



Picasso Prints

The Vellard Suite

J237/W5

PICASSO PRINTS

The Vollard Suite

Stephen Coppel

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THE BRITISH MUSEUM PRESS

Published on the occasion of the acquisition
of the *Vollard Suite* by the British Museum.

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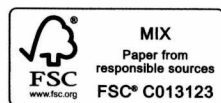
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Frontispiece: *Model and Large Sculpted Head* (VS 61)
1 April 1933, Paris. Etching, 268 x 194 mm

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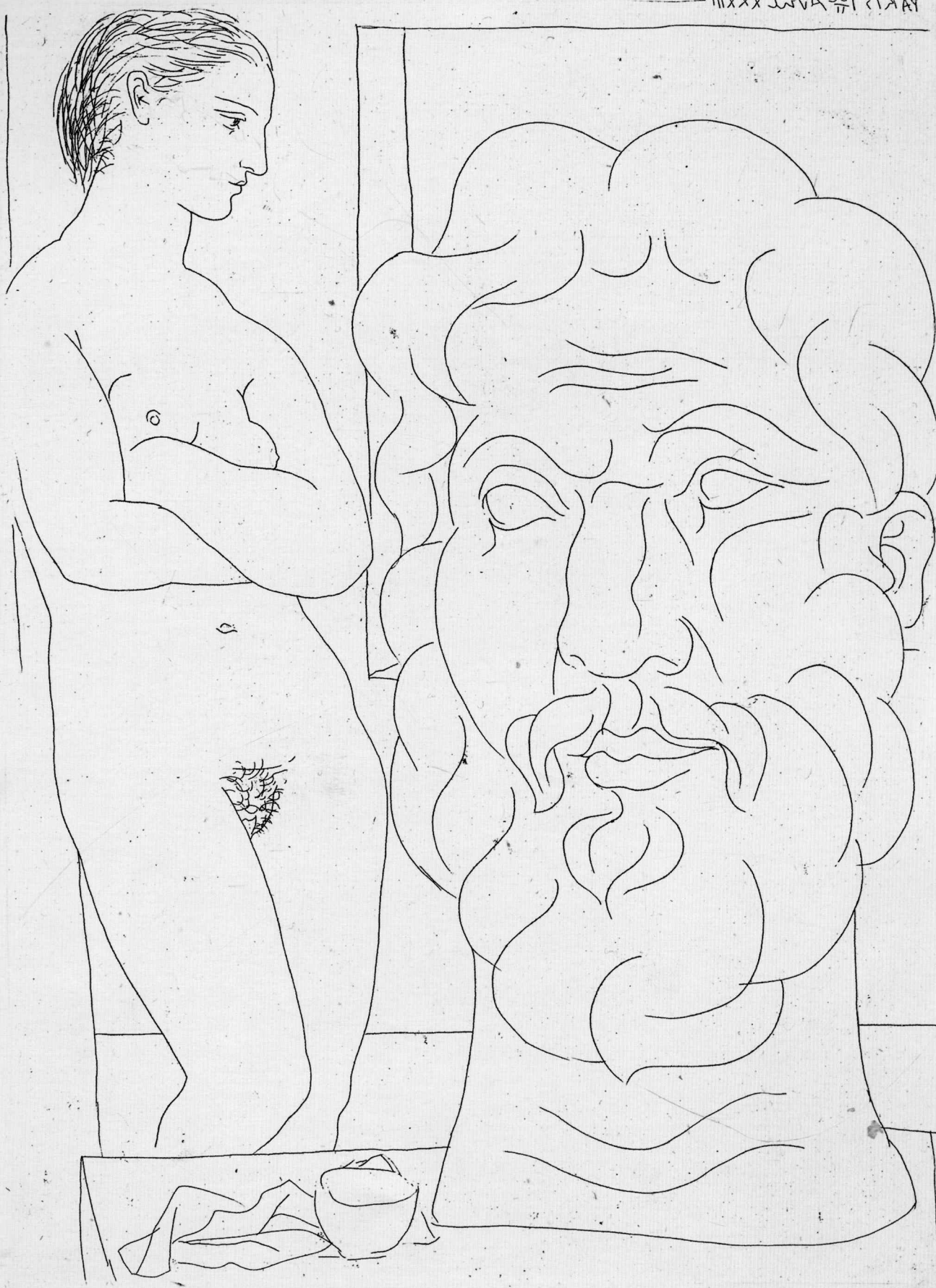
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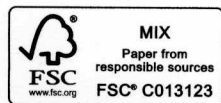
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PREFACE

On 26 April 2011 Stephen Coppel, the British Museum curator responsible for modern and contemporary works on paper in the Department of Prints and Drawings, received an astonishing email from Hamish Parker, a collector of modern graphic art. It began: 'As you know I have for some time felt that the BM should have in its possession a complete set of the *Vollard Suite*. From our many conversations together I realise that this is a sentiment shared by you. I'm happy to report that I am well on the way to achieving this goal and, if all goes well, a complete set, with the highest of provenance, should be in the department [of Prints and Drawings] by year end... I am making this donation in memory of my father who passed away last year. Although it might be going too far to suggest that he was a fan of Picasso he certainly was a fan of the British Museum; especially anything involving education and enlightenment. To have this set in such close proximity to the Elgin marbles would be of particular delight to him.' And so, thanks to this great act of generosity, the British Museum in September 2011, was able to purchase Picasso's *Vollard Suite*.

This acquisition is a hugely significant milestone in the Museum's collecting of modern prints and drawings. It gives an energizing boost to the Museum's ambition to represent seriously Picasso's prodigious achievements as a printmaker. The 100 etchings of the *Vollard Suite* are rightly regarded as a highpoint of Picasso's long career and the British Museum is now the only public collection in the UK – and one of only a handful in the world – to own the entire series.

The entry of the *Vollard Suite* into the collection signals the Museum's wider ambition to integrate modern and contemporary works from across the globe with its historic collections built up over more than 250 years. The contemporary dimension of the British Museum's activities is often overlooked, yet it is one that can be traced right back to the founding purchase of the diverse collection of Sir Hans Sloane in 1753. While Sloane is perhaps best remembered in the field of prints and drawings for his Old Master treasures, above all the volumes of drawings and watercolours by the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, it should not be forgotten that he was also a collector of select works by his contemporaries,

*Reclining Sculptor in front
of a Draped Nude (VS 51)*
27 March 1933, Paris
Etching, 267 x 194 mm

including the prized series of Hogarth engravings, *A Harlot's Progress*. Hamish Parker's gift is the munificent continuing of a long tradition.

The spark that ignited this extraordinary act of generosity came from attending an annual event of the Friends of Prints and Drawings in the Print Study Room in the autumn of 2010 when a selection of the year's acquisitions was put out. On that occasion Stephen Coppel included an etching from the *Vollard Suite* which had been given by the dealer Karsten Schubert in honour of the previous modern curator Frances Carey. The accompanying label expressed the hope that one day the Museum would own the entire set of 100 etchings but as this was just the seventh from the Suite, acquired over thirty years, the prospects of realizing this ambition seemed remote. Hamish Parker took note and made the dream a reality. As he told Stephen Coppel in an email, 'I'm actually having more pleasure in knowing that it's destined for the BM than I would if I were buying it for myself and I'm doubly pleased knowing that you're as excited as well!'

Things were not always so happy or so straightforward. During Picasso's lifetime the British Museum was usually less than enthusiastic about his work. His status as the most influential and revered artist of the twentieth century is now so universally accepted that it is easy to forget how the avant-garde nature of his style aroused open hostility in certain quarters of the British art establishment. Perhaps the most publicly outspoken expression of this antagonism was the broadcast speech given by the equestrian painter Sir Alfred Munnings on his retirement as President of the Royal Academy in 1949. He candidly admitted that he and Winston Churchill, a talented amateur painter, had fantasized about giving Picasso a good kicking. Such reactionary views may have influenced the Museum's decision to turn down the opportunity to acquire the *Vollard Suite* in 1955 for the sum of £1,900. Despite pressure to act from Philip James of the Arts Council of Great Britain, the British Museum procrastinated and after months of deliberation finally concluded in a memorandum that

the purchase of the series would be inadvisable for the following reasons:

- (i) The 100 prints concerned, however important, formed only a small part of Picasso's work, in only one of his graphic media, over only a very short period...
- (ii) The 100 prints did not form an inseparable series, and could in fact be purchased individually at prices not very much higher than the average for the set as a whole.

This failure of judgement and nerve was at odds with the fact that the 1948 bequest of Campbell Dodgson, a former Keeper of Prints and Drawings, included a small group of early Picasso etchings, notably one of the most haunting images from his Blue Period, the *Frugal Repast*. It was not until the Directorship of John Pope-Hennessy in the mid-1970s that the Museum began again to acquire modern and contemporary prints and drawings. Frances Carey and Antony Griffiths, both

appointed at that time, were instrumental in building up holdings of Picasso, as well as other twentieth-century masters, and organizing exhibitions of modern material that highlighted the Department's renewed activity and ambitions in this field.

The Museum's dedication to 'education and enlightenment' is embodied in the public accessibility of the Prints and Drawings Students' Room, where the *Vollard Suite* is now housed in perpetuity. Entry to the study collection requires nothing more than ringing a bell and showing a valid means of identification. Once inside the visitor is free to explore the Museum's extraordinarily rich holdings of prints and drawings in western art, ranging from around 1400 to the present day. Such a collection provides a matchless opportunity for all comers, not forgetting the many millions who consult the collection digitally through the online database, to seek out their own perspectives on how Picasso's works fit into a graphic tradition that stretches back five centuries. That point of contact might be stylistic, such as the parallels between the spare clarity of outline of the nude figures in the *Vollard Suite* and those found in the pencil portraits of the nineteenth-century French artist Ingres. Equally it could be thematic, as in Picasso's contemplation of the seductive power of artistic creativity in the *Vollard Suite* and its distant echo some 400 years earlier in Michelangelo's ardent, if more chaste, wooing of a beautiful Roman aristocrat with his gift of an exquisite black chalk drawing of the *Fall of Phaeton*.

Picasso's brilliant draughtsmanship was certainly informed by his admiration and study of exalted masters such as Ingres, but the inspiration of much of the imagery of the *Vollard Suite* reaches further back to classical art in the shared celebration of the transient beauty and sexuality of the body. Like the sculptors of ancient Greece and Rome, the Malaga-born Picasso was shaped by the sensual intensity and warmth of the Mediterranean. He was also conscious of another, darker side of the classical world, its violence and brutality, which he mined in his depictions of the Minotaur, the mythical half-man, half-bull, embraced as his alter ego. Thanks to Hamish Parker's magnificent generosity, the kinship between the *Vollard Suite* and Picasso's ancient Mediterranean inheritance comes to life in thrilling juxtaposition with the kinds of classical works in marble and bronze that sparked his imagination and ours.

Our greatest debt is to Hamish Parker whose generosity and farsightedness has made it possible for our public to enjoy Picasso's *Vollard Suite* at the British Museum both now and for generations to come. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Marc Rosen, the New York print specialist who acted as intermediary with the Petiet family in the purchase of the *Vollard Suite*, and to Frankie Rossi, Director of the Marlborough Gallery, London and Tara Reddi, Vice-President of the Marlborough Gallery, New York, for facilitating its negotiation.

Neil MacGregor
Director, British Museum



INTO THE LABYRINTH PICASSO'S VOLLARD SUITE

Stephen Coppel

The *Vollard Suite* is Pablo Picasso's most celebrated series of etchings, yet considerable mystery surrounds the circumstances of its 'commissioning' by Ambroise Vollard, the French picture dealer and print publisher, after whom it is named. The set of 100 etchings was produced between 1930 and 1937 at a critical juncture in Picasso's career. Although almost half of the etchings are largely concerned with the relationship between the artist and his creation and between the artist and his model, the *Vollard Suite* as a whole defies any precise interpretation or definition. The etchings were made at a time when Picasso was re-engaging with sculpture and when the middle-aged artist had embarked upon a passionate, sustained affair with his young lover Marie-Thérèse Walter, who became his model and muse. Through its inter-related imagery, Picasso weaves the rival claims of making art and making love. He offers no unfolding narrative but allows the viewer to make connections freely between one plate and another. Nor does he impose any prescribed order to their sequence. It was only in 1956, when the art historian Hans Bolliger reproduced these prints in a publication, that five principal themes – Battle of Love; the Sculptor's Studio; Rembrandt; the Minotaur; and the Blind Minotaur – were identified, together with a further twenty-seven miscellaneous plates and three portraits of Vollard.¹ This arrangement continues to be upheld in subsequent literature, including this publication, although Picasso's two cataloguers, Georges Bloch and more recently Brigitte Baer, while referring to the Bolliger numbering, have reordered the plates in strict chronological sequence.² The title *Vollard Suite* was never used by Vollard or Picasso but a convention that first appeared in the 1950s once these prints began to emerge on the art market after Vollard's untimely death in a car accident in 1939.

Ambroise Vollard (1866–1939) (fig. 1) supported the young Picasso in the early years of his career in Paris when he gave him his first exhibition in 1901.³ Like Picasso, who had come to Paris from Barcelona, Vollard was an outsider who arrived in the metropolitan capital in the late 1880s from the tiny French colony of La Réunion in the Indian Ocean. After training as a lawyer at the Sorbonne, Vollard established his own picture gallery in rue Laffitte in 1893. He focused on the work of Edouard Vuillard and fellow young Nabis artists, whose experiments after Paul Gauguin formed the Paris vanguard of the 1890s, as well as the Post-Impressionist painters. In 1895 he gave Paul Cézanne, until then a neglected artist in his fifties, his first solo

Fig. 1
*Ambroise Vollard with his
cat, Brassai, Paris, 1934*

exhibition of about 150 works. Vollard went on to acquire pictures by other similarly overlooked artists, including Vincent van Gogh and Gauguin.

During the first decade of the twentieth century he supported the young radical Fauve artists Maurice de Vlaminck and André Derain, sending the latter to London to paint vibrantly coloured views of the Thames. Through his acute eye and shrewd business acumen, Vollard had become immensely wealthy and influential by the 1920s and the subject of considerable gossip and envy among artists and dealers in Paris. René Gimpel, then embarking on his successful career as a picture dealer between the wars, gave a vivid portrayal of the speculation surrounding Vollard on their first encounter in 1918:

He is a millionaire ten times over. The beginning of his fortune goes back to the day in Cézanne's studio when he found the artist depressed and bought about 250 canvases from him at an average of fifty francs apiece. He parted with some but kept the majority until the time he could sell them for ten to fifteen thousand francs each.⁴



Fig. 2
Ambroise Vollard,
Pablo Picasso, 1910
Oil on canvas, 930 x 660 mm
Pushkin State Museum of
Fine Arts, Moscow

Vollard's reputation as the Croesus of the art world is confirmed by the evidence of his tax statements in the mid-1930s; at the time he was involved with the *Vollard Suite* project, the dealer valued his entire stock, including the unpublished projects, at 22.5 million francs and declared sales in art of over 1.5 million francs per annum in 1935 and 1936.⁵

Vollard's stature as Paris's leading avant-garde art dealer was matched by his vanity and egoism. Nearly every artist with whom he had dealings was asked to produce his portrait, sometimes on more than one occasion; Cézanne, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Pierre Bonnard, Raoul Dufy and Picasso all did so. From the outset Vollard was a print publisher of real imagination and enterprise. At a time when he was struggling to establish himself, he published albums of original prints by the artists he was interested in. These mixed portfolios of prints and the single-artist albums by the Nabis artists Bonnard, Vuillard and Ker-Xavier Roussel were undertaken without heed to their commercial saleability. Vollard was committed to engaging painters and sculptors to make prints. He was not interested in professional printmakers but in those artists who could translate their visions into prints of startling originality. In this respect, from the 1890s he was very much at the forefront of the rise of the original print, particularly in colour lithography.⁶

Vollard was equally passionate about publishing books illustrated by many of the same artists. He launched his career as an innovative publisher of *livres d'artiste* in 1900 with *Parallèlement*, a series of poems on the theme of Sapphic love by Paul Verlaine illustrated with Bonnard's sensuous lithographs spreading across the book's pages. In 1902 Vollard issued his equally sensational book, *Le Jardin des supplices*, by Octave Mirbeau with erotic lithographs by Auguste Rodin. Like his print albums, his *livres d'artiste* proved too avant-garde for bibliophilic collectors and copies remained unsold for decades. Yet despite the lack of sales, the publishing of luxury volumes gave Vollard his greatest satisfaction. He was involved in every aspect of these publishing projects: whether experimenting with a host of different typefaces, ordering prodigious quantities of different kinds of handmade papers, or collaborating closely with a multitude of printers and workshops. In his



Fig. 3
The Frugal Repast,
 Pablo Picasso, 1904
 Etching, Vollard edition
 1913, 463 x 377 mm
 British Museum, London

Recollections of a Picture Dealer, first published in 1936, Vollard mentioned the following books then in various stages of preparation: Hesiod's *La Théogonie*, with etchings by Georges Braque; André Suarès's *Cirque* and *Passion*, two projects illustrated by Georges Rouault; another book by Rouault, *Cirque de l'Étoile Filante* and Virgil's *Les Géorgiques*, with etchings by André Dunoyer de Segonzac.⁷ Braque informed Gimpel that 'money doesn't count for [Vollard]. He has never done a book for profit. He'll redo a text, no matter what it is, for a missing letter, his editions often cost him a fortune'.⁸ Projects were begun without heed of eventual publication, much to the frustration of the scores of artists and writers who were commissioned by him. Prolonged delays and procrastination particularly embittered relations between Marc Chagall and Rouault towards Vollard; issues of ownership and rights to the unpublished work were only resolved by legal settlement with the artists after Vollard's death.

In contrast, Vollard's relationship with Picasso was less fraught, although never consistent. It began when Vollard gave Picasso and fellow Spanish painter, Francisco Iturrino, a joint exhibition at his gallery in June 1901.⁹