

Commentary

by Crystal M. Jonas

“Guernica” records a true war story, but unlike most historical accounts of battle, “Guernica” doesn’t reduce the victims to mere casualties—*numbers*—neither does Picasso’s mural clearly define the aggressors. The monochromatic work’s end is not to survey bomb damage to determine ratios of losses and objectives. “Guernica” does not relate a battle of logistics, fought in war-planning rooms with maps and toy soldiers; Picasso’s “Guernica” portrays, instead, the ramifications of such safe, sterile proposals, and the portrayal is horrific, chaotic, personal.

The form of Picasso’s mural is necessarily complex given its study of the human condition during violent and deliberate destruction. A fluid narrative, the mural evolves as the viewer interacts. Probably, we react initially to the mural’s disorder and overload of information that must be worked through—deciphered. Picasso portrays consuming human anguish without cliché.

A mother—head unnaturally tilted and scream perpetual—clutches her infant. Above, a bull poses, clearly male. Beside, a disemboweled horse collapses upon the body of a beheaded man, who grips the only visible weapon in the mural: a broken sword. A woman staggers in, looking toward unnatural light, an illuminated bulb. Hands open, gaze upraised, she seems to be petitioning an unseen force for explanation. Over her shoulder, a confused or anguished woman proffers a pale light of investigation onto the scene, but her dim light is overpowered by the artificial overhead light, which shines brutally on the pictured mayhem. Any individual quest for understanding is outshone. Rather than providing figurative illumination to the why of destruction, the light seems only to emphasize facts of loss and ruin. Concluding

the reading—left to right—of the mural, another woman appears to be falling, in flames.

Because we are presented a collage of isolated griefs, we sense we're being offered a spectrum of what occurs in war. Further, we have cubist, or multi-dimensional, presentation of figures and a combining of idiosyncratic scenes. But, though these techniques may help suggest our perception can be omniscient, such is not actually the case. For instance, in the mural we find no explanation as to *why* the bombing of Guernica occurred. From the mural, we know only enough to identify with the victims. But though the artist's and viewer's omniscient perspective is illusory, this perspective serves not to mislead about the artist's meaning, but to create his meaning.

There is no attempt to impose order on the flood of either emotions or events. In fact, the components of the painting work upon each other to suggest the simultaneity and illogicalness of events. Human and animal figures clash in unexpected configuration. Elements of both day and night are evident. Indoor and outdoor locations are depicted ambiguously. Rather than presenting Guernica's bombing as a logical sequence of events, then offering a rational explanation for what happened, Picasso depicts confusion and desperation as these emotions must have been actually experienced.

Faced with an unsettling work of art, it is natural to want to define it, to contain its message in pithy moral, to comprehend and move on. "Guernica," however, does not yield to such convenience. The work's fluidity, ambiguity, and breadth elude containment. The result is an unbounded narrative more accurately reflective of war than any precise and detailed record might be. Moreover, in a sweeping, monochromatic palette, Picasso moves beyond the representation of the event of Guernica itself to evoke the universal agony of *total* war. A terror-bombing of a strategically unimportant Basque village becomes an image of the inhumanity of war in general, and of technologically effective war—*modern war*—in particular.

On April 26, 1937, following 3¼ hours of saturation bombing, the fishing village of Guernica lay leveled. Such needless, fruitless annihilation could have hardly been framed within traditional

artistic conventions. Picasso illustrates that what happened at Guernica can be neither quantified nor qualified. Such loss cannot be inventoried. □