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Picasso's obsession with bullfighting laid bare at London gallery
'Those horses are the women in my life': Minotaurs and Matadors exhibition sheds fresh light on artist's recurring themes

Mark Brown



A forlorn minotaur in an artwork from 1937. Photograph: © 2017 Estate of Pablo Picasso

There are many matadors, picadors, minotaurs, bulls and horses in a new show exploring Picasso and the importance of bullfighting – but also a glimpse of his terrible treatment of women.

An exhibition opening to the public on Friday traces Picasso's lifelong engagement with bullfighting and includes the artist's earliest surviving painting, a small portrait of a picador on a horse made when he had just turned eight.

The show has been curated by Picasso's friend and biographer Sir John Richardson, who regularly attended bullfights in the south of France with the artist.

Richardson recalled that Picasso rarely said much during the fights. They would be surrounded by “screaming and clapping and cheering and Picasso just sat there, absolutely still, not making any sound but just taking it all in. Occasionally he would make a remark.”

One of those occasions was while they were watching the moment when old horses were dragged out for the bulls, a cruel sacrifice that was often a terrible, bloody sight, Richardson said.

“Picasso said to me once: ‘Those horses, they’re the women in my life,’” said Richardson. “Throughout his life there was a thing of women being sacrificed to feed his art. His record with wives and mistresses and girlfriends is pretty rugged and a lot of women had to suffer for the sake of his art.”

The term “rugged” is something of an understatement for a man who could be monstrous to the women he loved. He once told one of his mistresses that for him there were only two kinds of women: “goddesses or doormats”.

The exhibition, at the Gagosian gallery in Mayfair, central London, includes 120 works, most of which are from private collections.

Among the rarely seen works is one called *Le Petit Picador*. It was a remarkably accomplished painting given Picasso had barely turned eight when he made it, Richardson said.

“It is amazing to see all what comes out of that early image. We haven’t got anything else from that date, it was something he always hung on to. It is fascinating to see what came out of it.”

Shown nearby are paintings of matadors, which have a child-like quality but were made by Picasso towards the end of his life in the early 1970s. Given Picasso always identified himself as the bull, one interpretation is him facing his impending death as a bull faces the matador.

Richardson, 93, is the author of three volumes of Picasso’s biography and has for several years been at work on the overdue volume four.

Asked how it was going, he said: “It is going ... the difficult thing with this is that now and only now is a mass of papers being made available, letters and so on.

“Things which were kept under lock and key, now they are all available, so it’s ‘93-year-old biographer suddenly swamped with new material’. It is a bit of a nightmare but I do my best to cope with it. Let’s hope it works out.”