# *Françoise Gilot, Artist in the Shadow of Picasso, Is Dead at 101*

An accomplished painter (and memoirist), she did what no other lover of his had ever done: She walked out.

**By Alan Riding**

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Françoise Gilot, an accomplished painter whose art was eclipsed by her long and stormy romantic relationship with a much older Pablo Picasso, and who alone among his many mistresses walked out on him, died on Tuesday at a hospital in Manhattan. She was 101.

The death was confirmed by her daughter Aurelia Engel, who said Ms. Gilot had recently been dealing with heart and lung ailments.

“You imagine people will be interested in you?” Ms. Gilot quoted a surprised Picasso as saying after she told him that she was leaving him. “They won’t ever, really, just for yourself. Even if you think people like you, it will only be a kind of curiosity they will have about a person whose life touched mine so intimately.”

But unlike his two wives and other mistresses, Ms. Gilot rebuilt her life after she ended the relationship, in 1953, almost a decade after it had begun despite an age difference of 40 years. She continued painting and exhibiting her work and wrote books.

In 1970, she married Jonas Salk, the American medical researcher who developed the first safe polio vaccine, and lived part of the time in California. Still, it was for her romance with Picasso that the public knew her best, particularly after her memoir, “Life with Picasso,” written with Carlton Lake, was published in 1964. It became an international best seller, and so infuriated Picasso that he broke off all contact with Ms. Gilot and their two children, Claude and Paloma Picasso.

Ms. Gilot’s frank and often-sympathetic account of their relationship — she dedicated the book “to Pablo” — provided much of the material for the 1996 Merchant-Ivory movie, “Surviving Picasso,” in which she was played by Natascha McElhone, with Anthony Hopkins as Picasso.

If Ms. Gilot’s book sold well, so has her art. With her work in more than a dozen museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, her paintings fetched increasingly higher prices well into her later years.

As recently as June 2021, her painting “Paloma à la Guitare” (1965), a blue-toned portrait of her daughter, sold for $1.3 million in an online auction by Sotheby’s. That surpassed her previous record price, $695,000, paid for “Étude bleue,” a 1953 portrait of a seated woman, at a Sotheby’s auction in 2014. And in November 2021, her abstract 1977 canvas “Living

Forest" sold for $1.3 million as part of a retrospective of her work at Christie's in Hong Kong.

Ms. Gilot in 1965. She was drawn to art from an early age, tutored by her mother. Jacques Haillot/Sygma via Getty Images

Ms. Gilot's "Paloma à la Guitare" (1965), being readied for auction at Sotheby's in London in 2021. It sold for $1.3 million. John Phillips/Getty Images for Sotheby's

Lisa Stevenson, the head of curated sales for Sotheby's in London, told ARTnews after the 2021 auction, "It isn't commonly known that Gilot's commitment to art was present long before her relationship with Pablo Picasso, and she was sadly often left in his shadow."

Ms. Gilot herself preferred to leave judgments about her art and life to others. As she told The New York Times in a profile of her published in January 2022, "I am not going to make a big deal of being more than what I am — or less."

## Born Into Wealth

Marie Françoise Gilot was born into a prosperous family on Nov. 26, 1921, in Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris, the only child of Emile Gilot, an agronomist and chemical manufacturer, and Madeleine Renoult-Gilot. Her 19th-century ancestors had owned a couturier house of fashion whose clientele included Eugenia, the wife of Emperor Napoleon III.

Marie Françoise was drawn to art from an early age, tutored by her mother, who had studied art history, ceramics and watercolor painting. Her father, however — recalled by Ms. Gilot as an authoritarian who had forced her to write with her right hand, though she was left-handed — had other ideas. Envisioning a career in science or the law for his daughter, he persuaded her to enroll at the University of Paris, where she received her

bachelor's degree in 1938 at age 17.

She went on to study at the Sorbonne and the British Institute in Paris and receive a degree in English literature from Cambridge University. As war crept closer to France in 1939, her father sent her to the city of Rennes, northwest of Paris, to enroll in law school. All the while she continued working on her paintings.

Then came the German occupation of Paris, in June 1940, and she joined other students in an anti-German protest march at the Arc de Triomphe. In a clash with the French and German authorities, Ms. Gilot was arrested, briefly detained and put under watch. "From day one, we were not the kind of people who would become collaborators," she said of her family.

She continued her law studies at the University of Paris, but after taking her second-year examinations, in June 1941, she lost interest and abandoned the field, deciding to devote herself to art. She began private lessons with a fugitive Hungarian Jewish painter, Endre Rozsda, and attended classes at the Académie Julian, which numbered Matisse, Bonnard, Léger and Duchamp among its alumni. Her father was unhappy about the decision, however, and the two clashed frequently, until Ms. Gilot moved in with her grandmother.

As Ms. Gilot described it in "Life With Picasso," her first encounter with Picasso, in May 1943, was accidental. She was dining with her closest friend, Geneviève Aliquot, and an actor, Alain Cuny, in Le Catalan, a small restaurant on the rue des Grands-Augustins, near Picasso's Left Bank studio. Picasso was at another table accompanied by his mistress at the time, the Surrealist photographer Dora Maar.

Picasso asked Cuny to introduce him to the two young women. Learning that both were painters, he invited them to visit his studio. They did so together the following day and several more times before Geneviève returned to her home in southern France. Ms. Gilot continued to visit Picasso, seemingly fearless of his growing attraction to her.

She spent much of that summer with Geneviève in Provence. But in the winter of 1944 her relationship with Picasso blossomed. She was 22; he was 62. She later recalled lying naked by his side. "He was very gentle," she wrote, "and that is the impression that remains with me to this day — his extraordinary gentleness."

Ms. Gilot in 1978. Married to Jonas Salk at the time, she shuttled between a home in the La Jolla section of San Diego and her studio in southern France. Associated Press

To be drawn into Picasso's world would also prove tumultuous. In an interview for this obituary in 2007, Ms. Gilot recalled that German officers would arrive at Picasso's studio at least once a month.

"They'd never be in uniform when they came, a group of five or six," she said, "and Pablo

would ask me to follow them to make sure they didn't plant any documents they could 'find' later. He was always concerned about that."

With the liberation of Paris in August 1944, Picasso was again an international star, and he thrust himself into politics by joining the French Communist Party.

## Moving In, Walking Out

Meanwhile, Dora Maar was still present in his life, as was his longtime mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter. Maar began to worry, rightly, that Ms. Gilot would replace her. Indeed, in May 1946, Ms. Gilot agreed to move in with Picasso, and a volatile chapter in her life began.

By all accounts, while Picasso's painting and ceramics reflected a new happiness — he portrayed Ms. Gilot as a nymph to his centaur — he apparently now felt that he had conquered her and began seeing other women.

She gave birth to Claude in May 1947 and Paloma in April 1949. She also continued painting, adopting a colorful abstract style associated with the postwar School of Paris rather than imitating Picasso. In April 1952, she had a well received exhibition in Paris. But by then Picasso had been traveling to southern France without her and made little secret of his new affairs.

Finally, on Sept. 20, 1953, unwell and unhappy, Ms. Gilot told Picasso that she was going to leave him.

"No woman leaves a man like me," he replied, according to her account in "Life With Picasso." She wrote: "I told him maybe that was the way it looked to him, but I was one woman who would, and was about to. A man as famous and as rich as he? He couldn't believe it, he said."

Ms. Gilot had a brief affair with a Greek philosopher, Kostas Axelos, but remained in contact with Picasso, even informing him of her decision in 1955 to marry a childhood friend, Luc Simon, a French artist. Her daughter Aurelia was a product of that marriage before it ended in divorce in 1962, a year after Picasso married Jacqueline Roque, his second wife.

Ms. Gilot's final rupture with the artist was over "Life With Picasso." His friends attacked her over the memoir, and so did the French Communist Party. Picasso himself made three vain attempts to prevent the book from being published in France. Then he refused to see Claude and Paloma again, apparently keeping his word until his death in 1973.

By then Ms. Gilot had married Jonas Salk, shuttling between a home in the La Jolla section of San Diego and her studio in southern France. In 1975, she published a new book, "Interface: The Painter and the Mask," a memoir of her life as an artist. The next year she became chairwoman of the fine arts department at the University of Southern California, a post she held until 1983.

Ms. Gilot in her studio and home in Manhattan in 2015. She preferred to leave judgments about her art and life to others. “I am not going to make a big deal of being more than what I am — or less,” she said. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

In addition to Ms. Engel, she is survived by Claude Picasso, the director of Picasso Administration, which manages the artist’s estate; by Paloma Picasso, the fashion and jewelry designer best known for her perfumes; and four grandchildren.

After Salk’s death in 1995, Ms. Gilot made her home on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in an apartment that doubled as a studio — “an airy refuge with barrel-vaulted ceilings, towering bookcases and an outsize window that bathes her canvases in a cool north light,” Ruth La Ferla wrote in the 2022 Times profile.

Ms. Gilot also kept a small studio in Paris while continuing to work prolifically, holding exhibitions in Europe and the United States through 2021. In 2018, she published a book of sketches, many in vivid color, that she completed during travels to India, Senegal and Venice from 1974 to 1981.

## The Picasso Presence

But Picasso, though long gone from her life and by then long dead, nevertheless remained an imposing and, as a giant of 20th-century art, overshadowing presence.

In 1990, Ms. Gilot, continuing to reflect on him, published “Matisse and Picasso: A Friendship in Art,” an account of the two artists’ rivalrous friendship that focused on the years in which she witnessed it. In 2012, she and the Picasso biographer John Richardson curated a well-attended show, “Picasso and Françoise Gilot: Paris-Vallauris, 1943-1953,” at the Gagosian Gallery in Manhattan, displaying work that she and Picasso created during their years together.

Ms. Gilot at 96 in 2018. Asked if she had ever felt competitive with Picasso or his famous artist friends, she replied, “That never entered my mind.” Jody Rogac for The New York Times

“Looking at the 30 paintings here, including naturalistic portraits of herself and her grandmother, Cubist still lifes and abstractions and pictures of herself and her children, you might think for a moment that you are looking at more Picassos,” Ken Johnson wrote in his review of the show for The Times.

Asked by Ms. La Ferla if she had ever felt competitive with Picasso or his friends — among

them Chagall, Braque, Matisse and Giacometti — Ms. Gilot replied: “That never entered my mind. I started painting, after all, at 3 years old. As a child, you aren’t thinking in terms of me, me, me. You are not capable of that.”

But she acknowledged that those 20th century masters had an inevitable impact. They “helped me grow,” she said, and by their very attention instilled in her a measure of self-confidence.

“I realized,” she said, “if they are so great, then I am not so small.”

Alex Traub and William McDonald contributed reporting.

**Alan Riding** was a correspondent at The New York Times from 1978 to 2007. More about Alan Riding