The year 1937 put an end to the civil war in Euskadi. It was in that year that Basque artist Aurelio Arteta painted *Triptico de la Guerra*—a symbolic work for the reconstruction of the memory of the conflict in the Basque country. This triptych, which was executed when Arteta was exiled in Biarritz, consists of canvases of great dimensions and is intended to globally represent the heroic actions of the war. The paintings offer an unusual vision of the conflict, which integrates the front line and the rear guard. The canvas on the left, which represents the *Frente* (*Front*), organizes the entire scene around the figure of the *gudari*.1 Two soldiers are dead and one, still alive, heroically confronts the enemy airplanes with his rifle. The painting on the right, called *Retaguardia* (*Rearguard*), is structured around the figure of the dead mother, a woman lying beside a baby unable to reach his mother’s naked bosom and lies dead in her arms. The center canvas, larger than the other two, is called *Éxodo* (*Exodus*), and shows the figure of the living mother who lifts her child in her arms as a sign of hope. This appears at the center of a sad scene in which the men bid farewell to the women. The *Triptico* has come to us as the iconic representation of the civil war in Euskadi. Thanks to the incorporation of the female presence in the rear guard scenes, the paintings manage to increase the dramatic and emotional dimension of war.

This emotional impact is achieved by the incorporation of the Basque mother into the scene and of the complex chain of connotations associated with her in the Basque nationalist imaginary. It’s an indiscutable fact that the Basque nationalist project influenced Arteta in the 1920s.2 The synthesis of the mythical Basque mother by the nationalist imaginary and cultural elements associated with it has to do with the organization of the concept of the Basque solar house, the hamlet, as the origin of the nation and its identification with motherhood. Through the idealized body of women,

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1 A word in Euskera that refers to a Basque soldier.
Aurelio Arteta wished to signify well-being, a safe haven, and the home. In the *Triptico* of 1937 the chain of symbols, embodied by the dead mother with her naked breast, occupies the foreground of the *Retaguardia* (see Figure 5.1), confirming, in a dramatic code, the devastated homeland, the ruined dream of an entire nation and, finally, defeat. But the polisemy associated with the figure of the mother in Basque nationalist imaginary made it possible to convey hope.

The *Éxodo* (see Figure 5.2) once again makes the mother into the mythical point of reference; with the baby in her arms breathing life into the future. The scene emphasizes the figure of the mother as the symbol of the nation’s stability: in the painting, women are on the side of the land and guarantee the continuity of the nation; men are associated with movement represented by the sea, with farewell, with contingency.

Figure 5.1. *La retaguardia*, 1937, 160 por 120 cm., Aurelio Arteta, Colección particular, Bilbao. *Aurelio Arteta. Una mirada esencial 1879-1940*, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, BBK, Bilbao, 1998, pág. 168

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3 The naked breast of Liberty guiding the people is a recurrent theme in art.

4 McClintock maintains that the representation of time by nationalism is based on a natural division of gender: the women representing atavism and continuity and the men, as agents of modernity, giving impulse to discontinuity. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), 359.