

The San Carlos Museum

Elisa García Barragán *

The San Carlos Museum in Mexico City contains one of the most important collections of Western art from the 14th to the 20th century, and is the largest of its kind in Latin America.

The paintings in the museum came mainly from the galleries of the former Academia de San Carlos; additions have gradually been made through acquisitions, direct commissions of Spanish painters (such as Mariano Salvador de Maella), donations and the use of a number of paintings expropriated from

time as the school was founded, painting and sculpture galleries were built on the school's premises.

According to Abelardo Carrillo y Gariel, the "Jacob of Rivera," later known as *Laban Pasturing His Sheep*, as well as *The Seven Virtues*—then ascribed to the school of Raphael and now correctly attributed to Peter de Kempener—have formed part of the museum's collection since its inception in 1785.

Another important collection is the group of Spanish paintings acquired by Porfirio Díaz' government



Main façade.

monasteries closed during the 19th century. The museum also holds some copies of works by the great masters made by students at the academy.

The Academia de San Carlos, which dates from the late 18th century, was founded by order of Charles III as the Real Academia de San Carlos (1783). At almost the same

in 1910. Paintings by the most distinguished artists of the time, including Sorolla, Chicharro and Benlliure, were selected for the museum. These paintings were exhibited in the Pabellón Español, built to commemorate the first centenary of our independence.

The former Academia de San Carlos proved too small to house the already large and varied collection of



Oval courtyard.

Rear façade.



* Museum Director.

paintings, much of which had to be stored in a cellar for lack of space. As a result, then-president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz decided to provide a more suitable site: the building known as the Palace of the Count of Buenavista. The museum, known as the San Carlos museum because of its origins, was inaugurated on June 12, 1968.

The paintings needed to be arranged in chronological order, which was done taking styles and schools into account. Many of the paintings' former attributions were carefully reviewed and in some cases changed, in accordance with the opinion of curators from such museums as El Prado in Madrid and other experts and scholars. Nowadays the collection, for which an inventory has duly been made, is exhibited in the San Carlos Museum in all its splendor.

A tour of the museum begins with the Spanish school, the oldest and best represented. This first hall, showing Catalan and Valencian Gothic, boasts a superb display of oil paintings of both regions — *The Life of Saint Lazarus*, by an anonymous Catalan painter (14th century), *The Christ of Mercy*, by an anonymous Valencian painter (15th century) and other paintings surrounding the splendid 15th-century *Altarpiece of the Incarnation*, by the Catalan Pere Espallargués.

Pedro Berruguete's *Adoration of the Magi* (15th century) is an example of the transition from Gothic to Renaissance art. From this point onwards, the distinctive features of each school begin to display attractive modifications, such as those that can be seen in *Madonna and Child* and *Saint Anne with Donors* by Jan Provost, master of the Flemish Renaissance.

Almost Mannerist in style is the work of the Extremaduran Luis de Morales, known as "The Divine," whose spiritual sense, reduction of images and elongation of figures can be seen in *The Madonna and Child Writing in a Book*. The same subject, but more in keeping with the tenets of

Mannerism —the intellectualized disproportion and defiguration of classical forms— is shown on a large scale in the *Madonna and Child* (1525) by Jacopo Carucci, "El Pontormo."

The religious story, together with an elegant sensuality, places Lucas Cranach's *Adam and Eve* in a different category of Mannerism. Cranach modified the female figure, making it slimmer, with small breasts and an elongated neck, and adding childish or Chinese-like features. Cranach further individualized his work by placing his signature —a tiny serpent with bats' wings— on the trunk of the



Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Supper at Emaus*, oil on canvas, 1639.

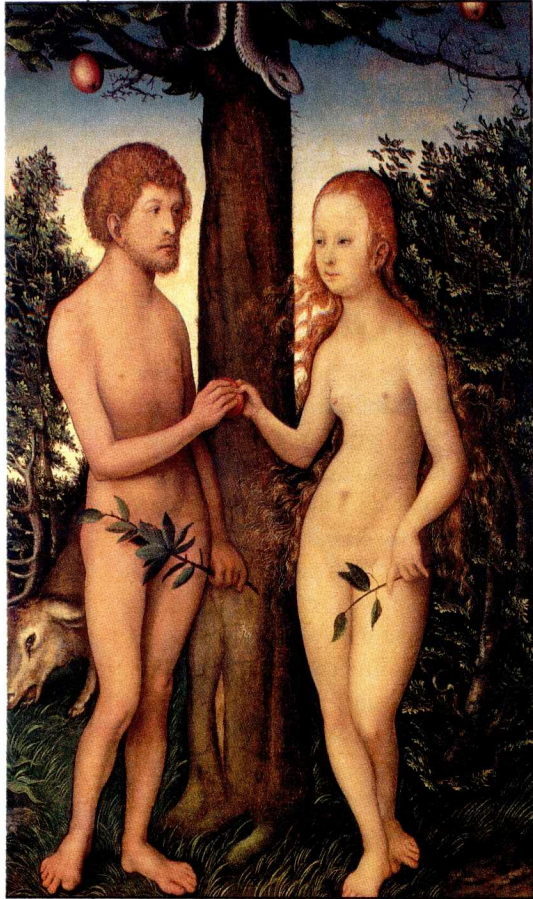
"tree of knowledge." His portrait of *Frederick of Saxony* is equally impressive. Dominating this work are features denoting a great personage: sumptuous vestments, and the coats-of-arms of the House of Saxony at the top of the painting.

Next in this attractive sequence of styles come the dazzling Baroque paintings, with their Italian and Spanish exponents almost equally represented. Leading the way into these halls is the Belgian Hendrick van Balen's *Don Alvaro de Bazán Giving*

Thanks for the Taking of La Goleta, a monumental oil painting in which, in keeping with the Baroque spirit, time seems to have frozen in the three stages of the triumphant Marqués de Santa Cruz' life and the boundaries between earth and heaven seem to have disappeared.

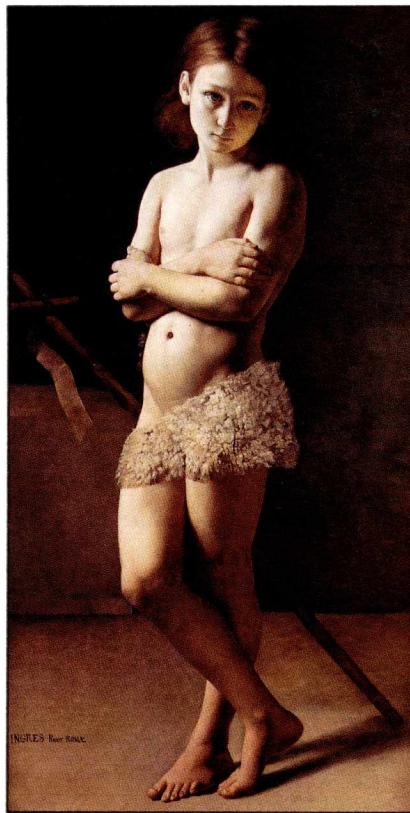
Once again, Spain, whose artists were masters of the Baroque, displays several of the main features of this style: superficiality as well as ornamental and decorative excess, together with depth, gravity and significance —in other words, natural and poetic truths. Examples include *Mary Magdalene and the Angels* (ca. 1660) by Ciro Ferri; Luca Giordano's *Astronomer of Antiquity*, *St. John the Evangelist and the Poisoned Goblet* and *St. John the Evangelist Giving the Virgin Communion*, both by Alonso Cano, a native of Grenada, superb oil paintings probably painted for the altarpiece at the Church of St. Paula in Seville. Spanish portraits, regarded as some of the finest examples of court painting, reach their apogee in the splendid *Philip II* from Sánchez Coello's studio. Four superb paintings by Francisco de Zurbarán are displayed in a hall that visitors have already dubbed the Zurbarán Room. The most outstanding of the four, *The Supper at Emaus*, is a magnificent painting that has often been lent for exhibitions by European and American museums. Next to this mystical brilliance one observes humble, everyday objects: fish, kitchenware, meat and bread jostle for space amid the shining copper saucepans in Mateo Cerezo's two still-lives.

Among the milestones of Spanish painting, two of Francisco de Goya y Lucientes' works contribute to this museum's international standing: the portrait of *La Marquesa de San Andrés* and the delightful *Water Carrier* reveal the artist's predilection for capturing typical Spanish figures. The portrait artists represented here



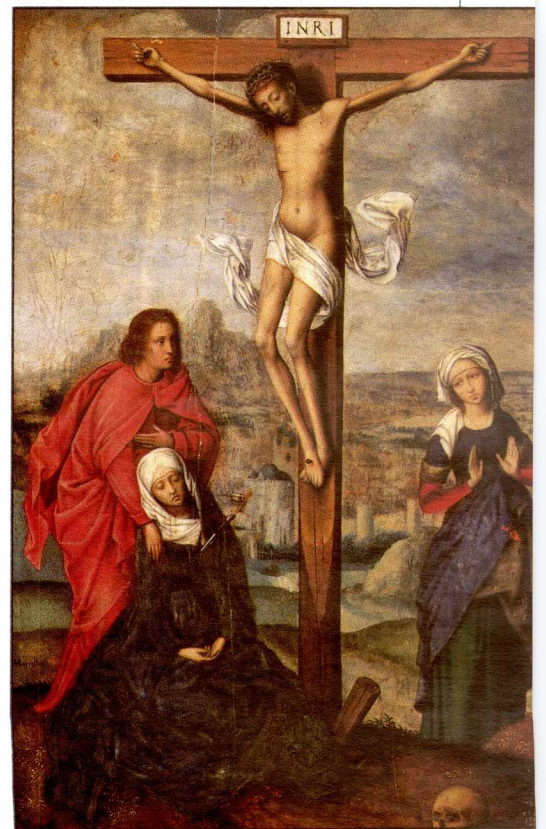
Lucas Cranach,
Adam and Eve, oil
on wood, ca. 1530.

Luis de Morales,
The Madonna and Child
Writing in a Book.



Juan Auguste Dominique Ingres
(1780-1867), St. John the Baptist As a Child,
oil on canvas.

Marcellius Koffermans,
The Crucifixion.



Francisco de Goya Lucientes, Water
Carrier, oil on canvas, ca. 1810.



Mateo Cerezo, Still-life with Fishes.

also include a selection of painters from various countries; Franz Hals, “Tintoretto”; Peter Paul Rubens; Thomas Lawrence and John Opie.

Three essential stages of French painting are embodied in Jean Honoré Fragonard’s courtly-style paintings, the dramatic symbolism in Pierre Puvis de Chavannes’ *Allegory of Grief* and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ paradigmatic Classicism, visible in the beautiful, melancholy *St. John the Baptist*.

19th-century works include European landscape paintings such as Eugenio Landesio’s *View of Rome from Villa Freborn Along the Via Cassia* as well as quintessentially Mexican scenes captured by the same Italian painter, such as *The Valley of Mexico from the Cerro de Tenayo*.

A truly exceptional work is the diptych *The Annunciation, The Visitation*, by the German painter Johann Friedrich Overbeck, founder of the Nazarene group, whose purist theory, imported by the Catalan Pelegrín Clavé, was used as the basic teaching principle at the Academia de San Carlos and opened new vistas for

art. Pelegrín Clavé’s best work includes his mid-19th-century portraits of the Mexican upper classes. Particularly noteworthy is his canvas *The Early Years of Queen Isabella at the Side of Her Sick Mother*, based on important historical events.

A walk through the museum’s permanent collection leads one past works of unabashed romanticism, combined with demonstrations of verisimilitude and technique, such as Ladislás de Czachorski’s *Confidants*. Further on the visitor reaches other, less refined works by a group of 20th-century Spanish painters: Benedito and Vives, Benlliure and Gil, Chicharro and Sorolla, with their idealized versions of humble tasks, embodied in the study of women weaving fishing nets by the Valencian Sorolla.

Another point of interest is the group of European sculptures placed in areas easily accessible to the public. In the San Carlos Museum, works of art are enhanced by their physical surroundings. The mansion, originally intended for the Count of Buenavista, was designed by the

Valencian architect Manuel Tolsá, in a style influenced by Neo-Classicism. This provided the artist with a sober setting contrasting with the exceptionally “monumental” design of the central oval courtyard.

The architect and sculptor from Enguera, Valencia, trained in the Baroque, did not totally abandon this style. Characteristic of this unforgotten sentiment are the decorations of the building’s main façade, which display features of Classicism: curved and triangular gables, balustrades and other adornments used with great freedom and movement, with particular emphasis given to hollowing out the façade so as to complement the oval courtyard.

This beautiful construction—with all the formal and architectural virtues of an edifice built for the nobility or moneyed classes—has a long history. It belonged to several families, among them the Counts of Pérez Galvés and Regla. In the mid-19th century, its owners were members of the political aristocracy, including General Antonio López de Santa Anna. Later the Emperor Maximilian gave it to Marshal Aquiles Bazaine as a wedding present. Other distinguished residents contributed to the splendor of the building with its then spacious gardens.

The 20th century saw the arrival of occupants seemingly at odds with the building’s original purpose: the Tabacalera Mexicana tobacco company, the National Lottery, Express International’s offices and, from 1958 to 1965, UNAM’s National Preparatory School No. 4. It was not until 1968 that the palace recovered its splendor and was inaugurated as the San Carlos Museum.

Visitors also flock to the museum’s temporary exhibitions, the quality of which matches that of the permanent collections. Children and young people are particularly well-served by the educational department, designed, among other things, to attract future friends of the museum ✎