

The promise and tragedy of Spain's great art museum

by Nora Hamerman

The Prado

by Santiago Alcolea Blanch
Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1991
474 pages, hardbound, \$95

During 1990, when the Titian retrospective exhibition was hanging in Washington, three famous pictures by the Venetian Renaissance artist, his *Danaë* of 1553, the *Entombment of Christ* of 1559, and the *Self-Portrait* of Titian's very last years, presented a disconcerting appearance. While most of the other pictures in the show, (except those borrowed from some eastern European collections) displayed rich, glowing colors and vibrant brushwork, these three masterpieces were heavily discolored with yellow varnish. The paintings belong to one of the world's greatest picture galleries, that of the Prado in Madrid. Two of them were painted by Titian on commission from the King of Spain.

Similar cases appear throughout this splendid new picture book on the Prado museum. Deep horizontal cracks are visible in the photographs on both panels by the eccentric Flemish painter Reymerswaele.

There are notable exceptions. *The Maids of Honor* by Velázquez, which has few competitors for the rank of the greatest surviving painting of all time, had been lovingly cleaned and conserved by John Brealey, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's senior painting conservator. In gratitude for this donated labor in late 1989, the Prado arranged a unique loan exhibit of that Spanish artist's works at the New York institution. This was part of a serious effort under Prado director Alfonso Pérez Sánchez to bring the Prado into the 20th century and to give it the laboratories and professional staff appropriate for an institution of such stature.

The Prado is a special place. It has a density of great works by certain masters, especially those two incomparable Spanish painters, Velázquez of the 17th century, and Goya, whose career spanned the late 18th century and well into the third decade of the 19th. Lyndon LaRouche, who visited the Prado a decade ago, reminded me recently of the impact of the Prado's paintings when he observed that the sheer density of works by these Spanish masters has a unique, nonlinear effect, unlike what can be produced by one or merely a few.

This density evokes a concept of the creative mind at its highest potency, similar to hearing a sequence of the mature works of a composer such as Beethoven.

Professor Alcolea Blanch's book attests to the strengths of the Prado collection, which includes, besides, obviously, the Spanish School, in-depth representation of the Flemish and Italian Renaissance. As is well known, the Prado holds several of the greatest works of Rogier van der Weyden and by far the largest number anywhere of Hieronymus Bosch's altarpieces, which were sought after by King Philip II for the



Raphael's Holy Family of the Lamb. The Prado's collection of this Renaissance master is the largest outside Italy, a product of Spanish-Italian ties from the 15th and 16th centuries.

Flemish school.

As for Italy, besides the abundance of Titians, the Prado owns more great pictures by Raphael than any other museum outside of Florence. These holdings attest to historical ties which go back to the 15th and 16th centuries. Flanders had economic ties to Spain related to the wool trade (Spain produced the wool, ruining its countryside permanently under the Mesta system, which was finished into luxurious textiles in Flemish cities) and these turned into political ties as the Spanish ruling dynasty, the Trastámara, intermarried with the descendants of the Duke of Burgundy who ruled Flanders.

Spain also emerged by the second quarter of the 16th century as the dominant foreign power in the Italian peninsula, directly ruling or strongly influencing the governments of most of the peninsula. It was in this period and the ensuing "Golden Age" lasting into the 17th century, that the bulk of what is now the Prado collection was formed. Only the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, which began out of the Medici family art collection, can compare to this.

A checkered history

This book, written by a Spanish art historian, differs from most "coffee-table" art books in having a very long text which describes the history of the collection and the founding of the museum itself (by an otherwise undistinguished monarch, Fernando VII, in the early 1800s) as well as the vicissitudes of the museum during the last two centuries. The story includes details of the harrowing escapades of the Civil War of 1936-39, when the Anarchist-dominated republican government ordered the emergency evacuation of many of the art works to sites outside Madrid and even to League of Nations custody in Geneva! It was left to the nationalists under Franco to retrieve these treasures and bring them back to Spain literally weeks before World War II broke out, at which time it would have been too late.

Particular attention is paid to Dr. Pérez Sánchez's effort, since becoming director in 1983, to equip the museum with the necessary personnel and economic infrastructure as well as juridical autonomy. Among his prime goals were an expansion in exhibition space, because of all its rich collections, only a small percentage can be seen by the public; facilities to turn the Prado into "a center of rigorous research"; and a dedicated, scientifically qualified preservation staff. A nearby palace, Villahermosa, was designated for the expanded exhibition space.

Then, in a sudden and unexplained decision of the Felipe González government of Spain in 1988, this palace was turned over to exhibit the Baron Hans-Heinrich von Thyssen-Bornemisza's family art collection, of some 700 pieces, for a period of ten years. Pérez Sánchez bitterly lamented the loss to the Prado, and pointed out, in a published comment, that since exhibition space had already been converted in the main building for offices and laboratories in anticipation of the use of Palace of Villahermosa, for the next ten years now,



Goya's The Milkmaid of Bordeaux, a work painted when the artist was in his 80s, one of the dense collection of paintings by him in the Prado.

not more, but fewer of the Prado's great pictures will be on public view!

Fired for opposing Gulf war

On March 11, 1991, the conflict took a dramatic turn. The director suddenly resigned from his post—forced out after he had joined 17 other prominent figures a month earlier in signing a manifesto in protest against Spain's enthusiastic participation in George Bush's war on Iraq.

Sources familiar with the museum world say that the sudden ouster of Pérez Sánchez fits into a broad and disturbing pattern of the dismissal of museum directors who have a commitment to the curatorial and technical staff and collections under their care, and their replacement by political appointees, which began with actions taken by Margaret Thatcher a decade ago in London. This is not to say that the world of museum directorates of the postwar era represents the pinnacle of cultural leadership, but merely to point out that we seem to be headed toward something worse rather than something better.

There is a tendency, already well advanced in Italy and now making inroads in Spain, to stress that because great art treasures are part of the universal heritage of mankind, they must therefore be entrusted to a supranational institution for their care. Countries which have abundant cultural riches but few financial resources, present many such problems of

conservation of their art works.

The usual procedure these days, and the one which had been followed by Dr. Pérez Sánchez, is to raise donations from foreign donors and multinational corporations to finance the conservation work. Unesco, the U.N. cultural agency to which author Alcolea Blanch is affiliated, also undertakes to sponsor restorations of art deemed to be part of the world's vital cultural patrimony.

It would be difficult to oppose such interventions under present circumstances. But one cannot help but feel queasy in the face of the "internationalizing" of national artistic treasures under the aegis of what is a British-run "free trade" clique of banking and trading cartels. It is wrong to present this as the only choice.

In the long run, if the post-industrial idiocy of the past quarter-century's monetarist banking policies is reversed, the resulting industrial and demographic boom will generate more than enough money to pay for the preservation of the art. It will also necessitate the building of new cities and create the climate for production of a new Renaissance, in which works like those in the Prado museum will be a rich resource of inspiration rather than the relics of a dead, nostalgically remembered and irretrievable bygone era. This is why everyone who really cares about great art, should work to ensure that Lyndon LaRouche's plan is implemented, for making Europe the powerhouse of a worldwide economic recovery, spinning out from the "Productive Triangle" in the industrial heartland between Berlin, Paris, and Vienna. Encompassed by one of the "spiral arms" of that development plan, Spain will become a wealthy industrial power, capable of sustaining its artistic treasures by itself.

Careless editing

Editorially speaking the book suffers from a neglect which is surprising in a such an experienced publisher of art books as Abrams. Perhaps all the care was lavished on the color separations for printing the plates, carried out in Barcelona. The translation is poor, sometimes merely stiff, but sometimes literal to the point of being ridiculous. At least twice a picture of the well-known Old Testament story of Moses is labeled, strangely, "The Metal Snake," instead of "The Brazen Serpent." Names of artists and sitters are frequently not translated out of their Spanish spelling, into either the Italian original or an English equivalent. Instead of the normal designation "oil on panel," the funny term "oil on board," or even "paint on board" occurs throughout. The Infant St. John the Baptist, called "San Juanito" in Spanish, appears at least once in the text as "St. Johnette," a novel usage that could exist in English, but doesn't. The most ludicrous stab at a literal translation from Spanish occurs in the case of a gorgeous painting by Tintoretto of a woman baring her breast, which is solemnly captioned, "The Woman Who Discovers The Bosom." And quite a discovery it must have been, indeed.

Sovietologist still in love with Gorby

by Denise Henderson

What Went Wrong With Perestroika

by Marshall I. Goldman

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258 pages, hardbound, \$19.95

What Went Wrong With Perestroika is Harvard University professor and "adviser to the Soviets" Marshall Goldman's latest work of mythology about the Soviet Union. This unabashed, if not obscene, "romance of Gorbachov" purports to be a summary account of the history of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1990, with a prologue and epilogue that refer to the Aug. 19, 1991 attempted coup.

Although there are many standpoints from which *What Went Wrong With Perestroika* can be shown to be either factually wrong or a misinterpretation of the facts, the most important aspect of the book is its blunt message that it is the intent of Anglo-American policymakers to deindustrialize the former Soviet Union back to the Stone Age. Any self-respecting Russian—or, for that matter, any U.S. industrial engineer from the 1950s—reading Goldman's diatribe against the Soviet machine-tool industry in particular, would have to wonder from what insane asylum this man has escaped.

A useful corrective to Goldman's mythologizing is *EIR's* 1985 Special Report, *Global Showdown: The Russian Imperial War Plan for 1988*, which forecast 1) that Gorbachov's perestroika was actually part of the Ogarkov Plan, a strategic plan to create a Soviet war-winning capability; and 2) that the attempt to implement this plan, would fail, further weakening an already unviable Soviet imperial economy based on looting of raw materials from its eastern European satellite countries.

"Plan B," wrote the report's authors, "is based significantly on Moscow's exhaustive study and monitoring of the writings of U.S. economist Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. As far as we are able to determine thus far, this monitoring of LaRouche is centered within the Soviet Academy of Sciences. The Soviets fear that the Reagan administration might adopt the reforms in economic policy proposed by LaRouche. . . . Soviet planners associated with Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov and General Secretary Gorbachov, are purging the Soviet apparatus of the so-called 'Brezhnev Mafia,'