

## History of Art trip to Spain

In November, 26 members took part in a trip to the Madrid region, staying at a comfortable 4\* star hotel close to the main sights. Our first full day included a coach tour of central Madrid, including the Plaza de Toros and the Bernabeu stadium. We were actually travelling in the team bus of Salamanca F.C. so we attracted a few funny looks from passers-by, who probably thought the team had changed drastically! We then had a fascinating tour of the Reina Sofía art gallery, including works by Dali and Picasso's 'Guernica'.

The following day we travelled to Toledo, a World Heritage site, where we were treated to panoramic views of the town and the Tagus gorge. A guided walk took us in the Juderia (Jewish quarter), including a former synagogue designed in the breath-taking Mudéjar (Moorish) style. Close by in Santo Tomé church we saw El Greco's masterpiece, 'The Burial of Count Orgaz', a fine example of the Mannerist style. Toledo cathedral is a monument to the High Gothic style. The interior is spectacular, including a huge golden monstrance said to contain the first gold brought by Columbus from the New World and a Baroque altarpiece called El Transparente. The sacristy of the cathedral has been turned into a small art gallery, with paintings by Goya, Titian, Velázquez, Caravaggio and Bellini, including 19 El Greco masterpieces. Amazing!! More El Greco's were seen in the quieter museum of Santa Cruz, a former orphanage and hospital with lovely cloisters.

You probably need a full day for either, but we saw the Prado and Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in one art-packed day. Of the two, I found the Thyssen the better experience, with Blanca proving to be a wonderful guide. The collection is arranged chronologically top-to-bottom and all the usual suspects are there. I was especially impressed by Ghirlandaio's 'Portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni' and the late Van Gogh 'Les Vessenots in Auvers'. Some of us took the opportunity to see the temporary exhibition of work by Max Beckmann, the German Expressionist artist. The Prado is vast and is widely considered to have one of the world's finest collections of European art, dating from the 12th century to the early 20th century, based on the former Spanish Royal Collection. With nearly 8,000 paintings on view it was always going to be a struggle! Our guide concentrated on Spanish art but we saw much more, including Bosch's enigmatic 'Garden of Earthly Delights' and 'The Haywain'. It was nice to relax with a coffee in the peaceful Botanic gardens afterwards.

The Spanish monarchy built several royal palaces outside Madrid and we saw two, the first being at La Granja, near Segovia. This was a summer retreat for the Kings of Spain and the house and (wonderful) gardens are based on Versailles. The collection of Flemish tapestries inside were a real treat to behold. Before leaving for Segovia we had the obligatory refreshment stop and a chance to sample some 'poncho segoviana', a Spanish dessert from the town. It is made with custard, cake and marzipan, all held in place with syrup! In the hill-top town of Segovia, another World Heritage Site, we at least had the opportunity to burn off a few calories! Starting from the very impressive Roman aqueduct, dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., we were able to explore this fascinating walled town, with its interesting Gothic Cathedral, Juderia and Alcazar (castle). There were fine views to the Guadarrama mountains with their snow-capped upper slopes. As our return flight was late afternoon, we had the opportunity to visit another summer palace at El Escorial on our final day. The forbidding exterior of grey granite encloses a wealth of treasures in yet another World Heritage site. From the lavishly-decorated Gothic basilica we moved to the Pantheon of the Kings. This contains twenty-six marble sepulchres containing the remains of the kings and queens of the Habsburg and Bourbon dynasties from Charles I to the present. Before leaving we had the chance to view Rogier van der Weyden's monumental 'Calvary' with its life size figures. With that we came to the end of another enjoyable trip, now where shall we go next year?!

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