

Picasso's Guernica

Exam 2, Part 2: Essay Portion

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Picasso's painting, *Guernica*, from 1937, exemplifies the devastation of war and illuminates the grief of the Basque Capital City, Guernica upon its attack by Nazi war planes during the Spanish Civil War. This Pablo Picasso masterpiece is one the most well-known pieces of Anti-War Protest Art and even in 1981, eight years after Picasso's death, *Guernica* raised dangerous protest and still ignites voices of anger and dispute against war and its devastating effects on innocent people. This paper will reveal the visceral emotion that Picasso's *Guernica* is representative of and will provide an illuminating history of the devastation in Guernica on April 27, 1937, the rich history and opposition of the painting itself through the years and will speak of the ability of Anti-War Protest Art to immortalize the effects of war.

Picasso believed "painting is not meant to decorate apartments. It is an instrument for the offensive and defensive war on the enemy,"<sup>1</sup> and his home town's entrance into civil war in the late 1930s further ignited his political stance. Prior to *Guernica* and his home town's entrance into civil war, Picasso was propositioned by the Spanish Republican Government to create a large-scale work that would hang in the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition. Although Picasso accepted the invitation to paint the mural-sized piece, he only began creation upon the news that his home town, the Basque Capital City, Guernica, had been raided by bombs at its busiest market hour, either killing or injuring almost all of the city's 7,000 people. For more than 3 hours, at least 25 of Germany's bombers riddled the city in systematic waves of high-explosive bombs. The planes went back and forth until the city was a hill of unrecognizable ashes, and individuals caught running for their lives were struck by machine gun fire.<sup>2</sup>

Picasso leapt into action and completed the huge oil on canvas mural, *Guernica*, by the following June. *Guernica* is a monumental oil on canvas painting that expresses an outcry of human grief and is 3.5 meters high and 7.8 meters wide. *Guernica's* size and Picasso's use of a black, white and gray palette brings immense focus to the visceral emotions he felt in response to the air raid on his home town. The enormous painting not only speaks of the devastation of war but rages against Francisco Franco, the rebel general who gave the Nazi's permission to bomb Guernica, and particularly during its busiest hour when innocent townspeople were unknowing targets for the testing of bombs.

Anti-War Protest Art has the distinct ability to immortalize the effects of war and gives a voice to defenseless victims. Anti-War Art extinguishes rumor and provides unarguable imagery of war's devastating effects. Photographers like Horst Faas, for example, brought light to the horror of the Vietnam War and silenced rumor amongst Americans who were previously unaware of the dramatic extent of the war's effect on real people.<sup>3</sup> Picasso's *Guernica*, in this same way, personifies the horror of the attack that occurred on his home town in April of 1937. *Guernica* illustrates Picasso's vehement response to rebel general Francisco Franco's allowance of the city's bombing so much that Picasso refused to exhibit the painting in Spain until Franco's death and the ending of his powerful dictatorship. *Guernica* is rich with emotion and grief that is signaled stylistically through the limited palette and contorted figures that are distinct of Picasso's cubist background. Picasso chose to paint in black, white and shades of grey to speak truthfully of the starkness of that dark day in Guernica. Each figure in the painting is symbolically distorted and fragmented to personify the broken pieces left of his home town and its people after the air raid. Without specific reference to the bombings, Picasso passionately condemned the attack on Guernica through the use of vexed figures that scream of the brutality that occurred on this armless city. Towards the bottom center of the painting, a slain warrior who clings desperately to his broken sword is trampled by a rearing horse that falls and dies, while a mournful

woman holds close her dead baby on the right side of the painting. Still farther right of the painting, a woman filled with horror screams and runs from a burning building while another woman frantically scurries without direction. In the upper right, a solitary head comes forth holding a lantern that symbolically sheds light on the tragedy in *Guernica*.<sup>4</sup> Another light bulb protrudes from the ceiling of the work, also illuminating the violence and bloodshed. A bull, said to represent Franco, overlooks the horror with a stoic lack of emotion. While viewing *Guernica*, the eye jumps frantically from one fragmented form to the next, eyeing the spasms of necks, crying mouths and contorted figures that transfer the horrific grief endured by innocent townspeople.

*Guernica*, as previously mentioned, still endures much protest, criticism and fame. This mural-sized Picasso original, as per the request of the artist, originally displayed in the New York Museum of Modern Art after the 1937 World's Fair, in which it was created for, ended. Even in New York *Guernica* was the object of debate and in 1974 was splashed with red paint in political protest. Picasso originally painted *Guernica* as a gift to the Spanish people, and in 1981 it was decided that Spain's government was democratic enough to accept the painting. In this year, *Guernica* was shipped to Madrid in extremely tight security, surrounded by a riot-resistant cage with bullet proof glass that stood 14 feet in front of the painting itself. *Guernica* was seemingly protected at the Prado Museum but at the cost of its message and expression. Museum visitors complained about being so distanced from the masterpiece that the debate finally, in 1992, caused the painting to move yet again. A special steel box was built to move the painting just a mile away to the Reina Sophia Museum. Weighing 3,500 pounds, this climate-controlled box that would transport this 25-foot wide painting called for weeks of practice runs to ensure the safety of the Picasso masterpiece. Finally, *Guernica* was moved, in a mere half hour, down guarded streets to its new home where it was once again surrounded in bullet proof glass. This move

alone rung up a \$200,000 bill and museum-goers are still disappointed with the distance from which they are forced to view the painting.

*Guernica*, through the decades, has been the spectacle of obvious debate, monetary commitment and public scrutiny due to the severity of protection it endures. The opposition this painting faces personifies and immortalizes the brutality that Picasso's home town faced on April 26, 1937. *Guernica* blazes a trail for protest artists and represents the scrutiny that political art faces. To this day, *Guernica* is protected from the possibility of destructive protest, so much that its true expression is compromised. (However, the glass was removed in 1995 after years of complaints.) This screams of the power of anti-war protest art and the undying opposition it faces.

Notes

1. Gardner's Art through the Ages. Editors Fred S. Kleiner et al, Vol. II 11<sup>th</sup> Edition. Harcourt: Orlando, 2001.
2. Bombing of Guernica, PBS, accessed October 27, 2013, [http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/guernica/glevel\\_1/1\\_bombing.html](http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/guernica/glevel_1/1_bombing.html)
3. Horst Faas, Wikipedia, accessed October 27, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horst\\_Faas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horst_Faas)
4. Gardner's Art through the Ages. Editors Fred S. Kleiner et al, Vol. II 11th Edition. Harcourt: Orlando, 2001.

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