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Stage curtain for the Théâtre du Peuple or stage curtain for Romain Rolland's play Le Quatorze- Juillet, The Hide of the Minotaur in Harlequin Costume

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Prologue

June 1936. The new Popular Front government had decided to celebrate Bastille Day with a presentation of Romain Rolland's play, *Le Quatorze-Juillet*, at the Alhambra, known then as the Théâtre du Peuple. This "Iliad of the French Nation" closed Rolland's vast cycle of epic dramas, the Théâtre de la Revolution (1898-1901), in which the playwright brings on-stage a dialogue of grand ideas and forceful characters. *Le Quatorze-Juillet* had not been played since it was first performed at the Théâtre de la Renaissance-Grenier in 1902. A large array of personalities brought their support to the presentations given between the 14th and the 23rd of July 1936. Jacques Ibert, Georges Auric, Darius Milhaud, Albert Roussel and Arthur Honegger all wrote original overtures which were directed by Roger Désormière. Marie Bell, of the Comédie Française, played the role of Louise Contat. Finally, Picasso was asked by his friends Jean Zay (the Minister of Education), Jean Cassou, and Léon Moussinac to create the stage curtain. Picasso had not worked in the theatre since 1924, but was remembered for his frequent work in dance productions, notably for Diaghilev's Russian Ballets, for Satie, Massine and Cocteau, de Falla, Stravinsky, and Milhaud (*Parade* in 1917, *Le Tricorne* in 1919, *Pulcinella* in 1920, *Cuadro Flamenco* in 1921, and *Le Train Bleu* and *Mercure* in 1924). He was less well known for his work in the theatre (*Antigone* in 1922, for Cocteau and Dullin). Each of his sets constituted an event in the history of the performing arts as much as in the history of art itself. Picasso's paintings are themselves highly dramatic and often reveal the traces of his theatrical experiences, experiences which themselves were inspired by the continual transformations and unceasing transpositions of his constantly renewed pictorial inventiveness. This was the case for *Rideau de scène pour "Le Quatorze- Juillet"*.

The Stage Curtain

Picasso's short deadline did not give him time to create an original work for Rolland's play. Instead, he chose to enlarge a small gouache painting with India ink detailing dated 28 May 1936, called *La dépouille du Minotaure en costume d'Arlequin* (*The Hide of the Minotaur in Harlequin Costume*). This work shows a dead Minotaur, dressed in the costume of a Harlequin, held by an eagle-headed winged giant. A powerful bearded man, draped with a horse's skin advances, menacing the monster with his raised right fist. He carries on his shoulders a beautiful adolescent (?) wearing a crown of flowers, and who, with his open arms, seems to be blocking the path of the mythic couple. The scene appears to be suspended in a desolate seaside landscape, in front of a tower in ruins. It is a strange choice, since the work bears no iconographic or narrative relation with the rousing drama of Romain Rolland.

...In 1936, for those who did not know how much Picasso was himself the Harlequin and the

Minotaur of his paintings, nor to what extent Picasso had long integrated allusions to his personal life with mythical and bull-fighting references, it was only natural to see in the confrontation of the characters of his backdrop the combat between Good and Evil, the victory of youth, of beauty over threatening death, of truth, and of progressive thinking over obscurantism, of triumphant Peace banishing the monsters of war... They were free to find a logic in this union of Pablo Picasso and Romain Rolland's epic themes. And it is easy to imagine how the impact of the play's evolutionary and pacifist message was amplified by the imposing dialogue between the two gigantic characters of the curtain. Was there not, in this strange relation between word and image, an echo of the anguish and the optimistic resolutions which fired the events of 1789, the events being symbolically honoured on that 14th of July 1936? Could it be that Picasso's choice asserts a sort of equivalence between personal drama and social epic, or more even, a coherence between life, painting, theatre and history?

...The *Rideau pour "Le Quatorze-Julliet"* was painted with great speed during the week preceding the première of the play. To achieve this, Picasso had to ask for the help of his friend, the painter Luis Fernandez. "Picasso had brought my husband a cartoon of this painting and asked him to enlarge it considerably, which he did (from 250 cm² to 1090 cm²). He had to find a suitable space [...] He had to draw it and paint it on the floor because of its size. [...] When it was finished, Picasso was perfectly satisfied, and only drew in the contours in black, as was his wont. Of course, he signed it Picasso, but he always made it known that it was Fernandez who had painted it."¹

...Luis Fernandez was faithful to Picasso, and Picasso, justifiably satisfied, added his own final touch. What this final intervention by the artist himself brings in terms of a signature is evident. A few bursts of black paint underline the violence and the firmness of line which obliterates here and there the preparatory brown conte drawing, giving life and force to an attitude, to a movement, particularly in the hands, limbs, and heads. And what vivacity, what luminosity are obtained by the addition of white pigment, notably in the crown of flowers on the young man's head, and in the Harlequin costume. These are the mark of the Master. Picasso's "demiurgical" prowess explodes in the gigantic confrontation between these two man-monster couples which symbolise the mad struggle between life and death, between desolation and hope. All Picasso's stylistic, iconographic, and formal pursuits come together in this single work. It brings together plasticity expressiveness of the "blue period", the luminist graphic clarity of his neoclassical period after 1917, and a thematic surrealism.

Epilogue

After the last showing of Rolland's play on 23 July 1936, Picasso's *Rideau pour "Le Quatorze-Julliet"* became the permanent stage curtain of the Théâtre du Peuple. It was used in particular for productions of Spanish popular dance, and in 1938-1939, for the performances of *Fuente Ovejuna*, Jean Cassou's adaptation of the Lope de Vega play. In September 1939, Aragon brought it back to Picasso, who had just moved into his Grands-Augustins studio. In 1965, the artist lent his stage curtain to Musée des Augustins in Toulouse for its *Picasso et le Théâtre* exhibition, organised by Denis Milhau, making the loan a donation when that show ended. It is now in the collection of the Musée d'Art Moderne.

Epigraph

"How can anyone see into my dreams, my instincts, my desires, and my thoughts, which took so long to ripen and to come to light – let alone deduce from them what I wanted to do, and this maybe

¹ From a letter by Mrs Luis Fernandez to the museum, dated 1 February 1995, where it is stated that the collaboration was charitable. Picasso and Fernandez worked together for around ten years.

even against my will?".² Picasso admonishes us to be prudent when interpreting the hidden meanings in his works. He was a man who delighted in play, in disguising both himself and those whom he was close to. He appropriated myths with a unique liberty, transforming them by infusing them with highly personal allusions and taurine themes. This is certainly true with the theme of the Minotaur, the fruit of the guilty love of King Minos' wife Pasiphae for the white bull which Poseidon sent to her. As we recall, the maddened bull, together with the Minotaur, to which the Cretans sacrificed young men and young beauties of Athens, were both killed by Theseus. Picasso overturns this theme in his fantastic cycle of *Minotauromachies* (1933-1937), a cycle which "well illustrates the ambivalence of the symbolism of the corrida, in which there is a constant permutation between human and animal, between male and female."³ Picasso's identification with the bull is attested by numerous accounts, and one can see how the duality of the Minotaur allowed him to make the transition from the beast in the arena to the demigod, half-man and half-animal, gentle yet cruel, victim and executioner, articulating all "the complexity of the relations he might have with his entourage."⁴ In May 1936, as he reached the end of an impressive series of paintings, drawings and engravings, covering everything from sexual games to death in the arena, Picasso made a series of four important gouaches, one of which he chose as the model for his stage curtain for Rolland's play. The theme of these four drawings is particularly difficult to decipher, but not one offers, however they are transformed or inversed, any of the elements of the one which finally became the *Dépouille du Minotaure en costume d'Arlequin* of 28 May 1936. Besides three variants of the *Minotaure aveugle guidé par une fillette* (*Blind Minotaur Guided by a Young Girl*, 1934), it seems possible to include in this group the superb etching of 23 March 1935, the celebrated *Minotauromachie*, which "condenses into a single image the motifs and all the symbols of the cycle"⁵, as well as the *Corrida - La mort de la femme torero* of 6 September 1933 (*Bullfight, Death of the Woman Torero*), in order to gain a broad view of this reworking of Greek myth. Picasso is the Minotaur which carries off the dead mare, who is Marie-Thérèse, because for him in the duality of the corrida, the horse is a woman.

Just as the *Minotauromachie*, the monster pushes away the little girl wearing a crown of flowers (once again, Marie-Thérèse, on a horse, representing the purity of love or desire). Picasso the Minotaur staggers under the lance like the bull the arena, and it is he who falls - a poor broken mannequin in Harlequin costume, into the arms of a man with an eagle's head who also evokes the figure of Horus, the Egyptian sun god. Executioner but also victim, Picasso the Minotaur sees his double standing before him in the guise of a bearded sculptor - a recurrent image in his work. He retreats to the top of a ladder the *Minotauromachie*, welcomes or pushes down the man wearing the mask of the Minotaur in the arena, or defies the monsters, stone in hand. The beautiful adolescent sitting on his shoulders could also be a representation of the artist dressed in his famous sailor shirt, his arms outstretched like those of the old sculptor. But the androgynous character of the adolescent is more strongly evocative of the woman picador in the gouache of 8 May. The feminine profile of the face resembles Dora Maar, the artist's new companion. The Picasso-Dora fusion was a recurrent feature of his work. This case, the dead mare is surely Marie-Thérèse. The strange team would then seem to be the transposition of the woman-horse couple which confronts the bull in many of the artist's works. One needs only raise upright the woman with the bared breasts and the profile of

² "Conversation avec Picasso," Christian Zervos, *Cahiers d'Art*, No. 10, 1935.

³ Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Du Minotaure à Guernica*, catalogue of the *Picasso Toros y Toreros* exhibit, Paris, Musée Picasso, 1993, p. 150. (This book was the main reference for this essay).

⁴ Jean-Marie Magnan, "De cape qui caresse et d'épée qui foudroie," *ibidem*, p. 68.

⁵ Marie-Laure Bernadac, *ibidem*, p. 150.

Marie-Thérèse stretched over the mare carried off by the injured fawn - a sublime image of the Rape of Europe - in the *Mort de la femme torero* to recognise the double, and to perceive the imagery of the picador's tercio in the corrida. The gouache chosen by Picasso for the *Rideau pour "Le Quatorze -Juillet"* is therefore the transposition onto a mythological base of a phases of the corrida in which the painter wishes to triumph over the amorous Minotaure within himself.

If it is true that the artist more or less consciously adapts his personal life to the antique myth by literally identifying those around him with the figures of tauromachy, we can only imagine the emotion he felt on the evening of the premiere of *Le Quatorze-Juillet*, in front of his backdrop, making history...

"The beautiful toro who engendered me, his forehead crowned with jasmine..." (Picasso, 1936)