

The Fauns and Nymphs of Picasso from Vallauris to Faenza

by Eleonora Cavallini

After his stay in Antibes, and before moving to Cannes and subsequently to Mougins, in 1948 Pablo Picasso settled in the Villa Galloise in Vallauris, a small town in the hinterland of Antibes and Cannes, where he remained until 1955. During that time, the artist created a lot of sculptures and paintings: one of the most important, *La Guerre et la Paix*, a complex composition consisting in two large panels, is currently on display at the Musée National Picasso in the same town.

In Vallauris, whose renown is mostly due to the art of ceramics, Picasso developed his interest in this technique, which opened him new horizons of artistic expression. Picasso's interest towards ceramics had started in 1946, when he visited the Vallauris annual pottery exposition, and met Suzanne and Georges Ramié, the owners of a pottery factory named "Madoura".

It was in the Madoura *atelier* that Picasso gave birth to his first creations in the field of ceramics, and then devoted an important part of his activity to this technique, which appeared to him particularly fascinating. The pliability of clay, together with the magic of cooking –which exalted the colours of enamel and the brilliance of varnish- gave him the chance to experiment with unusual artistic languages.

The majority of Picasso's ceramic production consists of plates decorated with his favorite themes, such as corridas, women, goats, owls, and so on; he also employed discarded materials such as broken bricks or fragments of pots, and invented the so-called "pâtes blanches", i.e. unglazed ceramics with relief decorations.

What is particularly interesting is Picasso's retrieval of techniques that date back to ancient Greek ceramics: he re-utilised them to create images of fauns and nymphs, of course always marking such artefacts with the unique sign of his personal style.

Picasso showed a particular interest towards the technique of the Attic ceramics with red figures, which was produced in Athens from 530 to 320 b.C. This technique was totally innovative, as the subject was drawn *a risparmio*: that is to say, by painting the surface around it entirely in black and adding some strokes of varnish to define details of the face or of the garments, in order to obtain absolute bichromy. After the piece was burned (in the presence of oxygen), the figures looked red. The exceptional aesthetic effectiveness of this technique -as well as its historical importance- exerted a comprehensible fascination on Picasso, who employed it for some masterpieces in the genre. Picasso's red-figure works mostly represent fauns and nymphs, but he also applied this technique to different subjects, such as the "Picador".

Over about twenty years, Picasso accomplished around four thousand ceramic works. In accordance with his will, some pieces were realized in a certain number of copies and Madoura had the exclusive right to do this. Probably, Picasso's purpose was to devote a part of his work to daily use, as is shown by the words he confidentially said to André Malraux: «J'ai fait des assiettes, on peut manger dedans».

During the Fifties, some important ceramic works of Picasso's were purchased by Gian Tomaso Liverani, a lawyer from Faenza, who was also the director of the art gallery "La Salita" in Rome, and gave a significant contribution to the birth and development of some movements and personalities of Italian art in the second half of the XX century. Liverani always showed deep affection towards Faenza, and from 1973 he donated about eighty ceramic works to the International Ceramic Museum of his town, including some masterpieces by Picasso and Lucio Fontana.

Bibliography : **G.C. Bojani (a cura di)**, *Picasso: la ceramica*. Milano, Electa, 1989.