

The instance of "positive identification" that led off the last dozen years' march of Picasso studies into the terrain of biography was the discovery that the major painting of the Blue Period—*La Vie*, 1904—contained a portrait of the Spanish painter and friend of Picasso, Casagemas, who had committed suicide in 1902.¹¹ Until 1967, when this connection with Casagemas was made, *La Vie* had been interpreted within the general context of fin-de-siècle allegory, with works like Gauguin's *D'Où Venons Nous?* and Munch's *Dance of Life* providing the relevant comparisons.¹² But once a real person could be placed as the model for the standing male figure—moreover a person whose life involved the lurid details of impotence and failed homicide but achieved suicide—the earlier interpretations of *La Vie* as an allegory of maturation and development could be put aside for a more local and specific reading. Henceforth the picture could be seen as a *tableau vivant* containing the dead man torn between two women, one old and one young, the meaning of which "is" sexual dread. And because early studies for the painting show that the male figure had originally been conceived as Picasso's self-portrait, one could now hypothesize the artist's identification with his friend and read the work as "expressing . . . that sense of himself as having been thrust by women into an untenable and ultimately tragic position. . . ."¹³

The problem with this reading is not that the identification is wrong, but that its ultimate aesthetic relevance is yet to be proved or even, given current art-historical fashion, argued. And the problem of its aesthetic relevance is that this reading dissociates the work from all those other aspects, equally present, which have nothing to do with Casagemas and a sexually provoked suicide. What is most particularly left out of this account is the fact that the work is located in a highly fluctuating and ambiguous space of multiple planes of representation due to the fact that its setting is an artist's studio and its figures are related, at least on one level, to an allegory of painting.¹⁴ Whatever its view of "life," the work echoes such distinguished nineteenth-century forebears as Courbet and Manet in insisting that, for a painter, life and art allegorize each other, both caught up equally in the problem of representation. The name Casagemas does not extend far enough to signify either this relationship or this problem. Yet current art-historical

11. Pierre Daix, "La Période Bleue de Picasso et le suicide de Carlos Casagemas," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, L.XIX (April 1967), 245.

12. Anthony Blunt and Phoebe Pool, *Picasso, The Formative Years*, New York Graphic Society, 1962, pp. 18-21.

13. Theodore Reff, "Themes of Love and Death in Picasso's Early Work," in *Picasso in Retrospect*, Roland Penrose, John Golding, eds., New York, Praeger, 1973, p. 28.

14. At the beginning of his discussion of *La Vie*, Reff has no trouble locating the work: "the setting, an artist's studio with two of his canvases in the background" (p. 24). But after "reading" it through the proper name of Casagemas, his account of the location changes and, curiously, "the setting is no longer necessarily an artist's studio" (p. 28). This is a niggling detail, but I bring it to the attention of the reader who feels that there is nothing inherently objectionable to a history of proper names, since that merely adds another dimension to the interpretation of a given work. In practical fact, what we find in most cases is not addition, but restriction.