

**Today's Masterpiece:** Pablo Picasso, [\*Black Pitcher and the Death's Head\*](#), 1946.  
Lithograph on paper. Bequest of Margot W. Marsh, 1995.40. © 2022 Estate of Pablo  
Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute with Doc Brown on Virtual SDMA**. I'm your host, **Michael Brown**, Curator of European Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is a magnificent still life made in 1946 by the renowned giant of Modernism, Pablo Picasso. It is a lithograph from a numbered edition of only 50, along with 18 proofs, of which this is one. Hovering just beneath the surface of "Black Pitcher and the Death's Head" is the spectre of World War II, and an allusion to one of Picasso's most defiant works of art.

[Music]

The young Picasso's prodigious artistic talents were honed first in Barcelona by his father, and then at the Real Academia de San Fernando in Madrid. In the early 1900s he became interested in the Post-Impressionist movements in Paris. He pored over illustrations he found in contemporary art magazines, and finally relocated to the French capital in 1904.

While he spent the rest of his life in France, he would not forget his Spanish roots, especially the masterpieces he studied both at the academy and on numerous visits to the Museo del Prado in Madrid, the national museum he eventually led as director in absentia during the second World War.

Picasso fully understood the significance of still-life to the art history of Spain; the humble *bodegón* tradition pioneered by Juan Sánchez Cotán (as we learned in Episode One) would subsequently be practiced to stunning effect by Zurbarán, Velázquez, and Goya. In one sense with *Black Pitcher and the Death's Head*, we see Picasso aligning himself with his visionary artistic forbears. It was, in effect, an act of solidarity with the immortals of the Spanish pantheon.

It may also be understood as an act of defiance. 1946 was a breaking point for Picasso. He had weathered the Nazi occupation of Paris, promising Matisse he would guard both their bank vault storerooms of artwork, which he did with Odyssean guile during a meeting with Nazi inspectors. In 1946, he would retreat to the South of France for the remainder of his career.

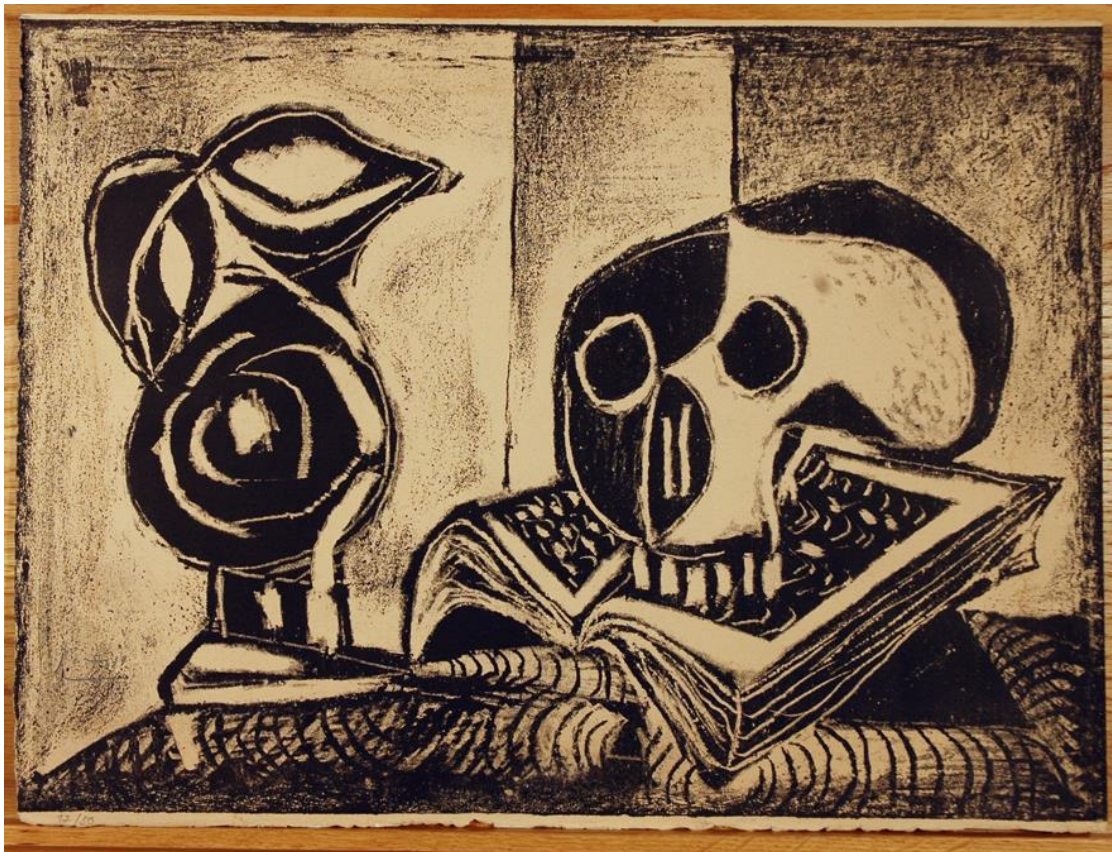
Picasso's defiance—of Nazism, of Fascism, of the horrors of war and genocide—can be found in the objects in his still-life. Executed using a greasy crayon and black ink scraped away in areas to heighten contrast, the composition's theme is known as a *vanitas*, referring to the transitory nature of worldly pursuits indicated by the book and



the wine jug. Even more to the point, the skull as memento mori is more than just a reminder to the viewer of the transience of human life but also a specific reference to a bronze sculpture Picasso made secretly in 1941 during Nazi occupation.

Known as the “Death’s Head,” Picasso’s bronze sculpture of a human skull was produced during an imposed ban on using metals for anything other than ammunition. In making the work, which put the artist in grave jeopardy, Picasso was daringly standing for peace and freedom in the face of oppression.

This has been Doc Brown with Masterpiece Minute, thanks for listening here on Virtual SDMA!



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