



*Chair and Owl*, 1947

Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881 – 1973)

Oil on canvas | 29 x 23 in. (73.7 x 58.4 cm.)

- What are some initial impressions of this work? Is the title and subject matter obvious at first glance?
- In what other ways does the artist manipulate perspective?

### VISUAL ANALYSIS

While this work's numerous geometric shapes and angles may seem confusing at first glance, upon closer inspection a clearer understanding emerges. The 'chair' of the title becomes apparent, despite the differences in thickness and shape of its four legs. Likewise, it is evident that Picasso has continued to exploit the visual techniques invented by himself

and Georges Braque during the early days of *Cubism*. The chair is shown from a variety of angles, with the seat and arm tops seen from above, while its seatback and legs seem to be shown from multiple vantage points. Clearly, Picasso was far more interested in playing with the formal elements of his painting than in creating a 'realistic' portrayal of his subjects.

One of the strongest formal elements in the composition is the use of diagonal lines to draw the viewer's eye towards the focal point — a dark black owl sitting atop the chair. There are three bold diagonals in the top two-thirds of the painting that serve to frame the owl, and these linear elements are echoed in the bottom third of the painting in parts of the chair legs. The arms seem to exist in different planes of the work, with the solid yellow color of the arm on the right bringing it towards the viewer in space, while the outline of the arm on the left makes it recede almost into pure abstraction. This creates an interesting push/pull dynamic between the foreground and background of the painting, with the owl positioned in between.

Additionally, the black owl contrasts with the white-grey palette of the background and is almost surrounded by a shocking 'electric' green color. This green seems to suggest a light source different from that which illuminates the rest of the work, perhaps a window or electric light.

### FUNCTION/Form & Style

Throughout his career, Picasso borrowed from objects available to him in everyday life and manipulated their appearance, and therefore their inherent meaning, to comment on events happening around him. When this work was painted, early in 1947, Picasso was still grappling with the realities of the Second World War. Having been trapped in his studio in Paris for long periods of time, he completed a number of still lifes. While this work was created after the war, and while he

- Does this work suggest any personal emotions on the part of the artist, or is it solely an exploration of form and style?
- Is there an explicit pacifist theme in this painting? Why or why not?

was living in Antibes, Picasso was still focused on items that were near-to-hand and imbuing them with meaning. Here, we see a simple chair from his studio, and an injured owl that had been discovered and given to Picasso. He kept the owl and embarked on a series of a dozen paintings of it, often perched on the same chair. But, Picasso rarely limited his explorations of a new subject to one medium - the owl comes up again and again in drawings, prints, sculptures, ceramics, and ultimately as inspiration for the character of 'War' in his great mural *War and Peace* at the Chapel of Peace, Vallauris, France.

As part of a larger examination of the still life, one of the last times Picasso explored this topic, *Chair and Owl* continues the struggle between works that grappled with the fallout from war and personal tragedy, and those which began again to appreciate the joy of living. While the black owl is highly suggestive of war and death, the bright green pigment used here suggests the light of a new day. Other paintings from the owl series show a window behind the bird, and windows themselves were used by Picasso as symbols of transition. As his second son, Claude,

was born just four months after this work was finished, Picasso may have felt a renewed enthusiasm for life after the dark days of the war.

## CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

Already an established and highly renowned artist, Picasso's decision to continue living in occupied Paris was hailed as a bold rebuke of the Nazi regime, and after the war increased his celebrity world-wide. From then on, Picasso was one of the most recognizable artists in the world — a legacy that continues to this day. Though this work was painted almost two years after the liberation of Paris, it suggests Picasso's personal liberation. Created while living in the south of France, Picasso was able to explore his art free of the continuous stream of well-wishers, reporters, publicity seekers, and other hangers-on that plagued his life in Paris after the war.

Politically, Picasso had been criticized for creating art that was a trivial, or overly personal, response to the wartime era. The exception to this was *Guernica*, Picasso's most influential and well-known anti-war statement. This

## VOCABULARY

**Blue Period:** Early period of Picasso's career in which he used a predominantly blue palette in his work. Lasting from 1901 to 1904, this time is seen as Picasso's reaction to the suicide of a close friend, as well as his first exposure to the extreme poverty and hardship among the downtrodden in Paris.

**Cubism:** a style of art that stresses abstract structure at the expense of other pictorial elements especially by displaying several aspects of the same object simultaneously and by fragmenting the form of depicted objects

**Francisco Franco:** Dictator of Spain, then regent between the years of 1936 to 1975, the year of his death.

**Guernica:** Painting by Pablo Picasso, a reaction to the bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica, on April 26, 1937 by the German and Italian air forces. It was first displayed in the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair, Paris.

## OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Research; Communications: Oral and Visual
- **Mathematics:** Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes
- **Sciences:** Physical Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** History; People in Societies; Geography; Economics; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships, and Applications

masterpiece depicts the catastrophic bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica by the German and Italian Fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War in 1937. This painting in particular, among all Picasso's works, was one of the biggest influences on the Modernist genre developed during and shortly after World War II. The First and Second World Wars created a need in Picasso, and many other artists, to understand and process such savagery. It was their explorations that lead to the realization of many artistic styles, such as Dada, Cubism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and later, Abstract Expressionism.

While not a direct statement on the war, *Chair and Owl* sees in the use of the owl a symbol for Picasso's intellectual exploration of war. It introduces a mythical element into his still lifes, for the owl is the symbol and attendant of the Greek goddess Athena. As such, the owl suggests not only wisdom (as it

can see in the night, or see those things which are difficult to see), but also war, as Athena was the companion of heroes and was also attended by Nike, the goddess of victory. Later, as Picasso worked on his murals representing War and Peace, his early studies depicted the main warrior of the mural with the head of an owl.

### ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Pablo Ruiz was born in Málaga, Spain, on October 25, 1881. As a young artist, he changed his surname to the maiden name of his mother: Picasso. His primary exposure to art was through his father, an art instructor who provided his young son with artistic guidance, which the prodigy soon surpassed. The Barcelona Academy of Art offered Picasso a scholarship, his first real opportunity to join the art community. While enrolled there, he won prizes, met fellow artists (many of whom were much older), dabbled in magazine and

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**LANGUAGE ARTS:** Throughout the 1930s, Picasso took up writing, and completed many poems and one play (*'Desire Caught by the Tail'*). The poems especially were written in an unpunctuated, Surrealist style. However, there are many similar themes amongst his poems and paintings, including the Painter and Model, Death, Bullfights, etc.

Read some of Picasso's writings and compare them with his paintings and sculptures. What other similar themes can be found, and is there a stylistic connection throughout his work? (*High School*)

**SCIENCE:** Divide into groups and try to build the "chair" figure in the middle of the painting. Is it stable? Try to describe why or why not in terms of its center of gravity. (*Middle and High School*)

**SOCIAL STUDIES:** Study the painting *Guernica*, then read about the bombing of Guernica in 1937. Compare the event and the painting: is the painting concerned with historical accuracy? How does Picasso make his point through his use of style and iconography? (*Middle and High School*)

**VISUAL ARTS:** Using objects cut from magazines, create your own cubist piece. Before beginning, however, discuss the important stylistic aspects of cubism: what things must you consider before constructing the work? (*All Ages*)

commercial illustration, and committed himself to becoming a painter. Around 1901, he began, either by choice or necessity, to limit his color palette to somber blue tones, a time now commonly known as the *Blue Period*.

In 1914, World War I began, and many of Picasso's friends, including Georges Braque, were drafted. Picasso stayed in Paris during these years, and could sometimes here cannons firing from the front, only miles away. Later, in 1936, the Spanish Civil War – a conflict between the Spanish Republican forces and the Fascist dictator, "Generalissimo" *Francisco Franco* – began. In 1937, the display of *Guernica* at the World's Fair was considered an act of defiance towards Franco. This act caused Franco to decree that Picasso

never be allowed to return to Spain, and Picasso was to die never again setting foot in his native country.

Picasso continued this revolutionary tradition after World War II, when he joined the French Communist Party, and befriended men and women of the intellectual world including Robert Desnos, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre. He continued to experiment with many different styles, and across several different media, and became one of the most successful painters ever to have lived.

Picasso had a long, storied life, and was married several times and had numerous children and grandchildren. He died on April 8, 1973, at the age of 91, from complications resulting from the flu.