



FINE ART
L.L.C.

EDWARD TYLER NAHEM

PICASSO — DE KOONING

Willem de Kooning and Pablo Picasso share a surprising number of parallels, despite their obvious differences of generation and cultural background. Both trained in the European academic tradition, with its emphasis on classical drawing. As older artists, both ventured far from the academy, abandoning linearity for painterly freedom, yet with eye and hand still anchored in that tradition. In their later years, both largely left the urban center where they had made their mark for a more solitary life in the countryside, close to the sea.

Almost all the works on view focus on the female form, usually nude, which injects an eroticized energy into the handling of the *matière*. This is thematized in Picasso's *Le peintre et son modèle*, 1963-1964, a recurring subject and occasion to reflect on the paradoxes of artistic inspiration.



The painter seems all powerful, his large head and all-seeing black eye filling much of the vertical expanse. The flecks of his black hair also imply cranial gray matter, and his profile is doubled, the black profile seconded by an enlarged one in white. Heavily painted and overpainted, the thick colors are embedded with numerous hairs from Picasso's brush, as if to materially identify the painter with his implement.

Pablo Picasso, *Le peintre et son modèle*, 1963-64, oil on canvas

In contrast, the female model is opposite in nearly every way. Lightly sketched in simple red and green contours, her body is the radiant whiteness of bare canvas. Horizontal to his vertical, she reclines on a yellow divan — miniaturized as if seen from a distance. Between the two figures rises a vertical canvas on a suggestion of an easel. Its subject is a welter of lines, a Frenhofer-like abstraction that bears no representational relation to the female muse.¹

Indeed the black arm and brush of the depicted painter extends beyond the vertical canvas toward the model, a frequent trope on the brush as phallus in the painter and model series. This also alludes to the painter of this image, Picasso himself, as does the male presence at the right edge, a sculpted bearded head on a tall support. This bust serves both as a surrogate for the viewer as well as a reminder of the art of sculpture, a medium which much occupied Picasso in these years.

Picasso was a dominant presence and influence on painters of the New York school in the 1930s and 40s, including de Kooning. Yet by the 1960s this had shifted, and the two older artists begin to seem more like contemporaries, masters who witnessed a tide of new movements and young art stars emerge in the 1960s.



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De Kooning's *A Woman (Marilyn)* (1965) is a standing, wide-hipped woman whose green shoes point to the painting's lower edge. At top, a spray of windblown blonde hair spreads over a sky-blue ground, with vivid red outlines completing the trio of primary colors. She averts her gaze and covers her mouth with her arm palm out, in a curious gesture, as if wanting to brush away the intrusive cameras of paparazzi. De Kooning had painted an earlier *Marilyn Monroe* (1954, Neuberger Museum); could this be a posthumous sequel?

Four years later *Woman (Arthur's Woman)*, 1969, a larger canvas, breathes with even greater painterly freedom. A shock of orange hair presses toward us, obscuring the face, as if the woman is leaning over. A clunky high heeled shoe in profile is visible on the lower right, as she reaches down toward the left, perhaps putting on its mate. Swoops of liquid brushstrokes are tempered by straight edges and scraped areas, and drizzled with drops of green and red. These two examples of the mid-sixties *Women* series sound a more lyrical note than the earlier, mid-fifties *Women*, a shift that has been linked to the artist's move to Springs, Long Island, in 1964.



De Kooning, *Woman*, 1969, oil on canvas

While De Kooning's subjects in this era range from "pin ups" to women observed by the sea, Picasso mostly focused on his companion — in his later years, Jacqueline Roque. She is featured in an extensive series of busts from 1962 and '63, including *Femme au chapeau assise. Buste*. There an opposed, left-facing profile is concealed within the central shadow. An earlier portrait of her, *Figure - Portrait of Jacqueline*, 1957 is closely related to the *Tête de femme* sculptures done that summer. Shades of brown and white clearly separate the planes of the nose and face.

De Kooning and Picasso both continued to explore what oil paint could do, even through the 1960s age of acrylic. De Kooning famously linked the medium to the subject, supposing "Flesh was the reason why oil paint was invented."ⁱⁱⁱ Their juxtaposition here offers a rare chance to evaluate their painterly exploits as contemporaries.

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ⁱ I refer here to an artist in Balzac's story *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (English "The Unknown Masterpiece"), which Picasso notably illustrated for Vollard in a 1927 series of etchings, published in 1931.

ⁱⁱ De Kooning, "The Renaissance and Order (1949)," <http://www.dekooning.org/documentation/words/the-renaissance-and-order> (accessed April 30, 2017).