A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO SPANISH HISTORY AND ART

The Colonizers

Phoenicians → Greeks → Carthaginians → Romans → Visigoths → Arabs → Reconquest

The first colonizers to the Iberian Peninsula were the Phoenicians. They founded the city of Cádiz in 1100 BC. They came primarily as merchants; it was mainly the mineral wealth of the southern area that attracted them. The Greeks arrived in 590 BC. They established colonies from Barcelona to Cádiz. Because of cyclical agricultural problems in Greece, they came in search of fertile land. They introduced to the Peninsula the cultivation of olives and grapes. Around 500 BC the Phoenicians were attacked by the Tartessians in the south. The Phoenicians called upon the Carthaginians (a powerful Phoenician colony in Carthage, North Africa) to help them fight the Tartessians. When the Tartessians were defeated the Carthaginians became the rulers of the Peninsula. With the help of thousands of slaves, they exploited the mines which supplied funds to finance the Punic Wars (referring to the wars fought between Rome and Carthage.) The Punic wars lasted from 264 BC – 206 BC. Hannibal was the famous Carthaginian general who marched his troops over the Pyrenees and Alps to defeat the Romans. The Punic Wars finally ended when the Romans conquered Cádiz in 206 BC. It then took two centuries for the Romans to fully conquer the Peninsula. Their great contribution to Spain is that they gave the native population the base for national unity by giving them a common language (vulgar Latin), a common government, and common laws. The Peninsula became Rome’s richest province. The exploitation of mines netted 20,000 pounds of gold a year. The Romans fertilized the land, built an incredible system of highways, aqueducts, and bridges that still are in use today. (During your time in Spain you may see Roman bridges in Salamanca and Córdoba, the aqueduct in Segovia, or amphitheaters in Mèrida and Itàlica near Sevilla.) With the fall of the Roman Empire, the Barbarians from the North began to move into the Peninsula. By 418 AD, the Visigoths became the principle group of Barbarians to rule Spain. Toledo was their capital and administrative center. There were 30 Visigothic kings in two centuries. The constant in-fighting and internal civil strife amongst the Visigothic leaders made the Arab invasion in 711 easy. Within 8 years the Arabs conquered the entire Peninsula except for the inaccessible valleys of the high Cantabric and Pyrenean mountains. The Arabs remained in Spain for 8 centuries. Córdoba became the most prosperous metropolis in the world. At one point there were more than 1000 mosques in Córdoba. Today the Mezquita de Córdoba remains as a reminder of the greatness of the Arab empire in Spain. Throughout southern Spain you may see vestiges of the 700 years of Arab rule in Spain.

From the small mountain town of Covadonga, a group of Christians began the battle to reconquer Spain in 722. The Reconquest took over 700 years. The Catholic Kings, Ferdinand and Isabelle, become the unifiers of Christian Spain.

Since the reign of the Catholic Kings, Spain has been governed by two dynastic families. The first family, the Habsburgs (Habsburgos) of Austria, are the descendents of Juana la loca and Felipe el Hermoso. The second family, the Bourbons (Los Borbones) of France, is the dynasty of the current King of Spain, Juan Carlos I.

The Catholic Kings

The marriage of Ferdinand of Aragón and Isabel of Castille (Los Reyes Católicos, Isabel de Castilla and Fernando de Aragón) created the union of two of the most important and powerful kingdoms, thus sparking the idea of a unified Spain. These kings conquered the last Moslem stronghold in the Peninsula, in Granada. This event gave rise to the triumph of Catholicism over the Moslem religion. The conquest of Granada took place in 1492. After this year Spain’s history took a radical turn since it was also the Reina Isabel who financed the voyage of Christopher Columbùs (Cristóbal Colón) in his search for new routes to the Indies…and you know what happened next…"In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue..."
The Habsburg Dynasty

**Los Reyes Católicos** had four children (three females and one male). One of the daughters of Los Reyes Católicos married a Habsburg prince, **Felipe el Hermoso**. Upon the death of the only male child, the crown of **Castilla** and **Aragón** was passed to the son of **Juana** and **Felipe**, **Carlos I** (also known as Carlos V). Carlos also inherited the title of emperor of Germany and became the most powerful king of his time. During his reign and the proceeding centuries, Spain was a world power due, in part, to the colonies outside of the Peninsula (America, the Netherlands - **Paises Bajos** - Germany, part of Italy...)

Carlos I brought the Renaissance (**Renacimiento**) to Spain. The Renaissance supposes the "rebirth" of classical culture, of Greek and Roman culture. Its origins began in Italy and assume a fundamental change in the way mankind perceives life. It is a humanistic art, centered on "man" and all that is human (Medieval art is fundamentally religious). This doesn't mean that Renaissance art had no religious content, but that the perspective was different. The Renaissance searched for beauty, the equilibrium of form and style, harmony. Two outstanding examples of Renaissance-style buildings are the palace of Carlos V in Granada (situated in the Alhambra) and the Real Chancillería, also in Granada (in the Plaza Nueva).

Carlos I governed until 1556 and then was succeeded by his son **Felipe II**. Felipe II's reign is associated with the Counter Reformation (**Contrareforma**), the reform proposed by Erasmus (Erasmo) from Rotterdam and Luther (Lutero) which gave rise to the schism in the Catholic Church. Spain became the defender of extreme traditional conservative values of the Catholic Church. **Felipe II** was an austere king, not prone to indulging in luxury and amusements. This king is credited with the construction of the monastery/palace, **El Escorial**, an impressive structure that you may visit during your time in Spain (all students will go with API except those studying in Barcelona). One of the painters with whom you will become familiar painted during this time period; his name is Doménico Theotocópulos, better known as **El Greco**. His name, as you will have realized, is not Spanish. El Greco is of Greek origin, and he came to Spain to work on El Escorial. He settled in Toledo where he produced the majority of his work, the most well known being "**El entierro del Conde de Orgaz**" (The Burial of Count Orgaz).

With the death of **Felipe II**, we enter in the XVII century. This century is known as "**El Siglo de Oro**", not necessarily due to the quantity of gold that came from the Americas but because of the spectacular growth of the arts, especially in literature. Many great Spanish writers and painters produced works during this time period. During this century, Spain's power as a world leader was put into question, due in part to the weak character of the kings (**Felipe III, Felipe IV, and Carlos II**) and the large external debt accumulated by the Crown in financing many external wars. The wealth from the Americas was beginning to be insufficient.

During the XVII century there coexisted two artistic styles. The Renaissance (**Renacimiento**) and the Baroque (**Barroco**). If the Renaissance searched for equilibrium and harmony, the Baroque moved to the opposite extreme. The Baroque style is a "heavy" art, searching for movement, which occasionally ended up almost theatrical in appearance. In Sevilla they created an important Baroque school. In Granada two important examples of the Andalusian Baroque style are the church of **San Juan de Dios** and the monastery of **La Cartuja**.

One of the greatest painters that you may be introduced to in Spain, who lived and worked during this period, during the reign of Felipe IV, is **Diego de Silva y Velázquez**. His best-known work, **Las Meninas**, captures the spirit of the Baroque period (mirrors, distinct planes, the painter looking at his art, and us, the spectators, forming almost a part of the painting.)

In 1700 the last king of the Habsburgs, **Carlos II**, died. His nickname was the "**Hechizado**" ("The Bewitched") and he produced no heirs. The fight for power resulted in the ascension to the crown of the first Bourbon king, **Felipe V**.
The Bourbon Dynasty

The XVII century, also known as the “Century of Light,” marks an age of change. Baroque art passes to Neoclassical (in other words, “new” classical art). The classical esthetic art becomes filtered by the Enlightenment (Ilustración), and has “logical thought” as its central core. During this century science begins to take on importance. The Bourbon dynasty brings with it a fundamental change to the esthetic of the capital, Madrid. From this time period we have the Palacio Real (modeled on the Palace of Versailles in France), the construction of the Museo del Prado and the opening of the grand avenues of Madrid, such as the Paseo del Prado. It isn’t a surprise that the esthetic is that of France since this new dynasty is French.

The enlightened thoughts and the French crown provoke one of the most important events in Europe, the French Revolution (1789). For the first time in the history of Europe, the populace (el pueblo) takes the role of protagonist and finishes off the old regime that has guided the history of Europe for so many centuries. The slogan of the French Revolution was “libertad, igualdad, fraternidad” (“liberty, equality, brotherhood”). Europe passes from the “Antiguo Régimen” to the “Nuevo Régimen” (from the old regime to the new). We are now in the “Modern Age.” Spain, like the rest of the Europe, was not spared from these changes. The transition from one political system to the other was slow, complicated and bloody.

The XIX century is marked by major upheavals and by the invasion of Spain by French troops. In fact José Bonaparte became the king of Spain from 1808-1814. But the populace united against the French by carrying arms against the invaders during the May battle in 1808, precisely at the door of the Puerta del Sol in Madrid. The new political ideas put forth by the French Revolution made it possible for the first Spanish constitution to be written in Cádiz (it was known as La Pepa). The Plaza de España, also in Cádiz, commemorates this first constitution; although it did not last long. The arrival of Fernando VII (El Deseado) constitutes a step backwards in liberal ideas. “La Pepa” did not do much, since the reign of Fernando VII was tyrannical. He was known as an “absolutist” who believed in the centralization of absolute power, and the democratic ideals of the constitution were declared null and void.

Witness to this epoch was Francisco de Goya y Lucientes. His work is invaluable testimony to what transpired in Spain during this time. A large part of his work is in the Museo del Prado, portraits of the royal family (Carlos III, Carlos IV, Fernando VII), the war against the French (“The 3rd of May 1808: The Execution of the Defenders of Madrid”) and other equally famous pieces (La Maja desnuda, self portraits, etc.)

The esthetic movement that happens during the Enlightenment is known as Romanticism (el Romanticismo), which reveals itself strongly in the literature of the times. Romanticism is an escapist movement. If the century of Enlightenment is marked by hope in a just political system (remember the slogan of the French Revolution), the failure of this movement is that the intellectuals hide in a world far removed from the reality of the pragmatic issues of the day.

At the end of the XIX century the crisis in Spain reached its most precipitous point with the loss of its last colonies (Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines) in the war with the United States. This episode occurred in 1898, the year that is given as a name to a generation of writers tremendously critical of the situation in which they find Spain, they are known as the Generación del ‘98. Regarding the esthetic of the end of the XIX century we have a new artistic movement, Modernism (el Modernismo), heir of Romanticism and anticipator of the crisis in art during the XX century. Modernism in literature is fundamentally an affected art that does not want to have anything to do with reality, and takes refuge in things Oriental. In architecture this style is reflected in the works of Gaudí, mostly in Catalonia.

Another important movement to consider is the Industrial Revolution at the end of the XIX century. New technologies and misery in the countryside provokes the massive emigration from the countryside to the city. The misery of the workers cohabits with the strength of the new bourgeoisie. It is the beginning of the creation of riches, and the face of the city is changing. The reflection of these new bourgeois ideals is seen in the Spanish cities. They constructed large avenues with buildings that show the power of this new class. You may see examples of this period in Madrid in the Calle Alcalá and surroundings, also in the Gran Via in Granada, where there are large modernist buildings.
XX Century
And now we enter the XX century, marked by a series of continuous attempts to reorganize and recuperate, but always hampered by an increase in economic, social and ideological tensions and conflicts. With the crisis in the monarchy, the military dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, the failure of the Second Republic, and rising schism between liberals and conservatives, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) becomes inevitable. Since both Mussolini and Hitler supported Francisco Franco against the Republic, upon the conclusion of the Civil War, there were economic sanctions against Spain. It was not until 1950 that the United Nations lifted these sanctions. Then in 1953 the United States government recognized the Franco government and opened bases there. Between 1962 and 1973 there was great economic development due to foreign investment and world prosperity. Despite the economic openness, the dictatorship continued to repress the liberties of its citizens. The secret police and the Guardia Civil were ever vigilant. Many intellectuals went into exile during those years, including Picasso and Casals. Franco died on November 20, 1975. After 39 years of dictatorship, Juan Carlos I became King at age 37. He has been admired worldwide for peacefully transitioning Spain into democracy. In 1977 the first free elections since 1936 were held. In 1979 a new constitution was drafted and in 1982 Felipe González, a socialist, was elected as the president of Spain. More than three decades later, democracy continues to flourish with Mariano Rajoy as the most recently elected Prime Minister (2011). During your stay in Spain you will learn about the Civil War and about contemporary Spanish history, politics and art.

With this background, you should understand the chain of events and the artistic and architectural trends that accompanied historic events in Spain. As you visit monuments and museums during your time in Spain, we hope that having this background will help you to enjoy more fully your cross-cultural experience.