

# PICASSO THE MAGICIAN

*Lydia Gasman's New Look at the Artist as Sorcerer*



Bill Sabiere



David Duncan photo/Albany Library Manuscript Department

By MICHAEL MARSHALL

It is said on the subject of mystical truth that those who know will not talk and those who talk do not know. Picasso, according to Lydia Gasman, assistant professor of art at the University, was someone who knew. "Objects...they are my parables" was as much as he would say, but he produced a prodigious number of parables to interpret.

The enigmas of Picasso's art are now less puzzling, thanks to Ms. Gasman, a native of Rumania who fled her homeland at considerable risk in 1960. At the time she was regarded as one of the country's

most promising young artists. In her 1981 Ph.D. dissertation, to be published in a revised and expanded form as *Art as a Form of Magic in Picasso* by the Yale University Press this year, she argues that Picasso believed his works had the same effect on reality as a sorcerer's spells.

Art critics are alert to this notion, and they are impressed by it. Referring to Ms. Gasman's research as "exhaustive," Picasso scholar John Richardson said in an extensive review in the *New York Review of Books* last winter that her "revelations...shed more light than any-

*"What I did was break his code, his private system of symbols," says Picasso scholar Lydia Gasman (above). "Nothing in Picasso's art is gratuitous. Everything that looks accidental is meaningful."*

one else not only on the *epoque Marie-Therese* (Picasso's young mistress in the 1930s) but also on the dark depths of Picasso's psyche." In an article appearing in the Nov. 21 issue of the same magazine, John Golding laments the lack of attention given to Picasso's literary output; only Ms. Gasman's "valuable" work in that area merits mention. Art historian Gert Schiff calls her analysis of drawings done by Picasso while working on his 1937 masterpiece *Guernica* "monumental" and "of paramount importance." Her insights are credited in museum exhibitions, catalogs of Picasso's works, and in the most recent commentaries on modern art, such as the essay on Picasso by William Rubin, director of the Museum of Modern Art, in *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art*. In short, many feel she has revealed a challenging new dimension of Picasso.

To describe Picasso's art as having magical qualities is not new. To describe it as having magical purposes is. Picasso himself referred to the sorcery he practiced in his art—in remarks to André Malraux, for example—but the term was taken figuratively. "What I did," said Ms. Gasman, "was break his code, his private system of symbols. Students of Picasso have known all along about his personal iconographic language, and that it has logic, but parts of it defied explanation. The way I did it was by studying his writing. Art critics naturally tend to consider the art itself as the most important focus of study, so his

literary work had been relatively neglected by scholars. It was there I eventually found the clues that solved many mysterious sections in his works.

"Picasso is one of the supreme intelligences of our century. He told the truth about modern culture more honestly and completely than any other artist. His work is an incessant source of meanings.

"Nothing in Picasso's art is gratuitous. Everything that looks accidental is meaningful. For instance, for a

ment hostile to Franco, though Picasso repeatedly denied this in order to focus attention on the universality of cruelty, and an attempt to do spiritual combat with the greater evil presence Franco serves."

Picasso first became intrigued with the connection between magic and art when he saw Matisse's collection of "magic" African art in 1907. Picasso explained its impact: "Men made those masks for a sacred purpose, as a kind of mediation between themselves and the

unknown hostile forces that surrounded them in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving it a form and an image. At that moment I realized what painting was all about. Painting isn't an aesthetic operation, it's a form of magic... a way of seizing power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires. When I came to this realization I knew I had found my way."

Picasso's way became the way of modern art. "On the one hand, by introducing Cubism Picasso



Les Femmes d'Alger (1907) was Picasso's first exorcism painting.

long time no one could make sense of what looked like a doorknob in *Guernica* (painted in response to the first use of saturation bombing in the Spanish Civil War). When one interprets it according to its magical intentions, its purpose is no longer obscure. A doorknob opens doors; in the picture its role is to activate the work's spiritual force. It's Picasso's symbol for himself as the magician. That is why it was painted in last. First he composes the spell, then he releases it, in this case to act against evil and brutality. So the painting is at once a political state-

deserves to be called the father of modern art," said Ms. Gasman. "On the other, he was a primitivist, affecting our emotions with images that a tribal witchdoctor would appreciate. The paradox in his approach to art is that he held that the art object was not the same as what it represented. That sounds obvious, but in fact it reoriented art away from the vagueness of form which romantic concepts had produced. It means a portrait of Franco is simply not Franco, and so it may be freely manipulated by the artist. It also means that a true portrait of

Franco is so convincing that anyone who has seen the portrait confuses it with the real Franco."

One example Ms. Gasman provides of what Picasso meant by magic art is her analysis of a series of 120 works depicting *casetas*, the small, wooden bathing huts common on Mediterranean beaches in the late 19th century. Picasso executed the series between 1927 and 1939, a period that coincides with the *epoque Marie-Therese*—the years of Picasso's greatest involvement with his young mistress of that name. Marie-Therese's appearance crystallized the *casetas* motif in Picasso's iconography, says Ms. Gasman, by restoring to him the "savage eye" of the child, the primitive, and the poet. The *casetas* came to represent his alter ego, a disguised symbol for himself magically confronting his unconscious and, though Picasso would say it amounts to the same thing, his fate. Inevitably, it seemed to Picasso, fate had a female character.

Dissatisfied with his wife Olga, a socially well-connected former ballerina, and vulnerable to the demon of middle age, Picasso was nearly 50 when he met Marie-Therese Walter. His marriage was foundering. Influenced by the ideas of surrealist poet André Breton, particularly his notions of "*l'amour fou*" (a love that transforms one's psyche) and the existence of a "*femme enfant*" (a woman/child goddess), phenomena that appear by luck only, Picasso began prowling the avenues and alleys of Paris in a mystical love quest.

He encountered Marie-Therese one frigid afternoon in January outside the Galleries Lafayette. Impulsively, he grabbed her arm and asked to paint her portrait. To overcome her suspicions (she had never heard of him), he took her to a bookstore nearby and showed her his photograph in books and magazines. Picasso was thrilled to learn that Marie-Therese was only 17; ideally, the *femme enfant* would be under age. She lived on the outskirts of the city with her mother and sister. Of her father she knew nothing, except that he was said to have been a painter.

Marie-Therese was private where her relationship with Picasso was

concerned. After a tactless interrogation by *Life* magazine reporters in the early 1960s, she declined interviews. Ms. Gasman met her in the 1970s by passing a message through the aid of a hotel doorman.

"I offered the doorman money," Ms. Gasman said, "to tell Maya, Picasso's daughter by Marie-Therese, that a college professor desired a meeting with her mother. The doorman was very vain. He acted as if, of course, he knew the family very well. Perhaps he did. The meeting was arranged.

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—Pablo Picasso

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"She was very candid, a very great help and exactly the way Picasso described her when they first met: totally naive. I once went shopping for fabric with her. She insisted on finding a particular design. We searched whole towns. When we finally found it, she wanted only one yard. She was as pure as a child."

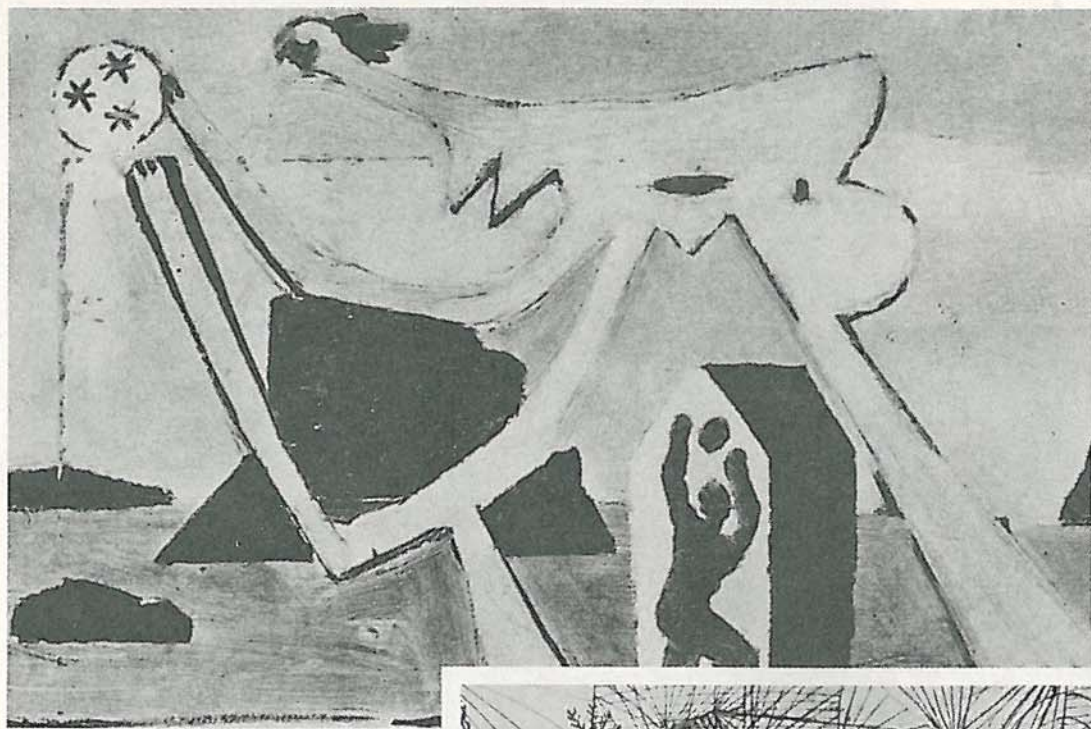
Marie-Therese confessed to Ms. Gasman, after years of defending her reputation on the point, that Picasso seduced her within a week of their meeting. Once surrendered, she was a willing pupil to Picasso's lessons in sex "freed from all taboos," as Ms. Gasman puts it. As companion texts, he gave Marie-Therese the works of Marquis de Sade. There she found vices exalted as positive and active and virtues labeled negative and passive. Picasso was "wonderfully terrible," she recalled to Ms. Gasman, his moods alternating between misogyny and tenderness. In the end, *l'amour fou*

altered Marie-Therese as well. Thirty years older than she, Picasso became a stand-in for the painter father she never knew. She identified with Picasso's children and their sense of rejection, continuing to love Picasso despite his referring to her as merely an orifice. When Olga died, Marie-Therese appealed to Picasso in vain to marry her and legitimize their child. She hanged herself in 1977, 50 years after her fateful introduction to the sorcerer artist.

Marie-Therese submitted with the same complete innocence to Picasso's use of her as an object in his art and thereby made possible the symbolic language of the *casetas* series, according to Ms. Gasman. It was in a *casetas* that Picasso, probably as a five-year-old, first saw a naked adult woman. The sight, he later confessed, left an indelible impression of female sexual parts as unclean and animal-like. His *casetas* always appear in relation to one of the current women in his life: the malevolently jealous Olga; the lolling, sexy Marie-Therese; and Dora Maar, the brilliant and artistic woman who stole Picasso's attentions away from Marie-Therese after 1935. Viewed individually, the *casetas* emerge as the closets of mystery in Picasso's psyche. They are also the progeny of the *casetas*' female guardian, who is typically depicted as a threateningly monumental form topped by a grossly small head (recalling Marie-Therese's voluptuous, unintellectual nature).

The first in the series, begun at Cannes, expressed Picasso's enduring primitivistic concept of man and life in reaction to the superficiality of the resort society. They transcend the "motif seen in the real world," also Picasso's purpose in *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), his first exorcism painting, he told Malraux, and the first example of Cubism. They express an irrational, biological and demonic aspect of human nature. Picasso gives a form to these terrors, the same threatening spirits that inspired "magic" African masks and ultimately portend death. In fact, some *casetas* appear to be based on his dead sister's sepulcher.

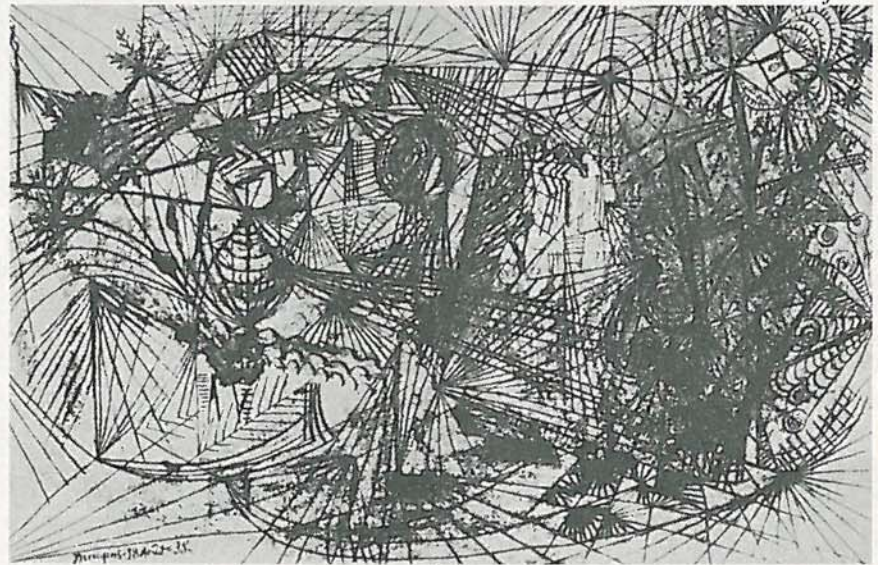
The *casetas*, in effect a small house, represents the body, a com-



*Magical symbols: Picasso's 1928 painting Bather Playing Ball and Caseta With Man Playing Ball (left) is typical of the caseta series, with its threateningly monumental female figure. In the 1938 ink drawing Spider's Web and Heavenly Caseta (below), the illuminated house at upper right affirms Picasso's belief in the presence of the divine in himself.*

mon analogy, according to Freud and Jung, who also maintains that the house can signify the self, knowledge of which may be the same as "divine unconsciousness of the world." In Picasso's system of magical symbols, the *caseta's* white exterior represents Picasso's superficial nature. Its black interior suggests his unconscious self. One pauses before a *caseta*, its door ajar, as though regarding the dark mouth of a dragon's cave. The monster Picasso senses lurking within is his female element, hostile, animal-like, perhaps dangerous and, because it is also his fate, that which must be confronted. Thus the *caseta* embodies Picasso's notion of woman as fate and the female guardian serves as an externalization of the *caseta's* contents, a "magical" symbol of the feared spirit within.

Reversing the pattern of earlier examples, a candle lights the serene interior of the series' final *caseta*, a work known as *Spider's Web and Heavenly Caseta*. A black sun spins a spider's web across a scene of destruction (the Battle of the Ebro, Aug. 18, 1938, was in progress as Picasso worked) which threatens to engulf the small *caseta* in the upper right center of the drawing. Lit from within, the *caseta* affirms Picasso's belief in the presence of the divine in himself, a conviction that emerged not from order but in the



presence of chaos. Ms. Gasman recalls St. John's description of the heavenly Jerusalem in his *Revelation* as a place which, though in the midst of the final cataclysm, "did not need the light of the sun or the moon because it was lit by the glory of God." (Rev.21:23-24)

The transformations of the *casetas* in the course of the series, according to Ms. Gasman, suggest the "rooms," or progressive stages of consciousness that St. Teresa of Avila, a Spanish contemplative of the 16th century, describes in *The Interior Castle*, her account of the mystical path. According to St. Teresa, the psyche's inmost chamber seems overpoweringly dark, just as Picasso's final *caseta* seems overwhelmed by black disintegration, precisely because of the intensity of

the divine light it houses. This sense of the immaterial world's immediacy is something Picasso shared with others in the Spanish quietistic mystical tradition, such as St. John of the Cross and El Greco, with whom he felt a sort of kinship.

How is the monster's cave changed into the sanctuary of the enlightened self? Magically, for lack of a better word. By giving form to the unknown demons of his unconscious, he drew them into light. He exorcised them. "Spirits and the subconscious—they're all the same thing," Picasso told Malraux while explaining the lesson he took from "magic" African art. And Picasso's art, whose magic gave him a profound knowledge of himself, can now more easily work the same magic for us, thanks to Ms. Gasman.