

VEGA INCLÁN AND HOUSE MUSEUMS: A NEW CONCEPT OF CULTURAL TOURISM IN THE SPAIN OF ALFONSO XIII

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In the context of the “Restoración alfonsina” we highlight the figure of Benigno Vega Inclán and Flaquer, II Marquis of Vega Inclán, as a visionary museologist, since he anticipated the creation of a museum typology so far unknown in Spain: the house museum, also guessing its potential to promote the touristic attractiveness of Spain among travelers interested in knowing its historical and artistic heritage. This interrelation between tourism and museology was by then a novelty. The specificity of the heritage was not to reside in its economic value, but in its cultural values and, in particular, in its symbolism and identity. The visit to a house museum sells an experience based on the territorial identity involving the visitor from their power of presence.

The house museum, as the new “Vegainclanian” cultural enterprise, is conceived as a place dedicated to a character converted to a myth. The Marquis created the first house museum in Spain in a 15th century building: the “Casa del Greco” (House of Greco), in Toledo, completed in 1907 and donated to the State in 1942, although it was already open to the public. Vega Inclán was aware that both house and museum would serve to build a national identity that needed to be regained and would also answer the desire to honor new heroes who should be known inside and outside of our Spanish borders. Similar purpose guided him to promote the “Casa de Cervantes” (House of Cervantes) in Valladolid (1915) and the Romantic Museum of Madrid (1924). Both museums were under his direct management in the frame of the “Patronatos” and later turned into homonymous Foundations dedicated to the management of the museums, following the will of Vega Inclán, who declared them universal inheritors of their property. The figure of Vega Inclán must be understood in its historical context, closely related to the philosophy of the “Free Institution of Teaching” and of the so called “Regeneration”. The finisecular crisis explains, in part, the need for Don Benigno to recover some national icons in order to give Spain its own identity signs, a desire for a strong national promotion campaign. Contextual museography was born, with an assembly based on recreation, the exhibition resource that will perdure in most of the Spanish house museums from 1950’s decade until today. This idea

was very embedded in the ideas of “Regenerationism”, that advocated the valorization of popular culture and of that considered Spanish as roots for a national identity.

Contextual museography involves the building, the collections and the environment as units of exhibition. In addition, the context is determined by the domestic function of the house, which is one of the main features of a house museum. This is a powerful resource for exhibitions, as it catches the visitor in a unique atmosphere, the living and domestic space, that generates a serie of experiences that escape the characteristics usually assigned to museums. The value of the context was discovered during the mid-nineteenth century through the use of the so called *period rooms* in museums of decorative arts in Anglo-Saxon countries. These countries perceive that objects were better understood when contemplated in their original environment, as it encouraged their historical and cultural understanding. The context was also promoted through the presentation of sets of objects in show-windows of galleries and stores selling luxury products in many European and American cities. Also, the historical period was favorable, since there was a desire to educate and make the visitor aware of the values of the culture itself, and this idea was best achieved by representing a time or style than through an isolated object. The staging of set of objects strengthened that bond. Don Benigno was aware of the need to prepare spaces filled with contents that intended to summarize a whole culture or an era.

Vega Inclán conceives cultural heritage tourism linked to houses museum. This position of the museum as a theoretical field of reference opens a series of perspectives to deepen the protection and conservation of cultural heritage with its use as a tourist and cultural resource. It was in this context that the “Comisaría Regia de Turismo” (Royal Commissariat of Tourism) was created, allowing the Marquis to promote, between 1911 and 1928, the cultural policy of the “Restoración alfonsina” that based tourism in an idea of the nation. The valorization of house museum and their exploitation for tourist purposes was a new idea in Spain, although it was already taken in account in the Anglo-Saxon world. It created touristic attributes linked to Toledo, Valladolid and Madrid through the so-called experiential tourism, which entails the visitor transfer to a place different from the one of his origin. The “vegainclanian” recreation needs to transmit experiences, ways of living, a culture and the identity of a place. Therefore, El Greco needed a building at the height of a historic city, symbol of a lost greatness: Toledo, as later Cervantes and Larra, other myths for the promotion of tourism in those years, also did. The “Casa del Greco” became an act of nationalist self-assertion while serving as propaganda for the cultural works of the monarchy. It is the first Spanish house museum, a landscape archetype linked to Greco in the Spanish nationalist imagination of the first half of the twentieth century and the true protagonist of the recently born Spanish tourist policy of the first third of the twentieth century.

We point out that Vegainclanian museum houses embody a visionary concept of tourism by a series of characteristics that still exist today. In the first place, they pose a fiction-based museology, creating an imaginary world, opposed to the real, a dialectical world that remains a source of controversy among museum professionals. The aspiration to preserve the authentic has been a constant in the history of our heritage: the idea we have of an object or monument raises the fantasy about its aspect in the past. The use of fiction to reinvent the daily life of a character, would initiate a debate on the “authenticity” of

the patrimonial element. A good example of it is the “Casa del Greco”, that culminated in present times with the symbolic destruction of the myth of the house, as we been turning fictions into realities and realities have been transformed. “Authenticity” has to do with the symbolic character of that heritage. Unlike “Casa del Greco”, in “Casa de Cervantes” Vega Inclán was facing the the real building where the writer had lived between 1603 and 1606. Although the house was authentic and despite of the absence of vestiges of the original rooms or objects, Vega Inclán decided its consecration to another Spanish myth. The case of the Romantic Museum, the original building inhabited by the counts of the Puebla del Maestre during the romantic period, was also related to the historical period that Vega Inclán wanted to revalue, with Larra as its main character. The fiction was then an element worthy of being exposed, showing the visitor the representation of something that could be true.

In the other hand, “vegainclanian” house museums allowed the creation of cultural constructions associated with the the importance of collective memories, myths and symbols. The house museum is more appropriated and with greater emphasis than museums, to the heroism of a character. The Marquis favoured El Greco, Cervantes and Larra as a kind of new heroes, who were the alternative to those national icons already consecrated like Velázquez or Goya. The appeal of these new heros was enhanced by their presentation in a house museum that exhibited both their public and private lives. The visitor was able to identify himself with their daily lives, with what they ate, at where they slept or to what they would do to satisfy their basic needs. The “vegainclanian” house museums delocalized high culture by generating a multiplicity of local cultures, worthy of being protected as part of the national heritage, that were cultural references by themselves.

Thirdly, we were facing a new museum category, the house museum, well-known typology outside our borders that had not occupied in Spain a relevant place in museological or patrimonial studies. Even the visitors ignored its existence. *Museum* magazine, a few years after its creation in 1927 by the International Bureau of Museums, established in 1934 a division of historic houses that could be considered as houses museum, being the first “official” classification of this typology. Only in 1997 did it reach its institutional recognition, with the creation of DEMHIST, the International Committee of Historic Houses of ICOM, in charge of its conservation and diffusion. Finally, the museum houses created by Vega Inclán showed the power of context by creating a close, understandable, manageable atmosphere that generates a series of experiences that would only be possible with this museography, enhancing the communicative value of the building, the Object and the environment, replacing the traditional cult value of the museum. This is linked with the nineteenth-century German museology, with Bode at its head, noting that period rooms, with their contextualization of objects of the same epoch and / or style, allowed to better understand art as the fruit of an historical context and thus art of different historical periods would be also different. This type of exhibition transformed the visitor in a tourist of the reality of the past.

In this way, Vega Inclán, with his house museum, established the starting point to take into account the territorial dynamics and the relationships and interdependencies between heritage and tourism, in short, of the cultural heritage tourism functionality. In addition, his tourism policy was meaningful to the development of modern landscap. The environmen-

tal interpretation of heritage was conected with the values architects gave to architecture and its urban environment and, above all, to the patrimonial and landscape orientation of the “Free Institution of Education”, to which the Marquis was very related to, as well as with the so called “Generation of 98” members. Thus, the tourist interest was added to the more common strategies of “patrimonialization”, such as the nostalgic recovery, the claim of the national identity or the romantic allegory. “Vegainclanian” house museum enhanced the city’s assessment as a national landscape, prespective that was also promoted by the tourist guides edited by the “Comisaría Regia de Turismo” (Royal Commissariat of Tourism), which included “Casa del Greco”, “Casa de Cervantes” and the Romantic Museum, They were places of memory to the service of the interests and objectives of the elites, in this case, Vega Inclán, creator of a new museum typology, recognized and appropriated for its value as historical memory.