



Local religious art exhibitions, between heritage and evangelization: the case of *Las Edades del Hombre*

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Abstract

This article examines the narrative and the museographical model of the exhibition cycle named *Las Edades del Hombre* in Castilla y León (Spain), through the study of the first display in Valladolid (1988-1989). It analyses how a religious and evangelical exhibition became one of the major components of the cultural scene of the region for the past thirty years and a model for other autonomous regions or cities in a country affected by secularisation.

The cycle *Las Edades del Hombre* tended towards the mode of an « exhibition-show ». Various types of objects from the religious heritage of the local Church are displayed in religious buildings transformed into “ephemeral museums”, using unprecedented means of display. Presenting works of art in such exhibitions defines them as heritage to be preserved.

It appears that the aim of the exhibition is to remember that the Church plays a heritage role model in local history and collective memory. Furthermore, often accused of not taking enough care of its cultural heritage, by playing the role here of the guardian that preserves and restores its heritage for the local population, the Church improves its image.

Although these exhibitions are, for the Catholic Church, a new way to evangelize people, they are also a way of attracting a national audience and contributing to the development of regional tourism. Moreover, the coalition of local government and the Church in the financing of the exhibitions establishes these events as a privileged means of building a sense of community and a means of letting religious heritage become a tangible witness to the regional past.

Las Edades del Hombre is a cycle of exhibitions that has been a major component of the cultural scene of the region of Castilla y León (Spain) for the past thirty years. The sixteen exhibitions composing the cycle have welcomed nine millions visitors, while religious art museums struggled to find an audience. It has been such a success that other provinces and autonomous regions have followed this model and welcomed either punctual exhibitions or regular events related to religious art. *Las Edades del Hombre* exhibitions display various types of objects from the religious heritage of the Church in religious buildings, with unprecedented display means. All the cathedrals of the eleven dioceses (as well as the churches of some cities) of the region have welcomed an exhibition of *Las Edades del Hombre*. These exhibitions aim at having a “social impact” and are “intended to restore the feeling of its existence and identity to a group”(Davallon, 1986: 9). The initiative of these events first came from the “episcopal representative for faith and culture” of the diocese of Valladolid, José Velicia, after he visited in Barcelona a retrospective and temporary exhibition in the diocesan museum: “*Thesaurus. l'art als bisbats de Catalunya (1000 / 1800)*”, directed by the Catalanian priest and historian Josep Maria Martí i Bonet. As in the Catalanian case, their goal is to combine the local religious cultural heritage with its Christian roots.

Las Edades del Hombre is based on three points defined by its organisers:

- To show through art the presence of the Church in Castilla y León
- To recover the collective memory and identity as well as the Christian roots of the regional history
- To recognise the region of Castilla y León as a creator of Art and History (González Cuadrado, 2010: 410).

To achieve these goals, all aspects of the local heritage are displayed around religious themes. Some events were based on a specific kind of heritage, like books in Burgos (1990) or music in León (1991-1992), while other were based on religious topics, like the exhibition that closed at the end of 2011 in Valladolid's province, named *Passio*, about the Passion of Christ.

The first exhibition of the cycle, which took place in Valladolid from October 24th 1988 to April 2nd 1989, is, in some ways, the organisers' statement of interest, because it was there that they implemented the terms that have been systematically repeated over the last 24 years and have been reproduced in the other regions of Spain. They offer a template, which tends to the « exhibition-show » (Drouguet, 2011: 89) immersing the visitor into the event, in order to reinforce its message. The purpose of this paper is to highlight how this elaborate museographical model translates the conception of the region of the Clergy of Castilla y León and analyse how it develops the components of its program. From the choice of the exhibition location to the choice of the works of art and their presentation we will look at the means used by the organisers to implement their narrative.

Between church and museum: the transformation of the place of worship

As previously stated, Valladolid was the location chosen for the first exhibition. Besides being the diocese where Jose Velicia worked, it is also the capital of the region of Castilla y León. The idea was to use a space with a strong symbolic value and large enough to host a major exhibition. The cathedral was chosen by default as indeed no other structure could fulfill these criteria. However, as a landmark built in the 16th century by the architect Juan de Herrera, it is a protected

monument, and so, the cathedral quickly became a trump card to be integrated into the exhibition narrative. The use of places of worship as exhibition venues became one of the major features of the cycle. For the organisers the purpose was to immerse the spectator in a place for which the works of art had been made, in which they could be explained according to a religious message. Those works of art, which had left the places of worship for the museums, came back to their initial location, and thus the cathedral represented the will of the local Church to be the place of both worship and culture.

To carry out their project, the organisers asked the scenograph and architect Pablo Puente Aparicio to lay out the exhibition. He structured the space into four levels of organisation that was to structure the exhibition's interpretation (Puente Aparicio, 1995 : 206).

The first level was the cathedral itself (fig. 1). Prior to the exhibition, it had been closed for five months for restoration. During the exhibition, the interior space of the cathedral was redistributed; picture rails and white partition walls defined the vertical space. Moreover, some elements, like the altar, were hidden or moved in order to create an “ephemeral museum” (Haskell, 2000), which is the second level of reading.

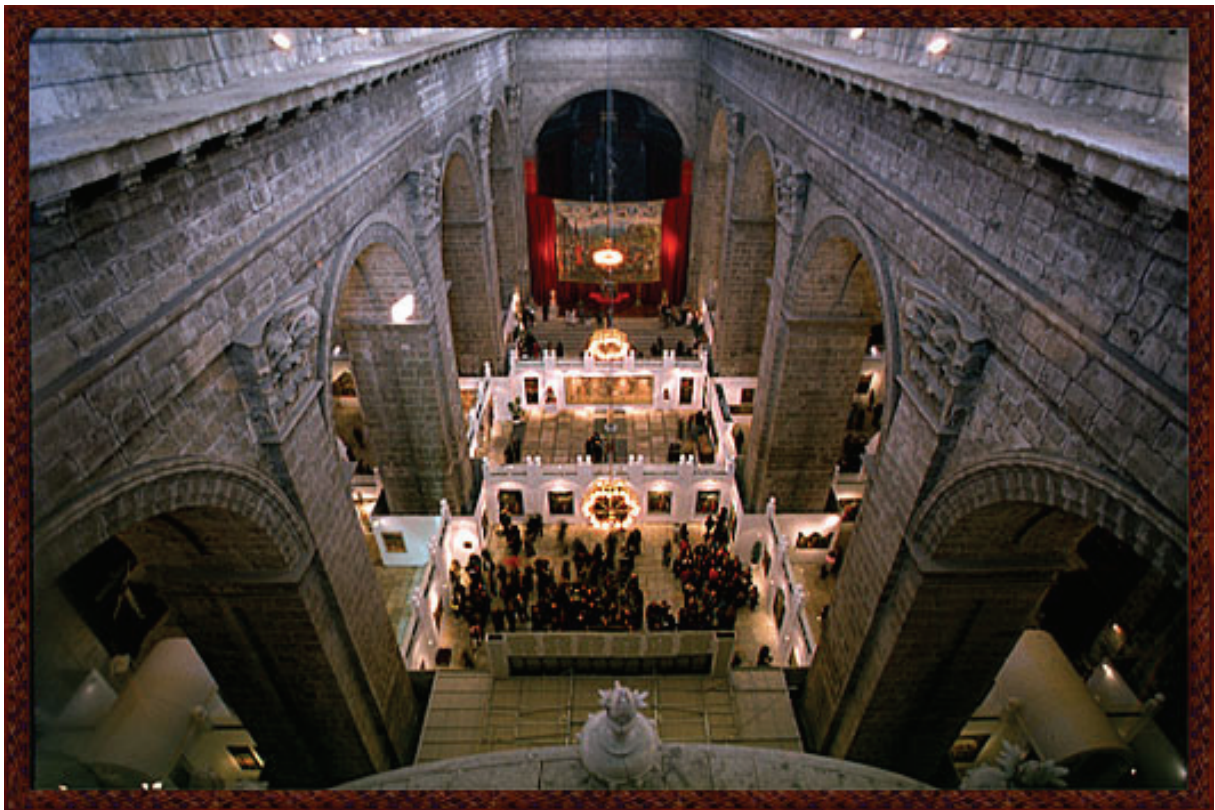


Figure 1: Central Nave of Valladolid's cathedral (6th January 1989) © 1989 Fotograffia www.michael-reckling.com

Above these temporal white walls, the cathedral structure was still visible, as if the white parts, reminder of the museum, matched the earthly things, while the cathedral stones referred to the sky and Celestial Jerusalem. To give the illusion of an architecture inside another architecture, some rooms were defined by the partition walls, and matched the different sections of the exhibition. Little tunnels, called “transition tunnels” by Aparicio, allowed visitors to walk around the exhibition (fig. 2). They were equipped with a vaulted roof, to recall the context of religious architecture, but

also to prevent visitors from gazing at the cathedral's architecture. Walking through the tunnels, visitors enter directly into a new world, that of the exhibition, that the organisers want them to be immersed in. Thus, visitors were directly projected into the universe of the exhibition, without taking into account the environment. They could concentrate on the third level defined by Puente Aparicio as that of the works of art themselves.



Figure 2 : Transition tunnel and exhibition scenography© 1989 Fotografia www.michael-reckling.com

A way to memories

One of the goals of this exhibition was to show the historic role of the Church as a patron of art. In fact 80% of Spanish heritage, whether built heritage or catalogued objects- is composed of religious heritage: inside of this figures, Catholic heritage from Castilla y León represents 50% of all national Catholic heritage. The organisers wanted to show the Church as one of the most important institutions for the development of national and obviously of local art. To achieve this goal, they presented works of art created between the 10th and 18th century, corresponding to the most active period of the artistic patronage by the Spanish Church.



Figure 3: Pedro de Mena, Immaculate, 17th century © 1989 Fotografia www.michael-reckling.com

The works displayed were paintings, sculptures like the Immaculate Conception (fig.3), by Pedro de Mena, representative of the 17th century Spanish religious sculpture school, books, liturgical and devotional objects. The organisers combined works from masters of Spanish art to more unrecognised works of art: for instance the *Saint Sebastian* by El Greco (fig. 4), which can be seen in the cathedral of Palencia, or works by 15th century painter Fernando Gallego, were displayed alongside works by local anonymous artists, which can be seen in parish churches.



Figure 4: El Greco, Saint Sebastian, 1577-1578 © 1989 Fotografia www.michael-reckling.com

The works of art displayed came exclusively from the region of Castilla y León: 192 items, coming from the eleven dioceses of the region, were displayed during the Valladolid exhibition. In the previous years, José Velicia visited museums and small parish churches to find the works to exhibit. Most of them belonged to the Catholic Church, and were restored for this occasion. If

we have a look at the figures, 38% of the works of art in Valladolid's exhibition came from museums of the Church (diocese, parish or cathedrals), 31% were directly chosen in churches and parishes of the region and 21% belong to cathedrals.

The aim was to display the works in a different perspective or setting from that provided by religious service for worship: 55 % of the works shown during *Las Edades del Hombre* in Valladolid had never been exhibited in a museographical way before. The organisers aimed at showing all the works of art of the Church as heritage while highlighting the local creative genius.

The idea was to attract a local audience with works that belonged to their parish churches and therefore had an emotional charge for them. In this way the displayed works of art were doubly acknowledged, by the institutions that chose them, and by the visitors who gave heritage value to the objects and thus developed a sense of pride. The organisers sought the public's acknowledgement of the artistic value of each work on display, but also the role of the Church in their creation and their preservation.

The local Church relied on emotions and mostly on the popular religious feeling of the region dwellers. The *Virgen de la Vega* displayed in Valladolid illustrated this approach and its limits. This late 12th century woodcarving, plated with bronze and gems, represents the Virgin Mary on a throne; the Holy Child on her left knee holds a book in his left hand and gives a sign of blessing. The display of this work in the exhibition sparked a lot of comments. The *Virgen de la Vega* is the patroness of the city of Salamanca, and she is popularly believed to give blessings, only if the carving stays in the city. Therefore extracting such a work of art from its home city and displaying it as cultural object was a challenge, for the Church. The danger was that its displacement would affect popular religious feeling due to the loss of "magical marks" provided by the place of preservation, and that the added cultural value would modify its function, until then unique and iconic.

The exhibition's goal was defined as a response "to a strictly religious feeling, but contrary to other exhibitions on the same theme, to also aim at showing the real reason why the works were originally created" (*Las Edades del Hombre*, 1988: XIX). For the Church and the organisers of the events, the challenge was that the works of art were difficult to understand for an audience lacking religious culture. Indeed, according to them, the secularisation of the Spanish society had lead to a misunderstanding of the principles and the history of Christianity. For the Church, religious art should unveil the Truth contained in the Gospel. José Jiménez Lozano, writer and co-organiser of the project *Las Edades del Hombre*, explains in his 1989 essay "Los Ojos del Icono", the relationship to art in modern society and particularly insists on the fact that the perception of the beauty and the history of the objects cannot be fully understood, when detached from their religious meaning. For example, in museums, the religious message is overshadowed by the aesthetic value. According to him, one has to bring together all the elements of understanding necessary to reconstruct the relationship between religious art and the visitor. He refers to the principles of the Second Vatican Council and the Message to the Artists of Pope Paul VI to assert that the perception of beauty and history of the works of art can allow the visitor to integrate religious principles.

According to these principles, and thanks to the dialogue between the visitor and the work of art, the didactic mission of the exhibition was defined. The resources and the scenography of the exhibition were used to promote this dialog. It also matched the fourth level of reading created

by the architect Aparicio: "A dreamt space', a world of reflection, made by the use of models which are part of the collective memory and claim to be the result of the exhibition" (Las Edades del Hombre, 1988: 356).

In Valladolid, this "dreamt space" was conceived of as a book. Divided in ten sections, named "chapters" by the organisers, the exhibition was conceived of as a "story told by the works". In order to allow the public to experience the forgotten religious experience, the tour was thematic and mixed different levels of narrative. The first level of reading was artistic; the visitor was offered a choice of works that represented the artistic evolution of the regional art. Some chapters were about specific periods like chapter VIII "The dream of Death and Glory" based on baroque art and the Counter-Reformation.

The second level of reading was about the biblical narrative, as developed in the exhibition script developed by José Jiménez Lozano. For the organisers, the exhibition "flees from academic criteria, chronology, art styles, author or time" (González Cuadrado, 2010: 409-410). It is closer to catechism lessons because it recalls the main events of the Bible. The first chapter "The Dream of Paradise" was dedicated to the Genesis, the beginning of mankind and reminder of man as a creature of God. It was then followed by various chapters telling Jesus Christ's life, from his birth to the Passion up to his death and resurrection. The chapter titles chosen by Jiménez Lozano, like "The Smile and the Pain", "The Silence and the Poverty", or "The Master of Life and Death" are enigmatic, almost mystical. They contributed to emphasizing the tragic side of the works of art. The visitor, about the meaning of the titles, had to focus on iconography and the message of works of art to understand them. Thus, the exhibition took advantage of the characteristics of the place of worship. Visitors were immersed in the soft light of the cathedral while some objects were surrounded by softened light. Besides, a peculiar sound environment also surrounded the visitors; religious music was being played during their tour, designed to emphasize the solemn and dramatic side of the exhibits. The goal was to immerse the visitor in a parallel world that should be familiar to him: the religious word.

A third level of reading, more philosophical, was about the meaning of life. The exhibition recounted the stages of human life through the life of Christ: birth, life-trials, death and judgment. The organisers intended to make visitors reflect about the meaning of life from a religious viewpoint. Jesus was seen as the «Master of History» in the second chapter but also as the «Master of Life and Death», title of the chapter X. This last chapter ended with a depiction of Doomsday (fig. 5), the Reckoning day when, according to Christian belief, everyone is to be judged by God. In this way, the way through the exhibition could be related by a believer to the Stations of the Cross: the visitor was invited to follow the different stages of biblical life, to meditate just like during this religious event.



Figure 5: Doomsday (Anonymous 16th century) © 1989 Fotografia www.michael-reckling.com

Beyond the presentation of the regional works of art, the exhibition tried to show the intellectual headways made thanks to the influence of religion in the region. Chapter IX entitled “Silence, Poverty, Enchantment and Spirit of the Small” was a reconstruction of Saint-Theresa’s convent cell in Valladolid. Saint Theresa life belongs to the imaginary of the regional and national genius of Spain; she was indeed promoted as early as the 17th century to the rank of patron saint of the entire country. Inserting her image in the exhibition showed how much the Church, and particularly the Church of Castilla y León, had produced talents of many sorts. This reconstruction, together with others works of arts, were the means to make the faith of the past live again. In the exhibition there was an idealisation of the past, a time before secularisation, when the Church played a major role in regional history. Through all these elements, visitors were invited to travel to back in time through this heritage, to better consider the major role of the Church and to remember the advantages of Catholicism. Used in this way its heritage allowed the Church to become, in a prophetic way, the main mediator that visitors must follow to access a memorial experience.

Towards a definition of the regional identity

Keys to the success of these exhibitions were the use of a cathedral as an exhibition space and its transformation into an «ephemeral museum» according to a carefully conceived scenario, and works of art that for the most part, do not belong to any outside cultural institution. The local Church uses all the modern means to conquer the audience. Over the years, the most spectacular aspects of the cycle exhibitions were emphasized; the creation of a daunting museography became one of *Las Edades del Hombre* principal traits. For instance, the city of Ponferrada, who welcomed the

exhibition in 2007, does not have a cathedral, so the event took place in two different churches, separated by a street. To build a path from one church to another, the architects thought of a bridge (fig. 6). This path was a direct reference to the “via lactea” that one must follow to the way of Saint James of Compostela, and reminded more of a planetarium or a theme park than of a fine art exhibition. The organisers do not hesitate to use every museographical resources available, whatever its type, to create a religious experience for visitors. The aim is to erase any critical distance between the visitor and the content of the exhibition in order to gain support.

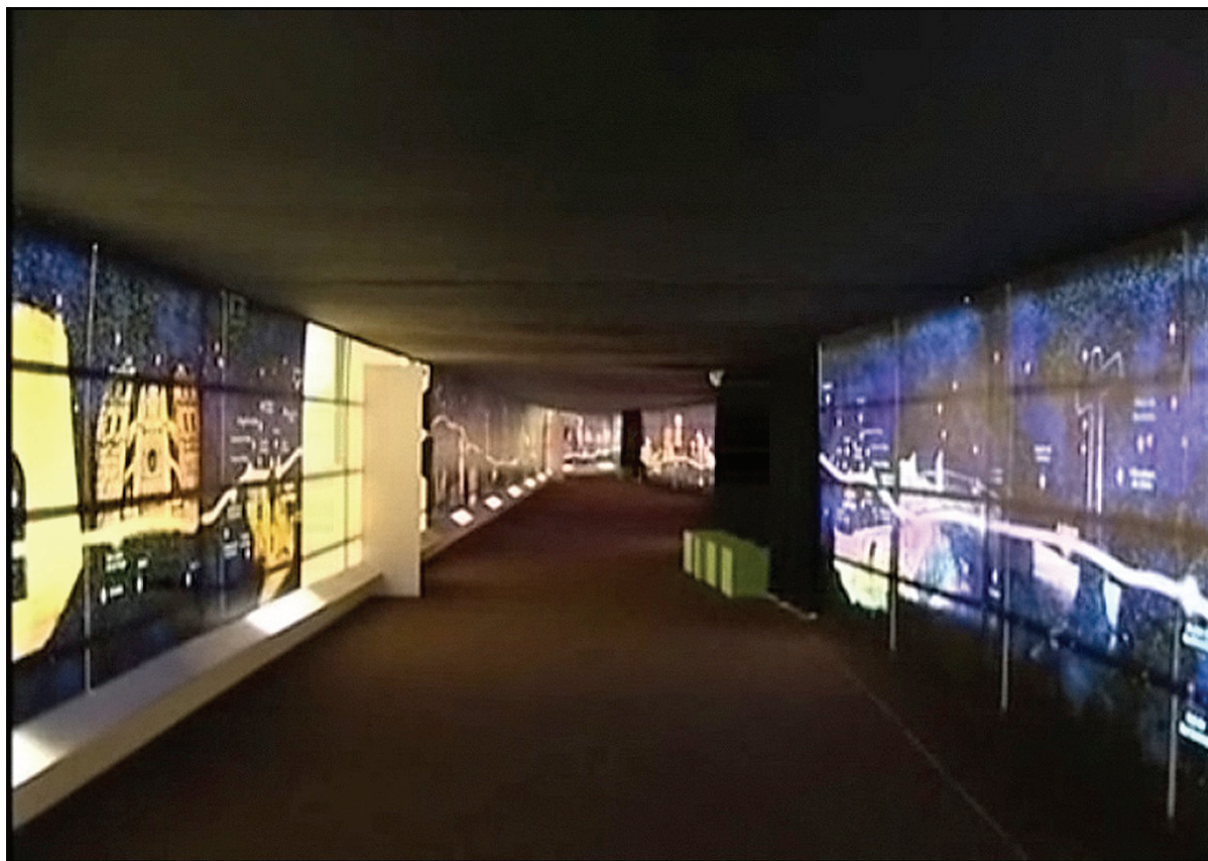


Figure 6: Inside the path in *Las Edades del Hombre* exhibition in Ponferrada, © Nathalie Cerezales.

Moreover, to exalt sense of community, entry to the exhibition was free; for the organisers, these works that legally belong to the Church were made for the inhabitants of the region and bear witness to the population's faith. So, the local population should not pay for it. It should be noted that access to most religious buildings and museums belonging to the Church is not free in Spain. With *Las Edades del Hombre*, the organisers expressed a will to give free access to religious culture. This specific initiative happened a few years after a debate concerning the preservation of Church property. After the dictatorship, a press campaign accused the Clergy of not taking enough care of its own artistic heritage. The exhibition establishes the Clergy as keeper not only in charge of its preservation but also of its cultural diffusion. For the organisers the success of the events lies in the fact that the people of Castilla y León are the true protagonist, because the cycle and the works of art exhibited belong to them. For the organisers the exhibition had to be a tribute to local people. The idea to give the heritage back to the public in a sacred environment is expressed from the beginning of the cycle by the use of a religious building, which, even stripped

of some of its features was used to create a hybrid place, where works of art could be presented in a museographical way as heritage and as religious works.

This hybrid place combined the use of all the museographical resources available in order to seduce an audience larger than the typical audience of regional art museums, and more particularly of museums of the Church, and who, moreover consider them as an elitist place, that's why the Church wanted "to get heritage closer to a largest audience" (González Cuadrado, 2010: 410).

As the project evolved and gained success, the exhibitions became a sort of «label»; visitors do not necessarily come to see the local works, but the exhibitions for themselves, because they are branded *Las Edades del Hombre*. Furthermore, the prolongation of the cycle, when it should originally have been a 'one-time only event', points to the conclusion that the local Church follows a global project towards the promotion of its local cultural goods. It called on professionals of the cultural domain like Pablo Puente Aparicio, at the same time as on the national Church, that created specific entities like the Asociación de los museólogos de la Iglesia (1988).

This local project also integrates the cultural policy of the Church towards its heritage. For example, the idea to uncover the Christian roots of a specific territory appeared first in the speech of Pope John Paul II in Santiago de Compostela in 1982 where he invited Europe to rediscover the Christian roots of its culture. Cultural Catholic heritage is, for Vatican cultural institutions, a way to emphasize the Church's role in History. It is also a method of "inculturation of faith", meaning the use of local cultural means to renovate catholic faith.

Moreover, *Las Edades del Hombre* cycle was described in the "Action plan 1990-1993" named "Promote new evangelisation" of the Spanish episcopal Conference (which gathers all Spanish bishops and holds concerted pastoral actions): "Studying, making a catalogue, showing the Church's religious heritage, we must not only focus on how and when it was created, but also specifically on why this historic heritage was created, to quickly find the reasons and the deep roots, which are to announce the Salvation story" (Rodríguez Domingo, 2009: 259). Church heritage, a controversial topic in the 1970's, became a favoured medium to show the Church's role in local history, and its preservation and its promotion made the Church a full actor in the establishment of the local memory.

Las Edades del Hombre is endowed with a foundation, "to manage its own fame" (Bolaños, 2008: 496). This foundation is aimed at continuing and at amplifying the dialogue between Faith and Culture in all its aspects with appropriate evangelising mediation" (Fundación *Las Edades del Hombre*, 1995: 76). The foundation, which is housed in a monastery in the Valladolid region, has developed a research centre that organises scientific conferences on local religious heritage. A specialised restoration centre takes care of the works of art before their display and collaborates with Valladolid authorities to lead preservation missions devoted to the heritage in the diocese. Furthermore, the foundation uses all modern means available to promote its actions: it has a web store, a web television and its website proposes a virtual visit of the last exhibition *Passio*. The foundation is well differentiated from other cultural institutions of the Church; its council is composed of the eleven bishops of the dioceses as well as representatives of the autonomous government of Castilla y León, which also finances the project with the credit institutions, the Cajas de ahorro (Caja de Duero, then Caja de España).

If the Francoist dictatorship was very close to the Catholic Church, the democratic Spanish Constitution declared in the sixteenth section that «No religion shall have a state character». One of the factor which can explain the coalition between these two institutions is that the first exhibition of the cycle took place five years after the edition of the Castilla y León Estatuto de Autonomía, held in 1983, authorized by the Spanish Constitution of 1978. Spain is composed of regions named “autonomías”, which have political competences. They have specific roles in cultural matters. Every Spanish region promotes its own cultural particularities. *Las Edades del Hombre* offers a way to promote a common culture in the region and gathers all the provinces and people around the same project.

Las Edades del Hombre cycle also became a way of promoting the image of Castilla y León outside its borders. Based on the proposal of Juan Vincente Herrera Campo, president of the autonomous government of the region, an exhibition was set up in Saint John the Divine Cathedral of New York in 2001 (*Las Edades del Hombre*, 2002).

Each exhibition welcomes an average of 500 000 visitors, and the event in Valladolid itself welcomed 1.5 million visitors. These exhibitions attract local population and consequently make use of the tourism resources of the city. *Las Edades del Hombre* exhibitions help the development of touristic facilities and a new economy based on tourism. For the Foundation, thanks to the cycle, the region has found a new situation in the current touristic panorama of the country.

Las Edades del Hombre cycle produces benefits for all the actors implicated in the project. It helped community identity undergoing construction to strengthen while Democracy was being established in the country. Christian roots became a favoured way of building a sense of community and a way to allow religious heritage to become a tangible witness to the regional past

Conclusion

Las Edades del Hombre phenomenon used modern media to conquer the local audience. The exhibitions play on the emotional impact created by the display of the works of art from a different perspective in a cultural setting. Not only do the spectacular means used to present the works of art attract a local audience, but they also relate to a national audience and lead to the development of regional tourism. The cycle emphasizes, through the display of the local artistic genius, the role of the Church in making the local heritage and its efforts as the guardian that preserves and restores its heritage for the local population. *Las Edades del Hombre* ultimately aims at reminding the model role that the Church played in local history and collective memory and uses heritage as an agent of the “New evangelisation” of the region.

Las Edades del Hombre cycle sparked off the increase of religious art exhibitions and has contributed to defining local religious objects displayed in the exhibition as heritage to be preserved. A total of 34 exhibitions of this type have taken place in the entire country, and for example an almost identical foundation, in Valencia’s province has been created to preserve regional religious heritage.

Nowadays, the cycle is at a turning point, the template has been modified since the two last events. The foundation has already used all large place of worship of the region, the exhibitions take place in two churches in different cities or villages and the last exhibition entrance was not free, because of the economic crisis. Nevertheless, the cycle (1988-2011) has enjoyed a long lift that leads us to consider these exhibitions as a traditional cultural event, which although strongly

promoting religious teachings, are integrated into the local cultural field and help to define the community identity like the museum.

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