



Centred'ÉtudesPicasso

A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN H. FIELD (JUNE 2025)

By Anna Jozefacka and Luise Mahler

AJ and LM: John, this month you turned 96. Over the decades you have been open to sharing your research. Please tell us why you like to collaborate with others?

JHF: My motto is “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” I recall when Ron [W.] Johnson, while researching his PhD thesis on the early sculpture of Picasso, sought me out in London in 1969.¹ We joyfully exchanged information and opinions, and afterwards we corresponded on different topics. He was only one of many people to whom I feel indebted for helping me.

AJ and LM: You aspired to become an artist when you were a boy growing up in Brooklyn, New York. How did it lead you to art history?

JHF: Well, I am a would-be artist who became an art historian. Since I was a little boy, I loved drawing but I was largely self-taught, copying illustrations from books and magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and I was influenced also by Walt Disney and comic strips. As a senior in high school, I became the art editor of the yearbook for the graduating class of 1947 and I drew many cartoons for it. But I also was making drawings from people seen on subways and the city streets of Manhattan and Brooklyn. And I became aware of the avant-garde revolution and modern art at Williams College [Williamstown, Massachusetts], but the college didn't teach how to make art, but it did

offer a major in art history so I made a transition from trying to be an artist to an academic subject of the history of art. Imbed the corresponding recorded answer here.

AJ and LM: Where did your interest in art come from?

JHF: My mother's grandmother, my great-grandmother, was a talented amateur portrait painter, but possibly with some training. Two of her sons became professional artists. Her eldest son, Edwin Howland Blashfield was a fine artist in the academic tradition of the high Renaissance. He studied in Paris with several French artists. His younger brother, Albert Blashfield, my grandfather, was an illustrator, who had trained at The Art Students League of New York. He illustrated books and worked for *Life Magazine*. He died before I was born, in 1920. Still, I aspired to be an illustrator like him. My mother also studied at The Art Students League, but I never saw any of her drawings or paintings, which I think she destroyed. My father, William Field, had an exhausting career as a surgeon. His friends insisted he should have a hobby as a relief. He chose to study and collect Chinese art. My sister and brother also had considerable artistic talents.

AJ and LM: What about Hamilton Easter Field, your distant relative? He was also an artist and collector. You were the first art historian focused on Picasso to take an interest in his 1909 commission for a series of decorative paintings by the artist. How did you find out about him?

JHF: I had no knowledge of Hamilton Easter Field until I came across him in the late 1960s when I learned of his Picasso commission. It was a total surprise to me. That is to say, he was not a part of my growing up. But my farther knew him as a relative. My paternal grandfather and Hamilton were first cousins and they lived near each other in Brooklyn Heights [Brooklyn, New York]. As a boy, my father was sent to him [Hamilton] to have his portrait made and Hamilton showed him around his house, but I don't think a portrait ever took place. Then, when Hamilton was dying of pneumonia years later, my father was among several doctors who attended him. There was nothing they could do to stop him from dying. He died in 1922, so before I was born. In 1969 my father was in Ogunquit, Maine, where Hamilton used to run a summer artist colony, and came across a publication

by Robert Laurent, Hamilton's protégé, in which he wrote about the commission.² A year later, in France, I visited Frank Burty Haviland, Hamilton's cousin on his mother's side and the one who introduced him to Picasso. Unfortunately, he didn't remember much.

AJ and LM: Let's go back to your education. After Williams College and serving in the Korean War, you did study art for a short period of time in Paris.

JHF: Yes, that was in 1953–54 at the grand old École des Beaux-Arts. It was really a couple of days a week. I thought I would get that paid by the GI Bill. In fact, the fee was very negligible. But I didn't get the approval or rather the school was not on the list of institutions approved by the United States government. Can you imagine: one of the most prestigious and oldest art schools in the world.

I switched to the Sorbonne. They had several special programs for GIs to study French. It was a sort of foreign legion of people from different countries who were going to teach French when they went back home. In terms of art-related courses, there was a series of lectures by someone whose name I can't remember, and he wasn't much of an admirer of avant-garde art.

Now this is ridiculous. I chose to go to Paris because I was infatuated with this revolution that had taken place there before, during and after the First World War. Whereas by the 1950s the new center for modern art was New York City.

AJ and LM: You eventually moved to London and enrolled in the Courtauld Institute. How did you decide on this institution and what did you study first?

JHF: I moved to London in 1954 with my wife Carla and our first daughter, Gabrielle, who was born in Paris and was three months old at that time. I realized that I had to stop fiddling around and that I needed a job. Already when I was graduating from Williams College I thought of pursuing an advanced degree. The Courtauld was the best institution teaching art history, strongly influenced by Austrian and German refugees. The idea was

to get an advanced degree so that I could teach at the university level and support my growing family. I ended up writing a M.A. thesis on the Scottish Baroque architect James Gibbs based on the English Baroque Architecture course I took at the Courtauld. It was a practical choice on my part as it didn't require extensive research outside of the UK and was acceptable to the Courtauld. I published some of my research on Gibbs in *The Architectural Review*.³

AJ and LM: What drew you to the work of Picasso eventually?

JHF: In the late 1940s, I became acquainted with modern art, including Picasso, while attending Williams College. I wanted to bridge the gap between my own traditional, representational artistic practice and early twentieth century modern art. Picasso's cubism seemed to me the way to go. I became interested in his artistic evolution through a series of different styles. I remember reading Alfred H. Barr [, Jr.]'s books published by the Museum of Modern Art, *Cubism and Abstract Art* [1936] and *Picasso: 50 Years of His Art* [1946], which defined his successive art styles. Later, when I lived in London, I saw a very large Picasso exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1960, with all his style periods on view.⁴

AJ and LM: What is your favorite Picasso and why?

JHF: Well, that's tricky. My favorite is really *The Three Musicians* in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which I believe is from 1921 or [192]2. And it was one of two. There is another one in Philadelphia [Philadelphia Museum of Art], which is apparently being painted at the same time. I liked the way he was using flat forms in an imaginative way to bring the figures together and overlap them and interbreed them. And also I liked the element of humor and satire. The humor in the dog lying beneath the table and his tail showing up in one side and his legs in the other side, and so forth. I thought it was very cleverly balanced and it was striking and amusing at the same time. And I think the element of humor or satire in Picasso is important. Imbed the corresponding recorded answer here.

AJ and LM: Early on you sought out John Richardson about your thesis on Picasso. Who else did you meet then?

JHF: 1965 was a wonderful summer when my thesis took off. I was meeting people, not just reading books. That year, my supervisor John Golding recommended that I do a summer research visit to the Museum of Modern Art, New York, with an introduction to his friend William [S.] Lieberman, who worked there, and had written about Picasso and the Diaghilev ballet.

Lieberman had acquired Jean Cocteau's early writings for *Parade*, and he kindly allowed me to hand-copy them. Golding also gave me an introduction to John Richardson. We met in Richardson's New York apartment, and we discussed my thesis. He gave me all sorts of very useful suggestions and tips as to who I should look up among the socialites, lovers, and other impresarios. I followed up these clues, but I don't recall discussing Kahnweiler with him in particular. During this trip, I also interviewed Maria Chabelska, who had danced the original 1917 *Parade* character "The Little American Girl" and Vera Nemchinova, who danced the female acrobat role in the 1919 season of *Parade* in London. Later in 1965, I met with Valentine Hugo and Leonid Massine in Paris.

AJ and LM: How about before your trip to New York? Who did you meet?

JHF: In 1963, before I officially declared my thesis topic, I went to Spain and visited Señor [Joan] Ainaud [de Lastre], a museum director in Barcelona. He gave me addresses of three people to interview. I spoke with [Alexandre] Cirici-Pellicer, Manuel Pallarès, and Juan [Joan] Vidal Ventosa.

AJ and LM: Who did you enjoy meeting the most or conversing with?

JHF: Well, really, I think it was Valentine Gross Hugo. She was already an old lady when I met her. I forget who had suggested that I look her up. It might have been Richardson or it might have been someone else. When she greeted me at the door to her apartment she was very feeble and pathetic, and very old. But once she had sat down and started to relate

her connection with the ballet, and her friendship with Eric Satie and Cocteau, and the collaboration for *Parade*, she grew younger and younger, and she talked endlessly for five or six hours. I was listening and occasionally asking questions, but she was talking about these people she knew. During the collaboration which included a change suggested by Picasso to Satie, but behind the back of Cocteau to change his libretto as it were too a more modern innovation. Valentine had preserved her correspondence with Satie and Cocteau. And she had her own little machine for making copies and she very kindly made copies of great many of those letters [for me].

Now, it happened at the time that two different Americans were trying to or were competing to publish biographies of Cocteau and they both had wanted to consult her and [she] refused to see them. She chose me to be the person to be seen. I was embarrassed by having almost more information about Cocteau than I needed, but I also thought that I might be able to get some of their information in exchange for me giving them access to my copies. Imbed the corresponding recorded answer here.

AJ and LM: So was it Richardson who put you on to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler? Or was it Golding? Or did you become propelled to reach out to him on your own after speaking to some of these intimates of Picasso?

JHF: It was neither of them. I had read about Kahnweiler in books about Picasso and came to understand how important he was to the artist.

AJ and LM: What were your impressions of Kahnweiler? When you first met him in 1966, you were 37 and he was 82. What did he tell you about Picasso?

JHF: I had read about Kahnweiler in books about Picasso and knew he was important. Before seeing him, I wrote down some questions to ask him. I was impressed, perhaps a bit frightened, by the prospect of meeting Kahnweiler, a living monument. But Kahnweiler was a very kind old man. He was pleasant and helpful. In my letters to my family, I wrote that we talked for two hours but I can't recall what we said exactly. Luckily, I took notes.

As to meeting Picasso, he said it would not be possible, he being upset by his recent operation. Imbed the corresponding recorded answer here.

AJ and LM: When you went back to see Kahnweiler the second time in 1969, why was that? How did that come about?

JHF: Perhaps because I had become increasingly interested in the relationship between the art dealer, the artist, and the collector. There was a tendency for me to go in that direction. And, I required answers I could not find otherwise.

AJ and LM: What do you recall from the experience of transcribing Kahnweiler's stock book and his record of shipments abroad at the Galerie Louise Leiris in 1969?

JHF: My thoughts while copying Kahnweiler's notebooks was astonishment at my unexpected windfall. I felt very honored to be allowed to do this, to be granted permission from Kahnweiler. I copied his German handwriting as accurately as possible. I recall that when transcribing, I was at one point locked in the gallery while Kahnweiler and his friends had lunch and perhaps a nap as well, and I was frantically writing at the back [of the] gallery. I asked him to confirm and correct some items that I was not sure I had copied and he patiently and kindly did correct me or did certify that I got it right. And so, this copy [the Field transcriptions] was assisted by the author, Kahnweiler himself. Imbed the corresponding recorded answer here.

AJ and LM: You spent decades researching various aspects of Picasso's career? What motivated you?

JHF: Well, I did a lot of research and I enjoyed doing research. What motivated me was intent to finish what I had started. I was sure I had accessed almost everything, except what was in the Musée Picasso and which was not yet available. My great error was that I

wanted to learn everything about Picasso, riding off in all directions instead of doing a sensible limited-scope subject for a PhD. Imbed the corresponding recorded answer here.

AJ and LM: Tell us about your working relationship with Richardson in the 1990s. How did it come about and how did it work?

JHF: I contacted Richardson again after about thirty years of no communication. It was after I had permanently returned to the United States and after he had published the first volume of his Picasso biography. He was working on the second volume and I offered him all my material. I wanted to reciprocate the generosity he showed me back when I started on my Picasso research.

I probably worked for Richardson for two or three years. I was not the main researcher, that was Marilyn McCully. I produced reports on various topics based on my research over the years but which I updated before handing them to Richardson. While my thesis became less important, my interest in Picasso never waned.

AJ and LM: Was Picasso the sole subject of your long career?

JHF: While pursuing my Picasso research I also taught art history at Hornsey College of Art in London for nearly twenty-five years. As I became more involved [with the college], Picasso research had to be limited to weekends and holidays. I also participated in the Association of Art Historians and presented on topics other than Picasso. One of them was a German sculptor Franz Metzner, who was active during the late 19th and early 20th century. I also contributed a chapter to a 1975 book *The Erotic Arts*, by Peter Webb who was a colleague at Hornsey.

AJ and LM: John, what are your hopes in donating your transcriptions to the Musée national Picasso in Paris and its newly opened Centre d'Études and making them widely accessible to scholars?

JHF: Donating my transcriptions to the Musée Picasso in Paris is appropriate given how much time I devoted to Picasso. And Paris is where I met Kahnweiler, who had worked there for most of his life, and where I copied his notebooks with his permission in 1969. I hope the new Centre d'Études will continue to amass and make available material related to Picasso, perhaps following my example. Imbed the corresponding recorded answer here.

AJ and LM: Thank you, John, for agreeing to speak with us.

For excerpts of the audio recording for this interview, see :

<https://cep.museepicassoparis.fr/a-conversation-john-h-field-june-2025>



¹ Johnson, Ron W., *The Early Sculpture of Picasso: 1901–1914*. PhD diss., University of California, 1971 (published Garland, 1976).

² Laurent, Robert, "A Personal Statement," in *The Hamilton Easter Field Art Foundation Collection. Gift of the Directors*. (1969), unpaginated.

³ John Field, "Dating St. George's, Hanover Square," *The Architectural Review*, 127 (August 1960), 153-154; John Field, "Early Unknown Gibbs," *The Architectural Review*, 131 (May 1962), 315-319.

⁴ Organized by Roland Penrose, the retrospective exhibition *Picasso* was on view at Tate Gallery [today's Tate Britain] in London from July 6 to September 18, 1960.