

PICASSO GIRL BEFORE A MIRROR



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AT SOME POINT ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14, 1932, PABLO PICASSO STEPPED BACK from his easel and took a long, hard look at the painting we know as *Girl before a Mirror*. Deciding there was nothing more he wanted to change or to add, he recorded the day, month, and year of completion on the back of the canvas and signed it on the front, in white paint, up in the picture's top-left corner.¹ Riotous in color and chockablock with pattern, this image of a young woman and her mirror reflection was finished toward the end of a grand series of canvases the artist had begun in December 1931, three months before.² Its jewel tones and compartmentalized composition, with discrete areas of luminous color bounded by lines, have prompted many viewers to compare its visual effect to that of stained glass or cloisonné enamel. To draw close to the painting and scrutinize its surface, however, is to discover that, unlike colored glass, *Girl before a Mirror* is densely opaque, rife with clotted passages and made up of multiple complex layers, evidence of its having been worked and reworked.

The subject of this painting, too, is complex and filled with contradictory symbols. The art historian Robert Rosenblum memorably described the girl's face, at left, a smoothly painted, delicately blushing pink-lavender profile combined with a heavily built-up, garishly colored yellow-and-red frontal view, as "a marvel of compression" containing within itself allusions to youth and old age, sun and moon, light and shadow, and "merging . . . one of the most pervasive cultural myths about women inherited from the nineteenth century, the polarity between virgin and whore, archetypes that haunted Picasso from his earliest years."³ Her reflection, on the right, further complicates the picture, introducing a shadowy, introspective doppelgänger into the painting's compressed and chromatically overheated space. The intensely mysterious relationship between the two figures is the primary subject of the painting, which reinvents the time-honored artistic theme of a woman before her mirror in radically modern terms, tinged by the mortal associations of traditional Vanity images and by powerful psychic overtones.

Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973). *Girl before a Mirror*. Paris, March 14, 1932. Oil on canvas, 64 x 51¼" (162.3 x 130.2 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF MRS. SIMON GUGGENHEIM, 1938



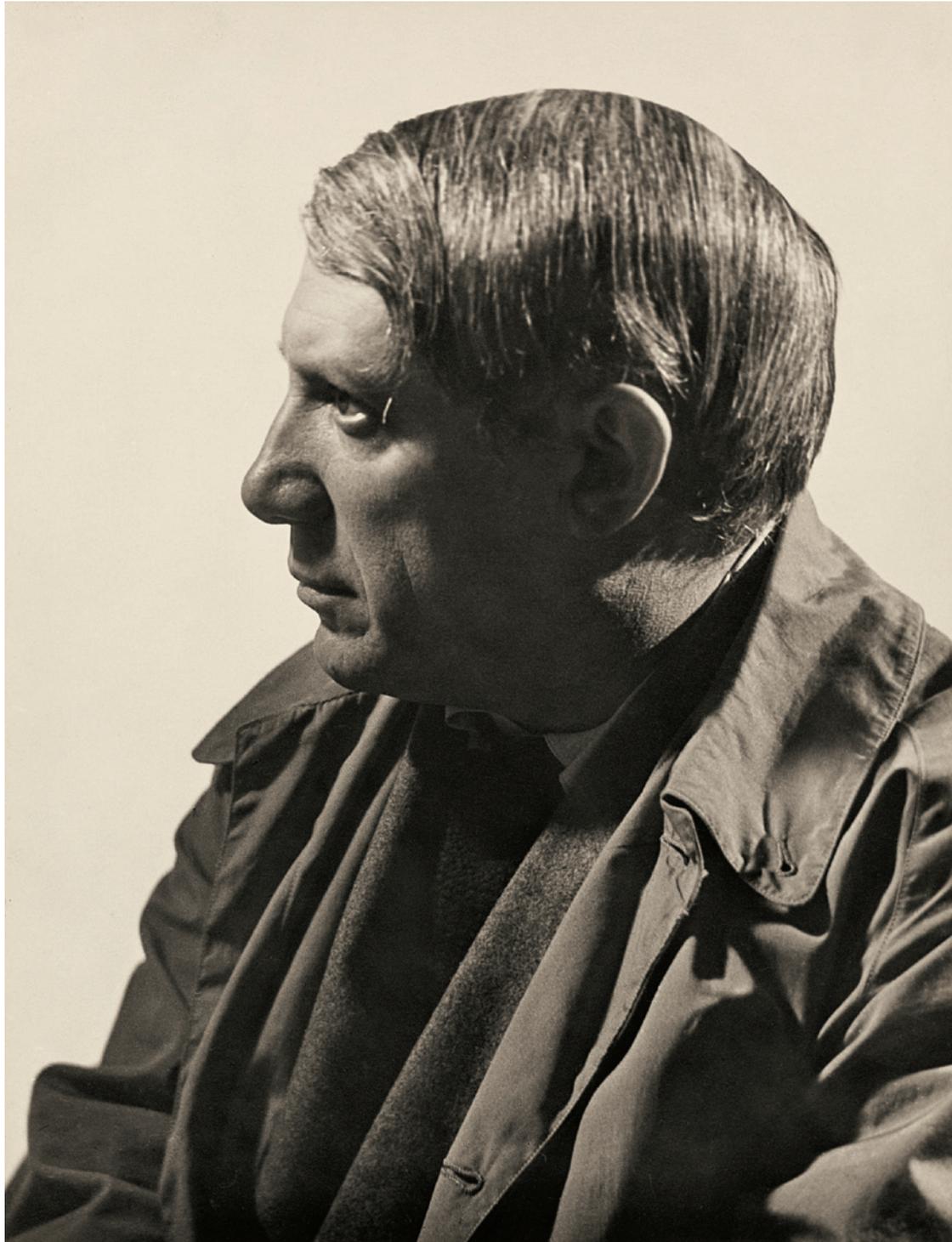


FIG. 1. Man Ray (American, 1890–1976). *Pablo Picasso*. Paris, 1932. Gelatin silver print, 11¾ x 9¼" (29.8 x 23.2 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF JAMES THRALL SOBY, 1941

“The body of work one creates is a form of diary,” Picasso told the art critic and prominent publisher Tériade a few months after completing *Girl before a Mirror*.⁴ His words invite us to think about the painting as a visually extravagant form of diary or journal entry that allows us to peer into his art and life at a particular time and place. Picasso had turned fifty the previous year [FIG. 1]. Although he was extraordinarily successful by any standard measure, the rapidly approaching opening of his major retrospective exhibition at the Galeries Georges Petit, in Paris, scheduled for June 15 of 1932, inspired him to work at a fever pitch, believing that his contemporary relevance and artistic legacy were on the line.⁵ *Girl before a Mirror* was clearly painted with this make-or-break retrospective in mind. According to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., The Museum of Modern Art’s first director, Picasso said he “preferred this painting to any of the others in the long series he had completed that spring.”⁶ Although he did not elaborate, part of the reason must have had to do with the painting’s dazzling visual and thematic complexity, which exceeds that of the many other splendid canvases Picasso created for the Galeries Georges Petit show.

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The blond hair and pink-and-lavender profile of *Girl before a Mirror*’s female protagonist represent the distinctive features of a young woman Picasso had fallen passionately in love with five years before, whose name was kept secret for decades from all but those who best knew him.⁷ Years later, this woman recalled the circumstances of the first time she met the artist, on Saturday, January 8, 1927, a cloudy Paris winter day, with the type of vivid clarity memory accords life-changing events:

I met him in the street. I was going shopping: I was going to buy a little collar for a blouse. He was looking at me. He had a superb red and black tie on, which I still have, incidentally. I thought it was very handsome. He gave me a nice smile and then he accosted me. He said to me “Miss, you have an interesting face. I would like to do your portrait. I have the feeling we will do great things together.” It was six in the afternoon. He said to me “I am Picasso.” He showed me a thick book about himself in Chinese or Japanese. He thought it was very funny because you couldn’t read his name on the book. He said to me “I would like to see you again.”⁸

Born on July 13, 1909, Marie-Thérèse Walter was seventeen years old on the day she met Picasso.⁹ The artist was forty-five, had been married to the Russian former ballerina Olga Khokhlova for more than eight years, and had a five-year-old son,



FIG. 2. Photograph by Picasso of Marie-Thérèse Walter with her mother's dog, Dolly, Alfortville, France, c. 1930. ARCHIVES MAYA WIDMAIER PICASSO

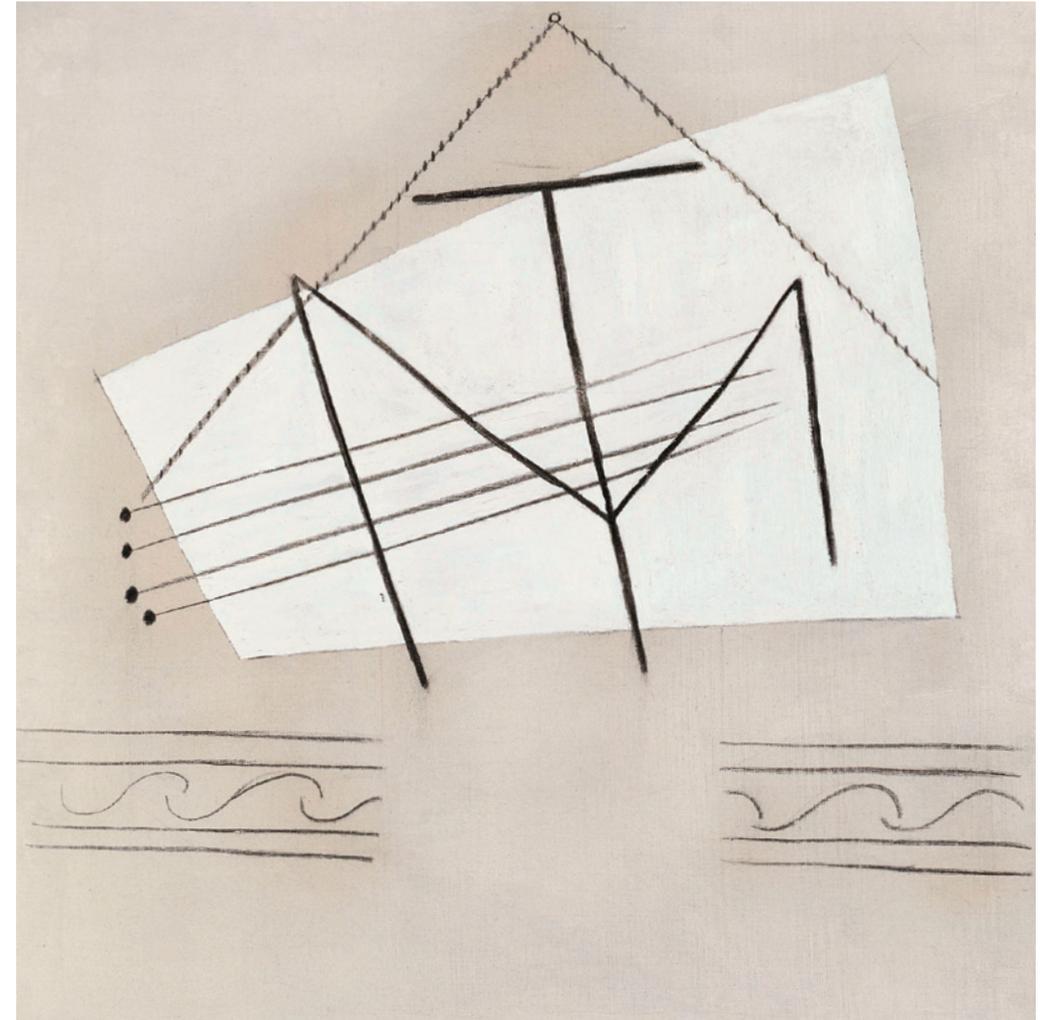


FIG. 3. Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973). *Guitar*. Paris, April 27, 1927. Oil and charcoal on canvas, 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (81 x 81 cm). MUSÉE PICASSO, PARIS. REMITTANCE IN LIEU OF INHERITANCE TAXES TO THE GOVERNMENT OF FRANCE BY JACQUELINE PICASSO

Paulo. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Picasso saw Walter again only two days later, and from then on their encounters grew more frequent. By 1932 she had become a well-established and profoundly transformative presence in Picasso's art and life [FIG. 2].

The first traces of Walter in Picasso's work appear in the form of cryptograms [FIG. 3]. Perhaps thinking back to his early Cubist years, when he wrote the name of another secret lover onto the surface of his art, Picasso created several small, schematic paintings that nominally depict the classic Cubist subject of a guitar but whose primary protagonists are the letters M and T, suggestively

overlaid, conflated, and combined.¹⁰ The following summer, when Walter clandestinely followed Picasso and his family on their summer holidays in Dinard, in Brittany, Picasso snapped a photograph of her on the beach that captures her unique physical presence [FIG. 4].¹¹ “I found Marie-Thérèse fascinating to look at,” recalled Françoise Gilot, an artist and Picasso’s companion from 1944 to 1953, who met Walter in the 1940s.¹²

I could see that she was certainly the woman who had inspired Pablo plastically more than any other. She had a very arresting face with a Grecian profile. The whole series of portraits of blonde women Pablo painted between 1927 and 1935 are almost exact replicas of her. . . . Her forms were handsomely sculptural, with a fullness of volume and a purity of line that gave her body and her face an extraordinary perfection. To the extent that nature offers ideas or stimuli to an artist, there are some forms that are closer than others to any artist’s own aesthetic and thus serve as a springboard for his imagination. Marie-Thérèse brought a great deal to Pablo in the sense that her form demanded recognition.¹³

Picasso’s representations of Walter range from instantly recognizable portraits to radically abstracted figures. Two works from 1928 convey a sense of early stylistic extremes. A closely observed and tenderly drawn lithograph of Walter [FIG. 5] — included, without any reference to the identity of the subject, in a 1928 book on Picasso’s work written by his friend, the dealer and collector André Level — has a magical quality.¹⁴ The tight cropping brings the soft cheek, curved lips, distinctive nose, and luminous eyes of Picasso’s model into breathtaking proximity, testifying to his intimate familiarity with the defining features of her face. The tiny *Bather and Cabin* [FIG. 6], painted in August 1928, suggests another way that the artist made aesthetic use of Walter’s presence in his life. Filled with playful sexual innuendo — the dropped towel, the double entendre of a key inserted in a keyhole — it conjures up heated trysts in beachside cabanas while introducing a new vocabulary of pictorially rendered abstract-yet-figurative sculptural form.¹⁵ The bather’s nude body (behind which, at right, lurks a shadowy, silhouetted figure bearing the artist’s profile) comprises seemingly separable, softly contoured volumetric shapes.

A few years later, after purchasing Château de Boisgeloup, a country estate about forty miles northwest of Paris, where he was able to set up a sculpture studio, Picasso returned for the first time in years to intensive modeling (as distinct from making welded metal assemblages).¹⁶ The years between 1931 and 1934 were one of the most remarkably productive periods of sculpture making in his career.¹⁷ The features of many of Picasso’s plaster busts from the early 1930s, for all of their abstract simplifications, evoke Walter’s. They vary from the



FIG. 4. Photograph by Picasso of Marie-Thérèse Walter at the beach, Dinard, France, August 1928. ARCHIVES MAYA WIDMAIER PICASSO



FIG. 5. Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973). *Face of Marie-Thérèse*. Paris, c. October 1928. Lithograph. Publisher: Galerie Percier, Paris. Composition: 8 x 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (20.3 x 14.1 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF ABBY ALDRICH ROCKEFELLER, 1940



FIG. 6. Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973). *Bather and Cabin*. Dinard, August 9, 1928. Oil on canvas, 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (21.5 x 15.8 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. HILLMAN PERIODICALS FUND, 1955



FIG. 7. Plaster of *Head of a Woman*, Boisgeloup, December 1932. Photo by Brassai. ARCHIVES PICASSO, MUSÉE PICASSO, PARIS

relatively straightforward likeness of *Head of a Woman* [FIG. 7] to the exaggerated volumes of *Head of Woman* [FIG. 8] and *Bust of a Woman* [FIG. 9] to the monumental *Head of a Woman* [FIG. 10], with its engorged nose, swollen cheeks, and distended mouth.

The sexualized facial features of the latter three sculptures, in which noses and mouths double as male and female sex organs, demonstrate Picasso's love

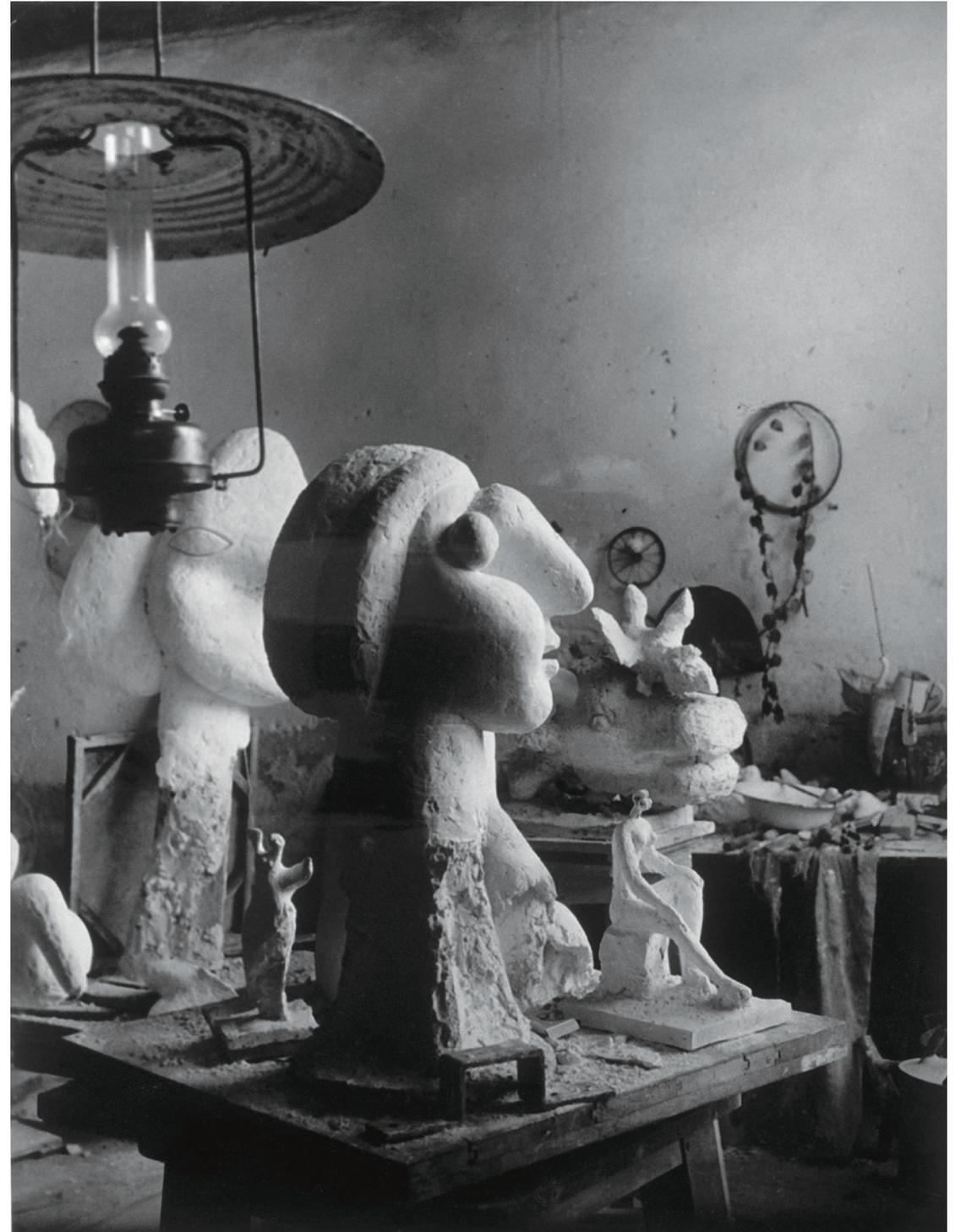
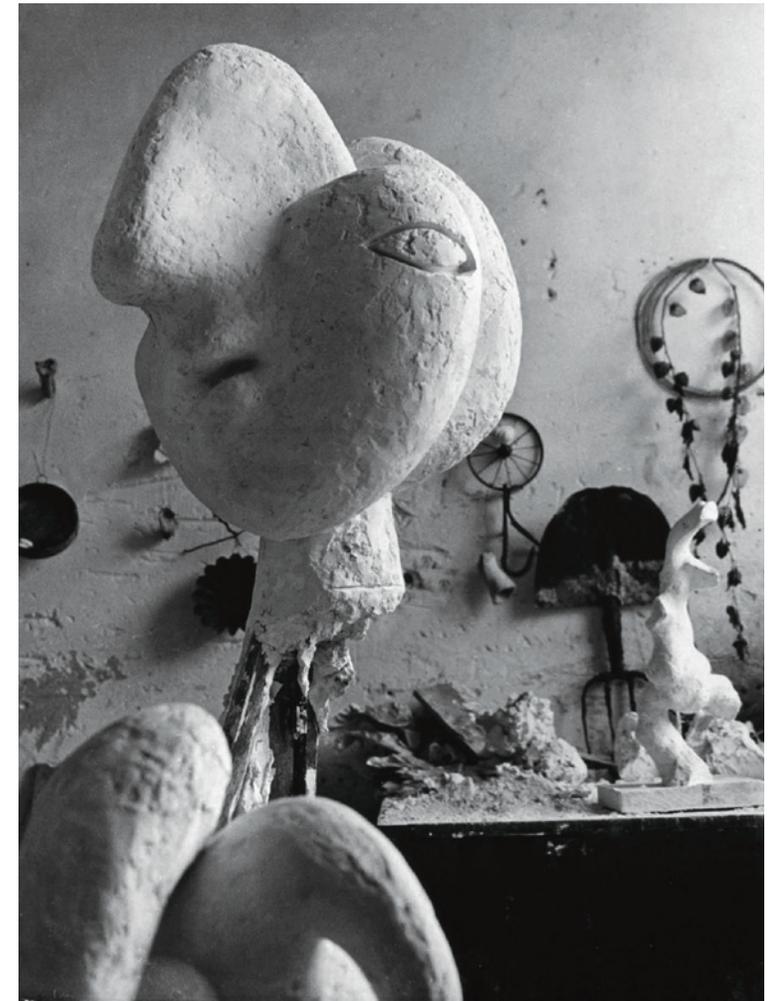


FIG. 8. A corner of the sculpture studio at Château de Boisgeloup, December 1932. Photo by Brassai. ARCHIVES PICASSO, MUSÉE PICASSO, PARIS



FIG. 10. Plaster of *Head of a Woman*, Boisgeloup, December 1932. Photo by Brassai. ARCHIVES PICASSO, MUSÉE PICASSO, PARIS



of visual punning and his remarkable ability to render the familiar radically strange. “I seek always to observe nature,” he commented in 1945. “I cling to resemblance, to a deeper resemblance, more real than the real, attaining the surreal.”¹⁸ Although Picasso’s definition of “the surreal” was different from that coined by André Breton, the Paris Surrealist group’s leader, in 1924, the Surrealist poets’ and artists’ rejection of contemporary social and sexual mores, along with their celebration of “convulsive beauty” and “mad love,” surely were among the factors that helped propel Picasso’s sculptures and subsequent paintings beyond the visual specifics of Walter’s features into the realm of great, erotically charged art.¹⁹

OPPOSITE: FIG. 9. Plasters of *Bust of a Woman* and *Head of a Woman*, Boisgeloup, December 1932. Photo by Brassai. ARCHIVES PICASSO, MUSÉE PICASSO, PARIS

NOTES

1. Although *Girl before a Mirror* was placed on a new stretcher in 1957 and relined in 1964, recent infrared pictures of the verso suggest the original canvas was inscribed “32 14/mars,” which would correspond with the dated inscription recorded in early published mentions of the paintings. My thanks to MoMA conservators Cindy Albertson, Anny Aviram, Michael Duffy, and Kristin Robinson for their time and skill in examining and X-raying the painting and for their many thoughtful insights.
2. For an excellent account of this series, see Michael Fitzgerald, “A Question of Identity,” in *Picasso’s Marie-Thérèse* (New York: Acquavella Galleries, 2008), pp. 8–29.
3. Robert Rosenblum, “Picasso’s Blond Muse: The Reign of Marie-Thérèse Walter,” in William Rubin, ed., *Picasso and Portraiture: Representation and Transformation* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1996), p. 354.
4. “L’oeuvre qu’on fait est une façon de tenir son journal.” Pablo Picasso, quoted in E. Tériade, “En causant avec Picasso,” *L’Intransigeant*, June 15, 1932, p. 1.
5. On preparations for Picasso’s retrospective at Galeries Georges Petit, see Yve-Alain Bois, *Matisse and Picasso* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1998), pp. 66–75. See also Fitzgerald, “A Question of Identity,” pp. 24–27.
6. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Picasso: Forty Years of His Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1939), p. 156.
7. For an illuminating account of their relationship, see Diana Widmaier Picasso, “Marie-Thérèse Walter and Pablo Picasso: New Insights into a Secret Love,” in Markus Müller, ed. *Picasso and Marie-Thérèse Walter: Between Classicism and Surrealism* (Münster: Graphikmuseum Pablo Picasso Münster, 2004), pp. 27–35.
8. Walter, interview with Pierre Cabanne on the radio broadcast *Présence des arts*, April 13, 1974; translated in Diana Widmaier Picasso, “Marie-Thérèse Walter and Pablo Picasso,” p. 28.
9. Pierre Daix, *Dictionnaire Picasso* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995), p. 901.
10. Picasso would sometimes include a P in his coded inscriptions, fusing it with MT; one might also see the upended M as a W, for Walter. On Picasso’s cryptograms, see Rosenblum, “Picasso’s Blond Muse,” pp. 338–39.
11. Diana Widmaier Picasso, “Marie-Thérèse Walter and Pablo Picasso,” pp. 29–30.
12. Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 241.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 241–42.
14. On the lithograph published with André Level’s book, *Picasso* (Paris: G. Crès, 1928), see Rosenblum, “Picasso’s Blond Muse,” p. 338.
15. In the summer of 1928 Picasso rented a cabana for trysts with Walter; the scholar Lydia Gasman was the first to suggest that this beachside refuge could have served as a symbol for their illicit affair. Gasman, “Mystery, Magic, and Love in Picasso, 1925–1938: Picasso and the Surrealist Poets,” 4 vols. (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1981).
16. In 1928 Picasso modeled two small plasters in preparation for designing a monument to his friend, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, but the many plaster sculptures made at Boisgeloup constitute a much more sustained engagement with the practice of modeling.
17. On Picasso’s work as a sculptor, see Elizabeth Cowling, “The Image of Picasso—Sculptor in the 1930s,” in John Richardson and Diana Widmaier Picasso, eds., *Picasso and Marie-Thérèse Walter: L’Amour fou* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2011), pp. 256–91.
18. Picasso, quoted in André Warnod, “En peinture tout n’est que signe, nous dit Picasso,” *Arts* 22 (June 29, 1945). Translation by Blair Hartzell.
19. On Picasso’s relationship with Surrealism, see Anne Baldassari, *The Surrealist Picasso* (Paris: Fondation Beyeler, 2005).
20. Cowling, “The Sculptor’s Studio: Picasso’s *Bust of a Woman*,” in *Picasso’s Marie-Thérèse*, pp. 35–37.
21. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, letter to Michel Leiris, March 19, 1932; published in Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, *Donation Louise et Michel Leiris: Collection Kahnweiler-Leiris* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984), p. 192; translated in Richardson, *A Life of Picasso: The Triumphant Years, 1917–1932* (New York: Knopf, 2007), p. 470. Since Kahnweiler mentions having seen Picasso two days earlier, Richardson dates his visit to Picasso’s Paris studio to March 17.
22. I am indebted to Leo Steinberg’s insightful discussion of Picasso’s “continual struggle in the *Femmes d’Alger* series to reconcile distance with presence, possessing and watching, the data of vision and the carnal knowledge attained in an embrace. Sight, which needs distance, is out of touch with its aim. Whereas the embrace, having lost distance, is blind.” Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 130.
23. John Elderfield describes the “hinged composition” of this painting in Cowling et al., *Matisse/Picasso* (London: Tate Publishing; Paris: RMN; New York: The Museum of Modern Art; 2003), p. 238.
24. On Picasso’s conjuring of the “ghosts of mirrors past,” and for significant references and precedents, see Rosenblum, “Picasso’s Blond Muse,” pp. 350–60; and his earlier “Picasso’s *Girl before a Mirror*: Some Recent Reflections,” *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 1.
25. On the poor reviews Matisse received from the press, see Bois, *Matisse and Picasso*, pp. 64–66. On Picasso’s sustained involvement in planning his own retrospective, see Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, pp. 475–79; and Simonetta Fraquelli, “Picasso’s Retrospective at the Galeries Georges Petit, Paris, 1931: A Response to Matisse,” in Tobia Bezzola, ed., *Picasso: His First Museum Exhibition, 1932* (Zurich: Kunsthau Zürich, 2010), pp. 78–80.
26. Bois, *Matisse and Picasso*, p. 64.
27. On the issue of artistic appropriation and give-and-take between the two artists, see Elderfield, *Matisse/Picasso*, p. 234.
28. On the Matissean qualities of Picasso’s work in this period, see Bois, *Matisse and Picasso*, pp. 58–75.
29. The work Richardson connects with Picasso’s rue de Liège love nest is *Reclining Nude* (Paris, April 3, 1929). See Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, p. 467.
30. On Picasso’s Harlequin alter ego, see Rosenblum, “Picasso’s Blond Muse,” p. 359.
31. Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, p. 181.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Many thanks to Blair Hartzell for bringing this etching to my attention.
34. On the connection to Édouard Manet and other mirror images in the history of painting, see Rosenblum, “Picasso’s Blond Muse,” p. 358.
35. William Rubin has connected the darker bands in the painting to striped fabric. See Rubin, *Picasso in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972), p. 138.
36. For descriptions of the figure’s belly or womb, see Reinhold Hohl, “C. G. Jung on Picasso (and Joyce),” *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1983): 10–18. See also Rubin, *Picasso in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art*, pp. 138–41.
37. Picasso, quoted in Christian Zervos, “Conversation avec Picasso,” *Cahiers d’art* 10 (1935): 174; republished as “Statement by Picasso: 1935,” in Barr, *Picasso*, p. 16.
38. On the installation at Galeries Georges Petit, see Fraquelli, “Picasso’s Retrospective at the Galeries Georges Petit, Paris, 1932,” pp. 77–93.
39. On possible motives behind his achronological installation, see *ibid.*, pp. 89–91.
40. Carl Jung, “Picasso,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 153, no. 2,107 (November 13, 1932): 2. On Jung’s diagnosis of Picasso, see Christian Geelhaar, “Picasso: The First Zurich Exhibition,” in Bezzola, ed., *Picasso*, pp. 38–41.
41. Jung, “Picasso,” p. 2.
42. Barr’s heavily annotated catalogue is in The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Papers, 12a.6.
43. E. M. Lundell, on behalf of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim, letter to Barr, December 3, 1937, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Department of Painting and Sculpture, Museum Collection Files.
44. Barr, letter to A. Conger Goodyear, December 16, 1937, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Department of Painting and Sculpture, Museum Collection Files.
45. Press release, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 24, 1938.

FOR FURTHER READING

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