Art through the centuries has defied boundaries not only in style and technique, but also in purpose. This can be seen in Picasso, written by Wilhelm Boeck and Jaime Sabartés, in which Pablo Picasso is quoted stating, “No, painting is not interior decoration. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy” (505). However, in the case of the 2003 United Nations World Summit, Picasso’s painting, Guernica was treated as just that: a meaningless, decorative piece of furniture. As if it were simply an accessory meant for beautification, Guernica was concealed from the public’s eye for the convenience of officials who urged war between the United States and Iraq ("Notes From the Editors"). Even upon its first debut, Guernica was not warmly welcomed into the 1937 International Exposition in Paris, because of its controversial themes of violence and death ("Guernica: Testimony of War"). This body of research will shine light onto the proposed analyses of the conceptualized figures of humans, animals, and objects in Guernica as symbols of the aerial bombardment of the town, Guernica. This essay will also discuss how the painting has influenced the way society views war, using two occurrences in which Guernica is involved: The International Exposition and the United Nations World Summit.

In order to understand the proposed theories of Guernica’s symbolism, one must first be familiar with the events that surround its creation. In January 1937, the Spanish Republic asked Pablo Picasso to create a piece to showcase at the International Exposition in Paris, in which the theme was Modern Technology. After three months, Picasso finally found the inspiration to be used as the subject of his masterpiece. It was the news report written by George Steer that made Picasso aware of the atrocities that occurred the day before in Guernica. The report reads, “Guernica, the
most ancient town of the Basques and the centre of their cultural tradition, was completely
destroyed yesterday afternoon by air raiders” (Steer). Due to its integral role as the heart of
resistance in the north, Guernica became a target of General Francisco Franco’s intimidation
towards civilians that opposed the Nationalists. This threat takes shape in the most violent form,
supported by German and Italian military air forces that dropped 50 tons of bombs over the
defenseless residents of Guernica on April 26, 1937. The town was left in burning ruins, with over
thousands dead, and hundreds injured (Rhodes 20). Outraged and inspired, Picasso responds to this
catastrophic event, by painting *Guernica*.

Picasso’s technique was using oil on a canvas with dimensions of 11.5 ft. high by 25.5 ft.
wide (Rhodes 21). Since Picasso is one of the founding fathers of cubism, one can find jagged
shapes and harsh geometric lines that overlap with translucent layers to compose this piece. His
manipulation of gray and black tones with a mix of textural elements adds to the chaos of the mural,
while also expressing agony. The painting itself contains four women, a soldier, a baby, a horse, a
bull, a bird, and a few objects, all of which are significant to the overall message of cruelty the
painting is trying to convey. The buildings set aflame surrounding the main figures, depict the
destruction of Guernica when it was under attack, and perhaps even foreshadow the future of the
Republic of Spain (Ray 169).
The destruction of the Spanish Republic is illustrated with the four women posed in exaggerated positions in the picture, alluding to the suffering the people of Guernica had to endure. The woman in the far right of the painting, with arms flailing and an expression of terror on her face, depicts the panic and confusion when the town was under siege. This woman has her head tilting upwards, mouth gaping open as if screaming, and has her palms reaching up in the air, all of which indicate pandemonium. When Guernica was attacked, thousands of civilians were unaware of what was happening, and so this woman perfectly captures the hysteria the town was experiencing at the time. The woman next to her, with the enlarged foot, grasping her knees in anguish, also stands for the hundreds who were injured during the attack. This woman appears to be dragging herself across the ground, her eyes fixated on the candlelight, a metaphor for hope. The woman emerging from the door, bearing a torch, symbolizes the reveal of the bombing of Guernica to rest of the world, almost as if she is shining light to the committed atrocities (Rhodes 22). The fourth woman is a mother sprawled on the ground cradling her dead baby, which correlates to Michelangelo Buonarroti’s, Pietà. This Renaissance sculpture is known globally for its portrayal of a dead Jesus Christ lying on Mary’s lap after His crucifixion. Christianity is the predominant religion in Spain however; the mother in Guernica symbolically goes beyond a biblical reference. The mourning mother signifies the thousands of innocent lives taken away, including children’s during the Spanish Civil War. On the ground, lies a mutilated soldier with a decapitated head and dismembered arm that is still grasping onto a broken sword, symbolizing the defeat of the Republic. On the soldier’s open palm is a stigmata, corresponding to Jesus Christ’s crucifixion wounds. This pays homage to the soldiers and rebels who died during the war for the freedom of others (Potter).
The animals in the painting also serve as symbols of the massacre in Guernica. Bullfighting is the traditional blood sport of Spanish culture, in which the bull is sacrificed to be killed in the ring. This wide-eyed bull in the painting represents the people of Spain who are treated as nothing more than collateral damage during the Spanish Civil War. The bull has a panic-stricken face, which conveys the fear the Spanish people felt during the air raid of Guernica. The bull is also a symbolic representation of the collapse of Spain as a country, because of the war that rips apart the nation. The impaled horse with a massive laceration on its side belly signifies the unjustified slaughter that took place in Guernica. The injured horse alludes to the thousands of people who died and the hundreds that were devastatingly hurt. A large portion of horse’s body is painted with what seems to be newsprint. Picasso used this technique to show how he learned of Guernica’s bombing through news reports (Ray 169). The bird in the painting that fades into the dark background is a symbol of hope for the future, just as how the dove carrying an olive branch in the Bible is a symbol of peace. The bird also signifies a longing for prosperity, which seemed unattainable during that time of war and violence, which is why it can barely be seen in the painting (Potter).

The inanimate objects in *Guernica* provide metaphorical optimism for the people of Spain. With regards to the torchbearer who holds the candlelight against the electrical lamp on the ceiling, the lamp’s bulb was created to look like a pupil within an eyeball, interpreted to be the “evil eye” alluding to modern technology and the devastation it can bring about, such as war and destruction. The natural light emitting from the candle held by the torchbearer counters the modern invention, almost as if it is expressing good versus evil, mirroring the real-life fighting happening in the world. There is a flower located near the broken sword held by the dead soldier. The flower signifies purity and harmony, while the broken sword represents combat and death. Picasso places these two
objects with contrasting meanings adjacent to each other, to show how the people yearn for peace in the midst of war. Lastly, the broken sword delivers the message that war has casualties on both sides. Soldiers used swords as weapons before the age of gunfire, thus the sword in the painting represents battle. Picasso chose to paint a sword with a cracked blade instead of a whole one, in order to express the defeat of the Spanish people, particularly on the Republican side. (Ray 169).

The Spanish Republic asked Picasso to create a piece for the 1937 International Exposition in Paris however, when Guernica was first exhibited, most people did not greet it in warm admiration. Instead, crowds were repulsed by its defiant contradiction to the theme of the entire exhibition, which was meant to be the glorification of modern technology. The painting’s gory and disturbing depiction of the brutalities of war, upset the public. As art historian Patricia Failing mentioned in an interview, “[Guernica] was something that people really didn't want to be reminded of, necessarily, when they came to a World Fair” ("Guernica: Testimony of War"). Here is a clear instance of how a political painting, such as Guernica, can influence the way people react to war.

Citizens were aware of the bombing of Guernica, which occurred earlier that year, but rejected the painting that encompassed the horrors of what happened. Although Guernica failed in conforming to the exposition’s motif of celebrating advancements in machinery, it succeeded in evoking emotion in those who understood its allusions to the recent bombing of Guernica.

Fast-forward to about 66 years into the future, where society finds Guernica in a similar situation of spurning. During the 2003 United Nations World Summit held in New York, Secretary of State Colin Powell was to propose his argument as to why the United States should go into war with Iraq. As it so happened, Governor Rockefeller’s commissioned tapestry version of Guernica hung at the entrance of the Security Council room. To the inconvenience of UN officials, the
tapestry needed to be concealed beneath a blue curtain, so as to be hidden from the television cameras that documented Powell’s press conference ("Notes From the Editors"). Having a background of a painting that protested against war would make the attempt to try to sell this concept to the masses quite a difficult challenge for the U.S. diplomats. The officials feared that since Guernica exposed the barbarities of war, it could trigger the consciences of those watching, provoking thoughts about antiwar. The irony in this scandal is that the actual crime of covering up the painting, led to even more controversy. The mere fact that the officials found it necessary to hide these disturbing images of bloodshed from the public is an obvious reason not to go into war. As it was so perfectly put by a group of editors from the Monthly Review journal, “The shrouding of Guernica—so that hundreds of millions of television viewers would not see Powell’s argument for war being made against the backdrop of the most famous antiwar painting of modern times—speaks volumes about the administration’s stance that art should not be mingled with politics” ("Notes From the Editors"). Perhaps this concealing of Guernica was the universe’s way of foreshadowing the horrors that had yet to come following the initial war in Iraq, just as how it predicted what was to come in the Spanish Civil War.

Guernica, as a political masterpiece, has an impact on the way humanity perceives war in such a way that it exposes the horrific realities that war bears. Pablo Picasso’s manipulation of dark monochromatic tones, cubism, distorted figures that express protest, and images that allude to violence and chaos, all contribute to the overall concept that war brings about destruction and death. Those who encounter the painting and experience its powerful outcry against military attacks, cannot help but have their consciences provoked. Then again, each individual is entitled to his or her own interpretations of the painting. As Picasso said, “It isn’t up to the painter to define the symbols,
[it is the] public who look at the picture must interpret the symbols as they understand them” (Potter). This is true, because we, as a society, have the responsibility to take these symbolic interpretations to learn from the past to better the future.
Works Cited


