

# Pablo Picasso

## *Guernica* (1937)

Pablo Picasso painted *Guernica* at the request of the Republican government for the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition. The work is a testimony and condemnation of the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica's population by the Luftwaffe, who were allied to the rebels, and is considered a fundamental work of 20th Century art, remaining a universal symbol of the fight against oppression.



An icon of the Spanish Civil War, of worldwide anti-war sentiment and of the fight for freedom, *Guernica* is one of the most emblematic images of the contemporary world and the last great painting of history of the European tradition. Converted into a universal symbol of indiscriminate massacres wherever they occur, it carries an implicit message of resistance to authoritarianism and against the rise of the fascisms in the Europe of that moment, which it conveys through an iconography whose meaning has been the subject of polemic for years. At the same time it vindicates, from the spirit of modernity, the intent of the avant-garde to take on a political function and to establish a direct dialogue with the viewer, who is seduced with a spectacle of death and tragedy.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) painted *Guernica* as his contribution to the Spanish Pavilion in the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* of Paris, in 1937. The Spanish government, straying from the announced theme, wanted to use the Pavilion as an instrument of political propaganda that reflected the drama being lived in the country, in full Civil War after the insurrection of the army against the Government of the Second Republic. The Spanish participation in the Expo thus became an opportunity to broadcast news of this conflict, in a search for international aid. To do so, they relied on some of the most important artists and intellectuals of the country, such as Joan Miró (1893–1983), Julio González (1876–1942) and Picasso himself, who after receiving the commission, spent the following months indecisive and without painting anything, with a single idea as the subject of the work: *The Studio*, an allegory of painting represented by the painter and the model.

April 26, 1937. On that day, planes of the Condor Legion of the German air force, in aid of the rebel troops beneath the command of General Franco, launched incendiary bombs

against Guernica, a key city in the Basque political tradition. Some foreign press correspondents covering the happenings on the northern front of the war were in Bilbao. The very day of the bombing, they moved to Guernica, gathering the images and testimonies which would reach the international press the following day and affect the entire world. The news of the attack on a non-military enclave with a civil population made up principally of women and children spread throughout Europe, causing the traditional manifestation on May 1 in defense of labor to become a show of solidarity and aid for Spain. His search for a subject had ended. That same day, Picasso made the first notes of what would be the great mural (3.50 m x 7.87 m) taking as his inspiration the destruction caused by the bombing of the city. The drawings and preparatory works made before and during the conception of *Guernica* revealed the original plan and the phases of execution of the work, offering precision and shades of nuance to its meaning, and functioning together as a modern altarpiece. The process of creation, which lasted approximately one month, was photographed by Picasso's companion at the time, Dora Maar (1907–1997), becoming one of the best-documented examples of the progress of a work in all of art history.

*Guernica* summed up the innovations in Picasso's artistic language realized over the previous thirty years, already present in *Sueño y mentira de Franco* (The Dream and Lie of Franco), 1937, and which defi-

ned his later work. It wasn't necessary to invent anything new. The Picassoesque style, synthesis of post-Cubist deformation and Surrealist symbolism, proved the most adequate to depict the death and suffering. The languages of the avant-garde superimposed themselves, in a natural way, over a classic composition with a pyramid structure and symmetric organization, recovering the spirit of the Spanish Baroque with its tragic excess and its fascination for pain. The choice of black and white eliminated any anecdotic or hedonistic intention, converting the Grisaille into the most-accurate means of expression. Under the influence of tradition and of the great masters, Picasso portrayed the terrible consequences of the war in the light of the electric light bulb, a symbol of technical progress being honored at the Paris exhibit, which replaced the traditional candle as a vanitas in a modern key.

The stillness of the composition, photographically frozen image, was a substantial element that converted the mural in a *tableau vivant*. A theatrical stage by means of ephemeral decoration, in which the great drama of the Spanish Civil War was staged with a magisterial command of the theatrical effects of the Picasso who was a decorator of the Russian ballets. To do so he recovered the ritual of death and passion of the mythic bullring, in which the protagonists, the women, the bull, and the horse, take on the quality of what is perhaps the most extreme expression of pain of all of the history of art. Those women, embodied in Dora Maar, will be the fundamental subject of his later works, the "Postscripts", in which shouts and the suffering are expressed through open mouths, tongues like fists, and eyes transformed into needles, ships, or fountains which overflow with tears.

After the closing of the exhibit, an itinerary of the work was scheduled in different European countries and cities of the United States with the goal of raising funds for the Republican cause and the Spanish refugees. The political situation in Spain and the outbreak of the Second World War forced Picasso in 1939 to name the MoMA as depository of the work until, as he stated at the time, the legitimate government of the

Spanish Republic was restored. Before his death and after noting the first indications of political change, the artist changed the clause which granted custody to the museum, expressing his desire that *Guernica* be returned to the Spanish state when it recovered democratic liberty.

With the death of Franco, the paperwork was set in motion for the return of the painting after forty years of exile from a country in which it had never been. *Guernica* and the legacy which accompanies it finally arrived in Spain in 1981, becoming a major symbol of the end of the transition and the national reconciliation, and was assigned to the Reina Sofia Museum in 1992.

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# Pavilion of the Spanish Republic, 1937

With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, the role of artists who supported the Republican government with propaganda came to a head. One of the most unrivaled projects in promoting the Republican cause abroad was the construction of the Spanish Pavilion at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la vie Moderne* (International Exposition Dedicated to Art and Technology in Modern Life), held in Paris in 1937.



In the middle of the war, Largo Caballero, President of the Council of Ministers, saw the Pavilion as an opportunity to gain economic and political support beyond Spain's borders. Because the majority of European states had signed the Non-Intervention Agreement, except the Soviet Union, the Republican government found itself at a clear economic and military disadvantage. This circumstance would drive the government's plans for the Pavilion: instead of designing a setup that promoted Spain's commercial and industrial achievements, its accompanying exhibitions and activities would focus exclusively on the Republic's political needs.

Largo Caballero named Luis Araquistáin Spain's Ambassador to France, whose primary mission was to convince European powers to finance the Republic's defense. Toward this end, the Republic had to demonstrate its stability and solvency, including its religious tolerance and independence from the Soviet Union. In February 1937, José Gao was elected Chief Commissioner of the Pavilion. Araquistáin's influence was fundamental to defining the Pavilion as a reflection of Largo Caballero's politics and Araquistáin's own socialist ideals. The Spanish government was formed by a coalition of socialists, communists, republicans and representatives from regional Basque and Catalan administrations. Despite his ability to bring together very different political programs, Largo Caballero was accused of being responsible for the Soviet Union's growing influence in the Popular Front. The Soviet Union, the Republic's only diplomatic and economic ally, was both needed and feared: necessary, because the Republic could not survive

without its help, and feared, since Spanish officials were aware of growing anti-Stalin sentiments spreading throughout Europe. Araquistáin shared these fears and tried to counteract them in the Pavilion by emphasizing the Republic's liberal aspects, such as its protection of private property, agrarian and industrial reforms, educational programs and preservation of Spain's cultural and artistic diversity.

Araquistáin and Max Aub, one of the strongest supporters of Spanish artists in Paris, was responsible for recruiting the most prominent Spanish artists for the Pavilion's diplomatic mission. Luis Lacasa (1899–1966) was named its architect and Interim Chief Commissioner in December 1936, even though Araquistáin, due to the slow selection process, had already contacted Josep Lluís Sert (1902–1983) when Lacasa arrived in Paris.

The two architects worked together on designing an effective structure that could satisfy the needs of the Republic's vision of modernity and humanism. With participation from Joan Miró (1893–1983), Alexander Calder (1898–1976), Julio González (1876–1942) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), the Pavilion was assured to draw the public attention and criticism

## New Acquisitions

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Carteles de la Guerra Civil, 1936–39

that the government so desired in its attempt to procure international support for its fight against fascism.

Naming the most internationally renowned Spanish architect to construct an equally functional and attractive building was essential when creating the appropriate environment to exhibit art, culture and propaganda, despite the chaotic circumstances surrounding the entire process. In fact, the Pavilion was intentionally conceived as an open, comfortable space without being imposing, which attempted to demonstrate the horrors of war while simultaneously showing the government's optimism and its continuous productivity. The Pavilion stood in great contrast to the monumentality of the Soviet and German buildings for their size, use of materials and layout of space.

Even before entering the Pavilion, visitors could contemplate *El pueblo español tiene un camino que conduce a una estrella* (There is a way for the Spanish People that Leads to a Star), 1937, by Alberto Sánchez (1895–1962), *La Montserrat* (1936–37) by Julio González, *Femme au vase* (Woman with Vase, 1933) by Pablo Picasso, and photomurals designed by Josep Renau (1907–1982). After entering the building below them, visitors crossed a patio on the ground floor where Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) and Alexander Calder's *Mercury Fountain* (1937) were displayed. Next, a spiraled ramp guided visitors to the second floor where a long hallway with photomurals designed by Renau took them through an exhibition of different traditional dresses, industries and topographies from Spain's regions. On the other side of the hallway, separated by a screen, works by sculptors, graphic artists and painters (Ramón Puyol, Fernando Esquivà) were displayed. At the end of the second floor, a staircase with a mural by Miró, titled *El segador (Campesino catalán en rebelión)* (The Reaper. Catalan Peasant in Revolt, 1937), led viewers to the first floor, which contained some of Renau's newest photomontages depicting agrarian reform, the protection of Spain's cultural heritage, the Republic's Educational Missions and its industry. At the end of this hall, a ramp

with propaganda posters and samples of Renau's graphic works led visitors outside the building.

The Pavilion's different spaces were lived by film screenings, concerts, dance recitals and theatre performances. In particular, regional dances were presented as a symbol of Spanish purity. The Republican government considered them an example of popular culture and a weapon against fascism. Photographs and objects exhibited in the Pavilion, especially ceramics and textiles, underscored the fact that the contemporary political situation should not overcast a long history of popular traditions. Towards this end, the peasant figure had a leading role, which explains the mixing of Republican propaganda with other works and documents by authors would not necessarily have been associated with the Pavilion's ideology.

Such is the case for the photography by José Ortiz-Echagüe (1886–1980), which belonged to the Museum of the Spanish People in Madrid. Ortiz-Echagüe protested when his work appeared in the anarchist magazine *Revolución*. Although we do not have much evidence of his response to his inclusion in the Pavilion's exhibitions, we do know that his photographs were reproduced with his permission both during and after the war in the Francoist magazine *Spain*, published in New York. A selection of works included in the Pavilion is exhibited in this room.

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# Francisco de Goya (1746-1828)



Among the many artists who served as historical inspiration during the Civil War, none were as influential and relevant as Francisco de Goya. In 1937, his portfolio of engravings *Desastres de la guerra* was reissued and the Comissariat de Propaganda de la Generalitat de Catalunya published Ramón Xuriguera's monograph *Goya, pintor del pueblo*. In July 1938, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London held an exhibition of Goya's drawings and engravings that had great international impact, so much so that the artist's works were reproduced in both the republican press (*El Mono Azul*, *Voz de París*, *ABC*, *Tiempos Nuevos*, *Nosotros*) as well as the insurgent (*Vértice*).

The grotesque vision that Goya brought to his political critique was not lost on artists as a powerful tool for crafting their own views of the present. It was as relevant to Pablo Picasso's interpretation of the genre of history painting in *Guernica* as it was to the works by José Gutiérrez Solana and Antonio Rodríguez Luna that took "España negra" as their theme. These artists, while distinct in their pictorial styles, shared in their admiration of Goya and his ability to shine a dark lens on Spain's complex political and religious traditions.