

# PABLO PICASSO

Ilya Ehrenburg

**Pablo Picasso was recently awarded a second International Lenin Peace Prize. This article about him by his long-standing friend Ilya Ehrenburg was originally published in Moscow as the introduction to a book about the painter and his work.**

ONE cold winter's day at the beginning of 1915, Picasso took me home to his studio, not far from the Café Rotonde in the Rue Schoelcher. Its windows looked out on to Montparnasse cemetery; but Paris cemeteries are merely abstract cities of straight roads, vaults and tomb-stones and quite devoid of the poetry of Russian or English graveyards.

It was impossible to turn round in the studio, as completed canvases and pieces of cardboard, tin, wire and wood lay about everywhere, with tubes of paint in the corner, more tubes of paint than I had ever seen in a shop. Picasso explained that he had often not had enough money for paints, so when he had sold some pictures recently he had decided to equip himself with paints 'for the rest of his life'. I noticed there were pictures on the walls, on broken stools, on cigar-boxes; he admitted he could not bear to see an unpainted surface. He works with an incredible kind of frenzy. With other people months of creative activity are followed by periods of idleness, when the poet or artist, in the words of Pushkin, 'indulges in a cool sleep', but Picasso has spent his whole life working, and goes on working with the same fury. The various eccentricities that journalists and photographers fasten on are not part of his real life, they are only off-moments of relaxation.

I asked him about the pieces of tin, and he said he wanted to use them but did not quite know how. There seems to be no material in which he has not worked. He has been learning all his life, for he loves craftsmanship. When he was 40 he learnt how to handle sheet-iron from the Spanish craftsman Julio González, at 60 he learnt the art of lithography, and at 70 he became a potter.

In the studio were a Negro sculpture and a large picture, depicting a peace conference, by the customs officer Rousseau, an amateur painter whose works now decorate galleries all over the world. Picasso explained that Negro sculptors alter the proportions of the head, body and arms not because they do not see people clearly or because they cannot handle their material; they simply have different conceptions of proportion, just as Japanese masters have different ideas of perspective. 'Do you really believe this customs officer Rousseau never saw a classical painting?' he asked me. 'He often used to go to the Louvre. But he wanted to work in a different way. . . ' Picasso was the first to realise that our age requires plain dealing, frankness and strength.

At that time he was 34 years old, but looked younger, with his very lively, penetrating and incredibly black eyes, black hair and small, almost feminine, hands. He would often sit moodily in the Café Rotonde, scarcely uttering a word; at other times he would be full of spirits, and joke and tease his friends. There was a feeling of restlessness about him, and this reassured me; looking at him, I realised that what was happening to me was no personal matter, no illness, but a peculiarity of the age.

I have already mentioned that Picasso was sometimes dear to me because of his destructive power; this was how I knew him and grew to love him in the years of World War I. It is generally assumed that at this period Picasso

was indifferent to everything savouring of politics. If we mean by this the replacement of ministers and newspaper controversies, then it is true that he was inclined to look for anecdotes rather than political declarations in *Le Matin*. But I remember how pleased he was at the news of the February Revolution. It was then that he gave me his picture, and we said goodbye for many years.

They say that friendship, like love, needs close contact and withers with long separation. At times I would not see Picasso for eight or ten years, but never once did I find him remote or changed as a human being. (This is precisely why I do not remember exactly when he said such-and-such a thing to me—he might have said it in 1914 or 1954.)

I remember various studios of his: in the Rue de la Boétie, in a smart residential district, where he seemed like a casual visitor, almost an intruder; in the Rue Saint Augustin\*, in a very old house, a huge studio with Spaniards, doves, enormous canvases and that deliberately organised disorder which Picasso engenders everywhere; a barn in Vallauris, full of tin boxes, clay, sketches, glass balls, scraps of posters, cast-iron bars and a shanty where he slept on a bed, covered with newspapers, letters and photographs; a big, bright house called 'California' in Cannes, with children, dogs, the same heap of letters and telegrams, huge canvases and a bronze Picasso nanny-goat in the garden.

I had long nicknamed him 'Devil' as a joke. This word in Russian is difficult for a Frenchman to pronounce, but the 'ch' sound exists in Spanish, and Pablo would smilingly declare 'I am a *chort*'. If he is a devil he is certainly a very special one, one who argues with God about the universe, rebelliously and uncompromisingly. A devil is generally not only cunning but wicked; but Picasso is a good devil.

How naïve, ignorant or unscrupulous are people who look upon his great, difficult, creative career as an attempt to be original, a desire to 'impress the middle classes', a passion for fashionable 'isms'! He has told me more than once how amused he was when people wrote that he 'searches for new forms': 'I do not search for new forms, I find them'. He once told me that sometimes, when he sits down to paint, he does not know himself whether the picture will turn out cubist or purely realistic—that is determined by the model and the emotional state of the artist.

At Vallauris a beautiful young American girl sat for him, and he did dozens of sketches of her and painted her in oils. In the first portrait she looked very like what those around her saw; not a single realist, in the narrowest sense of the word, could have found any objection to it. Then gradually Picasso began to take her face to pieces. Obviously this model had revealed herself to him not simply through her angelic appearance; he had found traits which betrayed her character and had begun to study them. 'But that's a pig in a cube', joked a visitor to the exhibition who was standing by my side and looking at the 10th portrait of this American girl, not in the least suspecting that the portrait of the beauty, which had thrown him into ecstasies, was the original of the 'cubist pig'.

After the Wroclaw Congress in 1948 we were in Warsaw, where Picasso sketched my portrait in pencil; I sat for him in a room in the old Bristol Hotel. When he stopped drawing I said: 'Finished already?', for it seemed a very short sitting to me. He burst out laughing, and said 'You see, I've known you for 40 years'. This portrait seems to me not only very like me (or rather I am like it), but profoundly psychological. All Picasso's portraits uncover (at times unmask) the model's inner world. A very long time ago, when I

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\* Rue des Grands Augustins?—Tr.

was talking to Picasso about my love for the Impressionists, he remarked: 'They wanted to depict the world as they saw it. That does not appeal to me. I want to depict the world as I imagine it.'

Of course, many of Picasso's pictures are difficult to understand because of their complicated ideas and emotions and their unusual forms. I happened to be the interpreter at the first conversation between Picasso and Alexander Fadeev in Wroclaw.

*Fadeev:* I had better tell you straight out that I don't understand some of your things. Why do you sometimes choose forms that people can't understand ?

*Picasso:* Tell me, Comrade Fadeev, did they teach you to read at school?

*Fadeev:* Of course they did.

*Picasso:* How did they do it?

*Fadeev* (with his shrill laugh): Bee—ee—bee . . .

*Picasso:* The same with me—'bee'. Good, but did they also teach you to understand painting?

Fadeev started laughing again, and began to talk about something else.

If you consider the whole of Picasso's creative work it becomes clear that he has transformed painting. After the Impressionists people saw nature afresh, no longer through the eyes of the Bolognese school. Artists painted exclusively from nature—portraits, landscapes and still life. Composition became the monopoly of artists of the academic trend. Above all, artists were afraid of 'literary' subjects, as they expressed it. Perhaps the last composition painted in France by a great artist is Courbet's *Funeral at Ornans*, painted in 1851. In 1937, nearly 100 years later, Picasso painted his *Destruction of Guernica*.

When I arrived in Paris from Madrid I went at once to the Spanish pavilion at the International Exhibition and froze on the spot. I had caught sight of *Guernica*. I saw it twice after that, in 1946 in the New York Museum and in 1956 in the Louvre at the Picasso Retrospective Exhibition; and each time I felt the same emotion. How could Picasso have foreseen what was to come ? The civil war in Spain was still fought in the old way. For the German air force, certainly, it was merely a manoeuvre, but the attack on Guernica, though not a big operation, was the first try-out. Then came World War II. Then came Hiroshima. Picasso's canvas is the horror of the future, a great repetition of Guernicas, of atomic catastrophes. We see before us fragments of a shattered world, madness, hatred, despair, annihilation.

(What is realism, and is the artist realistic who tries to depict the drama of Hiroshima by carefully tracing sores on the bodies of one or of dozens of stricken beings? Does reality not really need a different, more general, approach, where it is not a single incident that is revealed, but the essence of tragedy?)

Picasso's power lies in his ability to express the most profound ideas and the most complicated feelings in the language of art. When still a boy he could draw like a master; his lines convey everything he wants and are completely under his control; he is so devoted to painting that he is furious or in agony if he cannot immediately find the colour he wants.

There was a time when we cultivated painting that resembled enormous coloured photographs. I remember an amusing conversation from this period between Picasso and a young Leningrad painter.

*Picasso:* Can you get paints where you are ?

*Painter:* Of course, as many as you like.

*Picasso:* In what form ?

*Painter* (puzzled): In tubes.

*Picasso:* But what is written on the tubes ?

*Painter* (still more puzzled): The name of the colour—'ochre', 'burnt sienna', 'ultramarine', 'chrome'.

*Picasso:* You should rationalise the production of pictures. Mixtures should be prepared in factories, and printed on the tubes of paint should be the words: 'For the face', 'For hair', 'For a uniform'. That would be much more sensible.

Some authors, when writing about Picasso, have tried to describe his enthusiasm for politics as something accidental, a mere whim; he is an original, they say, who loves bull-fights and became a communist for no particular reason. He always took his own political opinions very seriously, however. I remember a dinner in his studio on the day of the opening of the Paris Peace Congress. His daughter was born on that day, and he called her Paloma, which means 'dove' in Spanish. There were three of us at table, Picasso, Paul Eluard and I. We spoke first of doves, and Pablo told us how his artist father, when painting doves, used to tell his son to finish off the claws, as he was sick of them. Then we began to talk about doves in general. Picasso loves them, and always keeps them in his home; he said laughingly that they are greedy, quarrelsome birds, and he really did not know why they had become the symbol of peace. Then he went on to talk about his own doves, and showed us hundreds of drawings for a poster; he knew the bird on it was destined to go round the world. He talked of the congress, of war and of politics. I remember one remark of his: 'Communism for me is closely bound up with my entire life as an artist'. The enemies of communism never trouble to think about this bond, which even seems enigmatical to some communists at times.

Picasso then painted more doves for the Warsaw and Vienna congresses. Hundreds of thousands of people have got to know and love him only through his doves. Intellectual snobs scoff at this. Ill-wishers accuse him of seeking an easy way to fame. But his doves are closely connected with all his creative work—with minotaurs and goats, with old men and young girls. Of course, his dove is only a speck in the riches created by him, but how many millions of people have come to know and revere Raphael from reproductions of only one of his pictures, *The Sistine Madonna*; how many millions have come to know and revere Chopin only because he wrote the music they hear at funerals! So it is silly for the snobs to laugh. Naturally, you cannot appreciate Picasso from one dove alone, but we had to have Picasso to create such a dove.

Picasso himself is not only not offended by this love of simple people for his dove and for him, but is continually being moved by it. In the autumn of 1949 I was with him in Rome at a meeting of the Peace Committee. After the meeting, in a big square, we were walking along a working-class street when the passers-by recognised him, took him to a small *trattoria*, gave him a drink and embraced him; women asked him to take their children in his arms. It was a demonstration of an affection which cannot be assumed. They had not seen his pictures, of course, and if they had they would not have understood much about them, but they knew that he, a great artist, was for them and with them, and so they embraced him.

At conferences in Wroclaw and Paris he used to sit all the time with headphones on, listening intently. I had to turn to him a number of times with a request, as it nearly always turned out at the last minute that one of his drawings was needed to ensure the success of the conference or for some campaign or other in defence of peace. And, no matter how absorbed he was in other work, he always complied with my request.

Now and then some of those who held the same views as his would criticise or reject his paintings. He used to accept this sorrowfully but calmly, with the words: 'There are always rows in the family circle.'

He knew that his pictures were displayed in the art galleries of America, knew that when he wanted to go to the United States with a delegation from

the World Council of Peace he was refused a visa. He knew something else as well: the country which he loved and believed in had long been reacting unfavourably to his work. Once when we met he said laughingly to me: 'You and I have had it.' Not long before this I had written an article for a literary paper, not about painting, of course, but about the fight for peace (this was in 1949); in the article I stated that the best brains of the West were on our side, and cited Picasso. There was a footnote to this article, which expressed regret that I had not criticised the formalistic elements in Picasso's work. Naturally, the anti-soviet French papers reprinted not my article, but the editor's footnote. Pablo laughed about it and said it was not worth getting upset about—you could not do everything all at once.

Nothing could shake his faith in the Soviet Union. In 1956 some of his friends, giving way to their confused state of mind, asked him to put his signature to protests, declarations and statements against it. He refused to do so.

His exhibition in Moscow was a great joy to me. Too many people came to see it, for the organisers, fearing there would not be enough visitors, had sent out far too many invitations. The crowd burst through the barriers, afraid they would not get in. The director ran up to me, looking pale and crying: 'Calm them down; I'm afraid someone may get hurt.' I said over the microphone: 'Comrades, for 25 years we've been waiting for this exhibition. Won't you please wait quietly for 25 minutes?' Three thousand people burst out laughing, and order was restored. It was my job to open the exhibition in the name of the 'Section of Friends of French Culture'. Ceremonies of this kind usually bore me, but that day I was as excited as a schoolboy. I was handed a pair of scissors, and it seemed to me that I was cutting not merely through a ribbon, but through a curtain, behind which stood Pablo. Of course, there were heated arguments about the exhibition. This always happens at Picasso's exhibitions—he enraptures, infuriates, amuses, delights, but never leaves anyone indifferent.

'Inconsistencies'? All right, if you like. 'In Picasso's work there are a number of inconsistencies.' But let us remember the dates—his first works were shown in 1901, and now as I write these lines 1960 is at the door. Have there been few inconsistencies during those 60 years? Picasso does not live in the past or in the future; he expresses the complexity, the confusion, the despair and the hope of his age. He destroys and creates, loves and hates.

I have been very lucky really. In my lifetime I have met a few of the people who have determined the shape of this century. I have seen not only the storms and fogs, but also the shadows of those standing on the captain's bridge. I look back upon that far-off day when I first met Picasso as one of the great strokes of luck of my life.

*Gulomstock i Sinyavsky. Picasso. M. 1960. Translated by K.B.*

## TALKING ABOUT FREEDOM

Margarita Aligher

**A famous Russian poet takes up a conversation she had with a London journalist one evening in July.**

IT was a mild London evening at the end of July when I dropped in to see some Moscow journalist friends at the Prince of Wales Hotel. They had a few London newspapermen visiting them, and I was immediately drawn into an atmosphere of animated amiability, natural among people wishing to see and know more about each other.

We spent a very pleasant evening, one that we recall with pleasure. We all went for a walk, mingled with the crowds in Piccadilly, and wandered through the streets of Soho . . . We felt perfectly at ease with our new acquaintances—there was complete harmony and mutual understanding between us.

On the way back, one of our companions asked me about my work.

‘Do you only write poetry, or do you write other things as well—short stories or newspaper articles?’

‘I write articles for the papers whenever the need arises’, I replied. ‘I also try to write short stories, though I haven’t attempted to publish any of them as yet. I translate a good deal, but in the main I write poetry, lyric poetry . . .’

‘But you must find that very difficult.’ My companion’s voice carried a note of sympathy. ‘You can’t write what you want, can you?’

Taking a deep breath to quell a rising feeling of irritation, I said: ‘The form I write in has the priceless advantage of being expressive only when it is dictated by the heart. Otherwise it cannot exist.’

‘Ah yes, poetry! I realise that. You are right. But still, you are forced to write what you’re told, aren’t you?’

‘Forced? Verses? May I ask you, by the way, whether you have read any of my poetry? I should be very interested to know what you think caused me to write any one of my poems.’

But my English acquaintance had not read any of my poems, and he was visibly perturbed and embarrassed. As for my initial irritation, to tell the truth, it resolved into placid boredom and complete loss of interest in the man walking by my side. I noted with pleasure that we were already in Bayswater Road and near the end of our walk. I tried to pass the rest of the time away with banal chatter about nothing: ‘How wonderful the air is in this part of the city, don’t you think? Somebody said that Hyde Park was the lungs of London . . .’

At last we came to the door of my hotel. I was home.

‘Thank you very much for the lovely time. So glad to have met you. Good night, sir.’

Yes, I was very glad to meet you. I am aware that you are an honest man, our real friend and well disposed towards us. You have been to our country and have written about it seriously, with genuine interest and attention. So it is all the more vexing that our conversation ended so flatly and bluntly. Perhaps it was wrong of me to avoid a straightforward and serious talk with you. I should have gone on with it. It was not civil on my part to by-pass it. My solemn remark regarding the uniqueness of poetry, and the manœuvre that reduced a general question to a point in particular, could hardly have convinced you and changed your views on the matter.

It is most important that those views be radically changed. It is important that our questioners and colleagues who are as misled as my London acquaintance stop repeating general unsubstantiated and absurd statements that can only irritate and insult us.