Communicating Context: Spain's Newly Renovated Museo Arqueológico Nacional

JOSEPHINE SHAYA

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Archaeology museums are one of the most important ways that our field communicates its findings to the wider public.[1] The work of archaeology museums, however, is by no means simple. Archaeologists, curators, and museum directors have grappled with recent debates focusing on the politics of display, the cult of the masterpiece, the appeal to multiple publics, and the acquisition and ownership of cultural property.[2] This is an exciting and fraught time for archaeological collections.

It is in this context that we should look to the recent renovation of the Museo Arqueológico Nacional de España (MAN) in Madrid. The new installation, opened to the public in April 2014, addresses many current issues in the field in meaningful ways: it aims for universal accessibility; it embraces technology; it values the effective communication of archaeological findings to a wide audience; it emphasizes the fundamental importance of archaeological and historical context; and it historicizes the museum itself. Potential dangers lurk in the choices that guided MAN's renovation. Appeals to a broad audience, for instance, can lead to the watering down of scholarly rigor, the Disneyfication of the past, the valorization of attention-grabbing technologies over the objects themselves, and the heavy-handed intrusion of the curator onto the viewer's experience. While these threats exist, they are not in evidence at MAN. The new installation offers an important—and what is likely to be influential—model for the exhibition of archaeological collections.

MAN holds one of the outstanding archaeological collections in Europe. Its origins lie in the 19th-century European creation of national museums. It was founded in 1867 by Queen Isabella II (1830–1904) with the aim of documenting the entire history of Spain and offering an overview of ancient civilizations. Originally, MAN brought together material from three different institutions—the Museum of Medals and Antiquities at the National

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[2] Gill and Chippindale 1993; Chippindale and Gill 2000; Cuno 2008, 2009; Barker 2010; Marlowe 2013; Powers 2015.

Library, the Museum of Natural Sciences, and the Spanish School of Diplomacy—but it quickly acquired a vast collection of objects from Spain and beyond. First housed at the Casino de la Reina (Queen's Retreat) outside of Madrid, it soon moved to its current location in the Palace of the National Library and Museums now at the end of Madrid's "Golden Mile," on the edge of the fashionable Salamanca neighborhood. Through the tumult of civil war, dictatorship, and democracy, MAN has reinvented itself several times. It currently holds about 1.25 million objects dating from prehistory to the 19th century.

In recent decades, museums have strived to expand their audience, and MAN is no exception. Before the renovation, most of MAN's visitors were university graduates, teachers, and researchers. The renovation's chief aim was to open the museum up to a much wider public and to present an accurate, attractive, and critical interpretation of the collection that would be accessible at many different levels. Faced with this challenge, MAN began the renovation in 2008 and completely closed its doors to the public in 2011. The museum reopened in 2014 and the result is nothing short of spectacular.

The transformation was comprehensive. Under the orchestration of Andrés Carretero Pérez, MAN's director, the building was gutted, the space modernized, and the surface area increased; in addition, systems were updated (e.g., electricity, air conditioning, security) and storage facilities upgraded. The building's two interior courtyards were covered with steel and glass roofs; two large circular stairways were added to enhance vertical traffic flow; handicapped accessibility was improved; the cafeteria, store, bathrooms, and cloakroom were all expanded; the events and lecture halls were modernized; and the attic was finished as a research library, historical archive, and restoration workshop.

Within this refurbished space, the permanent exhibition was completely transformed and remounted. Most of the 13,000 objects on display passed through the hands of conservators; teams of curators, artists, designers, and video producers filled the galleries with artistically arranged installations and a great number of supporting materials, including 337 display cases, 329 original illustrations, 728 graphic wall panels, 86 original maps, 55 video productions, 17 tactile displays, a multimedia guide with more than 10 hours of material, and a rich new website. The funds for this vast project, just over €65 million, were supplied by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport. Judging from the public reaction, it has been money well spent: the museum's audience has more than tripled to an average of 662,420 visitors a year for 2014 and 2015.

On a visit in the fall of 2015, I found MAN bustling with school groups, families, retirees, locals, tourists, and scholars. The entrance alone speaks to its new inclusiveness. No longer does one enter through the neoclassical building's original doors, which are up a grand stairway flanked by cast-bronze sphinxes. Rather, the entrance is now on the ground floor through three wide glass and bronze doors that slide open onto a large new reception area. It is equipped with a long sloping ramp for people with disabilities and flanked by the cafeteria's outdoor terrace and garden.

The architectural remodeling is stylish, spare, and luminous. The architect, Juan Pablo Rodríguez Frade, covered the floors and walls with sober travertine and warm timber, materials that emphasize the historical building itself with clean, elegant lines. Light pours in through newly uncovered windows and the courtyards. Two new glass, wood, and travertine stairways make the building easy to navigate and serve as balconies that overlook the courtyards, their surrounding arches, and their collections of Iberian and Roman sculpture (fig. 1; online fig. 1).[3]

The permanent collection is divided into three large thematic areas: "Archaeology and Heritage" (galleries 1–3); "Spain: A Place of Cultural Encounters" (galleries 4–30); and "From Cabinet to Museum" (galleries 31–40). The length of the entire exhibition itinerary is 3 km. The visit begins in the "Archaeology and Heritage" area on the ground floor, through a hall with dramatically lit mirrored vitrines illustrating the types of materials in the collection and their chronological range. Two enormous multipanel displays follow. These eye-popping electronic mosaics, made up of images, videos, and animations, engulf the visitor, set the tone, and sound big themes. They immediately break any old stereotypes that an archaeology museum is a dusty, dry place.

One multipanel display centers on human evolution, with images relating to the origins and development of humanity. It focuses on key topics in archaeology—biological change and adaption, land-use strategies, technologies, production, trade, immigration, death and burial, and so forth. Stacked in 10 chronological

[3] See AJA Online for all online-only figures accompanying this article.

FIG. 1. South courtyard of the Museo Arqueológico Nacional (Mika Cartier; courtesy Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid).

layers, with the Paleolithic at the bottom and the 21st century on the top, the screens show images ranging from cave paintings to milk cows, from cuneiform tablets to the Internet, from Bronze Age wheels to Charlie Chaplin on the assembly line in *Modern Times*.

The electronic mosaic on the facing wall is about archaeology (fig. 2). Its screens show innovators in the field and their books (e.g., V. Gordon Childe, Lewis Binford, Colin Renfrew), the names of archaeological methods and theories (e.g., archaeology of identities, cognitive processual archaeology, landscape archaeology), illustrations of the work of subfields (e.g., numismatics, epigraphy), and photographs of archaeological institutions and museums in Spain. Heritage also plays a large role, with images of archaeotourists, historical reconstructions, reenactments, and organizations for the protection of cultural patrimony.

The area ends with a large three-dimensional topographical map of the Iberian Peninsula onto which the locations of archaeological sites are projected chronologically, from the early days of hominization to the founding of MAN itself. A screen behind the map shows photographs of the sites and places them on a timeline.

Taken together, the "Archaeology and Heritage" area announces what MAN is all about: the museum employs technology to offer visually stunning exhibitions; its subject is both the evolution of human societies in Spain and beyond and the archaeological work that leads to an understanding of those societies; it emphasizes context, has a broad conception of the chronological and social scope of archaeology, and sees itself as a heritage site for investigation. While some might think the flashy multipanel displays are over the top, to this reviewer they set expectations, announcing that MAN is a state-of-the-art museum engaged with current issues in the field. While technology is front and center here, in the rest of the museum its use is more restrained and in close dialogue with the objects on display.

The second thematic area, "Spain: A Place of Cultural Encounters," occupies more than two-thirds of the exhibition and covers the history of Spain from its first inhabitants to the founding of MAN. It includes such treasures as the Lady of Elche, the *Lex Coloniae Genitivae Juliae* (Charter of Urso), and the Guarrazar crowns (fig. 3; online fig. 2).

One of the great challenges in creating a new archaeology exhibition, particularly on MAN's scale, lies in

FIG. 2. Detail of multipanel electronic display in the "Archaeology and Heritage" area (Niccolo Guasti; courtesy Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid).

FIG. 3. Lady of Elche, Iberian, late fifth to early fourth century B.C.E., limestone, La Alcudia (Elche, Alicante). Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, inv. no. 1971/10/1 (Doctor Sombra; courtesy Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid).

providing a rich scientific explication of the collection without overloading the exhibition with texts. MAN's solution has been to embrace a very carefully planned multimedia museography that is textual, visual, auditory, and tactile. The most innovative and successful part of the new installation is the interweaving of these different modes of communication with one another and with the objects on display.

The organizing principles of "Spain: A Place of Cultural Encounters" are clear and easy to follow: focusing on the evolution of humanity in Spain, the area is divided into chronological units: "Prehistory," "Protohistory," "Roman Hispania," "From Late Antiquity to Middle Ages," "The Medieval World," and "The Modern Era." The units are well marked and color coded on the museum plan, time lines, and labels. Each is subdivided into sections that highlight key features or developments for the period. "Roman Hispania," for instance, examines such topics as power and society, the Hispano-Roman city, workshops and markets, games and entertainment, the house, the necropoleis, and the countryside (online fig. 3).

While the overall design of the exhibition is unified, each chronological unit has a distinct personality. "Prehistory," for instance, is dramatic and embraces the visitor with life-sized images of prehistoric landscapes that trigger the imagination (fig. 4), while "Roman Hispania" is aglow with light from the courtyard that is evocative of Roman public space. Visitors feel a change when moving from one unit to another, but the entire exhibition flows together, suggesting layers of history rather than decisive breaks between periods. Along with the chronological narrative, the exhibition also explores themes across time, such as cross-cultural exchange and the history of archaeology in Spain. Against this background, remarkable objects, such as the bronze hydraulic pump from the Roman copper mine at Sotiel-Coronada, come to life.

Sight lines and color blocks highlight key objects, as do dramatic settings. For instance, in the Al-Andalus section of the "The Medieval World," objects that are emblematic of the Umayyad caliphate are displayed below a scale model of the Great Mosque at Córdoba (online fig. 4). Here the Zamora pyxis, an ivory box delicately carved with images of plants and animals that recreate the palace garden, stands in its own case. Commissioned by al-Hakam II (r. 961–976) as a gift for the mother of his first son, the work offers a glimpse into relationships between the caliphs of Al-Andalus and their families.

The museum's system of signage is fairly standard and includes what amounts to nearly 800 pages of text. The information is scaled. Each chronological unit begins with a broad introductory synthesis. Wall texts and panels in galleries and cases offer more detailed interpretation. Object labels give particulars, including title, material, culture, date, and provenance (almost always the site and often the specific location of the find). Additional information about an object's significance sometimes follows. Labels are bilingual in Spanish and English; the texts are engaging, accessible, and concise.

The written museography, however, is just the beginning. MAN also fully embraces the power of images, following the maxim that a picture is worth a thousand words. The galleries are vividly illustrated. In "Prehistory," for instance, images reveal what the landscape was like, how people were dressed, and how they used the tools on display. All the images are based on concrete data from archaeological sites and include men, women, and children of every stage in life (see fig. 4).

Maps appear throughout the museum, showing the location of sites as well as political territories, the distribution of cultural phenomena, and trade networks. Many cases emphasize the archaeological work that stands behind the objects on display by including archaeological drawings, site plans, photographs, stratigraphic sections, and illustrations and notes from excavation diaries taken from the museum archives. The plans and drawings from Luis Siret's (1860–1934) excavations of the Late Chalcolithic site of Los Millares in Almería, for instance, are reproduced behind grave goods from the site itself. A Belgian mining engineer who dedicated his life to archaeological study in Spain, Siret laid the foundations of archaeology in southeast Iberia.

Along with illustrations, 55 video productions spread over 40 rooms offer more than 200 minutes of further information about the historical and cultural significance of the objects. The videos are powerful teaching tools. They are clear, brief (usually about three minutes), and focused. Concise subtitles in Spanish and English supply basic information, but most is conveyed through strategies of visual storytelling, animated maps, three-dimensional reconstructions, time lapse, and zooming in and out on landscapes and particular features. Like the wall texts, the information is scaled. A four-minute overview introduces and synthesizes the history of each major period, while videos within the galleries explore topics in greater depth,

FIG. 4. "Prehistory" gallery (Mika Cartier; courtesy Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid).

such as "Post Paleolithic Rock Art," "Phoenician Navigation," and "Underground Mining."

One problem with using videos in museums is that they can quickly appear dated. MAN's solution has been to avoid realism in the productions and instead rely on high-quality drawings, animations, three-dimensional mock-ups, and re-creations that are themselves works of art. The museum employed four different companies to produce the videos; perhaps the most familiar to Americans is El Ranchito, the company known for the opening sequence and special effects in *Game of Thrones*. Readers can sample a short montage of their productions, presented at the 2015 Digital Heritage International Congress in Granada and available on YouTube, called "Animando la Historia."

Another possible pitfall of videos in museums is that they can be distracting and direct attention away from the objects on display. MAN avoids this problem by carefully incorporating the content, style, and sound of the videos into the exhibition. El Ranchito's "Celtic Religion," for instance, explores nature-inspired Celt-Iberian worship. Its style springs from the Celtic iconography on objects in the gallery. Images on nearby ceramics and bronzes—trees, animals, heroes, priests, and worshipers—spring to life and fill the gallery with sound. A brief scene in which devotees offer vessels at the sanctuary of Cueva Santa del Cabriel reconstructs the ritual context of objects displayed in a case nearby.

The only real people who appear in the videos speak from the present as archaeologists or as actors in archaeological re-creations. "The Neanderthal Genome" for instance, shows the archaeological collection of Neanderthal remains in the cave at El Sidrón and their paleogenetic analysis in the lab. Again, the video is closely integrated into the exhibition, which includes a life-sized, red-haired, dark-skinned sculpture of a Neanderthal woman whose features reflect the genetic sequences found at El Sidrón. The video and the sculpture add to the nearby objects, which, as the written museography explains, speak to Neanderthal hunting strategies, technologies, and symbolic practices.

Aiming for universal accessibility, the curators have developed 17 tactile displays, which are again carefully integrated into the exhibition. Designed first and foremost for the visually impaired, the displays are a treat for anyone desiring to touch the objects in the museum. Each is tied to key historical phenomena and uses replicas of objects exhibited nearby. "Technology: Motor

of Social Change in Iberia," for instance, employs a reconstruction of a potter's wheel brought to Iberia by the Phoenicians and a copy of an Iberian ceramic jar worked with Phoenician techniques to illustrate the movement of technological knowledge from the eastern Mediterranean to Iberia. A tactile map traces the route; further information is provided in braille and print.

MAN offers visitors a multimedia guide and a printed guidebook. The multimedia guide can be rented on a tablet or downloaded as an app for free. It contains more than 300 entries, each about two minutes long, for a total of 10 hours of audio information along with images and interpretive texts. The visitor can choose to hear about one of 220 objects individually or can follow a thematic visit such as "Archaeology and Death." The guide is also available in sign language and English and includes a special itinerary for people with visual impairments.

The museum's website (www.man.es) was redone as part of the project and provides a successful virtual experience for the user. Accessible in Spanish, English, French, Catalan, Basque, and Galego, it includes a searchable general catalogue, thematic catalogues, a PDF of the guidebook, information for visitors and scholars, current activities, lectures, conferences, and more. Catalogue information is also available via the Digital Network for Spanish Museum Collections (CERES), which has more than 52,000 images of MAN's collections (http://ceres.mcu.es).

MAN's long chronological narrative of human evolution in Spain ends in 1867 with Isabella II's founding of the museum. Here, the visitor enters the third thematic area, "From Cabinet to Museum," which begins by exploring MAN's own history and the history of its collections and then goes on to present MAN's collections from beyond the Iberian Peninsula. It concludes with an exhibition, entitled *Coins, Much More than Money*, on the forms, uses, and historical significances of coinage. MAN has one of the most important numismatic collections in Europe, with nearly 300,000 coins and other artifacts relating to money, many of which are integrated into exhibitions throughout the museum (online fig. 5).

Questions about a museum's own collecting history can be thorny for museums today, but rather than skirt the issue, MAN faces it head on and examines itself as an object of archaeological study. "The Repository of Our Past: The National Archaeology Museum" illustrates how the museum has changed over time, focusing on the founding of the museum, the growth and history of its collection, and the evolution of its exhibition designs. This unit tells of scientific committees that worked to enhance MAN's early collection by acquiring objects from various locations in Spain and abroad. A documentary film with original footage of the dismantling of the museum during the Spanish Civil War highlights efforts made to save MAN from Nationalist bombings of Madrid. Photographs from the late 19th and 20th centuries document changes in the aims of the exhibition, with the gradual reduction of the number of objects on display, the slow addition of explanatory texts, and the movement away from artifact typologies toward greater and greater contextualization.

"The Road to the Museum" addresses questions of where MAN's collection comes from and how it grew. This section explores different routes through which objects have entered the museum (excavation, chance discovery, purchase, donation, donation in lieu of payment, bequest, long-term loan, exchange, assignment by confiscation, redistribution of assets, and acquisitive prescription) and offers examples of particular objects and their histories. It explains why a museum dedicated to the archaeology of Spain has collections from the Nile Valley, the Near East, and Greece. In highlighting the activities of Spanish travelers, collectors, priests, diplomats, merchants, scientists, and archaeologists, it shows the museum's own long history of cultural encounters and exchanges.

"The Road to the Museum" introduces the ancient Near Eastern, Egyptian and Nubian, and Greek units. The overall design of these galleries is much like that of "Spain: A Place of Cultural Encounters." Each unit has its own distinct personality but is also clearly part of the whole. "Greece," for instance, is organized iconographically: vase paintings offer insight into Greek identity, the *oikos*, the polis, death, and myth. MAN's multifaceted museography continues; for example, in a display entitled "Symposium: The Banquet," vases are contextualized against a large-scale image of men playing *kottabos* (fig. 5).

Other displays continue the theme of cross-cultural exchange, only here the focus is on MAN's collections as well as antiquity. A video entitled "Spaniards in the Near East," for instance, documents the travels of Adolfo de Rivadeneyra (1841–1882), Spanish viceconsul in Tehran, whose collection of Near Eastern artifacts is now partially housed in the museum. The video begins with Rivadeneyra's description of Persepolis and his comments on the earlier account of the site by Don García de Silva y Figueroa (1550–1624),

FIG. 5. Display cabinet in the Greek gallery (Fernando Velasco; courtesy Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Madrid).

Spanish ambassador to Safavid Iran and the first western traveler to identify the ruins of Takht-e Jamshid as the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid empire.

A temporary exhibition space offers further displays. The first exhibition following the reopening of the museum presented treasures from the Spanish Navy frigate *Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes*, which was recovered by the state through litigation against Odyssey Marine Exploration, the company that salvaged the shipwreck. For scholars, MAN's library, located on the fourth floor, has more than 120,000 volumes as well as a collection of historical documents. The museum's archives contain documents published by the museum and others that provide information about the museum and its collections; there are also photographs of the museum's own assets as well as those of other institutions.

No short review can fully cover the rich collection. The museum is vast. The central point is that this is an important reinstallation, especially for its rich museography and its emphasis on context. It is one that anyone thinking about the display of archaeological objects will want to get to know.

A few gaps are noticeable. The permanent exhibition lacks a full discussion of looting. While various displays address the subject briefly, more could be done to raise public awareness about the problem. MAN also has little to say about archaeology under Franco. Archaeology under dictatorship is a fascinating if largely unknown story. While there is a strong emphasis on the history of the museum itself, the political and archaeological context of the 1968 renovation seems largely ignored. But these omissions by no means detract from the overall success of the museum.

MAN's emphasis on context and historical significance upholds today's archaeological values. While visitors are welcome to contemplate the beauty of many of MAN's collections—such as the expressive Chalcolithic Eye Idol of Extremadura, the handsome seated statue of Livia from Paestum, and the intricate 11th-century ivory crucifix of Ferdinand and Sancha—the museum does not hold up such objects as timeless works of art. Rather, MAN's main aim is didactic; it seeks to convey the historical and cultural significance of its objects, its collection, and itself. Throughout, the museum highlights the importance of context,

especially through its emphasis on archaeological explication, including maps, site plans, histories of excavations, lives of objects, and the history of collecting. MAN succeeds in speaking to a broad audience without sacrificing scientific rigor. It does so, in part, by speaking on many different levels and by engaging the eyes, the ears, and the sense of touch. And, rather than seeing itself as a neutral space, MAN emphasizes that museums, too, have histories and always take on a role in the interpretation of their collections. This self-awareness is fundamental to the renovation.

Many museums with archaeological collections have been renovated in the last two decades, and they deserve our attention for the innovative ways that they appeal to their publics and display their collections.[4] These institutions have confronted significant challenges, including questions of provenance, the value of archaeological context, the status of masterpieces, and the need to appeal to broad audiences. What is exemplary about MAN—and what will attract curators, art historians, and archaeologists along with the tourists—is the museum's wholehearted devotion to context, its stunning installations, and its accessibility to the broadest range of visitors.[5] While this is a challenging time for archaeological collections and their caretakers, the Museo Arqueológico Nacional shows that it is also an exciting one.

Josephine Shaya
Department of Classical Studies
The College of Wooster
Wooster, Ohio 44691
jshaya@wooster.edu

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[4] Examples in the United States include the Harvard Art Museums; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the San Antonio Museum of Art; the Saint Louis Art Museum; the Cleveland Museum of Art; the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago; the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; and the Kelsey Museum of Archeology in Ann Arbor. The J. Paul Getty Museum plans to reinstall its villa galleries in the near future. Many examples are also found in Europe and beyond, including the Museo Nazionale Romano, the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, the Altes Museum, the Neues Museum, the Pergamonmuseum, the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, the Musée du Louvre, the Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, the Nicholas P. Goulandris Foundation Museum of Cycladic Art, and the Istanbul Archaeological Museums.

[5] In this regard, one of MAN's closest peers is the State Museum for Prehistory in Halle, which has been progressively redesigned since 2003.