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Author(s): Timothy Anglin Burgard
Published by: College Art Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3045817

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Picasso and Appropriation

Timothy Anglin Burgard

Picasso’s use of appropriation is usually associated exclusively with his borrowings from the history of art, especially his later variations after such famous works as Delacroix’s The Women of Algiers (1954–55), Velázquez’s Las Meninas (1957), and Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe (1959–62). The creation of a new work through the copying or paraphrasing of an existing image was, however, only one aspect of Picasso’s multifaceted concept of appropriation. For Picasso, appropriation was not merely an artistic exercise in which he critiqued the Modernist reverence for originality and explored his relationship to great art and artists. Indeed, the artist perceived appropriation as a magical transference of power that could be applied to both historical and contemporary art and to objects and people. Picasso’s early and lasting interest in appropriation transformed and shaped his life and his mature artistic practice.

Four important events in Picasso’s life appear to have induced him to adopt appropriation: the decision of his artist-father to give up painting and turn over his brushes and palette to his son; the death of his sister Conchita in 1895; the suicide of his friend Carles Casagemas in 1901; and, finally, his visit to the Trocadéro Museum in Paris in 1907. For Picasso, the first three events were traumatic and linked by the related themes of death and artistic and sexual impotence. His inability to cope with these forces compelled him to develop his early conception of appropriation, and his revelatory visit to the Trocadéro Museum crystallized his realization that the potent weapon of appropriation could be assimilated into his art to control or conquer these dangerous and unpredictable forces throughout his career.

This paper examines the origins, development, and use of at least three aspects of Picasso’s subsequent methods of appropriation: a fundamental belief that art is, in his words, “a form of magic,” a strong personal identification with both the primordial artist and God the Creator, and a conviction that the appropriation of works by other artists would result in a magical transfer of artistic powers.

**Picasso’s Creation Myth**

Appropriation formed an integral part of Picasso’s personal mythology and public biography. Its origins may be traced to his childhood in Spain, where he began his artistic career by emulating his father, Don José Ruiz Blasco (1840–1913), a painter who specialized in depictions of pigeons and flowers. According to Picasso, after his father lost his job in the Mediterranean city of Malaga and moved the family to the Atlantic city of La Corunna in 1891, Don José suffered bouts of depression and began to neglect his painting.¹ His father’s depression deepened with the death of his daughter, María de la Concepción (Conchita), from diptheria in January of 1895. When the family moved to Barcelona later that year, Don José realized that he would never return to his beloved Malaga, and his bleak existence later was summarized by Picasso as: “No Malaga, no bulls [bullfights], no friends, nothing.”² Picasso captured his father’s depressed state in a portrait of 1896, in which he appears head in hand, deep in a state of melancholia and staring blankly into space (Fig. 1).

Picasso, meanwhile, had progressed to completing portions of his father’s paintings until, one day, Don José gave him his brushes and paints and “never went back to painting.”³ Picasso’s early emulation of Don José thus culminated in what may be viewed as Picasso’s seminal act of appropriation. Picasso elaborated on the story in a conversation with Geneviève Laporte: “Then my father handed over to me his brushes and palette. At the time, I didn’t understand why. I was too young . . . but it made me very happy. It was not until much later that I came to understand the full significance of his gesture.”⁴ That’s to say [Laporte suggested], ‘that he was bowing out before the genius of his son?’ ‘Well [Picasso replied] . . . genius is a big word. Yet in a sense . . . ’⁵ “We have since learned from Picasso’s mistress Françoise Gilot and his wife Jacqueline that this essential part of the artist’s personal mythology was exaggerated, for he omitted the fact that his father’s gesture was motivated primarily by his failing eyesight.⁶ We also know that while Don José may have given his son a palette and brushes, he did not give up painting entirely, for he continued to paint the annual portrait of the pigeon-of-the-year for the Colombólia Society of Barcelona.⁷ Disregarding the facts, Picasso interpreted his father’s transference of the brushes and palette as a symbolic transference of authority and power. Picasso’s later recollections of his father’s psychological state during these years, however, suggest that at the moment of this triumph, he believed that his victory was Oedipal and inseparable from his father’s artistic and psychological defeat.


⁴ Laporte, 41–42.

⁵ Gilot, 291. Jacqueline Roque reported that Picasso had confided to her: “After my father’s eyes couldn’t draw the pigeons’ feet any more, I made them for him.” See Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, *Pablo Picasso: Meeting in Montreal*, Montreal, 1985, frontispiece page.

⁶ See Richardson, 51.
The Deaths of Conchita and Casagemas

Picasso would have had special cause to empathize with his father's plight, for his own career was almost terminated by the death of his sister Conchita in 1895. The traumatic effect of Conchita's death on him is apparent in a preliminary study (Fig. 2) for Last Moments, a painting that he exhibited in 1900 but later painted over with the composition La Vie of 1903–04 (Fig. 4).² In the sketch, Death appears as a skeleton with a scythe, leaning over a bed to claim his young female victim while a young male figure stands nearby with his head held in his hand, paralyzed with grief. Mary Matthews Gedo has argued that this scene recreates Picasso's presence beside Conchita's bed at the moment of her death.³ His heightened emotional state at that time led him in desperation to promise God that he would give up painting if his sister survived. Picasso later told Françoise Gilot that he believed he might inadvertently have caused his sister's death by not making his vow sufficiently fervent.⁴ But it also is possible to interpret Picasso's statement to Gilot as a veiled admission that he had made a promise that he never intended to keep. Had Conchita lived he would have been honor bound to give up his art, and only her death released him from his vow.

⁷ For a discussion of Last Moments, see Gedo, 1981, 116–129. Picasso later incorrectly recalled Conchita's death as having occurred four years earlier (1891) than was actually the case (5 Jan. 1895). See Gedo, 1980, 16.
⁸ Gedo, 1981, 126.
⁹ Gilot, 294. Some forty years after his sister's death, Picasso may have attempted to resurrect Conchita symbolically by giving her name (María de la Concepción) to his daughter by his mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter. For the lasting impact of Conchita's death on Picasso, see Richardson, 50.

² Picasso, study for Last Moments, ca. 1899–1900, conté crayon on paper, 6⅞ × 9⅞". Barcelona, Museo Picasso

Picasso's subsequent belief that his father's career as an artist ended at this time, a belief based upon his willful distortion of the facts, enabled him to fulfill his promise to God with a sacrificial surrogate.

Six years after Conchita's death, Picasso was confronted with the suicide of Carles Casagemas (1880–1901), an artist and poet who was a close friend in both Barcelona and Paris.⁵ Tormented by his obsessive love for a woman named Germaine, as well as the psychological or physiological impotence that prevented the consummation of the relationship, Casagemas suffered from severe depression. Late in 1900, in an unsuccessful attempt to improve Casagemas's spirits, Picasso took him home to Barcelona for Christmas and then to Málaga for the New Year. Overwhelmed by the severity of Casagemas's depression, Picasso abandoned him and departed for Madrid. In February of 1901, soon after returning to Paris, Casagemas pulled a gun in a café, unsuccessfully attempted to shoot Germaine, and then killed himself with a single shot to his right temple. Picasso learned of the tragedy in Madrid, and he must have experienced considerable guilt for having separated from his friend, particularly since Casagemas had attempted suicide once before.⁶ His ambivalent role in the affair may account for the fact that he neither attended the funeral in Barcelona nor responded artistically to Casagemas's death until he returned to Paris in the spring of 1901, nearly three months after the suicide. Working in the studio he had shared with Casagemas, Picasso painted several images of his dead friend, including The Dead Casagemas (Fig. 3), which depicts the young artist lying in his coffin, illuminated by the brilliant flame of a candle. The discreetly painted bullet hole in
Casagemas’s right temple belies the violence of his suicide, attested to by the eyewitness accounts of mutual friends.\(^{12}\)

If gaining control of his father’s palette and brushes provided Picasso with his first experience of symbolic appropriation, the death of Casagemas may have prompted his first conscious appropriation of another artist’s work for its content as well as its style. Specifically, Picasso borrowed the vivid colors and broad brushstrokes of *The Dead Casagemas* from the paintings of Vincent van Gogh. His appropriation of Van Gogh’s work, and its inevitable associations with the Dutch artist’s life and death, enabled him to glorify Casagemas’s own brief and tragic life.\(^{13}\) Picasso’s thinking in this regard, no doubt influenced by the example of Casagemas, is apparent in later comments that reject a purely aesthetic evaluation of an artist’s career: “It’s not what the artist does

\(^{12}\) The sculptor Manolo reported that Casagemas’s face, “like a crushed strawberry, was all blood.” Reff, 29.

\(^{13}\) Reff, 9. Van Gogh was also a suitable choice to commemorate the dead Casagemas, for both were expatriate artists who died in France. Picasso adopted not only Van Gogh’s style for *The Dead Casagemas*, but perhaps even the colors and associations of a particular painting, *The Night Café* (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven) of 1888. Picasso may have known the Dutch artist’s comments in reference to this painting, of which he wrote: “In my picture of *The Night Café*, I have tried to express the idea that the cafe is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime.” See Vincent van Gogh to Théodore van Gogh, 9 September 1888, in *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh: With Reproductions of All the Drawings in the Correspondence*, 3 vols., Greenwich, Conn., 1958, ii, 31. Even if Picasso was not familiar with this letter, Van Gogh’s hellish cafe interior must have seemed an appropriate model to commemorate Casagemas, who committed suicide in a café.
that counts, but what he is. Cézanne would never have interested me a bit if he had lived and thought like Jacques Émile Blanche, even if the apple he had painted had been ten times as beautiful. What forces our interest is Cézanne's anxiety—that's Cézanne's lesson; the torments of Van Gogh—that is the actual drama of the man. The rest is a sham.14 No doubt Picasso similarly rationalized that the meaning of Casagemas's "anxiety," "torments," and death transcended his meager artistic production. Picasso's linking of Casagemas with Van Gogh, the archetype of the modern artist who suffers unrecognized and then dies by his own hand, also served as an effective self-defense mechanism. By likening Casagemas's death to that of an artist-martyr seemingly predestined to his fate, like Van Gogh, Picasso could alleviate his guilt for having abandoned his friend in his hour of need and suggest that Casagemas's life and death, like Van Gogh's, would serve as an example to future artists.

Picasso, of course, was the artist most influenced by Casagemas's death, and in La Vie of 1903 (Fig. 4), he juxtaposed the nude and embracing figures of Casagemas and Germaine with a female figure holding a child, two pairs often interpreted as symbolizing profane and sacred love.15 Picasso's strong degree of identification with his dead friend was manifested in a study for La Vie in which Picasso, not Casagemas, embraces Germaine (Fig. 5).16 This study and the Au Lapin Agile (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) of 1905 have been cited as pictorial evidence of Picasso and Germaine's romantic involvement and their complicity in Casagemas's death.17 Picasso identified the Au Lapin Agile as a self-portrait with Germaine, and a guilt-ridden affair could account for his visible estrangement from the femme fatale whom Picasso saw as the cause of Casagemas's suicide and a living reminder of the tragedy.18 In addition, Mary Matthews Gedo has cited studies for the couple in La Vie in which the female figure appears to be pregnant, as well as two remarkable sketches that depict the male figure beating the female figure with his fists. Gedo has argued that this male figure was Picasso, who obliterated his face in one of the drawings to conceal his violent feelings toward Germaine.19 While these studies may or may not depict actual events, they are, at the very least, artistic expressions of Picasso's desires.20 Thus, Picasso adopted Casagemas's identity, consummated the frustrated affair with Germaine (manifested through her actual or imagined pregnancy), and ultimately channelled his mingled guilt and rage into visualizations of himself exacting a violent revenge upon her, similar to that attempted unsuccessfully by Casagemas.21 Although Picasso suppressed any explicit self-reference in the final state of La Vie, the evolution of the composition documents the expansion of appropriation into both his art and life.22

Picasso's relationships with his father, Conchita, and Casagemas were linked by the interrelated themes of death, artistic and sexual impotence, and his fear of these dangerous forces. As an adolescent, Picasso witnessed his father's psychological surrender, which culminated in Don José's transfer to him of the brushes and palette of his profession. At about the same time, Picasso narrowly averted the demise of his own nascent career as an artist when Conchita died, thus releasing him from his pact with God. Several years later, Picasso watched helplessly as Casagemas surrendered to sexual impotence and depression and ultimately terminated his artistic career and his life. Picasso's fear of artistic impotence (and its perceived link with death by suicide) was revealed dramatically to his mistress Fernande Olivier, when he experimented with hashish during the Cubist period:

... In a state of nervous hysteria he shouted that he had discovered photography, that he wanted to kill himself, he had nothing left to learn. ... He appeared to have had a revelation that one day he would be prevented from developing. He would come to the end and find a wall which would impede all progress. No longer would he be able to learn, or discover, or understand or penetrate little by little into the secrets of an art which he wanted to make new and fresh.23

Throughout Picasso's career, and especially during the final decades of his life, he struggled to avoid the fate of his father and Casagemas—and the fate that he himself nearly suffered through his promise to God and Conchita—being rendered
artistically and physically impotent and forced to relinquish his brushes and palette.

In his personal life, Picasso’s defense against this omnipresent threat took the form of a behavior pattern in which he appears to have compulsively and hypochondriacally reenacted the depressed states of his father and Casagemas and the illness of his sister Conchita. Françoise Gilot later recorded the daily ritual in which she was a reluctant participant:

One of the hardest of the jobs that fell to me was getting Pablo out of bed mornings. He always woke up submerged in pessimism and there was a definite ritual to be followed, a litany that had to be repeated every day. . . . One day typical of many went this way: “You have no idea how unhappy I am. . . . I’ve got stomach trouble. I suppose it’s cancer. And nobody cares. . . . Nobody understands me. . . . Under those conditions life is a terrible burden. Well, there’s always painting, I suppose. But my painting! It’s going very badly. Every day I work worse than the day before. . . . When I think that it’s like that day after day, going from bad to worse, do you wonder I despair about going on? . . . Why should I paint? Why should I continue to exist like this? A life like mine is unbearable.”. . . Finally, after an hour or so, as I was beginning to run out of all the reasons he might have for living—or I either—he began to stir in his bed vaguely, as though he were making his peace with the world, and said, “Well, maybe you’re right. Perhaps it’s not so bad as I thought. But are you sure of what you say? You’re absolutely certain?” So at that point I could only reach for a second wind and say, “Yes, yes, of course it’s going to be better. . . . At least you can take action. Through your painting you can be sure that something is going to change.”. . . Then he got up and began his usual movements. . . .

Every day Picasso played the role of the martyr and then allowed himself to be “saved” or forced to continue his existence by others who took responsibility for the decision. His daily ritual symbolically resurrected his father and Casagemas in their roles as artists, as well as his sister Conchita, and enabled him to exorcise both his survivor’s guilt and the threat posed by these traumatic events. That Picasso may have been emulating Casagemas in particular is suggested by his reaction on the one occasion when Françoise Gilot upset the routine by agreeing “that things were dreadful, that there was no way out, but that the worst was yet to come, and that things would grow so black that one day he would look back on these days as happy ones. He was outraged. He went into a fit of anger and threatened to commit suicide.” Gilot’s behavior may well have been an unintentional reminder of Picasso’s response to Casagemas’s unrelenting depression fifty years earlier. Picasso’s threat to follow in Casagemas’s footsteps by committing suicide would have served as a warning to Gilot about the dangers of such behavior.

The Trocadéro and Les Demoiselles d’Avignon
Picasso also used appropriation to exorcise the forces of death and impotence through his art. If his concept of artistic appropriation originated with his borrowing of Van Gogh’s work for The Dead Casagemas and evolved further during the painting of La Vie, confirmation of the power of this stratagem came with his visit to the Trocadéro Museum of ethnology in Paris in 1907. As the artist later described this seminal experience, the objects that he encountered in the Trocadéro came as a revelation:

Men had made those masks and other objects for a sacred purpose, a magic purpose, as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown hostile forces that surrounded them, in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving it a form and an image. At that moment I realized that this was what painting was all about. Painting isn’t an aesthetic operation; it’s a form of magic designed as a mediator between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires. When I came to that realization, I knew I had found my way.

Picasso’s experience in the Trocadéro confirmed his growing realization that the meaning of an art work is not dependent upon conventional form or narrative, and it further encouraged him to shatter the boundaries of representation. He also may have come to the realization that an art work, as a magical object, is perhaps more powerful in an all-encompassing abstract form than within the limits of representation. This does not diminish the significance of Picasso’s formal innovations, but rather suggests that these innovations were consistent with his underlying interests and aims.

After his visit to the Trocadéro, Picasso reworked Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (Fig. 6) and incorporated ethnological forms as fetishes and “mediators” to express his overlapping themes of voyeurism, sexuality, initiation, woman as femme fatale, and death. In preliminary studies for the painting, these themes were conveyed by more conventional means, including a male figure entering at the left and carrying a skull (Fig. 7), a traditional memento mori symbol. Picasso confirmed that at one stage this enigmatic figure was a

24 Gilot and Lake, 153–156. Sabartés, 107, was subjected to similar behavior.
25 Picasso’s fatal decision to abandon Casagemas shortly before his suicide may have had a permanent effect on his decision-making capabilities. According to Sabartés, 106, “outside the realm of his art, there is for Picasso a vast difference between thinking and deciding, so that the minutest detail tortures him. . . . Observing him at close range and pondering his strange ways, I sometimes think that perhaps he does not dare exert pressure on events for fear that the air displaced by a voluntary gesture may shatter the equilibrium of his life and change his fate.”
26 Gilot and Lake, 347–348.
27 Ibid., 266. For a variant of this quotation, see Malraux, 10–11.
self-portrait. However, this figure may be identified in at least one study (Fig. 8) as the grisly image of Casagemas, resurrected from the dead with a bullet hole in his right temple and blood streaming down his face. Like the magical masks that Picasso encountered in the Trocadéro, the effigy of Casagemas may have been created to “give a form and an image” to the dangers of sexuality and the omnipresent threat of death, while also serving to ward off these dangerous forces. As in La Vie, Picasso does not appear in the final state of Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, but in two of his most important paintings dealing with sexuality, life, and death, the artist initially perceived his role as interchangeable with that of Casagemas. Casagemas thus was a source of inspiration for both Picasso’s initial conceptions of appropriation in The Dead Casagemas and La Vie, and for its mature expression in Les Demoiselles d’Avignon.

With his father’s depression and decision to give up painting, and the deaths of his sister, Conchita, and Casagemas, Picasso undoubtedly felt threatened by events over which he had no control and about which he may have harbored strong feelings of guilt. In The Dead Casagemas, La Vie, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, and Picasso’s subsequent work, he turned to appropriation as a way of coming to terms with, and regaining control over, the “unknown hostile forces” of nature and man. He accomplished this in part through three interrelated strategems of appropriation: by transforming his art works into magical objects; by assuming the identities of both God the Creator and the primordial artist whom he termed “the little man”; and by appropriating art works as a form of “intercourse” with rival artists of the past and present.

Art as “a Form of Magic”

Although Picasso’s visit to the Trocadéro Museum was a revelatory experience, there was an important precedent in his life for the association of magical powers with special objects, namely the brushes and palette of his father. According to his friend and secretary, Jaime Sabartés, when Picasso reached school age he often feigned illness to avoid attending classes. When he did go to school he was escorted by his

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30 Sabartés, 32.
father, whose return he attempted to ensure by securing temporary possession of his paintbrushes, walking stick, or pigeon models. As Sabartés later recounted:

On reaching the [school] door there was always the same battle scene between father and son. "Why don't you go in with me? I don't want to go alone. Leave me the brushes then. If not the brushes, then the walking stick. Give me the little pigeon!'" Don Pepé was in the habit of taking his brushes home to clean them and Pablo knew that without his brushes he could not paint. He was afraid he would forget to come back for them. Every day it was the same. It did not matter that he promised not to forget—that papa would come for him promptly at one o'clock. . . . "If he left the stick or the pigeon with me [Picasso recalled], I was sure he would return. But rather than the stick, I preferred the pigeon or the brushes because I knew he could not do without either of these."31

While still a child, Picasso thus may have believed that he could control external events through the control of objects. This belief would have been reinforced when his father relinquished his brushes and palette and the young artist assumed control of his father's profession. As John Berger has observed: "Is it likely that a boy will ever believe in progress step by step when at the age of puberty he is suddenly told by his father that he deserves to take his father's place and that his father is going to step down? Since this is what every boy wants to happen, is he not more likely to believe in magic?"32

Picasso himself related a striking incident in which he believed his thoughts, expressed through his art, had affected the actual course of events: "I ate lunch at the Catalan's [restaurant] for months, and for months I would

look at his sideboard thinking only that it was 'a sideboard.' One day I decided to make a painting of it. I made it. The following day, when I arrived, the sideboard was gone, the space was empty. . . . I must have taken it without realizing it when I painted it."33 While most observers would describe such an incident as coincidental, Picasso's anecdote infers that if the representation of an object can make the original disappear, then the work of art is not merely a simulacrum but rather a magical fetish object, endowed with the properties of its model and capable of affecting its destiny.34

31 R. Desnos, "Bonjour M. Picasso," in Écrits sur les peintres, Paris, 1984, 175. Desnos observed that, "For Picasso what matters, when he paints, is 'to take possession' and not provisionally like a thief or a buyer, just for a lifetime, but as himself the creator of the object or the being, and not only of the object or the being, but also their constituent elements, of their fugitive and lasting form, of their total destiny." Ibid., 175–176.


33 This belief may have prompted Picasso to create a shrine to Fernande Olivier incorporating both a work of art and a fetish object in a small alcove of his Bateau Lavoir studio. This "chapel" included a "pen-and-ink portrait," a "very fine, white silky blouse," and "two magnificently cerulean blue Louis-Philippe vases, containing bunches of artificial flowers like Cézanne must have had." Olivier (as in n. 23), 47–48. Toward the end of his life, Picasso refused to allow the American photographer David Douglas Duncan to photograph his recent portraits of Jacqueline Roque, exclaiming, "No! They're not finished! You might take something away!" See P. Cabanne, Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times, trans. H. J. Selzman, New York, 1977, 509.
The most revealing anecdote pertaining to Picasso’s object fetish was recounted by Françoise Gilot, who was surprised by Picasso’s violent reaction when he discovered that she had given their gardener one of her old sweaters:

“Damn you! I hope you realize that one day you’ll begin to look like him and that you’ll be all bent over just the way he is. That will teach you to give your clothes away to anyone who happens to pop into your head.” The next time it happened, we almost broke up over it. I had unwittingly given the gardener an old imitation suede jacket of Pablo’s. . . . When Pablo came back from his atelier and saw the gardener wearing his old jacket, he flew into a rage. “That’s too much,” he shouted. “This time I’m the one who’ll be transformed into that ugly old man.”

Apart from the fact that the “ugly old” gardener was twenty years younger than Picasso, this story is remarkable for its demonstration of Picasso’s belief that possessing an object meant possessing the properties of the former owner. Gilot also noted Picasso’s superstition “that one person can assume control over another through the possession of his fingernails or hair trimmings,” and added:

... There are other fetishistic addictions which Pablo has followed in the most systematic manner. Even now, whenever Claude and Paloma have gone to spend their holidays with their father, Pablo has never let Claude return without taking at least one, sometimes more than one, article of clothing from his luggage. . . . I finally became convinced that Pablo hoped by this method that some of Claude’s youth would enter into his own body. It was a metaphorical way of appropriating someone else’s substance, and in that way, I believe, he hoped to prolong his own life.

Picasso gave form to these beliefs in Maya in a Sailor Suit (Fig. 9) of 1938, in which he depicted his daughter Maya wearing a sailor suit with “Picasso” inscribed on the hat band. In an interview of 1945, Jerome Seckler, believing the portrait to be of Picasso himself, asked why the artist had depicted himself as a sailor. “Because,’ he answered, ‘I always wear a sailor shirt. See?’ He opened up his shirt and pulled at his underwear—it was white with blue stripes! No doubt Picasso did not contradict Seckler on his identification of the portrait because it depicted both Maya and Picasso, who thus appropriated his daughter’s identity in order to project himself in an eternally youthful state.

35 Gilot and Lake, 229. Picasso exploded in a similar angry outburst when Françoise Gilot suggested that she would like to give his daughter Maya a necklace Picasso had given her: “You mean you’d give away something that I gave you? I find that monstrous,” Gilot and Lake, 302.
36 Ibid., 231–232.
37 Ashton, 136.
38 This interpretation is reinforced by the rendering of the sailor’s ear with the “figure eight” sign for infinity.

Picasso as the “Little Man” and God the Creator
Picasso’s concept of appropriation gradually evolved to the point where he consciously assumed the identity of the primordial artist or, as Picasso called him, the “Little Man.” In an extraordinary conversation with André Malraux while they examined a Cycladic idol in the artist’s collection, Picasso explained:

From time to time I think: There once was a Little Man from the Cyclades. . . . Nothing’s left of his life; nothing’s left of his kind of gods; nothing’s left of anything. Nothing. But this is left, because he wanted to make a piece of sculpture. What’s it all about,. . . our necromancy? And that kind of magic power painters and sculptors have had for such a long time? . . .

There have always been Little Men who wanted to sculpt in their own way, and no other. People cut them down. But they grew again. . . . And then, from time to time—but without fail—there came a Little Man. Sometimes a tramp. Sometimes a rich man. Respected. A friend of the king’s: Velázquez, Rubens. After them, Rembrandt: . . . Rich or poor, but always a little mad, right? . . . Do you know what I sometimes think? It amuses me: I’m superstitious. I think that each one is always the same Little Man. Ever since the cave paintings. He keeps
returning, like the Wandering Jew. . . . Painters are necessarily reincarnated as painters. They’re a race in themselves . . . the Little Man . . . watches the professional painters. He waits until they’ve finished. But they never finish. So he makes a comeback. He returns. He returns again. Maybe it’s me—how do we know? He loves bull-fights, naturally.39

Picasso’s purely rhetorical comment “Maybe it’s me—how do we know?” makes it clear that he saw himself not merely as one in a long line of great artists, but also as the actual reincarnation of the primordial artist or “Little Man.”40 Picasso thus could tell himself that when he appropriated works of art from great artists of the past, he was re-embracing works that he had created in another incarnation. It is no wonder that when he donated some of his paintings to the French government in 1946 and was given the opportunity to view his work in the Louvre alongside masterpieces by Zurbaran, Delacroix, and other Old Masters, he exclaimed: “You see it’s the same thing! It’s the same thing!”41

Once Picasso considered himself the primordial artist, drawing upon the experience of all his previous reincarnations, it was a short step to view himself as the primordial Creator as well and to believe he could appropriate God’s divine powers of creation. He once told Françoise Gilot that, “God is really only another artist,” and he reenacted God’s creation of Eve by carving her image into a cow bone that he designated “Adam’s rib.”42 In a conversation with André Malraux, Picasso made clear his perceived kinship with God: “Down with style! Does God have a style? He made the guitar, the harlequin, the dachshund, the cat, the owl, the dove. Like me. The elephant and the whale, fine—but the elephant and the squirrel? A real hodgepodge! He made what doesn’t exist. So did I. He even made paint. So did I.”43 Picasso’s identification with God the Creator was so much a part of his self-image that the Catalan sculptor Fenosa overheard Picasso repeating over and over to himself while at work, “I am God, I am God. . . .”44 Picasso’s synthesis of the primordial artist and the divine creator yielded a sacred art endowed with magic powers:

You ought to be able to say that a painting is as it is, with its capacity to move us, because it is as though it were touched by God. But people would think it a sham. And yet that is what’s nearest to the truth. No explanation can be given in words. Except that by some liaison between the man-creator and what is highest in the human spirit, something happens which gives this power to the painted reality.45

For Picasso, the act of creation was almost as important as the resulting work of art. For Picasso in his role as the creator, an essential element of the meaning of art lay in its affirmation of life.

Appropriation as a Form of “Intercourse”

Picasso’s quotation of works by other artists was his most controversial form of appropriation. Significantly, he appropriated not only the form of these works, but also the underlying theme or associative meaning that he perceived or hoped to discover. There were numerous motivations behind these borrowings, but perhaps none more important than Picasso’s fear of the artistic and physical impotence suffered by his father and Casagemas. Picasso’s fear was magnified by his advancing age and physical disabilities, and it is not surprising that the majority of his variations after works by other artists date from the final decades of his life. By challenging great artists from the past and appropriating their works, Picasso was able to reenact his early artistic triumph over his father. More important, he employed these borrowed works as magical “mediators” to renew his own art and to ward off the “unknown hostile forces” by which he felt threatened.

Picasso’s belief that one artist could acquire a second artist’s power by appropriating his models or work was manifested in several exchanges with Henri Matisse. In 1946, when Picasso took Françoise Gilot to meet Matisse for the first time, the older artist observed that if he were to paint Gilot’s portrait, he would depict her with green hair. Picasso was troubled by this potential artistic violation of his model by an outsider, and after leaving Matisse, he complained indignantly to Gilot: “Really, that’s going pretty far. Do I make portraits of Lydia?,” a reference to Matisse’s model and companion.46 Yet Gilot reports that shortly afterward, as if to circumvent the possibility of Matisse carrying out his idea, Picasso himself painted Gilot with green hair in his famous Femme-Fleur portrait.47 During another visit, Matisse suggested that he paint Gilot in his Chinese robe, prompting Picasso to reply defensively: “If you do, you’ll have to give me

40 Picasso’s view of himself as the quintessential painter is also reflected in one of his favorite anecdotes: “When I was a child, my mother said to me, ‘If you become a soldier you’ll be a general. If you become a monk you’ll end up as the Pope. Instead I became a painter and wound up as Picasso.” See Gilot and Lake, 60.
42 Giot and Lake, 50, 128, and ill. 36.
43 Malraux, 18.
44 J. Richardson, “Picasso and Marie-Thérèse Walter,” in William Beadelstone Fine Art, Through the Eye of Picasso, 1928–1934, New York, 1985, n.p. Picasso’s identification with God was sufficiently strong that he appears to have believed that he held power over the forces of life and death: “[T]he writer Maurice Raynal was one of the friends whose names Picasso had a habit of mentally ticking off—a compulsive litany to ward off death—every day of his life. When he heard that Raynal had died [1954], he told a friend that he felt very guilty: that day he had left Raynal’s name off the list. ‘But that doesn’t mean you killed him,’ said his friend. ‘To be forgotten is worse than to be dead,’ he replied.” Richardson, 360.
45 Ashton, 25.
46 Gilot and Lake, 99–100.
47 While painting the Femme-Fleur portrait, Picasso told Gilot, “Matisse isn’t the only one who can paint you with green hair.” Gilot and Lake, 117. For the Femme-Fleur portrait, see Zervos, xiv, no. 167.
the painting and give her the coat.” Finally, when Matisse wrote in 1947 that his initial sketches for the Virgin and Child for the Chapel of the Rosary at Vence resembled Françoise and her son Claude, Picasso exclaimed, “I feel negated—that’s it, negated, obliterated from A to Z, not only as an artist but even as a father.” Picasso seems to have believed that Matisse’s depiction of his mistress and muse would give the older artist power over one of the sources of Picasso’s creative drive and art. Picasso nearly carried this proprietary belief to its ultimate extreme when he told Gilot: “You should wear a black dress with a kerchief over your head so that no one will see your face. In that way you’ll belong even less to the others. They won’t even have you with their eyes.”

Picasso had no qualms about appropriating Matisse’s work, however, and soon after the French artist’s death in November of 1954, he commented: “He’s dead, and me, I’m continuing his work.” In 1955, when Roland Penrose commented on the resemblance between Picasso’s variations after Delacroix’s The Women of Algiers and the work of Matisse, Picasso replied with a laugh: “You are right, when Matisse died he left his odalisques to me as a legacy . . .” In a reclining nude of 1955 (Fig. 10), whose composition and colors recall similar works by Matisse, Picasso appears to have equated Matisse’s death with artistic impotence. Matisse, whose features are recognizable in the ghostly, bearded, white head outside the studio window, is relegated to the status of a voyeur, looking in on the voluptuous nude model who formerly was his, but who now belongs to Picasso. Matisse is accompanied by a bearded, black head in profile that also is suggestive of death and that bears a striking resemblance to Picasso’s deceased father, Don José (Fig. 1).

Françoise Gilot noted the physical resemblance between Picasso’s father and Matisse, and believed that among the characteristics that linked the two relationships were “the tenderness, the admiration, the wish to please, the fear of rejection, as well as the not-so-paradoxical need to rebel and criticize.” While Matisse’s death forced Picasso to acknowledge the bonds of death and artistic impotence that had claimed these two patriarchal figures in his life, it also enabled him to proclaim his own triumph over these dangerous powers.

Picasso’s reaction to the death of Georges Braque in 1963 was equally revealing. While the two men had been nearly inseparable during their Cubist period prior to World War I, they later became estranged as their artistic paths diverged and as Picasso came to view Braque as a rival for his place in the history of art. Nonetheless, when Braque died, Picasso paid homage (Fig. 11) to their former intimacy by contributing a lithograph to a volume published as a tribute to the French artist. To his image of a reclining female nude, Picasso added the following inscription: “Braque, you once said to me a long, long time ago, when you met me out walking with a girl whose beauty was of the kind we call classical—and whom I found very pretty: ‘in love, you still haven’t freed yourself enough from the masters.’ In any case, I can still say to you today that I love you, so you see I still haven’t managed to free myself.” Picasso’s moving tribute to Braque was uncharacteristically generous and should be seen in the context of their actual relationship. While Braque was alive, Picasso often remarked condescendingly: “Oh, Braque is only Madame Picasso,” or “Braque is the woman who has loved me the most,” thus revealing his view of Braque as his subservient counterpart, playing a role comparable to that of the women in Picasso’s life as mistresses and muses.

68 Gilot and Lake, 265.
69 Gilot, 200–203.
70 Gilot, 183, wrote of Picasso: “He did not work from nature; therefore he had only muses, or detested ex-loved ones who became counter-muses in his private inferno. He felt so territorial in that regard that he was certainly not willing to share his muses, and even his scourges were taboo.”
72 Ibid., 19.
73 Penrose (as in n. 41), 351.
74 In 1943, when the photographer Brassai observed that all the male figures in a series of Picasso’s drawings were bearded, the artist replied: “Yes, they all have beards . . . And do you know why? Every time I draw a man I think involuntarily of my father . . . . For me, a man is Don José, and that will be so all my life . . . . He wore a beard . . . .” See Brassai, Conversations avec Picasso, Paris, 1964, 71.
75 Gilot, 64–65.
context, it is possible to interpret Picasso's female nude as a visualization of his perception of Braque. The juxtaposition of the reclining female nude and the black cat inevitably recalls Manet's Olympia (Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 1863), and it permitted Picasso to link Braque and the sexually available female nude with Manet's famous prostitute. Picasso thus appropriated the work of one master—Manet—in order to place a second master and rival—Braque—in a subservient and compromising position in both his life and the history of art.

Voyeurism, the end result of artistic and physical impotence, is an overt or underlying theme that links many of Picasso's variations after works by earlier artists, including those derived from Courbet's Young Women on the Banks of the Seine (1950), Delacroix's The Women of Algiers (1954–55), Velázquez's Las Meninas (1957), Manet's Déjeuner sur l'Herbe (1959–62), Ingres's Raphael and La Fornarina (1968), Rembrandt's Christ Presented to the People (1970), and Degas's monotypes of brothel scenes (1970–73). Picasso actually owned eleven of the Degas monotypes, and once posed the question, "What do you think he was doing in those places?" As Gert Schiff has suggested, judging from the forty prints produced in response to Degas's works, Picasso's answer appears to have been "just looking," a passive and voyeuristic stance accentuated by the blatant sexuality of the prostitutes on display. In one of these etchings (Fig. 12), Picasso relegated Degas to the opposite side of a window or frame-like opening, just as he previously had isolated his father and clear his perception of all friendships, even the male ones, in terms of a sexual relationship with a lover: "I can't have friends if they're not capable of sleeping with me. Not that I require it of the women or want it from the men—but there should at least be that feeling of warmth and intimacy one experiences in sleeping with someone." "Picasso, Homage to Georges Braque, 1964, transfer lithograph, 10⅞ x 14⅞". Private collection

Matisse from a nude subject. While the Degas figure passively observes the voluptuous nudes like a portrait hanging on the wall, Picasso's own problematic relationship to the prostitutes on display is like that of a prospective client. This role is accentuated by the shrouded, sinister figure of the old procuress at the right, who holds out a gnarled, open hand to the artist-viewer as if awaiting payment for the sensual pleasures on display. As Picasso entered the ninth decade of his life and confronted his own sexual impotence, the pleasures that he once obtained through his artistic and sexual prowess now had to be purchased.

Picasso's 1968 series of twenty-four prints after Ingres's Raphael and La Fornarina (first version, 1813, numerous variants) reveal the artist's linkage of sexual and artistic virility and perhaps provide a clue to the motivations underlying his appropriations. In one print from the series (Fig. 13), Raphael appears as a virile young artist who makes both love and art with his voluptuous model. Nearby, an unshaven old man wearing a dunce cap and seated on a chamber pot is reduced to the status of a voyeur, watching the passionate couple with an idiotic grin on his face. The old man has Picasso's features, and the print appears to be a visualization of his fear of being rendered artistically and sexually impotent and replaced by a younger man, just as he had taken his father's brushes and palette and usurped his position of authority. Picasso may have had this precedent in mind when he offered the following cryptic description of his variations after Raphael and La Fornarina: "... Michelangelo is also there, spying on them from behind the draperies or under the bed. And sometimes the Pope is peeping through the keyhole, or some other important character is lurking..."

"Picasso referred to his impotence in a conversation with Brassai: "Whenever I see you, my first impulse is to reach in my pocket and to offer you a cigarette, even though I know very well that neither of us smokes any longer. Age has forced us to give it up, but the desire remains. It's the same thing with making love. We don't do it anymore, but the desire for it is still with us." Brassai, "The Master at 90—Picasso's Great Age Seems Only to Stir Up the Demons Within," New York Times Magazine, 24 Oct. 1971, 96.

11 Picasso, Homage to Georges Braque, 1964, transfer lithograph, 10⅞ x 14⅞. Private collection

12 Picasso, Brothel Scene, 4 April 1971, etching, 14⅝ x 19¾. Private collection

13 Picasso referred to his impotence in a conversation with Brassai: "Whenever I see you, my first impulse is to reach in my pocket and to offer you a cigarette, even though I know very well that neither of us smokes any longer. Age has forced us to give it up, but the desire remains. It's the same thing with making love. We don't do it anymore, but the desire for it is still with us." Brassai, "The Master at 90—Picasso's Great Age Seems Only to Stir Up the Demons Within," New York Times Magazine, 24 Oct. 1971, 96.
about. Anyway, they have to do with certain facts—I would call them historical facts.61 These “historical facts” may have been drawn in part from Renaissance history, which recounts that the young Raphael’s fame surpassed that of both his rival Michelangelo and the popes who commissioned their works. However, they may also refer to Picasso’s personal history, in which the young artistic genius rendered his father, the “important character” in his own life, a voyeur of his son’s career.

Given Picasso’s equation of artistic creation with love-making and procreation, two of his comments regarding women would seem to illuminate further his motivations for the appropriation of works by other artists. In the first, Picasso told Geneviève Laporte:

I am full of contradictions. I love what belongs to me, yet at the same time I have a strong urge to destroy. It’s the same with love. Any desire I have for procreation is an expression of my other desire, namely to free myself from the woman in question. I know that the birth of a child will be the end of my love for her. I shall have no more sentimental attachment. But the child will bind me with moral obligations.62

Picasso also told Laporte: “You see, getting a woman with child is for me taking possession, and helps to kill whatever feelings existed. You can’t imagine how constantly I feel the need to free myself.”63 Picasso’s appropriation of other artists’ works may also be seen as a form of “intercourse” or “taking possession.” The resulting variations “freed” Picasso from the artist in question. As in the examples cited in relation to Matisse, Degas, and especially Braque, these artists became not only partners, but also the emasculated, “female” counterparts to Picasso’s virile male. Instead of children, these unions produced artistic offspring.

Even as Picasso acknowledged the threat of his being rendered a sexually and artistically impotent voyeur by old age, he challenged major figures from the history of art and appropriated their works. If, in the process, he seemed to be dissecting or destroying these works more than paying homage to them, it was after all Picasso who said that “a picture is a sum of destructions.”64 Just as Picasso often asserted his sexual virility with his mistresses in domineering and destructive ways, the appropriation and “destruction” of these works may have served to reaffirm his artistic virility.65 One is reminded of Picasso’s Oedipal response to Françoise Gilot when she asked why he created his variations after the Old Masters: “It is not enough to kill one’s father, one must bury him also.”66

Appropriation also provided Picasso with the means to express his thoughts and emotions as an “old master” himself, through the selection of specific works and their associations. Picasso, who according to Gilot “disliked references to feelings, which he condemned as being sentimental rubbish, just good for conventional artists,” thus empowered great artists from the past to speak for him.67 Determining what Picasso was trying to say, however, is problematic. For example, one of his variations of 1955 after Delacroix’s Women of Algiers (Musée du Louvre, Paris, 1834, and Musée Fabre, Montpellier, 1849), would seem to embody a male fantasy of a harem of exotic and available women (Fig. 14). Indeed, the female figure at the left of the composition is a portrait of Picasso’s mistress and wife Jacqueline Roque, and we know that Picasso’s actual relationships with women approximated that of a domineering master and his harem.

Servility characterized even the first weeks of Jacqueline Roque’s relationship with Picasso in the summer of 1954: “... Eyewitnesses agree that... she clung to him devotedly and submissively, while he treated her with rude disdain. Beneath this surface behavior, a far different drama was evidently taking place. Picasso finally abandoned the struggle, surrendered to his fate, and lived out the remainder of his life as the prize of a woman who tyrannized him through...”

61 Ashton, 8.
62 John Richardson has arrived at similar conclusions regarding Picasso’s appropriations: “Each case was different, but there is always an element of identification, an element of cannibalism involved—two elements that, as Freud pointed out, are part of the same process. Indeed Freud described the process of identification as ‘psychic cannibalism’: You identified with someone; you cannibalized them; you assumed their powers. How accurately this describes what Picasso was up to in his last years. ... Picasso cannibalized great artists in much the same way. He engaged them in mortal—or rather, immortal—combat, and devoured them one after another. With their powers added to his, this very small, very frail, very old man felt himself more powerful than any other artist in history, so powerful indeed that he embarked on a one-man apotheosis of post-Renaissance painting.” See J. Richardson, “Picasso’s Last Years at Notre-Dame-de-Vie,” in Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Pablo Picasso: Meeting in Montreal, Montreal, 1985, 91.
63 Fraser, 149.
64 Ibid., 36.
66 Laporte, 74.
67 Gilot, 222.
According to Roque, from 1954 until Picasso’s death in 1973, she never left his side for more than a few hours at a time. Her “idolatry” also was apparent in her curt comment after a spectacular sunset was pointed out to her: “When one is lucky enough to have Picasso in front of one, one doesn’t look at the sun!” Yet, ironically, while Picasso appeared to wield absolute power and his mistresses appeared to render him absolute servility, ultimately he was responsible for their physical and emotional needs. Moreover, the suffocating nature of these symbiotic relationships precluded any challenge to his way of life or his work. The high degree of dependency that Picasso encouraged in Roque, combined with her desire to insulate him from the outside world, resulted in a prisonlike confinement. In a conversation around 1959, Picasso told Hélène Parmelin, “You live a poet’s life, and I live a convict’s.”

Having achieved the status of the most famous living painter, in 1957 Picasso paused to examine the implications of his position in a series of variations (Fig. 15) after Velázquez’s Las Meninas (The Prado, Madrid, 1656). Velázquez, the “father” of Spanish painting, was linked by association with Picasso’s own father, who had taken the young artist to the Prado to see the seventeenth-century master’s works. Just as Picasso had scored his first great artistic triumph by assuming his father’s profession, brushes, and palette, late in life he may have challenged Velázquez as a surrogate “father figure” to relive that triumph. However, Picasso selected as his subject Las Meninas, a work famous for its ambiguity. While Picasso retained Velázquez’s theme of the apotheosis of the artist as an equal among kings, he also satirized his role as the focus of an entourage consisting of animals, freaks, and servile dependents. Given the extraordinary power of Las Meninas to engage the viewer in its own reality, Picasso may have hoped that through his variations, both he and the viewer would arrive at a new understanding of his existence. However, Picasso’s comments while looking at a Château Noir by Cézanne in his collection suggest that he was pessimistic about the possibility of obtaining true understanding from his viewers: “And those men worked in unbelievable solitude, which was perhaps their blessing, even if it was their misfortune too. Is there anything more dangerous than understanding? Especially as it doesn’t exist. It’s almost always wrong. You think you aren’t alone. And in reality you’re more alone than before.”

Was Picasso ultimately successful in forestalling the threat of artistic and sexual impotence through his appropriation of the Old Masters? And did he come to believe that his empathy with the Old Masters fostered greater understanding among his viewers? Characteristically, he seems to have provided contradictory answers to these questions. In an aquatint of 1968 (Fig. 16), Picasso depicted a proud and confident youth, prepared with his staff to begin the journey of life, but already crowned with a laurel wreath—the traditional symbol of victory. He is surrounded by a maternal old crone, a beautiful nude woman with a mantilla who may represent Spain and the artist’s model, and two mature men wearing Baroque dress who have been identified as great

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68 Gedo, 1980, 224.
69 Richardson (as in n. 65), 18.
71 Gilot, 213, records that, “Pablo always used money, or rather refused money, to control his entourage.”
72 H. Parmelin, Picasso Plain: An Intimate Portrait, trans. H. Hare, New York, 1963, 250. One is also reminded of Picasso’s suggestion that Françoise Gilot remain permanently in the attic of his studio, seeing only Picasso and going out in public only at night. However, after contemplating the ramifications of such an arrangement, Picasso equivocated: “I don’t know whether it’s such a good idea or not because it’s binding on me, too. If you’re agreeable to having no more liberty, that means I wouldn’t have any more, either.” See Gilot and Lake, 47.
73 Gedo, 1980, 233.
artists from the past, perhaps Rembrandt and Velázquez. Picasso probably intended these figures to symbolize both his genetic and artistic parentage. But ultimately the scene depicted appears to be a nostalgic reminiscence of the past, of the golden age of Picasso’s youth when his father relinquished his palette and brushes to his young son, who then rose to prominence as the world’s greatest living artist.

A very different perspective is conveyed in an etching (Fig. 17) by Picasso of 1970 that was inspired by Rembrandt’s etching, Christ Presented to the People of 1655. According to Jacqueline Roque, Picasso turned to the study of Rembrandt when he was recuperating from ulcer surgery in 1965 and was unable to paint. Twenty years earlier, however, he had shown Françoise Gilot a Vollard Suite print depicting Rembrandt with a young painter wearing a Phrygian cap, and observed: “Every painter takes himself for Rembrandt. Even this one, and you can tell from the cap he flourished at least three thousand years before Rembrandt came along. Everybody has the same delusions.” In his old age, Picasso returned to Rembrandt, perhaps recognizing a kindred spirit in the Dutch artist who documented his physical decline but also achieved new artistic heights in his later works. Significantly, Rembrandt’s late works were criticized or ignored by contemporaries, but they were redeemed by history.

The process of aging plays a central role in Picasso’s print of 1970, in which he seems to have projected himself as the three ages of man—infancy, maturity, and old age. There is a comparable progression from activity to inactivity in the three figures, beginning with the toddler who considers leaving the stage, to the mature man who poses self-confidently with his arms crossed, to the old man, who is content to sit and passively observe the scene that unfolds before him. Gert Schiff related the imagery of this print to the Gran Teatro del Mundo, a play by the Spanish author Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681), and he observed: “Only if one realizes that he [Picasso] turns this baroque pageant into its very contrary does one get the measure of his irony. For in the Gran Teatro del Mundo, it is God himself who in a lavish feast celebrates his might and splendor, receiving the homage of all nations, races, and continents. Instead, Picasso depicts an aged king, perplexed and intimidated by the carefree, genial life surrounding him.” The physical frailty of the enthroned figure underscores the “Behold the Man” theme of Rembrandt’s print and suggests a growing awareness of mortality on the part of the previously God-like creator, Picasso. Schiff has observed that in this print Picasso is “a mere spectator of the life around him as he is no longer part of more recent artistic developments, and no longer capable of the amorous conquests of his former years.” Picasso is thus reduced to the role of the artistic and sexual voyeur, the very fate that he had struggled to avoid. Second, by placing himself on stage, Picasso suggests that as a performer in the public eye, the artist is exposed to the misunderstanding and ridicule of the masses, not unlike that

75 Schiff, 47.
77 See Malraux, 4, 86.
78 Ibid., 124.
79 Gilot and Lake, 51.
experienced by Rembrandt’s Christ. Third, as in his variations after Las Meninas, Picasso depicts himself confined in a boxlike stage, surrounded by an entourage of mistresses, models, retainers, hangers-on, and other dependents. Although he is enthroned and rules in this little world, like Christ in captivity Picasso is a prisoner of his fate and destined to be a martyr. Finally, by contrasting the simply outlined and comparatively static figures enframed by the stage with the maelstrom of activity surrounding it, Picasso draws attention to the vast gulf between the artificiality of the stage and the world beyond it. He seems to suggest that it is not what is created or staged that is vital, but life itself, which goes on with or without the artist and cannot be captured in a work of art.

**Picasso as the “Archetype”**

In the last years of his life Picasso confronted death directly in his work. He chose the penetrating self-portraits of Van Gogh as the models for his own self-portraits in which he recorded both the effects of his physical decline and the psychological toll exacted by the approach of death. As he had done following Casagemas’s suicide seventy years earlier, Picasso seems to have appropriated Van Gogh’s work in search of the ultimate meaning of an artist’s life, death, and legacy. His selection of Van Gogh as his artistic alter-ego was appropriate because, as he explained to Françoise Gilot, he considered him the archetype of the modern artist:

> We were, at one time, Cubists, but as we drew away from that period we found that, more than just Cubists, we were individuals dedicated to ourselves. As soon as we saw that the collective adventure was a lost cause, each one of us had to find an individual adventure. And the individual adventure always goes back to the one which is the archetype of our times: that is, Van Gogh’s—an essentially solitary and tragic adventure.82

Hélène Parmelin observed that throughout the last decades of his life, Picasso was obsessed with Van Gogh: "Picasso talks about Van Gogh all the time, and thinks about him all the time; he often contrasts him, not without bitterness, with the spoilt, self-satisfied arrogance of the times we are living through in painting. For him, Van Gogh is the one painter’s life who was exemplary, up to and including his death."83 Picasso commemorated Van Gogh’s death by painting a Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat (formerly in the collection of Jacqueline Picasso), derived from Van Gogh’s similar Self-Portrait (Detroit Institute of Arts) of 1887, on 26 July 1971, the day before the anniversary of the Dutch artist’s suicide.84

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81 In his late eighties, Picasso looked back nostalgically on his days at the Bateau Lavoir studio in Paris and told André Malraux, "Then I was famous. I was a painter! Not a freak." Malraux, 48–49.

82 Gilot and Lake, 75.

83 Parmelin (as in n. 74), 38. Picasso’s admiration for Van Gogh is apparent in the statement, “When it comes to painting, what does it mean, going through the sound barrier with a painting? Does it mean doing nothing? Doing just anything? Or does it mean being Van Gogh?” *Ibid.*, 82.

84 For Picasso’s Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat, see Zervos, xxxiii, no. 117.

85 Schiff, 67.

86 Ibid.
a pink torrent of blood and brain matter has been released.87 This act of artistic self-mutilation recalls Van Gogh’s mutilation of his ear and, in fact, one of Picasso’s prized possessions was a photocopy of an Arles newspaper of 1889 describing that incident.88 However, Picasso’s self-inflicted wound also might represent the results of a bullet wound to the head, suggesting that when Picasso looked into a mirror near the end of his life and confronted death, the image he saw reflected there, and that he appropriated as his own, was that of another “archetype,” the dying Casagemas.


87 In a variation of this work in which only the outline of the head is depicted, it is clear that Picasso intentionally omitted a portion of the skull. See Zervos, xxxiii, no. 430.

88 Parmelin (as in n. 72), 232–233.

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