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## The Greatest Ever Anti-War Painting

**“Painting is an Offensive and Defensive Weapon Against the Enemy”**



View of Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (1937). Courtesy Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

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Published 31 August 2017 in [Must See](#)

“Painting is not made to decorate apartments. It’s an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy.” Pablo Picasso angrily scribbled this mini-manifesto midway through an interview in 1944, in response to a journalist’s questions about the relationship between art and politics.

He hadn’t always been so vehement. Seven years earlier, he had been asked to produce a massive work of protest for the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 World’s Fair in Paris but was reluctant to accept the commission. Not only had Picasso never set foot in Republican Spain (he hadn’t returned to his homeland after civil war broke out in 1936), he had actively avoided

making public political pronouncements.

Ultimately he accepted, creating a mural-sized memorial to the Nazi and Italian fascist aerial bombing of the ancient Basque town, Guernica. The 11.5ft by 25.5ft painting would secure Picasso's reputation as the genius who created the century's greatest work of anti-war art.



View of Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (1937). Courtesy Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

*Guernica's* location never changes: it's on display in Room 206 on the second floor of Madrid's Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Coinciding with the painting's 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Spanish gallery has surrounded the work with another 150 masterpieces by Picasso, both from its own collection and loaned from 30 international museums such as the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, Tate Modern in London, MoMA in New York and the Beyeler Foundation in Basel (until 4 September).

Entitled "[Pity and Terror: Picasso's Path to Guernica](#)", the exhibition has been organized by the art historians T.J. Clark and Anne Wagner. It tackles Picasso's vision of modern mechanized war—as well as the ruthlessly visionary road traveled by the Malaga-born artist to arrive at his masterpiece of mass catharsis.



Dora Maar, *Picasso de pie trabajando en el Guernica en su taller de Grands-Augustins* (Paris 1937), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía © Dora Maar, VEGAB Madrid 2017

The exhibition, which opens with works from 1924, includes seminal paintings such as *Three Dancers* (1925) from Tate's collection—which renders the joy Matisse dedicated to the same subject violent and terrifying; the monumentality of copulating insects in the *Figures by the Sea* (1932), a work owned by the Reina Sofía; and the wild-eyed political violence animating *Le Meurtre* (1934), a drawing depicting the death of Jean-Paul Marat belonging to Paris' Musée Picasso, which the artist created a year after Hitler came to power in Germany.

At the center of the exhibition, of course, is *Guernica* itself: an enveloping, movie-screen-sized scene of human agony, pleading and disorientation that Picasso painted in luminous black and white (he prepared his giant canvas with lead white, graphite and finely ground glass for a supremely radiant effect).

He depicts a room being ripped apart by a bomb—where bodies are weaponized, figures sprout projectile tears and beasts brandish swords for tongues. The image is not just “the Last Judgment of our age”, as the art historian [Gijs van Hensbergen](#) would have it. It is a vision that, 80 years later, retains its horror and relevance with every fresh and blinding outbreak of violence and chaos, from Mosul to Fallujah to Charlottesville, VA.

