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Picasso and the bulls

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EXHIBITIONS

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THE SIXTH EXHIBITION by John Richardson for Gagosian Gallery, Grosvenor Hill, London, *Picasso: Minotaurs and Matadors* (to 25th August), delves deep into the artist's association with the bullfight and its mythological archetype, the Minotaur.¹ Richardson's extensive knowledge of Picasso and his longstanding connections with the artist's estate and dealers on both sides of the Atlantic result in a careful selection of more than 120 works spanning the entirety of Picasso's career. Within the non-chronological display, the artist's works are interspersed with photographs and films showing him at bullfights in the South of France, ageing yet vigorously youthful, invariably accompanied by a large entourage (of which Richardson was a fixture). An earlier amateur film presents his son Paulo in matador costume staging a bullfight with his nanny during a holiday in Brittany. A torero outfit – which the artist's grandson Bernard was also made to wear as a child – reappears in a neo-classical portrait of young Paulo in the final section of the exhibition (*cat. no.177*). Here Picasso's first painting, *The little picador* (1889; no.193), rub shoulders with his late matadors, painted in a consciously childlike manner, with elements of the grotesque (nos.182, 185, 187 and 191). Picasso used the *corrida* as metaphor for both his private world and his privileged public arena, but the many minotaurs and matadors to be encountered in the show are equally rooted in Picasso's passion for bullfighting.



58. *Minotauromachy VII*, by Pablo Picasso. 1935. Etching, 49.8 by 69.3 cm. (Private collection; exh. Gagosian Gallery, Grosvenor Hill, London).

The installation leads the visitor through a labyrinth of theatrical curtains, which opens onto an arena-like room surrounded by dusty white walls. Two series of prints, the virtuoso etchings *Minotauromachy* (nos.19–26; Fig.58) and the experimental lithographs *The bull* (1945; nos.226–31), dominate each of the two rooms and constitute the thematic, chronological and aesthetic cores of an exhibition in which the opposition of light and darkness enacts the confrontation between bull and matador. Following a bullfight binge during his last two visits to Spain in 1933 and 1934, Picasso began to associate himself with the mythical figure of the Minotaur, starting with the etchings he produced in spring 1933 and later included in the *Vollard suite* (1930–37; nos.34–41).

Minotaurs, bulls and matadors, especially female ones, populated Picasso's production with greater density from 1935, when his mistress Marie-Thérèse gave birth to their daughter, the collapse of his marriage to Olga forced him out of his home and studio at Boisgeloup, and he began an intense affair with Dora Maar. At a time of personal and political turmoil Picasso used classical myth and allegorical figures to produce epic accounts of lived experience, either private, as in the revisitation of an earlier accident in which Marie-Thérèse almost drowned (no.45; Fig.59), or collective, as in *Guenia* (1937; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid). This approach, according to Clemente Marconi in his catalogue essay, broke away from the tradition of illustrating or interpreting classical mythology and pertains properly to mythmaking. Picasso's exploration of the theme of the Minotaur was contemporaneous with the discovery and largely inventive reconstruction of Minoan Crete, when the myth of the Minotaur was given a historical dimension and came to be seen as the origin



59. *Minotaur in a boat saving a woman*, by Pablo Picasso. 1937. India ink and gouache on paperboard, 22 by 27 cm. (Private collection; exh. Gagosian Gallery, Grosvenor Hill, London).

of both modern European sophistication and its irrational, Dionysian impulses.

Close contact with the Surrealists further intensified Picasso's interest in the psycho-cultural interpretation of the myth. His combination of bullfighting, sex, art and ritual sacrifice was certainly shaped by Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille, whose writings on bulls and the *corrida* were in turn influenced by Picasso.² According to Richardson, Picasso described the rays of light in *Minotauromachy* as a 'Mithraic shower', in line with Bataille's analogy between the sun and the sacrificial bull in an essay dedicated to the subversive power of Picasso's art.³ The collage that Picasso produced for the first issue of the Surrealist review *Minotaure* (June 1933; no.113) presents the figure as both heroic and bestial, monstrous and delicate, at once executioner and victim, in contrast to dialectical interpretations of the *corrida* works that identified Picasso with either a lucid matador or pure irrational force.⁴

At ninety-three, Richardson continues to wrestle with archival documents and offer new interpretations of Picasso's career. As this sophisticated show reveals, Picasso's Minotaurs and matadors, far from being simple symbolic types, are ciphers for a multitude of contrasting but equally legitimate readings: jovial and traumatic private memories as well as Spain's conflicted politics; popular culture as much as classical myth; sex and death; and, ultimately, a historical and philosophical battle between good and evil. Picasso the savage Minotaur and self-conscious matador continues to dazzle with his sheer ambivalence, his sudden but constant changes of direction, his brightness as well as his darkness.

¹ Catalogue: *Minotaurs and Matadors*. By John Richardson, with contributions by Gertje R. Utey, Clemente Marconi and Michael FitzGerald. 265 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (Gagosian, London, 2017), \$100. ISBN 978-0-8478-6110-1.

² M.-L. Bernadac: 'Le Christ dans l'arène espagnole. La corrida dans les écrits de Picasso', *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 38 (1991), pp.58–75.

³ G. Bataille: 'Soleil pourri', *Documents* 3 (1930), pp.173–74.

⁴ For instance, R. Gómez de la Serna: 'Le Toreador de la peinture', *Cahiers d'art* 3–5 (1932), pp.124–25.