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 virtuosic etchings Minotaur with Dog (1924; nos.226–29; Fig.5) and the experimental lithographs The Bull (1924; nos.226–29), dominate each of the two rooms and constitute the thematic, chronological and aesthetic core of an exhibition in which the opposition of light and darkness exacts the confrontation between bull and matador. Following a bullfight binge during his last two visits to Spain in 1922 and 1923, Picasso began to associate himself with the mythical figure of the Minotaur, starting with the etchings he produced in spring 1923 and later included in the Follies RIale (1925–27; nos.34–45). Minotaurs, bulls and matadors, especially female ones, populated Picasso’s production with greater density from 1931, when his mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter 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 revision of an earlier accident in which Marie-Thérèse almost drowned (nos.44; Fig.59), or collective, as in Guernica (1937; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid). This approach, according to Clémente Manconi in his catalogue essay, broke away from the tradition of illustrating or interpreting classical mythology and permitted property to mythmaking. Picasso’s exploration of the theme of the Minotaur was contemporaneous with the discovery and largely invented reconstruction of Minoan Crete, when the myth of the Minotaur was given a historical dimension and came to be seen as the origin 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. According to Richardson, Picasso described the rays of light in Mitonaur with Dog as ‘a Mithraic shattering, 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’. The collage that Picasso produced for the first issue of the Surrealist review Minotaure (June 1941; no.11) presents the figure as both heroic and bestial, monstrous and delicate, at once avenging and victim, in contrast to dialectical interpretations of the corrida works that identified Picasso with either a heretical matador or pure irrational force.

At ninety-three, Richardson continues to work 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 chinks 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.


