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**FORMS OF ANTI-WAR PROTEST: A STUDY OF
 PICASSO'S WAR PAINTINGS (1925-1949)**

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to examine the pacifist stance in the war paintings of Pablo Picasso, focusing on the period between 1925-1949. The artist uses typically Cubist techniques, such as fragmented subjects, geometrical figures and multiple perspectives, to bring out subtly the horror and devastation of war. There is a subtle shift from the abstract nature of his Analytical and Synthetic Cubism phases, which carried on till about the first decade of the 20th century, to the period pre and post the World Wars. Art, in his conceptualisation, becomes very much a part of the public and political sphere, capable of change and fiery activism. The subjects of many of his paintings post 1925 are distorted and broken, riddled with symbols of death and despair. A sense of foreboding and disillusionment pervades the canvases, along with deeply philosophical representations of the futility of the human condition. The paper discusses Picasso's post war works vis-à-vis his controversial, sometimes unpopular political leanings.

Keywords: *Pablo Picasso, World War, Anti-War, Modern Art, Cubism.*

Pablo Picasso's career is so varied and immense that art historians have divided it into phases, both chronologically and thematically. His Early Years combined experiences from his native country with his adopted one, and thus there is a range of influences that can be seen. These include the new ideas of the Parisian art circle, such as those of Toulouse-Lautrec, Vincent Van Gogh, Renoir and so on, coupled with Spanish masters such as Velasquez. The Blue Period was his phase of social comment where he displayed compassion for the common masses, their poverty and harshness of condition. The subjects ranged from beggars in Madrid to prostitutes in Barcelona. This implies a move away from the early influence of Impressionism and its prioritisation of atmospheric effects towards an emotional, intense form of art. The Rose Period from 1904-06 is when Picasso moved to Paris. This was his encounter with new worlds, new realms of ideas and a heady atmosphere of flux, change and radicalism. The subjects shifted from the darker ones of the Blue Period to a lighter vein with instances from the streets of Paris, the boulevards and the theatres. The colours in the previous period were largely blues and greys; here, there is a shift to pink, peach and other brighter notes. The 1907-09 period is one where there is a tremendous influence of African art and culture. Called the Transition Phase, it was a more primitive style, very earthy and with a simplification of form and content. The subsequent phases, after his move to Paris, involved his foray into the ground-breaking art theory and movement known as Cubism, and the years following 1904 are experiments with various kinds of Cubist art. The 1910-12 years cover the phase of Analytical Cubism. This is marked for the extreme abstraction of the paintings. The Cubists', and Picasso's in particular, experimentations on how to present a highly personalised vision of reality led to more and more abstract forms, till a point where they became almost incomprehensible to the outsider. This then brought on the 1912-16 Synthetic Cubism Phase, where the artists decided that there was a little too much abstraction for comfort. It had become impossible to recognise and distinguish objects, and there was a need to create a little more 'reality'. Thus, the Cubists and Picasso began with a combination of nostalgia and progressiveness in their art, and then moved on to a fragmented view of the subject. Cooper remarks that Cubism has a "strong subjective trait...one that is centred on the visionary perception of the artist. In addition, underlying Cubism is a belief that artistic images are independent of reality." (Cooper, 2007, 9).

However, Picasso moves away from this in the period that follows, and his art becomes increasingly a means of social and political comment. This period (1925-1949) is the focal point of this paper, because the sudden shift in the artist's work from the geometrical and abstract to the political and grim marks the sinister, disillusioned mood surrounding the World Wars. These were pre and post war years. The idealism in Picasso's art had all but vanished, replaced by a disillusioned view of the world. The artist was deeply affected by the shattered state of humanity after the war, and the art was consequently darker, grimmer and more sombre. This seemed to be a harking back to the Blue Period, but the paintings of this phase take an even more active role in the changing world around them.

This brings us to Picasso's view of art as revolution; as very politically rooted and capable of effecting change. His paintings are revolutionary in that he profoundly challenges the accepted ideals of beauty. His figures, his objects and his landscapes are far from pleasing to the aesthetically-bent mind. The fractured images depict a point of view or a vision, rather than conveying anything beautiful. His nudes could not be further removed from the Greek, Renaissance, Victorian or Romantic ones. They can be oddly distorted, twisted and sometimes with grotesque aspects. The artist is also a revolutionary in that he explores an unknown, new style that is a complete breakaway from traditional acceptances. Not only is it new, it is also fearless. Like all freedom fighters and radicals, Picasso through his art does not hold back on his vision even if that vision shocks and scandalises the public. He suffered from critical backlash over much of his work, yet did not attempt to dilute the so-called shock value. His was a huge influence on a variety of movements despite the initial resistance. Symbolism, Imagism, Surrealism and so on all greatly borrow from the new style of art that Picasso pioneered. According to Penrose, "He was responsible for one of the major revolutions in the art of our time, a revolution which revised the relationship of painting to reality and widened the scope of our vision and our understanding of the world" (Penrose, 1998, 8). There is a keen inclination towards social comment and change, particularly in the compassion with which he paints humankind, sometimes empathising with his characters, at other times painting them in a different way to highlight the suffering of their condition. The strongest examples of his revolutionary leanings, however, come from his activities during the war period, both pre and post. In these paintings, the tremendous sense of anguish resonates throughout. They are expressive of his violence and frustration; especially in the period from the end of the war. The subjects are extremely fragmented, and the complete loss of idealism and hope is evident. *The Three Dancers* (1925) for instance, is the first to show violent distortions of the human body and a fractured spirit full of despair. In his paintings from 1925 to almost the end of his career, he shows complete destruction which, according to him, is a necessity in order to 'make it new' and to make room for an improved world order. A new type of anatomy shapes his characters, far removed from harmony and beauty. The subject matter shows the concern of the artist at the disaster that seems to have befallen humankind. There is a recurrent appearance of the sport of bullfighting, a Spanish borrowing from his origins that was indicative of the violence within the artist. This period of art is also highly intense, prioritising emotions, passions and agony. There lingers an ominous, foreboding mood in the compositions and some gory actions. Examples are *Cat Devouring a Bird* (1939) and the *Charnel House* (1945).

Even from an early period, Picasso's revolutionary, anti-war tendencies are clear. The collages of 1912-13 are intended to represent anarchy. The artists believed that a complete overturning of old power structures was in order, which could only mean a state of complete anarchy and chaos. Only then could a new world emerge, phoenix-like, from the ashes. He constantly raged against the futility of war, both verbally and pictorially. In this, he takes a position amongst modernist war writers and poets such as Rupert Brooke, W.H Auden and T.S. Eliot. Like them, much contemporary political debate is incorporated in his revolutionary art. For instance one can look at the ingenious use of newspaper clippings in his collages during the pre-war period. These are certainly not random, but have a purpose. They are records of the events leading to World War I, which sometimes present slyly anarchic political opinions and at other times

simply shout provocative slogans. Further, they do not just reflect front-page news but even financial pages, thus presenting a complete picture. According to Patricia Leighton, “a close look at many of the newspaper clippings incorporated into the collages shows them to be not arbitrary bits of printed matter, nor mere signs designating themselves, but reports and accounts meticulously cut...” (Leighton, 1985, 653). She further points out the witty use of newsprint that is often “tied to the Cubist images of the cafés, where such arguments and discussions about the threat of war took place [representing] an artistic and political bohemia” (653). During the period in Barcelona, Picasso became completely caught up in anarchic groups presenting an alternative stance towards the war. Artists and writers of Barcelona, particularly Picasso, simply refused to ignore social and political realities. Picasso was the “anarchist anti-hero” (Leighton, 1985, 656) whose works were savage, satirical and railed against the decadence and amoral aspects of human beings which had led to such a futile war. Those who had lived through the war had lost sight of the conventional interpretations of meaning and order. They were facing a new world, devoid of all stability and this existentialism is often reflected in Picasso. He engaged highly with current political affairs through a deep sense of involvement. For instance, he was a political activist during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), during which he exhibited bold, avant-garde paintings.

Picasso's experiences with war profoundly raise the question which has been asked from centuries past- the role of the artist in society. If Picasso's influence is anything to go by, there is no escaping the fact that art can make a huge difference in viewpoints towards an issue such as war. The artists of this group represented anarchy through the outrageousness of their art that questioned the paradigms of order and decorum. Moreover, the violence in paintings such as *Demoiselles* reflects the horror and conveys it pictorially, which can be at times far more effective than even oral speeches and literature on the subject. If the role of the artist in society requires a stand, Picasso certainly took a courageous and in fact, highly unpopular one. He was a pacifist and stubbornly kept to his anti-war opinions, reflecting them through his Cubism, collages, newsprint bits and fragmented pictures. His activism was not limited only to the canvas or to the palette, as it were. In 1944 he joined the Communist Party, wrote political pamphlets, made speeches and in sum, displayed his “lifelong commitment to artistic revolution” (Leighton, 1985, 622). He also thematically used black humour, a sense of looming threat and virulent satire on the utter ridiculousness of the war via his compositions. That he was anti-war was never hidden from the viewing public, despite outraged, indignant criticism and attack. His artwork is highly complex, in keeping with Cubist styles which seamlessly weave into his themes and concerns. Some of his post 1925 war paintings are discussed below.

The Three Dancers (Figure 1.), one of Picasso's post war compositions, has become iconic of the artist's work. This is simply because it combines all possible Cubist themes, symbols and techniques. It is also progressive since it uses modern laws of optical illusion, to create a scientifically and visually baffling dual view of the same figure. Painted in 1925, the work is discussed by Penrose, who remarks, “Here it is evident that the Post-War hopes of a new Golden Age shared by so many had vanished, and yielded to a desperate, ecstatic violence, expressive of frustrations and foreboding” (Penrose, 1998, 17). As he further notices, this work is probably one of the first to so violently distort the human figure. It has multiple meanings in this light.



Figure 1: *The Three Dancers* (Picasso, 1925).

The violence of the war is subtly recognised in the menacing, underlying violence of this painting. It also implies a loss of belief in the serenity and coherence of humanity and instead, shows humankind as twisted and bestial, capable of incomprehensible cruelty and ridiculous violence. The figure on the left appears to be in a kind of frenzy, and the agitation and disturbing mood of the composition creates much unease on the part of the viewer. It seems to contrast the serenity of a former world to the chaos of the new. Penrose remarks that “the central figure adopts a crucifixion pose which certainly conveys a tragic, ritualistic air” (Penrose, 1998, p. 94). This is intermingled with the overall, inexplicable sadness emanating from the scene. As an undercutting of the tragedy, there is also a sense of community in the dancers, perhaps the artist's way of showing a ray of hope amidst the chaos. This can be inferred from the way their hands are interlinked and they appear to be in synchronisation with each other, if not with the world outside. Other than this is the use of music as a motif, a major, recurrent symbol in Cubist painting. Music, musical notations and instruments are used repeatedly in this kind of art. This is presumably because it is symbolic of a certain harmony and a soothing sensitivity, which challenges the disorder and grimness of the modern world. Further, the painting shows the modern as well as Cubist use of science, geometry and optical illusion. It is possible to identify triangular, conical shapes with points and corners shown in sharp relief. Added, the figure on the extreme right is shown in a dual capacity. There is the brown-tinged body which is surrounded by what appears to be the black shadow of another face. This could also be indicative, again, of the influence of Surrealism, which used the technique of recording one's unexplained, but spontaneous unconscious thought process. There is also the usual ambiguity regarding the gender of the characters. The only identifying mark that these could possibly be women is the feature of the breast in the figure at the centre. Otherwise, the composition retains the androgyny of the other works of art. The artist thus creates a loosely constructed, fluid scene that is open to various opinions and refuses to be pinned

down to a single rigid interpretation.

Many of the paintings post the 1930's continue along the theme of war representation. They are full of violence, distorted human figures and a sense of anger and disgust. *Guernica* (1937) and *The Charnel House* (1944-45) are often seen as companion pieces despite the gap in time period. The dates of both are significant, and clearly, if *Guernica* signals the beginning of World War II, *The Charnel House* shows the end in all its violence and horror. Rachel Wischnitzer discusses Picasso's own take on *Guernica* (Figure 2.); stating that in an interview "Picasso admitted that the bull represented the dark forces, while the horse stood for the Spanish people." (Wischnitzer, 1985, 153). It is one of the most iconic war paintings in history and represents a severe indictment against violence and war. Picasso's pacifist leanings are fairly evident because far from exhibiting the so-called heroism of war, *Guernica* represents its ugliness and horror. It was painted as a response to the bombing of Guernica, a small Spanish village, on 26th April 1937 by the German Nazis and was an important work depicting the Spanish Civil War. The canvas is chaotic with dismembered limbs, flames and panics everywhere. Most of the figures in the painting are of women and children; Picasso's way of showing that violence is indiscriminate and rips apart the innocent and the faultless as well. The open mouths of the figures are a recurring symbol in the artist's work, and the daggers emerging from them grant intensity to the wordless screams. To the extreme left is a woman weeping over her dead child, being watched by a helpless bull. The painting thus uses the most archetypal of Spanish symbols, the bullfight, to make its point. A wounded horse is in the centre and the suggestive violence of the bullfight is conflated with the violence of the bombing. At the extreme right is another figure, again female, with her hands raised in fear. Right next to her, a floating female head can be seen, dismembered from the body but with an extended arm holding a lighted candle. The flames of the candle and the light from the bulb next to it are a powerful symbol of hope amidst all the chaos. Significantly, both the floating woman and the figure below her dragging its leg gaze at the glow of the lights, searching for hope in all the darkness. Symbols of grief, horror and violence are intermingled with those of hope, strength and survival. Sombre grey, black and white colours dominate the canvas, adding to the grim atmosphere. The use of space, always significant in Cubist Art, emphasizes a sense of claustrophobia and inability to escape. A recurrent debate surrounding *Guernica*, and indeed, Picasso's other works, is a certain ambiguity vis-à-vis his political stance. This is brought out through the symbols of the bull and the horse in the painting. It is easy to read it as the two animals being representative of opposing forces, the Spanish nationalists and the Germans. However, Picasso's depiction of both the animals in a relatively sympathetic light lends uneasiness to the question of which side the artist has actually taken. The horse is in agony and automatically evokes compassion from the viewer. As for the bull, Carla Gottlieb remarks, "Even if we assume the bull is only a personification of the miasma of evil permeating the world, this does not satisfy. Under the circumstances, we would expect the mother to attack it, to fight it, to tear out its heart. Instead she howls into its face, seeking comfort from it in her pain!" (Gottlieb, 1964, 106). The paintings are thus not a particularly definitive proof of Picasso's stance.



Figure 2: *Guernica* (Picasso, 1937)



Figure 3: *The Charnel House* (Picasso, 1944-45)

The Charnel House (Figure 3.) also deals with similar themes of war and destruction. It is a significant work in war history because it was painted right after Picasso joined the French Communist party in 1944. It is seemingly a heap of corpses all piled on top of each other, suggestive of the mass murder of Jews by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Like in *Guernica*, the colours used in this painting are significant; the black-and-white palette is meant to resemble war photographs of the time. In particular, horrific photographs of the treatment of prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps were being released at the time. A contrast is created here- the Cubist questioning of reality and move away from capturing the same is juxtaposed with the factual nature of the photographic effect. It seems to be a subtle assertion by Picasso about the political and activist value of art, clearly as important as 'factual' news and history. The open mouth, an aforementioned recurring symbol in Picasso, is the focal point here, evocative of the lifeless nature of the bodies strewn around haphazardly. The dismembered limbs and body parts are again evident here, as is the innocent presence of women and children. It is clearly a family that has been massacred, reminiscent of Picasso's own grief over the loss of many of his friends and relatives during the Spanish Civil War. The pathos of the war is accentuated by the intermingling of the erstwhile domestic family scene with its violent massacre. The artists often uses symbols of domesticity, such as the cat in *Cat Devouring a Bird* (discussed later in this paper) and the family in *The Charnel House* to emphasize the destruction of the domestic and of stability and order in a war-torn world.

The Weeping Woman (Figure 4.), painted after *Guernica* in 1937, is a jarring picture of the utter inhumanity of war. It is a typically Cubist work and conflates the technique of the movement with the theme of the work. In other words, the artist breaks up his subject, Cubist-style, into fragments, thus showing the brokenness of the human spirit in a war-torn world. It is clearly a portrait of a distressed woman who utters a heart-rending shriek at the utter horror of war. To capture a situation that defies logic and reason, Picasso paints the face as almost inhuman and grotesque. He concentrates on every single detail of the face, including the open mouth, the fingers that attempt to drown the scream and the eyes that

are like blank, disbelieving holes. Like in *Guernica*, it is a distorted human figure, twisted beyond shape and form literally and metaphorically. The painting is particularly jarring because the colours clash and assault the eye with their cacophony. The use of non-harmonious colouring is a subtle way of bringing out the disharmony of warring humankind. The artist also indicates the polarisation of the barbaric and the civilised through certain symbols. The woman's sophisticated, elegant hat is visible, with ribbons and neatly combed long hair, implying her Parisian socialite background. The ravaged look of this Parisian beauty highlights the effects of the massacre going on.



Figure 4: *The Weeping Woman* (Picasso, 1937)

The singularly predatory quality of *Cat Devouring a Bird* (1939) (Figure 5.) assaults the viewer's eye. It was painted when the Germans invaded Poland. Abstract as they are, Picasso's works provide a parallel representation of so-called 'factual' history and *Cat* is one such example. A cat rips apart its victim with violence and aggression that is palpable on the canvas. Picasso's focal point is the face of the cat, which he makes disturbingly human. The eyes are blind and frenzied, possibly indicating the senseless violence of the World War that has no basis in sanity. A subtle juxtaposition can be seen here as well, between the civilised and the 'wild' as it were. The cat is generally a symbol of household domesticity but with the yellow and black stripes, it resembles the tiger, an untameable jungle beast, much like the perpetrators of the war. Added, the artist seems to be trying to say that the frightening aspect of violence is that it is deeply rooted in civilization, in ordinary human beings who become inhuman and unrecognizable when in the pursuit of power.



Figure 5: *Cat Devouring a Bird* (Picasso, 1939)

Picasso's war paintings are thus a record of an important moment in the 20th century, an alternative but equally relevant method of analysing history. They are not only reminiscent of early modern artistic styles, but also a strong social comment and an indictment against war.

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