

GUERNICA

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Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*. 1937. Oil on canvas. Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid.

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Within three months of the complete destruction of the Basque city, Guernica in 1937, Picasso emerged from an unproductive period to create one of the most galvanizing artistic political statements ever depicted. His painting was a reaction to the first saturation bombing of an entire city in military history, which killed and injured over 2,500 innocent civilians. Picasso's artistic expression of that historical event and the

historical significance of *Guernica* make this painting unique. The visual conversation that we as viewers have with *Guernica* affects our impression of the past. This powerful ability of art to influence our perception of the past, and hence the truth, bestows upon the artist a great deal of responsibility. Therefore, Picasso's artistic expression in *Guernica* and his contribution to historical perspective are worth exploring. In fact, these two founding principles in Picasso's painting are reflected in themes in *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger, *What is Art?* by Leo Tolstoy, and *On Irregularity* from the notebook of Pierre-Auguste Renoir. This paper will recognize the power of art to form our perception of the truth and will affirm the potential utility of works such as *Guernica* to unveil and convey historical accuracy.

It is Picasso's artistic expression that affords viewers the opportunity to understand his opinion of this event. Artistic expression is a reflection of the artist's perception of an object or event. This phrase "artistic expression" is how some have defined art: that is, art enables the viewer to experience the world through the senses of another. In this respect, art is a language. More importantly, it is a language that needs no translation. The language Picasso uses here is purely pictorial. Every individual who views this work might interpret it differently, but they may all be correct. These multiple interpretations are possible because individuals could have many different responses to Picasso's *Guernica*. This exchange between the viewer and the work is what guides our understanding as to what the artist is illustrating.

Picasso once said, "We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth, at least the truth that is given to us to understand. So, the artist must

know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies."¹ *Guernica* depicts a documented event. It represents Picasso's individual truth of what he saw and felt in regard to this attack on the Basque city. Historians, however, search for verifiable truths. Since no individual can go back in time to experience the reality of this event, we rely on historical documents to shape our understanding of the past. Thus, the historical significance of works such as *Guernica* ensures that our understanding of the past is as unbiased as possible. According to Picasso, even though we know that "art is a lie,"² we can use it to find the truth. Using a multitude of historical documents from various sources that depict a variety of views and opinions, we are able to configure the underlying truth. With more diverse opinions, we will be able to highlight the bias, cast aside unsupported opinions, and distill the core of the truth. In this way, *Guernica* exhibits its historical significance. It is another tool that allows us to unveil the truth of the past.

Furthermore, Picasso's *Guernica* speaks to the viewer more efficiently than the text of historical documentation. John Berger, in *Ways of Seeing*, reminds us that "Seeing comes before words."³ As stated before, art can serve as a window into the past. It is one of the media that allow us to see the past through the eyes of another. Literature also shares this quality with art. The distinction, however, lies in the speed and accuracy with which an historical perspective is offered to the viewer. In order for a person to receive an historical lesson by literature, that individual must first be able to

¹ Alfred Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art* (New York City: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 26.

² Barr, *Picasso*, 26.

³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York City: Penguin, 1989), 1.

read. In the past, when a large proportion of the population was not literate, this problem was significant. However, more recently it has been proved to be less of an obstacle. Nevertheless, in addition to being literate, the individual who would learn from literature must also have sufficient analytical skills to understand and comprehend the authors' messages. Although literature is a valuable means of expression, it presents these barriers. In contrast, art is visual. The visual experience affords a more immediate understanding of the world around us than reading does. Beginning at birth, we use our eyes to take in information about our environment. Reading comes later. In this respect, art is a more organic medium through which we can experience the past. Art allows us to return to our natural ability to observe an object and understand something about it. As Berger said, "Seeing comes before words."⁴

Berger was then able to conclude that "images are more precise and richer than literature"⁵ because of their ability to inform us immediately. When we see a work of art, such as *Guernica*, our senses allow us to understand that the artist was not depicting beauty or contentment. *Guernica* shows struggle, grief, destruction, and chaos. Viewing this work does not require any formal understanding of the bombing of the city to understand the artist's view.

Now that we understand how the image conveys a more precise understanding than literature, we must discover what the image is. According to Berger:

An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or set of appearances, which has been detached from the

⁴ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

place and the time in which it first made its appearance. . . Every image embodies a way of seeing.⁶

Guernica is an image that embodies Picasso's way of seeing human brutality. This work is a rebirth of the destruction, pain, and terror that began at four in the afternoon on April 26, 1937, in the Basque city of Guernica. In recreating this instant, Picasso is able to detach this event from a specific place and time. The detachment occurs when he records this event on canvas. By painting this moment in time, Picasso has inscribed his perception of what happened, along with the truth behind the event. This depiction of a moment that has been removed from the restraints of time and place is the essence of an image. Berger notes, "Gradually it became evident that an image could outlast what it represented."⁷ Therefore, when the essence of an event has been extracted in the form of an image, it can last indefinitely. Once Picasso completed *Guernica*, he gave us the option to travel back in time and to experience the intensity of that one moment in the past.

Now that *Guernica* has been proven to be an image that promotes an historical perspective, we must attempt to define it as art. Tolstoy believes that:

Art is a human activity . . . that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them.⁸

In this definition of art, Tolstoy assumes the same definition of an image as Berger. He assumes that art is a form of communication. The most significant difference between the two is that Tolstoy believes that in order for something to be art, an artist must

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 2.

⁸ Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (New York City: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1899), 3.

communicate some emotion to the observer. In this respect, we should recognize that the class "art" comprises only a portion of the genus "image." The term "image" is the more inclusive category because there are many images that are not to be considered art. However, art is not a subset of the term "image" because not all art is conveyed visually.

Guernica can be defined as an image and as art. Picasso, through his individual way of seeing, was able to capture an event at one instant. In this respect, we can see *Guernica* as an image. It is also art because Picasso consciously expresses his emotions and feelings towards this event. *Guernica* exemplifies Tolstoy's claim about art when he says that it is "a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity."⁹ Picasso shows his condemnation of brutality in this work. He fights for the progress of the individual and humanity by using a visual tool to challenge the thoughts of others. He realizes that such an attack on innocent civilians is evidence of the corrosion of humanity. The evidence of pain in this work is palpable, and the overall organization of subjects aids in the portrayal of chaos. This composition is extremely emotional and influences the viewer effectively.

Tolstoy understands that artistic observation is a reciprocal relationship that we, the viewers, have with the work:

Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with who produced the work, or is producing the art

⁹ Tolstoy, *What is Art?* 2.

and with all those who simultaneously, previously, or subsequently received the same artistic impression.¹⁰

The first relationship is obvious; it is the visual one. Style and technique are used to communicate the artist's intentions. The second relationship is more subtle. The viewers, critics, and historians will all see this painting differently. In a sense, the second relationship is with the "art world." Influential people in the "art world" will create new ideas and interpretations of art so that when other people view the work, they will take all of these new ideas with them. This outside information creates a bias that can possibly take away from the artist's original intentions.

Guernica is more than just an image. It represents Picasso's ideas and emotions in reference to the destruction and brutality of mankind. A photograph of this bombing would represent, with accuracy, the actual event. It would remove the moment from the restraints of time, but it could not fully capture human reactions and perceptions. This hypothetical photograph would be an image. *Guernica*, however, is art. It is an image first because it pauses time for a moment, much like the photograph, but unlike the photograph, this work is further from the truth and, in a sense, dishonest. This visual dishonesty and the idea that "Art is a lie"¹¹ should not be seen as a fallacious portrayal of reality. It is only dishonest because it is Picasso's view and interpretation of these events. Picasso was biased in this creation, but that is the nature of art.

As we noted in the beginning, art is a form of communication. In this case, Picasso is communicating with the viewer how he perceives this event. The painting *Guernica* is

¹⁰ Tolstoy, *What is Art?* 2.

¹¹ Barr, *Picasso*, 26.

only one tool that we need to understand the truth of what happened on that fateful day in the city Guernica. No single record of an historical event is ever completely unbiased. For example, poems and articles concerning the attack were written by individuals who experienced this event in some capacity. These individuals have their own personal perspectives that also distort the truth. Moreover, with a multitude of sources, we can move closer to historical accuracy by comparing and contrasting the biased sources with one another.

Picasso has a unique method of expressing his ideas. His forms and shapes in *Guernica* are extremely irregular and unrealistic. His emphasis on abstraction adds to the tension in this piece. Renoir, in his notes *On Irregularity*, mentions:

The earth is not round. An orange is not round. Not one section of it has the same form or weight as another. If you divide it quarters into quarters, you will not find in a single quarter the same number of pips as in any other three; nor will any of the pips be exactly alike.¹²

One interpretation of this quote is that everything is irregular, even the human mind, and that irregularity explains why all artists capture the world differently. Picasso's forms represent more than people and animals—they represent a community. Each form, pattern, and line has significance. In fact, it is the "significant form"¹³ of this work that conveys a particular impression to the viewer. It is the way in which the forms are united to create an historical statement that allows Picasso to express his feelings to the fullest extent. If he had formalized and forced his characters into conventional forms, the power of his message would have been lessened.

¹² Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *On Irregularity* (New York City: Little Brown, 1958), 1.

¹³ Clive Bell, "Art" in *Reflecting on Art*, ed. John A. Fisher (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1993), 268-298.

Guernica shows its viewers a destructive event in the past. It is a marvelous piece of art because it represents Picasso's perspective of the direction in which humanity was moving in the late 1930s. He utilizes irregular forms and patterns to convey his individual way of seeing. As a result of the artist taking so much individual liberty in expressing his way of seeing, the truth becomes distorted. However, this phenomenon is true not only of art, but also of all media in which history is recorded. All documents, which serve as records of the past, contain some bias. Therefore, in reality, we cannot independently trust any individual account of an historical event. Instead, if we wish to accurately understand the past, we must rely on a multitude of sources.

Picasso accepted that "Art is not truth."¹⁴ Instead, he acknowledged that art is a dangerous lie. If individuals accept it as complete truth without comparing it to other accounts, we are likely to be misled. Hence, the second part of his quote, "Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth,"¹⁵ is essential to understanding what he really means. We can use *Guernica* to come up with our own opinions of the past. This idea is supported by Renoir when he says, "Young people should learn to see things for themselves and not take advice."¹⁶ With the aid of *Guernica* and other supporting documents, we can better understand the truth behind this human catastrophe.

Bibliography

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¹⁴ Barr, *Picasso*, 26.

¹⁵ Barr, *Picasso*, 26.

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