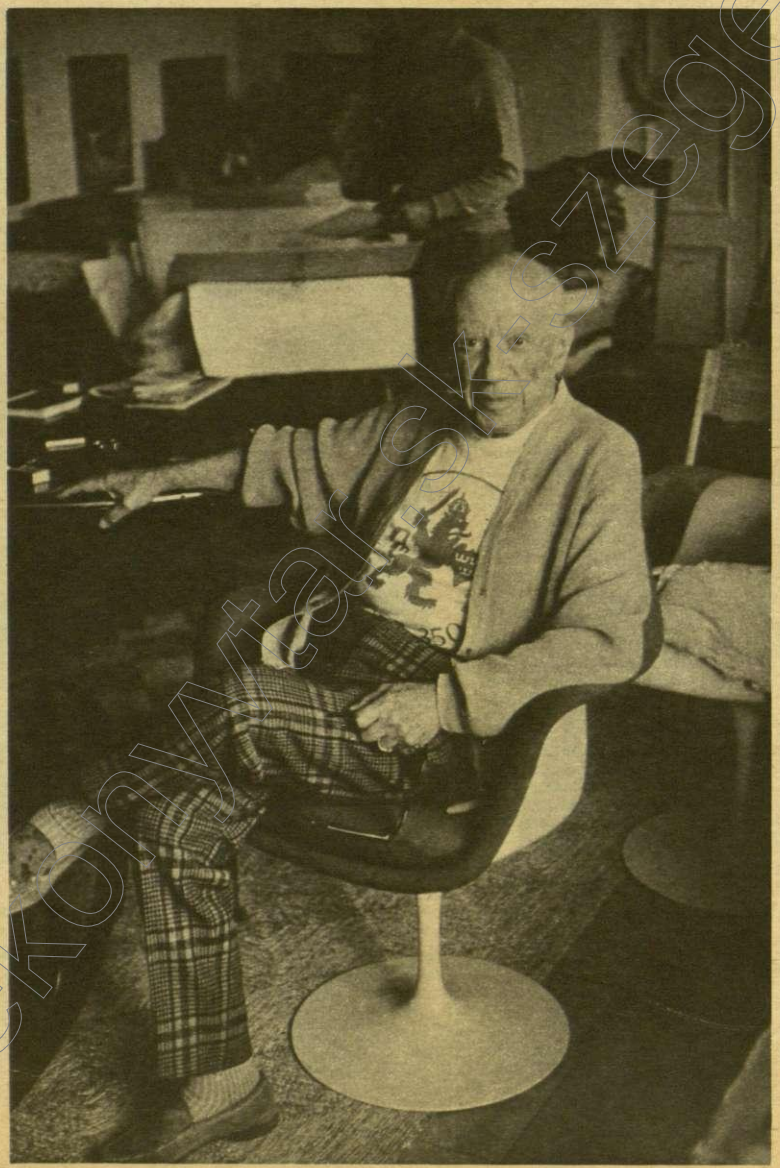
The master at 90—

Picasso's Great Age Seems Only To Stir Up the Demons Within

By BRASSAÏ



MOUGINS, like most of its neighboring villages, is perched on a hilltop in a landscape reminiscent of Tuscany, studded with silvery olive trees and cypresses so dark they seem almost black. Beneath the town lies the Bay of Cannes, and behind it, to the north, the snow-capped chain of the Alps. Picasso had spent many carefree vacations here in the years before the war, and in the room he occupied at the Hotel Vaste Horizon a few smears of paint that fell from his palette are still to be seen, preserved as zealously as sacred relics.

The first surprise of the afternoon is a distinctly unpleasant one. Surrounding the very entrance to the property of Notre-Dame-de-Vie, a series of enormous orange posters announces the formation of a subdivision of 26 lots on this site. The once-peaceful, isolated hillside Picasso had chosen as a last, inviolable refuge will soon be invaded by bulldozers and cranes, pneumatic drills and armies of workmen and trucks. A splendid gift for a 90th birthday!

In the early fifties, when he purchased the Villa la Californie, near Cannes, he did not fully realize the risk he ran when he ignored the suggestions of real-estate agents that he should also buy the adjoining sections of property. And then, in 1960, the giant cranes had begun to appear, so close they could be seen from the windows of the villa.

"It's frightful," he had said to me at the time. "An enormous apartment building is going to be put up in the garden just next to mine. Not only will it cut off our view of the Iles de Lérins, but all of the tenants will be able to look down on us from their

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BRASSAÏ, the internationally known photographer whose professional name is taken from Brasov, his Hungarian birthplace, has long been a member of Picasso's "spiritual family." He is the author of "Conversations Avec Picasso," which appeared in English as "Picasso and Company."

PABLO. Picasso-at-ease, in bold plaids and heraldic T-shirt, as photographed by Brassaï on the day of his visit to Notre-Dame-de-Vie.

SATYR? A sketch by (and curiously resembling) Picasso—who is 90 tomorrow—from the "Suite Erotique" of "Le Gout du Bonheur."

balconies! I shall be forced to leave here."

And he had left. But when he bought the big, comfortable country house of Notre-Dame-de-Vie, he had run the same risk and reacted to it in the same manner. The corkscrew road that leads to his property runs through land that does not belong to him. He was advised to buy it too, but he did nothing about it.

He and his wife Jacqueline are waiting for my wife and me at the door, and he throws his arms around us, kissing us repeatedly on the cheeks; not just formal pecks, but sensual, very Spanish kisses. Standing slightly apart, waiting to greet us in more reserved fashion, is the tall, elegant figure of Albert Skira, the Swiss publisher and old friend of both Picasso and myself.

"You see!" Picasso exclaims triumphantly, "here we are again—the original crew of Minotaure, 40 years later. We could start all over. I'm sure I could even find my trumpet."

So he remembers even that! In that long-ago year of 1932, when Minotaure, "the most beautiful art review in the world," was born, Picasso had lived at 23 Rue la Boétie, in Paris, and Skira had a tiny office at No. 25, just next door. Picasso was working on a series of etchings to illustrate the "Metamorphoses" of Ovid, and as soon as he completed each of the plates he would lean out of his window and blow a discordant fanfare on his trumpet. Skira waited for the sound of that trumpet far more eagerly than he ever awaited a telephone call.

"It was just 40 years ago," Skira says, "that I came to him with the idea of illustrating the 'Metamorphoses' of Ovid." He turns to me. "Do you remember? I had a terrible time selling all of the copies of that album, and now they are collectors' items. So—for his 90th birthday [Oct. 25] I am going to publish a new album and call it 'The Metamorphoses of Picasso.'"

Picasso laughs, and I can imagine what he is thinking. Perhaps now it will be easier to sell.

HE is dressed today with the sort of refined whimsy that often governs his choice of clothes. There has always been an element of the Renaissance dandy slumbering in him, and now he feels free to indulge whatever fancy may strike him. The last time I saw him, he had resembled a standard-bearer in some Uccello fresco. He was wearing velvet trousers of which one leg was blue and the other scarlet.

"A tailor made him a gift of a dozen pairs of the same kind, but of different colors," Jacqueline had told me. "He can change them to suit his mood—one day green and yellow, the next day violet and orange."

Knowing his tendency toward such flights of sartorial elegance, tailors deluge him with gifts and constantly propose all kinds of innovations in materials, in cut and in colors. Today, he is wearing paint-spattered moccasins, trousers of varying tones of brown in a bold plaid, and a Scandinavian tee shirt printed with an enormous heraldic lion. Despite the ever-present threat of the builders outside his walls, he is in an excellent mood. His energy seems inexhaustible.

"After a period of doing only drawings," he tells me, "I've started again on a series of etchings. Wait. I want to show you something."

He disappears into a cavern somewhere beyond the room in which we are gathered, and when he returns he is carrying an elaborately framed Degas monotype depicting a scene in a brothel. The girls, clad only in long midnight blue stockings, are clustered around their madam, an old harridan dressed entirely in black, embracing her and kissing her cheeks.

"It's called 'La Fête de Madame,'" Picasso explains. "One of Degas's masterpieces, don't you think? It was the inspiration for the series of etchings I'm working on now."

At the age of 90, Picasso is returning to the theme of "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon"! In 1907, that painting

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JACQUELINE. Picasso's wife of 10 years—"calm, serene and utterly devoted." Again, a photograph by Brassaï on the day of his visit.

Translated by FRANCIS PRICE

Picasso at 90

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had changed the whole course of modern art. And its theme was also a scene in a brothel—not in Avignon, as its misleading title would seem to indicate, but on the Carrer d'Avinyo, a street in Barcelona named for the old French city of the Popes.

Such a flowering of creative energy would be astonishing enough in a man who has already lived longer than many of the great artists of history, but in Picasso's case there is an even more astonishing factor: Instead of bringing with it a slackening of his physical ardor, his great age seems only to stir up the demons within and heighten the intensity of his erotic imaginings. The sensuality which impregnates the drawings, etchings and paintings of these last years, the multitude of lustful attitudes, the flood of carnal embrace will probably reach its culminating point in this new series of etchings. From what he has shown me of them already, they seem to border on lechery. He makes a laughing attempt at explanation: "Whenever I see you, my first impulse is to reach in my pocket to offer you a cigarette, even though I know very well that neither of us smokes any longer. Age has forced us to give it up, but the desire remains. It's the same thing with making love. We don't do it any more, but the desire for it is still with us!"

We are interrupted at this point by the arrival of the Crommelynck brothers, the two sons of the author of "Le Cocu Magnifique." They have been in Mougins for the past seven years, operating an engraving studio in a building that was once a bakery. When Picasso starts work on a long series of etchings—which may mean two, three or even more prints every day for a period of months—they shuttle constantly back and forth between Mougins and Notre-Dame-de-Vie, sometimes bringing the prepared copper plates on which he will work and sometimes the still-damp first impressions of yesterday's work. Today, they have brought some of the new "Demoiselles d'Avignon" series.

"Since we seem to be on the subject of prostitutes and madams," Picasso says to the engravers, "I should tell you about the marvelous photos Brassaï took in the brothels of Paris in the thirties." He turns then to me. "Why do you still refuse to publish them?"

"I gave myself 40 years," I reply. "It seems hard to believe, but that time will soon be up."

WHILE he is talking with the Crommelynck brothers, I take the opportunity to glance around the room in which he receives visitors. Every corner of it is filled with an accumulation of books, catalogues and papers, strewn about in what seems total disorder. But woe betide the unwary visitor who displaces so much as an envelope. Picasso's all-seeing eye will notice it at once. As for the paintings "on exhibition," they change occasionally. For a long time, a portion of the walls was hung with the little canvases done by Don José, Picasso's father, a specialist in pigeons, whose tiny feet were often painted in by his son Pablo, then aged about 14. I have also seen here—unframed and just placed against the wall—the little canvas Picasso always keeps somewhere close at hand: the famous self-portrait of the Douanier Rousseau, and its companion piece, the portrait of Madame Rousseau. Picasso has owned the first of these for a very long time, and he confided in me that he had bought the second "at a very high price" from his own longtime dealer, Rosenberg.

Today, four or five early Matisse landscapes cover the wall of one entire corner of the room, and hung with them is Matisse's portrait of his daughter, Marguerite Duthuit. Picasso has always derived pleasure from confounding people who do not know him well by hanging the paintings of his friend and supposed rival in his own home. (In his studio on the Rue des Grands-Augustins in Paris, the first painting one saw on arriving was a large Matisse still life of oranges and bananas, dating from the period before World War I.)

A door from the reception room opens into Picasso's mysterious "private domain," and only his close friends are permitted to enter here. Each time he goes into or leaves it himself, he closes and locks the door and puts the key in his pocket. Noticing my surprise at this, he smiles: "I'm becoming as suspicious as Vollard, aren't I? Do you remember how he saw a potential thief in everyone who came in?"

The spectacle that meets one's eyes on crossing the threshold is one of utter confusion, an Ali Baba's cave in which even the floor is strewn with little piles of booty gathered by the 40 thieves. Picasso surveys it with obvious delight:

"It's a second-hand dealer's dream, isn't it? A flea market! And it's nothing now. A thousand things, including hundreds of canvases—my own and those I have collected—have been sent off to Vauvenargues.* La Californie is stuffed with them, too. But even so, they are overflowing here to such an extent that I've had

*The Chateau de Vauvenargues, near Nimes in Provence, is the first of the houses Picasso bought in the south of France when he decided to leave Paris and settle there, after the war.

to add on three big rooms and several workrooms."

The amazing thing is that Picasso seems perfectly oriented in the midst of this jungle. If he happens to be looking for something, he goes to it without the slightest hesitation. Some little bronze figurines are lying in a basket on the floor at my feet, and there is a scrap of paper on top of them on which Picasso has written the number 26 in bold figures, and then drawn a circle around it. If one of the figurines were missing, he would know. Other bronzes—busts, figures of women, owls and bulls—are displayed on *étagères* and on shelves around the walls.

"I decided to have some of my ceramic pieces cast in bronze," he says. "Terra cotta is fragile. . . . This head is the very first piece I did in ceramic, in Georges and Suzanne Ramié's factory in Vallauris, in 1946. This bull was the second."

He leads me then into a studio on the ground floor in which larger bronzes and ceramic pieces are stored. Among them, to my surprise, are plaster reproductions of the two giant Michelangelo "Slaves" in the Louvre. They are placed at opposite ends of the room, and seem to be observing each other.

"Are you surprised to see them here?" he asks. "They were offered to me one day and I bought them. They come from the museum in Grenoble, I think."

In these two massive forms, Michelangelo has made no attempt to dissimulate the sensuality of his approach to the masculine nude. Just a portion of the chest is concealed beneath a fold of cloth, and the Herculean arms are held against the body with an elegant grace that is almost feminine.

I comment that it is easy to see, in these, that Michelangelo was himself a slave to his "Slaves," and that his penchant for beautiful male bodies is openly displayed.

"It certainly is!" (His voice assumes a falsetto note.) "It certainly is, my dee-e-ar! Oh! Ah!" (His voice returns to its normal level.) "Just look at those tiny little balls on those muscular bodies! Those pretty little balls! Yes, the whole story is there."

As we wander back into the reception room, I realize that he is fairly bubbling over with stories today. His memory is an inexhaustible mine of details from the past. He picks up a copy of Douglas Cooper's handsome book, "Picasso: Theatre," to show it to me, and almost at once notices a photo of Erik Satie and exclaims:

"What a joker Satie was! Think of the titles he gave to his music—very serious music. What a fantastic mind! Always dressed in the height of fashion, and always without a sou. He often had to walk from his home in Arcueil to Paris. The Princesse de Polignac, who considered herself a sort of adviser to him, sent him a thousand francs one day. And do you know what Satie wrote to her? 'My dear lady, your thousand francs have not fallen on deaf ears. . . .' And when my son Paulo was born, it wasn't to us, the parents, that Satie sent a note of congratulations; it was to the newborn child! 'You did well to come into this world,' he wrote to Paulo, 'and if you should see your parents say *bonjour* to them for me. Erik Satie.'

In this same album, when he catches sight of another photo, he cries out again:

"Look, look here! It's Mr. Leven. He was an Englishman who came to Monte Carlo once at a time when it was terribly hot, but he refused absolutely to part company with his bowler hat, his topcoat and gloves, or even his umbrella. Everyone said, 'You're insane to walk around like that in the August heat,' and eventually they forcibly separated him from all of his English trappings. And they had no sooner done it than there was a violent thunderstorm. He was soaked to the skin, but you would have thought he had won the battle of Waterloo!"

I mention to him in passing that I now regret having cited several examples of his "avarice" and "egotism" in my book "Conversations Avec Picasso," but none of his numerous acts of generosity.

"So much the better," he answers. "I would rather be taken for an ogre than for a philanthropist."

"For example," I say, "I really should have included the story of what you did for Valentine Hugo at a time when she was threatened with the seizure of her property and eviction. . . ."

"Really? You mean I came to Valentine's rescue? I don't remember it."

"She was sitting in Christian and Yvonne Zervos' shop, completely unnerved, almost suicidal. You came in, and talked with Christian for a moment at the back of the shop. Then, as you were leaving, you said to Valentine: 'Come over to the Rue la Boétie with me. There is something I would like to show you.' When you got to the apartment, you took out your checkbook and said: 'Tell me

"It is difficult for outsiders to realize that Picasso's wife, who is still young and beautiful, has lived for years in almost total retreat, rarely traveling anywhere. And God knows her role is difficult. Picasso is not easy to live with."

PICASSO'S etching for Chapter VIII of a 1932 edition of Ovid's "Metamorphoses." "As he completed each plate he would lean out the window and blow a fanfare on his trumpet."

how much you need, Valentine.' And you wrote her a check."

Valentine Hugo had told me this story herself. It took place in 1935 or 1936, the most painful period of Picasso's life. His first wife, Olga, had left their apartment and taken with her their son, Paulo, whom Picasso adored. In addition to this, her lawyers had sealed up his studio, pending a settlement. Separated from his work, even from the paintings that stood on his easel awaiting completion, depressed, not knowing what to do with himself, he wandered back and forth among the cafes of Saint Germain-des-Prés, and went back to the apartment only to sleep.

"You can't imagine the disorder of the place," Valentine had said. "All of the tables and chairs were covered with piles of books and magazines, and stacks of letters he hadn't even the courage to open. He searched in vain for some cleared space on which he could write. Finally—I'll never forget his gesture—he just swept aside everything that was on the mantelpiece, with his elbow. And then he wrote the check for me, standing there in front of the fireplace."

Both during and after the Spanish Civil War, Picasso gave millions of francs to the republican cause. It would be impossible to enumerate the Spanish refugees he has aided. At one time, a group of Catalan intellectuals who had escaped from a disciplinary camp arrived in France with no money at all. One of them suggested sending a telegram to Picasso and asking for a loan of enough money to get to Paris. He sent them not only this, but a sum sufficient to pay their debts in Perpignan and to live for some time after their arrival in Paris.

He has always sent substantial monthly sums to members of his family and to the various families he has "adopted." One day, when he turned on his television set, he caught a fleeting glimpse of the image of an old woman, walking painfully down a street. Despite the years that had passed he recognized her at once. It was Fernande Olivier, his beautiful mistress in the early days in Montmartre, now terribly aged and very poor, but too proud to ask anything from her former lover. Picasso learned her whereabouts, sent her a considerable sum of money and arranged for her to receive a regular income for the rest of her days. When Jaime Sabartès, his "majordomo" and friend, suffered a stroke and was partially paralyzed, he could no longer climb the stairs to his apartment near the Porte d'Orléans. Picasso immediately bought another one for him, on the ground floor of a building on the Boulevard Auguste Blanqui.

FOR some reason, I am reminded now of a scene that took place in this same room at Notre-Dame-de-Vie, during one of my visits in the summer preceding his 85th birthday. When one of the organizers of the vast "Homage of France to Picasso" exhibition that was to be held in Paris arrived, bringing some further details or requests, Picasso greeted him with these words: "Just a little bit more of this homage and I may be tempted to shoot you." It is clear today that both he and Jacqueline dread the approach of this 90th anniversary, but there is something that troubles him even more.

"Have you heard the bad news?" he asks, in a voice that trembles with emotion. "My studios in the Rue des Grands-Augustins are gone. They've been taken away from me. I've lost them. . . ."

It is as if he were announcing the death of some dear friend whom we had both known and loved. And in all truth, that aristocratic old building at 7 Rue des Grands-Augustins was indeed a dear friend. When

Picasso saw it for the first time, in 1937, he fell in love with it at once. The worn steps of the narrow spiral staircase, the old beams and timbers of the rooms reminded him of the barnlike interior of the Bateau-Lavoir, that ramshackle Montmartre building which had been almost his first home in Paris and for which he had always retained a secret nostalgia. It suited his every need and desire, and he had rented it on the spot. He lived there for 12 years, including all the years of the German occupation of Paris, and literally hundreds of his most famous paintings were created there, including what is perhaps the most famous of them all, "Guernica."

Built in the 17th century, the building was the Hôtel de Savoie-Carignan until the time of the Revolution. Balzac had used it as the locale for his "Chef d'Oeuvre Inconnu," situating the meeting of the artist Fernhofer with Franz Porbus and Nicolas Poussin in the very rooms which were to be used by Picasso more than three centuries later. It was already a literary and historic monument, and after Picasso's long occupancy of it, reason would seem to dictate that the building should be preserved and classified as a landmark. It is a sorry fact that the houses and studios in which artists and writers such as Balzac, Victor Hugo, Rodin and Delacroix once lived and worked in Paris can now be numbered on the fingers of the hand.

"It's sad, isn't it?" he says. "But how can I fight it, when the owners of the building are all officials of the courts? The United Bailiffs of France and Navarre!* They took over the premises on the grounds that I no longer inhabited them. Well. . . . But it's a great loss for me. I was prepared to buy the building myself and make a gift of it to the city of Paris. But the bailiffs would have none of that. . . ."

I find it almost impossible to understand how the city of Paris or the French Government could have allowed such a windfall to escape them, and somehow I feel sure that future generations will find it equally impossible to understand. "What about Malraux?" I ask. "He was Minister of Culture; he still has influence. Couldn't he have done something?"

"He tried," Picasso answers, "but not hard enough. And too late. Perhaps he didn't really want to, or perhaps he simply couldn't do anything. It was the same thing in 1951. . . . I had to give up the studio and apartment on the Rue la Boétie. And I had worked there for 20 years! Greed. Official denunciations. 'Premises insufficiently occupied.' You know that law. . . . And no one intervened, so I was unable to keep them. I'm not trying to blame anyone for it; I'm simply stating a fact: All trace of the half century I lived in Paris is now totally, irrevocably wiped out. . . ."

If Picasso always seeks to hold on to the places in which he has lived, it is primarily because of a deep-rooted feeling that, having once welcomed him, they remain forever after a part of himself, of his work and of his life. They retain some portion of his being. The bailiffs may well have judicial right on their side, but they have no moral right to destroy a venerable edifice which, for a dozen years, was not only home workshop to one of this century's authentic geniuses but also a forum of ideas for the greatest writers, poets and artists of the period, a center of intellectual resistance during the occupation and a place of pilgrimage for the armies of the Allies at the time of liberation.

In an attempt to put this unhappy subject behind us, I turn to Jacqueline and ask her to show me whatever new photographs she has taken of Picasso. She has done some very beautiful ones in the past.

"But, Brassaï," she replies, "I've done absolutely nothing of that kind in years—I thought you knew. I no longer have the time. There are so many things. . . ."

She waves a hand, as if to dismiss the matter, but I know what she means. Her time is devoted entirely to the needs of Picasso.

It was just 20 years ago this summer that Picasso first met Jacqueline Roque, at Madoura, the pottery and ceramics workshop of Georges and Suzanne Ramié in Vallauris. At that time, Jacqueline was their official hostess, receiving visitors to the shop and guiding them through the factory. And it was just 10 years ago, on March 2, 1961, that she and Picasso were married. Being the wife of the most famous artist of our time is certainly a destiny that may be both enviable and envied, but it is by no means a sinecure. It is difficult for outsiders to realize that this woman, who is still young and beautiful, has lived for years in almost total retreat, rarely traveling anywhere, almost never going to a concert or a play, and seldom entering a museum or seeing an exhibition. She had not even seen the great "Homage of France to Picasso" exhibition at the Grand and Petit Palais in Paris, at the time of his 85th birthday in 1966. She has, in fact, been to Paris only once in the past 16 years, and that was in 1965, when Picasso entered the American Hospital there for an operation.

"If I were to see everyone who asked to see me, for just 10 minutes," he says, "it would mean that I did nothing else until midnight of

***The building at 7 Rue des Grands-Augustins is owned by the *Groupement des Huissiers de Justice du Département de la Seine*, a federation of minor court officers of the city of Paris.**

"One day Picasso glimpsed an old woman on TV. He recognized her at once: it was Fernande Olivier, his beautiful mistress in the early days in Montmartre. He found her and arranged for her to receive a considerable income for life."

every day. If I went through the mail myself, and read only the letters that interest me, the whole day would be gone. And yet I am interested in the mail—there is always something of importance in it. I would like to be able to read the letters from young people, from the young artists particularly. . . . But what am I to do? Hire an army of secretaries? Wouldn't I then just be spending all of my time with the secretaries? I would at least have to tell them what to do, wouldn't I? In any case, I would no longer have a minute to myself, to work, to go on creating something, and that is the only thing that interests me."

So, it is Jacqueline who filters the mail (which seems ever to grow in volume), answers the letters and the telephone, prepares a periodic "bulletin" for the press, supervises the house and grounds and, in short, does everything to spare him any intrusion that might worry or upset him. Calm, serene and devoted, she is the ideal companion for Picasso at this time of his life. And God knows her role is difficult. Picasso is not easy to live with. Every move one makes must be governed by tact and diplomacy. If she should want him to go somewhere, it is generally wiser not to suggest it, because the chances are he will refuse. But if she were to say that it would be preferable to remain at home, that he really should rest, he may very well reply: "But why not go? I would enjoy it. . . ."

"I don't know how she does it," Picasso has told me. "I would drive 10 secretaries mad."

IT is only in recent months that Jacqueline has been assisted in her overwhelming task by an engaging young man who is known in the household as Don Miguel. Picasso still retains his habit of working at night, often until the early hours of the morning. He rises late, and sometimes receives friends toward the end of the afternoon. But then there may be a period of weeks when he wants to see no one, and even his closest friends telephone in vain or arrive at the house to find the doors are closed. Shutting himself off completely is his only means of safeguarding his most precious possession: his time. At night, if he is not working, he wants to be alone with Jacqueline. Often, she dismisses the servants

BRASSAÏ AND PICASSO at Notre-Dame-de-Vie in 1966. Brassaï came to Paris in 1923, but the two never met until World War II, when Brassaï was assigned to photograph Picasso's sculpture.

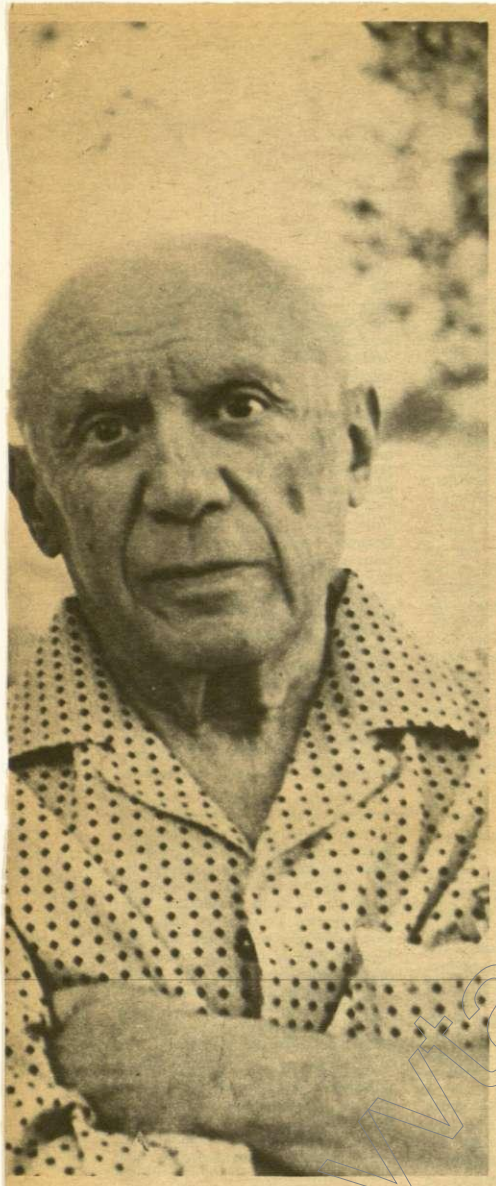
and prepares the meals herself. Her daughter, Kathy, no longer lives with them, since she is attending a university in Spain.

If Picasso has thus been able to pass so lightly across the threshold of his 90's, without ever setting down his brush, his pen, his etching needle or his sculptor's chisel, if he can still give himself over entirely to his creative demons, it is because of the devotion and the constant vigilance of his wife. It must be said—indeed, it must be emphasized—that this man who seems immune to all the agonies of old age, who still glories in all the visible signs of youth, this Picasso whose 90th year is being celebrated in every part of the civilized world is in large part the work—or, rather, the masterpiece—of Jacqueline Picasso.

Before we leave, I show him a copy of a new translation of my book, "Conversations Avec Picasso," and he immediately decides to do a drawing on the flyleaf.

"Rembrandt and his model. . . . Would you like that? But have you ever noticed—whenever someone paints 'The Artist and his Model' he almost always places them much too close together. In reality, there is always considerable distance between them. So, I'll put Rembrandt on the left-hand page and the model on the right. That will give more air, more space."

He concentrates on his work like a matador on the bull. The drawing is superb, but when he puts down the pen he says: "It isn't finished," and goes out to the terrace, returning in a moment with the petals of some flowers and a few green leaves. Be-



fore I can fully grasp what he is doing he has begun to rub the drawing with the colors from this living palette. He disappears again, looking for some yellow flowers, to tint in a golden light around the head of Rembrandt.

"The finest colors imaginable!" he exclaims, delighting in our astonishment. "Guaranteed pure! Completely natural! Solid! Stable!"

In a few seconds, the drawing has been transformed into a painting in delicate tones of violet and rose, yellows and blues and greens. . . . ■

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(New York Times Magazine
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