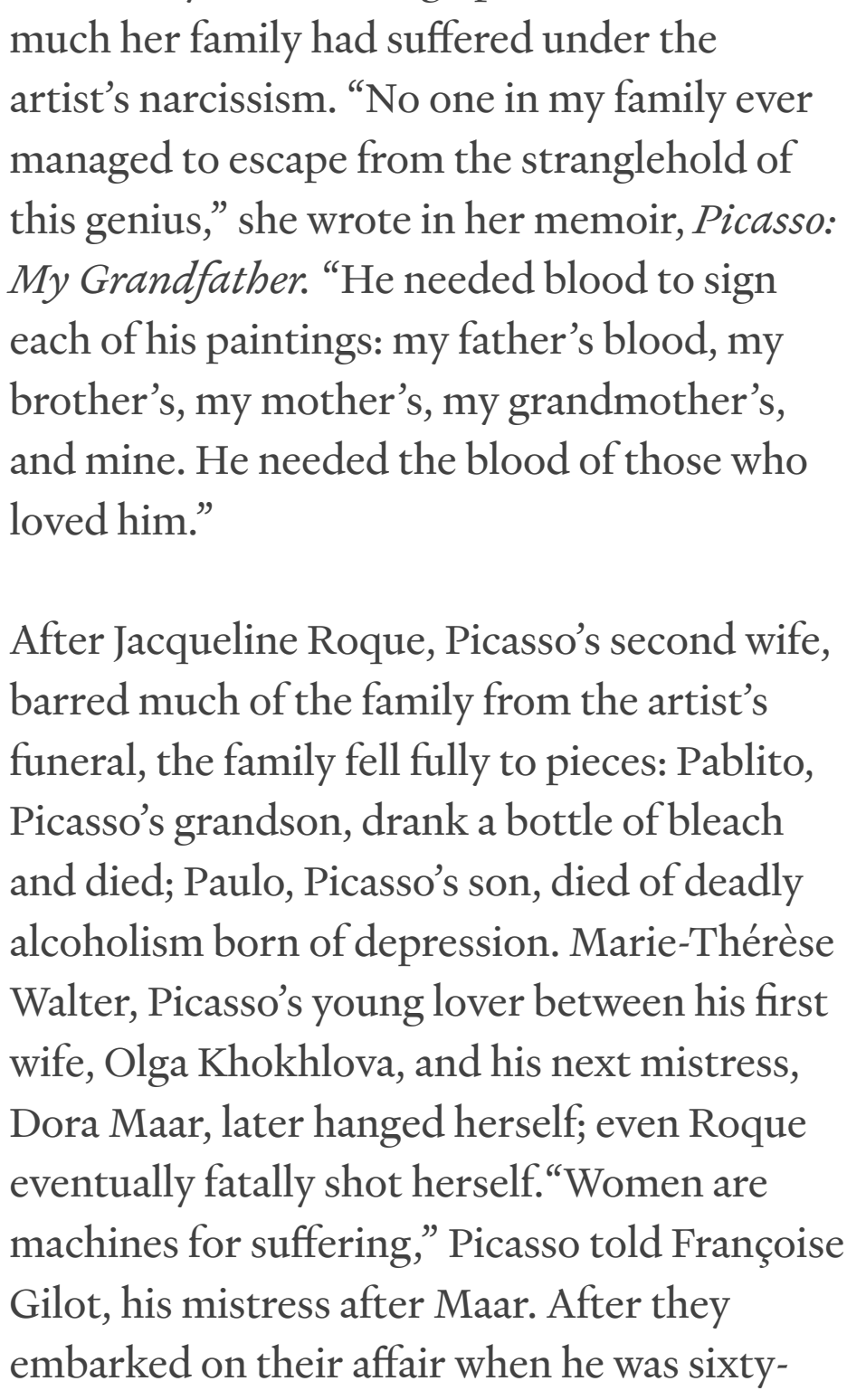


THE PARIS REVIEW

How Picasso Bled the Women in His Life for Art

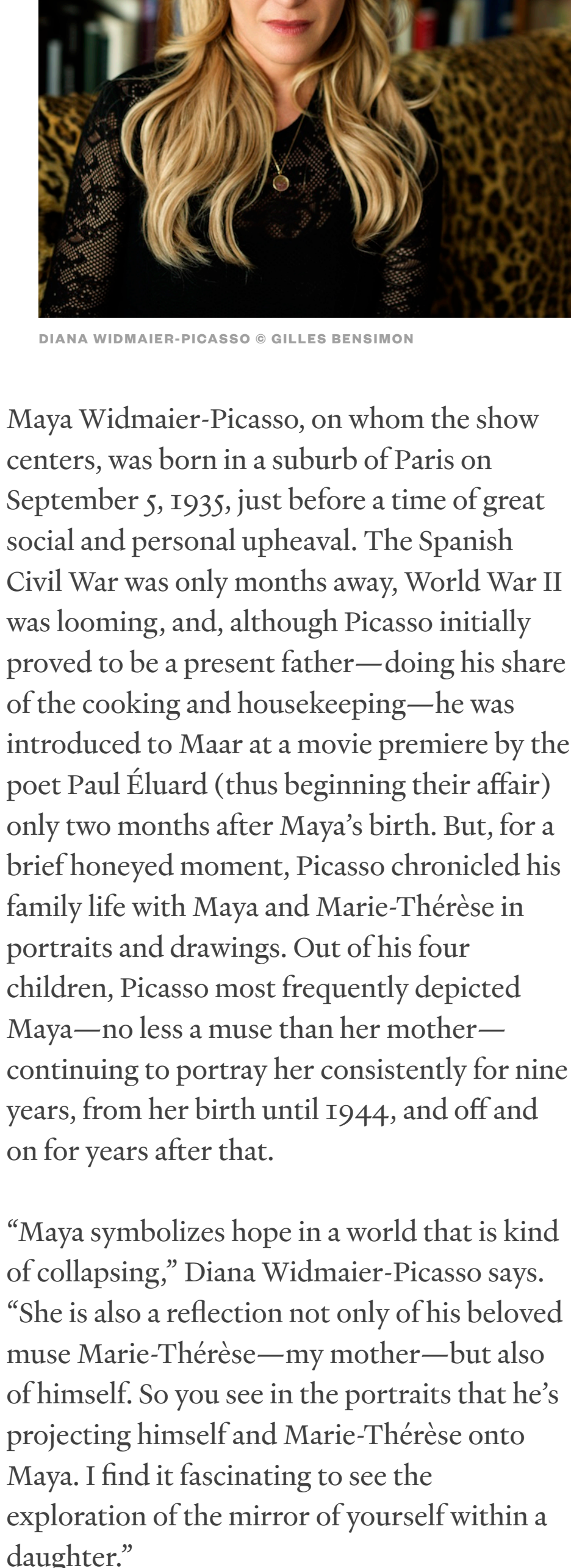
By [Cody Delistraty](#) November 9, 2017

ARTS & CULTURE



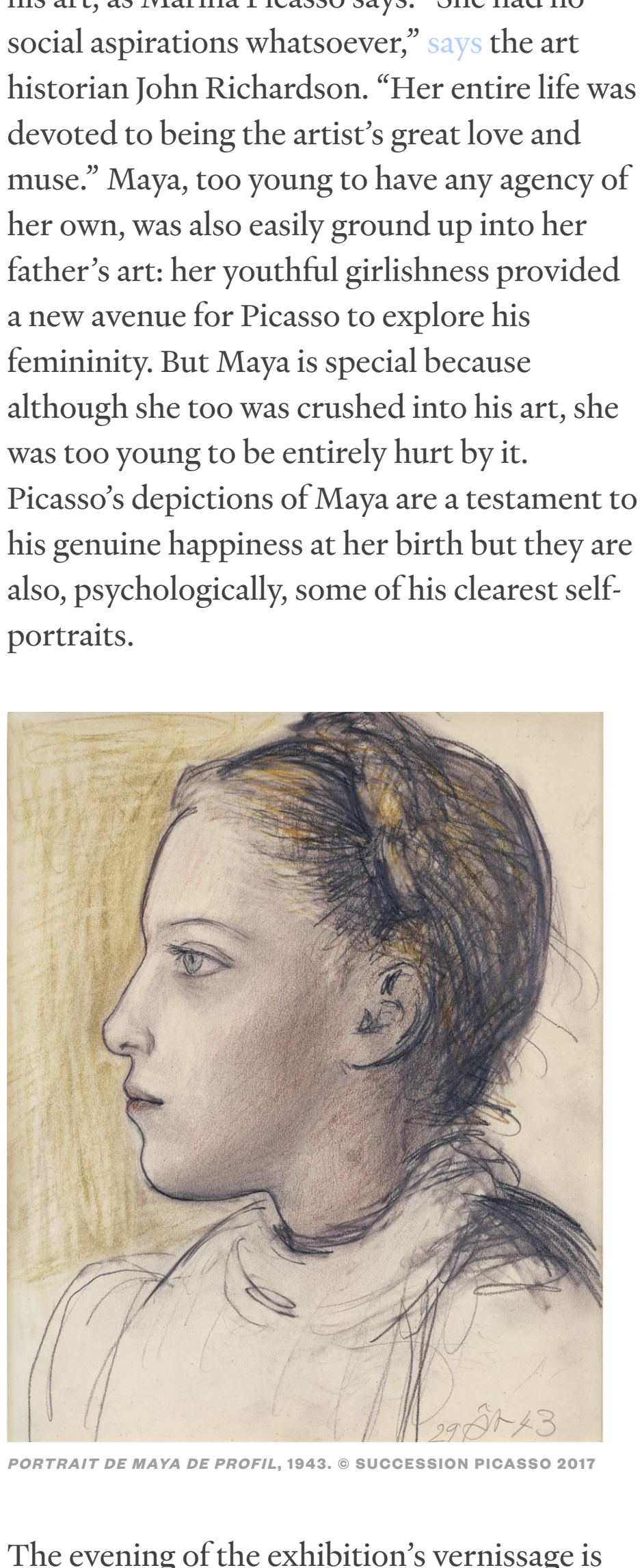
Sixteen years ago, Marina Picasso, one of Pablo Picasso's granddaughters, became the first family member to go public about how much her family had suffered under the artist's narcissism. "No one in my family ever managed to escape from the stranglehold of this genius," she wrote in her memoir, *Picasso: My Grandfather*. "He needed blood to sign each of his paintings: my father's blood, my brother's, my mother's, my grandmother's, and mine. He needed the blood of those who loved him."

After Jacqueline Roque, Picasso's second wife, barred much of the family from the artist's funeral, the family fell fully to pieces: Pablito, Picasso's grandson, drank a bottle of bleach and died; Paulo, Picasso's son, died of deadly alcoholism born of depression. Marie-Thérèse Walter, Picasso's young lover between his first wife, Olga Khokhlova, and his next mistress, Dora Maar, later hanged herself; even Roque eventually fatally shot herself. "Women are machines for suffering," Picasso told Françoise Gilot, his mistress after Maar. After they embarked on their affair when he was sixty-one and she was twenty-one, he warned Gilot of his feelings once more: "For me there are only two kinds of women: goddesses and doormats." Marina saw her grandfather's treatment of women as an even darker phenomenon, a vital part of his creative process: "He submitted them to his animal sexuality, tamed them, bewitched them, ingested them, and crushed them onto his canvas. After he had spent many nights extracting their essence, once they were bled dry, he would dispose of them."



It is curious then that a new exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in Paris, just off the Champs-Élysées on the nightclub-laden rue Pontthieu, called "Picasso and Maya: Father and Daughter," is full of heartfelt wood sculptures and paper cutouts Picasso made for his daughter Maya, loving and colorful portraits of his shy mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter, and a wall full of rarely seen family photographs: Picasso with his children at the beach, at Christmastime, at a bullfight; Picasso and Maya sitting together, looking at a camera; Picasso and Maya with their dog, Riki, on a Parisian balcony. A flip-book turned into a video has Walter posing and smiling for him. A pencil drawing of a childish Maya has her cheeks red with crayon, as if blushing.

Diana Widmaier-Picasso, who is the daughter of Maya Widmaier-Picasso and Pierre Widmaier, a shipping magnate, and the granddaughter of Picasso and Marie-Thérèse, curated the exhibition. She is well aware of the usual misanthropic, misogynistic characterizations of Picasso. "He's a man of metamorphoses," she tells me carefully in Paris, a few days before the vernissage of her exhibition. "A complex person to grasp."



Maya Widmaier-Picasso, on whom the show centers, was born in a suburb of Paris on September 5, 1935, just before a time of great social and personal upheaval. The Spanish Civil War was only months away, World War II was looming, and, although Picasso initially proved to be a present father—doing his share of the cooking and housekeeping—he was introduced to Maar at a movie premiere by the poet Paul Éluard (thus beginning their affair) only two months after Maya's birth. But, for a brief honeyed moment, Picasso chronicled his family life with Maya and Marie-Thérèse in portraits and drawings. Out of his four children, Picasso most frequently depicted Maya—no less a muse than her mother—continuing to portray her consistently for nine years, from her birth until 1944, and off and on for years after that.

"Maya symbolizes hope in a world that is kind of collapsing," Diana Widmaier-Picasso says. "She is also a reflection not only of his beloved muse Marie-Thérèse—my mother—but also of himself. So you see in the portraits that he's projecting himself and Marie-Thérèse onto Maya. I find it fascinating to see the exploration of the mirror of yourself within a daughter."

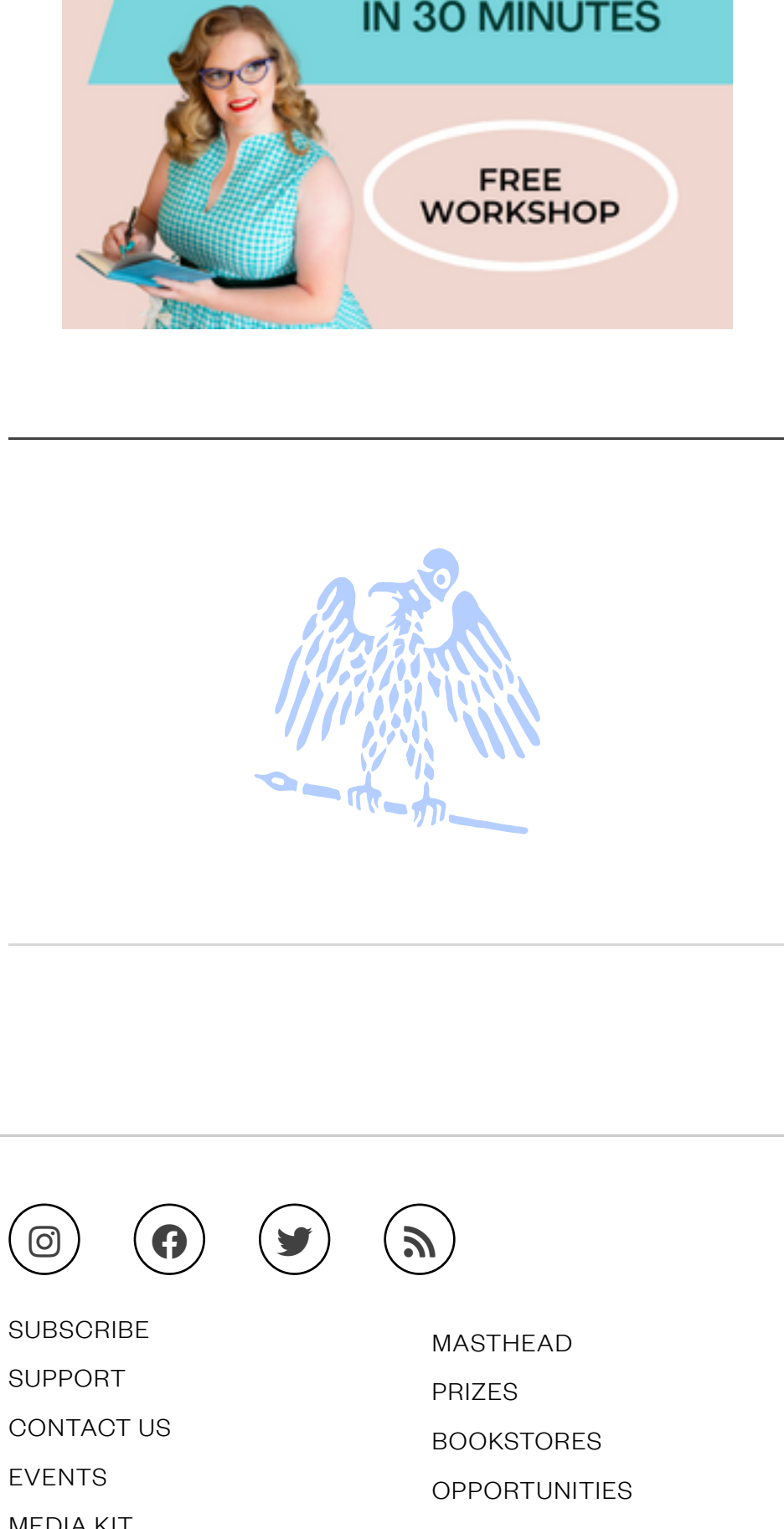
When the French president, Emmanuel Macron, recently stopped by the gallery to look at the works with Maya, who is now eighty-two, he asked her how it felt to be portrayed so frequently by her father. She merely shrugged. "She thought it hardly felt like her at all," Diana explains.

"Sometimes, you see that he's clearly doing a self-portrait through the features of his daughter," she says. "It's not a portrait of a child, you know? She's meant to be three years old, and there is something very severe about the way she looks ... Certainly, he found a feminine projection of himself within his daughter."

The works on display also mark a stylistic shift for the artist. His series of portraits of three-year-old Maya in 1938 show a rare gentle but physical energy—Maya playing with a toy boat, Maya holding a doll against her cheek in a way that recalls the *Virgin and Child*.

There are some who see Picasso's treatment of women in a relatively positive light: the women in his life enriched his art and, in turn, he depicted them in loving portraiture and artistic allegory. The classic example given for Picasso's respectful relationship with women is his friendship with Gertrude Stein, which Stein fondly recounted in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

But Picasso's relationship with Stein and his gentle portraits of Marie-Thérèse and Maya don't change the fact that Picasso cheated on nearly all of his lovers and, at least indirectly, drove two of them to suicide. Perhaps the nuance is to be found in the *types* of love he doled out—that is, between the type of love that he showed Stein and certain friends and the type of love he showed his wives and lovers like Jacqueline Roque and Marie-Thérèse.



Marie-Thérèse was ready to be "crushed" into his art, as Marina Picasso says. "She had no social aspirations whatsoever," [says](#) the art historian John Richardson. "Her entire life was devoted to being the artist's great love and muse." Maya, too young to have any agency of her own, was also easily ground up into her father's art: her youthful girlishness provided a new avenue for Picasso to explore his femininity. But Maya is special because although she too was crushed into his art, she was too young to be entirely hurt by it. Picasso's depictions of Maya are a testament to his genuine happiness at her birth but they are also, psychologically, some of his clearest self-portraits.

The evening of the exhibition's vernissage is warm and a line snakes through the gallery's vestibule and out onto the street. Inside, Widmaier-Picasso balances on Louboutins while adjusting the pink bow on the front of her cherry-red dress. After an hour or so of glad-handing, Widmaier-Picasso is tired. She sits down on a circular cushion in the middle of the gallery's second floor. On one wall next to her are dozens of photos of her mother, her grandmother, and Picasso, living what appears to be a fashionable but relatively normal life—restaurants, holidays, work. Earlier, Widmaier-Picasso had told me that her favorite artwork in the exhibition was *Maya, dans ses cheveux une poupée en tissu*, a drawing of Maya in which Picasso placed a cloth doll in her hair, adding a rare physical dimension to the artwork. Now, Widmaier-Picasso turns from the photographs to stare at it on the opposite wall.

Picasso was a womanizer who left most of his lovers in emotional shambles. He was not, by most stretches of the imagination, a moral or "good" person. And yet, two generations on, his granddaughter, who now specializes in his art and is even working on a catalogue raisonné of his sculptures, has organized a show feting his relationship with one of his daughters. What we are willing to look past—Picasso's indiscretions, cruelties, and emotional bloodletting—is just as telling of the viewer as of the artist.

Today, Picasso is, seemingly, safely ensconced in the canon. And, as one gets to know his art and his life more intimately, it is a balm to look at works like that of little Maya with a cloth doll in her hair. Maya was not destroyed in Picasso's artistic process, because the face he depicted of her wasn't her own face so much as a portal for him to find—for a moment—his innocence, his childishness, and his goodness.

Because so few other women in his life made it out unscathed, that wall will always be the easiest one to look at, which Widmaier-Picasso does, until, finally, she musters the energy to get up and start chatting and cheek-kissing with strangers once more.

Cody Delistraty is a writer and historian based in Paris.

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