Dora Maar: Contextualizing Picasso’s Muse

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Abstract

Henrietta Theodora Markovitch (1907-1997) abbreviated her name to Dora Maar in the 1930s working as a Surrealist photographer and painter. She was born in Paris, France to a Jewish Croatian father and a Catholic French mother. After spending her childhood in Argentina, she returned to France studying in various ateliers. Dora Maar was Pablo Picasso’s (1881-1973) muse from 1936-1944. Past art historical research has obliquely referenced her Jewish background when it was central to a contextual critique of Picasso’s pre-war and wartime paintings of Dora Maar. Picasso’s numerous and revelatory portraits of Dora Maar reflect her prescient understanding and personal distress of the escalating fascist threat and growing anti-Semitism in Europe in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Introduction

Henrietta Theodora Markovitch (1907-1997) initially met Pablo Picasso in 1935 in Paris when she was 29 and the Spanish artist was 54 years of age; his immediate attraction to her was enhanced by her ability to speak with him in Spanish. Dora Maar spoke Spanish because from ages three to nineteen (1910-1926) she lived in Buenos Aires, Argentina with her family.

Markovitch abbreviated her birth name to Dora Maar when she was working as a commercial photographer and painter in the early 1930s in France. Reinterpreting Picasso’s frequent description of ‘beautiful sad Dora’ or other acquaintances’ mention of her melancholy, self-absorption and strong personality has obfuscated the social and political climate of pre-war and wartime Paris. This essay focuses on Maar’s prescient cultural and political sensibilities seminal to a critical understanding of Picasso’s pre-war and wartime portraits of Dora Maar.

Joseph Markovitch (1873-1969), Dora Maar’s father was a Croatian Jewish architect who worked in France in the early part of his career. He married Julie Voisin (1877-1941) a French Catholic woman; he moved the family from France to Argentina in 1910 based on anticipated architectural projects in the burgeoning South American city. The family returned to Paris in 1926 living there throughout World War II.

Background

The German Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831-1896) founded the Jewish Colonization Association in Argentina with the intention to better the lives of Eastern European
Jews by buying land and offering settlements in Argentina. Eastern European Jews escaping pogroms in Russia came to Argentina as early as 1889 and became known as ‘gauchos’ or Jewish Argentine cowboys. They bought land and established a colony named Moisesville. In its heyday, more than 200,000 Jews populated more than 600,000 hectares of land. Baron de Hirsch did not have a political interest in the growing Zionist movement of the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel.

In the early part of the 20th century, Argentina was a cultural melting pot due to its open-door immigration policy encouraging Jews and non-Jews from Europe and North Africa to settle in Argentina. Despite anti-Semitism and increasing xenophobia, Jews became involved in most sectors of Argentine society. Many Jews settled in cities especially Buenos Aires. As they were prohibited from positions in the government or military, many became farmers, peddlers, artisans, and shopkeepers. There is no documentation where Jewish families in Buenos Aires sent their children to school in the first two decades of the 20th century.

It is also not clear if the Markovitch family raised Dora Maar with religious traditions and allegiances. Therefore, it is not known if Dora Maar attended public school in Buenos Aires, the Alliance Francaise, the Alliance Israelita Francaise, or a Catholic school. It can be imagined that many of Dora Maar’s childhood friends were Jewish due to the cosmopolitan nature of the city and her father’s cultural and religious identity. This unexplored portion of Dora Maar’s life is rife with intellectual possibilities that one can imagine frame her political instincts and passions on her return to France in 1926. Dora Maar was multilingual speaking French, Spanish, and English fluently.

Jewish contributions to the culture of Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America is a research area of many historians, literary critics, and art historians forming the academic Latin American Jewish Studies Association (Foster, 2009). To date, this academic organization has no documentation on Dora Maar’s early education in Argentina.

Surrealism

Surrealism began in the 1920s under the leadership of the anti-Fascist French writer, poet Andre Breton (1898-1966) and continued as a vibrant art and literary movement until 1940 when
France surrendered to the invading German forces. Surrealism overthrew the assumption that the artist may find his/her model only in the external world. Hallucinatory images and the element of chance became essential components in Surrealist artists’ work as well as elements of surprise, contradiction and disorientation in their arrangement of objects (Lucie-Smith, 1984). Man Ray (an American Jewish expatriate born Emmanuel Raditzky) who knew and worked with Dora Maar has said that he photographed an idea rather than an object, a dream rather than an idea.

The Surrealists saw contradictions in the everyday world; they saw their art movement as a way to spur on revolution (Rubin, 1968). The history of Surrealism beginning in 1924 had been one of schisms and scandals. The movement became increasingly preoccupied with their relationship with communism. Surrealist artists and poets posed the question, could artistic radicalism be reconciled with the political variety? (Lucie-Smith, 1984). It was both the aesthetic and political overtones of Surrealism that attracted Dora Maar.

In 1926 when Dora Maar came to Paris from Buenos Aires, she studied decorative arts and painting. She became friends with Jacqueline Lamba, who was also studying the visual arts. It was financially difficult in the late 1920s for artists to make ends meet so Dora Maar worked as a fashion photographer and in advertising. Dora’s father was financially supportive during this time in her career as a photographer. Her photography in the late 1920s was both commercial and, at other times, influenced by Surrealist aesthetics. Dora came in contact with the most interesting photographers of the time, Emmanouel Sougez, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassai and as mentioned earlier, Man Ray. Her friendship continued with Jacqueline Lamba sharing mutual interests in Surrealism where art should not reproduce or copy nature but link with intuitions or ideas that represent the content of reality (Gablick, 1985). Jacqueline Lamba married the founder of Surrealism, Andre Breton, in 1934.

**Political Aesthetic Engagements**

Dora Maar was closely aligned with the key movements in the history of the avant-garde (Baldessari, 2006). Noting the juxtaposition of artifact and thought, appearance and meaning and the appeal of distorted realism, the Surrealists brought attention to psychological influences on thought and actions often linked to politically left-wing revolutionary ideas. In 1931, Dora
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officially joined with the Committee of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals that was also supported by the Surrealists. She briefly shared a dark room with Brassai and lived with the filmmaker Louis Chavance who included her in one of his films. The Surrealist poet and graphic designer George Hugnet (1906-1974) was Dora’s lover in 1934 and remained her lifelong friend. After several photographic assignments to Spain and England, her perspectives changed. Her photographic work after these trips blurred the distinction between reporter-ethnographer alluding to the flux of urban culture (Baldassari, 2006).

The Surrealist painter Rene Magritte has said that everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. Magritte’s insights resound in Picasso’s portraits of Dora Maar where the worried, distraught, and weeping woman was revealing her own intellectual and personal fears of fascist aggression in France. Picasso’s preoccupied half-Jewish sitter has not been fully examined as a representation of the encroaching Nazi terror in the duplicitous political climate of inter-war France. Maar was keenly aware of the mounting tensions in democratic circles of encroaching fascism evidenced in the debates published in left and right-wing journals and newspapers.

In 1935, Dora Maar had a passionate love affair with the writer George Bataille (1897-1962). George Bataille was inspired by Marxism as evident in his 1933 article The Psychological Structure of Fascism. He wrote Writing the Sacred in the early 1930s and was the editor of the left-wing newsletter/newspaper Contre-Attaque. Contre-Attaque’s manifestos, which Dora Maar signed, asserted the need for coherent power and communist revolutionary authority unique to France. In 1934, Bataille called for the total subversion of all authoritarian control in order to defeat fascism and to bring about an authentic emancipation of human lives. By 1936, Bataille reversed his ideology and demanded an extreme form of authority in a new committed society. He understood fascistic ideology had an aesthetic stage to proclaim a new era.

Meeting Picasso

Dora Maar met Pablo Picasso in November 1935 and then again in January 1936 but their relationship did not begin until the summer of 1936. Picasso was attracted to Dora Maar’s knowledge of the Spanish civil war and her informed psychological and political understanding
of fascism. He found her an intellectually absorbing woman (Ruben, 1996). Early in their relationship, Picasso refers to Dora as ‘an Oriental idol,’ ‘a haughty beauty’ and later as a ‘sphinx.’ These Romantic euphemisms reference the Near East and more directly his muse’s Jewish heritage and appearance.

Past art historical research had obliquely referenced Maar’s Jewish background when it was central to a contextualized critique of Picasso’s pre-war and wartime paintings of Dora Maar. Picasso’s numerous portraits of Dora Maar reflect her prescient understanding and personal fear of the escalating fascist threat and growing anti-Semitism in Europe in the late 1930s. Her Jewish ethnic background, her mother and father’s presence in Paris, the racial laws of The Third Reich detailing who was a Jew and her anti-fascist political activities augmented the worry, fear and terror evident in many of Picasso’s portraits of Dora Maar in 1937-39 and during the war.

Confluence of Spiritual and Political Revolutionary Thought

French fascist activity and right and left-wing political parties included surrealists, communists, radicals, and reform socialists. It was in this climate of distorted political thinking, that Dora Maar further developed her political acuity and aesthetic bearings. One can imagine she was profoundly aware of the rabid anti-Semitism surfacing in political and social discussions and actions in France as well as in Germany during the 1930s (Fiss, 2009).

In the early 1930s France took in refugees from fascist Italy (Benito Mussolini/Italian fascist dictator 1922-1943) and then during the Spanish civil war (1936-39) against the fascist general Francisco Franco Bahamonde (1892-1975). Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany in 1933 establishing the fascist policies of The Third Reich. Between 1933-39, fifty-five thousand Germans arrived in France escaping Hitler’s regime with many refugees going to other countries. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 instituted racial laws that forbid German Jews’ citizenship and marriage to non-Jewish Germans. On September 15, 1935, the Law for the Protection of German blood and honor prohibited marriage and extramarital sexual relations between Jews and persons of German or ‘related blood.’ Jews were designated as second-class citizens under the law (Paxton and Marrus, 1981). Germans who had Jewish grandparents were considered Jewish. This law could have affected Dora Maar during Germany’s control of France in June 1940. This
designation would have greater ramifications when the Germans took total control of the government of France in 1942.

This was a pivotal time for Dora who fully understood that the racial laws affected her and her father and mother since her father was a Croatian Jew. The shadow of France’s deference to Germany was evident by the mid-1930s with growing subservience to the principles of the Third Reich. According to the historian Karen Fiss, France developed an acrobatic system of self-delusion in the 1930s about Nazi aggression. The French journal Cahiers published anti-Semitic articles justifying Nazi racial policy during the 1930s.

By September 1938, there were demonstrations against Jews in Paris and Jews were discouraged to congregate in large groups even during the Jewish high holidays in early fall. In March 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Czechoslovakia and in September 1939 conquered Poland. In 1941 as part of The Third Reich’s final solution, eighty percent of the Croatian Jewish population – the home of Dora Maar’s paternal family- was destroyed since Slovakia and Croatia were puppet governments of the Nazi regime.

Photographing the Painting of the Guernica

Dora Maar was instrumental in mobilizing Picasso to take the commission from the Republican forces ruling parts of Spain to execute a painting for the Spanish pavilion at the Paris Exposition in 1937. Picasso had great empathy for the Republican army fighting General Franco’s government forces. And in September 1936, Picasso is named Director of the Prado in Madrid in absentia by the Spanish Republican representatives in Paris. Picasso never visited Spain during the Spanish civil war 1936-39 though his mother and sister were living in Barcelona at the time. His mother died in 1941 from natural causes under the dictatorial fascist regime of General Franco.

Dora Maar’s photographs documented the aesthetic thinking processes of Picasso during the painting of the Guernica in the summer of 1937. Maar’s photographs captured Picasso’s representation of the devastation and human misery of the Spanish people under bombardment on April 26, 1937 by the fascists. The Guernica was painted at Picasso’s studio at 7 Rue des Grand-Augustus which Dora Maar had found for him. She was acquainted with the space since it
had been the editorial offices of the left-wing newsletter *Contre-Attaques* (Nash and Rosenblum, 1998).

The large wall length black and white painting has the immediacy of a newspaper account of the debilitating bombing of the inhabitants of the town. The painting’s pyramidal structure leads one’s eye up to the top of the center of the large canvas where jarring sparks of light from a light-bulb illuminate The scattered body parts, anguished screaming faces, a dead child, broken swords in outstretched arms, smoldering fires, a snorting bull with one of the many dagger-like tongues, and a terrified bucking horse. The painting visually encapsulates the ferocious intensity of the dictator’s bombing raids on innocent people.

Completing the painting at a furious speed between May and June 1937, Picasso’s deft use of cubism forcefully depicted the artist’s personal, political, and humanitarian reaction to the bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica. He altered initial sketches, painted, repainted, and rethought the stark black and white composition that has been explicated through examination of Dora Maar’s seminal black and white photographs. Picasso trusted Maar’s profound understanding of the personal and political weight and importance of the painting. Dora Maar was the model for the disembodied female face that floats as a siren in the upper right-hand part of the painting. The anguished faces of weeping women that began in the sketches and painting of the *Guernica* took on an extended life during July and into the fall of 1937.

In the 1937 series of the ‘weeping woman,’ Picasso said he saw examples of a suffering woman when referencing art historical images. On a more intimate level, Picasso sensed Dora’s preoccupation with the Third Reich’s advance across Europe that was then reflected in his portraits of her. Understanding Picasso’s portrayal of Dora Maar as a disturbed psychologically unstable individual as the art critics have referred to her is open to a more critical and contextualized discussion. The terrifying reality of the advancing German army with its extreme racial and anti-Semitic polities have been reflected in Picasso’s evocative, sensuous, psychologically, and politically challenging portrayal of his muse, Dora Maar.

**Jewish Circle of Picasso’s Parisian Friends**
Picasso had known several Jewish artists and writers since he permanently moved to Paris in 1904. Andre Salmon, the art critic, and defender of cubism, and Picasso lived at the Bateau-Lavoir when they first came to Paris at the beginning of the 20th century. Picasso had a very close relationship with the poet Max Jacob who is immortalized in Picasso’s painting *The Three Musicians* 1921. Picasso’s involvement with the artistic and literary circle of Gertrude Stein (*Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, 1905) was pivotal to his success with patrons. Stein also introduced Picasso to several Jewish thinkers and artists living in Paris. Picasso’s first art dealer Paul Rosenberg, a Jew, arranged an exhibition for him in 1919; Rosenberg left France to the United States when the Nazi’s occupied Paris June 1940. Daniel Henri Kahnweiler, the influential Jewish gallery owner of Picasso and other modernists, turned over his gallery to his gentile step-daughter Louise Leiris/also known as Zette in July 1941. In 1943, Picasso walked in the funeral cortege of the Jewish painter Chaim Soutine in Paris.

**Anticipating War**

*Fishing at Night off Antibes*, 1939 by Picasso is an amalgam of modernist ideas understood through cubist and surrealist imagery anticipating the onset of war. The painting depicts a beautiful summer evening in the south of France with two young anglers in a rowboat and two young women along a sea wall. The sun is still evident in the dark sky that sparkles with fluttering fireflies. One angler leaning over the boat spears a fish while the other angler searches the sea for other fish. Dora Maar was the model for the woman leaning on a bicycle eating an ice cream cone with her friend Jacqueline Lamba standing near-by in this tranquil yet ominous painting. Painted in August 1939, the painting’s duality is suggestive of the calm before the storm of war with fireflies alluding to the lights from aerial bombing and the four-pronged spear of the angler the armaments of war. Picasso poetically infuses intuition, aesthetics, and personal attachments in this depiction of a political precipice at the eve of World War II in September 1939.

When the Nazis overtook Paris in June 14–26, 1940, Picasso was offered asylum in Mexico and the United States. He declined these invitations due to deep familial and romantic relationships. His son Paolo born to Picasso’s wife Olga Khokhlova in 1921 was studying in
Switzerland during the war, his young daughter Maya born to his muse Marie Therese Walter in 1935 was living in a nearby apartment to his in Paris, and his ‘protection’ of Dora Maar in the late 1930s that extended to her father who was living in Paris. As early as January 1939 it became evident that Maar had become increasingly terrified, preoccupied with events, and despite her own forceful nature was heavily dependent on Picasso (Freeman, 1994). During World War II, Dora ate dinner with her father on Sundays suggesting that he had some privilege of movement during the Nazi occupation of the city. Dora’s mother had died in 1941.

Love and the Trajectory of Time and War

Picasso depicted Dora Maar in a wide variety of media over their eight-year relationship. From June through October 1937, Picasso created a series of oil paintings known as The Weeping Woman. One of these paintings completed in October 26, 1937 shows a distraught woman with a red hat whose white mouth and cheeks crying into a white handkerchief are in glaring contrast to the yellow green and violet colors of the rest of her face. The crying woman with exaggerated dark eyebrows, long dark hair reference Dora Maar’s features. The painting The Suppliant, December 1937, combined the upward stretch and horse-like teeth from animal and human figures from the Guernica with teardrop eyes from the weeping woman series sharing imagery from the past year associated with Dora Maar.

www.pablopicasso.org/the-weeping-woman.jsp

Overlapping in time during fall and early winter 1937 with the ‘weeping woman’ series, Picasso began a series of paintings of Dora Maar sitting in a tight space painted white wearing a black dress contrasting with her red fingernail polish. Maar’s facial expression is calm and relaxed pensively staring off into space. In 1938-1939, Picasso developed a new series of portraits of Dora Maar seated in a chair where there is a great unease and tension in the figure as well as a troubling expression on her face. Other paintings of Head of a Woman from June through November 1939 abstractly conjure up the face of his intellectually absorbing muse.

In February 1940 in Paris, there were rumors of German expansion into France; it appears that Picasso’s images of Dora Maar’s face and posture mirrored the increasing likelihood of Germany’s political control over France. Judi Freeman (1994) describes the 1940 large seated
nude entitled *Woman Dressing her Hair* that has Maar’s face cleaved down the middle, her chunky feet resembling giant mitts, her breasts are splayed and possess a phallic aspect with the right arm becoming a sword. William Ruben (1996) interpreted this painting as a psychic conflict shown through somatic dislocation. Dora has a persona of a prisoner or a victim with ribs suggesting starvation. The full-length portrait was painted at the end of a series of double portraits of Maar focusing on the distress that Maar was experiencing. Picasso built large bulbous portraits/sculptures of Dora Maar in 1941 during the early German occupation (Nash and Rosenblum, 1998).

After the total German occupation of France in 1942, Picasso was accused of having Jewish blood and he had to attest to this, like everyone else. In November 1942, Picasso needed to renew his *la carte d’identité d’étranger* for which the *Statut des Juifs* (established June 1941) compelled him to sign that he was not Jewish. This racial/religious/ethnic attack may have made him uneasy over the safety of his muse Dora Maar (Nash, 1998). By the end of the war, more than seventy-five thousand Jews from France died in German concentration camps – a number that would have been impossible without the willing collaboration of Vichy France (Fiss, 2009), which (July 1940-September 1944) was under the regime of Marshall Petain. France was divided into two zones, one under German military occupation and one to be left to the French in full sovereignty – this unoccupied zone was in the southeastern two-fifth’s of the country from the Swiss border to the Spanish frontier.

By June 1942, Jews in France were required to wear yellow stars on their clothing to easily identify them. One of Picasso’s last portraits of Dora completed in October 1942 is a frontal portrait of her in a simple orange-and-green-striped dress, with shoulder-length black hair, staring out at the viewer. According to Judith Freeman (1994), it is a revelatory document of a woman shattered by the turbulent events of the time. Dora’s face is intact. She is no longer deconstructed, shattered, or masked; now she is quite legible and accessible, staring vacantly at the viewer.

[www.pablicicasso.org/woman-dressing-her-hair.jsp](http://www.pablicicasso.org/woman-dressing-her-hair.jsp)

Dora Maar’s friend Sophie Mosse, a Surrealist and a Jew, whom she and Picasso had summered with in 1937 in the south of France was deported and killed in a concentration camp.
One of the most horrifying events was the massive round up of French Jews in the Veladome d’Hiver in July 1942 when they were sent east to concentration camps. Picasso’s long-time friend the poet, Max Jacob died in the transit camp at Drancy after the Veladome d’Hiver round up en route to Auschwitz. In the last days of the War in 1944, the French Jewish socialist ex-premier Leon Blum and other government and military officials were deported to the Dachau concentration camp though they did not perish there (Marrus and Paxton, 1981). Picasso was able to continue his prodigious art production during the German occupation of France. He created 2,200 works of art between 1936-1945, which include three years before World War II began and the end of the War.

https://theartstack.com/artist/pablo-picasso-max-jacob-1

The artistic and romantic trajectory of the Dora Maar/Pablo Picasso relationship is tightly aligned with the political climate of pre-war and wartime Paris. The intent of this essay is to strengthen the collaborative interweaving of the personal and political outlook, thoughts, and artistic output of Dora Maar and Pablo Picasso. It is impossible to imagine the daily fears and anticipations that were reflected as chronic distress and great pessimism by friends and commentators on Dora Maar during this genocidal period of European Jewry.

**Departing Gift**

By April 1943, the weight of anti-Semitism was isolating and impoverishing the Jewish community in France. And by May 1943 after newly enforced Nazi laws were being implemented, Dora and Picasso’s relationship was showing great strain and tension. In May 1943, Picasso met Francoise Gilot when she was dining with a friend. Dora Maar was under great pressure in her precarious position protected from the Germans by Picasso while confronting his growing devotion to Francoise Gilot. Picasso’s full time affair with Gilot began in August 1944 (German occupation of France ended in September 1944) and lasted until 1952. They had two children together Claude and Paloma. Dora reportedly had hallucinations and uncontrollable public outbursts because of Picasso’s new romantic affections (Freeman, 1994). Jacques Lacan, the psychoanalyst, had Dora Maar institutionalized for a period of time in a
private mental health clinic. Her emotional breakdown had colored many interpretations of Dora Maar’s pivotal role and influence on Picasso.

Picasso gave Dora Maar a drawing from 1915 he had done of Max Jacob as a good-bye gift at the end of their relationship in 1944. The haunting selection of the beautiful drawing reveals Picasso’s critical emotional, aesthetic and cultural sensitivity of Max Jacob’s and Dora Maar’s Jewish background/consciousness and its potential repercussions. It is a powerful reflection of the political climate of pre-war and wartime France that Picasso witnessed personally through the death of his dear friend and the terrifying preoccupation of his muse, Dora Maar.

The psychological burden of rampant anti-Semitism paired with the horrific reality of the destruction of European Jewry is one of the legacies of Dora Maar’s romantic and emotional liaison with Picasso. Past art historical research has obliquely referenced Maar’s Jewish background when it is central to a contextual critique of Picasso’s pre-war and wartime paintings of his muse. Picasso’s numerous and revelatory portraits of Dora Maar reflect her prescient understanding and personal fear of the escalating fascist threat and growing anti-Semitism in Europe in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

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