur, Picasso allegorizes her twice—maybe three times—in *Guernica*. She is the desperate girl running from right to left across the foreground. She also inspired the girl clutching a lamp emerging from an upper window. Finally, she can be identified as the mother wailing over her dead child on the left. The bull and dead hero with a broken sword in the foreground are self-referential. As for the agonized horse, its dagger tongue and shattered body had in previous works characterized Olga, whom he had repeatedly portrayed as a picador's mount.

Dora Maar also played a part in *Guernica*, primarily a practical one. A skilled photographer, she documented every stage of the painting's gestation. She also served as Picasso's studio assistant and even painted some of the repetitive markings that define the horse's flanks and legs.

Picasso did his best to keep Marie-Thérèse away from the work in which she starred. He did not want his lovers to meet, though they inevitably did. Both later denied having had a fight, rumored to have been in front of *Guernica*. However, in her memoir, *Life with Picasso*, Françoise Gilot (the mistress who would replace Dora) provides the artist's all-too-convincing explanation: "I kept on painting and they kept on arguing. Finally Marie-Thérèse turned to me and said, 'Make up your mind. Which one of us goes?' ... I was satisfied with things as they were. I told them they'd have to fight it out for themselves. So they began to wrestle. It's one of my choicest memories."

This fight is commemorated in Picasso's striking *Birds in a Cage*, once owned by the designer Elsa Schiaparelli. Marie-Thérèse and Dora are portrayed as doves in a cage far too small for them. Dora, the

*farouche* black one, claws away at the serenely beautiful white dove nestling on a clutch of eggs. Picasso made his preference very clear, but he left things the paradoxical way they were.

The signing of the Munich Pact on September 30, 1938, left Picasso exceedingly fearful of what might be in store for him when the bombs started falling. As a precaution, he rented a house for Marie-Thérèse at Royan, on the Atlantic coast, 300 miles southwest of Paris, where he occasionally joined her. Meanwhile, his divorce proceedings dragged on.

On January 13, 1939, Picasso's 83-year-old mother died in Barcelona. Thirteen days later that city, which meant so much to him, surrendered to Franco. After recovering from sciatica, Picasso moved for good out of the apartment haunted by Olga and installed himself in his Left Bank studio. He found an apartment for Dora nearby. Marie-Thérèse divided her time between Le Tremblay and Royan. Dora was now the official mistress, and Marie-Thérèse, though not actually married, was very much the wife.

In the summer of 1939, Man Ray lent Picasso his apartment in Antibes, and from there Picasso sent frequent passionate letters to Marie-Thérèse. "My love," he wrote on July 19, "I love you more every day. You mean everything to me. And I will sacrifice everything to you Our love will last forever."

When war broke out, Picasso took Dora to Royan and settled her in a hotel near the villa occupied by Marie-Thérèse and Maya. A tense month later, Picasso took Dora back to Paris, leaving Marie-Thérèse and Maya behind. He spent the rest of World War II in occupied Paris, taking his horror of war out on Dora and producing some of his darkest works. At the end of the war, Dora suffered a complete nervous collapse.

Meanwhile, Marie-Thérèse and her daughter had also returned to Paris, to an apartment that Picasso had taken for them. For the next decade, whenever Picasso was in Paris, he would visit them on Thursdays, when Maya was off from school, and on Sundays. To celebrate de Gaulle's liberation of Paris, in 1944, he decked Marie-Thérèse's balcony with banners.

After the war, Picasso moved to the South of France with Françoise Gilot, with whom he would have two children, eventually settling in Vallauris. Marie-Thérèse would see Picasso only when she delivered Maya for holidays, or occasionally when he was in Paris. However, she continued to write him passionate letters for a time. Then she stopped. Maya remembers that on the day Olga died, in 1955, Picasso telephoned Marie-Thérèse and asked her to marry him. She said no. Jacqueline Roque, Françoise Gilot's replacement, became Madame Picasso six years later. Picasso never saw Marie-Thérèse again, but Maya remained a link between them. Perhaps to be close to him, Marie-Thérèse moved to the South of France.

The artist's death, in 1973, prompted Marie-Thérèse to show her devotion to the Picasso family—not only his illegitimate children but also the offspring of Paulo Picasso, Pablito and Marina, who had been kept from attending the artist's funeral. Picasso had loathed their mother, and Pablito, who longed to connect with his grandfather, had been banished, prevented by the police from entering the house. Heartbroken, he swallowed a bottle of bleach. To his rescue came Marie-Thérèse, who asked the minister of health to get a helicopter to take him to the American Hospital in Paris. The minister was not available, but his brother-in-law, an art dealer, took the call. Though exceedingly hard up, Marie-Thérèse sold him two of the few paintings Picasso had given her. Pablito did not survive, but the cash helped meet his medical costs. Did Marie-Thérèse, who had more firsthand experience of Picasso's complex nature than anyone else, feel that he would have wanted her to rescue his namesake?

Shortly after Picasso's funeral, a great 1933 concrete figure of Marie-Thérèse with a lamp in her outstretched hand—similar to the woman at the window in *Guernica*—was placed over his grave at the Château de Vauvenargues, his residence near Aix-en-Provence. Jacqueline then had the mold destroyed. Only one other cast exists, in Madrid's Reina Sofia museum. Marie-Thérèse's presence at the foot of the great stone steps leading up to the Château de Vauvenargues's majestic portal celebrates the love that she embodied and her sustaining and illuminating role in Picasso's genius. Unable to go on living now that Picasso was dead, Marie-Thérèse took her own life in 1977, 50 years after they met.