Madrid

WHO SHOULD GET GUERNICA?

The Museo del Prado, the repository of Spain's greatest artistic masterpieces, is just a five-minute walk from the Reina Sofía, the country's national museum of modern art. But that distance makes a world of difference to the people involved in a tug-of-war over which one should be the final resting place of Picasso's 1937 masterpiece, Guernica.

In 1981, after hanging for four decades in New York's Museum of Modern Art, the painting was ceremoniously installed in the Casón del Buen Retiro, an annex of the Prado, and hailed as "the last exile to come home." And there, according to Prado director Alfonso Pérez Sánchez, is where it belongs. "Any future move for the Guernica depends on many, many factors—political, economic, legal, and moral," he explains. "It is not going anywhere for now."

Over the years, however, critics have charged that the Casón, a converted 17th-century palace, is too cramped and dark to contain the painting's powerful energy. And ever since the Reina Sofía opened five years ago, its officials have been claiming that the painting would one day form the "backbone" of its collection of modern and contemporary art.

The conflict is the latest episode in the continuing political saga surrounding Guernica, which began when Picasso painted the mural for the Spanish Republic's pavilion at the 1937 Paris World's Fair. Although it was inspired by the German bombing, on orders of General Francisco Franco, of the Basque city of Guernica that year, Picasso often denied that Guernica had any particular political significance.

But the work memorialized the bombing as a particularly brutal event in Spain's civil war, and it subsequently toured the United States to raise funds for Spanish war relief.

In 1942 it was installed at MoMA, where Picasso said he wanted it to stay until democracy was restored in Spain.

In 1979—four years after Franco's death—it was agreed that Spain was ready to receive the painting. That decision spawned a national debate in Spain. The Basque cities of Bilbao and Guernica laid moral claim to it as a symbol of their suffering during the civil war. Málaga, Picasso's birthplace, and the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, the city where he spent his adolescent years, expressed interest. In Madrid, a museum of contemporary art, which is now closed, had been built in the '70s with a special hall for Guernica in anticipation of its return.

Into the fray stepped Picasso's widow, Jacqueline, who told then-president Alfonso Suárez, "I always heard him express the desire that the painting and the drawings accompanying it, once in Spain, remain in Madrid and in the collection of the Prado Museum." And there it went.

"The main point is whether it's going to be associated with one group of pictures or another," says William S. Rubin, director emeritus of the department of painting and sculpture at MoMA. What the Reina Sofía wants to do, he charges, "is to use the picture to enhance a skimpy and not very good collection of 20th-century art. It recontextualizes the picture horizontally in the context of contemporary art instead of vertically in the context of Spain and international art." That decision, he says, is "morally wrong" because it is "directly contrary to the wishes of Picasso."

Though Picasso didn't leave a will, he did leave specific instructions that he wanted the work to hang in the Prado, Rubin says. "Picasso took me aside and told me what he wanted to happen when democratic government was resumed," he recounts. "There was no question, as he told Roland Dumas [the artist's lawyer], Alfred Barr [MoMA's founder and first director], and me that he wanted it to be a gift to the Prado and he saw it in that context—in relation to the tradition of painting of Velázquez and Goya."

To that end Picasso gave the preliminary sketches for the painting to the museum.

However, Spanish Minister of Culture Jorge Semprún believes that Picasso's wishes must be considered in relation to new developments. "Picasso never knew the project of the Reina Sofia," he said at a recent news conference. If the artist had known that the country would build a modern art museum, Semprún added, "I am sure that he would have approved of our decision." But when questioned by reporters at the reopening of the newly renovated Reina Sofía last October, Tomás Llorens, the museum's director at the time, said that the plan to move Guernica had been postponed indefinitely because Semprún was "negotiating with Picasso's heirs."

The obligation to those heirs—three children and two grandchildren who share in the distribution and administration of Picasso's legacy—is not only moral but legal, Rubin says. "The Spanish government always claimed—wrongly, I believe—that they own Guernica and had bought it from Picasso himself because they made a small payment. Picasso understood it as money for materials, etcetera. He considered himself the owner of the picture until he died."

If the government had truly bought the picture from Picasso, he adds, "They could have successfully got it back from MoMA before they did—and they would have no obligation now." But because of the hazy legal status of the painting, the Spanish government wants the heirs' approval. Besides, Rubin believes, "they still hope to get gifts from the..."
heirs, otherwise they wouldn't bother."

However, "when Dumas and I met with the heirs early in the proceedings for the resolution of Guernica's future, none of them had conversations with Picasso about this," Rubin says. But some of them have spoken with Semprún, although he has not revealed the outcome of the meetings. One heir, reached by ARTnews, acknowledged off the record that she was against moving the painting; sources say that another heir feels the same way.

Rubin says he has never visited Guernica in Madrid because he couldn't bear to see it under its protective bulletproof glass. That situation, Semprún recently announced, is about to change. The case that guarded the painting for the last decade, he said, will be removed on the occasion of an exhibition uniting Guernica with another work that deals with war's horrors—Goya's The Second of May, 1808, which is usually housed in the Prado's main halls. He implied that the glass was being removed in preparation for Guernica's transfer. But no date for the event was given.

—Judy Cantor

Paris

"GOD HEARD US"

After five years of somewhat discouraging suspense, nine Impressionist masterpieces that were stolen in a dramatic holdup at the Marmottan Museum in Paris have been recovered on the French island of Corsica. "God heard us—it's the best Christmas present we could have had," said Arnaud d'Hauterives, director of the Marmottan.

A special 30-member French police unit that is devoted to art theft, headed by Commissioner Mireille Balestrazzi, one of the highest-ranking women in the country's national police force, traced the paintings to an apartment in the southern town of Porto Vecchio, where they were seized December 5. According to Balestrazzi, the works were not hidden but were guarded by a man she identified as a reseller, who was arrested at the scene. Police are still searching for those who were directly involved in the actual robbery.

Several factors prolonged the hunt for the five armed men who entered the museum one Sunday morning and removed the artworks as visitors and guards stood by helplessly. "It was not until three years ago, after an enormous amount of groundwork, that we received the first viable tip from Japan, which allowed us to successfully orient the investigation," Balestrazzi says. The information came from Japanese police who questioned members of a local organized crime network, as it was first believed that the stolen works were either located, or intended to be sold, in Japan.

Once on track, Balestrazzi says, her team proceeded slowly. "A normal investigation would have gone more quickly, but we took precautions, fearing that a faux pas would risk the destruction of the art," she explains. "Because of the paintings involved, it was an investigation close to our hearts."

In the course of the sleuthing, Balestrazzi says, it became apparent that the crime was not the work of professional art thieves but of everyday robbers who decided to try their hand at valuable paintings. Police further surmised that a deal with a Japanese collector had fallen through, leaving the loot stranded in Corsica.

D'Hauterives says that judging by the relatively minor damage incurred by the paintings, they probably never got very far. The two most affected were Monet's Field of Tulips (1886), which had two holes in the background, and Berthe Morisot's Young Girl at the Ball (1875), which had two holes in the background. "These flaws are easily corrected," says d'Hauterives, who is having all the paintings restored before putting them back on permanent exhibition this spring. "We are going to take advantage of their long absence by having them properly cleaned," he adds.

The most famous work in the group, which includes paintings by Renoir, Nattier, in this regard, by setting the example of assigning women top authority positions," she comments. "However, it's one's professional qualities that count."

—Ginger Danto

Berlin/Paris

CACHE IN A CUPBOARD

Nineteen years ago, a mysterious stranger appeared at the Nationalgalerie, the national museum of what was then East Germany, and told curator Lothar Bräuner that he wanted to donate 28 paintings. The man refused to identify himself, or to identify the third party from whom he had gotten the artworks. But he said he was leaving them at the museum "so that they would be properly preserved until being returned to their rightful owners." According to a legal document drawn up that day, Bräuner accepted the paintings—which were by such artists as Monet, Gauguin, Renoir, Cézanne, Corot, Delacroix, and Pisarro—and put them in a yellow wooden cupboard. They stayed there until last year, when a team of investigative reporters from the French news magazine L'Express discovered them.

Their resulting cover story, published on December 28, says that the paintings were stolen and removed by Nazis during the use, and Monet, is Monet's Impression, Sunrise (1873), a scene of morning fog and sun over the French port of Le Havre that was initially criticized for being "impressionistic"—and thus gave the name to one of the major movements in French art. Fragile and dusty, the work will be restored by a common method of transposing the pigment onto a new canvas which, d'Hauterives adds, "will ensure the painting's long future." It will then be placed in a bulletproof glass case for protection.

Balestrazzi, who has headed the art-theft unit for two years, found herself in the spotlight after the investigation's success—but not, she says, because of her sex. Of 2,000 commissioners in the French police force, 120 are women. "France is doubtless one of the most advanced countries in the world in this regard, by setting the example of assigning women top authority positions," she comments. "However, it's one's professional qualities that count."

—Ginger Danto

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