

THE FRENCH TASTE

AND ITS PRESENCE IN SPAIN
[17th – 19th CENTURIES]

This exhibition looks at the principal routes by which French taste arrived in Spain through more than 100 works created from the 17th to the 19th centuries which are still part of the Spanish cultural heritage. This process of transfer, culturization and cross-fertilisation is analysed both chronologically and thematically in the exhibition's eleven galleries. The opening rooms offer a focus on the arrival of the first works from France during the reign of Charles II, the last Spanish Habsburg monarch, and on the golden age of French painting. The following galleries are devoted to the consolidation of French taste during the years of Bourbon rule, with a particular emphasis on the reigns of Philip V, Charles IV and Isabel II, while the exhibition concludes by examining the decline of this monopoly of taste around 1870 at a time when Spain had become a fashionable model of Romanticism.

In the mid-17th century France embarked on its unstoppable cultural conquest of Europe, within which Spain was a key location. Over the following centuries the projection of French splendour, social mores and "savoir-faire" spread in a progressive but unequal way from the court to the other settings for the country's visual and material culture.

The exhibition thus pays tribute to the more than two hundred years during which everything French was a synonym not just of classicism in the arts but above all of distinction, magnificence and incomparable elegance with regard to interior decoration and dress in Spain.

COMPLEX RELATIONS: PORTRAITS, EXCHANGES AND GIFTS

Throughout the 17th century, known in France as the *Grand Siècle*, and in contrast to Italy, the Iberian Peninsula was a destination rarely favoured by French artists due to the political hostility of the two nations. Successive matrimonial alliances between the royal houses of Bourbon and Habsburg facilitated the exchange of portraits and diplomatic gifts but only a few French painters, such as Claude Vignon, crossed the Pyrenees. The double marriage in 1615 of Louis XIII and Anne of Austria and that of her brother Philip IV and Isabel of Bourbon of France did not prevent the latter country declaring war on Spain in 1635.

During the second half of the century Louis XIV's France replaced Spain as the leading European power, and the monarch embarked on a progressive and unstoppable political and cultural conquest of the continent. In 1659 the Treaty of the Pyrenees brought an end to the Thirty Years War, imposing a long-lasting peace that was sealed with the marriage of the French monarch and the Infanta Maria Theresa of Austria, Philip IV's daughter, a union that symbolised the reconciliation between the two nations. Of their six children only the Dauphin of France survived, his portraits revealing a return to classicism inspired by antiquity.

The fourth royal marriage, that of 1679 between Charles II of Spain and Marie-Louise of Orléans, Louis XIV's niece, resulted in new portraits and diplomatic gifts arriving at the Alcázar in Madrid. These include Pierre Mignard's *Saint John the Baptist*, present in this exhibition, which Philip of Orléans gifted to his son-in-law, the king of Spain.

COLLECTING AND FRENCH INFLUENCE

In the 17th century the lengthy wars and tense relations with Paris complicated the arrival of French paintings in the Iberian Peninsula. Some, however, did cross the frontier as diplomatic gifts or exchanges while others reached Spain via Rome, then the artistic capital of Europe where a considerable number of French artists had settled. Painters such as Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain were considered the interpreters of the Italian school and their works were consequently acquired in Rome for Spanish collections.

At the same time, the 1630s and 1640s were a golden age for French painting in Paris. Simon Vouet dominated within the context of a reinvigorated, classicising art which favoured a restrained, harmonious and refined language. The Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture was founded with those tenets in 1648, promoting a classical, elegant and erudite type of art throughout the reign of Louis XIV. From 1660 onwards France enjoyed internal stability and a strengthened international position which the absolutist monarch associated with his own person. The arts were thus used in the service of the Sun King to illustrate his power and magnificence under the supervision of Charles Le Brun, First Painter to the king.

In the following century France continued to configure the bases of its aesthetic identity through painters such as François Boucher and Jean-Marc Nattier, two of the principal creators of the image of Louis XV's reign. Many of the paintings and important drawings of this period did not arrive in Spain at the time of their creation but rather in subsequent centuries.

THE ARRIVAL OF ARTISTS IN BOURBON SPAIN

In the final years of the 17th century French art triumphed over the Spanish tradition while in the political sphere the Sun King also achieved his aims. Charles II, the last of the Spanish Habsburgs, died in Madrid on 1 November 1700, having named in his will the Duke of Anjou, Louis XIV's grandson, as the heir to the throne. In 1715 the Duke ascended the throne as Philip V, thus installing a new dynasty of French origin, the Bourbons, in Spain.

During his reign Philip V embarked on introducing the court models of decoration, etiquette and “French comfort” that he had known at Versailles. In addition to the sumptuous objects which he had inherited (known as the “Dauphin's Treasure”), the monarch commissioned a large number of decorative items and furnishing from Parisian craftsmen for the embellishment of the Royal Residences. French artists arriving in Spain also contributed to these decorative campaigns, including the architect René Carlier, the sculptors René Frémin and Robert Michel and the gardener Étienne Boutelou. The taste for the French style was thus significantly promoted in court circles.

Following his ascent to the throne, Philip V also focused on securing a portraitist to his taste in Madrid. With the end of the War of the Spanish Succession he was able to attract a renowned French painter to court, Michel-Ange Houasse, whose portraits did not, however, meet his expectations. The creator of the sovereign's official image would ultimately be another French painter, Jean Ranc, who was replaced after his death by Louis-Michel Van Loo.

CHARLES IV: FRENCH TASTE AT ITS HEIGHT

During the second half of Philip V's reign and the subsequent ones of his sons Ferdinand VI and Charles III the Spanish court turned to Italian models with a consequent and progressive waning of the initial intent to impose France as the principal institutional and artistic reference.

Following Charles IV's succession to the throne in late 1788 the court acquired a more Spanish character. Most of the key positions relating to the arts were now occupied by national architects, painters and sculptors trained at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando. In parallel, the king's well defined and sophisticated tastes, his quest for the exquisite and his passion for collecting led to the arrival of a large number of decorative items as well as the latest trends from France, at that time starting to overtake Rome in terms of artistic preeminence. Sent from France to decorate Spain's royal residences were sumptuous porcelain, ornate tables, Lyons silks, *all'antica* bronze braziers and important clocks. A great lover of the latter, Charles counted on the services of the French clockmaker François-Louis Godon, who supplied him with outstanding examples.

The most important decorative project during Charles IV's reign was the Platinum Cabinet in the Real Casa del Labrador in Aranjuez, an audacious early example of the French Empire style. Designed by Napoleon's architect Charles Percier, the leading Parisian cabinetmakers and bronze casters participated in its creation while its interior was decorated with works by renowned French painters.

REVOLUTION AND EMPIRE

French art of the revolutionary and Empire periods corresponds to a time when France and Spain's social paradigms moved apart to a considerable degree. The outbreak of the Revolution profoundly disconcerted Spain, which adopted a hostile position towards the new French regime. With the execution of Louis XVI in early 1793 the pre-existing family pacts collapsed, leading to the outbreak of the War of the Convention between the former allies.

The Treaty of Basel of 1795 brought an end to the conflict and re-established fluid relations, artistic exchange and Charles IV's decorative projects "in the French taste". In a diplomatic gesture aimed at ingratiating itself with its intimidating neighbour, during the Consulate the Spanish monarchy commissioned Jacques-Louis David to paint the large equestrian portrait of Napoleon crossing the Alps which is now in the Musée national des châteaux de Malmaison et de Bois-Préau. This masterpiece would have been the most important testament in Spain to monumental French painting of the time had Joseph Bonaparte not taken it with him on his departure. Joseph's short-lived reign did not see the arrival of any prominent French artist in Spain as the monarch favoured local names in his intention to secure the loyalty of his subjects.

The works on display here reflect the rapid unfolding of events which in less than three decades led from a family pact to the Spanish War of Independence and from the Europe of absolutism to the Europe of nations. Portraits of the chief protagonists are shown alongside genre scenes, clothing of the period and objects of symbolic value.

FRANCE, SYNONYM OF LUXURY

Following Philip V's ascent to the throne, the Spanish court saw the arrival of luxury objects which he had previously inherited (known as the "Dauphin's Treasure") and others that celebrated marital alliances with the French royal house, such as the fan that commemorates the marriage between his daughter María Teresa and the Dauphin of France. With regard to gastronomy, the tastes and fashions of Versailles were also introduced, resulting in the presence in Madrid of French silversmiths who created important services for the adornment of royal dining rooms and great noble houses.

During the reign of Charles IV the king's agents acquired decorative items in Paris for his leisure palaces, including clocks, candelabra and mantelpiece sets, and his successor Joseph I continued with such commissions. Following the Restoration in Spain and with Ferdinand VII now king, items made at the French royal manufactories were sent to the court, such as the beautiful landscape service still in the Royal Palace in Madrid, its painted scenes based on the prints that illustrate Alexandre de Laborde's travel books. Also dating from this period is the delicate glassware known as the "caramel" type in reference to its cabochon-carved motifs.

The French taste continued to spread throughout Spain during the reign of Isabel II, taking the form of new decorative trends. Traditional workshops such as that of the bronze caster Thomire, the creator of the Empire style, now adapted their language to these new tastes, evident in the elegant dessert dish on display here which was made in the year of the queen's wedding. French silver reached shops in Madrid in the area around the Puerta del Sol, notably that of Jean-François Mellerio, who opened a branch of his long-established family jewellers on calle Espoz y Mina in 1848. Isabel II purchased various ewers from this establishment, including the splendid example that she gifted on the occasion of the baptism of the Infante don Francisco de Borbón at the royal palace; a work in the historicist style made by the Parisian house of Crosville & Glachant. The queen presented French objects as official gifts to authorities, institutions and churches across Spain. Displayed here is the fine chalice by Louis Bachelet which she donated in 1865 to the church in Zarauz, where it remains today.

While some members of the nobility acquired French objects to decorate their town palaces from establishments in Madrid, Spanish ambassador in Paris, who commissioned a splendid table adornment comprising more than thirty silver objects from the goldsmith François-Desiré Froment-Meurice. An elegant fruit dish with allegorical motifs from that decoration is displayed here.

INTERIORS IN THE FRENCH TASTE

In the second half of the 17th century France established the canons of European taste. Together with the norms of manners, etiquette and refinement, the country imposed its customs on practices of dress and the decoration of interiors, which were the domestic settings for socialising “in the French style”.

The “*salon*” was the favoured venue for the celebration of gatherings, informal debates and concerts. The presence of musical instruments denoted a family’s high educational and social status, exemplified here by an important harp with early Neo-Gothic decoration made in 1810 by the prestigious Parisian firm of Erard. The importance of music in 19th-century society was also expressed visually in the presence of decorative busts of composers, such as the one of Charles Gounod modelled in terracotta by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. In the context of the eclectic and ostentatious decoration of the Second Empire, these objects coexisted with other more exuberant ones such as the candelabra in the form of a rampant lion inspired by Japanese porcelain.

Within the new culture of appearances that had emerged in the 18th century, the dressing table became the item of furniture for the *toilette*; for preparing oneself to perform on the world’s stage. Travellers made use of portable toilet sets comprising finely made cases housing cosmetic and washing implements. In another domestic context, the eroticism and sensuality that characterised one of the trends within 18th-century court painting moved with similar discretion from the walls of private galleries to prohibited books and some everyday items, such as small boxes with hidden compartments and pocket watches. The example exhibited here has an explicit sexual scene concealed under the delicate chased cover.

The hangings and silks from Lyon (such as those made by Camille Pernon) which decorated 18th-century interiors were replaced in the following century by manufactured wallpapers, which continued to denote social but at more accessible prices. Among the most exclusive types were the panoramic wallpapers such as *Les Jardins français*, in which figures in Romantic-era dress are shown strolling around and at leisure in a picturesque garden. The material culture of French *savoir-vivre* survived in stained-glass windows, which moved from illuminating medieval sacred spaces to domestic buildings. From the end of the century, the glass made in the Mauméjean studio in Madrid added a sense of distinction, prestige and modernity “in the French style” to numerous residential spaces.

THE PARALLEL COURT OF THE MONTPENSIERS

On 10 October 1846 the double wedding was held in Madrid of Queen of Isabel II and her cousin Francisco de Asís, and that of her sister Luisa Fernanda and Antoine d'Orléans, Duke of Montpensier and younger son of Louis Philippe of France. Aware of the importance of self-promotional images in the creation of his reputation, when the Duke arrived in Spain from France he was accompanied not only by Alexandre Dumas but also by two reputed French painters who enjoyed his patronage and whom he commissioned to produce a pictorial cycle on the key moments of his entry into Madrid and the celebrations to mark the so-called "Spanish weddings."

The Montpensiers first settled in France but abandoned that country after the 1848 Revolution which deposed Louis Philippe and after some changes of location finally opted to settle in Seville, a city which combined historical tradition with the factors necessary for industrial development. The Duke established a small Andalusian, French-influenced court and became a notable art patron. His sophisticated tastes and the decoration of his town residences, particularly the sumptuous interiors of the San Telmo palace, made the "*goût Montpensier*" fashionable and encouraged the emergence of a new refinement, manifested in the appearance of "French style" homes and luxury shops in Seville. At the same time, the couple's constant presence at the events which comprised the city's social life, such as bullfights, country pilgrimages and secular and Christian festivals, contributed to the consolidation of a collective identity and the birth of tourism.

PORTRAITURE IN THE FRENCH STYLE

Throughout the 19th century the genre of portraiture, traditionally considered of inferior rank in the academic hierarchy, moved beyond conventional codes of representation and adapted itself to growing public and private demand from a broader clientele, becoming the modern genre par excellence. The portrait established itself as an effective tool for the configuration of the identities of sitters who, through their painted and sculpted images, aimed to establish their positions - whether social, political or intellectual - in different contexts and settings.

At the same time, with the decline of the Grand Tour the centre of elegance shifted from Italy to Paris. Having oneself portrayed there was a sign of distinction for European high society throughout the 19th century. Some chose to commission their portraits from sculptors while others opted for miniature painters. A notable example of monumental painting is the equestrian portrait of Eugenia de Montijo which emphasises her Spanish origins four years after she became Empress of France following her marriage to Napoleon III. Her portrait is flanked in this gallery by two works that exemplify aristocratic artistic taste: the fine pink marble vase with bronze mounts in the decorative style that became fashionable during the Second Empire in France, and Joseph-Michel-Ange Pollet's sculpture *Night*, a work commissioned by the Empress herself.

THE ROMANTIC VISION OF SPAIN

From the viewpoint of Enlightenment France, Spain represented undesirable values to be ignored or opposed. After Italy lost its role as strict arbiter of artistic taste and the Napoleonic wars complicated travelling for the French, the Iberian Peninsula came to be seen as a new Orient, both near-at-hand and unknown, arousing the interest of a handful of pioneering scholarly travellers, such as Alexandre de Laborde. The writer Chateaubriand applauded their initiative when he stated that “now Spain only needed painting.” Direct knowledge of the country as a result of the War of Independence (1808-1814) and the punitive expedition of the Hundred Thousand Sons of Saint Louis (1823) introduced French artists (prior even to Spanish ones) to previously unappreciated landscapes, customs and traditions but ones that now proved to be profoundly captivating.

This first wave of Romantic hispanophilia, which gave rise to a charming, picturesque vision, was followed by a second one in the 1860s in which artists strove to capture Spain’s “local colour” more faithfully. At the same time, the writer Jules Champfleury, who promoted the realist trend as the direction to be followed in painting, positively emphasised the austerity of French painters of the past, such as the Le Nain brothers (whose work was confused at the time with that of another artist known as the *Maître des Jeux*) and Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin. Modern artists should thus follow their example and paint the reality around them with the spontaneity and sobriety of their predecessors, distancing themselves from academic artifices.

EPILOGUE. THE ROAD TO MODERNITY THROUGH SPAIN

In contrast to the picturesque Hispanicism applauded in Paris for its depiction of “local colour”, other French artists undertook a more profound quest for the essence of Spain. This was the case with Édouard Manet, who in order to escape from the scandal that *Olympia* had provoked at the 1865 Salon decided to travel to Spain that summer to see the works of Velázquez at first hand. Manet had started to evolve his unique synthesis of the Spanish style some years before, configuring a formula which transposed the lessons of the earlier masters onto modern life. Painted in Paris the year before his trip to Spain is one of his most Spanish still lifes, the exquisite *Grapes and Figs*, a work indebted to Velázquez, particularly in the unfocused planes and background and the juxtaposition of blacks and whites.

Manet only wrote one letter in Spain, which he sent from his hotel on the Puerta del Sol to his friend Henri Fantin-Latour, another artist who fervently admired Velázquez’s painting and defended the genre of still life. The latter’s exceptionally delicate *Vase of white Stock* reflects a type of intimate realism devoid of any grandiloquence. It transmits the serenity of the contemplative mood of painters such as Zurbarán and Chardin, recalls the delight in textures characteristic of the Flemish and Dutch traditions, and looks to Velázquez in the undefined quality of the ochre background.

Théodule-Augustin Ribot, a common friend of Manet and Fantin-Latour, undertook the same route, assimilating the lessons of the great masters of the past which he reworked into a personal vision that has little to do with the dictates of artistic taste of the time. His *Gunsmith* clearly looks to the art of both Manet and the Spanish Golden Age master José de Ribera. As Marcel Fouquier wrote after the artist’s death: “Ribot [...] is above all what we might call a Ribera, but a French Ribera.”