

Cultural Heritage and War

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On the occasion of the European Year of Cultural Heritage, this article reviews what are considered to be the first steps in terms of protection and international cooperation for safeguarding cultural heritage in times of war. Thus, the great development in the protection of works of art during the Spanish Civil War and the Bosnian and Iraq wars helps us to understand the current mechanisms of cooperative action that have developed in Syrian territory. However, as long as there is war, the identity and cultural symbols of peoples will continue to be at risk.

“María Teresa and I evacuated Titian’s *Charles V* and *Las Meninas*. Before leaving [for Valencia] we harangued the soldiers in charge of the convoy, telling them: ‘We’re carrying the most colossal works of world art. No one will talk about the dead of this war but, if the paintings are lost, it will be a disaster for humanity.’ The soldiers immediately stopped smoking.”¹

Rafael Alberti

2018 has been designated European Year of Cultural Heritage and this initiative seeks to identify, highlight and preserve what forms part of our identity. Alongside the intense agenda of events and calls that support these actions, heritage requires a series of reflections that enables it to remain part of life. Therefore, through the year’s motto, “Our heritage: where the past meets the future”, we briefly explore the first initiatives that laid the foundations of both its protection and the cooperation between countries. Today there is an effort to consolidate this idea in the so-called “Blue Helmets for Culture”, although they are not yet fully operative.

We think it appropriate here to examine some of the official contexts that established

the precedents of this collective awareness. In 1945 we read about the horror through the voices of the survivors of the Second World War and, after a poorly learnt lesson, we are doing so again through the pictures and accounts of refugees fleeing war now. Theodor Adorno affirmed that “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” but today, as the journeys without destination, the walls and the human drama go on, art continues to provide a strange meaning. This issue once again awakens the will to conserve heritage in conflict zones as a symbol of culture and identity, perhaps to establish a common language beyond the chaos.

Artistic heritage is one of the first victims of any war. The bombing of the Library of

1. “Memoria del exilio” [talk by Rafael Alberti in El Escorial], *El País*, 29 August 1989.

Sarajevo during the Bosnian conflict (25 August 1992) or the sacking of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad (April 2003), where around 15,000 pieces were looted, are a few examples. The Iraq war also led to the assault on the Museum of Babylon or the occupation of the Nasiriyah Museum by US troops, which used it as army barracks. The conflict also resulted in paralysing the study of its heritage, which in the 1980s was covered by an Archaeological Charter that brought together 12,000 sites. Today, the scenario of destruction is presented as an exercise in propaganda by Islamic State. The pictures of the damage to the Mosul Museum in 2016, together with the attacks on the famous Lamassu on the Nergal Gate, which guarded one of the entrances to the old city of Nineveh, showed us barbarism almost as it happened.

Syria is undergoing constant massacre: towns declared World Heritage sites by UNESCO such as Damascus, Palmira and Aleppo are part of the strategic showcase of a war that never ends. Added to this situation is a destruction that, as in previous examples, encourages constant robbery of its artistic fabric. In the words of Maamoun Abdulkarim, Director-General of Antiquities and Museums in Syria, the only way to stop this sacking is by applying “measures that combine raising the awareness of the people about their heritage and proper documentation of all the sites, with the involvement of local authorities, backed by international legislation and cooperation.”²

Since the needed call for this international cooperation, a few years ago we heard about the creation of an operational force that will be able to act in cases of “cultural emergencies”. On 16 February 2016, a symbolic agreement between Irina Bokova (Director-General of

UNESCO) and Paolo Gentiloni (Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs), established a special group of conservation experts with the aim of deploying them in places whose cultural heritage is in danger of destruction or looting. The strategy would be included in the humanitarian and peace actions, as an element to promote diversity and social cohesion. One year later, the commitment was expanded and the countries that make up the G7 (France, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom, United States, Canada and Japan) strengthened their commitment. This resulted in a new document, the Florence Declaration, a text that condemns the destruction of cultural heritage and calls upon “all States to take strong and effective measures to combat the looting and trafficking in cultural property from their places of origin.” Time will tell if these actions achieve practical solutions or are merely relegated to a misleading symbolic level.

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However, we must remember that responses to the protection of heritage in the contexts of war are not new. We have antecedents here that indicate their outstanding role in the Spanish Civil War in the first stages of the technical studies. In that scenario, the Ministry of Public Instruction and Fine Arts offered official safekeeping for all the property that made up the historical and artistic heritage of the time.

2. M. Agudo Villanueva, “El patrimonio en Irak y Siria. Entre la barbarie y la hipocresía”, *Atalayar, entre dos orillas*, Madrid, June 2016.

The first protection measures put into practice by the architects to conserve public buildings, under the direction of Josep Renau, followed the technical principles established by the Office international des musées (OIM), a body created in 1926 by the League of Nations with the aim of promoting international cooperation between museums.³ The OIM's second meeting, the Athens Conference held in 1931, was dedicated to the preservation of monuments and was a milestone in the history of conservation. That meeting led to the Athens Charter, the first international document on restoration criteria and protection policies, which would be the basis of a great deal of European legislation on heritage.

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Unfortunately, five years later, the official Spanish centres of culture would be bombed: the Museo del Prado, the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, the Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando and the Biblioteca Nacional, among others. The actions undertaken then basically consisted of moving the works to basements of museums and public buildings, together with the protection of large-scale objects using piled up sandbags and supports, and by strengthening security and fire prevention services.⁴ This was the result of the efforts of citizens and the desire for streamlined and coordinated technical responses. Here we must recall the

words of Manuel Azaña in June 1939 when, in a letter to Ángel Ossorio, he warned Negrín that “the Museo del Prado is more important for Spain than the Republic and the monarchy combined.”⁵

In Madrid, the Central Committee and the provincial committees rolled out several collaborative actions that we mainly summarise as three. First is the protection against bombings of monuments such as the fountains of Cibeles and Neptuno or the façade of the Café Madrid using brick structures and other formwork. Second, the collection of objects and works of art from museums, convents and private collections to avoid damage or robbery was a task carried from the city towards many villages. And the third factor is the development of propaganda for the protection of artistic heritage that would become one of the focal points of Republican cultural policy. The objective was to raise people's awareness of protecting, respecting or safeguarding through manifestos, information in the press and on radio, lectures or posters, the latter playing an important role in this. Produced on occasions by fine arts students, they covered the streets of Madrid with attractive designs accompanied by short direct messages such as: “Citizen, do not destroy any engraving or old artwork” or “Books are tomorrow's weapons.”

These initiatives led to the discovery of unknown works of art, the restoration of pieces in poor condition and donations to the government of the Republic, which were another of the outstanding aspects of the artistic heritage protection policy. In a few days, over 20,000 paintings and 12,000 sculptures were rescued, inventoried and stored in a dozen locations

3. I. Argerich and J. Ara (coords.), *Arte protegido. Memoria de la Junta del Tesoro Artístico durante la Guerra Civil* [exhibition catalogue], Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2003.

4. J. Renau, “L'Organisation de la défense du patrimoine artistique et historique espagnol pendant la guerre civile”, *Museion*, X, Paris, 1937, pp. 7-68.

5. M. Azaña, “Carta a Ángel Ossorio de 24 de junio de 1939”, *Obras Completas*, Mexico, Oasis, 1966-69.

throughout Madrid, notably the church of San Francisco el Grande, which housed the royal carriages, the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, whose structure was reinforced, and the Biblioteca Nacional, which held a million books.

With a collection of 24,000 pieces, including 8,000 paintings, the protection of the Museo del Prado proved to be a crucial mission. Let's remember that the government of the Republic moved to Valencia on 7 November 1936. One of the most interesting events in the coordination and protection of artistic heritage occurred a few days later, with the order to evacuate the main works of the Museo del Prado. The first shipping of pieces was on 10 November,⁶ followed by others from El Escorial, the Academia de San Fernando, the Palacio Real or the Palacio de Liria. Thus, a process had begun that would last over two and a half years and take the pieces to a safe place on the French border.⁷ The first movements responded to the clear state of emergency. Around a hundred works from the Museo del Prado were sent to Valencia under the responsibility of María Teresa de León, member of the Alliance of Antifascist Intellectuals. In those first moments, Rafael Alberti described the difficulties, for example, of transporting a piece such as *Las Meninas* and leaving it unexpectedly at the entrance of the headquarters of the Palacio de Linares after the start of a bombing raid. Or the need to take Titian's painting *Charles V* off a lorry, move it on rollers and cross El Jarama bridge.

Fortunately, the evacuation of artistic treasures was gradually carried out using all the measures available in the precariousness of a war: fireproof packaging, waterproof paper and lorries driven at a speed barely above 15

kilometres an hour. To coordinate the whole process, the work of the artist Josep Renau, at the time head of the Directorate of Fine Arts, would be fundamental.⁸ As a consequence of his work the creation of the Central Council of Archives, Libraries and Museums was strengthened, where distinguished intellectuals such as María Moliner and Enrique Lafuente Ferrari participated. The process of centralisation was completed two months later, with the formation of the Central Committee for Artistic Heritage. Once in Valencia, the pieces were deposited in two emblematic monuments of the city: the Torres de Serranos and the church of El Patriarca.

Humidity and temperature requirements made the Torres de Serranos the destination for the most important works such as Velázquez' Las Meninas, Goya's The 2nd and The 3rd of May 1808, The Clothed Maja and The Naked Maja, El Greco's The Holy Trinity, or the portraits of Marie de Medici and Charles V by Rubens and Titian, respectively

Both venues were first properly equipped. Humidity and temperature requirements made the Torres de Serranos the destination for the most important works such as Velázquez' *Las Meninas*, Goya's *The 2nd and The 3rd of May 1808*, *The Clothed Maja* and *The Naked Maja*, El Greco's *The Holy Trinity*, or the portraits of *Marie de Medici* and *Charles V* by Rubens and Titian, respectively and the best tapestries from the Palacio Real. There was less possibility of humidity damage in the towers, which were located above ground level, than in other

6. Nine bombs against the Museo del Prado were dropped by Franco's air force on the afternoon of 16 November 1936, which hastened the exodus to Valencia of the museum's main works.

7. A. Colorado, "Arte Salvado. Los antecedentes de una deuda histórica" [exhibition catalogue], *Arte Salvado. 70º aniversario del salvamento del patrimonio artístico español y de la intervención internacional*, Madrid, Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales, 2010, pp. 6-19.

8. J. Renau, *Arte en Peligro, 1936-1939*, Ed. Fernando Torres and Ayuntamiento de Valencia, 1980.



Packing *The Family of Carlos IV*, by Francisco de Goya, to be evacuated to Valencia (<http://pgp.ccinf.es/PGP/#/>).

buildings. Moreover, the thickness of their walls, over three metres, added to their suitability, together with their structural condition, surrounded by a bank and a moat that isolated them from blast injuries. However, the building's structure was strengthened even more. The architect José Lino Vaamonde fortified the vaults with other double vaults of reinforced concrete, practically creating a tower within the Towers that could withstand the possible impact of a bomb. A structure formed by reinforced concrete and bars that gave the tower enough mobility to avoid shaking.

In the church of El Patriarca the measures applied focused protection on the two chapels

of the central nave and the two side naves as a store for artworks. Some theoreticians also note the installation of air conditioning, which was unusual for the time.⁹ The building was the first point of reception for pieces arriving in Valencia, where they were opened, cleaned and restored. This was the reason for preparing an important workshop for revising and repairing them.

As support buildings for the large amount of works that arrived in Valencia (around 1,868 boxes with over 20,000 pieces were recorded), two more buildings were equipped, the Museo de Bellas Artes and the Archivo Municipal, where works by Goya and paintings from Va-

9. A. Colorado, "La salvaguarda del patrimonio artístico nacional en Valencia", in M. Aznar, J.L. Barona and J. Navarro (eds.), *Valencia, capital cultural de la República (1936-1937)*. *Congrés Internacional*, Valencia, Universidad de Valencia, 2008.

lencia cathedral were stored. Together with the coordination of all these actions by Josep Renau, and the advice of the OIM, we highlight the visits by technicians and specialists such as the former Director of the British Museum, Frederic Keyton, and the curator of the Wallace Collection, among others, who wrote articles expressing their admiration for the procedures established for the protection of heritage.¹⁰ The pieces were in Valencia until March 1938. From that date it was decided to send the works to three provisional shelters. One of them was Peralada Castle, where the most important works of the Museo del Prado, El Escorial, the Palacio de Liria and the Academia de San Fernando were sent. The second destination was Sant Ferran Castle, on the outskirts of Figueres, which stored tapestries, sculptures and documents. Another group of pieces travelled to the talc mine in La Vajol, while the depots in Olot, Besanó, Darnius and Agullana stored pieces of Catalan artistic heritage.

The works left Spain and were sent to the Palace of Nations in Geneva. A selection of the most significant pieces would form part of the exhibition “Masterpieces from the Museo del Prado”, held at the Museum of Art and History in Geneva to great public acclaim, with around 400,000 visitors. On the morning of 1 September, just a few hours after the closure of the exhibition, Nazi Germany attacked Poland. Two days later, France declared war on the Third Reich. The dismantling and return of the pieces was urgently arranged, to the point of travelling on a French train that ran without lights to avoid a possible attack by the German air force. Three years after the first evacuation, the works returned to Madrid.

This chapter in the history of our heritage allows us to define some concepts for future

heritage management. In 1939 the Figueres Agreement was signed, which ensured that all the works belonged to the Spanish people and that they must return to the country at the end of the war. “The creation of this Committee is a precedent in the concept of world heritage, as its members acted without any kind of ideological or political motivation and also set a precedent for the defence of European culture.”¹¹

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We can see how these events have been narrated through cinema by looking at two documentaries, *Las cajas españolas* by Alberto Porlan and *Salvemos El Prado* by Alfonso Arteseros, along with other titles such as *La hora de los valientes* by Antonio Mercero. Aleksandr Sokúrov’s magnificent work about moving the heritage of the Louvre Museum in the film *Francofonía* is also outstanding.

We want to end this review of the process of moving and protecting Spanish works of art by reproducing the words of professor Arturo Colorado of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, who says that “it is one of the most surprising adventures you can imagine and, at the same time, it is a story almost unknown to Spaniards, even though thanks to these events the Museo del Prado, the collections of

10. There is a famous picture of the former director of the British Museum alongside the curator of the Wallace Collection with Timoteo Pérez Rubio at the entrance of the Colegio del Patriarca with *Las Meninas*.

11. A. J. Martínez, “El viaje que salvó los cuadros de los bombardeos”, Madrid, *Público*, 24 January 2010.

El Escorial, the Palacio Real de Madrid, the monasteries of Las Descalzas Reales and La Encarnación, the collection of the Duke of Alba... still exist.” Moreover, public recognition of the people who participated in safeguarding artistic heritage became a palpable clamour, which finally materialised in Spanish society and internationally. In 2010 the room in the Museo del Prado that exhibits *Las Meninas* became the setting for a homage to these heroes. The Medal of Arts and Literature finally went to the representatives of all the museums and descendants of people who formed part of the creation of the International Committee for the Safeguarding of Spanish Art Treasures.

The perversion inherent in any war uses artistic pieces as icons of survival or showcases of this barbarism. But we can ask about how, for the second time, these recovered objects will be exhibited. Are there other ways of representing power through saved or recovered heritage?

After the presentation of these awards the exhibition “Protected Art” was opened, which travelled to almost the same settings as the pieces evacuated. The exhibition opened at the Museo del Prado and then moved to the Centre Cultural La Nau in Valencia University, Sant Ferran Castle in Figueres and the Museum of Art and History in Geneva. The exhibition was organised around boxes and packaging whose laths gave a glimpse of the most representative life-size reproductions of some of the works saved from the Museo del Prado. Moreover, this packaging worked as a support for the graphic material and information. The design was complemented by sacks and wooden structures of different shapes and sizes.

Through the symbolic meaning of the boxes, the artist Francesc Torres revises and questions the value of the museum as a protector of heritage treasures. In his recent exhibi-

tion “The entropic box [The museum of lost objects]”, held in October 2017 in the Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya, the artist transforms the meaning of the institution into an entropic box to reflect on its conservation function. His approach focuses on the circumstances whereby, occasionally, what is conserved is the result of destruction: the passage of time, natural phenomena, wars, urban planning, religious intolerance... His emphasis on the museum’s responsibility for safeguarding, conserving and selecting takes us to other moments such as the reopening of the Museum of Iraq in Baghdad in 2015. With the recovery of almost half the total number of pieces originally deposited in its collection, the plans for this exhibition in Iraq in some way encourages reinterpretations. The perversion inherent in any war uses artistic pieces as icons of survival or showcases of this barbarism. But we can ask about how, for the second time, these recovered objects will be exhibited. Are there other ways of representing power through saved or recovered heritage? Francesc Torres plays with the meaning of the imposture of a reality where the past will not be recoverable. Thus, from this supposed ordering of chaos, the heritage of Iraq would also be reborn through a new arrangement of the museum rooms.

The Spanish Civil War would become not only the prelude to the Second World War but also anticipated the system of protection and evacuation of artistic treasures. The Spanish model was later followed by other democratic countries such as France, Belgium, Holland and Great Britain. The members of the International Committee that participated in Spain in 1939 to evacuate endangered works to France and Switzerland were, in some cases, responsible for managing the evacuations of their respective heritages in other countries. This was the case, for example, of Frederick Schmidt-Degener, director of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, who led the evacuation of the

most important part of the museum's collection under the threat of the arrival of the Nazis in Holland.

We now know that the influence of the Spanish experience on the orientation of the OIM project and the technical recommendations were decisive and, as a result, the manual *La protection des monuments et oeuvres d'art en temps de guerre* was published in 1939. Despite the suspension of the OIM's activity during the Nazi occupation of Paris and its definitive closure in 1946, its work had important repercussions for the Hague Convention of 1954. In this framework, the passing of the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was the first international treaty, after the Second World War, focused exclusively on this function.

The objective of the so-called Unite4Heritage campaign consist of activating their deployment when requested by a UN member state suffering a conflict that could affect its historical and cultural heritage

If at that time the committee of experts comprised jurists, soldiers and museologists, today the so-called Blue Helmets for Culture will comprise cultural heritage professionals and members of the police, specialised in the fight against illegal trafficking in cultural property. The objective of the so-called Unite4Heritage campaign we mentioned at the start of this text will consist of activating their deployment when requested by a UN member state suffering a conflict that could affect its historical and cultural heritage. This special force will work to conserve and restore the damaged works, and will have a training centre in Turin.

The Italian proposal to drive the work of UNESCO results from the ongoing destruction of archaeological remains in Iraq and Syria. However, while this project was consolidated

in the 38th General Conference, passed by 53 countries, life in the besieged regions went on. From this everyday routine, some creators have developed remembrance or safeguarding actions of local heritage. Notable, on the one hand, is the group of artists taking refuge in Jordan who reproduce miniatures of historical monuments that the Syrian war has reduced to dust (parts of the ancient city of Palmira, the Deir ez-Zor suspension bridge, the Citadel of Aleppo or the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus). Since November 2014, the artists have been making these models through a project called Syria: History and Civilisation. As Ahmad al-Hariri, project coordinator, says, "the objective is to define the Syrian people, preserve our legacy and show our identity. But the most important message is to stop the war."

Recently, the CASA MIA project was short-listed for the Beazley Designs of the Year award. A group of refugees participated in eighteen workshops in different neighbourhoods of Berlin where they revived the memories of the emblematic buildings of their city, most of them destroyed. Moreover, the will to survive in an environment of desperation prompted the sculptor Assem Al Bacha to bury most of his sculptures in one of the Syrian fields of Yabroud during the night. The artist, who now lives in Granada, hid his works before leaving his country, in the hope of protecting them from the bombing and recovering them upon his return. In 2013 we could see his exhibition at Casa Árabe entitled "From Within: Sculptures of Pain and Rebellion", where only the pieces that fitted in suitcases were shown.

Heritage becomes collateral damage more when it is part of the devastation of a war, vandalism, pillaging or occupations. Moreover, and as we have seen in this article, it becomes a military target in the hands of those in power and a strategy of oppression of the enemy (as can be seen in the actions of Islamic State).

There is sometimes a clear attempt to impose a new order to displace the previous one, systematically erasing the cultural vestiges and, with them, the connection with the identity of a people. But unfortunately we can add to this an economic cause, where the sale of archaeological pieces and old books on the black market acts as funding for the armed struggle.

The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage can be considered a war crime (according to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court) and, in this context, the protection of

monuments and artistic production works as another factor, creating peace. Therefore, the laws and the coordination of diplomatic actions are established, but the core seems somewhat absurd when, ultimately, it depends only on the decision to declare war. The president of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation summarised this idea in the following observation in 1932: "If we have enough good sense to respect monuments and works of art, it would be better to start by having the good sense not to make war."