Blood is Thicker in Oil
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A mother cries, her head raised to the heavens, over the dead body of her child. On the right, the burning pyre that was a building entombs a woman while she is still alive. In the center, a wounded Spanish horse shrieks in both terror and agony. A candle holder and a bull stare at the scene in horrified shock. The body of a warrior continues to scream in the agony that brought on its death. And, above all of this, a light illuminates the horror of both what is, and what was, Guernica (see fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Guernica, by Pablo Picasso

Pablo Picasso painted Guernica in 1937 for the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne (25 May 1937 – 25 November 1937). Picasso first exhibited his 3.5 meter by 7.8 meter canvas in the Spanish Pavilion in July—a mere three months after the tragedy of Guernica ("Guernica Undergoes"). On April 26, 1937, a German air fleet flew over the historic city of Guernica, strafing the city with “100,000 pounds of explosives” and machine gun fire for three and a half hours. The attack left the town decimated and a third of its inhabitants dead (Stokstad and Cothren 1062; "News Report by George Steer"). Within days, the event had become the muse and namesake of one of Picasso's greatest masterpieces.

Picasso painted Guernica to bring the horrors of a single event of the Spanish Civil War to light, as well as the atrocities of war as a whole. Guernica became an undeniable force in the art world. Today, Guernica is considered a world treasure. Examining the elements of its composition can reveal why Guernica achieved such prestige.

Robin Williams, a writer on visual web-design principles, is well known for the acronym CRAP. Her four basic design principles—Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, and Proximity—often serve as a means of evaluating what is effective and ineffective in visual media design (Hawthorne and Pass). Williams’ principles
are a modern standard which can be applied to evaluate Guernica, a well-known piece of artwork that has been effective in conveying its message through the decades.

Guernica has vast contrast, superb repetition of triadic elements, a highly developed alignment, and an interesting proximity that suggests a religious allusion. For all of the painting’s assets, Guernica has a few elements that Williams would consider ineffective in modern design—such as being left heavy (if only just barely) and somewhat disjointed. These elements do not diminish the painting’s power, or its ability to challenge viewers’ depth perception; instead, Guernica’s noteworthiness is elevated by its ability to defy fundamental artistic doctrines while maintaining both visual appeal and sophistication.

How is Guernica Effective?

The sheer size of the canvas is overwhelming. The painting towers four feet over its tallest viewers and spans nearly four times the International Residential Code’s required minimum length of seven feet for a “habitable room” (“Building Planning”). The size overwhelsms viewers, making it impossible to ignore its billboard-sized anti-war message. The stark, monochromatic color scheme gives the painting the impression of being a newspaper photo, which imparts validity to the painting that color could not have produced. As newspapers were a main source of information during the 1930s, the parallel most likely evoked the same unavoidable sense of truth and horror in its viewers that the televised news reports from Vietnam produced thirty years later (“Vietnam”).

Contrast

Beyond strengthening the painting’s message, the color scheme creates immense contrast in the painting’s composition, particularly where areas of deeply saturated black meet areas of light gray. Merriam-Webster defines contrast as the “juxtaposition of dissimilar elements (as color, tone, or emotion) in a work of art.” According to Williams, contrast occurs between cool and warm colors, large and small elements (e.g.: type font, graphic size), and horizontal and vertical elements (Hawthorne and Pass). In Guernica, contrast is primarily created through color. While the painting appears to be white at points, there is no white found in the painting, only light, lowly saturated grey. The contrast between the dark background and light figures is effective for two reasons. First, it forces viewers to pay more attention to the figures than the background. Second, it creates a feeling of negative space in a painting that has very little.

The background is also significantly smaller than the figures, whose faces tend to be their largest features. This proportional contrast furthers the importance of the figures over the background and the figures’ faces over everything else. The contrast makes it impossible for viewers to pass over the faces, forcing them to concentrate on the distorted suffering where it is most haunting. The proportional contrast also creates a sense of depth by pushing the figures into the forefront, even when they are physically located in the middle ground.

Repetition

While contrast is an ineluctable attribute of Guernica’s composition, the sheer scale of its repetition is easily overlooked. Williams relates repetition to “consistency” (qtd. in Hawthorne and Pass). The repetition of visual elements creates consistency to “develop organization and strengthen unity” (Hawthorne and Pass). Throughout the painting, Picasso uses triadic design—implied triangular shapes—as well as obvious triangular shapes, to create both movement and unity. There are numerous examples of triadic design in the painting.
The first triadic pattern is found in the middle of the painting (see fig. 2).

\[ \text{Fig. 2. First example of triadic movement in Picasso's Guernica.} \]

The implied line formed by the light, the fallen warrior's left hand, and the running woman in the lower right corner form a triad. The components forming the second triad—essentially an inversion of the second triad—are the smoke cloud, the woman in the burning building, and the broken sword's pommel (see fig. 3).

\[ \text{Fig. 3. Second example of triadic movement in Picasso's Guernica.} \]

These first two examples show how Picasso unified his painting by creating proximity between fixtures at opposite sides of the painting.

There are also smaller triads that unify sections, instead of the entirety, of the painting (see fig. 4).
Fig. 4. Third example of triadic movement in Picasso’s *Guernica*.

The triad follows the implied line created by the light gray background to move the viewer’s eyes from the top of the painting to the bottom, where it then shoots the eye upwards to the negative space just right of the burning woman. These three examples show how the repetition of triadic design produces movement, unifying the composition so that it is aesthetically pleasing.

Repetition of triangular shapes can be found throughout the painting. A few examples are the light, the flames, and the running woman’s knee. The running woman’s knee is a distinct, exaggerated triangle. In fact, all of the figures are constructed out of triads. The women’s hair, breasts, and noses; the bull’s hoof, ears, and outline; the horse’s tongue, wound, and muzzle are all triads. Moreover, many of the figures appear to be posed so that their outlines form triads. The mother is the best example of this (see fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Triadic outline of the mother in Picasso’s *Guernica*.

By constructing his figures in triads, Picasso strengthened the unity, repetition, and movement in *Guernica* as a whole.

**Alignment and Proximity**

These triads do more than produce movement in the composition. They also create unity, proximity, and alignment. According to Williams, “physically separated elements, if they are aligned, will have an invisible line that connects them” (Hawthorne and Pass). Alignment is achieved through the painting’s triadic design, which visually connects elements that are not directly next to each other through an implied line. These implied lines are the reason that the viewer’s eyes are continually moving, which then gives the viewer the impression that the figures are both far from and near to each other. The perception of flowing proximity is one of the defining characteristics of cubism, and one of the many traits that make the painting interesting.
Guernica’s alignment and proximity are also defined by Picasso’s use of positive and negative space. There is a large quantity of positive space (space that is filled by a figure or form) but very little negative space (the space above, below, within, or around the forms that is visually perceived as being empty) in the painting. While there is little negative space in the painting, it is decisively placed so that the painting remains balanced. Because of its arrangement, the negative space can be cut into three sections, which highlights the three distinct groups found in the painting (see fig. 6).

![Guernica](image-url)

Fig. 6. Approximation of the Negative Space and Its Divisions in Picasso’s *Guernica*.

From left to right, the groupings are as follows: the bull, the grieving mother, and the warrior; the horse and the light; and the candle holder, the burning woman, and the running woman. These groupings are especially significant if the painting is viewed as a nativity scene, as Pablo Huerga Melcón suggests in his 2009 journal article titled “The Other Side of Guernica.”

According to Melcón, *Guernica* can be viewed as a nativity scene because 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.” In this interpretation, each figure is representative of one of these “necessary components”: the bull symbolizes the ox, the grieving mother symbolizes Mary, the dead child symbolizes Jesus, the horse symbolizes the mule, the warrior symbolizes Joseph, the fleeing woman, the candle holder, and the burning woman symbolize the three wise men, and the light symbolizes the angel. From this interpretation, the significance of the groupings becomes apparent. The three wise men are following the star to the already deceased Son of God. The child’s mortal father is already deceased as well, leaving Mary to look towards the angel in anguished despair “the moment after the sudden destruction” of a traditionally ordered—and orderly—nativity scene.

Even though the negative space clearly divides the figures into three groups, these groups are not completely autonomous, as the figures from one grouping commonly intrude upon the space of another group. Thus, the grouping of similar objects creates harmony while the intertwining grouping makes the painting feel unified: as in a Venn diagram, the parts that overlap indicate similarities between the groups. The unity and harmony created by this indistinct proximity and alignment help to make *Guernica* effective.

**How is Guernica Ineffective?**

Art is not a perfect science and even masterpieces have flaws when set against Williams’ design principles. *Guernica* is left heavy, with the weight of the space emphasis leaning towards the left. Many of the figures look left, forcing the viewer’s eyes to move left with them. There are very few elements that point right. The mother’s eyes and left hand, the broken sword, the candle holder’s fingers, the running woman’s left hand,
the lower set of flames, and the horse’s mane are all elements that face right, but they do not account for a significant quantity of the painting’s visual mass. As such, there are only a few ways to move right, but numerous ways to move left.

The painting is also somewhat unbalanced, with many forms and details for the viewer to attend to. Because of the numerous trials, the viewer’s eyes are pulled in almost every direction. Being stuck in a tug-of-war between equally horrific elements causes the viewer feel a sense of terror akin to that displayed by the painting. This dread causes the viewer to move through the painting at an increasing rate, allowing the figures to seem jumbled and possess a varying depth. As a result, the painting feels disjointed. This feeling of chaos produced by the painting’s asymmetric balance distracts slightly from its aesthetic effectiveness, but ultimately increases the painting’s effectiveness as an artistic and political statement.

**How is Guernica different:**

In most paintings, the ineffective elements make the painting weaker. This is not true for Guernica, whose flaws seem only to heighten the message. The painting is disjointed and slightly left heavy. In a way, being disjointed makes the painting more interesting. Because the painting weakens its viewers by making them uncomfortable, the painting gains a power that transcends the ineffective elements. The viewer does not remember the painting as disjointed, but the terror and discomfort it evokes becomes inseparable from the viewer’s memory of the painting. These feelings then heighten the anti-war sentiments found in the painting. Picasso’s appeal to pathos is further heightened if the painting is viewed as a nativity scene. If the painting is viewed this way, it becomes obvious that Picasso wanted the world to understand “the bombing of the civilian population [of Guernica] as an expression of the death of God itself, as if it were the prelude of nihilism, a premonition of Auschwitz” (Meleón). In a Western context, is there a better way to inspire pure anguish in one’s viewer than to kill off God, His child, and all but the barest ounce of hope? It’s doubtful. By intentionally including elements that would usually be considered ineffective, Picasso both overcame the notion of “correct” art and made the painting’s antiwar sentiments stronger than they could have ever been otherwise.

The painting’s depth is also interesting. According to the *Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture*, Cubists attempted to achieve the illusion of three-dimensional forms… by showing solids and volumes in two-dimensional flat planes to suggest space. To do this, many aspects of familiar objects were represented all at once, their forms shown on various geometrical planes redrawn from many vantage-points to create new combinations. (“Cubism”)

Because of this stylistic choice, most Cubist paintings exhibit a variation in perceived depth that correlates with how much of the painting the viewer takes in. The horse is one example of perceived depth variation in *Guernica*. When viewing only the horse, it seems to be located in the forefront of the painting. As the viewer allows himself or herself to incorporate more of the painting’s elements into the evaluation, the horse seems to sink from the forefront into the middle ground. As mentioned above, this flowing proximity is important because it helps create harmony, balance, and unity in the painting. Because of the relative scarcity of composed cubist compositions, *Guernica* stands out, even amongst other cubist works.

**Conclusion**

Under the eye-shaped flashbulb, the figures in *Guernica* are consumed by death, chaos, and pain. The painting is a living, breathing interpretation of the horrors of war. Forever frozen like the lovers in Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the figures will forever be young and unchanging, forever unmoving, forever in anguished and pitiable pain. Picasso’s anti-war sentiments are unmistakable throughout *Guernica*. Viewers are forced to live what Picasso viewed as an unforgivable sin against innocent human beings and animals alike, intensely altering the perception of Guernica. The painting’s profound effect is due to its ability to transform
aesthetically ineffective elements into effective elements in the mind of its viewers. The painting is highly effective at accentuating contrast and using triadic elements to create movement, unity, and alignment. Having a slightly unbalanced and disjointed composition are ineffective elements that Guernica overcomes because of the message it conveys and the feelings it evokes. This ability to overcome weaknesses is one of the unique qualities about Guernica. It is also unique in the fact that its disjointedness causes the viewer’s depth perception to change in relation to how the painting is viewed. For all of these reasons, Guernica remains one of the greatest paintings produced in the 20th century.
Works Cited


