

# Goya to Sorolla: Spanish Art between Tradition and Modernity

## *Background Notes*

Dr Kathy McLauchlan — 6 May 2026



**Joaquín Sorolla**, *Strolling along the Seashore*, 1909  
(Sorolla Museum, Madrid)

Drawing on an art tradition going back to El Greco, Zurbarán and Velázquez, Spain saw a revival in its national school during the 19th century. Foreign artists and collectors were attracted by the qualities of realism, drama and expressive power associated with Spanish painting. Yet at the same time, there was a widespread feeling - both in Spain and abroad – that its contemporary artists had lost their way and were no match for their great predecessors. Many Spanish painters of the 19th century sought a new impetus in the example of French contemporary art. They engaged with the major innovative trends of the time, from Romanticism to Impressionism.

The story of Spanish art in the 19th century is often framed as an inconsequential passage between key figures: Francisco Goya and Joaquín Sorolla. Yet the reality is richer and more complex, with artists responding to political upheaval at home, shifting perceptions of Spain abroad, and a dynamic interplay between state patronage and the global art market.



**(1) Francisco Goya, *The Third of May, 1814*,  
(Museo del Prado, Madrid)**

In the early 19th century, Goya's late works – created during the Peninsular War and the repressive government of Ferdinand VII – offer an unflinching vision of violence, superstition, and

disillusionment **(1)**. Some even seem to anticipate the work of 20th century modernists in their psychological intensity and formal freedom. However, Goya was also a court painter, embedded in the structures of royal patronage that would continue to shape the development of Spanish art well into the 19th century **(2)**.

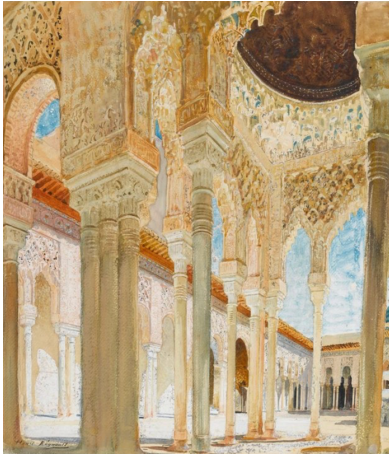


**(2) Francisco Goya, *Charles IV of Spain and his Family*, 1800-01 (Museo del Prado, Madrid)**

In the meantime artists and writers outside Spain were increasingly drawn to the country. This interest was fed in part by the enduring legacy of the 'Black Legend', which cast Spain as backward, cruel and fanatical - a stereotype rooted in earlier conflicts between Spain and the north, but reinvigorated by the Romantics.

At the same time, Spain's Islamic past, particularly the legacy of Al-Andalus, captivated European audiences. Monuments like the Alhambra became essential destinations for those in search of an exotic 'other' **(3)**. Foreign artists such as David Roberts and Henri Regnault travelled to Spain and built on its long-standing associations with passion, violence and spectacle. Bullfights, church processions and flamenco dancers were recurring motifs **(4)**. Spanish artists

themselves were not immune to these expectations; indeed, some sought to capitalise on them in the international market.



**(3) Henri Regnault, *Court of the Ambassadors at the Palace of the Alhambra*, nd (Louvre, Paris)**



**(4) Alfred Dehodencq, *A Confraternity in Procession*, 1851 (Museo Carmen Thyssen, Málaga)**

Within Spain, the state remained the dominant patron of the arts. The 19th century was a period of political instability, marked by civil wars and shifting regimes, but successive governments recognized the importance of art in constructing national identity. The Prado Museum was opened to the public in 1819 – a means of enhancing the country’s international prestige while at the same time educating

and ‘improving’ the Spanish people. History painting – bolstering the current status quo by celebrating Spain’s past - was heavily promoted through official exhibitions like the National Exhibition of Fine Arts (Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes), established in 1856, and artists competed for state recognition and the chance of prestigious commissions. A key legacy of this system is the 19th century collection in today’s Prado Museum.



**(5) Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz, *Joanna the Mad*. 1877 (Museo del Prado. Madrid)**

The painter Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz was one of the most notable products of this system. His monumental canvas *Doña Juana la Loca* (1877) **(5)** dramatizes the story of Joanna of Castile, blending historical narrative with emotional intensity. The painting combines theatricality with academic rigour, and its theme is aligned with the state’s desire to forge a coherent national history. Pradilla’s success—he would later become director of the Prado—illustrates how closely artistic prestige was tied to official patronage.

By the second half of the century, Paris, the undisputed capital of European art in this period, was starting to exert a powerful

attraction for Spanish artists. The most celebrated of these was Mariano Fortuny, whose virtuoso technique and vivid colour made him a sensation in Paris during the 1860s and early 1870s.



**(6) Mariano Fortuny, *The Spanish Wedding*, 1870 (Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya)**

Works such as *The Spanish Wedding* **(6)** combined meticulous detail with an almost jewel-like luminosity, appealing to collectors who prized both technical brilliance and exotic subject matter. Yet Fortuny's success was not merely a matter of pandering to taste; his work was also innovative in its treatment of light, texture and colour. His experimental technique is most apparent in late works like *The Artist's Children* **(7)**, completed shortly before the artist's death in 1874.



**(7) Mariano Fortuny, *The Artist's Children in the Japanese Room*, 1874 (Museo del Prado, Madrid)**

The international – above all French - influences on Spanish art in this period cannot be overstated. In common with painters across Europe, the Spanish started to address themes from modern life and to innovate in their treatment of natural light and colour. The most important of these was Joaquín Sorolla. Early in his career he drew both admiration and controversy with ‘social realist’ paintings, representing contentious contemporary issues. Typical is a work of 1892, *Another Marguerite!* **(8)**, which shows a young woman being taken into custody.



**(8) Joaquín Sorolla, *Another Marguerite!* 1892,**  
(Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Saint Louis, USA)

But he soon moved on to the type of contemporary subject for which he is most celebrated – fashionable scenes of women and children at the seaside (often members of Sorolla’s family), enjoying their leisure under dazzling sunlight **(Cover image)**. The artist’s own comfortable lifestyle is today on show at the Sorolla Museum in Madrid. He achieved extraordinary success, both in Spain and abroad.

Exhibitions of his work in Paris, London, and especially the United States drew large audiences and critical acclaim. In 1909, his show at the Hispanic Society of America in New York cemented his international reputation, while also providing him with an opportunity to promote his own nation through art. The Society

commissioned him to paint *Vision of Spain* – a series of large-scale murals depicting regional life across the country. The project culminates a fascinating period in Spanish art, as it navigated a course between national identity and an international market, modernity and tradition.

## **Books**

Javier Barón and José Luis Díez, *The Nineteenth Century in the Prado* (Madrid, 2008)

Claudia Hopkins, *Art and Identity in Spain, 1833-1946: The Orient Within* (Bloomsbury, 2024)

Priscilla E Muller, *From Goya to Sorolla* (Hispanic Soc, 2005)

B Pons-Sorolla, *Sorolla: The Masterworks* (Rizzoli, 2012)

S Stepanek et al, *Goya: Order and Disorder* (Boston MFA, 2014)

Janis Tomlinson, *Goya in the Twilight of Enlightenment* (Yale, 1992)

Isabelle Valverde, 'El siglo XIX en el Prado', *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, vol 15, issue 1 (Spring 2016)

Oscar Vázquez, *Inventing the art collection: patrons, markets, and the state in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Spain* (Penn State U Press, 2001)

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