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In View

Picasso: The Real Family Story

By Olivier Widmaier Picasso
PRESTEL £19.99

Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon

By Gijs van Hensbergen
BLOOMSBURY £20.00

There is a question that persists in dividing philosophers of art and art historians in their search for interpretive clarity, and that occasionally takes the fancy of artists as they ponder their practice and the lives in which they find themselves: to what extent must we consider the biography of the artist in coming to make a judgement about a work of art? These two beautifully produced books represent, each in its own way, a resource either for getting further involved in the life of Picasso or for better concentrating upon his most famous work.

His grandson, Olivier, writes a warm and intimate account of the life, loves, politics and broad mischief of Pablo Picasso. It is a strange mixture of personal research and reflection upon a man who was distant to the writer until the artist's death in 1973. Consequently, the book is a personal journey for the author, who sets out to 'find' his famous grandfather. In doing so, Olivier attempts to fend off the various perspectives (motivated by either personal advancement or by political alliance) that have been directed upon Picasso. For instance, the allusions of an earlier biographer to Picasso's 'passionate homosexuality' toward a young gipsy whilst in Horta, staying with the Malagueño painter Pallarés, are dismissed as 'nonsense'.

The influence of Dora Maar on his work in the mid-1930s, and in particular on *Guernica*, is of real interest in considering the question with which we began. She met Picasso in Paris in 1935, when he was living with Marie-Thérèse Walter and their daughter, Maya, mother of Olivier. That Picasso needed both women can be discerned from Marie-Thérèse: 'I was a bit like an angel for him... the other woman, Dora Maar, was war, poor thing.' Olivier goes on to quote William Rubin:

That Picasso was now spending more of his time with Dora than with Marie-Thérèse had, I believe, less to do with passion for Dora than the fact that, as an artist and an intellectually absorbing woman, she... challenged the artist in psychological and practical ways. Meanwhile, Marie-Thérèse (and Maya, to whom Picasso was deeply attached) remained the centre of the secret private world she had always embodied for him.

If the sexual proclivities of painters and their attendant psychological forces prove too remote for some, then perhaps the political domain might provide more focus. Picasso has been denounced as both a communist degenerate and as a reactionary

Guernica's monumentality and formal properties were meat upon which the abstract expressionists could gnaw

Whether Picasso was politically naïve or not, there is an underlying humanity in his moral stance

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That this book works through the context of the political developments up to and beyond the bombing of Guernica provides a sense of what was so monumental about the painting Picasso finished in a couple of months in 1937. Commissioned for Josep Lluís Sert's Spanish Pavilion, and feverishly worked on during that Parisian summer, *Guernica* was destined to become the political work of art of the twentieth century.

More interestingly, in separating the life of the artist from the autonomous life of the work, the author is able to build up a picture of how it is that an icon establishes itself and comes to hold a particular position in the history of art. We see that Picasso absorbed and appropriated imagery at will and used it to provide the compass of expression he needed for *Guernica*. But beyond this range of influence on Picasso we are introduced to the political context that *Guernica* bequeathed. In Spain, for example, the collective Equipo Crónica produced a series of works based on *Guernica*, just as Picasso had based a series of works on Velázquez. More interestingly, the influence of *Guernica* upon the Americans is also well documented and allied to the shift in power from Europe to the United States, marked by the transportation of *Guernica* to the U.S., where it toured before being installed in New York.

The abstract expressionists – and Pollock in particular – were inspired by this new 11-foot by 25-foot presence in MoMA. And whilst the critic Clement Greenberg was threatened by its narrative and expressive qualities – each denying the flatness of the picture – its monumentality and formal properties were meat upon which the abstract expressionists could gnaw:

Guernica arrived in New York at the very moment when American art was changing from the ideological, Utopian and regional to the romantic, interior, epic and mythological. Initially blasted by Picasso's creative power, a whole school of artists would deconstruct his lessons and slowly rebuild their art from the rubble up.

And so here we have a case of artistic significance which lies beyond the remit of the artist responsible for the work under view.

Van Hensbergen's book is convincing and is written by a man who has a deft touch in describing the visual arts. It is a book I recommend and one that I feel sure will be the focus of much interesting argument concerning the question with which we opened.

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force. We know of his fascination and sympathy with gipsies and with the poor and the lonely. In this, above all else, lies the humanity in his work – but what of the real political connections and deeper significance? Olivier tells us that Picasso remained naïve.

But whether Picasso was politically naïve or not, there is an underlying humanity in his moral stance – the abomination of war – and his political position is plain enough: 'With "editorial" support from Dora, he countered those spreading the rumour that he was a reactionary artist, committed to the Right: "The war in Spain is a battle of reactionary forces against the people, against freedom. All my life as an artist has been a continual struggle against reaction and the death of art. In the painting I am working on, which I will call *Guernica*, I proclaim my horror of the military caste that has dragged Spain into an abyss of pain and death."'

Olivier poignantly closes a chapter on Death with the sentence: 'On April 8, 1973, his body left him.'

In *Guernica: The Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon*, Gijs van Hensbergen presents a beautifully illustrated and richly contextualised account of the emergence of (arguably) a century's greatest painting. Nor, from the point of view of our opening question, does our author beat about the bush:

From Paris in 1937 to the United Nations today much of the painting's meaning has lain beyond Picasso's reach and control. Guernica has had its own life, forging a relationship with its audience that has often been entirely separate from the life of the genius who brought it into our world.

