

Modernists as Matadors: Deciphering Picasso's *Tauromachy* (1935)

Irma Flóra Kiss, CAS '25

Background

From the 1920s onwards, the bullfight emerges as a discursive construct in the modernist imaginary. Tinged with the glamour of spectacle and the sombre cast of death, the bullfight furnishes an arena in which to confront questions of mortality, subjective agency, and masculine virility. For figures ranging from Bataille to Hemingway, it is a privileged space to interrogate man's place in a changing world. This fascination rests largely on the bullfight's unique situation between spectacle and reality. As a spectator sport, it is distinct from other forms of gestural performance—such as opera or ballet—insofar as its artifice conceals real danger: the bullfight is a matter of life or death. The athlete's strength, agility, and technical proficiency have actual import in the bullfight's ineluctable sequence leading to death—whether in the form of the intended dispatch of the bull, or the accidental death of the sportsman.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Cover design by Picasso, *Minotaure: revue artistique et littéraire* / directeur-administrateur : Albert Skira ; directeur artistique : E. Tériade (1933), Paris : Editions Albert Skira. <http://ark.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb343950177>



La Minotauromachie (Minotauromachy), 1935, Pablo Picasso. Etching, engraving, and scraper. Princeton University Art Museum X1986-104 © 2013 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

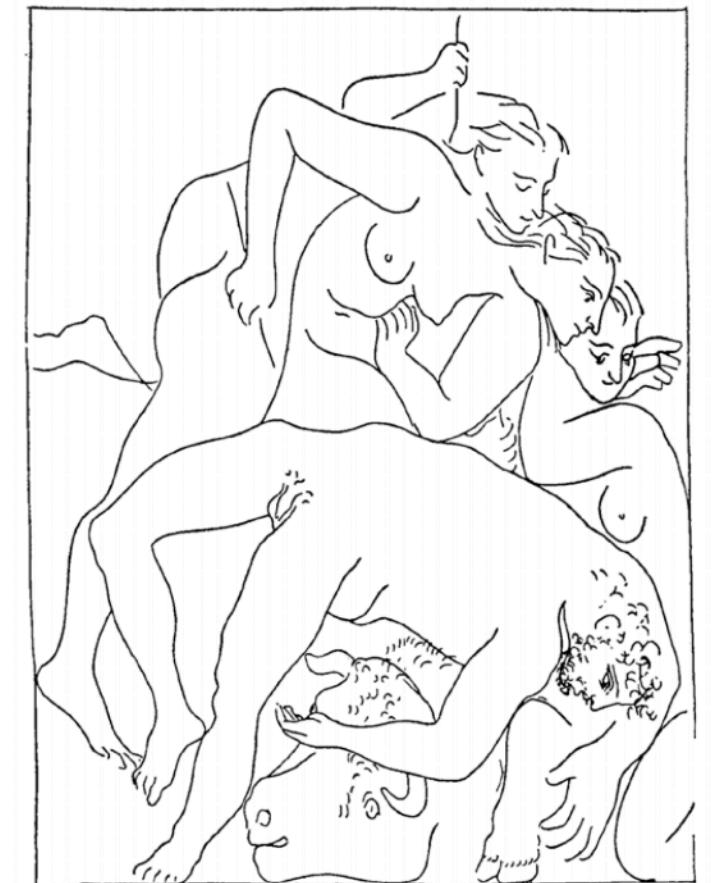
Abstract

'Minotauromachie' (or 'Minotauromachy' in the English translation), Picasso's seminal print from 1935, is an object of perennial derision and confusion. Various regarded as an emblem of Picasso's reactionary turn to classicism, or as a veiled confession of his sexual misconduct, the print has suffered from inadequate critical attention. Previous critics tend to read the artwork as an indication of Picasso's stylistic degeneration in the '20s, concomitant with his abandonment of cubism. Others have strained to ascribe biographical meaning to an otherwise intractable work. Biographical and psychoanalytic readings alternately cast its central figures as Picasso's ex-wife Olga, his mistress Marie-Thérèse, and even his deceased younger sister. While Picasso's personal life often provides insight into his compositions, such explanations do not suffice.

To unlock the integral meaning of 'Minotauromachie' within Picasso's body of work, a new methodology is necessary. I approach the artwork with an ethnographic view of the bullfight as a living practice. Drawing on firsthand testimony from the sport's spectators and practitioners, I situate Picasso's work within a more expansive modernist interest in the bullfighting motif. As concerns my reading of the work itself, I draw equally on the psychoanalytic approach promulgated by Rosalind Krauss, and the semiotic approaches of commentators like Barthes and Louis Marin to unlock the print's integral meaning. I read Picasso's work as a gesture of infinite regress; the composition blocks the beholder's identification at the same time as it invites it. As concerns this dual approach, it is only by reading the bullfight as a closed-loop system of signifiers that one does full justice to its complexity and systematic rigor as a codified sport; and it is only by using this approach in concert with psychoanalysis that one captures the interpretive demands Picasso's etching places on the beholder. In sum, this approach allows us to demonstrate 'Minotauromachie's' filiation with cubism, and thus to reinvest the artwork with its full radical potency. 'Minotauromachie' is not just a piece of chauvinist dross from the Master's regrettable foray into the Mediterranean antique—but a radically significant work, born from the internal logic of Picasso's pathbreaking innovations in Cubism.

Methods

This approach calls for a new theoretical framework to evaluate Picasso's artwork. Firstly, primary sources and contemporary ethnographic accounts of the bullfight's development both lent ballast to my notion of the sport as a historically mutable, discursive construct. Secondly, I drew on Rosalind Krauss's psychoanalytic critique of Picasso, which harnesses the concept of reaction-formation to dispute claims of Picasso's classical decadence in the 1930s. Lastly, in encountering the image itself, I drew on Louis Marin's theory of semiotic signification in visual art. This approach is apposite to the bullfight as a complex and rigorously codified system of gestural signs.



The Death of Orpheus, 1931, Pablo Picasso, in *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520334519>