

“Picasso’s Lithograph(s) ‘The Bull (s)’ and the History of Art in Reverse”

Irving Lavin

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It may have occurred to some of you to wonder why, of all things, I should want to introduce a discussion of *Art Without History* with a paper on Picasso. The reason is partly that in this domain as in others, Picasso just seems to have felt everything, seen everything, understood everything. But another closely related reason lies in the paradoxical fact that Picasso was surely one of the most historically conscious and self-conscious artists who ever lived—we certainly have far more signed and dated works by him, including even sequentially numbered works done on the same day, than by any other artist. In Picasso the extremes touch; Picasso embodied the great crisis of conscience and the conscious implicit in the realization that the idea of history and the idea of non-history are inevitable counter-parts. The sense of time and the sense of the timeless are like Siamese twins, or binary stars forever entwined in a fateful embrace uniting the past to the present in our human, all too human, search for meaning.

On November 2, 1945, when Picasso entered the lithographic workshop of Fernand Mourlot in Rue de Chabrol in Paris, he took up a medium he had practiced before only rarely, and never very assiduously. On that day, however, he began a veritable orgy of lithographic creativity that lasted four months, during which he worked at least 12 hour days almost without interruption. The hectic activity was described as follows by one of the assistants 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 12 to 15 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 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 he 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 female heads, a pair of nudes, and 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”—was pulled, reserved for the artist. In each case the suite was not made from separate lithographic stones, but from successive re-workings of the same stone. The description confirms the evidence of the actual prints, that what possessed Picasso was precisely the process itself, the sequence of states and their cumulative effect as a series.

As far as I can discover, the world had never seen anything quite like it. There was certainly nothing new about works in series on a single theme (think of Monet’s haystacks or the serial sculptures of Matisse); and there was certainly nothing new about multiple states of a single print—although the thirty or more re-workings to which some of Picasso’s own earlier etched plates had been subjected, must have broken all records on that score. Two points mainly distinguish the lithographic series. The separate re-workings were treated quite differently than heretofore: instead of pulling a small number of trial proofs—1, 2, 3—before a much larger run from the final version, Picasso now ordered a fixed and unusually large number of prints—either 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 prints made from them were trials in the ordinary sense; they were progressive transformations of a basic theme that were conceived as a unified, if not wholly pre-determined, series, and meant to be compared with one another. It is as if Picasso had set out to tell a story, an epic, almost cinematographic narrative that recounted the life-history of a work of art. The second great difference from the earlier suites is that the formal and conceptual sequence moved in the opposite direction. Normally, the successive states of prints, including Picasso’s own, become richer and more complex. Now, instead, the compositions became simpler and more schematic—more “abstract,” if that word has any sense in this context.

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 the famous 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 intact, in spite of appearances.”

In engraving and etching, the normal sequence of states, from relative simplicity to relative complexity, is consonant with the technique—it is extremely difficult to expunge the marks in a metal plate. Erasures are much easier in lithography, though Picasso evidently now also pushed this medium much farther than the experts thought possible. 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 kind of 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.

Needless to say, the process of simplification and abstraction had been inherent in the Cubist enterprise, and can be followed implicitly through many of Picasso's preparatory studies for individual works. In these lithographs, however, the process is objectified and has become the subject of an object lesson in the history of art. The lesson, moreover, is conceived in a special way, which can best be learned from the history of the bull.

Several factors suggest that the bull was, in fact, the main offspring of Picasso's lithographic orgy. He started it after the other three series, but then worked on it with particular intensity; for a time, he even dropped everything else to pursue the bull to its end, or should one say its beginning? The bull also has a special place in the participants' recollections of the time 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 diminish, 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 would 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 remembered 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 had involved..." Picasso's joke about the butcher and the housewife reveals part of what he had in mind: to reduce the bull to its constituent parts, to recover the *disjecta membra* of his dream-bull—of pure line to an elemental, disembodied, quintessential bullishness.

Another insight is suggested by one of the most striking aspects of the animal's metamorphosis—duly observed by the perspicacious assistant—the progressive reduction in the relative size of the head until it becomes barely perceptible as a totally impersonal zero. The head, surely, is a metaphor for rationality and what Picasso was headed for was a pre- or proto-rational state of illumined absent-mindedness, before the bull acquired the bulky accretions of sophisticated western culture.

The whole process might be thought of as a kind of genetic historicism in which, to borrow a biological concept, ontogeny repeats phylogeny—that is, the history of the individual recapitulates the history of the species. Picasso's bull really does have binary genealogy. Apart from the animal's more obvious mythological and sporting associations (that is, the Minotaur and the corrida)—through which they are certainly related to Goya's etched cycle of floating dream-bulls—the primordial beasts of Paleolithic art must have also figured vividly in Picasso's imagination. The final state of the lithographic bull has, in fact, 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 kind of 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 (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 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 same schools. Its essence has evaporated, and I make you a present of what remains'."

The primordial purity of expression emphasized here had particular meaning for Picasso, meaning so deep that it motivated the explanation he gave André Malraux of the underlying 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 Egyptian and Chaldean sculpture were, and his interest was not, as was Matisse’s and Braque’s, merely formal, as if they were just like any other good sculptures. He realized instead that the Blacks were magic things, intercessors, mediators, fetishes, weapons, and he described the *Demoiselles d’Avignon* as his first exorcism painting. This link between what he called “the spirit,” “the unconscious,” “emotion,” and the exorcism of the accumulated legacy of western tradition, is the phylogenetic aspect of Picasso’s enterprise.

One might say with equal aptness that as Picasso’s lithographic series become increasingly simple and simpleminded, they also 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 could draw like Raphael, and it took him many years to learn to draw like a child. This dictum itself has a remarkable history. It first appears in an anonymous article in the London *Times* in 1956, on the occasion of Picasso’s seventy-fifth birthday; it was reported that on visiting an exhibition of children’s art Picasso had remarked that at their age he could draw like Raphael; period. The writer comments that such personal arrogance would be worthy only of a man of Picasso’s greatness. Two days later Herbert Read, the great English art critic, wrote a corrective letter to the editor of the *Times* explaining that the remark, which he quoted in full, was made to him during a visit he and the artist made to the exhibition. Taking the comment metaphorically, Read thought that, on the contrary, it showed the humility that is a characteristic of true genius. In my view the observation was neither arrogant nor humble nor metaphorical, but a simple—and perhaps somewhat rueful—statement of fact. In another context, Picasso said of a child’s drawing: “At that boy’s age I was making drawings that were completely academic. Their minuteness, their exactitude, frightens me. My father was a professor of drawing, and it was probably he who pushed me prematurely in that direction.” In any case, it may not be coincidental that the children’s exhibition, which had been arranged by Herbert Read himself, was shown in Paris in 1945, shortly before the lithograph series began.

What the lithographic process enabled Picasso to do was to merge, in the evolution of a single work, two conceptions of the history of man—one cultural and rooted in a pre-rationalistic state of society, the other psychological and rooted in the pre-sophisticated 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, significantly in one 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. The second, Arcadian or Pastoral State, includes the invention of the practical and the fine arts, and here Cole shows

the invention of painting as a young boy drawing a childish stick figure on a stone, which, incidentally, bears Cole's own initials. The difference from Cole, of course, is that Picasso was not motivated by an antiquarian historicism but by the search for a modern and universally valid expressive idiom. The history of art thus leads to an art without history that seeks to exorcise the past and discover the magic, the fetish—the will-o-the-wisp, if you will—of man's humanity.

Finally, it must be said that in their deliberateness and coherence the lithographic series seems distinctly pedagogical; they have the consequential, demonstrative quality of academic 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 history but also in graphic method. Indeed, the prints strike me as ironic but serious shifts into reverse of the classic vehicle of European visual sophistication, with which Picasso must have been all too familiar in his youth—the drawing manual, the academic course in draughtsmanship which intended, through a series of increasingly complex states, to change the simple and perhaps mystified neophyte into the divine Raphael. Seen in this light, the specific nature of Picasso's method becomes crucial: it is not merely a matter of progressive simplification and abstraction; in each series line tends increasingly to predominate, and the ferocious bull is ultimately subdued by a line 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 generation of this ethereal and apocalyptic beast. By his reversal of tradition, Picasso seems to have given shape at last to that mystical ideal of *Disegno Interno* of which artists had been dreaming since the Renaissance.