

Controversial tapestry to star in Whitechapel reopening

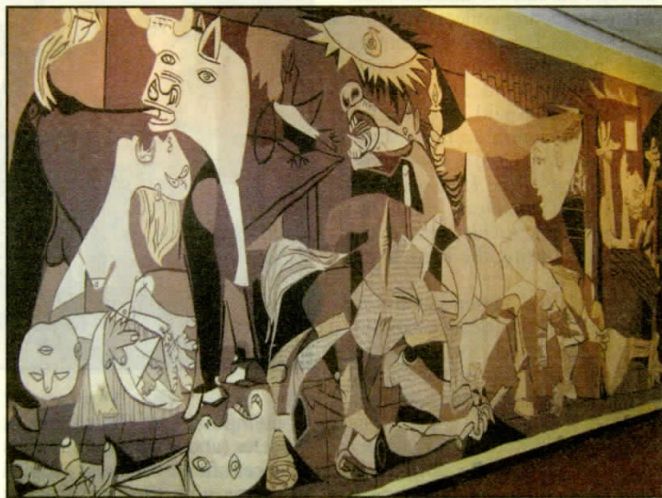
Work deemed sensitive at the United Nations

LONDON. A tapestry of Picasso's *Guernica*, which was at the centre of a row just before the invasion of Iraq, is to go on display at the Whitechapel Art Gallery on 5 April. It currently hangs at United Nations headquarters in New York, just outside the Security Council chamber.

On 5 February 2003, the day US Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the council on Iraq, a blue curtain was temporarily draped in front of the tapestry. A UN spokesman explained that as press interviews were given there, the plain hanging provided "an appropriate background for the cameras".

However, Mr Powell's advisors apparently felt it would look wrong for him to speak of war in Iraq in front of the work. The tapestry is a full-scale replica of the original painting, done in 1937 after the bombing of the Basque town. Now at the Museo de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, the painting has come to symbolise the destruction of war.

So why is the Picasso tapestry coming to the Whitechapel? In January 1939 *Guernica* was temporarily displayed at the gallery as an artistic protest against Republican atrocities during the Spanish Civil War. This has inspired Polish-born London artist Goshka Macuga to create an installation featuring the Picasso tapestry for the reopening of the Whitechapel, following a £13.5m expansion project. Her work will explore the links between art and propaganda. The one-year installation is sponsored by Bloomberg which is



Coming to London: the Guernica tapestry

owned by Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York (initially a supporter of the war in Iraq).

Whitechapel director Iwona Blazwick came up with the audacious idea of borrowing the tapestry. Commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller in 1955, it was placed on long-term loan at the UN in 1985 by his widow Margaretta. She has just agreed to the Whitechapel loan.

A major renovation of the UN building starts in November, which makes the loan easier, but the 6.7m-long tapestry will have to be taken down before then. It is unclear whether it will be returned to the UN after completion of work in late 2011.

Nelson Rockefeller had a strong attachment to *Guernica*, since he had been president of New York's Museum of Modern

Art in 1939 when Picasso sent his masterpiece there (it remained until 1981, when it was transferred to Madrid). A former US Vice President, as well as art collector, Rockefeller died in 1979.

Rockefeller would presumably have opposed the covering up of his tapestry at the UN in 2003, although something similar had occurred in his family. In 1933 he and his father had tried to get Picasso to paint a mural for New York's Rockefeller Centre, but the job ended up going to Diego Rivera. Among figures depicted in Rivera's mural was one of Lenin. When the Rockefellers asked him to remove Lenin, Rivera refused. The Rockefellers initially had the mural covered with a drape and it was then destroyed.

Martin Bailey