

## In the Queen Sofia Museum

"Wow!" exclaimed Carol, "it's huge!"

"Yes," said her husband casually, "I know. I told you it was mural size."

"Some wall, Jim," replied Carol. "That wouldn't fit on any wall in our house. How big is it?"

"Three and a half metres high, and 7.8 metres long," he replied.

"What's that in old money?" asked Carol.

"Let me think, Carol," replied Jim, calling up Google on his mobile phone and not doing very much thinking himself. "I make that about eleven and a half feet high, and a bit over thirty five and a half feet long."

"As I said, Jim," replied Carol, "a bit big for any wall in our house. Not that I would want it on any wall in the house. It's not exactly a cheerful picture, is it? All black, and grey and white - there's no colour in it. And all those distorted figures. I thought art was to do with truth and beauty!"

"That's a 19th century notion," said Jim. "We've moved on a bit since then."

"So I see," said Carol. "But I don't like it."

"You're not supposed to *like* it," replied Jim. "But it's certainly about *truth*. The trouble is, if you tell the truth what you say is not always going to be nice, because the world isn't always nice."

"I know," said his wife. "But, Jim, isn't art - I mean literature, poetry, music, as well as painting - meant to bring relief from the troubles of this world?"

"It can, Carol," agreed Jim. "But all great art - I mean really great art - challenges the wrongs of this world, makes us face up to them and look beyond."

"Just think," he continued, "of the anguished cries of the *Agnus Dei* in Beethoven's 'Missa Solemnis' - a desperate cry against war, a pleading for peace - *dona nobis pacem*. This painting is a cry against the suffering and inhumanity of war."

"All right," said Carol. "But why is there no colour? Why is it all monochrome?"

"It has been suggested," said Jim, "that it was because Picasso first learnt of the terrible event from reading about it in newspapers, which at that time were always black and white. Maybe he wanted to present this as a news item - in an odd way to make it more real. Whatever the reason, it certainly makes it stark and sombre."

"Yes, Jim," agreed Carol. "It's certainly sombre - nightmarish even. It's all in a huge enclosed room; there's no escape from the horror. I thought it was supposed to be about the bombing of a town."

"A small country town, almost a village," said her husband. "It was market day, with people coming in from neighboring villages and hamlets. But when the Luftwaffe's Condor Legion, helped out by Mussolini's Aviazione Legionaria, rained bombs down on the town, the people were trapped; they had nowhere to go. They were hemmed in by a wall of bombs. "

"I see," said Carol, "he's trying to convey the idea that there was no way out, no escape, for all those distorted figures. That mother and child over there on the left is harrowing. Look, Jim, she is so distraught and the child looks dead."

"Well, yes, Carol," said her husband. "There weren't many men around. The Basque region had been an autonomous area under the Spanish Republic, but Franco wanted to bring it fully into Spain and destroy Basque identity and its language for good. So fighting men had joined the Basque army. It was mainly

women, children and old men left in the town."

"Oh," said Carol, "I hadn't known that. I suppose the town must have been of some military importance, however."

"No, no," said Jim, shaking his head, "not military importance, Carol. The battle front was 30 kilometres away."

"So why, Jim?" asked Carol, puzzled.

"It's the home," replied Jim, "of the Gernikako Arbola, the Tree of Gernika, an oak tree that symbolizes the freedom of the Basque peoples. Gernika is, so to speak, the *heart* of the Basque country. If you want to kill someone, or an animal, what do you go for?"

"The heart," said Carol.

"Exactly!" said Jim. "You go for the heart. This was a deliberate attack on the civilian population of the heart of the peoples Franco wished to destroy. Hitler was happy to let the Condor Legion take part so they could practise Blitzkrieg tactics for the war he saw coming in Europe."

"No wonder the picture's so nightmarish," and said Carol and, pointing just to the right of the center of the picture, she added: "Look, there are two more female figures in bewilderment or anguish."

"That's right, Carol," said Jim, "and see that figure on the far right raising his hands in terror as he's trapped between fire above and below."

"Oh yes, Jim," said Carol, "his arms look a bit like the shape of an aeroplane. Do you think that was intentional?"

"Quite possibly, Carol," said Jim, "the man is a grim reflexion of the source of the fires which now entrap him."

"And that character lying on on his back on the ground," asked Carol, "isn't he a soldier? What's he doing there, Jim? And what's that mark on the palm of his hand?"

"He's a soldier, all right, Carol," said Jim. "But look carefully: his body is dismembered and his sword is shattered. He must represent the shattered, dismembered Basque people. As for that mark, it is surely a stigma, a symbol of martyrdom."

"Like the stigmata of St Francis? Marks of Christ's wounds?" queried Carol. "That's a bit odd in a painting like this, isn't it?"

"Not really," said Jim, "The Basques have long been devout Catholics. Haven't you noticed the white cross on the Basque flag? It is superimposed over the red background with its green saltire."

"Oh yes, Jim," said Carol, "I remember seeing those flags when we were in the Basque country earlier this year. But I hadn't realized the symbolism."

"The red background," said Jim, "symbolizes the Basque people, the green saltire the Tree of Gernika, and superimposed over all is the white cross which symbolizes Basque Catholic devotion. I guess the dismembered soldier symbolizes the Basque nation, shattered at Gernika. So a reference to the third symbol on the flag is not inappropriate."

"I see, Jim," said Carol, reflectively. "But what's been puzzling me for some time are the two animals. Obviously the horse is sharing in the chaos and suffering around it, but I'm not sure about the bull. What are they doing there?"

"That, Carol, has puzzled many. All Picasso himself said ..." said Jim as he once again googled on his mobile, "was: 'this bull is a bull and this horse is a horse. If you give a meaning to certain things in my paintings it may be very true, but it is not my idea to give this meaning. What ideas and conclusions you have

got I obtained too, but instinctively, unconsciously. I make the painting for the painting. I paint the objects for what they are."

"Oh," said Carol, "not very helpful. So those other things you said may or may not have been in Picasso's subconscious."

"Well," said Jim, "you can't read a person's subconscious mind – especially if they're dead! But it is what I understand from the painting. As for the bull and the horse, they are both important elements in Spanish culture and Picasso used the two in many different ways during his lifetime. But in a series of paintings called 'The Dream of Franco', he depicted Franco as a monster that devours his own horse and later does battle with an angry bull. I think the two animals symbolize the rest of Spain; the horse is already being dismembered with the destruction of Gernika, and the sturdier bull will also face destruction."

"Yes, that makes sense, I guess," agreed Carol. "But what about that strange shape at the top? Is it a distorted sun? Or an evil eye, or what?"

"Yes," said Jim, "it does vaguely suggest the sun, perhaps, but the scene is set in a closed room. I think evil eye is not wide of the mark. But look at pupil of that eye."

"Oh yes, Jim," exclaimed Carol, "it's a light bulb!"

"And what, Carol," asked Jim, "is the Spanish for 'light bulb'?"

"Bombilla," replied Carol. "Oh I see, Jim – it's sort of like 'bomba', bomb. So you look up where the sun should be shining and see bombs raining down. The evil eye of the Condor Legion is looking down on the destruction."

"Yep," said Jim, "you've got the idea, Carol. That's about it, I think."

"But it's all so depressing, Jim," said Carol, "it's claustrophobic and so sombre. There's no escape from the carnage and destruction – no hope."

"Look more closely, Carol," said Jim. "On that dark wall on the right you'll see a door, and the wall on the left is open. See the flower growing from the soldier's shattered sword. And see that female figure that seems to have floated in through the small window; she is holding a flame-lit lamp near the evil-eye light bulb; she is holding a symbol of hope. And if you look carefully at the wall behind the bull, you'll see a dove carrying an olive branch scratched on the wall, and part of the dove's body contains that crack through which light comes – a beam of hope from the outside world."

"I see, Jim," said Carol, "So like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony it cries out not only against war but also of hope and peace."

"Yes, Carol," said Jim, "It's not just about that terrible day in Gernika in 1937; it's about all who suffer devastation and genocide, and yet it gives a message of hope. The painting is timeless."

Carol and Jim spent some time in silence looking at the huge mural and contemplating its message before they left.