ALMINE RECH

Pablo Picasso
Picasso Memory and Desire

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The Museo Picasso Málaga is presenting the exhibition 'Picasso Memory and Desire'. Centering on the oil painting *Studio with Plaster Head* executed by the artist in 1925, it explores the complex relationship between images and the divergences of the modern subject through the work of Picasso and his contemporaries.

The exhibition brings together more than one hundred works by key figures of 20th-century art, such as Giorgio de Chirico, Fernand Léger, Jean Cocteau, Man Ray and René Magritte, as well as interpretations of Picasso's work by Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca.

Curated by Eugenio Carmona, professor of art history at the University of Malaga, and sponsored by Fundación Unicaja, the exhibition presents a revealing dialogue between memory and desire, historical time and modernity, and the way in which subjectivity transforms cultural symbols.

'Picasso Memory and Desire' takes its starting point from the inspiring and complex painting *Studio with Plaster Head* (1925), a work that greatly impressed Dalí and Lorca and one considered to represent a "dividing line" in Picasso's output and the evolution of his artistic personality. This is both a research project and an exhibition proposal that explores the relationship between images, the divergences of the modern subject and the experiencing of different historical periods within a single cultural present. In synergy with the Surrealist spirit, Picasso’s painting reveals how an era is not a fixed mental universe but a complex articulation of cultural references, accumulated life experiences and expectations of future action.

The exhibition’s argument is generated by a painting executed by the artist in 1925: *Studio with Plaster Head*, a multifaceted work that Picasso transformed into both a psychic emblem of the divided subject and a metaphor for a past that becomes present in response to the demands of desire. For Eugenio Carmona, the exhibition's curator, it is thus a meta-painting that reflects a tension between desire and memory. Sponsored by Fundación Unicaja, 'Picasso Memory and Desire' is on display at the Museo Picasso Málaga from 14 November 2025 to 12 April 2026.

THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN MEMORY AND DESIRE IN MODERN ART

In the 1920s and 1930s European society developed through a series of powerful and dramatic paradoxes. The devastating implementation of colonial rule continued, while extreme nationalism would ultimately and lethally lead from one war to another. Despite this, many men and women transformed their mindsets and social values in pursuit of a liberating emancipation, and Modern Art extended through broad social circles. At the same time, however, it began to be challenged by the emerging authoritarian political regimes. The dialectic between permanence and change was incessant. The present relocated the memory of a past that continued to exist in everyday life while at the same time, new ways of living and thinking fuelled a continual desire for transformation. Memory and desire

The myth of technical and scientific progress provoked doubts, but this did not prevent a continued analysis of the "self" from being strongly encouraged, accompanied by an aspiration to reassess inherited identities. The subject aspired to redefine itself. Albeit with contradictions, Surrealism permeated the entire creative milieu in an extensive manner. The dynamic relationship between memory and desire showed that the present was not a frozen instant but a continuous flow of interactions. The complex dialogue between everything experienced and everything yet to be experienced was the driving force of existence. Memory was not a mere archive of the past; it was reactivated and updated to the present through the demands of desire.

The revelatory effectiveness of the icons created by Picasso influenced the Modern Art of his time. In this sense, Giorgio de Chirico can be seen as a precedent, although the two artists' proposals were substantially different. From the perspective of the present exhibition, what Picasso created was remote from and even challenged the concepts of the "return to order" and "modern classicism"; rather, he was proposing the sum of different periods in a single present. In that historical context and with this work, Picasso closed the cycle of his relationships with the so-called "return to order" and with his classical period. Moreover, by making the antique bust an emblem of the present, both he and the modern artists around him were questioning the very notions of "return to order" and "modern classicism."

STUDIO WITH PLASTER HEAD

Studio with Plaster Head, painted by Pablo Picasso in the summer of 1925, uniquely expresses this historical situation. In it, the artist presents a powerful series of iconic signs that contain a revealing psychomachy. As Eugenio Carmona observes: "To look at *Studio with Plaster Head* is to locate oneself in front of a complex web of signs. Powerful icons demand attention in their effort to become emblems. It is not inappropriate to refer to Picasso's painting as a painting of signs." Functioning as a generative element of the work as a whole, Picasso included the covert evocation of his father, a drawing teacher within the official Fine Arts system. This also implied a reference to Picasso's own training within that system. For the artist, this was the place of memory. But why bring these references into the present, in 1925? The plaster bust at the centre of the work is not related to anachronism nor to a "return to order," but rather to the presence of the past that is redefined from the present. Furthermore, in its displacement of time and meaning, the bust disturbingly explodes into contrasting profiles, projecting a mysterious shadow and interrogating us with its penetrating gaze. Picasso developed the concepts he initially presented in Studio with P laster H ead in a fascinating series of works, expanding them across his output and transforming them over the decades. The bust became an emblem. The "split faces" and the "profile in shadow" were developed as vehicles for a simultaneously revealing and disturbing figurative and visual interplay. These were proposals that incessantly evolved around themselves. For the artist, the continuous succession of these vanishing lines was the locus of "desire," understood not only as an erotic drive but above all as an intense affirmation of the will to live.

KEY FIGURES IN 20TH-CENTURY ART

The redefinition of the classical plaster bust, the ideogrammatic play of split faces and the sense of alienation produced by shadows were not exclusive to Picasso's art. Giorgio de Chirico had anticipated the use of some of these devices and was still employing them in his painting in the 1920s. De Chirico's figures are inert and deny a view to the exterior. Picasso's explode in their inner life and emphasise the drive of the gaze. De Chirico poses a paradox. Picasso shows a conflict. In addition to the names of these two artists, reference should be made from 1924 onwards to that of Fernand Léger, who introduced the plaster bust and the profile in shadow at the same time they appear in Picasso's works. Studio with Plaster Head was reproduced in several magazines of the time and soon attracted the interest of numerous contemporary artists, although the dialectic between memory and desire was already strongly present in all of them. In 1926 Salvador Dalí thus appropriated Picasso's icons and gave them new meaning by relating the bust to the Christian iconography of decapitation. He used it at the start of his paranoid-critical method to formalise his self-portrait and locate the keys to his psychomachy. The "split faces" in his work express the tensions surrounding the identity of modern art, in a youthful dialogue and polemic with Federico García Lorca. In turn, the latter shared with Dalí the references of the bust, the shadow and the splitting of the face as signs of the conflicts of theamorous self. Lorca and Dalí's interpretation of Picasso constitutes one of the key themes around which this exhibition project is articulated. In his constant interaction with Picasso, Jean Cocteau made the bust and split faces part of his reflection on the contemporary survival of the Orpheus myth. Orpheus appears here as a metaphor for the link between love, death and creation, and at the same time as a model of self-representation. Man Ray manipulated the image of Venus to question the relationships between eroticism and culture, shifting the semiology of the bust toward the timeless petrification of its own image. From this perspective, his work opens up to a field of questions about the self, memory and desire. Influenced by Picasso and Cocteau, Carl van Vechten transferred these motifs to the context of the “Harlem Renaissance” and the vague nègre , photographing the Senegalese model François “Féral” Benga, among others. Felice Casorati and Jean Metzinger located the bust in domestic settings treated as artistic spaces, while René Magritte took up Picasso and Cocteau’s ideas and made the motif a recurring one from 1925 up to his series *La Mémoire*. In Cocteau’s work the bust is associated with the feminine, with memory and with trauma, characterised by arbitrary wounds that reveal the paradox of fragility and permanence.

In the field of photography, Walker Evans and André Kertész made their own shadow an icon. By experiencing the street as a dreamlike space and by using female shop mannequins as “involuntary sculptures”, Brassaï, Dora Maar and again Kertész replicated and reinterpreted the classical bust, blurring the boundaries between the everyday and the artistic while highlighting the alienation of gender codes. Brassaï and Dora Maar also documented Picasso's sculpture studio in Boisgeloup as a modern transformation of academic plaster cast galleries.

Gender issues were further explored by Eileen Agar and Claude Cahun. In dialogue with nature and with a classical bust of a contemporary male figure, Agar reversed the roles assigned to women in Surrealism, transforming them into active agents of the gaze. In collaboration with Marcel Moore, Cahun created a "double bust" that has become a pioneering reference in transgender art, a radical reflection on identity.

Finally, Juan Gris, like Picasso, incorporated the classical bust into still lifes that functioned as homages to the arts, introducing the soft forms later revisited by Dalí. In the context of Spain, José Moreno Villa, Gregorio Prieto, Joaquín Peinado, Benjamín Palencia and Enrique Climent—all representatives of the New Art—understood the reference to classical art not as an anachronism or surrender but as a living dialogue between the strata of time.

LE CHEF-D’OEUVRE INCONNU

In 1924, while on holiday in Juan-les-Pins, Picasso produced the drawings known as the "Constellations," in which dots of ink connected by fine lines form guitars and mandolins. In 1931 some of these drawings were reproduced as woodcuts by Georges Aubert and published by Ambroise Vollard and Blaise Cendrars to illustrate Honoré de Balzac's famous story Le chef -d’oeuvre inconnu [The unknown masterpiece] (1831). The publication also includes other drawings by Picasso executed between 1927 and 1931 and various etchings on the subject of the artist and his model.

For this reason, the exhibition includes an installation in which the voice-over of Malaga-born baritone Carlos Álvarez narrates fragments of this work in several languages whilewhile visitors proceed along a corridor that displays the “Constellations” from Sketchbook 30 and the drawings of double heads and faces from Sketchbook 31, which was used to illustrate the edition of this text. By happy coincidence—or perhaps an irony of fate—Honoré de Balzac's famous story has become linked to Picasso’s Studio with P laster H ead given that, in a sense, the painting can also be considered an unknown masterpiece: little known, rarely exhibited, yet fundamental with regard to Picasso's transition between Classicism, Cubism and the first signs of Surrealism. The installation accompanying the exhibition not only engenders a dialogue between word and image but also illuminates this singular painting which, like Balzac's story, contains the mystery of its creation and the enigma of a barely revealed work.

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