



GASPAR MELCHOR DE JOVELLANOS Y RAMÍREZ

Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos is one of the foremost personalities of the Enlightenment in Spain. A judge, politician and writer, he is the author of many important reports, lectures and memoirs, in which he analyzed, from a progressive standpoint, crucial issues for the development of Spanish society in the second half of the 18th century and early 19th century.



A son of members of the local aristocracy, he was born in Gijón on January 5, 1744. His father, Francisco Gregorio de Jovellanos, was the mayor of the city, and his mother, Francisca Apolinaria Jove Ramírez, belonged to one of the most illustrious families in town. In 1757, at the age of 13, he began his studies of philosophy at Oviedo, from where he transferred with outstanding marks to the Colegio Mayor de

San Ildefonso at the University of Alcalá de Henares, where he studied to become a magistrate.

His first professional assignment took him to the wealthy city of Seville, where he was appointed magistrate judge, and then promoted higher up in the judicial rank. During his ten years in the Andalusian capital he enjoyed an intense social life, attending regularly some of the main literary circles in the city, such as that of the intellectual Pablo de Olavide, who had befriended many members of the French Enlightenment.

He was promoted again in 1778 and appointed Mayor of Madrid, and in 1780 he became councilman of the Military Orders. In the course of these years, he joined the main Academies, such as History and Fine Arts, as well as the Friends of the Country Economic Society, becoming actively engaged in all of them. He travelled to Asturias in 1782 so as to supervise the construction of the new road between Oviedo and Gijón, while designing a major urban improvement plan for his hometown as well.

The relevance and influence he achieved gradually began to create trouble for him in the court of Carlos IV. After expressing

public support for his friend Francisco de Cabarrús, director of the San Carlos Bank, after he was indicted and jailed in 1790, Jovellanos was then forced to travel to Asturias so as to inspect the coal mines of the region, which may be perceived as an exile in disguise.

Don Gaspar remained in Gijón until 1797. These seven years became one of the quietest and at the same time most productive periods of his life. During this time he founded the Royal Asturian Institute of Maritime Studies and Mineralogy, an institution which materialized his notions in regards to the transformation and modernization of the land of his birth. The creation of this institution corresponds to one of the key ideas in his thought, namely education as the foundation of the progress of the peoples. During this exile of sorts in Gijón he also wrote the *Report on the File of the Agrarian Law*, where he analyzed the problems of Spanish agriculture and suggested solutions for its improvement.

In 1797 Godoy appointed him Minister of Grace and Justice, a position he held for a long nine months during which his reformist intentions crashed against the immobilism and the interests of certain people in the government. He was removed from office in 1798, and he returned to Gijón once again, ill and depressed.

On March 13, 1801, an anonymous accusation caused Jovellanos to be arrested at his home and made a prisoner of





the State, without ever going to trial. He spent the next seven years imprisoned in the island of Majorca, first at the monastery of Valldemosa and then transferred to Bellver Castle, where he remained until 1808, failing in ever being tried, in spite of the many requests made to the King. When the Aranjuez mutiny earned Fernando VII the throne, Jovellanos was freed, and in spite of the severe harm done to his health, he still had a chance to participate in the 1810 opening decree of the Cortes of Cádiz as the representative of Asturias to the Supreme Central Governing Committee of the Kingdom.

This same year he requested his retirement, and travelled to Asturias by sea. Once settled in, the French threat forced him to flee Gijón in a rush. His health worsened, and on November 28, 1811, Jovellanos passed away in the village of Puerto de Vega, a small seaport where the brig carrying him along with his friends and members of the most important families of the city had taken shelter from a storm. He was 67 years old.

In his fecund life, Jovellanos put together a very important art collection, including a magnificent selection of drawings, but unfortunately it was lost during the Spanish Civil War.

The rooms presently dedicated to Jovellanos are the two chambers in the new tower which he occupied between 1798

and 1801. In 1798, after his brief stint at the Ministry of Grace and Justice, his brother Francisco de Paula passed away, and so he returned to his hometown and took possession of his household and inheritance. These rooms were renovated again in 1994, under the guidance of Professor Javier González Santos, who designed a project based on the study of the documentary sources, including diaries, correspondence and other writings by Jovellanos himself, as well as the *Documento del ilustrado Jovellanista*, by Julio Somoza .

It was rather difficult to create a faithful rendering of the atmosphere in which Jovellanos lived due to the fact that many items were since scattered as well as on account of the condition of the building. This is why the decision was made to recreate the environment of an 18th century Asturian mansion, making use of a relevant selection from the original furniture and also from the painting collection, including *View of St. Lawrence's Church and Valdés Park*, by Mariano Ramón Sánchez (1740-1822), formerly decorating the fireplace; *Penitent Magdalene*, by Francisco Ruiz de la Iglesia; and *The Burial of Count Orgaz* and *St. Augustine Conjuring the Locust*, by Miguel Jacinto Meléndez (1679-1734). A number of manuscripts, publications and portraits are also on display in this exhibition about the life and works of this man of the Enlightenment.