

75 years of Picasso's Guernica: An Inconvenient Masterpiece

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Take a closer look at Picasso's *Guernica*. Let its powerful images of the ravages of war confront you: the screaming man engulfed in flames, the bewildered horse, and the howling mother carrying the dead body of her child--all forever unable to escape an unseen horror.

The chaos unfolding seems to happen in closed quarters provoking an intense feeling of oppression. There is no way out of the nightmarish cityscape. The absence of color makes the violent scene developing right before your eyes even more horrifying. The blacks, whites, and grays startle you--especially because you are used to see war images broadcasted live and in high- definition right to your living room.

On the left, a bull stares at you with uneven eyes while a warrior lies dead still holding a broken sword. In the midst of this swirling madness, signs of hope appear: a lily, barely noticeable, surfaces from underneath the broken images; and a woman, her eyes filled with anguish, holds up a lamp so that we can all bear witness to the calamities of war.



This year marked the seventieth fifth anniversary of both the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica and the creation of Pablo Picasso's mural depicting the horrors of the unprecedented aerial bombardment against a defenseless civil population of around five thousand. In those years, *Guernica* has become a universal and powerful symbol warning humanity against the suffering and devastation of war.

Picasso's mural is now also inescapably linked to the US-led war in Iraq. In February 2003, Colin Powell spoke about going to war in Iraq at the United Nations Security Council. There was a press conference scheduled afterwards. A tapestry reproduction of *Guernica* located outside the entrance of the Council Room was covered with a blue curtain. UN officials claimed the mural was a distracting background for the TV cameras covering the press conference. Its unappealing ménage of mutilated bodies and distorted faces proved to be too strong for articulating to the world why the US was going to war in Iraq. *Guernica* became

an inconvenient masterpiece.

On what might be considered the "shock and awe" of the time, German and Italian warplanes launched a daytime attack in Guernica on April 26, 1937. The Basque town was of no strategic importance in the civil war ravaging Spain. The Luftwaffe, however, attacked the center of Guernica for three hours with incendiary bombs. Afterwards the planes rained down machine gunfire on civilians trying to escape. "Throughout the night houses were falling until the streets became long heaps of red impenetrable debris", wrote correspondent George Steer in his original report for the Times of London. The number of casualties is a matter of debate. The body count ranges from a few hundred to more than a thousand.

For military historians, the bombing of Guernica set a precedent of the near total destruction that other European cities experienced during World War II. The bombing was also meant to send a message to the Basque people for siding with the Republican Government against General Francisco Franco and the Falange, the Spanish wing of the fascist movement, to defend their separate linguistic and cultural identity.

Picasso learned through newspaper accounts of the bombing of Guernica in Paris where he lived at the time. The Republican government had recently commissioned him to paint a mural for the Spanish pavilion at the Paris World Fair due to open in the summer of 1937. Picasso had struggled for some time to find a suitable subject for the mural. The bombing of Guernica changed that. He worked feverishly for weeks on a fast-evolving depiction of the slaughter in the Basque town. He set the massacre in a "claustrophobic Cubist space", as art critic Simon Shama describes it in *The Power of Art*. There are, however, no obvious references to the actual attack, which has contributed to make its message universal and timeless.

Guernica was received lukewarmly at best at the Paris World Fair. After Franco's victory, Picasso refused to send the mural to Spain. It traveled to several countries before finding a home at the Museum of Modern Art in New York where it remained until 1981 when it was sent to Madrid after democracy was restored--according to Picasso's wishes. *Guernica* is to painting what Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is to music: a cultural icon that speaks to mankind not only against war but also of hope and peace. It is a reference when speaking about genocide from El Salvador to Bosnia.

Guernica became even more relevant as the military and civilian casualties in Iraq continued to mount and the reasons to launch a preemptive war boiled down to tragic fabrication. Never again should the UN reproduction of Guernica be covered particularly when a government --no matter how powerful--is about to speak to the world on launching a preemptive attack.

Look again at *Guernica*.