

Martin Schmidt In the Exhilarating Vortex of Variations: From the Workshop of a Genius

No other creative mind of the 20th century so completely epitomizes the paragon of the prodigiously inspired artist as does Pablo Picasso. The height of the pedestal we place him on surely is also due to the numerous radical stylistic shifts that this restless Spaniard passed through, setting artistic benchmarks in the process that were soon adopted by many of his contemporaries. And our fascination is also aroused by how Picasso was able to transmute an individual motif into ever new and diverse variations, each with a surprisingly different feel.

The art of printmaking is ideal in this regard, since it gives the artist free rein to indulge in spinning off a composition into a practically unlimited range of new permutations. Small wonder then, that Picasso made such impressively multifaceted contributions to all of the various manual printing techniques. Particularly notable is how his motifs evolved only as he reworked his printing plates and evaluated the resulting test proofs. The ideas he sought to visualize thus progressively took shape in the multi-stage process of craftsmanship, ultimately resulting in the immense breadth of image variations we have before us.

While drypoint and aquatint etching were part of Picasso's repertoire even in his earliest periods, his discovery of lithography came relatively late, in the winter of 1945/46. The decisive impetus for Picasso's newfound enthusiasm for this technique, which was not entirely new to him, but which he had hardly used, was his encounter with the printmaker Fernand Mourlot, whose Parisian workshop provided him with technical assistance and limitless cooperation from November 1945 onwards. As an expert in his field, Mourlot had the requisite sensitivity for Picasso's often unconventional approach to lithography. It was also he who, from the start, made it a rule to print six proofs – Picasso's hectic work ethic permitting – of each evolutionary state of an image (known as "state proofs"). He would then retain one of these and give the other five to the artist. These printer's proofs would go on to serve as the basis for the catalogue raisonné of Picasso's lithographs that Mourlot eventually compiled. Mourlot's collection also is the source of the eight proofs of various states of the colour lithograph *La femme à la résille* which are now up for auction (Lots 38–45).

The model for this lithograph was Françoise Gilot, an artist in her own right whom Picasso met in 1943 and who became his intimate companion until she decided to part ways with the egomaniac artist some ten years later.

To create this particular portrait, Picasso dispensed with the heavy lithography blocks made of stone in favor of zinc plates, which were far easier to handle. He used four plates in all, one for each colour and one for the black & white drawing.

The process of arriving at the final printed version of the frontal portrait encompassed five black & white concepts and two colour concepts, so that the combined use of all the printing plates resulted in a total of 13 variant prints. Of these, seven folios have been consigned to us. While the colour concept for the lithograph was selected early on (violet, green, and light brown) and basically underwent only slight changes – with the surfaces becoming rather more closed than open and the ornamental garment structure denser – Picasso varied the black & white drawing



Picasso checking a trial proof at the printing press. 1957



Lot 45

much more markedly. The single widest design leap lies between the 2nd drawing (Lot 40, in this case executed as a combination print with one of the colour versions) and the 3rd drawing (Lot 41). The artist brightened the broad dark lines with sandpaper and, most notably, gave the highly stylized face a more sculptural form that seems considerably more emotive and truer to life. Given that Picasso always enjoyed surprising himself, he also had the 2nd black & white drawing printed in combination with the 2nd colour concept (Lot 40) in order to test the resulting effect. He then had another combination print made (Lot 42), namely of the 3rd black & white drawing together with the faceless 1st colour concept, prior proofs of which had already been produced. Thus, Mourlot's workshop already had prints of the two colour concepts on hand (cf. Lots 38 and 39), onto which the black & white variants Nos. 2 to 4 could then be superimposed for purposes of directly comparing their varying effects. This means that the variant proofs were not only multiplied in a linear manner, they were also concomitantly tested in pairings of black & white with colour and brought together in all conceivable combinations. It is not only this working process which corroborates the insight that the artist was not just interested in perfect end results but was just as aesthetically fond of the intermediate state proofs.

This said, the combination which Picasso ultimately selected for the final edition printing run was that of Colour Concept II in conjunction with the 5th black & white drawing, which deviates only minimally from the 4th one (the oval surface above the forehead has been brightened). The most marked shift in mood occurs between the 3rd and the 4th, respectively 5th, black & white drawings: The gauze of melancholy that enveloped the face in Variant 3 (Lot 42) is lifted in Variant 5 so as to give it a calm expression of belonging (Lot 44), which in turn allows the viewer to identify with the subject in an emotionally well-tempered manner. What this mainly speaks to, though, is the fact that Picasso kept an eagle eye on the preferences of the art market; actually tells us only little about his own aesthetic preferences.

Our seven state variants offer a unique insight into the conceptual and stylistic paths that Picasso explored in his artistic working process and reveal how their striking effect was achieved through experimentation.

All the state prints of *Femme à la résille* come with a formal certification (in copy) issued on 19 December 1988 by Jacques Mourlot, son of the Parisian printer Fernand Mourlot.