

**TRAVEL GUIDES**

# A day at the Prado Museum



## INDEX

FIRST FLOOR.....	3	SECOND FLOOR.....	8
BASEMENT.....	6	EXTENSION.....	8



## FIFTEEN MASTERPIECES AT THE PRADO

It would be unthinkable to visit Madrid without stopping by, at least for one morning, at the Prado Museum. Here, in one of the biggest and best galleries in the world, European painting is on display in all its glory. Here we find some of the most important paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens, Dürer and Hieronymus Bosch, Italian masters from Fra Angelico to Titian, and the most valuable collection of Spanish art in the world, with numerous works by Velazquez, Goya and Ribera. In addition, we should consider the architectural value and interest of the building itself, designed by Juan de Villanueva in the eighteenth century and recently extended by Rafael Moneo. This latest renovation and extension was carried out in conjunction with the renovation of the church of Los Jeronimos, which is now linked to the Museum.

This guide is intended for those who have only a short time available for their visit. Here, we offer a simple route encompassing the fifteen works the museum considers most significant. We also suggest a visit to the recent extension and the restored cloister of Los Jeronimos. At the end of the guide you will find practical information about the museum.

The route we suggest starts on the first floor at the Puerta Alta de Goya entrance, continues through the basement and ends on the second floor.

## FIRST FLOOR

### 1. Artemis, Rembrandt. 1634

#### First Floor: Room 7

This is the only painting by Rembrandt in the Prado. Painted in 1634, it is one of the Dutch painter's most important masterpieces. It depicts Artemis, queen of Pergamus, in Asia Minor who lived during the fourth century BC. Overcome by the death of her husband and brother, King Mausolus, she is about to drink his ashes from a goblet, which is being handed to her by a servant. In the background an enigmatic figure is visible. An alternative interpretation suggests that it is the Carthaginian aristocrat Sophonisba and the goblet contains poison. Whichever interpretation is correct, it is widely agreed that the painting is a tribute to conjugal love and that the artist makes skillful use of light and darkness.

### 2. The Three Graces, Rubens. 1635

#### First Floor: Room 9

This painting represents the mythological theme of the Three Graces as described by Hesiod. Fruit of one of Zeus's amorous adventures, the Graces were young virgins who lived with the gods and were never bored. The warm colours, picturesque landscape with animals in the background, the triangular and baroque composition and, above all, the exuberance of the models, are the main features of this work by Rubens. The voluptuousness of the flesh is characteristic of the painter, and brings a sensuality



Portrait of a nobleman with his hand on his chest, El Greco

hitherto unknown in paintings of mythological themes which tended towards idealisation.

### 3. Portrait of a nobleman with his hand on his chest, El Greco. 1580

#### First Floor: Room 10 A

This is a disturbing portrait of a nobleman of unknown identity. Some believe him to be Juan de Silva, Marquis de Montemayor and mayor of the Alcazar of Toledo, where

the Greek painter set up his studio. Others believe it to depict Miguel de Cervantes, as the sitter's left hand is not visible in the portrait, and the author of *El Quixote* lost his hand at Lepanto. The gesture has also been widely disputed as it is unclear whether the gentleman is expressing repentance or taking an oath. Whatever the true interpretation, it is striking how the subject seems to look directly, intensely, at the viewer, as if demanding a response. The ruff and the lace at the wrist serve to emphasise the melancholy facial expression and the natural gesture of the hand. The painting has popularly been understood to be a

personification of the Spaniard of the Spanish Golden Age.

#### **4. Emperor Carlos V on horseback, Titian. 1548**

##### **First Floor: Room 11**

This equestrian portrait of Carlos V commemorates his victory over the Protestants at Mühlberg. As well as the historical value of the

painting, the work is noteworthy for its symbolism. Carlos V is portrayed not only as emperor, but also as a "soldier of Christ" who fights against heretics. He carries a spear, reminiscent of the weapon with which St. George slew the dragon (a beast symbolically associated with heresy) and also a reminder of the spear of Longinus (the Roman soldier who, after wounding Christ on the cross, converted to Christianity).

Interestingly, the painting does not focus on the military victory or defeat: the background scenery is pleasant and tranquil, without any sign of troops or the defeated armies of the enemy. The armour that the emperor is wearing in the painting is now housed in the Royal Palace in Madrid.

#### **5. Las Meninas, Velazquez. 1656**

##### **First Floor: Room 12**

This, the most famous work in the Prado, shows the Infanta Margarita, daughter of Felipe IV, surrounded by her entourage: the "meninas" - maids of honour - Maria Agustina Sarmiento and Isabel de Velasco, two dwarf buffoons, Maria Barbola and Nicolasito Pertusato, and a mastiff dog. On the left, Velazquez has placed himself at his easel, thereby daring to appear in a painting with the monarchs, but with the subtlety that the king and queen are not actually present, only reflected in a mirror. From this palace scene a number of possible messages and symbols can be inferred. The most obvious of these is the claim that painting is a noble art form, a craft performed by artists, not artisans, which is how it was usually viewed at that time. Some of the characters portrayed can be seen as allegorical: one dwarf holds a bag of coins, symbol of greed, while the other, who is teasing the dog, could represent malice. Technically, this baroque masterpiece marks a breakthrough in the complexity of perspective, composition and the use of lighting to create the atmosphere of the scene.



Las Meninas, Velazquez



The 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid: the executions on Principe Pio hill, Goya

## 6. Jacob's Dream, Ribera. 1639

### First Floor: Room 16B

This work illustrates the well-known Old Testament story of Jacob the shepherd who dreams of a heavenly ladder with angels ascending and descending. The figure of Jacob is realistically portrayed in the foreground while the ladder appears, with the figures of the angels suggested rather than clearly visible, in a luminous cloud in the background. The scene composition is baroque, the detailed treatment of the sleeper counterpoints the intangibility of the vision, the scene is bright, unlike Ribera's more usual dark style, which might account for why the painting was attributed to Murillo for many years.

## 7. The 3rd of May, 1808 in Madrid: the executions on Principe Pio hill, Goya. 1814

### First Floor: Room 39

On 2nd of May, 1808, the citizens of Madrid rebelled against the Napoleonic occupation; the next day the prisoners taken during the uprising were shot. This is the scene illustrated by this painting by Goya. On the right, forming a diagonal on the canvas, are the French soldiers, an instant before firing. On the left, lit by a lantern, the prisoners, some already fallen and others awaiting death. In addition to the facial expressiveness, the iconic strength of the man in the white shirt is worthy of note. He

stands with raised arms and his white shirt focuses the light, drawing the viewer's eye and offering a moral interpretation of the scene: the victims, face on and in the light, while the executioners are in shadow, their faces hidden. The background shows buildings that could be the military headquarters at Conde Duque. The vague outline of the background and the play of light between the various layers of the composition is a precursor, decades ahead of its time, of the depth of field and contrasts of modern photography. This is one of the amazing qualities of Goya's vision, and why this work still impresses us, appearing as realistic as the best contemporary war photos.

## BASEMENT

### 8. The Annunciation, Fra Angelico. 1430

#### Basement: Room 49

This altarpiece from the San Domenico convent in Fiesole (Tuscany, Italy) was brought to Spain at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The Annunciation is shown in the foreground, with Gabriel telling Mary that she is to be mother of the baby Jesus. Mary is seated under a portico and a ray of sunshine reaches through to her, bearing a white dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit. The sensitivity and care with which the figures are treated is a feature of the emerging spirit of the Renaissance era, but, additionally, it is very much in tune with the artist's own style: Fra Angelico was also known as Blessed Angelico, and was known for his religious fervency and piety. Elements of the new style, such as the careful architectural perspective



The Annunciation, Fra Angelico

and the landscape of the secondary scene, which depicts Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, are combined with medieval techniques, including the use of gold leaf. Scenes from the life of the Virgin are shown along the predella, the bottom section of the altarpiece.

### 9. The Cardinal, Rafael. c. 1510

#### Basement: Room 49

This portrait of an unidentified Roman cardinal, is one of Raphael's most famous paintings, and certainly the foremost of the eight works the Prado has by this artist from Urbino. The composition is simple, but extremely harmonious. The cardinal's robes, in tones of red with pink reflections, form a triangle against the dark green background. The base of the triangle is formed by the arm, sheathed in a delicately-painted white sleeve. The face is a vivid psychological portrait of the sitter: the fine features, the restrained expression and piercing gaze. The painting was not attributed to Raphael until 1828. Paradoxically, it is this that allows us to see the work as it was painted originally: in 1813 other works of the painter were transferred from their original wooden panels to canvas.

### 10. Self portrait, Dürer. 1498

#### Basement: Room 55b

In 1498, the German painter and engraver Albrecht Dürer painted this self-portrait. The background includes the text: "I painted this from my own appearance; I was twenty-

six years old." The artist depicts himself as a handsome, although not idealised, young man, dressed in a costume beyond his social status at a time when artists were still thought of as artisans rather than creators. The elegance and care with which Dürer portrays himself here, together with the careful drawing of the hair and the oval of the face - which has been linked to the iconography of Jesus Christ - can be seen as an affirmation of the artist's social and creative aspirations.

### 11. The Garden of Earthly Delights, Hieronymus Bosch. c 1510

#### Basement: Room 56

This three panel altarpiece, product of the imagination of the Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch, shows the creation and fall of Man according to the Old Testament tradition. The left-hand section shows Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the centre panel represents the apotheosis of pleasure and lust and the right-hand panel shows divine retribution in the form of destruction and chaos. Beyond the sobering intention of the work, the emphasis is on unbridled imagination and the humorous tone in which Man's surrender to sin is depicted. Many of the situations shown are based on popular folk sayings, and the viewer is a privileged observer of the microcosm they comprise. In its time the painting inspired many imitators.

## 12. The Crucifixion, Juan de Flandes. 1510

### Basement: Room 57B

In 2005, the Prado acquired this oil on wood, a later work of Juan de Flandes, through a new system that allowed companies to pay taxes by means of the donation of artworks to the museum. The Crucifixion, dating from 1510, formed part of the main altarpiece of the cathedral of Palencia. The painting has been referred to as the artist's "swan song", as he painted it towards the end of his life and it draws together his main artistic influences, the Flemish and Italian schools. The artist's maturity is apparent in the the skilled blend of landscape, figures, and still life, and in the deep expressiveness of the characters.

## 13. The Descent from the Cross, Van der Weyden. c. 1435

### Basement: Room 58

The lifting down from the cross of Christ's dead body is depicted with sensitivity in this painting by Roger Van der Weyden that dates from the artist's time in Brussels. The sorrow of the characters, together with the reduction of external elements to a minimum, focuses our attention on the suffering of Jesus' family and followers. Van de Weyden made use of an ingenious technique in this painting: he arranged the figures as if they were part of a sculpted group and painted a plain gold background; this creates the sensation of relief, without the need to carve the wood. In the centre of the scene, Joseph



The gallery dedicated to Bosch

of Arimathea and Nicodemus are lowering the body from the cross and wrapping it in a white linen cloth. On the right, Mary Magdalen leans forward with her fingers intertwined and an expression of grief. On the left, the Apostle John supports the fainting Virgin, whose posture echoes that of her son.

## 14. Offering by Orestes and Pylades, Anonymous. c. 10 B.C.

### Basement: Room 71

This sculpted group, a tribute to brotherly friendship, dating from the Augustan Roman period (around 10 B.C.) was brought to Spain by Felipe V. The stylised positioning of the figures, which simulates

movement, shows the clear influence of the Greek school of Praxiteles. The work represents Orestes, son of Agamemnon, with Pylades, son of the king of Phocis. The Praxiteles school believed that symmetry and proportion formed the basis of beauty, hence the care taken over the proportions and placement of the figures in this work, and the sense of elegance and beauty it conveys.

## SECOND FLOOR

### 15. The Immaculate Conception, Tiepolo. 1767

#### Second Floor: Room 89

This painting is one of a group of seven commissioned by Carlos III in 1767 for the church of San Pascual Bailon in Aranjuez. The Virgin is shown as a mature and serene woman whose powerful physical presence is accentuated by the way she half turns towards the viewer. She is surrounded by a range of symbols of her virtue: the serpent that tempted Eve is



The Immaculate Conception, Tiepolo

crushed under her foot, a palm branch, symbol of triumph, a mirror, representing purity, and the obelisk that represents the Tower of David, symbol of virginity. The tradition of extolling the humanity, beauty and youthfulness of Mary was already widespread at the time and can be seen in the works of Guido Reni and Murillo whose depictions of the Virgin were of great inspiration to the artist.

## PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Address: Calle Ruiz de Alarcon 23.

Phone: +34 91 330 2800.

Price: General Admission: 6 €. Advance booking: € 9 (Tel. +34 902 10 70 77)

Free admission: Tuesday-Saturday, 6pm to 8pm; Sundays, 5pm to 8pm. Children under 6; adults over 65.

Open: 9am to 8pm, Tuesdays to Sundays & public holidays. Closed Mondays.

Web: [www.museodelprado.es](http://www.museodelprado.es)

Notes:

Food and drink, photography and recording are not allowed inside the Museum.

The Museum does not offer a guide service, but visitors may arrange for private tourist guide services.

Association of Professional Tourist Guides of the Autonomous Community of Madrid

Web: [www.apit.es](http://www.apit.es)

Tel: +34 91 542 12 1

Foundation of Friends of the Museo del Prado:

Web: [www.amigosmuseoprado.org](http://www.amigosmuseoprado.org)

## EXTENSION

The Museum extension project around the Church of Los Jeronimos, carried out recently by architect Rafael Moneo, represents the most important extension in the two centuries the Museum has been in existence. The works form part of the Museum campus project that proposes the incorporation with the Prado of the Cason and the Salon de Reinos of the former Buen Retiro Palace. Huge carved bronze doors, rugged and vertical like tree trunks, welcome the visitor to this new Museum space. These doors, made by the Basque sculptor Cristina Iglesias are the most striking element of the façade that links the old and new buildings by means of a platform planted with boxwood. Built of brick and granite, from the outside, the building allows some of the restored arches of Los Jeronimos to be seen. Inside, three floors open to the public are home to various galleries and the restored cloister. The extension reinstates access via the main entrance to the Villanueva building, the entrance known as the Velazquez door, as this access is directly connected to the extension by means of the great basilica hall. Alongside, two new entrances give access to a spacious lobby which opens onto the new spaces: a modern auditorium, a shop and a cafeteria.

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