



**Kia Vahland**

## **True Colors**

Old Paintings in a New Era

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Alte Bilder, neue Zeiten)

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

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### **FOREWORD**

Climate change, a pandemic, the ongoing rivalry between democracies and dictatorships, war in Europe, inflation. The early twenties of the twenty-first century have been years of crisis and transformation. The events have been new and unexpected; and seem a far cry from the experiences of people who lived around the time of the Industrial Revolution.

Old knowledge cannot just be applied directly to present and future events. But it's not entirely useless either. Earlier generations also had to deal with extreme events and feelings of fear, desperation, and uncertainty, and they too looked for ways get through them, to resist giving up on themselves or on a belief in our shared humanity and the beauty to be found in everyday life. Today, we are faced with our own, unique worries, but we are by no means alone with them.

The best artists found ways to respond to the conditions of their epochs that transcend the confines of history. They did not just seek to depict the world around them but also to understand it, to interpret it, and sometimes, to find solutions. Often, their aim was to rescue their beliefs from the ravages of a hostile world. In doing so, they have left behind instructions for overcoming such events, which can give us the courage to stand up for our beliefs and ideas. They show their colors: Peter Paul Rubens, Artemisia

Gentileschi, and Pablo Picasso stand up for the victims of war and violence. Wassily Kandinsky and Charlotte Salomon make an impassioned plea in defense of the lust for life. Raffael and Kazimir Malevich defy the power of despots. Rembrandt and Lotte Laserstein place their faith in communities based on solidarity. Leonardo da Vinci and Titian exalt the force of female pride. And Jan Vermeer and Giorgione (or his followers) place their trust in the value of intricate details.

What connects the works of these artists—who were born in various countries and epochs—is a profound humanism. They painted on canvas, panels, and paper, and created objects that were quickly recognized as extraordinary and are thus still hanging in museums or churches to this day. But the people depicted in these works are no objects but thinking, feeling, active people. As such, the figures approach the viewer attentively, sometimes staring right at them; they seem to be right there in the present with us, even though they're anything but.

We are best able to grasp a painting when we know its history, are familiar with the circumstances under which it was created, and know the intentions of the artist. This book explores the histories behind these pictures. Though the phenomena of the present day cannot be equated with the events from back then, good artworks remain open to a range of associations. As such, this book also takes a look at the stories of our own age: at Russia's invasion of Ukraine, at the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, at contemporary liberation struggles, at the radical shifts in the world of media, and at the rapid changes of the early 2020s. It is a book about living well and enjoying life, about collective resilience, and about hope and action. Because the very fact that there is a historical distance between us and these old pictures can help us to take a step back and see the present more clearly. Putting us in a better position to shape it.

## IMAGES OF WAR

*For those who haven't lived through war, it can be difficult to imagine the violence and terror. With his 1937 work "Guernica," Pablo Picasso managed to rouse the attention of the world and bring home the horrors of the Spanish Civil War.*

What are the limits of the imagination? What can somebody who lives in Zurich or Hamburg envision, somebody who heads to the office in the morning and opens their front door in the evening knowing that everything will be right where it's supposed to be? Can we get our heads around what it was like in the first days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to sleep in the subway tunnels of Kyiv, how much courage the city's orchestra had to muster to play on Maidan during the air raids? What it means, out of sheer thirst, to drink from the water in the radiator, as was reported during the siege of Mariupol.

Over the years, the inhabitants of affluent countries have grown accustomed to wars and images of violence. Only now and then does a photograph pierce through the empathetic armor of the West: such as that of the young Syrian refugee Aylan Kurdi, whose body was found washed up on the Turkish coast in the fall of 2015. Suddenly, despite having been well aware of all the other deaths in the Mediterranean, the people of Europe found their sense of outrage. And some of them felt all too comfortable with their sympathy. For the victims, though, nothing changed.

This time it was different. A major power had attacked an independent state with complex trade relations to the rest of Europe, as well as intricate familial and affective ties. This was not just an attack on Ukraine, but on the principles of national sovereignty and liberal democracy.

The fact that from the outset, the rest of the world was also emotionally invested is partly down to the recent revolutions in the world of media, to the fact that this war was recorded in real-time, on the ground, by numerous smartphones, appearing instantly on millions of smartphones right around the world. First thing in the morning, on our lunch breaks, at night, when we just wanted to quickly check the time but then ended up scrolling through our Twitter feed: there was the war. And this time, the victims were telling us what it meant themselves. The Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy and

his team—along with everyday Ukrainians—not only gave each other words of encouragement, they also directed their appeals directly at audiences in the West. And in seizing control of the media like this, they took their fate in their own hands.

But this was not the first war whose images made their way into the living rooms of people who were utterly detached from the conflict. The photographs and reports from the Spanish Civil War that reached Paris, London, and New York were disturbingly new. Back then, it was reporters and photographers who had traveled to the towns and cities on the front lines who produced the material. Many openly voiced their support for the elected Republican government, which had been drawn into a war by the military leaders around General Franco—with the support of German and Italian fascists. The journalists published pictures of fighters in heroic poses and images of the devastation wrought by bombs, of the injured, the grieving, and the dead. These images shocked readers of newspapers and magazines abroad, in part because the governments of the liberal West were refusing to get involved in the conflict (despite the fact that they could have done so at the time without any major risk, something which would not be the case in the coming atomic age).

On April 28, 1937, news reached Paris that two days earlier, German planes had destroyed the Basque town of Guernica with bombs and incendiary devices, killing and wounding large numbers of the town's inhabitants. There was widespread disbelief and rage at their inability to act. However, there was one person who reacted immediately: Pablo Picasso. The Spaniard locked himself in his studio near the banks of the Seine, smoking cigarette after cigarette, sketching out ideas and tearing them up in a furor. At the end of the process, he had completed his response to General Franco. Three and a half meters tall and eight meters long, Picasso's painting confronts its viewers with the horrors of this war—and of all wars.

Guernica restricts its palette to dark shades of gray, as if the canvas itself were in mourning. This black-and-white picture must have immediately reminded viewers of press photographs, and the painter was indeed seeking to fulfil a documentary function with this work. He was not in Guernica when the roofs caved in under German bombs, but he showed the world what this kind of attack meant for those who were.

Mortal fear seems to stream from lost pairs of eyes. Seized by terror, they are scarcely able to weep. A mother with a dead baby in her arms wants to cry out, her angular tongue stretches toward the heavens, from which no respite can be expected. Even the mournful bull that cozies up to her cannot protect her. A man lies on the floor and dies, his fingers still clenched around his shattered weapon, though his body has already broken into its composite parts. Perhaps he had been riding the injured horse that has broken into a panic above him, lit by the faint glow of a lightbulb in the ceiling.

On the right, a house burns, and a woman along with it. Another is on her knees, keening. Someday, at least, she might be able to give an account of what occurred here—together with the large head poking through the window, which does not shy away from taking a good look at everything. This figure also has an oil lamp, which a muscular arm holds toward the drama, as if to shed light on the distress, and like the Statue of Liberty in New York, to nurture a hope for better times.

These tormented figures express their pain as best they can—but they also need people to listen and watch. Picasso's picture does not just seek to hold up a reflection of this suffering to the world in order to move viewers for their own gratification. It is also a call to action. The painter wanted people to truly imagine how it feels to be in a war, and to then take the appropriate action.

The work was first exhibited at the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 Paris World's Fair. It was not necessarily what the Spanish government had in mind—in their eyes, this *cri de coeur* had too little heroism, the visual language was too avant-garde. But the German Nazis and the Spanish nationalists were livid, and among Western audiences in particular, the painting ensured that these atrocities carried out by the European fascists would not be forgotten any time soon.

Picasso saw to it that so long as Franco held power in Spain after his victory over the Republic, the painting would never be shown in that country. Today, the work—heavily damaged from its many travels in the early years—belongs to the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid. And a large tapestry of the composition can be found hanging in the headquarters of the United Nations in New York. It has lost none of its power. When the USA launched its war against Iraq in 2003, the secretary of state at the time, Colin Powell, had the tapestry taken down before making his statement. A dead child, a panicked horse, a burning house accompanying the start of a war? That would have sparked questions.

Today, media users are forced to distinguish between fakes and documentary material, between propaganda and snapshots that convey a sense of what things are like on the ground. We have to allow ourselves to be moved without being manipulated, to open ourselves up to the oppressive living conditions of others without mistaking them for our own. To bear witness, without looking away, perhaps offer a helping hand, and hold up the oil lamp of a shared future.