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Picasso: Minotaurs and Matadors at the Gagosian

Suzannah V. Evans



PICASSO *Minotaure dans une barque sauvant une femme*, March 1937, Paris Gagosian

The Minotaur was a key figure in Picasso's imagination and art, so much so that the artist once remarked that 'If all the ways I have been along were marked on a map and joined up with a line, it might represent a Minotaur'. *Picasso: Minotaurs and Matadors* seeks to investigate and illuminate this map, querying what the Minotaur, matadors, and bullfighting meant to Picasso at the various stages of his life through displays of paintings, etchings, ceramics, and sculpture.

Picasso's affinity with the Minotaur peaked in the 1930s, although the mythological creature would continue to haunt his later imagination. What was it about this part-human, part-animal that so intrigued the artist? It may have been this very duality between human and bestial, although as Picasso pointed out to Françoise Gilet, his later companion, the Minotaur knows that he is a monster. Picasso was not alone in finding inspiration in the prehistoric creature. The Surrealists in particular were drawn to the Minotaur's sheer force, believing that this vitality 'allowed them to give free reign to their innermost urges, especially their desire for transgression and sexual liberation', as Gertje T. Utley notes in her essay in the exhibition's accompanying compendium.

The exhibition itself opens with a painting from 1958, entitled simply *Minotaure*. Here, a somewhat friendly-looking Minotaur peers quizzically at the viewer from a canvas of creamy white paint. The piece is an exercise in tonal variation. Charcoal-coloured lines sit upon smudges of grey, white, and cream, and the Minotaur's face is suspended against its shadowed background. The frontal positioning of the creature, as well as his direct gaze, makes it seem as if the Minotaur is assenting to the portrait, complicit with the artist; perhaps this is also an intimation of the intense connection, or self-identification, that Picasso felt with the Minotaur figure. As Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler comments, 'Picasso's Minotaur, carousing, loving, and fighting, is Picasso himself. He is laying himself totally bare, in what he hopes is complete communion'. The quiet mutations of white also suit the hushed atmosphere of the gallery space, which is hung with thick green curtains, the silence interrupted only by shuffling feet and the sound of a video installation in another room.

PICASSO Minotaure caressant du mufle la main d'une dormeuse, June 18 1938, Boisgeloup Gagorian

From the still face of *Minotaure*, the viewer's eyes wander to a wooden display table of pencil sketches. The first of these, *Minotaure courant*, from December 1937, is full of fierce energy and strong lines. Rather than staring out from the page, this Minotaur is engaged in intensive movement, his legs striding forward, his hands outstretched and grasping empty air. Muscular and strongly-built, the Minotaur's body casts a ferociously sketched shadow on the ground, while the multiple lines of his body suggest fluidity and motion. Prominence is also given to his genitalia, which are placed in the centre of the page, offset by the creature's curling tail. It is perhaps worth noting that the French for 'tail' is 'queue' – a word that can also signify male genitalia – and the phallic connotations of the image are heightened by the Minotaur's horns. The overall impression is of physical energy and exuberance, with erotic overtones that Picasso delves into more deeply elsewhere. *Minotaure assis au poignard* is also a strikingly erotic sketch, displayed on the same table, and depicts the Minotaur sitting with a hunched neck, bearing a phallic blade, legs open to expose his rounded genitals.

After the grey tones of *Minotaure*, and the black-and-white pencil sketches, the first painting featuring colour is particularly striking. *Nature morte au Minotaure et à la palette*, painted in 1938, is a confident piece with bold, angular shapes and joyful colour. A statue of the Minotaur's head fills the right side of the painting; to the left is a candle and an artist's palette. The paintbrushes in the palette point towards the Minotaur, reinforcing the sense of elective affinity between the artist and beast, while the warm, earthy shades of the Minotaur's head, outlined in black, are suggestive of the black- and red-figure vessels of Attic art. Other works also refer back to antiquity. *Le combat dans l'arène*, an engraving from 1937, shows the Minotaur armed with a spear and fighting two men in an arena. His animal head marks his difference from his

competitors, although his body is strikingly human and he runs on two feet; his grip on a horse's mane, signifying the pull towards his animal nature, further complicates the division between animal and human that the piece represents.

Scenes of fighting are balanced with images of sleeping women. *Nue endormie*, from 1932, recalls the white tones of the opening *Minotaure*, although its charcoal lines are dream-like, as faint and grey as if they had been whispered on to the canvas. The roundness of the woman's forms – head, breasts, arms, fingers – are contrasted to the one horizontal line in the background. It is as if Picasso has captured the nebulous quality of sleep itself. *Femme couchée à la mèche blonde* depicts a similar sleeping woman, although the canvas has been doused in colour. Feathery strokes of lilac and green paint gather at the bottom right of the painting, rising to where the woman cradles her head, then turning to red and yellow. The woman's face, moon-like, has been left white, while the concentrated colour around her head signifies her dreaming.

These women contrast distinctly to the ones in the middle section of the room. A series of etchings, displayed in a cabinet, become more and more graphic as they progress. One, entitled *Le Minotaure une coupe à la main*, shows the Minotaur's muscular arm holding a champagne glass and possessively shielding a naked woman from the viewer. She in turn gazes expressionlessly out of the drawing, while the Minotaur also turns towards the viewer, looking faintly satisfied. His reclining position means that his tail is on full show, and the sensual lines of both bodies jar with the hard outline of the window. The Minotaur is no longer outside, in an arena or open space – he has entered the private domain of humankind. *Scène bacchique au Minotaure*, also from 1933, goes further in its portrayal of excess. The ferociously hairy Minotaur lounges with one arm extended, holding his champagne glass in a toast to male virility and ownership. A smaller man accompanies him, legs spread and fingers delicately holding the stem of a champagne glass. Sprawled between them are two women, one of whom the man clutches with an oversized hand. While the Minotaur and the man look comfortable, leaning back in relaxed positions, the women appear to be flung over them as if they are merely part of the luxurious décor. Later etchings are titled *Minotaure aimant une femme* and *Minotaure et femme faisant l'amour*, and show the Minotaur's violent erotic appetite. While the woman in the former image could be tilted backwards in pleasure, the awkward angle of the woman's head in the second image, combined with her wide-eyed gaze, suggests distress. *Minotaure caressant du muffle la main d'une dormeuse* is also a strange work, combining the earlier imagery of sleeping women with that of the Minotaur, who nuzzles the woman's face with his snout. The heavily-inked head of the Minotaur, with his haunted eyes, suggests the darker side of human (or animal) nature, which is contrasted to the serenity of the sleeping woman. Alone, and seemingly unloved, he is unable to access the woman while she sleeps.

Picasso was also a 'real bullfight addict', as the famous bullfighter Luis Miguel Dominguín once said, and the exhibition turns its attention to Picasso's many images of Matadors, picadors, horses, and bulls. Like David Jones, the Anglo-Welsh artist with a precocious talent for drawing animals, Picasso started early. He drew his first bullfight scene when he was just eight years old, and returned to the theme, often in tandem with the myth of the Minotaur, after spending time in Spain in 1933 and 1934. 'The spirit of the corrida is part of his way of life. He has bulls in his soul. The matadors are his cousins. The arena is his house', explains Hélène Parmelin. This part of the exhibition is filled with dramatic images of bulls. One particularly striking etching is *La femme torero*, depicting a female bullfighter. The abundance and busyness of the lines imitates the rapid action depicted as the woman is caught up with the bull and horse, and just as a spectator watching the scene in real life might find it difficult to decipher which body is which,

so the viewer's eyes are caught between the woman, her costume, the horse, and the bull's rump. *Torero*, painted in 1971, is another stand-out piece, incorporating luxurious swirls of pistachio green and red paint. The curving shapes and wide brush strokes have a liquidity about them, and the thick oil paint glimmers wetly. Despite these excellent depictions of matadors, it is, as Rafael Alberti reminds us, Picasso who is the 'best matador who ever existed. His paintbrush is like a sword dipped in the blood of all the colours'. *Picasso: Minotaurs and Matadors* attests to this.