



PICASSO

FIGURES

This exhibition features paintings, works on paper, and sculptures on loan from the Musée national Picasso-Paris, the largest public collection of Pablo Picasso's works in the world. The exhibition explores the artist's lifelong fascination with the body as a means of conveying experiences from love and sexuality to conflict, anxiety, and despair. Highlights include major paintings from most phases of Picasso's career, as well as more intimate works that give insight into his process of dismantling and reconstructing the body to signify psychological rupture and transformation.

Born in Málaga, Spain, in 1881, Picasso was classically trained by his father, a professor of art at a local university who later taught at the School of Fine Arts in Barcelona, where the precocious boy started taking classes at age thirteen. After studying in Barcelona and then Madrid, Picasso took periodic trips to Paris. He moved there in 1904 and soon earned recognition for his talent and his desire to expand the limits of artistic expression. In 1908, with Georges Braque, Picasso conceived of cubism, a style of faceted geometric forms that suggest the relativity of time and space while exploding conventions of representation. Following this radical departure, Picasso would sustain a lifelong reputation as one of the great groundbreakers in twentieth-century art.



Picasso. Figures begins with "Female figures," portraits of women with whom he had romantic relationships. The selection shows Picasso's wide range of stylistic approaches and demonstrates his capacity for renewal while highlighting the deep coherence that governs his entire range of production. At the same time, the paintings in "Female figures" afford insight into Picasso's complex attitudes toward women throughout his life, which is reflected in various

Fig. 1



Fig. 2

ways throughout the exhibition. For example, a highlight of this section, the stunningly lyrical *Reading Woman* (*La Lecture*, 1932; fig. 1), depicts Marie-Thérèse Walter, a young woman with whom the married artist, then in his mid-forties, had an affair.

The next section, “Cubist figures,” shows Picasso in the first decade of the twentieth century as he synthesizes influences, from the geometric faceting of Paul Cézanne’s paintings to the abstract stylization of African and Iberian masks and sculptures. Like many artists of his time, including Paul Gauguin and Henri Matisse, Picasso admired tribal objects for their expressiveness and primal

force. They appear in the painting *The Women of Avignon* (*Les Femmes d’Alger*, 1907), a landmark of twentieth-century art that portrays prostitutes in a brothel, several wearing fierce African masks that seem intended to provoke sexual anxiety. That painting is in the Museum of Modern Art, but several studies are in this exhibition.

The hybrid women in *Les Femmes d’Alger* appear to have been collaged together in quasi-geometrical parts, an approach that is expanded in purely cubist works such as *Man with a Guitar* (*Homme à la guitare*, 1911; fig. 2). Following Cézanne’s notion that everything in nature is based on geometric forms, the subject is translated into a series of overlapping planes, angled blocks, and squares that denote two and three dimensions simultaneously. With its references to the unfixed conditions of modern life, the ambiguous description of form and space, and the liberation from the visible world, cubism would become one of the twentieth century’s most influential styles.

Despite the brilliance of cubism, Picasso was not satisfied with following a singular artistic path. Instead, he moved freely between styles, integrating them to achieve his desired sense of drama and tension. The section of the exhibition called “Magic figures” includes works from the mid-1920s through the 1930s. Showing the influence of surrealism, they relate to psychoanalytic theories aimed at unveiling the forces and desires that reside in the unconscious. While never a part of the surrealist group, Picasso shared with its members an interest in metamorphosis—the transition of a body from one state of being into another. And, like the surrealists, he continued to evoke ritual objects from places like sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania, which Picasso felt held a magical power lacking in Western tradition.

In the next section, “Sculptural figures,” human primality is manifested in constructions of rounded organic forms, often suggesting anatomies made of earth and rocks. These figures are shown interacting at the beach, sometimes playfully and occasionally in poses of extreme tension—erotic or violent. A recurring motif for Picasso, the open mouth is at the center of this ambiguity: it may at once indicate a passionate kiss, a despairing scream, or a savage bite.

Such intensification of emotions is amplified in the following section, “Disfigured figures,” where depictions of the figure are increasingly distorted, often conveying extreme expressions of lust, anger, or despair. Among the most powerful is *The Suppliant* (*La Suppliante*, 1937; fig. 3), which shows a terrified woman, hands upraised as if imploring the sky for mercy. The painting evokes the female figure on the right side of Picasso’s



Fig. 3

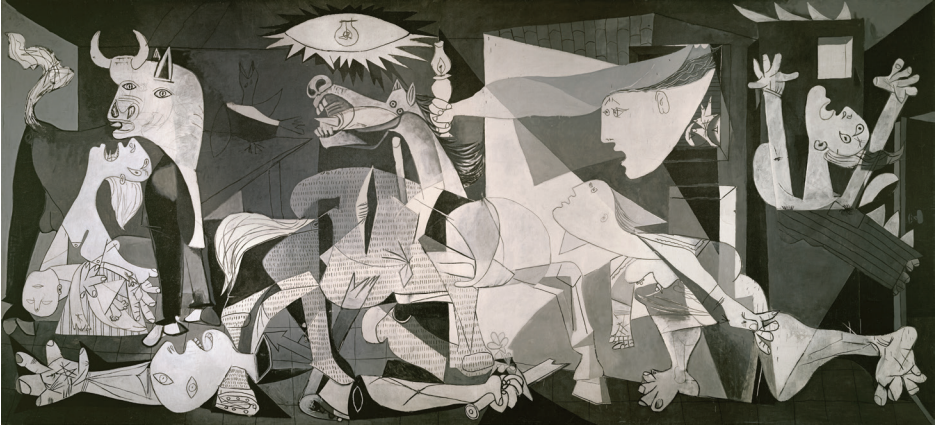


Fig. 4

great anti-war masterpiece, *Guernica*, painted the same year (fig. 4). Like *Guernica*, *The Suppliant* elicits horror at human cruelty, and empathy for the victims of violence.

In the concluding gallery, “Late figures,” we are confronted by painterly figures whose forms contain rapid brushstrokes, jarring color combinations, and densely packed compositions. With almost brutal vitality,



Fig. 5

these tableaux illustrate how Picasso constantly questioned academic ideals of beauty and harmony. But they also circle back to his early classical training, showing the inspiration he took from art history, as evidenced in his tribute to Édouard Manet, *Luncheon on the Grass, after Manet* (*Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe d'après Manet*, 1960; fig. 5). Here we see an artist whose fame rests on his rejection of tradition, but who never stopped being in dialogue with the past.

IMAGES

Cover: *Portrait of Dora Maar*, Paris, November 23, 1937. Oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 18 1/4 in. Musée national Picasso-Paris, Pablo Picasso Acceptance in Lieu, 1979. MP166. © 2021 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée national Picasso-Paris) / Mathieu Rabeau

Fig. 1: *Reading Woman*, Boisgeloup, January 2, 1932. Oil on canvas, 51 1/8 x 38 3/8 in. Musée national Picasso-Paris, Pablo Picasso Acceptance in Lieu, 1979. MP137. © 2021 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée national Picasso-Paris) / Mathieu Rabeau

Fig. 2: *Man with a Guitar*, Paris, fall 1911. Oil on canvas, 60 5/8 x 30 1/2 in. Musée national Picasso-Paris, Pablo Picasso Acceptance in Lieu, 1979. MP34. © 2021 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée national Picasso-Paris) / Adrien Didierjean

Fig. 3: *The Suppliant*, Paris, December 18, 1937. Gouache on wood, 9 1/2 x 7 1/4 in. Musée national Picasso-Paris, Pablo Picasso Acceptance in Lieu, 1979. MP168. © 2021 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée national Picasso-Paris) / Mathieu Rabeau

Fig. 4: *Guernica*, Paris, May 11, 1937. Oil on canvas, 137 3/8 x 305 1/2 in. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain. © 2021 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée national Picasso-Paris) / Mathieu Rabeau

Fig. 5: *Luncheon on the Grass, after Manet*, Vauvenargues, March 3–August 20, 1960. Oil on canvas, 51 1/8 x 76 3/4 in. Musée national Picasso-Paris, Pablo Picasso Acceptance in Lieu, 1979. MP215. © 2021 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée national Picasso-Paris) / Mathieu Rabeau

PICASSO FIGURES

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Picasso. Figures is organized in collaboration with the Musée national Picasso-Paris. It was conceived and organized by Emilia Philippot, curator, and François Dareau, associate curator, Musée national Picasso-Paris.



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