

# Impact of spanish civil war on surrealism art



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This investigation assesses the significance of surrealist artists' responses to the Spanish Civil War and how the experiences of the horrific event were documented visually. In order to evaluate such significance, this investigation examines the impact the events the war had on surrealist art in Spain, through the use of primary recounts of the war's impact on art and visual art history, mostly focusing on works by Salvador Dalí and Pablo Picasso who became world renowned for their contribution.

The Spanish Civil War broke out in the summer of 1936, as did the revolution within surrealist art. It was an event that did not just affect people locally, but on an international scale. Although, European art in general was impacted by the war, this investigation will not examine the effect the war had on continental surrealism, thus will only focus on Spanish artists and their work. As the leading artists in this movement were the Spanish born artists Picasso and Dali, they will be the central focus.

Two of the sources used in this essay will assess are Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War by Robin Adèle Greenley and The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí by Salvador Dalí will be evaluated for their origins, purposes, values and limitations.

This investigation does not assess the difference in ideologies (Republicanism versus Nationalism) tearing apart Spain, nor does it assess other surrealist art movements in literature, philosophy, film, architecture or music.

## **Background on the Spanish Civil War**

The summer of 1936 marked the beginning of a landmark event within modern European history: the Spanish Civil War, inviting with it a three-year tumultuous period of terror, destruction and persecution, shattering the nation. Its deep rooting ideological confrontations resulted in the intense commitment of all its participants and the loss of over half a million Spanish lives acted as a stimulus to the various international surrealist movements of the time, inspiring artists of all cultures. The creative energy focused on portraying political ideologies and illusions, the social idealisms and the military take on modern warfare, documenting the hopes and despair of the participants in this Kafkaesque war.

The fall of the crumbling Spanish Monarchy and the dissatisfying Second Republic, and the electoral success of the leftist Popular Front, a rebellion against the newly elected government erupted. The Falange or the Nationalists, lead by General Franco, conducted a nationwide revolt, alongside General Mola. They managed to seize the key cities in Northern Spain, including Madrid. The Catalan and Basque country, both known for their persistent separatist movement, anarchism and socialism, unsurprisingly sided and remained loyal to the Republic. This politically polarized Spain, dividing the country into the Nationalist and Republicans.

Mostly socialists, separatists, artists and intellectuals sided with Republicans. Franco wanted to follow Mussolini's example and establish a secular conservative regime and was supported mostly by the conservatives, the military, the royalists and the Clergy. Even though the Church and the Falange experienced some friction, they continued to remain in their '

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marriage of convince' because the Republic was seen as antidisestablishmentarian and lethally temporal. The Nationalists rose against the electoral Popular Front government and finally over threw it.

The interferences from external powers such as Germany and the Soviet Union dragged out the war and worsened the conflict. Horrific events which paralyzed the country, such as the annihilation of the Basque country by the German Luftwaffe's Blitzkrieg, served as inspiration which sparked the notion of a world exhibition in France, in 1937. The section dedicated to Spain was known as the Pavilion. Many artists, such as Dali, Picasso and Renau were asked to participate; each created a response to the many atrocities which occurred in the past year of the war. It was the first exhibition of its kind, prompting propaganda from countries such as Spain.

## **Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War**

Surrealism, with no exact definition due to its ambiguous nature, is known for 'imaginative eccentricity' and became a major movement in the late 1920s and throughout 1930s Europe; mostly in places like Germany and Spain. The twisted yet fantastic reality which surrealism creates is seen as an escape from the actual reality. Surrealist artist art is considered to be closely connected with Freudian psychological analysis, claiming that such warped art is an insight into a deeper psyche.

The surrealist works of the Andalusian painters Dalí and Picasso (amongst others) became signatures of the satirical content of the war, acting as world informants of the paralyzing happenings within the country. Although both artists had very different notions of surrealism, both artists depict the war in

a grotesque, incomprehensible, violent and audacious manner which reflected the Civil War in all its accuracy. It can be concluded that the war distorted many perspectives of reality. Traditional elements of surrealism stemmed from the Dadaism movement and were subjected to metamorphosis by many artists who incorporated components from cubism, impressionism, 'Enlightenment' and post impressionism as well as various other movements. In its 'purest form', surrealism had little or no affect on the civil war, in fact, prior to the war, it was much more submissive and discerning. However, the introduction of war perverted the movement in Spain most notably by Dalí's Autumn Cannibalism (1936) (fig. 2) and Soft Construction with Boiled Beans: Premonition of Civil War (July, 1936) (fig. 1) and Picasso's Guernika (1937) (fig. 3). Such works were considered a mutation and mockery of works of artists from previous movements like El Greco whose work was considered contemporary for his time.

The Spanish surrealist art culture became a symbol of the Spanish Civil War as well as its leftist orientation and the Republic. This demonstrated the highly interlinked nature of political and cultural developments in 1930s Spain. Architects, like Alphonse Laurencic, drew inspiration from the twisted works of Dali, Kandinsky and Klee among others to invent a form of 'psychotechnic' torture found in the mind-bending prison-cells and torture chambers of Barcelona and elsewhere, built in 1938. Jose Millicua suggested that through the use of the psychological properties of colors and geometric abstraction found in these works, Laurencic created a hell that would physically distort and mentally disturb the victim connecting the growing art culture with the growing militaristic government.

## Section C

### Evaluation of Sources

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Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War was written by Robin Adèle Greenley, a respected art historian, currently Latin American Studies professor at the Connecticut University. The book, published in 2006 by Yale University Press, New Haven, is a critical interpretation of Surrealist art works by five artists, including, Dali and Picasso. The purpose of Greenley's work is an ' attempt to unravel the correspondence between aesthetics and politics during the Spanish Civil War' and focuses on surrealist aspects of the war, how they differed and were affected by the intense struggle plaguing the country. The value of the book is that there is a clear study of the correlation between the art and the events which took place. It is a secondary source, designed mainly for the purpose of educating. Greenley intimately analyzes how ' artistic practice offers unique insight into the cataclysmic debacle of war.' The limitation of the book from a historical perspective are the existence of some ' peculiarities in relation to its subject' because she examines the surrealist artists and their work immaculately, but fails to draw strong parallels between the political situation of the time and the drastic change of the movement. Her work, although useful, is mostly suited for contemporary aesthetics and critical theory.

The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí was written by Salvador Dali (published in 1942 in its original French, then in 2000, translated into English by Haakon M. Chevalier). The purpose of this source is a memoire, allowing an inside scope to Dali's life. The source's value is that it is a direct account from the <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-spanish-civil-war-on-surrealism-art/>

leading artist of the Surrealist movement, providing the historian with a unique and personal insight as how the war impacted him and his work. Dali is considered one of the few misunderstood artists of his time and here the idea that ' his genius saves him from chaos' allows us to understand him more. The book allows a deeper understanding of the awesome painter. It is a primary source and therefore is subjected to personal prejudice. Taking into account that the source is a personal memoire, Dali has grandiose his life and placed a very positive theme to everything he did with is ingenious use of words. This highlights the limitations of the source. However, he acknowledges some of this over-the-top heroism on his part in the central chapters of his prose as ' false memories'. The memoir written only three years after the war, and passions were still running high in Spain while many people were trying to exonerate themselves from the general violence and anarchy.

## **Section D**

### **Analysis**

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Both the civil war and the surrealist art movement are closely connected and referred to by Greenley, as the public's awakening of politics and pictures in the politically polarized Spain. It is an accurate description of the relationship between the cultural and political aspects of the war, pointing out how closely connected the two were, although they are often treated as two separate issues within the 1930s.

## **Common Themes in Surrealist Art**

Spain's political polarization was that of artistic polarization too. The Spanish artistic culture were more than just a visual voice of the war's terrors; they took a more proactive role within the war, thus recording and commenting on the accounts of the petrifying events from a firsthand perspective. The perversion of the surrealist art movement was done in a manner that possibly was perfectly collaborated between all artists. There is no evidence that suggests this, however. The idea of the body as a political metaphor for the country, the people, the artist, for the audience to relate to was simply a trend that caught on. The lewd art united the people, it was not only those who were suffering on Spanish soils, but those who had suffered from the previous war and the various other struggles that were happening concurrently or had passed recently. The surrealist art 'evolved and functioned' in ways that 'one can relate his stylistic consistencies to his wild political swings' Both Greenley and Dalí agree that that surrealism is the portrayal 'horrific metaphor for the physical annihilation of life.'

## **Prevalent abstract portrayal in surrealist works**

Fundamental components which make up work such as that of Dalí and Picasso were considered contemporary, even for surrealism and, to some extent, were frowned upon and considered the 'assassination of painting'. These innovative elements found in surrealism seemed to pervert the movement making reality more abhorrent and unnatural, but at the same time it acted as an escape from the living nightmares of their reality allowing life to have a more satirical texture to it. Things such as disembodied humans, genitals, death, destruction, furniture and foods even references to



religion and Catholicism became the norm in surrealist works represented the subtle irony of the artists' lives as well as that of the people; they were painting from their perspective of a war that created a reality for the world that was so obscene, it could not be captured any other way

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## **Use of media**

Elements of Spanish Surrealism became mostly to do with fascism in a farcical, perverse form of display, causing a 'ruin of surrealism'. This was mostly Dali's movement, joined with other surrealists like Rene Magritte and Max Ernst. Dali, in particular, served as the main revolutionary artist to this complex way of painting. The constant elements of his works were things he

found some sort of fascination in as a child such as food, death, the idea of sexuality, the human anatomy, insects, a crutch, and various other strange items which he later turned into a satirical, metaphorical component for his work.

The idea of the body as a political metaphor became a fast trend throughout Surrealists work. The body came to represent many concepts of the happenings within their lives. It was a metaphor for the artist's body, a body wounded by war and its ritualized combat, personal strife of civilians and artists, of politicized or sexualized body, an indicator of unconscious desires as well as body mechanisms acting as a transgression of avant-garde within the social context. It was created in a fashion as a universal component; anyone and everyone could relate to the art effortlessly.

Picasso's *Guernika* (1937) utilized these aspects to create an unconscious conception of war, where the strong prey on the weak as a response to the Pavilion, capturing the violence and the disruptive nature of the confusion of private sexuality. It was a symbol of *Guernika*'s struggle and suffering after its violation by the German Blitzkrieg attack.

Dali's *Autumn Cannibalism* (1936) also took into consideration these components, as well as his signature elements to represent the Kafkaesque idea of the war with a more ironic twist than Picasso's art. Dali's work making mockery of bourgeoisie and the subtle grotesque manner in which this war is carried out, an element of sadomasochistic aggression between the two faceless, closely entwined figures that have an almost parasitic feel

to them, turning a seemingly amorous kiss into a fatal, inescapable trap; underlining the murderous violence depicted.

## **Artists' social and political issues in their work**

A majority of the art responses to the war were surrealist, proving an obvious correlation between the two events. The war had an overwhelming impact of the surrealist art movement inspiring artists such as Dalí and Picasso throughout Spain.

## **Section E**

### **Conclusion**

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It is evident the Spanish Civil War had an impact on the surrealist visual art movement and altered, significantly, the ways in which the movement was captured. The fundamental elements and secondary components that such works were composed of obtained many satirical and metaphorical characteristics which were impacted very much by the war.

Previously, the image of the body as a perverse form of political metaphor was not thought of and therefore rarely appeared in surrealist paintings for the mutation of the body was seen as sacrilegious, and in doing so, the already worrying contemporary art became aesthetically tormenting. The perverse maturity of the images from artists such as Dalí and Picasso have been used as ideal examples of this epic movement which altered not only the way people saw their reality but the global ideal of art and art history.

The Spanish Civil War did impact surrealist visual art in Spain by forcing the elements of the work not only more uniform among the artists but changed them to represent something more than the war in their minds.