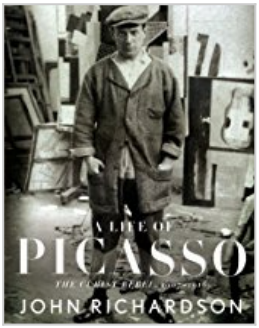

A Life of Picasso: The Cubist Rebel, 1907-1916

By John Richardson

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In *The Cubist Rebel, 1907–1916*, the second volume of his *Life of Picasso*, John Richardson reveals the young Picasso in the Baudelairean role of “the painter of modern life”—a role that stipulated the brothel as the noblest subject for a modern artist. Hence his great breakthrough painting, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, with which this book opens. As well as portraying Picasso as a revolutionary, Richardson analyzes the more compassionate side of his genius. The misogynist of posthumous legend turns out to have been surprisingly vulnerable—more often sinned against than sinning. Heartbroken at the death of his mistress Eva, Picasso tried desperately to find a wife. Richardson recounts the untold story of how his two great loves of 1915–17 successively turned him down. These disappointments, as well as his horror at the outbreak of World War I and the wounds it inflicted on his closest friends, Braque and Apollinaire, shadowed his painting and drove him off to work for the Ballets Russes in Rome and Naples—back to the ancient world.

In this volume we see the artist’s life and work during the crucial decade of 1907–17, a period during which Picasso and Georges Braque devised what has come to be known as cubism and in doing so engendered modernism. Thanks to the author’s friendship with Picasso and some of the women in his life, as well as Braque and their dealer, D. H. Kahnweiler, and other associates, he has had access to untapped sources and unpublished material. In *The Cubist Rebel*, Richardson also introduces us to key figures in Picasso’s life who have been totally overlooked by previous biographers. Among these are the artist’s Chilean patron, collector, and mother figure, Eugenia Errázuriz, as well as two fiancées: the loveable Geneviève Laporte and the promiscuous bisexual painter Irène Lagut.

By harnessing biography to art history, he has managed to crack the code of cubism more successfully than any of his predecessors. And by bringing fresh light to bear on the artist’s private life, he has succeeded in coming up with a new view of this paradoxical man and of his paradoxical work. Never before have Picasso’s revolutionary vision, technical versatility, prodigious achievements, and, not least, his sardonic humor been analyzed with such clarity.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
John Richardson is the author of a memoir, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice;* an essay collection, *Sacred Monsters, Sacred Masters;* and books on Manet and Braque. He has written for *The New York Review of Books, The New Yorker,* and *Vanity Fair*. He was instrumental in setting up Christie's in the United States. In 1993 he was made a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. In 1995–96 he served as the Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford University. He divides his time between Connecticut and New York City.

Chapter 1: Rome and the Ballets Russes (1917)

Picasso's visit to Rome in February 1917 had originally been conceived as a wedding trip, but at the last moment his on-again off-again mistress, Irène Lagut, who had promised to marry him, changed her mind, as her predecessor, Gaby Lespinasse, had done the year before. Instead of Irène, Jean Cocteau accompanied him. In a vain attempt to set himself at the head of the avant-garde, this ambitious young poet had inveigled Picasso into collaborating with him on Parade: *a gimmicky, quasi-modernist ballet about the efforts of a couple of shills to lure the public into their vaudeville theater by tantalizing them with samples of their acts. Cocteau had desperately wanted Diaghilev to stage this ballet in Paris. The meddlesome Polish hostess Misia Sert had tried to scupper the project. However, Picasso's Chilean protector and patron, Eugenia Errázuriz, had persuaded Diaghilev to agree, provided Picasso did the décor, Erik Satie the score, and Léonide Massine the choreography. Sets, costumes, and rehearsals were to be done in Rome, where Diaghilev had his wartime headquarters. Picasso's cubist followers were horrified that their avant-garde hero should desert them for anything as frivolous and modish as the Ballets Russes, but he ignored their complaints. After two and a half years of war, with its appalling death toll, its hardships and shortages, and above all the absence of his closest friends—particularly Braque and Apollinaire at the front—Picasso was elated at the prospect of leaving the bombardments and blackouts behind to spend a couple of months in the relative peace of Rome, which he had always wanted to visit. Besides working on Parade, he was determined to get married.*

Picasso and Cocteau arrived in Rome on February 19, 1917, a day later than they had intended. Cocteau, who had forgotten to get a visa from the Italian embassy, had lied when telling him that no reservations were available. Diaghilev had booked them into the Grand Hotel de Russie on the corner of the Via del Babuino and the Piazza del Popolo. So that Picasso could work in peace on the costumes and sets for *Parade*, he had also arranged for him to have one of the coveted Patrizi studios, tucked away in a sprawling, unkempt garden off the Via Margutta. Although most of the artists are now gone, the Patrizi studios are still as idyllic as they were in 1917.

"I cannot forget Picasso's studio in Rome," Cocteau later wrote. "A small chest contained the maquette for *Parade*, with its houses, trees and shack. It was there that Picasso did his designs for the Chinese Conjurer, the Managers, the American Girl, the Horse, which Anna de Noailles would compare to a laughing tree, and the Acrobats in blue tights, which would remind Marcel Proust of The *Dioscuri*."[1] From his window Picasso had a magnificent view of the sixteenth-century Villa Medici, seat of the French Academy, towering above the studio garden. As he well knew, the Academy had associations with some of his favorite artists. Velázquez had painted the garden; Ingres had spent four years there as a fellow at the outset of his career

and, later, six years as director; Corot had also worked there and caught the golden light of Rome and the *campagna*, as no other painter had done.

"Rome seems made by [Corot]," Cocteau reported to his mother. "Picasso talks of nothing else but this master, who touches us much more than Italians hell bent on the grandiose!"[2] That Picasso infinitely preferred the informality of Corot's radiant views to the pomp and ceremony and baroque theatricality of so much Roman painting is confirmed by his sun-filled pointillistic watercolors of the Villa Medici's ochre façade—as original as anything he did in Rome.[3]

Diaghilev insisted that Picasso and Cocteau share his passion for the city. Sightseeing was compulsory that very first evening. Since there was no blackout as there was in Paris, they were able to see the Colosseum all lit up—"that enormous reservoir of the centuries," Cocteau said, "which one would like to see come alive, crowded with people and wild beasts and peanut vendors."[4] The following morning, Diaghilev picked them up in his car for another grand tour. In the evening he took them to the circus. "Sad but beautiful arena," Cocteau wrote his mother. "Misia Sert (or rather her double) performed on the tight rope. Diaghilev slept until woken with a start by an elephant putting its feet on his knees."[5]

When he arrived in Rome, Picasso was still suffering from *chagrin d'amour*. Eager to find a replacement for Irène Lagut, he had promptly fallen in love with one of Diaghilev's Russian dancers, the twenty-five-year-old Olga Khokhlova. Although he courted her assiduously and did a drawing of her, which he signed with his name in Cyrillic, Olga proved adamantly chaste. Chastity was a challenge that Picasso had seldom had to face. Both Diaghilev and Bakst warned him that a respectable Russian woman would not sacrifice her virginity unless assured of marriage. *"Une russe on l'épouse,"* Diaghilev said. Olga personified this view. She was indeed respectable: the daughter of Stepan Vasilievich Khokhlov, who was not a general, as she claimed, but a colonel in the Corps of Engineers in charge of the railway system.[6] Olga had three brothers and a younger sister. They lived in St. Petersburg in a state-owned apartment on the Moika Canal. Around 1910, the colonel had been sent to the Kars region to oversee railroad construction, and the family had followed him there. Olga stayed behind. Egged on by a school friend's sister, Mathilda Konetskaya, who had joined the Diaghilev ballet after graduating from the Imperial Ballet School, she decided to become a dancer.

Olga had considerable talent. Despite starting late and studying briefly at a St. Petersburg ballet school,[7] she managed to get auditioned by Diaghilev. The Ballets Russes was having difficulty prying dancers loose from the state-run theaters and was desperate for recruits. A committee consisting of Nijinsky and the greatest of classical ballet masters, Enrico Cecchetti, as well as Diaghilev—a trio described by another dancer as more terrifying than any first- night audience—put Olga through her paces and accepted her. Intelligence and diligence compensated for lack of experience. Nijinsky was sufficiently impressed to pick her out of the corps de ballet.

Léonide Massine, who had taken Nijinsky's place in Diaghilev's company as well as in his heart, had chosen Olga to play the role of Dorotea in *Les Femmes de bonne humeur*, an adaptation of a comedy by the eighteenth-century playwright Goldoni, with sets by Léon Bakst and a heavily arranged score after Scarlatti. It was at a rehearsal for this ballet, which would have its premiere in Rome the following month, that Picasso spotted Olga and immediately set about courting her. To familiarize himself with the techniques of theatrical décor as well as watch his new love at work, he helped Carlo Socrate (the scene painter who would work on *Parade*) execute Bakst's scenery. So that he could join Olga backstage, Picasso even helped the stagehands at the ballet's premiere.[8] Eighteen months later he would marry her.

Compared to her predecessors—Bohemian models Picasso had lived with in Montmartre or Montparnasse—Olga was very much a lady, not, however, the noblewoman biographers have assumed her to

be.[9] She came from much the same professional class as Picasso's family. Don José, Picasso's father, may have been a very unsuccessful painter, but his brothers included a diplomat, a revered prelate, and a successful doctor, who had married the daughter of a Malagueño marquis. One of Picasso's mother's first cousins was a general—more celebrated than Olga's parent, also the real thing. Indeed, it may have been Olga's lack of blue blood that made her so anxious to become a grande dame and bring up her son like a little prince. Arthur Rubinstein, the pianist, who had met Olga in 1916 when the ballet visited San Sebastián, remembered her as "a stupid Russian who liked to brag about her father, who she pretended was a colonel in the Tsar's own regiment. The other dancers assured me that he was only a sergeant."[10] This was an exaggeration, but Olga's pretensions were resented by other members of the company.

Ten years younger than Picasso, Olga had fine regular features, dark reddish hair, green eyes, a small, lithe, dancer's body, and a look of wistful, Slavic melancholy that accorded with the romanticism of classic Russian ballet. Formal photographs reveal Olga to have been a beauty—usually an unsmiling one—although in early snapshots of her with Picasso and Cocteau in Rome, she is actually grinning. Later, she plays up to him, dances for him, takes on different personalities, which might explain the widely varying reactions to her. The celebrated ballerina Alexandra Danilova declared that Olga "was *nothing*—nice but nothing. We couldn't discover what Picasso saw in her."[11] A Soviet ballet historian, the late Genya Smakov, found references to her in an unpublished memoir by someone working for Diaghilev, where she is said to have been "neurotic."[12] On the other hand, Lydia Lopokova—the most intelligent of Diaghilev's ballerinas—was Olga's best friend in the company.

Picasso fell for Olga's vulnerability. He sensed the victim within. She would have appealed to his possessiveness and protectiveness especially when the Russian Revolution cut her off from her family. Her vulnerability would likewise have appealed to Picasso's sadistic side. (The women in his life were expected to read the Marquis de Sade.) In the past year rejection by the two women he had hoped to marry had left him exceedingly vulnerable. Picasso's residual bourgeois streak should also be taken into account. He was thirty-five and wanted to settle down with a presentable wife and have a son. None of his father's three brothers had had any issue, and there was pressure from his mother to produce an heir.

Sexual abstinence was something Picasso had seldom if ever had to face. His two previous mistresses may have shied away from marrying him, but they had been easy enough to seduce. Olga was as unbeddable as the "nice" Malagueña girls that his family had tried to foist on him. "Don't forget Olga who cares for you very much," she wrote on the back of a dramatic photograph of herself in *Firebird*. "Who neglects me, loses me."[13] (Cocteau could not resist using the phrase *qui me néglige me perd* as a caption to a caricature of Bakst he subsequently sent to Olga.)[14] Picasso must have been very much in love to put up with this ukase. Ernest Ansermet, Diaghilev's principal conductor, describes walking back to the Hotel Minerva, where he and the dancers were staying. Olga had the room next to Ansermet's. "I heard Picasso in the passage knocking at her door and Olga on the other side of it saying 'No, no, Monsieur Picasso, I'm not going to let you in.' "[15] Clearly, marriage was his only option.

Diaghilev, who felt responsible for the genteel Russian girls in his company, advised Picasso against marrying Olga. Foreseeing problems with her parents, who were averse to their daughter marrying a mere painter, the impresario told Picasso that he had a much more suitable girl set aside for him. She was currently dancing in South America and would soon be returning to Europe. Picasso would not listen; he was obsessed by Olga. Not that this kept him away from the local brothels, to judge by an address noted down in his Roman sketchbook.[16] "In Rome of an evening," Picasso told Apollinaire, "whores ply their trade in automobiles—at walking pace—they accost their clients with smiles and gestures and stop the car to negotiate the price."[17] From Naples he would send Apollinaire a postcard: "In Naples all the women are beautiful. Everything is easy here,"[18] and, sure enough, the sketchbook he took with him records the

address of a Neapolitan brothel. For an Andalusian, regular visits to a whorehouse would have been an obligatory response to a fiancée's virtuous stand. Another option was an affair with a less virtuous member of the company. Picasso did that too.[19]

Cut off by the war from Russia, Diaghilev and his company led a nomadic life. Their principal wartime base was Rome. Officially the impresario stayed in the Grand Hotel, but he spent most of his time in an apartment in the Marchese Theodoli's palazzo on the Corso that he had rented for Léonide Massine, the handsome twenty-one-year-old dancer, who had been his lover for the previous three years. So as not to compromise himself publicly, Massine had insisted that he and his employer live under separate roofs. That this hot-blooded heterosexual, who was also a cold-blooded operator, should have allowed himself to be captured and caged by the notoriously jealous and possessive Diaghilev is not surprising. In Russia it had been a standard career move for a dancer of either sex to have a rich, influential protector. To negotiate these arrangements, one of the company's dancers, Alexandrov, acted as pimp. Massine's predecessor in Diaghilev's life, the legendary Nijinsky, who was likewise heterosexual, had started off—with his mother's blessing—as the protégé of the rich, young Prince Lvov. The Prince had then handed him on to the Polish Count Tishkievitch, who gave him a piano.[20] Like Diaghilev's previous lover, Dimitri Filosofov, Nijinsky would leave the impresario for a woman; as would Massine.

Exceedingly parsimonious and very ambitious, Massine had everything to gain from this arrangement. Diaghilev had already turned him into a star dancer, a choreographer of near genius and a major collector of modern paintings, including many Picassos and Braques. Sex with Diaghilev was part of the job—"like going to bed with a nice fat old lady,"[21] as he told one of his mistresses, when she asked how he could possibly have done it with Diaghilev.

That Massine was a passionate Hispanophile would prove to be a great bond with Picasso. The previous summer in Madrid, the dancer had agreed to choreograph two ballets with Spanish themes, *Las Meninas*, which would be put on later in 1917, and *Tricorne*, which would not appear until 1919. A small, driven, Spanish-looking Russian with enormous eyes—in some respects a younger version of Picasso—Massine expected the artist to teach him about modern art. He proved so perceptive and imaginative and such a quick learner that over the next ten years he and Picasso would collaborate on four great ballets.

Another bond between Picasso and Massine was a passion for women—a passion that differentiated them from Diaghilev's largely homosexual entourage. Cocteau's presence in Rome made for more pique and intrigue than usual. In the face of Diaghilev's jealousy, Picasso was delighted to provide his fellow womanizer with an alibi for his amorous escapades. After failing to persuade Picasso to spy for him, Diaghilev hired a couple of detectives to take on this job.[22] At the slightest suspicion of infidelity on Massine's part, Diaghilev would have a temper tantrum, attack the furniture with his stick, tear the telephone out of the wall and smash it.

NOTES

[1] Jean Cocteau, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. IX (Lausanne: Marguerat, 1946-51), 246.
[2] Letter from Cocteau to his mother, February 22, 1917, Cocteau 1989, 297.
[3] Picasso sent one of these Villa Medici drawings to the dealer André Level, who wrote him on March 10, 1917 (Archives Picasso): *"Merci du croquis de la villa Médicis, dont vous serez peut être un jour le Directeur."* Level goes on to say *"Revenez-nous avec un tableau de Romaines, frère de celui des Hollandaises, ou, simplement avec des souvenirs agréables."*
[4] Letter from Cocteau to his mother, February 20, 1917, Cocteau 1989, 296.

[5] Letter from Cocteau to his mother, February 22, 1917, ibid., 297. After living with Sert since 1908, Misia was known as Madame Sert, although she was not married to him until 1920.
[6] Cocteau refers to Olga in a letter to Picasso, April 13, 1917 (Archives Picasso) as *"La fille du Général Kloklov."*
[7] The school was run by Yevgenia Pavlovna Sokolova.
[8] Carandente 1998, 37.
[9] Penrose presumably believed that Olga was a general's rather than a colonel's daughter; otherwise he would not have described her as such (Penrose, 201). In her typescript, "A tale of brief love and eternal hatred," Natalia Semenyova, the only Russian art historian to write about Olga, likewise mistakenly claimed she was a noblewoman.
[10] Rubinstein 1980, 150.
[11] Menaker-Rothschild, 49 n. 8.
[12] Genya Smakov in conversation with the author.
[13] Baldassari 1998, 96.
[14] Letter from Cocteau to "Mademoiselle Olga Koclowa" [*sic*], April 21, 1917, Archives Picasso.
[15] Ernest Anserment, *Ecrits sur la musique* (Neuchatel: Langages, 1971), 26.
[16] MP Carnets I, cat. 19 (MP 1867).
[17] Postcard from Picasso to Gaullame Apollinaire, February 1917, Caizergues and Seckel, 144.
[18] Postcard from Picasso to Apollinaire, March 10, 1917, ibid., 145.
[19] According to Laurence Madeline, former Conservateur, Archives Picasso.
[20] Buckle 1971, 56-7.
[21] Recounted to the author by Tatiana Lieberman.
[22] Sokolova 1960, 170.

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