

Guernica

"What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has only eyes if he is a painter, or ears if he is a musician, or a lyre in every chamber of his heart if he is a poet, or even, if he is a boxer, just his muscles? Far, far from it: at the same time, he is also a political being, constantly aware of the heartbreaking, passionate, or delightful things that happen in the world, shaping himself completely in their image. How could it be possible to feel no interest in other people, and with a cool indifference to detach yourself from the very life which they bring to you so abundantly? No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war."

Pablo Picasso

In 1937 Pablo Picasso painted *Guernica*, a mural that was the centerpiece for the Spanish Pavilion of the World's Fair in Paris. The official theme of the Paris Exposition was the celebration of modern technology. The Aeronautics Pavilion, featuring the latest advances in aircraft design and engineering, was a centerpiece of the exposition. It is a bitter irony that *Guernica*, the most lasting monument of the exposition, is the Twentieth century's most enduring symbol of the horrors of war and the inhumane use of technology. It is a portent for the terrors of the next decade. The painting is based on the events of April 27, 1937, when the German air force, in support of the Fascist forces led by Generalissimo Francisco Franco, carried out a bombing raid on the Basque village of Guernica in northern Spain. At that time such a massive bombing campaign was unprecedented. The hamlet was pounded with high-explosive and incendiary bombs for over three hours. The non-combatant townspeople including women and children were indiscriminately cut-down as they fled their crumbling buildings. The town of Guernica burned for three days leaving sixteen hundred civilians killed or wounded in its smoldering remains. The Fascist planners of the bombing campaign knew that Guernica had no strategic value as a military target, but it was a cultural and religious center for Basque identity. The devastation was intended to terrorize the population and break the spirit of the Basque resistance. In effect it was intended to "shock and awe" the Basques into submission. The bombing of Guernica was a sensation in the world press. The *Times* of London called it the arch-symbol of Fascist barbarity.

Guernica depicts suffering people, animals, and buildings wrenched by violence and chaos:

- The overall scene is within a room, where, at an open end on the left, a wide-eyed bull stands over a woman grieving over a dead child in her arms.
- The center is occupied by a horse falling in agony as it had just been run through by a spear or javelin. The shape of a human skull forms the horse's nose and upper teeth.
- Two "hidden" images formed by the horse appear in *Guernica* (illustrated to the right):
 - A human skull is overlaid on the horse's body.
 - A bull appears to gore the horse from underneath. The bull's head is formed mainly by the horse's entire front leg which has the knee on the ground. The leg's knee cap forms the head's nose. A horn appears within the horse's breast.

- Under the horse is a dead, apparently dismembered soldier, his hand on a severed arm still grasps a shattered sword from which a flower grows.
- A light bulb blazes in the shape of an eye over the suffering horse's head.
- To the upper right of the horse, a frightened female figure, who seems to be witnessing the scenes before her, appears to have floated into the room through a window. Her arm, also floating in, carries a flame-lit lamp.
- From the right, an awe-struck woman staggers towards the center below the floating female figure. She looks up blankly into the blazing light bulb.
- Daggers that suggest screaming replace the tongues of the bull, grieving woman, and horse.
- A bird, possibly a duck, stands on a shelf behind the bull in panic.
- On the far right, a figure with arms raised in terror is entrapped by fire from above and below.
- A dark wall with an open door defines the right end of the mural.

Picasso's painting is without question the most important anti-war work of art produced in the Twentieth Century. It is a testament to the horrors of Fascism. The authority of this image is reflected in the hanging of a tapestry reproduction of Picasso's painting outside the Security Council of the United Nations, an institution which emerged after the defeat of Fascism. It is poignant that this symbol served as the backdrop to many of the public statements by diplomats engaged in the Security Council debate during the winter of 2003 over the use of military force in Iraq. On January 27, a blue curtain was used to cover the tapestry, because someone (it is not clear whether it was a diplomat or member of the media) confidentially approached U.N. officials expressing concern that it would not be an appropriate background if the ambassador of the United States at the U.N. John Negroponte, or Secretary of State Colin Powell, talk about war surrounded with women, children and animals shouting with horror and showing the suffering of the bombings. *Guernica* deserves our serious attention. It testifies to the power of representations of war, and should serve as a cautionary tale to us. Although "smart" bombs can be targeted with extreme accuracy, their impact on representations of war in international public opinion cannot be controlled. While preparing this webpage on March 26, 2003, reports came in concerning a bombing of a market in downtown Baghdad. Both Iraqi and "coalition" spokesmen deny responsibility for the bombing, and there is a major public relations campaign on both sides accusing the other side of responsibility.

