

Picasso's lover at heart of historic UK collection of his finest prints

Depictions of artist's muse feature in British Museum's unique gathering of graphic works

by Vanessa Thorpe
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Where can you see the most persuasive proof that Pablo Picasso was the finest graphic artist of the 20th century? A great French or Spanish art gallery? The unlikely answer is closer to home.

The British Museum has just purchased a group of mint-condition prints by Picasso worth millions, the completion of a mission to house the key European collection of the artist's print-making skills.

The 19 new works revealed today were made between 1947 and 1957 and include some of the famous depictions of his muse, Françoise Gilot, the mother of his children Paloma and Claude, made in the south of France as their relationship flowered and then faded.

"This is the last important gap to be filled in the British Museum's representation of Picasso's print work," said Stephen Coppel, curator of the modern collection in the museum's department of prints and drawings. "It is very important that we were able to acquire this

work. It is one of the greatest achievements in graphic art."

Hartwig Fischer, director of the British Museum, said the purchase, made with an Art Fund grant and individual donations, now "stands us among the most important public collections of Picasso in the world".

While London's National Gallery prepares to launch its Picasso Portraits show next week, this set of rival images, central to the development of modern art and lithography, will be on display from January.

The museum has been building up a leading collection of the Spanish artist's linocuts, lithographs and coloured prints, or aquatints. It has pursued a campaign to augment its collection and now has more than 550. Coppel said: "We have been playing catch-up really since the 1970s, because Picasso is the greatest 20th-century artist making prints, following on from the work of Dürer and Rembrandt and Goya."

The largely abstract prints, Coppel said, show the influence of Gilot on his designs. He frequently represents her long neck and flowing hair, showing her

working at her own art, their children at her feet. "Françoise was an independent spirit and an aspiring artist herself, and his drawings of her abstracted form communicate just how forthright she was. The transformations are extraordinary. Sometimes he plays with the line of her neck and her hair, almost making it like a guitar, while in another she looks like the Queen of the Night."

As well as chronicling the impact of his time with Gilot, the only woman to defy Picasso, the prints illustrate the art-

ist's lifetime interest in pagan Mediterranean themes, featuring what Coppel describes as "Bacchanalian cavortings and goings on".

The 19 new works join the museum's other important Picasso prints, including the Vollard Suite of 100 neo-classical etchings from the 1930s and the immense 347 Series, all made in 1968 near his home in Mougins.

"Art Fund trustees simply couldn't resist giving a major grant for the acquisition of this captivating group of works,"



The Little Artist, left, made by Pablo Picasso in May 1954; and, above, Figure, another lithograph, from March 1949. Succession Picasso/DACS

said Stephen Deuchar, director of the charitable fund that raises money to secure artworks for the British public. "Even in a collection as huge and important as the British Museum's prints and drawings, they stand out for their visual and art historical punch."

The National Gallery's show, which opens on 6 October and runs until February, includes portraits of Gilot and studies of his friends, associates and lovers, many lent by the Museu Picasso in Barcelona, some by the British Museum.

This autumn another gallery in Mayfair, Omer Tiroche, will mount a small complementary show called Picasso on Paper, a collection of more than 30 works that map out the artist's world in his obsessive and simple draftsmanship.

The show, which opens on 4 October, features drawings on pages torn from books, on sheets of tracing paper and on the backs of café receipts. Many depict the other women Picasso once categorised as "either goddesses or doormats". His muses and lovers Olga, Marie-Thérèse and Dora are all there, sometimes caught with affectionate curves and sometimes cruel spikes.