

LESSON FIVE: Art and War



IMAGE THIRTEEN: Pablo Picasso. 1881–1973. *Guernica*. 1937. Oil on canvas, 11' 5½" x 10' (349.3 x 776.6 cm). Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE FOURTEEN: Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *The Charnel House*. 1944–45. Oil and charcoal on canvas, 6' 6¾" x 8' 2½" (199.8 x 250.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Sam A. Lewisohn Bequest (by exchange), Mrs. Marya Bernard Fund in memory of her husband Dr. Bernard Bernard, and anonymous funds. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

INTRODUCTION

Picasso's work was not consistently political, but in 1945 he said the following:

What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has only eyes if he's a painter, or ears if he's a musician, or a lyre at every level of his heart if he's a poet, or even, if he's a boxer, just his muscles? On the contrary, he's at the same time a political being, constantly alive to heartrending, fiery, or happy events, to which he responds in every way[...] No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.¹⁴

The two paintings in this lesson are Picasso's most overtly and powerful political statements.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider political art's definition and role in society.
- Students will explore Picasso's response to specific historical events in the twentieth century.

14. Pablo Picasso, *Statement*, in Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, 487.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to brainstorm definitions of political art. Your students should discuss what they expect to find when looking at art that is deemed political. Make sure they consider the choices an artist might make in terms of medium, material, scale, and composition to best represent his or her ideas and allow for widest dissemination.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to take a moment to look at *Guernica*. Ask them to describe what they think is going on in the work, and why.
- Ask your students to consider the formal characteristics of the work. Ask them to consider the impact of a work that is black and white and has abstracted figures and an ambiguous background. Ask them how this work compares to a photograph. How is it similar? How is it different? What would be the impact of this work if it were in color instead of black and white?
- Inform your students that Picasso painted this scene in reaction to an actual event.

During the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), the incumbent Spanish government, which was engaged in a rebellion led by right-wing nationalist Francisco Franco, commissioned Picasso to create a mural that would hang in the 1937 World’s Fair in Paris. Picasso began work on a theme, but, on April 27, 1937, rebels bombed the Spanish town of Guernica for over three hours, killing or wounding 1,600 civilians. Newspapers in Paris, where Picasso was living at the time, were filled with photographs and first-hand accounts of the event. Picasso put aside his original theme and began work on *Guernica*. He completed it six months later.

- *Guernica* is considered to be an antiwar statement. When asked to explain his use of symbolism in the work, Picasso said, "It isn't up to the painter to define the symbols. Otherwise it would be better if he wrote them out in so many words! The public who look at the picture must interpret the symbols as they understand them."¹⁵ Ask your students if they think *Guernica* is effective as an antiwar statement. Ask why or why not.

Guernica, which traveled to many places after the 1937 World’s Fair, was exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in 1940, where it remained until 1981. Picasso wanted the mural to be owned by the Spanish people, but he refused to allow it to return to Spain while Franco was in power.

- Ask your students to take a moment to look at *Charnel House*. Ask them to compare this work to *Guernica*. What are the similarities? What are the differences?
- *Charnel House* was executed between 1944 and 1945, eight years after *Guernica*. Ask your students if they know what was going on in the world during this time. Inform your students that this period marked the end of World War II (September 1945).

In 1944, Picasso said, “I have not painted the war because I am not the kind of painter who goes out like a photographer for something to depict.”¹⁶ In this quote, Picasso was distinguishing between *recording* an event, as a documentary photographer would, and *commenting* on an event as an artist. Picasso began *Charnel House* in the months that followed having been exposed through newspapers to horrifying photographs of concentration camps.

15. http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/a_nav/guernica_nav/main_guerfrm.html

16. Pablo Picasso, quoted in *Picasso in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art*. William S. Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 166.

- Ask your students to consider both paintings. How does Picasso communicate the innocence of the suffering people represented in the paintings?
- Ask your students to consider Picasso's quote on the previous page. How might *Guernica* or *Charnel House* be considered "an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy?"¹⁷
- Unlike *Guernica*, *Charnel House* does not explicitly represent an historical event, and the title of the work is unspecific. Ask your students how they think Picasso's choice not to be explicit about his topic impacts the effect of the painting.
- Show your students images from this guide of some of the work that Picasso completed between 1937, when he painted *Guernica*, and 1945, when he painted *Charnel House*. Picasso worked in many different styles during that time, but he returned to the style of *Guernica* when creating his image of the horrors of World War II. Ask your students why they think Picasso returned to the style of *Guernica* when creating *Charnel House*.

ACTIVITIES

1. By depicting the massacre of innocent victims in a monumental public work, Picasso advocated the end of the Spanish Civil War. With *Charnel House*, he created a scene of an innocent family being murdered, in order to advocate for peace. Ask your students what they think the relationship is between art that comments and art that documents. Ask your students to research contemporary artists who comment on political events and contemporary artists who document political events.
2. Picasso exhibited *Guernica* at the 1937 Paris World's Fair, where he knew that millions of people would have the opportunity to see it. Ask your students how they could best communicate a political message to a large group of people today. Ask your students to form groups to research a political issue and come up with a plan for disseminating the information.

17. Pablo Picasso, *Statement*, in Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, 487.