

GUERNICA (1939) by Pablo Picasso

As the war raged on, Pablo Picasso revealed his mythical Guernica to the MoMA in 1939. In 1937, the Spanish republic asked Picasso to create a large composition for the Paris International Exhibition. This request came just after the most destructive event of the Spanish civil war: the bombing of the small Basque village of Guernica. The commune was destroyed; hundreds had been killed or hurt, all of whom were innocent civilians. Picasso, who was living in Paris at the time, learnt about the ordeal through newspapers. Deeply moved by the testimonies he read and the photographs he saw, Guernica became his enraged cry against this absence of humanity.



The Bull:

The human-eyed bull evokes the fight between man and beast. Without a doubt, we can see the incarnation of Spanish Nationalist and Totalitarian regimes in this animal.

The Light Bulb:

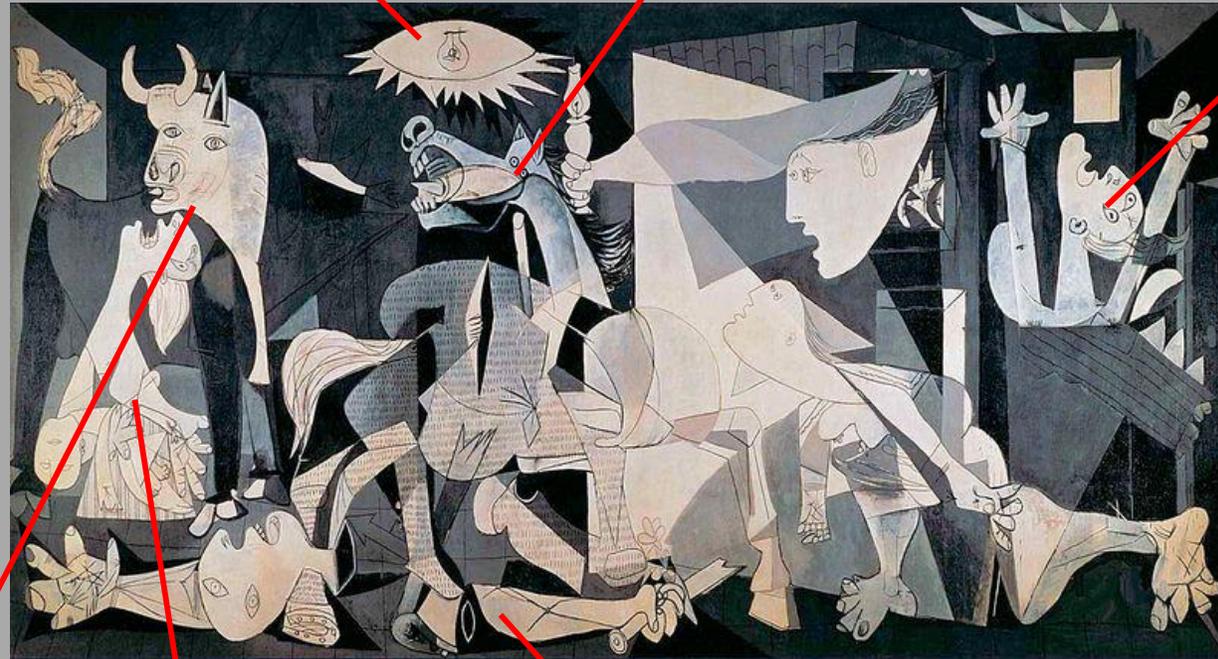
Picasso didn't illustrate the bombing in a realistic manner, and there aren't any bombs depicted in the piece. Instead, Picasso uses a light bulb surrounded by a glowing halo of luminous spikes. This symbolises the flames that tore apart the sky during the bombing.

The Horse:

Just under the light bulb the viewer's attention is drawn to a horse. The animal has been dis-emboweled by an arrow and is howling in pain. This is emblematic of the suffering inflicted on the Spanish people by the dictators and German bombers. Picasso additionally includes a subliminal skull, formed by the nose and teeth of the horse.

The Second Woman:

Another woman is also shown to the right of the painting; her arms are also raised and her mouth frozen mid-scream. She is surrounded by flames, which are symbolised by the tips of triangles which allude to the explosions caused by the bombs.



Although Picasso was never officially part of the Surrealist movement, its influence can certainly be seen in this painting. Nightmarish figures and dismembered bodies fill the painting. Guernica combines Cubist structures with a monochrome palette which renders the painting more realistic. It is however the Surrealist images that create the shocking representation of suffering and war. Picasso never gave an official interpretation of Guernica, refusing to be seen as a political artist. However, in depicting such subject matter he created a heavily political work, where Guernica is a symbolic protest for peace.

The Woman:

With her head and eyes rolled back, the woman holds her dead baby whilst helplessly reaching out towards the sky. This depiction is reminiscent of portraits of Dora Maar, which Picasso nicknamed "the woman who cries".

The Man with the Sword:

He is the only man and the only figure lying down in the painting. He has been dismembered yet still holds his broken sword, which is emblematic of his heroic yet futile attempt to fight against the terror. A ghostly flower grows by the fighter's hand, signifying hope despite the bloodshed- much like the shrouded light provided by the woman's kerosene lamp.

