

*Pity for the Mythic Brute: Pablo Picasso's Minotaur in the Vollard Suite*

Mary Sachs  
Department of Art History University of Colorado - Boulder

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Thesis Advisor  
Albert Alhadeff | Department of Art History

Defense Committee  
Robert Nauman | Department of Art History  
Warren Motte | Department of French

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the nuances of Pablo Picasso's minotaur as presented within the framework of the Vollard Suite. I argue that a text by Honoré de Balzac, *Physiologie du Mariage*, may have influenced Picasso's conception of the minotaur. It features of a minotaur, yet one framed within a parodic setting. The minotaur, explored in connection with the Balzacian creature, reveals the introspective nature of the Picasso's beast. Furthermore, the comedic tone of Balzac's *Physiologie* served as a means for Picasso to reflect upon the subconscious drives, which in turn, the artist visually manifested through his surrogate-self, the minotaur. As Picasso's favored alter-ego during the 1930s, one that was deeply linked to his personal, artistic, and Spanish identities, Balzac's text offers the infusion of his French identity into his conception of the minotaur. Traditional scholarship surrounding the minotaur focuses on the mythological or Spanish aspect, which this analysis will not be contesting, but will rather offer another facet to interpretations of the creature.

## Introduction

The minotaur is an ancient monster, one damned at birth by the perverted coupling of a bull and a woman. Yet Pablo Picasso would find in him a kindred monster to himself. A beast whose base nature allowed the artist to mediate and work through the emotional turmoil of his subconscious. The minotaur was a favored alter ego for the artist throughout his life, with the most concentrated focus beginning in the early 1930s. The creature would serve as title character of important canvases and etchings of the period, most famously immortalized in the *Minotauromachy* of 1935. But this analysis shies away from the famed work and chooses instead to look to the minotaur's narrative within the Vollard Suite. The suite reads of pure artistic effusion, intimately unveiling the synthesis of the artist's visual interpretation of his unconscious and the literary and mythological narratives at the heart of the work.

Commissioned by the art dealer and publisher Ambroise Vollard, Pablo Picasso made one hundred etchings between 13 September 1930 and March 1937 that eventually became known to art history under the name of the "Vollard Suite." It is within this body of plates that Picasso presents his automythological narrative of the minotaur; the half-man, half-bull of antiquity. Compared to the narrative of the sculptor, the minotaur takes a secondary role in the suite, with only sixteen of the one-hundred plates dedicated to him<sup>1</sup>. Yet these plates within the set, offer the most robust exploration of the creature in Picasso's oeuvre. While superficial aspects of the prototypical minotaur description hold true, Picasso's creature is antithetically tender and vulnerable. Picasso

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<sup>1</sup> Pablo Picasso and Hans Bolliger, *Picasso's Vollard Suite: Introd. by H. Bolliger* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956).

imbued a level of depth and humanity, never once given to the minotaur in all its manifestations in literature or art history. The artist eschews the traditional values, virtues, and even the original narrative of the minotaur, to create a beast that mirrors himself. Decades after the minotauric plates of the Volland Suite, Picasso told Romuald Dor de la Souchère, "If all the ways I have been along were marked on a map and joined up with a line, it might represent a minotaur<sup>2</sup>." This analysis aims to source these places on the map, to uncover the base influences. Integral parts of the artist's identity are found in the very being of the monster, his Spanish identity in the bull and his Classical roots through the mythic and, as this analysis will come to argue, his French identity through allusions to the literary work of Honoré de Balzac.

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<sup>2</sup> Romuald Dor de la Souchère and Dor de La Souchère, *Picasso in Antibes*, 1st American ed.] (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960).

## Chapter One. The Vollard Minotaur

### ***Picasso and Engraving, a new medium***

Long after the plates were completed, in the 1940s, Picasso would show the plates to a new mistress. In her book, *Life with Picasso*, Françoise Gilot tells the story of a lesson in engraving with Picasso. Much to the chagrin of the artist, she had arrived in an improper costume and he instead decided to take out a thick packet of prints, which he introduced as, "... a series of etchings, a hundred of them, that I made for Vollard in the 1930s<sup>3</sup>." These prints formed, as art history would come to call them, the Vollard Suite. He began his lesson to the young Gilot by showing her the final plates of the series, three portraits of Ambroise Vollard, the art dealer, and as Picasso indirectly states, the commissioner of the suite. There was a fourth portrait as well, although only three were chosen to round the suite to one hundred plates<sup>4</sup>. All of the plates were completed on the same day, mirrored in their simple single-figure composition. Yet each is executed in different techniques that were used throughout the suite; one is a clear linear line drawing [fig. 3], another uses fervent cross-hatching [fig. 4], and two which are variations on a hybrid sugar-lift aquatint technique [fig.1-2]. The four plates serve as a technical palette, laying bare the pure emotional tones inherent in the techniques within the suite.

The four portraits also serve as a testament to the artist's development and mastery of the medium. Despite the technical bravado, Picasso conveyed when

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<sup>3</sup> Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso* (London: Nelson, 1965), 48.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca A. Rabinow et al., eds., *Cézanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant-Garde* (New York : New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art ; Yale University Press, 2006), 114.

showing the plates to Gilot, the artist had never formally studied printmaking<sup>5</sup>. His eventual mastery and technical experimentation are much indebted to Picasso's working relationship with the printmaker Roger Lacourière. Their meeting was a chance encounter. As the legend goes, Picasso was strolling in Montmartre and caught a glimpse of printing presses through a window. He went inside asking after the owner who just happened to be Lacourière. Their meeting was timely, as Picasso's previous printer, Louis Fort, had just retired in 1932 and the artist was in need of a new printmaker. Lacourière was decidedly different from Fort, he was not just a printer, but engraver himself. He had a workshop where Picasso had everything he needed at hand. Lacourière was a true artisan and a master of his trade, always looking for new techniques and processes which he would share with Picasso<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the Atelier Lacourière assumed many of the arduous tasks of the process, allowing Picasso to work with greater ease at a much faster speed<sup>7</sup>. The newfound pace allowed for his engraving work to take on a sense of emotional immediacy and experimentation. Brigitte Baer, a connoisseur of Picasso's engravings, observed that "his burin, his etching needle, and his scraper are used with such force that it seems as if he wanted to gouge right through the copper<sup>8</sup>." This fruitful collaboration begat the experimental

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<sup>5</sup> Jay A. Clarke et al., eds., *Picasso* (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Clark Art Institute, 2017), 52.

<sup>6</sup> Brigitte Baer et al., *Picasso the Printmaker: Graphics from the Marina Picassocollection* (Dallas, Tex.: Dallas Museum of Art, 1983), 70-73.

<sup>7</sup> Jay A. Clarke et al., eds., *Picasso* (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Clark Art Institute, 2017), 40.

<sup>8</sup> Brigitte Baer and Pablo Picasso, *Picasso the Engraver: Selections from the Musée Picasso, Paris* (New York, N.Y: Thames and Hudson : Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 56.

nature of the suite, which combines and blends techniques such as, burin, etching, sugar-lift aquatint, and drypoint. These methods bind the chaotic nature of the suite, connecting the disparate narratives and themes explored.



### ***Approaching problems of intent and structure***

Perhaps the most challenging obstacle in approaching the Suite Vollard is of intent; that of Picasso and that of Vollard. Little is known about the agreement between the artist and the dealer regarding the commission of the Suite. The origin of the Vollard Suite has a complicated history, one largely left a mystery due to the dealer's accidental death in 1939. The narrative logic of the prints defies easy explanation. The immediate and ostensible narrative of the suite reads as more of a patchwork of disconnected scenes, in a process of fluid interlocking and juxtaposition. Interspersed throughout the suite are minotaurs and models, Bacchuses and Rembrandts, colossal heads and sailors, with all manner of themes and settings placed aside each other in the collection. They vary erratically in style and technique; from month to month or even day to day, the plates and their figures go through endless permutations. Picasso ruminates on a theme for a plate or two and leaves it, working in rapid bursts of creation with many plates executed in a single day. This often-incoherent clash of alien realities poses a true challenge for interpretation.

It seems with every publication came a new perspective on the suite's coherence, with the first to come about in 1947. Following Vollard's death and German occupation, the sheets remained in storage for the better part of the 1940's. The suite would finally be published by Henri Petiet, a Parisian art dealer. He felt that the plates were too diverse and their production too intermittent for them to be considered an intentional body. He referred to them as "cent estampes originales," often breaking the

suite apart in order to sell small groupings or individual prints<sup>9</sup>. Yet as this analysis argues for the idiomatic nature of the minotaur within the framework of the Vollard Suite, this discussion is vital in the understanding of the structure and logic, underpinning the plates. One such means to mitigate the structural chaos of the suite was presented by Lisa Florman in her book *Myth and Metamorphosis: Picasso's Classical Prints of the 1930s*, who proposed a number of perspectives and modes of understanding to approach the etchings. The strongest of Florman's arguments, and one which this analysis will adopt, is the characterization of the suite's structure in terms of Ludwig Wittgenstein's "family resemblances." Wittgenstein discussed his approach through an analogy to games:

*Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?-Don't say: "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games' "-but look and see whether there is anything common to all.-For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!-Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.-Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think*

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<sup>9</sup> Lisa Carol Florman, *Myth and Metamorphosis: Picasso's Classical Prints of the 1930s* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000), 3, 71.

*now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.*

*And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.- And I shall say: 'games' form a family<sup>10</sup>.*

Much akin to Wittgenstein's "games," the plates of the suite form a sort of extended family. The bonds between the plates manifest in varying degrees of intensities. Some relations are self-evident, firmly connected by narrative, familiar roles, and characters. These intimate "kinship" links have been solidified by scholars in thematic categories, like that of Bolliger's groupings<sup>11</sup>. Yet some connections are far subtler, almost phenotypic, linked by way of a simple shared technique or lingering motif. We see this in the reoccurrence, departure and return to specific etching techniques, in the busts and giant heads that litter the studio and plates, but also in the leitmotif of the profile of Marie-Thérèse's, Picasso's model and mistress during the creation of the suite, whose appearance is nearly ever-present throughout the suite.

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<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Hans Bolliger's 1956 publication of the suite was the first time the one hundred etchings came to be viewed as an intentional body. Although he managed to create fixed thematic groups namely, "Rembrandt," "The Minotaur," "The Blind Minotaur," "The Sculptor's Studio," and "The Battle of Love," there were still a large number of plates that escaped clean categorization.

The philosophical realm offers us another avenue into understanding, found in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome. The term is a botanical one, referring to underground root-like stems which grow from their apex in any which direction, including plants like ginger. The rhizome in philosophy is presented as a new mode of thought, in contrast to the dominant "tree-like" Western ontological model which represents hierarchical thought<sup>12</sup>. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order<sup>13</sup>" Their theory provides us a means to understand the chaotic nature of the suite. In order to mediate the manic heterogeneity of suite, we can adopt Deleuze and Guattari's method of "mapping" this rhizomatic system. While many of the plates are disparate in theme and style, they all remain within a framework of interpersonal dialogue. They may be mapped and charted, intimately revealing the psychic landscape of the artist;

*The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious ... The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification<sup>14</sup>.*

Certain markers, such as technique, motifs, or even influence, all serve as connectable points within Picasso's oeuvre. The suite doesn't follow a strict logical sequence, it is a non-linear work bound by a liminal structure. Through it we are given a glimpse into the stratification of the artist's psyche, a unique example of the artist's unbridled

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Gartler, "Rhizome," The University of Chicago: Theories of Media Keywords Glossary, accessed October 25, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987,7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 12.

experimentation and inner logic of his artistic creation. The problem lies in connecting these dimensions, linking the ostensibly inconsistent points in order to learn the language of the underlying asymmetrical logic. No motif, technique, narrative, or reference remains fixed within the suite. They are mutable and in constant flux, yet unity can be found in the visual language left behind by these mutations<sup>15</sup>.

One such plate that has defied a clean categorization depicts two drinkers [fig. 5], etched in late November 1934. The two are ostensibly new figures, introduced late within the suite. The leftmost figure is a haggard bearded fellow, drenched in meticulous shadow created by extensive cross-hatching. Yet the technique is muddled, with the lines inexact but concentrated. The techniques recall Rembrandt self-portrait etchings [fig. 6-7], with the sullen eyes and shadowed face and the playful reprieve with the imprecise line-work that allows for a more emotionally improvisational expression. He dons the same Phrygian cap as the old master, yet the curved ticks of the drinker's striped shirt are shared in varying degrees of intensity throughout the suite. We see a more tempered approach in an early plate completed in the summer of the same year [fig. 8], depicting the death of a female bullfighter in a battle between a bull and horse. In this etching, the manic curved lines are more temperate, utilized in swells of detail to separate the entanglement of bodies. The burling leg of the horse recalls that of the old

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<sup>15</sup> The connections present within the suite ought not to be viewed as arbitrary. This analysis suggests that the plates of the suite were not either selected or created without consideration. While the psyche of an artist is intangible, and the mystery of the suite leaves us with little means to form an understanding, an attempt is necessary to decipher the nuance of the work. As a layman of philosophy, my engagement with the presented theories may be all too shallow. Yet the intention of this utilization is to impart a sense of logic from the omnipresent motifs, techniques, and influences found throughout the suite.

man's hands, which look like gnarled roots as he holds a drink in one hand and a cigarette in another. Across the table, a young man reaches out to the smoker. Juxtaposing the decorous man, his lines are simple and clear, yet cautious and a bit imprecise. When showing the plate to Gilot, Picasso introduced the plate by stating; "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.<sup>16</sup>" Both drinkers seem to share in that delusion in different points in their life. If they are to be viewed as artists, then Picasso communicates their inadequacies through their technical depiction, exhibiting their delusion through breaks in technique. Innate in this plate is dialogue with the past, personal and historical, one that speaks to his relationship with an old master, just as much as it communicates to his own fear of delusions of grandeur.

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<sup>16</sup> Gilot and Lake, *Life with Picasso*, 51.

### ***The ill-fated monster***

The legend of the minotaur is an ancient one. As the tale goes, the newly crowned King Minos of the island of Crete asked Poseidon to send him a white bull to sacrifice. But when the King of the Sea obliged, Minos, struck by the beauty of the creature, kept the bull for himself and sacrificed one of his own in its stead. This enraged Poseidon, who punished the King by compelling his wife Pasiphaë to develop an unnatural passion for the bull. In order to satisfy her passion, the queen enlisted Daedalus to fashion a cow out of wood which could conceal Pasiphaë and enable her to mate with the creature. This union birthed the minotaur, a creature so ravenous and violent that it needed to be locked away in a Labyrinth<sup>17</sup>. In order to satiate the beast, seven young Athenian were sacrificed to the minotaur every nine years. With the help of Ariadne and her famed thread, Theseus succeeds in slaying the minotaur<sup>18</sup>.

The death of the minotaur at the hands of the hero had been a favorite of artists for centuries, yet Picasso chose a more defiant approach. Picasso's minotaur sharply deviated from the accepted characterization of the beast in art, he chose instead to humanize the monster, so far as to use the creature as a surrogate for himself. As art historian Héléne Lasalle suggests;

*There is a sort of decanting process in Picasso's allusions to Antiquity. He gradually breaks down the traditional version of the myth and any specific connotations it may have and draws from it the elements that will enable him to*

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<sup>17</sup> Ovid and Mary M. Innes, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, Penguin Classics L58 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex), [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955].

<sup>18</sup> Dickhaut, Kirsten. 'Minotaur'. In Brill's New Pauly Supplements I - Volume 4 : The Reception of Myth and Mythology.

*create his own myth, the myth of the creative artist and ultimately the myth of Picasso himself, the mythical twentieth-century creator, the cannibalistic and provocative rival of the great masters of the past. (Hélène Lasalle, "Picasso et le mythe antique" p. 242.)*

It is through this process and within the Vollard Suite that Picasso offers another myth for the minotaur, one that forms his own liminal auto-mythology. In its base form, the narrative of the Vollard minotaur reads as such;

Anticipating the arrival of the minotaur, numerous plates [fig. 9-12] are devoted to a reclining sculptor and his model. As they lounge on the artist's bed, they watch increasing bizarre scenes unfold before them. The sculptor gaze remains fixed on the object at hand, keeping a diligent watch over his creations. In some scenes, the gaze of the sculptor and model is coupled, but more often their eyes divert. Her interest wavers from plate to plate; at times she is fixed on the spectacle at hand, while in others she averts her gaze, shuts her eyes, or intently stares straight ahead, directly at the viewer. The sculptor, so detached from reality and so subsumed in his creations, fails to notice when the beast has usurped his place. Although a novel intruder into the classical scene, the horned beast is integrated with not only no objection, but also hardly any notice.

The minotaur arrives with little ceremony, finding himself invited into the bed of the sculptor and taking his place with the artist's model [fig. 13]. Irrespective of all that around them, the two fall in love. The minotaur, with coupe in hand, reclines with the nude model. In the plates that follow, the artist's monster is accepted in the sculptor's studio, seated aside and carousing with Bacchus and his languorous women who



tumble over them [fig.14]. The minotaur deftly and innately conforms to civility, lifting his glass as if in a toast to his Bacchic companion. He takes his glass, not as a brutish creature, but rather with an almost farcical elegance. In bed with the minotaur, the model is engaged with her partner, burrowing into his arms and even watching him as he sleeps [fig. 15]. This latter act is of particular importance, given that for Picasso, the recurring motif of sleep watcher is a decidedly masculine gesture. The inversion of this tender, yet voyeuristic act, suggests that their passion is reciprocal.

When he wakes he again, he caresses his companion as a veritable crowd looks on— a flutist and his companion watch, while a giant bearded head peers from a window and the model's bust looks over the scene behind the pair [fig. 16]. But their place of bliss is disrupted when a horse places itself between the bodies of the minotaur and the woman, shocking and disturbing them both [fig. 17]. In the next scene, in a mirrored body position, the minotaur is punished [fig. 18]. He is wounded and on all fours with a dagger on the ground. Yet they are not in the mythic labyrinth, but the bullring<sup>19</sup>. The next plate reveals that a Theseus-like figure has stabbed him in the neck. Among the crowd in the stands are his love, the Bacchic figure, and an old woman reaching out to him [fig. 19]. The final scene in the corrida is the minotaur's defeat. On his knees, he clutches his chest, head raised as his love reaches out to him, now the

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<sup>19</sup> An important setting in the suite is the bullring. It was a long-explored venue for Picasso, deeply tied to his childhood in Malaga, Spain. The beast was uniquely familiar to Picasso through the analogy of the bullfight, intimately associating the creature to his Spanish heritage (Penrose, Golding, and Kahnweiler, *Picasso, in Retrospect*). In the suite, the corrida is a favorite setting, reoccurring numerous times throughout the narrative. The bullring grows in prominence in Picasso's work during the summer of 1934, when the minotaur and bull merge in some of the most violent scenes of conflict in Picasso's oeuvre — see figure 8.

only friendly face in the crowd above [fig. 20]. But in the next plate, the minotaur and the woman had returned to the studio, once again finding solace in each other's arms [fig. 21]. As she sleeps in following scene, he is crouched over her as she sleeps [fig. 22]. He is then in his lover's bed again, but this time surrounded by three other characters, the bearded sculptor with the goblet joined by his woman, and a young man leaning over his shoulder, with a tail attached by a string [fig. 23]. The minotaur's story starts again a year later, but this time in a new setting by the seaside. The minotaur is now blind, led by a little girl with an uncanny resemblance to his lover. Sailors gawk at the scene from their boat, and a young sailor watches from the shore. Three plates chronicle their journey, varying slightly in the placement of characters communicating a sense of urgency and movement to their journey. The final plate of the minotaur is more technically experimental, but compositionally much the same as the three previous [fig. 24].

As presented, the tale of Picasso's minotaur is difficult to decipher. The narrative is disjointed and abstracted in time. Motifs, introduced and abandoned, leave questions. Yet this analysis proposes to fill in these narrative gaps and find meaning through the motifs.

### ***Early explorations: The minotaur and surrealism***

The minotaur first appears in an infantile state in a collage [fig. 25] completed in January 1927, which was later made into a tapestry<sup>20</sup> It features a rather odd construction, with the body consisting of a large bull's head atop giant legs. For five years Picasso ignores the creature. This is especially curious given that the myth of the minotaur is included in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which the artist illustrated in 1931. Picasso's first true exploration of the minotaur [fig. 26] was completed for the cover of the inaugural issue of the surrealist magazine, *Minotaure*, nicknamed "the magazine with a beast's head." Yet Picasso's ties to surrealism are often tenuous at best. Although André Breton fervently vied for his allegiance, the artist would only lay claim to a surrealist title in 1933. However, this does not mean that he never engaged with the principals of movement. In 1943, Picasso explained to his friend, André Warnod, his interpretation of surrealism as such; "I am always trying to observe nature. Likeness is important to me, a deeper likeness, more than reality, to the point of being surreal. This is how I imagined surrealism, but the word was used in an entirely different way<sup>21</sup>." Brassai supports this assertion in his *Conversations with Picasso*. He viewed the artist's minotaur as a wholly unique interpretation of the creature;

*But this highly significant name [minotaur] did not have the same meaning for Picasso and for the surrealists. For the painter of Guernica, this ancient symbol, half-man, half-bull, was not far removed from the toro of Spanish bullfights, laden with obscure, volatile forces. Picasso felt these dark powers*

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<sup>20</sup> Pierre Cabanne, *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times* (New York: Morrow, 1977), 261.

<sup>21</sup> Brigitte Léal, Christine Piot, and Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Picasso: The Monograph, 1881-1973* (Distributed Art Pub Incorporated, 2009), 249.

*moving within himself, and he humanized them. His minotaur personified the "monster" — sardonic, dangerous of course, but also alive, its nostrils belching smoke and dilated by a desire that drove it to lust after nude, sleeping girls, to fling itself in a frenzy on their young, provocative, and defenseless flesh. His Minotaur was always the monster pawing the ground, on the prowl for sleeping women.*

*For surrealists, this name evoked cruel and ambiguous myths: the monstrous union between Pasiphaë and a white bull, the labyrinth built by Daedalus, where the Minotaur devoured Athenian boys and girls, myths that Freud had borrowed from legends and applied to the unconscious. Surrealists saw the Minotaur as the force that broke through the limits of the irrational, that transgressed borders, broke laws, and offended the gods. They identified it with their own aspirations: constant, universal violence, absolute revolt, a total lack of submission, unbridled freedom. Whereas Picasso liked the Minotaur for its "human, all too human" side, surrealists liked it for everything they discovered in it that was against nature, superhuman, surreal<sup>22</sup>.*

In Brassai's view, the surrealists interpreted the minotaur by way of its "cruel and ambiguous myths." In surrealism, the minotaur was associated with a break from natural laws, a creature of universal violence and unbridled freedom. The minotaur was posed as a symbol of the "obscure forces of the subconscious," through which they could express and explore their base urges and desires<sup>23</sup>. Yet Picasso admired the minotaur for his humanity in face of a monstrous reality. Brassai asserted that for the artist, the ancient symbol as a half-man, half-bull, was thusly linked to the toro of Spanish bullfights. Like so many of the works that Picasso had probed for influence, the artist

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<sup>22</sup> Brassai, *Conversations with Picasso* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 8-9.

<sup>23</sup> Enrique Mallen, "Pablo Picasso and the Truth of Greek Art" 1, no. 4 (2014): 294.

personalized the surrealist body of thought regarding the creature. The approach enabled Picasso to use the minotaur as an unfettered gaze into his own psyche.

## Chapter 2. A Dialogue of masters: the minotaurs of Picasso and Balzac

### ***Picasso and Balzac***

Returning again to Gilot and Picasso's discussion of the suite, they happened upon a two-figure plate depicting a curled-haired, cherub-cheeked painter holding the hand of a partially draped nude woman [fig. 27]. Picasso described the plate as such,

*You see this truculent character here, with the curly hair and mustache? That's Rembrandt, or maybe it's Balzac; I'm not sure. It's a compromise, I suppose. It doesn't really matter. They're only two of the people who haunt me. Every human being is a whole colony, you know<sup>24</sup>.*

This declaration that Honoré de Balzac "haunted" him, is rather curious given that, by all scholarly accounts, the artist had only worked with one of the author's texts, *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*<sup>25</sup>. Balzac's short story, published in 1831, tells the story of a young and unknown artist, Nicholas Poussin, who comes to visit the painter Pourbus. There he meets an aged and quixotic master painter, Frenhofer, who has been laboring on his masterpiece, *La Belle noiseuse*, for a decade. The artist kept the painting in secret for all those years, unable to complete it without a model comparable to its beauty.

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<sup>24</sup> Gilot and Lake, *Life with Picasso*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> The most recent scholarship on the subject of Picasso's minotaur, *l'atelier du Minotaure*, published in 2018, is perhaps one of the most thorough studies of his alter-ego to-date. The catalogue was written as a companion to the Palais Lumière exhibition of the same title. The book takes a rather holistic art historical approach, exploring the minotauroic iconography from the antique to modern manifestations. Pertinent to this examination, this text is the first to address, albeit tangentially, Balzac's *Physiologie du Mariage* in the discourse of Picasso minotaur. It is introduced in a discourse of modern renderings of the minotaur, specifically in conjunction with Rodin's sculpture [fig. 28]. Clemente Marconi connects the eroticism of the minotaur in Rodin's sculpture to the central motif of Balzac's text, the minotaur. This beast "minotaurizes" (a term synonymous with cuckolding) husbands by seducing their wives.

Poussin, desperate for a chance to see the painting, offers his lover, Gillette, to model for him. With her aid, the master is able to complete his masterpiece. But when it was finally revealed, the canvas emerged as a confused and illegible mass. Frenhofer aspired to the realization of what was "unknown" to painters, to an artistic perfection impossible to realize in the world<sup>26</sup>. In the modern era this took on a near-mythic status as a parable of the artist's battle with reality, serving as a visionary prefiguration of the avant-garde<sup>27</sup>.

One hundred years later, in 1931, Ambroise Vollard commissioned Picasso to illustrate the short story, and the artist produced a sketchbook of near-abstract line drawings and another set of in his neoclassical style<sup>28</sup>. According to Brassai, surrealist photographer and intimate friend of the artist, the tale would have a great impact on Picasso, even inspiring his move to an apartment on rue des Grandes Augustins [supposed house of Pourbus]; Picasso was,

*"...moved and excited by the idea of taking the place of the illustrious shadow Frenhofer, Picasso immediately rented the studio. That was in 1937- And on the site of the Unknown Masterpiece he had painted the "well-known masterpiece" Guernica<sup>29</sup>."*

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Barolsky, "A Brief History of the Artist from God to Picasso," 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Lynda Nead, "Seductive Canvases: Visual Mythologies of the Artist and Artistic Creativity," *Oxford Art Journal* 18, no. 2 (1995): 59.

<sup>28</sup> Rebecca A. Rabinow et al., eds., *Cézanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant-Garde* (New York : New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art ; Yale University Press, 2006), 113.

<sup>29</sup> Brassai, *Conversations with Picasso*, 52.

Scholars have linked the central theme of "the artist's studio" in the Vollard Suite to Picasso's etching accompanying *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*. Yet the link between the two may not have stopped at that point.

Brassaï continues this psychic connection between the artist and author further on in his book, *Conversations with Picasso*. Speaking with Picasso's close acquaintance and personal secretary, Jaime Sabartés, the photographer muses;

*Doesn't the nature of his memory remind you of Balzac? Steeped in forms and observations, he too never needed to gather material to create his characters. He carried them inside him. In fact, he said — referring to Louis Lambert — that he possessed every sort of memory, of places, names, words, things, shapes. But deep down, he could never separate out nature from his phenomenal gift. He spoke of a kind of "second nature." I have the impression that this man, who wanted to elucidate everything, still didn't dare tamper with his mysterious capacity for mimesis and invention. Perhaps he was afraid of it<sup>30</sup>.*

Brassaï continues with a selection from Balzac's introduction to *La Peau de Chagrin*, which serves to bolster his assertion;

*Among the truly philosophical writers, a moral, inexplicable, unheard of phenomenon occurs, for which science has difficulty accounting. It is a kind of second sight that allows them to discern the truth in every possible situation; or, even better, some unknown power that transports them where they must be, where they want to be. They invent the true by analogy, or see the object to be*

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 149.



*described, either because the object comes to them, or because they themselves go toward the object*<sup>31</sup>.

Picasso, like Balzac, represented reality, not in its physical state, but in its subjective state. The artist was modernity's inheritor of this second vision. Through his artwork, Picasso "invented the true" as he manifested his vision of the world. A vision which melded his psychic states and the subjective view of the beauty in the real. Through his hand, centuries of artistic influence coalesce into his ostensibly fractured, yet subconsciously unified vision of the world. The two masters, of art and of literature, are bound by this "second sight," allowing them to capture reality and reform into a figurative truth— Balzac with his realism and Picasso with his sur-real conceptions.

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<sup>31</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *La Peau de Chagrin*, Lettres Françaises (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1982).

## ***Physiologie du Minotaure***

As Picasso's alter-ego, Picasso found imbued within the minotaur integral parts of his identity, namely his Classical heritage through the mythic and his Spanish identity through the bull. Yet if we are to take seriously Picasso's statement; "If all the ways I have been along were marked on a map and joined up with a line, it might represent a minotaur<sup>32</sup>," then we ought to consider the absence of his French identity within the minotaur. Thusly, perhaps there is another point in the map, one that integrates this other facet of himself. No better allusion to this identity could be found, than through a bastion of French literature like Honoré de Balzac. Potentially Picasso may have read a lesser-known text by the author, one completed early in his career entitled, *Physiologie du Marriage*. Perhaps at the behest of Vollard<sup>33</sup> or of his own volition, Picasso read this text and wove this interpretation into his own. If we are to continue rhizomatic thought, even without a concrete connection, Balzac's text was ever a part of discourse, imbued and melded into the collective consciousness. Such an allusion could have potentially fermented the exploration of the mythic creature, beyond its mythical or even surrealist conceptions, and served as a means for Picasso to identify with the minotaur on a deeper, more introspective level.

Published in 1829, years before the publication of the *Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, Balzac's *Physiologie du Mariage* is the unmarried author's treatise on marriage. It is

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<sup>32</sup> Romuald Dor de la Souchère and Dor de La Souchère, *Picasso in Antibes*, 1st American ed.] (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960).

<sup>33</sup> Vollard had previously commissioned Picasso to work with Balzac's texts. It seems plausible that the dealer may have recommended the text to Picasso, although no such evidence was found in the archival record. However, their correspondences suggest that the two preferred to speak over the telephone, so the prints (and their theme) would have surely been a topic of conversation

important to note that this text is not a novel, instead, it is a sort of *mélange* of lectures, aphorisms, stories and observations on marital politics. The text would join the author's opus *La Comédie humaine*, categorized under *Études analytiques*<sup>34</sup>. Balzac's text serves as an ironic "manual" for marriage. It is a mixture of parody and commentary on the institution of marriage and the problem of adultery.

The text is comprised of thirty "meditations," divided into three parts; "General Reflections," "Internal and External Means of Defense," and "Civil War." The pseudo-scientific, pseudo-sociological terminology and manipulation of "statistics" paints a gloomy picture of the bourgeois wife and marriage. It is within the meditation entitled the "Honeymoon" that a curious rendition of the minotaur is introduced. After a rather odd metaphor of a man's wig, Balzac introduces a fictive dialogue between himself and a woman who has a question about his book. After realizing he could not be direct in his reference to marital indiscretion as, "a man should carefully respect the ear of the weaker sex, for it is the only chaste thing about them,"<sup>35</sup> he finds a new metaphor through the Greeks, with the minotaur introduced through his myth;

*... the minotaur was, of all known creatures, the one that was signaled out by mythology as the most dangerous; that, to secure themselves from its ravages, the Athenians had promised to sacrifice fifty virgins to it every year*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Bellos, David. "Comédie Humaine, La." In *The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

<sup>35</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *The Physiology of Marriage* (London: Privately printed [by Strangeways & sons], 1904), 91.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

Yet it is notable that Balzac identified the humanity of the creature, citing how authors had typically depicted the minotaur as a half-man, half-bull, but the frescos in the recently discovered Herculaneum, "shows us this allegorical monster with his whole body that of a man and only a bull's head<sup>37</sup>." It is from this more human conception that Balzac calls upon the myth to be utilized as an allegory to the unfaithful wives' cuckolding of their husbands; "When a woman is indiscreet, the husband is, according to me "minotaurised" [minotaurisé]<sup>38</sup>." This neologism served as a metonymic in-joke, which creates an intimate language between author and reader<sup>39</sup>. French literary scholar Andrew Counter suggests that Balzac's minotaur represents; "... the slip from the threatening power of the domineering husband to the ridiculousness and passivity of the cuckold, a decline which is expressed grammatically in the shift from the noun minotaure to the comical past participle minotaurisé<sup>40</sup>." This curious metaphor is used throughout the text. "Minotaur" was synonymous with the indiscreet wife's lover, just as the "minotaurised" became short-hand for the cuckolded husband.

After its introduction, the creature becomes an obsessive fixation within the Balzac text, serving as the ultimate enemy. Much of *Physiologie* is devoted to instructing the husband on how to guard against the creature, especially the second part of the text "Internal and External Means of Defense," which includes various means and strategies to control the wife and prevent a marital invasion. Mediations such as "Arrangement of the House" and "The Custom-House" are entirely devoted to

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Farrant, Tim. 2002. *Balzac's Shorter Fictions: Genesis and Genre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>40</sup> Counter, Andrew. 2007. "Tough Love, Hard Bargains: Rape and Coercion in Balzac." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 36 (1): 61–71.

instructing the husband on how to guard against the inevitable invasion of the minotaur, including such measures as banishing all couches, ottomans, sofas that may hold two people or boarding up any closets or cupboards that people could sneak into. Balzac even devotes twenty pages to a treatise on "The Theory of the Bed."

In such instructions, the women, or more appropriately the wives, in Balzac's text are treated as fickle creatures, all too prepared to fall for the charms of the minotaur. These sardonic jabs at the untamed female, who necessitated careful watch may have been an appealing notion to the disgruntled married Picasso, juggling a troubled wife and mistress ingénue. Assuredly there would have been some allure to a "manual" for marriage that parodied and perhaps mirrored his view of his wife. The same bourgeois French morality and bureaucracy mocked in the Balzac tale barred the artist from a simple divorce. Olga was his wife by law and for show, but by the mid-30's, no longer by will<sup>41</sup>. As early as 1930, Picasso began consulting with a lawyer about a divorce<sup>42</sup>. Perhaps he would have considered such proceeding earlier but was not until 1931 that the new Spanish Republic permitted divorce. Still, Picasso waived, given that his marriage contract with Olga did not specify the division of wealth and by French law half of his fortune and property, including artworks, would go to her<sup>43</sup>. The bourgeois world he so ardently attempted to escape barred him from a simple transition into a new life with his young mistress, Marie-Thérèse. In such a situation Picasso may have found solace in Balzac's playful text. The bemoanings and far from sheathed criticisms of

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<sup>42</sup> Pierre Cabanne, *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times* (New York: Morrow, 1977).

<sup>43</sup> When they married, Picasso and Olga signed a community-property agreement which specified that the couple would share all assets (including unsold artworks) in case of a divorce. (Richardson).

marriage may have been a sardonic comfort. While suggesting that this may have been the initial appeal of the text, the role of this text's hypothetical influence is found in its primary antagonist.

### ***The comic beast***

Of note in Balzac's text is the ever-present tone of parody, with the axioms and prescriptive adages often silly and mocking. Evidence of this tone is exemplified in a passage entitled, "Catechism of Marriage." Balzac feigns doctrinal language in order to institutionalize his credos, manipulating and countering the sacred tone of Catholic dogma

XXVII.

*Marriage is a science.*

XXVIII.

*A man ought not to marry without having studied anatomy, and dissected*

*at least one woman.*

XLV.

*The progression of pleasures is from the distich to the quatrain, from the quatrain to the sonnet, from the sonnet to the ballad, from the ballad to the ode, from the ode to the cantata, from the cantata to the dithyramb. The husband who commences with dithyramb is a fool.*

XLVII.

*Marriage must incessantly contend with a monster which devours everything, that is, familiarity.*

XLVIII.

*If a man cannot distinguish the difference between the pleasures of two consecutive nights, he has married too early.*

XLIX.

*It is easier to be a lover than a husband, for the same reason that it is more difficult to be witty every day, than to say bright things from time to time.*

LI.

*The man who enters his wife's dressing-room is either a philosopher or*

*an imbecile.*

*LIV.*

*A man must not flatter himself that he knows his wife, and is making her happy unless he sees her often at his knees.*

Marriage is no longer a holy sacrament but a science, and a pseudoscience at that. In lieu of the sacred is the irreverent, these sorts of absurd testaments hijack the traditional. In Balzac's purview marriage obeys the laws of science, of superstition, of poetic measure, and indelibly of farce.

Much akin to Picasso's minotaur, Balzac's creature was somewhat of an anomaly in the modern era<sup>44</sup>. His work was the first to use the creature in a metaphorical vein. Although not treated with the same sympathy as Picasso's creature, Balzac's role for the creature was one all-too-familiar for the artist. Never before had the creature been depicted with civility and complexity, except perhaps once before in a different medium. In Balzac's caricature, the beast is no longer quite a monster, but still a rogue threat to society.

The minotaur of Balzac is one of parody, he is the caricature deviant who threatens the monogamy and sanctity of the bourgeois marriage. Thusly, the creature serves as a perfect comedic mirror to Picasso's aberrant rendition. It is a beast that must be strategized against, lest the wife fall victim to his compulsive charm. In both works, the minotaur takes on the role of the sexual usurper. The artist's minotaur takes the place of the sculptor with almost comedic grace, absurdly socially adroit. In the sculptor's studio, the minotaur plays the respectable guest. He adapts to the world with curious ease, reclining amicably among the artist's models. He doesn't drink from an

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<sup>44</sup> Dickhaut, Kirsten. 'Minotaur.'



ancient chalice but from a glass coupe. With Picasso, such juxtapositions are not placed without forethought. Although done with subtly, this is a comedic gesture.

The comedic vein and more specifically the mocking of morality found in the Balzac text serve to influence the tone of Picasso's minotaur. As psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* suggests, humor functions as an element of the individual's developing ability to face the limitations imposed by society, mortality, and the horror of the real<sup>45</sup>. Humor is a means of dialogue to understand oneself and one's place in the world. In essence, "jokes" are unconscious formations that allow us to mediate the chaos of the world. Furthermore, in Lacanian theory, "comedy paradoxically provides us with the ability to faithfully symbolize the emotional, unconscious experience of the real, of the horrifying and terrifying experiences that make us feel helpless, meaningless, empty, and dumb<sup>46</sup>." Picasso not only symbolized but also manifested his exploration of his "unconscious experience of the real." Picasso scholar T.J. Clark describes Picasso's vision of the world as somewhat distorted, stating that the artist was unable to, "... see the human world in any other terms than the monstrous- his automatic decision to recast pain and panic as a theater of distortion<sup>47</sup>" Clark argues that for most, "Either monstrosity is a threatening but precious form of the human, which all cultures hem in with taboos, or it is a mechanism to put us back in touch with the real and everyday- the mere body, the body as it is. In

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<sup>45</sup> Joseph Newirth, "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious: Humor as a Fundamental Emotional Experience," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues; Hillsdale* 16, no. 5 (October 2006): 557–71.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 562.

<sup>47</sup> T. J. Clark, *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica*, The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 35:58 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 172.

Picasso, it is both. It oscillates between the one and the other<sup>48</sup>." It is this perspective of monstrous humanity that can guide interpretation of the creature. Picasso's depiction is moral damning, but at the same time sympathetic and redemptive. Through envisioning himself as the sexual usurper found in Balzac's minotaur, Picasso was able to explore his base-self and the urges of it, visually manifesting them through his conceptualization of the minotaur. In the final chapter, we will explore this on a more specific level through later plates of the creature, in which we can see the deformation and ultimate death of the Vollard minotaur.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 176.

### ***Minotaurs and maidens, Picasso's vision of the beast***

The beast's role as surrogate for the artist, places him within an "all too human" context.<sup>49</sup> Again, through his conversation with Gilot, Picasso describes what that actually entails within the mythic world of the Vollard Suite;

*That's where the minotaurs live, along the coast. They're the rich seigneurs of the disland. They know they're monsters and they live, like dandies and dilettantes everywhere, the kind of existence that reeks of decadence in houses filled with works of art by the most fashionable painters and sculptors. They love being surrounded by pretty women. They get the local fishermen to go out and round up girls from the neighboring islands. After the heat of the day has passed, they bring in the sculptors and their models for parties, with music and dancing, and everybody gorges himself on mussels and champagne until melancholy fades away and euphoria takes over. From there on it's an orgy<sup>50</sup>.*

Picasso's tale bears a strong resemblance to that of Balzac's rendition, yet an even stronger resemblance to himself. He, like both creatures, is a sort of libertine dandy, carousing with young women in his own Parisian studio. His wife Olga abhorred all that which was "Bohemian," and expected that an artist of Picasso's reputation would have the lifestyle to match<sup>51</sup>. For her, this meant an adoption of bourgeois routine, a life of fancy dinners, clothes, and friends from high society, a life with maids, cooks, chauffeurs, and luxurious vacations in the summers. Yet things changed when Picasso

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<sup>49</sup> Brassai, *Conversations with Picasso*.

<sup>50</sup> Gilot and Lake, *Life with Picasso*, 49.

<sup>51</sup> Cabanne, *Pablo Picasso, 191-196*.

would acquire a new floor to his apartment, all to himself, with its own front door which required an invitation, even to Olga. This new-found privacy allowed him to once again see his old bohemian friends and return to his promiscuous ways<sup>52</sup>.

He would eventually find himself a prized offering for his beast, in the form of the seventeen-year-old Marie-Thérèse. She possessed a classical beauty, one that evoked the "atavistic memories of his Mediterranean inheritance, in which echoes of Carthage and beyond that of Gilgamesh have been heard. He was a native of Roman Spain, living in Roman Gaul<sup>53</sup>." It was through their unnatural coupling that the minotaur was realized. She was at once a sacrificial Athenian maiden devoured by the creature, yet also Pasiphaë, fated to lust the inhuman. Picasso was never the cuckold. He was the minotaur, a manifestation of raw, unquestioned, and irresistible appeal. He has taken the role of the sexual usurper. Picasso is not the husband in his life or in his artistic metaphor, but rather the antithesis. Picasso's base-self, his minotaur, cuckolded his artistic drive. His psyche was, to a certain extent, "minotaurisé," by another facet of himself. He was plagued by lust for his young muse— the lover whose youth he devoured and pulled into his labyrinth. The beast had taken over his studio, allowing the erotic to eclipse the artistic.

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<sup>52</sup> John Richardson and Marilyn McCully, *A Life of Picasso*, 1st ed, vol. III (New York: Random House, 1991), 297.

<sup>53</sup> J. K. Newman, "Ovid's Epic, Picasso's Art," *Latomus* 62, no. 2 (2003): 362–72.

### Chapter 3. The Suite as Elegy

*“I live only on your memory, which feeds on the love you bring me each day.”  
(Letter from Pablo Picasso to Marie-Thérèse, 3 October 1935, family archives of Maya  
Widmaier Picasso)*

#### **Marie-Therese’s creature**

Shortly before the arrival of the minotaur, Picasso dedicated a number of canvases to a scene of his muse being saved from drowning by different manifestations of herself [fig. 49]. The canvas is colorful, almost bucolic and serene despite the disturbing nature of the scene. The painting was based in reality. In late autumn 1932, after swimming in the Marne, Marie-Therese caught an infection from rats in the river. Her illness caused her to lose her golden locks and would leave her more or less convalescent into the early months of 1933. The image of her trauma would never leave Picasso’s mind, and he would return to it again in 1936 [fig. 50]. But the tone had changed, the once vibrant palette was reduced to only grey and blue, her bodies now only a muted mass. Yet now she is depicted to grotesque detail, her body swollen and postpartum, no longer idealized. These two canvases, in their disparate tones, bookend the lifecycle of the Vollard minotaur. Her initial illness and the deteriorated state gave cause and time apart for Picasso to reflect on his relationship. It is because of this, that Picasso could begin to recognize the folly of his liaison. She was still a young girl, but the destruction of her physical appearance may have appeared to the artist as a symptom to his influence. The return to the motif years later, after birth Maya and doubtlessly another physical change in Marie-Therese body, signals another time of reflection. It is in 1936, that Picasso transitions to a new muse, abandoning the old. Its place near the end of the Vollard minotaur reveals another truth, that Marie-Therese had lost her place as the idealized muse. Picasso, the man, is an unreliable narrator,

even by his own admission. But his artworks reveal a more intimate truth. In this second canvas, he manifests his disgust of Marie-Therese new form. She no longer can be the Classical beauty. His works suggest a sadness and regret, not echoed in Picasso's admissions. I wanted to underline the importance of the Vollard Suite as served as a final ode to his once favored muse. The minotaur was her creature, one that she created through her passion and their love. The minotaur's devolution chronicles the end of that relationship, as, without the passion, there would be no beast. The minotaur, although a surrogate for Picasso, had much more to do with Marie-Therese.

When she was seventeen and he forty-five, Picasso and Marie-Thérèse Walter met by chance outside of the Galeries Lafayette in 1927. She quickly became a well of inspiration for him, but Olga's jealousy and the clandestine nature of their affair required their relationship be kept a secret. His wife, notorious for her paranoia, was surprising unaware of Walter until 1935. Marie-Thérèse first appeared in Picasso's oeuvre in code. Her initials "MT" would be hidden into his canvases, much to the critical confusion of his contemporaries. Even in the early years, Picasso could never be too far away from her. In the summers of 1928 and 1929, Picasso would travel to Dinard with Olga and Paula, but Marie-Thérèse was at summer camp in the area, never too far away.<sup>54</sup> In June of 1930, Picasso purchased the Château de Boisgeloup and in the autumn of the same year, installed Marie-Thérèse in an apartment just blocks away from his own<sup>55</sup>. The Château de Boisgeloup not only provided Picasso with ample space to create his large-sculptures but also provided a covert meeting place for him and his new muse.

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<sup>54</sup> Brigitte Léal, Christine Piot, and Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Picasso: The Monograph, 1881-1973* (Distributed Art Pub Incorporated, 2009), 246-249.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

According to Brassai, "He [Picasso] loved the blondness of her hair, her luminous complexion, her sculptural body ... At no other moment in his life did his painting become so undulant, all sinuous curves, arms enveloping, hairs in curls<sup>56</sup>" In his letters to her, Picasso is devoted and romantic.

*I see you before me my lovely landscape MT and never tire of looking at you, stretched out on your back in the sand my dear MT, I love you. MT my devouring rising sun. You are always on me, MT, mother of sparkling perfumes pungent with star jasmynes. I love you more than the taste of your mouth, more than your look, more than your hands, more than your whole body, more and more and more and more than all my love for you will ever be able to love and I sign Picasso<sup>57</sup>.*

Like the minotaur, his love seems true and naïve. But for the real Picasso, Marie-Thérèse's personhood was lost among in his mythology. Present throughout the suite is a lingering thematic and technical dialogue with Picasso's earlier etchings executed for Balzac's *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*. The layers of text and Picasso's previous manifestation of them hold fast in Picasso's imagination, with scenes and frames appropriated and recast. In the tale, the barrier between representation and reality are blurred. Picasso paid special attention to a subplot within the tale, that of Poussin's sacrifice of his muse and mistress Gillette, who he bartered for a chance glimpse at Frenhofer's masterpiece. Gillette was disturbed by her lover's ability to offer her up in such a way, but she consented. In agreeing to pose for the old master she knew that Poussin would never see her in the same way again, and was fated to become "a sign

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<sup>56</sup> Brassai, *Conversations with Picasso*, 28-29.

<sup>57</sup> *Letter from Pablo Picasso to Marie-Thérèse*, 3 October 1935, Family archives of Maya Widmaier Picasso.

of a woman, a painting deprived of intimate life<sup>58</sup>. With or without her knowledge, Marie-Thérèse found herself doomed to a similar fate. In a manner, Picasso "created" Marie-Thérèse just as Pygmalion formed his sculpture; she was approached by Picasso when she was a young girl and groomed by the artist to become his perfect hidden muse. As Frenhofer stated about his masterpiece, "it is not a canvas, it is a woman<sup>59</sup>." Yet for Marie-Thérèse, she became the art and no longer a woman.

Yet he endows his creature with doubt. In his narration of a plate depicting the minotaur watching over a sleeping woman [fig. 22], Picasso asserts "He's studying her, trying to read her thoughts, ... trying to decide whether she loves him because he's a monster ... Women are odd enough for that, you know ... It's hard to say whether he wants to wake her or kill her<sup>60</sup>." This statement to Gilot speaks to a level of anxiety and insecurity, undermining the confidence and bravado he so ardently tried to convey while showing his new mistress his old works. The minotaur is a beast that subsists on his passion for women, dependent on its source for survival. Thus, Vollard minotaur was formed by his love for Marie-Thérèse. Yet the creature whose very being once served as a testament to his passion for her ultimately becomes a proxy to communicate the dissolution of his desire for her. The Vollard minotaur was her beast. Although eroticism is thoroughly imbued within the myth of the minotaur, love is not. Romance, born of love or lust, is the central driving force of the Suite's minotaur.

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<sup>58</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece* (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Co, 1984).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Gilot and Lake, *Life with Picasso*, 49.



Picasso's transformation into the amorous beast may be a mark of remorse, but also a playful reprieve and displacement of guilt. A beast by nature is not at fault for acting on his instincts. His amorous embraces adhere to a different, more animal, code of morality. But this love had begun to feel like a violation, a force of corruption and destruction to the once innocent Marie-Thérèse. She perfectly fell into the role of the sacrificial Athenian maidens to satiate the beast. Picasso rewrites the narrative so that both the minotaur and his sacrificial love are destroyed.

As time passed, along with the development of both the suite and their relationship, Picasso's desire for her had begun to fade. Her pregnancy brought about Olga's vengeful and public rage, violently exposing Picasso's private world with Marie-Thérèse<sup>61</sup>. For nearly a decade their relationship was kept in secret, but when it was revealed, the excitement of the clandestine nature of their relationship diminished, after the birth of her daughter, Marie-Thérèse soon became de-sexualized and the veneer of innocence that he so eroticized was broken down. As Picasso biographer John Richardson notes, the artist preferred "to play Adam to unencumbered Eves<sup>62</sup>."

Marie-Thérèse's departure from Picasso's oeuvre is as unique as her influence. As Picasso would tell Françoise Gilot years in the future, "Every time I change wives I should burn the last one. That way I'd be rid of them. Maybe that would bring back my youth, too. You kill the woman and wipe out the past she represents<sup>63</sup>." Yet, unlike the spiteful plates and canvases dedicated to the destruction of his other loves, like that of

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<sup>61</sup> Picasso et al., *Picasso Erotique*. 153.

<sup>62</sup> Richardson and McCully, *A Life of Picasso*, 224.

<sup>63</sup> Gilot and Lake, *Life with Picasso*, 50.

Olga or Dora [fig. 29], Marie-Thérèse and her influence slowly withers. As she would attest to in her conversation with Frank Perls in 1969, "We sat at a square dining-room table. And she talked about him [Picasso]. She did not tell me a love story, or the story of a scorned woman. There were not even tears, but an unhappy woman trying to appear happy. Each story relived the past from their first encounter to the time spent together, from Maya's birth, Maya's youth, Picasso's visits, which became rarer and rarer. How he left and sometimes returned<sup>64</sup>."

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<sup>64</sup> Mary Mathews Gedo, *Picasso, Art as Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 156.

### ***Erotic violence and sublimated guilt***

A critical psychological distinction between man and beast is made in the grouping of plates known as the "The Violations," "Rapes," or "Battles of Love"<sup>65</sup>. Seven plates make up this theme, occurring in sporadic burst throughout the suite. Echoing in Picasso's oeuvre is a tendency for passion and desire to be bound by violence. Picasso had first explored such themes in his etchings for Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

Although, as noted earlier in this analysis, Picasso chose not to create a plate for the chapter on the minotaur, his etchings are nevertheless important. It is in these plates that the automythological precedent is cemented within his classical works, exemplified by the plates the artist devoted the most attention to, specifically those of Tereus and Philomena. In the tale, the king of Thrace, Tereus, is married to the daughter of Pandion, the king of Athens. After five years of marriage, his wife longs for her family and urges Tereus to bring her sister, Philomena, to visit. The king obliges his wife request, yet on their journey back to Thrace, overcome by his sister-in-law's beauty, he rapes her in the forest. Picasso paid special attention to this plate, completing three different versions<sup>66</sup>. The composition of these variations and the dynamism between them, herald those of the "Violation" plates to come.

The first of the seven rapes [fig. 30] maintains the blend of cross-hatching and classical line drawing used in the artist's illustrations for *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*. The

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<sup>65</sup> As the multiple titles suggest, scholars and publishers have been cautious in their naming of the plates. Picasso seldom gave titles to his paintings (Richardson, 221), and the suite was no different. All of the titles etchings known today have been ascribed by their publishers and scholars, rather than the artist himself.

<sup>66</sup> Pablo Picasso et al., *Picasso Erotique*, 1st edition (Munich ; New York: Prestel Pub, 2001), 140.

bodies of the two figures occupy the bulk of the frame, he atop her, pinning her wrists. Their heads look as though they were plucked from an antique sculpture, with their Romanesque noses and hollow eyes. Picasso gave them life and hair, casting them into an all-too classical scene. His outline is furred with fine marks, fabricating his curves and juxtaposing the fluidity of the contour cross-hatching in the victim's body. The violence of their contact is caught in the center of the composition. Between their bodies, the tension is expressed through the meeting of lines, so frenetic they nearly vanish into black.

The theme varies drastically in the second and most decorously modest of the seven. Completed two years later, in the spring of 1933, the composition is again of two bodies, a man atop a woman [fig.31]. But this time the etching is simplified, comparatively appearing more like a draft than a finished work. The confidence and precision of the previous line work is absent. This simplicity lays bare the aesthetic essence present in the other plates of the theme. What comes to unite the scenes are the muscles of assaulter's backs. Tortuous and gnarled, they at once echo and taunt their victims' anatomy. They too recall the bullfighting scenes [fig 8.], in which a bull, horse, and woman are entangled in a violent struggle, made spectacle. They convey a sense that the men have left their unbridled carnal and animal instincts take over. The curves of her sex, her breasts, her buttock, are perverted by the absurd flesh that pins her down. The plate that follows [fig. 32] reintroduces the hatching, heavily saturated in the lower portion of the frame. Grounding the composition in the gnarled confluence of bodies. From that vantage, the focus is pulled to the victim's expression. Wide-eyed and mouth agape, the scene doesn't allow for the spectator to look away from her horror.

His head bucks to the sky, again eyes hollow, turned as impossibly far from his victim. It is as if the artist wants the viewer to be repulsed, to see the act in its violent core, pulling the voyeur into her pain. The following two attacks [fig.33-34] feature the same base composition yet appear much more gruesome in nature due to the blend of etching techniques; at once employing the use of aquatint, drypoint and scraper. The technique gives a muddled appearance to the plates, laying bare the grotesque. The last of the human rapes is oriented vertically, executed in the same blend of technique [fig.35]. The muscles on the attacker's back have been calcified, his curves more deformed and soiled by the cruelty. While the act remains the same, Picasso intensifies the disgust of the act through the bearded man's tongue sticks out, reaching for his victim's breast.

Yet when we turn to the minotaur's "rape," we are faced with an entirely different approach. Moreover, contrasting the other attacks, there is an intruder to the two-figure composition. The minotaur's stance imitates the other attackers' body position, hunched and aggressive. Yet the act is obstructed by a horse. Its legs and hooves are burlled between the bodies of the woman and the creature. The minotaur's fingers are faintly spread as if startled, his hands lingering above the woman's body. The expressions of the minotaur and of the woman, suggests surprise.

The minotaur is a figure on the cusp of man, beast, and god. As Brassai would note, it was a creature "laden with obscure, volatile forces. Picasso felt these dark powers moving within himself, and he humanized them." It is curious then that the truly monstrous acts of the suite are committed, not by an animal, but by man. In their tone, these plates are diametrically opposed, this interchange of body language barter its

value to the men, not the beast. They, the rapists, appropriate the brute nature from the minotaur and in turn, take ownership of the violent epithet of the monster. In contrast to the narrative of the minotaur, they are the savage. The minotaur is more human, treated with sympathy.

Chronologically just days after these brutal plates were completed, Picasso again welcomes the minotaur, but not to the suite. Much is expressed in the minotauric drawings, paintings, and etchings that are absent from the suite. In the late months of 1933, the artist dedicates six plates to the theme of the minotaur and a nude woman. These plates were not used in the Vollard Suite, but their inclusion in this analysis is necessary for an understanding of the evolution of the minotauric narrative. Again, in these plates, the women bear a strong resemblance to Marie-Thérèse. Each of the plates date to a short time after the brutal rapes [fig. 36-39] of the suite, three of which were completed only days after [fig 40-43]. It is here again, that the minotaur's eyes filled with shock, but this time also with horror. He has found his love in the aftermath of her assault. In these plates, the minotaur deviates in appearance in the Vollard Suite. Once a burly, decorous creature is now simplified to point of a caricature. This is especially true in a plate in which the minotaur holds the limp body of the woman [fig. 37] His once brute façade, is exposed as a farce. His flared nostrils are no longer frightening, now almost made comical. He does not look like the true demi-beast, only the diluted representation of one. The minotaur was impotent to stop her trauma and perhaps was even guilty of it too. Their forms are complementary in their curves, yet the intimacy of their embrace only serves to heighten the pain of the scene.

The minotaur is made helpless, devoid of his deific force. He becomes progressively more cartoonish, his face simplified, and his physical presence made comic. The guilt and realization of her trauma forced the beast to see himself in true form. This self-caricaturizing functions like a gesture of shame, trying to erase the horror. These plates endow us with the narrative steps to better understand the logic of the suite's transitions.

Yet the absence of these plates may serve to suggest a potential mission of the Vollard Suite. Missing too, are the truly violent plates of the minotaur. Throughout the 1930s, Picasso etched many other renditions of the minotaur. In such plates [fig. 44], the minotaur participates in the violent sexual acts of the men. Yet through the absence of similar depictions in the Vollard Suite, Picasso revises the history of Marie-Thérèse and himself, allowing their love to be free of his insecurities and or his deviance. He portrays himself as the gentle, naïve lover he so emulated in his letters. In this manner, the Vollard Suite serves as an elegy to his love for Marie-Thérèse.

## ***Le fin d'un monstre***

It was through self-parody, instigated by *Physiologie*, that Picasso was able to look honestly at his relationship with Marie-Thérèse. She too was included in Picasso's interpretation of Balzac's creature. It was through Picasso and Marie-Thérèse's unnatural coupling that the beast was created. As the monstrous lover's object of affection, she both created and sustained the minotaur.

With the Vollard Suite, Picasso bids farewell to his longstanding muse. She does not leave his oeuvre completely, but the reign of her is finished. The final plate of the minotaur in the Vollard Suite was completed on the first of 1935, three months before he would begin his variations for the famed *Minotaurmachia*. As his passion for her faded, so too the minotaur is destroyed. Yet before its ultimate fall, the creature goes through a series of deformations, such as exemplified in the demi-minotaur [fig.45] He is a figure with the horns and tale of the beast, but one robbed of the verdant hair and imposing frame. Picasso self-fashioning as the minotaur which once felt so innate soon became an ill-fitting skin. The minotaur is no longer a subject that Picasso treats with any sort of fixed reverence. A figure that was once a rich emotional surrogate for the artist all too quickly was to become deformed into caricature. But this a communicative gesture, the humorous tone serves to humanize, and also mock the bestial.

Another plate displays a different sort of change in the minotaur. In a tender family portrait [fig. 46], still portrayed within Picasso's mythic world, a husband and wife with a child in her arms stand together. The wife looks on to her love and the child reaches out to its father, but he looks away, distracted. Curiously, the man holds a theatrical mask of a bull at his side. Picasso and Marie-Thérèse enjoyed their new



family, but their bliss was short-lived as his interest in his muse soon began to fade. After Maya's birth, Picasso's eye began to wander once more. The artist soon met a new romantic interest, Dora Maar. The meeting of the surrealist photographer would signal the end to the era of Marie-Thérèse's reign as his favored muse. The gesture of the bull mask reveals that he was not yet ready to relinquish his creature. Instead, the minotaur would now appear with another, Dora Maar [fig. 47].

The minotaur's tale finally reaches a true close, nearly a decade after its first appearance, in a drawing entitled *Le Fin d'un Monstre* [fig. 48]. The title derives from the title of Paul Éluard's poem based on the drawing given to the poet. The first two lines read as such;

Il faut que tu te voies mourir	You have to see yourself die
Pour savoir que tu vis encore	To know that you still live

In its final form, the minotaur is a decrepit and pitiable creature. On the shore, an emasculated minotaur has been struck by an arrow, as a woman, donning the flower crown of Marie-Thérèse, approaches him with a spear and a mirror. Like the Gorgon, the minotaur is destroyed by his own reflection. The woman who had loved, and who he had abandoned, turns a mirror to him and forces the man to see the monster. As art historian Niki Loizidi posits, "The monster dies at precisely the moment of self-discovery, at the moment that it gains an understanding of its own terrible nature<sup>67</sup>." In a manner, Picasso has manipulated Lacan's "mirror stage." In lieu of the infant, the monster realizes its selfhood through its reflection. As a fractured part of the artist, the

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<sup>67</sup> Pablo Picasso and Kyriakos Koutsomallēs, *Picasso and Greece* (Turin ; New York: Umberto Allemandi, 2004).

deformed creature is destroyed by its own reflection. Picasso, through his monster, manifests his own latent state of self-awareness. He is finally able to see the true nature of the beast within himself.

## Conclusion

*The rage for wanting to conclude is one of the most deadly and most fruitless manias to befall humanity. Each religion and each philosophy has pretended to have God to itself, to measure the infinite, and to know the recipe for happiness. What arrogance and what nonsense! I see, to the contrary, that the greatest geniuses and the greatest works have never concluded.*

- Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondence* (Paris 1929), vol. v, 111.

*You mustn't always believe what I say. Questions tempt you to tell lies, particularly when there is no answer.*

- Pablo Picasso to Roland Penrose

There is no shortage of scholarship devoted to Picasso, or even to the Volland Suite, but as of yet the connection between the minotaurs of Balzac and Picasso has not been made. Through the analysis provided, we may take on a better, more nuanced understanding of the creature and its role within Picasso's oeuvre. In envisioning himself as the sexual usurper found in Balzac's minotaur, Picasso was able to explore his subconscious urges and visually manifest them through his conceptualization of the minotaur. In essence, the minotaur was permitted Picasso to access the abstract forces of his repressed desires through the figurative. The narrative function of the Volland Suite facilitated this introspection which would eventually prove self-revelatory, allowing him to internalize the guilt and shame of his abandonment of Marie-Thérèse. It is because of this realization that Picasso may have selected the plates that form the Volland Suite, which serves in its edited tone as an elegy to his once favored muse.

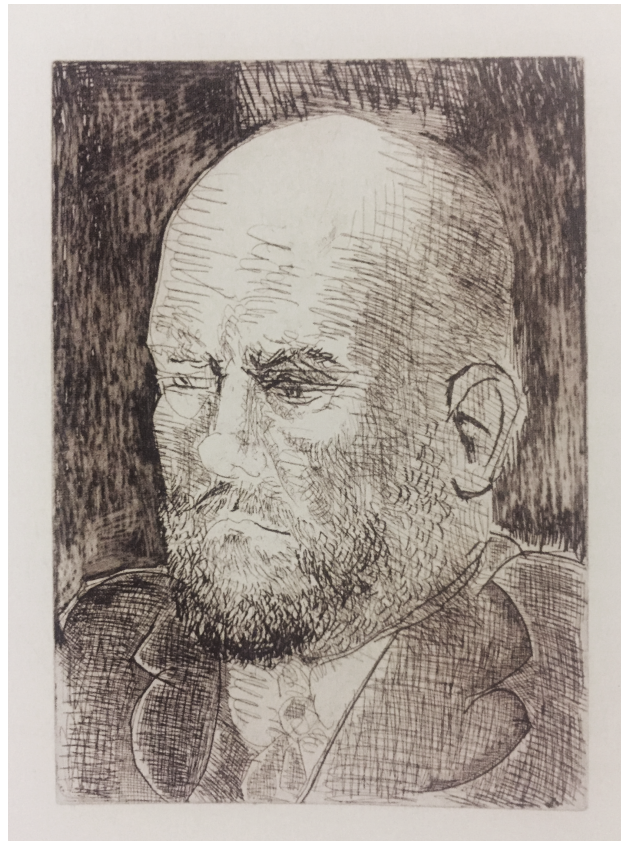
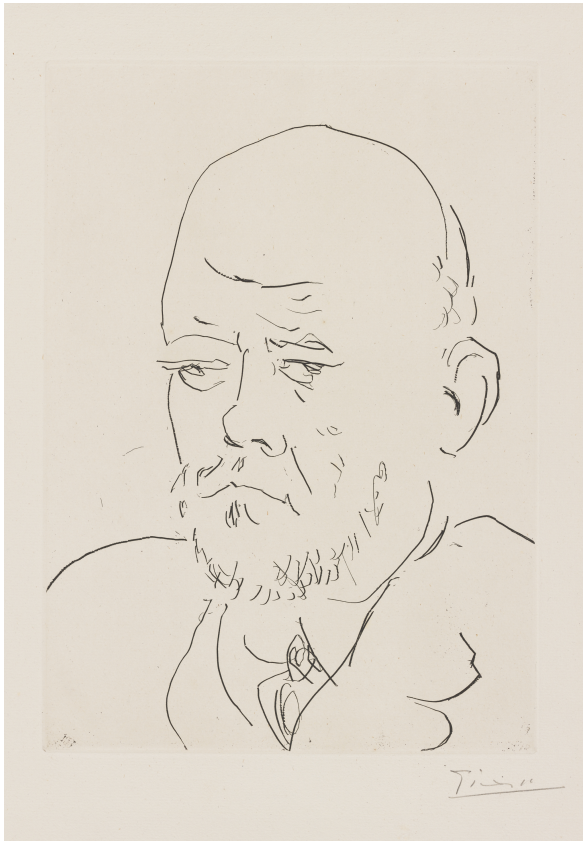
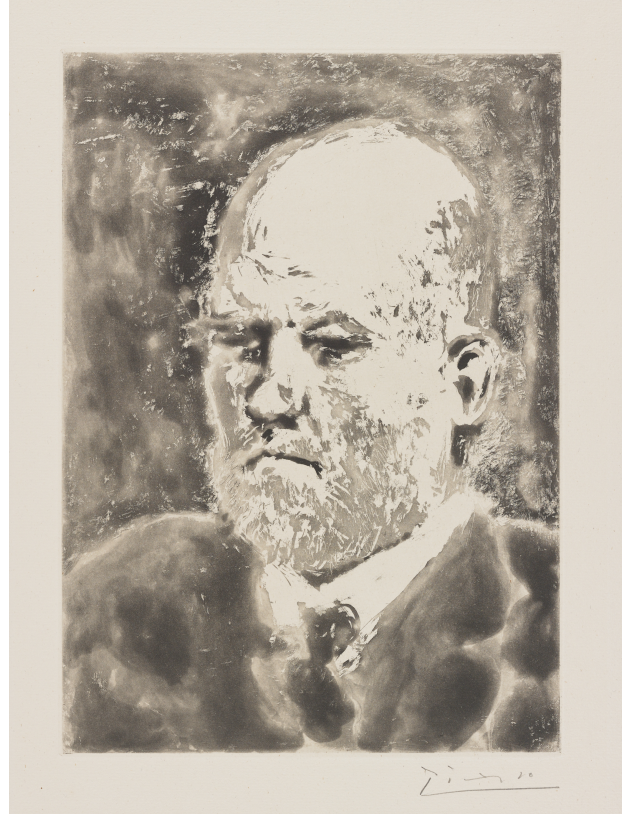
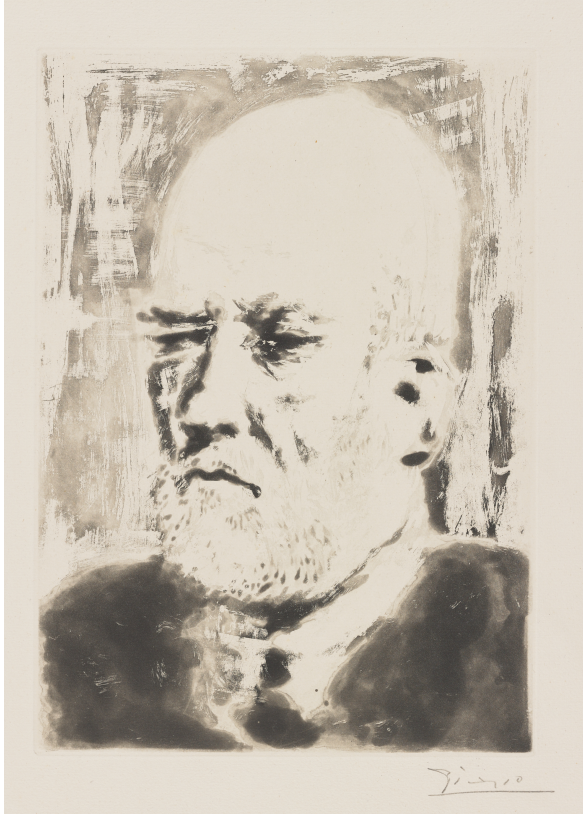
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Illustrations



*Figures 1-4. Portraits of Vollard I-IV, 4 March 1937, Paris.*



Figure 5. *Two Catalan Drinkers* 29 November 1934, Paris. Etching.





Figure 6. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Self-Portrait in a Cap and Scarf with the Face Dark: Bust*, etching, 1633.



Figure 7. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Self Portrait in a Cap, Laughing*, etching, 1630.



Figure 8. *Female Bullfighter, II*. 20 June 1934, Paris. Etching.



Figure 9. *Reclining Sculptor, I.* 2 April 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 11. *Reclining Sculptor in Front of a Bacchanale with Bull.* 30 March 1933, Paris. Etching.

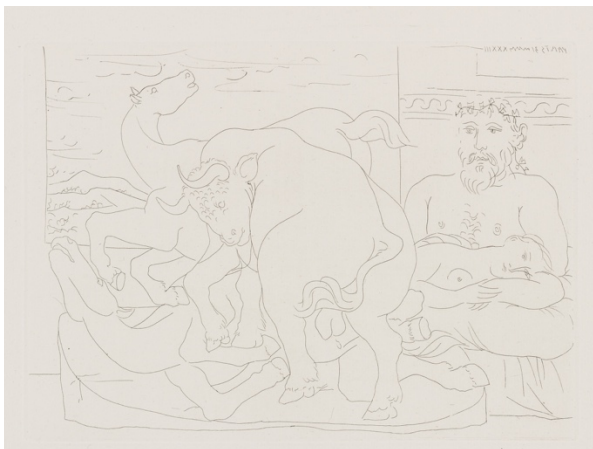


Figure 10. *Reclining Sculptor in Front of Horses and Bull.* 31 March 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 12. *Reclining Sculptor and Surrealist Sculpture.* 31 March 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 13. *Minotaur with a Goblet in his Hand and a Young Woman*, 17 May 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 14. *Bacchic Scene with Minotaur*, 18 May 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 15. *Woman Gazing at the Sleeping Minotaur*. 18 May 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 16. *Minotaur Caressing a Woman*. 18 May 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 17. *Minotaur Attacking an Amazon*. 23 May 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 18. *Wounded Minotaur, VI*. 26 May 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 19. *Vanquished Minotaur*. 29 May 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 20. *Dying Minotaur*. 30 May 1933, Paris. Etching.





Figure 21. *Minotaur and Woman Behind a Curtain*. 16 June 1933, Paris. Etching.



Figure 22. *Minotaur Caressing a Sleeping Woman*. 18 June 1933, Boisgeloup. Drypoint.



Figure 23. *Minotaur, Drinker and Women*. 18 June 1933, Boisgeloup. Drypoint, Etching, Scraper and Burin Engraving.



Figure 24. *Blind Minotaur Led by a Little Girl in the Night*. 1 January 1935, Paris. Aquatint Worked with Scraper to Resemble Mezzotint, Drypoint, and Burn Engraving.

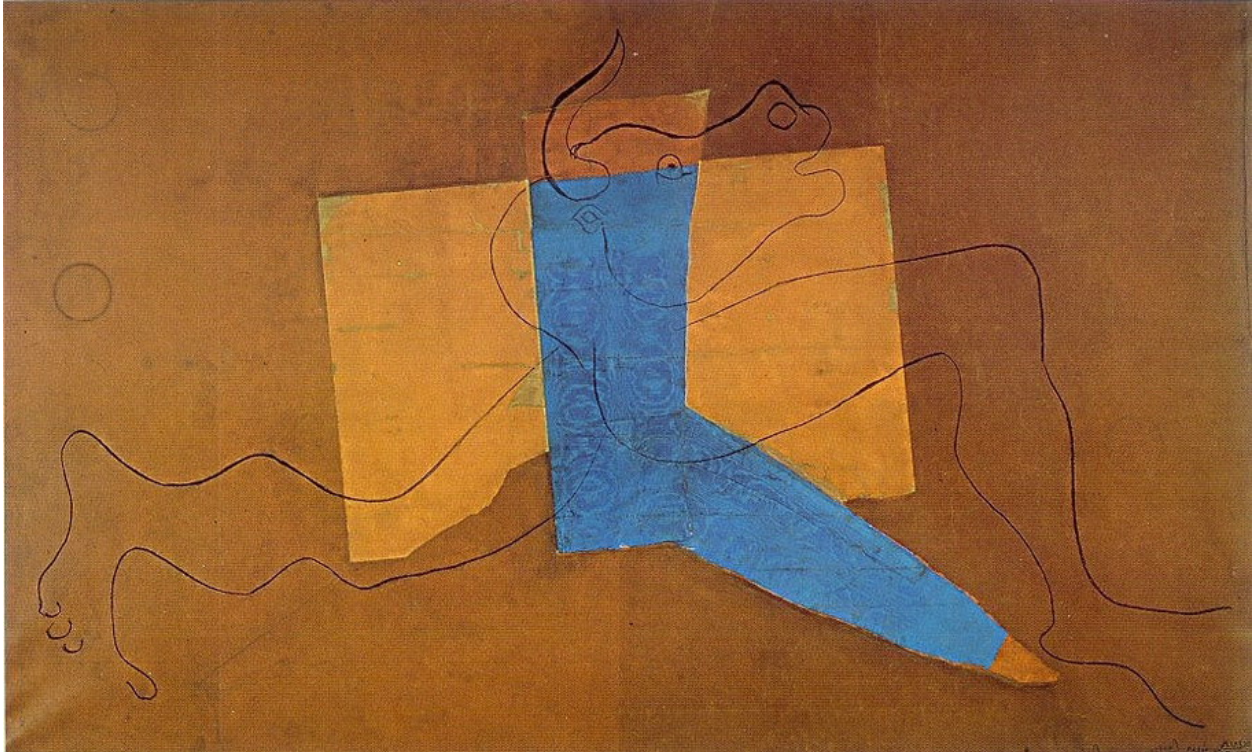


Figure 25. *The Minotaur*, 1928, collage.



Figure 26. *Minotaure assis avec un poignard* [Maquette pour la couverture de *Minotaure*] 1933.



Figure 27. Rembrandt and Woman with a Veil. 31 January 1934, Paris. Etching.



Figure 28. Auguste Rodin, *The Minotaur*, 1885, Plaster painted with varnish.

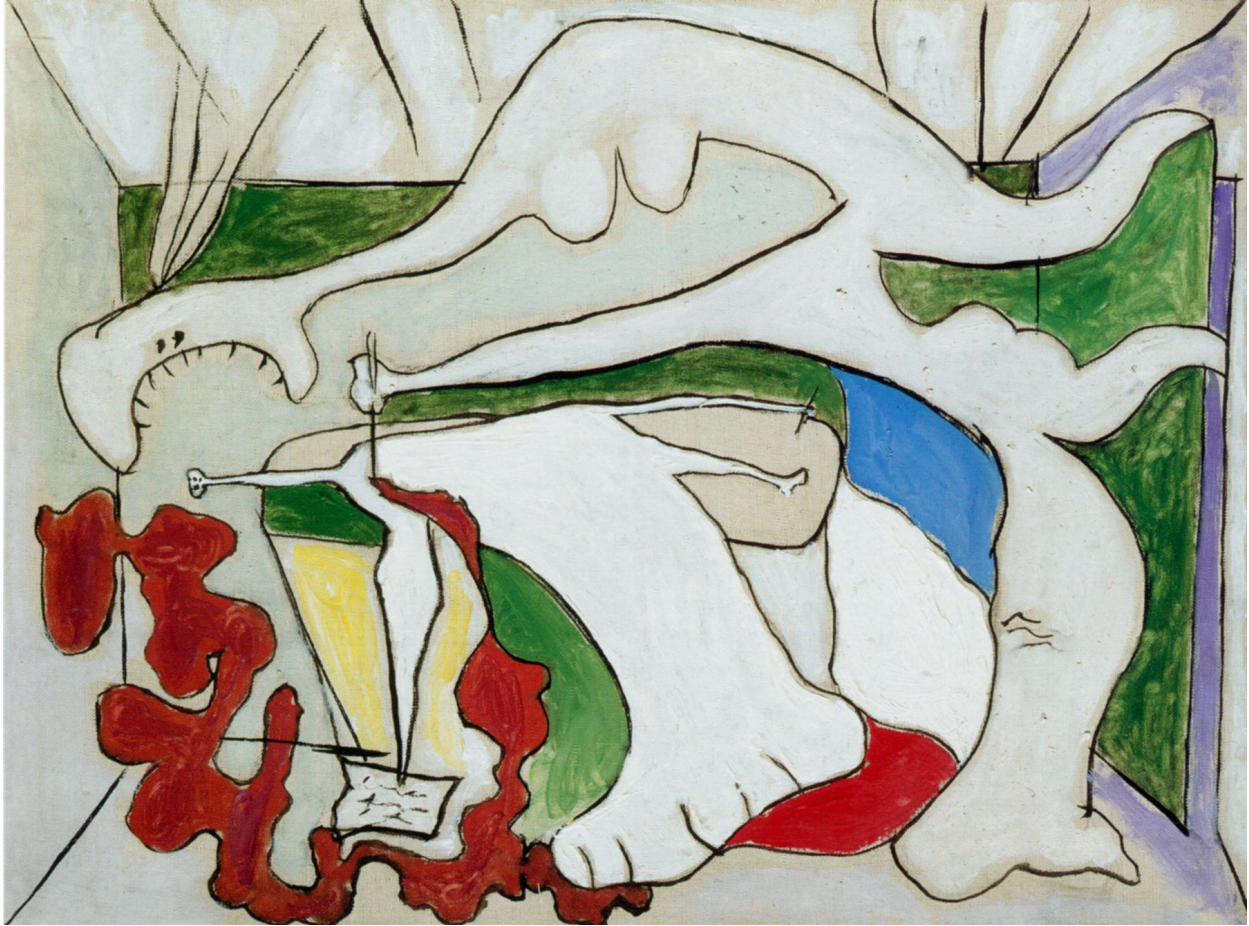


Figure 29. *Woman with Stiletto (Death of Marat)*, 1931.



Figure 30. *Rape*, 9 July 1931, Boisgeloup. Etching.





Figure 31. *Rape, II*. 22 April 1933, Boisgeloup. Drypoint.



Figure 32. *Rape, V.* 23 April 1933, Boisgeloup. Drypoint.



Figure 33. *Rape, IV*. 2 November 1933, Paris. Etching, drypoint and aquatint.



Figure 34. *Rape, VII*. 2 November 1933, Paris. Etching, aquatint, drypoint and scraper.



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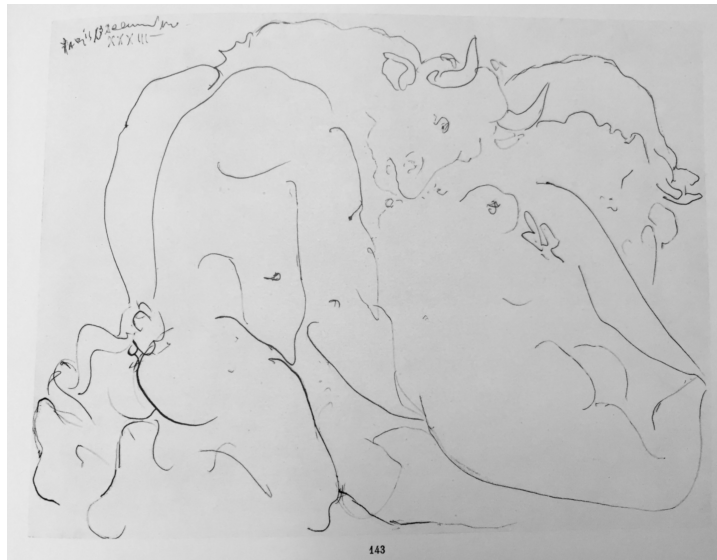
Figure 35. *Rape Beneath the Window*. Probably early November 1933, probably Paris. Etching, drypoint and aquatint



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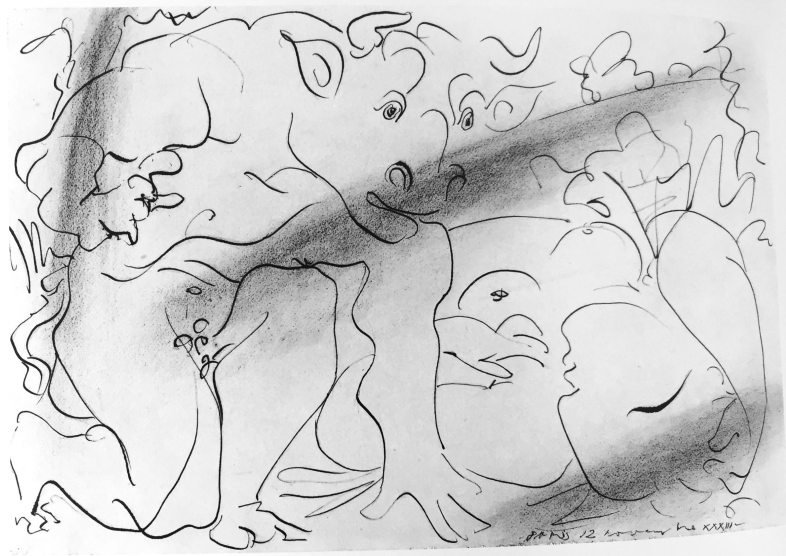


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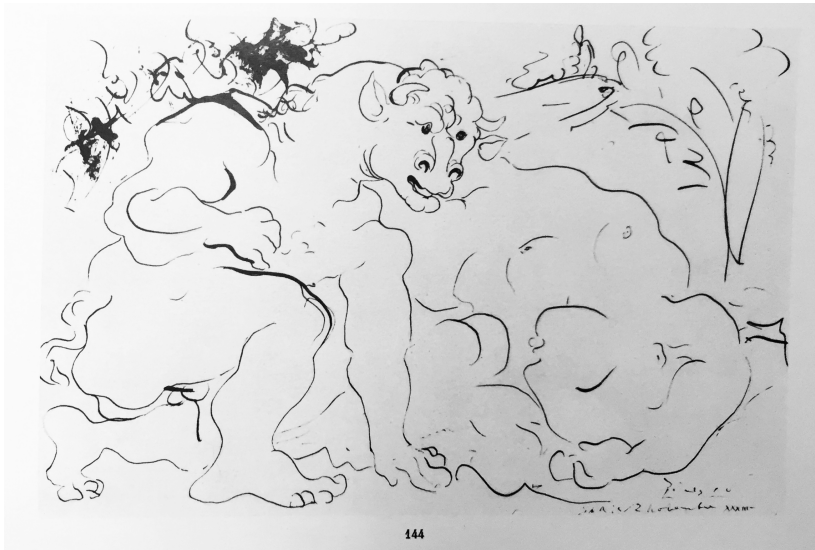
Figures 36-38. *Minotaur and nude woman*. Paris, 12 November 1933. India Ink.



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Figures 40-43. - *Minotaur and nude woman*. Paris, 12 November 1933. India Ink.



Figure 44. *Minotaur and Woman*. 10 December 1933, Paris.





Figure 45. *Minotaure courant*, December 14, 1937



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Figure 46. *Composition*, Dessin à l'emcre de Chine. Paris, 5 April 1936.



Figure 47. *Dora et le Minotaure*, September 5, 1936, India ink and colored pencil on paper.



Figure 48. *La fin d'un monster* [*The End of a Monster*], 1937.



Figure 49. *Le sauvetage (The Rescue)*, 1932, Oil on canvas.



Figure 50. *Deux femmes enlacs*, April 29, 1936.