

Picasso Becoming Picasso

A small, exquisite exhibition at the Guggenheim shows how the City of Light transformed the 19-year-old Spanish artist. One painting says it all.

By Roberta Smith

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Some celebrations are fleeting, others bring permanent, tangible results. With “Young Picasso in Paris,” a tiny gem of an exhibition, the Guggenheim Museum has it both ways.

Organized by Megan Fontanella, the Guggenheim’s curator of modern art and provenance, this show is one of over 30 mounted in European and American museums as part of “Picasso Celebration: 1973-2023,” which has been spearheaded by the Musée Picasso-Paris on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the artist’s death. The point seems to be that in the half century since then, the legacy of the 20th century’s greatest artist remains undiminished, continues to influence new generations of artists and still contains mysteries to be discovered by scholars and new technologies.

The Guggenheim show hits all of these marks. The museum has used the celebration as an impetus to continue the analysis (initiated in 2018) and undertake the conservation of its best-known and most beloved Picasso painting: “Le Moulin de la Galette,” of 1900, and to make this beguiling, subtly refreshed work the centerpiece of “Young Picasso.”

As Picasso shows go, it has a distinctive lightness. For one thing it contains only 10 works. But it is also unburdened by the artist’s oppressively unforgettable, often disturbing life story, of which there was as yet not much. It gives us Picasso before he was Picasso, which was in essence Picasso before he knew Paris.

He had traveled there from Barcelona by train with his friend, the Spanish poet and painter Carles Casagemas, in order to visit the Universal Exhibition, which was nearing its conclusion. He wanted to see a painting of his hanging in the Spanish Pavilion. This was “Last Moments” from 1898, which he repainted in 1903 as “La Vie,” a high point of his Blue Period.

But Picasso’s larger mission was to breathe in Paris — the capital of the 19th century in Walter Benjamin’s words — and take a crash course in modern French painting. During the visit he worked hard in studios shared with other artists and often their models. And he voraciously sampled everything the city had to offer a frighteningly talented, ambitious, curious, sociable yet provincial young artist. He visited museums to see older art and galleries for the latest thing. He partook of the glamorous bohemian nightlife in cafes, cabarets and dance halls, of which “Le Moulin de la Galette” was the most famous.



"The Fourteenth of July, 1901" loosely painted on cardboard when Picasso could not afford canvas, depicts street celebrations of Bastille Day. Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



"The Diners, 1901" portrays an extravagantly dressed woman accompanied by an older man whose thoughts are elsewhere. Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

And he got to know people, initially Spanish artists and writers, some of whom he had known in Barcelona, and a widening circle of Parisians as he learned French.

At the Guggenheim, “Le Moulin de la Galette” occupies pride of place in a large gallery painted in a slightly cool (in temperature) dark blue. Reigning in magnificent solitude from one of the longest walls, this seductive wide-angle view depicts a dance hall full of beautiful people — elegantly turned-out women and top-hatted men — who dance, drink and exchange pleasantries or gossip while their eyes slide away, perhaps seeking out the very topic of discussion. It is relatively quiet — Picasso would also paint cancan dancers, but not now — a suave, sophisticated crowd painted by an artist who understood its fashions, body language and interpersonal connections perfectly.

It also shows him mulling over the painting styles of his elders — Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, the Swiss born illustrator Théophile Steinlen in particular. I might add a soupçon of Seurat, to account for the smooth unruffled Classical forms of the dance hall’s clientele.

The prevailing darkness, in which the men’s black coats alternate with the subtle colors and fabrics of the women’s garments, owes something to Picasso’s love of Velázquez and Goya. But the colors that bloom from its shadows brighten throughout several of the other paintings: in the coarse pointillism of “Woman in Profile” and “Courtesan With Hat,” and the flat colors of “The Diners” — especially the red banquette on which the mismatched couple are seated. In the parade of “The Fourteenth of July” — the only glimpse of daylight here — tossing and turning strokes of red, white and blue suggest a riled Impressionism.



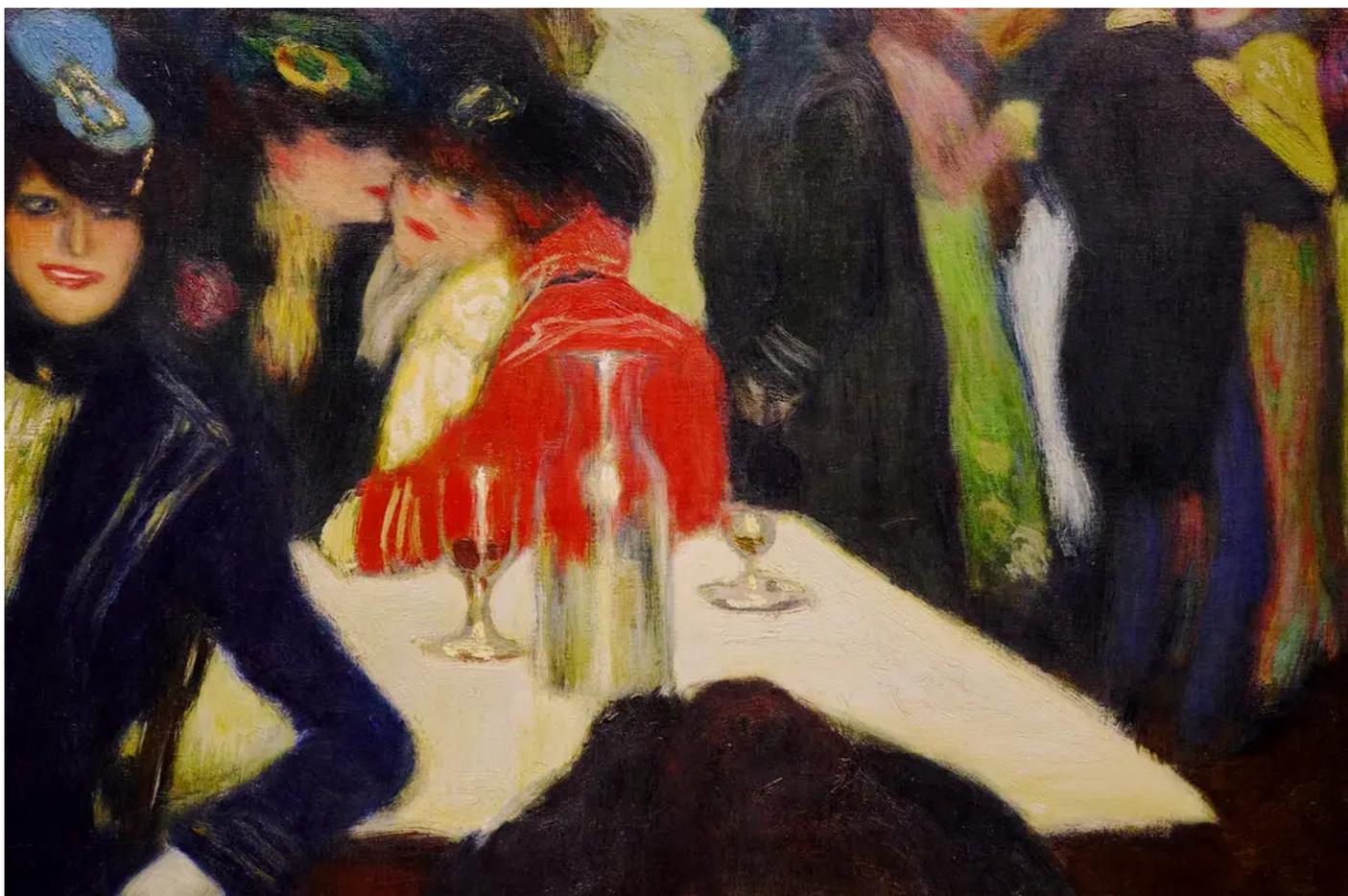
Detail of “Le Moulin de la Galette,” which portrays a dance hall full of elegantly turned-out women and top-hatted men who dance, drink and exchange pleasantries or gossip. Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The completeness and complexity — the amazing growth spurt — of “Le Moulin de la Galette” cannot be underestimated. It is one of the first paintings Picasso completed in Paris — the masterpiece of this initial two-month transformative immersion. It was also the first Picasso to enter a French collection, selling quickly through the art dealer Berthe Weill — whose role in discovering Picasso is often overlooked — to the progressive publisher and collector Arthur Huc.

“Le Moulin de la Galette” has been off view since November 2021. Its painstaking conservation was led by Julie Barten, the museum’s senior painting conservator, with input from Fontanella. Not unlike doctors, the conservator’s oath is do no harm, or more precisely nothing that cannot be reversed. They initiate a project only after reaching a consensus based on discussions with colleagues — art historians, curators and conservators from their own and other museums.

In more ways than one, all this conversation must offset some of the inherently solitary, nerve-racking, artisanal aspects of the conservator’s task. And so Barten ventured into the meticulous cleaning of the painting’s surface, using bits of cotton wool and dampened paper to remove a layer of grime and then a coat of yellowed varnish that had been applied decades ago, although certainly not by Picasso.

A growing component of conservation is the collection and analysis of data by research scientists using high-powered instruments, usually in response to specific questions from conservators. In this case, essential aid came from research scientists at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art.



Detail of “Le Moulin de la Galette” showing the dark pile at the table’s edge that once was occupied by an auburn-coated King Charles spaniel, now faintly visible after conservation. Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Generally these combined efforts have cleaned up the painting’s surface, brightened its colors and the glow of the gaslight; expanded the depth of its atmospheric space and made certain forms — the top hats, the decanter and glasses on the table — more fully dimensional while also revealing some of the changes Picasso made as he worked.

One is the dark pile at the painting’s lower edge, left side, that resembles coats piled on a chair at the white-clothed table. On it an auburn-coated King Charles spaniel once rested, wearing a vermilion bow and looking our way. The table also hosted a second empty chair.

One of the show’s greatest moments is a vigorous drawing from 1900 in charcoal and crayon from a private collection in Europe that is being shown in this country for the first time. It is like a great

snapshot, a group selfie as it were, that depicts Picasso and his friends taking exuberant leave of the Universal Exhibition. With their arms linked, their bodies and limbs lean and overlap in different directions and tones of black. They have a joyful, slapstick air, either from tipsiness or maybe the thrill of seeing their young friend's painting on public view in Paris. Picasso's talent for caricature is evident in the unruly frieze, the floundering chorus line of comrades. The King Charles spaniel in the foreground of this scene escaped effacement.



Picasso's "Leaving the Universal Exhibition, Paris," 1900, shows the artist (second from left) leading his Spanish cohort — the artist Ramon Pichot, the critic Miguel Utrillo and the poet-painter Carles Casagemas — flanked by the artist models Odette Lenoir and Germaine Florentin. Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The exceptions from the show's emphasis on Parisian social life and its habitués are two intense self-portraits from 1901, the first few months of which Picasso spent in Madrid and then Barcelona. (He had returned to his birthplace, Malaga, for Christmas and to see if an uncle could pay for his draft exemption.) The first self-portrait may date from this time away. It shows an artist over-emphasizing his famously intense, burning stare amid a dark background of quasi-Expressionistic brushwork that surrounds his face with an aura of blue.

The second self-portrait is from the last months of 1901, after his return to Paris mid-May to prepare for his first Paris solo at the gallery of Ambroise Vollard. This three-quarters view shows the artist, inhaling his powerful personality. It's all self-contained areas: the flat blue background tending toward the show's wall color; his pale, somewhat grim yet tentative expression and the solid dark slab of his overcoat. He looks a bit like a captain about to go down with his ship.



“Self-portrait, Paris,” late 1901, is an early instance of Picasso’s Blue Period. Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



“Self Portrait (Yo),” 1901, in which the artist’s intensely staring face has an aura of blue. Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

These two paintings open the door to the first phase or style that Picasso could call his own: his Blue Period, which turns away from the brighter colors and moods of his first Paris paintings. It introduces a more original figurative mode — despite debts to El Greco and Symbolism — and turns inward, toward melancholia and deprivation that reflects Picasso’s inherent temperament, his continued poverty and his mourning of the death of his friend Casagemas, who committed suicide in Paris in February 1901, while the artist was in Spain. This haunting self-portrait effectively brings down the curtain on Picasso’s first ebullient savoring of the City of Light.

Young Picasso in Paris May 12 through Aug. 6, Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, (212) 423-3500; guggenheim.org.

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art. More about Roberta Smith