



A DESCRIPTION OF

DAVID'S SLING

A HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY IN TEN WORKS OF ART

THROUGHOUT WESTERN HISTORY, the societies that have made the greatest contributions to the spread of freedom have created iconic works of art to celebrate their achievements. Yet despite the enduring appeal of these works—from the Parthenon to Michelangelo's *David* to Picasso's *Guernica*—histories of both art and democracy have ignored this phenomenon.

Millions have admired the artworks covered in this book but relatively few know why they were commissioned, what was happening in the culture that produced them, or what they were meant to achieve. Even scholars who have studied them for decades often miss the big picture by viewing them in isolation from a larger story of human striving.

David's Sling places into context ten canonical works of art executed to commemorate the successes of free societies that exerted political and economic influence far beyond what might

have been expected of them. Fusing political and art history with a judicious dose of creative reconstruction, Victoria Coates has crafted a lively narrative around each artistic object and the free system that inspired it.

This book integrates the themes of creative excellence and political freedom to bring a fresh, new perspective to both. In telling the stories of ten masterpieces, *David's Sling* invites reflection on the synergy between liberty and human achievement.



TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW WITH VICTORIA COATES CONTACT:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF

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VICTORIA C. GARDNER COATES is a cultural historian who received her Ph.D. in Italian Renaissance art from the University of Pennsylvania. Her work has appeared in *The Sixteenth-Century Journal*, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* and *Renaissance Studies*.

As the director of research in the office of Donald Rumsfeld, Dr. Coates provided editorial support for his best-selling memoir *Known and Unknown*. She has served as a senior fellow at the Commonwealth Foundation, an adjunct fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and a consulting curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

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VICTORIA COATES

Q & A

ENCOUNTER: Why write a book about the relationship between art and democracy over more than two millennia at this time?

COATES: Well I would say some of writing David's Sling had to do with explaining myself, and coming up with a rationale for why an art historian has a significant perspective on contemporary foreign policy and national security challenges. And what I've always believed is art history is simply a specialized kind of history, that you are using objects the way other disciplines use texts to understand the past; and that if we really want to spread freedom today, we want to do it in a responsible, enduring way, we really need to understand what the history of freedom is. The United States is an apex of the story, and a kingpin of the story, but it isn't the whole story.



ENCOUNTER: *David's Sling* has a double meaning. Can you explain that?

COATES: I think most people are familiar with the story from the *Book of Samuel* of David the shepherd who would go on to be the great king of Israel, and the founder of the house that produced Jesus Christ. But at the beginning he was just a simple shepherd, and the Israelites were battling the Philistines. And the

Philistines had a great giant named Goliath who came out and taunted the Israelites, and asked them to join in single combat. And they didn't have anyone brave enough to do it. So David came along and said he would. And because he was so pure in his faith in God, and also so ingenious and skillful with his slingshot, he was able to defeat the giant. And so, as I was looking at this project which originally started just focusing on Michelangelo's *David*, it seemed to me the slingshot was really the metaphor for democracy.

ENCOUNTER: I am struck by the chapter on the *Parthenon*. Here was a symbol of democracy at the height of civilization—and yet today it's surrounded by a decaying country.

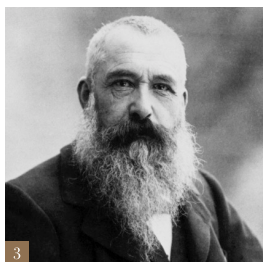
COATES: One of the great lessons of *David's Sling* is that freedom is not inevitable. All of these states are unlikely heroes. Rome is a swamp. Venice shouldn't exist at all. Holland is underwater. Florence is flat. It's a market town. These are not places that you would assume are going to flourish. But because of the remarkable effects of democracy, and particularly democracy when married to free market principles—which is really central to the Florence, Venice and Holland chapters—you have this remarkable economic and creative flowering that allows for the creation of the works of art that each of these chapters study.

ENCOUNTER: Tell us about *St. Mark's Basilica*.

COATES: Most people think of as the “cathedral of Venice.” It's nothing of the sort. It's the palace chapel of the duly elected leader of Venice, the Doge, and it was built as kind of a treasure box to be the manifestation of the



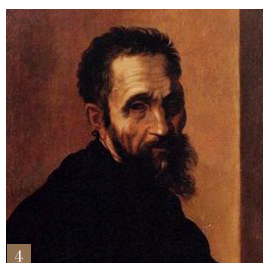
wealth that was generated by the remarkable advances in shipping and bookkeeping that were achieved by the Venetian Republic. And then on top of that, they added in wonderful antiquities like the beautiful bronze horses that are over the door to the church, which were brought back on the Fourth Crusade from Constantinople, and became the symbol of Venice as the inheritor of the mantle of Antiquity in the Middle Ages. And to have this very physical reminder in Venice was now the new Athens, and was going to take that role going forward.



ENCOUNTER: You assert that Monet was a political artist. Why?

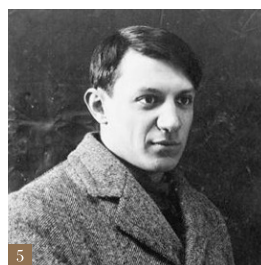
COATES: Most people don't think of Monet as a 20th century artist, and certainly not a particularly political one. But the fact of the matter

is the *Water Lilies* cycle that's installed in the Orangerie Museum is done very deliberately to celebrate the victory in World War I. And it was a very personal communication between Monet and Georges Clemenceau to celebrate the preservation of the Third Republic. And Monet was a very passionate French patriot.



ENCOUNTER: One of the tensions is that these works of art throughout history have been financed because wealth created the ability for people to indulge in the arts. Yet so frequently when you look at artists and they have a Leftist worldview. How do you explain that?

COATES: I blame Michelangelo for all of this. It's really his fault. And I don't think he did it on purpose, but he really pioneered the notion of the artist as the independent creator. And it's in many ways ironic because Michelangelo at the same time was a committed patriot, he was a devout proponent of the Florentine Republic and I don't think he would have done what he did with the intent of divorcing artists from participation in free systems in a way that we would consider to be salutary. But that's been the effect.



ENCOUNTER: And how about Picasso in this regard?

COATES: He painted the great *Guernica* in the late 1930s to protest against the dramatic Nazi and Franco combined bombing of the Basque town, terrible slaughter

of civilians which was sort of a test-run for the Luftwaffe. But because of the advances in communications, rather than just sort of being buried, the event was telegraphed around the world within hours with pictures. Wverybody saw the slaughter and the destruction. And Picasso, who was in Paris at the time and had been commissioned by the exiled Republic of Spain to do a major mural for their World's Fair pavilion—and had been struggling with it—said “I have my subject.” He said, “I’m not generally a political artist, but I want to do *this*.” And he paints the great protest picture, this massive black-and-white fractured image of destruction. What’s so ironic in Picasso’s case is he could see the existential threat of the Nazis. He understood the Nazis weren’t just trying to take over one state, they were trying to extinguish liberty. But he couldn’t see it with the Soviets. He couldn’t see it with Communism. Or he wouldn’t see it. And so while on the one hand he was able to embody the resistance to one existential threat of the 20th century, he couldn’t see the other.

IMAGES

1. Michelangelo's David, 1501–1504, Galleria dell'Accademia (Florence) (Wikipedia)
2. Exterior of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, Italy (Wikipedia)
3. Claude Monet, photo by Nadar, 1899 (Wikipedia)
4. Portrait of Michelangelo, Jacopo del Conte, circa 1540 (Wikipedia)
5. Portrait photograph of Pablo Picasso, 1908 (Wikipedia)



AN EXCERPT FROM *DAVID'S SLING*

PICASSO'S GUERNICA AND THE THREAT OF FASCISM

BY JUNE 4, the composition was largely complete. Joining the original horse and bull were six humans in various stages of dismay, panic and death, including a central male figure lying on his back in defeat, his sword broken. A bare lightbulb at the top represents a single, stark source of illumination, echoing the lantern in Goya's *Third of May*.



While the individual elements of the composition are clearly recognizable, their proportions are fantastic and the pictorial space is flattened. Forms are fractured and abstracted in the Cubist manner, emphasizing the

violence being played out across the canvas.

The International Exposition of Art and Technology had already opened when Picasso completed the *Guernica*. Two mammoth temples faced off on opposing sides of the central plaza near the Eiffel Tower, one glorifying Nazi Germany and the other Soviet Russia. The considerably smaller Spanish pavilion was late for the opening, as the beleaguered Republicans struggled to finish the work. But finish they did. "It seems almost impossible in the struggle that we are conducting, that the Spanish Republic has been able to construct this building," remarked the Spanish author Max Aub. "There is in it, as in everything of ours, something of a miracle." On June 10, Picasso accompanied his mural to the exposition grounds and oversaw its installation just inside the entrance of the pavilion.

Max Aub anticipated that some viewers would object to the painting's style or political message, or both, but he vigorously defended Picasso's creative vision:

It is possible that this art be accused of being too abstract or difficult for a pavilion like ours which seeks to be above all, and before everything else, popular manifestation.

This is not the moment to justify ourselves, but I am certain that with a little good will, everybody will perceive the rage, the desperation, and the terrible protest that this canvas signifies... To those who protest saying that things are not thus, one must answer asking if they do not have two eyes to see the terrible reality of Spain. If the picture by Picasso has any defect it is that it is too real, too terribly real, too atrociously true.

Aub also correctly predicted that *Guernica* would be "spoken of for a long time."

Picasso's masterpiece continued to be an object of considerable interest, and after the exposition in Paris it went on an extended world tour designed to draw attention to the plight of the Spanish and to raise money for refugees. The painting arrived in Great Britain on September 30, 1938—only a few hours after Neville Chamberlain signed the Munich Agreement acknowledging Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland, the mostly German-speaking territories of Czechoslovakia. The prime minister would return home shortly thereafter, agreement in hand, and confidently announce that he had achieved "peace in our time."

Less than a year later, the United Kingdom and France declared war on Nazi Germany. Another year after that,



London seemed like another Guernica under the Blitz, a sustained bombing campaign that began on September 7, 1940, and continued for fifty-seven consecutive nights, taking forty thousand lives. By the time World War II ended, the staggering death toll, along with the unprecedented horrors of the Holocaust and the shock



of the first atomic weapons, made the First World War pale in comparison.

Meanwhile, Spain retreated from the headlines. General Franco decisively won the civil war in 1939 with the support of Germany and Italy. He

dissolved the parliament and made himself dictator for life, a brutal reign initially characterized by the torture and execution of his political opponents. But he kept Spain out of World War II, so the Allies essentially left him alone.

Picasso remained in Paris during the war, and he never seemed to tire of taunting the German officers who would visit his studio. One of them offered him additional firewood to heat the large, drafty space. "A Spaniard is never cold," Picasso retorted. Another officer, seeing a drawing for *Guernica*, asked him, "Did you do this?" "No, you did," was the caustic response. In spite of such provocations, Picasso survived the occupation with his person and his oeuvre mostly intact.

He never returned to Spain after a visit there in 1934. Franco's baleful presence in his homeland was a perpetual source of irritation to the artist, who officially joined the Communist Party in 1944. In his ferocious opposition to fascism and his personal affinity for left-wing politics, he could not—or would not—see that Soviet communism presented just as grave a threat to the freedom he claimed to champion.

Guernica toured the globe until the constant travel was found to be damaging the canvas. Although the painting technically belonged to the defunct Spanish Republic that had commissioned it, Picasso arranged an extended loan to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where it was displayed from 1956 to 1981 along with some of the preparatory sketches and Dora Maar's photographs of the creative process. During this period, the painting metamorphosed from a protest against fascist oppression to a generalized symbol of antiwar dissent. Vietnam sit-ins routinely took place in its gallery, and on February 28, 1974, the painting was attacked by a protestor who wrote "KILL LIES ALL" across it with red spray paint (which was subsequently removed).

Franco made an effort in the late 1960s to bring the painting to Spain, but Picasso was adamant that this would not happen until Franco was no longer there and the republic was re-established. The artist made these conditions explicit in his will, so *Guernica* could not legally travel to Franco's Spain even after Picasso's death in 1973. The general died two years later, and his appointed successor, Prince Juan Carlos (the grandson of Alfonso XIII, who had abdicated in 1931), initiated a transition to a parliamentary monarchy of which he would be the titular head. The Spanish government soon requested that *Guernica* be brought to Spain, which had been Picasso's wish once political liberties were restored. But his heirs were dubious that this condition had been met, while MoMA, for its part, was understandably resistant to relinquishing what was now generally accounted one of the greatest paintings of the twentieth century.

Eventually, all sides came to terms. With great ceremony, *Guernica* finally traveled to Madrid to be displayed at the Prado, as the artist had specified in his will. The exhibit opened for public viewing on October 25, 1981, the centenary of Picasso's birth. Over a million people visited his masterpiece during the first year of its residence in Spain.