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The Prado: Spanish Culture and Leisure, 1819–1939

The Prado, we are told, means simply ‘meadow’, designating a stretch of land that regularly played host to Madrid’s many popular festivals (such as the festival of San Isidro) and not the museum that would eventually be named after this location.

This is an ambitious book. As the subtitle suggests, it attempts to tell the story of Spanish culture and leisure across two centuries. The scope is broad, the story complex, unfolding a veritable pageant that includes a cast of thousands, cultural, urban, political history; history of class and taste as well as museum history, all rolled into one. Such ambition is to be commended. It lifts the writing of cultural history to new heights, offering a contextual reading of the Paseo del Prado and the museum that came to bear its name. The simultaneous focus on leisure, culture and politics allows Eugenia Afinoguénova to map the different roles the museum was assigned to play in Spain’s shifting political landscape.

The story which cuts across elite and popular culture and charts Spain’s turbulent political history is told chronologically, each chapter explores a particular period of political power. The author recounts the changing fortunes of the museum in fascinating detail, drawing on travel accounts, visitor books, the periodical press, the satirical press and cultural commentary. The chapter headings oscillate between a focus on the museum and a broader sense of cultural history, anchored in the political. While this demonstrates the book’s broad reach it also results in a jerky read which lurches between detailed institutional biography, a broader cultural history of leisure and class, and an understanding of Spain’s political history as exemplified in the fortunes of its royal museum and the transformations it underwent.

The Paseo del Prado represented a charged location, in which the museum needed to assert its place and symbolic function. The Paseo invited *flânerie* before the term was coined; the mingling of different social classes gave it a shady reputation. The decision to place Madrid’s royal museum here, the Museo Real which opened in 1819, was intended as an enlightened act of urban regeneration to bring high culture to the area. The museum served as a backdrop to the Paseo del Prado’s long-established goings-on. In the Introduction entitled ‘Between the Prado and the Pradera’, Afinoguénova outlines the cultural complexities of this in-between position, highlighting often unintentional mutual inflections and cross-currents that a visit to the museum and to the Pradera generated. Afinoguénova fuses urban and political histories with museum history. In her account of the Prado, the museum is closely connected to established cultural manifestations which cut across the traditional high-low divide. This ambitious reading counters the long-established assumption that the museum visit functioned as a civilising ritual, a term that Carol

Duncan and Alan Wallach coined in their seminal essay on the universal survey museum which has been often unquestioningly invoked since.¹ Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach, “The universal survey museum.” *Art History* 3/4 (December 1980), 448–469. View all notes Museum visiting is here understood as a ritualistic act through which a new definition of the citizen was performed in museum culture emerging during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In contrast, Afinoguéova presents the Museo Real as both antidote to and extension of the urban life and popular cultural events unfolding on the Paseo del Prado just outside the museum’s hallowed neo-classical walls. In Afinoguéova’s reading the museum is a multivalent cultural institution open to different interpretations and appropriations; it was used by royalists and republicans alike to interrogate the making of Spanish culture.

This in-between position seems true to — in the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke’s (1795–1886) phrase — ‘history as it really was’. The reader is taken on a rich tour of 200 years of Spanish cultural history. The deep mining of historical source materials surfaces an abundance of factual detail which results in a thick description of the subject. But it is not always clear to what end details are told or what broader issues are being addressed. The pace is brisk with little time to reflect on the wealth of material held up for inspection. Afinoguéova is an eager guide, liberally dropping comparisons with other European situations into her narrative. Brief mentions of museum practices range from Paris to Vienna and Berlin to Munich. Whilst, these reference the author’s extensive knowledge, their brevity prohibits close analysis and in-depth understanding of similarities, differences, time-lags and influences. For example, we are none the wiser when the author claims that Christian von Mechel’s (1737–1817) re-hang of the imperial collections at the Belvedere in Vienna according to schools and periods showed similarities with the Museo Real’s early hang. Closer analysis is needed to make such assertions meaningful and productive.

The study’s broad scope and emphasis on large and multifaceted terms such as leisure and culture occasionally result in a lack of focus. For readers like myself who approach Afinoguéova’s book with a strong interest in museum history, the mention of other museums and their practices felt a bit tokenistic and not like the illuminating explorations they should have been, allowing a thorough evaluation of the specific Spanish version of cultural and museum politics. Similarly, a section such as the one entitled ‘Art and Nationhood in midcentury Europe’ practically merits a book-length study in itself. Afinoguéova sums up the formation of nation states across Europe in hasty and general brush strokes, thus offering little that is of use or new. The liminal space that is the Paseo del Prado, with its comings and goings, the mingling of high art and popular culture, the museum’s changing faces and functions as it lived in uneasy proximity to the Paseo, and the complicated history of Spanish politics it refracts and reflects is a fascinating topic, and Afinoguéova is brave to tackle it. Instead of offering a veneer of European context she would have done better to articulate her study’s theoretical framework more

explicitly, cast her analysis into stronger relief and make it stand out from the detail of historical research. Fascinating topics such as the museum's affinity to theatre and its relationship to other, popular forms of visual entertainment such as the diorama deserve fuller exploration as does the intriguing use of 'fake' or pseudo culture which was invoked by key commentators to blur and sometimes deliberately invert class distinctions and assert a political right to the museum space.

In an account so tantalisingly strewn with facts and detail a reader will always catch glimpses of things they wish the author had allowed themselves more space to explore. Afinoguéova's attempt to write a fact-rich history of place is ambitious and brave. It offers a new way of interrogating the history of our cultural institutions by inserting them into a web of cultural manifestations that take into account the complexities of life and 'history as it really was'. A tighter grip on her theoretical framework, which needed to be made transparent throughout the text and not left behind after the introduction, and a more frequent interrogation of facts and the precise purpose of sharing them would have invested the incredible wealth of historical material mined for this ambitious book with greater clarity in the telling of what is a fascinating story of a liminal space and the complex cultural configurations it witnessed.

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Notes

1 Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach, "The universal survey museum." *Art History* 3/4 (December 1980), 448–469.