

PABLO PICASSO

At the close of the Second World War in 1945, Pablo Picasso, at the age of 63, enjoyed recognition as one of the leading painters, sculptors and graphic artists of the 20th century. He had been acclaimed as a prolific master of etching, drypoint and aquatint printing techniques and was soon to enter into an ambitious series of lithographic studies—The Bull; Portraits of Françoise; Arcadian revels of centaurs and Bacchantes; and homages to Lucas Cranach—which would make it clear that he was equally resourceful and virtuosic in the lithographic medium. Picasso epitomized the Renaissance ideal of an artist, working in every medium with skill, intelligence and energy.

In summer 1946, while attending an exhibition of local handcrafts in Vallauris, France, he met Georges and Suzanne Ramie, owners of the Madoura Pottery. He asked permission to make a few works and was willingly assigned a spot at the bench where he shaped three pieces which were left to be dried and baked.

When Picasso returned to Vallauris in summer of 1947, he was pleased to find his three earlier ceramic experiments, and he carried with him a packet of drawings which he thought might come to life in clay. His pleasure in working with clay and with the owners and staff of the Madoura Pottery resulted in a working environment familiar to him from his experience in etching and sculpture workshops. The Ramies and staff were delighted to apply their knowledge and technical skills to help Picasso realize his projects. He devoted increasing amounts of time to the work, including a large part of 1947, and intermittently during vacations for 25 years.

Picasso was a quick worker, decisive in mind and hand, who remembered the Ramies' teachings and suggestions and began to communicate in their ceramic language. He devoted long hours to developing ideas and multiple variations upon them. Soon he began to find among his accumulating works pieces which embodied a vitality which he felt might be produced in an edition. He discussed with the Ramies how such editions might be made, and as a result they evolved a series of positive stamps for the underside of such works, which proclaimed the work as an original, an authorized copy, or a numbered and/or signed example of "Picasso Editions" made from a plaster original plate and imprinted in the manner of an edition of multiple original etchings. The Ramies developed technical procedures to ensure precision of form and accurate rendering of the drawn designs and colors: a genuine replica of an original by an accurate model of the exact contour and coloring, created by hand and using materials and methods of which very precise reference notes were made, at the time the

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original piece was created. Successful work received the proper impressed stamp of authenticity.

Picasso requested that a large pitcher form be turned and modified to his specifications. He then launched a series of designs—sometimes inscribing a contradictory form, such as a slender vase of flowers in color upon the outer surface, so that the pitcher's silhouette and the vase-and-flower image were set in constant dialogue. In other pitchers he inscribed calla lilies, parrots, a landscape with a two-story building, a series of four nude or clothed figures set out upon the pitcher's four faces, Arcadian scenes with centaurs and fauns, male and female heads. These turned and formed volumes offered irregular convex surfaces for his imagination as well as a memorable pitcher profile. In many cases these works were never used in domestic service, but were displayed on a sideboard, table, or vitrine as prestigious collectors' items. Oftentimes he would sign them boldly and/or inscribe the work's date—day, month and year. There can be no doubt that Picasso valued these inventive pieces as enduring works of art. He retained most of the unique works making occasional presents to friends and to the Musee d'Antibes, France, along with a few major sculptures. After his death an important gift of ceramics was made to the Picasso Museum in Paris, France, with the remainder divided between his heirs.

Many of his forms tended toward the three dimensional and are therefore in part non-utilitarian: plates decorated with a whole fish in relief; three sardines in high relief; half a watermelon with knife and fork; or a breakfast of two eggs, bacon and black pudding. In many other cases, when the depicted subject is not in high relief, Picasso would nevertheless decorate the surface with patterns of ridged lines and bumps, as in the two plates titled *Goat's Head in Profile*, 1952; *Hands with Fish*, 1953; *Big-Eyed Face*, 1954; the white on white *Disheveled Woman*, 1963; and many dancers and birds in relatively low relief. It must be remembered that many of the works which we may know by a single example actually are part of a short series of three or more variations. Picasso focused all of his knowledge from all of his arts on his ceramic outpourings, and found numbers of ways to re-examine a given design: a blind stamp into red terra cotta; a blind stamp into terra cotta after a white glaze, and a number of differing color-glaze treatments, which might result in a series of four or more quite different plates derived from a single image.

It seems fair to conclude that Picasso's ceramic adventures had profound influences, enlarging his field of invention, stimulating his imagination, and enriching his painting, sculpture and graphic output in the post-war period. He was so broadly experienced in two and three dimensions that he succeeded in

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achieving his powerful effects with minimal means, moving back and forth with ease. His aesthetic effects are complex, combining intellectual daring, technical skill, economy, and impish humor.

Picasso's ceramic oeuvre may seem frivolous to some, particularly where the emphasis upon his painting and sculpture has tended to keep his long involvement in ceramics in the shadow of his other work. His ceramic activity has been extremely ambitious and encompassing. It embodies his imagination and wit, his enthusiasm for making much from little. It employs his understanding of the mytho-poetic power inherent in simple table utensils as they serve their role in the sacraments and ceremonies of daily meals taken en famille. As exemplified by capacious and generous serving dishes, bowls and pitchers, Picasso's splendid forms relate to the comfort and reassurance one finds in one's warm hearth and to the physical well-being associated with the pleasures of the table. It is his ceramic oeuvre that fostered the artist's witty variations on the religious and mythic tales of God's use of clay to create a human likeness and all the birds and beasts; to transform one form into another, as bird into spirit, God into bull; and to relive the magical realization of plates that are never empty and jugs that are always full.