

Ateneo de Madrid



The word 'Ateneo' comes from the name of the Greek goddess of wisdom Athena and an Athenaeum is a center where culture is disseminated. It is a particularly Spanish phenomenon and in Spain, from the mid-nineteenth century, both the bourgeoisie, with the Ateneo de Madrid and the Ateneo de Barcelona, and the working classes, created their own Athenaeums, where cultural and intellectual activities took place. Their slogan was "culture as a means towards the emancipation of the people."

Created in 1820 the first Ateneo de Madrid brought together all the liberal philosophers, writers and politicians of the day, but when Fernando VII reinstated Absolute Monarchy in 1823 most of these men went into exile, and it was not until the Regency of Maria Cristina in 1835 that the Ateneo was restored. It occupied various different buildings in Madrid but finally in 1884 a new building was created in Calle del Prado to become its permanent headquarters.

The Ateneo became the centre of intellectual life. The writers of the Generation of '98, such as Unamuno, Machado, Pio Baroja, Azorín, all the Spanish Nobel prize winners – Ramón y Cajal, Jacinto Benavente, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Severo Ochoa, Vicente Aleixandre and Camilo José Cela - were members of the Ateneo. The musicians Manuel de Falla and Andrés Segovia performed here and the actress Sarah Bernhardt was fêted here. Luis Buñuel was a member and Cartier-Bresson's photographs were shown here. In 1895 the writer Emilia Pardo Bazán became the first woman to be admitted as a member.



Today's Ateneo is a place to see, hear and experience a wide variety of cultural activities from a talk on a particular topic, to poetry readings, musical recitals or discussions of books or exhibitions of art. The cultural activities of the Ateneo are not restricted solely to its members, but are open to all those who wish to participate.

El Salón de actos (The Auditorium)

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It is the work of the architects Luis Landecho and Enrique Fort who charged the artist Arturo Mérida with the difficult task of capturing in pictures the function and the reason for the existence of the Ateneo, and he designed a setting where his paintings would play a central role.

On its platform have stood kings, presidents, artists and thinkers. Einstein, Marie Curie, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Ortega y Gasset gave conferences here.



The Library

Unfortunately we cannot visit the library as it is in constant use by students and researchers, however if anybody wishes to make use of the archives or documents it is possible to become a member for a few days or a few weeks and have the right to sit at one of the 300 desks, and study where many famous intellectuals and leading political figures have studied and done their research.



The library has some 350,000 volumes, 27,000 pamphlets, 2,800 collections of newspapers and scientific journals, many in foreign languages, and is a valuable resource for researchers in many fields.

The library is a beautiful series of rooms and the most famous is known as 'La Pecera', or the Fish Tank, because of its high glass roof. There are three galleries of bookcases rising up to the roof, communicated by wrought-iron staircases.



The Portrait Gallery

This is a unique and exceptional collection of 189 portraits of the most outstanding and important figures of cultural and political life in Spain in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Painters such as Madrazo, Rosales, Sorolla or Casado de Alisal contributed to this gallery of portraits which is, without doubt, the most important in the whole country.



La Cacharrería

The literal translation of 'Cacharrería' is 'hardware store' and refers to the noise made by the members of the Ateneo as they enthusiastically discuss and debate, and raise their voices in disagreement. Just as we say in English 'like a bull in a china shop', in Spanish the expression is 'like an elephant in a hardware store'. This large room has seen many lively debates over the years which in Spanish are called '*tertulias*'.

The Study of Manuel Azaña

Manuel Azaña was a Spanish politician who became the first Prime Minister of the Second Spanish Republic (1931–1933), and later served again as Prime Minister in 1936, and then became the second - and last - President of the Republic (1936–1939). The Spanish Civil War broke out while he was President, and with the defeat of the Republic in 1939 he fled to France, resigned his office, and died in exile.



As a student Azaña studied in the library of the Ateneo and from 1913–1920 he occupied the post of Secretary. In 1930 he became its President and this is the room he used as his study and office.



Conference rooms and exhibition spaces

The Ateneo has spread from the historical building at number 21 Calle del Prado, to occupy also number 19 on the same street, and in this building can be found conference rooms which can also be rented for events or conferences, and the exhibition galleries where a wide range of art exhibitions are displayed.

The Ateneo is a very busy place with over 600 activities a year covering everything from debates and lectures on literature, science, history, philosophy, education, economy, the environment, or musical concerts and theatrical presentations, or cinema. The Ateneo receives over 60,000 visitors a year with over 20,000 people who regularly attend the programme of activities.

Tertulias

Are regular, informal social meetings, which bring together people interested in a topic to discuss, learn and share opinions. The gatherings can be on all kinds of subjects: literature, politics, religion, poetry or anything of general interest that arises spontaneously. There is an implicit rule that it is permissible to attack and discredit any person who misses a *tertulia*, which ensures that none of the regular members miss their meetings.



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