

Ceán Bermúdez: Historiador del arte y coleccionista ilustrado

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by JONATHAN BROWN

Juan Agustín Ceán Bermúdez (1749–1829) is a major figure in the historiography of Spanish art. Even today, his major work, *Diccionario histórico de los más ilustres profesores de las Bellas Artes en España*, published in six volumes in 1800, is consulted by specialists in the field. Ceán's name is also familiar to students of Francisco de Goya, who was a close friend. A facsimile of the *Diccionario histórico* was published in 1965 but only a few studies have been devoted to Ceán.¹ Nonetheless, his writings on Spanish art, in which he included non-Spanish artists who worked on the Peninsula, such as Rubens, Luca Cambiasi, known as Cambiaso, and Pompeo Leoni, have remained largely unknown, even within Spain. This gap has now been filled by the catalogue under review, which accompanied an exhibition of the same title at the Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid, in 2016. It contains five extensive essays, which cover the multiple facets of Ceán's activities, and the catalogue itself, which includes 151 entries mostly devoted to Ceán's writings, both published and unpublished, as well as relevant works that provide context. Many texts preserved in the Biblioteca Nacional and the nearby Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, are presented for the first time and include correspondence with members of Ceán's circle and drafts of unpublished texts.

Ceán was a figure of the Spanish Enlightenment (*Ilustración*), particularly the branch concerned with the encyclopaedic

classification of knowledge. He was born into a modest family in Gijón and did not attend university. His talent was recognised by a fellow citizen, Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos (1774–1811), whom he accompanied to the University of Alcalá in the capacity of page and to whom Ceán owed his education and career. After a spell in the Banco de San Carlos in Madrid, the forerunner of the bank of Spain, Ceán was appointed in 1791 to supervise the organisation of the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, where remained until 1797. In that year, he received an appointment as secretary in the short-lived ministry of Jovellanos, but was caught up in the political turmoil that led to the Peninsular War and temporarily stripped of his position in the Ministry of Justice. During the French occupation of Spain, Ceán chose to remain in Madrid and serve King Joseph Bonaparte. With the defeat of the French in 1812, he was investigated by the government of Fernando VII and acquitted of collaboration with the French, despite the fact that he had kept his official posts during French Rule. He served the crown until his retirement in 1815 and thereafter dedicated himself to writing on art until his death.

Prior to Ceán's *Diccionario histórico*, a small number of important books had been dedicated to the history of Spanish art but none matched the discipline, rigour or reach he brought to the task. His long spells in the Archivo General de Indias equipped him with a mastery of the methods of archival research. His various official duties made him travel the length and breadth of Spain, and he took the occasion to study the monuments and mine the archives of smaller cities and towns. His itineraries included Madrid, Seville (where he lived for twenty-four years) Cádiz, Toledo, Segovia, Murcia, Granada, Badajoz, Málaga and Córdoba. He established a network of 'informers' via the postal service, who answered queries and provided new data for his research. Unfortunately, the book did not find a market. The sales figures were disheartening: of the 5,000 copies published by the Real Academia in 1800, only around half had been sold by 1835.

Ceán was also serious collector. Two of the essays in the first section of the catalogue are devoted to his collection of works on paper. The exact number of his drawings is difficult to determine, since he also purchased drawings for Jovellanos. In 1863 his daughter Beatriz sold his collection to the French writer and hispanophile Paul Lefort and they have since been lost or dispersed. More impressive was

his collection of prints, which included works by many of the major European printmakers and is now in the Biblioteca Nacional. Ceán started to build this collection during his first posting to Seville and eventually amassed some 12,699 prints, comprising 2,000 single sheets and the remainder contained in books and folios. In 1819–22, he wrote a catalogue of his collection, the frontispiece of which is included here, but unfortunately the catalogue itself is still unpublished.

It is a shame that the author's did not take the opportunity to include a section devoted to the friendship between Ceán and Goya, who is only briefly mentioned. The pair became acquainted in August 1766, when they worked in the studio of Anton Raphael Mengs and became lifelong friends. Although the full extent of their relationship has not been investigated, it is known that Ceán assisted Goya in the production of three of his print series, *Los Caprichos* (1799), *Disasters of War* (1810–20; published in 1835) and *Tauromaquia* (1816), correcting the texts and advising on the sequence of the sheets. Ceán's keen interest in prints provided Goya with models and exposed him to the history of the medium.

The objective of the book under review is to rehabilitate Ceán as a historian. The best evidence remains, of course, the *Diccionario histórico* itself with its copious documentation and systematic approach to works of art. Nonetheless, the importance of this monumental work is now buttressed by the presentation of much new material that testifies to Ceán's informed curiosity about a wide range of artistic questions.

¹ For example, J. Clisson Aldama: *Juan Agustín Ceán Bermúdez: escritor y crítico de Bellas Artes*, Oviedo 1982.