

Living Arts

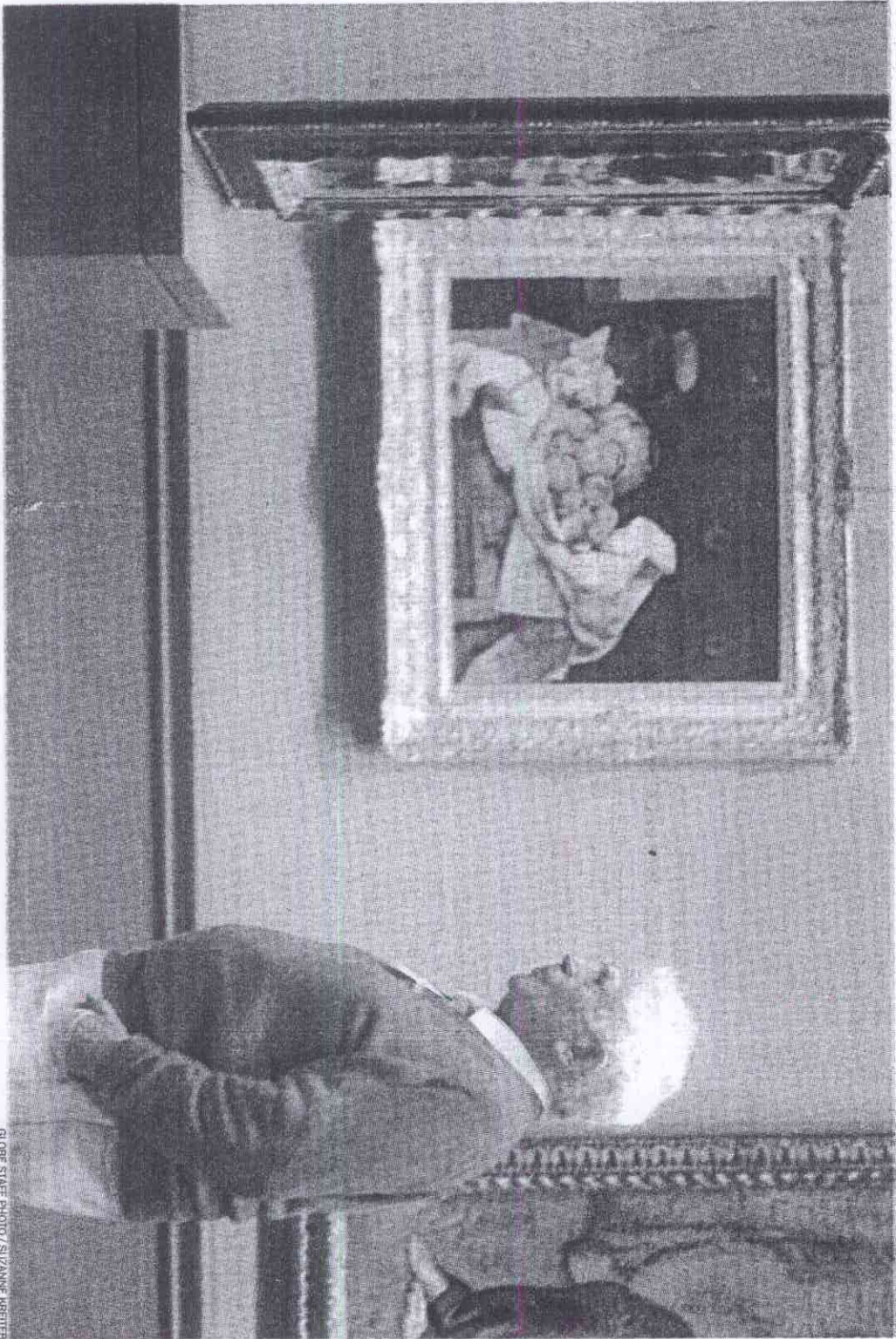
THE BOSTON GLOBE • TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 1995

MAILER vs. PICASSO

AT HARVARD

Also Inside:
TV-Radio 83, 84

77



Harvard grad Norman Mailer looks at Picassos at the Foggy Museum: "God, if only they'd had things like this when I was here."

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/SUZANNE KREITER

By M.R. Montgomery
GLOBE STAFF

CAMBRIDGE - Norman Mailer, author of 29 or 30 books (who's counting?), returned to Harvard last week and set foot in the Fogge Art Museum for the first time since his senior year in the spring of 1943. About the last thing he did before joining up and shipping out to the Pacific (and writing "The Naked and the Dead") was to take a modern art course at the Fogge. "It's bigger, it's different," he said wonderingly. Well, 52 years is a long time, and a once-musty Fogge now has one of America's finest (if small in numbers) collections of modern art.

Mailer was in town to promote his latest book, "Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man," with public ap-

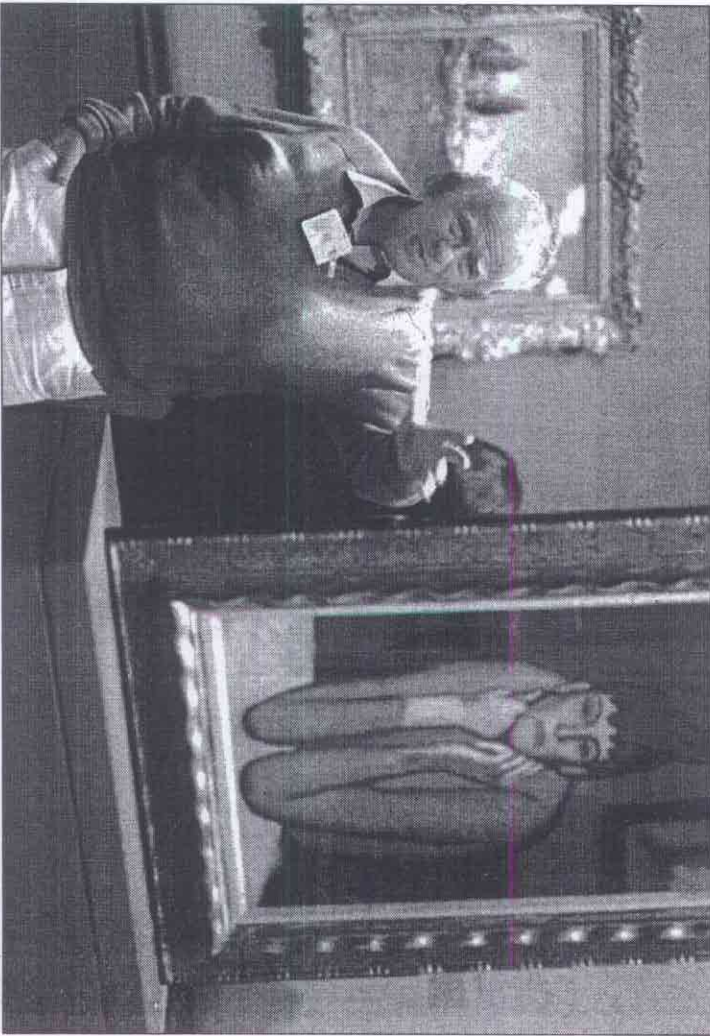
Facing some
of the paintings
for the
first time,
the biographer
takes his
gloves off.
But it's
the artist
who scores the
knockout.

pearances (Ford Hall Forum, the David Bridgway and Christopher Lydon radio talk shows) and one semi-private event, a visit to the Fogge to see its Picassos nose-to-paint.

He is not planning a second volume on the Spanish painter: "It is as though, after cubism, he lost his navigator; there's no narrative thread to his life after 1917, it is just a series of episodes," Mailer said, while waiting for an assistant curator to locate a few extra Picassos buried in the storage vault in the museum's basement. When "Cigarette and Absinthe Glass," a small and murky cubist piece, was located, Mailer climbed a rolling ladder to view it reading-glasses close and declared it "a pretty trivial piece."

Another one, down the hall and through another security gate, was merely interesting. "There's a famous Picasso anecdote," he related, after peering at a small landscape, a "View of Horta." "Picasso was talking disparagingly about some of his own paint-

MAILER, Page 82



Malier at the Fogg Museum with a portrait of a woman from Picasso's Blue Period.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/SUZANNE ROBITER

MAILER

Continued from Page 77

ings, and the visitor pointed at one and said, 'So, this is a bad Picasso?'

"There is no such thing as a bad Picasso," he replied, 'only some are better than others.'

"Well," Mailer concluded, "This one comes pretty close."

This instant criticism is not meant to denigrate Harvard's Picassos, the great ones, including two Blue Period masterpieces that are upstairs, not hidden in the bowels of the Fogg. Mailer was properly impressed with the "Mother and Child" in the modern gallery on the second floor and stunned, if that is the right word, by "The Blind Man," a work on paper kept in the Fogg's Agnes Mongan Gallery.

In both cases, although the works are reproduced in "Portrait of Picasso," he had never seen the originals. The mother's feet - painted, he thought, with brush-strokes reminiscent of van Gogh - captivated him. The sinuosity of her gown, not evident except to someone standing right in front of the painting, he found compelling. The solidity of the planes making up the face of the blind man were a revelation. (His wife, Norris, looking over his shoulder at the "Blind Man," remarked: "If we only had had that to look at before.")

An Impressionist-style portrait of an anonymous young woman with knowing eyes almost overwhelmed Mailer. "It's so exciting," he said. "I've never seen anything from that period [just months before the Blue Period] up close.

"God," he muttered, "if only they'd had things like this when I was here." Much of the Fogg's incredible, if small, collection was acquired after World War II.

No respect

Mailer's generosity, his ingenuity, in sharing such reactions with a reporter have charm and also illustrate the problem Mailer has had getting a respectful audience for his book. Indeed, he had trouble getting respect before there was a book. "We had enormous problems getting permissions," he said, more in sorrow than in anger. "It took almost three years. William Rubin [former director of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York], for example, would not give

'Look, something like three-quarters of the people who come to listen to me have never thought about Picasso or modern art. If I get them interested, that's to the good.'

me permission to quote him at length - he said he had heard it was a bad book. So to use an anecdote in his book, we had to search back to all the original sources.

"I like to quote extensively from other people's work," he continued. "I did it in 'Oswald's Tale.' There's a problem if you rewrite instead of quoting... unconsciously, you make them conform to your views. But the reviews of this book, well, 'vile' would come to mind."

Robert Taylor, reviewing "Portrait of Picasso" in the *Globe*, predicted the critical reaction. Mailer would be seen as "poaching on the turf of taste makers and scholars [and] will no doubt be accused by literary game wardens of stalking Picasso without a license." Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic of the *New York Times*, found the book "clumsy and disappointing" and thoroughly unoriginal. Robert Storr, curator of painting and sculpture at MOMA, was the hired assassin for the *Washington Post* book pages, and found "purple prose of the utmost banality." Not content with criticism, Storr moved on to cruel, ad hominem remarks drawn from boxing argot: "Mismatched" opponents are Mailer and Picasso, and "Mailer's editorial handlers and promoters are also at fault for letting their palooka into the ring."

Mailer, tired after a hard hour of gazing at Picasso originals and understandably weary after the New York/Boston air shuttle and the charms of the Sumner Tunnel, and thinking back over the reviews ("the worst I've ever gotten for a book") was reminded of the critical reaction to his sole directorial effort, making a film of his own "Tough Guys Don't Dance."

"Maybe it didn't add anything to cinematography," he said, "but the reviews were personally vicious. Livid and vicious. Someone in Hollywood explained it to me: 'Critics want to be directors. You got to be one.'

"Well, I've written 29 or 30 books, and if 10 of them survive, I do believe 'Portrait of Picasso' will be one of the 10."

He enjoys some of the aspects of self-promotion, of the literary tour. He talks about "Portrait" with a slide show, illustrations of the subject that he thinks are probably new to his audiences. "Look, something like three-quarters of the people who come to listen to me have never thought about Picasso or modern art. If I get them interested, that's to the good."

Wrestling Lydon

Radio talk shows, the major venue of all authors, are another matter. "I like radio," he said, "but you never know. I feel like a professional wrestler on talk radio, you know: 'What town am I in, am I supposed to win or lose?'"

Later, standing outside the Fogg waiting for his driver (a perquisite of the better authors in a publisher's stable) to take him to the Four Seasons Hotel, he somehow found himself talking about accents. (This reporter, when tired, sometimes reverts to a faint Montana imitation-Texas-cowboy intonation.)

"The Texas accent," he said, "is the scariest accent in America." Since the reporter had done nothing threatening, Mailer felt obliged to explain.

"In the army, I was a fill-in in a Texas National Guard outfit. We shipped out to the Pacific. Let me give you an example of the scary Texas accent."

Now he was in full Mailer raconteurship.

"One of us non-Texans was on guard duty. I don't know why, but they let the Texans walk around with their sidearms. So this guy sees a Texan coming and he stops him and says something like, 'You can't pass through here, that's officer country.' And the Texan says:

"You tawkin' a me."

"And the kid says he can't let him by, and the Texan won't stop, so the kid throws the bolt on his rifle and

puts a round in the chamber. And the Texan" – here Mailer makes the quick-draw gesture – "he pulls his .45 out and says:

"'You wan' play?"

"Believe me, that got around the ship fast. To this day, when I'm threatened, I drop right into that Texas accent. It's just automatic, a defense."

The next morning, Mailer found himself on Chris Lydon's "Connec-tion" on WBUR-FM. Lydon, who may have read the book and certainly had read the reviews, started with his usual aeolian introduction, in which the whole point was that Mailer wasn't writing about Picasso, he was writing about Mailer as much as the painter. And Mailer, when it was his turn, demurred, denied, said it was a book about Picasso.

Lydon ignored the protest and repeated his assertion that Mailer was talking about himself, and then Picasso.

There was a pause, and then a distinct Texas-accented voice came over the radio.

"Chris, laits get one thin strait," Mailer began.

The wrestler knew two things: He knew he was in Boston, and he wanted to win.