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San Telmo Museoa

PEOPLE AND LANDSCAPE: AN ARTISTIC JOURNEY THROUGH THE CENTURIES

A THEMATIC TOUR ON VISUAL ARTS

FOR ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS

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SAN TELMO MUSEOA

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PEOPLE AND LANDSCAPE: AN ARTISTIC JOURNEY THROUGH THE CENTURIES

A THEMATIC TOUR ON VISUAL ARTS

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The San Telmo fine art collection is arranged in classic chronological and stylistic order. This is true of both the works themselves and the written texts that accompany them. The periods covered are: gothic, renaissance, baroque, neoclassicism, the development of different schools in the 19th century and avant-garde artists of the 20th century, and the exhibition contains works by some of history's greatest artists, including el Greco, Tintoretto, Rubens and Sorolla, as well as a number of prominent Basque artists, such as: Regoyos (or at least his works painted in the Basque Country), Iturrino, Zuloaga, Arteta, Ucelay, Lekuona, Oteiza, Chillida, Basterretxea, Ameztoy and Ferrer.

Secondary school teachers wanting to offer their students a general overview of art history will therefore find excellent examples in the San Telmo Museum. They will be able to illustrate their educational programme and find interesting contents for study, without having to reserve a guided tour. Of course, if you do require more in-depth information or wish to organise a customised visit that is specially adapted to the specific needs and interests of your students, then please do not hesitate to contact the museum's education service.

The museum has a large, varied collection of works by a broad range of artists, which are illustrative of many different styles, techniques and themes. The collection covers the period from the 15th to the 20th century and is housed in two exhibition rooms specifically dedicated to Fine Art: the Historical Collection and the room entitled "100 years of Basque art". Both of these rooms are characterised by the wealth and diversity of the works of art contained in them.

It should always be borne in mind that the main aim of any guided tour is to leave visitors with the feeling of having had a pleasant, instructive experience. It is therefore important to avoid confusion and ensure that the group has understood the basic concepts. To this end, the proposed tour focuses mainly on two elements, which together form the backbone of the entire visit. The aim is to teach visitors that, in addition to being a question of aesthetic taste, art can only really be understood in the context of the society which created it, a society in constant evolution.

The two backbones of the visit are as follows: portraits and landscapes. By charting the development of these two genres over the centuries, as well as the evolution of the main pictorial styles, we gain a better understanding of the development of society itself: from religious paintings to rural scenes, workers or summer resorts, and from the interests of royalty to those of first the aristocracy, and later the bourgeoisie. The tour strives at all times to use plain, simple language that is not overly technical and can be easily understood by all members of the public.

If, instead of a guided tour by the museum staff, you decide to organise an independent visit, you can, if you wish, use the material in this book to guide you in your comments and observations. If you decide on this option, we recommend that the group leaders visit the Fine Art exhibition rooms beforehand in order to prepare. Whatever you

choose, this book contains a series of comments proposed by the museum in relation to certain selected works. Each group is free to decide whether to organise their visit around these comments, or indeed any other ones they feel to be more appropriate, or whether they prefer to use them either before or after their visit to San Telmo.

Outline of the guided tour:

Start of the tour, at the entrance:

Welcome, introduction to the museum and explanation of the activities to be carried out.

Church: video (13 min.).

Thematic tour:

The tour starts on the 2nd floor. From the cloister, we access the tower (towards the exit) and climb up the stairs to the second floor (you can also use the lift if you prefer). The visit begins with the Historical Collection, which charts the development of art from the 15th century onwards.

After looking at the works in this room, the tour continues on down the stairs at the back to the cloister, from where it “doubles back” to the door located next to the entrance to the tower. This door provides access to the “100 years of Basque art” room, where the visit continues.

The whole visit should take approximately one hour (at least).

15th CENTURY: RELIGION RULES, BUT...

INTRODUCTION

The 15th century was characterised in the Basque Country by a period of intense economic growth. Castilian wool set sail from Bay of Biscay ports bound for Flanders, which in turn sent manufactured goods back to the peninsula, and Basque iron was sold in both regions. Flemish goods included these oil panel paintings, one of the country's specialities.

PORTRAITS

Look at this pair of paintings depicting Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist. We know which is which thanks to what they are holding and how they are dressed, as well as to the banners on which their names are written. Religious iconography hardly differed at all from painting to painting, and often the only clues we have as to the identity of the subjects are animal and vegetable symbols. For example, the chalice with serpents tells us that the figure in the painting is Saint John the Evangelist, because a Roman emperor once tried to kill him with poisoned wine. Saint John, however, blessed the wine before drinking it, thus causing the poison to evaporate (symbolised here by the serpents rising out of the chalice). Other than these small differences, the figures are more like characters than actual people: if we changed their symbols, they could easily be almost any one of the saints. Look around you. The saints in the pictures beside these ones are so alike, they could almost be brothers.



LANDSCAPE

The landscapes in the background contain no elements that enable us to recognise them as specific locations. They are symbolic environments. In the case of John the Baptist, it was said that his mere presence was enough to cause deserts to become green again. Here then, plants and animals (birds, rabbits and flowers) are symbols of purity and simplicity. In the other picture, next to Saint John the Evangelist there is a bird holding an inkwell and quill in its beak. Why a bird? Because quills were made from bird feathers.



Although they also have symbolic meaning, the plants in these pictures are technically rendered with a greater degree of realism. This is because, unlike in previous periods, symbolism was no longer enough, so the composition is “naturalist”: various plants are used to give a sense of depth and distance, there are tone nuances in each colour, and the shape and proportion of the objects depicted are realistic. During the previous era, known as the Romanesque period, size indicated symbolic importance rather than real dimensions, and landscape as a background simply did not exist.

CONTEXT

The consolidation of realism as a pictorial concept influenced the spread of oil painting, since this medium was conducive to precision and carefully-rendered detail. However, it was not just a question of technique. Society was changing, and while religion continued to be of paramount importance, the idea of the individual also began to gain ground. Consequently, painting began to strive to reflect not only an ideal, but also the real world in which the artist and subject lived.

16th CENTURY: THE INDIVIDUAL TAKES CENTRE STAGE

INTRODUCTION

Following the rediscovery and study of classical culture, art and humanism underwent a resurgence all over Europe. The renaissance reached its height during the 16th century. But this did not mean that religion became less important; quite the opposite in fact, as evident in the wars fought for religion reasons. However, man (and to a much lesser extent woman too) gained a much more prominent place in art. The major creative hubs of the artistic world, the Netherlands and Italy, developed with extraordinary force and vigour.

PORTRAITS

Portrait painting, which began (rather timidly) to develop during the 15th century, came into its own from the 16th century onwards, eventually becoming one of the most important pictorial genres. Art reflected the rise of individualism: symbolic representation was no longer enough, and individuals had to be rendered with their own physical features, right down to the very last detail.

Of course, this individualism did not extend to everyone, only to those who could afford to pay someone to represent them with all the attributes of their economic, social and political power.



Consequently, portrait painting developed mainly at the royal courts of Europe. Although more fanciful works can be found, such as the portrait of a page boy (who was not a simple servant, but rather a nobleman in service at court), most paintings were large works illustrating the subject's powerful status as much as, or even more than, his

physical features. For example, many subjects were painted in suits of armour, a symbol of military might, even though such garments were hardly ever used any more in actual combat.

LANDSCAPE

Landscape painting also became more popular during this period, so much so, in fact, that it almost developed into a genre of its own.... almost, but not quite. Two examples: The Virgin of the Grape. If we were to take out the Virgin and Child, in the background we would have another work, a naturalist landscape perfectly defined and depicting everyday images (a house, a ploughman at work, etc.).



Saint John on the Island of Patmos. Although the symbols are still very much present (the eagle, for instance), if we were to cut the painting in half, we would have two pictures: one of Saint John dressed in beautifully rendered clothing and writing the Gospel (incidentally, note that John is depicted as a young, muscular man – the influence of Michelangelo), and another showing a beautiful naturalist landscape.





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CONTEXT

Following the conquest of America, as the monarchies and bourgeoisie consolidated their power (especially in Holland), new clients began to demand motifs different from those requested by the Church.

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17th CENTURY: AN ERA OF CONTRASTS

INTRODUCTION

The baroque period was the golden age of visual art. Precious metals from America arrived in Seville, where a new class began to establish itself: the Catholic bourgeoisie. In the world of sculpture, religious images made from wood for the Easter processions became increasingly sought-after. Encouraged by a counter-reformist Church, this school of sculpture also resonated with the more popular religious sentiments of the era. In painting, the most assiduous clients continued to be royalty and the Church, although there was some demand also for smaller works that were “religious, but not only religious”.

PORTRAITS

This portrait of Mariana of Austria is magnificent as regards both its composition (note the play of perpendicular and diagonal lines) and its technique. Although at first glance it may seem simple, almost crude, every single detail has been meticulously calculated. The figure is seated, and thanks to the perspective, one senses that the other people, who do not appear but who are nevertheless there (for a start, we who are at this moment looking at the picture) are standing in front of her, at her service, as inferiors rather than equals. She “looks” at us, but her posture holds no invitation to approach. Quite the opposite, in fact; her body language warns us to keep our distance. She is neither young nor beautiful, nor does she aim to appear so (her body is completely hidden). She makes no effort to seem agreeable or pleasant – “I have no need to” she seems to say. She is wearing no jewels or ornate clothing, and the black and white vestments imply a powerful life, a woman who answers to no one but God.



LANDSCAPE

In the 17th century, religion was everywhere. In fact, it was so present, so much a part of everyday life, that it was literally integrated into the landscape. In these two paintings by Ignacio Iriarte (an artist from the Seville school who was born in Azkoitia), the religious theme is central yet “minor”.



It is as if the religious theme was just an excuse to paint the landscape in which the events are set, and it is that landscape that is the true subject of the painting.

In the crucifixion of Saint Peter, this is even more evident. The scene is not even centred, and the actual events occupy less than a quarter of the whole canvas. What's more, despite the fact that the painting depicts an extremely violent act, the artist's rendering of it is very bland. It is almost as if the men in the picture were hammering a post into the ground under the impassive gaze of their colleagues, rather than nailing a man to a cross. Instead of using the landscape to highlight or contextualise the dramatic nature of the scene (a storm, floods or high cliffs, for example), the artist seems to want to transmit a sense of calmness and serenity.



CONTEXT

During the 17th century, wherever the Counter-Reformation triumphed, the new Catholic bourgeoisie demanded landscapes, much as the Dutch had during the 16th century. However, unlike the Protestant bourgeoisie, the new Catholic middle classes wanted religious paintings too, although obviously not as large as those which hung in churches, because they wanted them to decorate the walls of their houses.

THE 18th CENTURY: THE ART OF DOCUMENTATION...

INTRODUCTION

The baroque style did not die out, but rather became a more gentle, “human” version of itself.

This new style was known as rococo. At the other extreme, neoclassicism took the Greek and Roman classics as its model and prioritised science, measurement, proportion and realism over the violent plays of light and dark (chiaroscuro) and horrific scenes of earlier periods. Both portraits and landscapes were painted “true to life”, albeit in a somewhat idealistic manner: everything balanced, everything light – even the colour tones were more pastel in nature.

PORTRAITS

During the 18th century, not only were the contrasts and colours gentler, the subjects themselves also seem pleasanter and more agreeable. They were still, however, mainly people from rich, noble families, since commissioning a painting was no cheap affair. But the overriding desire was no longer to show off their power and distance from the common people, but rather to highlight their gentler side and humanity. These three half-length portraits are good examples of this new “closeness”.

- The rich gentleman (as his clothes denote) was painted without the aristocratic white wig and with an earring, which suggests a rather unconventional lifestyle.
- The lady is elegantly clothed, but her dress is not shown in full, with the focus rather being on her bare bosom. Instead of a rich necklace she wears a wreath of flowers in her hair.
- The officer of the French Armada is not in his dress uniform and nor is he holding any weapons. Rather, his portrait highlights the more scientific side of his profession: the globe, books, a compass for measuring distances on maritime charts, etc.



LANDSCAPE

These views of Barcelona and Tortosa depict calm, balanced landscapes that are nevertheless true-to-life. The measurements, proportions, etc. that appear in the paintings are the same as can be found in the landscapes themselves (or rather could be found almost three centuries ago).



The landscape is, without doubt, the main focus of the pictures. The figures are figures that belong there, sailors and washerwomen, but they themselves are not important. In fact, they have their backs to us because their only function is to ratify the landscape itself and provide a sense of scale.

Much the same can be said about this archaeological landscape. The title says it all. We do not know whether the figures are archaeologists or goatherds, but it doesn't really matter since they are only there to give a sense of scale and to show us the true size of the magnificent ruins. It is the ruins themselves which are the main focus of the scene.

There is no religion, unless we count the pagan religion of the ruins. It is a cultured reference to the classical world.



CONTEXT

The 18th century was the “Century of Light”. It was the age of neoclassicism and the Enlightenment, a period which prioritised science and technological progress over prejudice.

While not rejecting religion, it nevertheless demanded freedom of thought and expression, and preferred reason and the individual to more “celestial” themes.

19th CENTURY: THE PREDOMINANCE OF DIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

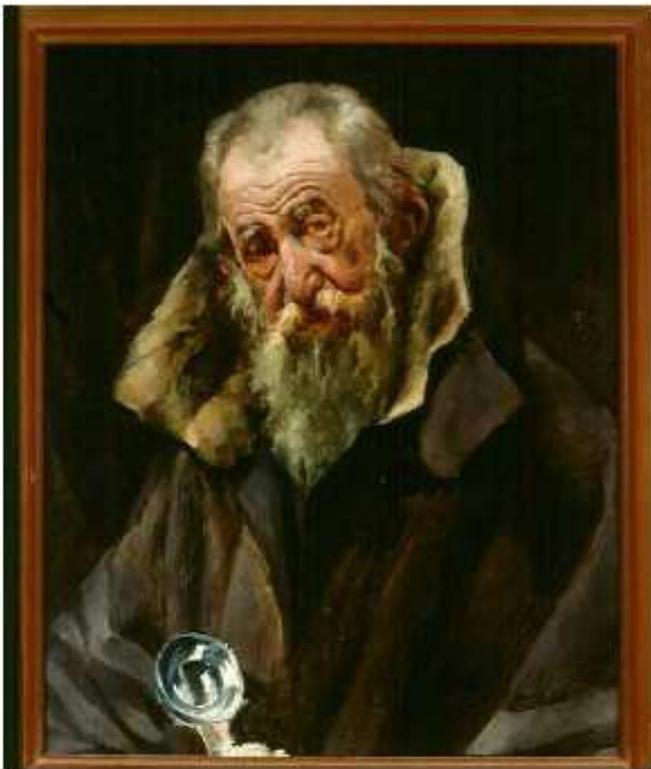
The 19th century was characterised by an impressive evolution of styles and pictorial techniques.

Variety was, during the eighteenth hundreds, truly the spice of life. New themes were chosen, or old ones revisited, and oppositions were sometimes used to reflect the contradictions of a society in constant transformation.

PORTRAITS

Sorolla's beggar and gipsy are pure portraits; they contain no denunciation, symbolism or metaphor. As photography developed, "objective" portraits became available to a broader spectrum of the population and painting no longer aimed to document, but rather to reflect intensity, psychology and expression, as well as, of course, the talent of the artist himself.

As a result, those on the edges of society began to appear as subjects of portraits. The important thing was the work of art itself, not the subject depicted.



LANDSCAPE

Since it was now the job of photography and other graphic arts (illustrations, engravings, maps, etc.) to document the world, landscape painting was freed from its former bonds and became a purely artistic exercise. Although the titles of the works refer to specific places, such as Getaria, el Llobregat, San Sebastián, etc., the artist was often only interested in colour and shape, with the green of the vegetation (or the brown of the rocks, or the reddish tone of the soil –depending on the particular work in question) reinforcing the contrast with the sky and/or the water. For example, we know that this picture is of the Grand Canal because of the title and the church we can see in the distance, but here, the city of Venice is not the main focus of the painting. The artist was much more interested in the play of the sky's reflection on the water, an effect he emphasises by adding a couple of small gondolas.



Pure beauty was not the only goal of art in an urban, industrial society and indeed, new landscapes began to emerge: the train accident, with the factory chimneys in the background, aims to be true-to-life rather than “beautiful”. Similarly, and indeed even more intensely, the painting of a French cart driver shows part of the landscape that had hitherto been excluded from the art world, or at least had never before been featured as a key subject: the weather.

Until this period, it never actually rained in paintings, despite numerous depictions of storm clouds gathering. Here, the key subject of the painting is the rain, as evident in the tired horses, the mud and the blurriness of the driver, despite the fact that he is not that far away. The rain is not there to accentuate the beauty of the canvas, but rather to highlight the harshness of working day in, day out at the mercy of the elements.



CONTEXT

Following the French Revolution, the world began to change at an ever increasing pace. With the dawn of industrialisation, the bourgeoisie became an established presence and the proletariat began to emerge. Social groups which had hitherto been almost invisible became “typical” subjects of paintings; even those on the very edges of society now had a place in art. Sorolla painted subjects from all over the social spectrum, from wealthy patrons of a café (the leisure culture had just been born) to beggars and gypsies. His landscape paintings also reflect a process by which landscape scenes become pure blocks of colour.

20th CENTURY: A SHINING EXAMPLE OF INTERCULTURALISM AT SAN TELMO

INTRODUCTION

Antonio Ortiz Echagüe's works are a faithful reflection of the diversity of painting during the first thirty or so years of the 20th century. Ortiz lived in many different places and adapted his art to the themes and styles of the regions he visited. After showing his mastery of the use of light and colour (*El beso de la madre* was not painted at the height of his career, but rather right at the beginning), he decided to use painting to convey the joy of living, as is indeed so evident in his portraits of his family.

PORTRAITS

In this picture of Dutch women, in addition to their individual facial features, he realistically portrays their austere, even severe, way of life, depicting the psychology of women who see the world in black and white. He also demonstrates his extensive knowledge of the great Dutch masters of the 17th century, since the composition, form and technique used here are almost identical to those used during the sixteen hundreds.



LANDSCAPE

In Morocco, however, he was not interested in portraits at all. Indeed, we don't know whether it was the women themselves who decided not to show their faces in this painting, or whether it was the artist's choice to have all the mystery emanating from their eyes. Whatever the case, what the artist is interested in here is the play of blue tones against the white background of broken clouds, which in turn reveals glimpses of blue sky and highlights the force of the light in the picture.

It is a painting which can be taken in with a single glance, but which then invites you to linger a while longer.



CONTEXT

The Museum's collection, and particularly its artistic collection, comes from many different sources. The criteria used for selecting exhibits does not always follow traditional museum procedure and some acquisitions are more fortuitous than anything, with items being ceded or donated by other entities or being goods that had been confiscated by the administration and given into the care of the institution best able to conserve and protect them.

Some exhibits were also donated by private citizens. This is the case of the Echagüe family. Of Basque origin, the Echagües settled first in Guadalajara and later in Argentina, although they used to summer in San Sebastián. Living museums maintain a dynamic relationship with the society in which they are located, and this is reflected in their collections.

100 YEARS OF BASQUE ART: BASQUE EXAMPLES OF THE EVOLUTION OF ART OVER THE CENTURIES - I

INTRODUCTION

Obviously, the evolution of Basque art is closely related to the evolution of European art in general. The difference is that these artists tended to paint “Basque themes” (farmhouses and fishing scenes as opposed to bullfights and processions in Andalusia, as seen earlier) in the style prevalent during each period: realist, naturalist, impressionist, expressionist, and even some examples of cubist and hyperrealist tendencies.

PORTRAITS

Zuloaga was a magnificent portrait artist. Like the true Basque he was, he never stopped painting “typical Basque” figures, although he was to painting what the Basque writers of the '98 Generation were to literature: he showed all the raw beauty of the landscape and people of Spain, in places such as Segovia and Turégano. His portraits show the subject in his or her entirety: physical and psychological features, socioeconomic status, personal tastes – all rendered with exquisite perfection.



LANDSCAPE

Basque landscape painting evolved amidst idealisation, naturalism and even irony (*Intelectuales de mi aldea*). Festive religious processions are a recurring theme which offer the opportunity of showing the personality of the Basque people and culture through one of their most colouristic aspects: the stereotypical “euskaldun fededun”, the profoundly Catholic Basque with his or her unique clothing, music and dances. However, in this picture the artist has modernised this muchpainted theme. The chapel is in the background and indeed, only its roof can be seen. So much for the religious reference. In the foreground we see men and women from both rural and urban areas who are not dressed in the tradition Basque costume, a folkloric reminder of the typical clothing worn during the 19th century.

The only exceptions are an older couple on whom this costume does not look out of place. There are *txistularis* (Basque flute players) and people.



CONTEXT

The wealthy middle classes in the metropolitan area of Bilbao demanded an idealised vision of the rural world, which was changing at an alarming pace. Although there are examples in art of the industrial, urban world, it never really took off as a genre. Many social themes also became popular, but they were not meant as a denunciation of the subjects' plight, but were intended rather to evoke pity and charity: beggars, young rascals, etc.

The war in 1936 put a drastic stop to the development of Basque society and culture. In the art world, for example, the surrealist painter Nikolas Lekuona, a pioneer in the use of collage, died at the front. It is a poignant metaphor of the devastation of an entire generation, which resulted in 20 years with no prominent artistic activity whatsoever.



100 YEARS OF BASQUE ART: BASQUE EXAMPLES OF THE EVOLUTION OF ART OVER THE CENTURIES - II

INTRODUCTION

Although the Historical Collection extends only up to the first third of the 20th century, it is worthwhile adding some brief comments about Basque art after that date. Focusing still on our two main themes: portraits and landscapes, we shall now take a closer look at “our art” from “our own time”.

PORTRAITS

Various artists searching for their Basque aesthetic roots were inspired by Oteiza to express themselves in abstract works. The next generation, as always, reacted against this and looked for new means of expression, both in portraits and in landscape painting. Although it may at first seem somewhat paradoxical that the new trend should have been a return to figuration, it is not, since the “return” was in fact no return at all. Ramón Zuriarrain’s “portrait of a couple” is formally very realist in style, but it is oneiric (dreamlike), and could even be classified as “metapainting”. It is art about art itself, since the subjects are painting each other. The aim of the work is not, then, to reflect specific physical features; nor is it to portray the subjects’ psychological characteristics or socioeconomic status. The truth is that, by this point in the 20th century, not even photography was considered any more to be an objective or documentary art form.



LANDSCAPE

Much the same can be said of Ameztoy's landscape which hangs on the opposite wall. This artist, who was technically very skilled, both in drawing and in the application of colour, purposefully avoided abstraction. Here, however, he reaches such an intense level of detail in his rendering of vegetation that he creates absolutely unreal, even dreamlike landscapes. His use of green does not result in a reproduction of the bucolic Basque landscapes featured in other paintings, but rather in something much more disturbing, as if all that vegetation were hiding an intense internal tension. Just as the background trees in Zuriarrain's work are too slender, here also, although each element is realistic in itself, the final result is pure fantasy. In comparison, even Goenaga's underwater landscape (next picture along) is more believable.

