



FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT
WRITERS IN MUSEUMS 1798-1898

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18. Remarks on Illumination in Nineteenth-Century American Travel Writings on Madrid's Prado Museum

Pere Gifra-Adroher

The foreign travelers who wrote about Spain in the nineteenth century left a notable corpus of observations on Madrid's Prado Museum that now constitutes, as Javier Portús observes, a 'written memory' of this institution.¹ A significant number of Americans contributed to this effort. This essay seeks to analyze their reaction to Madrid's chief museum by focusing on some of the nearly fifty published travel texts in which it is mentioned. Former studies have referred to the activities of American artists in Spain (Osborne, Boone), the different forms of museum-going exhibited by cosmopolitan bourgeois tourists in Madrid (Afinoguénova), and the ideological constraints and religious prejudices with which certain Yankee visitors often scrutinized the works of the Spanish masters at the Prado (Kagan).² Here I will instead examine the writers' responses to the lighting of the museum and how this affected their aesthetic

1 Javier Portús, *Museo del Prado, memoria escrita, 1819–1994* (Madrid: Museo del Prado, 1994), pp. 227–60.

2 Carol M. Osborne, 'Yankee Painters at the Prado', in Suzanne L. Stratton (ed.), *Spain, Espagne, Spanien: Foreign Artists Discover Spain, 1800–1900* (New York: Equitable Gallery, 1993), pp. 59–77; Elizabeth Boone, *Vistas de España. American Views of Life and Art in Spain, 1860–1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Eugenia Afinoguénova, 'Art Education, Class, and Gender in a Foreign Art Gallery: Nineteenth-Century Cultural Travellers and the Prado Museum in Madrid', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 32 (2010), 47–63; Richard L. Kagan, 'Yankees in the Prado: A Historiographical Overview', *Boletín del Museo del Prado* 25 (2007), 32–45.

perambulations. I argue that illumination, to use Eugenia Afinoguénova's words, constituted one of the various elements which these travel writers employed 'to present themselves as aristocratic connoisseurs,'³ and to legitimize their aesthetic experience within an American context where the middle class struggled to consolidate its cultural status.

Most nineteenth-century American travelers who wrote about the Prado, with the exception of a few southerners, were prosperous white men from the Northeast. Some journeyed with their wives, daughters, or sisters, who in turn wrote about the Prado in diaries or notebooks that eventually became published. Such was the case, for example, for Harriet T. Allen, Julia L. Barber, Sarah R. Haight, and Caroline Cushing; though few women traveled alone (the journalist Kate Field was an exception in this regard). These women shared similar views on art, accepted the existence of well-defined national schools of painting, and used common sources to support their artistic observations. Their texts are peppered with topoi that situate them within the textual practices of nineteenth-century bourgeois tourism.⁴ Many, for example, highlight the Prado as 'one of the finest picture galleries in the world,'⁵ a commonplace assessment that virtually nobody challenged. Another textual convention involves the notion of cultural pilgrimage, which served to justify the long journey to the heart of Spain. Charles Dudley Warner explains that a visit to the Prado 'compels and repays a pilgrimage from any distance,'⁶ whereas Fanny Bullock Workman, who cycled across the Peninsula with her husband, affirms that such an idea makes anyone 'desirous to return after leaving Spain.'⁷ The cultural capital which travelers were able to bank after a visit to the Prado upheld the validity of an idle practice — the journey abroad — which was still frowned upon by hard-nosed moralists at home.

These texts also employ a decidedly emotional diction to express the traveler's bewilderment before a wealth of masterpieces. To Kate Field,

3 Afinoguénova, 'Art Education', p. 48.

4 Afinoguénova, 'Art Education', pp. 51–55.

5 Louise Chandler Moulton, *Lazy Tours in Spain and Elsewhere* (Boston: Roberts brothers, 1896; repr. 1897), p. 18, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=yale.39002007650568;view=1up;seq=34>

6 Charles Dudley Warner, *A Roundabout Journey* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1883), p. 320, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433082478334;view=1up;seq=332>

7 Fanny Bullock Workman, *Sketches Awheel in Modern Iberia* (New York: Putnam's, 1897), p. 190, <https://archive.org/details/sketchesawheeli00workgoog/page/n220>

a visit to the Prado signifies an ‘absolutely stupefying’ and ‘gradually fascinating’ experience that leaves the visitor ‘spell-bound,’⁸ while to Joseph Warren Revere, the very act of naming the titles of so many great paintings ‘makes the eyes of the connoisseur glisten with delight.’⁹ William Cullen Bryant engages himself in a similar vein. Under a sort of Stendhal syndrome, he explains how for three days he wandered the galleries of the Prado ‘amazed,’ ‘bewildered’ and ‘intoxicated by the spectacle.’¹⁰ Only when his soul became capable of absorbing so much beauty did he begin to appreciate the great pictures serenely. Perhaps no voice resorts so candidly to sentimental language as that of southern American Octavia W. Le Vert, who painfully mixes aesthetic pleasure and personal psychological suffering in experience of the Prado. She provides a touching description of a canvas by Murillo, where she beheld ‘the exact resemblance’ of her lost child. The contemplation of such beauty, she explains, triggered a flow of tears and helped her, above all, to keep deathly thoughts at bay.¹¹ Her account not only posits the visit to the Prado as a pleasurable, culturally enriching pursuit, but also as a therapeutic experience capable of healing personal wounds.

A profound fascination with the Spanish school of painting equally characterizes American travel writing on the Prado, which responded to Spanish art, Richard Kagan notes, following two main strains of criticism. The first, based on Burke’s aesthetic categories, highlighted the principal traits of individual artists like Murillo and Velázquez, focusing on their idiosyncratic styles. Meanwhile, the second, being more politically inflected, emphasized the otherness of the Spanish school, contending that its cultural exceptionalism, unequalled in the western world, had been produced by centuries of monarchical despotism and religious fanaticism.¹² Often the travel texts also contain remarks on other museum-related issues that transcend the aesthetic

8 Kate Field, *Ten Days in Spain* (Boston: Osgood, 1875), p. 132, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433070304823;view=1up;seq=158;size=150>

9 Joseph Warren Revere, *Keel and Saddle* (Boston: Osgood, 1872), p. 67, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t56d5q33;view=1up;seq=87>

10 William Cullen Bryant, *Letters of a Traveller. Second Series* (New York: Appleton, 1859), p. 133–34, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433082467998;view=1up;seq=139>

11 Octavia Walton Le Vert, *Souvenirs of Travel*, 2 vols. (New York & Mobile: Goetzel, 1857), II, p. 18, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044017976267;view=1up;seq=32>

12 Richard L. Kagan, ‘Yankees in the Prado. A Historiographical Overview’, pp. 37–40.

and ideological value of the artistic holdings. They refer, for example, to the Prado's architectural grandeur, to the impossibility to see the collection in a single visit, to the inadequate arrangement of the pictures in certain rooms, or to the illumination of the building. The latter point became especially relevant not only because a poor or good reception of light in the halls might affect the visitor's perception of shapes, colors and nuances, but also because, by offering remarks on illumination, the traveler could take sides and engage in artistic debates.

Today, projects like 'Lighting up the Prado' — launched in 2015 to gradually change the museum's old halogen lamps for energy-efficient LED technology — remind us that lighting remains a capital issue for this institution, but the readiness to adapt the gallery to new forms of illumination cannot belie the fact that seeing the paintings in the Prado sometimes could become an arduous task in the nineteenth century. Such problems existed because the building — designed by Juan de Villanueva in 1785 and originally meant to house the Cabinet of Natural History — relied on a system of daylight illumination which proved unsatisfactory once the museum was inaugurated in 1819. The restoration of the edifice had begun in 1813 after the withdrawal of the Napoleonic troops, and soon became, in Andrew Schulz's words, 'an expression of national pride' to the crown.¹³ In the initial years of operation, only the northern pavilion was opened and 311 works were on display. Then, over the course of the following decades, the growth of the collection made it necessary to tackle serious rehabilitations. The first work had focused principally on mending important roof leaks and repairing structural problems, but little concern was then shown about illumination. This seemed satisfactory enough in the post-war context, but over time the contrasts between gloomy and light spaces posed problems because the illumination of Villanueva's initial project — carefully planned by means of rotundas, domes and high windows — became affected by a number of reforms.¹⁴ The central gallery linking the north and south pavilions was finally completed in late 1826 and new rooms were gradually opened to accommodate a

13 Andrew Schulz, 'Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid: Absolutism and Nationalism in Early-Nineteenth-Century Madrid', in Carole Paul (ed.), *The First Modern Museums of Art* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012), pp. 237–60 (p. 242).

14 Margarita de Luxán García de Diego, 'Restauración de la iluminación natural', *Informes de la construcción* 40 (1989), 37–41 (pp. 38–39).

growing collection, which by 1872 already boasted well over a thousand pictures on display. Villanueva's original dome was preserved — with some changes — and eight skylights were opened, but it was then decided that it was better to cover the high windows with curtains to block the slanted light. The outcome was a hall bathed by zenithal and slanted daylight that, according to early testimonies such as that of French writer Prosper Mérimée, dazzled the viewer and at times required the use of a hat for the proper contemplation of the paintings.¹⁵

Years later, in 1852, further renovations enlarged and unified the skylights, leaving two big apertures on each side of the central gallery. Also in this decade Queen Isabella II planned to isolate the Prado by ordering the demolition of all the constructions within its perimeter that might obstruct the entrance of light.¹⁶ This long project, not fully resolved until the late 1880s, gradually ameliorated the brightness of the upper and lower galleries, strengthening the function of daylight and rendering the use of artificial systems of illumination unnecessary. In contrast to other contemporary museums like the Peale Museum in Baltimore, which had already implemented gas lighting in 1816, the Prado did not adopt this new illumination despite the fact that it became customary in the streets of Madrid starting in 1832 and was used in the local theaters starting in the 1840s.¹⁷ Documents held in the Prado archives reveal the use of wax torches outside the building on certain festive occasions, and bills issued in later decades prove the purchase of oil for lamps or coal for the heaters that warmed up the spacious halls, but no records confirm the supply of gas. Electricity was not fully implemented until well into the twentieth century.

American travel writers began to express divided opinions on lighting when they visited the Prado. Lieutenant Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, who had already been in the museum during his first sojourn to Madrid in 1826, returned there in 1834 and found it 'admirably arranged for the exhibition of the pictures and the accommodation of the public,' but nevertheless regretted that 'The light perhaps might have been more

15 Prosper Mérimée, 'Les grands maîtres du Musée de Madrid', *L'Artiste* 1 (March 1831), 73–75 (p. 74).

16 Pedro Moleón Gavilanes, *El Museo del Prado. Biografía del edificio* (Madrid: Museo del Prado, 2011), pp. 64, 80–84.

17 Juan P. Arregui, 'Luminotecnia teatral en la primera mitad del siglo XIX: de la herencia barroca a la introducción del gas', *Stichomythia* 3 (2005), 1–49 (pp. 29–30).

favorably introduced from above.’¹⁸ Despite these remarks, though, other travel writers after him applauded the brightness of the rooms, especially the central hall. In general they claim that there the paintings are ‘shown to the best advantage’¹⁹ and look either ‘well lighted,’²⁰ ‘well lighted from above,’²¹ or ‘well-lighted from the top.’²² Other authors even employ the phrase ‘beautifully-lighted.’²³ Following the same vein, Charles Augustus Stoddard, editor of the *New York Observer*, stresses how much the museum benefits from its location: ‘the atmosphere of Spain is dry and clear; [and] there is always light, which adds so much to the charms of color.’²⁴ These positive remarks notwithstanding, not everyone seemed to be pleased by the effects of daylight from above and the atmosphere created within.

The uneven lighting, which left the central hall fully illuminated and some of the other rooms poorly lit, emerges as a complaint in other texts. Sinclair Tousey, founder and president of the American News Company, laments that many unknown gems of the Prado hang ‘in rooms most miserably lighted, and in positions where they can hardly’ be seen,²⁵ an opinion shared by journalist Edward Smith King, for whom ‘[m]any of the corridors and halls are badly lighted, and insufficiently fitted for the display of the splendid canvases which adorn them.’²⁶ Occasionally, as John Hay laments in *Castilian Days*, the problem did not reside exclusively

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- 18 Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, *Spain Revisited*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper Brothers, 1836), I, pp. 227–28, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t51g0p101;view=1up;seq=239>
 - 19 Charles Rockwell, *Sketches of Foreign Travel, and Life at Sea*, 2 vols. (Boston: Tappan & Dennet, 1842), I, p. 286, [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b42004;view=1up;seq=316](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b42004;view=1up;seq=316)
 - 20 Edward Everett Hale, *Seven Spanish Cities* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1883), p. 226, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433070305119;view=1up;seq=234>
 - 21 Henry Willis Baxley, *Spain. Art-remains and Art-realities*, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1875), II, p. 262, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hn5fir;view=1up;seq=276>
 - 22 William Howe Downes, *Spanish Ways and By-Ways* (Boston: Cupples, 1883), p. 59, [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b48828;view=1up;seq=63](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b48828;view=1up;seq=63)
 - 23 James Albert Harrison, *Spain in Profile* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1879), p. 275, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t1jh4f09f;view=1up;seq=289>; John Hay, *Castilian Days* (Boston: Osgood, 1871), p. 137, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t6543kj6m;view=1up;seq=149>
 - 24 Charles Augustus Stoddard, *Spanish Cities* (New York: Scribner’s, 1892), p. 69, <https://archive.org/details/spanishcitieswit00stodrich/page/69>
 - 25 Sinclair Tousey, *Papers From Over the Water* (New York: American News Company, 1869), p. 54, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433082470877;view=1up;seq=66>
 - 26 Edward Smith King, *Europe in Storm and Calm* (Springfield: Nichols, 1885), p. 111, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t3dz0rn4j;view=1up;seq=121>

on the illumination of a room but rather on the effects of the light on a single canvas placed too far away from the spectator's gaze. This occurs with Tintoretto's *Death of Holofernes*, he remarks, which could not be duly appreciated because it hung higher than it should be and accordingly 'a full light is needed' for optimum aesthetic pleasure.²⁷ Even though such critical appraisals might present the writers as fastidious onlookers, they only really endowed their texts with an aura of authority only attainable by careful scrutiny and personal presence. In other words, by making remarks on the illumination of the Prado, no matter how superficially, the American travel writers were consolidating their status as middle-class art devotees pursuing cultural tours abroad.

While on particularly bright days, as seen in the previous examples, some travelers complained about the dazzling sun, and on other occasions bemoaned the darkness of certain galleries; the case was different on overcast or rainy days, as the dim, variable light could hamper the careful scrutiny of details. Samuel Irenaeus Prime, founder of the New York Association for the Advancement of Science and Art, observes that when it rained the museum was 'always shut,' not only because 'visitors will soil the floors with their shoes' but also because 'the gallery is so badly lighted that in gloomy weather some of the pictures are quite invisible.'²⁸ In further elaborating the invisibility of certain pictures, he comments that 'scattered through these long apartments, in narrow halls and basement rooms, in bad lights, and some almost in the dark, are many gems of rare value, 'blushing unseen' and worth a better place, and deserving wider renown.'²⁹ The thrill of discovering and standing before an unknown masterpiece, for all the lighting difficulties it posed, made the visit ultimately worthwhile. Other travellers, equally aware of the illumination problems caused by the changing weather, chose not to complain and instead sought solutions. Take, for example, Mary Nixon Roulet, who recommends a visit to the museum simply at the time of the day when the light is 'fine,'³⁰ or the anonymous author of *Traces of the Roman and the Moor*, nicknamed 'A Bachelor,' who relies

27 Hay, *Castilian Days*, p. 136.

28 Samuel Irenaeus Prime, *The Alhambra and the Kremlin* (New York: Randolph, 1873), pp. 48–49, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t90873x5f;view=1up;seq=78>

29 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

30 Mary Nixon Roulet, *With a Pessimist in Spain* (Saint Louis: Herder, 1897), p. 215, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t0xp7vp5f;view=1up;seq=237>

on the museum's staff to overcome the inadequate lighting in some rooms.³¹ Now and then the museum's assistants would open and close the shutters of certain rooms to modulate the presence of light, thus solving with ingenuity whatever lighting problems might have arisen.

The fact that the museum staff performed such a role connected to the illumination of the building may have gone unnoticed in some texts, but those who record it express a high opinion of the museum's aides, believing that their competence, affability and cordiality deserve true recognition. The 'white-haired door-keeper' who receives the visitors was a very amiable fellow, explains James Albert Harrison, 'one of the most gracious specimens of his kind that I have ever met [...] and smiled radiantly at each individual visitor as he entered.'³² Likewise, Julia Langdon Barber, wife of asphalt magnate Amzi Barber, comments that the museum custodians are 'uniformly courteous' and seemed 'actually glad' to see a group of Americans because they 'represented some nation that was as a sealed book to them.'³³ No author, however, fully summarizes the positive views on the Prado's staff with the exactitude of Edward Everett Hale. 'They like to have you come, and they are sorry to have you go away,' affirms the Unitarian minister, further adding that 'It is not as in the Louvre, or in galleries I have seen nearer home, where they wish there were no visitors to the gallery [...]. On the other hand, everybody is pleased that more visitors have come.'³⁴ The tribute that he pays to the personnel of the Prado is exceptional and, stretching the terms of our discussion, could metaphorically stand for another sort of illumination present in the museum: human light. The staff's friendly rapport brightened the visitors' faces, adding a glow of happiness to their artistic pursuits and making them feel like quasi-patrician art lovers pampered by a host of foreign attendants.

Nineteenth-century American travel writers, in short, expressed mixed views on the illumination of the Prado Museum. Their texts bear witness to the lack of artificial lighting systems in Villanueva's reformed building and the prevalence of a natural type of light that,

31 Bachelor, *Traces of the Roman and the Moor* (New York: Lamport, Blakeman & Law, 1853), p. 138, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hn1lu8;view=1up;seq=156>

32 Harrison, *Spain in Profile*, p. 274.

33 Julia Langdon Barber, *Mediterranean Mosaics* (New York: privately printed, [1895]), p. 13, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hnuuba;view=1up;seq=25>

34 Hale, *Seven Spanish Cities*, p. 227.

whether lateral or partially intercepted, created atmospheres and effects, shades and reflections. Occasionally the weather conditions and time of the day hindered the natural perception of the pictures under normal daylight, but then, as discussed before, they could rely on the museum's dependable personnel to solve such problems. In some cases, the somewhat irregular lighting that obscured several rooms, opened new possibilities of artistic exploration in uncharted spaces with hidden gems. In other cases, the accidental dimness led some writers to feel an 'indefinable air of severity and gloom,'³⁵ especially in Spanish religious painting, that boosted old anti-Catholic biases. Whatever the situation, however, let me conclude by suggesting that, apart from lending authority to their texts, writing on the illumination of the Prado not only became another one of the travel writers' subtle ways of participating in the cultural and ideological debates of contemporary America but also a handy tool to maintain their status as middle-class art lovers on tour.

35 Hay, *Castilian Days*, p. 130.

