

Pablo Picasso

Guernica, 1937

The Historical Context

This artwork is closely tied to the Spanish Civil War and in particular to the bombardment of the city of Guernica by General Franco's aviation. In just a few hours on April 26, 1937 the Basque city was razed to the ground.

It was the period when the whole country of Spain was rocked by the civil war between supporters of a Republic and those who wanted a Monarchy, the latter led by general Francisco Franco.

The Republican government took Picasso as an exceptional representative of their cause and they entrusted to him the direction of the Prado Museum and commissioned him to paint a large canvas for the *Universal Exposition of Paris* in July 1937. This was the origin of the painting *Guernica*.

The war dragged on until 1939, when it ended with Franco's victory and over one million dead.

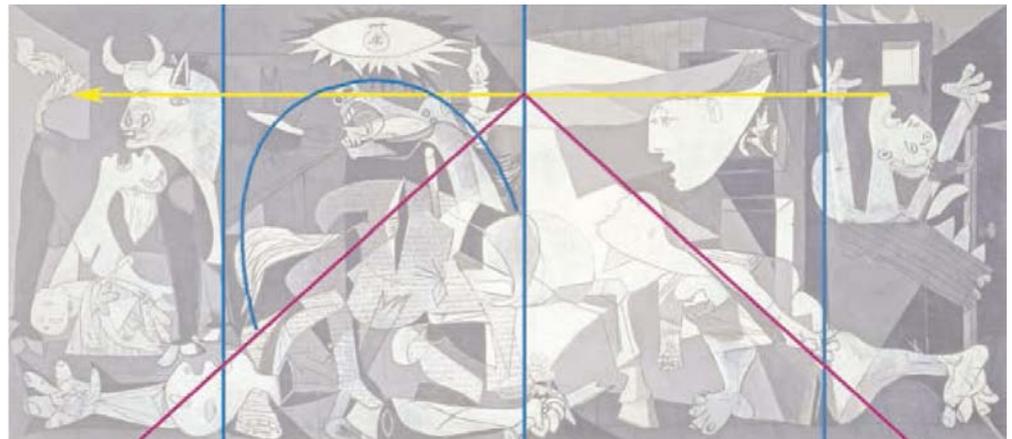
A Work of Civic Commitment

The alternating moods of Picasso's **civic commitment** had never been so explicitly expressed as in *Guernica*. Conceived as the description of a local drama, the painting also serves as a universal manifesto against the blindness of wars as they overpower helpless populations. Picasso himself insisted that the painting belong to the Spanish state only when the country reinstated a democratic order after totalitarian rule. In fact it wasn't until 1981, six years after the death of Franco, that the Museum of Modern Art in New York returned *Guernica* to Spain.

Originating as a mural composition, the painting's enormous dimensions involve the viewer almost to the point of attacking him, making him feel like one victim among the many portrayed.

In this work, Picasso does not invent anything new for his art but rather presents the highest form of all his results. So the artist tells his story with all the **stylistic devices** that he had explored and perfected during the previous decades, including **simultaneous viewpoints**, the reduction of colour to almost **monochrome**, the elimination of **perspective**, the **juxtaposition of representations** – flat line-drawings next to volumetric figures (such as the horse whose shading is reinforced by a vertical application), the collapsing planes that fall towards the viewer instead of moving into the distance.

The **space** Picasso has chosen to describe is **an interior room** that has been gutted by bombardment. Reading the work from left to right we see a mother with a dead child in her arms, a bull, a dead man, a horse screaming under an electric light, a woman carrying an oil lantern, a woman dragging herself along, a man on fire.



Figg. 1, 2 Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 349,3x776,6 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia. *Right*: compositional diagram.



All of these figures recall **quotations from classical art** as well as from Picasso's own *oeuvre*. The mother and child is an archetypal holy grouping, the baby's falling arm recalls the same gesture of the Christ figure in Michelangelo's first *Pietà*, or even the arm of Marat in David's famous post-mortem portrait.

The **bull**, always a symbol of strength in the Spanish bull-fighting tradition, was a theme that Picasso returned to obsessively in his *tauromachie*, or bull-fighting, series. The bull in *Guernica*, in particular, recalls another one included by Picasso in his *Minotauromachia* (1935) etching where the beast appears as a symbol of brute force.

Even the *Guernica* horse seems to have evolved from the studies that Picasso had made for the 1935 work; there he is a symbol for strength domesticated by intelligence. In fact the artist once stated that, «*here the bull represents brutality, the horse stands for the people.*» He later denied this allegorical contrast on several occasions.

However, in *Guernica*, the beasts are really conceived of as generous companions of Man who share his same fate. The universe of offended civic life opposes the military system's indiscriminate violence.

So we see here that the twentieth century wars enter the houses just as they do the stables, with no pity for children, women or animals.

The modest ceiling **lamp** casts a light recalling the flames of war. On the right side of the painting we find tongues of flame that find a literal counterpart in the horse's open mouth.

At the farthest right of the painting, in his pose the **man on fire** recalls Mary Magdalene in many crucifixion scenes where desperation is not dominated but rather is displayed in a spectacular manifestation of grief. The same *Guernica* man also recalls an analogous figure in Raphael's *Room of The Fire in the Borgo* in the Vatican Apartments.

Compositional Structure

Conceived after almost one hundred preliminary sketches and their variations, **the composition is subdivided into parts** just like medieval polyptychs and many paintings from history which served as important models for Picasso. In the highest layer of the painting, presented in a rhythmic succession from left to right, we see the bull, the horse, the woman holding the lantern and the man on fire. Each one of these elements is reinforced by a vertical line that serves to divide it from the rest: the bull's neck, the white plane behind the horse, the screaming man's left arm.

In the midst of this **linear and vertical organization**, a group of lighter-coloured figures draws a **strong isosceles triangle right in the centre** of the canvas. The apex of the triangle is the lamp woman's arm that intersects the plane behind, while the left side runs down to the fallen man's arm and the right side descends to the knee of the fleeing woman.

The light-coloured areas not included in this triangle thus give the appearance of **exploded fragments** flying out from the centre, increasing the dramatic quality of the scene and creating almost visual noise. The fallen man has the shattered fragment of a sword in his hand and the horse, with his circular motion, shows a disorientation worthy of a labyrinth. Whereas Picasso's earlier *Demoiselles d'Avignon* achieved a static pose that expressed a theatrical quality, here we are faced with a moment of collective panic that has been captured and frozen for a single instant.

Almost all the figures are depicted in movement towards the left, almost as if pushed by a hidden wind: the bomb blasts that are driving them to flee.

In this way the painting is transformed into an allegory of pain illustrated in all its moral and physical forms. The continuous reference to classical themes, mythology, and epic poetry nourishes the scene of a real-life occurrence and raises even the most pressing current event to the level of the mythic.



Fig. 3 Pablo Picasso,
Minotauromachia,
1935. Etching,
49,6x69,6 cm.
New York,
The Museum
of Modern Art.