

Annie Cohen-Solal
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TITLE

Skvělé jak sklomalba...Krásná věc...
Vincenc Kramář and Pablo Picasso
A Magical Encounter
During the Darkest Times of Cubism in France

ABSTRACT

In 1900, when Pablo Picasso first arrived in Paris at age 19, escorted by Catalan friends, he knew neither the language nor the codes of the country. France was then a wounded country, enduring waves of social unrest, built on two strong institutional pillars. While the “Police of Foreigners” obsessively protected the “purity of the nation” against the foreigner, the Académie des beaux-arts equally protected French “good” taste against those who dared transgressing its canon. In June 1901, Picasso’s first exhibition in Paris was praised by the critic, but the French police opened a file against him, labelling him an “anarchist under surveillance.” As foreigner and avant-garde artist, although celebrated all over the western world, Picasso’s situation in France remained difficult for more than four decades: he became both vulnerable and invisible. In 1940, by fear of being shot by Franco’s militia, the artist requested French naturalization, but his file was denied by a police official who exuded common prejudice against foreigners.

In this respect, Picasso’s encounter with the great art historian and collector Vincenc Kramář (and erstwhile Director of the Picture Gallery in Prague) remained one of the most magical moments for the artist, at a time when he was considered a “traitor,” responsible, with his “Kubism,” for the aesthetic and moral decline of France. “Superb as a painting... Beautiful thing”, Kramář wrote about *Head of a Woman* (1908), a Picasso painting that had been doomed “ugly” by local critics. But how did the Czech collector develop such an extraordinary ability to understand Picasso’s evolution during the most audacious and difficult period of his career? Was it his frenzied way of collecting, his passion for Paris, or else his training under the leadership of the best art historians of the Vienna school, all open to interdisciplinary approach who, in those decades, were living their golden age? From 1907 to 1914, Kramář strictly followed the experimentations of the artist (who was engaged in his most heroic phase of hybridization of his life, influenced by the discoveries of philosophy, science, and technology), before he became the first theorist of cubism.

Based on extensive research in the police archives and in the Paris Picasso Museum that had never been unveiled before, the book *Picasso the Foreigner* adopts the interdisciplinary approach of *social* art history, touching on themes such as cosmopolitanism, nationalism, xenophobia, immigration, that are still relevant today. It follows the production of the artist from his arrival in Paris until his death, through

the two world wars, the Spanish civil war and the rise of fascism, focusing on Picasso's genius as an artist, but also on his talent as a political strategist.

BIOGRAPHY

Annie Cohen-Solal is Distinguished Professor at Bocconi University in Milan. After her PhD from the Sorbonne, she led an academic career in Berlin, Jerusalem, New-York and Paris, before gaining international recognition as a writer in 1985 with *Sartre (1905-1980)*. As Cultural Counselor to the French Embassy in the United States (1989-1993), she started exploring the theme of art and immigration –as illustrated in her books: *Painting American* (Alfred A. Knopf, Prix Bernier, 2000); *Leo Castelli & his Circle* (Alfred A. Knopf, Prix ArtCurial 2010); *Mark Rothko* (Yale UP, 2015); *Picasso the Foreigner* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), Prix Femina 2021 and Premio *Il Giornale dell'Arte* 2024, all widely translated worldwide. As curator, she produced *Magiciens de la terre: Revisiting a Legendary Exhibition* (Centre Pompidou, 2014 with Jean-Hubert Martin). Her last show *A Foreigner Called Picasso* presented in Paris (Musée de l'Immigration with Musée Picasso), New York (Gagosian Gallery), Mantova (Palazzo Te), Milan (Palazzo Reale), and Rome (Palazzo Cipolla), was awarded the Historia Prize (2022) and the Baer Faxt Award (2023). Born in Algiers, Cohen-Solal lives between Milan, Paris, and Cortona.