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Picasso in War and in Peace, at the Gagosian Gallery



Adolf Hitler and his entourage visiting the Eiffel Tower in Paris, June 23, 1940, following the occupation of France by the Nazis. ("[Adolf Hitler, Eiffel Tower, Paris 23 June 1940.jpg](#)" by Pegiko is licensed under [CC BY 3.0](#))

By **BRIAN T. ALLEN**

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Surviving the Nazis and winning over French critics after the war

‘**P**ICASSO, what did you do during the war” is always a good question. He despaired of Spain, under Franco starting in early 1939. *Guernica*, his brutally operatic war painting, was a sensation. Picasso supported aspects of the Spanish Republic, mostly artist relief, declared his Communist allegiance in 1937, and was appointed, without soliciting it, director of the Prado in 1936. It would have been a no-show job. Picasso made a visit to Spain in 1934 but never returned, determined to boycott Franco’s reign.

Still, as Spain’s most famous artist since Goya, the mostly Communist regime there wanted him identified

with the cause. No less than Dolores Ibárruri, she of “I’d rather die on my feet than live on my knees,” connived to get Picasso to return as the war raged, getting her instructions from Moscow.



Guernica, from 1937, was a statement on Europe’s present and future, and Picasso despaired of both. (Shannon Stapleton/Reuters)

After the civil war ended, all this was moot. Picasso believed that the Old World was committing suicide. Spain had nothing to offer him. Paris, his home for a tad under 40 years, was still quiet but officially at war with the Germans. In April 1940, Picasso applied for French citizenship, worried that his murky status as a resident alien would lead to his arrest, deportation, or incarceration. His application, still in French official files, was stamped “extremely urgent.” Within weeks, and with Nazis invading, he was rejected.

French police-intelligence service nixed his application in a vicious, four-page, indecipherably signed report stating that Picasso was “a so-called modern painter” who stashed millions of francs abroad, a Communist, an ingrate, and a war dodger in 1914. The curator of *A Foreigner Called Picasso* discovered through detective work who wrote the report: Émile Chevalier, a dirty cop with unchecked power who was an artist!



Left: Pablo Picasso, *Man with a Lamb*, modeled 1943, cast 1948–50, bronze. (Philadelphia Museum of Art, © 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society, New York, courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Gagosian) **Right:** Pablo Picasso, *Buffet Henri II, Vauvenargues*, 1959, oil on canvas. (© 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society, New York, courtesy Gagosian)

A small group of Picasso's wartime art is in the exhibition. Two of my favorite things in the exhibition are small still-life vanitas with skulls. He did lots of small pictures of women's heads, angular, using thick paint and citrus colors, and oozing unease. A powerful bronze sculpture, *Man with a Lamb*, made in 1943, depicts a shepherd carrying the vulnerable, pathetic animal. Picasso's day-to-day life was precarious.

Who helped him survive? The German ambassador to France had persuaded Hitler to rule occupied France more subtly than, say, he ruled Poland, as an extreme example. Franco's ambassador to France helped Picasso, too, and we don't know why. He assured the Germans that Picasso had turned recluse, which he hadn't entirely. Picasso's banker had friends in high places. Still, Nazi culture hawks called his art degenerate. The old Fauve painter Maurice de Vlaminck, by the war tight with Nazis, wrote in 1942 that Picasso had "led French painting into denial, powerlessness, and death."

The filmmaker Jean Cocteau had history with Picasso, sometimes friendly, sometimes turgid. Cocteau floated in the 1930s and '40s among Nazi, Communist, and, flakier still, pacifist camps, but he knew Arno Breker, Hitler's favorite sculptor, who lived off and on in Paris and was part of what had become the French avant-garde establishment, and such a thing did indeed exist. Using Breker, Cocteau helped keep the dogs at bay.

Picasso himself abstained from all open involvement with the marketplace. He socialized discreetly in the mornings, sometimes with Nazis, but, otherwise, worked and worked and worked. He wrote a Dada play — Picasso was an accomplished poet — with characters named Big Foot, Onion, Tart, and Fat Anguish and Skinny Anguish. He looked like a hobo.

Even committed Nazis can't goose-step day and night. Starting in the '20s, Picasso, already rich and getting richer, employed fixers. A short pause in the Nazi high kick, a whisper in the ear, an obliging wink, here and there, and during the war Picasso laid low. By hook or by crook, he survived. Paris adjusted to Nazi rule and subverted it in many ways. A military wing of the French resistance was at open war with the Nazis, but a not-too-stealth society wing was as well. By 1944, Picasso hosted salons in his studio where Parisians of many political stripes gathered, many sick of hostility, all knowing that the Germans would soon lose.



Gallery view in the exhibition. (Brian Allen)

A Foreigner Called Picasso ends with a big gallery of paintings from the 1950s and '60s, among them *Women of Algiers*, from 1955, a brilliant heavy hitter and one of his late tributes to Delacroix. I know Picasso's late paintings are in vogue now, but I think they're mostly clunkers, as did most everyone else until about 20 years ago. By the '60s, Picasso's prewar painting production was more or less picked clean and seekers-after-Picasso had to settle for paintings that still seem to me to be gloppy.

These make for a splashy, colorful ending, and I like splashy, colorful endings, but these wander from the exhibition's core points. They look like billboards for Picasso, by Picasso, but I don't think his heart was in them.



Picasso's career as a potter was prolific and late in his career. He was inspired by ancient Greek and Iberian sculpture and vases. (Albert Gea/Reuters)

After the war, Picasso became that rare thing. He was — finally — a prophet honored in his own land, which, practically speaking, was France, though he wasn't a citizen. In 1947, only two of his paintings were in French public collections, but that changed as museum acquisitions accelerated and the French art establishment — always conservative — seemed to hate him less. The center of the art world shifted from Paris to New York, so Parisian contempt mattered less. And by 1950 Picasso was mostly gone from Paris, not in a huff but for the three villas he owned in the south of France. There, he did his best end-of-life work, not in painting but in sculpture, prints, and ceramics.

Picasso, I'll add for enquiring minds, never visited the United States. He was considered as a delegate to the World Peace Conference in New York in 1952, which would have required a visa. A quiet diplomatic shuffle ensued as the FBI recommended its rejection on the grounds that Picasso was a Communist subversive. The State Department feared that a public rejection would offend chattering classes everywhere, you know, the types with portraits of Alger Hiss under their beds. The resolution? Picasso wasn't invited, so there was no visa application to reject.

In the '60s, the French government offered citizenship to Picasso. He declined, understanding that Spain prohibited dual citizenship. If he accepted French citizenship, Spain would have crossed him from its dance card. He hoped that Franco would die before he did and that he would live to return as a citizen of a Spanish republic. This was not to be. Franco outlived him, and *Guernica* is displayed in a museum named for the consort of the restored Spanish king.

A Foreigner Called Picasso shows a few pots, but they're not in prime gallery real estate. That's a shame. Starting in the '50s, Picasso immersed himself in pottery, learning techniques as old as humanity from master — and old-fashioned — ceramicists. Ceramics became the last frontier for him — voracious learner, pusher of

envelopes, and amalgamator that he was. He saw himself, and justifiably so, as his age's edition of the best Greek vase painters from antiquity. Voracious and inquisitive as always, he added ceramics to a repertoire that then ranged from blue and pink periods, at least three brands of Cubism, art inspired by Africa, classicism, prints, tapestries, set decoration, and sculpture.

Picasso, of course, was a great sculptor. A few years ago, I wrote about the *Calder/Picasso exhibition* at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. It was an intellectual bucket of bolts since Picasso was a visionary in sculpture in so many ways while Calder did one thing well and that's mobiles. Most of Picasso's art after, say, the '20s was in the medium of prints, but his late portfolios of prints like the *347 Suite*, from 1968, and the *156 Suite*, from 1971, are nowhere to be found. In them, he expresses contemporary concerns but reflects in his old age on the dead artists who meant the most to him, some Spanish but most not. Prints aren't splashy, though, and neither are pots.

There's no interpretation in the individual galleries, which is a relief in a way since most exhibition labels these days are terrible and a distraction from the art. A central, artless space in *A Foreigner Called Picasso* does indeed display meaty wall panels about chronological chunks of Picasso's life as well as wall murals showing documents like his Paris police file.

The exhibition is based on Annie Cohen-Solal's superb book *Picasso the Foreigner*, published in 2021. Cohen-Solal, who curated the Gagosian show, dug deep into the dirty details of Picasso's 50 years of police surveillance and harassment. I read the book, but I doubt whether anyone else seeing the show at the same time I did read it. This gave me context as I walked through the galleries with art but with next to no interpretation. Most people skipped the space on Picasso's reception as a foreigner and his tussles with the police and the xenophobic. This is a shame, and the price for keeping the galleries with art clear of didactics.



Pablo Picasso, *Le Moulin de la Galette*, ca. 1900, oil on canvas. (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, N.Y.,

Thannhauser Collection, Gift, Justin K. Thannhauser © 2023 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y. Photograph by Midge Wattles, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, N.Y.)

A Foreigner Called Picasso is a wonderful exhibition with great, rarely seen art and themes that soar and sing. Why were so many other Picasso shows so modest, if not lame? If any artist could be called MoMA's ballast, it's Picasso, whom Alfred Barr, MoMA's first director, considered the hub of Modernism. I looked at MoMA's history. It's done about 300 Picasso exhibitions since 1929. For 2023, the 50th anniversary of Picasso's death, when the Picasso Museum sponsored a year of Picasso exhibitions, it did a small, boring show on Picasso's 1921 Fontainebleau art. The Guggenheim did a nice but also small exhibition focused on its early *Moulin de la Galette* Picasso.



Left: Pablo Picasso, *The Sculptor*, 1931, oil on plywood. (Musée National Picasso-Paris, Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979) **Right:** Pablo Picasso, *The Crying Woman*, 1937, oil on canvas. (Musée National Picasso-Paris, Dation Pablo Picasso, 1979)

And then there was *It's Pablo-matic* at the Brooklyn Museum, a hideous 2023 exhibition curated by an Australian stand-up comic, though the show was salvaged by superb loans. Picasso, it seems, should be judged by how he — granted, a macho narcissist — treated the women in his life. This is idiotic.

All of these shows were in the planning for years, starting, I'm sure, around the time the Me Too movement trapped politicians, media moguls, movie stars, and masters of the universe in flagrante, so to speak. Picasso's relationships with women were indeed fraught but also complicated, and the fervent tangos took two. Museums, a lagging indicator of most things, hesitated to give Picasso too prominent a place in the sun. Why invest time, money, and loan chits on an artist who, when the show is set to open, might have been put down by hysterical, vengeful morality wardens? Of course, Me Too evaporated around the time that big Obama, Clinton, and Biden donors got caught flying the smutty skies on the Lolita Express.

Kudos to the Gagosian Gallery for doing Picasso justice. Its brave, original exhibition is a challenge to xenophobia, mediocrity, and the get-along-get-along lifestyle. It's not lost on me that the Gagosian exhibition is a very good reincarnation of MoMA's 1939 retrospective, which traveled to dozens of venues in the United States. It cemented Picasso's renown in America and was, on the eve of a cataclysmic world war, a blow for artistic freedom and creative adventure.

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