

Guernica

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Abstract

In 1937, Pablo Picasso, aged fifty-six was considered world's foremost living painter. Due to his popularity the Government of the Spanish Republic commissioned Picasso an enormous mural painting of almost 8 meters width to be shown at Paris International world's Fair. Picasso's mind was blank for several months, but when Nazi air raiders destroyed the city of *Gernika*, his unchained anger led him to an intense and passionate creative process, which culminated in the most iconic of 20th century masterpieces. From the 45 sketches that served to prepare the painting and the ten pictures his partner Dora Maar took during the creation of the painting we can deduce the process followed by Picasso during the 37 days of fury in which he painted *Guernica*. Note that along this paper we will use the official Basque name *Gernika* when referring to the town and the Spanish name *Guernica* when referring to the painting, as Picasso named it in 1937.

The bombing of Gernika on 26th April 1937

José Antonio Aguirre, President of the Autonomous Basque Government during the course of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) described the bombing of Gernika with these words:

“Gernika was a town of around seven thousands inhabitants located in a peaceful valley surrounded by mountains. It was an open town, totally lacking any defenses. Market day was held every Monday in Gernika and this was a well-known and picturesque event, where peasants and villagers congregated. This was the scenario that Franco and Germany chose to carry out the first rehearsal of a total war.”

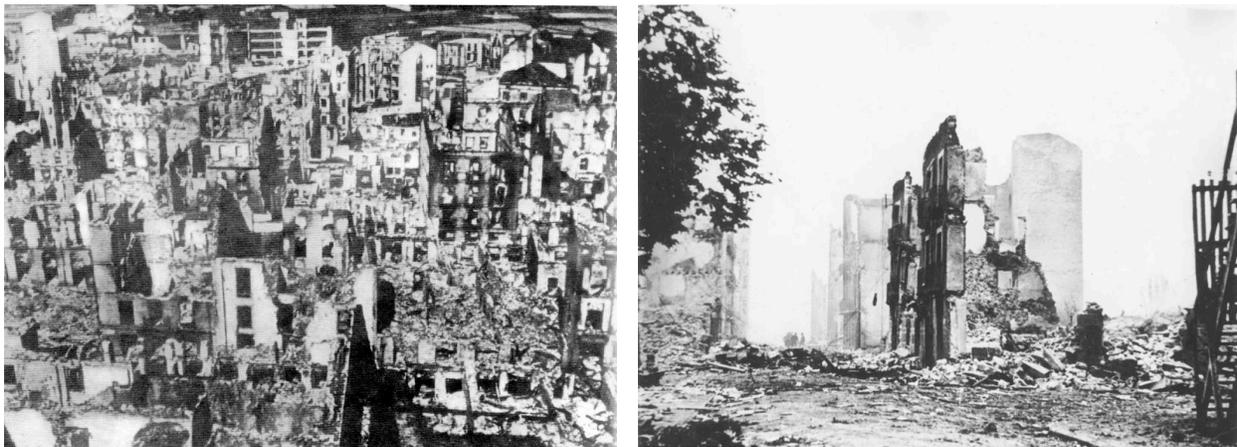


Figure 1: *The raid carried out by 42 planes of the Condor Legion from the German Luftwaffe and the Italian Fascist Aviazione Legionaria destroyed Gernika almost completely.*

The town was far from the line of battle and the attack was absolutely extraordinary, and unexplainable as a target. Gernika began to be a symbol for groundless savagery a few days after the 26th of April, 1937. Never before there was a better planned and less predictable tragedy at the same time. George Steer, special correspondent for the times in the Basque Country describes the events:

“Gernika, the most ancient town of the Basques and the centre of their cultural tradition, was completely destroyed yesterday afternoon by insurgent air raiders. The bombardment of this open town far behind the lines occupied precisely three hours and a quarter, during which a powerful fleet of aeroplanes consisting of three German types, Junkers and Heinkel bombers, did not cease unloading on the town bombs weighting from 1,000 lbs. downwards and, it is calculated, more than 3,000 two-pounder aluminum incendiary projectiles. The fighters, meanwhile, plunged low from above the centre of the town to machine-gun those of the civilian population who had taken refuge in the fields”.

The Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International World’s Fair in 1937

During the Spanish civil war, the Government of the Spanish Republic decided to participate in the International Exhibition opened in Paris in May 1937. It was a strange decision when the country was in such an extreme situation that it would seem there was no time for anything apart from the war effort. Nevertheless the Government decided to participate in the event considering it as an act of propaganda. In addition its intention was to attract interest to the unstoppable rise of fascism in Europe.

The Spanish Pavilion of 1937, designed and constructed by Joseph Lluís Sert and Luis Lacasa in just four months, was a unique and unrepeatable creation, only made possible by the climate of passion, power and enthusiasm displayed by everyone involved in it.

From the first moment, the Government of the Republic wanted the collaboration of Picasso, as the most prestigious artist of the time. The first step to achieve this objective was his appointment as director of the Prado Museum, which the artist was delighted to accept. Joseph Lluís Sert then visited Picasso in Paris to commission a large mural painting that would be the center point of the building surrounded by pieces from artists like Joan Miró, Julio González or Alexander Calder. The building was to be a landmark in the history of Art and Architecture.



Figure 2: *The Spanish Pavilion designed by Sert and Lacasa. The Guernica Mural was hanged in a privileged position of the building, in front of Alexander Calder’s Mercury Fountain.*

Picasso enters into war: 37 days of fury

During the next months after the commission for the Spanish Pavilion, Picasso's mind was blank, unable to begin any work. But on April 27th all the French newspapers report the bombing of Gernika. The destruction of the Basque town is almost complete and Picasso is horrified by the tragedy. Finally, on May 1st, Picasso focuses on a single theme: Guernica. At that moment everything is clear for Picasso and it is impossible not to be involved. Now it is not a matter of politics, but a criminal act against innocent victims. That same day Picasso began the work that will have the greatest political significance of the 20th century.

Picasso works with authentic fury during the first ten days, making twenty-one sketches and studies. Then, on May 11th he transfers all his fury to the canvas in his studio in Rue des Grands-Agustins in Paris. His creative impulse is burning like fire and he converts Guernica into a terrifying and sublime icon of any atrocity against innocent civilians, from Hiroshima to Bosnia, from Dresden to Vietnam. Picasso intentions with Guernica are clear, as he says:

“No, painting is not done to decorate apartments, it is an instrument of offensive and defensive war against enemy”.

Picasso continues tirelessly painting the enormous canvas and making 24 more studies and sketches of the main characters. He will not stop until its completion on June 6th. Some two weeks later the painting is installed in the just-completed Spanish Pavilion. During these frenetic 37 days everything that up to then was doubt is now resolved with authentic passion and anger. His biographer Pierre Daix stated: “Picasso entered into war in May 1937”.



Figure 3: *Composition Study for Guernica, 9th May 1937 (24x45cm).*

The Geometry of Guernica

The Guernica scenery is clearly inspired by *The Consequences of War*, a painting by Peter Paul Rubens. But Pablo Picasso flips the direction of the action in Ruben's painting (from left to right) by using its mirror image as starting point. Action now moves from right to the left and gets more tension and intensity due to the physiological fact that a viewer's eye naturally moves from left to right. This effect is increased with the chaos introduced by the angular distortions and the violent contrasts of light, shade, and texture.

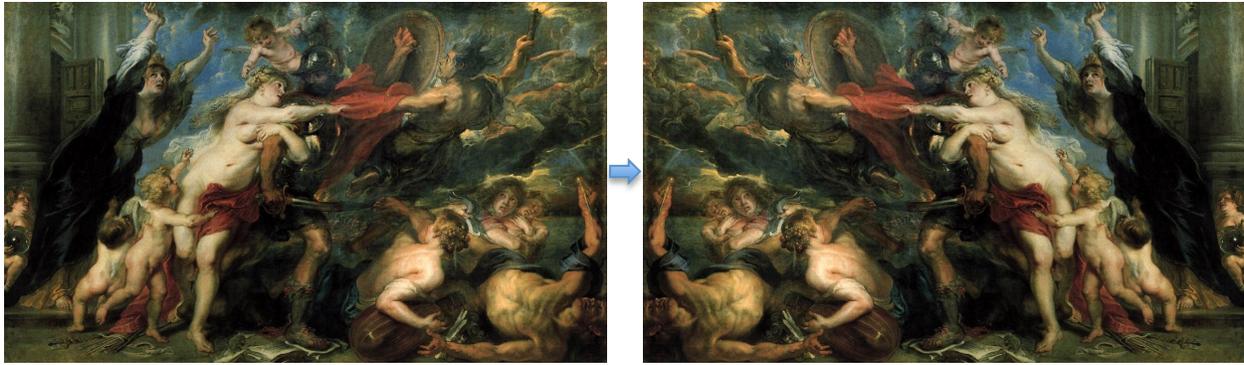


Figure 4: *The Consequences of War*. Peter Paul Rubens (1638). Palazzo Pitti, Florence. Pablo Picasso used a mirror version of this painting as a starting point for the composition of *Guernica*.

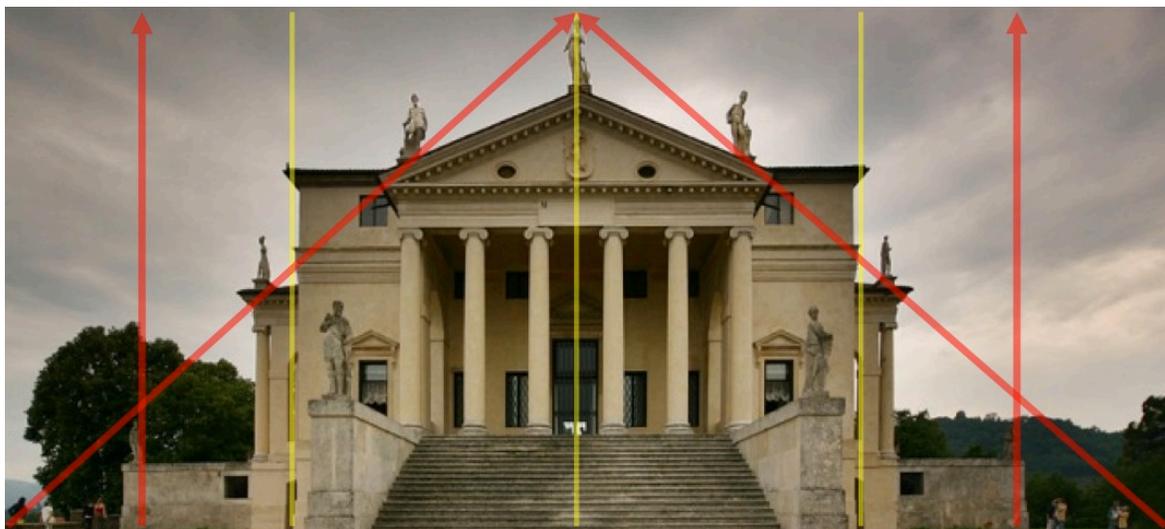
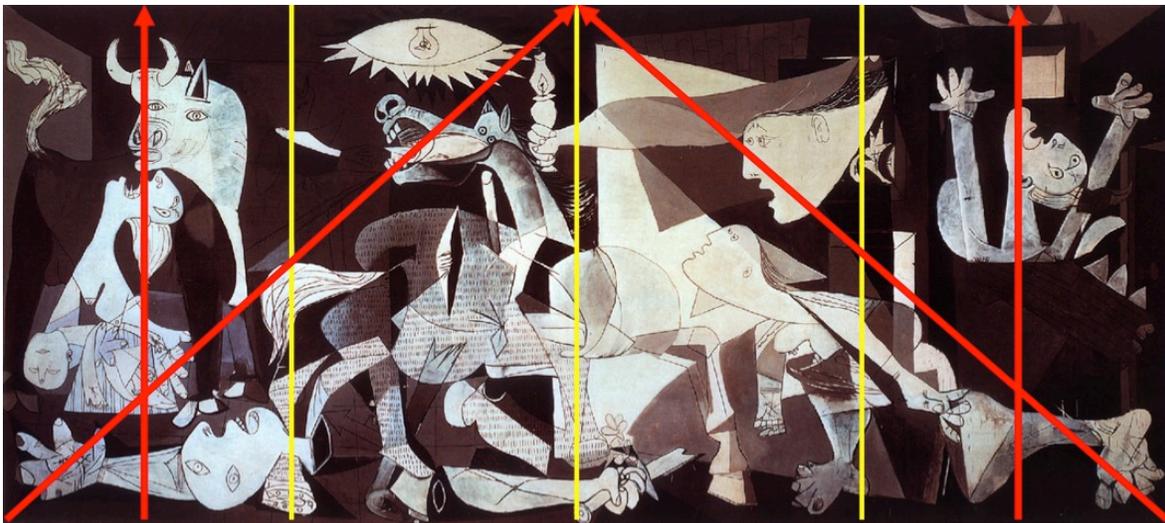


Figure 5: The geometrical construction of *Guernica* can be compared with the design of many classical temples and buildings like Andrea Palladio's *Villa La Rotonda* (1566) inspired in the Pantheon in Rome.

The mural is constructed on a classical scheme like the one of a Greek temple or a medieval altarpiece. Two smaller side panels frame a large central panel twice the width of the side ones. Within this framework, a large triangle dominates the composition. The apex of the triangle is the upper central point, almost in coincidence with the rays of light departing from the small lamp. The balance achieved by the hand and foot at either end of the triangle is emphasized by the mass of the statue's head, and the large form of the running woman's knee. It is a carefully design.

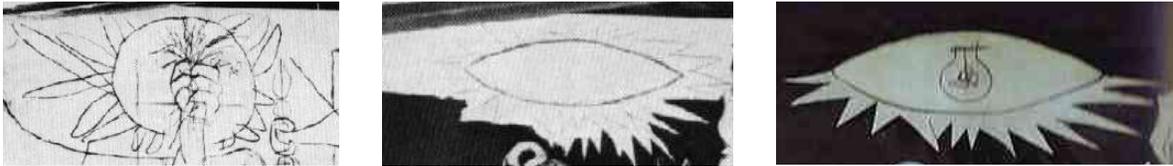


Figure 6: *Evolution of the solar disk into an electric lamp in different stages of Guernica.*

It is not clear whether action occurs in the exterior or interior of a building. In the first stages of the painting a sun clearly dominates the scene and some building blocks are clearly visible. Along next stages of the picture Picasso changes the sun into an oval shape and finally he places a bulb on it. At the same time, doors and windows replace the buildings. Now it is not clear whether the scene happens inside or outside. There is no place to escape and confusion and anxiety is produced in the spectator.

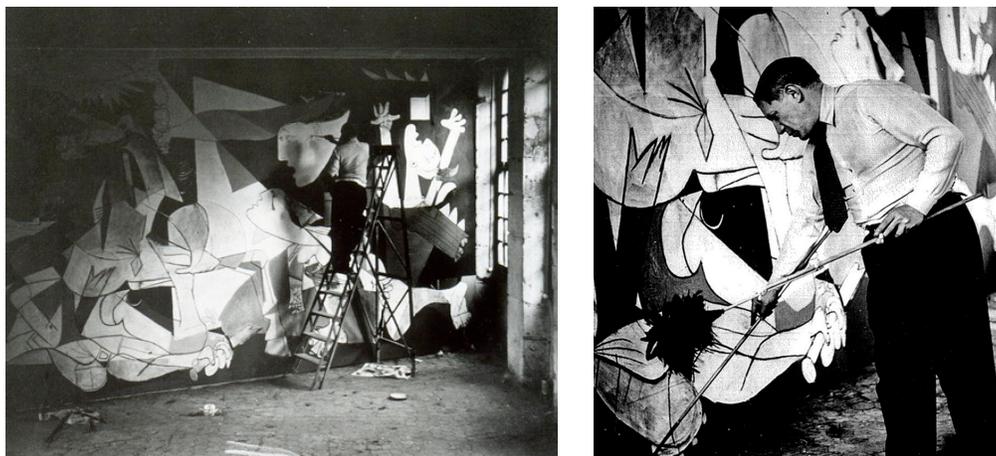


Figure 7: *Paris, May 1937. The canvas was so enormous that doubled Picasso's height. The painter needed a ladder and brushes strapped to sticks in order to paint its heights. During 27 days Picasso worked in the canvas with an unusual anger and intensity, even for him.*

Dora Maar's photographs of the work in progress

During the creation of Guernica, Picasso's companion, Dora Maar, took a series of ten photographs as the work progressed. This unique document records the magical creative process of a masterpiece. From the first moment, when the painter fits the varied composition full of figures onto the canvas, until the moment in which he finishes the painting, as we know it today, there are a multitude of transformations. He composes, decomposes, fits and disengages, until everything is in its place. In the exciting process that follows, all confusion will lead to order and harmony.



Figure 8: *Four of the ten pictures that Dora Maar took during the creation of Guernica in his Paris studio at Rue des Grans Agustins 7.*

The different stages of the painting

According to Dora Maar's pictures and Picasso's 45 sketches, the horse and the bull, which are the major elements of the composition, suffer a series of transformations both in character and placement. From a mere geometrical point of view, the bull changes its dominant position by turning its body to the left without moving its head. The flame-like tail of the bull replaces the moon placed on the left of the canvas in the early stages. The shifting of the bull's body away from the center also serves to open the space necessary to raise the head of the horse and paint a bird, probably a pigeon.

The bull's back, insignificant as a central focus is replaced by the horse's head, which acquires great protagonism showing its sharp tongue in a gesture of pain. The separation from the bull eliminates any chance of fighting between both animals, as in a bullfight. The bull, the only stable and unmutated figure in the composition, the one to whom the other characters turn for help or hope, now heads straight spectator with a noble and humanized face which happens to be that of the painter.

The body of the warrior is the ultimate transformation. Picasso makes on June 4th his last two sketches, a study of the hand and head of the warrior, just two days before completion on June 6th. The dead warrior changes completely. His body is now fragmented in two pieces emphasizing total devastation. The head is ovoid, almost bare of details, which render death even more evident. A flower, rising from the broken sword can be seen as a sign of hope and rebirth. The Guernica is finally finished.

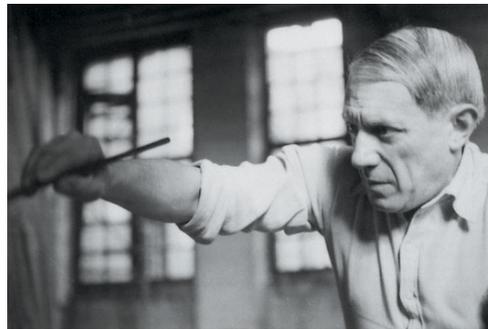
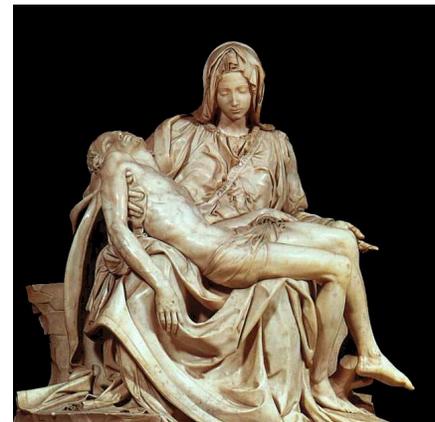


Figure 9: Picasso appears in Guernica represented as a bull, as he did in other paintings. It is also his homage to his favorite painter, Velazquez, who also appears in his masterpiece *The Meninas*.



Figure 10: The mother with the death son is sheltered under the bull's head searching for an impossible consolation. This figure is extracted from a well-known religious scene known as *La Piedad* (*Pietà* in Italian). It depicts the supreme pain of a mother, the loss of his child.



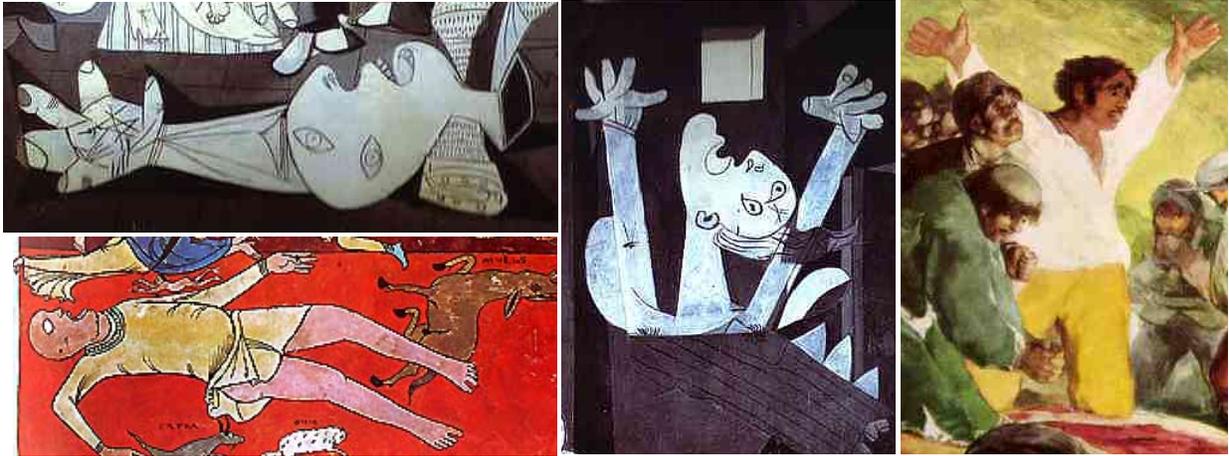


Figure 11: Picasso got some of his ideas for *Guernica* from the great masters of Spanish Art. The figure of the death warrior is based on a Romanesque drawing of Saint Server Beatus (XIth Century). The woman on fire is inspired on the painting *The Third of May 1808*, by Francisco de Goya (1814).



Figure 9: *Guernica*. Oil on canvas. 777 cm x 349 cm. National Museum Art Center Reina Sofia, Madrid.

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