

‘Picasso the Foreigner’ Review: An Outsider in Paris

The early years of Pablo Picasso’s life in France showed evidence of his genius, but the Parisian authorities saw a potential troublemaker.



‘Family of Saltimbanques’ (1905) by Pablo Picasso. PHOTO: ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO/ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY, NEW YORK

By Hamilton Cain

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In 2015, New York’s Museum of Modern Art mounted the first major retrospective of Pablo Picasso’s sculpture in a half-century, with over 100 pieces, from stylized ceramic heads to “found” metal weldings to wood deconstructions. His genius poured forth in three dimensions, building on breakthroughs in painting and collage. One period stood out for its darkened, austere galleries: the World War II years, when he remained in Paris during the Nazi occupation. The objects here were stripped-down, elemental, toying with minimalist representation during an epoch of maximalist anguish, as in “Bull’s Head,” which fuses a bicycle seat and handlebars, evoking his perennial theme of the bullfight, and opening a portal onto fear and vulnerability, a striking counterpoint to the self-assured, protean figure Picasso presented to the world. We’re used to seeing the great man play offense, not defense.

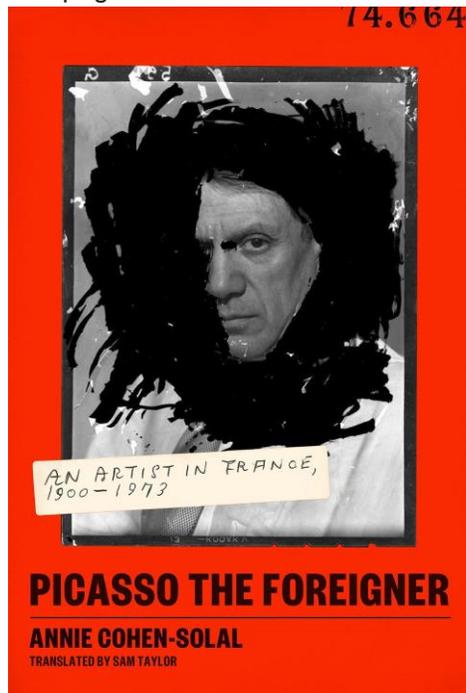
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Picasso the Foreigner: An Artist in France, 1900-1973

By Annie Cohen-Solal

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

608 pages



Annie Cohen-Solal probes this sense of vulnerability in her absorbing, astute “Picasso the Foreigner,” nimbly translated from the French by Sam Taylor. Ms. Cohen-Solal, whose previous books include a life of Jean-Paul Sartre, recounts the artist’s biography chronologically, putting her imprimatur on an exhaustively examined life as she scours archives and the French government’s dossiers on Picasso, and making the case that the artist’s outsider status in France is vital to the understanding of his work. Throughout seven decades in his adopted country he struggled with the identity of foreigner. In the wake of the Dreyfus affair, which had exposed deep anxieties about who was authentically French, the French government had cracked down on immigrants, anarchists and the demimonde of Montmartre—Picasso’s people. When he arrived from Barcelona in 1900, a brash, ambitious 19-year-old, he was assigned a quartet of “informants,” agents who traced his movements and documented his relationships. Picasso was careful not to attract too much attention; as Ms. Cohen-Solal observes, “he had already discovered the best way to protect himself: he worked.”

His output was prodigious, his brilliance recognized by diverse allies, among them the German dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the expatriate collectors Leo and Gertrude Stein, and the poet Apollinaire, who declared that “more than all the poet . . . this Spaniard bruises us like a brief frost. His meditations undress in silence.”

“Picasso the Foreigner” skips around impatiently, but key sections gel beautifully, such as the author’s analysis of the charged symbiosis between Picasso and Georges Braque, whom the French regard as cubism’s catalyst, the sun to Picasso’s moon. (She blames this judgment on nationalist fervor.) There’s gossip, too, about money woes, bad romances and intellectual feuds. The author cites Braque dismissing Gertrude Stein: “Miss Stein understood nothing of what was happening around her . . . For someone who considers herself to be an authority of her time, it might be said that she has never moved beyond the status of tourist.”

Ms. Cohen-Solal positions herself as an investigative journalist, pursuing leads neglected by other writers, but her through-line fades in and out, like a forest path. Her detours into contemporary protests and riffs on civil-rights thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois (who visited Paris) occasionally feel contrived, although they offer rich context. She toggles between the 20th and 21st centuries, bringing her chronicle into our present. A 2018 exhibit of his early canvases at the Musée d’Orsay highlighted the marginalized: prostitutes, drinkers and outcasts, alongside “those nomadic performers . . . his clowns, his carnies, his harlequins, his saltimbanques, the child precariously balancing on a ball, the trained monkey, the tame crow.”

And yet Ms. Cohen-Solal’s portrait reaches admirably beyond the heroic, flawed Übermensch of John Richardson’s multi-volume (and never-completed) biography. She writes with a Gallic insouciance—whiffs of irony, shrugs of the shoulder—but her anger flares as she connects Picasso’s years in France with the injustices of our own era: “Doesn’t the scandal of the greatest artist of our age, stigmatized and targeted *because he was a foreigner*, resonate now with the rebirth of our ordinary xenophobias?” Her rhetorical questions are ornate and overwrought, but segue into broader, sure-footed arguments about the development and impact of his most subversive work.

World War I kindled a firestorm of “Germanophobic hysteria” (Ms. Cohen-Solal’s term) that affected all of Kahnweiler’s clients. But American collectors whipped out their wallets, and business boomed. Beginning in 1917 Picasso crafted backdrops for the Ballets Russes, joining forces with composer Erik Satie and choreographer Léonide Massine and marrying a Russian ballerina, Olga Khokhlova: “In shades of beige, blue, and white, Picasso drew a Harlequin playing the guitar and a Mercury on violin, dynamic, dancing, floating . . . thus reinventing, as his friend Étienne [de Beaumont] had suggested, the old alphabet of classical mythology.” Ms. Cohen-Solal finds amid this exuberance evidence of “a mercurial artist in a distraught state.”

Even as Picasso ascended the summit of virtuosity, the French establishment snubbed him. In 1929 the Louvre rejected his now-celebrated “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon.” A decade later, only two museums in the entirety of France had acquired Picasso’s paintings. The

artist carried, perforce, an identity card, as Paris had created a police department expressly designed to monitor foreigners. France between the wars was a “victorious but wounded country . . . swept by a wave of xenophobia,” Ms. Cohen-Solal observes. “At the fringe of French society, Picasso became the archetypal menace because he increasingly represented everything the patriots hated: he was rich, famous, unfathomable, uncontrollable, cosmopolitan.”

Then came the German and Italian bombing of a Basque village in 1937, at the behest of Franco; Picasso’s fever-dream response in “Guernica” elevated his profile globally and triggered fresh problems. “With the renown he’d gained through *Guernica*, Picasso had become a reference point, a moral compass, and it was to him that people turned when they wanted to decipher the future,” Ms. Cohen-Solal writes. Still a suspect, Picasso was kept under surveillance by French authorities. The work that brought him international renown and became a “standard of resistance to all forms of fascism” marked him all the more firmly as a troublemaker.

Art as crime, literally. His sole application for naturalization, submitted just before the Germans marched into Paris in 1940, fizzled. After the war his influence soared, but he maneuvered warily, dodging the likes of J. Edgar Hoover—who worried about Picasso bringing subversion to the U.S.—while flashing Communist credentials. (Ms. Cohen-Solal suggests that Picasso’s politics were more fervently antifascist than Communist.) He shifted in the 1960s toward the decorative, buoyed by the subservient devotion of his second wife, Jacqueline Roque, a period dubbed by Richardson “L’Époque Jacqueline.”

For the most part, Ms. Cohen-Solal avoids Picasso’s tempestuous personal life and his visionary evolution, sticking to professional transactions, dramatic in themselves, and the watchfulness that enveloped him like a fog. “Picasso the Foreigner” largely succeeds by following a narrow trail through the artist’s monumental career, exposing prejudices embedded in French culture (and ours). Ms. Cohen-Solal captures a facet of Picasso’s character long overlooked, never wavering in her admiration for the man and his oeuvre.

Mr. Cain is the author of “This Boy’s Faith: Notes From a Southern Baptist Upbringing.”