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Review of Eugenia Afinoguénova, *The Prado: Spanish Culture and Leisure, 1819-1939*

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Afinoguénova, Eugenia. *The Prado: Spanish Culture and Leisure, 1819-1939*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018. xv + 295 pp. + 50 ill. + 6 maps.

Every cultural historian has experience taking artworks or other artifacts and situating them in a social or political milieu. Eugenia Afinoguénova goes one step further. Her richly contextualized and impressively researched institutional history *The Prado: Spanish Culture and Leisure, 1819-1939* places the building that houses such artifacts into its broader context, refusing to isolate the museum from the city that surrounded it and shaped it. Debates about the way that art should be displayed and understood in the museum converged with debates over how to regulate the activities taking place on nearby streets and fields. These debates over the role art should take in the wider leisure life of Spaniards were part of larger socio-political debates as the country lurched from absolutism to parliamentary democracy to republicanism in the century preceding the Spanish Civil War. Building on a solid historiographical framework that demonstrates how Spain was taking part in European-wide debates over making art accessible to a broad population, *The Prado* demonstrates how cultural institutions like museums have always played a vital role in shaping civil society.

Afinoguénova subdivides each of her chronological chapters into five sections that trace the various changes the Prado underwent during Spain's long nineteenth century (24-25), but her overall narrative arc encompasses two broad themes. The first is the relationship between the Prado and Spanish politics. Because the museum began life as the art collection of the royal family, the Prado became a key institution as Spain transitioned from absolutism to constitutional monarchy—and then into the era of mass politics and republicanism. Debates over what pictures should be displayed and how the collection should be arranged were part of larger political debates over ideas like the value of liberalism, what role the monarchy should have in a parliamentary system, or how to incorporate the masses into the body politic. Since the museum was administered by the Spanish government, the ways in which the Prado displayed its treasures “became a measure of the state's ability to represent the nation” (104).

Discussions over mundane matters like admissions policies and prices could reflect the growing political hegemony of the bourgeoisie and their status-driven anxiety over what access the working classes should have to cultural (and thus political) institutions. Concerns over how new actors were to be incorporated into the public sphere also informed the gender politics of the Prado. The presence of female nudes in the collection created a problem for patrons in a moralistically Catholic society, and the Prado constantly teetered between the prurience of male patrons who wanted to see some flesh and their worries about corrupting women who might also view said paintings. And yet, because women could come to the

Prado to copy paintings and because the museum was opening itself up to wider audiences by the early twentieth century, the museum provided an avenue for some women to enter into the public sphere. By tracing the political history of the Prado, Afinoguénova demonstrates how civic institutions reflect the ways in which Spanish civil society has struggled with inclusivity.

The other theme that Afinoguénova follows is the way in which the Prado mediated between the city and countryside. When the museum building was constructed in the early nineteenth century it stood on the edge of Madrid. The surrounding fields were used for *verbenas* and the Prado quickly became a space of mediation between the countryside and the rapidly urbanizing city. Was the Prado a site of education or of entertainment? This question haunted many cultural institutions during the nineteenth century, before modern perceptions of what elite and popular culture were had settled. The question itself arose from the problems of order and control caused by the modernization of the city and the resultant influx of workers from the countryside: “when the age-old pastimes of looking at exhibits in the museum and spending time on the Promenade met mass politics, the distinction between autonomous art and the messy world surrounding it became hard to sustain” (184). Here is where the true originality of the arguments being made in *The Prado* shine forth: Afinoguénova traces the wider influence the museum had on Spanish culture, from the way it inspired theatrical designers in the nineteenth century to the displaying of copies of paintings by the Misiones Pedagógicas in the 1930s, placing seemingly arcane cultural questions at the center of Spain’s sometimes painful efforts to build a mass civil society.

One could make minor criticisms of *The Prado*—the narrative construction imposed by the chronological organization of the chapters becomes choppy at times—but in the end, there is only one significant problem with the book: it ends too soon. Afinoguénova concludes her story in 1939 by noting how transferring the Prado from the Republic to the Franco régime is proof that it had become a truly national institution (239). This is a perfectly logical endpoint, and yet one wonders what the author could tell us about the intersection of National Catholicism and international tourism at the Prado; about the battles over the establishment of the Museo Reina Sofía and ultimate location of Picasso’s *Guernica*; or about the implications of the development of Madrid’s “museum triangle” in a world where art is business. There are books on these topics, but I would very much like to see what Afinoguénova’s eye for historical detail and skill with creative analysis could do for the post-Civil War period. *The Prado* is a rich and richly rewarding book, and one looks forward to the author’s future work with great anticipation.

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