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Francisco Pradilla y Oritz,
El Suspiro del Moro, 1879-1892

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FRANCISCO PRADILLA Y ORITZ
(Villanueva de Gallego 1848 – 1921 Madrid)

EL SUSPIRO DEL MORO, 1879-1892

Signed and dated lower left corner: "F. Pradilla Ortiz./ Granada 1879, / Roma 1892"

Oil on canvas
196 x 303 cm (77 1/4 x 119 1/4 in.)

Provenance

French Gallery, Londres;
George McCulloch;
Rodríguez Bauzá Collection;
Private collection;
Ansorena, Madrid, 17 December 2018, Lot 234;
Private collection; Madrid.

Literature

Ossorio y Bernard 1884, p.555;
Gárate 1905;
Rincón 1987, p. 121, nº 77;
Pardo Canalís 1952, fig.5;
Casado Alcalde 1987, pp.732-733;
García Loranca y García-Rama 1987, p. 333, nº 151;
Rincón García 1999, pp.340-341, nº 166;
Canovas del Castillo 2022, pp. 114-122, p. 133, pp. 140-141, nº13.

Exhibition History

Londres 1901, p. 25, nº 10;
Londres 1909, p. 41, nº 185;
Madrid 1987-1988, pp. 90-91, nº 24;
Barcelona-Madrid 1998, pp.105 and 251;
Madrid, 2022-2023, pp. 140-141, nº13.

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This monumental canvas depicts the legendary final farewell of Boabdil, Muhammad XII (r. 1482-1492), the twenty-second and last Nasrid ruler of Granada, as he pauses to cast one final, anguished glance at his lost kingdom from the heights of the Alpujarras. The *Puerto del Suspiro del Moro* (the pass of the Arab's sigh), situated around 860 meters above sea level, is the last point along the road where the Alhambra Palace can be seen.

Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz (1848–1921), one of Spain's leading history painters of the late 19th century, achieved international acclaim with his painting, *Doña Juana la Loca*, 1877 (Fig. 1), exhibited at the National Exhibition of Fine Arts in Madrid in 1878. The success of this work led to numerous official commissions, including the celebrated *La Rendición de Granada*, 1882 (Fig. 2), for which Pradilla undertook extensive preparatory studies in Alhambra. It was during this period that he conceived *El suspiro del moro*, a personal endeavor completed over a long span between 1879 and 1892, eventually finished in Rome. This epic canvas of remarkable quality, emphasises the emotional aspects of the Reconquista rather than its military themes, transforming a historic moment of defeat into a profound reflection on loss and the inexorable decline of civilisations. A formal analysis of the painting reveals how Pradilla achieved this masterpiece through composition, atmospheric control, gesture, technical skill, and historical empathy. In this meticulously arranged painting, the procession of exiled Moors moves across the canvas from left to right, forming a striking diagonal that suggests the physical journey into exile. The artist places his central figures on an elevated rocky ridge, a compositional choice that serves multiple symbolic purposes. The rugged, unyielding terrain beneath their feet highlights the harsh reality of their displacement. The landscape sharply descends to the right, creating a dizzying sense of physical and metaphorical precipice that reflects the historical moment itself: the end of nearly eight centuries of Islamic presence in Iberia.

Pradilla's palette demonstrates his deep understanding of colour as a means of emotional expression. The dominant muted earth tones, ochres, umbers, and sienas ground the scene in the stark reality of the Andalusian landscape. Against this subtle background, touches of

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luminous white in the flowing garments and horse's coat act as glowing focal points that seem to radiate their own inner light. The sky, rendered in subtle gradations of pearl grey and lavender, suggests a liminal moment between day and night.

Each figure in Pradilla's carefully arranged ensemble contributes to the painting's emotional symphony. The central white horse's noble bearing suggests the former grandeur of the Nasrid court, now diminished to this poignant caravan of exile. The supporting cast of courtiers, soldiers, and attendants weaves a complex web of psychological responses to loss. Some figures kneel on the rocky ground as if in prayer, others look stoically ahead, while still others seem lost in private reverie. This multiplicity of reactions elevates what could have been a simple narrative illustration into a profound study of how individuals process defeat. The placement of the female figures and Boabdil himself, cloaked in flowing white robes that billow dramatically in the mountain wind, adds a spectral beauty to the scene. The artist's handling of light is particularly sophisticated, suggesting the diffuse illumination of an overcast day that bathes the entire scene in a silvery, melancholic tone.

Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz rose from humble beginnings to become a notable figure in Spanish painting during the second half of the nineteenth century. Although he claimed to be an orphan, Pradilla was the second of five children, the son of migrant farm workers, born in the small Aragonese town of Villanueva de Gállego, near Zaragoza, around 1848. His parents hoped he would enter the priesthood, but he developed a precocious talent for art at the age of eleven and was enrolled at the Institute of Zaragoza. His artistic journey began in the provincial atmosphere of Zaragoza, where he entered the studio of Mariano Pescador y Escarate (1816-1886), a painter and theatre designer whose discerning eye proved instrumental in shaping the young artist's future. While working with Pescador, Pradilla studied at the Real Academia de San Luis in Zaragoza from 1862 to 1865. Pescador encouraged Pradilla to pursue further formal artistic education at the Royal Academy of San Fernando, Madrid, which he did at the age of eighteen.

COLNAGHI

In Madrid, he was accepted as an apprentice in the studio of the distinguished stage and theatre designers Augusto Ferri (1829-1895) and Giorgio Busato (1836-1916). This experience would profoundly influence his later mastery of dramatic composition and theatrical staging in his great historical canvases. While studying and working with the Italian set designers, Pradilla lived with his uncle, Simón Pradilla, who lived near the Prado Museum. Within days of arriving in Spain's capital, Pradilla's name appeared on the Prado's register of copyists, as he spent many hours at the museum copying works of art. He was in good company; some of his fellow copyists included Mariano Fortuny (1835-1874), Eduardo Rosales (1836-1873), Carlos de Haes (1829-1898) and Federico Madrazo (1815-1894). It was also a regular gathering place for prominent foreign artists, including Édouard Manet (1832-1883), Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) and Mary Cassatt (1844-1926), who copied works at the Museum in the 1860s and 1870s.

Pradilla studied in Federico de Madrazo's private studio and Madrazo allowed the young artist to assist in teaching. This connection granted Pradilla access to the highest echelons of the Spanish art world, and he was invited to attend classes at the newly founded Agrupación de Acuarelistas in 1870. The culmination of these formative years and relentless hard work arrived in 1874 when Pradilla enrolled at the *Academia de Bellas Artes* in Madrid, the pinnacle of Spanish artistic education. Here, his historical paintings captured the admiration of the distinguished jury presided over by Carlos Luis de Ribera, earning him the coveted travel scholarship to Rome, a prize that would transform him from a promising provincial talent to an internationally renowned artist. The scholarship to Rome marked the start of Pradilla's evolution into a painter of international importance. His time in Rome was not merely one of study but a period of creative blossoming, as he began to conceive and produce the monumental works that would establish his reputation. The significance of his Roman period was further confirmed in 1881 when he was appointed director of the Accademia Spagnola di Belle Arti in Rome. This role placed him at the heart of Spanish artistic culture abroad and acknowledged his emergence as a leading figure in the international art world. Pradilla's participation in collective exhibitions began early,

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with his appearance in the regional exhibition of Aragon in 1868 and continued throughout his working life as he became a regular and successful participant in art competitions. His notable milestone occurred in 1874 when he won first prize for *The Rape of the Sabine Women* in a drawing competition organised by the Ilustración Española y Americana, which secured him the aforementioned scholarship to study at the Spanish Academy in Rome, and established his reputation within the Spanish-speaking world. However, it was his participation in the 1878 Exposition Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris that truly launched his international career. There, he received a medal of honour and was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur, recognition that placed him among the elite of European artists. A series of international accolades followed this Parisian triumph: a medal at the National Exhibition of Fine Arts in Spain in the same year, and a medal of honour at the Vienna Universal Exhibition of 1882, securing his position among the leading painters of his generation.

Pradilla's appointment as director of the Prado Museum from 1896 to 1898 placed him at the helm of Spain's most prestigious cultural institution. In this role, he helped shape not only the museum's collections and exhibitions but also the broader public understanding of Spanish artistic heritage. His international standing was further affirmed by his membership in prestigious artistic institutions across Europe: he became a member of the Berlin Academy of Art and a corresponding member of both the Société des Artistes Français and the Institut de France. These appointments reflected the cosmopolitan nature of his achievement and the high international regard in which he was held.

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Fig. 1 Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz, *Doña Juana la Loca*, 1877. Oil on canvas.
Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.



Fig. 2 Francisco Pradilla y Ortiz, *La Rendición de Granada*, 1882. Oil on canvas.

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