BOOKS JULY 22, 2019 ISSUE

HOW PICASSO'S MUSE BECAME A MASTER

Françoise Gilot was the artist's lover and pupil. Then she wanted more.

By Alexandra Schwartz

July 15, 2019

Picasso called Gilot "the woman who says no," and their courtship was a playful battle for dominance. **Photograph by Gjon Mili / The LIFE Picture Collection / Getty**

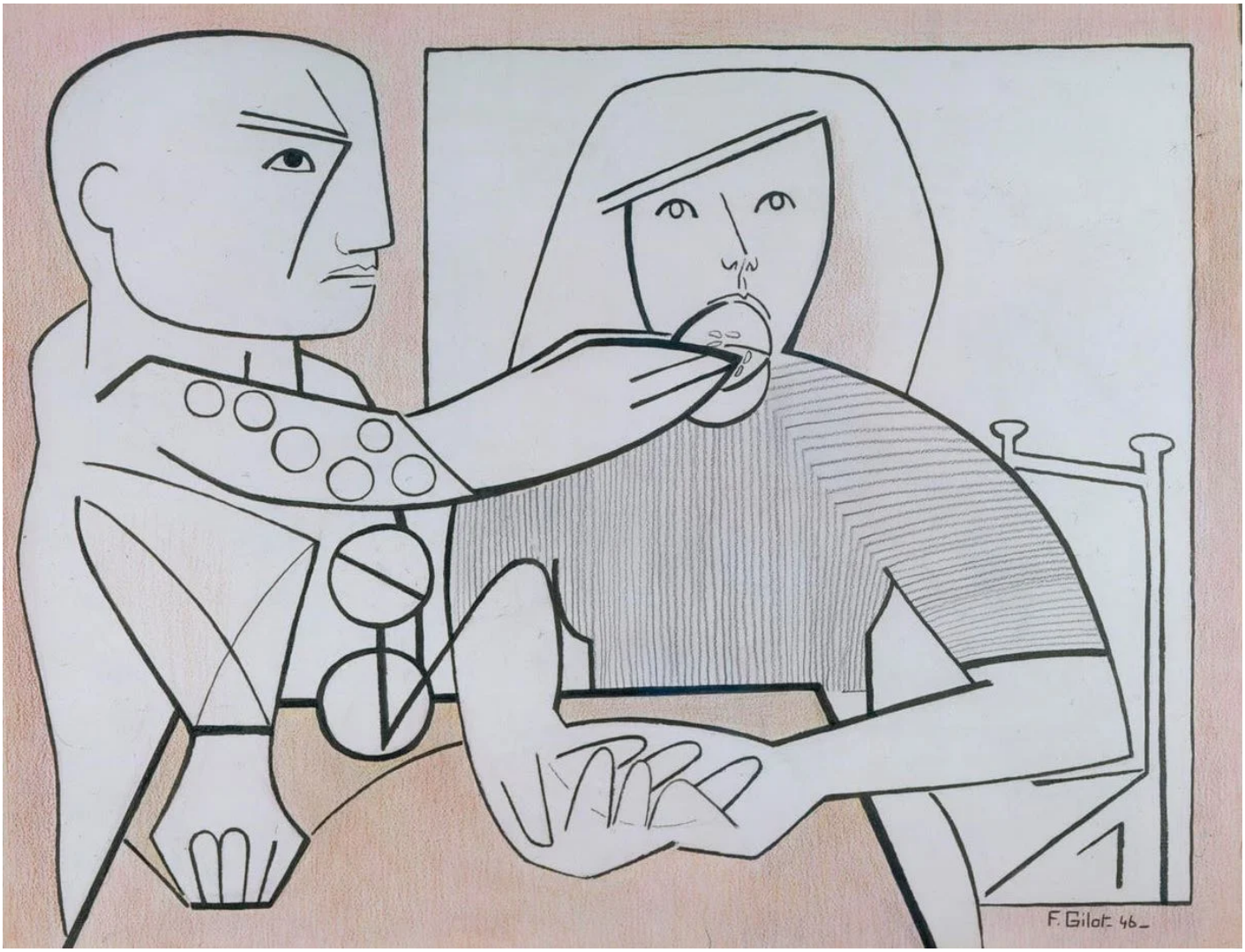
In 1946, not long after she fell in love with Pablo Picasso, Françoise Gilot made a painting called "Adam Forcing Eve to Eat an Apple." Two flat, angular figures sit at a table. The woman placidly clasps her hands in front of her as the man—bald, blocky, with one dark, piercing eye shown in profile—thrusts the fruit into her mouth. Temptation, knowledge, punishment, exile: these are things, in Gilot's version of Genesis, that come from man, even if it is woman who will be blamed. The same year, Gilot moved in with Picasso. A friend warned that she was headed for catastrophe. "I told her she was probably right, but I felt it was the kind of catastrophe I didn't want to avoid," Gilot recalls in her remarkable 1964 memoir, "Life with Picasso," written with the

art critic Carlton Lake, and recently reissued by New York Review Books Classics. In the painting, the woman's eyes are clear, and wide open.

Gilot and Picasso met in May, 1943, at Le Catalan, a Left Bank restaurant near the building on the Rue des Grands-Augustins where Picasso lived and worked. She was twenty-one, and "already felt that painting was my whole life." Picasso, forty years older, was sitting with his lover Dora Maar, the "weeping woman" of his paintings from the late thirties, and brought over a bowl of cherries, to flirt. Later, he liked to say that he had painted Gilot during his Blue Period, before she was born. Gilot, too, composes the scene like a painting: the red of the cherries is set against the green of her turban, which is echoed by the "intense bronze-green eyes" of the glowering Dora Maar.

Green: the color of envy. Maar was hardly the only woman in Picasso's life. He was still married, to Olga Khokhlova, a minor Russian aristocrat and former Ballets Russes dancer. That union was a disaster—one look at the saw-toothed grotesques that he painted during their separation will tell you more than you want to know about his feelings for her—but French law prevented them from divorcing. Then there was Marie-Thérèse Walter, athletic and sunny, whom he had seduced on the street when she was seventeen and he was forty-five. She and their daughter, Maya, lived in an apartment near his, and Maar lived in another; much to his amusement, the women despised each other. Picasso expected Maar, a noted Surrealist photographer, to make herself completely available to him, so she sat at home all day, in case he might call. After he took up with Gilot, Maar had a breakdown. When he went to see her, she confronted him with the truth: "As an artist you may be extraordinary, but morally speaking you're worthless."

Picasso did not like to hear this, but he didn't disagree. There were two kinds of women, he said, goddesses and doormats. Gilot diagnosed him with a Bluebeard complex, which "made him want to cut off the heads of all the women he had collected in his little private museum":



"Adam Forcing Eve to Eat an Apple," from 1946. Courtesy the Elkon Gallery, New York

But he didn't cut the heads entirely off. He preferred to have life go on and to have all those women who had shared his life at one moment or another still letting out little peeps and cries of joy or pain and making a few gestures like disjointed dolls, just to prove that there was some life left in them, that it hung by a thread, and that he held the other end of the thread.

The Bluebeard story is one of escape: just as he is about to behead yet another wife, her brothers swoop in and save her. So is Gilot's, but she did the saving herself. After ten years and two children with Picasso—Claude, born in 1947, and Paloma, born in 1949—she left him, becoming, in the Picasso mythology, the only one of "his" women to do so of her own accord. That distinction conferred on her a morbid celebrity, as if she were the sole survivor of a plane crash. Reporters camped outside her door. Even Picasso was impressed. He had Gilot prance in on horseback to open a bullfight hosted in his honor at Vallauris, the Riviera town where they had lived—a final tribute to a worthy adversary. Things were uglier behind the scenes. When Gilot told Picasso that she wanted to "live with my own generation and the problems of my time," he put a curse on her head:

Even if you think people like you, it will only be a kind of curiosity they will have about a person whose life has touched mine so intimately. And you'll be left with only the taste of ashes in your mouth. For you, reality is finished; it ends right here. If you attempt to take a step outside my reality—which has become yours, inasmuch as I found you when you were young and unformed and I burned everything around you—you're headed straight for the desert.

He was wrong—mostly. For one thing, Gilot ended up happily married to Jonas Salk, who was doubtless secure enough in his own accomplishments to like her for reasons that had nothing to do with Picasso. And she went on to have an admired career as an artist. Gilot is ninety-seven now; she has been painting nearly as long as Picasso did, and is enjoying something of a revival. In October, I went to Sotheby's to watch a curator interview her about a new edition, from Taschen, of fanciful travel sketchbooks that she made in Venice, India, and Senegal. Gilot, still beautiful in a navy-blue suit and knotted silk scarf, was lucid, witty, and pitilessly dry in the French way. Though she has given numerous interviews on Picasso over the years, her interlocutor had evidently been advised not to make any mention of him: this was her time.

But it is true, too, that Picasso branded Gilot. She became the symbolic rebel, the muse who got away. He had marked her reality, and she repaid him, in "Life with Picasso," by signing her name to his.

Her book ends with an act of rupture, but it begins with one, too. Gilot was the only child of a wealthy agronomist who, like other disappointed haut-bourgeois fathers of the time (Simone de Beauvoir's comes to mind), compensated for having a daughter by raising her as a son. He decided that she would become a lawyer, but she had a sense of calling. A self-portrait made the year that she met Picasso shows a sober young woman resolutely approaching her canvas:

Until then I had been cushioned by a kind of cocoon that my milieu formed around me. I had the impression that the noises of life had been reaching me so muted that all connection with reality was strained out. But I knew that an artist draws from his direct experience of life whatever quality of vision he brings to his work and that I had to break out of the cocoon.

Study for "Mother and Child," from 1952. Courtesy the Elkon Gallery, New York

Gilot informed her father that she was giving up the law for art. In response, he beat her, cut off her income, and tried to get her committed to an insane asylum. She went to live with her grandmother, gave riding lessons at a stable, and painted. She describes, with no small pride, her habit of rising from bed and reporting straight to her easel without even bothering to brush her hair. Essentially, this well-bred girl from Neuilly-sur-Seine became a bohemian overnight.

That was Gilot when she met Picasso: independent and hungry for experience. She had been trying for some time to "get beyond that barrier called virginity," but most of the men she knew were off in the Resistance. Now the most famous artist in the world was giving her tours of his studio, introducing her to people like Gertrude Stein (imperious) and Matisse (a total peach), discussing his work with her, and actually encouraging hers. He went to see her first exhibition, and pronounced her "very gifted for drawing." The comment sent her back to her studio, ecstatic.

And Picasso, too, was alone, in his very different way. Many artists and intellectuals had fled Paris when the Germans arrived. But he was convinced, arrogantly but correctly, that he was too famous to be harmed. Although he was officially at the top of the Nazis' list of degenerates, he got special treatment. When Gilot first went to visit him, he bragged about his hot-water supply and invited her back for a bath.

Her appeal to Picasso seems obvious. She was young, unattached, beautiful. But so were many girls. More unusual, she was confident, opinionated, unafraid. "I knew that here was something larger than life, something to match myself against," she writes, like a scrawny prizefighter training to take on the champ.

Picasso called her "the woman who says no." He was funny, charming, expansive—she reports that they spoke to each other with total understanding—but pretty soon she had an idea of what she might be getting into. She describes arriving one evening at the Rue des Grands-Augustins, only for Picasso to shout that he would rather be at a brothel. Gilot's strategy in ugly situations, and there were many, is to insulate herself with irony. Coolly, she calls his bluff: he doesn't even like whores; he is only trying to test her. But she is wary. For months, she stays away, and goes back only "as a birthday present to myself." This is sweet, and startling—one of the few times that Gilot sounds as young as she was.

Their courtship was a playful battle for dominance; each is constantly trying to throw the other off rhythm. When she doesn't resist his kisses, he declares himself disgusted by her forwardness. He tries to provoke her by alluding to his sadomasochistic habits in bed, but she is unimpressed: "I told him, the principle of the victim and the executioner didn't interest me. I didn't think either of those roles suited me very well." The matter of sex is finally settled during a nude modelling session; afterward, he treats her with "extraordinary gentleness," and that contrast, softness after so much sparring, produces the book's most beautiful line: "From then on, he became a person."

Few others saw him that way. When Gilot first went to his studio, she found it to be "the temple of a kind of Picasso religion, and all the people who were there appeared to be completely immersed in the religion—all except the one to whom it was addressed." He had been famous for forty years, and when the war ended he became a cultural totem, the mascot of liberated France. (He then joined the Communist Party, compounding his notoriety.) Gilot understood how Picasso, who fed on this celebrity, was also isolated by it. Early in their courtship, he took her on a pilgrimage to the Bateau-Lavoir, the dilapidated Montmartre building where he got his start alongside Max Jacob and Apollinaire—the last time he truly had a private life. He complained that he nourished the public ("like a chicken") but had no one to nourish him. "I never told him so," she writes, "but I thought that *I* could."

"Oriental City II," from 1977. Courtesy Várfok Gallery

There is a carnival atmosphere to Picasso's charmed world, and it can be wonderful. We see Matisse making his cutouts (and flirting with his secretary), and meet Braque, who stands up to his old collaborator by hosting him for a visit in which he shows off his paintings but refuses to offer any lunch. Picasso himself is a kind of magician, inventing things out of thin air: a new lithography technique, special glazes for his pioneering pottery, sculptures made from toy cars and scrap metal.

Then there is Gilot's private Picasso. He is superstitious, terrified of flying and of getting his hair cut, and must be coaxed, like a child, through trivial decisions: how many tickets to get for the bullfight? Should he take a little trip? (The tyrannical moods are childish, too—tantrums.) When Gilot is pregnant with Claude, Picasso doesn't want her to see a doctor, which he is sure will bring "bad luck." Instead, he sends her to be analyzed by Lacan.

Gilot is Picasso's amanuensis, his interlocutor and interpreter, his money manager, his model. When they move house, it is she who loads and unpacks the car. He stays up late, so she does, too, and she is out of bed first thing in the morning to start the fires at home and in his studio, since "he had very suavely made the point that it was only when I built the fires that the place ever got warm enough." More difficult is the situation with his other women, whom he arrays before her like an obstacle course: fragile, resentful Dora Maar; Marie-Thérèse, who writes him loving letters daily, and, when she and Gilot meet, warns her not to "take my place." (Gilot tells her not to worry: "I only wanted to occupy the one that was empty.") It would be a stretch to say that Gilot expresses solidarity with her predecessors, but she does feel sympathy, even for Olga, half mad with bitterness, who ambushes her and Picasso on vacation and trails them in the street, shouting curses. At the same time, Gilot analyzes them like a general reviewing lost battles, looking for their vulnerabilities so that she can seal up her own.

There's no way to know, of course, if all this happened as Gilot says it did. (Lake said that she had "total recall," a claim that tends to raise rather than allay suspicions.) She has the memoirist's prerogative—this is how *I* remember it—and Picasso's tyranny and brilliance are hardly in dispute. The bigger mystery is Gilot; the self in her self-portrait can be hard to see behind the lacquered irony and reserve. She goes along with Picasso's more outlandish demands and schemes, but, she tells us, "not at all for his reasons." Her dissent is withering and sarcastic rather than furious; like other women of her generation who pointedly overlooked the bad behavior of their husbands, she is concerned with preserving her own dignity. When she is seven months pregnant with Paloma, her doctor (an obstetrician this time) tells her that she is in danger; the labor has to be induced immediately. Alas, this is inconvenient for Picasso, who is due to be at a World Peace Conference elsewhere in Paris the same day. After much grumbling, he decides that his driver will take him there and then come back for Gilot. Even in a book full of ghoulish caprice, this incident stands out, but Gilot treats it with an eye roll. What really bothered her, she says, is what Picasso wore when he finally showed up at the hospital: ripped, tatty pants. Then she launches into a long complaint about his inability to buy new clothes. This may be a standard case of displacement, Gilot directing onto his attire an anger fuelled by the man's egomania. But she had devoted her life to him. The least he could do for her was put on a decent suit.

When "Life with Picasso" first came out, this kind of anecdote did not go over well with Picasso's supporters, who denounced Gilot as a spiteful ingrate and rushed in to avenge the great man. (He had tried to block the publication, and afterward he never saw Claude or Paloma again.) "Françoise Gilot had the good fortune to be loved by the most inventive and creative artist of this century—perhaps of all time," John Richardson, Picasso's biographer, wrote, in a caustic review of her "wretched book." (Later, they became friends.) Patrick O'Brian, the author of the Aubrey-Maturin novels, met Picasso just after his breakup with Gilot, and published a biography of the artist that portrayed Gilot as a self-absorbed villain who didn't have "the least idea of the tension under which a creative man must work."

Critics like these readily acknowledged that Picasso did harm to those around him, but their feeling was that genius ultimately justified transgression. Art demanded sacrifice—particularly with someone like Picasso, whose life fed his work. (Discussing Picasso's hatred of Olga, Richardson wrote of the "rage, misogyny, and guilt that fueled his shamanic powers"; you can practically smell the spilled blood.) Now the popular view is at the opposite pole. Last year, the Australian feminist comedian Hannah Gadsby, in her Netflix special "Nanette," performed an incendiary bit about Picasso's treatment of women, quoting some damning lines from Gilot's memoir and lamenting in particular the case of Marie-Thérèse. ("Picasso fucked an underage girl. That's it for me, not interested.") Next to these trampled lives, Gadsby couldn't care less about the art.

And lives *were* trampled. Picasso died, at the age of ninety-one, in 1973. In 1977, Marie-Thérèse Walter hanged herself; eight years later, Jacqueline Roque, Gilot's successor and Picasso's second wife, shot herself in the head. Paulo, his son with Olga, drank himself to death, in 1975, and Paulo's son, Pablito, killed himself by swallowing bleach when he was barred from attending his grandfather's funeral. This is a body count out of Greek tragedy.

"Aspects of Femininity," from 1994 Courtesy Várfok Gallery

Yes, others may think, women's lives were destroyed, but at least they got to be immortalized in the process. Gilot writes that Marie-Thérèse Walter and Dora Maar themselves both felt this way, and so did Fernande Olivier, his first love. This spring, Gagosian mounted a show called "Picasso's Women," with the apparent goal of rescuing Picasso's wives and lovers from their status as victims and returning them to their perch as muses to a genius. The exhibition copy, buffed with pinup prose ("blonde Venus Marie-Thérèse . . . Jacqueline Roque, the devoted, romantic beauty"), argues that Picasso's depictions of each woman captured "not how she presents herself to the world, but how she feels inside." The show featured "Le Rêve" (1932), the lovely, serene portrait of Marie-Thérèse that Steve Wynn put his elbow through a dozen years ago; if you look closely, you can see that half of her sleeping face looks like a phallus. This was how she felt inside?

But it's hard to make the case that caring about the lives of these women means throwing a cloth over their painted faces and walking away. It may be that the more you know the harder you will look, and look, and look. You can look forever and still wonder what it is that you see.

Gilot's memoir shines, now, as a proto-feminist classic, the tale of a young woman who found herself in the thrall of a dazzling master and ended up breaking free. But it is also a love story, and a traditional one. The contradiction is right there in the book. "At the time I went to live with Pablo, I had felt that he was a person to whom I could, and should, devote myself entirely, but from whom I should expect to receive nothing beyond what he had given the world by means of his art," she writes toward the end. "I consented to make my life with him on those terms." Where is the fierce, proud girl we met at Le Catalan? Gilot explains it simply: love changed her terms. She wanted "more human warmth" from Picasso—to be a family. (He responded by having another affair.) Unseemly pain begins to well up. She admits to crying all the time, "something terribly feminine and—for me—most unusual."

How did Gilot break free? It helped that she had a fling with a suitor her own age, who didn't understand why she was going crazy over such a mean old man. And she had her art. Late in her book comes this perverse, delectable scene:

Once as I was working at a painting that had been giving me a great deal of trouble, I heard a small timid knock at the door.

"Yes," I called out and kept on working. I heard Claude's voice, softly, from the other side of the door.

"Mama, I love you."

I wanted to go out, but I couldn't put down my brushes, not just then. "I love you too, my darling," I said, and kept at my work.

A few minutes passed. Then I heard him again, "Mama, I like your painting."

"Thank you, darling," I said. "You're an angel."

In another minute, he spoke out again. "Mama, what you do is very nice. It's got fantasy in it but it's not fantastic."

That stayed my hand, but I said nothing. He must have felt me hesitate. He spoke up, louder now. "It's better than Papa's," he said.

I went to the door and let him in.

The art monster versus the mother: this struggle is familiar to many women. What comes through here is the strength of Gilot's ego. "It's got fantasy in it but it's not fantastic": What child says that? One who has been trained to flatter his mother.

For all that, she was worried about what Picasso would do without her. Who would light his morning fire? A friend told her to snap out of it; he would find another woman. And he did: Jacqueline Roque, who presented herself as the submissive mirror image of Gilot. When the new couple moved away from Vallauris, Gilot went back to her old house and found nearly everything—her paintings, letters, books—gone. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Picasso's dealer, who had begun to represent her, dropped her, too. But, she writes, she was grateful to Picasso for totally severing their past: "In doing so he forced me to discover myself and thus to survive." A decade later, she got the chance to prove it. She dedicated her book to him. ♦

Published in the print edition of the July 22, 2019, issue, with the headline "Painted Love."

Alexandra Schwartz has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2016.

More: Pablo Picasso Artists Muses Memoirs Books Francoise Gilot