Natural Histories

A PROJECT BY MIGUEL ÁNGEL BLANCO

19 November 2013–27 April 2014
Museo del Prado

Exhibition organised by the Museo del Prado with the special collaboration of the Higher Council for Scientific Research CSIC.

Curator: Miguel Ángel Blanco

Project coordinator in the Museo del Prado: Javier Portús, Chief Curator of 17th-century Spanish Painting (up to 1700)

The Museo del Prado is presenting the exhibition Historias Naturales. A Project by Miguel Ángel Blanco, organised with the collaboration of the Higher Council for Scientific Research (CSIC) and the support of the Region of Madrid. 150 objects from the natural world make up the twenty-two interventions installed in the Museum’s galleries by this Madrid-born artist. Most of the objects – animals, plants and minerals - have been loaned by the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales of the CSIC, displayed alongside 25 works from the Museum’s own collection. The result is a close dialogue with these 25 works of art and also with the building itself and the urban setting of the Paseo del Prado.

Through this exhibition the Prado is paying tribute to its own history and to the origins of its building, originally designed as a Natural History museum. On 19 November 1819 the Prado opened its doors to the public for the first time as the Museo Nacional de Pinturas y Esculturas (National Museum of Paintings and Sculptures). However, the Neo-classical building designed by Juan de Villanueva that now houses the Prado was originally designed as the Royal Natural History Cabinet on the orders of Charles III in 1785.
Madrid, November 2013. To celebrate the anniversary of the Museum’s first opening to the public on 19 November 1819, the Prado will be introducing visitors to a lesser known aspect of its history, namely that of its origins as a natural history museum prior to its inauguration as the Museo de Pintura y Escultura.

The building that now houses the Museum was designed by the architect Juan de Villanueva in 1785 as the Natural History Cabinet on the orders of Charles III. Now, for a period of almost six months the galleries of the Permanent Collection will display objects including some of those that the monarch acquired from the collector and naturalist Pedro Franco Dávila for his new natural history museum, which was previously located in the Palacio de Goyaneche (now the headquarters of the Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando).

The exhibition

*Natural Histories. A project by Miguel Ángel Blanco* consists of twenty-two interventions in the Prado’s galleries, made up of 150 objects from the natural world (minerals, stuffed or preserved animals, skeletons and insects), the majority from the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, shown alongside twenty-five works from the Museum’s collection. The result is to establish a close relationship between them and also with the building itself and the surrounding urban context of the Paseo del Prado.

Visitors will thus be able to see the realisation of Charles III’s desire to house a Natural History museum in the Villanueva Building. Due to the circumstances of history, the arts and sciences coexisted under the same roof on two occasions: in 1827 and during the Civil War when objects from the collections of the Real Jardín Botánico and the Museo de Ciencias were moved to the Prado for greater safety.

In order to bring about this reencounter with the Museum’s history and origins, the artist Miguel Ángel Blanco has not set out to reconstruct the Natural History Cabinet three hundred years later. Rather, as he explains: “What I have done in the Museo del Prado is to evoke that collection, the ghost of which inhabits the Villanueva Building. The twenty-two artistic interventions create a collection for the future, incorporating a creative viewpoint, interacting with the Permanent Collection and encouraging a new way of looking at the works which helps to increase the significance of the images.”
22 artistic interventions - Miguel Ángel Blanco

The first intervention is to be seen in the Ariadne Rotunda in the Museum, in which the preeminent work is the large-scale, recently restored sculpture of the *Sleeping Ariadne* (anonymous sculptor, 150-175AD). Next to it is the sculpture of *Venus with a Dolphin* (anonymous sculptor, 140-150AD), who now becomes the principal focus of this space. From the room’s ceiling Blanco has suspended a dolphin's skeleton from the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, explaining that “the marble-like bones of the skeleton resemble the ivory-like marble of the sculptures”. The skeleton projects its shadow over Venus, “leaping like a Leviathan to swallow up the goddess […]”

Another of the works that best sums up Blanco’s work in the Museum is his intervention based on Joachim Patinir’s celebrated painting *Charon crossing the Styx*. Patinir’s work, which is among those that has most fascinated Blanco, ceases to be a painting and becomes an extension of the lake. It is transformed into pigment by the placement immediately in front of it of a giant piece of azurite (Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales), the source of the copper carbonate that Patinir used as a pigment in his painting, “which we can imagine as the result of the lake drying up, assisted by the similarity between the shape of its outline and that of the stone.”

Room 55B in the Prado is another space transformed into a natural history collection by Blanco through his introduction of the skeleton of a snake wound round itself, located next to Dürer’s two panels of *Adam* and *Eve*. The skeleton is one of the most beautiful objects in the Museo de Ciencias Naturales’ reptile collection. Through this juxtaposition, Dürer’s two nude studies remind us even more forcefully of the subject of human proportions, which Blanco considers “a scientific endeavour”. Here he reveals an aesthetic intent in his placement of the skeleton, while “the snake’s flexibility resulting from its numerous vertebrae echoes the sinuosity of Dürer’s figures.”

Blanco’s twenty-two installations are completed with one of his own works, *Book-box no. 1072*, which is part of the work for which he is best known, the *Forest Library*. It consists of 1,131 book-boxes housing natural elements, each one forming a micro-landscape. The book-box that he has chosen for this intervention acquires meaning in front of Lucas van Valkenborch’s *Landscape with an Iron Works* of 1595. According to Blanco, this is one of his boxes most oriented towards landscape and can be visually related to the landscape paintings in the Room 57 of the Museum: “Among these Flemish painters I feel close to Lucas van Valkenborch, who depicted himself in some of his works with a sketchbook on his lap, reflecting the practice of observing
the landscape at first hand [...]” “Of all natural environments, the forest is my place and the tree my equal.” (www.bibliotecadelbosque.net)

Miguel Ángel Blanco (born Madrid, 1958)

Miguel Ángel Blanco is among the best known of Spanish artists associated directly with nature. For some years he lived in the Sierra de Guadarrama, which has been his preferred artistic terrain and was the subject of an exhibition he held at La Casa Encendida in Madrid in 2006 entitled *Visions of Guadarrama. Miguel Ángel Blanco and the pioneering artists of the Sierra*. In that event his book-boxes established a dialogue with works by the leading Spanish landscape painters who visited this mountainous area in the 19th century with the aim of depicting it in their works.

Miguel Ángel Blanco has exhibited different selections from the *Forest Library*, his most important project, at the Biblioteca Nacional de España, the Museo Nacional de la Estampa in Mexico City, the Fundación César Manrique in Lanzarote, the Calcografía Nacional, Madrid, and the Abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía), among other venues. In 2008 the Ministry of Culture commissioned a project from him in memory of the dead beech tree in the garden of the Fundación Lázaro Galdiano, which presented the temporary exhibition *Fallen Tree*, focusing on the relationship between the tree and time.

The Catalogue

The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition includes a text by Miguel Ángel Blanco, the creator of this project, entitled *The Call of the Bird of Paradise*; and another, entitled *From Wunderkammern to Enlightenment Collections*, by Javier Ignacio Sánchez Almazán, curator of the collection of invertebrates at the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales. The catalogue also includes a portfolio with photographs and texts by the artist of each of the exhibition’s 22 interventions with technical details on all the works on display, in addition to the artist’s biography.