

STILL BELLAS ARTES? THOUGHTS ON THE VALIDITY OF A TERM

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Abstract

My interest as graduated in Fine Art, as apprentice of Art teacher and looking forward to university teaching is to set a critical reflection, through a reasoned text, about the validity of the *Bellas Artes* term to refer this studies branch being already in XXIst Century.

Why do we keep using *Bellas Artes* even though this term implies, taking into account a linguistic sense, a purely aestheticist conception about artistic practise? Is it necessary to reconsider the nomenclature of this field of knowledge when it involves research factors that go beyond the formal? Is this a particularity of our territory or it expands to other places? With these questions, made lightly in appearance, there is an interest not to give answers but, from the consciousness of being in a formative process, to enable the opening of a dialogue space with the other speakers and readers.

Keywords: *Bellas Artes, Fine Art, Postmodernity, nomenclature, criticism, beauty*

*The school seems to work regardless of the vicissitudes of history and society.*ⁱ

(Dussel cit. Hernández, 2003: 55)

*"And you should know," writes Dürer, "that the greater the accuracy with which you approach nature by way of imitation, best and more artistic will be your work."*ⁱⁱ

(Panofsky cit. Marín, 1998)

Introduction:

The term *Bellas Artes*, Spanish term for what in English can be called "Fine Art", was originally forged in the French term *Beaux-Arts*, which has the same meaning, referring *Art* as a matter of beauty related with imitation of nature. This idea coming from ancient Greece was later rediscovered and adapted by many authors like Charles Batteaux (1713-1780), French philosopher from XVIIIth century. The fixation of use of the term beaux-arts probably derives from his 1746-7 ouvre *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (*Fine Arts reduced to one principle*), in which he tried to develop a theory trying to sum up ancient aesthetics to come up to with an ultimate theory about what should be the matter of art and what it has to do with genius and taste. He claims that *the* genius (man, artist), despite of his own taste, only "discovers" the beauty already present in nature:

"Taste is the category for aesthetic assessment or evaluation, and is therefore rooted in the subjective. However, it does not create unrestrained subjectivity, thanks –once again– to beautiful nature. Taste is a matter of pleasure. What gives pleasure is what brings us closer to the perfect or allows us to hope for such a thing. This explains why beautiful nature is so charming, and why the fine arts charm us." (Vinje, 2002: 3)

These main fine arts, which Batteaux included under the canopy of *Beaux-arts* name, were Poetry, Painting, Sculpture, Music and Dance and he made reference to Architecture and Rhetoric too. In any case, the expansion of use of the *Beaux-arts* was later greatly generalised by d'Alembert's introduction to French *Encyclopédie* (1751), in which he quoted: "the liberal arts, which reduced to its principles are the ones who intend to imitate the nature, also called *Beaux-arts*" (d'Alembert, 1751).ⁱⁱⁱ

Beaux-arts probably arrived lately to Spain due to its geographical proximity and turned into *Bellas Artes* just by simple translation.

The meaning of *Bellas Artes*

The *Real Academia Española de la Lengua* (Royal Spanish Academy of the Language, major authority on Spanish language) defines *Bellas Artes* within its definition of Art with these words: "(*Bellas Artes*) Each aimed to express the beauty and specially painting, sculpture, architecture and music."^{iv}

As we can see, this definition appears to be out of place within XXIth century, when the arts (understanding arts taught in Art faculties) largely go further than that. I sincerely think that to be using the term *Bellas Artes* is out of date since what is produced within those *Artes*, in faculties, has usually nothing to do nor the beauty or the imitation of nature in a classical sense of the words. Despite this, Ricardo Marín points of something very present in Spain in relation with this affirmation: "For main public and most of professional world the figurative representation of reality keeps being a laudable artistic goal and a basic criteria of quality in drawing, painting & sculpture." (Marín, 1998: 63). That's it, for most people, Art still has to do with good representation of nature and, in fact, this is what is still taught by curricula in Spanish secondary education, along with concepts of visual alphabetisation.



Fig. 1 Motivational poster about “Modern Art”. Source: *CuantaRazón.com*. Submitted by the user *lontrack* (In 04-04-2013).

A good way to find out what is Fine Art or (just) Art to people, away of this enclosed environment, is to visit such webpages like *Yahoo Answers* [<http://es.answers.yahoo.com/>] or social networks as the Spanish website *CuantaRazón* [<http://www.cuantarazon.com/>]. In first one, broadly known site where any people can ask questions and get answered by other people, we can just look for the question someone made “¿Porqué las Bellas Artes se llaman así?” (“Why are they called Fine Arts?”). Someone then answered “Se llaman Bellas Artes porque son cultura, son historia y por lo tanto son las demostraciones de arte mas bellas mas perfectas que el ser humano ha an creado.” (“They are called Fine Arts because they are culture, they are history and therefore are the most beautiful (and) most perfect art demonstrations man has created”).¹ In second one, a site where people can send their self-made motivational posters about any subject, we can find, for example, a poster [figure 1] which states in Spanish “Modern Art: Deep down we all knew it” under

¹ Seen in *answers.yahoo.com* (last visited on 07-07-2013) [<http://es.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100731234450AAjMzGqj>].

image of a fake news report which claims that “Experts reveal that modern art does not exist, it is just an excuse to make feel fine untalented people!”².

As far as we can imagine that main public of this media are youngsters (especially in second case), we can't deny the fact that these opinions represent a general way of thinking, at least, in Spain. It is good to the educational art sector to keep using a term that goes against itself? Doesn't it helps keep going this idea of “good art” means “realistic art”? It would be nonsense to assign all the responsibility to the use of the term *Bellas Artes*, but I sincerely think it has something to do. We also derive in the general idea of that *Fine Art* actually educate students to be *artists*.

The ANECA's (*Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación* –National Agency for Quality Evaluation & Accreditation–) White book for the degrees in Fine Art/Design/Restoration, base document for the implementation of the European University Degree System in these specialties in Spain, defines that the Fine Art (*Bellas Artes*) graduated should be a “free professional” that has to do with “creation, exhibition, diffusion, education, evaluation, critique and management of manifestations related with expression of the plastic and visual thinking”. Moreover, in a foot page, it quotes a number of work possibilities for this graduated, related to *creation*:

“Drawing, painting, sculpture, illustration, comic, graphic arts, artistic editions and art diffusion materials; photography; holography; video art, animation cinema; environmental creations (installations, in-site art), stenographical projects and ephemeral design, performances, creations for leisure time & tourism & construction of theme parks, art-therapy, etc.” (ANECA, 2004: 240) ^v

So, what has the term *Bellas Artes* to do, for example, with Video-Art or Art-therapy? ANECA's work does not seem to point off any reflexion about term using.

However, what ANECA's document surely exemplifies, even in its name, is another issue related with the cohabitation in the same spaces of different

² Seen in *cuantarazón.com* (last visited on 07-07-2013)
[<http://www.cuantarazon.com/815366/arte-moderno>]

degrees, globed before under the same name. The separation of Design and Conservation & Restoration from the main body of Fine Art studies responds to an adaptation to student & market interests. In my experience as recent *Licenciado*³ in Fine Art, I met so many people coursing Fine Art with the intention of being exclusively dedicated to Art Restoration. It was struggling to them to have to make “creation” subjects when what they wanted to do was to make ones only related to “restore”. Lots of this people enrolled, after graduating, in the new degree in Restoration to get better and specific formation. As a teacher in formation, I think it is important to have a broad experience in all matters, but I can understand someone who wants to specialise in a very specific way, especially when it comes to a university education.

One can ask “Does this means that we have to change generalist studies in *Bellas Artes* for so many specialisations like in sculpture or painting?” Restoration, for example, refers to a so specifically way to work, a concept. The solution, I consider, is not just to make an undetermined number of specialisations but also to make these specialisations meaningful. It shouldn't be about deconstruct *Fine Arts* into different unrelated genres but be able to adapt these different ways to work or create into contemporary times. In a completely different way, within the actual European credit system, that promotes the realisation of Master and Doctorate programs, the generalist studies in Fine Art might help the students into have a broad view to later select on one of those.

Attending to ANECA table charts (2004: 81 and so on), there are not so many countries that specifically have courses in Fine Art, understanding that, there are indeed so many different ways to conceive art studies around Europe. As we pointed about specialisation, there are countries that empower study programs not based in a general conception Fine Art but into new genres like Media Art or the Finnish example *Pallas* Fine Art (art related to Science). This means that there are places where there are no studies specifically called Fine

³ Pre-ECTS university system in Spain understood degree in Fine Art as a *Licenciatura*, a 5-year study program that conduced to the title of *Licenciado en Bellas Artes* (which can be translated, saving the distance, into England's Educational system's BA [Hons] in Fine Art). The title allowed the adoption of one or more specialties, depending on the coursed subjects during the study time. Some of this specialties, in the case of University of Barcelona's Faculty of Fine Art, where Design, Restoration, Sculpture, Painting and Drawing between others.

Arts, although in general this English term (meaning, in fact, the same as *Bellas Artes*) is broadly extended in use (from Netherlands to Scandinavian states). When it comes to German speaking countries, the term changes into *Bildenden Künste*, (as an example, *Akademie für Bildenden Künste Wien*) which has an interesting background.

According to an article of Dominique Château citing Thomas Munro (2003), the term is also forged in XVIIIth century and its:

“Abstract signification [...] is vague and imprecise; derives of a substantive (Bild) which means ‘image’ and a verb bilden which means “to form”, and evokes the formation of visual images; the label, given its application to architecture (non-representative art) and painting (non-tridimensional painting), and the exclusion of mobile-form arts, will cover the ‘arts of static visual form.’”

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As he continues pointing, the term *Bildenden Künste* may have, in fact, the same Greek origin than Fine Art, but if western terms like this or *Bellas Artes* incised in the concept of Beauty of (within) nature, the German name incised in the concept of defining “the arts of expression of the ideas in the intuition of the senses”^{vii}, that’s it, through the author view.

A brief conclusion?

The UNESCO’s *Road Map for Arts Education* (2006) quotes that: “any list of art fields must be seen as a pragmatic categorization, ever evolving and never exclusive [...] a tentative list might include performing arts (dance, drama, music, etc.), literature & poetry, craft, design, digital arts, storytelling, heritage, visual arts & film, media, and photography.” Are all of these Fine Arts? Maybe *Bildenden Künste*?

Neither the UNESCO nor other countries studies programs use the naming *Bellas Artes-Beaux Arts-Fine Arts*. Leaving aside that is a traditional naming, shouldn’t be a matter of just use the term “Art” to refer to our studies, quitting to use the “Beauty” or “Fine” particle? How something subjective as beauty can define the look of university studies? I dare not to answer as I think

there are no correct answers.

Modifying the term *Bellas Artes* in Spain implies more than a simple word changing, it becomes something that affects to a general way of thinking about art and creation, about the traditional figure of the genius artist (Spanish, English or German) versus the contemporary and antiheroic figure of the degree student. Being romantic, maybe the use of the *beauty* to define these studies can poetically refer to its liberty, to its power to engage. But being romantic is also a way to stay in the past and the continuum.

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ⁱ “La escuela parece funcionar al margen de los avatares de la historia y de la sociedad.” (Dussel cit. Hernández, 2003: 55)

ⁱⁱ “Y has de saber”, escribe Durero, “que cuanto mayor sea la exactitud con que te acerques a la naturaleza por la vía de la imitación, mejor y más artística será tu obra.” (Panofsky cit. Marín, 1998)

ⁱⁱⁱ “Les arts libéraux qu'on a réduits à des principes, ceux qui se proposent l'imitation de la nature, ont été appellés beaux arts.” (d'Alembert, 1751)

^{iv} “(Bellas Artes) Cada una de las que tienen por objeto expresar la belleza, y especialmente la pintura, la escultura, la arquitectura y la música.” (RAE, 2013)

^v “Consideramos que forman parte de este ámbito la producción de manifestaciones y eventos realizados con el concurso de los medios técnicos y lingüísticos propios de la creación de imágenes, objetos o entornos artísticos: Dibujo, pintura, escultura, ilustración, cómic, artes gráficas, ediciones artísticas y de materiales de difusión de artes; fotografía; holografía; video arte, cine de animación ; creación de ambientes (instalaciones, arte in situ), proyectos escenográficos y diseño efímero, performances, creaciones para el sector del ocio y turismo y para la construcción de parques temáticos; arte terapia, etc” (ANECA, 2004: 240)

^{vi} “Signification abstraite [...] est vague et imprécise; dérivé d'un substantif (*Bild*) qui signifie 'image' et d'un verbe *bilden* qui signifie 'former', il évoque la formation d'images visuelles; l'étiquette, étant donné son application à l'architecture (art non représentatif) et à la peinture (art non tridimensionnel), à l'exclusion des arts de la forme mobile, recouvrirait les 'arts de la forme visuelle statique.’” (Munro cit. Château, 2003)

^{vii} “Les arts de l'expression des Idées dans *l'intuition des sens*” (Château, 2003)