

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE  TIMES

Visual art: Picasso — Minotaurs and Matadors at the Gagosian Gallery, W1

Power and eroticism of Picasso's beasts

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Barque de naïades et faune blessé, oil and charcoal on canvas, 1937 from Picasso: Minotaurs and Matadors, a survey of the artist's engagement with the ancient rituals of his native Mediterranean
ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO/MAUR

A portrait-type picture meets your eye as you enter. At first glance it might look childishly simple. Yet the longer you gaze, the more deeply befuddling it seems. Man and beast muddle about on its surface.

Human features mingle with a bovine snout. And so it is that with just a few lines a master captures the essence of the protean drama that lay at the heart of his creative life.

Pablo Picasso saw the bull as his alter ego. Arising in the realms of his imagination, it is released like some big snorting beast into a Spanish arena, to run amok in his work. Picasso himself seldom explained his imagery.

He preferred to let images speak for themselves. But John Richardson, the writer of his most famous (but still unfinished) biography, makes this obsession the focus of a viscerally stirring show.

Minotaurs and Matadors gathers together more than 200 works in all mediums, as well as old family photographs and fragments of filmic footage (including videos of Picasso drawing on glass with transfixing assurance), to look at the Spanish master's fascination with the bull.

The hang is thematic, rather than chronological. It focuses in the first half on mythological inspirations, showing seldom-seen works from private collections alongside museum pieces and revealing the breadth of the artist's practice, from back-of-the-envelope sketches through his landmark print *La Minotaure* (shown in all its seven states) to a cast of his *Tête de taureau* (a bull's head famously created from bike saddle and handlebars). The second half of the show plunges the spectator into the bullring.

The power of the totemic animal can be impressive. A raw force is released into the work. Hirsute and hulking, the bull storms through the pictures: proud, massive and strong. Yet it can also be sensually erotic, or surprisingly gentle, and occasionally so cosily intimate that it appears to have been tamed. Picasso leaves you wandering the passageways of his imagination. This is a show to get lost in for hours.