

16 - Introduction: Picasso the activist

Welcome to the exhibition room at the **Picasso** Birthplace Museum. Here, you will discover a side to **Picasso** that you perhaps did not know existed: not the genius hidden away from the world in his studio, but a man deeply involved in the conflicts of his era. It is easy to assume that his political commitment began on the day he joined the French Communist Party, in November 1944. We might even, rather complacently, think that all of his artistic endeavours that came before were purely aesthetic in nature. But that idea is, quite simply, wrong.

Picasso did not restrict himself to just painting pictures that conveyed some kind of message, and signing a manifesto from time to time. He opened up his studio and made it a permanent embassy for righteous causes. Through his doors came members of the French Resistance, hunted by the Gestapo; exiled poets; Communist scientists; political leaders; and the widows of men who had been executed by firing squad. **Picasso** used his fame to help people that no-one else would listen to; he funded clandestine publications, paid for burials, helped subsidize hospitals and soup kitchens for children, and together with political leaders designed propaganda strategies and solidarity initiatives.

In this exhibition, we are not going to talk to you about **Picasso** the sympathizer: we are going to show you **Picasso** the activist, the man who got involved and showed his face; the man who converted his house into a refuge and, on numerous occasions, transformed his paintbrush into a weapon. Let's start with the episode that marked the point of no return.

17 - Guernica and the Spanish Civil War

Up until the mid-1930s, **Picasso** kept politics out of his art, at least on the surface. However, everything changed with the Spanish Civil War. The bombing of the Basque town of **Guernica**, in April 1937, affected him so deeply that he accepted the commission of producing a large painting for the Spanish pavilion at the International Expo in Paris. Initially, the task provoked serious doubts in the artist: he had never worked on commission before, and had certainly never produced works with a political subject matter.

However, the painting of **Guernica** was not an isolated act; it was the culmination of a commitment that had been brewing for some time. Months earlier, he had produced a set of satirical etchings titled **The Dream and Lie of Franco**, the proceeds from the sale of which – amounting to some 245,000 francs – would be donated to the Republican government. When the war was at its height, he also accepted the position of director of the Prado Museum (although he was never able to travel to Madrid); and he declared, with devastating logic, that the real curators of the museum at that moment were the soldiers defending the city, not the intellectuals. Self-evidently, **Picasso** was much more useful in Paris than in Madrid, which was at that time suffering Italian and German bombing raids in order to pave the way for **Franco's** advance.

Money was never a motivation for **Picasso**. Towards the end of 1938, he donated 200,000 francs to soup kitchens for children in Madrid and Barcelona. **Guernica**, he said, had been painted not with brushes, but with his heart. And this heart continued to beat long after the war had ended: the painting travelled all over Europe and the United States, raising money and denouncing fascism, and became a universal symbol of opposition to war.

18 - Picasso and the writers

Throughout his life, **Picasso** was surrounded by writers. Far from being mere acquaintances to chat with over a coffee, many of them were close political allies. **Dora Maar**, his partner during the second half of the 1930s, and his friend the poet **Paul Éluard** were deeply committed to political issues, and through this circle **Picasso** began to actively collaborate with the Republican cause, even before he painted ***Guernica***. In the summer of 1936 he had already contributed a number of poems to the British journal ***Contemporary Poetry and Prose***, which dedicated an entire issue to the artist's work and, in giant letters on the journal's back cover, called for arms and financial aid to be sent to Spain.

The poet **Juan Larrea**, a close friend of **Picasso's**, was in charge of the international distribution of ***The Dream and Lie of Franco***; while another writer, **Max Aub**, was the man who audaciously managed to convince **Picasso** to sign the contract for ***Guernica***.

However, the most singular episode happened during the height of the Nazi occupation of Paris. In March 1944, at his studio, **Picasso** held a dramatized reading of a play he himself had written, titled ***Desire Caught by the Tail***. In front of a tiny yet illustrious audience, consisting of **Jean-Paul Sartre**, **Albert Camus**, **Simone de Beauvoir**, **Jean Cocteau**, **Jacques Lacan** and **Pierre Reverdy**, the reading was in fact an anti-Nazi gathering disguised as a literary soiree. The meeting was presided over by a portrait of **Max Jacob**, a friend of **Picasso's** who had died in a concentration camp and whose portrait was on display as a form of homage.

19 - Picasso and the French Resistance

Remaining in occupied Paris was itself an act of resistance. **Picasso** had money, contacts and plenty of invitations to flee; indeed, the United States consul requested several times that he leave France. But **Picasso** stayed, kept working, and flatly refused to collaborate with the Nazi regime, which considered his art to be "degenerate".

The critic **Gualtieri di San Lazzaro** recounts an anecdote that sums up Picasso's character: while discussing the French defeat, **Picasso** protested that he did not consider himself to have been defeated in the slightest, and that if the painters of the **Third Reich** challenged him, he would stand up to them. After being warned that if he defied the Nazis, they would cut off his hands, he thundered:

"Then I will pick up my paintbrushes with my teeth!" LOC. FEM.:

This was not mere bluster. **Picasso** gave generous donations to the French Forces of the Interior, and his gesture of "silent resistance" – in which he kept painting, and remained true to himself – was subsequently recognized by both the people of Paris and by General **de Gaulle** himself, who was far from a Communist. **Picasso** had suffered vicious attacks, such as the tirade by the painter **Maurice de Vlaminck** at the height of the German occupation, who directly accused the Spaniard of being responsible for the "degradation" of French painting and made anti-Semitic insinuations against him. In the collective memory of Paris, however, **Picasso** was remembered as the foreigner who decided to resist, even while some of his compatriots chose to become collaborators.

20 - Picasso and the Surrealists of *La Main à Plume*

Picasso's studio on **Rue des Grands Augustins** was not just a place of work: it was a veritable centre of operations. Even before the occupation it had played host to figures such as **André Malraux** and the Communist leader **Laurent Casanova**. When Paris fell to the Nazis, **Picasso's** studio remained a vital meeting-place for rebellious intellectuals.

The artist also welcomed into his studio the young poets who formed part of **La Main à Plume**, a group that had taken over the reins of the Surrealist movement in Paris after **André Breton** fled to the United States. They were introduced to **Picasso** by two of his friends, **Benjamin Péret** and **Paul Éluard**, both of whom were fully committed to the Resistance. **Picasso** not only opened his doors to the young poets; he also funded their publications and illustrated several of their works: humble and clandestine books that would have struggled to see the light of day were it not for **Picasso's** financial support.

The group of young writers included the Spanish exile **Manuel Viola**, who had fought against **Franco** as part of a militia organisation and whom **Picasso** helped by giving him work. However, the story of the artist's association with this group has a tragic ending: **Robert Rius**, one of the authors of the final publication that the group dedicated to **Picasso** in 1944, was arrested by the Gestapo, tortured, and executed by firing squad five months after the work's publication, and just weeks before the liberation of Paris.

21 - Picasso's heroes

Far from the image of an aloof genius, **Picasso** responded again and again to injustice by producing portraits, posters, and putting his name to initiatives that helped to raise awareness of specific causes. These actions were carried out on behalf of people who we have chosen to call "**Picasso's** heroes": men and women who lost their lives or freedom fighting against fascism, war or oppression.

Those heroes include **Robert Desnos**, a Surrealist poet and member of the Resistance who was deported by the Gestapo and died of typhus in **Terezín** shortly after the concentration camp was liberated; **Madeleine Riffaud**, a Resistance fighter who killed a Nazi officer and whose portrait **Picasso** painted to illustrate her first book of poems; **Max Barel**, who was tortured by **Klaus Barbie**, the so-called "Butcher of Lyon", but refused to confess a single word, and whose father asked **Picasso** to produce a drawing in order to raise awareness of **Barel's** story; **Nikos Beloyannis**, a Greek Communist leader who was sentenced to death, and on whose behalf **Picasso** campaigned along with **Sartre** and **Charlie Chaplin**; **Henri Martin**, a sailor imprisoned for opposing the war in Indochina; **Ethel** and **Julius Rosenberg**, who were executed during the Cold War and in whose defence **Picasso** chaired a public event; and **Djamila Boupacha**, an Algerian activist who was tortured and whose cause was taken up by **Picasso** along with **Simone de Beauvoir** and **Gisèle Halimi**.

These are not isolated anecdotes: they are proof of a commitment that the artist sustained over decades.

22 - The dove of peace: his father's influence on the creation of a universal symbol

After the Second World War, the world breathed a fragile sigh of relief, although tension soon returned with the new shadow of conflict cast by the atom bomb. Against this backdrop, **Picasso** gave the international pacifist movement a symbol that is still immediately recognizable today: the Dove of Peace.

Far from being accidental, the origin of this image is deeply personal. **Picasso's** father, **José Ruiz Blasco**, was also a painter and was extremely fond of birds, especially doves; indeed, he bred them in **Picasso's** childhood home. In the speech he gave at a conference for peace, **Picasso** recalled that when his father's eyesight began to fail, he – **Picasso** – assumed the responsibility of painting the birds' feet in his father's compositions, even though he was still a young boy. Over time, this childhood gesture became a legacy: **Picasso** imagined, with both emotion and irony, how proud his father would have been to see his modest doves become a symbol known around the world.

Picasso made hundreds of drawings of doves, reproduced on posters, prints, scarves and postcards that were distributed at conferences across the globe. Sometimes, they were not even images of adult doves, but of squabs, or young birds; Picasso himself was aware of this, and found it highly amusing to see that virtually nobody else realized. The most important thing, however, was that the message of peace penetrated into all corners of the world.

23 - The Spanish Friend: Eugenio Arias

We will end the tour with a story that, despite not featuring any grand figures from the world of politics or the resistance movement, is perhaps one of the most touching. **Eugenio Arias Herranz** was born in the town of Buitrago del Lozoya, in the region of Madrid, and during the Civil War fought in both the Battle of Madrid and the Battle of the Ebro. After the defeat of the Republican forces, he went into exile: following a spell in the internment camp at **Argelès-sur-Mer**, he joined the French Resistance, becoming part of a guerrilla group in the **Corrèze** region. After the liberation of France, he took part in the failed attempt to reconquer Spain via the Val d'Arán.

In 1947, **Arias**, by now working as a barber, moved to **Vallauris**, a town in the south of France where **Picasso** also used to stay for long periods. Upon learning that a fellow Spaniard had moved there, the artist went to meet him in person. Their meeting gave rise to a friendship that would last for 26 years, nourished by the two men's love of Spain and their shared passion for bullfighting.

Arias was not just **Picasso's** barber: he became one of his chief links to the Spanish Communist Party, an unassuming bridge between the world's most famous artist and the anti-Franco cause that Picasso continued to support, from exile, for the rest of his life.

24 - Conclusion and Farewell

As you will have seen throughout this tour, **Picasso's** generosity went far beyond symbolic gestures. He was the one who helped numerous Spanish exiles in Paris, subsidized a hospital in **Toulouse**, funded soup kitchens in wartime Spain and lent his image, energy or name to innumerable solidarity organisations and aid committees. He quietly paid for the burial of the Jewish painter **Chaïm Soutine** in Paris during the Nazi occupation; he supported the Resistance writer **Madeleine Riffaud**; and he even created the universal symbol of peace that we all recognize today. And to give one more example among so many, he contributed by calling for an amnesty for Spanish political prisoners and by supporting the National Committee for Aid to the Victims of Francoism.

Understanding this activism, with all of its silent manifestations and public gestures, is vital to understanding the true nature of **Picasso's** social commitment: a commitment that reached its maximum expression – although by no means had its origin – in **Guernica**.

Thank you for accompanying us on this visit. We hope that from now on, you are able to see **Picasso's** work through different eyes.