Primary Maker: Pablo Picasso
Title: Curtain for the Ballet "Le Tricorne"
Date: 1919
Medium: Tempera on canvas
Dimensions: Overall: 20 × 19 ft (6.1 × 5.8 m)
Credit Line: Gift of New York Landmarks Conservancy, Courtesy of Vivendi Universal
Object Number: 2015.22
Object Name: Stage curtain
Classification: PAINTINGS

Curatorial Remarks:
Picasso's curtain set the scene for the ballet "Le Tricorne"—commissioned by the impresario Serge Diaghilev for the avant garde Ballet Russe in 1919—with a quintessentially Spanish vignette: a bullfight (corrida). Picasso's bullring, with spectators gathered in an arcade, recalls one of his favorite arenas, the Roman amphitheater at Nîmes. This exceptional work testifies to Spain's Roman heritage and to Picasso's stylistic turn away from Synthetic Cubism after World War I toward his Classical Period. The artist designed the curtain with black outlines and flat colors to resemble a poster and Goya's tapestry cartoons in the Prado. Signing and dating it, he used the traditional colors of the bullring (plaza de toros)—ochre yellow and reddish orange—for authenticity. In the foreground are Goyesque figures—racy young women (majas) and men (majos) who adopted costumes of Spain's poor and working class as a fashion statement. A young fruit vendor, influenced by El Greco, offers a pomegranate to three majas reminiscent of the Three Graces but holding fans and wearing mantillas with combs. In the ring, a two-horse team led by a man
with a whip drags off the slain bull (el arrastre, the anticlimactic part of this highly choreographed sport). With classical restraint, Picasso positioned another maja and majo to block the grisly scene presided over by a picador on horseback. The intricate movements of the toreros and matador can be likened to a ballet. Since its choreographer, Leonide Massine, and Diaghilev decided that the subject should be ultra-Spanish, Picasso rejected the eighteenth-century setting of the ballet’s narrative in favor of the bullring, which for him represented the essence of Spain and Spanish culture. From the time he could walk, his father had taken him to corridas, explaining his obsession with the sport. The bullfight, the national symbol of Spain, enjoys a complex past. More than a sport, it celebrates ritualistically the drama of life and death. Picasso employed many symbols to echo this theme in his curtain. Among them, the pomegranate (granada)—a fertility symbol emblematic of the city of Granada that also symbolizes death and the underworld (the ancient Greek myth of Persephone). Like the sacramental still life with the wine bottle at the left of the painting, pomegranates allude to the bloody nature of the sport and to a celebration of life. The four swallows in the sky symbolize hope and renewal.

Signed: Signed and dated at lower right: "PICASSO / PINXIT 1919"