

JANUARY 16, 2009, 12:15 PM

The Prado 2.0

By [ROBERT MACKEY](#)

A screenshot of one Google Earth view of Goya's "The Third of May, 1808," one of the masterpieces in the collection of the Prado Museum in Madrid now available for high-resolution digital viewing online. As Victoria Burnett of our sister publication The International Herald Tribune [wrote](#) earlier this week from Madrid,

Google and the Prado Museum here are making it possible for Web-surfing art lovers to study 14 of the museum's greatest works in minute detail without ever setting foot in Spain.

The project allows users of Google Earth to zoom in on high-resolution images of the works, scouring the canvas for details that would barely be visible to a museum visitor standing behind a velvet cordon.

Users of the [Google Earth](#) software can simply type in "Prado, Madrid" to be "flown" in to the virtual front door of the museum, where they are greeted by this explanation of the project, alongside 14 thumbnails of the paintings that can be viewed in high-resolution:

We present a virtual tour of fourteen masterpieces from the Museo Nacional del Prado, displayed in ultra high resolution, enabling you to see details of the paintings that have never been seen before. Thanks to the high resolution of the digital images, you can view the whole painting or zoom in on a small fragment. Given the plethora of masterpieces housed at the Museum, choosing which works to include was no easy task but this selection represents the best of the collection.

For a better idea of how this works, [Google Earth's Lat Long Blog](#) presents this overview on (Google's) YouTube (it's Google's world, we're just living in it):

While the director of the Prado told BBC radio that he thought of the online experience as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for seeing the paintings in person, much of the discussion online has centered on the idea that this technology allows people to have a museum-quality experience while sitting in their homes or offices. That led The Guardian's art blogger Jonathan Jones to argue, in a post headline "[Google Earth's Prado can't compete with the real thing](#)," that the virtual experience of art is still "no substitute" for an actual trip to the museum:

There are so many things about the Prado that cannot be rendered digitally. However amazing it may be to fly in from space on Google Earth, approach a 3-D model of

Madrid's great art museum, and whizz to one of the 14 ultra-high resolution masterpieces within, there's a lot you miss. The world's greatest museum bar, for one thing, and the atmosphere of its galleries, where (as I remember it) a low, silvery light provides perfect viewing conditions for such sombre masterpieces as Velazquez's *Las Meninas* and Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

It is the severity of the Prado's collection that makes it the most moving of all the world's great public galleries. Nowhere else preserves the taste of the royal collectors who amassed its treasures so exactly, and no collectors or patrons were more serious-minded than Spain's Habsburgs and Bourbons. The reason *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and other masterpieces by Bosch, Breughel and Patinir hang in Madrid when they were painted in northern Europe is that Spain ruled Flanders in the 16th century, giving its monarchs access to Flemish art, and that Philip II, who married Mary I of England and sent the Armada against her sister Elizabeth, loved to brood over these spooky visions as he thumbed his rosary.

A detail from Goya's painting seen in a screenshot from Google Earth.

Last July, Michael Kimmelman [wrote in the Times](#) about a visit to the Prado to see a show featuring the refurbished Goya masterpiece, "*The Third of May, 1808*," one of the paintings now viewable on your computer screen. His description of the "ways Goya painted white" in this painting from 1814 — about a bloody Spanish insurgency against Napoleon, who had [wrongly predicted](#) he would be greeted as "the liberator of Spain" — casts serious doubt on how even the most finely-tuned monitor could possibly do this sort of visual work justice:

The sculptor Richard Serra saw the show recently and told me, with a kind of rapture, that he was amazed by all the different ways Goya painted white. "*The Third of May*," in particular, depends on whites: under a black sky, the white of the shirt of the captive who kneels before the firing squad, arms flung open, is illuminated by the glare of the square yellow-white lantern before him. The picture's punctum, the detail that lingers in the mind after registering the bloody pulp of the dead man's head in the foreground and the silent rows of bayonets and shakos, focused on their victim, is the semicircle of white in the Spaniard's eye, disbelieving, beseeching.

It can seem as if the whole of art history pivots on that expression, that image. After it came modernity.