

Pity and Terror.

Picasso's Path to Guernica



DORA MAAR
Picasso in his workshop of Grands-Agustins (Paris) working in *Guernica*, 1937
Silver gelatinbromide on paper
20,7 x 20 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
© Dora Maar. VEGAP. Madrid, 2017

DATES:	April 4 th – September 4 th 2017
PLACE:	Museo Reina Sofía. Sabatini Building, 2 nd Floor
ORGANIZATION:	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
CURATORS:	Timothy James Clark and Anne M. Wagner
PROJECT MANAGEMENT:	Manuel Borja-Villel and Rosario Peiró
COORDINATION:	Carolina Bustamante and Almudena Díez

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2017 will mark the 80th anniversary of the first public showing of one of the most iconic paintings in art history, Pablo Picasso's Guernica, initially exhibited in the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris. The Museo Reina Sofía therefore organizes Pity and Terror. Picasso's Path to Guernica, a major exhibition that will bring together some 180 pieces from the Reina Sofía's own Collection and more than 30 institutions around the world, including the Musée Picasso and Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Tate Modern in London, the MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Beyeler Foundation in Basel, as well as private collections like those of Nahmad and Menil.

We shall also be celebrating the 25th anniversary of the arrival at the Museo Reina Sofía of this painting, which was commissioned by the Republican government for the Spanish Pavilion at the World's Fair in Paris with the aim of presenting an artistic denunciation of events in the Spanish Civil War.

Unlike other retrospectives on the art of the Málaga-born genius, this show places the emphasis on the evolution of Picasso's pictorial universe, with Guernica at its epicenter, from the late 1920s until the mid-1940s, a period when the artist brought about a radical change in his oeuvre. Through key works from that period, it will be possible to analyze the transformation undergone in Picasso's art from the initial optimism of Cubism to his search in the 1930s, a period of great political tumult, for a new image of the world lying between beauty and monstrosity. Guernica is thus treated not as an isolated piece but as a fundamental work forming part of the evolution of Picasso's art.

A study of the structure of his works in those years reveals the new path undertaken by the artist through the gradual introduction of different spaces and figures, scenes of both frenzied and static action, and situations of violence, fear or pain, often expressed by means of destructured bodies, all finally issuing into a political art that culminates in the most famous of his works.

Picasso's metamorphosis

When in early 1937 Picasso was asked to produce a painting for the Spanish Pavilion, he told the Republic's delegates that he was not sure he could do the kind of picture they wanted. The world of his art had been till then essentially intimate and personal, bound by the walls and windows of a room; he had almost never spoken to the public realm, still less to political events; since 1925 his art had often steered close, claustrophobically, to nightmare or monstrosity. Yet the painting he eventually did for the Republic spoke grandly to the new realities of war. And the scene of suffering and disorientation he showed us has lived on, as an emblem of the modern condition, for eight decades. Guernica has become our culture's tragic scene.



PABLO PICASSO
The Three Dancers / Las tres bailarinas, 1925
Oil paint on canvas / Óleo sobre lienzo
215,3 x 142,2 cm
Tate
© Sucesión Picasso. VEGAP, 2017

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Are there continuities between Guernica and the strange, often agonized vision of humanity that Picasso had set forth over the preceding decade? How did Picasso's distinctive set of concerns, which at moments seem dark to the point of despair, inform his final picture of women and animals in pain?

One writer said of Guernica that in it the world had been "changed into a furnished room, where all of us, gesticulating, wait for death". Since 1937, generations of viewers across the globe have found the painting's image of terror indispensable – maybe even cathartic. This exhibition asks why. It is clear that Guernica's epic, compassionate treatment of violence moves beyond the dangerous fascination with the subject that had characterized much of Picasso's work during the late 1920s and early 1930s. But would Guernica have been possible without that previous fixation? Isn't violence very often "fascinating" as well as repellent? How does an artist represent it without falling under its spell? What is involved – psychologically, aesthetically – in giving Terror public form?

20' and 30'

Even before Cubism, Picasso's art had been rooted in the reality of the room. Cubism itself was a hymn to proximity and familiarity, with its small world of objects – guitars, liquor bottles, old plaster casts, a fruit dish, the body of a friend or lover – pressed close to the picture plane, inviting our touch. Life was pleasure; life was intimacy; life was private property. The Cubist world, for all its strangeness, was made from nineteenth-century materials. Picasso was once asked why he had painted so few landscapes. "I never saw any," he replied. "I've always lived inside myself. I have such interior landscapes that nature could never offer me ones as beautiful."

In a series of still lifes painted in 1924-1925, several of them more massive than anything Picasso had done previously, the artist returned to the world of Cubism and gave it resplendent form. But already there is something valedictory to these visions of the room. Some are electric and theatrical – dreams of delight and illumination, with flamboyant colour and syncopated spaces. Others are dark and unstable. And in one or two, like the Museo Reina Sofía's Musical Instruments on a Table, the room seems to thin and disperse, fading into empty – maybe even cosmological – space. The note is not ominous, necessarily, but the interior is no longer a firm container, a place of safety.

1925 marks a turning point in Picasso's art. The Three Dancers, which Picasso later declared the best painting he had ever done – better than Guernica, he said – signaled the irruption of wildness, darkness, and dismemberment into the world of the room. Agonized figures replaced liquor bottles and guitars. In the years that followed, terror becomes a constant theme – the terror inflicted on the women portrayed, who are so often wedged into armchairs like victims in a torture chamber, but also the terror provoked in us by the women's staring, shrieking faces.

Panic and horror in Picasso often seem to coexist with a kind of desperate artistic tomfoolery: colours are deliberately garish, bodies and faces reduced to impossible scrawls, walls and wallpaper ripped to shreds. But equally, terror can cohabit with intricacy and orderliness. The wild fragments are most often locked into place. Hard-edged geometry divides and rules. The “viewer” in *Figure and Profile*, for example – a feast of repeated vertical lines – looks to be assessing the caricature pinned to the wall with a steady, almost respectful attentiveness, as if trying to learn from the Unconscious. Perhaps beauty and deformity, or attraction and revulsion, are always two interlinked aspects of our experience of other people – and ourselves.

It did not take long, once *The Three Dancers* had turned Picasso’s art in the direction of the terrible, for his pictures to be populated by looming, threatening faces. The Centre Pompidou’s *Figure* is one of the earliest and starkest examples: the hopeless snarling creature, painted in *Guernica* black-and-white, taps its snout against the window pane, trying to enter the room. It is a monster and a familiar – close to us, but not like anything we know as grownups. “Things that exist immediately and totally for the child,” to quote a psychologist working in Paris in the late 1920s, “possess a quality that goes beyond information from the senses – they are ultrathings, which may be constructed in conformity to, but distinct from, the data of reality.”



PICASSO
Figures at the edge of the sea, 1931
Cleo sobre tela
130 x 198 cm
MUSEE PICASSO PARIS
© Sucesión Picasso, VEGAP, 2017

These ultrathing faces can be malevolent or genial – one of them has a grasshopper strutting along its jaw – or infinitely sad. They can attain to a strange dignity, especially when the scale of things becomes uncertain, so that face and body are interchangeable. Picasso once said to Malraux: “When I paint a woman in an armchair, the armchair, it’s old age and death, isn’t it? Too bad for her.” That sounds almost spiteful. But the woman in the Museu Coleção Berardo’s *Woman in an Armchair* seems impervious to the ravages of time – age will not wither her, nor ever disturb her implacable stone balance.

The faces and phantoms of the late 1920s still had the room as their natural habitat. But as 1930 approached, Picasso’s creatures became more massive and self-sufficient, stepping out into a wider world. By and large this outdoor space was empty, with the beach, the sky, maybe a bathing cabin the only decor. What should we call the strange beings that Picasso put in this space at the edge of the sea? Are they monsters? Perhaps – but what do we mean by “monstrosity”? Are normal human beings any less monstrous – less absurd and alone and unexpectedly touching – than, say, Picasso’s *Nude Standing by the Sea*? Don’t we immediately recognize that the two insects coupling on the sand in *Figures by the Sea* are our

brother and sister? A poet at the time, Wallace Stevens, writing with Picasso's paintings in mind, thought it possible (and desirable) "That I may reduce the monster to / Myself, and then may be myself / In face of the monster."

Picasso believed that monstrosity – even the violent and threatening kind – was part of the self. It ought to be recognized and represented. Maybe the world would be a saner place, his art suggested, if it possessed a set of public representations of human fears, buffoonery, capacities for evil. It will always be a question whether Picasso's pictures, in which "Woman", fear and monstrosity are so dangerously intertwined, offer a way forward to any such deeper comprehension. But the extraordinary small Monument: Head of a Woman does seem to be Picasso's dream of an alternative world.

Sometimes in Picasso's work the space of the room is overtaken by nightmarish brutality. For much of 1934 murder and horror engulf the artist's sketchbooks: body parts on beds are reassembled into monstrous sculptures, deathly black swallows hurtle in through windows, Charlotte Corday slashes at Marat's throat.

It is no doubt part of the story that the year in question saw the Night of the Long Knives, the purge of rivals that consolidated Hitler's hold on power. But Picasso thought cruelty a basic human characteristic. The only episode of the Christian story he chose to illustrate was the Crucifixion. Any effort to draw a firm line between the "normal" and the "pathological" in human nature was liable to infuriate him. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, for example, reacted to an appalling double murder in 1933 by calling the perpetrators, the Papin sisters, a pair of madwomen.

After the bombing

For months after agreeing to send a canvas to the Spanish Pavilion, Picasso did nothing. Finally, on 18 April 1937, he went to work on a reprise of a favourite subject, the studio. Things did not go well. It was hard to see how the space of artist and model, which so often he had made the scene of a complex erotic game involving belligerence, elusiveness and distortion, could be reworked to speak to the Pavilion's mission. How could such imagery connect with the struggles of the Republic?

Then came the bombing of Guernica. Picasso began again, finding his way towards a representation that would be public, yet also domestic: political, yet deeply familiar as a figuration of Spain. Now women took centre stage – not as models or monsters, but as active forces in the everyday world of war, mothers whose children bleed and die in their arms. And in a reversal of the imagery of contemporary poets, who at moments saw bombs as "iron embryos" dropping from the wombs of warplanes, Picasso began to imagine the female body taking on its own desperate "weaponized" defiance. Women's tears stab their eyes; tongues flicker like knives or flames; breasts are projectiles; bodies turn into armoured shells. These are images of outrage and resistance, but also of despair. The blood of children never stops

pouring; and eventually the blood mutates, in the “Weeping Women” series done as postscript to Guernica, into lines of unstoppable hard tears, squeezed – hurtled – from “machines for suffering”.

In Guernica, two central “themes” of the work Picasso had done during the previous decade – the fragile intimacy of a room’s four walls, and the terrors that more and more put such a place of safety at risk – came together and assumed epic form. But it took time in 1937 for the two themes to assert themselves and interact – to be understood as central aspects of the bombing subject. In the first studies for Guernica, and in the opening stages of work on the canvas itself, as recorded in Dora Maar’s photographs, the drama appears to be happening outdoors, somewhere at the edge of town. Only slowly did the limits and character of the new



PICASSO
Cabeza de mujer llorando con pañuelo (III). Postscripto de Guernica, 1937
Óleo sobre lienzo
92 x 73 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
Archivo fotográfico del Museo Reina Sofía
Legado Picasso, 1981 / © Sucesión Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2017

space of warfare emerge in the painting – “total war” as a condition in which room and street, private and public, home and homelessness were confounded. The viewer of Guernica in its final form is situated “inside” and “outside” simultaneously – looking up at the ceiling of a room and out across flaming roofs, with the room torn open by the light bulb / bomb-blast / sun.

Just as fundamentally, Picasso struggled to find a new form for terror. He had to draw on all his previous imaginings of monstrosity, but somehow retune them to the key of compassion. He had to pull pain and suffering away from the territory of dream. He had to show the full isolating and bewildering force of “death falling from the skies”, but also the way in which human beings are capable, even at the moment of death, of reaching out to one another and seeking a last instant of understanding. Horror and cruelty are no

doubt indelible aspects of the human condition; but so too are the answers they call forth – comradeship, tragic commiseration, and belief in “the potential immortality of the group”.

40’ production

Picasso’s attitude to death, like his attitude to the century he lived in, defies any neat summing up. Many witnesses testify to Picasso’s unwillingness to face mortality, at least in practical and verbal terms. He died intestate. But his work is haunted by death – the skull is a constant companion. He draws deeply on the Spanish still life tradition, in which the dark cavities and mirthless grin of the death’s head are often given special prominence. And like Goya he is prepared to look at the appallingly “lifelike” forms taken by butchered flesh before an animal’s face is reduced to bone. “It’s a funny thing, flesh,” Picasso said to a friend, “to be built of flesh – imagine a house built of flesh – it wouldn’t last long.”

The death's head becomes an insistent presence in Picasso's art in 1939. It persists as a motif throughout World War II and into the first years of post-war recovery. It may be that one or two pictures were specific memorials – the Düsseldorf Still Life with a Bull's Skull of 1942 was painted a few days after Picasso learned of the death of his friend Julio González – but in general what seems to matter is the surrounding slaughter of millions, and the room as a refuge where one “shelters in place” waiting for the end. What tone to adopt in the face of the killing fields remains a problem for Picasso, as it was for many artists at the time: perhaps the skull appealed to him because, as so often when his subject was the human in extremis, it lent itself so naturally to tragic or comic treatment, or a strange mixture of both.



PICASSO
Naturaliza muerta con cráneo de buey, 1942
Óleo sobre lienzo
130 x 97 cm
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-westfalen, Düsseldorf.

It took years for Picasso to escape from Guernica's spell. The “Weeping Women” were Guernica's sequel, and the portraits of Dora Maar that followed were essentially variations on the same theme. “An artist isn't as free as you might think. For me Dora Maar was a woman who weeps. For years I painted her in tortured forms, not out of sadism or because it gave me pleasure. I could only follow the vision that imposed itself on me. This was Dora's profound reality.”

That there is a dimension of sadism to Picasso's portrayals seems undeniable, and sometimes Picasso admitted as much. The women in my paintings, he said, “are trapped in their armchairs like birds in a cage ... I imprisoned them in this absence of gesture and repetition of motif because I was trying to lay hold of the movement of flesh and blood through time.” Time is the enemy. Death is the destination. Dora Maar was undoubtedly “Woman” for Picasso, enclosed in that (for him) tragic category – but she was also “a woman” bearing the specific burden of history. The rooms she is trapped in could be bunkers or torture chambers. But even there she asserts herself, and is far from being invariably agonized. One scholar points to a Picasso poem of 1937 in which Dora is “devilishly seductive in her disguise of tears and wearing a marvelous hat put on by the blows of destiny”. Perhaps the later paintings are never as jaunty, but in many of them anguish is mixed with tenacity and verve.



PABLO PICASSO
Woman Dressing Her Hair, Royan, June 1940.
The Museum of Modern Art, NY.
© Sucesión Picasso. VEGAP, 2017

Perhaps the greatest – and certainly the most grave – of Dora Maar's "portraits" is that done in the spring and early summer of 1940. It was painted in Royan, a small seaside town at the mouth of the Gironde estuary, to which Picasso had fled in September 1939. The date of the picture's completion, which Picasso wrote on the stretcher, is 19 June 1940. The Luftwaffe had bombed Paris's airports on 3 June. Nazi troops had entered Paris on 14 June. Marshal Pétain and Hitler signed the Armistice of Rethondes on 22 June. Hitler strolled by the Eiffel Tower the day following. The Vichy government was installed on 10 July. Picasso returned to occupied Paris at the end of August.

Catálogo

Besides Pity and Terror in Picasso: The Path to Guernica, the Museo Reina Sofía is also working on a number of other important projects to commemorate this anniversary. The first will be a publication that will include an extensive essay by the exhibition curators, the art historians T. J. Clark and Anne M. Wagner, together with case studies by other authors and graphic material.

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