

ALEXANDER LIBERMAN

'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,' 1907 (left); the artist (above); 'Girl Before a Mirror,' 1932: a prodigy who remained prodigious



Art

Picasso - old master of modern

By Philip Monk

Walking through the Pablo Picasso retrospective at New York City's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) is as tiring a journey as the Spanish artist's career was exhaustive. An entire museum cleared of all other work, every inch a tribute to the 78-year career of one man who began painting in the 19th century and eventually changed the whole face of art in the 20th. A history of Picasso, the show is also a history of art, the monumentalization of a man who was only too prepared to create a one-man tradition. A protean artist, both joker and old master, revolutionary and bourgeois, he was the supreme figure of modern art, one who was, like the myth he became, everything to everyone, especially to himself.

To celebrate and perhaps reinforce that myth, MOMA, marking its 50th anniversary, mounted this four-month exhibit (May 22 through Sept. 16), the largest assembly of Picasso's work ever

and surely the largest exhibit devoted to the original work of a single artist. Three floors are filled with nearly 1,000 pieces of his art—paintings, sculptures, drawings, collages, prints, ceramics, costume and theatre designs—all testifying to an unending and obsessive productivity. These works, which could fill the lives of a number of lesser masters, are only a fraction of the total oeuvre of this dynamo of creativity. A virtual factory of art, Picasso spawned a name-sake industry comprising heirs, scholars, curators, dealers and publishers. After his death in 1973, at 91, art experts spent more than three years cataloguing the work he left in his three residences in the south of France, a list that included 1,876 paintings, 1,355 sculptures, 2,880 ceramic pieces, 11,000 drawings and sketches and 27,000 prints.

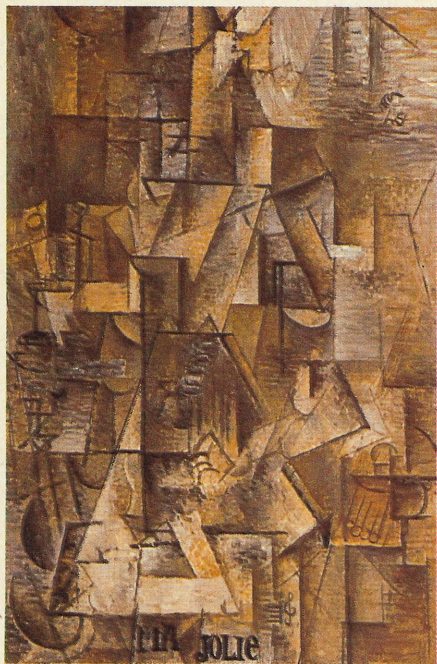
One-third of the exhibit comes from this personal collection, generally agreed to encompass some of his best work; Picasso had a habit of hoarding his favorites and even buying back pieces he had sold earlier, perhaps to

control the market value. He left no will to accompany his estate (valued officially at \$260 million, unofficially at twice the amount), one last joke to his heirs, and a black one considering the maze of his "family" tree—his wife, Jacqueline, former mistresses, children legitimate and otherwise, as well as grandchildren. After a six-year legal battle the estate was divvied up last year, with 3,488 pieces going to the French government as a settlement for 290 million francs in inheritance tax; nearly 300 pieces of the state's parcel, now on view in New York, will form the basis of the Musée Picasso, due to open in Paris next year.

Picasso's full life in art, beginning as a prodigy and remaining prodigious, is detailed chronologically throughout the museum, from the precocious academic drawings from plaster casts and the early paintings of Victorian sentiment, such as *First Communion*, painted at 14, to his final canvases. At 13 he was already so accomplished that his father, an artist and a teacher, is said to have



'Guernica,' 1937; 'Ma Jolie,' 1911-12 (below): winking through the planes of paint



ART COURTESY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

announced he would not paint again, passing his palette, brushes and colors to his son. By his early 20s the young Picasso was spending much of his time in Paris pursuing the most modern work of Gauguin and Van Gogh, absorbing the fin-de-siècle atmosphere of Toulouse-Lautrec's café and dance-hall paintings. But he wrapped up this period of apprenticeship with a more traditional approach to the human figure in his popular Blue and Rose paintings, establishing a lifelong inclination of swinging from the radical camp to the conservative and back again.

Never did Picasso have his feet more firmly on the radical side than when he produced the violent, epoch-making brothel painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, in 1907. Influenced by primitive African and Iberian sculpture and the example of Cézanne's fractured portraits and landscapes—and in rivalry with Matisse for the crown of the avant-garde—Picasso, with this piece, simultaneously gave birth to cubism and to the modern movement. The painting's broad, faceted planes, the nudes fractured into slices, were the first signs of reducing a canvas to flat planes of color.

Picasso and his cubist collaborator, Georges Braque, fancied themselves the Wright brothers of the art world, and their work took on a laboratory air as they pushed at the formal structure of painting.

But for all its radicalism, cubism is concerned with painting studio life; the human figure or the still-life objects do not disappear completely, but wink whimsically through the shimmering planes of paint. Picasso can't be accused of destroying the Renaissance tradition single-handedly, but he was a shock trooper, and the reverberations were felt worldwide. The Italian futurists and Russian constructivists, the Dutch de Stijl painters and German Bauhaus artists all took him further, perhaps, than he intended; he himself remained fundamentally conservative, never abandoning the human figure for pure abstraction. Still, art, design and the very look of the world would never be the same.

By the beginning of the First World War, Picasso had moved back to the conservative camp. The technological world had outstripped the craft of painting, and he seems to have lost his nerve. He decorated and tarted up his cubist canvases with color; no longer investigations, they have the look of paintings for a dining room, paintings not to shock but to please. Near the end of the war he was painting kitsch portraits of his new wife, Olga Koklova, and when the war was over Picasso, like many others, greeted the end of the chaos by reverting to classicism in modern art. The cubism in *Three Musicians* (1921) is classicized, but he also returned to the French tradition of Poussin and the Greeks with his elephantine nudes and ballerinas.

While Picasso drifted back and forth, outraging critics and the public with his experimenting, he held at least two generations of painters enthralled, the periods of his work, for them, rhyming off like a litany: blue, rose, African, cubist, neoclassical. Yet a full 50 years of his art has no designation but "Picasso," and artists began to pay no attention. He seemed to lose that vitality, that sense of challenge and collaboration with those around him; he withdrew into the myth of his Paris studio or the

south of France. Only during the late '20s and early '30s did the tension of the times and his own life produce paintings dramatically original and influential, culminating in 1937 with *Guernica*, his massive mural lamenting the victims of fascism in the Spanish civil war (it is soon to be sent to Spain where it will likely hang in the Prado).

With his stamina, skill, precociousness and longevity, the viewer expects more than a prodigious output. The Picasso myth set in after the Second World War, and he became the artist we know—the man of peace with his dove prints, the UNESCO artist, the most-reproduced modern artist, the archaic satyr in a technological and warring world. Everything he touched had his signature and could be sold; signed napkins and two-second scribbles turned to gold.

In the end, Picasso put his signature to the whole history of art, obsessively paraphrasing his predecessors throughout his 70s in dozens of reworkings of Manet, Delacroix, Velásquez—simultaneous homage and violence. In the spirit of a contest, he had to conquer this for himself, remaking in his image. His need for creativity and his need to make something new every day caused him to feed on his own work instead of advancing, to turn voraciously on the past subjects to support what, in the end, is merely stylistic inventiveness. *Pyramids to Picasso*—the pejorative term for first-year art history courses—becomes the epithet for this unmanageable oeuvre. ☘

MACLEAN'S BEST-SELLER LIST

FICTION

- 1 *The Bourne Identity*, Ludlum (1)
- 2 *Princess Daisy*, Krantz (2)
- 3 *Random Winds*, Plain (6)
- 4 *Smiley's People*, Le Carré (4)
- 5 *The Devil's Alternative*, Forsyth (3)
- 6 *Joshua Then and Now*, Richler (7)
- 7 *Life Before Man*, Atwood (5)
- 8 *The Bleeding Heart*, French (8)
- 9 *Solo*, Higgins (9)
- 10 *The Twyborn Affair*, White (10)

NONFICTION

- 1 *The Third Wave*, Toffler (1)
- 2 *Donahue, My Own Story*, Donahue & Co. (2)
- 3 *Men in Love*, Friday (6)
- 4 *How to Invest Your Money and Profit From Inflation* (revised edition), Shulman (3)
- 5 *Free to Choose*, Friedman (4)
- 6 *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, Talese (7)
- 7 *Men in the Shadows*, Sawatsky (5)
- 8 *Confessions*, Amiel (8)
- 9 *Jim Fixx's Second Book of Running*, Fixx (9)
- 10 *The Real War*, Nixon

() Position last week