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Teresa Posada Kubissa

*August L. Mayer y la pintura española: Ribera, Goya, El Greco, Velázquez*

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The German-Jewish art historian August Liebmann Mayer (1885–1944?) was one of the most distinguished specialists of Spanish art active in the first half of the twentieth century. He was also one of the most prolific. His publications on this subject number in the hundreds, ranging from comprehensive monographs on the leading figures of Spain's Golden Age to groundbreaking articles that feature important documentary discoveries and new attributions. Mayer was instrumental in expanding interest in Spanish culture among twentieth-century European audiences. Yet despite his achievements, his work has received little attention in recent years. In her ambitious intellectual biography of Mayer, Teresa Posada Kubissa attributes this neglect to the harm his legacy suffered from the campaign to discredit him launched during the Nazi era. Mining a wealth of resources, she has produced a valuable account of Mayer's life and career that seeks to redress this injustice by recording his contribution to the historiography of Spanish art in full and restoring his reputation as an innovative scholar and keen connoisseur.

The only son of a successful Darmstadt merchant, Mayer opted to pursue an academic career, graduating in 1907 from Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin with a dissertation on Jusepe de Ribera supervised by Heinrich Wölfflin. After publishing his thesis and traveling for several months in Spain, he moved to Munich and accepted an unpaid position at the Alte Pinakothek and a lectureship at Ludwig Maximilian University. He was appointed curator at the Alte Pinakothek in December 1913 and promoted to chief curator of the Bavarian State Painting Collections in September 1919. The following year, he secured a salaried professorship at the university.

The rise of the National Socialist Party derailed Mayer's career. In January 1931, Ernst H. Zimmermann, the director of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, sent the Bavarian Ministry of Education and Culture a letter accusing Mayer of using his position as chief curator to profit from underhanded dealings in the art market, a charge that Posada Kubissa disproves. Zimmermann's allegations, which the author attributes to professional jealousy, relied on hearsay from both German and Spanish sources. (One of the Spanish scholars involved in the scandal was Elías Tormo, who claimed that Mayer had jeopardized Spain's national patrimony.) Art historians and National Socialist Party sympathizers Wilhelm Pinder, Luitpold Dussler, and Bernhard Degenhardt (a former student of Mayer)

also publically denounced him, and amid growing animosity, Mayer resigned his positions in Munich. In the wake of the Reichstag Fire Decree of February 1933, he was detained for months on spurious charges of tax evasion and eventually fined 115,000 RM. The following year, he faced additional charges from the Treasury and was forced to sell his home and possessions to pay the resulting fines. Fleeing further persecution, Mayer and his wife and daughter relocated to Paris, where Mayer was able to resume his research. This short respite ended in September 1939. As Paris mobilized for war, Mayer was arrested and detained by the French government. He was allowed to return to Paris with his family in December, but in May of the following year, he was arrested again and held at a camp near Toulouse. After his release in June, Mayer resided in Nice, supporting himself as an art advisor under the pseudonym of Henri Antoine until the gallerist Louis Delclève betrayed him to the Gestapo in 1944. He was arrested and deported to Auschwitz, where he perished.

Posada Kubissa's publication, which is based on her 2007 doctoral thesis, carefully contextualizes Mayer's achievement. She devotes three chapters to the intellectual milieu within which Mayer was educated and launched his career, including overviews of the collecting history and study of Spanish art in Germany. She often returns to a discussion of the formalist methodology of Wölfflin, Mayer's mentor. According to the author, Wölfflin's comparative approach and rigorous use of visual analysis were methods that Mayer employed throughout his career. The remainder of her book focuses on Mayer's monographs on Ribera, Goya, El Greco, and Velázquez, arguably his most influential studies.

Although Mayer's monograph on Ribera (1908; revised 1923) did not provide new archival documentation, it did offer the first synthetic account of the artist's life. Mayer minimized the influence of Caravaggio on Ribera's development and focused instead on Ribera's possible apprenticeship with Francisco Ribalta. In the accompanying checklist, Mayer introduced three paintings that have since been accepted into the canon, including the *Portrait of a Musician* (1638). (In subsequent publications, Mayer would propose an additional six paintings that would win widespread acceptance by specialists.) Posada Kubissa maintains that the monograph's most significant contribution, however, was the detailed discussion of Ribera's prints and drawings and the remarkable discovery that Ribera's prints often predated painted versions of the same subject. Apparently, prints did not serve as records of the master's paintings but as independent works of art.

In his writings on El Greco, Goya, and Velázquez, Mayer frequently explored the relationship between the old masters and modern painting, a topic of widespread interest at the turn of the twentieth century. Posada Kubissa notes that although it was fashionable among Mayer's contemporaries to recast the three Spanish artists as crucial sources of inspiration for the avant-garde or embodiments of modernity's core values, Mayer approached these theories with characteristic independence. For example, in his 1911 monograph on El Greco, he refuted Julius Meier-Graefe's influential interpretation of El Greco as the forerunner of the Impressionists and Cézanne. Instead, Mayer insisted on studying El Greco within his historical context, emphasizing his training as a Byzantine icon painter, his exposure to sixteenth-century Venetian Mannerism, and his passion for the work of Correggio. Mayer also presented thirteen new attributions with his publication, substantially updating Manuel B. Cossío's monumental catalogue raisonné of 1908.

Posada Kubissa observes that Mayer was less confrontational in his monograph on Goya (1923), in which he described the artist as the quintessential proto-modernist, claiming him as both the first impressionist (a man who “painted what he saw, not what he knew”) and an early expressionist who developed a unique late style that fully revealed the inner life of his subjects. Mayer’s interpretation relied in part on Valerian von Loga’s catalogue raisonné of 1903, which frames Goya as a conservative court artist who revolutionized the Spanish pictorial tradition by means of his innate talent, his own artistic evolution from “realism” to “impressionism” prefiguring artistic developments in nineteenth-century Spain. In his discussion of Goya’s training and chronology of paintings, however, Mayer closely followed the opinions of Aureliano de Beruete as recorded in his three-volume study of 1917. Expanding on these two sources, Mayer produced a passionate defense of Goya’s spirituality, imaginative powers, and individuality. He also significantly enlarged the artist’s oeuvre, adding 109 paintings, thirty-nine of which are still recognized by specialists, and twenty-two drawings, sixteen of which would enter the canon. (In subsequent publications, he would identify another seventeen paintings and thirty-five drawings, the majority of which are still accepted by scholars.)

*Velázquez der spanische Meister* of 1924 remains one of Mayer’s most controversial publications. Despite Velázquez’s widespread reputation as an important influence on the nineteenth-century Realists, Mayer resisted framing the old master as an arch-naturalist and instead offered an original interpretation of Velázquez as a “classicist” who pursued his own aesthetic criteria. As Posada Kubissa explains, this complex thesis turned on two issues that Mayer maintained had not sufficiently been addressed in the previous scholarship on Velázquez: his *künstlerisches Wollen* (artistic will) and the transcendence of his painting. When tackling the first theme, Mayer focused on the artist’s dedication to translating his subject’s essential plastic form to canvas. To address the second issue, Mayer concentrated on Velázquez’s elevation of the ugly, describing him as a painter operating beyond the artistic standards of his time who celebrated the intense humanity of his subjects. Thus, although Mayer acknowledged that Velázquez’s approach was innovative, he did not consider the artist a precursor of modernism: his work was progressive only in the sense that it was the summation of the technical advances of the early modern period. Notwithstanding this unconventional thesis, Mayer made a major contribution to the field with his monograph by introducing several spectacular discoveries, including the so-called *Sybil* (ca. 1648) and *The Seamstress* (ca. 1640–50).

Posada Kubissa’s publication is a testament to her scholarly rigor. The extensive appendixes, which comprise a third of the book, are a case in point. To navigate Mayer’s vast bibliography, she includes critical reviews of each of the books, articles, and essays that Mayer published on Ribera, Goya, El Greco, and Velázquez as well as tables detailing his successful additions to their oeuvres. Reproductions of important documents and her transcriptions, the complete bibliography of Mayer’s publications on Spanish art, a list of contemporary reviews of his monographs, and newspaper articles recording Mayer’s expulsion from the Alte Pinakothek are also incorporated. With this thoroughly researched study, Posada Kubissa has achieved her goals—to provide a comprehensive assessment of Mayer’s substantial contribution to our current understanding of Spanish art and to bring renewed attention to the remarkable career of this unfairly marginalized scholar.

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