

# Picasso's Madonna: Portraits of Françoise Gilot

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By Marian Ang | Mar 24, 2023

On the 50th anniversary of the artist's passing, we look at three paintings that represent the legacy Pablo Picasso built with his muse, lover and partner of a decade – the French painter Françoise Gilot, famously known as the only woman who ever dared to leave him.

In 1943 in German-occupied Paris, a 21-year-old Françoise Gilot and 61-year-old Pablo Picasso crossed paths at Le Catalan restaurant, when Picasso brought a bowl of cherries to the table where Gilot was dining with friends. The beautiful and accomplished Cambridge- and Sorbonne-educated Gilot was enjoying her first major painting exhibition in Paris, whilst Picasso was still living with his soon-to-be-ex mistress and photographer Dora Maar (who was also dining that fateful night at Le Catalan, looking daggers at their table). At this first meeting, Gilot explained that she was a painter, to which Picasso replied: "That is the funniest thing I've ever heard. Girls who look like you could never be painters."



Françoise Gilot and Pablo Picasso. Photographer/Artist: Robert DOISNEAU  
via Getty Images

Warned by friends and family of impending disaster, and yet propelled by a breathless sense of urgency that pervaded Paris in the wartime years, Gilot threw herself into a decade-long relationship with Picasso. "It was a time when everything was lost; a time of

death. So: do I want to do something before I die, or not?...It was – let's do something right away!" A relationship with him, Gilot concluded famously in her 1964 book *Life with Picasso*, was a "catastrophe I didn't want to avoid."



Pablo Picasso, *Femme dans un fauteuil*, 30 October - 25 December 1948.  
estimate upon request

Gilot exerted a profound influence on Picasso's work: much more than merely a muse and companion, Picasso's biographer John Richardson acknowledged that "Picasso took from her rather more than she took from him" and Picasso produced an impressive body of work testifying to the joy of the years he spent with Gilot and their two children, Claude (b. 1947) and Paloma (b. 1949). Gilot was more than Picasso's intellectual equal, and she recorded the ups and downs of their life together with a detached and humorous eye that only served to emphasise the unmistakable genius behind the myth, a force of nature whose compulsive, subversive creativity bordered on the magical.

"Painting isn't an aesthetic operation; it's a form of magic designed as a mediator between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires."

Pablo Picasso, quoted in *Life with Picasso*, 1964

## The Flower Woman

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"I've been wondering how I could get across the idea that you belong to the vegetable kingdom rather than the animal. I've never felt impelled to portray anyone else this way. It's strange, isn't it? I think it's just right, though. It represents you."

Pablo Picasso, quoted in *Life with Picasso*, 1964



Pablo Picasso, *La femme-fleur*, 1946  
(Image Source: <https://www.pablo-ruiz-picasso.net/work-1171.php> )

In the early years of their relationship, Picasso depicted Françoise as inextricably linked with the natural world, representing her with voluptuous, organic lines and a rich emerald green that would come to be her *leitmotifs* in his body of work. Like a solitary, unplucked flower, Gilot's poised and luminous face reflects her independence from Picasso, who repeatedly implored her to move in with him during the early years of their relationship. She finally acquiesced and in May 1946 she settled into his apartment at Rue des Grands Augustins. Picasso worked on different portraits of Gilot, but kept returning to the oval moon-shape and flower forms that spring. "I can't do a thing about it," he said. "It just wants to be represented in that way. That's the way it is sometimes. There are forms that impose themselves on the painter. He doesn't choose them."

## Woman in a Chair

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Picasso and Françoise Gilot at the Cannes Film Festival in 1953, with Gilot wearing the Polish coat gifted to her by Picasso

Picasso's 1948 portrait of a serene, pregnant Gilot, *Femme dans un fauteuil*, in many ways represents the apex of the couple's love affair. It was painted at the midpoint of their relationship, as Gilot approached the second trimester of her pregnancy with the couple's second child Paloma, and was completed on Christmas Day of 1948. Begun shortly after the couple returned to Paris from Vallauris, Gilot recalled "It was a happy and idyllic period. Pablo was very attentive and, most of the time, quite calm". Picasso was unable to stand skinny or even slender women, and starting to feel the effects of pregnancy upon her body, Gilot recounts, "I found added grace in his eyes". Deeply saturated colour harmonies, undulating lines and an overall sense of balance pervade the work, whilst a tranquil smile plays on Gilot's lips.



Pablo Picasso, *Femme dans un fauteuil* , 30 October - 25 December 1948.  
estimate upon request

That winter was a busy one for Picasso, who started painting again after a period of working on ceramics and lithography. Away during Gilot's first month of pregnancy at the Wrocław Peace Congress, Picasso returned with a peace offering: a Polish coat in brown leather lined with black sheep's wool and decorated with peasant embroidery in red, blue and yellow, as well as a miniature version lined in white wool for their son, Claude. A series of works of Gilot clad in the Polish coat ensued, continuing Picasso's explorations of linear rhythms from his illustration of Pierre Reverdy's *Le Chant des morts*— extended arabesque lines that touched upon fields of bold, contrasting colour, whilst the striking visage superimposed itself in the manner of a black-and-white papier collé. That winter Gilot assisted Picasso with three or four such portraits of herself, copying images onto canvas to provide a jumping-off point for Picasso to explore variants more quickly.



Pablo Picasso, *Femme au chignon dans un fauteuil* . lot sold for 29,930,000 USD

Other works from this particularly fulfilling period in Picasso's life include *Femme au chignon dans un fauteuil* (1948), which depicts a pregnant Gilot with her trademark chignon hairstyle and clad in the Polish coat. Calmly looking straight at the viewer, Frank Elgar points out that these portraits of Gilot "have a Madonna-like appearance, in contrast to the tormented figures he was painting a few years earlier". As the mother of God and a symbol of purity and humility, the Madonna (a representation of the Virgin Mary) has often been depicted as the queen of Heaven enthroned alone or with her child Jesus. Her images became icons venerated by both the Catholic and Orthodox churches, including in Picasso's native Spain, where her likeness was portrayed by – amongst others – the old Master El Greco, whose paintings Picasso encountered in his early visits to the Prado in Madrid and whose portraiture motifs Picasso would borrow throughout his long career. Believing that motherhood would help to settle his headstrong muse, Picasso urged Gilot to have children with him. Wrapped in her trademark green, a signifier of rebirth and renewal, Gilot's image would forever become associated with Picasso's newfound happiness in life.

## Seated Woman in Green

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Pablo Picasso, *Femme assise en costume vert*, 1953. lot sold for 20,946,000 USD

The taut composition of *Femme assise en costume vert*, completed just months before the breakdown of Picasso's and Gilot's relationship, echoes Picasso's Cubist period of many decades ago and, more ominously, the weeping woman motif once associated with his former companion, Dora Maar. The angular, incisive lines excise the soft and fluid lines of Gilot's beautiful oval face in earlier depictions, fracturing it into sharp, bitter pieces.

The cracks had become inescapable in their relationship: Gilot was increasingly aware of Picasso's infidelities, whilst he chafed loudly against the domesticity he had once craved. The end came slowly and then all at once for the lovers: suffering prolonged exhaustion from her workload, ill health after childbirth that required urgent medical attention, as well as the emotional fallout from the death of her grandmother, Gilot notified Picasso that she would be returning to Paris with the children. Unwilling to believe it was really the end, Picasso was so angered that he refused to say goodbye, instead exclaiming "Merde!" and marching back into the house when the taxi arrived to take Gilot and the children to the station. He later softened his stance, inviting Gilot to open the bullfight at Vallauris on horseback, a ritualistic reconciliation and separation of the bull and the horse that symbolised the parting of himself and Gilot. Gilot used the same metaphor of the bullfight to reflect their decade together, describing it as a passionate *mano a mano*, a duel in which two matadors take turns in fighting, each killing three or four bulls:

"In *mano a mano* two artists work side by side, sharing the same challenge, the same ideal... The term also emphasises the hand, and the strange fraternity that must exist between artistic partners in which emulation must never degenerate into rivalry. Thus it seems an apt metaphor for what happened between Picasso and myself. [...] After Pablo and I separated, even though new loves entered our lives, a sense of loss remained. It was the end of a great passion."

Françoise Gilot, quoted in Picasso and Françoise Gilot, Paris-Vallauris, 1943-1953, 2012

## About the Author

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Marian Ang is a Hong Kong-based art writer and researcher, and a regular Sotheby's contributor.