



143 Pablo Picasso

1881 – 1973 Spanish

Tête de femme

oil on canvas, signed and dated 6.10.1939 and on verso titled on the labels and inscribed *no. 52091* (Photo) on the Galerie Simon label, 76 on the stretcher upper right corner, *Feigen* on a sticker at centre of the upper stretcher, 14 on a green label and *Galerie Louise Leiris, 29 bis rue d'Assolant, Paris. Valeur d'assurance: 250 000 francs and Zervos Vol. IX.345* on the South Africa exhibition label 16 1/8 x 13 in, 41 x 33 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the Artist
Galerie Simon, Paris
Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris
Collection Claude Hersaint, Paris
Richard L. Feigen & Co., Chicago
Acquired from the above on January 2, 1962 by the present Prominent Private Collection, Montreal

LITERATURE

Christian Zervos, editor, *Pablo Picasso*, vol. 9, *Oeuvres de 1937 à 1939*, 1958, #345, reproduced page 160 and listed as *Royan*

EXHIBITED

Afrique du Sud, *Exposition d'art français contemporain*, work lent by Galerie Louise Leiris

“MACHINES À SOUFFRIR”? THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY IN PICASSO’S “PORTRAITURE” – BY JOHN FINLAY

GIVEN THE LIBERTIES that Pablo Picasso took with “natural appearances,” marking the parameters of his portraiture is something of a predicament. In fact, the vast majority of his single figure compositions question the nature of identity, not to mention the hopelessness of conclusively copying “reality.” As Picasso told his dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, “There are so many realities that in trying to encompass them all one ends in darkness. That’s why, when one paints a portrait, one must stop somewhere, in a sort of caricature.”¹ In his vast and revealing exhibition, *Picasso and Portraiture* (1996), William Rubin intentionally expanded portraiture’s definition to include works that might easily be classified as general painter and model subjects, nude studies, descriptive genre scenes, caricatures and so forth.² Rubin’s focus centred on the idea of transformation and metamorphosis: transitory concepts that go against the notion of “portraits” in the customary sense of the word.

Despite Picasso’s eagerness to distort and caricature, at times monstrously, Rubin argues that “they are clearly portrayals,” associating them with particular “sitters,” the artist’s “mood” and essentially viewing “portraiture” as “exorcising anxiety.” As Rubin further contends, “It would not be far from the truth to consider these pictures autobiographical portraits.”³ Insistence that these “dramatically transformed images ... should not be called a portrait” nonetheless led Rubin to recount that “Jacqueline [Roque] herself recognised [*Seated Woman*, November 27, 1960, Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan] as one, and said of this very picture: ‘Ça, c’est moi.’” As Rubin further reasons of the countless “portraits” of Jacqueline made over a 20-year



Dora Maar, Paris, France, 1956

Photo: Lee Miller

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period “and ranging along a continuum from extreme realism to extreme transformation, there is no simple divide, no fixed single point at which an image inspired by her can securely be said to cease being her portrait.”⁴

But surely the opposite is equally true: in Picasso there is no secure image that can safely be termed or identified as a “portrait,” this being the artist’s great gift to us? Picasso was utterly capricious when it came to using the term “portrait,” but when asked about the prominence he gave to “likeness,” realism and physiognomy in a work, he claimed that there was none. “It’s not important to me to know whether a certain portrait is a good likeness or not. Years, centuries pass, and it is not important if the physiognomical traits are exactly those of the person portrayed. The artist loses himself in a futile effort if he wants to be realistic. The work can be beautiful even if it doesn’t have a conventional likeness.”⁵

Leaving aside for a brief moment the issue of identification and that self-recognition and the search for identity are a natural response in figurative art, it is often very hard to be sure what exactly Picasso meant by a “portrait” in both his art and statements. Yet identification of a particular “sitter” appears to be the hallmark of Picasso studies—the great divide between retrospective styles and extraordinary transformation no barrier to scholarly insistence on identifying a particular individual in a Picasso work, especially when it comes to singling out various muses and models. Yet the vast majority of Picasso’s portrayals depict a single individual and these are virtually always composed of his own imagination. For Picasso, identity and “conventional likeness” mattered little when representing one person



Pablo Picasso in the safe of the Banque nationale pour le commerce et l'industrie (BNCI) with portraits of Dora Maar, Paris, 1939
 Photo: Dora Maar © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris
 Courtesy of Art Resource, New York

or another, or both, or various individuals. As a marker of the “realist” figurative subject, identity is repeatedly called into question in his “portraiture.”

Recent analysis strongly suggests that when Pablo Ruiz changed his moniker circa 1901 to “P. Ruiz-Picasso” and subsequently to a more pithy “Picasso,” in *Yo Picasso* (I, Picasso, May–June 1901, private collection), he was revealing not just a “progressive construction of a personal and artistic identity,” but also ascribing “less an identity than an entity.”⁶ In fact, *Yo Picasso* is equally a method of experimentation in “appearances,” the artist depicted not in the act of painting, but literally through paint. Notably, his use of thick impasto and loosely brushed, vibrant colours is highly akin to the work of fashionable nineteenth-century French Post-Impressionists. Neither brush nor palette appears in Picasso’s hands. “The painter and the unity of his

oeuvre supplant his person and the vicissitudes of his biography.”⁷ Hence it is the *matière* of art, not likeness, that speaks for itself.⁸

In general, Picasso’s working practices reveal that he habitually overlaid and coalesced postures and gestures, a habit that reflects his remarks to Christian Zervos: “Do you think it concerns me that a particular picture of mine represents two people? The ‘vision’ of them gave me a preliminary emotion; then little by little their actual presences became blurred; they developed into a fiction and they disappeared altogether, or rather they were transformed...”⁹ Given that Picasso frequently expressed notoriously fluctuant, precarious and conflated figurative identities—selves that could metamorphose into something (or somebody) else completely—it might be prudent to assuage any thoughts as to what can be gleaned from biographical identity in his oeuvre. For Picasso, a genre of this kind was never confined

solely to portraying particular personages, so an additional and fundamental question would be to ask what else—to the degree we can ascertain or deduce—might the artist be addressing in each “portrait”?

What, therefore, of our *Tête de femme* or the related *Tête de femme au chapeau*, both created a day apart in early October 1939?¹⁰ The “manner” of their execution is certainly evocative of Picasso’s Royan masterpiece painting *Woman Dressing Her Hair* (1940, Museum of Modern Art, New York), inspired it is said by seeing Dora Maar brush her hair. Numerous writers have linked the work with Maar, a work which, it is claimed, neatly characterizes a highly strung, neurotic and “Kafkaesque personality,”¹¹ and though acknowledging the work’s allegorical aspect, it is nevertheless identified as a “portrait.”¹² The concept for these works occurred during Picasso’s initial weeks in Royan, where Picasso filled a *carnet* (utilized between September 30 and October 29, 1939) with drawings for the painting of a woman with the skull of a sheep.¹³ They seem to have inspired too the coupling of a seated woman and death’s head in a series of tiny cardboard reliefs made in Royan at the start of 1940.¹⁴ As Elizabeth Cowling contends, this places them firmly “in the venerable tradition of *vanitas* where a young girl sees a skeleton in the mirror or is shown as half as flesh, half as bone, a tradition which took on special meaning in the midst of the war.”¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, writers such as André Malraux later called these images *machines à Souffrir*. But are they really Picasso’s “suffering machines”—a term that foists a psycho-biographical connection upon the artist’s oeuvre?¹⁶

Alternatively, we could view *Tête de femme* as a painting that turns Picasso’s Cubism on its head by exploiting the original and often brutal syntax of collage and construction: work that intentionally twists, bends, distorts and abstracts, to the point of near obliteration, human form. *Tête de femme*’s death’s head/cranium—a series of white graffiti-like marks representing a ghastly, distorted countenance with toothy rictus and a dark, physical presence—certainly intimates life’s ineffable ravages. Whatever the precise circumstances or “identity” of Picasso’s 1939 painting, however, it is this synthesis of viewpoints that reinforces the perpetually Cubistic/Surrealistic nature of Picasso’s work, the cruel twistings and turnings of *Tête de femme* making the work feel intensely “real.”

As one author has recognized: “In Picasso’s work, there is no beginning, and above all, no end to Cubism. It simply unfolds across time, in temporal facets that are labelled ‘periods’...”¹⁷ Looking at Lee Miller’s famous photograph of Maar, alone in her Parisian apartment circa 1956 (Lee Miller Archives, England), with two renditions of the *ex-maitresse* displayed on the wall—one painted, one drawn, one expressively distorted, the other “naturalistically” rendered—the snapshot becomes a paradigm for the fruitlessness of definitively aping nature, veracity and the “real.” As such, it throws doubt on any essential “truthfulness” vis-à-vis Maar, or any other “portrait” image for that matter. In rejecting the erudite compartmentalization of his work, one can justifiably say that “portraiture” was Picasso’s “vision” of a person, and his alone. He was very clear of mind regarding this matter: “Doesn’t everyone look at himself in his own particular way? Deformations simply do not exist. Daumier and Lautrec saw a face differently from Ingres or Renoir, that’s all. As for me, I see it this way.”¹⁸



PABLO PICASSO
Woman Dressing Her Hair
 oil on canvas, Royan, June 1940
 51 ¼ x 38 ¼ in, 130.1 x 97.1 cm
 Collection of MoMA, 788.1995
 © MoMA, New York, 2005
 © 2020 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
 Courtesy of Art Resource, New York

Not for sale with this lot

We thank John Finlay, a historian of French history, specializing in twentieth-century modern art, for contributing the above essay. He studied art history and theory at Essex University and received an MA and PhD on Picasso from the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1998. His book *Picasso’s World* was published by Carlton Books (London) and by Larousse (as *Le monde de Picasso*, Paris) in 2011. He is also the author of *Pop! The World of Pop Art* (London, 2016) and co-author of *Andy Warhol: The Mechanical Art* (Madrid, 2017). He has contributed to international journals, publishing articles on Picasso and Alberto Giacometti for the *Burlington Magazine*. Finlay is funded by FABA (Fundación Almeline y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte, Brussels) and is currently working on its collection of Picasso’s *Vollard Suite* (1930–37). His new project for FABA concerns Picasso’s portraiture in the 1920s. Arcturus (London) will publish his new book, *Art History*, in May 2020. Finlay lives and works in Edinburgh, Scotland.



Dora Maar, Mougins, France, 1937
 Photo: Lee Miller
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Dora Maar and Picasso on the beach, Côte d'Azur, France, 1937
 Photo: Lee Miller
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1. Picasso to D.-H. Kahnweiler, November 9, 1959, cited in Dore Ashton, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972), 82.

2. See William S. Rubin, "Reflections on Picasso and Portraiture: Representation and Transformation," in *Picasso and Portraiture: Representation and Transformation* (New York: Museum of Modern Art; Paris: Grand Palais, in assoc. with Thames & Hudson, 1996), exhibition catalogue, 13–109.

3. *Ibid.*, 15, 97.

4. *Ibid.*, 16.

5. Picasso to Efstratios Tériade, "En causant avec Picasso," *Intransigent* (Paris), June 13, 1932, and cited in Ashton, *Picasso on Art*, 110.

6. Claire Bernardi et al., "The First Spark of a Firework," in *Cubist Picasso*, ed. Anne Baldassari (Paris: Réunion de musées nationaux and Flammarion, 2008), 18.

7. *Ibid.*, 42.

8. As Michael C. FitzGerald has shown, however, "[Picasso] also painted three pictures that curried favour more directly. These were portraits of his three backers of the exhibition [at Vollard's gallery in 1901]": Pedro Mañach, Gustave Coquirot and Ambroise Vollard. Despite distressing poverty at this time, "Picasso's actions reveal his understanding of the relationship between commercial success and

critical commendation." See FitzGerald's *Making Modernism: Picasso and the Creation of the Market for Twentieth-Century Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 29.

9. Cited in Ashton, *Picasso on Art*, 10. Ann Hoenigswald has confirmed that buried images are fundamental to the structure and subject of Picasso's earliest paintings, with preliminary forms often influencing the final result. See her essay "Works in Progress: Pablo Picasso's Hidden Images," in *Picasso: The Early Years, 1892–1906*, ed. Marilyn McCully (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1997), exhibition catalogue, nos. 299–309. As he later informed John Rothenstein, "I even take up old ones that I have not seen for years." Sir John Rothenstein, "A Letter on Paris," *Cornhill Magazine* (London, 1964), 288–95, and reproduced in Ashton, *Picasso on Art*, 98.

10. See Christian Zervos, ed., *Pablo Picasso*, vol. 9, *Oeuvres de 1937 à 1939* (Paris: Éditions Cahiers d'Art, 1958), 345–46.

11. Françoise Gilot with Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso*, rev. ed. (1964; London: Virago Press, 1990), 85.

12. Judy Freeman, *Picasso and the Weeping Women: The Years of Marie-Thérèse Walter and Dora Maar* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997), 190.

13. See, for example, *Nude Dressing Her Hair*, 1939, pencil on paper, 21.7 × 17 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris.

14. The four mixed-media works are listed in Werner Spies, with the collaboration of Christine Piot, *Picasso: The Sculptures* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje-Cantz, 2000). Revised edition of *Picasso: Das plastische Werk* (Stuttgart: Gerd Hatje, 1983), nos. 182–85. No. 184 is the only relief-work not in the Musée Picasso, Paris.

15. Elizabeth Cowling, *Picasso: Style and Meaning* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002), 623.

16. André Malraux, *La tête d'obsidienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 128.

17. Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "Periods: Cubism in Its Day," in Baldassari, *Cubist Picasso*, 53.

18. Picasso's account to Anatole Jakovsky, in "Midi avec Picasso," *Arts de France*, no. 6, 1946. Cited in Ashton, 110.

ESTIMATE: \$1,200,000 – 1,600,000