

The Art Cruise Inspires, Again

BY PETER TRIPPI



Fine Art Connoisseur's fifth annual adventure abroad, the *Iberian Art Cruise*, delivered exactly what it promised, and then some. Conceived by FAC publisher Eric Rhoads, this voyage last September proved an ideal way to mix world-class art and architecture with five-star comforts and a delightfully cohesive group of 46 passengers who shared with each other their passion for beauty and quality. The complex and fascinating history of Spain and Portugal is not familiar to many North Americans, so this trip brought that heritage alive through artworks and buildings of almost every era.

Our participants arrived one by one and couple by couple at the elegant Four Seasons Hotel Ritz, which stands on a hill overlooking Lisbon. Though no organized tours were offered, little parties of *Fine Art Connoisseur* guests headed out each day to explore the remarkable capital of Portugal. Among the many sites they visited were the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, National Museum of Historical Art, National Museum of Tiles, National Coach Museum, Berardo Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art, Jeronimos Monastery, and Belém Tower.



Silversea Cruises' *Silver Cloud*



On Friday the 12th of September, everyone gathered in the Ritz's lobby — a rare surviving masterpiece of 1950s Portuguese modernism — and boarded a private motorcoach that brought us to Silversea Cruises' exquisite ship the *Silver Cloud*. This vessel holds only 296 passengers, which made boarding and disembarking remarkably quick each day. Though the ship's other passengers seemed perfectly nice, our group ate supper nightly in our own section of the main dining room, and only they were allowed to attend my three illustrated lectures that summarized the region's history and set its artworks and architecture into geopolitical contexts. As in previous years, our cheerful tour coordinator, Gabriel Haigazian of Creative Travel Planners, ensured that every logistical detail was addressed.



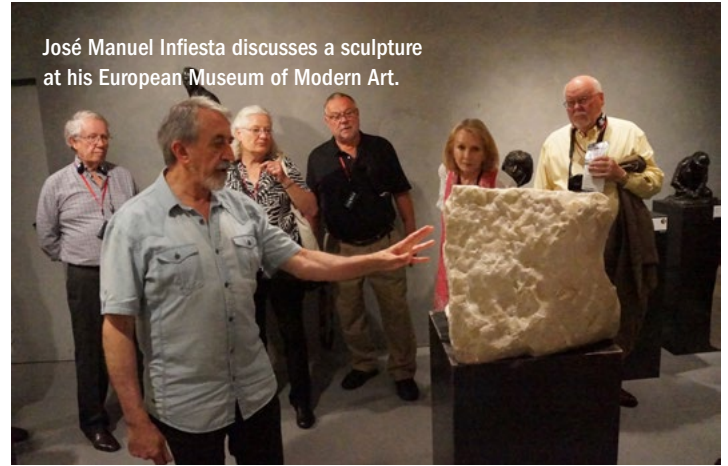
The group prepares to visit Antoni Gaudí's La Sagrada Família.



Baroness Carmen Thyssen (center) with artistic director Lourdes Moreno and Peter Trippi at the Museo Carmen Thyssen Málaga



Enjoying box seats at the Palace of Catalan Music



José Manuel Infiesta discusses a sculpture at his European Museum of Modern Art.



The group disembarks their first-class car at Madrid's Atocha Station.



Savoring tapas at Madrid's Los Gatos Cervceria

SKIRTING THE IBERIAN COAST

The voyage began with a welcome cocktail reception on a deck as the *Silver Cloud* sailed out of Lisbon's magnificent harbor at sunset. We awoke the next morning in Portimão, on the southern coast of Portugal. The town is unremarkable, yet we could immediately see why it draws visitors: it is surrounded by a spectacularly scenic coastline ideal for sailing and sunbathing. Indeed, most of our guests enjoyed half-day land excursions to attractive headlands and towns nearby, including Sagres and Lagos.

Overnight we sailed onward to Spain's historic naval port of Cádiz, a small but handsome city of mostly 18th-century buildings and innumerable churches. We visited on a Sunday, so we were able to watch the locals promenading after church with their children and pets, then lunching in the city's many squares. Our visits included the small but exquisite Oratorio (chapel) of Santa Cueva, with its colorful lunettes painted by Francisco de Goya (1746-1828); the Museo de Cádiz, with its paintings of saints by Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664); and the stunning cathedral, with its airy interior dome that seems to glow with celestial light.

The *Silver Cloud* brought us next to Málaga, the large city on the Costa del Sol closely associated with beach tourism, yet now rediscovering its own cultural heritage through a growing number of museums.



Roger Rossi (center) with Charlie and Barbara Robinson proudly sporting the commemorative T-shirts they received in celebration of their five consecutive years cruising with *Fine Art Connoisseur*.



Juan Andres Maya dancing at El Corral de La Morería



Prado curator Javier Barón Thaidigsmann (center) with Peter Trippi and Eric Rhoads



Bob Wrathall and Claudia Clayton



Dick and Anne Keigher



The Mapfre Foundation's Pablo Jiménez Burillo and Nadia Arroyo Arce welcome the group to the Sorolla & America exhibition.

We were greeted by the art historian Javier Cuevas, who brought us first to the ruined Gibralfaro castle, from which we could gaze over a long sweep of coast. Like almost every hilltop site in this region, this had once been a Moorish fortress, which made more sense when we suddenly realized that we could see North Africa on the horizon.

Málaga is proud to be the birthplace of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), so naturally we went next to the house where he was born, now a museum that shows how his middle-class family lived. (His father was an academic artist and teacher, a fact that became highly relevant when we reached Barcelona.) We then walked further into the historic quarter, where — since 2011 — the Museo Carmen Thyssen Málaga has presented its founder's collection of 19th-century Spanish paintings, as well as temporary exhibitions in that field. (On view was a show about the painter Dario de Regoyos, who lived from 1857 to 1913.)

There we were thrilled to be welcomed by Carmen "Tita" Thyssen herself, who was accompanied by the museum's artistic director, Lourdes Moreno, and also by its managing director, Javier Ferrer. Because the museum was closed to the public the day we visited, we were able to relax in its bright foyer to hear the Baroness (widow of the famous collector Baron Hans Heinrich von Thyssen Bornemisza) discuss her own interests in art. She also introduced us to her friend and portraitist Mercedes Lasarte, as well as that lady's dealer, Mercedes Duerinckx, from Art Wanson Gallery in nearby Marbella. All of us were enchanted by the Baroness,



Libby Whipple studies a Sorolla portrait at the Mapfre Foundation.



Sorolla Museum director Consuelo Luca de Tena; Mariano Benlliure's sculpture of Sorolla appears behind her.

even before we learned that she was gracing the cover of a popular Spanish magazine that very week.

Before leaving Málaga, we enjoyed a sneak peek inside a superbly renovated house that now serves as the Museum of Glass and Crystal. Founded in 2009 by Gonzalo Fernández-Prieto and Ian Phillips, this is a repository not just of glass and crystal, but also of paintings, sculptures, furniture, ceramics, and clocks from around the world. We were shown around by the founders themselves, and were particularly interested to learn how the house's original architects kept it cool even in the hottest weather by opening most rooms onto the verdant central patio.

The next morning found our ship docked in Cartagena, a city founded by the Carthaginians (thus its name) but swiftly conquered by the Romans, who left a remarkably intact amphitheater and other ruins. This was a day at leisure for us to explore a "real" Spanish city on our own, especially because the pier was in easy walking distance of the main shopping street.

Such leisure was not possible the next day in València, Spain's third-largest city, and one packed with sites not to miss. After a panoramic bus



David Orcutt, Mitch and Shelly Neto, and Janet Smith



Eric Rhoads and Gabriel Haigazian enjoy some paella.

tour, we headed to the medieval quarter and its superbly preserved Lonja de la Seda, a grand hall where raw silk was traded during the prosperous 16th century. Across the street is the bustling Central Market, where mouth-watering displays of this region's famous produce include abundant *jamón ibérico* (cured ham) and manchego cheese, which we tasted and washed down with local wine. Because València has long been a ceramics-making center, we went on to the National Museum of Ceramics, housed in a mansion adorned in brilliant, patterned tiles. Next up was the Casa-Museo Benlliure, the seemingly unspoiled studio-house of the painter José Benlliure (1858-1937), who came from a dynasty of distinguished artists and arts administrators. Our last stop — well worth the wait — was the Museum of Fine Arts, which holds several galleries of paintings by the great Joaquín Sorolla (1863-1923), who came from València but ultimately settled in Madrid.

BARCELONA

The next morning found our ship in Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia and an exciting place to be that weekend because the Scots were voting on whether to secede from the United Kingdom. (The Catalans have long sought to secede from Spain.) Welcoming us at the pier were the guides Silvia Riera and Tate Cabré, who brought us to one of the world's most famous places of worship, the Basilica of the Holy Family designed by Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926). Under construction since 1882, "La Sagrada Familia" is now complete enough inside to convey



Laurie Rhoads, DeeAn Gillespie, and Peter Strub



James and Mimi Fountain with Peter Vig



Rick and Pandora Dickinson, Dan and Libby Whipple, Charla and Bob Nelson, and Roger Rossi

the architect's vision of heaven on earth. Next we explored two buildings designed by Gaudí in his uniquely fluid manner, Casa Batlló and La Pedrera, as well as the recently renovated Casa Lleo i Morera created by his rival, Lluís Domènech i Montaner. Back on the *Sea Cloud* for our final evening aboard ship, we enjoyed a farewell cocktail reception and festive dinner.

Having transferred to a hotel in the heart of Barcelona, we now had two more full days to experience this great city. Starting with a vista from its surprisingly high Montjuïc, we remained in this verdant hill-park to visit the reconstruction of a sleek pavilion designed by the German architect Mies van der Rohe as his country's submission to the 1929 world's fair in Barcelona. Located nearby is the palace-like National Museum of Catalan Art, which contains astonishing displays of the country's Romanesque art, particularly entire church apses saved from mountain villages early in the 20th century. An unexpected surprise was the outstanding exhibition about Sorolla's paintings of the sea, held at the Caixa Forum, an exuberantly designed factory now operated as an arts center by a Spanish bank. That night, many of us attended a dynamic performance of flamenco and opera held in the luminous Palace of Catalan Music, another monument designed by Domènech i Montaner.

The next day was spent in Barcelona's well preserved Gothic Quarter, which is now home to the European Museum of Modern Art. Founded and directed by the architect-collector José Manuel Infiesta, this is one of the few institutions anywhere that focuses on both contemporary realist art and figurative artworks from the late 19th through mid-20th centuries. Our group was delighted to hear Mr. Infiesta's commentary on his current sculpture show, and to enjoy a glass of Catalan cava (white sparkling wine) in one of the museum's historic spaces. Our final stop this day was the Picasso Museum, which opened to the public in 1963 featuring major gifts from the artist himself, who in his youth had moved to Barcelona with his family and made his first independent masterworks here.

SPAIN'S CAPITAL

Early the next morning, 22 guests boarded one of Spain's chic high-speed trains for a first-class voyage to Madrid, the country's capital. We were welcomed by the guide Ángela Ballesteros, who brought us to our luxurious hotel and then to the famous tapas bar Los Gatos Cerveceria for a delicious meal of local specialties. Soon we headed to the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, a treasure house of masterworks from the Renaissance onward, collected not only by the late Baron but also by his widow,

Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) was a highlight at the Prado, though its influence was apparent throughout our stay in Spain.



Larry Blovits and Kathy Jackson



Natasha and Tom Neihart

Carmen, whom we had met in Málaga. The day ended with a memorable meal at El Corral de La Morería, a well-known venue for flamenco performances. We were fortunate to see the athletic young dancer Juan Andres Maya, who apparently had never before worked with the more experienced star Karime Amaya.

Our first full day in Madrid began with a panoramic tour of its grand boulevards, followed by a visit to a museum established by the collector José Lázaro Galdiano (1862-1947). Rather like New York City's Frick Collection, this is an exquisite mansion filled with superb fine and decorative arts. After lunch in the lively San Miguel market, the rest of our day was spent inside one of the world's greatest museums, the Prado. Here we were welcomed by Javier Barón Thaidigsmann, who heads the department of 19th-century art and had co-curated the current blockbuster exhibition, *El Greco and Modern Painting*, which demonstrated the influence of El Greco on many of the artists who followed him. Barón was particularly generous in showing us the nine galleries he has reinstalled to feature more 19th-century masterworks, including top examples by Sorolla and the subject of Barón's next project, the Orientalist painter Mariano Fortuny (1838-1874).

Fortunately, this "post-trip" to Madrid ended on a complete high. September 23 began with a private visit to the Mapfre Foundation, an



exhibition venue near the Prado that is operated by a leading insurance company. There we were welcomed by its director general, Pablo Jiménez Burillo, and its exhibition director, Nadia Arroyo Arce, who had arranged for us to see the brand-new exhibition *Sorolla & America* even before the press had arrived. (This is the same exhibition recently shown in Dallas and San Diego, and described in the October 2014 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.) We enjoyed an incisive tour by the art history Ph.D. candidate María Rosón, as well as time to study Sorolla's masterworks on our own.

The Sorolla focus continued as we headed to the large and charming studio-house he created for his family. Here we were greeted by director Consuelo Luca de Tena, who briefed us on the museum's plans before we experienced it independently. Armed with snacks, we boarded a motorcoach for the 45-minute drive south to the historic city of Toledo. There we explored its atmospheric cathedral, and also the chapel of Santo Tomé (with its stunning painting by El Greco) and the Synagogue of Santa Maria la Blanca. The day concluded with a breathtaking drive around the edge of Toledo, allowing us to admire its dramatic topography and memorable skyline.

Needless to say, our final journey — from Toledo to Madrid — was bittersweet. After sharing so much fun together, it was sad to bid farewell to friends old and new. Going our separate ways, we all agreed to try and gather again in the autumn of 2015, and we hope that you will consider joining us then, too. For details on that Rhine Art Cruise (rhineartcruise.com), which starts with a lengthy "pre-trip" in Amsterdam, please see page 20. ■

Information: To learn even more about the Rhine Art Cruise, contact Gabriel Haigazian, Creative Travel Planners, 5855 Topanga Canyon Boulevard, Suite 220, Woodland Hills, CA 91367, 818.444.2700, gabriel@thectpgroup.com.

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