

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Nikki Otten

book review of

Picasso and the Mysteries of Life: La Vie by William H. Robinson

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 12, no. 2 (Autumn 2013)

Citation: Nikki Otten, book review of *Picasso and the Mysteries of Life: La Vie* by William H. Robinson, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 2013), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn13/otten-reviews-picasso-and-the-mysteries-of-life>.

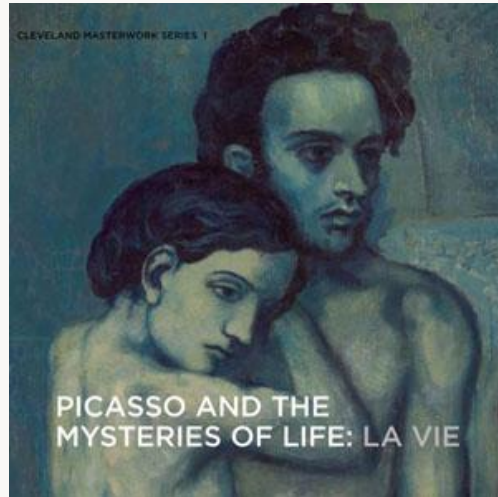
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



William H. Robinson,
Picasso and the Mysteries of Life: La Vie.
Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 2012.
176 pp.; 173 color illustrations; bibliography.
\$24.95 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-907804-21-2

Despite its seeming simplicity, Picasso's 1903 Blue Period painting, *La Vie*, has continued to confound viewers since its creation. Unlike the subjects of his later cubist works, the forms and figures Picasso presents in *La Vie* are realistic and readily recognizable. What they signify, however, has largely defied explanation. In *Picasso and the Mysteries of Life: La Vie*, released in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name, Cleveland Museum of Art curator William Robinson takes an unprecedented approach to analyzing Picasso's confounding painting. Rather than confining his investigation to the finished surface of the work, Robinson uses images from conservation technology and preparatory sketches to trace its complicated history of repeated revisions. Robinson supplements his visual and technological analysis with information about the surrounding historical context and insights about Picasso's sources of artistic inspiration. He also summarizes and deconstructs previous scholars' interpretations of the work, comparing them against his own conclusions. Through his thorough analysis, Robinson provides a newly cohesive, though not especially conclusive, answer to the question of what *La Vie* may mean.

Robinson presents his unique methodology in the introduction to the book, informing the reader that, "After presenting essential background information, subsequent chapters analyze the painting's individual parts in the approximate order in which they were created, from the earliest drawings and forms painted in the underlayers to Picasso's final alterations to the composition" (6). This manner of organization is interesting and effective, recreating Picasso's process for readers. Knowing precisely when elements were added, altered, painted over, or scraped off is important, since it allows Robinson to link Picasso's changes to pertinent historical and biographical events that inform the meanings of different elements on the

canvas. The first two chapters of the book are devoted to establishing the painting's provenance and the contextual details of Picasso's early artistic life, which Robinson has researched meticulously. He cites account books from galleries and museum archives, maps from the time when Picasso lived in certain locations, and contemporary periodicals. He also devoted attention to studying the conventions of the Catalan culture in which the artist lived. This level of detail provides a thorough grounding for the analysis that follows in the remaining chapters.

Examining the layers of the painting chronologically allows Robinson to introduce a discussion of artworks, both Picasso's own and those of other artists, which prefigured and influenced the Blue Period. This approach begins in the third chapter of *Picasso and the Mysteries of Life*. Robinson reveals that the deeply buried foundational layer of *La Vie* appears to be another Picasso painting, *Last Moments*, which had been missing for seventy years. Both here and throughout the book, Robinson makes successful use of drawings to substantiate his arguments and trace Picasso's likely path of development through *La Vie*. In his discussion of *Last Moments*, which is only partially and faintly visible in the reproduced x-radiograph of *La Vie*, Robinson uses a related preparatory drawing, along with descriptions of *Last Moments* written by Picasso's contemporaries, to demonstrate the veracity of his claim and give the reader a glimpse of the probable composition of the now-buried painting. Robinson begins his analysis of *La Vie* with this earlier work because he believes it "signaled a shift from his early academic studies toward the morbid themes of death and suicide popular among Symbolists and decadents of the late nineteenth century . . . its romantic obsession with death would erupt time and again in his art, and never more powerfully than in *La Vie*" (38). The foundation of the painting, then, provides readers with a sense of the themes Picasso was likely to explore in *La Vie*.

Robinson continues to rely heavily on Picasso's sketches throughout the book, and they form the crux of his argument about the overall meaning of *La Vie*. In chapter four, he reproduces a number of preparatory drawings for the painting. Picasso placed himself in these initial drawings and also included an easel, which leads Robinson to conclude that Picasso originally intended to create an artist's studio scene. Rather than simply depicting a particular setting, however, Robinson argues that Picasso wanted to symbolically convey the artist's ability to transform the real into the ideal. The author notes the variations in the male figure's gestures across the three sketches and provides an illuminating interpretation of one: "The *La Vie* sketch depicting Picasso pointing upward with his right hand and toward the painting on the easel with his left . . . implies that the artist is not only a mediator between life and art, but also between earth and heaven, between the human and the divine" (44-45). This reading of the early meaning of *La Vie* indicates that Picasso's vision of the artist has begun to reflect the views of the Symbolists, a position that Robinson supports by citing Charles Baudelaire and Paul Gauguin and reproducing works by Auguste Rodin.

Following his examination of preparatory sketches and the initial meaning of *La Vie*, Robinson devotes each subsequent chapter to explaining and interpreting an element visible in the final version of the painting—Picasso's fellow artist and friend Carles Casagemas (1880–1901), the nude model, the robed woman, and the pair of small figures in the center of the work. Robinson's evidentiary use of drawings culminates in chapter ten with his analysis of the birdman figure that remains discernable beneath what Robinson calls the somnolent woman.

As in the preparatory sketches for *La Vie*, Picasso has drawn himself into two scenes that feature prototypes of the birdman and a woman who reaches out to receive the creature. Robinson relies on these drawings to create his interpretation of the birdman, which he sees as proof that Picasso originally conceived of *La Vie* as an allegory of the artist as divine creator: “The close relationship between these drawings and the birdman scene in *La Vie* suggests that Picasso created the birdman by conflating the male lover in the drawing with the winged deity sheltering the two lovers, thereby transferring the deity’s flying and procreative powers to himself and implying that the birdman, who is about to mate with the woman on the ground, represents an allegory of the artist as a godlike progenitor of new life” (116). Robinson locates a vital component of his argument in the contrast between the birdman and a sketch of Casagemas covering his genitals. He interprets this latter work as proof that the artist believed Casagemas was impotent. Picasso ultimately painted over his own self-portrait in *La Vie* and replaced it with the face of his departed friend. This change made it inappropriate to include the “virile” birdman that Picasso had envisioned in his early drawings, and he painted over “this protean generator of life” with a curled, isolated and insensate woman. Picasso’s incorporation of fantastic and “resurrected” figures is central to Robinson’s overall argument that *La Vie* evolved over time from a realistic artist’s studio scene to a comprehensive Symbolist allegory.

In addition to using details within *La Vie* to introduce relevant historical context, Robinson also relates individual elements of the painting to Picasso’s possible visual sources. Within his examination of the preparatory sketches for *La Vie*, the author introduces a discussion of the French newspaper, *Gil Blas*, and provides a convincing demonstration that Picasso would have seen numerous examples of artist and model scenes within its pages. He then expands this topic, noting that Picasso’s Blue Period themes of social stratification, femmes fatales, and bohemian life have parallels or precedents in *Gil Blas*. Robinson also references works by Rodin, Gauguin, Théodore Géricault, and Edvard Munch, among others, creating a rich picture of Picasso’s place in, and departure from, an artistic legacy. Robinson is scrupulous about his visual source references, ensuring that the works he cites existed in a time and place where Picasso could realistically have seen them. In the case of Old Master paintings, Robinson makes note of the holding institutions and tells the reader when Picasso was likely to have visited them. One intriguing source that Robinson notes is tarot cards. While the plausibility of this connection is not immediately evident, Robinson explains that Picasso’s friend and roommate, Max Jacob, was interested in the tarot and palmistry, further proving this connection by providing a sketch that Jacob made of Picasso’s palm.

Robinson’s chronological methodological approach to the development of the painting would not be possible without the use of conservation technology. A large component of Robinson’s analysis of *La Vie* relies on technological examinations, revealing revisions that would otherwise be lost to the naked eye. This type of evidence plays a role in Robinson’s interpretation of the birdman, summarized above. Robinson uses data gathered from optical microscopes to determine the order in which paint layers had been applied, allowing him to conclude that the birdman had coexisted with Picasso’s self portrait in an earlier version of the work. Robinson also relies on and reproduces several x-radiographs of the painting, sometimes highlighting the areas pertinent to the discussion in white. The x-radiographs reveal the long and complicated history of the painting and Picasso’s extensive reworking of its various figures and elements, from the *Last Moments* base layer to the length of the female model’s hair to the face painted on the male figure. Technology is not infallible, however. In

certain cases, as with the question of whether the bearded man in the early sketches for *La Vie* was ever committed to canvas, all recoverable traces have been erased. Picasso apparently scraped the paint off the canvas in this area, leaving its history open to question. Similarly, a layer of lead white paint, impenetrable to x-radiograph, thwarts technological interpretation of the area around the nude model.

Despite his typically careful methodology and use of technology, Robinson occasionally seems to draw overly definitive conclusions from little evidence. In some cases, he relies on dubious biographical speculation to lend additional support to his position. For example, in a discussion of Picasso's use of the birdman in a later work depicting Icarus, Robinson writes, "In painting the death of Icarus, Picasso—now an old man, the most famous artist in the world—must have thought about Casagemas and so many others who suffered and died under tragic circumstances, as well as the irony of his own triumph in escaping such a fate" (131). Using work Picasso created more than fifty years later to read meaning into an element of *La Vie* seems unsound, and the mental state that Picasso experienced while painting *The Fall of Icarus* is based on supposition. Robinson's off-hand suggestion that *The Fall of Icarus* may have been meant to commemorate Matisse is more plausible, since Matisse had died just three, rather than fifty-seven, years earlier. Robinson also reproduces a Matisse stencil that bears the same title as the Picasso work and features a form that is nearly identical to Picasso's Icarus. Exploring this possibility, rather than using biographical speculation to tie *The Fall of Icarus* back to Casagemas, may have allowed Robinson to create a more convincing argument in this instance.

Throughout the text, Robinson compares his conclusions to other scholars' thematic interpretations of *La Vie*. By presenting the ideas of John Richardson, Michael Leja, Theodore Reff, and Mary Mathews Gedo, Robinson provides a solid grounding in the field of Picasso scholarship and allows readers to consider these different theories against the visual evidence that he provides. Robinson first introduces some of these alternate interpretations within his discussion of specific elements of *La Vie*, and he devotes the first half of his concluding chapter to re-presenting, and largely refuting, these readings. Because it incorporates a baby, a young couple, and an older woman, some scholars have interpreted *La Vie* as a cycle of life allegory. The contrast between the nearly nude, embracing couple and the clothed woman cradling a baby has prompted others to see the painting as an expression of sacred and profane love. Alternately, the baby could represent unplanned pregnancy, and the clothing of the woman might allude to the sisters who cared for prostitutes infected with venereal diseases in St. Lazare prison. In this interpretation, the painting represents the hazards that result from unfair social stratification and poverty.

For each of the three common interpretations of *La Vie*, Robinson points out inconsistencies that threaten their ability to explain the painting as a whole. In the case of the cycle of life reading, for example, Robinson notes that the two small figures in what seems to be a painting in the upper center of *La Vie* do not represent any particular life stage. After refuting the interpretations suggested by other scholars, however, he concludes that Picasso intended for *La Vie* to be a Symbolist work that encompasses all of the possibilities he summarized and then rejected. He writes, "In fact, *La Vie* can be plausibly read as a merging of many diverse themes: the cycle of life, a secularized or blasphemous sacred and profane love allegory, a commentary on the hazards of lower-class life," all interpretations he challenges only a few

pages before. “Picasso,” he explains, “masterfully orchestrated all of these symbolic elements to interact with each other in a highly expressive, emotional context” (143). While the wide range of meanings attributed to the painting within Picasso scholarship indicates that several different readings are possible, ending the book with a generous nod to all theories seems somewhat unsatisfying. As readers, we follow Robinson’s careful and systematic presentation of context, technological evidence, preparatory sketches, and stylistic analysis, waiting for him to tie all of the elements together to support his own reading of the work’s meaning. Whether Robinson acknowledges all interpretations out of respect for his fellow scholars or a desire to emphasize Picasso’s Symbolist tendencies during the Blue Period, it is slightly disappointing not to be led to a strong conclusion.

In *Picasso and the Mysteries of Life: La Vie*, Robinson makes effective use of conservation technology and preparatory sketches to trace the chronological development of Picasso’s *La Vie*. Rather than constructing his interpretation solely from evidence that can be gleaned from the surface of the painting, Robinson relies on figures and details buried below the pigment or off the canvas to construct a comprehensive meaning for *La Vie*. He connects Picasso’s initial drawings to the subsequent additions of the robed woman, the birdman, Casagemas, and the somnolent woman, concluding that *La Vie* incorporates the artist’s studio theme into a highly complicated, perplexing allegory that can simultaneously accommodate a number of readings. Robinson’s approach is innovative, but possibly problematic. Should we allow ideas that an artist purposely omitted from a final work to inform our ideas about what it means? Robinson attempts to disprove the common interpretation of the painting as a cycle of life allegory by arguing that the bearded man who appears in early preparatory sketches for *La Vie* does not belong in such an allegory. There need not be, however, a connection between earlier, painted-over elements and those that Picasso chose to present to his viewers, especially since he frequently reused canvases during his impoverished Blue Period. Looking back to Picasso’s rejected ideas may unnecessarily complicate the work that is ultimately before us. Nevertheless, Robinson’s intensive investigation results in an original and worthwhile analysis of the painting through unprecedented attention to Picasso’s artistic process. Not only has Robinson provided his audience with newly ample material from which to construct our own meanings for *La Vie*, but also his insights into Picasso’s practice may inspire scholars to form new interpretations for other works in the artist’s oeuvre.

Nikki Otten
University of Minnesota
otte0120[at]umn.edu