

# Guernica returns to its first British home

On the eve of its grand reopening, **Alastair Sooke** looks back at the Whitechapel Gallery's trailblazing role in exhibiting work by celebrated and cutting-edge artists

Seventy years ago, a modest art gallery in the East End of London pulled off a memorable coup by securing the loan of a world-class masterpiece. For the first two weeks of January, 1939, the Whitechapel Art Gallery exhibited Picasso's celebrated painting *Guernica*, created by the artist during the Spanish Civil War as a scathing depiction of man's capacity for cruelty.

The exhibition was opened by leader of the Labour Party Clement Attlee and proved to be a hit: more than 15,000 people passed through the doors in the first week alone, raising £250 for the Spanish Republican cause, as well as truckloads of working men's boots, which Picasso had decreed should be the price of admission (they were then sent to the Spanish front).

Luring back *Guernica* for a second UK showing has been the holy grail of the gallery's subsequent directors ever since – to no avail. Current director Iwona Blazwick, though, is about to come closer than any of her predecessors.

Early next month, the Whitechapel reopens following an ambitious two-year programme of renovation and expansion that has cost £13.5 million. The old library next door has been colonised and turned into a network of smart new galleries, reading rooms and studios. To celebrate the reopening, at the suggestion of Polish artist Goshka Macuga, Blazwick has secured the year-long loan of a life-size tapestry replica of *Guernica*, commissioned from two Parisian weavers by Picasso in the Fifties. It usually hangs

in the corridor outside the Security Council chamber in the UN headquarters in New York.

The revamped Whitechapel, designed by Belgian architects Robbrecht en Daem, promises to usher in a vibrant chapter in the gallery's history, though not at the expense of forgetting about its past. "The founder of the gallery believed that great art could change people's lives," says Blazwick, director since 2001. "And that ethos continues to this day."

The Whitechapel was established in 1901 by a young Anglican clergyman called Samuel Barnett who had moved from Westminster to the East End of London nearly 30 years earlier with a dream of founding an art gallery. His new parish of St Jude's in Whitechapel was an unlikely location in which to realise his vision: in the twilight years of the 19th century, the stinking alleyways off Brick Lane were a dingy stew of cheap lodging houses, brothels and thieves' dens, populated by impoverished workers and immigrants fleeing oppression. This was the backdrop for the violent murders perpetrated by Jack the Ripper in 1888.

And yet the gallery that Canon Barnett eventually founded on Whitechapel High Street, after holding free exhibitions in the schoolroom of St Jude's every Easter for 20 years, rapidly evolved into one of the most important spaces devoted to visual art in Britain. A century before Tate Modern, the Whitechapel was introducing the latest developments of the international avant-garde to an eager public.

The roll-call of foreign artists of the first rank that have shown there over the years is impressive: everybody from Picasso to Jackson Pollock. The gallery has a strong record, too, of supporting fledgling giants of British art: David Hockney, Gilbert and George, and Antony Gormley all had important solo shows at the gallery early in their careers. It was also where Nicholas Serota, now director of the Tate, earned his stripes: he took over at the Whitechapel in 1976, and stayed there for 12 years.

Like many 19th-century philanthropists, Canon Barnett and his wife Henrietta saw themselves as missionaries. They were determined to bring enlightenment to the heart of darkness in the impoverished East End. With a donation of £6,000 from the Victorian benefactor John Passmore Edwards, they were able to buy a plot of land in the middle of the rough neighbourhood of Whitechapel and build a gallery that would aim to showcase "the finest art of the world for the people of the East End".

The look of his new gallery was important. To encourage passers-by to drop in, there were no steps up to the front entrance, for instance. At the same time, the terracotta-clad exterior, designed by Charles Harrison Townsend in an up-to-the minute Art Nouveau style, signalled the ambition of the gallery's founders: this new space would be in the vanguard of modernity. Unlike the national museums, which were still closing at dusk, the gallery even had electricity, which meant that visitors

could stay until 10pm.

Whether or not East Enders came to marvel at the newfangled electric lights, the gallery's opening show, held in the spring of 1901 and featuring works by Constable, Rubens and Hogarth, among many others, was a success. In total, 206,000 people came to see it, with a record 16,000 visitors on a single day – attendance figures that directors of the gallery in later decades would kill for.

It was not until the second half of the 20th century, though, that the Whitechapel really came into its own as the pre-eminent destination for modern art in London. This was thanks to the visionary directorship of Bryan Robertson, who took over in 1952. Robertson reinvigorated the galleries, stripping the walls of coffee-coloured hessian and painting them white. He also inaugurated a series of important exhibitions, premiering contemporary American masters such as Jackson Pollock (1958), Mark Rothko (1961) and Robert Rauschenberg (1964), as well as emerging British artists including Patrick Caulfield and Bridget Riley.

"Bryan was the best director the Whitechapel has ever had," says Nicholas Serota. "He was internationally minded, he cared passionately about art, he supported underrated British artists, as well as fashionable names."

Serota, too, kept the bar high for his successors, expanding the gallery, masterminding an auction at Sotheby's that raised an impressive £1.3 million, and enticing a new generation of figurative artists



who appeared in the early Eighties in Germany and New York to exhibit in the East End. In 1982, he showed a little-known Mexican artist called Frida Kahlo, kick-starting her international celebrity.

Until the Sixties and Seventies, when the Hayward and Serpentine Galleries were established, the Whitechapel had little competition in the field of modern art. But in recent years, there has been an explosion of spaces in the UK that show work by living artists. Tate Modern opened its doors in 2000 and now pulls in five million visitors a year. Has this been a problem for the Whitechapel?

“Not at all,” says Serota. “It’s a totally different game now. There were very few shows at the Whitechapel when I was there that looked outside north-west Europe and North America. People are much more aware now of what’s happening across the world. There are still lots of very good artists who need shows. I would love to run the Whitechapel again. I could find all kinds of things that I would like to do that the Tate will never do.” Like what? “Oh, anything – younger artists, aspects of forgotten artists.”

“A colleague from New York,” Blazwick says, “told me that attendances at museums have gone up in the last six months by 20 per cent. It’s almost as though the more adverse our living and working conditions are, the more there seems to be a hunger and a need for art.”

Her words hark back to the principles of Canon Barnett, who believed he could improve the benighted lives of destitute Londoners through the transformative, transcendental power of art. The key to the future of the Whitechapel lies in understanding its past.

♣ The Whitechapel Art Gallery, London E1 (020 7522 7888), reopens on April 5

*The gallery's founder believed great art could change people's lives'*



**Modern times: a tapestry replica of 'Guernica', top, will be at the Whitechapel Gallery to celebrate its reopening; David Hockney, above, was one of the artists who showed at the gallery early in his career; a Frida Kahlo self-portrait, right**



