

# Hommage à César

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In honor of the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of César (1921-1998), a selection of his works is on view at the Musée national Picasso-Paris and in Picasso's studio in Boisgeloup. These works demonstrate César's admiration for Picasso, and for his sculpture in particular: "It was fantastic and uncanny to see what he was able to do by disregarding classical form."<sup>1</sup> In the book accompanying the scholarly retrospective of his work held at the Centre Pompidou in 2017/2018, Bernard Blistène describes how César admired Picasso's "technique, his transformations, his sharp and revelatory sense of bricolage, his 'material instinct'". This two-fold personal exhibition at the Musée national Picasso-Paris and Boisgeloup develops connections between the two artists.

César's *Centaure* is on view in the Jupiter Salon of the Musée national Picasso-Paris — a loggia that overlooks the monumental staircase of this 17th-century mansion. This sculpture came about in 1976 following an invitation to take part in an exhibition to be held at the Picasso Museum in Antibes in 1983 to mark the tenth anniversary of Picasso's death. On that occasion, César created an initial plaster version. The final version, titled "Hommage à Picasso" and measuring almost 16 feet tall, was produced later and placed in Place Michel Debré in Paris in 1985. César produced various versions, cast at the Régis Bocquel Foundry, including the one shown here, which is just over 3 feet tall. This *Centaure*, a combination of man and horse like the mythological creature, has César's face and wears a mask with Picasso's effigy above its head, like a raised visor evoking a welder's helmet. A dove rests on his hand, symbolizing the freedom that César rightly associated with Picasso. "Pablo is a centaur on two legs. For me, the theme of the centaur is the great theme of classical sculpture, as seen in the great equestrian monuments that I worked from when I was a student at the École des Beaux-Arts studying the plaster statues in the ancient art room."<sup>2</sup> At the Musée national Picasso-Paris, the *Centaure* is surrounded by an *Expansion* from 1970. Originally temporary works, the *Expansions* were produced in public starting in 1967 and cut up into fragments that were handed out to viewers, before César decided to give them a more permanent status. "It's always like that with me, there's an idea that bursts forth suddenly from the discovery of a material or a process, but it takes me a long time to accept it — I circle around it, I try to draw all possible conclusions from this new idiom, I experiment with its possibilities and resources, I correct one form and pick another one up again."

In addition to the *Centaure* and the *Expansion*, another work is presented here: *Violet Mica 105* (1998), a compression of a Fiat Marea from the series *Suite Milanaise*. For this series, for the first time César sent the compressed sculptures into the painting chamber to be repainted like new in the metallic monochrome colors of the latest Fiat line. The "compressions" came about in 1959 after the artist's 1956 encounter with a hydraulic press at a scrap metal yard in Gennevilliers. "It was love at first sight. Right away, I wanted to use it. At first I used it in a raw manner, so to speak. The press met my every wish: it seized material, crushed it, and transformed it into huge balls calibrated with various weights; I was wrecked by this machine that turned cars into masses of scrap metal that weighed more than a ton."<sup>3</sup>

César went to Picasso's studios in Mougins and Vauvenargues, and the one in Cannes called "La Californie," as shown by David Douglas Duncan's 1957 photos, but he never went to Boisgeloup. A gilded bronze *Pouce* sculpture by César, measuring 11.5 feet tall, is on view on the promenade of Boisgeloup. Picasso purchased this manor house in 1930 and worked mostly on sculpture there. This is where he made his first "assemblage sculptures." With the building as a background, this raised thumb seems to measure the landscape, as painters once did to perceive the proportions of their subject for an academic drawing exercise. This reminds us that César, who at the age of fourteen started taking evening drawing classes at the École des Beaux-Arts in Marseille in 1935,

tirelessly studied drawing, modeling, and sculpture (he won the first prize in drawing, engraving, and architecture), and worked from live models starting in 1940. “The student must learn about anatomy, earth, and the model. These are exercises, but they allow you to get out of any situation.”<sup>4</sup> The first of these *Pouces* was produced for an exhibition at Galerie Claude Bernard in 1965 on the theme of the hand, titled “La Main, de Rodin à Picasso.” In César’s wonderful description, these works were “sculpture probabilities, or antisculptures.”<sup>5</sup>

In his studio in the former stable, where Picasso carved stone, worked plaster, and soldered iron, and where the famous stepladder photographed by Brassai still remains, there is a group of sculptures in plaster and soldered iron, an echo of César’s discovery of Picasso’s heterogeneous assemblages upon moving to Paris in 1943. The horn armchair that followed him to all his studios seems to suggest that César has temporarily moved into Picasso’s studio — but respects the memory of its historic owner, first of all by presenting various portraits of Picasso by César in plaster and in soldered bronze. (Only Picasso and Francis Bacon inspired portraits by César.) Chickens and owls, such as the soldered bronze *Coq* from 1947/1980, also remind us that chickens and owls were part of Picasso’s iconography, similar to the famous *Pachollette* (1966/1991), which was considered for a long time to mark the end of the period of César’s assemblage sculptures. Picasso had planned to purchase one of César’s soldered iron chickens on his second visit to “César, Sculptures de 1955 à 1966” at Galerie Madoura in Cannes in 1966, remarking: “He’s a great sculptor too.” A woman seated on a bronze chair and a cream compression completed the group shown in the studio — a purposefully heterogeneous group that shows the multidirectional experimental approach that both artists share. In the garage that Picasso set up right next to his studio to park the 1930 Hispano-Suiza H6B that he purchased in 1930, we see *Plaque Femme*, a soldered bronze sculpture from 1963/1991, one of the series of *Plaques* that César returned to over ten years, which were made by accumulating and overlapping elements. These are his only totally “abstract” works. While a bronze *Poulette* naturally seems at home on the floor of the do-vecote at Boisgeloup, *Hayon Corail* (1986), a fragment of a compressed car whose metal is painted bright red, takes center stage on the central wall of the apse of the Boisgeloup chapel, built in the 14th century. In 1986, César met Jean Todd, the head of Peugeot, and asked if he could obtain cars that had been damaged in auto races. He received some 205 turbo GTIs, which he took apart. *Hayon Corail*, a car fragment that has become a wall sculpture, is a crushed hatchback (rear windshield and part of the trunk) from one of these cars.

- Eric Troncy, Director of Consortium Museum, Dijon and Editor-in-Chief of Frog Magazine

1. Bernard Blistène, “Un entretien avec César”, *César oeuvres de 1947 à 1993*, Centre de la Vieille Charité, Marseille, 1993, p. 167
2. *Bonjour Monsieur Picasso, 13 commandes du Musée d’Antibes à des artistes pour le Xème anniversaire de la mort de Picasso, 1973 – avril 1983*, exhibition catalog, Antibes, Musée Picasso, 1983.
3. Catherine Francblin, *Les nouveaux Réalistes*, Paris, éditions du Regard, 1997.
4. Otto Hahn, *Les sept vies de César*, Lausanne/Paris, Favre, 1988, p. 94
5. Pierre Cabanne, *César par César*, Paris, Denoël, 1971, p. 131
6. Otto Hahn, *Les sept vies de César*, Lausanne/Paris, Favre, 1988, p. 2