

# The Early Days of Pablo Picasso

*A Memoir of the Celebrated Modernist  
Painter by a Friend and Contemporary*



By MAX JACOB

**A** **WHOLE** volume is needed when we try to speak of Picasso, and when he dies—which may God defer as long as possible!—we shall need many. Consider that here is a man who is only forty-one and who has modified the whole of painting. (He was born October 24, 1881, at Malaga.) Yes, all painting! for I defy the most distant to ignore the new demands he has made upon the art. And not painting alone: I have seen during fifteen years, first in the poor attic of Montmartre, 13 rue Ravignan, then in finer studios, 33 boulevard de Chichy, or 5 rue Schölchez, finer but always bare, for Picasso has that mysterious force, the spirit of poverty—I have seen workers in every art of this generation fired and tempered by his discriminating advice.

### *Picasso's Sarcasm*

**A** **PLEASANTRY** of Picasso's would serve as guide-post for a whole life-time. He has a terribly sarcastic mind—his wonderful understanding of realities expresses itself in biting words which attack stupidity and folly in defense of his vast ideals of an entirely new art. I verily believe that he has even influenced the fashions in dress for men and women. On the days of "vernissage", great days on which all Paris gazed upon his faithful followers who, proud and envied, filled the exhibition rooms, the costumes of the women who surrounded him did more to mold the new spirit than did those of the smart women at the races. His genius is to uncover the first principles of art and to build upon them; thus he has made the fortune of several artists by creating a sculpture without stone, a sculpture which makes use of any material. The day that he applies himself to architecture or to designing furniture he will revolutionize them as he revolutionized the theater with his settings for *Parade*, the famous synthetic horse and the two cubiste managers; as he revolutionized dancing with the dance of the "Petite Américaine" in the same piece, made up of gestures taken from everyday life.

Apollinaire, that great exponent of the new poetry, often worked only to please him. Salmon would have torn up a poem, his best,

at a joking criticism by Picasso. You perceive what this man was in his youth; today his field of action is enlarged; it is from the stage of the opera that he speaks to the artistic world and the settings which he sometimes consents to make for the Russian ballets are an education for the whole world, thanks to the illustrated papers.

Upon his first arrival in Paris, Picasso met with success. It was in '99. He came from Barcelona, where his father was Director of the Royal Academy of Painting. He seemed but a child; his great black eyes which have an expression so tense when he looks at one, so mocking when he speaks, so tender when he is moved, glowed with life under his low, wide, positive forehead; his hair was coarse, thick and smooth; today one or two silver threads shine in its blackness.

At that time he had a face of ivory, and was as beautiful as a Greek boy; irony, thought and effort have brought slight lines to the waxen countenance of this little Napoleonic man. He is today a dandy, albeit an unaffected one; he was then a Spaniard with wide hat and enveloping cloak. For a long time he wore the caps and sweaters of the sportsman; in fact, it was he who started this fashion in the world of art, as well as that of shaving oneself completely. When he came to Paris, he was accompanied by a manager who arranged for an exhibition at Vollard's. It was the manager who wrote me, in answer to a word of admiration, to come to the studio in the Place Clichy.

At that time, Picasso was living the life of the "provincial" in Paris; he wore a high hat and spent his evenings in the music halls. He had won fame there by his portraits of actresses in the public eye. Jeanne Bloch, Otero . . . all the stars of the Exposition. Ah, what changes, since, in him and about him! What an amazing evolution! It was a fortune; this fiery little boy of eighteen made two pictures a day, and the rue Lafitte paid a hundred francs apiece for them. Just think, two hundred francs a day before the war and for a child! Those paintings are priceless today; the intelligent museums have bought them.

I arrived, then, at the Place Clichy. I found a band of impoverished Spaniards sitting on the floor in the fine studio, eating white



1907

beans—for Picasso is profoundly kind, as he is profoundly honest, sensitive and sincere. There is much that is fatherly in this sarcastic dilettante, in this almost mystical knight. No one will ever know how much money he has given away, how many artists he has provided with success, nor how many have enriched themselves through but a single spark from his great flaming love of Art.

They kept me for the evening and half through the night—we were friends! That was in '99—we are friends still, I trust. Picasso, who now speaks French as well as an Academician and better, for his language has a color and a precision that might well be envied by the best French stylist, Picasso in those days spoke only Spanish. And yet we used to talk the whole night through; the manager slept, the Catalonians left—our enthusiastic youth found means of understanding each other. He made an immense portrait of me. Unfortunately, this genius has several times lacked canvases; one impecunious day he was forced to re-cover this masterpiece to create another.

### *The "Blue" Period*

**O**NE day he left Paris, perhaps because he had glimpsed new paths in art and felt the need of solitude to ripen reflection, perhaps because he had troubles which I do not remember. How many times Picasso has abandoned successes which have seemed too easy! Three times at least, to my knowledge.

All this was before the Exposition. When he returned from Spain he had his first taste of misery; it was in 1902, he brought back those celebrated blue paintings which were often done on wood. No one would buy them. A famous dealer who would be much vexed were I to name him, said to me literally—"Your friend has gone mad." The same man, one day when I was seeking to interest him in Picasso, who was ill, and in a landscape full of



1910

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sublime melancholy, said—"The church is crooked." There are you experts! Very accurate connoisseurs, but prophets, no!—unless they are prompted. Poor child, he lived at the Hôtel du Maroc, in the rue de Seine, in a room whose ceiling sloped so sharply that his iron bed could hardly fit in. This bed was covered with drawings rather reminiscent of Puvis de Chavannes; no one wanted them. The house still stands; I think it is opposite the rue Jacob. How did he eat? The faithful few were as poor as he and Paris ignores those who will not follow her, until she begins to follow them. One day he succeeded in selling a pastel to a dealer for a hundred francs and went back to Spain. This picture represented a woman with a child holding an orange at the edge of the sea.

*Père Vernin*

**WHEN** he returned in 1904, he settled down, if we can call it that, at No. 13 rue Ravignan. It is today the Place Émile Goudeau, a little sloping village square on Montmartre with crumbling benches under the trees. He took his meals at Père Vernin's in the rue Cavalotti, behind the Hippodrome, which was not yet the Cinéma Gaumont. The name of Père Vernin will be historic when all the young men to whom he has served his stew have attained celebrity; he was yet another whose fortune would have been made by Picasso if only the friends he attracted there had been any less hard-up than he, or as honest! That was the time of earnest meetings and gay insouciance. In the rue Ravignan and the rue Cavalotti, towards 1905 and later, poets, painters, musicians and actors flocked to Picasso. Montparnasse, which had only lately become a rival to Montmartre, came with Paul Fort. I used to see there Alfred Jarry, the douanier Rousseau, Georges Enesco, Jules Romains, Vildrac, Marie Laurencin, Fargue, Henri Hertz, Jean Richard Bloch, Georges Duhamel, Roger Allard, Mercereau



1918

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*Picasso*

and a hundred, a thousand others.

You understand that I am speaking of 1905; since then, Picasso has known almost every important artist in Europe. In those days he did not yet know the prodigious Jean Cocteau, nor Stravinsky, nor Satie. After the café of the Père Vernin, it was the turn of Azon's to be crowded. It was situated on the little square, just opposite the huge brown doorway of the studio. The studio was on the ground floor of a house which, from the square, seemed to have no upper stories, but seen from neighboring streets, revealed at least one. A veritable barn, Picasso's studio, with beams and walls of ill-joined boards and a crazy floor on which one could not tread at night without awakening the neighbors. I remember that a miserable vegetable-vendor, M. Sorrieul, complained that the chain of Picasso's dog, the admirable Frika, kept him from sleeping. In that house have lived many men, famous today—among them, Max Orlan, André Salmon, Pierre Reverdy, Van Dongen, Maurice Raynal, Juan Gris. Good Madame Coudray, the concierge, knew how to be kind when the rent was due, and how to tolerate noise. Oh! dear days of hardship, of work, of friendship and of joy. Several studios in the house were cellars, and the stairs were never swept. Everything was of wood.

*Guillaume Apollinaire*

**O**F all the young and brilliant friends who came to the rue Ravignan, Picasso preferred Guillaume Apollinaire, that great lyric poet whom the war, alas! has killed. One day Picasso took me to a bar in the rue d'Amsterdam (this was in 1905) to let me meet an extraordinary man. This is not the place to describe Guillaume Apollinaire—but how he dazzled us, how he charmed us! and what a place he held in Picasso's life. What a spectacle to see the friendship of those



1919.

two geniuses who understood each other so well.

Apollinaire introduced him to Matisse, Derain, Picabia, Vlaminck and Braque. We used to dine often at Matisse's house, and I believe it was there that Picasso first saw a negro statuette. He grew to admire negro sculpture so much that he gave deep thought to the underlying principles of that art. Although Picasso has never taken me into his confidence as to the origin of his discovery of cubism, I have often thought that it was the application of the rules of negro sculpture which brought it about. He groped a long time toward this discovery, and his work absorbed him to the point of burying him in silence for hours at a time; "Go and amuse yourselves", he said, in the voice of the genius enslaved by himself, to Apollinaire and me, one evening when he was feverishly covering sheet after sheet of paper with signs and figures—sitting at the table which served also for his meals. Picasso "made" negro art as he "made" the work of Rousseau.

Picasso was also very fond of Salmon. He greatly likes clever people, and Salmon has in his cleverness a combination of tenderness and biting humor which gives great charm to his experience of Parisian life. It would need a volume, I repeat, to tell about Picasso and those who have surrounded him. He reigned on the Butte Montmartre as our Lord reigned in Palestine. Deaths, rivalries, removals, successes, have separated these hard-working young men, but I am persuaded that in his fine apartment on the rue La Boétie, Picasso never thinks without emotion of the friendly ties, the gaiety, and the discoveries of that poor and happy time. For a vivid picture of the life on Montmartre which centered about Picasso, one should read "La Nègresse du Sacré Cœur", a novel by Salmon.

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