

SPANISH ART TREASURES AND THE WAR

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VER the face of Spain there are many museums of art and many beautiful churches and shrines where masterpieces from the brush, the chisel, and the loom bear witness to the Spaniard's love of the beautiful and the striving of Spanish artists for its expression in color, form, and texture. This artistic patrimony is not the work of any one age, but rather the collection of centuries, embracing world-famous works executed by artists of the fertile Middle Ages, of the golden ages of the Spanish Monarchy, and of the decades that witnessed the decline of Spanish dominion.

Not many months ago Spain suffered a civil war which upset her provinces from the Pyrenees to the Mediterranean. The seeds of this bloody conflict had been planted and nurtured long before signs of fruition appeared in July, 1936. True Spaniards could no longer stand by in silence while churches were burned and the worship of God boldly suppressed. It was not till March, 1939, that the world learned of the fall of Madrid and knew that hostilities were over. The general aspects of the war are well known and need no recounting here. The battles for possession of the provinces and fortified cities and their eventual capture by the forces of the Nationalist government regularly appeared as front-page news.

However, there remains one aspect of the war about which little has been written in this country. It is true that articles have appeared on the destruction and dispersal of the works of art, but many of the authors, by misleading information under captions such as "Spanish Art Saved" and "Spanish Art Survives," leave the reader with the impression that the art treasures of Spain were preserved almost intact. The authors do justice to the commendable accomplishments of the Republican Committee for the preservation of the masterpieces of the museums of Madrid and Barcelona, but with few exceptions they pass over in silence the destruction of invaluable gems of architecture with their treasures of painting and sculpture. Now that Spain again has peace and unity and its populace has settled down to normal living, it is possible to uncover the interesting

history of Spanish art in the recent conflict. In this article an attempt will be made, not always to trace individual works or priceless collections, but rather to give the reader a general perspective of the fate of the works of art.

Madrid, in the heart of Spain, will serve as the starting point inasmuch as one of the world's most famous collections is housed within the city limits of the Spanish capital. Besides the Prado museum, a Mecca for artists, guides will show visitors works in the Escorial and the San Fernando Academy—works which have been copied and reproduced on countless occasions. It is proverbial that one can not hope really to appreciate Velasquez, Goya, Murillo, and El Greco without seeing the works of these masters in Madrid.

It was the siege of Madrid that occasioned the removal of these masterpieces and a host of others to Geneva; this provided an unusual exhibit for half a million visitors who flocked to the Swiss capital to view them in the summer of 1939. As the army of General Franco drove on towards Madrid, city, town, and village fell in rapid succession. Planes appeared over the capital, engaged in aerial warfare and, when possible, dropped destructive bombs on their objectives. As the web of the ground forces spread about the city, museum officials decided that rather than risk their destruction by bombs, the priceless paintings should be prepared for shipment. Some works had already been sent to ports on the Mediterranean, especially to the strongly fortified cities of Valencia and Alicante. All private collections in the palaces about Madrid, such as the Medinacelli, Alba, Santa Colona, and Tavor, had already come under the control of the Committee for the Preservation of Art. Added to these were the treasures of the Escorial, containing works by Velasquez, Titian, Ribera, and Tintoretto. Of this vast collection brought into the city by truck and car, a large part was stored in the vaults of the Bank of Spain. The Prado presented a bleak appearance, its walls bared and its paintings packed for shipment. With so much art being moved about it is not difficult to see how, during the excitement, pictures could be damaged or lost and statues destroyed, often the result of haste and inexperience.

When Madrid became the main theatre of the war, the Republican government moved to Valencia. With it went the more important masterpieces under the protection of the Committee for the Preservation of Art. The war scene shifted to this

region, and the paintings were again loaded on trucks, this time being sent to a castle near Barcelona. A wall fell in and did considerable damage to two Goyas—the famous *Riflemen in la Moncloa* and *Los Mamelucos*—as they were being hauled from Valencia to Barcelona. Titian's *Emperor Charles IV* and Ruben's *Three Graces* received dents and abrasions in transit, according to a correspondent of the *London Times*. A loose board in a packing case caused a twelve-inch gash in a Velasquez portrait, *King Philip IV*. Again the paintings took flight as Barcelona fell, finally finding a safe place in the rock quarries near Figueras, where they remained undisturbed for a few weeks. But aerial warfare did considerable damage in the vicinity, causing the curators to send an urgent appeal to associates in Paris and London, who immediately formed the so-called Committee for the Salvage of Spanish Art Treasures. Through the combined efforts of the Spanish, French, and English associates, seventy trucks were requisitioned to transfer the fortune in painting, sculpture, and other rare masterpieces over the Pyrenees into French territory. Their plans first called for shipment to Paris for exhibition, but at the suggestion of a prominent artist of Catalonia, the caravan set out for Geneva, to be placed in charge of the League of Nations till the settlement of the war.

After the fall of Madrid, plans were completed for the above-mentioned exhibition, the Nationalist government giving its approval. A selection was made of the works that could best be shown in the skylight galleries of Geneva's Museum of Art and History. The Committee shipped the other works back to Spain where they were stored for a time, catalogued, and later rehung in familiar surroundings. Visitors to Geneva were privileged to view a group of a hundred and seventy-five paintings and twenty tapestries that once belonged to the Royal Collection. Amongst the paintings, one saw *The Deposition* by Roger Van der Weyden, Titian's *The Emperor Charles V at the Battle of Muhlberg*, a Velasquez *Portrait of Don Gaspar de Guzman*, Durer's famous *Self-Portrait*, Velasquez, *Adoration of the Magi*, and an El Greco masterpiece from the Escorial, *The Dream of Philip II*. All these paintings are now back in Spain.

It is regrettable, however, that solicitous attention and protection could not have been afforded beautiful cathedrals and churches and their precious adornments, so that a rich legacy of art might have been saved for Spain and the world. In all parts of sunny Spain, foreign art experts saw Gothic, Mozarabic, and

baroque architecture in ruins. Chalices and monstrances were melted down; altars and tabernacles, many of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, were desecrated and in many instances burned to ashes.

The Madrid government, early in the war, issued decrees in an attempt to protect the contents of the national museums and private collections. Yet no such decrees came forth to protect church property, with the result that losses and damage to religious art in churches far exceeded that of the museums and private collections. Not all churches and shrines destroyed were artistic gems, it is true, but even in village churches of the Peninsula there existed, as many travellers will attest, numerous works of great artistic merit. To show how little the government was concerned about the burning of churches, it is enlightening to recall that the beautiful sixteenth-century church of Saint Louis in Madrid was pillaged and burned by the Reds in spite of the fact that the police station was only three hundred yards distant.

The Cathedral of Madrid, the ancient church of the Imperial College of the Jesuits, was a wealthy museum, the edifice being a model of the Spanish baroque style of the seventeenth century. The interior was a mass of ruins when the Nationalist troops marched into the city. Many valuable paintings, frescoes by celebrated artists, and beautiful statues of Christ, the Blessed Mother, and the Saints were either burned, thrown to the ground, or carried away.

On the outskirts of the city the church of Saint Anthony was converted into a barracks for the militia and as such escaped destruction by flames or bombs, though the interior was not fit for church services after the troops had deserted the edifice. The artist Goya decorated the vaulting of this church with a number of frescoes that European artists for the past two centuries had studied and striven to imitate. During the winter months of the war, open fires were built by the militiamen in the interior of the church, the smoke of which rose to the ceiling and blackened the celebrated works.

This destruction of the treasures of religious art was not a mere accident of the war but for the most part corresponded to the deliberately organized and well executed plan of International Communism. Once in control, the Red leaders unleashed their subordinates, directing their widespread activities with diabolical fury and hatred. "The working class has resolved the

problem of the church very easily by not leaving a church undestroyed," we read in the Red review *Vanguardia* of September 2, 1936. How well they succeeded is shown by the fact that of the two hundred and forty churches, chapels, and religious houses in the city of Madrid, only a dozen and a half were fit for religious worship after the holocaust. On January 28, 1937, there appeared in the Barcelona paper *Solidaridad Obrera* this statement: "There remain neither altars, nor sacred ornaments. There only remain, perhaps, some believers who intend to restore worship, but this will never occur." *El Diluvio*, another Barcelona paper dated September 4, 1936, contains the following request: "We desire descriptions of the burnings of churches, convents, and other Catholic centers to compose a very well documented work."

Doctor Walter W. S. Cook, chairman of the Graduate Department of Fine Arts of New York University and an authority on Spanish Art, was in Barcelona at the outbreak of the war. His report is that of an eye-witness. "Practically all the finest ecclesiastical monuments in Barcelona have been destroyed with the exception of the Cathedral and the convent of Pedrables. . . . Although I did not visit every church in Barcelona, I did visit every important one, and in many instances arrived in time to see the actual destruction take place. The church of Santa Ana, near the Plaza de Catalunya, is a Gothic church dating from the fourteenth century. This contained two important *retablos* by Vermejo, the greatest master of the fifteenth century in Spain. This was completely wrecked and so thoroughly burned that even the vaulting fell. Santa Maria del Mar, probably the finest example of Catalan Gothic architecture, after the cathedral of Barcelona, was gutted by fire. . . . I went into the interior while it was still burning. All the fifteenth century *retablos* have been burned, the beautiful stained glass smashed, and only the walls stand. The church of San Pedro de los Puellas, dating in part from the ninth century, is almost completely wrecked. . . . These are only a few of the more important monuments destroyed, which have a great artistic value, many of them dating from the Gothic period and constructed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Practically every parish church of less importance was also set on fire and the statues thrown into the streets and broken."¹

¹ Cook, Walter W. S., "The Civil War in Barcelona." *New York University Alumnus*, September, 1936, p. 5.

Barcelona, like Madrid, saw her art collections crated and shipped out of the city at the height of the war. Many of the important works gathered from private and public collections, including masterpieces by Botticelli, Tintoretto, Titian, Goya, and El Greco, were sent to Paris, where an exhibition was held in the famous Jeu de Paume. The little village of Olot at the foot of the Pyrenees served as a repository for the majority of other works, a haven being found for them in a monastery under the surveillance of the Civil Guard.

A folio volume could be filled with the story of destruction in the province of Catalonia alone. From Lerida, Tarragona, Vich, Manresa, and Solsona come reports of irreparable losses. Among the art treasures destroyed we might mention the thirteenth century Gothic church of La Sangre in Alcover, three Gothic altars at La Granadella, the churches of the Carmen, Saint Michael and Saint Dominic at Manresa and the Romanesque church and Renaissance *retablo* by Juan Gasco at Sant Esteve. The convent of Sijena was burned, resulting in the destruction of its famous murals and the painted wooden ceiling in the Chapter House. In the town of Vich, there occurred a wholesale conflagration which left in ashes the Gothic church of La Merced and the neo-classic cathedral with its series of mural decorations by Sert. And so the story goes on and on.

L'illustration, a well-known picture magazine published in Paris, featured the Spanish Civil War in three numbers. In January, 1938, the editors, making a selection from five hundred pictures of Spanish art destroyed in fourteen provinces, entitled the issue "The Martyrdom of the Works of Art." In forty pages one sees all types of Christian art mutilated and destroyed. On the cover is a sixteenth-century statue of the Virgin and the Christ Child, with hand hacked off, eyes plucked out, and head smashed. An eighteenth-century tile panel painting, on which the artist had represented Saint Dominic preaching, was damaged beyond repair by the blows of a hammer. The famous portrait of Christopher Columbus which hung in the monastery of La Rabida in Huelva escaped the flames that swept through the building but was later found slit in two places by a bayonet or sharp knife. This might be cited as an indication of the attitude of the enemies of the Church towards the true national tradition.

The hammer and the sickle spared neither canvas, wood, nor precious metal. On paintings and statues there often ap-

peared the initials of two communistic organizations: F.A.I., signifying the Federal Anarchists of Iberia, and C.N.T., the National Workers Confederation. Throughout the forty pages of the magazine the story unravels, revealing a widespread destruction of works of surpassing beauty. Two works, to which any museum in the United States would have given a place of prominence, today are worthless: one, a picture of the head of Our Lord, a work of the Andalusian School of the sixteenth century, which had been used for target practice and riddled with bullet holes; the other, a fifteenth century Italian painting depicting the Blessed Mother and the Child Jesus, which had to be fitted together as a jig-saw puzzle so that a photo could be made of it. The painting, done on slate, was thrown to the ground and broken in pieces in the parish Church of Montemayor. El Greco's masterpiece, *The Magdalen*, disappeared in the conflagration of the Church of Magdalen in Cartagena.

In other cities and towns in the North and the South, from the Mediterranean to Portugal, the same brutal destruction of marvels of art was encouraged. In the *London Universe* of January 25, 1937, Francisco Moncayo described some of the priceless art treasures and relics that were lost in Toledo. "The Cathedral is now only the skeleton of what it was, just a glorious frame left standing as a sorrowful witness to the vandalistic madness of the Reds. The mantle of the *Virgen del Sagrario* with embroidery of over eighty thousand pearls by Felipe Corral, a thirteenth-century artist, has disappeared, as has also a relic of the True Cross engraved with stones. Other lost treasures of the Cathedral include the famous *retablo* of the high altar, the five stages of which represented scenes from the New Testament; the Monstrance of Arfe of solid gold brought from America by Columbus . . . and the chalices of Cardinals Fonseca and Mendoza of solid gold and enamel encrusted with pearls."² The Bible of St. Louis, King of France, each leaf of which is composed of gold panels on which are depicted scenes from the Old and New Testaments, a work valued at eight million dollars, was listed at one time amongst the lost treasures. However it is again in the possession of the Archbishop, having been returned to Spain at the time the paintings and other art gems shipped to Geneva were brought back from exile.

While the tale of the storm of destruction presents the

² N.C.W.C. News Service, February 1, 1937.

reader with a gloomy picture of present conditions in Spain, there is a silver lining to the dark clouds. Although many cathedrals, churches, and monasteries will not be rebuilt for decades, much is being done to set things in order. Appropriations have been made to rebuild or repair damaged edifices, especially in provinces which witnessed an almost universal destruction. Besides this, ornaments, vestments, and sacred vessels for needy parishes are being made and shipped to Spain by the faithful in Mexico, the United States, and the countries of South America. Thus by Divine Providence it has been brought about that the nations which once received the light of faith from the Spanish missionaries are now sending aid to assist the stricken Spanish Church.

Also doing a yeoman task is the National Artistic Recovery Service, which was set up during the very days of the war. Units of this organization, often located in the heart of enemy territory, secretly went about the work of preservation. Some of its agents, aided by soldiers and worthy citizens, worked in the front lines, entering the captured cities and towns to take charge immediately of the work of recovery and restoration. As a secret agency during the war, they were hunted down as part of the famous Fifth Column. By ingenious means these art experts and their associates, careless of life and devoted to country, blocked the sale or shipment of works of art abroad, many of which were destined to be exchanged for war materials. In spite of the dangers attached to the work, the agents searched out priceless paintings, statues, and metal work, and after a careful cataloguing, concealed them within the walls of buildings, under the stones of the church floor, or in some place of comparative safety.

A nucleus of the organization, working in Madrid in the early days of the war, sent a communication to the Salamanca headquarters of the Nationalist government requesting official approval of their work. The answer came late one evening over the air, but few knew the meaning of the terms used in the message. In Spanish the radio station at Salamanca sent out the short phrase: "To the basket of cats, all right. Hail Spain!" thereby signifying that the methods used by the group had the approval of the Franco government. A strange message it was, causing leaders and citizens of Madrid to conjecture in a thousand ways the meaning of the cryptic phrase, many imagining it to be the signal for a powerful offensive against Madrid. And

only a group of art experts knew that the mysterious words sanctioned their efforts to salvage the symbols of Christian culture.

Many precious works of art, which were at first thought to have been destroyed, have been recovered at home and abroad during the past six months. To the Cathedral of Valencia about seventy paintings have been returned, including portraits of all the bishops of that see and a celebrated painting of Saint Thomas of Villanova. Reus, a city of Catalonia, again displays the paintings of Fortuny, the Spanish artist who executed the famed *Vicaria*. Sacred objects of gold and silver, stolen from the parish church of Barbastro and from other churches in the province of Huesca, were found in a well near Saragossa.

The National Library in Madrid served for a time as a temporary storehouse for works of art recovered on the peninsula or returned from foreign countries. Boxes of all sizes and shapes, loaded with a cargo worth its weight in gold, jammed the corridors awaiting identification and removal. Private collections were separated from the treasures of the National Museums, which have been renovated and opened again to the public. At the same time the property of churches and monasteries was sent back or stored away until the ruins are replaced by new buildings. The library also has a large quantity of incunabula, codices, and rare books removed by the Reds from other libraries; among these books was found a first edition of the well-known Spanish classic, *Don Quixote*. Other books of inestimable value, such as the first Bible of Alcala, dating from the first half of the tenth century, were uncovered in the fortifications of Madrid's University City. "Culture will be your best parapet" had served as a motto for the Reds as they erected defences about the city.

Though it is true to say that the museums of Madrid again display the works of Goya, Ribera, Murillo, Velasquez, and El Greco, that Barcelona exhibits the works of great sculptors and the jewels of her museums, it is equally true that much treasure is still scattered abroad, a large part of which will never be returned. Yet "before all foreign countries Spain insists upon her full and unquestioned right to the ownership of the collective treasure of the nation. The voice of her outraged art lovers will continue to resound beyond her borders in protest against the Red excesses, demanding the return to her museums of all that which today is scattered abroad, sold at a low price by the

enemies of Spain or in the hands of second-hand dealers."³

During the years of the war Spain made a sacrifice unparalleled in her history. The titanic struggle that stained her soil showed to the civilized world the ultimate consequences of practical atheism. The battles in the trenches and in the air are now over, giving place to the battle of reconstruction. A once beautiful country sees today many churches destroyed and burnt; in years to come these will be rebuilt and readorned by the hands of her artists. Peace now reigns over the devastated land, and with that peace comes the dawn of a great hope for Catholic Spain.

³ *Spain*, August 1, 1939, p. 7.