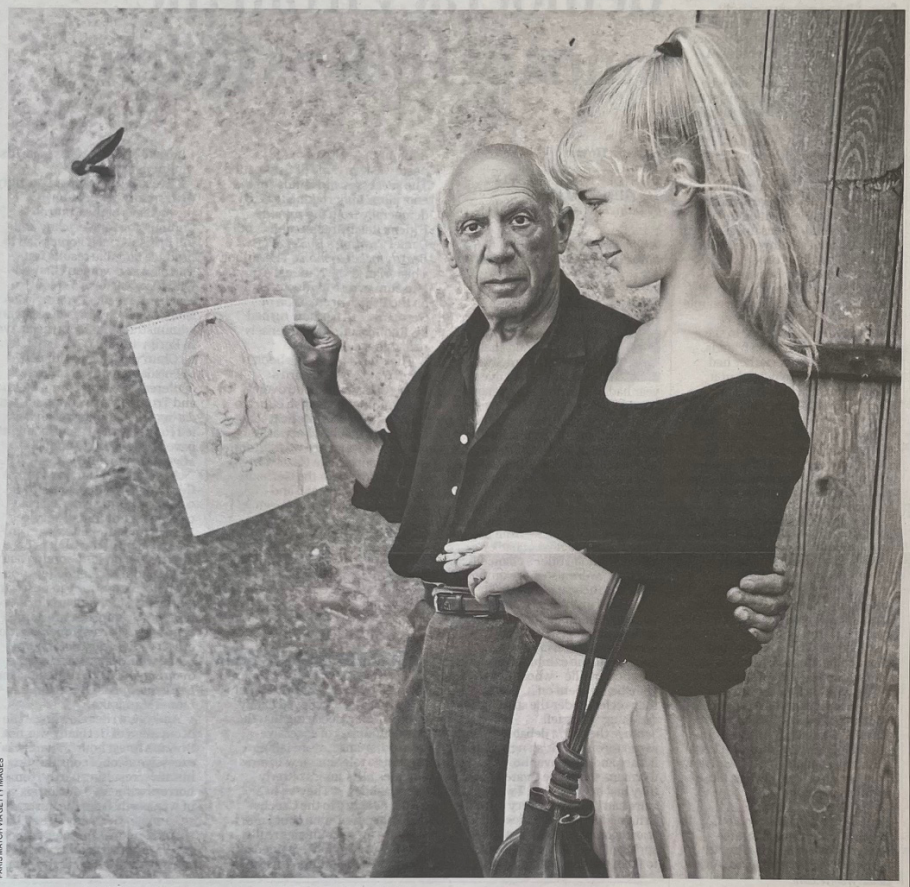
Arts & Books



PARIS MATCH VIA GETTY IMAGES

Inspiration: Pablo Picasso with his model Sylvette David, later Lydia Corbett

When I sat for Picasso: 'He never frightened me'

Lydia Corbett tells *Mick Brown* about meeting the great artist, influencing Bardot and refusing Hollywood

In the spring of 1954, a 19-year-old girl named Sylvette David was sitting with friends on a wall in the small Provence town of Vallauris when a short, bullish-looking man leaned out of the window of a nearby artist's studio, holding up a portrait he had drawn of her. The man was Pablo Picasso, then 73 years old.

"It was an invitation," says Lydia Corbett, the woman known as Sylvette, Picasso's last surviving model. "I think he must have been watching me."

Over the course of the three months following that encounter, Picasso would produce some 60 works, including drawings, paintings and sculptures of the model who became known as "the girl with the ponytail" – the most concentrated series of works that he produced of any model in his lifetime.

Lydia Corbett is an artist herself, who lives in a small house in a village on the edge of Dartmoor. You pass through a wooden arbour into a garden blooming with Japanese anemones and yellow morning glory. Inside, her paintings cover every inch of the walls, and her pottery stands on shelves and cabinets.

She is 88 now, speaking in a lilting French accent, long plaits where once there was the ponytail. Her vision is impaired by macular degeneration, but she says she still paints whenever the inspiration takes her: bold canvases bearing the influence of Picasso and Chagall, self-portraits, and religious imagery, of the Madonna and child, angels, the Last Supper. Some of them are worth up to £15,000. "My work is very inspired by God, especially in my older age," she says.

Lydia was born in Paris. Her father Emmanuel was French, an art dealer. Her mother Honor was English, an exhibited painter. She had little formal education. When the Germans occupied Paris, Lydia and her mother fled to the mountains. She would not go to school until she was eight, and later she was sent to board at Summerhill, the progressive school in Suffolk founded by AS Neil, where she met Toby Jellinek – a fellow pupil, sculptor and furniture-maker. They became boyfriend and girlfriend and later married. When she left Summerhill, Toby followed her to Vallauris, where Lydia's mother was living, having separated from her husband, and where Picasso had his studio.

Each day she would go to the studio and sit for two or three hours while Picasso worked. Picasso, she says, liked silence, and she was too shy to talk.

Sometimes, Toby would come to the studio and he and Picasso would talk. Toby made some folded metal cut-outs to Picasso's specifications, which Picasso paid for. "He said, 'I could pay you as a model', but I said 'No, no – I love doing it for you.' I thought if he pays me, I will have to get undressed, and I didn't want to be tempting him in any way.

"He did one painting without me, with my breasts exposed, from his imagination. He said, 'I hope you don't mind'. I said 'No, it's beautiful'. But I knew he was thinking that maybe I'll say yes and pose for him in the nude! Now I wish I had, because I would have a lovely painting to look at."

Picasso, she says, was "a mystery. When I hear all these stories about him being horrible to women, I never saw that side. I was very shy and young in spirit and he never touched me or anything; he never frightened me."

When she was eight, she says, she was abused by a friend of her mother's. "It was horrid. I can never forget that. I forgive him now, but it made me frightened of men. So Picasso could feel that, I think, that I had been hurt. That's why he was a very lovely man to me. He was never vulgar. I hate vulgarity. It makes me ill when people are rude."

"One day, he showed me his bedroom. It looked like Van Gogh's bedroom in Arles. And he jumped up and down on the bed,

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and I thought, ooh, I'm not coming in here to jump on the bed too! But he was a clown. Journalists and photographers would come to see him and he liked putting on funny noses and showing off."

She posed for him at a time when he was separated from Françoise Gilot, his long-time lover and muse (who would later leave him), and the mother of two of his children, Claude and Paloma.

Lydia was there on a day when Gilot and the children came to visit. "He must have been very upset. He gave me a painting, a drawing and a book. And when I said, 'Thank you for the presents', he said, 'Well, thank you for being there when I had a problem with my children and Françoise'."

When, later that year, Picasso exhibited his works on Sylvette in Paris, she became a sensation. She was on the pages of *Paris Match*, and *Life* magazine announced a new epoch in Picasso's art, his "Ponytail Period". At the Cannes film festival, she had a chance encounter with a dark-haired Brigitte Bardot, who promptly dyed her hair blonde and adopted a ponytail.

> 'Picasso was a clown. He liked putting on funny noses and showing off'

Bardot asked Picasso to paint her, but he refused. "He said, 'There is only one Sylvette'." Proposals for marriage arrived from as far afield as Colombia. "I had to tear them all up because my poor Toby was jealous." There were offers from Hollywood, all of which she turned down, "because I didn't want to be forced to make love to the director.

"One day at the Gare du Lyon in Paris, a lovely man came up and said, 'I'm Jacques Tati'. I didn't know who he was. He said, 'Here's my card, come and see me when you can'. I thought, I'm not going to do that, so I missed my chance to do cinema." Is that a regret? "I never regret anything."

She gave the drawing that Picasso had given her to her father, who sold it on her behalf. And in 1958 she sold the painting he had given her to an American man for £10,000 (about £300,000 in today's money). Toby was suffering from TB and money was tight. "The man said to me, 'When I die you can have it back'. But the poor man must have gone senile and forgot about me. The people around him took it and sold it to somebody in England. They let me see it once – they're lovely people, and they've also bought my work." The painting, I say, would be worth several million now. She laughs. "Isn't that incredible!"

She and Toby had one child together, Isabel, before divorcing in the Sixties. He went on to marry her best friend. "I was upset at the time, but I still love her." She married Rawdon Corbett, a civil servant, who later became vice-principal at the educational centre Dartington Hall. The couple had two children, Alice and Laurence. They divorced in the 1990s, but remain good friends.

As a child, Lydia's father had encouraged her to paint, but it wasn't until she was living at Dartington Hall that she started to paint in earnest. This week, a new exhibition opens of her paintings, along with her daughter Alice, a potter and ceramicist. Lydia uses a knife to draw lines into the clay, and Alice paints the lines after the pot has been fired.

She saw Picasso once more, in 1965 when she took Isabel, who was then two, to visit him, when he was with Jacqueline Roque. "He was very deaf. But it was very sweet. He was in a wheelchair and my daughter made him turn around and around. And then I never saw him again."

She thinks back on this, and to those three months, sitting with Picasso, so shy she could barely speak. "He had such a strong accent, and I didn't dare say, 'What did you say?' I didn't dare! We sat as if we were contemplating together. You learn a lot when you don't talk. And now I feel he is with me always, like a mystical marriage."

'My Life's Inspiration: Pablo Picasso, Lydia Corbett & Alice Corbett' is at Soho Home Studio, London SW3, from tomorrow-Oct 8; iwassylvette.com

TOM WREN / SWNS

Looking back: Lydia Corbett with one of Picasso's many paintings of her