



THE THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA COLLECTION

A COMPREHENSIVE SURVEY OF THE HISTORY OF ART

Duccio, Van Eyck, Carpaccio, Lucas Cranach, Dürer, Caravaggio, Rubens, Frans Hals, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Kirchner, Mondrian, Klee, Hopper, and Rauschenberg are among the great names of Art History whose works can be seen in the Palacio de Villahermosa, home of the Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Located almost opposite the Museo del Prado and very close to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, this Museum, housed in a palace re-modelled by the architect Rafael Moneo, was the previously missing element whose arrival completed the city's "art triangle". With the additional presence in Madrid of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, the most important private collection of art in the world until June 1993 when it was acquired by the Spanish State for 350 million dollars, few cities can offer more to the art enthusiast.

Comprising almost 1,000 paintings and incorporating the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection since 2004, the Museum's collection offers a complete survey of European painting from its origins in the 13th century to the late 20th century. Through a chronological arrangement, the visitor can follow the most important trends and movements in paintings starting with the Italian Primitives led by Duccio and concluding with late Surrealism and the development of the Pop aesthetic in the 1960s as well as work by painters who have continued the figurative tradition up to the present day.

One of the Collection's most notable characteristics as a Spanish museum is the fact that it complements the Museo del Prado with regard to its Old Master paintings and completes and expands the type of modern works to be seen in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, given that the strong points of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection are precisely those that are weaker in the other two museums: Italian and Flemish Primitives, German Renaissance art, 17th-century Dutch painting, Impressionism, German Expressionism, Russian Constructivism, geometrical abstraction and Pop Art. Particularly unique is the Museum's holding of 19th-century North American painting, a field almost unknown in Europe but which occupies two galleries in the Museum.

Initially loaned for a period of nine and a half years then acquired in 1993 by the Spanish State, the Collection (of which 75 Old Master paintings are exhibited in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya) is the result of the collecting activities of Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, who died in April 2002, and of his father, Baron Heinrich.

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The History of the Collection

Baron Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza began the Collection in the 1920s. Focusing primarily on Old Masters, by the time of his death in 1947 he had assembled a collection of 525 paintings. In 1930 the Alte Pinakothek in Munich presented the first public exhibition of works from this collection. Two years later the Baron purchased the Villa Favorita in Lugano, Switzerland, from Prince Leopold of Prussia with the intention of creating a home for his growing collection. On his death, however, the collection was divided among his heirs and it was his son, Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza, who devoted his efforts to reassembling it, buying back paintings from relatives. In this initial phase the Baron continued to focus on Old Masters, then in the 1960s started to build up a modern collection. The Baron's particular interest lay in the field of German Expressionism, a school considered "degenerate" by the Nazis, who destroyed many works of this kind. Gradually, the Baron's fascination with the German Expressionists led him on to acquire works by Russian avant-garde artists and other pioneers of abstraction. He then came to acquire important Impressionist, Post-impressionist, and early 20th-century European paintings, as well as English post-war painting by artists including Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, and 19th- and 20th-century North American painting.

Villa Favorita became too small as it could house no more than 300 paintings and the Baron decided to look for a new home for the Collection. The quality of the building in Madrid offered by the Spanish State and its proximity to the Museo del Prado were the factors that convinced him to bring the Collection to Spain. On 20 December 1988 an initial loan contract for a period of nine and a half years was signed. That date also saw the establishment of a foundation created by the Spanish Government, represented by the then Minister of Culture, Jorge Semprún and by Baron Thyssen. A Board of Trustees was constituted, comprising five representatives of the Government and another five representing the owners of the Collection. The Board's first task was to commission the architect Rafael Moneo to remodel the interior of the Palacio de Villahermosa in order to house the Collection. On 13 May 1992 the newly remodelled palace was presented to the press, ready to house the almost 800 works from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection that would travel to Spain. During the summer of 1992 and in accordance with a highly-detailed action plan drawn up by the Foundation in Madrid in collaboration with Villa Favorita, the works were moved to Madrid from their former home in Lugano.

On 8 October the Museum was officially inaugurated at a ceremony presided over by Their Majesties the King and Queen of Spain. Two days later it opened to the public and the long queues that wound round the outside of the building indicated the interest and expectation aroused by the arrival of the Collection in Spain. From that moment onwards a process of contacts and dialogue between the Baron and Baroness and the Spanish State was initiated with the intention of permanently installing the Collection in Spain, an idea that became a reality only nine months later. On 18 June 1993, the Cabinet approved a Royal Decree that authorised the Government to issue the contract through which the Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza acquired ownership of the 775 paintings that formed the collection of the same name. Once confirmed by a Real Decree/Law by the Spanish Parliament on 3 August 1993, the works all became permanent Spanish cultural patrimony.

Under the same contract, the Palacio de Villahermosa was handed over to the Fundación, whose statutes were also amended at this date: the Board of Trustees now consisted of twelve members, of whom eight were appointed by the Spanish Government and four designated by the Thyssen-Bornemisza family. The Minister of Culture was from that point on the head of the Board, while Baron Thyssen was Honorary Lifetime President and Baroness Thyssen-Bornemisza was Vice-president. As a result of all the above, Baron Hans Heinrich and his father's wishes to maintain the Collection intact and guarantee public access to it became a reality.

The permanent installation of the Collection in Spain seemed to be the culmination of this relatively short but intense history of a collection; however, this has not proved to be the case. Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza decided to continue the family tradition and over the past few years has assembled her own collection, which on the one hand includes works inherited from her husband and on the other is continually enlarged with new acquisitions.

The Story continues: the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection

As indicated above, over the past few years Baroness Thyssen-Bornemisza has built up an excellent collection of paintings, partly based on works donated to her by her husband (including the sculptures by Rodin that mark the start of the collecting activities of the first Baron Thyssen) and others acquired on the international and Spanish art markets. Following their presentation in Madrid in 1996 and continuing the Baron's policy of taking his works on tour, the Baroness' collection has been seen in numerous cities in Spain as well as in North America and various countries in Europe and Asia.

The Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection now comprises more than 600 works. They include paintings by artists of the stature of Simone Martini, Zurbáran, Jan Brueghel the Elder, Salomon Ruysdael, Jan van Goyen, Canaletto and Guardi, among the Old Masters represented. The primary focus of the Baroness' collection is, however, the 19th and 20th centuries. Together with notable holdings of Spanish and North American paintings, the Collection is particularly rich in the work of international figures such as Courbet, Corot, Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, Renoir, Degas, Gauguin, Bonnard, Vuillard, Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Gris, Léger, Nolde, Kirchner, Kandinsky and Delaunay.

In June 1999 it was announced that the two buildings adjoining the Palacio de Villahermosa had been acquired with the intention of enlarging the home of the Museum in Madrid in order to house the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, which would be loaned without charge for a period of eleven years. The signing of a Statement of Intent by the then Minister of Culture, Mariano Rajoy, and by Baroness Thyssen-Bornemisza took place in the Palacio de Villahermosa on 30 September of that year. At this point both parties manifested their desire to reach an agreement that would allow for the permanent installation of this collection in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid. Building work on re-modelling the new areas was immediately started, directed by the architects Manuel Baquero, Robert Brufau and the BOPBAA studio (Josep Bohigas, Francesc Pla and Iñaki Baquero). In February 2002 the definitive agreement was signed that confirmed the terms of the previous ones, and June 2004 saw the inauguration of the new spaces.

Once again, a member of the Thyssen-Bornemisza family, in this case Baroness Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza, has made a decisive contribution to the enrichment of Spanish public collections with the loan of her collection. It could be said that this inclination towards public service is undoubtedly one of the distinctive characteristics of great collectors, whose primary aim is to share their love of art with as many people as possible.