

Post-Franco Spain is experiencing an artistic reawakening.  
**Sacha Craddock** reports from Madrid

# The world through Spanish eyes

**W**ATER with or without fizz was constantly sipped by the conscientious dealers who sat at catalogue-covered tables surrounded by their assistants. Madrid has attracted the very best and most serious in the contemporary art world. It has pulled off a coup by transforming a baby democracy with a blank slate and isolated past, into a centre for all things cultural.

The international contemporary art fair, Arco, is now in its eighth year and ranks with the best as a venue for buying, selling, and discussing art. Despite the Spanish government's reluctance to subsidise more conventional manufacturing industries, Arco is state-funded to a generous degree.

Probably as a hangover from Franco's time, when anyone who was clever or creative tended to be on the left and therefore in exile from choice or necessity, anything from abroad would be considered to have more weight than something from home.

This year the government invited 120 foreigners to come to Arco and stay in Madrid as their guests. A collection of potential purchasers, museum directors, collectors and even critics, was placed in the best hotel in Madrid and politely left to get on with it.

This level of commitment to the fair and Madrid's cultural standing is way beyond the usual small involvement of government in social democratic countries. For while the government is seen to be helping an "industry", it is also doing something more. Spain has suffered much in the last 40 years, and cultural isolation was a painful price often overlooked in the pressing politics of the time. Somehow the balance is being redressed.

Until the turn of the decade, young artists did not have much contact with outside art. A reproduction in an art magazine would have to serve as source for many.

But the extraordinary speed of change and an embracing of all things "international" has gone to quite an extreme.

At the time of influx to Arco, not one of the newly restored or purpose-built State-run art galleries showed any 20th century Spanish art. Madrid is saying, we are like you, we know about what's in, avant garde and considered important, so here is Artschwager, Doukoupil, and our first exhibition of German art ever.

The Retiro park, in the middle of Madrid, is perfect. In the centre of the park is the Palacio de Velasquez which has recently opened as a gallery. Light streamed through its vast glass roof on to work by Richard Artschwager, who is recognised as the American uncle of conceptual furniture sculpture.

The day after it opened it was full; people streamed in to see something they may not have seen before. At the enormous Centro de Arte Reina Sofia there is always a queue. Only foreigners and out-of-towners have to pay to go in, to see one or all of the three exhibitions taking place. Just opened is German art 1900-1933, Baldesarri from the USA and Philip Guston will come soon.

The dealers that come from America and 16 other countries are having a field day. First of all, big money is being spent by Spain buying itself back. The Miro Foundation in Barcelona is an inadequate representation of his work. The same is true of the Picasso Museum. There is as yet no permanent collection of modern art in Madrid, and thrilled though they are at eventually receiving the Dali estate, over the heads of the Catalans, it is no substitute for a national collection of 20th-century art.

The Reina Sofia Centre will house that, while the regional governments of Valencia and Catalunya are building their own. Post-modern art is not cheap, but modern classics are really very expensive. Some dealers have come to Madrid with very special pieces with that

kind of killing in mind. At a slightly cooler financial level, Arco was still a success. Once a fair is trusted to be of a decent enough standard — unlike the London Art Fair which is supposed to pay for itself and will inevitably included gilded pornography posing as sculpture and pictures made out of nails — the dealers will make business among themselves whether in Madrid or Basle.

But what about the Spanish public? Arco is turning into a popular event, coach parties arrive and it is said that some dealers, whether cynical or sensible, keep at least one set of prints to sell at a more domestic price. For art, however obscure, is a real freedom which the Spanish appreciate much more readily than we do here.

The various regions of Spain, with their semi-autonomous governments, were also at Arco in order to distribute leaflets on their own arts programmes and investments.

But what about the Spanish artist? Didn't the advertising for Arco say that the geniuses of tomorrow were waiting to be discovered in the "homeland of great artists"? At La Maquina Espanola, Guillemo Paneque opened during Arco. Paneque's work has not been produced in isolation. It looks as if he has indulged in every Euroamerico art magazine going.

Two years ago his paintings had a hard edge graphic corporate look to them; now they are different. A complete mixture: stuffed soft sculpture, Van Gogh's potato eaters drawn on to tin foil, a set of shirts buttoned very tightly around squat posts. An American looked at it seriously and seemed interested.

This spectacle of assimilated art being paraded before the rest of the world is hopefully not just a case of asking "do I fit in?". The danger in all this lies in the cake being iced and decorated before it has been properly baked.