

ROBERT WATERHOUSE

Picasso in love

The idea of calling any Picasso exhibition “The Mediterranean Years” might seem extraneous given that the man was about as Mediterranean as you get. Yet his biographer John Richardson, together with his grandson Bernard Ruiz-Picasso, who jointly curated the Gagosian Gallery’s London show held from June–August 2010, were making a valid point. The years in question, 1945–62, are those when the artist homed south after the Second World War, which he had decided to sit out in his Paris studio.

Rebirth of the senses was consummated by relationships with Françoise Gilot (among others) and then Jacqueline Roque in a fabled, if highly industrious, Côte d’Azur setting. The cut-off date represents, of course, not Picasso’s death but the advent of his final decade – already memorably presented at New York’s West 21st Street Gagosian Gallery during 2009 with “Mosqueteros”, curated by the same pair.

First and foremost, “Mediterranean Years” was a privileged glimpse into the depths of a body of work which we had until now believed to be, if anything, overexposed. Much of it had been purloined from private collections and was not for sale, or not for sale to you and me. About the only thing on offer at the Britannia Street galleries was the £75 catalogue, and by mid-August when I went that had been sold out.

The curators confronted criticism of elitism by making the show upfront and uncomplicated, for instance putting in prime position (with reflecting mirrors), almost as a motif, Picasso’s joyful celebration of Riviera mores, the woman-size earthenware torso pot craftily sporting a yellow bikini and subtly moving in all the right areas.

Essentially, it is the woman or woman-and-child studies of Françoise and Jacqueline which remain in the memory, whatever the level of abstraction. Françoise is defiantly combative in her sexuality,

Jacqueline more composed and perhaps more in control. She was, after all, the ultimate winner – although even she would not be able to cope with Picasso's death.

Death is hardly on the table here, if you discount the inevitable bullfight or two. After the flesh-and-guts of *Guernica*, Picasso revels in the flesh, blood and love of family life along with the pleasure of being feted both by the smart set and by artisans who correctly saw him as the saviour of local economies.

One can only wish that Picasso had given himself more time to look seriously at the landscape around him, as Bonnard did at Le Cannet or before that Renoir at Cagnes-sur-Mer. The few landscapes he left behind, typically composed on the hoof, include "Paysage à Vallauris la nuit", painted on the evening of September 7 1952, where the whole town seems to dance before your eyes.

Success and fecundity carried, all the same, a heavy price. In Richardson's catalogue note (it was available for inspection if not for sale) Picasso is quoted by the poetess (and his sometime lover) Geneviève Laporte as commenting ruefully: "The terrible thing is that I'm like King Midas. Everything I touch turns to gold and the people close to me can't take it... If the elements I really love – water, the sun, love – could be bought I'd have been ruined long ago."

Picasso: The Mediterranean Years (1945-1962). Exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, Britannia Street, London, June 4 – August 28 2010.