

FACE TO FACE. PICASSO AND THE OLD MASTERS

Michael FitzGerald

This exhibition offers visitors an exceptional opportunity to directly experience major works by Pablo Picasso side-by-side with some of the great Old Master paintings in the collection of the Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla. Visitors will be able to judge for themselves the fundamental importance of Picasso's relationship to the past -- how the art of the Old Masters both inspired his admiration and drove his ambition to surpass his predecessors. By juxtaposing paintings by Picasso with those by El Greco, Zurbarán and five other artists, viewers will be able to examine how deeply Picasso valued the traditions of the Spanish Old Masters and distinguish the primary role their paintings played in his invention of the radical departures from tradition that define twentieth-century modernism. As Picasso proclaimed, "Cubism is Spanish in origin, and it was I who created Cubism." With the 50th anniversary of Picasso's death in 1973 nearly upon us, it is essential to understand his place in Spanish art.

Moreover, history provides an important precedent for the unusual structure of *FACE TO FACE. PICASSO AND THE OLD MASTERS*. When Picasso donated eleven paintings to the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1947, the director of national museums offered him the exceptional opportunity to see his paintings displayed next to pictures in the Louvre. With all of the paintings in the Louvre at his disposal, Picasso replied, "First of all, with the Zurbarán." The exhibition will recreate this experience for visitors.

Born in Málaga in 1880, Picasso first encountered the Spanish Masters through his early training by his father, the artist and teacher José Ruiz y Blasco, who instilled in his son a respect for the accomplishments of Golden Age painters of Seville and the region of Andalusia. During months spent in Madrid in 1897, Picasso deepened his understanding of the Masters by studying works in the Prado. Late in his career, he responded directly to his predecessors by painting a large series of paintings after Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. There is no doubt that Picasso was profoundly inspired by the Spanish Masters throughout his long career.

Even though Picasso spent most of his life in France, he always affirmed his Spanish identity, and his devotion to Spanish Masters played a key role in maintaining his ties to Spanish culture. Moreover, the remarkable diversity of these Masters' achievements offered Picasso unconventional models that inspired him both to emulate and transform traditions.

The Spanish Masters of the Golden Age responded to the classical traditions of ancient Greece and Rome in significantly different ways than their contemporaries in Italy or France. One distinguished scholar of Spanish art, Jonathan Brown, has defined this difference by coining the term "counterclassical" to characterize Spanish artists' freedom from the constraints of classical traditions. Unlike many European artists of the Renaissance and Baroque, the painters of Spain adopted a wider range of models than those offered by ancient Greece or Rome. They showed remarkable independence by embracing styles that purists excluded from the classical canon.

This openness to alternative aesthetic traditions was in many ways a reflection of the tremendous territorial expanse of the Spanish Empire. Artists and art works from the Low Countries flowed

into Spanish collections, planting the ideas of northern medieval painting as well as Renaissance perspective and proportion. At another extreme, Spanish control of the Kingdom of Naples offered access to the new realism of Caravaggio and his followers. This aesthetic eclecticism prepared Spanish patrons to embrace the radical innovations of El Greco.

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The remarkable selection of the collection of the Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla enables visitors to examine how Picasso engaged three foundational themes of the Spanish Masters that shaped his own art in the twentieth century: realism, artifice, and the Grand Manner. These three themes map not only Picasso's roots in Spanish traditions but also encompass the great variety of Spanish art.

Bridging from the idealism of Renaissance art to naturalism, the theorist and painter, Francisco Pacheco offered Picasso a compelling example of Spanish artists' profound commitment to the harsh materiality of life and the pictorial invention that created such lifelike images. A painter committed to raising the social and intellectual status of artists beyond that of common craftsmen, Pacheco employed his skill to create portraits, such as the *Portrait of a Lady and a Gentleman in Prayer* (c. 1630), to capture both the austere costumes and hard-bitten faces of the reverent couple. Throughout his career, Picasso reclaimed the distinctive dress of seventeenth-century Spain, even draping his future bride, the Russian ballerina, Olga Khokhlova, in a make-shift mantilla in 1917. He deeply mined the realism of portraits like Pacheco's to inspire his own confrontations with physical decay and ugliness in his late work. In *Bust of a Man* (1970), Picasso intensifies the linear precision characteristic of Pacheco to create an image that captures both the brutal crudity of this head and the imaginative invention that makes the image possible.

When Picasso said, "Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand," he echoed the ideas of his Spanish predecessors. Indeed, he spoke specifically of Velázquez's portraits of Philip IV, saying that "we believe in the one painted by Velázquez, for he convinces us by his right of might." Here we address the full artifice of the Grand Manner, as shown in Bernardo Lorente Germán's *Portrait of the Infante don Felipe* (1730). Picasso's fascination with this tradition extended across his career and became a pervasive inspiration during his late period. Only a few years before his death, Picasso painted an imposing *Bust of a Man* (1970) that both invigorates and dethrones this portrait tradition. His painting preserves the commanding address of these figures and the luxurious array of colors and textures that confirm the subject's status. Yet, Picasso's fluid brushstrokes ignore details of the man's features or costume in favor of creating a haunting presence highlighted by the brilliant strokes of red encircling his right eye. Picasso both vividly revived the tradition and completely remade it for the late twentieth-century.

Picasso's two most enduring links to the Spanish Masters were the art of Velázquez and El Greco. Velázquez's influence was primarily very early and late in Picasso's career, but El Greco remained an inspiration across many decades and provides the fullest expression of Picasso's roots in the Old Masters. His obsession with El Greco during the last years of the nineteenth century is evident in the thin, attenuated figures that populate his sketchbooks and his inscription on one page, "Yo, el Greco." Moreover, he claimed that El Greco "is Cubist in construction," declaring him a forefather of that ground-breaking movement.

El Greco's portrait of his son Jorge Manuel (1600-1605) is one of the glories of the Sevilla MBA. It was also one of Picasso's greatest inspirations. In 1950, he made one of his rare acknowledgements of his specific source by painting his own version of the portrait in a Cubist style that both honors and mocks El Greco's masterpiece. Twenty years later, he returned to the painting in a new variation. No longer strictly a portrait of Jorge Manuel, *Bust of a Man* (1970) preserves the elegance of El Greco's portrait and elevates the status of the subject by substituting a sword for the palette and brushes in El Greco's painting. Yet, Picasso also pays homage to El Greco as an inspiration for Cubism. The elongated head of El Greco's son becomes even more extended, and the artifice of El Greco's conception is revealed by Picasso's exaggeration of the interplay of profiles and glances. Insinuated in El Greco's subtle composition, these pictorial devices become essential building blocks of Picasso's Cubism.

Picasso's dialogue with El Greco encompasses the full range of his lifelong obsession with the Spanish Old Masters and demonstrates the central importance of these Masters for the development of his revolutionary art.

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