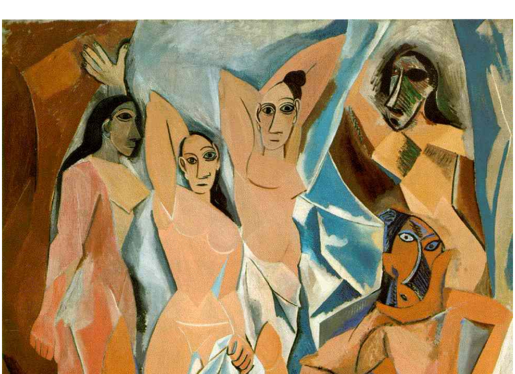

Brassai Interviews Pablo Picasso: An excerpt from 'Conversations with Picasso'

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Girl Before A Mirror by Pablo Picasso

"People are always asking me to sign my old canvases. It's ridiculous!" – Picasso

An excerpt from *Conversations with Picasso* by Brassaï

Wednesday 20 October 1943

The table, only yesterday covered with dust, is completely clean. Catalogs, brochures, books, and letters have been carefully dusted and even arranged by size into regular piles. Picasso appears, delighted with my surprise.

Picasso: I searched again all night for my flashlight. I hate it when people pilfer my things. Since I wanted to make a clean breast of things, I also attacked this whole heap of books. Maybe my flashlight got misplaced in all that. Given that opportunity, I arranged and cleaned everything.

Brassaï: What about the flashlight?

Picasso: I found it. It was upstairs in my bathroom.

Picasso has errands to do in town and goes out. Shortly thereafter, a woman enters with a package carefully tied up with string under her arm. She would like to see Picasso "in person." She has something to show him that will undoubtedly interest him. She can wait for him all morning if necessary.

When Picasso returns two hours later, she undoes the package and takes out a little picture: "M. Picasso," she says, "allow me to present you with one of your old paintings." And he, always rather moved to see again a work long lost from sight, looks tenderly at this little canvas.

Picasso: Yes, it's a Picasso. It's authentic. I painted it in Hyères where I spent the summer in 1922.

The Visitor: May I ask you to sign it, then? Owning a real Picasso without his signature is very distressing, after all! People who see it in our home may assume it's a fake.

Picasso: People are always asking me to sign my old canvases. It's ridiculous! In one way or another, I always marked my pictures. But there were times when I put my signature on the back of the canvas. All my works from the cubist period, until about 1914, have my name and the date on the back side of the stretcher. I know someone spread the story that in Céret, Braque and I decided not to sign our pictures anymore. But that's just a legend! We didn't want to sign the painting itself, that would have interfered with the composition. And even later, for that reason or for another, I sometimes marked my canvases on the back. If you don't see my signature and the date, madam, it's because the frame is hiding it.

The Visitor: But since the picture is by you, M. Picasso, couldn't you do me the favor of signing it?

Picasso: No, ma'am! If I were to sign it now, I'd be committing forgery. I'd be putting my 1943 signature on a canvas painted in 1922. No, I cannot sign it, madam, I'm sorry.

Resigned, the woman wraps up her Picasso, and we continue to talk about the signature. I ask him if he purposely chose his mother's name, "Picasso."

"My friends back in Barcelona called me by that name (Picasso). It was stranger, more resonant, than "Ruiz." And those are probably the reasons I adopted it. Do you know what appealed to me about that name? Well, it was undoubtedly the double s, which is fairly unusual in Spain." – Picasso

Picasso: My friends back in Barcelona called me by that name. It was stranger, more resonant, than "Ruiz." And those are probably the reasons I adopted it. Do you know what appealed to me about that name? Well, it was undoubtedly the double s, which is fairly unusual in Spain. "Picasso" is of Italian origin, as you know. And the name a person bears or adopts has its importance. Can you imagine me calling myself "Ruiz"? "Pablo Ruiz"? "Diego-José Ruiz"? Or "Juan-Népomucène Ruiz"? I was given I don't know how many names. Have you noticed, by the way, the double s in the names of Matisse, Poussin, and Le Douanier Rousseau?

And Picasso asks me if it was the double s that led me to adopt my pen name, "Brassaï." "It's from the name of my native city in Transylvania," I tell him, "which contains the double s, but the sonority of the double consonant probably played some role in my choice."

Among all the letters of the alphabet, the capital S is the most graceful.

"And what other movement determines the S line? Its aesthetic efficacity has long been noted by artists; the great English painter Hogarth, in his Analysis of Beauty, even extols it as the most perfect line, calling it the 'Line of Beauty.' In the engravings that illustrate his book, which he himself did, he shows multiple examples of its success, in the forms of the human body, in those of a flower, in the felicitous fall of a drape, or in the outline of a piece of furniture" (René Huygue, La puissance de l'image).

Another visitor arrives: the poet Georges Hugnet. He has just discovered one of Picasso's old gouaches and intends to buy it. "It's one of your finest gouaches: a popular fête with men and women dancers. It's being offered to me for 150,000 francs."

Picasso: That's not so expensive! I remember it well. I painted it in Juan-les-Pins. It was a fête on the Iles de Lérins, on Sainte-Marguerite. Old people were there. They were dancing almost naked. Is that the one? Yes, you may buy it. You'll be getting a good deal.

Georges Hugnet leaves to acquire the gouache. I show Picasso my twenty "arrondissements": a series of nudes done ten years earlier, nudes made completely of round forms, curvatures, arrondissements. Picasso sets them out on the floor.

Brassaï: What excited me was the vase, musical instrument, fruit aspect of the female body. That characteristic was captured in the art of the Cyclades: the woman was transposed into a sort of violin. And I was surprised to see how much the largest fruit, from the "maritime coconut palm," resembles the female posterior and lower abdomen.

Picasso: That enormous coconut you're talking about is the strangest fruit I've ever seen. Have you seen the one I own? Someone gave it to me one day as a gift. I'll go get it for you.

And Picasso brings back the enormous nut. Mine is in its natural state, with granulated skin and hair. His has been polished and shows off the grain of an exotic wood.

"Among all the letters of the alphabet, the capital S is the most graceful." – Brassai

Picasso: That was a good idea of yours to chop up the female body that way. The details are always exciting.

Then he looks at a few nudes, metamorphosed into landscapes. The outline that circles the body and simultaneously traces a relief of hills and valleys interests him intensely. You go directly from the sinuous lines of the female body to an undulating landscape. Picasso notices that in some photos the texture of "goose flesh" suggests the skin of an orange, the network formed by sea waves seen from afar, or the granulations of stone. One of the attractions of the photo is that it fosters such associations, such visual metaphors. And we talk about stones: sandstone, granite, marble.

Picasso: It seems strange to me that someone thought of making marble statues. I understand how you could see something in the root of a tree, a crack in the wall, in an eroded stone or pebble. But marble? It comes off in blocks and doesn't evoke any image. It does not inspire. How could Michelangelo have seen his David in a block of marble? Man began to make images only because he discovered them nearly formed around him, already within reach. He saw them in a bone, in the bumps of a cave, in a piece of wood. One form suggested a woman to him, another a buffalo, still another the head of a monster.

We have returned to prehistoric times.

Brassaï: A few years ago, I was in the valley of Les Eyzies in Dordogne. I wanted to see cave art at the source. One thing surprised me: every generation, totally unaware of the ones that preceded it, nevertheless organized the cave in the same way, at a distance of thousands of years. You always find the "kitchen" in the same place.

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, 1907 by Pablo Picasso

"Races and religions may have changed, but the marketplace, the living quarters, pilgrimage sites, places of worship, have remained the same. Venus is replaced by the Virgin, but the same life goes on." -Picasso

Picasso: Nothing extraordinary about that! Man doesn't change. He keeps his habits. Instinctively, all those people found the same corner for their kitchen. To build a city, don't men choose the same sites? Under cities you always find other cities; other churches under churches, and other houses under houses. Races and religions may have changed, but the marketplace, the living quarters, pilgrimage sites, places of worship, have remained the same. Venus is replaced by the Virgin, but the same life goes on.

Brassaï: In the lower strata of the valley of Les Eyzies, excavation archaeologists had the brilliant idea of preserving a cross-section four to five meters high, with layers built up over millennia. It's like a mille-feuille. In every layer, the "tenants" left their visiting cards: fragments of bone, teeth, flints. In a single glance, you can take in thousands of years of history. It's very moving.

Picasso: And you know what's responsible? It's dust! The earth doesn't have a housekeeper to do the dusting. And the dust that falls on it every day remains there. Everything that's come down to us from the past has been conserved by dust. Right here, look at these piles, in a few weeks a thick layer of dust has formed. On rue La Boétie, in some of my rooms—do you remember?—my things were already beginning to disappear, buried in dust. You know what? I always forbade everyone to clean my studios, dust them, not only for fear they would disturb my things, but especially because I always counted on the protection of dust. It's my ally. I always let it settle where it likes. It's like a layer of protection. When there's dust missing here or there, it's because someone has touched my things. I see immediately someone has been there. And it's because I live constantly with dust, in dust, that I prefer to wear gray suits, the only color on which it leaves no trace.

Brassaï: It takes a thousand years of dust to make a one-meter layer. The Roman Empire is buried two or three meters underground. In Rome, Paris, and Arles, the empire is in our cellars. Prehistoric layers are even thicker. We know something about primitive man—you're right—only because of the "protection" of dust.

Picasso: In reality, we know very little. What is conserved in the ground? Stone, bronze, ivory, bone, sometimes pottery. Never wood objects, no fabric or skins. That completely skews our notions about primitive man. I don't think I'm wrong when I say that the most beautiful objects of the "stone age" were made of skin, fabric, and especially wood. The "stone age" ought to be called the "wood age." How many African statues are made of stone, bone, or ivory? Maybe one in a thousand! And prehistoric man had no more ivory at his disposal than African tribes. Maybe even less. He must have had thousands of wooden fetishes, all gone now.

Brassaï: Picasso, do you know what the earth preserves best? Greco-Roman coins. I've followed the excavations in Saint-Rémy, where a Greek village is being uncovered. With every shovelful of dirt a coin appears.

Picasso: It's insane how many Roman coins are being found! It's as if all Romans had holes in their pockets. They sowed coins wherever they went. Even in the fields. Maybe to grow money . . .

Brassaï: With excavations, I always have the impression they're breaking a mold to take out a sculpture. In Pompeii, it was Vesuvius that did the casting. Houses, men, animals were instantly caught in that boiling gangue. There is something deeply moving about those convulsed bodies, captured at the moment of death. I saw them in their glass cages in Pompeii and Naples.

Picasso: Dali was really obsessed with the idea of such monstrous castings, of that instantaneous end to all life by a cataclysm. He talked to me about a casting of the place de l'Opéra, with the opera building, the Café de la Paix, the high-class chicks, the cars, the passersby, the cops, the newspaper kiosks, the girls selling flowers, the streetlights, the clock still marking the time. Imagine it in plaster or bronze, life-size. What a nightmare! If I could do that, I'd choose Saint-Germain-des-Prés, with the Café de Flore, the Brasserie Lipp, the Deux-Magots, Jean-Paul Sartre, the waiters Jean and Pascal, M. Boubal, the cat, and the blonde cashier. What a marvelous, monstrous casting that would make.

from *Paris by Night*, 1932 @ Brassai

"I love bats! Women are scared of them. They think bats can get caught in their hair, don't they? But bats are the most beautiful of animals, extraordinarily delicate. Have you observed their brilliant little eyes, gleaming with intelligence, and their skin, silky as velvet? And look at all these delicate little bones." – Pablo Picasso

Monday 25 October 1943

Picasso wants to show me the display case, or, as Sabartés calls it, the "museum." It is a large metal and glass cabinet, locked, placed in a little room adjoining the studio. To open it, he takes out his voluminous set of keys. About fifty statuettes are piled up in it, along with wood he has sculpted, stones he has engraved, and other curious or rare objects, such as an agglomeration of twisted, misshapen drinking glasses, crumpled one on top of another, which I stare at wide-eyed! Could this be one of Picasso's "experiments"? Seeing that this strange object has piqued my curiosity, with infinite care he takes it out for me.

Picasso: I see these glasses intrigue you. Magnificent, don't you think? Well, they're bordeaux glasses! They come from Martinique. You're too young to remember the terrible cataclysm that destroyed the city of Saint-Pierre: the eruption of Mount Pelée, in 1902, I think. In a single night, the volcano obliterated it. But although it destroyed many human lives, it also created something: strange objects such as this one, found in the ruins. Like you, I was intrigued and bowled over by its beauty. And to make me happy, someone gave it to me as a gift. All these glasses melted down by the heat of the earth, they're as beautiful as a work of art, don't you think?

Then I catch sight of the *Glass of Absinthe*, such a bold work in its time. It is the first time an object so simple has become a sculpture! It is also bold in its approach: to give the illusion of transparency, Picasso has cut away the "glass" in spots.

Picasso: I modeled it in wax. There are six bronzes of it. I colored each one differently.

Also in this display case is a mold of the *Venus of Lespugue*. There are actually two copies of it: one conforms to the damaged model, the other is whole, restored. Picasso adores this very first goddess of fecundity, the quintessence of female form, whose flesh, as if called forth by male desire, seems to swell and grow from around a kernel. Then there is the white skeleton of a bat, attached to a black support, in the attitude of crucifixion.

Picasso: I love bats! Women are scared of them. They think bats can get caught in their hair, don't they? But bats are the most beautiful of animals, extraordinarily delicate. Have you observed their brilliant little eyes, gleaming with intelligence, and their skin, silky as velvet? And look at all these delicate little bones.

"I have a real passion for bones. I have many others in Boisgeloup: skeletons of birds, dog's and sheep's heads. I even have a rhinoceros skull." – Picasso

Brassaï: I knew you liked skeletons! I've studied them; I've had fun taking them apart and assembling them. To understand the genius of creation, there's no better way than to put a skeleton back together.

Picasso: I have a real passion for bones. I have many others in Boisgeloup: skeletons of birds, dog's and sheep's heads. I even have a rhinoceros skull. Maybe you saw them in the barn? Have you noticed that bones are always modeled and not carved, that you always have the impression they come from a mold, that they were first modeled in clay? Any bone you look at, you always find fingerprints on it. Sometimes from enormous fingers, sometimes from Lilliputian ones, like those that must have modeled the minuscule, delicate ossicles of this bat. The fingerprints of the god who amused himself fashioning them—I can see them on any bone whatsoever. And have you noticed how, with their convex and concave forms, bones fit into each another? And how artfully the vertebrae are "fitted"?

Brassaï: The vertebra is a great find! The world of the higher animals is based entirely on that overarching idea, not to say "invention." What astonishes and amazes me is the art with which

nature always worked things out so that it could create the whole body from that single "idea," deforming, metamorphosing these vertebrae according to need. The whole skull is composed of vertebrae that fit into one another like a construction set, but vertebrae that are so transfigured that it took a poet's eye to recognize and identify them.

Picasso: What poet was that?

Brassaï: Goethe. He was the first to find and describe cranial vertebrae. And it was the skull of a sheep he picked up in a cemetery that put him on the trail.

The question interests Picasso passionately. Then I make a sketch of a vertebrate: a long column with two hollow cylinders, one for the spinal cord and brain; the other for all the organs to be protected. Three sets of members are attached to this column so that it can transport . . .

Picasso: I can see the arms and legs, but where do you come up with the third member?

Brassaï: It's the mandible, the lower jaw. Like the members, it's not part of the column, it's attached to it. It's articulated at its joints, just like arms and legs, but arms and legs that have been ankylosed at each end and knit together, the arm and hand joined. In fact, in birds, the lower jaw bends at its "elbow." The mandible of snakes also bends, with the additional peculiarity that the two ends are not knit together, but simply linked by a very elastic tissue. That, in fact, is why snakes can swallow animals whole, even enormous ones.

We talk at length about bones and the skeleton. Picasso is astonished that mammals consistently have seven cervical vertebrae.

Brassaï: It's as if nature purposely tied its own hands to force itself to get along with seven vertebrae, not one more. As if invention was somehow dependent on impediments. To make the giraffe's neck, it had to elongate them to an extraordinary degree—hence the stiff, inflexible neck—or, conversely, for the dolphin, which has practically no neck, to reduce them to thin, barely visible laminae. From the five fingers, nature may make a man's hand, a horse's hoof, a dog's paw, or those long umbrella ribs that form the armature of the bat's wings. You are often criticized for your daring, Picasso, your deformations, but people should see what nature dares do in this respect with a single "motif"! To better understand your art, they should go not to art museums but to the museum of natural history!

I am left alone with the six little bronzes Picasso has taken out of the "museum." Since I do not find a single section of bare wall in the cluttered studio to serve as a backdrop, I resolve to set up a board. And I need a few thumbtacks. I ask Marcel for some. But the strange thing is that, in this crucible of art where canvases come and go by the dozens, paintbrushes and tubes of paint by the hundreds, the thousands, there is not a single available thumbtack. Marcel goes to a great deal of trouble to dig some up and pulls out a few for me with his notched penknife. When Picasso joins me a little later, his eyes immediately fall on these six sorry thumbtacks.

Picasso: But those are my thumbtacks.

Brassaï: Yes, they're your thumbtacks.

Picasso: Okay, I'm taking them back.

Brassaï: Don't take them! I need some for my backdrop.

Picasso: Good, keep them. I'll leave them here. But you have to give them back to me. They're my thumbtacks.

Brassaï
Conversations with Picasso
Translated by Jane Marie Todd
With a Preface by Henry Miller and an Introduction by Pierre Daix

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