

## ARTS SOCIETY OXFORD VISIT TO MADRID October 2017

Twenty nine of us arrived in Madrid in early October sunshine, which was to last the week. Our guide, Mauricio, introduced us to the history of the city, its principal buildings & thoroughfares while the coach took us to our hotel. Hotel Liabeny proved to be ideally situated in a largely traffic-free area of the centre, meaning we could spend any free time exploring on foot. Something we noticed whilst driving from the airport were large numbers of red & yellow flags hanging from the windows of apartment blocks, a gesture of support for the Madrid government as the Catalan bid for independence had just been set in motion



There followed one of the highlights of the week, the Goya frescoes in the Ermita de San Antonio de la Florida. Mauricio explained that, contrary to usual custom, Goya had depicted cherubs & angels below the wonderfully lively human scene inside the cupola.

**Day 1** started with a walk through the old centre of Madrid, taking in a range of interesting sights from “the oldest continuously operating restaurant in the world” to arresting modern frescoes in the Plaza Mayor to the 1930s Tio Pepe neon sign, now conserved, high up on the Apple building in Plaza de la Puerta del Sol.



Then on to the Palacio Real, a vast 18<sup>th</sup> century Baroque building on the site of the alcazar, high up on the western edge of the city. Definitely built to impress with room after room of opulence. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum housing the collection of the late Baron & Carmen (a former Miss Espana) Thyssen provided an oasis of calm. The collection spans 7 centuries from medieval religious art to Lucian Freud. Mauricio revealed that the portraits of the Thyssens had been painted by his uncle!



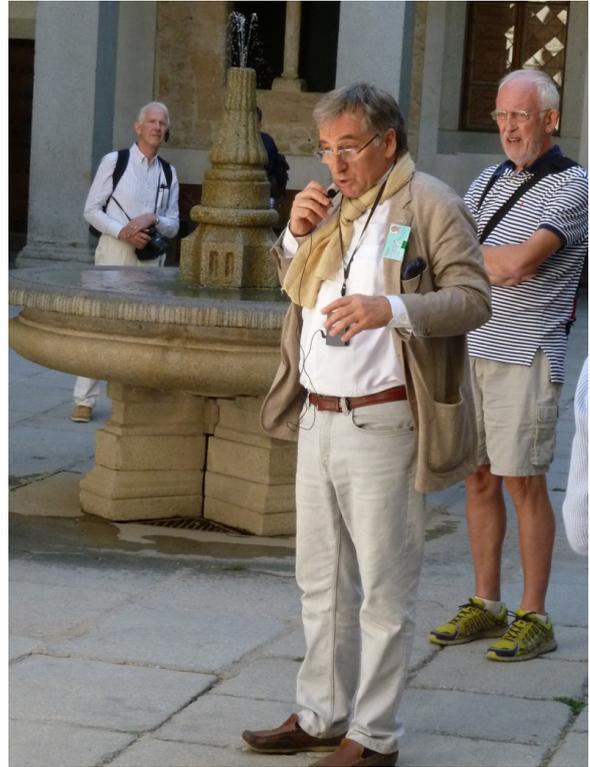
**Day 2** took us to Toledo, the old capital of Spain, occupied in turn by Arabs, Jews & Christians including El Greco. But a very up-to-date solution is provided by a series of escalators allowing access for hundreds of tourists to its cliff-top site. The 13<sup>th</sup> century High Gothic cathedral houses a contrasting Baroque feature in the Ambulatory, el Transparente, an altar lit up by a large hole high up in the outer wall, the two connected by an array of biblical figures seeming to tumble into the cathedral.

We went on to the beautiful synagogue & a remarkable El Greco painting, El Entierro del Conde de Orgaz in the Iglesia de Santo Tomé. Miracle guests include El Greco, his son & Cervantes.

On **Day 3** Mauricio guided us to highlights of the Prado Museum's wonderful collection. After the lecture on Hieronymus Bosch we were delighted to see his Garden of Earthly Delights before proceeding to Velasquez, Goya & El Greco. The afternoon being free meant we could stay on until closing time.

**Day 4** took us to Segovia with its aqueduct, alcazar (much restored & the inspiration for Walt Disney's Sleeping Beauty) and cathedral. Being 1000 metres

up, it is cooler than Madrid & lunching under awnings in the central plaza was very agreeable. For the same reason, the nearby royal palace, La Granja, was popular with the royal family in the height of summer. Built by the Bourbon Philip V, grandson of Louis XIV, it is maybe not surprising that it looks more like a French chateau than the farm its name suggests. Philip V was a manic-depressive who found solace in nightly recitals by the castrato Farinelli. The grand formal gardens, set on a steep slope, made for a pleasing wander though sadly the fountains were dry; "Spain is a dry country" Mauricio would remind us



**Day 5** was spent on 20th century art, first of all at the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, the home of the Spanish Contemporary Art Collection. We went at once to the room housing Picasso's Guernica, where Mauricio's explaining exactly what we were looking at was very helpful. Apparently a confirmed Nationalist himself, he emphasised the picture's role as Republican propaganda (a view challenged in the recent excellent 'In our time' programme on

Guernica) We were then taken on a quick tour of other 20th century Spanish painters including Dalí & Miró.

The drive to our next visit took us through streets crowded with banner-carrying demonstrators of all ages, many wrapped in the Spanish flag, supporting Spanish unity. It was all very good natured. Our destination was an unexpected highlight of the week, the Sorolla Museum. Seeing Sorolla's beautiful pictures, many of his family, in the family house in the secluded setting of a garden, was a delight.

That evening we were treated to dinner at a 17th century inn in the Old Town. A wonderful selection of tapas was followed by roast suckling lamb, a local speciality. The tapas had left some of us rather too full to appreciate the lamb.





As is usual with Arts Society tours, there is no let-up on the last day so we had a full day before getting the plane home. Our first stop was the “Valley of the Fallen”, a Franco-era fascist monument where Franco and de Ribera are buried. Then on to El Escorial, the vast austere granite royal palace, mausoleum & monastery built in 1562 by Philip II. A highlight was the Library with its frescoes depicting the liberal arts & sciences. The extensive mausoleum, almost fully

occupied, includes pudrideros, rooms for the royal remains to decay. After a magnificent tapas meal we drove to the airport for the flight home.

We are all indebted to Mauricio our guide with his wealth of knowledge and to Carol, our leader, a big thank you for your hard work in the preparation of the visit together with your care of us all during it which made it all so enjoyable.



Sally and Neil MacLennan November 2017