

Goya, Picasso, Miro: The Art History of Spanish Human Rights

Author: Kaylee Kim

Affiliation: Waterford School

E-mail: kayleekim1010@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

It wasn't until 1978 that Spain's constitution was written to guarantee equal human rights to all Spanish citizens. Like most countries, Spain still needs help finding its path through this complicated system. However, things were much worse, and Spanish citizens had to figure out their own means to protect themselves without relying on their political leaders. In this review paper, I discuss how three artists, Pablo Picasso, Francis Goya, and Joan Miro, contributed to human rights, not exclusively in Spain but worldwide. I will show how each artist, although in very different ways, led their country through these struggles. I will discuss topics such as how Picasso's Guernica was able to expose the horrors of war, how Goya's The Disasters of War used etched plates to denounce the tragedies of war and famine and the consequential political repression, and how Miro saw an artist as someone, in his own words, "to be someone, who amidst the silence of others, uses his voice to say something and who has the obligation that this thing not be useless but something that is of service to mankind."

Keywords: Goya, Picasso, Miro, Guernica, Disasters of War, The Reaper, Black and red series, human rights.

1. Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso was born in Malaga, Spain, on October 25, 1881. He was raised in Spain but left for France when he was 14 years old, where he spent most of his life painting. In 1937, Picasso created a large oil painting (11'6" X 25'8") titled 'Guernica,' which is now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This piece was painted because the Popular Front government of the Spanish Republic asked him to create a work for the Spanish pavilion at the International Exhibition that will be held in Paris.

While other governments presented exhibitions related to their economic power, the Spanish government wanted to put forward its cultural values.

Guernica is a black-and-white painting created in Picasso's signature cubist style. Picasso wanted to make this painting as powerful and memorable as possible and experimented with several different versions. It took him over 60 sketches to come up with the final composition. Some details of the painting include minotaurs and horses from Greek mythology, bull heads from Spanish bullrings, an upside-down picture of a virgin and a young child, a triangle lamp in the middle, an arm with a shattered weapon, and a flower growing from the cracks.



Fig 1: "Guernica" by Picasso [3]

Picasso did not witness the actual scene, but through accounts of his father José Ruiz and other authors like Alberto de Onaindia, he could imagine the tragic scenery.

When the audience first saw Guernica, it was highly criticized by both political sides. Picasso's painting proved that it was possible to make political statements through modern artwork through non-realistic forms. However, the success of Guernica can not be seen as a result of Picasso's genius alone.

It would not have been possible if Spain did not have a political culture where works of art could be shown as political symbols. Spain and France are cultures that accept the intertwining of popular culture and political views. Many artists, writers, and photographers joined political demonstrations by designing posters, newspapers, banners, and decorations to criticize other political beliefs.

Guernica received the attention it did because it was the first political artwork that represented the scene abstractly; therefore, there was freedom in the interpretation. The left and the right sides had certain aspects of this painting to acclaim. Continuing, Picasso made sure this piece and his artistic language did not directly interpret the political situation. Picasso vehemently denied his piece represented fascism and generalized the meaning of this piece, not allowing any political interpretation from either side of the politics.

However, compared to the size of the bombing in Guernica, which was relatively small compared to other bombings in the war, Picasso's painting helped people remember the day and the tragedy of war. Additionally, the artwork proves how one's artistic language can lend itself to a political situation and help people remember the event's significance.

2. Joan Miró

Joan Miró was born in Barcelona, Spain, on April 20, 1893. He was a Catalan painter, sculptor, and ceramist. His parents worked as a watchmaker and a goldsmith, so he was exposed to art from a young age. He also worked in both Spain and his hometown, France. However, after the Spanish Civil War broke out, he spent most of his time in France creating artwork. Joan Miró was known to develop political artwork that engaged in activism and represented human rights. The horrendous events in Spain at the time led him to create artwork that criticized society and the violence he saw increasing by applying more of his emotions and thoughts in his artwork. Miro was careful to develop his artwork politically but not make the relationship between his work and politics too literal because he believed this could lead to his work being used for propaganda purposes.

The two most famous artworks he created around the Spanish Civil War were *The Reaper* (1937), oil on masonite, 13'6" X 8'2 1/2", and the *Black and Red Series* (1938), eight separate artworks made from etchings. Like Picasso's work, his artwork emphasized the sufferings and seriousness of the Spanish Civil War by using colors more dark and lurid and abstract and monstrous figures.

The Reaper is also one of the pieces the Spanish government commissioned for Miró to draw a mural for the Spanish pavilion at the International Exhibition. *The Reaper* is a black-and-white piece based on a monstrous-looking reaper. It is presented as very spirited and abstract but decorative in the center, with an array of blurred spot patterns throughout the painting. Many critics thought the tormented and ferocious figure in the center of this piece was intended to have a symbolic meaning opposite of its decorative look. Its presence looks darker and more saddened than Picasso's *Guernica*, which was hung in the same building. Unfortunately, after the Paris Exposition closed, the painting was destroyed. However, the destruction of this piece did not matter because anyone who saw it in person could not forget the potent effect it carried, capturing the audience and touching their emotions with its powerful composition and large scale.

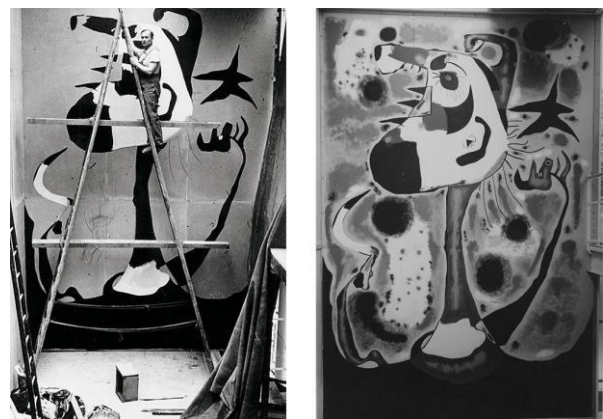


Fig 2: "The Reaper" by Joan Miró

The *Black and Red* series is a group of eight small etchings produced by Miró during the Spanish Civil War in France. Miró responded to the violence and expressed opposition to the bombings using violent images of monsters and different spiritual figures.

These compositions of the eight etchings are made by combining two plates that compose a monstrous figure in black and red. The first plate is an embryonic form of the grotesque figure that appeared in the second plate, composed of patterns that add to the work's overall composition. This piece can be politically interpreted as Miro using allegory and how the structure is meant explicitly with the etching's formal qualities. The allegory in these pieces is represented by the monster's head and how the monster encounters a sexually connoted grotesque female figure. Art critics say it illustrates the embodiment of violence of tyranny and connects it back to how the beast resembles one of Poland's dictators.

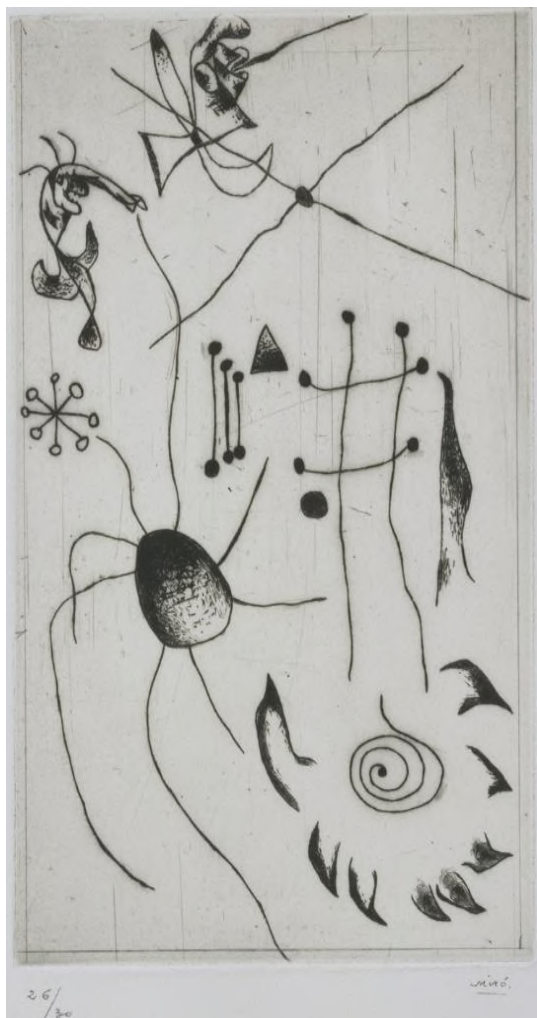


Fig 3: "Untitled" from the Black and Red Series by Joan Miró [2]



Fig 4: "Untitled" from the Black and Red Series by Joan Miró [2]



Fig 5: "Untitled" from the Black and Red Series by Joan Miró [2]



Fig 6: "Untitled" from the Black and Red Series by Joan Miró [2]



Fig 7: "Untitled" from the Black and Red Series by Joan Miró [2]

In these examples, Miró was never direct about the relationship between his artwork and the political situation. However, he left hints which allowed critics to notice how the political situation at the time could influence his work and how he wanted to represent the voices of poor and weak citizens. Most importantly, in the end, he created artwork his audience could not forget.

3. Francisco Goya

Francisco Goya was born in Fuendetodos, Spain, on March 30, 1746. He moved to Zaragoza when he was 14 to study art and painting with José Luzán Martínez. During this year, King Charles III, an intelligent king wanting a change amidst the Age of Enlightenment, was in charge of the monarchy government. After arriving back in his hometown after years of studying abroad, is when his real career began. He started by painting murals for the monarchy, and soon after, he became the court

painter for the Spanish royal family. During his time, he created tapestry cartoons for the Royal Tapestry Factory at Santa Bárbara, executives and their families from the Bank of San Carlos, and more paintings for King Charles III and IV. He was known as an excellent draftsman and created accurate portraits that captured the inner soul, humanity, and personality with authentic facial expressions.

After King Charles III passed away, King Charles IV was not strategic enough to continue handling the difficulties the country faced; soon after, Napoleon, the emperor of France, invaded Spain. In 1792, Goya's drawings began to change after he contracted a severe illness that left him permanently deaf. The 80 allegorical etchings called the *Los Caprichos* (The Disasters of War) were the most famous works he created after he survived his condition. This series of artworks introduced a world of witches, ghosts, and bizarre creatures that attack the psyche, especially during dreams; terrifying sights that represent a world against reason. The *Disasters of War* was created when Napoleon invaded Spain. However, it was not published to the public until after Goya died in exile in 1828.

Before Goya created these etchings, depictions of war were never portrayed like this to the public before. Artists drew heroic scenes of famous battles, glory, triumph, and victory through war, usually under the instructions of the emperors. But Goya was different; there was no glory or victory in his etchings but rather the struggles of the Spanish people fighting against the French and other horrors that ruined lives because of the war. Goya looked at war and painted his vision as religion without mercy, despair without redemption, and war without the consolation of chivalry.

In order to create these pieces, Goya visited many battle sites, witnessing and recording the Spanish resistance through his drawings, such as the atrocities on both the Spanish and France and the severe famine the underclass peasants had to suffer through. He depicted scenes of anonymous Spanish figures from the underclass who showed courage to face the overwhelming force of the invasion, for

example, plate 2, "Con Razon ó Sin Ella" (With or Without Reason). It depicts a scene where Napoleon's army aims rifles at Spanish peasants. It shows the Spanish underclass fighting with ferocious facial expressions, surrounded by corpses. As the title states, Goya represents a war with or without reason. Several of these etchings are difficult to look at in their brutal depictions. In one of the etchings called Ni Por Esas (Neither Do These) plate 11, Goya represents women in war through scenes of rape, which was forbidden to speak about.



Fig 4: "Plate 2" from the Disasters of War Series by Francisco Goya [11]



Fig 4: "Plate 11" from the Disasters of War Series by Francisco Goya [10]

At first, people were not fond of his work. But those criticisms did not stop Goya from creating these scenes. He was passionate about showing the public a different perspective on war and retained empathy for all the sufferings he had seen in his travels. Later, historians interpreted his work as an artistic protest

against the Spanish War of Independence and the subsequent Peninsular War.

Through this series, Goya influenced many other artists in that century, expressionist artists, war photographers, and even Picasso's *Guernica*. Before this, people did not even think about creating artwork related to the sufferings of war, but due to Goya's bravery, the public was able to understand the hidden horrors of war.

4. Conclusion

This paper discusses how Picasso, Miró, and Goya have contributed to showing the atrocities of war and spreading awareness of human rights. Goya was one of the first artists to create art exposing the horrors of war. Before Goya, war was portrayed as a chance for young men to become heroes, used as propaganda to encourage them to fight for their country. When his series of etchings called *The Disasters of War* was published after he was exiled, it influenced other artists to create work exposing the sufferings and pains of war, such as Picasso and Miró. One of Picasso's most famous paintings is "*Guernica*," an abstract painting of the Spanish Civil War. Goya also created a few of his most known pieces, like *The Reaper* and the *Black and Red* series, scenes of the atrocities he witnessed during the Spanish Civil War. Both pieces represent the suffering the underclass would have felt and helped the public sympathize. Through art, Picasso, Miró, and Goya have spoken for change and communicated with the audience about human rights and the wrongdoings their government has done, a true act of bravery.

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