



The Master of the Prado: A Novel

By Javier Sierra



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New York Times bestselling author Javier Sierra takes you on a grand tour of the Prado museum in this historical novel that illuminates the fascinating mysteries behind European art—complete with gorgeous, full-color inserts of artwork by da Vinci, Boticelli, and other master artists.

Presented as a fictionalized autobiography, *The Master of Prado* begins in Madrid in 1990, when Sierra encounters a mysterious stranger named Luis Fovel within the halls of the Prado. Fovel takes him on a whirlwind tour and promises to uncover startling secrets hidden in the museum's masterpieces—secrets that open up a whole new world to Sierra.

The enigmatic Fovel reveals how a variety of visions, prophecies, conspiracies, and even heresies inspired masters such as Raphael, Titian, Hieronymus Bosch, Botticelli, Brueghel, and El Greco. The secrets they concealed in their paintings are stunning enough to change the way we think about art, uncovering mysteries about historical facts, secret sects, and prophetic theories. It is these secrets that lead Sierra to question his entire understanding of art history and unearth groundbreaking discoveries about European art.

At once a captivating novel and a beautifully illustrated reference guide to Madrid's famed museum, *The Master of the Prado* is full of insights and intriguing mysteries. Sierra brings historical characters alive in this astounding narrative filled with dazzling surprises that will entrance you as much as the pictures within.



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Editorial Review

Review

Sierra is at once a great art historian and a greatwriter, and these two worlds merge and mesh in this wonderful book. Part guide to my favorite museum, part fictionalized autobiography, part dialogue on the mysteries of the art world and part novel, the sum is prism refracting the likes of Bosch, Velazquez, Titian and Raphael through the author's ingenious eye.

(Dr. Noah Charney, bestselling author of *The Art Thief* and *The Art of Forgery*)

“Sierra's triumph is to have forged a novel that instructs so easily and deliciously (yes, there are footnotes, but they're easily ignored if you're uninterested) you'll feel enriched however you read it. You may even be inspired to book tickets to Madrid. Just because we read something doesn't mean we're finished with it.”

(*NPR*)

About the Author

Javier Sierra, whose works have been translated into forty languages, is the author of *The Lost Angel*, *The Lady in Blue*, and the *New York Times* bestselling novel *The Secret Supper*. One of the most accomplished authors on the Spanish literary scene, Sierra studied journalism at the Complutense University of Madrid. *El Maestro del Prado* spent a year on the bestseller list in Spain, gaining the admiration of art experts, aficionados, and critics. A native of Teruel, Spain, he currently lives in Madrid with his wife and two children.

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The Master of the Prado

1

THE MASTER

Let me start at the beginning—in the beginning was the doubt.

What if it had just been a ghost?

People who know me are aware of my penchant for stories where the supernatural ends up deciding the ending. I've already written about these a lot, and am not likely to stop now. Here in the West we live in an increasingly materialistic society that tends to scorn the transcendent, but I don't think it's anything to be embarrassed about: Poe, Dickens, Bécquer, Cunqueiro, Valle-Inclán—all these writers fell under the spell of this fascination for the unknown. They all wrote about ghosts and tortured souls and the beyond, in the vague hope of being able to explain the here and now.

In my case, as I grew up I left most of those stories behind, only holding onto the really important ones, the ones where the protagonists have actually played a role in shaping our civilization. When you consider these, the mysterious stops being just anecdote, and becomes vitally important. Which is why I've never hidden my interest in encounters between the great figures of history and these mysterious “visitors.” Angels, spirits, guides, daemons, genies, tulpas—it doesn't matter what we call them. These are just various labels that we

use to mask our ignorance of that “other side” that all cultures talk about.

One day I will set down in writing what really happened when George Washington came across one of “them” at Valley Forge in the winter of 1777, during the campaign against the British that led to America’s independence. Or the account of Pope Pius XII, who was seen talking to an angel from another realm in the private gardens of the Vatican, according to more than one witness.

Following the trail of events like these can lead us to the very origins of our written culture, and can also often bring us warnings about the future. Tacitus gives us a good example. In the first century, the illustrious Roman historian and politician wrote of the encounter that none other than Brutus—Caesar’s protégé and assassin—had with one of these intruders. The ghost foretold his ultimate defeat at Philippi, in Macedonia, and the warning drove him to such despair that he chose to throw himself on his sword rather than to live with his defeat.

In most of these stories the visitors take a human form but also give off something invisible and powerful that marks them as different. Exactly like those “messengers” I wrote about in *The Lost Angel*.

So who—or what—was the unexpected teacher who appeared to me in the Prado that day? Did I find him, or did he find me?

Could he have been one of them?

I can’t be sure. I do know, however, that my apparition was flesh and blood, and that he uttered the ancient Eastern proverb, “When the student is ready, the teacher appears,” then proceeded to introduce himself.

“Dr. Luis Fovel,” he said, clasping my hand as if he didn’t want to let it go. He had a grave tone of voice and spoke with authority, while at the same time managing to respect the hush of our surroundings.

“I’m Javier Sierra,” I replied, surprised. “You’re a doctor?”

He arched his eyebrows then, as if my question had amused him.

“In name only,” he replied.

His tone revealed a hint of surprise, as if he hadn’t expected this young man to respond with a question. Which is perhaps why he then took control of the conversation, leaving a deathly coldness in the palm of my hand as he turned his eyes to the painting by Raphael that I’d been gazing at.

“I couldn’t help noticing how you look at that painting, young man, and I’d like to ask you something. If you have no objections, of course.”

“Go ahead,” I said, curious.

“Tell me,” he went on, in a rather familiar tone, as if we’d met before, “why does it interest you so much? It’s not exactly the most famous painting in the museum.”

Following his gaze, I cast another glance at *The Pearl*. I didn’t know much about the painting then, let alone how it had been esteemed by King Philip IV of Spain, the monarch with perhaps the most exquisite artistic taste in history.

There are only four paintings in the Prado that come directly from Raphael's hand, plus another few from his studio, and various copies from that era. Out of all of them, this is without a doubt the best one. It shows the Virgin Mary and her cousin Elizabeth sitting in front of some ruins and tending two infants who, upon further examination, begin to look suspiciously similar—the same blond curls, the same chins and cheekbones. One of the infants, who has a subtle halo and is partly dressed in an animal skin, is John the Baptist. The other—the only figure in the painting without a halo—can only be the baby Jesus. St. Elizabeth, John the Baptist's aging mother—who could also boast an immaculate conception—regards the children with a pensive expression, while the little Savior's own attention appears to be caught by something or someone outside the frame of the painting. Not St. Joseph, Mary's husband, who is in the background engaged in some activity impossible to divine. Whatever it is that the young Messiah is looking at is beyond the edges of the scene.

"Why am I interested in this painting?" I exhaled loudly, taking a moment to weigh my reply. "Actually, Doctor, it's pretty simple—I want to know what it means."

"Aha!" He lit up at this. "Isn't it obvious? You're looking at a religious scene, a painting that is meant to be prayed to. The Bishop of Bayeux commissioned this from the great Raphael Sanzio after he was already famous and working for the pope himself in Rome. The French bishop would have heard plenty about Raphael and his paintings of babies and virgins, and would have wanted one for his own devotional purposes."

"That's it?"

The doctor wrinkled his nose, as if my incredulity amused him.

"No," he replied, his voice switching to a low, conspiratorial tone. "Of course that's not all. Usually in paintings from this period, nothing is what it seems. While you may at first think you are looking at a religious scene, in fact, there is something there that is decidedly unsettling."

"Yes, I can sort of feel it," I admitted, "but I can't put my finger on it."

"That's how real art works, my boy. Paul Klee once said that 'art doesn't reproduce what we see—it makes us see.' If art simply showed us what was there, it would be tedious, we'd tire of it, and in the end, we wouldn't value it."

He paused. "Tell me, do you have a few minutes? I can show you exactly what it is that this extraordinary painting is doing."

Users Review

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Noah Giles:

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