

# Picasso: The Women Behind the Artist

Submitted by Andrew Fox on July 20, 2011

Behind every great artist, there is a muse. For Picasso, his romantic relationships provided inspiration for countless paintings, drawings and sculptures. The exhibition highlights many powerful depictions of Picasso's lovers, Marie-Thérèse Walter and Dora Maar among others, while touching on every major phase of his expansive career. To learn about the women in Picasso's life and work, here are their stories from the exhibition's curator Timothy Anglin Burgard.

## Fernande Olivier (1881–1966)



A voluptuous, green-eyed, auburn-haired beauty, Fernande Olivier was the first great love of Picasso's life and his artistic muse during the tumultuous seven-year course of their relationship. Born Amélie Lang to an unwed mother and a married man, Olivier was raised by an aunt above a workshop in Paris. Forced into an arranged marriage in 1899, Olivier fled the abusive relationship the following year, changing her name and embarking on a career as an artist's model.

Olivier met Picasso in 1904, when they both lived in the Bateau-Lavoir in bohemian Montmartre, Paris. A ramshackle conglomeration of studios named by the poet Max Jacob for its resemblance to the laundry boats floating on the Seine, the Bateau-Lavoir teemed with impoverished and aspiring artists, writers, and musicians, many of whom, like Picasso, had left their native countries to establish careers in the flourishing art capital. According to Olivier, she and Picasso met one stormy evening as she was on her way home. As she made her way to her building, he blocked her path and held out a kitten. One year later they were living together in his studio.

Opium is said to have played a significant role in Picasso's seduction of Olivier—he began experimenting with the drug in the summer of 1904, and soon he and Olivier were smoking regularly together. Both notoriously tempestuous, Picasso and Olivier were frequently unfaithful to one another. Despite, or perhaps because of, Picasso's own promiscuity, Olivier's infidelities fueled the artist's inherently jealous and possessive nature, and he is rumored to have occasionally locked his mistress in their studio when he left.

Olivier is credited for partly inspiring Picasso's transition to his Rose Period, in which he abandoned the somber tonalities and the melancholy, destitute personae of his Blue Period in favor of a lighter palette, idealized forms, and more exuberant subjects, such as circus performers. Later in his life, Picasso admitted that one of the figures in his revolutionary painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) was based on Olivier, and she was the model for his radical *Head of Woman* (1909), which is widely considered the first Cubist sculpture.

After the couple separated in 1912, the impoverished Olivier took various odd jobs to survive. In 1933 she published her memoir, *Picasso et ses amis* (*Picasso and His Friends*), outraging her former lover. In 1956, deaf and arthritic, Olivier persuaded Picasso to pay her a small pension in exchange for her promise not to publish anything further about their relationship. In 1988, more than twenty years after her death, a second book was published by Olivier's godson, titled *Souvenirs intimes* (*Intimate Memories*), which was said to have derived from her diaries.

## Olga Khokhlova (1891–1954)



Olga Stepanova Khokhlova was a Ukrainian-Russian Ballets Russes dancer with green eyes and auburn hair who became Picasso's first wife. Picasso first met Khokhlova in 1917, after her performance in *Parade*, a ballet created by Sergei Diaghilev, Erik Satie and Jean Cocteau. Khokhlova subsequently retired from the company and traveled with Picasso to Barcelona, where she was introduced to his family. In works like *Portrait of Olga in an Armchair* (1918), Picasso depicted her in Spanish guise to assuage his mother, who had hoped her son would marry a Spanish woman. They were wed in a Russian Orthodox ceremony in Paris in 1918 and had a son, Paulo, in 1921. As a classical ballerina, Khokhlova perfectly embodied the ideals of Picasso's Neoclassical period, which was characterized by a renewed interest in naturalistic representations of the human form.

Picasso's poet friend, Cocteau, disparagingly described the artist's first marriage as the "duchess period," a reference to Olga's aspirations for a respectable, upper-class life of social status and material possessions. Resistant to the artist's more avant-garde styles such as Cubism, Olga insisted that she only be depicted in a flattering academic manner. Given his bohemian roots in Barcelona and Paris, Picasso soon rebelled against this refined lifestyle, joking that he wanted to put an outhouse in the backyard of their home. Picasso's autobiographical painting *The Village Dance* (1922) shows him and a partner emotionally estranged from one another, powerfully capturing his melancholy state of mind in this period, when the artist was likely merely "going through the motions" of his marriage.

As Picasso's domestic situation deteriorated, he began an affair with Marie-Thérèse Walter. Khokhlova separated from Picasso in 1935 when she learned that Walter was pregnant with the artist's child, but the artist refused to grant a divorce, which would have required dividing his art collection as part of the settlement. Khokhlova subsequently hounded the artist and his new mistress, following them and shrieking accusations of his infidelity and her treachery. In works such as *The Minotaurmacy* (1935) and *Bullfight: Death of the Torero* (1935), Khokhlova is often represented by a horse, betrayed and even gored by Picasso in the guise of the mythological minotaur or Spanish bull. In the last two decades of her life, Khokhlova increasingly suffered from numerous physical and psychological ailments before dying of cancer in 1954.

## Marie-Thérèse Walter (1909–1977)



Picasso was forty-five and Marie-Thérèse Walter was seventeen when they met in front of the Galeries Lafayette department store in Paris in 1927. The artist declared: “You have an interesting face. I would like to do a portrait of you. I feel we are going to do great things together. I am Picasso.” Surprisingly, Walter had never heard of him, and so he took her to a nearby bookstore to show her a monograph of his work. Walter soon became Picasso’s mistress and, perhaps, the greatest love of his life. Without question she served as the inspiration for some of his most beautiful—and sensual—paintings and sculptures.

With a voluptuous build and strong features, including cobalt-blue eyes and blond hair, Walter was also sweet, innocent, and demure. Because of her full-bodied frame and her submissive nature, she could easily be manipulated to suit Picasso’s pictorial and sculptural sensibilities. This made her an ideal muse and model for the Surrealist period, in which he explored extreme physical and psychological states, often by rendering the human figure with imaginary and distorted forms. Walter lacked a deep understanding of Picasso’s work but revered it because it commemorated their love. She wrote on the back of one of his poems: “I love you and give you everything I have.” Their daughter, Maya, was born in 1935.

Still married to Olga Khokhlova, Picasso initially had to conceal the presence of his new mistress in both his life and his artwork. The *Large Still Life with a Pedestal Table* (1931) is a disguised portrait of Walter, in which fruit represents her eyes and breasts, and the curvilinear table legs represent her sinuous limbs. Picasso, too, is present in the form of a very attentive pitcher on the table. *Sleeping Nude* (1932) is a more overt expression of the artist’s infatuation with the sensory pleasures offered by Marie-Thérèse. Her brightly painted body appears to radiate more heat than the sun outside the window, while her silhouetted half-moon face hints at nocturnal pleasures. During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), in works such as *Guernica* (1937), Picasso utilized Walter’s youthful countenance as a motif of innocence. In *The Farmer’s Wife* (1938), Picasso used the complacent Walter as a symbol of the indifference of European nations to the destruction of free Republican Spain by the Fascists, led by Francisco Franco.

Walter remained loyal to Picasso even after their affair ended, although she declined his proposal of marriage following the death of his wife Olga in 1955. In 1977, four years after the artist’s death, she hung herself.

## Dora Maar (1907–1997)



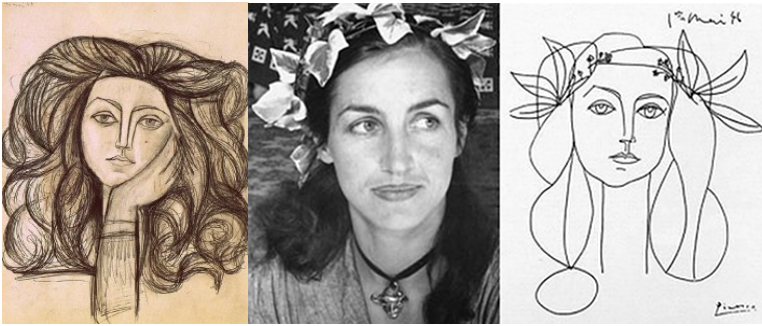
In 1935 the poet Paul Éluard introduced Picasso to Dora Maar, a tall, striking woman who was a gifted photographer, poet and painter. The daughter of a Croat father and a French mother, Maar had grown up in Argentina and spoke perfect Spanish, which made her even more attractive to Picasso. Maar mesmerized Picasso at the café Les Deux Magots in Paris when she took a sharp knife and stuck it into the table between each of her fingers in rapid succession. She cut herself in the process, and Picasso kept the bloodstained gloves she wore that day as a relic of their first meeting.

In contrast to Marie-Thérèse Walter, who was gentle and passive, Dora Maar was intellectually and emotionally challenging. Picasso developed unique pictorial vocabularies for each mistress and often emphasized their differences. In *Seated Woman in Front of a Window* (1937) Walter is rendered with pastel tones and sensual curves. In *Portrait of Dora Maar* (1937) the artist's new lover is portrayed with acidic colors and angular forms. In an incident that Picasso recalled fondly, the two women once encountered each other at the artist's studio. They demanded that he choose between them, but the artist refused, stating that they should fight it out, which led to their wrestling on the floor.

Maar's involvement in left-wing political activities may have encouraged Picasso, who rarely made overt political statements, to paint *Guernica* (1937) [studies in Gallery 6], the artist's famous condemnation of Nazi Germany and Fascist Spain for bombing the Basque town of Guernica. Maar even painted some minor elements of the painting, which she photographed as it evolved through numerous stages. Picasso's *Weeping Woman* (1937), which is related to *Guernica*, depicts a tear-streaked Maar with a handkerchief as a symbol of the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War.

Describing his portraits of Dora Maar, who frequently suffered emotional crises, Picasso said, "For me she's the weeping woman. For years I've painted her in tortured forms, not through sadism and not with pleasure, either; just obeying a vision that forced itself on me. It was the deep reality, not the superficial one." Maar's psychological issues deepened following her relationship with Picasso, and she underwent psychoanalysis with the famous psychiatrist Jacques Lacan. She died of natural causes in Paris in 1997.

## Françoise Gilot (b. 1921)



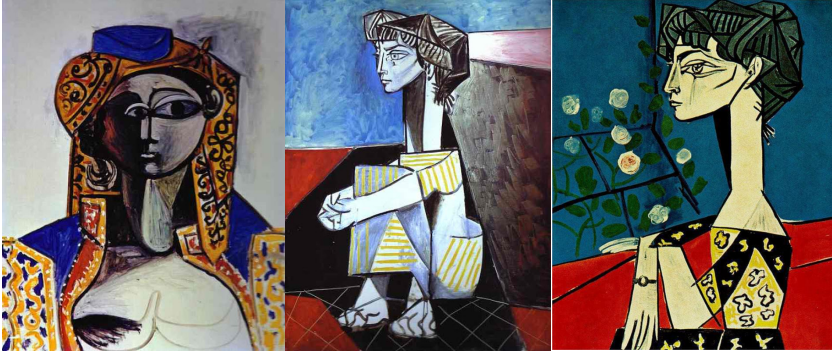
Françoise Gilot was Picasso's lover and muse from 1944 to 1953, and the mother of his children Claude (b. 1947) and Paloma (b. 1949). Gilot was born at Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, and enjoyed a comfortable bourgeois upbringing. Her father was a businessman and agronomist, and her mother was a watercolor artist. Gilot studied English literature at Cambridge University and at the British Institute in Paris. Although she undertook some training as a lawyer, Gilot abandoned a legal career to pursue her passion for art.

Gilot met Picasso in 1943, when she was twenty-one years old and living in Paris during the German Occupation. Strong-willed, extremely self-confident, and aspiring to be an artist in her own right, Gilot refused to humor Picasso's love of the romantic chase or to play the role of an innocent and impressionable ingenue. When Picasso first brought her to his studio, Gilot dispensed with any pretense of resisting his advances, prompting him to say, "How do you expect me to seduce anyone under conditions like that? If you're not going to resist—well, then, it's out of the question. I'll have to think it over." Picasso seemingly recovered quickly from his professed discomfort, and Gilot soon replaced Dora Maar as his primary mistress.

Many of the works Picasso produced during his nine years with Gilot—which include ceramics, wittily devised sculptures, and his exuberant *Joy of Life* series—attest to the happiness the couple experienced during much of this time. However, Gilot tired of Picasso's continued infidelities, and she left him in 1953. In *The Shadow*, Picasso depicts himself in black silhouette, mourning her departure.

In 1964 Gilot published *Life with Picasso*, which sold over one million copies. Although the publication of Gilot's memoirs enraged Picasso and prompted him to sever all ties with her, the book is remarkably evenhanded, both crediting Picasso's artistic accomplishments and revealing his human failings. Following her separation from Picasso, Gilot wed twice—the first marriage was in 1954 to Luc Simon, and the second in 1970 to the polio-vaccine pioneer Jonas Salk, with whom she remained until his death in 1995. Gilot currently lives in New York and Paris, where she continues to paint and exhibit, and to work on behalf of the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California.

## Jacqueline Roque (1926–1986)



Jacqueline Roque was Picasso's wife, lover, muse, and loyal assistant from 1953 until his death in 1973. Born in Paris, Roque was only two when her father abandoned her family. Her mother raised Roque and her older brother in a cramped concierge's lodge near the Champs-Élysées, supporting the family by working long hours as a seamstress. When Roque was eighteen years old, her mother died from a stroke, leaving her orphaned.

Roque worked briefly as a secretary before marrying an engineer, with whom she settled in West Africa and had a daughter. When Roque met Picasso, she was twenty-seven, recently divorced from her first husband, and working as a sales assistant at Madoura Pottery in Vallauris, on the French Riviera, where the artist produced his ceramics. Picasso was forty-five years her senior—old enough, as she said, to be her grandfather. With her large, dark eyes and long, black hair, Roque reminded Picasso of one of the harem girls in Eugène Delacroix's *The Women of Algiers* (1834), and she was the inspiration for a series of works Picasso created in response to Delacroix's masterpiece.

Picasso pursued Roque doggedly for six months—bringing her a red rose every day, composing love poems for her, and drawing a giant dove in white chalk on the wall of her house. Wary at first of committing to Picasso given his reputation, Roque warned the artist early on in their relationship: "If one day there is another muse, I'll congratulate her, I'll send her flowers. But I'll be out the door." Picasso and Roque married in secret in the Vallauris village hall on March 2, 1961, celebrating that evening with a dinner of duck and champagne.

The most reclusive of Picasso's women, Roque often said, "You don't cast a shadow over the sun." Acting at the artist's direction, Roque insulated Picasso from the intrusions his fame had brought, giving him the freedom to pursue his art. Throughout their marriage, Roque stayed by Picasso's side, essentially at his beck and call from morning until night. John Richardson, Picasso's close friend and biographer, recalled: "The strain on her was intense. Jacqueline had made up her mind fairly early on, I think, that she was going to sacrifice herself on the altar of his art. And sacrifice herself she did."

On the night of Picasso's burial, Roque slept outside in the snow, stretched over his grave. Roque fought tirelessly to preserve and promote Picasso's work, and she was instrumental in establishing the Musée Picasso in Paris. In 1986, thirteen years after his death, she committed suicide by shooting herself