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Pablo Picasso
Hibou brillant (A.R. 285), 1955

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Pablo Picasso

(Málaga 1881 – Mougins 1973)

HIBOU BRILLANT (A.R. 285), 1955

White earthenware clay, decoration in engobes and engraved by knife under glaze

39 x 32.5 cm

15 3/8 x 12 3/4 in.

Stamped underneath: "EDITION PICASSO" and "MADOURA PLEIN FEU"

Cocneived in 1955 and executed in an edition of 450

Provenance

Private collection, United States.

Literature

Alain Ramié, *Picasso: Catalogue de l'œuvre céramique édité*, 1947–1971, Vallauris, 1988, no. 285 (another example illustrated).

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An owl fills the dish from rim to rim. It stands squarely to the front on a ground of black engobe, carved from blade: contours, feathers, and claws appear as lines cut through the black slip to the white body beneath, so that the bird surfaces as a pale drawing on a night-dark field. The head is a squared block, fringed with short strokes along the crown. Two large eyes, white crescents under heavy lids, give it a drowsy and faintly sceptical stare; above each rises a small three-pointed tuft, which tells a *hibou* from a *chouette*, and between them. Hooked beak drops from the brow, with fine lines fanning out across the facial disc. Beneath a collar of dark beads, the body swells into a barrel, divided by stitched lines into bands, three of them set with rows of white crescents for the speckled breast. The folded wings are written in two different shorthands, long parallel hatching on the left and on the right, a herringbone of barbs like a fern frond, and at the base, the talons, touched with blue, close on a perch laid in brick-rid engobe. Around the bird, the black is sown with white stars, their centres pricked with blue, and a sweep of blue lightens the ground at the lower right. Over everything lies the gaze that gives the plate its name, deepening the black to lacquer and giving every incised line a gleam.

The plate is one of the editions that Picasso devised with Georges and Suzanne Ramié at their Madoura pottery in Vallauris. He first worked in their workshop in 1946, modelling a faun's head and two bulls, and returned the following year to begin a partnership that lasted the rest of his life. Between 1947 and 1971 he designed 633 editioned ceramics, made in runs of 25 to 500 and sold through the pottery, a deliberate means of carrying his work far beyond the buyers of his paintings. For the *empreinte originale*, Picasso carved or modelled a plaster matrix into which sheets of clay were pressed; for the *édition Picasso*, a model of his own was replicated by hand at the pottery, each example stamped or incised accordingly. The present plate is of the second kind, marked EDITION PICASSO beside the pottery's own MADOURA PLEIN FEU. Conceived in 1955 and executed in an edition of 450, it is no. 285 in Alain Ramié's catalogue of the editions, where the composition appears twice under consecutive numbers. In *Hibou mat* (A.R. 284), the engraved engobes are left dry on the face and the glaze is confined to the reverse (fig. 1); in *Hibou brillant*, the whole drawing is sealed beneath it. Matte, the engobes keep a soft surface and quieter colour, while glazed, the black gains depth and the incised white the brilliance of enamel.

The bird itself had come into Picasso's life entirely by chance nine years earlier. He had been painting in the Château Grimaldi at Antibes, then the town's museum of history and archaeology, whose curator, Romuald Dor de la Souchère, had given him the great hall on the second floor as a studio in the autumn of 1946. Between mid-September and mid-November, he had created twenty-three paintings and forty-four drawings that he left on deposit with the town.¹ One day the photographer Michel Sima, who had brought painter and curator together, arrived with a small owl he had found in a corner of the museum, one of its claws injured (fig. 2). Françoise Gilot, Picasso's companion, recorded what followed. They dressed the claw until it mended, bought a cage and, on returning to Paris, installed the bird in the kitchen among the canaries, pigeons and turtle-doves. While the other birds chirped and cooed, the owl repaid the painter's kindness with a glare, sitting in sullen silence and would touch nothing but the mice that Gilot trapped for it. Picasso met its snorts with a stream of French obscenities, to show that he could be ruder still, and pushed his fingers through the bars to be bitten, until by degrees the owl let him scratch its head and took to perching on his finger, though never, Gilot noted, with any appearance of contentment.²

¹ Musée Picasso, Antibes, *Dossier de presse*, Antibes, 2008, section "Du château Grimaldi au musée Picasso."

² Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso*, New York, 1964, pp. 144–45. Captions to Sima's prints of the scene name the bird Ubu: Artcurial, Paris, Impressionist & Modern, 5 June 2025, lot 467.

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While the owl was not new to Picasso's art (indeed, one stands at the feet of the picador in *El Zurdo*, the first etching he made, in Barcelona in 1899), after Antibes, it became one of his most prominent sitters. On 6 November 1946, he set it among the sea urchins that had crowded his still lifes all autumn, in *Nature morte à la chouette et aux trois oursins* (fig. 3), and in the following days filled sheet after sheet with owl studies, at times beside heads of women.³ In 1947, the bird perched for *Chair and Owl*, now at Oberlin, a canvas that Picasso gave to be sold for the benefit of the poet Benjamin Péret, then stranded in Mexico (fig. 4). At Vallauris, where he began to work in clay at Madoura that same year, the owl found its natural medium. The swelling body of a turned pitcher or vase needed little more than eyes, a beak and folded wings to become the bird, and owls recur throughout the editions, from the *Cruchon hibou* conceived in the same year as the present plate (A.R. 293) to the *Hibou noir perché* of 7 May 1957 (A.R. 398). In the unique sculpture of the early 1950s, the creature acquired a temper and even a human face: the *Chouette en colère* of 1953 in the Musée national Picasso-Paris (fig. 4), and the pair of owls with the heads of a man and of a woman known as the *couple Carnaval*.

Picasso's fascination with the creature had reached a point that it could not escape even his friends. Roland Penrose observed that the owl, "with its rounded head and piercing stare", seemed to resemble Picasso himself, and Picasso played along.⁴ In 1957, with René Burri as photographer, he drew an owl's face on a sheet of paper laid over an enlarged photograph of himself and cut it away at the eyes, so that the bird looked out at the world through his own (fig. 5); David Douglas Duncan photographed him making two such owl self-portraits that year.

The present plate, conceived two years earlier, is organised around the same organ. Everything in it converges on the eyes: the lines radiating from the beak, the tufts above the brows, the strict symmetry of a body otherwise dissolved into pattern. It is indeed less the portrait of a bird than of a gaze. By the time the plate was conceived, the household in which the owl had lived was gone but the bird remained in his repertoire, and through the editions it travelled far beyond the studio, as he had intended his pottery should. *Hibou brillant* gathers that history into a single frontal image, the injured bird of Antibes, the ungracious lodger of the kitchen and the alter ego with the painter's eyes, and fixes it in fired glaze.

³ *On-line Picasso Project*, ed. Enrique Mallen, catalogue of 1946, PDF: OPP.46:003 (*Nature morte à la chouette et aux trois oursins*, Zervos XIV, 255); OPP.46:078 (*Étude de chouettes, visages et oursins*, 7 November, Musée Picasso, Antibes, MPA 1946.2.32); OPP.46:521 (*Le hibou*, 8 November, Zervos XIV, 344); OPP.46:289 and 46:288 (*Chouette VII* and *Feuille d'études : chouette XIV*, 11 November, Musée national Picasso-Paris, MP1388–89). An owl already figures in two drawings of 3 August 1946, in which it attacks a cat (OPP.46:097 and 46:292; MP1376); when Sima's bird joined the household is not recorded.

⁴ Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work*, 3rd edn, Berkeley, 1981, p. 361, as quoted in the Christie's catalogue note cited in n. 8.

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Fig. 1: Pablo Picasso, *Hibou mat* (A.R. 284), conceived 1955, edition of 450, white earthenware, partially engraved, with coloured engobe, glazed on the reverse, length 37.4 cm (14 3/4 in.), Christie's, London, *Picasso Ceramics Online*, 10–22 September 2021, lot 55

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Fig. 2: Michel Sima, *Pablo Picasso avec sa chouette Ubu devant son tableau « Nature morte à la chouette et aux trois oursins »*, Antibes, ca. 1946, vintage gelatin silver print, 8.5 x 11.5 cm (3 3/8 x 4 1/2 in.)

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Fig. 3: Pablo Picasso, *Nature morte à la chouette et aux trois oursins*, 6 November 1946, oleoresinous paint on wood (beech), 81.5 x 79 cm (32 1/8 x 31 1/8 in.), Musée Picasso, Antibes

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Fig. 4: Pablo Picasso, *Chair and Owl*, 1947, oil on canvas, 73.7 x 58.4 cm (29 x 23 in.), Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio, inv. 1957.113, gift of Joseph and Enid Bissett

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Fig. 4: Pablo Picasso, *Chouette en colère*, 1953, terracotta with clay engobe, 29.5 x 30 x 32 cm (11 5/8 x 11 3/4 x 12 5/8 in.), Musée national Picasso-Paris, inv. MP335

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Fig 5: René Burri, *The Owl and Picasso*, 1957, gelatin silver print, printed later, 23.8 x 16.2 cm (9 3/8 x 6 3/8 in.), George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY, inv. 1968.0184.0068, gift of Time-Life Books

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