**[Conflict and art](https://www.dawn.com/news/1792908/conflict-and-art)**

[Huma Yusuf](https://www.dawn.com/authors/252/huma-yusuf) Published November 27, 2023 Updated about 5 hours ago

MAKE art, not war. On recently seeing that iconic slogan on a T-shirt at London’s Tate Modern museum, I thought: if only it were so simple. But as with many things in our tumultuous world, the relationship between art and war is increasingly uncertain.

Inside the museum, I lingered in front of Philip Guston’s Bombardment. Oval-shaped, the painting’s subjects fly at the viewer, who is now caught in the explosion, confronted by the full velocity of violence. Naked bodies tangle, a mother desperately embraces an infant (wounded? dead?), a gas mask morphs into a skull — and still, a fleet of war planes hovers at the top of the canvas, endless horror.

This was Guston’s rendering of Guernica, the Basque town that was bombed in April 1937 by Nazi and Italian fasicst forces during the Spanish Civil War. Hundreds of civilians were brutally killed in that attack, shocking the world and provoking pacifist art, most famously Pablo Picasso’s Guernica. But standing in front of the canvas early last week, all I could think of was Gaza. It was easy to conclude that we learn nothing from history, that the powerful artistic engagement with Guernica did nothing to prevent the horrors in Gaza, that art in a time of war is impotent, even irrelevant.

Art has emerged as a proxy front line.

But that is obviously not the case. Even during the Israel-Hamas war, art has emerged as a proxy front line, with news coming from Toronto to Tel Aviv, London to New York of artists with pro-Palestinian views or Islamic themes being cancelled, with shows called off and paintings pulled from galleries. Meanwhile, Qatar’s Islamic Art and National museums themselves became works of anti-war art, their walls bearing projections of the Palestinian flag, and photos of the buildings reproduced endlessly on social media.

The distinction between art and war is particularly blurred online — think of TikTok videos of the conflict, layered with obscene graphics, slogans and rousing music. Is this a form of art which itself is part of the violence?

The role of art in wars is becoming more complicated, particularly in the context of polarised politics. Rather than engage with the subject or the motivation, the goal is now to dismiss the artist. Artists are particularly susceptible to labels like ‘liberal’, ‘wokerati’, ‘leftist’ … ‘traitor’. Today, Guston’s images would barely bear consideration; his creation of them would be politicised, rendered toxic.

The commodification of art exacerbates the complexity. Think of it in a Pakistani context: art is now put in galleries for export to diaspora collectors, an elite pursuit. In economically desperate times, folk art dwindles as both time and materials become luxuries. The relentless need to profit, seek and extract, reduces opportunities for art to be expressive, a means of communal engagement. How many murals in Karachi have been wiped away to make room for flyovers or gated housing developments? And the local keeps getting overridden, commoditised, neutralised and recast as part of a global supply chain (think of how the truck art that brightened our roads is being replaced by unadorned standard-issue containers). When art is not coming from the people, then in times of war, it is not a voice, it is an affectation.

What we are left with then is propaganda. Art repurposed to witness history and preserve the narratives of would-be victors. Art repurposed to distract from the horrors of war, and instead, generate righteousness and triumph in the face of death and destruction. Art to maintain the myth of war.

Interestingly, there is still appetite for wartime art that doesn’t make myths, but bears witness, or even informs. In the early 19th century, artists made paintings of wounded soldiers, dwelling on the gory details of blown-off limbs and botched amputations as a way to educate other battlefield surgeons. Empathy for the victims was incidental, an afterthought. We now call such art photojournalism. We have seen it in the form of images of immense suffering from Gaza, neutralised with captions focusing on facts (where, when), the juxtaposed before-and-after drone images of decimated Gazan neighbourhoods. This is the most dangerous art, that invites you to engage but without an emotional response.

But emotions are the power of art. Art is part of the healing process after a war; a memorial, a beacon of hope that we will eventually learn, that we will not do this again. I was at the Tate Modern because it had all become too much, and all I could think to do was look at paintings to remind myself that there is still humanity, empathy, beauty. Art is known to have immense therapeutic effects and to help release trauma. The only thing worse than art that is weaponised, politicised, commodified, nationalised — would be silence.

*The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.  
X:* [*@humayusuf*](https://Mailtp:https:/twitter.com/humayusuf)

*Published in Dawn, November 27th, 2023*