

PREFACE
WHY SPAIN? WHY
SPANISH MUSEUMS?
WHY NOW?

When, at the close of 1993, I went to live in Spain for most of the following year, I was expecting to see a country much changed from the one I had last visited six months after Franco's death in 1975. Certainly I had kept an eye on the country's contemporary culture and knew, in much the way that many other Americans did, that the art scene in Madrid had been hot, the Olympics in Barcelona brilliant, and the films of Pedro Almodóvar hip. I anticipated that young people would be completely at home in this lively milieu, but I never expected to see that the whole population—much of which had been born and raised during the Franco regime—seemed to have completely redefined itself as lifelong democrats. Everyone acted and talked as if they had never known any other way of life. Spaniards, who less than twenty years before had felt marginalized by the outside world, now considered themselves to be cosmopolitans, participants, and insiders. I was amazed at how their extraordinary achievement of a peaceful transition—from a forty-year-long dictatorship (with a legacy of many long repressed internal resentments) into a fully intact democratic nation—seemed old hat to them. Almost everyone with whom I spoke with seemed to take for granted the ways in which most of their institutions had so quickly become modernized and accommodated themselves to democratic practices and values.

Notwithstanding their blasé, almost dismissive attitude to what is sometimes called the “Spanish miracle,” I probed further about which of those institutions they perceived as having been especially helpful during the transition period. Not surprisingly, many credited the press, the media, and the updated educational system. Others, of course, pointed to the weakened military and the reduced power of the Catholic church. Some mentioned the importance of tourism. Repeatedly, in a much vaguer way, I was informed that a completely “new culture” had evolved. But I was never told precisely what that meant.

As I inquired still further, I was constantly reminded that Spain is a country made up of a number of diverse peoples. The suppression of their cultural diversity during Franco’s dictatorship had left a country raw with unresolved tensions and separatist tendencies. That the exacerbation of those tensions after 1975 did not prevent progress toward democracy is largely due to the prevailing post-Franco wisdom that reversed any and all policies aimed at repressing the powerful expression of Spanish pluralism. The transitional government encouraged the development of cultural institutions that promoted and embraced this diversity—within the context of preserving the nation-state. Spaniards as a whole supported their changing political system in direct proportion to the aggressiveness with which that pluralism and diversity were projected and defended. The general consensus in Spain seemed to have been that the country’s survival depended on a constant striving for an ever more positive and complex, although markedly uneven, balance between the power of the center, with its culture of “Spanishness,” and the powers of the various autonomous regions, with their distinctive cultures and aspirations.

It is striking to an American how much the need for that balance was understood by all parties concerned. It is equally striking to see the degree of financial commitment that both the central and the regional governments were—and are to this day—willing to make to achieve their respective cultural goals. Furthermore, an unusually high percentage of Spaniards, whether highly educated or not, seem to understand the rights and obligations they have been granted in their 1978 constitution to create and to own their cultural identities. As a result, there are those who identify primarily with Spain, those who see themselves as relating primarily with their regions, those who identify with Europe, and those who will admit to multiple, overlapping, and competing identities. The proliferation of orchestras, theaters, dance companies, art schools, festi-

vals, languages, literatures, and museums that have flourished throughout the country since Franco’s death attest to how seriously this wide range of possibilities of cultural identification has been taken. The combined result of all of this now untrammled, often highly individualistic, expression is the “new” Spanish culture alluded to so frequently. This is the culture that proved to be so effective in oiling the machinery of the democracy while it was being created and consolidated.

Beyond the Prado is a meditation on Spanish museums and museum-related entities: about how these museums were affected by cultural and political changes and how they affected the nature of those changes. The book is made up of case studies, some of which find their points of origin years before Franco’s death, when certain of the nation’s visionaries took advantage of an unevenly liberalizing environment to chip away at the eroding fascist monolith. Others, such as the Museum of Fine Arts of Asturias (Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias) are products of the transition to democracy, a few including the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Museo Guggenheim Bilbao) represent the cultural environment of the last years of the 1990s.

Beyond the Prado is not a history book. Rather, it is meant to provide a nontraditional frame for the non-Spaniard to better comprehend the expanding world of Spanish museums, understand how they relate to each other within the country’s larger political transformation, and obtain a sense of their ongoing struggles to assert a broad spectrum of cultural meaning. This frame purposely surrounds entities that usually find it in their best interests to represent themselves as completely unrelated to each other and subject themselves to no framing device other than the minimum requirements of the system and their official mission. While the museums I have chosen to write about certainly do emerge from distinct systems and disparate impulses (the state, the regions, the municipalities, the Roman Catholic church, entrepreneurs, and private and public foundations), they are nevertheless systemic in that they exist within the fluid and porous web of meaning that characterizes Spain today—the very web that permits the state to cohere in the face of daunting postmodern pressures.

This book, then, conceptually and unofficially, links the Prado (Museo Nacional del Prado), the most well-known face of Spain’s historical and artistic center, with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the stunning symbol of the flamboyant Basque rejection of the center; the Reina Sofía (Centro de Arte Reina Sofía), the national museum of modern and

contemporary art, with the Army Museum (Museo del Ejército), a long-time bastion of ultraconservative values, and ARCO (Arte Contemporáneo Feria Internacional), Madrid's giant international art fair and annual "ephemeral" museum, with the stylish Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum (Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza). None of these links, or others like them, are in any sense physical or even necessarily structural. They do, however, allow for a way of appreciating that Spain has become a richly democratic country with an intricate mesh of cultural institutions, all of which sustain and nourish extreme divergences of meaning in the most salubrious manner.

These and other case studies are intended to bring to light some of the ways in which museums have functioned as one of the country's influential and, in varying degree, activist institutions in the renewal of Spanish civil society. *Beyond the Prado* tells individual stories while, at the same time, casts each on a stage far larger than any one of them could possibly command on its own. Art lovers casually interested in Spanish culture are, for the most part, familiar with the Prado. Now the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao has exploded into everyone's consciousness, and seeing beyond the Prado has become somewhat easier. This book will provide an analysis of the complex role that the Prado and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, and many other less-known museums, have played in the construction of the democratic Spanish citizens' sense of identity. The goal, ultimately, is to provide a better understanding of the unexpectedly powerful and positive force that museums have become in Spanish society throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century.