

Between representation and abstraction : Pablo Picasso, "Two nude women."

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Between Representation and Abstraction

Pablo Picasso, *Two Nude Women*

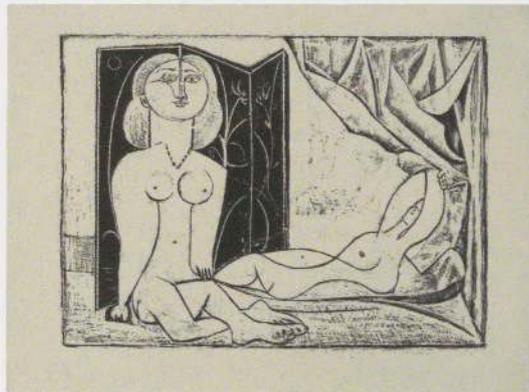
In printmaking, Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973) was fascinated by the possibility of preserving what he called “the metamorphosis of a picture” by printing successive stages (states) of an image as it developed into a final composition. The four prints shown here are from a progressive series of twenty-one states documenting the extraordinary transformation of two nude women from a relatively straightforward, naturalistic representation to a dramatically stylized abstraction.

Each of these images was printed from the same lithographic stone. Picasso would scrape away old lines and add new ones for each successive state. He started to work on the image in late 1945, when, at the age of sixty-four, and not having made a lithograph in fifteen years, his creativity was sparked by an intensive collaboration with the master printer Fernand Mourlot, in his lithography workshop.

Two Nude Women is an example of the theme of “sleep watchers” that recurs throughout Picasso’s art in all mediums, and which has been interpreted as an exploration of wakefulness versus dreaming, consciousness versus unconsciousness, the active versus the passive. These prints also reflect the profound influence that the people and events in Picasso’s life had on his art. He intended the seated figure on the left to be Françoise Gilot, his new love interest at the time. When she saw an early version of the print and asked Picasso who the sleeping figure on the right was, he responded that he was not yet sure, but by the time he had completed the final state, he told her he realized that it was Dora Maar, the mistress from whom he was separating. He noted that the insects in the margins were symbols for Dora, because he’d always felt that she had a “Kafkaesque” personality (a reference to Franz



Two Nude Women, state XII



Two Nude Women, state XV

Kafka’s novella *The Metamorphosis*, in which the hero wakes up to find himself changed into a beetle); the birds, he said, were for Françoise.

State XII depicts two women in quiet repose, each of near-equal presence within the picture. In state XV their forms have been simplified, and the figure on the left is now facing forward, with her left

arm down at her side and her legs crossed close to the ground. In state XIX more adjustments have been made to her legs, and her position is completely frontal. Her hair is fuller, her contours more rounded. A section of the right background has been darkened, offsetting the sleeping figure and pushing her further forward. By the final state, both figures have become radically abstracted, their insectlike forms nearly unrecognizable. What began as a classically familiar, inviting image of voluptuous women has become something prickly and disquieting; and, as if to correspond to shifts in Picasso's personal life, the seated figure (interpreted as Françoise) has grown longer and more prominent, and her previously relaxed pose is now alert, aggressive, even threatening. The sleeping "Dora," (the now abandoned lover) has diminished in stature to the point of almost disappearing.

Starr Figura, Assistant Curator
Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

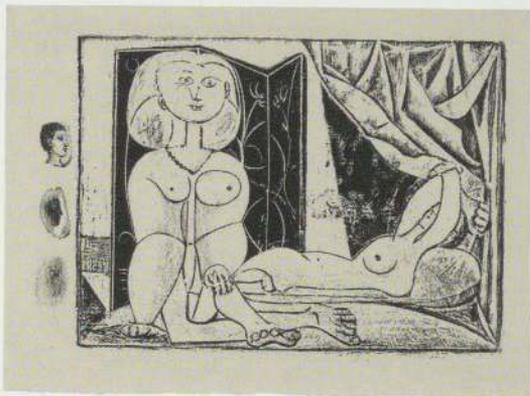
Two Nude Women, state XII. January 10, 1946.
Lithograph, composition: $10\frac{1}{8} \times 14\frac{1}{4}$ " (27 x 36.2 cm);
sheet: $12\frac{3}{16} \times 17\frac{3}{8}$ " (32.5 x 44.1 cm). Publisher: unpublished.
Printer: Fernand Mourlot, Paris. Edition: 18 artist's proofs.
Riva Castleman Endowment Fund

Two Nude Women, state XV. January 24, 1946.
Lithograph, composition: $10\frac{1}{8} \times 14\frac{1}{4}$ " (27 x 36.5 cm);
sheet: $12\frac{3}{16} \times 17\frac{3}{8}$ " (32.9 x 44.1 cm). Publisher: unpublished.
Printer: Fernand Mourlot, Paris. Edition: 18 artist's proofs.
Riva Castleman Endowment Fund

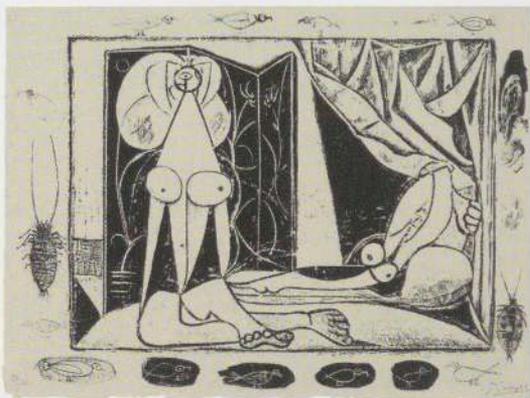
Two Nude Women, state XIX. February 6, 1946.
Lithograph, composition: $10\frac{3}{16} \times 15\frac{3}{16}$ " (27.5 x 39.4 cm);
sheet: $12\frac{3}{8} \times 17\frac{3}{8}$ " (32.7 x 44.1 cm). Publisher: unpublished.
Printer: Fernand Mourlot, Paris. Edition: 18 artist's proofs.
Riva Castleman Endowment Fund

Two Nude Women, state XXI (final state). February 12, 1946.
Lithograph, composition: $12\frac{3}{16} \times 16\frac{3}{16}$ " (32 x 43 cm);
sheet: $13\frac{3}{16} \times 17\frac{3}{16}$ " (33 x 44.3 cm). Publisher: the artist, Paris.
Printer: Fernand Mourlot, Paris. Edition: 50, plus 18 artist's proofs.
Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest

A NOTE ABOUT STATE NUMBERS AND EDITIONS: Although Fernand Mourlot documented eighteen states of *Two Nude Women*, Brigitte Baer, currently the most authoritative source on Picasso's printmaking, has found at least twenty-one. Furthermore, while Mourlot indicated that nineteen artist's proofs of each state were printed, Baer states that there were eighteen.



Two Nude Women, state XIX



Two Nude Women, state XXI

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