

The other side of *Guernica*¹

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1. Many of us have been accompanied by the image of *Guernica* since we were young. I cut it out of my Social Studies book to carry it in my wallet while I was an EGB student. Some years later, I was able to see it in person at the Casón del Buen Retiro in Madrid and I was, as are the majority of people, overwhelmed. However, I was unhappy with most of the common analytical interpretations of the painting in which every element has an individual meaning. For this reason I went back to see it, this time at the Museo Reina Sofía and the picture hanging in front of me reminded me of something each one of us knows. Those elements which are usually analyzed separately suddenly were pieced together as a whole: *Guernica* is manger blown up by bombs.

Every image tells its own story. All artists have tried to recreate traditional scenes and motifs from their own point of view, emulating and competing with their masters, thus contributing to perpetuate the life of these images. According to Fritz Saxl, images are born, and die. A semantic interpretation of a painting is only possible when it is placed in the context it gives life to. Sometimes the model coincides with the source of inspiration used by the artist, but this is not always the case. Sometimes it is almost impossible to integrate an image into the tradition to which it belongs, going beyond the artist's will as well as the intention or value given by his contemporaries - icon, symbol, banner. This is exactly what happens with Pablo Ruiz Picasso's *Guernica*. To which iconic tradition does Picasso's painting belong? In which single image does the painting with all its individual elements come together to have one meaning?

2. *Guernica* is a “manger”, a nativity scene the way it has been represented in Europe. And since Charles III, especially, in Spain when it became a traditional motif for the family at Christmas time. It has all the necessary components to represent a nativity scene: the ox, the mule, the Virgin Mary, Joseph and the shepherds as well as the star and the announcing angel, the moment after the sudden destruction.

¹ .- Traducción al inglés de Leticia Camarero Suay

Picasso transforms the traditional model so that the “adoration of the shepherds” represents not just the horror of war in general, but that of the Spanish Civil War. The ox is represented by a bull next to the Virgin Mary. The mule is represented by the *picador*’s horse in the bull fight. For this reason the horse is wearing protective covering and pieces of cloth around its breast and one of its legs. The horse is falling in agony due to the *picador*’s spear that runs through its croup and which tip comes through the horse’s abdomen. The devastated Virgin Mary is cradling the child Jesus, killed by the explosions. This is not a Pieta because she is not cradling the dead body of crucified Jesus Christ but rather the body of the child Jesus who was killed by the bombs. This is the most moving image in the entire scene. Joseph is not only a warrior brandishing a broken sword; he is also a destroyed figure. His head, as well as the hand brandishing the sword, look more like broken off pieces of a figurine in a manger rather than a body parts.

The character lighting the scene, coming through the right window, is the shepherd’s announcing angel and not just someone, who has been surprised in bed by the bombs. The two women on the right side are the shepherds: one with a shawl and the other one raising her arms to the sky. These women represent the shepherds in the original Adoration scene. The one running towards the Virgin Mary seems to be kneeling. At the top, the light bulb shaped like the star of Bethlehem, is illuminating the scene.

To me, this idea always seemed very hazardous to publish until I found two theories that matched up with mine while going through the different interpretations. One of them was of the magnificent Quino. In two vignettes he tells us the story of a woman, who asks her cleaning lady to straighten up the living room, including a copy of *Guernica*. The cleaning lady does her job so well that she tidies up the painting; putting the animals in the stable on the right and the rest of the characters on the left, in such a way that it could remind us of a Nativity scene. Some time after that, I found out that art historian Jean Clair had suggested an interpretation of *Guernica* as an inverted Nativity scene. This argument has, therefore, a rational basis. Nowadays, a couple of articles can

be found on the Internet establishing this relationship without any sort of ambiguity: a very interesting one signed by Héctor Solsona Quilis and another one by Luís Marián.

3. Once we have come to terms with this idea, the question we have to ask ourselves is the following: in which image does the painting take root? *Guernica* indeed recreates the “life” of the image known as *Adoration of the shepherds*. This image has been recreated though all the European pictorial tradition since the Middle Ages. Nowadays, anyone can easily check this out and I urge you to type “adoration of the shepherds” in Google images and then compare the compositions you find with the painting *Guernica*. The result is surprising. If we carefully look at the scene in any of the paintings, e.g. Taddeo Gaddi’s *Nativity* from 1325, Rubens’ *Adoration of the shepherds*, the ones from Murillo and Titian or from the anonymous Flemish from the 17th century, etc., the similarities are astounding. There is always a frontal perspective with the Holy Family on the one side, the scene takes place at night or in half-light, the angels and the zenithal light are on the top part, Joseph is carrying a stick, the Virgin Mary is next to the ox and there is a secluded area in ruins, there are around six or eight main characters and groups of angels often appear as ornaments.

In his 1605 version of *Adorations*, Greco shows us, among many other things, an angel with her arms risen on the left side of the painting. In *Guernica* we find a woman exercising this same gesture, but on the right side (this gesture is usually related to Goya’s *The Third of May*). Murillo’s *Adoration* from 1650-55 (in the Museo del Prado), which curiously does not include any angels on the top part, has six characters and the ox next to the Virgin Mary. It reveals to us another mystery of *Guernica*: a rooster as an offering. That is the bird on the table behind the Virgin Mary in Picasso’s painting. Now take a look at the ox, it is looking directly to the observer, just like the bull in *Guernica*! The shepherd on the right, the one who is on his knees, refers to the position of the woman coming on the right. She has her knee on the floor. In Ruben’s *Adoration*, a shepherd is carrying the oil lamp. In Josefa de Óvidos’ *Nativity* (1669), Joseph is carrying the candle and so on... You can keep on searching and comparing as long as you wish and still be surprised. I personally think that Murillo’s *Adoration* is an explicit source of inspiration.

The zenithal light depicted by the star-shaped light bulb symbolizes the recovery of the closed area, which was still open in the previous sketches of *Guernica*. In those sketches and mainly in one of them, the one painted on May the 8th, Picasso places the scene on a patio surrounded by houses and roofs. In this sketch we can already see depicted the basic elements of the Holy Family – the dead Joseph, the Virgin Mary with the dead child on her arms, the fallen horse and the severe bull surrounded by all of the other elements. However, the most important fact is that, when Picasso finishes the painting, the place where these characters are, has been partly closed and it looks like a stable -with the table behind the Virgin Mary, an open window behind the bull and a space of faded houses between the angel and the shepherds. The scenes related to the *Adoration of the shepherds* place the stable at Bethlehem in a similar context -a semi-ruined stable with cavities, we can discern an urban, rural or natural area through those.

4. The scene of the *Adoration of the shepherds* always takes place in the darkness of the night. It is an absolute intimate moment, in which the shepherds called by the angel, give their offerings to the newborn. All of us are familiarized with this moment of peace since our tender infancy. It is a moment that has taken root in the catholic tradition we have been brought up. It is a moment that the German bombs have destroyed in the middle of the night, bringing death and destruction to the Holy Family, the symbol of civil society, the people.

The interpretation given by the Museo Reina Sofía seems, honestly, reductionist. It insists on the anti-war component, pacifism and the recognition of the overcoming of the Spanish Civil War. That is true, but it only stresses the immediate symbolic meaning of the purpose it was painted for, it was an order of the Government of the Republic. We suggest a semantic reading that roots the *Guernica* in the pictorial tradition, giving it an artistic value beyond the symbolic, iconic or ideological value.

To see *Guernica* with all its moving and terrible connotations against the war means that the image of the Holy Family is still alive in our cultural tradition, inspiring a reaction of astonishment and distress while facing the painting. For this reason we are

not able to identify its elements in an explicit way. When Picasso bombs the Holy Family -the private, secluded and peaceful scene of the adoration of the shepherds in the nativity of Christ- he might have blown up and killed the image of the Holy Family that determined the pictorial tradition in which the painting is set. It is obvious that Picasso has understood the bombing of the civilian population as an expression of the death of God itself, as if it were the prelude of nihilism, a premonition of Auschwitz.

