Painting the War:
Picasso’s Genre Works During the German Occupation of Paris
“I have not painted the war because I am not the kind of painter who goes out like a photographer for something to depict. But I have no doubt that the war is in these paintings I have done. Later perhaps historians will find them and show that my style had changed under the war’s influence. Myself, I do not know.” - Picasso, 1944, shortly after the liberation of Paris.\(^1\)

“What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has only his eyes if he’s a painter, or ears if he’s a musician, or a lyre at every level of his heart if he’s a poet, or even, if he’s a boxer, just his muscles? On the contrary he’s at the same time a political being, constantly alive to heart-rending fiery or happy events, to which he responds in every way. How would it be possible to feel no interest in other people and by virtue of an ivory indifference to detach yourself from the life which they so copiously bring you? No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.”- Picasso, 1945.\(^2\)

Picasso spent the years of the German Occupation in his apartment and studio in Paris painting still lifes and portraits. Bracketed by such distinctly political works as *Guernica* of 1937 and *The Charnel House* of 1945, the question of the artistic politics of Picasso’s genre works of the war years is unavoidable. In this thesis I argue that the genre, subject, and style of Picasso’s works during the Occupation are inextricably linked to the war torn times in which he was working. I make no claim that through painting still lifes and portraits Picasso was crafting some sort of political manifesto. Rather, I intend to demonstrate that, despite the seemingly mundane thematic choices, these works are expressive vehicles of human suffering, which potentially operated as private, even subconscious, acts of resistance against the oppressive and destructive forces of war. After contextualizing Picasso and his painting within the sociopolitical climate of Paris, I intend to show, through a close examination of several of the works he painted during the Occupation, that Picasso was indeed ‘painting the war’. Though the genre works of the

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\(^2\) This statement is in response to an accusation that Picasso had stated that art and politics have nothing in common. Quoted in Barr. *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, 247.
war years avoid any obvious narration of the war or depiction of specific events, they are powerful for the ways in which they capture and evoke not only the suffering of an artist, but the suffering of an entire country crumbling under the weight of war.

**Picasso as a Political Artist**

Various arguments have been made regarding the degree to which Picasso was truly a political and politically influenced artist. Beginning at the turn of the century with Picasso’s papiers-collés which, as argued by art historian Patricia Leighton, reflect the imminent threat of World War I in Europe, it is clear that Picasso was not one to insulate himself from the realities of the world around him. After World War II Picasso joined the Communist Party, and it was then that Picasso became an active political figure by publicly allying himself to the party. Throughout his life, prior to joining the Communist Party, Picasso had surrounded himself with artists, writers, performers and activists, but maintained his artistic and political independence by refraining from overtly subscribing to any group or theory. This independence does not mean that he was not conscious of or opinionated about political matters. His politics became artistically evident when Picasso produced the *Dream and Lie of Franco* in 1937 followed by *Guernica* of 1937. According to art historian Michael Fitzgerald, these works also mark a “shift of focus from Picasso as an extreme individualist and aesthetic innovator to an artist of deep

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3 Patricia Leighten argues for the presence of politics in Picasso’s early years, beginning with themes of poverty and social activism in the Blue Period through to, most specifically, the threat of war in his collages of 1912-1913, through his involvement with various political parties and individuals in both Paris and Barcelona. Leighten, Patricia. “Picasso’s Collages and the Threat of War, 1912-13.” *The Art Bulletin* 67.4 (Dec., 1985): 653-672.
Though Picasso generally evaded questions regarding the meaning and symbolic value of *Guernica*, he did at one point say, when the painting was being held at the MOMA, that “The truth of the matter is that by means of *Guernica* I have the pleasure of making a political statement every day in the middle of New York City.”

*Guernica* in many ways has structured a large part of the public’s understanding of Picasso as a political artist. Its renown as a painting that, more than denouncing a particular regime, is a scathing indictment of war and human brutalities has transcended Picasso himself and inflicted, in the words of Gertje R. Utley, “a legacy of responsibility” on him. During the years leading up to and throughout the German Occupation of France, Picasso imbued his works with heavy mythology and symbolism, which is aptly demonstrated by Timothy Burgard in his analysis of *Night Fishing at Antibes* of 1939.

It was not until the Liberation and the creation of *The Charnel House* of 1945 that Picasso reassumed the responsibility of creating the readable depictions of politics and violence that *Guernica* imposed upon him.

The question of Picasso’s politics during the Occupation years has been an area of considerable debate and speculation among critics and art historians. During the war years in Paris, Picasso lived in relative obscurity. His life and work were accessible only to close friends with whom he surrounded himself. Outside of Paris it was not known

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6 Ibid., 73.

7 Burgard argues, through references in the painting to apocalyptic imagery and to the Spanish artistic tradition, that *Night Fishing at Antibes* is ultimately about the Spanish Civil War and France’s involvement, or indeed non-involvement, in it.

whether he was alive or dead, whether he had allied himself with the Nazis or the
Resistance or whether he was working or not, and even after the war there remained some
debate as to his role in the Resistance. Upon the liberation of Paris he became a veritable
hero when it was found that he was alive and well, that he had been working and
producing throughout the Occupation and that he had not succumbed to any sort of Nazi
pressure. After Paris had been liberated his studio was flooded with visitors and he was
hailed by many, particularly Americans, as a Resistance artist. Christian Zervos, a
member of the Resistance and a friend of Picasso’s, set the record straight saying “The
participation of Picasso in the Resistance is false. Picasso simply kept his dignity during
the Occupation the way millions of people did here. But he never got involved in the
Resistance. Realize that his work itself is the greatest form of resistance.” It can be
argued that Picasso, in adhering to his lifelong history of pacifism, the same path he
followed during World War I, was enacting, in his own way, a personal resistance. He
was not a risk-taker, but, as he said to Francoise Gilot in 1943, “in a sort of passive way I
don’t care to yield to either force or terror.” Though Picasso did not involve himself as
an active member of the Resistance movement, I believe that he was, through his art and
through his determination to remain in Paris, privately resisting the terror inflicted upon
his adopted country, his friends, and his loved ones. Shortly after the Liberation Picasso
said of his work during the war years, “A more disciplined art, less constrained freedom,

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8 As quoted in Fitzgerald “Reports from the Home Front,” 119.
9 This was said in response to Gilot’s questioning Picasso regarding his decision to stay in Paris.
10 Picasso had ample opportunity to leave France before and after the outbreak of war- he was
extended offers by both America and Mexico. The fact that he remained in Paris, not simply out
of inertia, but also because of conscious desire not to “yield to either force or terror” is significant
in that it reveals something of, what I consider, his passive protestation.
in a time like this is the artist’s defense and guard… Very likely for the poet it is the time
to write sonnets. Most certainly it is not a time for the creative man to fail, to shrink, to
stop working.”  
Picasso, true to his word, most certainly did not shrink or fail: he was as
prolific during the war years as anytime during his life producing paintings, drawings,
sculptures (some cast in bronze- an unlikely feat for the time) and even a play, *Desire
Caught by the Tail*.  

**Art Under Fascism**

The works of the war years are defined by the constant interpretation and
reinterpretation of two prevalent genres: the still life and the portrait. Though in my close
analysis of certain specific works from the period, I will focus on the affective and
emotive possibilities for which the genres allow, I think it important to consider how
Picasso’s thematic choices may have been informed by the sociopolitical climate of Paris
as well. As I will outline in this section, still life and portraiture are important for the
ways in which they eclipse any obvious incriminating and political interpretation as well
as represent a continuation and invocation of the artistic tradition within Picasso’s
*oeuvre*. Under the constraints of fascism it was not only Picasso, but the freedom of
expression and the institution of art itself that were threatened.

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1944), 182-3 in *A Picasso Anthology: Documents, Criticism, Reminiscences* Ed. Marilyn McCully. Arts

12 In 1941, Picasso wrote *Desire Caught by the Tail* and with a cast of his friends and
contemporaries it was performed semi-publicly in 1944. According to Brassai “everything that
preoccupied [Picasso] during those uniform days in Royan- the harsh winter, the German
Occupation, the hardship, the isolation, the suspicion, the pleasures of the bedroom and kitchen-
It is not surprising that Picasso, as an artist deemed “degenerate” while living in an occupied country that was not his own, would avoid painting in the same aggressive and overt manner as *Guernica*. Picasso’s politics and anti-fascist stance against Franco presumably prevented him from obtaining French citizenship in 1940 and also prevented him from participating in any exhibitions while Paris was under Nazi control. He was visited in his studio on numerous occasions by members of the Occupying force. Under the pretext of searching for the Jewish sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, German soldiers would visit Picasso’s apartment on a weekly basis and would proceed to thoroughly search the apartment. This was, as might be expected, deeply unnerving for Picasso as he feared that someday they might find something incriminating that had been planted by one of his many, and occasionally suspicious, visitors during the Occupation years. Picasso, though allied by association with the Resistance, made it through the war years unscathed, but he had a number of actively resisting friends who were captured or killed by the Nazis. In short, Picasso was made constantly aware of his rather precarious position and, no doubt, had no desire to make it any more perilous than it already was by painting any sort of overt indictment of the Nazis or fascism. The subjects of still life and portraiture offered him an avenue to paint with his usual profusion while slipping into relative obscurity in an effort to avoid the critical eye of the Nazi occupiers.

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13 It is interesting to note that recently discovered documents reveal that Picasso applied for and was denied French citizenship in 1940. This denial on the basis of his politics and the police report states that Picasso should be regarded with “suspicion”. As reported in Underhill, William. “Picasso’s French Rejection.” *Art News* 102.7 (Summer, 2003): 76.
14 Gilot and Lake. *Life with Picasso*, 43-45
15 Max Jacob and Robert Desnos were both close friends of Picasso’s who were arrested by Nazi forces and ultimately died during WWII.
Picasso was not alone in his status as a “degenerate” artist working in Paris. Although the arts scene continued in Paris throughout the Occupation, its scope was extremely limited by the Nazi presence. Exhibitions continued, but only those that conformed to Nazi policy, and there was rampant Aryanisation of the art world and the art industry in Paris.16 While the collections of Paris were being looted for their artistic treasures (mostly taken from Jewish families), which were carted off to Germany, there was also, in 1943, the deliberate destruction, slashing and burning of canvases by a slew of “degenerate” artists including Masson, Miro, Picabia, Klee, Ernst, Léger and Picasso himself.17 It is safe to say that artistic freedom in Paris, and indeed in Europe at large, was deeply threatened by Nazi power.

Picasso was considered a “degenerate” artist more for his anti-fascist politics and purportedly “decadent” stylistic tendencies than for his subject matter, Guernica and The Dream and Lie of Franco being obvious exceptions. Picasso was always an artist deeply tied to a long history of art as well as the artistic climate in which he was working. His work had always reflected a familiarity with the themes, iconography and symbolism that have been passed down through generations of artists, and he himself produced a number of paintings after the “great masters”. During the days of liberation in Paris, Picasso was in his studio energetically painting Bacchanal, After Poussin of 1944. His work similarly reflected a consciousness of his artistic milieu. As Patricia Leighten argues, Picasso’s papier-collés of World War I, which intersperse elements of café culture and artistic life with newspaper clippings referring to the threat and damages of war, reflect a concern

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17 Ibid., 240
and fear regarding the destructive power of war on culture and art. A similar concern regarding the tenuous status of art in Paris during the German Occupation may have inspired Picasso to zealously return to the tenets of this tradition in the form of such time-worn genres as still life and portraiture as a means of preserving the artistic institution against the ruinous effects of fascism. By relentlessly continuing to create and by following, through the use of still life and portraiture, in the thematic footsteps of artists before him, I would suggest that Picasso was practicing both resistance and self-preservation. His persistent painting of the genres was both an invocation of a long tradition of artistic practice, as well as a means of working against the stifling effects of the war on art.

Style

One final area of consideration, before embarking on a closer analysis of Picasso’s still life and portraits, is the issue of his artistic style during the Occupation years. Le Musée Picasso in Paris divides the artist’s oeuvre into chronological periods separated into different rooms. When one walks into the rooms which house his works from the World War II era, the mood becomes immediately and indescribably somber and melancholy. This change in timbre is perhaps in part due to the fact that these works

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18 Leighten. “Picasso’s Collages and the Threat of War” Brassai, a friend and photographer of Picasso’s, documented all of his interactions with Picasso throughout his life, focusing mostly on the years of German occupation in Paris. He noted that the onset of World War II and the occupation of Paris provoked what he called an end to an eight-year long “café-period”, by which he meant a time during which, when Picasso wasn’t painting, he was out in cafés socializing with friends, artists and writers. After this period ended, Picasso spent the Occupation almost exclusively in his studio painting and accepting a bevy a visitors. It is clear that in many ways the war affected the freedom with which bohemians, artists, writers and performers, including Picasso, expressed themselves and interacted. Brassai. “Conversations with Picasso,” 57
are in the basement of the museum, but it is also that the works themselves exude a sober
gloom. In the words of art historian Brigitte Baer, “his work of this period stinks of war,
or rather of the German Occupation, more than that of any other artists during the period
of crisis.” Many of the works in this room are those that were exhibited at *Le Salon
D’Automne* in 1944. There, the works Picasso had created during the past five or six
years of war were displayed for the first time. Georges Limbour, a period critic, describes
the shocked reaction of the public to what turned out to be a rather controversial exhibit.
According to Limbour the public recoiled and then laughed to “conceal their terror.” He
describes the intensity of the works displayed at the *Salon* saying “They oppress and
haunt us until we have fathomed the multiple meanings they bear.” It is not the subject
matter of these paintings to which Limbour is referring, but rather a certain stylistic unity
of oppression among the pieces. Of the same exhibition Françoise Gilot, in her book *Life
with Picasso*, said “After the nightmare of the Occupation it must have been a shock for
the general public to be exposed to work that was so close in spirit to the years that they
had just lived through. Seeing the image of the period… was perhaps in some ways more
difficult than living through it.”

Art historians and critics have sliced Picasso’s work neatly into a series of
stylistic periods. We have all heard of the Rose period, the Blue Period, the Cubist Period
and the Neoclassical Period, but what of stylistic continuity during the war years? It

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19 Baer, Brigitte. “Where Do They Come From- Those Superb Paintings and Horrid Women of
“Picasso’s War”? *Picasso and the War Year 1937-1945*. Thames and Hudson Fine Arts Museums of

20 Limbour, Georges. “Picasso au Salon D’Automne” *Le Spectateur des Arts*, 1, Paris (Dec. 1944), 4-6,8
in *A Picasso Anthology: Documents, Criticism, Reminiscences* Ed. Marilyn McCully. Arts Council

21 Ibid., 222.

should be noted that as Picasso progressed as an artist he began to conflate in a single painting the multitude of styles he had explored throughout his career. Unity of time, space and style were not, as Leo Steinberg explores in “Picasso’s Endgame,” of great concern to the artist and in some ways their dissolution adds to the power of his work.23 During the war years Picasso tended to combine the structural and somatic dislocation, so prevalent during his work of the 20’s and 30’s, with the distorted and often harsh geometric renderings of his cubist period, while at moments adding in the opulent curves of his Neoclassical Period. During the war years these forms and figures are typically, in the words of Victoria Beck Newman, “stark in their isolation and confined to austere settings of spare, blank spaces.”24 Still, I believe it is difficult to pinpoint a specific ‘style of the war years’, rather, what I aim to represent here is that the unity of the work during the war years stems not so much from the consistent repetition of certain stylistic conventions, but rather from a concordance in mood and expressive quality.

There is particularly extensive variety of color in Picasso’s works during the Occupation. Many of the paintings of the period are marked by the similar grey-toned sobriety of the cubist period, but there are also a number of paintings that seem to revel in the vibrancy of the reds, purples, yellows and greens with which Picasso indulged his paint brush. Whether monochrome or vibrantly polychrome, the paintings of the period expose the viewer to a range of powerful emotional states, from subdued and somber to jarring and unsettling. Picasso’s approach to painting is a structural one: the power of a painting’s construction is in the interplay between lights and darks and this power remains even in absence of color, as evidenced by black and white reproductions. This

structural approach opens the door for Picasso to use color as a purely affective device within the framework of the painting. As William Rubin contends, “[Picasso] employed color to psychological and poetic, rather than structural, ends.”

This statement is corroborated by Picasso’s own words: when questioned in 1944 about the contrast and balance between the green and violet of a still life, he said “I’m not trying to make this first proposition more coherent… I’m interested in making it more disturbing… more deeply disturbing, more subversive.”

This declaration is essential to what remains consistent, regardless of divergence in color or form, within the painting of the war years: the style of the period is one of expressive rather than formal qualities. It is a style that, as evidenced by reactions to the exhibition of *Le Salon D’Automne*, is truly unsettling and represents a deeply disturbing, more subversive approach to figuration.

**Still Life**

In French the word for still life is *nature morte*, meaning dead nature. Many of Picasso’s still lifes of the war years are comprised of skulls, both human and animal, as well as the bodies of dead animals. According to historian Gertje R. Utley “the association between *nature morte* and the meditation on death goes beyond the simple play on words.”

These still lifes are powerful *memento moris* in which various images and interpretations of death are often juxtaposed with potentially ‘life-giving’ elements like light and pitchers of water. Before embarking on closer examinations of some of

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Picasso’s still life works from the period, it is worthwhile to examine, on a broader scale, the meaning and function of the genre and the use of *memento mori* as they relate to Picasso and to the German Occupation.

It is widely accepted that Picasso was both particularly fascinated by and paranoid about death. These sentiments were no doubt exacerbated during the Occupation, by both the war around him and the fact that Picasso’s friend Max Jacob, who ultimately died in a concentration camp during World War II, had predicted the artist’s death at the rapidly approaching age of sixty-eight.\(^\text{28}\) According to art historian Elizabeth Cowling, Picasso’s “primary means of warding off the evil hour was to make art at a staggering rate and without intermission.”\(^\text{29}\) Several years after the Occupation, Picasso described to Françoise Gilot the moments when he realized “what painting was all about.” For Picasso painting was a sort of exorcism, an exertion of power over darker forces, done, as the artist said, “in order to overcome fear and horror by giving it a form and an image…Painting isn’t an aesthetic operation; it’s a form of magic designed as a mediator between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires.”\(^\text{30}\) This expression of fear and desire in the form of image need not be a literal translation onto the canvas. Though Picasso has eschewed and thwarted efforts by critics and contemporaries to apply symbolic analysis to his work, he did express his desire to imbue even the most ordinary of things with emotive and expressive qualities saying, “I want to tell something by means of the most common

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30 Gilot and Lake. *Life with Picasso* 266.
object: for example, a casserole, any old casserole, the one everybody knows...”31, “You see, even a casserole can scream.”32 Here then we are confronted with the potential a genre such as still life truly held for an artist like Picasso. Picasso did not confine himself to casserole dishes in painting his still lifes, rather, he drew upon a long history of *memento mori* symbolism, using skulls, candles, books and palettes.33 By employing these elements Picasso was not only confronting death, but also referencing a long-standing tradition in Western Art. In using the genre of *memento mori* Picasso transformed its significance and meaning to conform to both the context of the times and his psychological needs. In the case of Picasso’s still lifes, the *memento mori* elements do not function simply as invocations of the afterlife, as reminders of the transitory nature of this life and the inevitability of death, but also serve to remind the viewer of the omnipresent threat of death in the context of war. In discussing Picasso’s *Death’s Head* (fig 1) of 1941, Elizabeth Cowling acknowledges its relevance to the vanitas theme present in Picasso’s painting of the period, and describes the sculpture as a “universal symbol and memorial to the victims of World War II.”34 As Norman Bryson asserts in his exploration of the still life genre, “still life pitches itself at a level of material existence where nothing exceptional occurs: there is wholesale eviction of the Event.”35 This ‘eviction of the Event’ is central to my argument regarding the expressive capacity of Picasso’s works during the war years. By taking up the genres of still life and, as I will explore later, portraiture, genres wherein narration is not the central theme, he opens up

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34 Cowling, “Picasso’s Imager of Death,” 9
the possibility for works where their affective and emotive qualities become the focus of
the canvas. Picasso’s still lifes of the World War II period, when the full symbolic and
expressive value of their terms and structures are taken into account, are unique gateways
into the dark purgatory of Occupied Paris and the psyche of the artist.

A still life that I consider highly relevant when one considers the presence of the
war in Picasso’s painting of the Occupation period is his *Still Life with a Pigeon* (fig 2) of
1941. The composition features a pigeon/dove, a bottle and some sort of vegetation,
perhaps olive branches. The structure is that of a traditional still life with all the elements
laid out before the viewer on a table. The colors are vibrant, but the forms are harsh,
angular and unforgiving. There is nothing gentle about the white bird splayed out with its
beak agape on the table. The use of the dove in this painting offers up a plethora of
symbolic interpretations beyond the obvious and recurrent theme of death in Picasso’s
still lifes. Picasso was certainly familiar with a long history of Christian iconography, and
I have no doubt that the symbolic relevance of the white dove with an olive branch did
not escape him. Here then we see this symbol of peace and hope sprawled out and
deceased on the canvas. We see a similar bird, beak agape and lying on a table top, in
*Guernica*. Art historian Robert Rosenblum describes this bird as “marked for sacrifice”
with its beak mirroring that of the screaming mother with child. Both mother and bird
have open mouths directed toward a “now extinct heaven”. The theme of animal sacrifice
occurs throughout his *oeuvre*, but is repeated with regularity in his works from the war
years. It is both implied, as in his still lifes with skulls and other animal parts, as well
as overtly depicted, as in *Girl with a Cock* of 1938. A painting which, in the words of art

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36 “Girl with a Cock” of 1938, “Woman Slaughtering Goat” of 1938, “Cat Seizing a Bird” of 1939
“Man with Lamb” of 1943 as well as the plethora of dead and decaying animals in Picasso’s still
lifes all reflect this theme of animal sacrifice.
historian Willard E. Misfeldt, “symbolized the destruction of helpless humanity by the forces of evil.”37 The theme of animal sacrifice, which can also be traced back to Picasso’s fascination with the bullfight, is particularly evocative in the context of World War II when one considers what is essential to animal sacrifice: the often brutal slaughter of an innocent being. Delving deeper into the symbolic relevance of the bird reveals another association: that of the constant threat of aerial bombardment in Paris. In her essay “Death Falling from the Sky: Picasso’s Wartime Texts,” Lydia Csato Gasman illuminates Picasso’s constant fear not only for his own safety, but especially for those around him. His fragmented, somewhat surrealist writings of the period make many allusions to and parallels between the threat of aerial bombardment and what Picasso called “veils of pigeons.” In this way the pigeon with its wings spread, its form echoing that of an airplane, becomes a manifestation of Picasso’s fear. Picasso said some years later, “that death could fall from heaven on so many, right in the middle of rushed life, has always had great meaning for me.”38 The presence of the pigeon in this still life reveals two major themes that can ultimately be derived from so many works of the World War II period: death and fear. I have not come to a conclusion regarding the symbolic value of the bottle. Perhaps it serves as a mundane element to contextualize the bird in the genre of still-life. However, if I have learned anything about Picasso, it is that

37 This is as relayed to Willard Misfelt by Mary Callery as told to her by either Picasso or Christian Zervos. In “The Theme of the Cock in Picasso’s Oeuvre,” Misfeldt traces the symbolic role of the cock through the artist’s career. He notes that uiring the Occupation years the cock does not appear frequently, but rather it is the dove, perhaps the female counterpoint to the cock, that becomes the focus of the artist attention. Misfeldt, Willard E. “The Theme of the Cock in Picasso’s Oeuvre.” Art Journal 28.2 (Winter, 1968-1969): 146-154 +165.

nothing he does is mundane. Perhaps it is filled with wine or vinegar, elements which offer up the possibility of a more in depth reading of Christian iconography. Perhaps it is filled with water, a life-giving component, which symbolizes a glimmer of hope – a hope that must persist alongside the image of death if one is to continue living and creating during times of terror.

Though *Still Life with a Pigeon* does not, in its iconography, coincide with the genre of *memento mori*, an astounding number of Picasso’s still life paintings during the war years do contain depictions of *memento mori* elements, particularly of the human skull. During the period just before the Occupation of Paris, while Picasso was working in Royan, animal skulls were dominant elements in many of his paintings and sketches. The sheep’s skulls that dominated the Royan period were gruesome; painted neither alive nor completely dead, but rather at a tenuous moment of decay. These skulls were especially ghastly due to what Jean Sutherland Boggs describes as the “horror of [Picasso’s] casual treatment.” After Royan, the sheep and bull skulls that were so prevalent in his still lifes and studies gave way to insistent depictions of human skulls. As Leo Steinberg notes in his chapter “The Skulls of Picasso,” Picasso had painted skulls throughout most of his periods, but it was at the onset of the Occupation that these skulls are most “serious,” as Steinberg asserts, “… in 1940, the moment of World War II, skulls entered his art in earnest. Real death was outside, real fear grounded within, and Picasso’s iconography narrowed upon it.” *Still Life with Skull and Pitcher* (fig 3), painted in 1943, is one of Picasso’s many “serious” skulls of the period. The two subjects of the painting, as indicated by the title, are a skull and a pitcher. They, the smooth,

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rounded skull and the sharp, harshly articulated pitcher, meet head-on in a claustrophobic
and undefined space. The surface (dare we call it a table?) on which these objects rest is
not perspectivally defined from the background, which offers up no illusion of depth. The
viewer is confronted with these forms against the unyielding backdrop of black, red,
brown and green. The skull is menacing with severely outlined teeth and eye-sockets that
are dark pools of black paint, like gateways into the abyss, and the pitcher, the supposed
life-giving juxtaposition to the skull, is not much gentler. The pitcher however, in its
lighter color scheme, is more tentative, brighter and holds the potential to be a more
hopeful counterpart to the grimacing skull at its side. Still, against the reduced, shadowy
and claustrophobic space it inhabits within the frame, the jug offers little more than a
half-hearted respite to the viewer in its faint wash of vermillion and white. One senses
that in this painting it is not, as Jean Sutherland Boggs says of a similar still life, “as if the
dignity of death and the spontaneity of life are confronting each other in this simple
painting,” but rather it is a darker meditation on the looming presence of death in a time
of war that is expressed through the angular forms of the canvas.\footnote{Boggs. \textit{Picasso and Things},
41} Picasso’s engagement
with the human skull and the pitcher was not confined to 1943. In 1945, after the
Liberation of Paris, he continued to explore the possibilities of these \textit{memento mori}
elements in a series of skull, leek and pitcher composition. These paintings can be read as
deeply symbolic equivalents of another contemporary piece of 1945, \textit{The Charnel House}.
Indeed, though Paris was liberated in 1944, Picasso’s work continued to reflect the fact
that much of Europe and the East was still struggling through the horrors and
consequences of war.
While these still lifes are only some of many Picasso that created during the war years, and I have only analyzed a few of many relevant and significant symbols, I believe that it represents, even in my brief analysis, the depth of symbolism with which Picasso imbued so many of his works. In short, we cannot overlook these still lifes simply because they are not Guernicas. For Picasso the power of the inanimate was infinite, and, in the words of Elizabeth Cowling, “in no sense was still life a lightweight genre for Picasso.”

Portraiture

Throughout his career Picasso had a continuous, if not somewhat complicated, engagement with portraiture. At the beginning of the twentieth century Picasso’s portraits were primarily of men, but ultimately women dominated the genre for Picasso. Within Picasso’s oeuvre is the tireless reinterpretation and reworking of the female form; bathers, reclining nudes, portraits and dancers, many inspired by the long line of women, wives, and mistresses in his life who are depicted hundreds of times throughout his career. The World War II years are no exception to the prevalence of this subject. The years of the ‘phony war’ leading up to the German occupation in Paris are marked by the presence of weeping women and bathers who have been removed from the context of the beach and situated on a claustrophobic canvas in distorted positions. Art historian

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43 ‘Phony war’, or in French, ‘la drôle de guerre’ is, in the words of Kirsten H. Powell, the “term used to describes those tense eight months between the incasion of Poland in September of 1939 and the escalation of the war with the invasion of France in June 1940. The ‘phony war’ was a lull when nothing seemed to be happening, when one could only imagine or deny the horrors that might come.” Powell, Kristen H. “‘La Drôle de guerre’: Picasso’s ‘Femme nue se coiffant’ and the ‘Phony War’ in France.” The Burlington Magazine 138.1117 (Apr., 1996): 235.
Kristin Powell makes an eloquent argument for the presence of the threat of war in the distorted body of *Femme nue se coiffant* (fig 4) of 1940, which evokes powerful emotions of isolation, alienation, helplessness and fear.\(^{44}\) After 1940 the female is often depicted from the bust up in a portrait format, frequently in an armchair, or else as a reclining nude in an interior space. Many of these portraits are of, or inspired by, Dora Maar, an intensely emotional woman whom Picasso saw as ‘always weeping’. These portraits harken back to Picasso’s pre-Occupation depictions of weeping women, which were inspired not only by Dora Maar but also by the Spanish tradition of the *mater dolorosa*.

Picasso can be credited with revolutionizing and redefining portraiture in the twentieth century. What was originally a linear relationship between the person and the image on the canvas, Picasso reinterpreted to be a depiction of “a record of the artist’s personal responses to the subject.”\(^{45}\) Discussing his portraits Picasso said, “Portraits should possess not physical, not spiritual, but psychological likeness.”\(^{46}\) Just as Picasso used still lifes as expressive vehicles, so too did he use the faces of his lovers, mistresses and wives as a means of portraying not only their psyches, but his own as well. Leo Steinberg cites Picasso as ranking among such male artists as Flaubert, Tolstoy and James Joyce in his “habit of empathy with the othermost sex in situations unobserved.”\(^{47}\) Yet it is more than empathy that Picasso exhibits in his portraits of the war years, rather, in the progressive deformation of Dora Maar’s countenance, we, as viewers, are witness not only to his mistress’s psychological breakdown, but Picasso’s own tormented vision

\(^{44}\) Powell. “‘La Drôle de guerre’”
\(^{47}\) Steinberg. “Picasso’s Endgame,” 107
of existence in Occupied Paris.\textsuperscript{48} Indeed, in the years between 1940 and 1944, I am aware of only two small pencil sketches that Picasso did of himself, the rest of his portraits are, for the most part, paintings and sketches of Dora Maar in varying degrees of figuration and disfiguration.

Picasso never saw the bloody bodies of World War II, for him the war was in many ways a psychological and emotional one. One of his few experiences of death had been years earlier, in 1918, when he learned of his friend Guillaume Apollinaire’s death.\textsuperscript{49} The sight of his own stricken countenance reflected back at him in the mirror inflicted such an unforgettable vision for the artist that he sketched what was for many years considered his last lifelike self-portrait. It was also at this moment that Brassai contends Picasso “developed his hatred of mirrors… Having seen the shadow of death pass across his own face.”\textsuperscript{50} Picasso then began to rely on others to be his mirrors: he would use their faces and bodies to project the gravity of his emotions. In the words of Brigitte Baer, “he discovered his feelings in the mirror of other peoples’ eyes or faces, or at least what he projected there, even into those bodies at rest or convulsed –in short, through the intermediary of his painting.”\textsuperscript{51} His mirror, Baer, argues, during the Occupation was the face of the extremely emotional Dora Maar, which in part explains the plethora of Dora Maar portraits of the period. Dora Maar played a leading role in

\textsuperscript{48} In \textit{Life with Picasso}, Francoise Gilot gives an account of Dora Maar’s psychological breakdown, which, according to both Dora’s and Picasso’s friend Paul Eluard, was in many respects Picasso’s fault. Gilot and Lake. \textit{Life with Picasso}, 89.

\textsuperscript{49} Baer contends that Picasso saw Apollinaire’s dead body. Baer. “Where do They Come From,” 83.


\textsuperscript{51} Baer. “Where do They Come From,” 83.
Picasso’s life during the years preceding and during the Occupation of Paris. Roy MacGregor-Hastie credits Dora Maar with both inspiring the overtly political turn that Picasso made in doing such works as *The Dream and Lie of Franco* and *Guerinca*, as well as keeping Picasso out of trouble and alive during the Occupation by scrounging for food and fuel as well as evading the Gestapo. It is clear however, from the proliferation of Dora Maar portraits during those years, that Dora did much more than keep Picasso safe, warm and fed: she, as a subject in so many of his canvases, provided him with “a tablet on which to inscribe his moment by moment reactions to [her], his current life situation, or both.” Dora’s portraits range from rather realistic, with all the parts in the right place, to canvases comprised of a series of distorted facial features. According to Brigitte Léal in her essay “‘For Charming Dora’: Portraits of Dora Maar,” the transformations of Dora Maar’s face, as it becomes more monstrous and more grotesque, “is certainly a vision of the world, the sign of universal catastrophe.” In the same way in which the still life genre vacates the ‘Event’, so too does portraiture evade performing a narrative role - it is pure expression. In the words of Léal, Picasso, in painting portraits and by engaging the viewer with universally readable images of suffering women, chose not to “paint the war [but rather] to paint the cry.”

Art historian William Rubin describes the Dora Maar portraits that proliferate during the war years as “characteristically tense and discomforted; the forms are

55 Léal. “‘For Charming Dora’,” 396.
predominantly angular and seem sliced into the surface.”56 This is in direct contrast to the neoclassical voluptuousness with which Picasso painted another mistress, Marie-Thérèse, in the years leading up to the war.57 The Dora Maar portraits during the Occupation have been lauded by some as the zenith of expressive force in Picasso’s career, and these portraits do indeed carry within them the weight of the war years.58 The *Portrait of Dora Maar* (fig 5), of October 1942, is one of the most ‘realistic’ portraits of Dora during the Occupation. Her face and figure are anatomically correct and are not distorted in the manner of so many other contemporary portraits. Still, it is not a peaceful painting. The lines are hard and angular, the space dark and confining, and her expression painted onto sallow, yellowing skin, is one of reserved distress. On her dress are strong orange stripes, a common theme within the series of Dora portraits. Sometimes even the entirety of the figure is constructed out of stripes and lines as in *Seated woman with a Hat* (fig 6) of 1938. These stripes are, according to Brigitte Léal, “an eloquent statement of the intensely emotional character of her image.”59 When Picasso employs line and stripes, as in *Woman Seated in an Armchair* (fig 7) of 1941, he adds elements of claustrophobia, pathology and obsessiveness to an already oppressive canvas. In *Portrait of Dora Maar* the space she inhabits is ambiguous, dark and restrictive. The subject is literally cornered into the canvas. This restrictive space, just as in the still lifes of the period, is reiterated again and again throughout the portraits. In *Woman Seated in an Armchair* (fig 8) of 1941

57 Painted on the same day in 1939 two versions of *Reclining Woman with a Book*, one of Dora Maar and the other of Marie-Thérèse, reflect the drastic stylistic difference with which Picasso chose to depict the two women. Dora Maar is angular, fragmented and severe, painted in a palette of green yellow and black, while Marie-Thérèse is rounded, smooth and voluptuous, painted in blue, grey and light green.
59 Léal. “‘For Charming Dora,’” 392.
the subject seems to just barely fit into the space of the canvas, as if Picasso in painting Dora Maar, forced her into a cube she just barely fits into. In *Woman Seated in an Armchair* we see the characteristic distortion of the figure, and particularly the face, which defined the period. Her face is split and distorted and in its severe disfiguration we see the precursor to a portrait of Dora that Picasso painted eleven days later, *Bust of a Woman* (fig 9). This portrait brings to completion the total skeletalization of her form.

Harkening back to the monochrome palette and fragmented structure of his cubist paintings *Bust of Woman* is barely human. Here the face of Dora Maar is reduced to its skeletal, deformed construction. Her body is a mass of chrome colored plates, her arms are like knife blades. Her face and body have become the portrait equivalent of Picasso’s bronze *Death’s Head* and *memento mori* still lifes: her figure is merely a sepulcher of what was once there. This progressive, though not always chronologically linear, transformation and distortion of Dora Maar from the weeping women series of the late 1930’s to the portraits of the early 1940’s reflect the Picasso’s personal purgatory during the German Occupation. They are not only a literalization of the artist’s psychic pain through somatic disfiguration on the canvas but also, according to Sarah Wilson, an “artistic response to France’s symbolic death.”

Picasso rarely used the word ‘portrait’ to describe his painting, and even more infrequently attributed them directly to a certain individual in his titles. However, even in some of the most distorted pictures during the war years, enough elements of “Dora iconography” remain such that critics and art historians can attribute their inspiration with

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60 Wilson. “Saint-Germain-des-Prés,” 241
relative certainty to Dora Maar. Still there exists, within the period of the war years, a number of paintings of which the inspirational provenance is ambiguous. Indeed, Dora Maar may have been one of Picasso’s most expressive mirrors during the Occupation, but her emotional and psychological relevance extends beyond just herself and to the universality of the female face and form. Picasso is quoted as having said that he felt that “women are machines for suffering.” Thus a woman such as the one in *Woman with an Artichoke* (fig 10) of 1942, inspired not by Dora Maar but most likely by Picasso’s housekeeper, becomes a mechanism through which Picasso can express anguish. In this case, though the woman seems to have the hint of a smile on her face, yet her corporeal dislocation reflects a deeper psychological turmoil. The artichoke she holds appears less like a vegetable and more like a medieval weapon, the fingers on her left hand are sharpened to points, even the armchair she sits in evokes, as Picasso revealed, “old age and death.” In *Woman in Gray (Paris)* (fig 11) of 1942, which eludes specific attribution to Dora Maar, we are confronted with an even more sober color scheme and portrait. Here the mouth has been relegated to a hole where a small cluster of teeth form, all converging to the same sharp point. Her face is comprised of a series of alternately curved and angular forms, all monochrome and without the softening touch of shading, and we again see intimations of skeletal forms within the face. Her hat evokes, for me, both the apparel of a woman in mourning with the long veil hanging down the back, and also the horns of a bull, minotaur, or even devil, protruding from the top of her less than human looking face. There is nothing pleasant or calming about this image. Hers is the visage of a grimacing, tormented woman; her face is one, like so many of the other

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62 Léal. “‘For Charming Dora’,” 387.
64 Nash. “Picasso, War, and Art,” 34. I believe this is corroborated somewhere in Brassai as well.
female countenances of the time, of a woman who, in the words of Brigitte Baer, “suffer[s] and who causes others to suffer.”

**The End of an Era: Bacchanal and the Charnel House**

The period of the ‘war years’ comes to a close in Picasso’s oeuvre with two distinctly different paintings: *Bacchanal* (fig 12) of 1944 and the *Charnel House* (fig 13) of 1945. The Occupation period ends with Picasso fervently painting his *Bacchanal (After Poussin)* as the Liberation rages on outside of his window. This painting is a celebratory painting reflecting not just the triumphal return of art from beneath the oppressive totalitarianism of Nazi policy, but also, as Victoria Beck Newman argues, is a painting that subscribes to “a Resistance narrative emphasizing the radicality of the Liberation as a revolutionary struggle for a new society.”

Though in 1944 Paris was released from the grips of Nazi control, it was not until 1945 that World War II truly ended. This occasion is marked by the powerful, though unfinished, *Charnel House*, inspired by recently released photographs and accounts of the atrocities of war. This painting is a synthesis of many elements from throughout the war years. In it we see the grisaille and monochrome *Guernica*, elements of his most skeletal and reduced portraits,

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68 Boggs explains that “Apparently, Dora Maar reported, the immediate inspiration for [Charnel House] was not, in fact, the stories of the atrocities in concentration camps which began to spread through the world after the liberation, but a Spanish film of the annihilation of one family in war.”

as well as a reiteration of his nudes of the war years.\textsuperscript{69} In the left-hand corner of the 
\textit{Charnel House} there is even the outline of a still life of pitcher and casserole dish,
perhaps an unfinished reference to an earlier still life, \textit{Pitcher, Candle, Casserole} of
1945.\textsuperscript{70} It is as if, during the war years, after painting \textit{Guernica}, Picasso had been
meticulously and unconsciously preparing himself for this painting that so literally
evokes the devastating carnage of war. Utley notes that the \textit{Charnel House} is
“unprecedented in Picasso’s oeuvre for its brutal imagery, unmitigated by the
mythologizing symbolism that pervades \textit{Guernica}”.\textsuperscript{71} It also, according to Utley, marks
the true radicalization of Picasso as an active and overt political artist and coincides with
his zealous post-war alliance with the Communist Party. \textit{Charnel House} marks the end of
an era dominated by still lifes and portraiture. In the safety of liberated Paris Picasso
embraces a return to the Event, a return to narrative, while sacrificing none of the
affective and expressive qualities he honed during the war years while relentlessly
painting still life after still life and portrait after portrait. It was through this
relentlessness, this survivalist attitude Picasso put forth while continuing to paint in
Occupied Paris, and the powerful emotive qualities with which he imbued his paintings
of the time, that he created a place for himself, not as an actively political and Resistance
artist, but as a \textit{resisting} artist. Not caring ‘to yield to either force or terror’, Picasso

\textsuperscript{69} These nudes, as in \textit{L’Aubade} of 1942, are in many ways derived from the bathers and nudes of
the Royan, pre-Occupation period. The distorted, twisted bodies reflect, in the words of art
historian Steven Nash, the “transformative powers of wartime emotion”. These warped bodies,
which in their form literalize the distorting effect of war, are visual precursors to the suffering
bodies of \textit{The Charnel House}.
\textsuperscript{70} In discussing the still life element in \textit{Charnel House} Jean Sutherland Boggs cites William Rubin’s
assertion that perhaps Picasso eliminated the candle because it might too easily be read as an
optimistic symbol.
\textsuperscript{71} Utley. “From \textit{Guernica} to \textit{The Charnel House}: The Political Radicalization of an Artist,” 79.
proved the power of the subversive and affective in the mundane and the profound dignity of simply staying put, “whatever the cost.” Writing about Picasso in 1944, Brassai said, “Picasso wants to commune with reality, all of reality, at its most immediate and most vulgar, at its least picturesque…” Picasso’s paintings of the Occupation mark an engagement with the stark, vulgar and emotional realities of the devastating effect of war on the human spirit. In his still lifes and portraits Picasso embarked on a mode of history painting that depicted, not the specific events of the Occupation, but rather the grim purgatory of an artist and a nation living each day beneath the stifling burden of war.

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72 To Francoise Gilot, Picasso spoke repeatedly about his desire to create subversive, disturbing and unexpected art “enough to make it impossible for [the viewer] to escape the questions it raises.” He also claims that it was inertia that kept him in Paris during the Occupation, but states that “[He’ll] stay, whatever the cost.” Gilot and Lake. Life with Picasso, 72, 46.

73 Brassai. Conversations with Picasso, 168.
Sources


Laporte, Paul M. “The Man with the Lamb.” Art Journal 21.3 (Spring, 1962): 144-150


Figure 1. *Death’s Head*, 1941 (?)\textsuperscript{74}

Figure 2. *Still Life with Pigeon*, November 13, 1941\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} *Picasso and the War Years*:1937-1945, 175.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 169.
Figure 3. *Still Life with Skull and Pitcher*, August 15, 1943\(^\text{76}\)

Figure 4. *Femme nue se coiffant*, March 1940\(^\text{77}\)

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 191.

\(^{77}\) *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, 225.
Figure 5. *Portrait of Dora Maar*, October 9, 1942\(^78\)

Figure 6. *Seated Woman with a Hat* (Dora), September 10, 1938\(^79\)

\(^78\) *Picasso and Portraiture*, 403.

Figure 7. *Woman Seated in an Armchair*, October 12, 1941\(^80\)

Figure 8. *Woman Seated in an Armchair*, October 4, 1941\(^81\)

\(^80\) *Picasso and the War Years: 1937-1945*, 167.
Figure 9. *Bust of a Woman*, October 15, 1941\(^{82}\)

Figure 10. *Woman with an Artichoke*, 1942\(^{83}\)

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 166.
\(^{82}\) Ibid., 168.
\(^{83}\) Ibid., 142.
Figure 11. *Woman in Gray (Paris)*, August 6, 1942

Figure 12. *Bacchanale, After Poussin*, August 1944

\[84\] Ibid., 181.

\[85\] *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, 243.
Figure 13. *The Charnel House*, 1945$^{86}$

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$^{86}$ *Picasso and the War Years: 1937-1945*, 202.