



**Art,
Contemplation
and Scenic
Beauty
at the Monastery of Santa
María de El Paular**

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Founded in the late 14th century by order of Henry II of Castile, the Charterhouse of El Paular was built in the first half of the 15th century during the reign of his son John I, and remodelled and concluded in 1442 during the reign of John II. Over time, it became a testimony to the chief characteristics of art in Castile under the Trastámara dynasty. The original project consisted of three main buildings: the monastery, the church and the palace. Those who worked on it included master builders and architects such as Rodrigo Alfonso, Abderramán (a *Morisco* from Segovia who designed the Gothic Mudejar refectory), Juan Guas (who supervised the building of cloister, the atrium and the west front of the church), Rodrigo Gil de Hontañón (who worked on the porch leading onto the Ave Maria Court in the palace) and Bartolomé Fernández (who carved the choir stalls in the 16th century). Its walls reveal how Castilian art evolved from the early Middle Ages up to a point of transition between the late Gothic and early Renaissance periods. This art displays the distinctive features of Castilian society that made it possible. Like medieval Castile as a whole, the Charterhouse went through various moments of crisis and decline before re-emerging with even greater impetus and enthusiasm than before. The ultimate goal was to consolidate the collective and historical identity of a people who were fighting above all for survival owing to civil strife and dynastic wars (Ortega Cantero 2009, p. 31). It was Francisco Giner de los Ríos, through the Institución Libre de Enseñanza, who first pointed out the significance of El Paular in the history of Spain. He organised regular trips for students from Madrid to the Charterhouse, where they were joined by intellectuals of the time.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, El Paular became a meeting place for intellectuals, artists and visitors who stayed at the monastery. Led by Giner de los Ríos, figures like Manuel Bartolomé Cossío, Ramón Menéndez Pidal and his wife María Goyri, Francisco F. Villega, Enrique de la Mesa, Enrique de la Vega and others drew attention to the importance of the history, culture and landscape of the Charterhouse, and warned of the urgent need for restoration work.¹ The directors of the Residencia de Paisajistas (Landscape Residence) of El Paular, created in 1918, went to some lengths to ensure that its teaching would raise awareness of the site's cultural value. Francisco Pompey, Enrique Simonet, Francisco Esteve, Rafael Pellicer and Martínez Vázquez were all painters who directed the Residencia and encouraged the creation of bursaries so that young artists could spend the summer months painting and meeting the intellectuals who were also regular visitors to the Charterhouse. The Residencia continued to take in these boarders until its final closure in 1953.

A rich collection of paintings

In 1623, the prior, Juan de Baeza, commissioned 54 enormous paintings for the cloister of El Paular, measuring 3.45 × 3.15 metres apiece, from Vicente Carducho (Florence c. 1576—Madrid 1638), a royal painter in the service of both Philip III and, like his successor Velázquez, Philip IV (Delgado López 1998-1999). All are on the subject of the life of St Bruno of Cologne and the history of the Carthusian order, of which he was the founder.

Carducho completed the vast pictorial cycle between 1626 and 1632, demonstrating a great sense of grandiosity and monumentality (Fig. 1). He can be regarded as one of the most outstanding painters of the Spanish Golden Age. Every picture in the series is related to the previous one, so by bringing them together in the place for which they were originally intended (as described below), they have recovered their formal relations and their intellectual and symbolic dimension. Carducho can also be regarded as one of the great precursors of Spanish pictorial realism, and he recorded his concept of painting in his work entitled *Diálogo sobre la teoría de la pintura*, written in 1633.



Fig. 1. Carducho and Charterhouse history.
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In the 19th century, the Charterhouse suffered the consequences of the disenfranchisement of church properties, and was sold to private individuals. The pictures went in 1836 to the ephemeral Museo de la Trinidad, and in 1870 to the Museo del Prado, where they remained in storage until 1896, when they were distributed somewhat randomly among various Spanish cities and provinces (Córdoba, Sevilla, Tortosa, La Coruña, Zamora and San Sebastián). The archive was also transferred to the Archivo Histórico Nacional, the library to the Biblioteca Nacional, and the walnut choir stalls to the church of San Francisco el Grande in Madrid. The monastery reverted to state possession in 1876, and was declared a national historic and artistic monument. In 1954, the government ceded it for use to the order of Saint Benedict, which has continued to occupy it to this day.

After responsibility for its conservation was assumed in 1978 by the Ministry of Culture through the Institute for the Cultural Heritage of Spain (IPCE), a Master Plan (BOE 1998; Barceló de Torres and Ruiz Gómez 2013) was drawn up jointly with the regional authorities of Madrid, the priority being to restore the cloister and adapt it for museum display purposes.

It was intended at the same time to return Carducho's works to their original locations and guarantee their future conservation and public exhibition (Fig. 2). This Master Plan is managed by the Directorate-General for Fine Arts and Cultural Properties through the IPCE, which has also undertaken the conservation of the library, the monks' cells, the mill and the archaeological remains, together with the restoration of the roofs, the sacristy, the choir stalls, the high altar and the west front of the church.



Fig. 2. Restoration of Carducho's paintings. © 2009 monasteriopaular.com

One of the largest such undertakings has been the restoration of Carducho's paintings. Of the 54 painted by the master, 52 are preserved, the other two having disappeared in Tortosa during the Civil War. They belong to the collections of the Museo del Prado, and starting in 2002, the canvases were gathered and restored at the Museo del Prado. They were returned to their original formats and placed in the same positions in the cloister they had occupied according to Carducho's designs, surmounted by pointed arches in order to match them with the Gothic arches of the cloister. It has thus proved possible to re-establish the narrative sequence of one of the most important such collections in Europe. In particular, the intervention on *The Ecstasy of Father Jean Birelle* has led to the recovery of some of the lost areas of colour thanks to the preparatory sketch of the canvas preserved at the Musée du Louvre. Special mention should also be made of the restoration of Eugenio Orozco's *Last Supper*, which belonged to the collection of the Museo Cerralbo in Madrid, and is now on display in its original position in the Gothic-Mudejar refectory. The new hanging of the paintings was inaugurated on 28 July, 2011.

Throughout the series of paintings, Carducho demonstrates his control of space and his narrative skill, using a variety of figures and colours to situate the viewer through a series of gestures and sentiments that lead to the heart of the history of the Carthusians. The works follow a linear narrative that can be grouped into two complementary sequences: the first 27 canvases relate the life of St Bruno of Cologne, the founder of the Carthusian order, from the moment of his conversion and his retreat to the Grande Chartreuse until his death and first miracle; the rest of the pictures show us the most significant acts of the Carthusians in Europe from the 11th to the 16th centuries, emphasising the order's great influence on the spread of monastic life. The viewer is therefore confronted with scenes that recall their lifestyle, epitomised by retirement to solitary landscapes, the ascetic life and the devotion of time to study and prayer. The cycle ends with canvases showing how the Carthusians of certain communities were persecuted and martyred as a result of the political and religious wars of 15th and 16th century Europe. The paintings belong to a style of Baroque religiosity that emphasises values such as prayer, martyrdom, miracles and mystic visions or experiences. Together, they form the fundamental basis of the museum's permanent collection.

The Cloister, an inhabited museum



Fig. 3. An image of the cloister.
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Taken as an architectural whole made up of the church, the cloister, the refectory, the library and the monks' rooms, the monastery of El Paular can be regarded as a genuinely inhabited museum, a living and dynamic space that is always open to transcendence for the traveller, whether a believer or not. The monks' choice to place the monastery within natural settings and landscapes that make it into an ideal garden is no surprise (Ramsés 2014). Here it is possible to create an intimate space of seclusion and an encounter with the divine, converting it into a metaphor for the contemplative soul. The point of departure here is the fact that the cloister where Carducho's paintings are located is, together with the rest of the monastery, the basis for the museum, which thus becomes not only an inhabited space but also an inhabitable place.

Paradoxically, it is not merely a place for brief visits, but a 'habitat' where people can live and relate to one another. There are many readings to be applied to the space of the museum, whether political, sociological, anthropological, architectural or environmental. All should lead us to the conviction that the museum as public institution may be regarded as an inhabitable monument open to all. In this regard, it is necessary to start from the principles of social ecology in order to envisage a sustainable, interconnected, inhabitable and inhabited museum that is responsible towards its environment.

I have stressed that the museum comprises the whole monastic complex of church, chapter house, chapels, tabernacle, cloister, monks' cells, library, refectory and kitchen garden, so that it can be regarded as a living museum. The fact that the monks live in the monastery, playing an active role in its conservation and in the spread of the artistic and spiritual values it embodies, shows that we are here confronted with a new way of conceiving the museum (Fig. 3). On guided tours, it is the monks themselves who explain the history and artistic and cultural content of the monastery to visitors, and who transmit the spiritual significance of a place that is both a museum and a spiritual centre.

At the same time, a small museum has been opened in one of the rooms leading off the cloister. It contains a narrative of the history of the site and the vicissitudes it has undergone, emphasising the interest it has aroused as a place of encounter and debate for various social, political and religious groups. There is also an exhibition on the entire process of restoration carried out on each of the structural elements of the monastery. In this way, visitors can gain an overall idea of the transformations that have affected the monastery throughout its history.

Within the monastery of El Paular, the garden is the place where the soul is stilled, the meeting point where people have something to say to one another. Monasteries have nature, history and artistic beauty concentrated in and around them, producing a sense of inner relaxation in visitors that helps them regain their energy. Faced with the hectic pace of big cities and the stress of everyday life, many people take refuge in monasteries for a few days in search of silence, relaxation and meditation. From this point of view, they have become genuinely therapeutic places where it is possible to find the inner serenity needed to recover from the stress of work and the incessant activity of daily living. Monasteries use architecture, iconography and music as therapeutic means for healing the infirmities of body and soul, such as melancholy and depression. The very sound of the bells has a healing effect on the emotional and psychological state of those listening to them.

For the monks, the garden is the cloister, where they perform their physical and spiritual labours and thereby convert it into a space for meditation and contemplation. If the spiritual and ritual centre of the monastery is the church, its soul and its emotional and psychological centre is the cloister. The two are therefore situated adjacently and with direct access to each other. All of the monks' activities are organised around the cloister, and the museum, library, refectory and dormitories all lead out to it. In the centre of the cloister there is always a fountain, whose symbolism leads us to the source from which the strength and energy of the community emanates. In transmitting stillness and harmony, however, the cloister not only invites contemplation but also becomes a living metaphor of the contemplative act itself. It is contemplation made form that marks the artistic variety to be found, its subjects and even its positioning, which always responds to both practical and symbolic concerns.

Contemplation and personal development

In the cloister-museum, we discover places for encounters with others—the other, the unknown—and are given the chance to create spaces of personal harmony that bring us closer to the vision of reality held by the monks of old. This echoes the ‘safe places, safe spaces’ theory. By contrast with the non-places of which Marc Auge (2000) writes, which are spaces of anonymity that provide us with various services but offer no life because they are transitory, without roots or memory, there are also places and spaces with a large social component where it is possible to participate, share, establish relations and undergo healing experiences. These are spaces where dialogue, fraternity, harmony and mutual respect are nurtured. Their similarity to monastic space is significant.

We are offered a chance to play out the theatre of life in a place without noise or commercial activity that might distract us from the aesthetic experience. Inside the museum, we are able to experience how vivid and intense sensory stimuli can be, and how they can constantly provoke us. On occasions, we may even perceive them in a state of chaos, although they can also appear to us as integrated in an experience of calmness and tranquillity despite its variegated nature and its frequently dissonant harmonies. These do not matter, since dissonance, like silence, can become music. A walk through the cloister-museum can become a sensorial symphony, since we must not forget that the contemplative attitude often resides more in that which is contemplated than in the person who contemplates it. For this reason, only the contemplative is creative.

The attitude of someone who enters the cloister-museum must be one of openness to ‘ourselves’, the communal and the diverse, in the awareness that such openness is possible only if it is deployed in the space we inhabit, and if we are prepared to modify it, when necessary, from the inside. We stand before a museum considered as a space steeped in silence, and inviting reflection, questions, openness to the ‘other’ or contemplation. In the cloister-museum, creativity, cohabitation and nature are combined in a unique experience. When we enter the cloister, we penetrate a space that has been lived in, going on an interior voyage through the history of the Charterhouse while experiencing the pleasure of inhabiting a space through which life flows and is continually renewed. This is a museography of immersion, where the visitor is invited to live out a unique experience in a setting that is real rather than fictional (Fig. 4).

Within the monastery, the architecture itself and all the sculptural and symbolic components form part of the discourse on the museum as an inhabitable space. They all speak to the visitor of encounters and relations, of the experiences and testimonies both of individual monks and of the communities they formed a part of. If we observe the monastery from both the outside and the inside, we can perceive its artistic and museological value and its enormous interest, not only because of what it once was but also because of what, despite its period of abandonment and deterioration, it is destined to become in the future: a new source of inspiration and creative movement.

Those who enter the cloister-museum find not a monotonous and impersonal ‘non-place’ rather, they encounter an atmosphere laden with memories and accumulated pieces of lives that refuse to disappear, and which interrogate and question our current lifestyle. The canvases on the walls may be interpreted as drawing our attention to lives involved in events of historical importance, inviting us to recreate and improve on them in the future. At heart, we find ourselves before a critical museum that does not attempt to leave us impassive. On the contrary, it provokes us and awakens us from the possible lethargy of everyday routine with the aim of improving everyday reality.



Fig. 4. Garden of the cloister. © 2009 monasteriopaular.com

A threefold way of conceiving the museum

When we enter the Lozoya Valley and approach the monastery of El Pualar, the landscape before us offers the opportunity of an aesthetic experience allowing us to visit and inhabit it. The visitor's first contact with the landscape is an invitation to discover the monastery, an inhabited dwelling, and the scenery to which it belongs. It calls on us to recognise the whole of the heritage encompassing the space we inhabit, and, having recognised it, to start to explore it in the knowledge that all we see is inhabited and accessible, for in this way alone is it possible to value and preserve it. The territory and the landscape form the starting point for a broad perspective over the spaces with concentrations of architectural monuments and places of special interest. All of these enable an interaction between nature and culture, between the physical environment and its history. There are thus three ways of conceiving and understanding the museum as a plural and globalising reality. Everything is now a museum, or rather, the museum takes responsibility not only for its collections, but also for all the cultural and natural heritage that surrounds it, although it is not directly responsible, because the monastery does not actually own the lands. They are managed by the local Council and SEPRONA (the Spanish Nature Protection Service), which are in charge of ensuring the conservation of the area's natural life and water resources.

It is not a question of freezing a moment of everyday life in space, like a photograph, but of perceiving the sensory beauty displayed in the landscape and scenic surroundings: the mountains, the river, the weirs, the lake, the forest and the paths connecting one spot with another. In this environment stands the monastery and the museum, which help us to define our perception of reality. This is manifested through the diversity of the natural and cultural heritage present. It is the result of different factors that emerge over time from the relations of human beings with their natural environment. The aggregated settings of the monastery, museum and natural surroundings constitute a patrimonial grouping that demands to be understood, fostered and complemented. They cannot be conceived in isolation from one other, but must be taken as a set if they are to be valued and protected as an indivisible whole, for they all form part of an outstanding universal value within a broad concept of the museum.

It was in 1992 that the UNESCO World Heritage Convention for the first time recognised the value of cultural landscape, defined as the result of a series of natural and cultural components, both tangible and intangible, in a specific territory. These include not only ecological and aesthetic values, but other aspects pertaining to the quality of human life, identity, collective memory and heritage value. The cultural landscape can thus be considered a dynamic and complex reality resulting from the environmental, social, economic and cultural processes of transformation undergone by a territory over the course of time. This demands mechanisms that enable to identify, protect and provide suitable management for it, as established in the European Landscape Convention, signed in Florence, Italy, in October 2000 and ratified by Spain in 2007, and the Ibero-American Cultural Landscape Charter (IPCE 2012), approved in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, in November 2012.

However, the landscape is also a complex reality that poses various management problems, since its components are both natural and cultural, material and immaterial, tangible and intangible. The landscape possesses a holistic nature that integrates elements of nature and culture, space and time, objects and perceptions that can be focused through a great many disciplines and professions. The cultural landscape includes a set of inherited resources, which reflect the values, beliefs and traditions of a constantly evolving society, and result from the interaction over time of people with their environment. The landscape is the bearer of the values of the people and society that inhabit, modify, perceive and manage it. There is, then, an individual and collective responsibility towards the landscape, a cultural heritage that holds a value and potential which, when properly managed, can become a source of development and ensure an enhanced quality of life.

Consciousness of the rapid transformations currently affecting Spain's rural areas has brought growing concern over the continual danger of degradation of the landscape, which is regarded as another utility for consumption and is therefore vulnerable to deterioration. This has led to great emphasis on the perception of landscape, which has come to be regarded as an element contributing to societal well-being and the enhanced quality of life of its members. Natural and cultural landscapes have thus become an essential part of the increasingly broad offer of tourism in the countryside, thereby raising society's esteem for the agricultural landscape and consideration of its heritage as a legacy to be preserved and enjoyed.



Fig. 5. The cultural landscape underlying the monastery backdrop. © 2009 monasteriopaular.com

Working in this direction, a National Plan for Cultural Landscape was drawn up in Spain in 2002 (Cruz 2012). It included a report on 'El Paular and its surroundings. Referential aspects of its value enhancement, protection, delimitation and use as a Cultural Landscape'. The monastery of El Paular is an example of how it is possible to understand the monastic and artistic life and thought reflected in architecture, painting and sculpture by combining it closely with human beings and their environment (Fig. 5). Still surviving today, indeed, is a cultural landscape that has perfectly integrated the life of the past into that of the present in the heart of the Upper Lozoya Valley.

With the project to restore the monastery and the pictures in the cloister, an attempt has been made to offer a vision of El Paular's historical past and present. In this way, the foundations are laid for correct management of a territory viewed as a cultural landscape.

The importance of the project can be argued on historical, architectural, artistic, museological, ecological and geomorphological grounds. By taking into account all the elements constituting the landscape around the monastery, including the physical setting, historical processes and social uses of the territory together with an analysis of the people who made it possible, it can be ascertained exactly which features mark El Paular's quality as a model of a cultural heritage landscape.

It may be added at this stage that many monasteries all over Europe have been declared World Heritage Sites, with outstanding examples in Spain, Portugal, Germany, Greece, Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Serbia and Russia. All can be regarded as active guardians of the cultural landscape in which they are located, and all are characterised by a close relationship between the natural and the intangible heritage.

A Planned Interpretation Centre

The project of setting up a Planned Interpretation Centre for El Paular and its surroundings is under the auspices of the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, currently still under construction at El Paular, is intended to raise sensibility and awareness among both the local community and outside visitors on the need to look at the landscape and change their perception of it. The goal is for the landscape to be viewed as an essential element that must be protected and preserved because it forms part of the cultural and natural heritage of the area. By advocating a respectful attitude towards the environment, the museum aims to foster inquiry and spread knowledge of the cultural heritage and its environs so that it will be recognised, valued, conserved and disseminated.

The museum takes responsibility for the surrounding landscape, though it does not manage it, and regards it as an integral part of itself. It is aware that the collection, the monastery and cloister and its natural backdrop are all essential parts of a whole that constitutes the cultural heritage; this is manifested, expressed and translated through the works of art, the building that houses them, the setting where they are exhibited, the landscape that surrounds them and the contemplative atmosphere that envelops them. We should not underestimate the importance of the presence of the monks for keeping this place alive and dynamic, with the same significance as it originally bore (Fig. 6). This is their greatest contribution, in the sense that they constitute a true intangible heritage value, which should not be left aside when it comes to completing the project for the future Interpretation Centre.

The creation of the Interpretation Centre is intended to provide a new focus on the management of the museological complex by broadening it to promote the protection of the region's cultural and natural heritage. At the same time, the involvement of the local community is requested in ensuring responsible use of their patrimonial resources and safeguarding the integrity of their heritage. Museum and local communities, through a mutual collaboration agreement, thus become guardians of the historical and cultural value of the landscape around the monastery, with a commitment to the sustainable development of the region. To this end, they

will also endeavour to offer a multisensory tour of the local scenery, biodiversity and traditional culture, as well as of the flora and fauna of the Lozoya Valley and the Guadarrama Mountains. This project necessarily involves a clear set of goals that will lead to specific programmes and activities, and these will in turn require a process of evaluation to assess their effectiveness and ascertain what needs to be corrected or boosted.

However, the task is not an easy one, since relations between the museum and the territorial community are not always fluid enough to allow for full collaboration in the management of the local heritage. This reminds us how important ecomuseums have been in promoting community participation in heritage management. It is therefore necessary to balance the management of the territory with the protection of heritage and cultural landscapes. Nevertheless, the Town Council of Rascafría has shown full willingness to assist in its correct implementation. It is evidently also necessary to educate the local population on their heritage and cultural landscape, arousing their curiosity and appreciation.

At the same time, this population must be prepared to protect, conserve, develop and disseminate it. Only thus will the realisation come about that it is necessary to work on the basis of a shared commitment. Museum and community are indeed both required to function actively and dynamically as equals; both must provide the means necessary for further investigation, for the empowerment of individuals and the promotion of scientific activities that will help broaden knowledge of museology and the natural environment alike. The museum and Town Council must also carry out a detailed analysis of the conditions that will be necessary for the Interpretation Centre to achieve sustainability, covering the expenses of the infrastructure, logistics and human resources essential for it to function normally.

Since the cultural heritage of El Paular is linked to a very attractive natural setting, it could become a major contributor to the development of tourism (Hernández 2009), allowing the public to experience a direct encounter with its cultural values and thus helping to spread them. At the same time, it can help to promote projects to study, investigate, preserve and restore the complex cultural heritage encompassed by the museum and its environment. In this respect, it must be said that the public that tends to visit the museum and monastery of El Paular is primarily middle class, and does not generally spend much in the region, devoting their time to climbing up to the monastery and hiking in the surroundings. As the number of weekend visitors to the Lozoya Valley is fairly high, it must be ensured that the heritage is not damaged or destroyed through improper use. It is essential to avoid any negative impact that would affect its cultural and natural integrity and to strive for its maintenance so that it may be enjoyed by all members of society, present and future.



Fig. 6. The church as a place opening onto the transcendent.

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Towards a museum respectful of nature, silence and contemplation

Today, the museum has truly undergone a process of transformation that has made it more open, more universal and more sensitive to those realities that favour the integral development of the human being. It might even be asserted that the museum of El Paular integrates four spaces with privileged links to the transcendent, expressed according to Dürckheim (1999) through nature, art, meeting and worship.

The museum of Carducho's paintings has the mission of allowing the public to discover, contemplate and enjoy these works. The museum moreover seeks to accompany visitors on their discovery of admiration and respect for the natural scenery that completely surrounds the monastery, inviting them to care for it and consider it a gift to be enjoyed, conserved and protected. The museum must make it possible for significant encounters to take place in both

its interior and its exterior space, where people go not to kill time but to create quality moments and encounter spaces that will help them grow in terms of humanity. The museum must cultivate the artistic dimension and the symbolic expression that allows human beings to transcend the senses; it must humanise the sacred and profane rites taking place within it so that they will fulfil their mission of expressing what we are frequently unable to communicate in words.

The museum should no longer be considered a reality isolated from its environment, since with the landscape it forms a whole and has the mission of making society aware of the need to confront it with an attitude of renewed respect. Museum and landscape form a patrimonial unit in symbiosis, making it difficult to tell where one entity ends and the other begins, for, while the collections are important, so too is the space that contains them and the landscape that surrounds them. It is time, then, to understand the heritage as an ambit in which people move and discover the value of beauty and aesthetics, which can be manifested as easily in a painting as in the trees of the garden or the landscape which gives everything its meaning. The museum breaks out of its walls, making way for a museum that is no longer imagined but lived, shared and celebrated within an environmental framework where reverential respect is felt for nature. In this case, it is also accompanied by the monastery inhabited by its monks—the transcendental aura of a holy place.

NOTES

¹ All these figures are linked to the Institución Libre de Enseñanza, and their teaching, their historical and literary research. Their fondness for excursions to the countryside made them staunch advocates for the conservation of the Lozoya Valley and the monastery of El Paular.

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