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• by Picasso

Guernica



Guernica

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Guernica

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Horse's Head. Sketch for *Guernica*

2 May 1937

Oil on canvas, 65 x 92.1 cm.

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Guernica and the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 Paris World's Fair

The large mural painting *Guernica* is the reflection of an era and of a set of sorrowful and dramatic circumstances, and sprang from a commission intended for the Spanish Pavilion of the *Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne*, commonly known as the Paris International Exhibition or World's Fair, of 1937. The French capital offered its most outstanding buildings as venues for this event – the purpose of which was, above all, to glorify the latest technological advances – ignoring in its pretensions to splendour the imminence of the Second World War, which was about to erupt. Owing to their greater affinity with the industrial or architectural products to be exhibited, almost all the artists who were chosen to paint the murals, such as Robert Delaunay, Jean Metzinger, Raoul Dufy, Fernand Léger and Albert Gleizes, cultivated styles that were very close to abstraction.

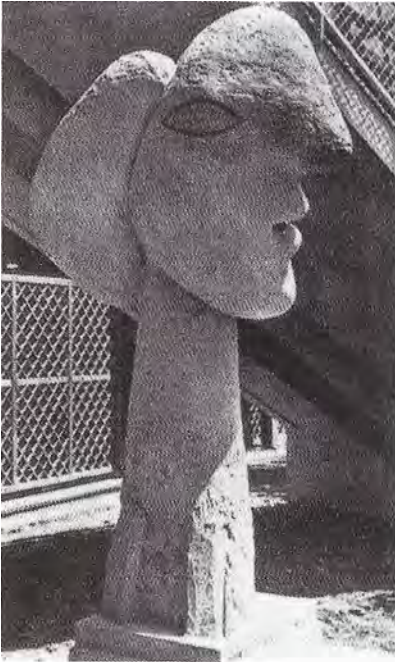
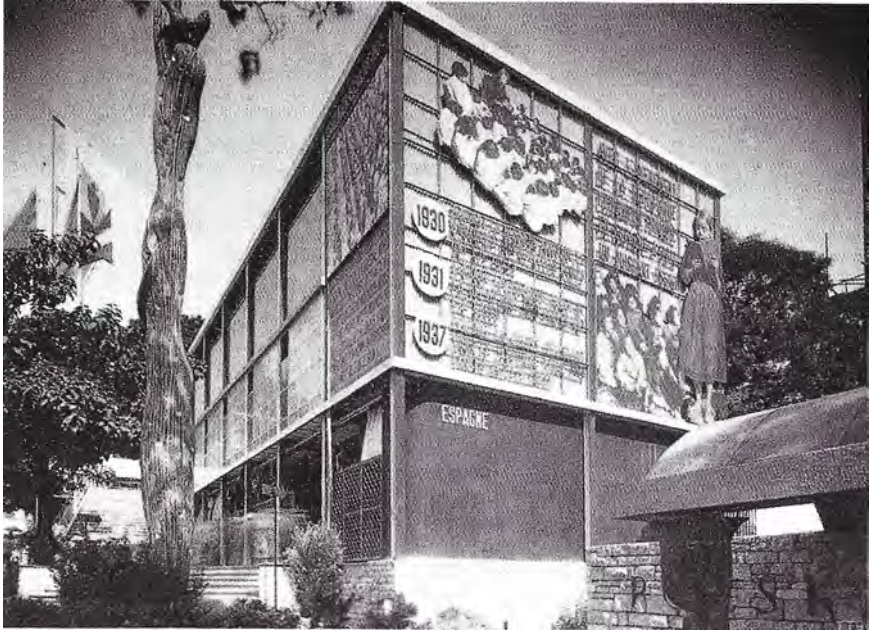
However, the Spanish Pavilion was built as a testimony to the tragic situation Spain was experiencing: the Civil War (1936-39). The main facade of the pavilion was covered in a huge photographic mural featuring soldiers and various allusions to the principles upheld by the Republic. Inside the building references to the events of the war and their impact on the civilian population predominated.

Near the aforementioned facade was the large monolithic sculpture by Alberto, *El pueblo español tiene un camino que conduce a una estrella*

[*The Spanish People have a Path leading to a Star*], in addition to Julio González's famous *Montserrat*, a life-size female figure fashioned in sheet iron holding her child in her left arm and a sickle in her right hand. Also outside the Pavilion were several sculptures by Picasso.

Inside the building, a large mobile by Alexander Calder, the *Mercury Fountain*, had been placed in the entrance hall. This circular fountain bears an inscription engraved in relief in the work itself – *Mercure espagnol d'Almaden* – in allusion to the town's mines from which mercury was extracted for munitions, then under siege from the Nationalists. On the right-hand wall hung *Guernica*, its title also emphasised in large characters, and opposite this imposing mural, on the left-hand side, was a large photographic composition dedicated to Federico García Lorca, who by then had been murdered. Finally, *El Segador* [*The Reaper*], a five-metre high mural by Joan Miró, located on the staircase leading to the first floor, completed this group of the most prominent and best-known works that made up the Spanish Pavilion.

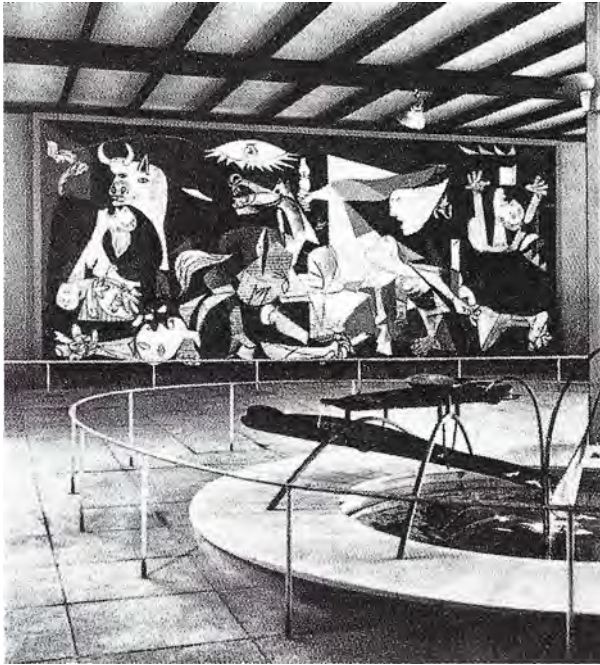
Picasso was commissioned by the Spanish Republican government to paint the canvas *Guernica* for the Spanish Pavilion, whose architects were Luis Lacasa and Josep Lluís Sert. The idea did not initially appeal to the Malaga-born painter, but he later decided to take on the project.



Head of a Woman, Pablo Picasso
Exterior, Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International
Exhibition, 1937



Montserrat, Julio González
Exterior, Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International
Exhibition, 1937





Model of the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International
Exhibition, 1937

The meaning of *Guernica*

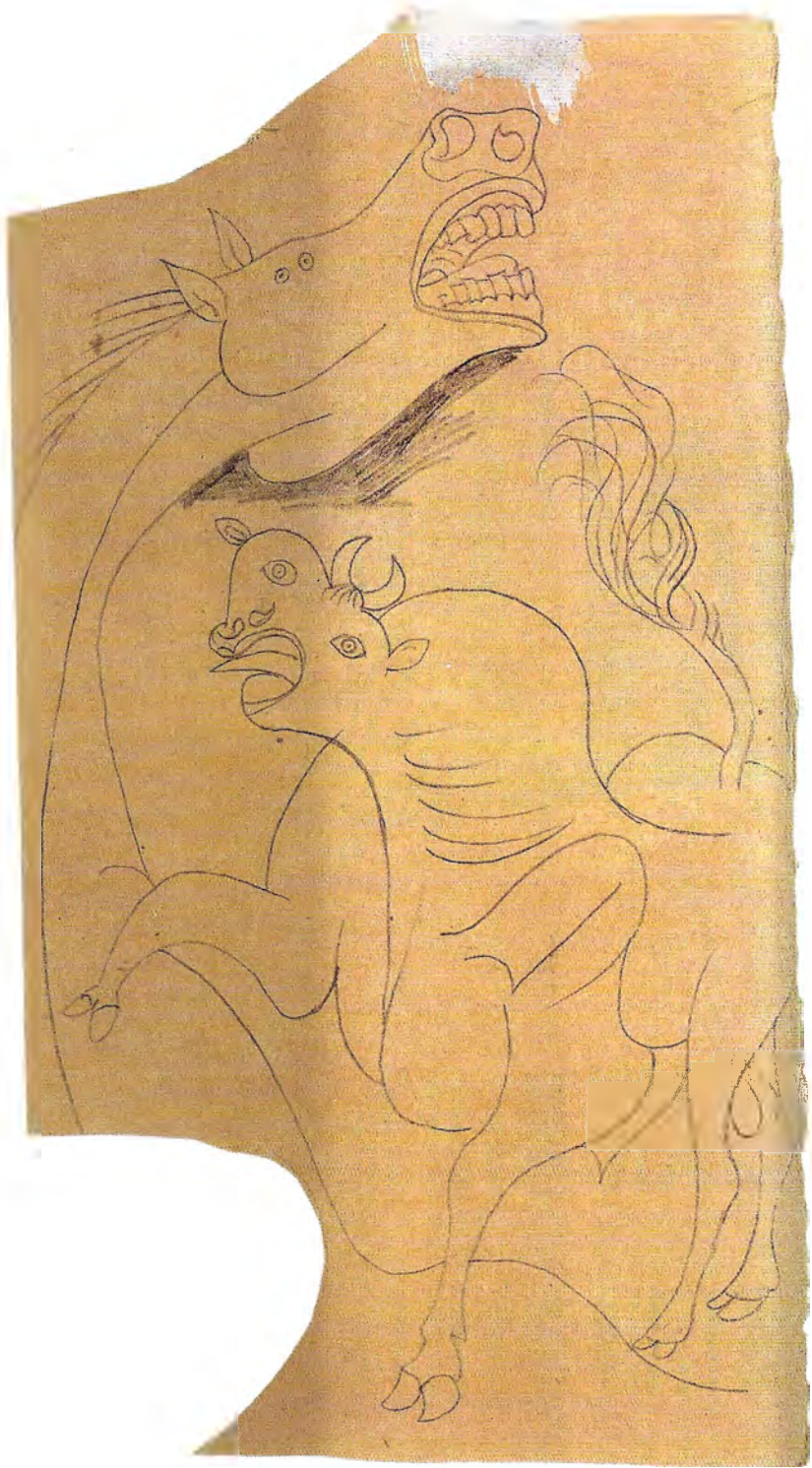
The first of the many sketches for the mural is dated Saturday 1 May 1937. Picasso worked on this set of preparatory drawings for six days before beginning the final composition on canvas.

It is known for a fact that the reason which prompted him to depict precisely this scene rather than any other was the news of the bombing of the Basque town that lends its name to the painting. Picasso learned of this occurrence through the dramatic photographs published by the French newspaper *L'Humanité*. Even so, the preparatory sketches do not contain any references to these specific events; indeed, on the contrary, they denounce barbarity, terror and war in general. In this connection, the words of Herbert Read are highly significant when he states that this allegory symbolises not only *Guernica* but Spain, not only Spain but Europe. He describes it as the modern Calvary, agony in the bomb-ravaged ruins of human tenderness and fragility, and a religious picture that is painted not with the same kind, but with the same degree, of fervour that inspired Grünewald and the master of the Avignon *Pieta*, Van Eyck and Bellini. He maintains that it is not sufficient to compare the Picasso who produced this painting with the Goya of the "Disasters", for Goya was also a great artist and a great humanist, but his reactions were individualistic and his instruments irony, satire and ridicule. Picasso is more universal; his symbols are trivial like the symbols of Homer, Dante and Cervantes.

According to Read, only when the most widespread commonplace is infused with the most intense passion is a great work of art born, transcending all schools and categories; and once it is born, it lives in immortality.

Similar observations were made by Elizabeth McCausland on the occasion of the showing of *Guernica* at the exhibition entitled *Picasso: Forty Years of his Art* held at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1939. She stated that Picasso had found his soul neither in the studio nor in the laboratory for plastic research but in his union with the people of his country of origin, Spain. In *Guernica* he not only behaves as a son of Spain but as a citizen of a democratic world. According to McCausland, Picasso wishes to utter a cry of horror and anguish at the invasion and destruction of his beloved Spain, to protest with his art against the treachery of Franco and his Fascist allies, and to kindle in all those who view *Guernica* an internal and emotional understanding of the destiny of Spain.

As can be inferred from these observations, nothing in the *Guernica* sketches can be identified with wartime Spain: neither arms, nor bombings nor soldiers, nor planes. The chosen motifs are drawn from the iconographic repertory of the artist's earlier works and are always closely related to events of his private life. This is one of the reasons why *Guernica* has given rise to many, controversial interpretations.



The main iconographic motifs in *Guernica*: The bull and the horse, the mother with the dead child

One of the main motifs found in *Guernica* is directly taken from bullfighting iconography and represents precisely the most dramatic part of the fight: the moment when the bull charges at the horse during the stage known as the *tercio de varas*. Picasso depicts the horse without padding, although by then it was customary for this type of protection to be worn. The bullfight is one of the painter's habitual themes, which he had drawn at the early age of eight. Bullfighting scenes are not found during the Blue and Cubist periods, though they subsequently made a powerful comeback.

The charging, an iconographic motif which held several meanings for Picasso, shows the bull as a proud and admirable animal, whereas the horse appears to be a secondary, passive figure. At the same time, this bloody clash also evokes a sexual encounter in which the bull obviously embodies the male and the horse could be identified with the woman. According to a third interpretation, the horse could symbolise the victims of the massacre of the Basque town, passive and powerless to ward off misfortune.

A variation on the bullfight theme is the horse, which is depicted as an isolated figure in some of the sketches, without the image of the bull facing it. As in this case, it is a gored and battered animal that has been mortally wounded. There are several versions of this motif, some of

which were done on 1 May 1937, while others date from the 10th of that month.

Picasso dwells even further on the figure of this four-legged creature. Indeed, also in these preparatory studies for *Guernica*, he concentrates not only on the animal's whole body but on what was to constitute the second version of the theme of the charging – its head, now disjointed and tense, as if about to draw its last breath, with huge teeth that seem to cling desperately to life, as found in the sketches of the *Cabeza de caballo* [Horse's Head]: drawing for *Guernica*, done on 2 May, and the oil painting which dates from that same day.

Another major theme that inspired the sketches is the mother who is clutching her dead child and flees, screaming in terror, from the attack by something or someone that the painter has intentionally concealed from the viewer. As in the case of the first motif, there are different versions. In some the woman is depicted by a blazing building and may be holding the child in either arm, as in several oil paintings and the drawings of the *Caballo y madre con niño muerto* [Horse and Mother with Dead Child] (8 May), *Madre con niño muerto* [Mother with Dead Child] (9 May), *Madre con niño muerto en una escalera* [Mother with Dead Child on Staircase] (10 May) and *Madre con niño muerto* [Mother with Dead Child] (13 May). The mother-and-child theme was to obsess Picasso, who continued to employ it even after completing the huge canvas; for example, in the painting *Madre con niño muerto* (26 September 1937) and in a subsequent stage of





12 *Study for the horse (I).* Sketch for *Guernica*
10 May 1937
Graphite on white paper. 24.1 x 45.6 cm.

Study for the horse (II). Sketch for *Guernica*
10 May 1937
Graphite, wax and pastel on cream paper. 22 x 45.6 cm.



Study for the horse's head (I). Sketch for Guernica

2 May 1937

Graphite on blue paper: 21 x 15.5 cm.

development of the theme, in the many shouting women's heads inspired by the physiognomy of the woman who was his partner at the time, the photographer Dora Maar.

The “postscripts” to *Guernica*. The weeping women

Women were a frequent theme of Picasso's from his first works, even in the Blue and Rose periods and the Neoclassic period of the twenties. Perhaps the reason for his constant recourse to this iconographic motif lies in the emotional connotations it held for him.

It seems that three women generated, more or less directly, the motif of the weeping women of 1937: Olga Koklova, Marie-Thérèse Walter and Dora Maar. It is known that when Picasso tired of a relationship and embarked on a new one his plastic universe also changed. When his relationship with Olga Koklova began to flounder in the twenties, the rounded women of the Classical period began to give way to more dynamic figures with markedly deformed physiognomies, as can be seen in the canvas of the *Three Dancers* (June 1925; Tate Gallery, London), which has been regarded as a distant forerunner of the weeping women. Deformity is transformed into violence in another of the paintings dating from that same year; *Le Baiser* (summer 1925; Musée Picasso, Paris), in which the main figures – undoubtedly Olga Koklova and Picasso himself – resemble monsters devouring each other.

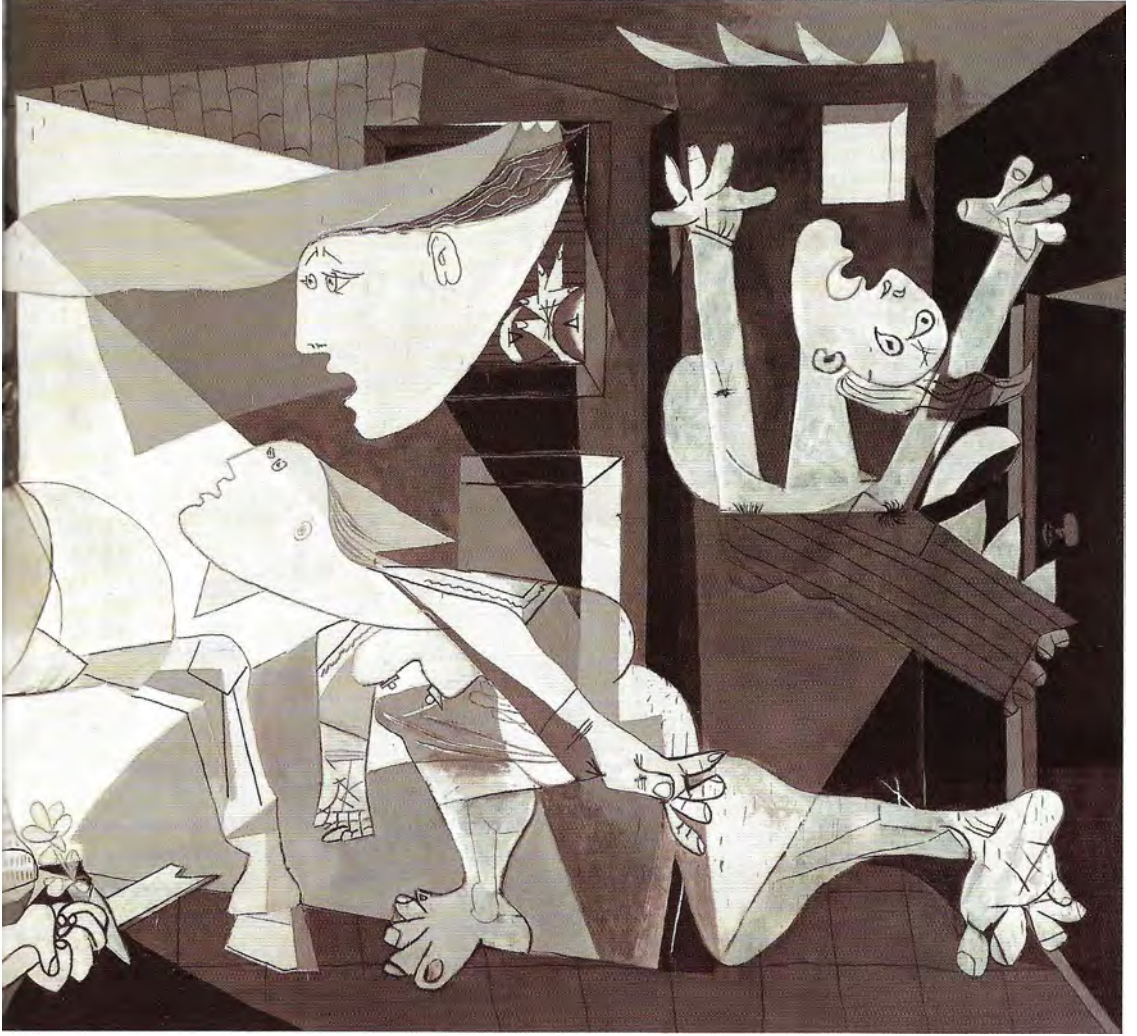
The metamorphic process to which Picasso subjected the female figure, and which was to culminate in the weeping women, became increasingly accentuated in the heads dated between 1927 and 1929 – the *Figura* [Figure] (1928; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid) belongs to this series – the works that come closest to surrealist ideology. Some researchers have interpreted these heads as symbolic portraits of Koklova. All of them display a predominant element, a huge mouth crammed with prominent teeth in a menacing attitude, like a toothed vagina.

By 1927 Picasso had met Marie-Thérèse Walter, on whose anatomy he was to base the large-scale three-dimensional heads he did at Boisgeloup, which marked a further, drastic change in his career. As a continuation of these monumental sculptures, in 1932 he produced a set of paintings showing a naked, highly sensual Marie-Thérèse asleep. These placid images of love at its prime (Marie-Thérèse Walter), even as far as their colours are concerned, are a total contrast to the brutal surrealist heads done in 1927-29, inspired by dying love (Olga Koklova). In addition to painting her asleep, Picasso also portrayed Marie-Thérèse – who gave birth to his daughter Maya on 5 October 1935 – sitting in an armchair.

In March 1936, Picasso settled for a time in Juan-les-Pins with Marie-Thérèse and Maya. By then the relationship had begun to cool and the journey sparked differences between the couple. It was around this time that he met Dora Maar, with whom he travelled to







Mougins in summer 1936, starting up a relationship with her.

Dora Maar was a photographer who had joined the surrealist movement in the early thirties, taking part in the exhibitions held in Tenerife (1935) and London (1936). She was to document with her photographs the different stages in the execution of *Guernica*. Picasso, who was always impressed by Dora Maar's knowledge of the political situation and her adherence to the most delicate causes, produced a number of portraits in 1937 based on her physiognomy, together with others of Marie-Thérèse. Both women are shown seated on similar chairs, holding one hand to their face, painted in bright colours (oranges, greens, purples...) and with marked facial deformities, although the more acid colours are generally reserved for the portraits of Dora Maar, whom the painter appreciated primarily on account of her intelligence, compared to the pronounced sensuality of Marie-Thérèse Walter.

One of the central themes of *Guernica*, the portraits of the weeping women, is also inspired by Dora Maar's physiognomy. These portraits were to be the artist's most frequently repeated compositions once he had completed the large mural on 4 June 1937, after which he began a series known as the "postscripts" – works produced after *Guernica*, but related formally and conceptually to this painting. Picasso introduced at least three formal variations with respect to *Guernica* in his weeping women. First, the tears that furrow the deformed female faces, which do not appear in the final

composition of the large-scale canvas. Another element, also absent from *Guernica*, is the handkerchief that wipes away these tears. Lastly, in addition to the two aforementioned iconographic motifs, Picasso included a third formal aspect, a very bright palette, which became the main feature of the canvas and contrasted with the chromatic range of whites, greys and blacks used in *Guernica*.

Weeping women were to become a recurrent iconographic motif in Picasso's works, even up to the forties, and linked up with the stylistic cycle begun by the painter in 1937 when he produced the large-scale mural.

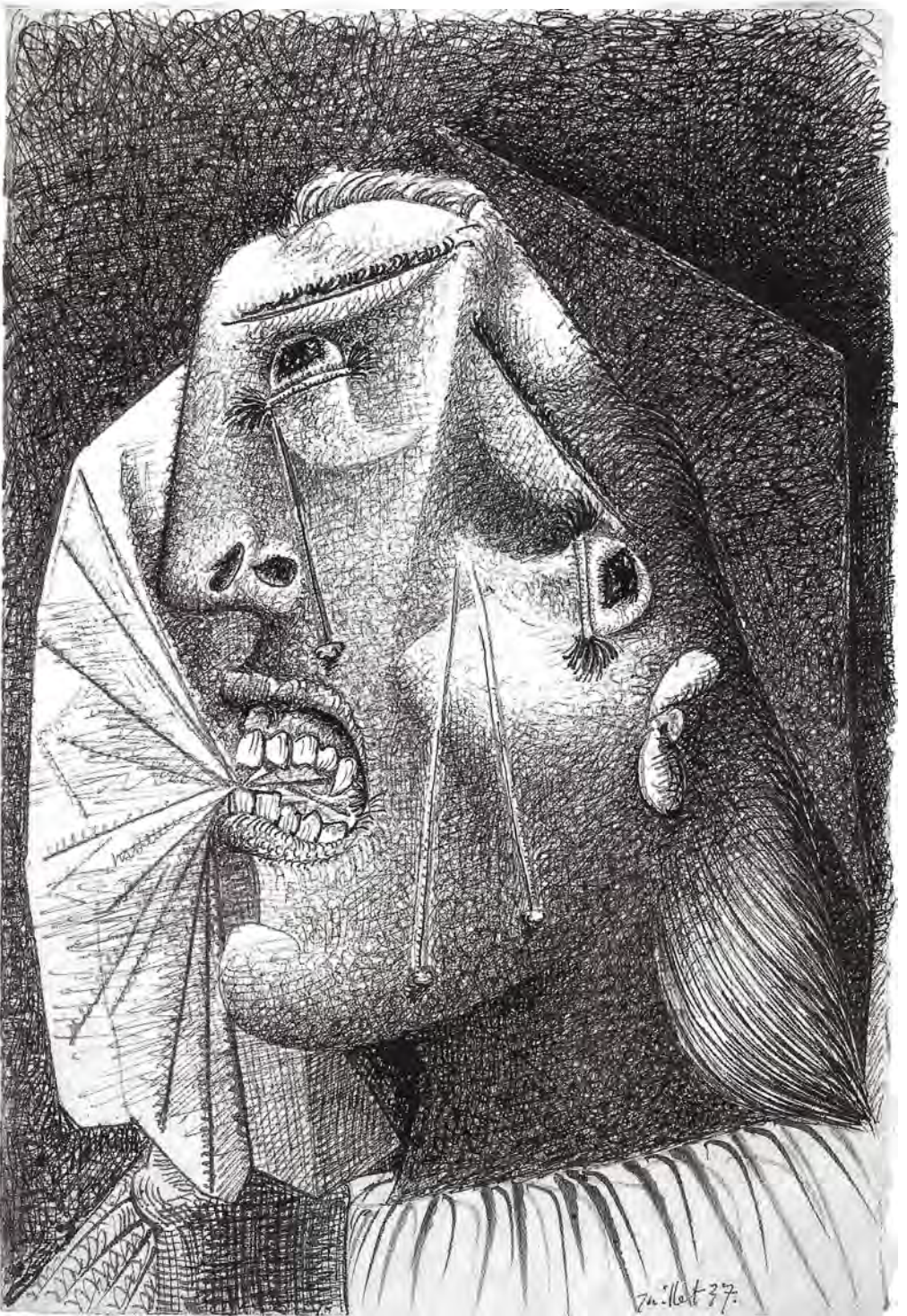
Although Picasso's weeping women were inspired by Dora Maar's physiognomy, the intensity and drama of his relationships with the three aforementioned women – Picasso was still married to Koklova, had a daughter by Walter, whom he visited weekly, and was involved in a stable relationship with Maar – provided the artist with an ideal existential baggage for depicting the tragic events that were occurring in Spain and threatening Europe. All this crystallised into the theme of the weeping women, who recreate cubist forms while incorporating the surrealist motif of metamorphosis. The events of his private life and the political happenings that perturbed Europe between the wars merge in the motifs Picasso created around this time to produce the most emblematic works of art of the 20th century.

Weeping Head (VI). Guernica "Postscript"

13 June 1937

Graphite, gouache, wax and pastel on tracing linen. 29.1 x 23.1 cm.





20 *Weeping Head with Handkerchief (I), Guernica "Postscript"*

4 July 1937

Ink on white paper: 25.3 x 17.1 cm.



Head of Weeping Woman with Handkerchief (III). Guernica "Postscript"

17 October 1937

Oil on canvas. 92 x 72.6 cm.

Guernica from 1937 to the present

The preparatory sketches and studies for *Guernica* were to give rise to the final painting, whose gestation can be appreciated through the photos taken by Dora Maar. Conceived as a giant poster, the huge canvas is a testimony to the horror of the Spanish Civil War and the best presage of what was to occur in World War II. The chromatic sobriety and intensity of the motifs, and their arrangement, emphasise to an unbearable degree the tragic nature of the scene, which thenceforth became a symbol of the condition of our era.

Herschel B. Chipp, undoubtedly the best qualified scholar of the great mural, stated after the Paris Exhibition ended on 1 November 1937 that Picasso was reported to have commented on various occasions that *Guernica* should eventually be moved to Madrid and later expressed this wish in writing.

The huge canvas travelled extensively to take part in many exhibitions in a short space of time. The first of these was a travelling exhibition comprising 118 works by Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Henri Laurens and Picasso himself, which was organised by Paris gallery owner Paul Rosenberg and visited Norway, Denmark and Sweden between January and April 1938.

After remaining, apparently for several months, in the artist's studio, in September 1938 *Guernica* was sent to the London-based National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief together with many of its preparatory drawings, with the aim of raising funds. It was also exhibited in other English cities.

Picasso later decided to send the painting and preparatory sketches to New York. The crossing was made in the French liner *Normandie* – in which the president of Republican government in exile, Juan Negrín, also travelled – and ended on 1 May 1939. Once again, in accordance with Picasso's intention to raise funds for Spanish political refugees, it took part in further exhibitions. The first of these was inaugurated at the Valentine Gallery in New York, presented by the American Artists Congress; when the showing ended the painting embarked on a three-month tour of some of the most important cities in the United States: Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago. These exhibitions triggered a major controversy in both art and politics owing to the content of the painting, the outbreak of the Second World War (1 September 1939) and the debate that arose in connection with the painting itself on the defence of modern art, which at the time was under attack from some sectors of the American press and critics.

Before 1939 ended, *Guernica* was shown again in New York, this time at the recently inaugurated Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) as part of a retrospective of the artist's oeuvre entitled *Picasso: Forty Years of his Art*. On this occasion, the mural was viewed in the context of Picasso's work as a whole and went from being a symbol of the Spanish Civil War to a fundamental 20th-century work of art.

Following the eruption of World War II, Picasso decided that the painting, along with the rest of the works shown in the MoMA's retrospective, should remain under the custody







of this museum while the war lasted. With the consent of the artist and of Alfred Barr, director of the MoMA – though in most cases going against the recommendations of conservators and restorers – *Guernica* was loaned for several showings during the forties, such as those held at the Chicago Art Institute (1940), the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio (1941) and the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1942).

In 1953 the canvas travelled to Milan to take part in the major Picasso exhibition at the Palazzo Reale. From Italy it again crossed the Atlantic to take part in the Second Sao Paulo Art Biennial from December 1953 to February 1954 and just over a year later, in June 1955, it travelled to Europe once more to take part in a retrospective on the artist in Paris, followed by a lengthy tour of various museums in Germany, Belgium, Holland and Denmark.

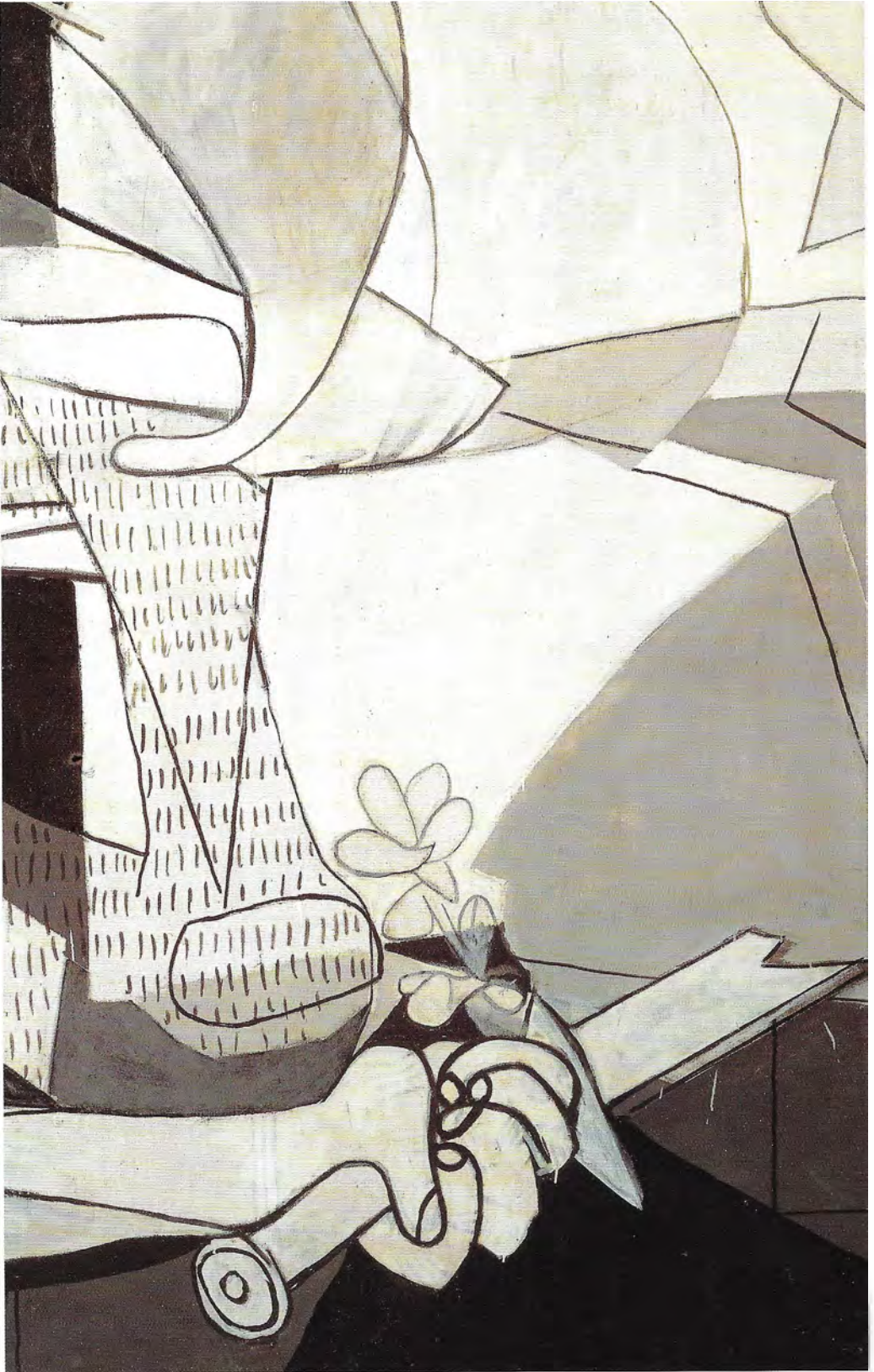
In 1957 and 1958 it was shown in the *Picasso 75th Anniversary Exhibition* held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and subsequently in Chicago and Philadelphia. Thenceforth, until it was moved to Spain definitively, the painting did not take part in any other exhibition outside the MoMA, and the only journey to which it was subjected was its definitive move from New York to Madrid on 9 September 1981. Earlier that day the MoMA and the Spanish government had signed an agreement to formalise the transfer of ownership of the painting and preparatory and related works. The official presentation at the Casón del Buen Retiro in Madrid took place

on 24 October 1981. In July 1992 the painting travelled a few metres from the Casón to what was to become its definitive site, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Finally, at the end of November 1995, the glass which had protected it since its arrival in Spain was removed.

According to Alfred Barr, in 1958 Picasso renewed the loan of the painting to the MoMA indefinitely. Nonetheless, the painter's wishes for it eventually to be housed in Spain were evident. Accordingly, on 13 February 1970, he wrote to the New York museum, eliminating the well-known clause that conditioned the return of the canvas to the restoration of the Republic, replacing it with one stating textually, "when public freedoms are re-established in Spain", and adding that, "you understand that it has always been my wish to see this work and the items that accompany it return to the Spanish people."

The canvas *Guernica* hangs in the exhibition rooms devoted to Pablo Picasso at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. These rooms constitute the backbone of this institution, owing both to the importance of this artist in the history of art in our century and to the quality of the works displayed there. Of all of them, *Guernica* is the prime exhibit, not only from the artistic point of view but also on account of its meaning, as it is one of the most emblematic works in the history of 20th-century art.







Exhibitions in which *Guernica* has taken part

1937.— *Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne*. Paris, Spanish Pavilion, 12 July-25 November.

1938.— [Exhibition of Picasso's *Guernica*]. Oslo, Kunstnernes Hus // Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst // Stockholm, Liljevalch Konsthall // Gothenburg, Konsthallen, January-April.

1938.— *Exhibition of Picasso's "Guernica"*. London, New Burlington Galleries, 4-29 October // Leeds (England) // Liverpool.

1938-1939.— [Exhibition of Picasso's *Guernica*]. London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 31 December 1938-mid-January 1939 // Manchester, February 1939.

1939.— *Picasso: Guernica*. New York, Valentine Gallery, 5-27 May.

1939.— *Picasso's masterpiece Guernica and 63 related paintings and drawings*. Los Angeles, Stendahl Art Galleries, 10-21 August // San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Art, 28 August-18 September // Chicago, Arts Club, 1-10 October.

1939-1941.— *Picasso: Forty Years of his Art*. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 15 November 1939-7 January 1940 // Chicago, Chicago Art Institute, 1 February-3 March 1940 // St Louis, City Art Museum, 16 March-14 April 1940 // Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 26 April-25 May 1940 // San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Art, 25 June-22 July 1940 // Cincinnati, Cincinnati Museum of Art, 28 September-27 October 1940 // Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art, 7

November-8 December 1940 // New Orleans, Isaac Delgado Museum, 20 December 1940-17 January 1941 // Minneapolis, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1 February-2 March 1941 // Pittsburgh, Carnegie Institute, 15 March-13 April 1941.

1941.— [Masterpieces by Picasso]. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 16 July-7 September.

1941.— Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum, 24 September-20 October.

1941.— Columbus, Ohio, Gallery of Fine Arts, 4-30 November.

1942.— Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum, 26 June-15 September.

1953-1954.— *Picasso*. Milan, Palazzo Reale, 20 September-20 November 1953 // II Art Biennial, Sao Paulo, 13 December 1953-20 February 1954.

1955.— *Picasso: Peintures, 1900-1955*. Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, June-October.

1955-1956.— *Picasso*. Munich, Haus der Kunst, 25 October-26 December 1955 // Cologne, Rheinisches Museum, 30 December 1955-29 February 1956 // Hamburg, Kunsthalle, 10 March-29 April 1956.

1956.— *Guernica*. Brussels, Palais des Beaux Arts, May-June // Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, 14 July-30 September.

1956.— *Guernica*. Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, 19 October-2 December.

1957-1958.— *Picasso 75th Anniversary Exhibition*. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 22 May-8 September // Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 29 October-8 December 1957 // Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 8 January-23 February 1958.



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● by Picasso

Guernica



Guernica, 1937

En portada: Dibujo de mujer llorando, 1937



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