

# And Picasso Painted *Guernica*

The story of a  
masterpiece, told by  
Alain Serres

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On the streets of Madrid (Spain)



On the streets of New York (USA)



On the streets of Bilbao (Basque Country, Spain)

And  
Picasso  
Painted  
*Guernica*



Written and designed by Alain Serres  
Translated by Rosalind Price





Pablo, aged 7.  
Even at this young  
age he shows a keen  
interest in drawing  
and pictures.

Paris, October 1881: in front of a crowd of thousands, Thomas Edison demonstrates his new invention – an electric light. Little by little, night will get brighter on Earth.



Edison's light

It won't be long before a train – the Orient Express – crosses Europe as far as Constantinople, gateway to Asia. And soon after, the first car will travel faster than a horse at full gallop. Little by little, the distance between countries is shrinking.



One of Pablo's first paintings, done when he was 13.

*THE GIRL  
WITH BARE FEET,  
JULY 1895*

In Spain, it's the end of summer. The sun is less fierce, and the oranges in Andalusia are ripe at last, plump and sweet.  
On 25 October, between the sea and the olive-tree hills of Malaga, a child is born. His parents call him Pablo.

From an early age, Pablo draws and paints. He astonishes everyone. His father helps him; he's a painter and teacher at the school of Fine Arts. Pablo's father says that a drawing should be an exact representation of the model: red fabric should look like red fabric, sadness should look like sadness.



Pablo paints his own portrait for the first time, aged 14.

SELF-PORTRAIT,  
1896

Young Pablo takes these touching gifts and uses them to paint exactly as he wants. Within a few years, he breaks away from the lifeless pictures he has been forced to paint, and gives his brushes a new freedom. From now on, white fabric can become a cloud of feathers on snow; sky can be the canvas for a painter's dreams.

Pablo Ruiz Picasso is a child who devours the world with his big dark eyes, and enjoys depicting it in colour in his first sketchbooks and early paintings. His father teaches him to look more closely at faces, birds, light, and Pablo reproduces everything perfectly. He helps his father paint doves. His father is so impressed by the boy's skill that he decides to stop painting when Pablo is 13. In his Barcelona studio, he presents his son with his paintbrushes, his paints and his very last palette.



MARÍA PICASSO LOPEZ,  
THE ARTIST'S MOTHER,  
1896



THE ARTIST'S FATHER,  
1896

His father, José Ruiz Blasco, and his mother, María, painted by Pablo Picasso at the age of 14.



The first doves Pablo painted. He was 8 years old.

It's 1900, the start of a new century. A train snakes beneath the earth – the first underground railway, in the heart of Paris.

Ferdinand von Zeppelin flies an airship over Lake Constance, Switzerland.

And this talented young boy from Malaga turns 19. He decides to become the painter Pablo Picasso.

CHILD WITH PIGEON,  
1901





ACROBAT ON A BALL,  
1905

HARLEQUIN SEATED,  
1905



Pablo Picasso chooses to live in Paris. He enjoys walking the streets, watching Parisian women in their new dresses, going to the Museum of African Art, to the Medrano Circus. But more than anything he loves painting.

He loves to paint travelling players and entertainers. Acrobats who spin planets beneath their feet, or juggle the stars, to set city people dreaming.

In Paris, Picasso mixes with dancers, musicians and theatre people.

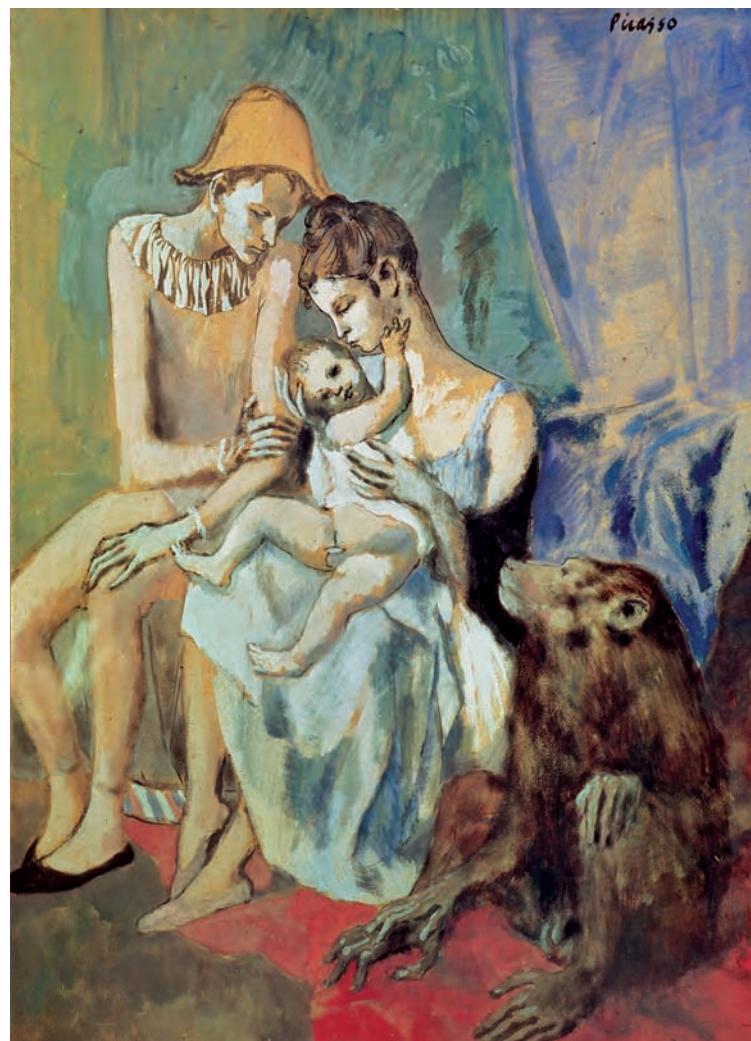




BACKDROP FOR A SCENE FROM PARADE, 1917

And harlequins who dance,  
defying the laws of nature, dressed  
only in a delicate sheath of satin.

Together, they make up the great  
family of artists. For artists,  
anything is possible.



FAMILY  
OF ACROBATS,  
1905

Anything is possible.  
Even being poor.  
Even being blue.  
Even living  
side-by-side,  
gazing in different  
directions.  
Even showing  
both the left-  
and right-hand  
sides of a face in  
a single image.



1901–1906: the phases of Picasso's work known as 'The Blue Period' and 'The Rose Period' follow one another. At first Picasso's paintings are dominated by cool tones, conveying melancholy and misery, then the colours warm up, restoring hope.

ACROBAT AND YOUNG HARLEQUIN,  
1905

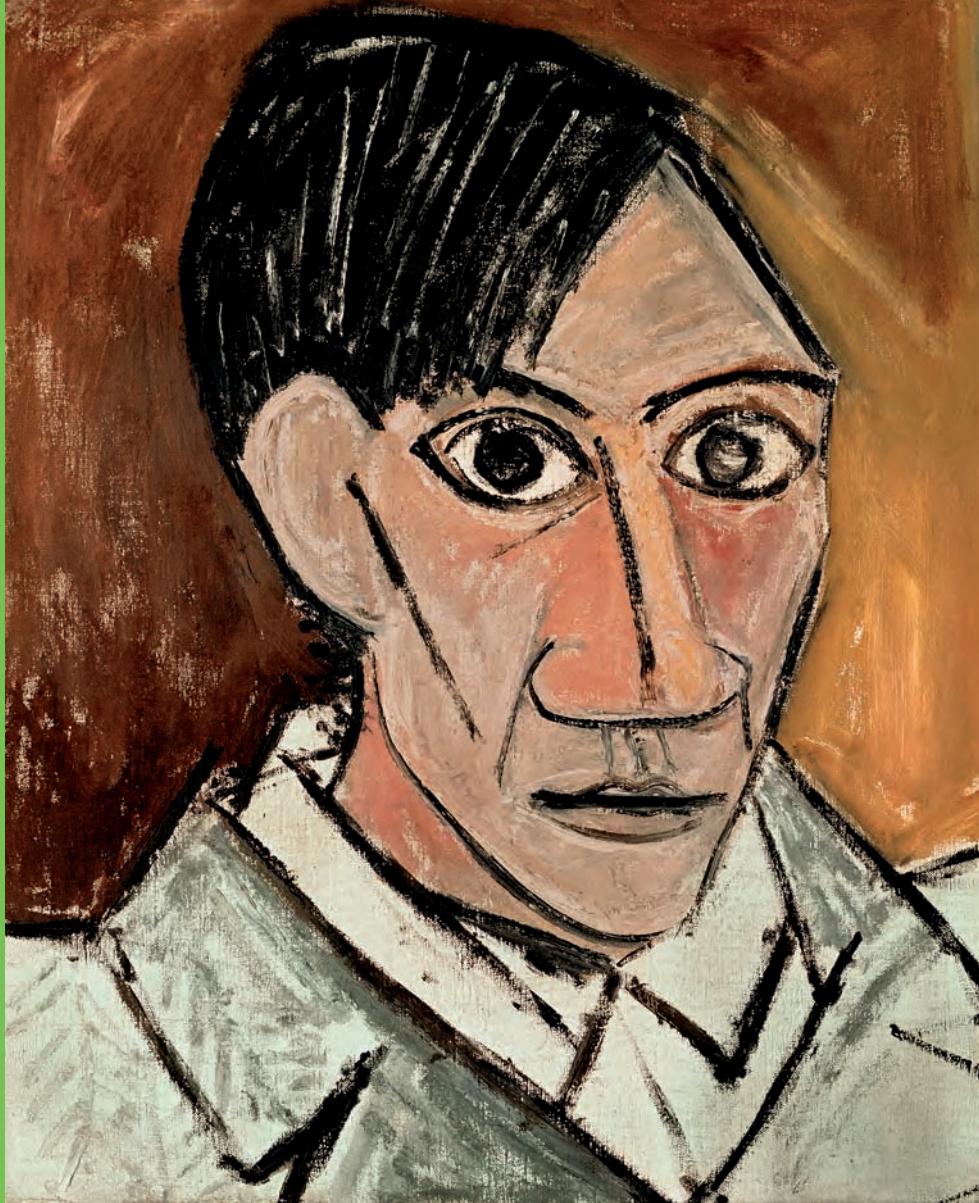


What if one could see everything through a blaze of emotion that seems more real than external reality? Picasso invents a way of seeing that nobody has ever dared think of before. It's as if his eye magically sees the world through 'cubist' lenses!

Picasso and a fellow painter, George Braque, developed a style that was given the name 'Cubism'. They painted people and objects from many different viewpoints, as if they could see every surface at the same time. Using geometric shapes, sharp angles and overlapping areas, they experimented with pictures that looked flat, rather than giving the illusion of perspective. Picasso's first painting of his 'Cubist Period' was *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* in 1907.

*HARLEQUIN,*  
1915

SELF-PORTRAIT, 1907



VIOLIN, 1913-1914

Paris bubbles with ideas. Writers challenge the official language prescribed by the French Academy; artists subvert the rules of art. The Dadaists are completely dada, and the Surrealists are far from realistic! They all dream of absolute freedom – freedom that can transform everything ugly in the world: for 8 million people have just been killed in World War I.

Picasso whips up these winds of change. He creates collages. He introduces bits of newspaper articles into his pictures. He even allows himself the freedom to go back to his father's more precise, naturalistic style of working . . .

His paintings travel to Switzerland, to the USA, to Spain. Young painters everywhere are inspired by his work.

In 1921, two years after the end of the horrifying war, his first son, Paul, is born. Pablo paints little Paul peacefully painting.

Paul's mother, Olga. One of the pictures from Picasso's 'Classical Period'.

PORTRAIT OF OLGA  
IN A CHAIR,  
1917



PAUL DRAWING,  
1923



INTERIOR WITH  
A WOMAN  
DRAWING,  
1935



Picasso paints all the time. He paints anything and everything: love, Spain, the gentleness of women, people reading and painting, his son, and his daughter Maya who is only nine months old when, in the summer of 1936, his own country of Spain is suddenly at war . . .



The previous five years have been a time of political turmoil in Spain. Left-wing parties won most votes at the elections and set up a Spanish Republic to replace the old monarchy. But some groups did not accept this new form of government. When the Republicans win again at the 1936 elections, General Franco and a section of the Spanish army decide to take military action against the Republic. On 18 July 1936, they launch a coup d'état, starting three long years of bloody civil war.

On Monday 26 April 1937, at 4.30 p.m., above the small Basque town of Guernica in the north of Spain, the sky darkens.

Town bells begin to ring ominously.

Fifteen minutes later, the first planes unleash their bombs over the squares and streets and houses. They are German bombers of the Condor Legion, followed by Italian planes.

It's market day in Guernica. People have come from neighbouring villages to buy and sell poultry, vegetables, cattle. At the sound of the first plane, a young bull goes mad and rampages in all directions.

People panic and race for shelter in the houses. Bombs rain down. Roofs collapse. Fires leap from building to building.

France and Great Britain refuse to help the Spanish Republic, but two dictatorships – Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Nazi Germany – give military support to General Franco. In many countries, volunteers rally to go and fight alongside the Spanish Republicans. They form the International Brigades.





This photo, taken under difficult conditions, was touched up at the time to give a more realistic impression.

Every five minutes, another bomber flies low over the town. Families flee into nearby woods; they are gunned down from the planes. It's 3 hours and 15 minutes of horror: 50 tonnes of bombs, 3000 firebombs.

The small town of Guernica contains an important building, the Casa de Juntas, that houses the history and laws of the Basque people – it's their store of memories. In the courtyard of this symbolic building grows an oak. For centuries, this particular tree has united Basques from all the provinces: the Guernica tree, *Guernikako arbola*.

At 7.45 p.m. the last plane disappears. Fires rage; the town is almost burnt to the ground. The church is still standing. The house of the Basques and the special tree are still standing. But where are the men and women, and their children?

The Spanish Civil War claimed 400 000 victims and heralded World War II.





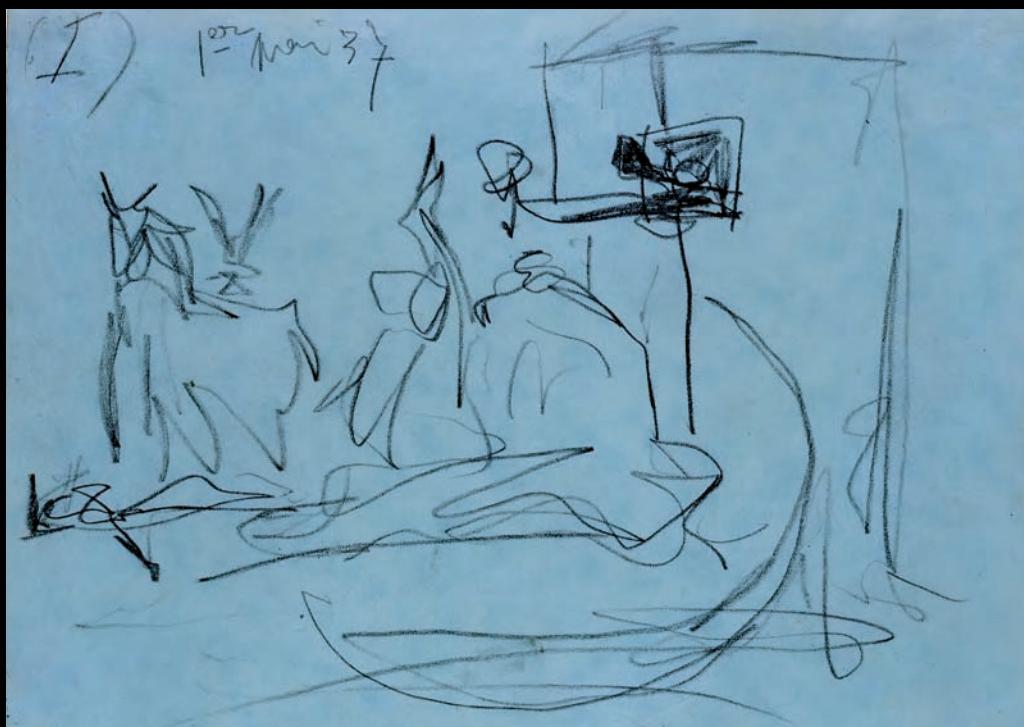
Picasso's first impulse is to paint *Guernica* in black and white. He experiments in colour, but resolves to stick to his initial plan.

That same day, in his studio on the Rue des Grands-Augustins, Picasso begins to hurl ideas onto paper, to scrawl his anger.

He begins to conceive a painting that will be as powerful as his fury.

The Spanish Republic has already commissioned a work from him, to hang side by side with works by Miró and Calder in the Paris International Exhibition, due to open in a few weeks.

He has been thinking of painting his studio, but tonight he makes a decision: he will paint his grief as a Spanish artist – the painting, *Guernica*.



ROUGH FOR GUERNICA (1),  
1 MAY, REINA SOFIA NATIONAL  
ART MUSEUM

The first drawing that Picasso dashed off, in response to what he'd read in the newspaper.

At the start of 1937, Picasso does this etching, which has to be read back-to-front, like a stamp. In a style of drawing that foreshadows the way he draws *Guernica*, he asserts his rejection of violence and fascism.

DREAMS AND LIES  
OF FRANCO  
(BOARD II, STAGE A),  
JANUARY 1937

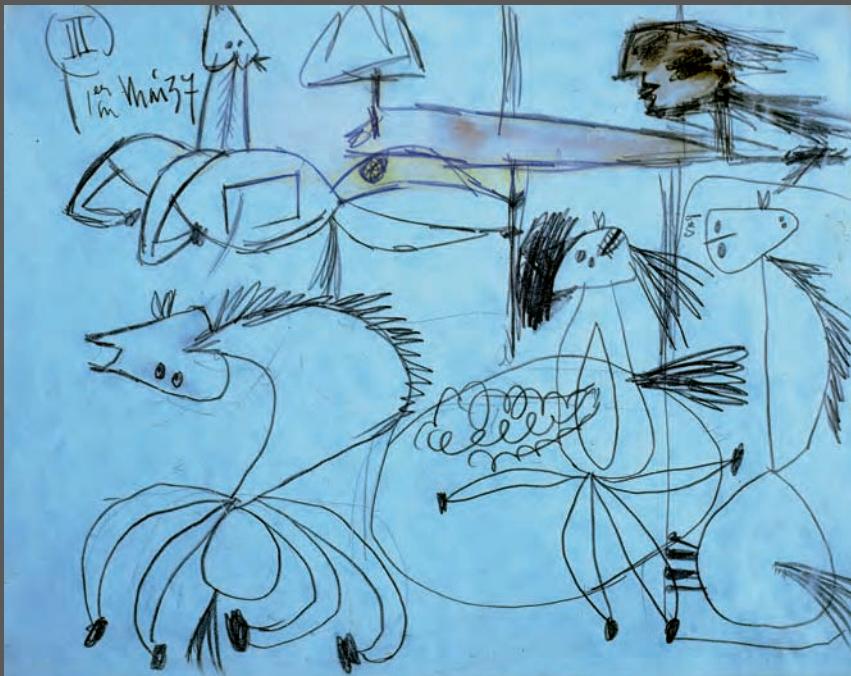


Picasso draws inspiration from anti-Franco etchings he made at the start of the year, from powerful works by the painters Goya and Rousseau, from childhood memories of bulls and horses in his long-lost Spain, and legends of old.

For several years, Picasso has drawn many minotaurs and horses taken from Greek mythology and the Spanish bullrings.

MINOTAUR AND HORSE, 1935





STUDY FOR GUERNICA (III), 1 MAY, REINA SOFIA NATIONAL ART MUSEUM

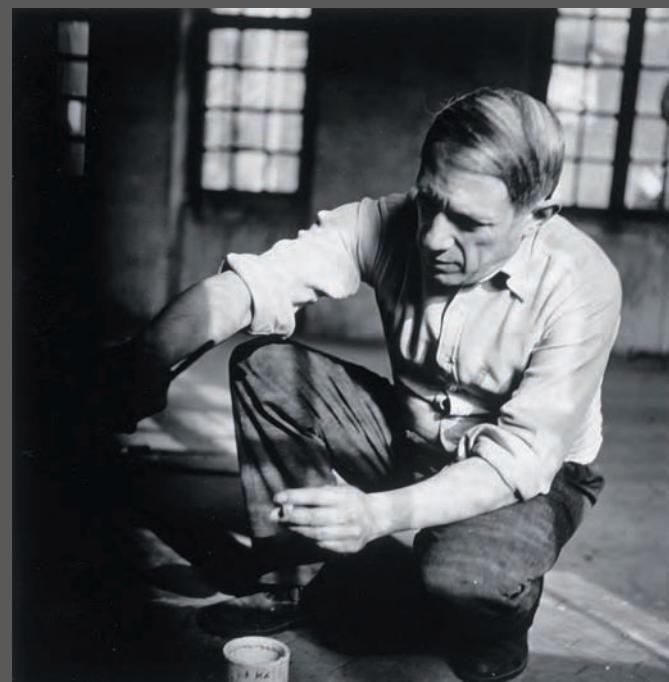


HORSE (V), 1 MAY, REINA SOFIA NATIONAL ART MUSEUM



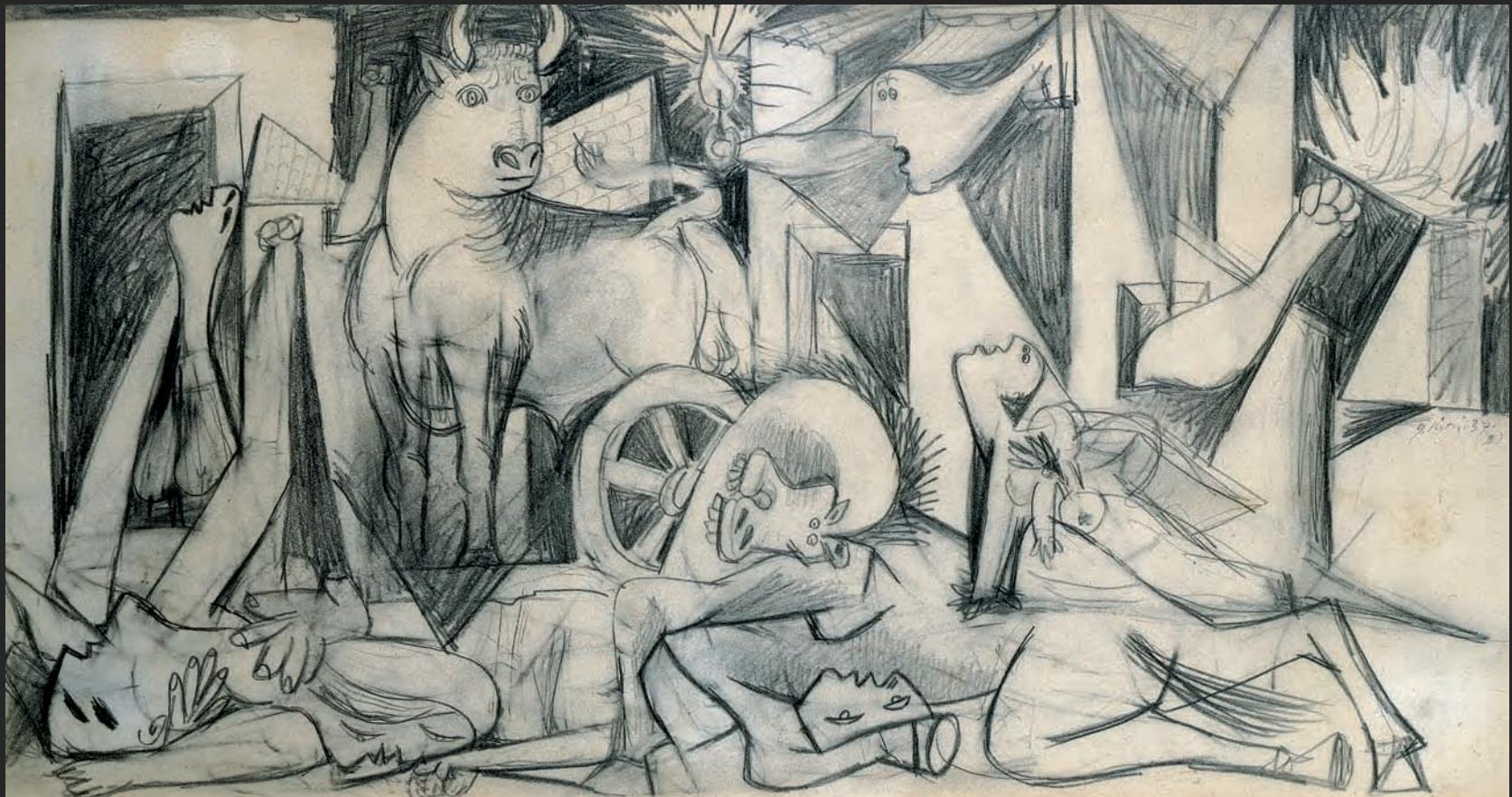
STUDY FOR GUERNICA (IV), 1 MAY, REINA SOFIA NATIONAL ART MUSEUM

How can an artist communicate the torments of body and soul in black and white? Is it acceptable to evoke a massacre with a simple, childlike drawing?



Throughout the painting of the canvas, his friend Dora Maar takes photos, leaving an invaluable record of the work's evolution.

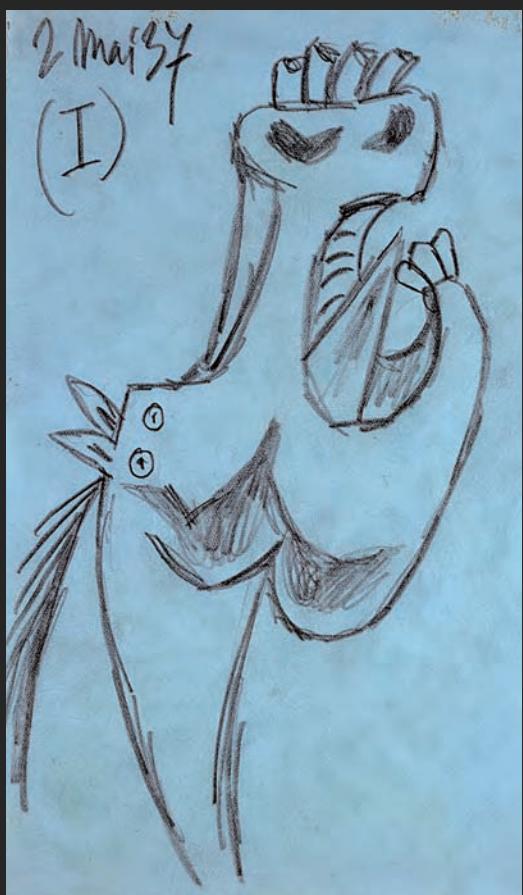
How to make an image more powerful than the blast of 50 tonnes of bombs? How to make it live on, long after the dust and debris has settled? How to make it linger in the mind's eye, even when people have stopped looking?



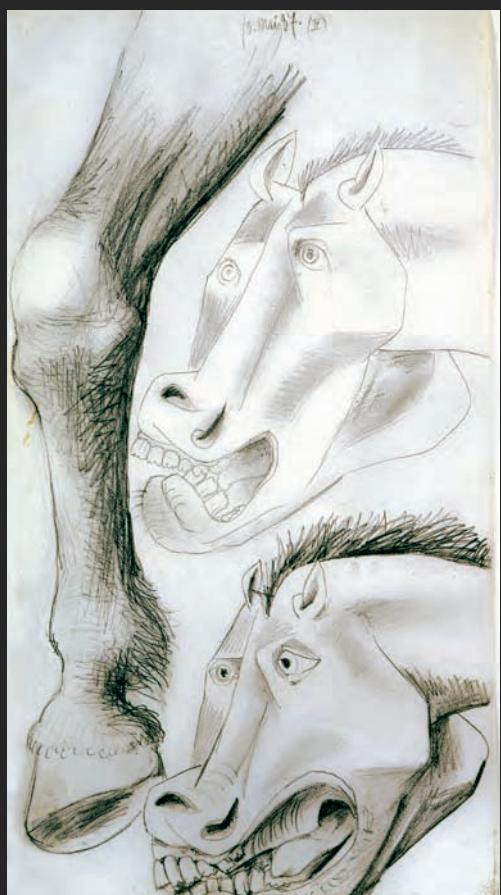
STUDY FOR GUERNICA (VII), 9 MAY, REINA SOFIA NATIONAL ART MUSEUM

On 9 May, after dozens of roughs, the concept for the huge mural begins to take shape on paper. But Picasso feels he must keep on drawing, experimenting, refining the work. Make it more powerful, more truthful. Have doubts. Discard ideas and start again.

THESE FOUR STUDIES: REINA SOFIA NATIONAL ART MUSEUM



HORSE'S HEAD (I), 2 MAY



STUDY FOR THE HORSE (II), 10 MAY



MOTHER AND CHILD DEAD ON A LADDER (III), 9 MAY



GUERNICA, STAGE I, 11 MAY

The first stage of the canvas, photographed by Dora Maar in Picasso's studio.

On 11 May, he takes delivery of more than 7 metres of canvas.

As soon as this is fixed to the wall, Picasso seizes a piece of charcoal, climbs his stepladder and starts drawing the characters that possess him.

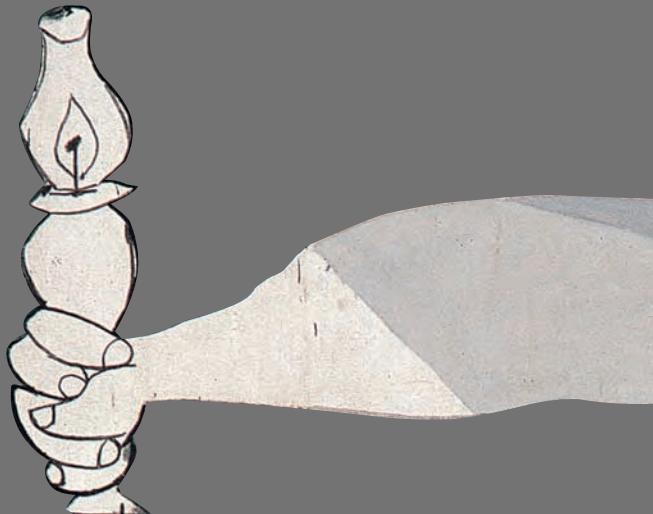


BULL'S HEAD (III), 10 MAY



For two days and nights he scarcely sleeps.  
He paints in black, white and grey, with barely  
a hint of living colour. *Guernica* progresses  
fast. But even as he paints, Picasso imagines  
and re-imagines the work, as if the very act  
of painting helps him think.

He's determined to hide nothing.

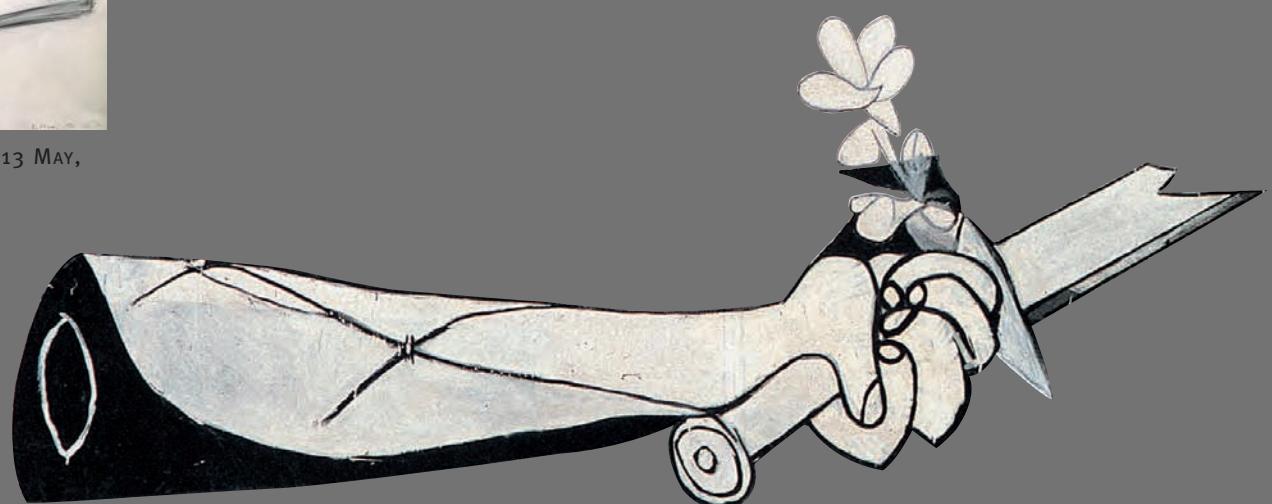


GUERNICA A, STAGE II

Right from the start, a man's arm  
is in the picture. An arm with a  
shattered weapon and a flower  
growing from its clenched fist.  
Perhaps it's from a freedom fighter,  
powerless in the face of bombers—  
torn apart?



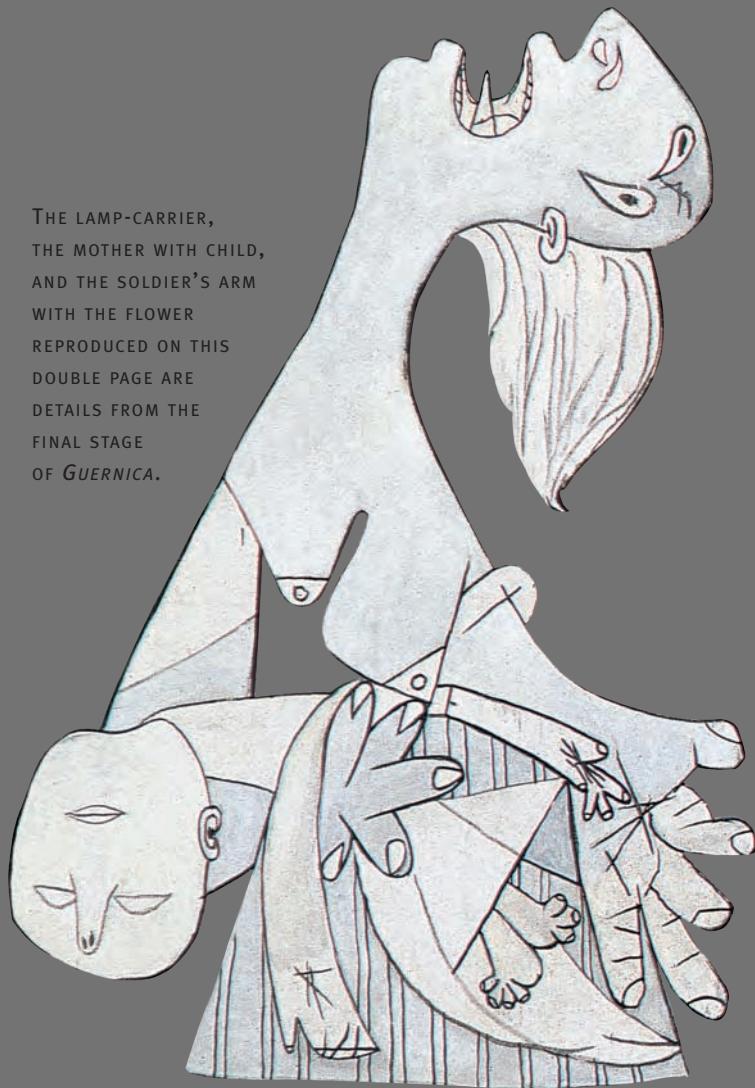
WARRIOR'S HAND WITH BROKEN SWORD (III), 13 MAY,  
REINA SOFIA NATIONAL ART MUSEUM





This lamp is the  
tip of a tragic triangle.  
A small flame of hope,  
above the horrifying  
pyramid of bodies?

THE LAMP-CARRIER,  
THE MOTHER WITH CHILD,  
AND THE SOLDIER'S ARM  
WITH THE FLOWER  
REPRODUCED ON THIS  
DOUBLE PAGE ARE  
DETAILS FROM THE  
FINAL STAGE  
OF *GUERNICA*.



With a single stroke, Picasso draws a line  
almost down the middle of the picture,  
which remains there right to the end.  
It's like the central pillar holding up a  
house, or the sky. Way up high, he draws  
an oil lamp. It's carried by a woman with  
outstretched arm who swoops in through  
a window to rescue the town from darkness.



Picasso throws back the  
mother's head, and her child's.  
He shatters the familiar image of  
Virgin and Child. Shows the world  
upside-down, like the child who dies  
before it can live, like the rain  
of steel that dreadful day.  
Like those eyes, those nostrils,  
made of tears. Like the mouth  
of the child that makes no  
sound, and the mother's that  
cries out, that screams.  
Who, in the midst of all this  
madness, can reassure us  
that the child is only wounded?



HEAD OF WOMAN WEEPING (II), 24 MAY,  
REINA SOFIA NATIONAL ART MUSEUM



GUERNICA, STAGE V



GUERNICA, STAGE VI



GUERNICA, STAGE VII

WOMEN WASHING,  
1938



After 35 days and many nights of dedicated work on *Guernica*, Picasso puts away his pots of black, white and grey. Colour reappears in his paintings. Life sweeps him along. For his huge collage, *Women washing*, Picasso even uses scraps of wallpaper that he'd thought of incorporating into *Guernica*. In life, death always brings transformation.



The best way to overcome barbarity



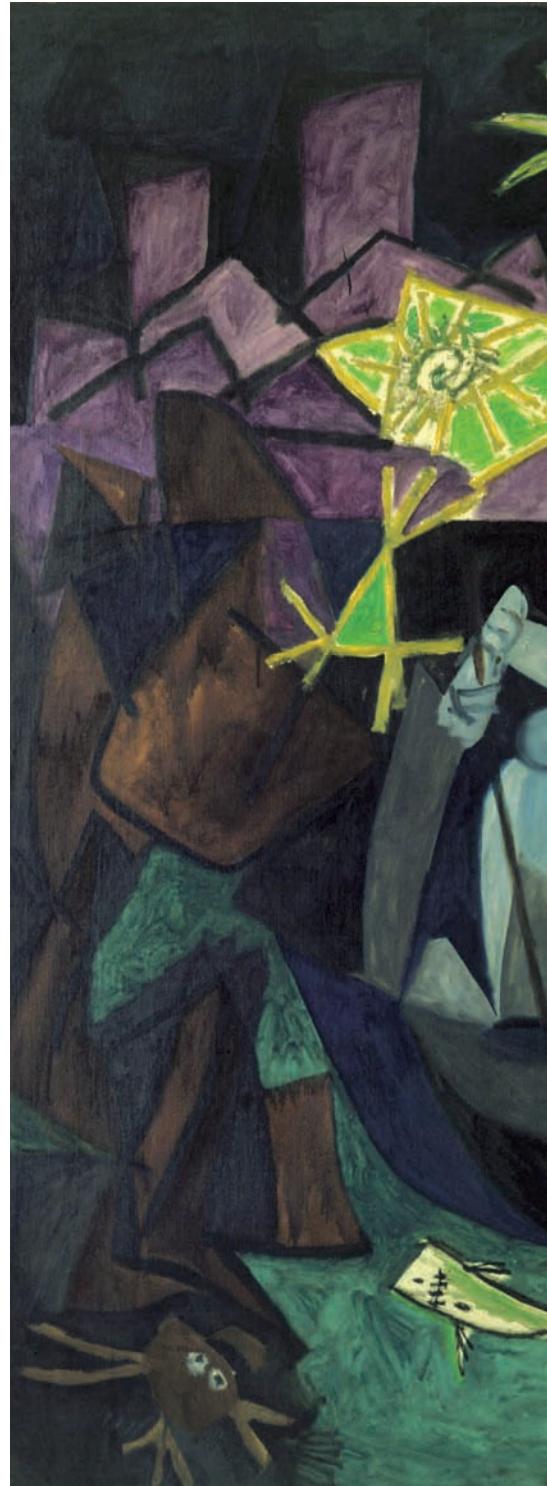
Marie-Thérèse  
is Maya's  
mother.

*PORTRAIT OF  
MARIE-THÉRÈSE,  
1937*

must surely be to let the colours of life sing out.

However, 1939 is a year of despair.  
In springtime, not long after the  
death of Picasso's mother,  
the Spanish Republic is no more.

Once again, war has the last word: fighting  
breaks out at the end of summer, and,  
for the second time, it is a world war.



For five long years, darkness reigns.  
Nazi Germany invades neighbouring  
countries, and carries out the worst  
genocide in history, denying more than  
six million Jews the right to live.





*NIGHT FISHING IN ANTIBES, 1939*

For five long years, Pablo Picasso is forbidden to exhibit. His work is considered 'degenerate' by the German authorities occupying France.

But for those five years, Picasso keeps his oil lamp burning. He paints and paints and paints.



*CAT SEIZING A BIRD, 1939*

In 1945, when the war is over and France is liberated,  
*la joie de vivre* (the joy of living) bursts out.  
Once again, anything seems possible.  
Even dancing naked on an island of light.



Even being as sensitive as a musician and as strong  
as a horse. Even being blue. Or having another child:  
a year after Picasso paints this big, cheery canvas,  
another son – Claude – is born.



THE JOY OF LIVING, 1946

This century full of wars has been a nightmare. Picasso's friends pester him to create new symbols of peace different from those associated with the famous *Guernica*. They all hope that the more people see the gentle lines of peace, the more they will commit to help it soar freely.

In 1949, Picasso draws a dove for the World Peace Congress held in Paris. At the same time, his fourth child is born. It's a girl, and he calls her Paloma – the Spanish for 'dove'. Picasso draws hundreds of doves, like the ones he helped his father paint so long ago.

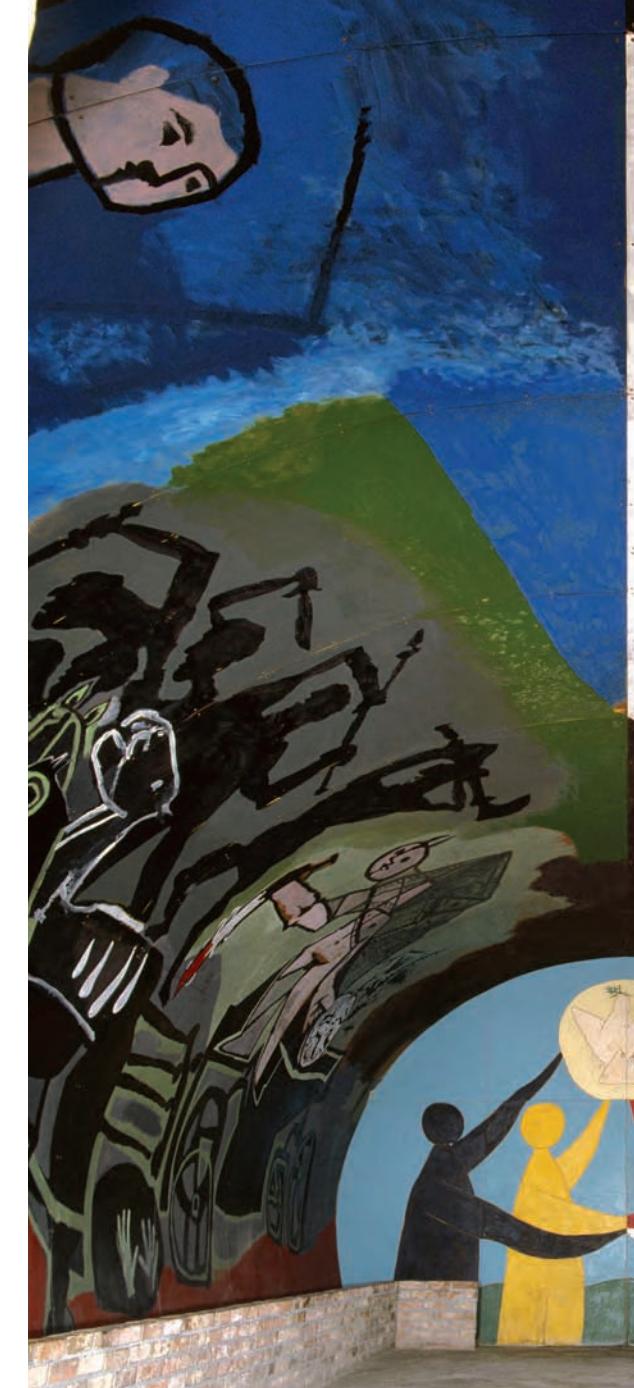


One of many doves drawn by the artist.

DOVE WITH FLOWERS, 1957



pictio



Picasso never gave up his dream

The dream of an Earth  
that's lighter than  
the shadow of air.

Murals done for the Temple of Peace  
in the ancient chapel of Vallauris  
(in the French region of Alpes-Maritimes).  
*WAR AND PEACE*, 1952



of an Earth without war.

The dream of an Earth  
where the only violence  
allowed is the struggle  
that's needed to create  
and never stop creating.

The two huge murals, 10 by 5 metres each,  
cover opposite curved walls of the Vallauris  
chapel, meeting overhead, on the ceiling.





Claude and Paloma drawing with their father, Pablo Picasso.

To create, the way children create  
a big house full of fine horses,  
peaceful bulls and lamps that  
no one can extinguish.

Using nothing but a pencil  
and a piece of paper.

Sometimes even becoming  
a great artist whose drawings  
speak to men, women  
and children.

Claude and Paloma drawing  
with their mother.

*CLAUDE DRAWING,  
WITH FRANÇOISE AND PALOMA,  
1954*







By the end of his life, Picasso will have painted, drawn, sculpted, cut out, stuck, modelled or engraved more than 30 000 works: grand old goats, love-sick lovers drowning in happiness, bulls that will never know their full selves, women who want things to be as simple as a child's soft cheek, market day, fish, buttocks as round as plates, a sun mask, children, birds that think they've achieved nothing, trees used to make guitars, guitars used as birds' nests, all the beauty of the world and its monstrous face as well, delicate jugglers, blue-painted boats . . .



MASK, 1919



FOOTBALLERS, 1961

Today, we know that the upright bird from Guernica shouts in our face:  
'I have so very many dark, cloudy skies to paint blue!'

And you – how will you respond when you see him limping beneath your window?



PLATE, DECORATED WITH THE FACE OF A FAUN, 1963



THE GOAT, 1950

From 1948 onwards, Picasso settled in the south of France. He lived in Vallauris, Cannes, Vauvenargues and finally Mougins, where he died on 8 April 1973, aged 91.

In Guernica there is now a peace museum. You can find information, in English, at:  
[www.peacemuseumguernica.org/en/initiate/homeeng.php](http://www.peacemuseumguernica.org/en/initiate/homeeng.php), including the link to the Paths of Memory project  
[www.peacemuseumguernica.org/en/documentation/pathsdoku.html](http://www.peacemuseumguernica.org/en/documentation/pathsdoku.html). There are several Picasso museums; the most useful websites are [www.museupicasso.bcn.es/en/](http://www.museupicasso.bcn.es/en/) and [www.museopicassomalaga.org/](http://www.museopicassomalaga.org/)



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The black bird reproduced on this page and on the title page is a detail from the final stage of *Guernica*.  
 The street photos featured on the endpapers show peace protestors. The last one in this book shows the restoration of a mural based on *Guernica*, done by the Residents' Association of the Lomo Blanco quarter (Plataforma vicinal Guiniguada Bajo) in La Palma (Canary Islands, Spain).  
 Thanks to them for the photo.

First published in France as *Et Picasso peint Guernica* © Rue du Monde, 2007  
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This English-language edition first published in 2010

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National Library of Australia  
 Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:  
 Serres, Alain.

Picasso paints Guernica / Alain Serres; translated by Rosalind Price.  
 ISBN: 9781741759945 (hbk.)

Translation of: *Et Picasso peint Guernica*.

Picasso, Pablo, 1881–1973. *Guernica* – Juvenile literature. *Guernica* (Spain) in art – Juvenile literature.  
 Spain – History – Civil War, 1936–1939 – Art and the war – Juvenile literature. Price, Rosalind, 1952– .  
 759.4

Cover and text design by Alain Serres  
 Printed in China by Imago



In the streets of Rome (Italy)



The original, on a wall of the Reina Sofía National Art Museum, in Madrid (Spain)



Mural in a square in La Palma (Canary Islands, Spain)

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