Understanding ART

You Think You Know

FOUNDING ISSUE



PICASSO

You Don't.

Art without the attitude.

GUERNICA | THE BULL | CUBISM & AFRICA | WEEPING WOMAN | PICASSO'S SPAIN | PLUS

Art as conscience | Drawing himself away | A style revolution | Grief made visible | Culture & identity | Symbolism & muses

CONTENTS

03 Welcome
A note from Miss Artsy

04 You Think You Know Picasso
The most famous name in art, misunderstood

05 The Bull
A man watching himself disappear into five lines

06 Cubism and Africa
The uncomfortable truth behind a revolution

07 Guernica
Art as conscience

08 The Weeping Woman
Grief made visible

09 Picasso's Spain
Born in Malaga. Shaped by Barcelona.

10 Picasso's Star Sign
A slightly unserious detour

11 Picasso and Horoscopes
He painted emotional constellations

12 Looking Beyond the Stars
Symbols and emotional truths

13 Sun, Moon and Symbolism
Archetypes in paint

14 Marie-Therese and the Moon
A muse, a moon, a state of mind

15 Why Picasso Still Feels Cosmic
Emotional constellations

16 The Australian Connection
Go see it yourself

17 Your Creative Prompt
Try the bull exercise

18 Miss Artsy's Library
Recommended reading

19 Closing
Until next time, Miss Artsy



You're here.

That's the best part.

UNDERSTANDING ART

A WELCOME NOTE

Hello and welcome to my very first issue of **Understanding Art.** No art degree required. No prior knowledge needed. Just curiosity, which you clearly have or you wouldn't be here.

In each UA journal issue I will reveal an artist, an idea, or a corner of the art world you've heard of but never **truly** understood. Picture us at a gallery together, talking about artists like long-lost friends and their works like new discoveries. That's the vibe. This issue: Picasso. But not the Pablo Picasso you think you know.



Miss Artsy

Angela McCormack | Understanding Art
FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO UNDERSTAND

You Think You Know Picasso. You Don't.

Ask anyone, anywhere, to name an artist. Try it at dinner tonight. Nine times out of ten the answer comes back the same: Picasso! It rolls off the tongue like someone you know well, like someone you have been following for years.

Now ask them what he actually painted.

He is not the sunflower guy (that is Van Gogh). He is not the one who cut off his ear (also Van Gogh, poor man). He is not the melting clocks (Dalí). For most people, the closest they got to Picasso was a school assignment: draw a self-portrait in cubist style. Two eyes on the same side of the face. A triangle for a nose.

So can they name an actual Picasso? Probably not *Guernica,* the enormous anti-war canvas so politically charged it was covered at the United Nations. Probably not *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Maybe not even *The Weeping Woman. Somehow his name drops, as though we have followed his work across ninety years. Most of us have not. So today, let us actually meet Pablo. The Spaniard Pablo, was born in Malaga on October 25, 1881. You might be surprised to learn that he inherited a healthy superstition that shaped him his entire life.*

"Every act of creation is first an act of destruction."

- Pablo Picasso

The superstition ran deep, for example he believed his art making kept him alive, he would not talk about death and that was the reason he never made a Will, and he wouldn't let just anyone cut his hair - just in case they used it against him.

John Richardson in A Life of Picasso, says Pablo changed his last name Ruiz, to his mother's maiden name, Picasso. He lived and worked as an artist in Paris, France, mainly because it was the art hub and he hated the Franco dictatorship that ruled in Spain.

Picasso often depicted himself as an animal in his work. He kept coming back to one image his whole career: the bull. It appears in sketches, paintings, prints, ceramics. It was never simply an animal. The bull was his self-portrait, raw strength, creative fire, a trace of danger. Sometimes hero, sometimes beast. Often both.

In 1945 he made a series of prints where he drew the same bull eleven times, each time stripping it further back. By the final image it is barely a handful of lines, yet the entire animal remains. That is the point.



The Bull

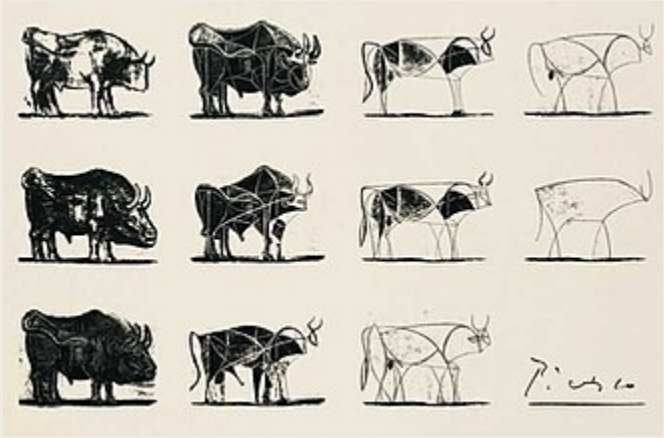
Understanding the Symbolism

Pablo Picasso spent his formative years in Spain, where bullfighting was an integral part of the cultural landscape. The bull emerged as one of his most lasting personal symbols, as it encompassed various themes:

- Spanish identity
- Strength and masculinity
- Creation and destruction
- Life and death
- Aspects of the artist's own personality

When Picasso depicts a bull, is he illustrating an animal, a nation, a mythological being, or a reflection of himself?
The answer often embraces all four interpretations simultaneously, which contributes to the enduring power and openness of his symbolism.





Picasso's Bull lithograph series, 1945. Progressive reduction to essential lines.

Young Pablo learned about art from his father José Ruiz, who was an art teacher. He was able to draw and paint with high level of detail and that's why he explored other ways of making art. He was greatly influenced by the Fauve artist Henri Matisse and his brave use of unrealistic colour in portraits - think blue on faces - radical and confronting at the time.

Complexity is easy. Simplicity is the hardest thing in the world.

The series is not about simplification for its own sake. It's about finding the truth of a form - stripping away everything that doesn't matter until only the essence remains.

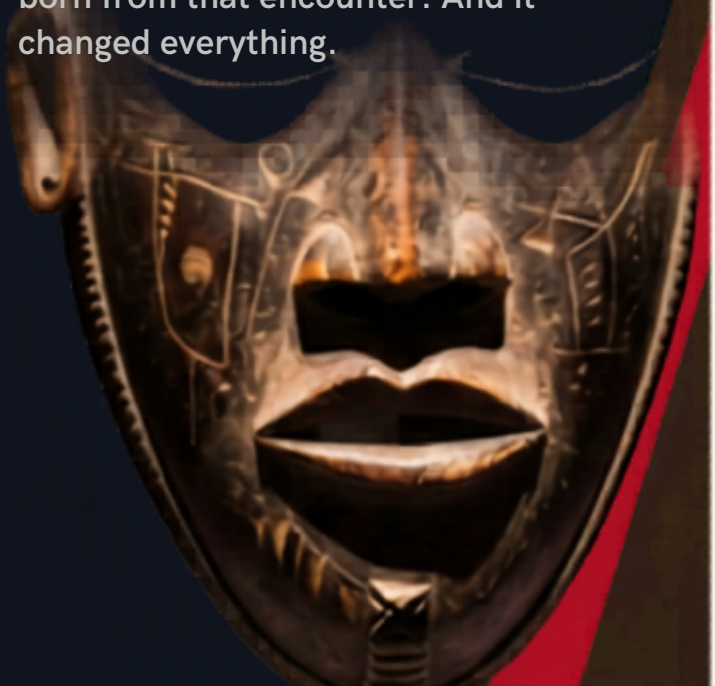
Apple's design team famously used this series as a teaching tool. The lesson: complexity is easy. Simplicity is the hardest thing in the world.

Now, put down your phone, find a pencil and paper, and start drawing.
See page 17.

Understanding Art

Cubism and Africa

When Picasso co-founded Cubism in the early 1900s, the art world called it revolutionary. What they rarely mentioned was why.
In 1907, he visited the Trocadéro museum in Paris and encountered African and Iberian masks for the first time. Those objects showed him that representation didn't have to be realistic, that you could show multiple perspectives at once, that emotional truth mattered more than photographic accuracy. Cubism was born from that encounter. And it changed everything.



These masks carried profound spiritual significance in their communities of origin. They arrived in European museums through the colonial period. The artists who made them were never credited. Their influence on Cubism, and thus on all of modern art, was profound.
Ngil Mask, Gabon, 19th century. Public domain, Musée du Louvre / Wikimedia Commons.

The encounter led directly to Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, the painting that shattered classical perspective and opened the door to Cubism. The angular faces, the flattened planes, the radical geometry - all of it drawn from African sculptural traditions.

There's the uncomfortable truth: the African artists who created these works were never credited. Their names were never recorded. Their traditions were treated as raw material for European innovation.

This is not to diminish Picasso's achievement. It is to acknowledge that genius does not emerge in a vacuum. Every revolution has its unsung sources.

The colonial context matters. These objects were not gifts freely given. They were taken, collected, displayed as curiosities.

"EVERY REVOLUTION HAS ITS UNSUNG SOURCES."

Guernica: The Painting You Cannot Look Away From

Francisco Franco was the military leader who won the Spanish Civil War and ruled Spain as a dictator from 1939 to 1975. During the war, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy helped Franco's forces, including the bombing of the town of Guernica in 1937. Picasso painted Guernica in response to that tragedy.

On 26 April 1937, German and Italian bombers destroyed the Basque town of Guernica. It was a market day. The town had no military significance. The attack was designed to terrorise.

When Picasso heard about the bombing he changed his original plan for Spain's pavillion at the 1937 Paris International Exposition and made Guernica instead.

Pablo Picasso's Spanish heritage kicked in and his response was immediate and monumental.

Working in his Paris studio, he produced a painting 3.5m tall and 7.8m wide. A grey-scale howl of anguish that remains the most powerful anti-war painting ever created.

The painting is not a literal depiction of the attack. It is a powerful anti-war statement showing:

- Innocent civilians suffering
- Mothers grieving dead children
- Animals in distress
- Chaos, fear, and destruction



Collection: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia
museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/guernica
© Succession Picasso / Copyright Agency

5 FEBRUARY 2003 NEW YORK
THE COVERED TAPESTRY
A REPRODUCTION OF GUERNICA THAT HAD HUNG OUTSIDE THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL CHAMBER SINCE 1985 WAS COVERED WITH A BLUE CURTAIN BEFORE COLIN POWELL MADE THE CASE FOR WAR IN IRAQ. SIXTY-SIX YEARS AFTER ITS CREATION, THE PAINTING WAS STILL TOO INCONVENIENT TO BE SEEN..

Grief made Visible

The Weeping Woman

Out of Guernica came another extraordinary body of work. Picasso became fixated on a single figure from the mural: the weeping mother. He returned to her more than thirty times, producing a sustained meditation on grief that remains among the most affecting art of the twentieth century.

His model was Dora Maar, photographer, Surrealist, intellectual, and his partner during this period. She was the only person permitted to document Guernica as it was being painted. He, in turn, painted her grief. Over and over.

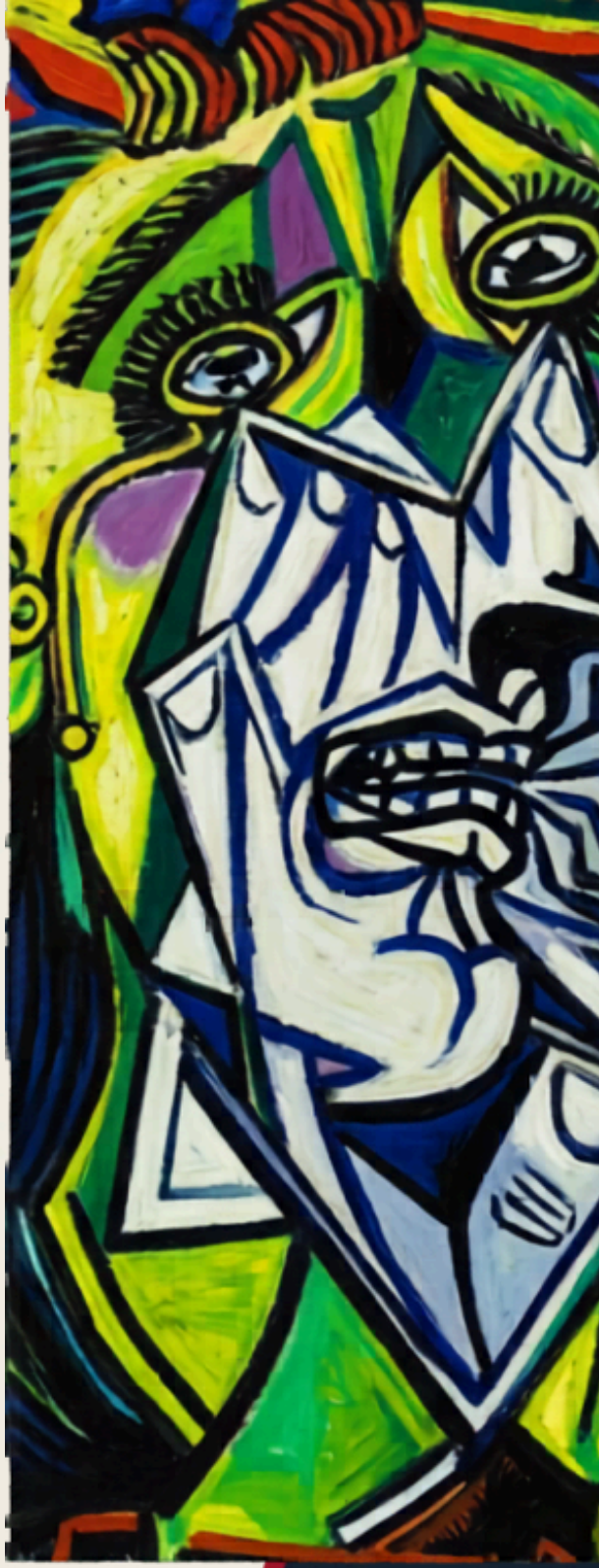
"For me, she is the weeping woman. For years I painted her in tortured forms, not through sadism, not with pleasure either, just obeying a vision that forced itself on me."

Pablo Picasso, on Dora Maar

The paintings fracture her face into angular planes of grief - eyes like shattered glass, tears like shards of crystal.

Australia has a remarkable claim on this work. The National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne holds the 18 October 1937 version of *The Weeping Woman*. If you are ever in Melbourne, stand in front of it in person. Reproductions cannot do her justice.

Maar's own art has only recently begun to receive the recognition it deserves.



"Eyes like shattered glass, tears like shards of crystal."

Collection: National Gallery of Victoria
The Weeping Woman (18 Oct 1937)

Geography

Picasso's Spain

The cities that shaped him, the town that inspired his greatest work, and the museum where it lives today.



MALAGA

Born 25 October 1881. Southern Spain, Andalucia. His birthplace, the city he never forgot, the city that shaped his earliest memories of colour and light.

BARCELONA

Family home from 1895. The city where he became an artist, studied at art school, fell in with the Catalan avant-garde, and first developed his individual voice.

GUERNICA

Bombed 26 April 1937. Guernica in Basque. A small market town in the Basque Country, northern Spain. The event that produced the painting.

MADRID

Museo Reina Sofía. Where Guernica now permanently resides, approximately 400 km south of the town it memorialises. The most visited artwork in Spain.

PARIS

Moved 1900. Lived most of adult life. The Trocadero encounter. The birth of Cubism with Braque. The studio where Guernica was painted.



Picasso's Star Sign

Born October 25, 1881. Scorpio sun.
Chinese zodiac: Metal Rooster.

SCORPIO

Intense. Obsessive. Magnetic. Secretive. Transformative. Scorpios don't do anything halfway. They consume, they destroy, they rebuild.

Sound like anyone?

Picasso's relentless reinvention - burning through styles, lovers, friendships, entire artistic movements - is textbook Scorpio energy. The need to go deeper. The refusal to stay comfortable. The ability to look at something beautiful and tear it apart just to see what's underneath.

METAL ROOSTER

In Chinese astrology, the Metal Rooster is confident, hardworking, and brutally honest. They strut. They demand attention. They believe - with absolute certainty - that they are right.

Picasso once said: "I do not seek. I find."

That's Metal Rooster energy in five words.

The combination of Scorpio intensity with Rooster confidence gives you someone who doesn't just break rules - they don't acknowledge rules existed in the first place.

**Is this scientifically rigorous? Absolutely not.
Is it fun? Yes. Does it weirdly fit? Also yes.**

This section is for entertainment purposes only. No astrologers were harmed in the making of this page.



Picasso Didn't Paint Horoscopes. He Painted Emotional Constellations.

Every now and then a question sends me down a fascinating rabbit hole. Recently I was asked whether Pablo Picasso ever created artworks about astrology, astronomy or star signs. The short answer is - no. At least not in the way we think about astrology today.

There are no zodiac wheel paintings. No horoscope illustrations. No cosmic birth charts hidden amongst his masterpieces. And yet...

The more I thought about it, the more I realised why so many contemporary audiences instinctively connect Picasso's work with ideas of fate, feminine energy, transformation, duality and emotional symbolism.

Picasso & His Lovers

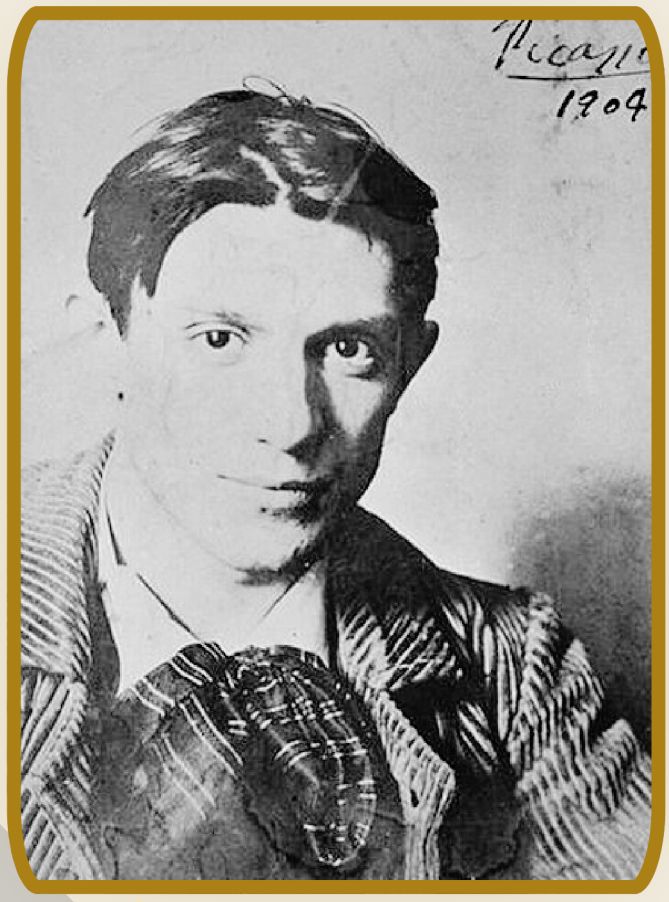
This is where it becomes deeply connected. Many of Picasso's major stylistic shifts correspond directly to specific women in his life.

Key lovers/muses:

- Fernande Olivier → Rose Period
- Olga Khokhlova → neoclassical works
- Marie-Thérèse Walter → sensual curved dreamlike portraits
- Dora Maar → fractured emotional Cubist portraits
- Françoise Gilot → brighter, more lyrical works
- Jacqueline Roque → late repetitive devotional portraits.



LOOKING BEYOND THE STARS



Picasso was deeply interested in mythology, symbolism and the hidden forces that shape human behaviour. Throughout his career he repeatedly returned to recurring motifs:

- suns and moons
- bulls and Minotaurs
- fauns and mythological creatures
- mirrors and doubles
- lovers and muses
- themes of transformation and destiny

These images often operate on an archetypal level. Long before social media quizzes asked us to identify our star sign, humans were using symbols to understand themselves and their place in the world. Astrology is one system. Mythology is another. Art is perhaps the oldest of all.

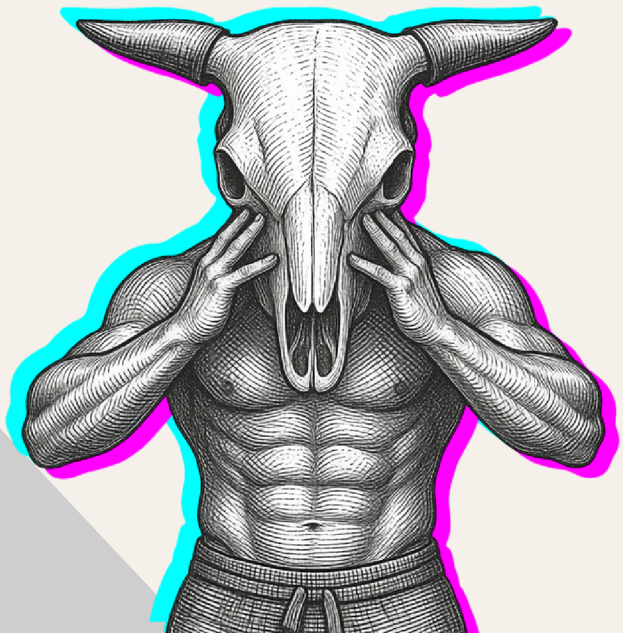
Picasso understood the power of symbols. Rather than painting literal stars, he painted the emotional and psychological forces we often associate with them.

THE MINOTAUR WITHIN

One of Picasso's most powerful recurring symbols was the Minotaur. Part man. Part beast.

The Minotaur appeared throughout his work as a complex alter ego representing instinct, desire, masculinity, violence, sexuality and vulnerability. In many ways the creature became a visual representation of the tensions within Picasso himself.

The Minotaur feels remarkably similar to the archetypes explored in psychology and astrology. Not because it predicts the future. Because it reveals something about human nature. Picasso was very superstitious.



SUN, MOON AND SYMBOLISM

Many of Picasso's later works include radiant suns, nocturnal scenes and symbolic animals. His ceramic works created in Vallauris often feature imagery that feels surprisingly close to astrological iconography:

- stars
- moons
- bulls
- divided faces
- mythological creatures

Whether intentional or not, these works speak a visual language that contemporary audiences readily associate with cosmic symbolism. The sun often appears connected to vitality, power and masculine energy. These associations are not unique to astrology. They have existed throughout art history for thousands of years.

The moon appears softer, more mysterious and closely connected to dreams and intuition.



Illustrative imagery inspired by Picasso's work. No Picasso artworks reproduced. © Succession Picasso / Copyright Agency.

PICASSO'S GREATEST SUBJECT: WOMEN

If there is one place where this conversation becomes particularly interesting, it is in Picasso's relationships. Many of his major artistic shifts correspond with the women in his life.

Fernande Olivier became associated with the warmth and humanity of the Rose Period. Olga Khokhlova accompanied his turn toward neoclassical forms. Marie-Therese Walter inspired some of the most sensual and dreamlike works of his career. Dora Maar appears through fractured, emotionally charged portraits.

Francoise Gilot brought a renewed lightness and lyrical quality. Jacqueline Roque dominated his final decades.

Whether we admire or criticise Picasso's treatment of women, it is impossible to deny their influence on his artistic evolution.

These women were not simply painted.

They became **symbols.**

MARIE-THERESE AND THE MOON



© Succession Picasso / Copyright Agency.

A muse...

A moon.

A state of mind.

Of all Picasso's muses, Marie-Therese Walter perhaps feels the most connected to what we might call celestial imagery. Her portraits are filled with soft curves, sleeping forms and organic shapes. Many art historians describe these works as dreamlike, sensual and lunar. Look closely and you begin to notice crescent-like forms, rounded silhouettes and rhythms that echo cycles found in nature. The imagery feels less like portraiture and more like visual poetry.

She becomes not just a person but an idea.



Il. © Succession Picasso / Copyright Agency.

WOMAN BEFORE A MIRROR

One of Picasso's most fascinating works in this regard is Woman Before a Mirror (1932).

The painting depicts Marie-Therese gazing into her reflection. However, what appears in the mirror is not a likeness. It is another version of herself. A darker self. A transformed self. A psychological self.

The work explores themes that continue to resonate deeply today:

- identity
- duality
- transformation
- youth and ageing
- self-perception
- light and shadow

It is easy to understand why audiences often interpret works like this through the language of shadow selves and personal transformation.

The Enduring Aura of Picasso

Picasso lived during a remarkable period of intellectual change.

The rise of psychoanalysis challenged traditional ideas about the mind.

Modern physics transformed understandings of reality.

Surrealism explored dreams, symbols and the unconscious.

Artists increasingly looked beyond appearances and toward inner worlds. Picasso was part of that shift. His work rarely tells us what to think.

Instead, it invites us to explore **hidden meanings** and emotional truths.This is why his paintings continue to feel contemporary, because they contain symbols. Symbols remain one of humanity's most enduring ways of understanding ourselves.

Perhaps that is why so many people today still connect Picasso's work to ideas of feminine and masculine **energy**, shadow selves, destiny, cycles and transformation.

He painted **obsession**, duality, desire and fate like someone mapping emotional constellations across the **human experience.**
Great art has always served this purpose so it remains relevant throughout history.

"HE PAINTED EMOTIONAL CONSTELLATIONS."



Two Picassos, two cities, one country - The Australian Connection

See Picasso in Australia

One of the great surprises for many Australians is that you don't need to travel to Europe to encounter Picasso's work. Both Brisbane and Melbourne hold significant works by the artist.



BRISBANE

Since its opening in 1982, the award-winning Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) has stood as a landmark of mid-century architectural design on the South Bank of the Brisbane River. Architect Robin Gibson harmonised brutalist concrete geometry with natural elements, using flowing water and light-filled walkways to connect indoor exhibition spaces with outdoor tropical gardens.





Collection: QAGOMA, Brisbane
collection.qagoma.qld.gov.au
© Succession Picasso / Copyright Agency

MELBOURNE

Established in 1861, the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) is Australia's oldest and most-visited public art museum. The iconic St Kilda Road building, designed by architect Sir Roy Grounds and opened in 1968, greets visitors with its famous glass water wall entrance before welcoming them into a massive bluestone complex filled with world-class international collections.





Collection: National Gallery of Victoria
ngv.vic.gov.au
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THE REDUCTION TECHNIQUE

YOUR CREATIVE PROMPT

Picasso didn't simplify the bull in one leap. He drew it again and again, each time removing what isn't essential, until only the pure line remained. This exercise follows his method.



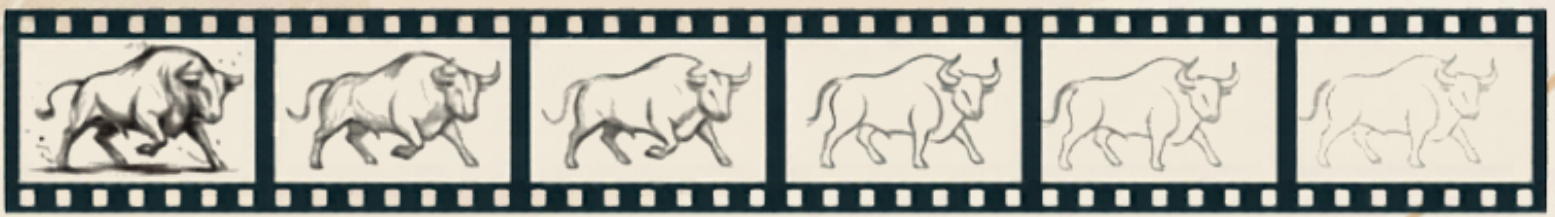
You Will Need

- **Paper, any size**
- **Pencil or pen**
- **20 to 30 minutes**
- **No eraser needed**

Picasso's 6-Step Exercise in Simplification

1. **Draw your subject as realistically as you can**
2. **Redraw it, removing the smallest details**
3. **Redraw again, simplifying the shapes further**
4. **Again - reduce to the essential structure**
5. **Once more - find the fewest lines that still say 'bull'**
6. **Final drawing: pure line. Nothing extra. Just the essence.**

Don't aim for perfection. Aim for clarity. Each version should have less than the one before.

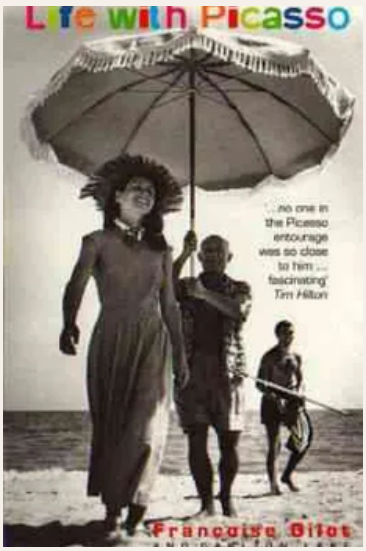


My LIBRARY

"If you only read one book about Picasso, read this one."

Life with Picasso

Francoise Gilot & Carlton Lake



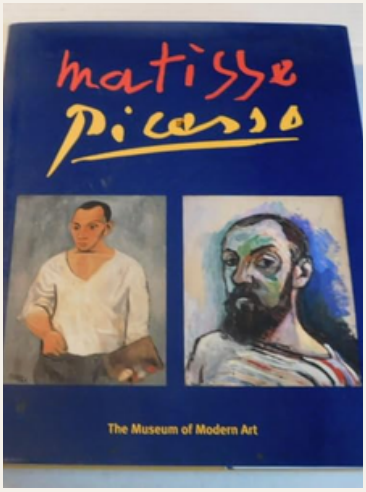
Written by Francoise Gilot, one of Picasso's lovers and the mother of two of his children, it offers a rare view of the artist away from the mythology. Gilot was one of the few women who left Picasso rather than being left by him. Intelligent, observant and fiercely independent, she documents both his brilliance and his flaws. A 40 year age gap between them is only the beginning of the story.

Why read it?

To understand the man behind the legend.

Matisse Picasso

Museum of Modern Art



Art history often celebrates the lone genius. This book reminds us that great artists rarely work in isolation. Picasso and Matisse spent decades watching, challenging and inspiring one another. Their rivalry became one of the most important creative conversations in modern art. Picasso was a great artist because he had great competition.

Why read it?

To understand how creativity grows through influence, competition and dialogue.

Thank you for reading the Founding Issue.

Share your thoughts - leave a comment on Substack, Instagram or Facebook

Substack → | Instagram → | Facebook →

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Until next time,
Miss Artsy

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