

## Postcard from Venice

The young boy, bedecked in a harlequin outfit and a tricorne hat, sits awkwardly in the black chair. His pale, rounded face reveals a certain innocence and a sadness pervades his eyes. It is a portrait of Paulo Picasso, Pablo Picasso's three year old son, and this poignant, unfinished painting is being used to promote an exhibition of the artist's work at the Palazzo Grassi Art Gallery. Posters bearing the image abound on ancient walls, stone bridges and in hotel lobbies. It is a clever choice, a sharp contrast to the cubist images so often associated with the artist and as such it engenders curiosity, enticing me to discover the 'other' Picasso.

Actually getting to the exhibition is far from easy. The Palazzo Grassi, as its name suggests, is one of the Renaissance palaces located on the Grand Canal. A bus stop is nearby, but only one waterbus stops there, so we have to alight further down the canal and negotiate the labyrinth of streets, alleyways and bridges. I wonder what it must be like to be wheelchair-bound. Access to anywhere, never mind the museum, must be a highly complex affair. We eventually find the gallery, join the circuitous queue and wait until we are allowed in.

Once inside our bags and cameras are secreted away and we are then free to wander at our own pace. Not surprisingly, the exhibition areas are located on the upper floors *amod operandi* necessitated by the city's rising tides and sinking buildings. We climb the grand central staircase and from the balcony encounter the first item on display a massive theatre curtain painted by Picasso in 1917 for the ballet *Parade*. It drapes from the top of the ceiling into the upper area of the entrance hall, an ingenious and effective way of using the space. We enter the first room and I am immediately struck by the novel method of captioning the text is placed directly on to the wall, rather than on separate labels. I then notice a white line running around the perimeter of the floor and discover it is part of the museum's strict security regime if anyone steps beyond the line an ultrasound device is activated, a bleep is emitted and a security guard is summoned.

We move, reverently, from room to room. The exhibition, which takes a seven year slice of the Picasso's life from 1917 to 1924, presents works of art produced during this period in a sequential, chronological way. The explanatory text provides a lucid interpretation, rooting the exhibits into proper context. Archival and photographic material add substance to the text and artefacts. We learn as much about Picasso the man his collaboration with Diaghilev and the Ballet Russes, his marriage to ballerina Olga Koklova, the birth of their son as we do

about the works themselves – the ballet costume and set designs, the contrapuntal execution of conservative, classical works with progressive cubist paintings, and the visits to Italy and France which informed and inspired his artistic style.

Running through the exhibition, like a precious silverlode, is the recurring theme of harlequin, a motif which seemed to fascinate Picasso. And here we return to that wonderful painting of the young boy in the harlequin outfit. It appears at a pivotal point in the exhibition and is so compelling that it is difficult to move away. But move away we must, and after further musing we reach the end. It is an abrupt end, suspending us in the summer of 1924 and catapulting us into Picasso's focus on Mediterranean culture and Greek mythology. Perhaps this is purposeful, to whet our appetite for more, to make us realise that this is only part of the Picasso story. Whatever the reason we come away feeling invigorated and truly inspired.