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## Russell: Picasso's Guernica: The Labyrinth of Narrative and Vision

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- 12 See Edgar Wind, "Charity: The Case History of a Pattern," *The Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1 (1937-1938):322-330.
- 13 See Charles Mitchell, "Benjamin West's 'Death of General Wolfe' and the Popular History Piece," *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 7(1944):20-33.
- 14 See Jean Seznec, "'The Romans of the Decadence' and Their Historical Significance," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* XXIV (1943):221.
- 15 Kenneth Clark, *The Nude* (Garden City, N.Y.:1956). p. 109.
- 16 The title essay in his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (London: 1965), pp. 1-11.
- 17 Interestingly discussed in Anne Coffin Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition* (New Haven and London: 1977).
- 18 See Robert Rosenblum, *Ingres* (New York, n.d.), pp. 98-99.
- 19 See Gombrich's "Raphael's 'Madonna della Sedia,'" in his *Norm and Form* (London: 1966), pp. 64-80.
- 20 Theodore Hetzer, "Francisco Goya and the Crisis in Art around 1800," reprinted in Fred Licht, ed., *Goya in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.:1973), p. 99.
- 21 These examples discussed in Theodore Reff, *Degas: The Artist's Mind* (New York: 1976), pp. 52-53 and 92-93.
- 22 John Berger, "Nude in a Fur Coat. *Rubens*" (1966), *The Moment of Cubism* (London: 1969), pp. 72-74; see also *Ways of Seeing*, pp. 60-61.
- 23 In his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*, p. 36.
- 24 In "Art and Freud's Displacement of Aesthetics," in Jonathan Miller, ed., *Freud* (Boston: 1972), p. 133.
- 25 A comment made in a discussion with David Sylvester and Andrew Forge, "A Kind of Informality," *Studio International* 171 (1966):55. See also Philip Rawson, *Drawing* (London: 1969), p. 266.
- 26 London, 1971; quotations from pp. 98, 31.
- 27 This subject is treated more generally in a number of essays in Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin, eds., *Woman as Sex Object* (New York: 1972), and in a fascinating polemical article by Carol Duncan, "The Esthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art," *Heresies* 1(1977):46-50.
- 28 Here the interpretation of Freud in his "Freud's Aesthetics," *Encounter* XXXVI, no. 1 (1966):30-40, and the essays now collected in his *Ideals and Idols* (Oxford: 1979) are helpful.
- 29 Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (New York: 1969), p. 133.
- 30 Berger, G. (New York: 1972), p. 111.
- 31 Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1 (Garden City, N.Y.: 1959), pp. 83, 119. Thanks to a letter from John Berger to Mark Roskill, I can now add that he, Berger, explicitly had this text in mind while composing G.

**Frank D. Russell.** *Picasso's Guernica: The Labyrinth of Narrative and Vision.* Montclair, N.J.: Allanheld & Schram, 1980. 334 pp., 215 illustrations. \$35.00.

### Review Essay by Rudolf Arnheim University of Michigan

One would be hard put to find another painting in the history of art that has been analyzed in such detail and by so many writers as Picasso's mural *Guernica*. Its content, meaning, evolution, and derivation have been scrutinized, and the end is not in sight. Professor Russell's recent book is the most comprehensive monograph so far. Where his forerunners have a remark, he has a chapter; and he can be said to be summing up what is left of earlier research. The path of more than 40 years of *Guernica* studies is strewn with the remains of attempts to meet the challenge of this enigmatic work of art. Those of us who survive have no reason to complain of being neglected by Mr. Russell. He spends thirty-seven pages of Notes in small print on quoting and critically discussing earlier interpretations.

But the work continues. The best essay I have ever read on *Guernica* was published by Reinhold Hohl (1978) in Germany. In our own country Mary Mathews Gedo (1979), in an article in *Art Quarterly* and now in a book (1980, which I have not yet seen), offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of the painting's subject matter. Still another book on the preliminary sketches and the "postscripts" is announced by Meyer Schapiro (1981); and were it not for the name of an author who has never failed to surprise us with new insights, one would wonder what is left to say on the subject.

One reason for this continued interest is the fact that *Guernica* is uncontested as the most significant painting of our century, mostly because of the way it deals with one of those historical episodes in which public opinion finds a passion-arousing symbol of the human experience. Nobody has yet analyzed the particular qualities that raise an event above the daily chronicles of heroism, suffering, and violence. Sometimes it is the mere size of a crime, as in the mass murder of the Jews under Hitler. Sometimes it is, on the contrary, the limited number of the victims, which allows for individual identification, as in the case of the American hostages in Iran and the paradigmatic nature of the outrage committed. The bombing of the small Spanish town of Guernica in 1937 shook the conscience of Europe as the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 had moved thinkers of that time to question the wisdom of God. The strike of the Fascists at the traditional sanctuary of civic free-

dom in the Basque country sharpened the symbolic significance of the onslaught and intensified the spirit of the crusade that had mobilized the young intellectuals of Europe. Add to this that the most famous painter of the century, himself a Spaniard, undertook to create the official image of that destruction, suffering, and resistance, and you have the main cause of the painting's distinction.

But this distinction alone does not explain why the commentators and analysts have singled out *Guernica* so persistently, in preference to perhaps equally good works by a Matisse, Klee, or Henry Moore. Further, Picasso has left us an unprecedented record of forty-five preparatory sketches and additional studies, which, together with photographs of the canvas taken while the work was in progress, display a unique reflection of the genesis of a work of art. Russell, in the second part of his book, emulates earlier attempts to trace the development of Picasso's conception through a step-by-step analysis of the chronological sequence.

Equally important is the realization that *Guernica* epitomizes the specifically modern discord between universal validity and individual vision. The function of the painting, commissioned by the Spanish Government-in-Exile for its pavilion at the World's Fair in Paris, required that it act as a collective statement on an objective fact of general concern. But a glance back at the closest example of a similar undertaking, Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), shows how much less modulated by the personal attitude and problems of the artist was that earlier work, even though it was not produced as an official commission. Frank Russell, in a remarkable epilogue, quite moving as the upshot of so exhaustive a labor of love, wonders whether *Guernica* truly lives up to its calling. "Why," he asks, "must the picture be eternally argued, searched? Why is there not, we ask when all is said, that unquestioned, that unquestionable quality we find in some earlier tragic expressions, expressions addressed, like the *Guernica*, in grand programmatic terms to a general public—Bach Passions, Giotto?" The answer, of course, depends first of all on whether the painting has, in a viewer's judgment, that definitive validity which Russell hesitates to concede to it. At that level, arguing is fruitless. But one can try to examine with some concreteness to what extent extrinsic influences such as personal traumas, recollections, and yearnings or the effects of religious tradition, political ideology, or pictorial models interfered with the requirements of the statement Picasso had been asked to deliver.

In the most general sense, any direct examination of the development of a person or a work tends to make the final product appear as the more or less arbitrary freezing of a process of complex forces—forces that were acting upon one another in the course of time and would have continued to do so, had they not been

stopped. Development frowns upon completion. I think that, to some extent, Russell falls victim to that perspective. He calls *Guernica* "a torture chamber of wrenching contradictions"; but the formal differences he has in mind—"the lightbearer's fluidity vs. the burning woman's angularity"—do not seem to support that judgment. They are justified by the different character of the two figures and, to my eye, fit the style of the whole work. Russell compares *Guernica* to a ship that "proceeds uneasily, rears up, strains..." *Fluctuat nec mergitur*. To some of us the picture looks more stable than that (Arnheim 1980).

Admittedly the composition is of staggering complexity, but Russell himself succeeds in reducing the dazzle of the surface to a skeleton of stable architectural patterns. To call the painting a labyrinth is tempting, if only because of the presence of the bull, close enough to the Minotaur who inhabited the original maze in the palace of Minos and haunted so many of Picasso's earlier inventions. But Russell goes further and points to the triangular pediment in which the central group is organized and which, together with the lateral scenes, conforms to the traditional plan of a triptych. He also mentions the resemblance of that scheme to the façades of medieval churches. Such references help to reveal an order that assigns its logical place to each of the painting's many details.

Every work of art is the product of many confluences, and the final success depends on how well they all integrate in a meaningful whole. Russell adopts the observation that the sacrificial slaughter scene of *Guernica* is intimately related to the religious theme of the crucifixion, which Picasso had extensively explored some years before. He follows earlier interpreters also in citing another permanent feature of Picasso's imagination, namely, the bullfight. Well documented, his survey extends the range of the relevant imagery to give us a more thorough understanding of what our eyes see in the picture. He establishes the symbolical meaning of the wounded horse and traces the origin of puzzling details, such as the Roman helmet and sword of the warrior, who goes back to the centurion of the calvary scenes. All this is illuminating. I get restless, however, when the spear of Longinus is compared with the brushes of painters who apply the *coup de grâce* to the scenes they depict, or when the ladder leaning against the cross is symbolically related to the ladder Picasso used in his studio. Those, alas, are the professional hazards of interpretation.

In the search for the sources of a work it is necessary to distinguish between references that help to clarify what the artist has chosen to include in his picture and others that serve the psychologist, the art historian, or the social scientist but burden the image with irrelevant associations. Thus Mary Gedo in her recent article suggests that the turmoil of *Guernica* is a reawakening of a childhood experience of the artist, who at the age of

3 was frightened by an earthquake in Málaga and by the birth of his sister Lola, which he may have witnessed at the same time. Such an observation, if valid, is of interest for the psychology of the creative process but may not add to our understanding of the painting. Nor are we necessarily enlightened by an inquiry into which mistress's features show up in the faces of the light-bearing woman or the bull.

Forays into the artist's personal disposition are of considerable interest, however, when they help to clarify aspects of the work that do not derive from the objective requirements of the subject. The ambivalence in the attitude of Picasso's bull has concerned many interpreters of *Guernica* and receives careful attention by Frank Russell. If the bull signifies the spirit of resistance and survival, to which the other characters of the cast appeal, he behaves peculiarly by turning his head away from the scene he faces with his body. Even his eyes express an uncertainty as to whether or not to engage in the central event. Since there is ample evidence that Picasso identified himself with the proud and savage animal, his own ambivalence toward the happenings in his home country is likely to be revealed in the stance of the bull. The self-centered privacy of the artist in conflict with the demands of national and political solidarity leaves an imprint that is no mere private projection. It highlights more generally the problem of the individual in an atomized society. But are the two functions of the bull reconcilable? The equation that attempts to parallel the spirit of Spain's survival with the dissonances in the artist's mind leaves a disturbing remainder.

Are we, then, to diagnose a crack in the structure of *Guernica* and call it a partial failure? Or are we dealing with a feature inherent in the way of life in our century and therefore legitimately present in a portrayal of our time? Is the inconsistency of the statement perhaps a necessary consequence of its truthfulness?

Any ambiguity in a work of art tends to raise the question that has been a nightmare in recent epistemology and the philosophy of communication: Does an aesthetic experience refer to an objective equivalent or are all responses purely subjective and therefore devoid of general validity? A fashionable relativism denies the possibility of communication and collectivity. But the destructive anarchism of such assertions loses ground when one looks at concrete instances. To be sure, the range of contradictory interpretations to which *Guernica* has been subjected may seem to prove that not one of them is objectively binding. But the very fact that the controversy continues indicates that there *is* something to be in disagreement about. Some of the readings have fallen by the wayside; others are questioned and modified by concrete references to the visual data. The image emerges ever more precisely.

This does not exclude ambivalences. Ambivalence can be objectively present, as the smile of Mona Lisa demonstrated long ago. It is possible also to define types of mistakes that make for misinterpretations. I will exemplify here two such types because they have not been sufficiently recognized. One is misplaced differentiation, the other, the naturalistic fallacy. Both come about when a statement, artistic or otherwise, is confused with its collateral, i.e., with a fact of reality.

When Russell discusses the figure of the mother with the dead child, he seems to sense that it is futile to ask: "What precisely, for example, is the mother's appeal—does she beseech the bull, does she rail against it? Does she utter an aimless curse—is she, in any ordinary sense, aware of the presence of the bull?" If we were looking at a real woman, the correct answers to these questions would have to exist; but to ask them about a picture is to commit displaced differentiation. The artist has used his privilege to stop his statement at a level of abstraction at which those alternatives do not exist. The questions cannot be asked. Nor should such abstractness be mistaken for vagueness.

The naturalistic fallacy is the more vulgar mistake of treating the style qualities of a work as though they belonged to the real thing. Throughout Picasso's work, many of his figures have been taken for monstrous, sadistic deformations. Picasso's own assertion "Deformations simply do not exist" is surely one-sided but closer to the truth. Russell observes sensibly that certain horror-readings of *Guernica* ignore "the nature of Picasso's visual language, which we see adapted with no less 'mutilation' to the patently affectionate rendering of girls skipping rope or sketching. To call the *Guernica* a picture of mutilation because of its swollen fingers is not altogether different from calling a Cufic inscription the same because its letters are not Roman." It is astonishing, therefore, to see him display the same lack of discrimination by calling the bull "primly fastidious" or "too witless or phlegmatic to pick up his hooves," not to mention the dreadful sentence on page 161 where the bull is called "foolish, like a committee chairman who does not know one end of his gavel from the other." Cheap jokes on the language of modern art should be left to others.

In addition, of course, interpreters commit straight misreadings of the perceptual data. On the whole, Frank Russell, trained as an artist and art historian, is an excellent guide. A few slips are all the more spectacular. Foremost among them is his insistence on describing the running woman as a kneeling woman. Deceived by the detail of an enlarged knee that touches the ground, he ignores the compelling dynamics of the diagonal which propels the runner into the central group. This error has the grave consequence of depriving the bull's stable immobility of its uniqueness. If the woman on the right is considered equally immobile, the entire basic theme of the composition



**Figure 1** Pablo Picasso. *Guernica* (1937). On extended loan to The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from the artist's estate.

is destroyed: an inappropriate symmetry replaces the joint rush of the central figures toward the towering monument on the left. Less crucial although surprising is the misreading of the important first sketch, where the raised legs of the dead horse are reinterpreted as the animal's neck and head, and that of a painting in which a dagger in the chest of a baby is called an erect penis.

I mentioned that Russell's survey of *Guernica* is remarkably complete. He does fail, however, to consider the function of Picasso's mural as an official manifesto of the Spanish Government-in-Exile and its physical place in the Paris Pavilion. Here Reinhold Hohl's essay offers a welcome complement. Hohl points out that the setting of *Guernica* resembles a theater stage because the pavilion did in fact contain a stage where plays and folk dances were performed and documentary war films shown. Picasso fitted his presentation to this environment. He also considered the spatial location of the mural. Visitors entering the pavilion approached the picture from the right and thereby went with the surge of the composition toward the bull, to which I just referred. Hohl also shows convincingly that the immediate impulse for Picasso's active start on the work was not only the bombing of Guernica in itself but the attempt of Nazi propaganda to convince the world that the Spanish towns had been destroyed by the Republican defenders themselves. The official rejection of these lies was published in the newspapers on May 1 — the day on which Picasso drew his first sketches. Hohl's contention that the painting's principal theme is the revelation of the truth about the crime of the aggressors explains the dominant role of the light-bearing woman, who is present in the artist's conception from the very first sketch.

Two remarks on Frank Russell's technique as an author will conclude this review. As he combines fine verbal equipment with acute observation, he offers formulations we will not forget, for example, when he

calls *Guernica* "a picture about voice" and concludes: "The upward path of these voices and staring eyes is blocked and countered by what I might call the downward disaster of Guernica." His talent for felicitous wording, however, is not kept in check by the equally necessary restraint of the professional writer. There is too much seasoning in almost every sentence. Beginning with the subtitle of the book, the text is burdened with succulent imagery. We are told about "Picasso's great triangular seismograph of mayhem," and one of the chapters begins: "In keeping with their bridging of old and new, the Guernica and its Studies with their twentieth-century splinterings were chopped into place under the mellow beams of a seventeenth-century Paris house—a studio of sufficient size for the picture, discovered by Picasso's mistress Dora Maar." Meet this sort of thing on every page, and you feel that it overheats the very mood of the conception Russell wishes to convey.

Unmitigated praise is deserved by the interplay of text and illustrations in the book — an achievement for which author and publisher should receive some official award. More than 200 photographs and drawings of varying sizes are freely distributed over the pages, with bits of text placed wherever they belong. As a true *auteur*, ruling over script and visuals, Russell gives us the closest substitute for a live demonstration.

Picasso would have been pleased to see the discussion of his art continue without letup. He viewed his paintings, drawings, and sculptures as inextricable elements of the flow of his life, and he disliked and feared all termination. It is in this spirit of continuity that we watch Frank Russell's monograph move beyond past efforts and take its place as an outstanding contribution to the work in progress.

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**Robert Klein.** Form and Meaning: Essays on the Renaissance and Modern Art. New York: Viking, 1979. 263 pp. \$19.95.

**Reviewed by Peter Burke**  
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Robert Klein, a Romanian in exile in France, was a "grey eminence" in Renaissance studies (the role of Richelieu being taken by Professor André Chastel). When he died in 1967, at the age of 48, he left behind him little more than a handful of essays. Twenty-five of his essays and reviews were published in 1970 under the title *La forme et l'intelligible*; thirteen of them have now appeared in a not altogether satisfactory English translation.

The selection includes four essays on modern art and literature—witty, elegant, but somewhat light-weight discussions of "the end of the image," "the eclipse of the work of art," and the relationship between modern painting and phenomenology. In the last case Klein was able to make good use of his philosophical training. The strength of the volume, however, lies in what he has to say about the Renaissance. Some of his essays are rather technical and difficult as well as important, notably the two studies on perspective and the discussion of the painter G. P. Lomazzo's use, in his treatise on art, of the astrological ideas of the magician H. C. Agrippa.

For a reader who is not a specialist in the art history of Renaissance Italy, Klein's caliber is most clearly revealed in three essays in this collection, each of which takes on a leading scholar in the field and criticizes him in an acute, precise, and constructive manner. "Burckhardt's *Civilisation of the Renaissance Today*" is unusual in its combination of scrupulous fairness and penetrating criticism. Having

noted the serious omissions in this apparently general survey (there is virtually nothing on the economy, technology, and philosophy of Renaissance Italy, and curiously little about its art), Klein does not fail to stress the book's enduring value, more than a century after its publication, in helping us relate Renaissance art to the rest of Renaissance culture.

"The Theory of Figurative Expression in Italian Treatises on the *Impresa*" suggests, contrary to Sir Ernst Gombrich, who argued the importance of Neo-Platonism in justifying Renaissance symbolic images, that the many treatises on these personal devices depend more on Aristotle (in whose psychology every act was the expression of an idea) than on Plato.

"Thoughts on Iconography" takes issue with the late Erwin Panofsky's essay "Iconography and Iconology," with its celebrated distinction between the primary, secondary, and tertiary meanings (or natural, conventional, and symbolic content) of a work of art, noting the difficulty of sustaining these distinctions owing to the "range of indeterminate or intermediary significations" of paintings. Among other examples, Klein cites the case of laughter being "mimed...by the painted characters, and not represented directly by forms and colours on the canvas." Klein had a remarkable gift for making subtle distinctions of this kind. Perhaps this very gift made it difficult for him to write books rather than essays. At any rate, this collection is both an appropriate (if belated) monument to him and a useful tool for his successors.