

Guernica tug-of-war fans the flames of Basque resentment

From Elizabeth Nash in Madrid

THE Basque regional government has asked to borrow Picasso's Guernica for an exhibition in Bilbao to mark next year's 70th anniversary of the destruction of the Basque town by aerial bombardment. But Madrid says the painting is too fragile to travel.

Picasso painted his cry against war shortly after the Basques' spiritual capital was flattened by Nazi bombs on April 26, 1937. The work – considered by many to be the 20th century's greatest painting – is the jewel in the crown of Madrid's Reina Sofia modern art museum. Basques, however, feel it belongs to them.

This is not just a tug-of-war over a painting. It is an emotionally explosive political power struggle over a symbol of Basque nationhood. Basques have a deep attachment to Picasso's homage to the town where hundreds died in a civil war bombing raid.

Basques remember that during 40 years of Franco's dictatorship, hanging a copy of Guernica in their front room amounted to a subversive act. They grieve that Guernica has never been seen in the region that inspired it and where, many claim, its rightful home should be.

The row has flared anew as Spain embarks upon a peace process following a ceasefire announced last month by ETA Basque separatists. But the tussle goes back 10 years, to when Frank Gehry's futuristic Guggenheim museum neared completion in the still filthy industrial wasteland of Bilbao. What persuaded New York's Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation to endorse that wild scheme, and what convinced the Basque regional government to pour some £70 million into such an ambitious regeneration project, was the expectation that Guernica would be displayed there.

The Guggenheim's sprawling "ship" gallery was, it's said, designed to house Guernica, and when the museum opened in 1997, the Guggenheim's New York president, Thomas Krens, campaigned furiously for Picasso's masterpiece to form the heart of the inaugural exhibition. Planting the Guggenheim in a city so far from the tourist track as Bilbao made sense only with Guernica as the top attraction.

But Madrid's culture ministry summoned a symposium of international art experts who advised that the much-travelled canvas was too damaged to move. Today's culture minister Carmen Calvo referred to these "many technical experts" when she insisted this month the painting was going nowhere. "I don't play politics with pieces of our national heritage," she said.

Miguel Zugaza, director of the Prado Museum, which mounts a blockbuster Picasso show in June with the Reina Sofia to mark 25 years since Guernica returned to Spain, backed the minister. "This is not a question of political will, but of practical considerations – this fragile work has travelled and suffered a lot," he said.

But for Basques it is deeply political. "This transcends technical considerations. To say it is too fragile is to insult our intelligence. We plan to transport it in its frame in a special protective vehicle. We'll pay," said Juan Ignacio Vidarte, director of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. He was speaking in 1997, but repeated the same thing last week.

"It's a cry for peace and freedom," said Miren Azkarate, spokeswoman for the Basque government. "Twenty-first century technology and the necessary human and material resources permit a transfer with all guarantees. It's

perfectly possible for a work that has crossed half the world to be shown in the land where the tragedy occurred, near the town whose name it bears, where it has never been seen.”

Guernica is certainly in poor shape. The canvas is cracked and distorted after being rolled and unrolled some 40 times, paint has flaked off, and scars remain from two knife attacks. Picasso frenziedly executed the work in 1937 for exhibition in Paris, and insisted it should never enter Franco’s Spain.

Guernica was held in New York’s Museum of Modern Art (Moma) until 1981, when it was brought to Madrid amid national rejoicing. Moma tried to restore it in 1957 with wax and resin that had to be heated and melted every time the canvas was rolled up for another move. The repair worsened the damage.

The Basques promise to transport Guernica in its frame, vacuum-packed and temperature controlled. In today’s peace process where gestures are all-important, who would predict the impact of Basque disappointment if their request is denied again?