



PABLO PICASSO

Femme

Oil on panel

25 1/8 x 18 1/2 in. - 64 x 47 cm.

Signed *Picasso* and dated *I - II - XXX* (lower left)

Provenance

Galerie Georges Petit & Etienne Bignou, Paris (1932)

Galerie Beyeler, Basel

Private Collection, London

Delbanco Arts, New York

Acquired from the above in 1988

Sotheby's, New York, Impressionist Modern Art Evening Sale, 3 May 2011

Acquired by present owner at above auction

Exhibited

Paris, Galerie Georges Petit & Zürich, Kunsthaus, *Picasso*, 1932, no. 195

Basel, Galerie Beyeler, *Surréalisme et Peinture*, 1974, no. 40, illustrated in color in the catalogue

Minneapolis, Houston, San Francisco, *Picasso-Braque-Léger*, 1975-76, no. 22, illustrated in color in the catalogue

Basel, Kunstmuseum, *Picasso*, 1976, no. 57, illustrated in the catalogue

London, Hayward Gallery, *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed*, 1978, no. 9.63a, illustrated in the catalogue

St. Etienne, Musée d'Art et d'Industrie, *L'art dans les années 30 en France*, 1979, no. 236, illustrated in the catalogue

Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; Brussels, Musée d'Ixelles, *L'aventure de Pierre Loeb: La Galerie Pierre Paris 1924-64*, 1979, no. 161a, illustrated in the catalogue

Berkeley, University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley, *Anxious Visions -- Surrealist Art*, 1990-91

San Francisco, M.H. de Young Memoria Museum, 1998-99 (on loan)

Literature

Christian Zervos, *Pablo Picasso, Oeuvres de 1926 à 1932*, vol. 7, Paris, 1955, no. 300, illustrated pl. 124

John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso, The Triumphant Years, 1917-1932*, New York, 2007, p. 391 & 547

Picasso by Picasso, His First Museum Exhibition 1932 (exhibition catalogue), Kunsthaus, Zürich, 2010-11, illustrated in situ p. 25 and in color p. 242

Catalogue Note

One of the most loaded images of Picasso's Surrealist production is his terrifyingly fantastic depiction of his wife, Olga, abstracted beyond the point of recognition. *Femme* and its antecedent composition, *Baigneuse assise (Olga)*, painted two days earlier and now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, are among Picasso's most memorable pictures from 1930, as they are emblematic of both the personal and professional forces at play that year. This picture was so important to Picasso's creative development that he selected it for a landmark self-curated exhibition in 1932 at Galerie Georges Petit in Paris and the Kunsthaus in Zürich, where it hung alongside his most important compositions to date.

Femme is among the harrowing images that belong to a small series known as Picasso's "Bone" pictures, inspired by 16th century anatomical drawings by Andreas Vesalius. Picasso's interest in the intricacy of skeletal design was well known, and over the years he amassed a collection of animal bones for personal study. "I have an absolute passion for bones," Picasso once told Brassai. "On any piece of bone at all, I always find the fingerprints of the god who amused himself with shaping it." During the last weeks of 1929 and until February 1930, Picasso occupied himself with piecing together skeletal images of a 'woman's head, using shapes that resembled pelvis, jaw, rib and thigh bones. The majority of the Bone paintings are done on wooden panels because, as John Richardson tells us, "canvas could not provide the unyielding hardness that Picasso hoped to gain" (J. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 319).

In later years, Picasso would admit to the historian William Rubin that the present work and the related pictures at MoMA were depictions of his aggrieved wife. Olga Picasso, transformed here into

an fierce *vagina dentata*, was at the time the victim of Picasso's unapologetic infidelity and domestic defiance. Although she supposedly knew nothing of Picasso's liaison with Marie-Thérèse by this point, the couple's marriage was in turmoil and Picasso vented his frustrations through these radical manipulations of form.

Writing about the picture in the Museum of Modern Art, John Richardson points out that Olga was perhaps not the only source of inspiration for these pictures. "With its porcelain finish, sharp focus, eerie serenity, and cracked-open Vesalian head, this painting has come to be seen as a surrealist icon," Richardson writes. "We should, however, remember that the Seated Bather followed closely on the succès de scandale of Salvador Dalí's first one-man exhibition in Paris (November 20-December 5, 1929). The surrealist wonder works in this show -- among them the *Lugubrious Game*, acquired by the Noailles, and the *Great Masturbator* -- apparently left Picasso feeling challenged to go one better than Dalí..." (*ibid.*, p. 392). The likeness of the present work to a praying mantis, an insect that was a particular favorite of Dalí, is telling of Picasso's receptivity to the aesthetic predilections of his contemporaries. Richardson continues: "Surrealist painters and poets had a collective male fantasy about these insects. Some even collected them in the hope of seeing the female bite the head off the male at the climax of mating. As a result, this had become a surrealist cliché, not least in the work of Masson and Ernst. Picasso would have been at pains to avoid it" (*ibid.*). Indeed, more than any other work in the Surrealist corpus, Picasso's arresting interpretation here has become emblematic of this preoccupation. But what is even more ironic than Picasso's denial of associations is the particular fate of this picture: Initially inspired by the fragility of life and its pleasures, *Femme* has become an enduring image of the most creative artistic movement of the 20th century.