Guernica

Pablo Picasso

Picasso is considered by some people to be the greatest artist of this century. This is not only because he produced so much great art, but because his mind was so restless and so inventive that he kept changing direction and influencing other artists, who continued to challenge tradition, too. Picasso often worked in more than one style at a time and experimented with new ideas, styles and medias all his life - and he lived to be 93.

Picasso’s most famous painting is Guernica (pronounced ger-nee-ca). He created this huge painting in just over three weeks in 1937 after the bombing of the little town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Thousands of innocent people were injured and killed. In its sharp lines, its confusion and its distorted shapes, Guernica shows the suffering and pain of war. Picasso has used only black and white paint as symbols of death, mourning and tragedy. He believed that brighter colours might distract the viewer from the agony of the scene. In Guernica, all of the figures have open mouths. You can almost hear them shouting or groaning or screaming. Each face has two staring eyes, too, regardless of whether they’re in profile or facing the viewer.

Guernica is a linear painting. This means that Picasso has painted sharp edges on his shapes rather than explaining them by using light and shade. There are many jagged lines and sharp angles. He has painted his black and grey tones in areas of almost flat colour (unbroken with texture or tone), and he has repeated shapes (e.g. the eye and the sun) and patterns (e.g. the horse’s hair). All of these techniques help to focus the viewer’s eyes on what is really happening in the painting. Picasso died in 1973.
**Guernica**

*Guernica* 1937 Mural

**Artist:** Pablo Picasso  
**Title:** Guernica  
**Date:** 1937  
**Medium:** Oil on canvas  
**Dimensions:** 3.5 x 7.8 m

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid
**RESPONSE TO AN ARTWORK**

**PURPOSE**
To describe, analyse and judge an artwork (image)

**STRUCTURE**

1. **Introduction - Context of Work**
   - title, artist, when/where, subject matter, theme/ideas, media, technique, style.

2. **Structural Frame Analysis**
   - composition, elements of design, principles of design

3. **Subjective Frame Analysis**
   - mood, emotion
   - audience
   - connections to you
   - art writers opinions

4. **Cultural Frame Analysis**
   - issues - symbolism - style, art movement/influences/individualism

5. **Post Modern Frame Analysis**
   - unconventional/challenging
   - relevance
   - appropriation - layered meaning - irony, parody, jokes....

6. **Conclusion - Judgement**
   - summarise Frames
   - interpretation/evaluation

**LANGUAGE FEATURES**

- **timeless present tense** eg 'This expressive artwork shows the artist's view of the horrors of war'
- **technical words** to describe artistic techniques & effects eg texture, pattern, oil
- **impersonal language** - passive voice. eg The artwork was painted by Picasso.
- **verbs showing relationships** eg shows, symbolises, evokes, depicts, represents,
- **noun groups** to describe artwork and its effects. eg extremely thick brushstrokes
- **evaluative language** in judgement. eg 'Picasso successfully involves us in his response to the horrors of war using stark colour and emotional symbols.
- **linking words** to show relationships. eg therefore, because, resulting in ...
- **topic sentences** introducing different frames & techniques

Response to an Artwork
RESPONSE TO AN ARTWORK

1. Context of Work
- title, artist, when/where, subject matter, theme/ideas, media, technique, style.

Context of Work
media, technique, style.

2. Structural Analysis
- Composition Focal Point, definedblurry Form, Foreground/Middleground and Background

Structural Analysis
Elements of Design, Line, Direction, Shape, Size, Colour, Mass, Tone and Texture.

Structural Analysis

3. Subjective Analysis
Mood, Emotion, how is it created? Why audience connects to the emotion

Subjective Frame Analysis
audience art writers opinions

Response to an Artwork
RESPONSE TO AN ARTWORK

4. Cultural Analysis
Issues - Social, Class, Gender; Politics, Economics, Technology;
Cultural Analysis
Symbolism, Art Movement, Style, Influences (other Artists),
Individualism

5. Post Modern Analysis
Unconventional, Challenging, Relevant to Today, What’s Missing;
Post Modern Analysis
Appropriation, Layered Meaning, Irony, Parody, Jokes, Puns;

6. Judgement
Interpretation
Judgement
Evaluation
Guernica

Learning Goals

Students will:

- Analyse artistic decisions (use of visual elements, composition, symbolism) and determine how Picasso’s choices affected the communication of a powerful anti-war message.

Assessment of Student Knowledge and Skills

Students will be able to:

- Identify the way organizational principles of art solve visual art problems in order to effectively communicate ideas.

Scene takes place in darkness in open space, possible town square surrounded by burning buildings.

Figures within the triangle:

- Fleeing Woman,
- The Wounded Horse (suffering humanity, originally had small winged horse/soul leaving gash in side),
- The Broken Statue of the Warrior (classical image perhaps of fallen Spanish republicans).
- Tip of triangle “eye” of electric light globe (image of sun/eye) and
- Woman with the Lamp (light holding darkness/bull at bay).

To right Burning Building with Falling Woman (perhaps also burning, in stance of suffering Mary Magdelene).

To left Wailing Woman with Dead Baby (originally on ladder, like bringing Christ down from the cross)

Behind which stand Bull (threatening or protecting woman and child?).

Other figures are Bird (rising or falling, originally small winged horse/soul) and

Flower (symbol of regeneration and hope, like 600 year old tree left standing).

Response to an Artwork
Considered a progenitor of Modern Art and an originator of Cubism, there were nonetheless several recurrent themes in Picasso’s work. Instead of using traditional battle imagery as visual inspiration for Guernica, Picasso turned to the familiar arena of the Spanish bullring. Picasso was only three when his father took him to his first bullfight. The brutal choreography — fierce power and inevitable tragedy — had obsessed him since.

According to art historian, Patricia Failing: "The bull and the horse are important characters in Spanish culture. Picasso himself certainly used these characters to play many different roles over time. This has made the task of interpreting the specific meaning of the bull and the horse very tough. Their relationship is a kind of ballet that was conceived in a variety of ways throughout Picasso’s career.”

In his studio Picasso kept a large wicker mask of a bull, and often played out scenes from the bullring. Is the bull Picasso himself? The artist, gazing helpless and horrified at the surrounding holocaust? Do the horse and the bull represent the fight between Loyalists and Nationalists, the stalwart Spanish people and Franco’s brutal regime? Or the ongoing struggle between the female and male, perhaps a reflection of the artist’s personal life? Was the enemy evident in the work, or were all of the subjects victims?

“Sometimes the bull is seen as a symbol of Spain, as a symbol of the virtues and the values of Spain and Spanish culture,” says Failing. “Sometimes the relationship is one of gender and a sort of masculine force and feminine force. Sometimes it’s a relationship of aggressor to something more passive. Sometimes it’s a relationship between darkness and light. So the bull can be the good guy, or the bull can be the bad guy, depending on which interpretation you happen to dig up in your survey of reactions to Guernica.”

In the past, Picasso has also drawn the bull in the form of the Minotaur — a mythological creature, half beast, half human — his thinly veiled alter ego in a battle of the sexes with the women in his life. His earlier works are filled with bulls and Minotaurs charging, goring, killing, raping. But many also depict bulls as the victims of suffering. Standing enigmatically in the background, the bull in Guernica was interpreted alternately as the brutish Fascist state and the Spanish people.

Picasso never committed to a specific explanation of his symbolism: “...this bull is a bull and this horse is a horse... If you give a meaning to certain things in my paintings it may be very true, but it is not my idea to give this meaning. What ideas and conclusions you have got I obtained too, but instinctively, unconsciously. I make the painting for the painting. I paint the objects for what they are.”

The central figure in Guernica is a horse run through with a javelin, wrenched in agony. Some interpreted the horse as Franco’s Nationalism, with Picasso predicting its downfall. But other, opposite meanings make more sense in the overall context. The portrayal of the people as a helpless animal dying a senseless death, without the light of hope, is certainly a disturbing idea.
I. Bull, Woman and Dead Child.


Pictures of Minotaur in which bull can be either violent force or calming force. Is bull brutality and darkness (fascism)? Or protector of grieving woman? Strength of Spanish people? Innocent girl fending off sword-wielding bull. Becomes woman in mural with lamp fending off threatening bull?
Speculations as to the exact meaning of the jumble of tortured images are as numerous and varied as the people who have viewed the painting. There is no doubt that *Guernica* challenges our notions of warfare as heroic and exposes it as a brutal act of self-destruction. But it is a hallmark of Picasso’s art that any symbol can hold many, often contradictory meanings, and the precise significance of the imagery in *Guernica* remains ambiguous. When asked to explain his symbolism, Picasso remarked, “*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.”
In creating Guernica, Picasso had no interest in painting the non-representational abstraction typical of some of his contemporaries, such as Malevich. Instead, he focused on a narrative subject matter that could be easily understood as his way of promoting the anti-Franco political message.

In examining the piece, the central horse is drowning into the triangle of chaos, but can be saved by Lady Liberty to the viewer’s right, carrying the lamp of democracy. Above him is the eye/sun’s rays/lightbulb motif, either symbolizing the hope of freedom and peace or representing the bomb dropped on Guernica; “bombilla” means both “light bulb” in Spanish and “bomb” in an older Spanish. To the horse’s left is Franco (also Hitler and Mussolini), depicted as a minotaur, trying to steal a child from his mother: their position is reminiscent of Michelangelo’s Pieta. To the viewer’s right of the horse is a character that resembles the Crucifixion and at the same time mimics the portrayal of Hell as an absorbing, underground force in Dante’s Inferno. In the center, at the very bottom of Picasso’s masterpiece is a flower growing from a shattered vase, reminding the viewer of the manipulation and dominion forced upon Spain by the Spanish Nationalists and Franco.
It was market day in Guernica when the church bells of Santa Maria sounded the alarm that afternoon in 1937. People from the surrounding hillsides crowded the town square. “Every Monday was a fair in Guernica,” says José Monasterio, eyewitness to the bombing. “They attacked when there were a lot of people there. And they knew when their bombing would kill the most. When there are more people, more people would die.”

For over three hours, twenty-five or more of Germany’s best-equipped bombers, accompanied by at least twenty more Messerschmitt and Fiat Fighters, dumped one hundred thousand pounds of high-explosive and incendiary bombs on the village, slowly and systematically pounding it to rubble.

“We were hiding in the shelters and praying. I only thought of running away, I was so scared. I didn’t think about my parents, mother, house, nothing. Just escape. Because during those three and one half hours, I thought I was going to die.” (eyewitness Luis Aurtenetxea)

Those trying to escape were cut down by the strafing machine guns of fighter planes. “They kept just going back and forth, sometimes in a long line, sometimes in close formation. It was as if they were practicing new moves. They must have fired thousands of bullets.” (eyewitness Juan Guezureya) The fires that engulfed the city burned for three days. Seventy percent of the town was destroyed. Sixteen hundred civilians - one third of the population - were killed or wounded.
4. The Fleeing Woman

Guernica is the cultural capital of the Basque people, seat of their centuries-old independence and democratic ideals. It has no strategic value as a military target. Yet some time later, a secret report to Berlin was uncovered in which Von Richthofen stated, “…the concentrated attack on Guernica was the greatest success,” making the dubious intent of the mission clear: the all-out air attack had been ordered on Franco’s behalf to break the spirited Basque resistance to Nationalist forces. Guernica had served as the testing ground for a new Nazi military tactic - blanket-bombing a civilian population to demoralize the enemy. It was wanton, man-made holocaust.
On May 11th, just fifteen days after the bombing, Picasso stretched a canvas for the mural. It stood eleven-and-a-half feet tall by almost twenty-six feet wide - so large, he had to brace it at a slant to fit under the ceiling of his studio. He then began to lay out the images in full scale - a woman wailing over her dead child . . . a warrior clutching a shattered sword as his horse drops in torment to its knees . . . a jumble of bodies lying trampled on the ground - all part of Picasso’s vision of the holocaust at Guernica.

According to art historian, Patricia Failing, “Picasso was very properly trained in the grand tradition of painting, allegorical painting about universal themes: the horrors of war, the massacres of the innocents. Characters that typically appear in these paintings reappear in Picasso’s paintings as well. There’s usually quite clearly a suffering woman, someone who’s screaming, a woman with a child who’s been injured, or may even be dead. And to see that Picasso was able to take that traditional academic motif and actually rework it and make it relevant again to this particular time and this particular circumstance, I think is really one of his great achievements in this painting.”
6. The Woman With The Lamp
7. The Falling Woman
8. The Flower
**QUESTIONS**

1. Look at the reproduction of Guernica. Picasso said the horse with the sword through its chest represented the Spanish people, and the bull symbolised brutality and darkness. Describe what you think is happening in this painting. Can you find the flower? What might it symbolise? Do you think it was a good idea that Picasso used such a limited number of colours when he painted Guernica?

2. Select one figure from Guernica. You may want to find a larger reproduction from which to work. Redraw it much larger, looking carefully at the way Picasso has exaggerated, distorted and rearranged the parts of the face and body.

3. Imagine that you are an art critic and your job is to write a column for your local newspaper. Last night you attended the opening of an exhibition of work by Picasso. Write 200 words describing the work that you saw and your response.

4. Define these terms: *Abstract, Cubism, linear, flat colour, paraphrase.*