

Artistic Responses to the Spanish Civil War

Background Notes

Barry Venning — 25 March 2026



José Bardasano: *Drive out the Invader*, lithographic poster, 1937

WAHG

Winchester Art History Group
www.wahg.org.uk

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) marked one of the most intense intersections of politics and visual culture in the twentieth century. Fought between the elected Republican government and Nationalist forces led by Francisco Franco, the conflict quickly became a symbolic battleground for competing ideologies: fascism, communism, anarchism, liberal democracy. For visual artists in Spain and abroad, the war demanded a response. Painters, sculptors, photographers, and poster designers mobilized their work as protest, propaganda, mourning, and testimony. The Spanish Civil War did not merely inspire individual masterpieces; it transformed the relationship between art and political commitment, accelerating new forms of visual expression and redefining the artist's public role.



[1] Pablo Picasso: *Guernica*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 349 x 777 cm. Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid

A discussion of artistic responses to the war must begin with *Guernica* [1] by Pablo Picasso. Created for the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exposition, the monumental canvas responded to the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica by German and Italian aircraft allied with Franco. Rather than offering a documentary depiction of the attack, Picasso employed the fractured visual language of Cubism and much of his own personal symbolism to convey anguish and chaos. The painting's monochromatic palette evokes newspaper photography, linking high art to mass media, while its distorted figures - a screaming horse, a fallen warrior, a mother howling over her dead child - transcend the

specific event to symbolise the suffering of civilians in modern warfare. Guernica became an international icon of anti-fascist resistance. Its tour across Europe and the Americas helped raise funds for the Republican cause and demonstrated how avant-garde art could serve urgent political ends without abandoning formal innovation.



[2] Alexander Calder with his *Mercury Fountain*, 1937, Spanish Pavilion, Exposition Internationale.

Picasso was not alone in responding to the crisis. The Spanish Pavilion as a whole represented a concentrated effort to mobilise modern art in defence of the Republic. The integration of architecture, mural, sculpture, and painting within the Pavilion created a unified aesthetic statement: modern art aligned with political progress. Joan Miró contributed the mural *The Reaper* (now lost), which depicted a Catalan peasant in revolt, merging Surrealist distortion with populist symbolism. Miró also designed the poster *Aidez l'Espagne*, using bold colour and simplified forms to call for international solidarity. His work illustrates a broader shift among avant-garde artists toward direct political engagement. While Surrealism had often explored the unconscious and dream imagery, the war redirected its energies toward collective struggle and resistance. The Spanish Pavilion contained works by a great many other artists, including Alexander Calder's *Mercury Fountain* [2], which was a memorial to the siege of Almadén by Franco's troops; at the time, the region supplied 60 percent of the world's

mercury. In addition there were a great many paintings in the Pavilion by lesser known artists, many of whom dealt with the impact of aerial bombardment on Republican strongholds, Madrid in particular, such as Horacio Ferrer's *Black Aeroplanes* [3] or Santiago Pelegrin Martínez's *Bomb in Tetuan (Madrid)*, (1937). Picasso's *Guernica* was frequently subject to unfavourable comparisons with Ferrer's painting: where Ferrer's meanings were clear, Picasso's painting seemed to some reviewers to be obscure and self-indulgent.



[3] Horacio Ferrer: *Madrid 1937 (Black Aeroplanes)*, oil on canvas, 148 x 129 cm. Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid

Another significant figure was Salvador Dalí, whose response to the war was more ambiguous. Dalí's painting *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (1936) predates the full outbreak of violence but eerily anticipates it. The grotesque, self-mutilating figure dominating the canvas can be read as an allegory of Spain tearing itself apart, a theme that he also treated in *Autumn Cannibalism* (1936) and *Spain* (1937). Unlike Picasso and Miró, Dalí avoided explicit political alignment, and his later associations with Francoist Spain complicated his legacy. Nevertheless, his visual metaphors of bodily disintegration powerfully capture the sense of internal collapse that characterized the conflict. Dalí's position demonstrates that artistic responses to the war were not uniform; they

ranged from overt activism to symbolic and psychologically charged reflection.

Beyond the realm of painting, graphic and poster design played a crucial role in shaping public perception. The Republican government invested heavily in visual propaganda, commissioning artists to produce posters that encouraged enlistment, promoted literacy, and rallied support for social reforms. Works such as José Bardasano's 1937 *Drive out the Invader* [front cover], combined Constructivist clarity with bold typography and simplified imagery to communicate effectively to a mass audience. As Josep Renau, who served as Director General of Fine Arts for the Republic, put it, "A poster is a cry launched from the wall." In certain parts of Spain - mainly in cities with the infrastructure to support poster production, such as Madrid, Barcelona, or Valencia - the proliferation of posters was striking, despite material shortages of paper and ink. George Orwell described this vividly in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938): "Revolutionary posters were everywhere, flaming from the walls in vivid red and blue that made the other advertisements look like daubs of mud." In this context, visual art was not confined to galleries but appeared on city walls, in newspapers, and in pamphlets—integrated into daily life as an instrument of ideological struggle.



[4] Robert Capa: *Death of a Republican Soldier*, 1936.
Gelatin silver print

Photography, in particular, became central to the visual culture of the war. The conflict was among the first to be extensively documented by modern photojournalists, whose images reached an international audience through

illustrated magazines. Robert Capa's photograph known as *The Falling Soldier* [4] captures the instant of a Republican fighter's death. The image crystallized the vulnerability of the individual in mechanised warfare. Its blurred motion and dramatic immediacy depart from earlier, more static war photography, signalling a new aesthetic of urgency.

Gerda Taro, who worked alongside Capa, produced striking images of soldiers and civilians, emphasizing both heroism and hardship. Her photographs of refugees and frontline fighters humanised the Republican cause for international viewers, and were published widely in European magazines. Taro's death in 1937 while covering the conflict further intensified the sense of artistic sacrifice associated with the war. Similarly, David Seymour (known as Chim) documented the plight of displaced children and devastated communities. His compassionate lens broadened the visual narrative beyond combat to encompass social trauma. Together, these photographers transformed war imagery, blending artistry with reportage and shaping global consciousness.

Sculpture and public art also responded to the crisis. The Spanish Pavilion featured works such as Alberto Sánchez's elongated sculpture *The Spanish People Have a Path That Leads to a Star* (1937), which used a semi-abstract visual language to embody the Republic's aspirations. Although much less widely known than *Guernica*, such works demonstrate how three-dimensional art participated in the broader cultural defence of democracy. One of the best known sculptural responses to Nationalist aggression was *El Madrileño* [5] by Josep Viladomat (1899-1989). Viladomat saw active service in the Republican militia and his sculpture depicts his comrade, the Madrid militiaman Ramón Vía, who was famed for his heroic participation in the Battle of Jarama, February 1937, one of the hardest episodes of the war. The battle, and the militiaman, Ramón Vía, became a powerful symbol of Madrid's resistance to Franco's troops.

On the Nationalist side, visual culture took a different trajectory. Franco's regime favoured traditional, academic styles that emphasized Catholicism, order, and national unity. Avant-garde experimentation was often suppressed or marginalised. This contrast highlights how aesthetic preferences themselves became ideological markers. While the Republic

embraced modernism as a sign of progress and internationalism, Francoist Spain promoted a conservative visual language rooted in historical continuity. The war thus exposed deep divisions not only in politics but also in artistic vision.



[5] Josep Viladomat (1899-1989): *El Madriles (Madrid militiaman Ramón Vía)* 1938. Plaster, 202.2 x 72.5 x 101.5 cm. Museu Nacional d'Arte de Catalunya

Exile further shaped artistic production. After the Republican defeat in 1939, many artists fled Spain, carrying their experiences into new contexts. Picasso remained abroad, refusing to return to Spain while Franco ruled. Miró continued to explore themes of violence and resilience in his later work. The diaspora of Spanish artists contributed to the internationalisation of their imagery, ensuring that the memory of the war persisted in global modernism. Guernica itself remained outside Spain until 1981, symbolising unresolved tensions and the long shadow of dictatorship. It is, to this day, a touchstone of totalitarian violence, and has been reused to draw public attention to atrocities in Vietnam, Ukraine and Syria.

The Spanish Civil War also altered the conceptual role of the artist. For many, neutrality seemed impossible in the face of fascism and mass violence. The urgency of the moment demanded commitment. Yet the variety of responses—from Picasso's allegorical monumentality to Capa's

journalistic immediacy - demonstrates that political engagement did not dictate a single style. Instead, the war expanded the possibilities of visual language. Abstraction, realism, Surrealism, and documentary photography all became vehicles for grappling with trauma and ideology.

In retrospect, the visual art of the Spanish Civil War stands at the crossroads of modernism and political activism. The conflict accelerated the fusion of avant-garde experimentation with mass communication, blurred boundaries between fine art and propaganda, and elevated the artist to the status of witness and participant. Through paintings, posters, photographs, and sculptures, artists shaped how the war was seen, remembered, and interpreted. Their images endure not only as historical documents but as powerful meditations on violence, resistance, and the moral responsibilities of art.

Further Reading

Gijs van Hensbergen. 2005. *Guernica: the biography of a C20 icon*. Bloomsbury.

Antony Beevor. 2007. *The Battle for Spain; the Spanish Civil War 1936-39*. Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Giles Tremlett. 2021. *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War*. Bloomsbury

Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid. *Rethinking Guernica*. Online. Available at: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/activity/rethinking-guernica>

Spanish Civil War Virtual Museum. Online. Available at: <https://www.vscw.ca/en/node/829>

© Text Barry Venning, 2026

These notes are for study use by WAHG members only and are not to be reproduced.