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Piero della Francesca's *Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroes*
and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*,
Analyses and Comparison

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After careful consideration of Piero della Francesca's *Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes* and Picasso's *Guernica*, it can be clearly presented that each artist uses a style and narrative which is uniquely different, as is to be expected by their 500 year separation, yet each has elements which are in fact similar enough to provide ample room for comparison. Putting all prejudices contributing to the nearly 500 year separation aside, obvious similarities exist, such as each work's general size, subject, and commission, and the circumstances and historical themes which influenced the individual artist. However, it should be strongly emphasized that the unifying factors between these two works act not to express some uncanny unity which only time has separated, but rather to show how the artists could use similar influences and pictorial structure, yet approach their works using iconography in dissimilar manners for inherently different purposes. In order to appreciate these works as they relate to each other, one must first examine each as to its media, size, location, and commission as well as pertinent historical basis to their individual subject matter.

The Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroes is one of several frescoes of the Legend of the True Cross series, painted in the church of San Francesco at Arezzo at least in some part by Piero della Francesca. The fresco itself is 329cm. x 747cm., being positioned in the lowest spot on the east wall of the choir.¹ The work in the church was originally commissioned to Bicci di Lorenzo by the Bacci family in 1427. But, upon his death in 1452, Piero was entrusted with the choir, as Bicci had already set works upon the entrance hall and vault. The subject of Piero's frescoes for the choir was to

¹ Peter Murray, The Complete Paintings of Piero della Francesca (N.Y.: Harry N. Abrams Publisher Inc., 1967), p. 28.

be story of the True Cross.² This was a theme drawn from several sources, particularly from the *Leggenda Aurea* by Jacopo Voragine, and had been already popularized in two churches of the 14th century. This tale of the cross upon which Christ was crucified was a story that was familiar to most citizens at the time, and allowed Piero the freedom to portray it in a liberal style.³ Due to these reasons, Piero was able to effectively adapt his work as a response to events of the day. The frescoes were begun at the moment when the Turks had been pressuring to end the Byzantine Empire in the East, and they had been completed by time the infidels had conquered Constantinople. *The Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroes* depicted the story in which King Chosroes of the Zoroaster-faithful Persians had stolen the True Cross in the year 615, and had it encased in his throne. In a sacrilegious personification of God, he had on his right the wood of the Cross instead of Jesus, and a cock on his left in place of the Holy Spirit. The story follows that the Christian emperor of the East, Heraclius, attacked the troops of the Persian King and defeated them on the banks of the Danube.⁴ In light of the threatening Turks to the East, and due to the fact that this battle was not even part of the traditional Legend of the Cross, it seems obvious that this fresco was included in the choir in some sense as propaganda for a Crusade.⁵ Considering Piero had concluded a stay in

² Jacqueline and Maurice Guillard, Piero della Francesca (New York: Guillard Editions, 1988), pp. 20-23.

³ Murray, p. 6.

⁴ Murray, p. 30.

⁵ Kenneth Clark, Piero della Francesca (London: Pheidon Press, 1969), p.

Florence during the construction of the series, and that at that time Florence had been the seat of council for many doctors and important men of Byzantium, it seems Piero may very well have undertaken the series, and in particular *The Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroes*, in a response and call to arms against the infidels.⁶

In the early months of 1937 Jose Luis Sert, chief architect of the ultramodern Spanish pavilion for the World's Fair of 1937 in Paris, arranged for Picasso to receive a commission for a large mural to be placed in the pavilion.⁷ As the most famous Spanish painter and avid supporter of the Spanish Republic, Picasso accepted the commission and began work on a piece entitled *Painter and His Model*. Little did he know how drastically his theme would change in the coming months. On April 26, 1937, planes of the German Condor Legion, in support of the military junta headed by General Franco in Spain, flew a major air attack against the undefended Basque town of Guernica and destroyed it completely. As the attack took place on a market day, the casualties and destruction were on a scale unequalled in previous history. On April 28, 1937, news reached France, and on May 1, an infuriated Picasso began his preliminary drawings for *Guernica*. Picasso had been relentless in his support of the Spanish people, and it seemed that he had changed his subject for the Spanish pavilion in response to the horrors that had befallen the ancient Basque town. The

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⁶ Murray, p. 28.

⁷ Eberhard Fisch, The Guernica of Picasso (Chicago: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1988), p. 19.

350cm. x 777cm. work was probably finished on the 4th of June and later erected in the unfinished pavilion.⁸ It was obvious that the patrons had envisioned a more realistic appeal to the masses, and had almost removed the piece. Little did they know that Picasso's *Guernica* would be the most compelling anti-war work of art ever to be constructed. *Guernica*, with its simple black, white and gray oil tones and abstract figures added a new sense of iconography which no realistic interpretation of the massacre could bring forth.

It seems clear that Picasso's *Guernica* and Piero's *Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroes* share certain similarities. Each artist had been commissioned to produce a work of roughly the same size and rectangular shape to be placed in a certain locale. Piero was a very prominent and learned artist of the area, so therefore was naturally picked to finish the choir of San Francesco. Picasso was the most famous of all Spanish painters, and at the time, living in Paris. It was only fitting that a Picasso should be the highlight of the Spanish pavilion in Paris. Further, each artist's rendering of their commissioned work was duly influenced by the hostile insurgence of a force against a peoples he held close to his heart. For Piero, it was the Turks against his fellow Christian Byzantines. For Picasso, it was the hired guns of the German planes against the helpless citizens of Guernica. Here, however, each artist splits in his direction and purpose. Piero chose to use the ancient story of Chosroes and the other stories of the True Cross to remind viewers of the past triumphs of infidels, and to possibly charge them to crush the threatening invaders. Piero did this by creating a fresco which showed a reasonably realistic, colorful depiction of

⁸ Fisch, pp. 17-20.

the battle between the Persians and the Christians, and Chosroes's impending decapitation. Picasso on the other hand chose to use various iconographic figures in black white and gray tones, which, in a sequence of interactions, create not the actual event of the bombing, but a universal appeal which calls for a recognition and sympathetic outpouring to the citizens of Guernica, as well as all of Spain. In essence, *Guernica* is a protest to the savagery of war. Thus, it can be seen in general terms that Piero's battle scene is meant to combat offense with offense through religious fervor, and *Guernica* is meant to proclaim such unmitigated violence as horrid, and to pinpoint its both temporary and lasting effects.

It should be noted that although each artist uses the subject of violence to portray differing, even somewhat conflicting, messages, each creates his work using such methods as to create a sense of eternal feeling and application. These methods are rooted in both classical and Christian values, but each uses these in differing manners to create this eternal effect. In order to understand these differences, it is necessary to probe what tactics each artistically valued, and to see how each applied these things to the overall flow of figures and action in the works in question.

Piero della Francesca was truly one the great exponents of perspective of the 15th century, as he not only wrote treatises of Euclidian type geometry and mathematics, but also applied these theories to his paintings.⁹ In Piero's work in question, there is a clear point perspective, as evidenced in the clumped, but positioned soldiers, and the positioning of Chosroes's throne. In fact, Piero uses this foreshortening and perspective to

⁹ Murray, p. 6.

align his characters in such a manner as to add a sense of flow to his seemingly static figures. He must do this to give action to his figures which tend to stand rather than move. This is not to say, however, that his characters offer no drama. He conveys his drama through gestures such as the falling of a sword upon a foe, or through vivid tones such as the dripping of blood from the freshly wounded.¹⁰ Clearly, when the fresco is seen in the whole, a movement of action is seen to be flowing from left to right. The Christian army attacks, and the scene becomes a melee. The aggressive combatants form a pyramidal mass in the center, with the Christian flags at its apex, and the Persian flags falling to the right.¹¹ The battle scene ends with Chosroes's son receiving a mortal wound to the throat by the base of the cross, and with the view of the throne and the awaited decapitation of the king. When the flow from left to right is considered in addition to the severity in consequence of the specific actions, a trend of increasing gravity is seen. Starting at the far left, the soldiers are less cramped, and there are less casualties. As movement continues toward the right, the fight reaches its climax as bodies fall, horses crowd the action, combatants die, and finally the king and his empire lie certain doom. In this manner Piero is emphasizing the approaching, eternal downfall of the blasphemous king. By creating this sense of gravity, in combination with his use of stern, yet expressive faces and gestures, Piero effectively creates an aura of lasting importance and pertinence to both this work's narrative, and its greater underlying

¹⁰ Clark, p. 42.

¹¹ Guillard, p. 26.

significance.

Pablo Picasso was one of the most productive and stylistically innovative artists of the 20th century. Throughout his various periods of artistic experimentation, Picasso consistently sought to find ways to express his inner world.¹² By using these various forms of expression which he gained over the years, Picasso was able to culminate his talents to produce *Guernica* in 1937. Outraged by the atrocities committed against the town, he was compelled to introspectively collect all his thoughts, and portray them in the mural. He did this by using his figures as symbols which, when followed and taken in different contexts, represented various conditions of human interaction. Because the figures have such ambiguous yet expressive features, and due to the fact that they are in some cases not even human, Picasso's work has led to varying interpretations. It can be stated, however, that *Guernica* is a reaction to the suffering of a people, and therefore traces and records this suffering in some manner. This point can be clearly made when the painting is schematically studied and the flow of actions through the figures are made obvious.

Picasso had been a major contributor to the Cubist movements, and in various degrees, those multiplanar styles are depicted in the figures in *Guernica*. The setting is as well a multiplanar, undefined inside/outside "room". Like Piero he is interested in perspective, but here it acts from several points and confuses more than organizes. In this sense it is ambiguous, and that what matters is that as the building flows from one form to the next, so does the interaction of the characters. Little is shown

¹² Ellen C. Oppler, *Picasso's Guernica* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 1988), p. 81.

of the setting to give the sense of the Basque town except the small glimpses of Spanish roofing. This is done intentionally, as to give a universal appeal. As the setting flows, so do the figures. In contrast to Piero's battle scene, this can be seen to go from right to left. However, quite similarly, the flow of action of *Guernica* follows many of the same principles that Piero's did. Yet, here the figures lose the statuesque shapes, and their faces scream and moan, as their unreal bodies contort in wild shapes. The figure to the farthest right has either hurled herself out of the flaming window above, or has been blown skyward by a bomb's blast. This moment of instantaneous action leads the viewer to the right where another woman drags her damaged left knee, and creates the corner for another pyramid of action, much like that of Piero's. This woman suffers, and directs her attention to a horse, wounded in the side by a spear and in the process of collapsing. In addition, this horse is being overlooked by a mechanical light and another woman swooping in from the right holding an oil lamp which does not shine. The pyramid of action is completed in the lower left hand by a man's head severed from his body. This figure, which seems at first to complete the action of the scene, looks upward to where a mother wails and holds her dead child. This mother stands in front of a bull, whose dark torso shelters her, and whose white head with ear pricked stands turned to the left, yet whose face seems strangely attentive. To the right of the bull stands a squawking bird of some sort on a table.¹³ By following this flow of action, an increasing gravity is seen in much the same way that Piero's was expressed. Surely there are similar animals in

¹³ Fisch, pp. 25-51.

both, but the iconography expressed here is much less definitive and much more open to interpretation. Some suggest that the horse represents an incarnation of suffering being right-hooked by the fury-like light bearer, and given no more than an ear by the bull of Spain, wrestling with its own civil war, and looking to the future. In other scenarios the scene is a nativity one, with the three figures to the left as wise (wo)men. Still another creates the scene as a bullfight.¹⁴ Because Picasso depicted many of these Spanish and Christian themes in his other works, it is possible, that all of these exist in *Guernica*. As Picasso had remained resilient to not pinpoint each figure's intended iconography, if indeed just one ever existed, *Guernica* has grown ever increasingly immortal.

Piero della Francesca's *Battle Between Heraclius and Chosroes* and Picasso's *Guernica* share similarities in their relative sizes, energy flows, and structures, but differ greatly in their uses of tonality iconography and perspective. Each's differing style does create the same effect as each work is created in its own way and for its own purpose as a universal work of feeling and vision.

¹⁴ E.I. Granell, Picasso's Guernica (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), pp. 7-9.



