Melvin Edwards: Lynch Fragments by Brooke Kamin Rapaport

The welded-steel wall reliefs in this series symbolize moments of oppression and resistance in African-American history.

Complex Vision by P.C. Smith

Four New York photographers create unorthodox images that suggest the elusiveness of visual experience.

Picasso's Bull(s): Art History in Reverse by Irving Lavin

In a celebrated series of lithographs, Picasso's complex image of a bull becomes progressively simplified, "artless" and ethereal.

Abstract Compounds by Michael Duncan

For five decades, West Coast abstractionist Emerson Woelffer has explored the play of formal structure and expressive gesture.

A Message from Luciano Fabro by Gay Morris

A retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art traced the career of the Arte Povera sculptor and performance artist.

Beckmann on Beckmann by Paul Brach

The highly charged self-portraits of Max Beckmann were reexamined in a recent exhibition.

Review of Books


Review of Exhibitions

L.A.: The Dark Side by Michael Duncan

New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Seattle, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Cologne, Antwerp

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Front Page

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Picasso’s Bull(s): Art History in Reverse

In a burst of creative activity after World War II, Picasso produced four series of lithographs—most notably the well-known group of prints in which he deconstructed the image of a bull. Picasso’s metamorphic process is here seen as an instance of modernist abstraction, but also as an exorcising of the accumulated legacy of the Western tradition and a quasi-pedagogical evocation of “the idea of a timeless graphic naïveté.”

BY IRVING LAVIN
On Nov. 2, 1945, when Picasso entered the lithographic workshop of Fernand Mourlot in the rue de Chabrol in Paris, he took up a medium he had practiced before only rarely, and never assiduously. On that day, however—as if to celebrate the liberation of Paris and the end of the war—Picasso began a veritable orgy of lithographic creativity that lasted four months. He worked at least 12-hour days, almost without interruption; the hectic activity was described by Jean Célestin, one of the craftsmen who participated:

"We gave him a stone and two minutes later he was at work with crayon and brush. And there was no stopping him. As lithographers we were astounded by him. When you make a lithograph, the stone has been prepared, and if you have to make a correction the stone has to be retouched. . . . Right. We run off twelve to fifteen proofs for him and return the stone to him in good order. Then he makes his second state. On a stone like that, normally when it has been retouched twice, the original preparation becomes somewhat spoilt. . . . And he would scrape and add ink and crayon and change everything! After this sort of treatment the design generally becomes indecipherable and is destroyed. But, with him! Each time it would turn out very well. Why? That's a mystery. [Picasso is] a real hard worker. . . . We used to leave at 8 at night and he would be there at 8:30 in the morning. Sometimes I would suggest that we should call it a day. . . . He would look at the stone, light up a Gauloise and give me one, and then we were off again . . . and in the morning we would start again."

We know everything Picasso did during that period and we can follow his progress day by day. The chief results of this frenzied activity were four series of images: two of female heads, a third of a pair of nudes, and the fourth of a bull. Picasso took up the themes in that order, producing respectively 6, 10, 18
and 11 versions; of every variant a number of prints—I hesitate to say proofs—were pulled, reserved for the artist. In each case the suite was made not from separate lithographic stones but from successive reworkings of the same stone.3

Célestin’s description confirms the evidence of the actual prints—that what possessed Picasso was the process itself, the sequence of states and their cumulative effect as a series. Indeed, Picasso seems to have put into practice here an idea he had expressed a few months earlier when speaking of one of his paintings: “If it were possible, I would leave it as it is, while I began over and carried it to a more advanced state on another canvas. Then I would do the same thing with that one. There would never be a ‘finished’ canvas, but just the different ‘states’ of a single painting, which normally disappear in the course of work.”4

As far as I can discover, nothing quite like it had ever been seen before. There was certainly nothing new about works in series on a single theme—Monet’s church facades and grain stacks spring to mind; and there was certainly nothing new about multiple states of a single print—Impressionist printmakers achieved varied effects comparable to Monet’s through multiple modifications of the same plate.5 Picasso had subjected some of his own etched plates to 30 or more reworkings.6

Three main points, taken together, distinguish the lithographic series. First, the states acquire a new self-sufficiency, with the separate reworkings treated quite differently. Instead of pulling a small number of trial proofs before a much larger run from the final version, Picasso ordered a fixed and usually large number of prints—18 or 19—to be made from each state, including the last, which was then given an additional, final run of its own. Clearly neither the states nor the multiple prints made from them were trials in the ordinary sense; they were conceived as a unified, if not wholly predetermined, series and were meant to be compared with one another. Second, the designs were not simply variations but consistently progressive transformations of a basic theme; it is as if Picasso had set out to tell a story, an epic narrative that recounted the life history of a work of art. Third, the formal and conceptual sequence moved in the opposite direction from that of earlier suites. Normally, the successive states of prints, including Picasso’s own, become richer and more complex. The bull starts out that way, with the second state darker and weightier than the first. Thereafter, however, the compositions become ever more simple and schematic—more “abstract,” if that word has any sense in this context.
In the four lithographic series Picasso began towards the end of 1945, it is as if he has set out to tell a story—an epic narrative that recounts the life history of a work of art.

While they might seem coincidental, I believe these innovations were interdependent and complementary; if so, the lithographs could even be conscious, programmatic illustrations of the trenchant self-revelations Picasso made in an interview with Christian Zervos in 1935. “In the old days,” he said, pictures went forward toward completion by stages. Every day brought something new. A picture used to be a sum of additions. In my case a picture is a sum of destructions, I do a picture—then I destroy it. In the end, though, nothing is lost... It would be very interesting to preserve photographically, not the stages, but the metamorphoses of a picture. Possibly one might then discover the path followed by the brain in materializing a dream. But there is one very odd thing—to notice that basically a picture doesn’t change, that the first “vision” remains almost intact, in spite of appearances.1

Matisse, who used photographs to record the evolution of his paintings, often toward greater abstraction, offers a striking parallel and contrast. His purpose was not to document the process as such, however, but to enable him to judge the progress of the work: “The photos taken in the course of execution of the work permit me to know if the last conception conforms more [to his mental conception] than the preceding ones; whether I have advanced or regressed.” Matisse referred to the succeeding conceptions as stages (étapes), a notion which, as we have just seen, Picasso specifically rejected.2 Matisse elsewhere described the multiple permutations portrayed in his Themes and Variations suite of drawings as “a motion-picture film of the feelings of an artist.”3 The cinema metaphor refers to Matisse’s variations on a motif, however, not to a consistent formal progression. And, in fact, while some of the themes start with a shaded drawing, all the other sketches are purely linear and betray neither a tendency toward abstraction nor any other idea of progression.

In engraving and etching, the normal sequence of states is from relative simplicity to relative complexity; this development is consonant with the technique because expunging the marks made in a metal plate is extremely difficult. Erasures are much easier in lithography, though Picasso evidently now also pushed this medium much farther than the experts thought possible,4 whence the plot of the creation drama enacted in Mourlot’s workshop begins to emerge. Only on the lithographic stone was it possible to tell the particular story Picasso had in mind—the retrogressive destruction of a single work of art back to its original state; or, what amounts to the same thing, the progressive evolution of a single work to its ideal state.

The process of simplification and abstraction had been inherent in the modernist enterprise and on occasion had approached a quasi-seriality. A case in point, which Picasso certainly knew, is Matisse’s successive variations of the same sculpture. It is doubtful that Matisse conceived of sculptures such as The Back as a series, however, since he made them only intermittently, sometimes at intervals of many years, and almost never exhibited them together.5 Moreover, the progression consists in reorganizing, rather than eliminating, modeled form. Modeled form is progressively eliminated in another case,
which I suspect Picasso also knew, a sequence of cows by the Dutch De Stijl painter Theo van Doesburg, who published a selection in a treatise on esthetics in 1925;13 Doesburg's cows are not variations of the same work, however, but begin with a photograph and pass through a number of preparatory drawings to a final, completely nonobjective, painting. In Picasso's lithographs, the process becomes coherent, unified, objectified, and the subject of an object lesson, not in art theory but in art history. The lesson, moreover, is conceived in a special way, which can best be learned from the history of Picasso's bull.

Several factors suggest that the bull was, in fact, the main offspring of Picasso's lithographic orgy. The four series were conceived in relation to one another and form a coherent group, personally and psychologically no less than formally. The women evidently refer to Dora Maar and Françoise Gilot, with whom Picasso was then deeply involved, and the bull served, here as elsewhere in his work, as a self-image and a symbol of bestiality in general.14 Moreover, Picasso started the bull series after the other three but then worked on it with particular intensity. In the case of the bull, Picasso actually studied the solutions he would then commit to the tortured stone: he produced concurrently several sketches, a watercolor and a number of intermediate states (of which evidently only single proofs were taken) and independent lithographs.15 For a time, he even dropped everything else to pursue the bull to its end—or should one say its beginning?

The bull thus forms the centerpiece, both thematically and chronologically, in this complex group of interlocking sequences of quasi-autobiographical images. The bull also has a special place in the recollections of those who worked with Picasso at Mourlot's:

One day... he started work on the famous bull. It was a superb, well-rounded bull. I thought myself that that was that. But not at all. A second state and a third, still well-rounded, followed. And so it went on. But the bull was no longer the same. It began to get smaller and to lose weight. . . . Picasso was taking away rather than adding to his composition. . . . He was carving away slices of his bull at the same time. And after each change we pulled a proof. He could see that we were puzzled. He made a joke, he went on working, and then he produced another bull. And each time less and less of the bull remained. He used to look at me and laugh. "Look . . . " he would say, "we ought to give this bit to the butcher. The housewife could say: I want that piece, or this one. . . . " In the end, the bull's head was like that of an ant. . . . At the last proof there remained only a few lines. I had watched him at work, reducing, always reducing. I still remember the first bull and I said to myself: What I don't understand is that he has ended up where really he should have started! But he, Picasso, was seeking his own bull. And to achieve his one line bull he had gone in successive stages through all the other bulls. And when you look at that line you cannot imagine how much work it involved. . . .

Picasso's joke about the butcher and the housewife reveals part of what he had in mind: to retrieve the bull's constituent parts, to recover and reduce the dissecta membra of his dream bull—bred of pure lines—to an elemental, disembodied, quintessential bullishness.

Another insight is suggested by one of the
most striking aspects of the animal's metamorphosis—duly observed, at least in part, by the perspicacious craftsman—the progressive diminution in the relative size of the head and the genitalia, surely metaphors for rationality and brutishness. Picasso's bull was headed toward a preternatural state of illuminated absent-mindedness and incorporeality—before it had acquired the bulky accretions of sophisticated European culture.

References to sophisticated European culture are both numerous and essential to the import of Picasso's image. The animal's mythological and sporting associations, the Minotaur and the corrida, had long been part of the fauna of Picasso's visionary landscape, and in this tradition the suite is certainly related to Goya's etched cycle of floating dream bulls, provocatively titled "Folly of Fools." Since the Middle Ages, when St. Luke, who painted the first portrait of Christ and the Virgin, became the patron of the artists' guilds and the early academies of art, the evangelist's ox had been the very emblem of the art of painting. As such, it often served to introduce books of instruction on academic drawing, a genre of publication that held special significance for Picasso, as we shall see presently. Even Picasso's joke about the butcher is relevant here, since his remark, and the intermediate stages of the design itself, insistently recall those sectioned images of bovine anatomy that adorn the walls of butcher shops and the chapters on meat in elementary cookbooks.

 Apart from such serio-comic references to traditional and familiar themes, Picasso's process of thought might be defined as a genetic historicism in which, to borrow a pair of biological concepts, ontogeny repeats phylogeny—that is, the history of the individual recapitulates the history of the species. Picasso's bull really does have a binary genealogy. The grandiose, primordial beasts of Paleolithic art must also have figured vividly in Picasso's imagination. The final state of the lithographic bull has been aptly likened to such Ice Age depictions. Indeed, the whole series seems to echo the great thundering procession of weightless animals at Lascaux, the noblest of all prehistoric bull pens; or, more specifically perhaps, the Black and White Chamber at Niaux, where the monochrome figures are shown in varying degrees of articulation, from modeled form to outlined shape.

Picasso defined his attitude to this art in two remarkable statements, one made quite spontaneously to his secretary, Jaime Sabartés, who reported it as follows: I cannot recall why nor on what occasion...

Describing the multiple permutations on a motif in his "Themes and Variations" suite, Matisse once called those drawings "a motion-picture film of the feelings of an artist."

[Picasso] decided to pass on to me, as if he were tired of thinking, this idea which he seems to have been meditating for the longest time: "Primitive sculpture has never been surpassed. Have you noticed the precision of the lines engraved in the caverns?... You have seen reproductions... The Assyrian bas-reliefs still keep a similar purity of expression." "How do you explain to yourself," I asked, "the disappearance of this marvelous simplicity?" "This is due to the fact that man ceased to be simple. He wanted to see farther and so he lost
Eleven progressive states of Picasso's The Bull, Dec. 5, 1945-Jan. 17, 1946, lithograph on stone. The dimensions of these lithographs are approximately 11 3/8 by 16 3/8 inches, but vary slightly in each state. Picasso worked the stone with ink wash, pen and ink, and a scraper. In addition to these 11 main states, there were a number of intermediary states as well (see page 85).
In a number of drawings and collateral works, the bull is a linear wraith. The once threatening enemy has become Picasso's pet, executing witty tricks, like a tame circus animal commanded by its handler.

the faculty of understanding that which he had within reach of his vision... The same happens with a watch: it will go more or less well; but if it goes at all it is not so bad. The worst begins the moment it falls into the hands of a watchmaker... His manipulations will rob it of its purity, and this will never return. It may preserve the same external appearance, just as the idea of art subsists; but we already know what has been done to it by the schools... Its essence has evaporated, and I make you a present of what remains.  

The marvel of this pristine purity of expression had deep meaning for Picasso. A similar response underlay the explanation he gave André Malraux of the difference between his own early interest and that of Matisse and Braque in African sculpture—les Nègres, “the Blacks,” to use his term. The Blacks, he said, were not primitive, as were Egyptian and Chaldean sculpture, and his interest, unlike Matisse's and Braque's, was not merely formal, as if these works were no different from any other good sculpture. He realized instead that they were magic things, intercessors, mediators, fetishes, weapons; and he described Les Demoiselles d'Avignon as his first exorcism painting. In this link between what he called “the spirits,” “the unconscious,” “emotion,” and the exorcism of the accumulated legacy of Western tradition, Picasso's enterprise is phylogenetic.

One might say with equal aptness that as Picasso's lithographic bulls become increasingly simple and simpleminded, they also seem to become increasingly childish. This is the ontogenetic aspect of the enterprise. It is best understood from another of Picasso's notorious pronouncements, that in his youth he drew like Raphael, and it took him many years to learn to draw like a child. This dictum itself has a revealing history. The first part alone was printed in an anonymous article in the London Times of Oct. 25, 1956, on the occasion of Picasso's 75th birthday. It was reported that on visiting an exhibition of children's art, Picasso had remarked that at their age he drew like Raphael. The writer comments that such personal arrogance would be worthy only of a man of Picasso's greatness. Two days later Herbert Read, the English art critic, wrote a corrective letter to the editor of the Times explaining that the remark, which he now quoted in full, was made to him during a visit he and the artist made to the exhibition. Taking the comment metaphorically, Read thought it showed "the humility that is a characteristic of all true genius. In my view, the observation was neither arrogant (he did not claim that he drew as well as Raphael)
nor humble nor metaphorical but a simple—and perhaps somewhat rueful—statement of fact.

In another context, discussing a young boy's drawings, which he greatly admired, Picasso spoke of "the genius of childhood":

Contrary to what sometimes happens in music, miracle children do not exist in painting. What might be taken for a precocious genius is the **genius of childhood**. When the child grows up, it disappears without a trace. . . As for me, I didn't have this genius. My first drawings could never be exhibited in an exposition of children's drawings. The awkwardness and naïveté of childhood were almost absent from them. I outgrew the period of that marvelous vision very rapidly. At that boy's age I was making drawings that were completely academic. Their precision, their exactitude, frightens me. My father was a professor of drawing, and it was probably he who pushed me prematurely in that direction... 2

For Picasso the fragile genius of childhood...
could be subverted in the name of freedom. On another occasion he said,

They tell you that you have to give children freedom. In reality they make them do children's drawings. They teach them to do it. They have even taught them to do children's drawings which are abstract...

In reality, as usual, on the pretext of giving them complete freedom and above all not tiring them down, they shut them up in their own special style, with all their chains.

An odd thing... is that I have never done children's drawings. Never. Even when I was very small. I remember one of my very first drawings. I was perhaps six, or even less. In my father's house there was a statue of Hercules with his club in the corridor, and I drew Hercules. But it wasn't a child's drawing. It was a real drawing representing Hercules with his club.25

This drawing of Hercules is actually preserved, inscribed with Picasso's signature and the date November 1890, when he was nine; it confirms his youthful academic ability. In fact, we have many drawings by Picasso from this early period. They are often playful and deliberately crude, but they are never really childish.26 In complete contrast to the childhood works are the astonishing counterparts of children's drawings and cutouts made by Picasso for his daughter Maia about 1937-40; some of these seem uncannily like childish versions of Picasso's own early (ca. 1890) "art-toys."27 In any case, it may not be coincidental that the children's exhibition mentioned in the Times, which had been arranged by Herbert Read himself, was shown in Paris in 1945, shortly before the

The lithographic process enabled Picasso to merge, in the evolution of his serial bull, two conceptions of history—one cultural and rooted in a prerationalistic spiritual state of society, the other psychological and rooted in the presupposed mental state of the child. In a way, Picasso was taking up an old theme that had been illustrated a century before—for example, by the American painter Thomas Cole in the second of a set of five historical paintings representing "The Course of Empire" from the Savage State through the Consummation of Empire to the final Desolation.28 The Arcadian or Pastoral State includes the invention of the practical and the fine arts; Cole shows the invention of painting as a young boy drawing a childish stick figure on a stone that bears Cole's own initials. The difference is that Picasso was not motivated by a romantic historicism but by the search for a new and universally valid expressive idiom.

In a curious way, however, Cole's image focuses on the tertiurn quid that conjoins phylogeny and ontogeny in the history of Picasso's bull(s), namely, the idea of a timeless graphic naiveté. This concept is most sharply perceived in Picasso's affinity for popular graffiti, which underlay his friendship with the photographer Brassai. During the very period that concerns us Brassai was preparing his book on graffiti (published in 1961) and the subject was a leitmotif of his conversations with Picasso.29 From the disparate remarks Brassai recorded it is clear that Picasso was intensely affected by graffiti: "A wall is a wonderful thing, isn't it? I've always paid close attention to what happens on them. When I was young, I often used to copy the graffiti I saw." And he engaged in the practice himself: "I left a lot of them on the walls of Montmartre." He recognized the potentiality as works of art, both of his own graffiti—he told of a banker who had one removed from the wall of a building under renovation and installed on the wall of his apartment—and those of others: "They are really astonishing. What fantastic invention you sometimes find in them." Some graffiti are "absolutely splendid... They are little masterpieces." He applied the technique to his own work: "Now I myself am making graffiti. But they are engraved in cement, instead of on a wall... enlarged, and cut out with electric chisels... for a building in Barcelona... each of them... two to three stories high." And he saw the influence of graffiti on other artists: "This is a Rouault!" "That one is a Klee!"

Picasso recognized local and regional "styles" of graffiti: "Italian and Spanish graffiti—I know them very well—do not resemble the Parisian graffiti. The phallic symbols you see on the walls of Rome, for instance, are specifically Italian. Rome is very rich in graffiti, as a matter of fact." At the same time, he grasped their universality, even in the physical sense: "Graffiti belong to everyone and no one." Most important in our context is that Picasso associated graffiti both with the art of children ("I always stop when I see children drawing in the street, on the sidewalk or on a
Allusions to European culture are both numerous and essential to the meaning of Picasso's bull. The series is certainly related to Goya's "Folly of Fools," an etched cycle of floating dream bulls.

It's surprising—the things that come from their hands. They often teach me something") and with primitive art: "That [head] is as rich as the façade of a cathedral! . . . Your book links art with the primitive arts." His comments to Brassai show that he found in graffiti evidence of an ultimate abstract graphic distillation of reality:

To arrive at abstraction, it is always necessary to begin with a concrete reality . . . I have often done faces like this myself. The people who scratch them out like this naturally gravitate to symbols. Art is a language of symbols . . . Two holes—that's the symbol for the face, enough to evoke it without representing it . . . But isn't it strange that it can be done through such simple means? Two holes; that's abstract enough if you consider the complexity of man . . . Whatever is most abstract may perhaps be the summit of reality . . . abstract art is not far removed from the random brushstrokes or carvings in a wall. No matter what anyone thinks or says, we always imitate something, even when we don't know we are doing it.

The history of art thus leads to an art without history that seeks to exorcise the past and discover, or rather rediscover, the magic, the fetish—the will-o'-the-wisp, if you will—of our common humanity.

Finally, it must be said that in its deliberateness and coherence the lithographic series seems distinctly pedagogical; the prints have the consequential, demonstrative quality of scholastic exercises. Picasso was not just finding implicit meaning but also, as I suggested earlier, imparting that meaning in an explicit lesson—a lesson not only in genetic and abstraction. Since the 15th century the study of harmonic proportions and geometric figure construction had preoccupied artists, who sought to retrieve the classical ideal of demonstrably perfect form. Only recently has Picasso's own preoccupation with this subject emerged—a preoccupation crucial for our understanding of the genesis of modern art. We now know that at the birth of Cubism,
Picasso’s early drawings are often playful and deliberately crude, but never really childish. In complete contrast are the astonishing counterfeits of childish works he made for his daughter Maïa.

while creating a new, measured canon of beauty based on “primitive” sculpture, Picasso recalled the theoretical investigations of Albrecht Dürer. Picasso studied Dürer in the spring of 1907 while working on Les Demoiselles d’Avignon. He was evidently inspired by Dürer’s Dresden sketchbook, which had been published for the first time in 1905. The German artist’s effort to reconcile the sometimes crass realism of his native tradition with the norms of antiquity must have seemed singularly appropriate to Picasso in his own search for an unclassical, or rather a proto-classical, ideal.

In the domain of practical pedagogy the drawing manual—the academic course in draftsmanship—aspired, through a series of increasingly complex exercises, to change the simple and perhaps mystified neophyte into the divine Raphael. Publications illustrating the method begin in 1608 with Odoardo Fialetti’s Il vero modo et ordine per disegnare tutte le parti et membra del corpo humano, and in 1753 William Hogarth anticipated Picasso’s reversal of the sequence in one of the plates of his Analysis of Beauty. To be sure, Hogarth’s purpose was not to undermine the system but, ironically, to exalt it by starting from an antique head admired by Raphael (no. 97) and showing “the reverse in several degrees, down to the most contemptible meanness that lines can be formed into . . . composed merely of such plain lines as children make” (no. 105). By the mid-19th century, in a French journalistic cartoon with political overtones (from a mock exhibition of fine arts), there is a veritable collision of childishness, caricature and the academic tradition. The image portrays the cultural state of the “anonymous Republic” in the
“noble genre.” An armored Marianne, enthroned on her lion, holds a lance and a schoolchild’s tablet displaying a nose, an eye, and a whole figure drawn with evident ineptitude. The lampoon suggests the immense symbolic and practical importance drawing manuals achieved from the mid-19th century on, with the development and dissemination of art education as a means of elevating popular culture. Van Gogh taught himself to draw by copying no fewer than three times the schematized exemplars in an important series of albums published by Charles Bargue in 1868-71.35

One of Picasso’s early art school drawings (1892-93) shows him following precisely the same method, progressing from abstraction to illusion, from simplicity to sophistication. Indeed, the sheet is also copied from one of Bargue’s plates, as is Picasso’s contemporaneous drawing of a seated nude.36 Here we see Picasso laboriously learning what he later took years to unlearn. Lithography—which demonstrated, especially through the technique of stumping, the transition from line to modeling—was the process of choice for illustrating such publications; perhaps it was this very association that motivated Picasso’s disdain for the lithographic medium before the period with Mourlot.37

The academic system in general comprised three basic elements, all of which have counterparts in Picasso’s attitude. The method progressed in stages with respect to form, technique and subject: (1) from simple geometric shapes to complex curved and undulating surfaces; (2) from linear definition to interior modeling and cross-hatching; (3) from parts or fragments of the anatomy to the complete body. Picasso’s bull progresses in exactly the opposite way and arrives at a coherent and unified design of a whole new figure.

Seen in this light, Picasso’s graphic method in the lithographs becomes crucial: it is not merely a progressive simplification and abstraction; in each series contour tends increasingly to predominate, until ultimately the ferocious bull is subdued by one continuous outline of quite enchanting grace. The modeling of brute form is metamorphosed into the delineation of pure spirit—there is no other way to describe the simultaneous degeneration of the bull and regeneration of this ethereal and apocalyptic beast. By his ironically serious reversal of tradition and evocation of “artlessness,” Picasso seems to have given shape at last to that mystical ideal of disegno interno (inner design) artists had been dreaming of since the Renaissance.

These considerations, in turn, help to illuminate specific stages in Picasso’s lithographic bullfight. I believe he conceived the series as a graphic corrida, with the lithographic stone as the arena.38 The confrontation at first progresses in the traditional way, with the forms becoming denser and more richly modeled, while the bull becomes heavier and more aggressive. Then Picasso begins his attack: the forms coagulate and break into gruff, rhinoceros-like sections. On one momentous day, Picasso made two crucial “passes”: in one, a sort of sketch-lithograph, he drew a delicate, purely linear bull, along with a menagerie of much less intimidating animals—rams, a cow, and doves; in the primary bull itself he introduced lines that delimit its constituent parts and change its dumb, bruitish expression into an almost caricatured scowl.

The dual principle implicit in these parallel works continues thereafter. In the monumental isolated bull the preponderance of dark and modeled areas tends to diminish step by step in a relentless ritual of decimation and dismemberment. In a number of drawings and collateral lithographic “spin-offs” the bull is already conceived as a purely linear wraith,
William Hogarth, Plate 1 from The Analysis of Beauty, London, 1753. In nos. 97 through 105 (bottom right corner), Hogarth anticipates Picasso's movement in The Bull series from complexity to a childlike simplicity.

not in grandiose isolation but in small, multiple guises. Here the bull's awesome power is "exorcised" in a humorous and playful game of hide-and-seek. The once threatening enemy becomes Picasso's pet, executing a repertory of witty tricks and permutations like a tame circus animal commanded by its handler. Only in the eleventh and final state are the lessons learned in the practice pen, as it were, applied unflinchingly in the main arena. The coup de grace to the earthly academic bull is elegantly delivered by the reduction of his entire body to a simple continuous outline.

Even in his own working procedure, therefore, Picasso transferred to the realm of "high" art the qualities achieved in a domain of informal, spontaneous creativity. It can hardly be coincidental that during the same period Picasso also produced lithographs of bulls and actual corrida scenes; moreover, he invented for these works a radical collage technique employing crudely cut out paper figures like those he had made both as a child and, later, for his infant daughter.36

Exercises for drawing the nose from Odoardo Fialetti's manual, Il vero modo et ordine per disegnare tutte le parti et membra del corpo humano, Venice, 1608.
The Bull series is an ironic reversal of two classic academic systems for producing visual sophistication—systems with which Picasso felt he had been made all too familiar in his youth.

If this view of Picasso's lithographic series is correct, it implies an absolute historicism from whose all-encompassing scrutiny nothing escapes, not even the artist himself. In this context one of the most salient manifestations of Picasso's conception of his own work may be understood. I refer to his practice—obsession, one is tempted to say—from his earliest childhood of signing his works, however slight and ephemeral, and to date them to the very day they were executed; when several versions of the same work were done on the same day, he would often number them in sequence. No other artist has left such a complete record of his production. It might be tempting to attribute this preoccupation to megalomania; no doubt pride played a role, and certainly Picasso in this way fixed his own place in history with unprecedented precision.

More to the point, in my view, is the implicit identification, through the historical process, of the individual self with human nature at large. This seems to me the ultimate meaning of Picasso's luminous notion, in the statement quoted earlier, that the record of the metamorphoses of a work of art might help to "discover the path followed by the brain in materializing a dream." Picasso made this point explicit in explaining why he dated his work, paradoxically linking—through the history of art, particularly his own—human creativity and science, subjectivity and objectivity, personal and collective awareness:

Why do you think I date everything I do? Because it is not sufficient to know an artist's works—it is also necessary to know when he did them, why, how, under what circumstances... Some day there will undoubtedly be a science—it may be called the science of man—which will seek to learn more about man in general through the study of the creative man. I often think about such a science, and I want to leave to posterity a documentation that will be as complete as possible. That's why I put a date on everything I do...

2. Picasso's work at Mourlot's is vividly described in Hélène Parmelin's introduction (unpaginated) to Mourlot's catalogue, for the passage given here, in which she quotes the printer Jean Célestin, see p. 33.

Mourlot himself gave an account in his Gravez dans ma mémoire, Paris, 1978, 11-37; see also the preface by Sabartés to vol. 1 of the first edition of F. Mourlot.
Picasso's early academic drawings show him moving via increasingly complex exercises from simplicity to sophistication. Here we see him laboriously learning what he later took years to unlearn.


5. There is no comprehensive study of the development of seriality in modern art, but see generally, J. Coplans, Serial Imagery, exhib. cat., Pasadena, Calif., and New York, 1968, 7-30, and the introductory chapters of G. Selzberling's study of the series paintings of Monet, Monet's Series, New York and London, 1981, 1-38; on the latter, see further P. H. Tucker, Monet in the 90's, exhib. cat., New Haven, Conn., and London, 1989. Deuchler's work, 1974, also emphasized the novelty of Picasso's graphic series, contrasting them with Monet's cathedrals, where only the color changes, not the forms, and with Mondrian's trees, where the forms become completely abstract. (Further to this point below, p. 79.)


8. The development of the bull would seem to contrast with P. Hacker's criticism of Matisse's serial drawings: "Matisse fait un dessin, puis il le recopie... Il le recopie cinque fois, dix fois, toujours en épurant son trait... Il est persuadé que le dernier, le plus déplouillé, est le meilleur, le plus pur, le définitif, or, le plus souvent, c'était le premier... En matière de dessin, rien n'est meilleur que le premier jet" (Brassai, 1964, 71, early October 1943).

Picasso's lithographic bull did not start life as a "drawing," however.


11. Cf. A.H. Barr, Matisse: His Art and His Public, New York, 1951, 265. See the perceptive observations on Matisse's temporal sequences by P. Schneider, Matisse, New York, 1974, 374-78, 578-80, who also describes in this connection the artist's habit of superimposing drawings on a single sheet. Matisse's method of photographing his works-in-progress, and his Thèmes et variations, is discussed in a suggestive essay by J. Flam, "Matisse's Subjects: Themes and Variations," forthcoming in the Cahiers of the Musée Matisse, Nice-Cimiez, who also notes that Matisse often made pairs (not sequential series) of images, the first reflecting the "shock of recognition of nature," the second a more abstracted interpretation.


12. The five Jennette heads (1910-13) were shown as a complete series only in 1959; the four Bocks were never exhibited together in Matisse's lifetime. This point, and the nature of Matisse's sculpture as "a private medium of study," are emphasized by M.P. Mezzatesta, Henri Matisse: Sculpture/Painter, exhib. cat., Fort Worth, Tex., 1984, 14.


Charles Barge: studies after a sculpture by Germain Pilon, lithograph, plate 35 from Coasts de dessin: Premiere partie, the first of Barge's pedagogical albums, published in Paris, 1868.

Picasso: profile heads after Barge, 1932-34, drawing.
Lichtenstein's bull series as a reversal of how-to-draw books, a relationship which, as will be seen, I believe also applies to Picasso's concept.

14. According to Françoise Gilot (Gilot and Lake, 1964, 85), the two nudes represented her and Dora Maar; cf. on this point L. Steinberg, Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art, New York, 1972, 105ff. I suspect that the contemporary head of a youth, Mourlot, 1970, no. 8, is a rejuvenated self-portrait.


18. I am indebted to Professor William Jerey for adding this splendid "connection" to my collection.

19. Picasso's bull seems first to have been related to Paleolithic painting in a brief essay by J. Palau i Fabre, Child and Caveman: Elements of Picasso's Creativity,
New York, 1978, who also perceived the relevance of Picasso's interest in children's art.


22. London Times, Oct. 25, 1956, 11: "Perhaps more than any other living artist, Pablo Picasso, who celebrates today his seventy-fifth birthday, has become a legend. It is reported of him that he was once taken to an exhibition of children's art, and asked his opinion. He swept the gallery with eyes as brown and deep as those of one of his own pet owls, and murmured 'A son âge, moi, je dessinais comme Raphael.' The personal arrogance implied in such a remark would be worthy only of a man who has for half a century been the undisputed dictator of artistic fashion, who has baffled prediction so often and yet so easily retained his influence at every turn that he has been accused—primarily by such as could not stand the pace—of that cardinal sin, a lack of high seriousness. And yet that claim to equality with the prince of draughtsmen while he was yet a child would only be a slight exaggeration of fact. Whatever the final rating of posterity may be on the significance and value of his life's work, that one supreme achievement shall never be denied him. Picasso is among the greatest draughtsmen to have appeared in the history of European art."

23. London Times, Oct. 27, 1956, 27: "Since the remark you attribute to Pablo Picasso in your leading article of today was made in my presence, and since it has gained currency in several distorted forms, you would allow me to put on record what Picasso actually did say. I had been showing him round an exhibition of children's drawings sent to Paris by the British Council. He looked at them very carefully, and when he had finished he turned to me and said (I will not pretend to remember the French words he used): 'When I was the age of these children I could draw like Raphael: it took me many years to learn how to draw like these children.'

"It will be seen that, far from implying 'personal arrogance,' as your leading article suggests, the remark shows rather the humility that is a characteristic of all true genius." Read's letter is referred to by R. Penrose, Picasso: His Life and Work, New York, 1973, 315f.


26. Picasso's early drawings may be studied in Zervos, 1933-58, VI; J.-E. Cirici, Picasso: Birth of a Genius, New York and Washington D.C., 1972; J. Palau i Fabre, Picasso: The Early Years, 1981-1907, New York, 1981; Musée Picasso: Catálogo de pintura y dibujo, Barcelona, 1986. For a particularly stimulating discussion, see N. Staller, "Early Picasso and the Origins of Cubism," Arts Magazine, LXX, 1986, 50-51. Recently, John Richardson with M. McCully, A Life of Picasso: Volume I, 1881-1906, New York, 1981, 292, 33, 42, 46f, has been at pains to discredit Picasso's accounts of his early development, seeing them in the conventional way as self-aggrandizement, rather than as expressing Picasso's disenchantment with the laborious academic training he had received; to counter the evidence of the extant drawings, Richardson even resorts to the unfounded suggestion (following Palau i Fabre, 1981, 32) that early drawings were deliberately destroyed to preserve the legend that the artist never drew like a child! See also fn. 36 below.

27. The later drawings and paper cutouts are reproduced in F. Deuchler, Une collection Picasso, Geneva, 1973, and in Palau i Fabre, 1978, for the early cutouts, see Musée Picasso, 1986, 33, with references. Richardson, 1981, 31, notes the analogy between Picasso's early cutouts and those he made later. Matisse also began using cutouts in the 1940s, but, unlike Picasso, never with a childlike intent or in a reproductive process (see p. 90 below); for Matisse's cutouts see J. Cowart, J. D. Flam, D. Fournard and J. H. Neff, Henri Matisse: Paper Cut-Outs, New York, 1977, and Flam, 1989.

28. A catalogue, with a preface by Herbert Read, was printed; see Peintures d'enfants anglais: Exposition organisée par le British Council, 28 Avenue des Champs Elysées, London and Beccles, 1945. (Barbara Put of the fine arts department of the British Council, London, was kind enough to provide me with a copy of this rare publication, for which I am most grateful.) The exhibition was briefly reviewed in Le Monde, Apr. 12, 1945, 2. Picasso evidently saw the exhibition again later that summer at Antibes, cf. P. O'Brian, Picasso: Pablo Ruiz Picasso, New York, 1976, 39, 5; also Musée Picasso: Château d'Antibes, Juillet-Novembre 1972, Peintures d'enfants, exh. cat., 1972, unpaginated but cf. p. 11 (catalogue kindly supplied by Danièle Giraudy).


Picasso’s Bull(s)
continued from page 121

31. R. Bruck, Das Stichenbuch von Albrecht Dürer, Strassburg, 1905. The relationship to Dürer was first observed by W. Spies, ed., Pablo Picasso: Eine Ausstellung zum hundertsten Geburtstag, Werke aus der Sammlung Mariza Picasso, exhib. cat., Munich, 1981, 27ff. (I have chosen slightly different examples; all the relevant sketches are reproduced in Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, exhib. cat., 2 vols., Paris, 1988, 1, 94, 184, 224.) Spies’s contribution was brought to my attention by Brigitte Baer, who made the same observation independently and is preparing a detailed study of the subject. The observation seems to me of fundamental importance since by implication it challenges the reading of the Demoiselles as a “degradation” of female form and suggests instead that Picasso was seeking a new canon of beauty. Moreover, we must now take seriously the striking analogies between the faceted forms Picasso adopted in the subsequent phase of Cubism, and the prismatic shapes Dürer often used in his theoretical studies (compare especially the 1686 heads of Fernande with those in the Dresden sketchbook E. Panofsky, The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer, Princeton, 1955, 201ff., fig. 312; also 266ff. on Dürer’s theory of proportions). Significantly, Dürer’s “cubist” studies also have a sculptural corollary, in the characteristically faceted forms of contemporary wood sculpture in an unfinished state (cf. H. Huth, Kunste und Werkstätten der Spätgotik, Darmstadt, 1977, figs. 6, 9).


34. The cartoon is published in M.-C. Chardonieres, La Figure de la république: Le concours de 1848, Paris, 1987, 97, fig. 122.

Picasso: “My first drawings could never been exhibited in an exposition of children’s drawings. The awkwardness and naïveté of childhood were almost absent from them. I outgrew the period of that marvelous vision very rapidly.”


36. Zervos, 1932-78, VI, nos. 10, 13. The number 88 inscribed below Picasso’s signature on both sheets refers to his matriculation in his father’s drawing class of 1892-93 (Falau & Fabre, 1981, 42). So far as I know, the relation of these drawings to Bargue’s plates has not been noted heretofore. Richardson, 1991, 45, intuits that the profile heads were related to drawing manuals, but finds the seated nude, although he also recognizes it as a copy, too assured for its date and suspects it was reworked later; Falau & Fabre, 1981, 518, is also astonished by its precocity, but acknowledges the unassailability of the date.

37. As reported by Gilot and Laue, 1964, 86.

38. Though less explicitly, Deuchar perceived this metaphorical aspect of the bull series (1974-[15]).


40. Brassai, 1966, 100 (Dec. 6, 1943); 1964, 123.

In the passage that follows Brassai recognizes the deliberateness and auto-historicism of Picasso’s custom, but not the universality of the motive: “Un jour, quand nous parlions avec Sabartès de cette habitude de Picasso de dater ses moindres œuvres ou écrits en indiquant non seulement l’année, le mois et le jour, mais parfois aussi l’heure, Sabartès haussa les épaules: ‘A quoi ça rime! me dit-il. C’est une pure fantaisie, une manie... En quoi celui qui peut intéresser quelqu’un si Picasso a exécuté tel ou tel dessin à dix heures ou à onze heures du soir?’ Mais, d’après ce que vient de me révéler Picasso, la minute de ses datations n’est ni caprice, ni manie, mais un acte prémédité, réfléchi. Il veut conférer à tous ses faits et gestes une valeur historique dans son histoire d’homme-créateur, les insérer lui-même—avant les autres—dans les grandes années de sa prodigieuse vie...”

Picasso associated prehistoric art with his passion for chronology, in a comment concerning his own “ages of stone,” i.e., engraved pebbles, the “style” of which changed (Brassai, 1964, 238 [Nov. 26, 1943]): “Mais on change tout le temps... Vous n’avez qu’à regarder le changement de ma signature... Ce sont mes différents âges de pierre”. Il faudrait publier tout ça dans l’album. J’aime les œuvres complètes... On ne peut vraiment surprendre l’acte créateur qu’à travers la série de toutes les variations.”

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