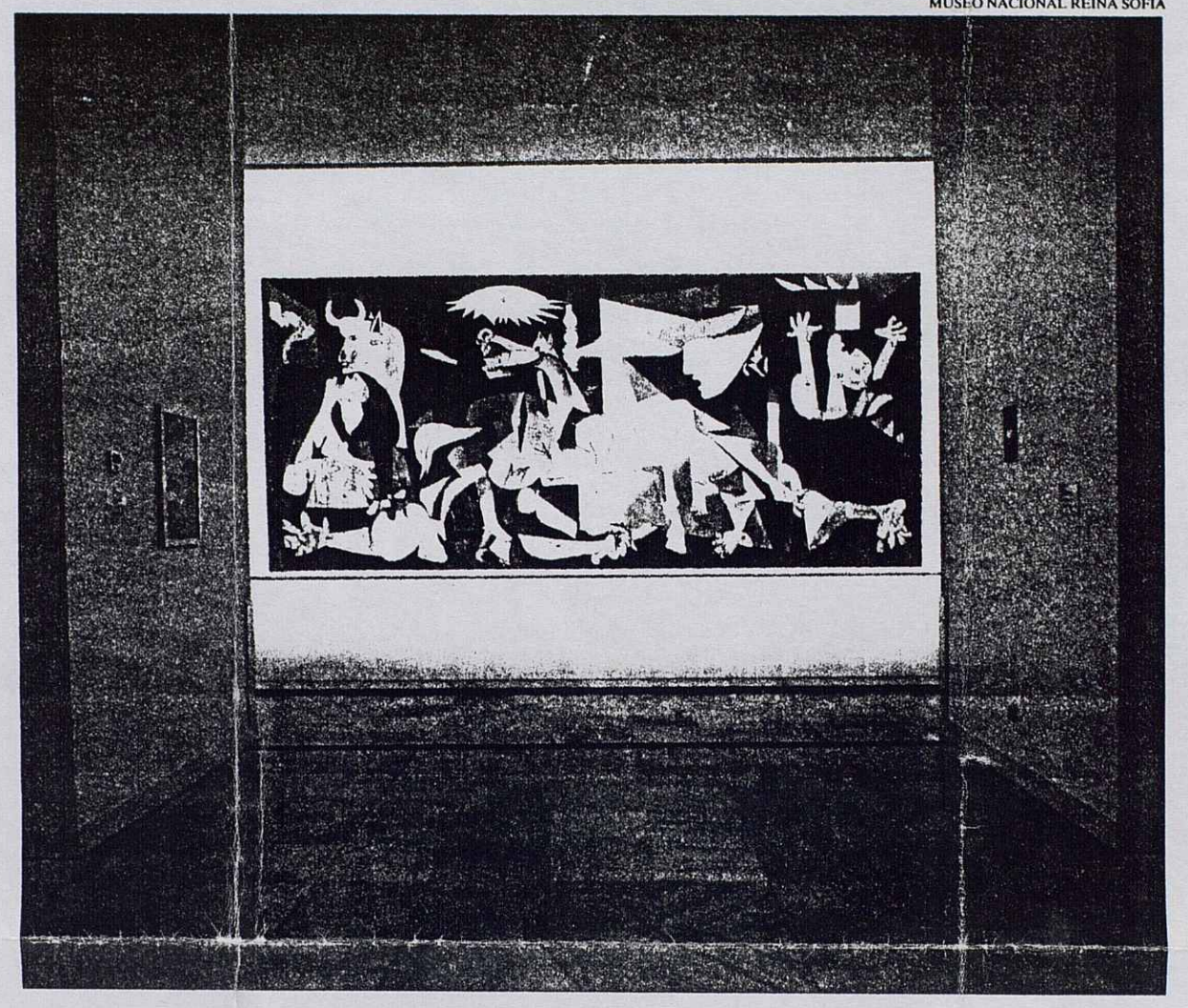
A rightful place in history

When Picasso's 'Guernica' left the Prado, many art lovers threw their hands up in horror. **David Sylvester** thinks they were wrong

MUSEO NACIONAL REINA SOFIA



'Guernica' in the Museo Reina Sofia: 'I have suddenly seen it as Picasso's — and therefore the century's — most important painting'

THERE are certain works whose history has the glamour of myth. In 20th-century literature the obvious examples are *Ulysses* and Proust, in popular entertainment *Gone with the Wind* and *Citizen Kane*. They are not always works of the very highest quality; they are works whose genesis or fate has for some reason made their very existence stimulating to the world's imagination. In modern art the work has to be *Guernica*. And *Guernica*'s myth carries a special weight, because it was brought into being by a real event which shocked the civilised world. So the myth includes, for instance, stories — perhaps true, perhaps apocryphal — that during the Nazi Occupation of Paris, Picasso used to hand out postcards of *Guernica* to German visitors, mainly army officers, and that, when one of them asked "Did you do this?", he answered "No, you did it".

The latest chapter concerns the fulfilment of Picasso's request that, when Spain became free of Fascist rule, the picture, which had been on loan from him for decades to the New York Museum of Modern Art, should be returned to his homeland as a national possession. The question was whether he had been specific about where in Spain he wanted it to go. There was nothing in writing, but some who had known him well said that he had wanted it in the Prado (the world's greatest collection of Old Masters) while others close to him said he had never asked for that.

When it was returned to Spain in 1981, it was hung in an annexe to the Prado, where by common consent it was not seen to advantage. Earlier this month it reappeared half a mile up the road in a haze of controversy. This was at the opening of Madrid's new museum of modern art, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, of which it is the centrepiece. It is presented there superbly, perfectly lit in a set-back space like a shop window which makes sense of the bullet-proof glass demanded by the possibility that the picture could still be provocative to neo-Fascists and the fact that vandalism in museums has become sickeningly fashionable. Oddly enough, the glass itself becomes an advantage aesthetically, rather like the glass which has sealed off the Michelangelo *Pietà* in St Peter's, Rome, since this was mutilated by a bullet. The separation makes the work more magical.

During the 40 years in which I have seen *Guernica* from time to time, I have always felt rather patronising about it, seeing it as a sacred cow which had inspired public interest and reverence because of its subject matter but which as a work of art was less moving than a number of the minor pieces which Picasso had created in association with it and certainly not as one of his greatest achievements. At the Reina Sofia I have suddenly seen it, probably because of the lighting, as Picasso's — and therefore the century's — most important painting. I have had the pleasure of perceiving that, like, say, Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* or Beethoven's Ninth, it is not just colossal and portentous and famous but marvellously good.

Perhaps the thing that has moved me above all is how the frenzied, helpless, agonized gestures of the figures, cutting through space in every direction, are locked together — like the pieces of a jigsaw — so that they are held in a terrible stillness which the explosive force in every inch of the design is endlessly trying to break through. It is only in finally responding to this tension between irresistible force and immovable structure that I have started to perceive the scale of the imaginative genius that underlies the deeply personal iconography, its choice and placing of actors and props, each functioning both as phenomenon and as symbol — the bull, the dying horse, the bird, the flower, the light bulb, the fallen warrior with a broken sword, the woman mourning a dead child, the woman falling from a burning house, the woman rushing across the scene holding a lamp — were worked out within a few weeks of the air raid with a conviction that gives it the inevitability of the classic religious iconographies — of Crucifixion or Resurrection or Entombment — which it took a whole civilisation centuries to evolve.

The Reina Sofia, before its opening as a museum with a permanent collection, was a gallery for temporary exhibitions, opened in 1988 and quickly famous for the sophistication of its choices of contemporary art, the stylishness of its installations and the beauty of the building itself. It is a neo-classical building round a cloistered garden which dates from the 1780s and was the Madrid General Hospital until 1965. It now provides 50 per cent more showing space than the Tate. This conversion

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into an art showplace of a public building which once had a practical purpose follows an analogous conversion in Paris, that of the Gare d'Orsay into the national museum of 19th-century French art. What happened there was a crime. Orsay is, of course, vastly popular, but that no doubt is because it works well as a Disneyland by showing to their advantage kitsch painters like Cabanel and Bouguereau, the makers of the Snow Whites of their time (sorry, Walt, that's unfair to you).

But the Impressionists! The minginess and hideous style of the spaces they're jammed into! The insane system of hanging which requires the walls to be dotted with rows of holes, like perforations in a sheet of stamps, whose optical effect constantly attracts and irritates the eye! So some of our most cherished paintings are lost to us. But it won't do to over-dramatise the calamity. It is not comparable to the mutilation and defacing of art in and on churches by God-crazed iconoclasts, for the artefacts will survive. They have been removed from us like kidnapped friends, not slaughtered. One day the French, with their intelligence and taste and national pride, will rescue them from their incarceration.

It has to be said in passing that museum personnel don't do destructive things only when they're working in converted spaces: the new wing at our National Gallery is a new building. The worst of the aberrations there — results of clever ideas unrelated to a sense of the physical presence of great paintings — is of course the hanging of the Pieros. Such blunders have happened, I'm told, in the wake of a lot of playing around with tiny reproductions of the pictures inside architectural models. Well, it's true that some successful marriages have come about when the partners have only exchanged photographs, but that's because people can change to adapt to one another; pictures can't.

At the Reina Sofia they've got it gloriously right. The works are displayed so that they are allowed to be vibrant entities, isolated enough from one another to live their own lives yet also related to their neighbours in ways that create dialogues which are both visually harmonious and intellectually stimulating. The proportions and style of the spaces — the architecture distinguished but neutral — and the quality of the lighting make second-rate art look almost first-rate and first-rate art sublime. (It will look better still if they can find the will and the money to replace the whitish marble floor they've inherited.) This Madrid museum, in short, has something of the sober grandeur of the spaces — likewise untainted by explanations stuck on the walls — of the Prado, that haven of civilisation in a cheapjack world.

The museum's actual holdings are still very much in a formative state. Given the current prices of modern art, even under the recession, no museum collection today can afford to buy its way to greatness. But a handsome museum which is run with intelligence and imagination and style is going to attract gifts (not least from artists), bequests and long-term loans, and the Reina Sofia already shows signs that it is going to have this sort of success. It will help if Spaniards have the good sense not to take their own art journalists too seriously. The grudging reception the museum has had in the home press has been very different in mood from the response of visiting luminaries from museums abroad.

As it stands, the Spanish collection includes some other important Picassos and selections of paintings by Gris, Miro, Dali and Tapies and of sculptures by Gonzalez and Chillida which range from the interesting to the excellent. The foreign collection has very little by artists born before 1900, but work of high quality by artists born since. There is a strong Fontana room and well-chosen pieces by Newman, Bacon, Kelly, Soto, Flavin, Scully and Nauman.

As finale there's a gallery with four enormous Schnabels, joyously ethereal. To say that a huge painting has qualities more likely to be found in a watercolour is normally to say that it's a monstrosity, something ridiculously overblown. Here the artist has achieved the feat of energising a vast area with the flimsiest of means rather as if the sounds of no more than six or seven instruments — the stringed ones playing tremolo — were combining to fill an amphitheatre. The notorious unevenness of Schnabel's output is profoundly unimportant: art is about winning or losing, not settling for a draw. At a time when almost all the best art is three-dimensional or photo-based, Schnabel's blend of flair, mastery and *chutzpah* provides a reassurance that the art of painting has still not been put to sleep by a wicked fairy.

☐ *The Reina Sofia is open 10am-9pm daily except Tues (010-34-1-467 4761).*

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