

# El Greco to Picasso

TIME, TRUTH, AND HISTORY

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Francisco de Zurbarán,  
*Saint Hugh in the Refectory*  
(*Saint Bruno and the Miracle of the Uneaten Meat*), ca. 1655.  
Oil on canvas. 262 x 307 cm.  
Museo de Bellas Artes, Seville.

One of the most comprehensive exhibitions of Spanish painting ever mounted in New York, *Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso: Time, Truth, and History* features works by the great Spanish masters of the 16th through the 20th centuries: Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664), Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1618–1682), Francisco de Goya (1746–1828), Juan Gris (1887–1927), Joan Miró (1893–1983), and Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), as well as El Greco (1541–1614), Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), and many others. Unlike other overviews that display paintings in a strictly chronological order, this exhibition is broken into 15 distinct sections, each based on a theme running through the past five centuries of Spanish culture. These thematic axes highlight affinities between the art of the old masters and that of the modern era and challenge conventional art histories that would seek to separate them. Accordingly, within each section of the exhibition works from different periods appear side by side, offering often radical juxtapositions that cut across time to reveal the underlying coherence of the Spanish tradition.

Until recently, art historians bracketed Spanish painting between El Greco and Goya, maintaining that 20th-century avant-garde movements such as Cubism and Surrealism—both of which were pioneered

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by artists of Spanish origin—broke completely with the traditions that preceded them. Today we have sufficient historical perspective to see that, despite their revolutionary aesthetic leaps, the great artists of the early 20th century were nourished by traditional models that were, furthermore, local in character. These models found their sources in the Spanish School of the late-16th and 17th centuries, an era commonly regarded as the Golden Age of Spanish painting. The aesthetic styles developed during these years—from the visionary opulence of El Greco to the intimate naturalism of Velázquez—dominated artistic production in Spain throughout the following two-and-a-half centuries, as the nation's imperial power declined and Spain became increasingly isolated internationally. Even Goya, arguably the greatest Spanish painter of the 19th century, could break free from his forerunners only by facing them square in the eye; as the French romantic poet Théophile Gautier observed, "In his desire for artistic innovation, Goya found himself confronted by the old Spain."

By the late 19th century, following Goya and the spirit of romanticism, a national critical

conscience had awoken in Spain's artists and intellectuals, but the country's antiquated political, social, and economic structures largely thwarted this modernizing impulse. Accordingly there began a long period of exile or simple emigration, which marked the careers of all the 20th-century masters exhibited here. During this time many stereotypical treatments of recurring subjects that had formed in the wake of Spain's Golden Age were cast in a new light, as Europe rediscovered the art of the Spanish School and began to write its history for the first time. Chief among these characteristics was Spain's resolute anticlassicism, which was reflected in its timeless customs, its culture, and its art, and which came to be seen as a source of resistance to the overwhelming homogeneity associated with an industrialized, modern world. Thus as Spanish artists stigmatized the ideological clichés of traditional Spain, they also realized that formal innovation could only come if these same aesthetic values were brought up to date. It is this endless return and reappropriation on a formal and iconographic level that binds together the works of Spanish artists, from Picasso, reaching back through Goya, to the masters of the Golden Age.

In this presentation the connections between Spanish art of the modern age and of the past become especially apparent through a series of carefully chosen thematic nodes: either established genres, such as still life, landscape, or portraiture, or more particular subjects, such as depictions of children, nudes, crucifixions,

LEFT: Juan Gris, *Still Life with Newspaper*, 1916. Oil on canvas, 73.6 x 60.3 cm. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., Acquired 1950. © VEGAP, Madrid, 2006

ABOVE: Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Still Life with Fruits and Vegetables*, ca. 1602. Oil on canvas, 69.5 x 96.5 cm. Várez Fisa Collection, Madrid.

or domestic scenes. The origins of each of these themes lie in the culture of 16th-century Spain, which was itself heavily influenced by the Counter-Reformation. For instance, in a *bodegón* (a uniquely Spanish term for still life, referring to the pantries, or *bodegas*, where the pictured objects were kept), one typically finds a group of humble objects inscribed with transcendental values but arranged with the utmost naturalism. The first master of this tradition, Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627), was himself a monk, and the inky blackness in the background of his still lifes seems to allude to the void that lies beyond worldly concerns. In his painting *Still Life with Fruits and Vegetables* (ca. 1602), lemons, cabbage, carrots, and other perishables evoke a sense of transience even as they are carefully arranged along a rigid sill with the utmost precision, implying the timelessness of mathematical law. Over 300 years later, Juan Gris would paint *Still Life with Newspaper* (1916), reconfiguring Sánchez Cotán's geometry within the Cubist idiom, where its immortal transcendence takes on a modern, wholly secular character.

Similarly, in the field of portraiture the old masters came to constitute an inescapable historical model for the artists of the avant-garde. Francisco de Goya's *The Duchess of Abrantes* (1816) reprises the depiction of noblewomen pioneered by Velázquez, in which a dualistic notion of femininity as both modest and immodest was articulated through the combination of carefully displayed luxury items and a subtly introspective countenance. Based on an increasingly outdated moral sensibility, this paradoxical understanding of womanhood nevertheless persisted into the 20th century, even as the concept of the "lady" disintegrated. In his painting *Portrait of Marie-Thérèse Walter with a Garland* (1937), Picasso depicts his lover with all the richness and ambiguity of his predecessors. The historical context and stylistic tendencies have changed dramatically, but the basic terms on which the painting is based have not.

Through such juxtapositions, *El Greco to Picasso* provides a revolutionary new perspective on Spanish painting of the past five centuries. These carefully chosen comparisons reveal previously unseen links between artists working in very different historical contexts, even as they bring the exquisite paintings of Spain's Golden Age into the curving ramps of the Guggenheim Museum for the first time. Together with works by the masters of the avant-garde, the incredible power and beauty of the Spanish tradition bursts forth all the more brilliantly.

Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso: Time, Truth, and History has been organized by Carmen Giménez, Curator of 20th-Century Art, and guest curator Francisco Calvo Serraller, Professor Chair of Art History, Universidad Complutense, Madrid.

Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Marie-Thérèse Walter with a Garland*, 1937. Oil and pencil on canvas, 61 x 46 cm. Musée de la Ville de Paris, Paris. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / Sucesión Pablo Picasso

RIGHT: Francisco de Goya, *The Duchess of Abrantes*, 1816. Oil on canvas, 92 x 70 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

