

# Pablo Picasso

1881 – 1973

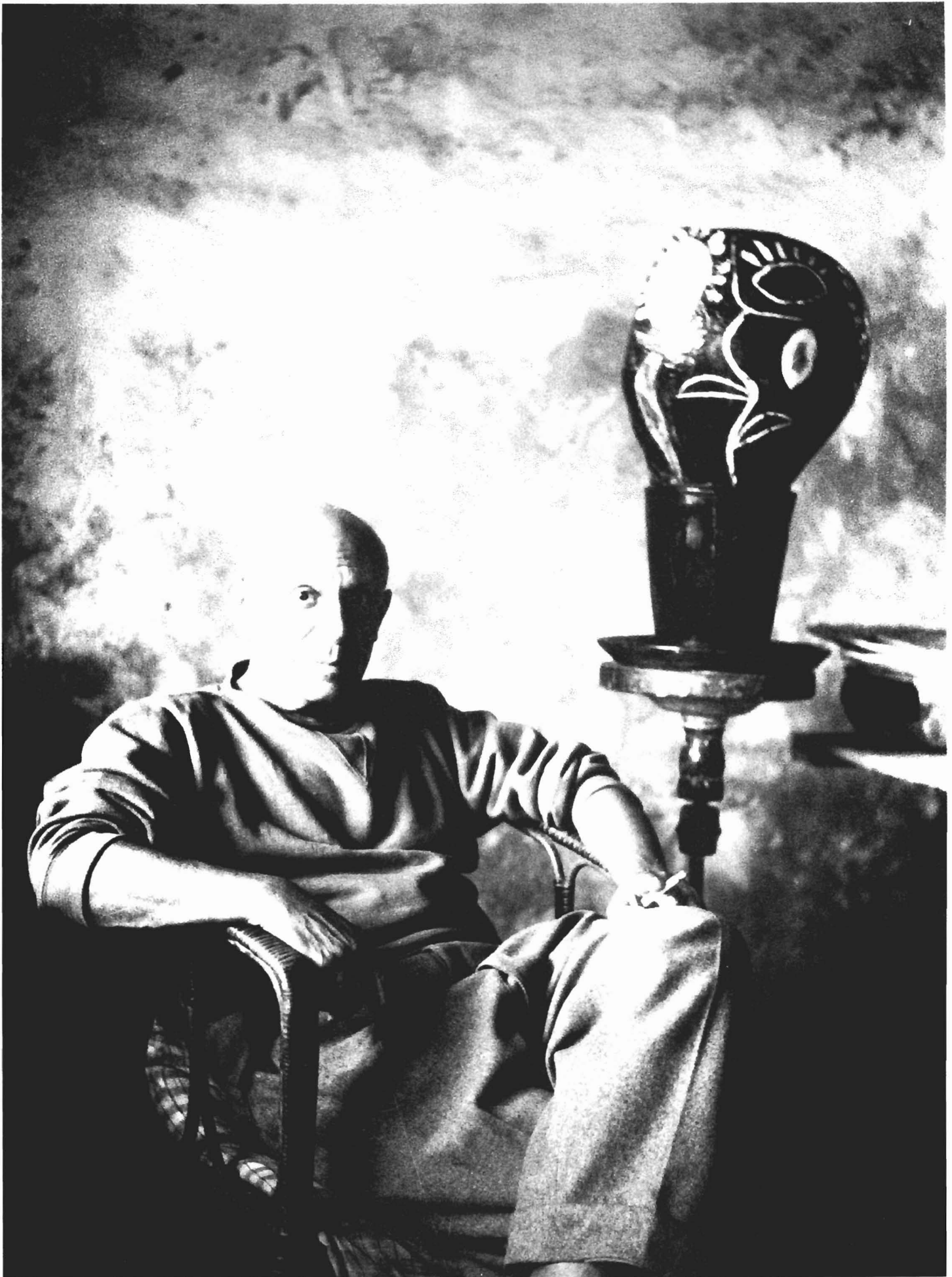
## Creative genius

No single artist in the last hundred years can plausibly challenge Pablo Ruiz Picasso's perch at the very top of the creative genius pyramid. Panegyrists have proclaimed in his honour, 'The twentieth century began and ended with Picasso.' Painter, sculptor, engraver, poet, potter and many other avatars were adorned by this maestro who lent excitement, shock and wonder to the world of art.

Born to an art teacher in Andalusia, Spain, Picasso was a child prodigy. At the age of 14, he passed a reputed art academy entrance examination in one day for which a whole month was allotted. So stunning and captivating was his early work that articles were written about his oeuvre when he was merely 16. His precocious excellence was nurtured in Barcelona, where unlike other Catalan artists, Picasso avoided melodramatic or romantic themes. Logic, discipline and ability to put mind above senses were preludes to the extraordinary art movement he would launch in time – Cubism. Picasso visited Paris in 1901 and started painting scenes of daily life including horse races, circuses, bars and dance halls. Despite changing preferences, Picasso remained unfailingly attached to reality and mostly abstained from abstraction. The colour blue pervaded his work so much so that a few of his early

years are now remembered as the 'Blue Period'. Picasso's famous sympathy for the poor and forlorn was reflected in this Period. The daily struggle of the downtrodden to keep body and soul together awakened his generous impulsive nature. Human emotions in different vicissitudes found a sublime expressionist in Picasso. One observer of Picasso at work during the Period noted the 'trance-like' state that came over him. He seemed to enter and leave his private world almost at will.

Picasso revolutionised painting by dealing a deathblow to aesthetic principles that had been sacred cows. He devised a new geometry that overhauled techniques of line, volume and colour. 'Les Femmes d'Alger' heralded a modern kind of representation, borrowing from practices of African tribal art. Though the originator of Cubism in the company of Georges Braque, Picasso was not an inveterate Cubist. He constantly engendered new forms, new materials and new methods of visual expression, continually adapting his style throughout the twentieth century. In art circles, he was the 'Ringleader of innovations.' Picasso believed that painting was visual poetry. He wrote numerous unpublished poems since 1935, toying with arrangements of words, traces, lines, loops and collages.



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He defied rules of grammar, syntax and punctuation and often drew doodles and illustrations beside the verse. The tragic events of the Spanish Civil War and World War II inspired poems of violence and pain that were equally graphic in his paintings. The greatest painter of portraits, Picasso brought human figures to life within the spatial limitations of art. The eternal look of a face, transcending the temporal and casual, found no finer exponent than him. Gory, distorted faces and limbs were Picasso's way of conveying the cruelty of Fascism. He also published surrealistic plays.

Ever embroiled in the politics of his time, Picasso's tremendous output of originality bore the stamp of contemporary events. What Picasso drew at critical junctures of Spanish and world history became important archival material for researchers. In one written statement, he said, 'What do you think an artist is? he was a political being, constantly alive to heart-rending, fiery or happy events. No painting is done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy.'

The First World War cut short Picasso's Cubist adventure. He went to Rome and designed costumes and sets for a Russian ballet. He briefly participated in the contrary artistic idiom of classicism. Picasso returned to Cubist principles for his great mural protest against Fascism—'Guernica' (1937), considered the finest limning of the horrors of war. Picasso abhorred war. His 'Flayed Head of Sheep' (1939) and many other productions centred on the theme of death. In 1945, the revelations of the Nazi concentration camps moved him to draw 'Charnel-House', a contorted jumble of bodies of what were once lively men. 'Massacre in Korea' (1951) took war painting to new heights, wherein the firing squad decimating women and children were flesh-and-iron robots whose weapons resembled not guns but more sinister instruments. The flip

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*Opposite: Picasso was a larger-than-life figure who struck friendships amongst high and low and generated heated controversies.*

side of Picasso's abomination of Franco and Hitler was admiration for Stalin. The Russian army's lead in liberating Europe and the general wave of optimistic enthusiasm among progressives were motivating factors. Picasso was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize by the U.S.S.R. Though a professed communist, he still succeeded in enchanting the West due to his intransigent individualism. Henri Matisse was the only peer painter whom Picasso esteemed and competed against. Asked about other artistic influences, he retorted, 'An artist must be very careful not to look for models. As soon as one artist takes another as a model, he is lost.'

Picasso's career as a full-fledged sculptor paralleled that of his paintings. From bronzes to iron pieces, he explored every medium of sculpture. His 'Head of a Bull' (1942) was one of the most famous assemblage sculptures, confectioned from the parts of an abandoned bicycle. He regularly inspected garbage cans and rubbish bins to find raw material for moulding into art. He could visualise form in every object.

Picasso was a larger-than-life figure who struck friendships amongst high and low and generated heated controversies. He served on committees to choose French war artists, helped refugee Spaniards and rallied intellectuals to support the Republican cause in Spain. He married once but had some liaisons. Some of his pronouncements belittling women enraged feminists, but such utterances were part of his vast maverick personality.

In the evening of life, his vigour to paint lessened not one bit. He lamented, 'I have less and less time and more and more to say.' His quantitative and qualitative yield surpassed known limits of feasibility. A complete artist-creator, Picasso was a demiurge. The impact of his fecundity was felt across the artistic universe from the 1940s to the 1980s and beyond.

