



A Life of Picasso, Vol. 1: The Early Years, 1881-1906

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As he magnificently combines meticulous scholarship with irresistible narrative appeal, Richardson draws on his close friendship with Picasso, his own diaries, the collaboration of Picasso's widow Jacqueline, and unprecedented access to Picasso's studio and papers to arrive at a profound understanding of the artist and his work. 800 photos.

A Life of Picasso, Vol. 1: The Early Years, 1881-1906 Details

Date : Published April 16th 1996 by Random House (first published February 20th 1991)

ISBN : 9780679764212

Author : John Richardson , Marilyn McCully

Format : Paperback 548 pages

Genre : Art, Biography, Nonfiction, Art History, History

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From Reader Review A Life of Picasso, Vol. 1: The Early Years, 1881-1906 for online ebook

Sharyle says

Fascinating story of Picasso's early years up until 1907 when he painted a modern masterpiece, Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. version). Every page is illustrated with drawings, paintings, and photos that illuminate the text. You may not like Picasso as a person but getting a glimpse of the Paris art scene at the beginning of the 20th century is amazing.

AC says

Let me try to be a bit more coherent.

First, there is a nice on-line collection of Picasso's complete works (and much, much more) at this site:
<http://picasso.tamu.edu/>

The first volume of this biography covers the years 1881-1906 (but really goes through 1907): Picasso's youth, his early years in Paris, Blue Period, Rose Period, the remarkable sojourn at Gósol -- his dealings with Apollinaire, Alfred Jarry (who Picasso actually did not ever meet), the Steins, Matisse -- and his passion (via Paco Durrio) for Gauguin and El Greco. These are the years of Fernande Olivier, his first mistress. The book, which runs to near 500 large, beautiful pages, must contain well over 2,000 photos -- mainly of Picasso's many drawing, paintings, sculptures, sketchbooks -- but also of the works of those who influenced him. The photographs are integrated into Richardson's text such that the book is, in effect, a prolonged meditation on the origins of Modern Art. One can "see", for example, through the juxtaposition of photographs, the influence of an El Greco or of a particular landscape on this or that work of Picasso's. It is thus a fabulous book -- at least for one, like myself, who knows so little about the topic.

There are times, as I said earlier, when Richardson seems to engage in the biographical fallacy. His discussion of "La Vie", for instance, focuses on Picasso's use of the head of Casagemas (the friend of Picasso's youth who committed suicide) in the final version, in place of his own (which had appeared in the earlier sketches) --- and gives an interpretation of a biographical interpretation of the picture which is clearly erroneous.

(La Vie. 1903. Oil on Canvass. Cleveland Museum of Art)

In fact, the picture shows a woman in the four seasons of her life: Spring (on the left), Summer (w/ child, on the right); deep Autumn and then Winter (death) on the top and bottom -- in the manner (as Richardson does help to point out) of a Tarot reading. Richardson, I think, does not recognize that the same woman is depicted throughout. Likewise, in the Saltimbanques, he does not see that the four male figures groped on the left are really two -- Picasso in his maturity and in his youth (on the far right of this grouping), and a mature (and younger) el Tio Pepe (in the center). As with La Vie, one can see it in the eyes... Assuming this is correct, the girl with her back to the viewer (in the lefthand grouping) is presumably the Fernande of the portrait (on the far right) as a young girl. In all of this, one sees Picasso's growing obsession with death.

(The Saltimbanques. 1905. Oil on Canvass. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC)

What I found most striking in all of these photos -- and what I had not understand about Picasso -- was that he was first and foremost a master of drawing -- a draughtsman -- and that everything else is secondary. In fact, in commenting on Matisse's remarkable *La Bonheur de Vivre* and the Fauve use of color -- Picasso says perceptively that he (Picasso) always used color as an additive -- that he began with drawings, and then added the color like salt into a soup...; but that Matisse began with color, that was in search of form ("I've mastered drawing and am looking for colour; you've mastered colour and are looking for drawing" (I.417).

The most serious drawback is that none of the prints in this volume are in color. I have purchased both a paperback AND a hardbound edition -- and neither have color. The hardbound edition of vol. III DOES have some color plates -- but for vols. I and II, the paperback is adequate.

Unfortunately, Richardson does not use the standard catalogue numbers, and so one must look them up simply by year. I have found one marvelous sketch in the book [1900:], from a private collection, which I cannot locate on the website: a self-portrait of Picasso in a raincoat, carrying easel and brushes, but looking like a gangster with a submachine gun.... and bearing the inscription "Paulus Ruiz Picasso Pictor en misere humane"

(In reading this book, the first thing I noticed were its flaws. In dealing with the painter's early life, I felt that there was a certain lack of depth and nuance...; the author seems often to be guilty of the biographical fallacy. But as I continued reading, I began to feel the power of the subject taking shape... and form... and to see the character of the painter deepening before my eyes.... as he matures.

More importantly..., the writing itself is in some respects almost secondary -- as the book is adorned, on every page -- with anywhere from 2 or 3 to 5 or 6 different plates, mostly (but not exclusively) of Picasso's. These plates are integrated into the text -- not simply tossed onto the pages as random 'daubs' -- so that the narrative and the artistic development grow and expand in a fascinatingly interconnected fashion....

I am learning much not only about Picasso and his art - but about fin-de-siecle Spain, the Paris of Apollinaire and Modigliani and Gertude Stein... about impressionism, expressionism, surrealism... and, of special interest to me, about the development and 'mentalité' of the WWI generation -- many of whom moved from the avant-garde to the political right (like Salmon, Max Jacobs) -- and only a relatively few of whom ended up as committed anti-fascists. Picasso was one of those few..., and what it is that inoculated him is quite curious, indeed.)

Jeff says

This is Volume One of Richardson's four volume biography of Picasso (Volumes One through Three are available. I believe Volume Four will be published in 2014). If you are looking for a quick read of Picasso's life, this probably is not the book for you. But if you are looking for a biography that weaves Picasso's life with his work in a manner that is both elegant and understandable, start reading this series.

John Richardson is an art historian. He lived near Picasso in the 50's and had a friendship with him that lasted nearly 40 years. Richardson is uniquely positioned write about Picasso: as a scholar, he studied the evolution Picasso's art from the artist's formative years until his death; and over the course of their long friendship, he was able to have intimate dialogues with Picasso about his values and influences.

Richardson's biography is not a 'remembrance of Picasso' type of book. It is based upon extensive research on Picasso's life through letters, studies, museum records, other Picasso reference books and the Picasso family. The research is thorough and the book his laced with drawings, paintings and photos.

Generally, Richardson's prose is engaging. From time to time he falls into a rather pedantic style usually when he is analyzing conflicting viewpoints around the aesthetics or origin of a particular art work.

Volume One traces Picasso's life from birth until he was 27. It ends just as Picasso was about to embark on Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, the masterpiece which changed the direction of 20th century art.

Jenny says

Another one on my quest to read biographies of all the artists. A tough slog, but fascinating sometimes.

Smoothw says

Comprehensive,detailed account of the artist as a young man but a little too dry for my taste. Trudge up the mountain as the author goes through seemingly every piece of art Picasso ever made (and he made sooo much), and also introduces you to every single other bohemian he hung around with. The fact that he ends his account just before his breakthrough with cubism seems almost pervers.

Craig Masten says

A life of Picasso Volume I by John Richardson is certainly an antidote to the rather effusively positive recent review I gave to the novel Madame Picasso by Anne Girard. Her novel was certainly wonderfully written, but this comprehensive nonfiction treatment of Picasso paints a considerably darker, more complicated view of that great painter. In his oversized work Richardson tells you in great detail the life of Picasso and from his birth in 1881 to the year of his first breakthrough success in 1906. Not only do you know practically every event down to what he ate for breakfast, as well as his innermost thoughts on virtually every subject, but the author also devotes at least several pages of biography to every person the artist met in the course of those years. Even had these additional biographical studies been limited to the women Picasso slept with, you'd have had a very thick book. Add long exegesis on his artwork, elaborating on the influences of past artists, art movements, his friends, lovers and places he visited. All is documented with hundreds of pictures of Picasso and those significant others, the places they inhabited, along with many many examples of his art and the art that influenced it. Be prepared to know more about Picasso then you might have wished to know. I ended with the impression that while he was an amazing talent in the history of modern art, he was not an easy or very nice man, even as he charismatically drew others to him. I generally knew that, but this book elaborately spells out the reasons why.

Randall Wallace says

I always thought I should read these three volumes on Picasso one day; I learned a lot less than I thought I would but it was still worth it. You do get an idea of Picasso's stages/periods, changing influences, and chronology of works. In Volume One here, Picasso gets into religious art, El Greco and then the Modernista movement, then the Blue Period, a brief Dutch Period, and the Rose Period. The book gets heavily into where Picasso would hang out, and with whom, and every vacation spot is explained in copious detail. There's a lot of who slept with whom, and who did opium or some other drug. Many pages are devoted to his art dealers and many famous friends who he loves on one page and then 20 pages later, can't stand. Cocteau, Apollinaire and Gertrude Stein are the most common sidekick names through this book. Most of Picasso's quotes in this book do little to explain why he did what art he did. The best I could find was a comment that Picasso wanted to make art "new and fresh".

Harlequins were on no one's mind before Picasso brought them back from near extinction. Picasso was Trotsky's "favorite modern painter". Origins of Picasso's Blue Period can be found in the preference of symbolist Paris for blue as well as Art Nouveau which often used Peacock Blue, Madonna blue, ice blue." Picasso seems to never get with a woman who is vaguely near his equal, so it's not surprising that the constant discussion about his relationships are a big snore (Zzz...) for the reader. The Paperback version of this book which I read is all black and white, however, I believe the hardback version is much better because it has color plates in the center. The biggest problem with this paperback book is that you must constantly go on Google to call up color versions of these paintings; how does someone really learn about the Blue and Rose periods if every picture is in black and white?

Steve Thorp says

A magisterial, monumental biography of the first 26 years of the most important artist of the 20th century. Impeccably researched and written, and crammed with drawings, paintings, photographs, the book reads like a novel. Essential if you enjoy reading biography, or about Western art, or the artistic process, or the life of a great artist, etc.

alexisren03 says

this book is the most interesting and very fun every part of the charm

Andrea says

I had the very good fortune of enrolling in a course on Picasso at UMass Boston the year of the "Picasso Early Years Exhibit" at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston 1997-98. This was the primary text book we used for the course, and our class attended a lecture by the author at the MFA. They say timing is everything. It was an incredible course, and this book provided rich insight into Picasso's work and life and times.

Rick says

I'm not sure how many volumes Richardson imagines. Three have been published to date, this first volume in 1991 and the most recent volume, which only goes to 1932, in 2007. When you take into account that Richardson knew Picasso, who died thirty plus years ago, and is therefore not a young man, and that he is not yet halfway through the artist's life, and that he clearly believes that Picasso remained a major artist throughout his long life, he's got some serious typing to do because at least three more volumes must be intended, perhaps four. And I'll look forward to each of them, as I do to reading the two more already published. Richardson is a crusty, opinionated, yet companionable narrator who brings two kinds of insight to his task: personal knowledge of his subject, with deep access to the papers and people in the artist's world, and the sure-footed authority of a major art historian. He doesn't overplay his being an insider to intrude into the spotlight, at least not yet, when his intersects with the works and events of this first volume are limited to late in life interviews with Picasso about a particular memory or a forgotten work that Richardson shared with Picasso as a prompt for a recollection. Volume one covers Picasso's childhood and early rise in the art world. Born in Malaga, in southern Spain, Picasso spends most of his early life in Barcelona, Madrid, and finally Paris learning to be, well, Picasso. His father was a painter of only local note, fond of painting pigeons. His dwarfish talent is sniffily dismissed by Richardson and the father-son relationship is given an Oedipal meaning by Richardson that never seems to warrant such mythical assumption. However, the boy can paint and draw. He admires El Greco and Velasquez. Later Cezanne, Matisse, and Gauguin. Before he reached the age when Kurt Cobain and Heath Ledger had died, he gone through his Blue Period, Rose Period, and entered the less definable period that gave the world his portrait of Gertrude Stein and the revolutionary Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, not to mention numerous self-portraits and other works influenced by primitive masks and classical forms. From the beginning, Picasso was both amazingly prolific and protean. Richardson provides a rich portrait with a cast of interesting thousands. He is a good writer, plain spoken and sharp-witted, and this multi-volume biography, a masterwork.

Ross Whamond says

A thoroughly enjoyable and informative insight into the early formative years.

Showing how Picasso developed his art through his different periods and. And the other artists and movements of the period.

Only improvement would be to have the illustrations in colour rather than black and white.

Looking forward to volume 2.

Adrian says

I've been eyeing this book on our shelves for twenty years knowing one day I'd get to it. Richardson's volume 1 of Picasso's life takes him up to age 26 just before his breakthrough painting Les Demoiselles d'Avignon and the dawn of cubism. Every move the artist makes and every person he meets is covered in his years of struggle and poverty. Excellent on influence of Gertrude Stein and PPs rivalry with Matisse. It's clear Picasso felt he had to divest himself of all family connections especially that of his father. The singlemindedness and brutality of the superstar Picasso became is already well formed. 475 pages and filled

with art. This was the first of four projected volumes.

Dara Salley says

I'm excited to go view some Picassos now! I'll have lots of insights to bore my friends with.

Charles Bechtel says

A while back I found myself, a canoeist for many years, the pilot of a river raft full of terrified landlubbers. I was chosen as pilot because I had wrestled with rapids and quick waters often, and was trusted. About halfway through the trip we were presented with a fast rapids in which an enormous boulder was centered. To one side ran fast water but few rapids, to the other were froths and boiling rages. I could manage either, but there was no way I could proceed without managing at least one.

Pablo Picasso is the boulder in the river of painting's progress. There are many who deal with him the same way they deal with the flow of that river: they don't even get in the water. But those who do get in must, inevitably, face the divide he makes.

This first volume, and the subsequent ones, help navigation immensely. Picasso changed the entire course of the flow, sometimes for the best, sometimes for the worst. Anyone who is serious about understanding this monumental obstacle to understanding painting would do well to read this and the subsequent volumes. There are other biographies, but this one is the rock in that river.
