

Analysis of the “Bull” Image in Picasso’s Guernica

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Abstract: The bull motif is a recurring visual element in Picasso’s works. Centered on the bull imagery in his iconic piece Guernica, this study analyzes the symbolic significance of the bull and its deep psychological resonance with Picasso through the lens of art psychology, drawing parallels with two contemporaneous works: Franco’s Dreams and Lies and The Bullfighter and the Great Bull. The study reveals that the bull serves as a crucial vehicle for projecting Picasso’s inner self-image. The violence and indifference embodied by the bull in Guernica stem from the artist’s conscious expression of trauma from the Spanish Civil War, while also incorporating unconscious manifestations of negative psychological factors rooted in childhood patriarchal pressures. The study further reveals that in Franco’s Dreams and Lies, the bull as an embodiment of justice represents Picasso’s earnest desire to end the civil war. In The Bullfighter and the Great Bullfight, the wounded, rebellious bull symbolically reenacts Picasso’s emotional struggle with his wife Olga and his yearning to break free from constraints.

Keywords: Bull; Picasso; Guernica; Art Psychology

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As the founder of Cubism, Pablo Picasso’s bold exploration of form, color, and space transformed humanity’s understanding of art and aesthetic standards. Guernica (Fig. 1) stands not only as a quintessential example of the artist’s Cubist style but also as one of the 20th century’s most symbolic anti-war works. Analyzing the bull imagery in Guernica through the lens of art psychology deepens our understanding of the piece and illuminates the cultural significance of this motif within Western and Spanish societies. Simultaneously, examining this image offers insight into the creative psychology underlying the artist’s work.

1. Background Research on Guernica and Western Bull Culture

1.1 The Background of Guernica’s Creation

Guernica was created in 1937. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 plunged Spanish society into extreme division, subjecting countless citizens to unspeakable suffering. Though Picasso himself enjoyed considerable social and political standing at the time, he could not escape the psychological and emotional toll of the war. On April 26, 1937, the Luftwaffe of Nazi Germany, supporting fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War, bombed the town of Guernica in the Basque region. This bombing resulted in the deaths of numerous innocent civilians and caused severe destruction to the city. This iconic act of violence profoundly affected Picasso, sparking an intense creative urge and laying the groundwork for his later creation of Guernica. That same year, Picasso received a commission from the Spanish Republican government to create a work for the Paris International Exposition, aiming to reveal the devastating consequences of the Spanish Civil War. This commission provided the impetus for Picasso to create Guernica. He ultimately chose to transform the historical tragedy of Guernica

into art, exposing the cruelty of war and expressing his sympathy and anger toward the suffering of innocent people. In fact, even before the Spanish Civil War erupted, Picasso had demonstrated profound concern for social injustice and war. After the conflict began, he unequivocally sided with the Republican cause and vehemently opposed the violent oppression of the fascist regime.^[1] These convictions served as the driving force behind his creation of this work. During the 1930s, Picasso's personal life was also marked by turmoil, as he navigated between his wife and his mistress. In 1935, Picasso formally divorced his second wife, Olga Khokhlova, and began a new relationship with the younger artist Marie-Thérèse Walter.^[2] Picasso's perception of war's brutality resonated profoundly with the emotional conflicts and losses he experienced in his personal life. These private sentiments also influenced his artistic creation, making *Guernica* not only an indictment of politics, war, and violence, but also a profound emotional catharsis for the artist himself.

*Figure 1: Pablo Picasso, Guernica, 1937, 350 cm × 780 cm,
Collection of the Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid*



1.2 The Image of the Bull in Greek Mythology and Spanish Culture

The bull was a motif particularly favored by Picasso himself, appearing in numerous works—a preference rooted in the cultural environment in which the artist lived. In Greek mythology, the bull holds profound symbolic significance, embodying strength, ferocity, and courage while being intrinsically linked to numerous deities and heroes in mythological narratives—such as the tales of Europa and Zeus, or Minos and the Cretan Bull. Ancient Greeks frequently sacrificed black bulls to the gods, particularly to Poseidon, the god of the sea, seeking divine protection and blessings. In earthquake-prone regions like Ionia and Thessaly, bullfighting contests were also held to honor the sea god.^[3] Picasso created a series of paintings depicting bulls and the Minotaur in the 1930s, this is Picasso's other self within the image.^[4] This demonstrates his profound understanding of Greek mythology, particularly the bull imagery within Greek culture. Furthermore, as a Spanish painter, Picasso was influenced from childhood by Spain's bullfighting culture. Bullfighting is a highly symbolic activity within Spanish traditional culture. As an ancient form of entertainment, it is not only a sporting event but also a social ritual. Bullfighting performances were the most important weekend entertainment in Picasso's hometown of Málaga. Picasso's father was a devoted bullfighting enthusiast who took Picasso to watch bullfights almost every weekend.^[5] From childhood, Picasso developed an interest in bullfighting—not only culturally but also emotionally and artistically. Many of his works feature figures and scenes inspired by bullfighting themes. Notably, his 1930s works, such as the *Bullfighters Series* and *Portrait of a Bullfighter*, vividly reinterpret imagery from bullfighting culture.

2. Image Analysis of the Bull in Guernica

Guernica is a monumental mural with a strong sense of horizontal expansion. The composition forms a visual continuum from left to right, with each segment resonating and interacting with the whole. The painting lacks clear vertical or front-to-back hierarchy; all figures are arranged in a fragmented, deconstructed state. In *Guernica*, the bull figure (Fig. 3) occupies the upper left corner, positioned near the edge of the composition. Its head protrudes prominently, dominating nearly the

entire left side of the canvas. Employing Cubist deconstruction, the bull's face is distorted, its gaze fixed forward. The horns and ears are depicted as sharp and pointed, while the tail bears no resemblance to a real bull's tail, instead resembling that of a horse. Its body exhibits a constrained posture, with limbs and neck depicted in extreme distortion, defying natural proportions. Directly beneath the bull's head sits the figure of a woman cradling her dead child. This mother figure serves as a common post-war symbol of victimhood, particularly representing mothers who lost children in conflict. Her face is positioned immediately below the bull's head, the two forms in close proximity. The woman screams toward the heavens, her face contorted in extreme agony. In stark contrast, the bull's expression appears blank and numb. The mother's heart-wrenching emotional outcry stands in sharp relief against the bull's impassive countenance. At the center of the composition, adjacent to the bull, stands the horse. The contrast between bull and horse is striking, particularly in their physical expression and symbolism. The bull appears more grounded, while the horse seems turbulent and frenzied within the composition—its eyes wide, mouth open as if screaming. These animals carry distinct symbolic meanings in Western art and culture: the bull often symbolizes wildness and courage.^[6] The horse, meanwhile, represents heroism, war, and speed.^[7] In *Guernica*, however, the bull and horse diverge from their conventional symbolism. According to Picasso's own description, the horse symbolizes humanity suffering the horrors of war, while the bull is identified as a force of cruelty and darkness.^[8] This explains the contrast between the bull and the woman mentioned earlier. As the only two animal figures in the painting, they convey strikingly different symbolic meanings, which inevitably piques the author's interest. What significance does the bull hold in the artist's psyche? Does it carry a special meaning for him?

Figure 2 *Guernica* (Detail 1)



Figure 3 *Guernica* (Detail 2)



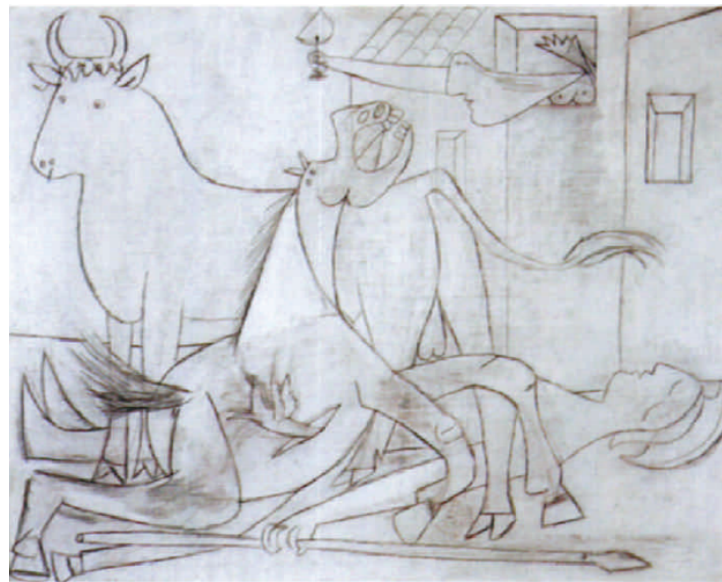
3. The Image of the “Bull” in *Guernica* from an Art Psychology Perspective

3.1 The Relationship Between the “Bull” Image in *Guernica* and the Artist's Psychology

Guernica, like Picasso's other works, carries a distinct autobiographical quality—a universal characteristic throughout his entire oeuvre.^[4] Thus, the bull imagery in this piece can first be understood as a projection of the artist's personal emotions onto its form. The bull unquestionably symbolizes masculine power, representing Picasso's latent virility and paternal complex. Picasso's relationship with his father, also a painter, was complex—a blend of mentor and father figure.^[9] This paternal oppression likely became a source of inner conflict and fear for Picasso. Additionally, Picasso exhibited a strong desire for control. Whether with his first official girlfriend Fernande or his later second wife Teresa, Picasso displayed an intense need for dominance.^[10] This behavior also served as a form of overcompensation for the lack of autonomy he experienced during his childhood. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the bull's violence and darkness symbolized Picasso's subconscious rebellion against paternal authority. Simultaneously, it reflected the artist's own psychological

projection of coercive, controlling, and violent impulses onto the bull's image (a view reinforced by Roland Penrose's commentary on Picasso, cited below). Furthermore, the bull's negative connotations may also relate to the trauma inflicted on Picasso personally by Western warfare. Picasso was an individual profoundly sensitive to war, inevitably becoming emotionally invested in its consequences.^[11] The Spanish Civil War constituted not only a personal trauma for Picasso but also a collective wound for the Spanish nation. The bull, originally a symbol of courage and strength in Spanish society, transformed in the artist's mind into an emblem of violence and darkness under the war's influence. Of course, Picasso did not purely unconsciously imbue the bull with negativity in his work; he consciously engaged in this process during creation, ultimately choosing to present the bull's image in a negative light. During the creation of this work, the bull also held positive connotations in Picasso's mind. For instance, in Picasso's May 1, 1937, compositional study for *Guernica* (Fig. 4), the bull is depicted as an innocent and benevolent figure, crowned with a wreath and appearing free and carefree.

*Figure 4: Pablo Picasso, Guernica (Composition Study), May 1, 1937, 53.7 cm × 64.7 cm
Collection of the Reina Sofía Museum, Madrid*



3.2 Analysis of the Contrasting Portrayals of the “Bull” and “Horse” in *Guernica*

In *Guernica*, the bull and horse, though both depicted as animals, exhibit starkly different visual representations. The horse is rendered in extreme agony, while the bull appears cold and cruel. This contrast in portrayal likely stems from the artist's childhood memories. In Spanish bullfighting culture, bulls and horses are often placed in the bullring to fight freely. The defenseless horse is inevitably no match for the powerful bull, and the noble steed frequently faces a painful death at the hands of the bull.^[12] Picasso witnessed this tragedy firsthand during his childhood, subconsciously associating the bull with violence and cruelty, while viewing the horse as the victim. Furthermore, the symbolic differences between bulls and horses can be traced to socio-historical and cultural contexts. In Spanish culture, the bull often symbolizes strength, courage, and masculinity. Thus, in *Guernica*, the bull represents male violence and power. In Picasso's May 11, 1937, compositional study for *Guernica* (Fig. 5), the bull figure was practiced separately. In this study, Picasso depicted the bull as a human-headed bull, with the facial features clearly identifying it as a male head. Although this image was ultimately not adopted in the final work, it sufficiently demonstrates the artist's recognition of the bull as a male symbol. The horse, as a vulnerable animal, is often seen as a more feminine symbol. The horse's fragility and agony in the painting reflect women's victimhood in war. In Picasso's May 8, 1937, compositional study for *Guernica* (Fig. 6), the image of a painfully contorted horse is juxtaposed with that of a mother clutching her dead child and wailing to the heavens. Evidently, the artist was conducting preparatory sketches based on shared emotional expressions. In his subsequent compositional study the following day (Fig. 7), the mother holding her child extends her right hand into the horse's abdomen, further intertwining their forms. This demonstrates Picasso's identification of the horse as a victim of war and an embodiment of the female figure. Rudolf Arnheim, in his analysis of Picasso's compositional studies, similarly observed: “In the artist's initial depictions of women, the most intimate connection

in conception and composition lies in the fusion of the mother's image with that of the horse".^[13]

Figure 5: Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (Composition Study), May 11, 1937, 23.9 cm × 45.5 cm,
Collection of the Reina Sofía Museum, Madrid



Figure 6: Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (Composition Study), May 8, 1937, 24 cm × 45.5 cm
Collection of the Reina Sofía Museum, Madrid



Figure 7: Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (Composition Study), May 9, 1937, 24 cm × 45.5 cm,
Collection of the Reina Sofía Museum, Madrid



4. Comparison of the “Bull” Motif Across Picasso’s Works from the Same Period

In the same year *Guernica* was completed, Picasso also created a series of politically charged etchings featuring bull motifs titled *Franco’s Dreams and Lies* (Fig. 8). This work depicts a series of tragic events while expressing support for the Spanish Republic, employing a colossal, grotesque figure to represent Franco.^[14] Some scholars have dubbed this grotesque figure the “Franco monster with a horse’s body and coral-like head”.^[4] The artist’s profound loathing for the dictator is evident throughout this series. Here, the bull is portrayed as a positive symbol, while the monster is depicted being disemboweled by the bull. Regarding the monster’s depiction, Picasso’s friend Roland Penrose offered an insightful commentary:

The repulsive image he created for Franco stemmed from a deeply personal monster lurking within him. Shortly after completing this series, I asked him to sign a set of prints I had purchased. As he signed my name, starting with the lowercase p, I was startled to notice that the shape of the capital letter P in his own signature was nearly identical to the head of the creature he loathed most—the coral worm. The power he imbued in this image was unconsciously drawn from such a deeply secret source, revealing the profound entanglement he felt. The desire to allude to himself through the capital letter of his own name could not be more compelling. Just as he had previously often used idealized self-portraits as the basis for his heroic Harlequin figures, here, conversely, the unconscious source for the image of the most detested person was equally personal.^[11] The coral-like head in Picasso's series possesses a hidden personal origin. Thus, the author posits that on an individual psychological level, the bull representing justice in this series likely mirrors the bull in *Guernica*—both being unconscious projections of the artist's inner self within his work. The former embodies his positive psyche, while the latter reflects his negative psyche. The author further contends that such hidden, idealized images within the artist's own psyche are more readily projected unconsciously into works and abstract forms rich in abstract qualities.

*Figure 8: Pablo Picasso, Franco's Dreams and Lies, 1937,
31.4 cm × 42 cm, Private Collection*



The Female Bullfighter and the Great Bull (Fig. 9) is an etching on the theme of bullfighting completed by Picasso in 1934. This work also possesses a strong sense of abstraction and expressiveness. The bull, enraged by a lance piercing its neck, is depicted with meticulous attention to its head. Its ferocious expression conveys both agony and fury. The female bullfighter has fallen from the bull's back, her limbs contorted. Some scholars suggest: "The exposed chest of the female bullfighter identifies her as Picasso's then-lover Marie-Thérèse, who has fallen from the bull's back; while the horse-like figure on the right, swollen like a flail threshing grain, represents Picasso's confused and despairing wife Olga."^[5] The author disagrees with this interpretation. While Picasso did frequently depict his wives, lovers, and children, his portrayals of beloved women were predominantly positive and triumphant.^[15] The title itself suggests the work celebrates the bull, positioning the female bullfighter as the defeated party. Picasso would not have depicted his lover Teresa as the fallen bullfighter. The female bullfighter in the painting likely represents Olga, with whom Picasso was on the verge of divorce. The bull, meanwhile, symbolizes the artist himself. In the biography written by Picasso's grandson Olivier Widmaier Picasso, we find this passage: In the summer of 1934, Picasso, Olga, and Paul embarked once more on the long journey to Spain. Marie-Thérèse followed behind. She still obediently followed Picasso's arrangements, yet a unique resonance developed between them, drawing them closer than ever before. Picasso even introduced his young mistress to his sister, Lola. By autumn, their shattered home was filled with Olga's rage over Picasso's absence, compounded by a prolonged silence.

Picasso remained devoted to painting and sculpture. Intriguingly, one motif grew increasingly frequent in these works: a girl resembling Marie-Thérèse guiding a wounded Minotaur. The Minotaur represented Picasso's subconscious self-portrait, and these creative experiments formed the prelude to his renowned Minotaur series.^[16]

*Figure 9: Picasso, The Female Fighter and the Great Bull, 1934,
81 cm × 60 cm, Collection of the Picasso Museum*



The passage above indicates that Teresa's portrayal in Picasso's other paintings and sculptures from the same year as *The Bullfighter and the Great Bull* was consistently positive. Picasso depicted Teresa as the benevolent maiden guiding the Minotaur (the bull-headed monster), while the wounded Minotaur symbolized the artist himself. Interestingly, the wounded Minotaur aligns with the injured bull in "The Ménage à Trois." Therefore, the author posits that the bull in "The Ménage à Trois" mirrors the bull in *Guernica*—both representing Picasso's inner self projected onto the bull motif. The female bullfighter in the painting embodies his wife, Olga. Holding a lance, she seeks to "tame" Picasso, embodied as the bull, in an attempt to salvage their crumbling relationship. Yet the bull, in agony, struggles fiercely and shakes the matador off his body—vividly reenacting Picasso's personal emotional turmoil and his desperate desire to break free from his wife. The bull's triumph in this struggle signifies Picasso's inner, idealized desire.

Conclusion

This paper analyzes three abstract works featuring bull imagery created by Picasso in the 1930s from an art psychology perspective. It explains the relationship between the bull imagery in the paintings and the artist's psychological state, revealing his emotional experiences and psychological characteristics. In all three works, Picasso unconsciously projected his own emotions or inner desires onto the bull imagery, making the bull figures vivid reflections of his psychological state at the time. In *Guernica*, the violent bull imagery first emerged from Picasso's conscious decision to negatively transform the bull motif. During the actual creation process, he infused the bull with masculine traits while simultaneously projecting unconscious psychological factors—shaped by childhood patriarchal pressures and the Spanish Civil War—onto the figure. In two other works from the same period featuring bull imagery, the bull in *Franco's Dreams and Lies* reflects Picasso's intense desire for a swift end to the Spanish Civil War on a socio-political level. Meanwhile, the bull and female matador figures in *The Great Bullfight* express the artist's emotional turmoil with his first wife, Olga, on a personal level. I believe it is precisely because the artist consciously or unconsciously infused his own emotions into the pictorial imagery that the numerous figures in *Guernica* possess such profoundly moving artistic power. This allows viewers to perceive the cruelty of war through the abstract forms within the painting, endowing the work with timeless artistic appeal. Naturally, the multiplicity of meanings inherent in abstract art and abstract imagery provides ample scope for the analysis of this work from an art psychology perspective in this essay.

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