

Picasso comes to Porto: an exhibition of the Vollard Suite



Few cities in the world have succeeded in winning the accolade of Best European Destination three times. Porto, in Portugal, was awarded this distinction in 2012, 2014 and 2017. This summer, there is a new reason to visit this devastatingly beautiful city on the shores of the Atlantic.

An exhibition of Pablo Picasso's monumental series of one hundred etchings, the Vollard Suite, has recently opened at the Palacio das Artes, where it will be showing until 11 September 2019.

This is a rare opportunity to see the entire series of etchings that constitute the Vollard Suite, one of the twentieth century's most significant works of art. Although a handful of sets can be found in the collections of world-famous museums such as the National Gallery in Washington, the British Museum in London, or the MOMA in New York, most sets have been broken up. The set being shown in Porto belongs to the Spanish Mapfre Foundation, and it is the first time that the Vollard Suite in its entirety has been exhibited in Portugal.

The exhibition is being sponsored by the Misericórdia do Porto and by Taylor's Port. Adrian Bridge, CEO of Taylor's Port, says this exhibition "brings value to the city as a tourist destination." Indeed, Porto is suddenly a huge dot on the contemporary art map with, besides the Picasso exhibition, Ci.CLO Bienal'19 Fotografia do Porto, the first Photography Biennial of Porto, on until 2 July (focused on 'Adaptation and Transition' in relation to climate change), and a series of strong exhibitions at the Serralves Foundation, one of the most interesting of which shows the work of New York performance artist Joan Jonas.

Commissioned in 1930 by Ambroise Vollard, the organizer of Picasso's first exhibition in Paris in 1901 and his leading art dealer from then onwards, the enormous series of prints was finally completed in 1937. Picasso's fee for his work was a group of paintings by Renoir and Cezanne, drawn from Vollard's extensive collection. The Vollard Suite comprises of one hundred etchings in the neoclassical style and is considered one of Picasso's most important works as well as one of the major graphic masterpieces of all time. Vollard died in a car accident, in 1939, and with the ensuing Second World War, the Suite which bore his name was not exhibited to the public until the 1950s. The series includes three portraits of Vollard.

At the opening last Thursday, I talked to Adrian Bridge about Picasso: "a fascinating man," he commented. During a career that spanned the first seventy years of the last century, Picasso was responsible for an exceptional number of ground-breaking creative innovations in fields which include painting, sculpture, printmaking, ceramics and scenography. His contemporaries, artists and art dealers alike, watched in amazement as he pushed boundaries ever further, while his long-time secretary, Jaime Sabartes, filtered access for the many curious to the master's studio.

The artist's studio is indeed one of the principal emotional arenas of this series which is marked by an astounding range of thematic variety and technical diversity. In addition to the sculptor's studio, Picasso develops themes which include the 'Battle of love', acknowledges the influence of Rembrandt, and introduces the presence of a minotaur, a half human-half animal beast from Ancient Greek mythology. Produced over a period of six years, the series reflects the emotional turbulence of Picasso's life against a backdrop of rising Fascism and approaching war.

The mood at the start of the series is arcadian. Picasso has just begun his relationship with Marie-Therese Walter, a seventeen-year-old French girl. As we move through the series, however, the atmosphere of order and happy eroticism slowly shifts. Picasso finally separates from Olga, his wife of many years, while the political situation becomes increasingly preoccupying. The mood in the later works is often violent and the eroticism predatory.

To celebrate the *tour de force* of viewing these one hundred exceptional works, the visitor is invited at the end of the exhibition to sample a glass of Taylor's Port. The pairing is perfect.