I spent 3 weeks in Spain this past May gathering visual research and searching for inspiration. I did visual research at cathedrals, monasteries, convents, shrines, palaces, and museums throughout Spain. I was especially interested in reliquaries and monstrances, as well as how sacred energy (especially in the form of halos or light rays) was represented in these religious relics and in paintings, sculptures, and the other arts I was able to view. I spent each day going to a specific site or area, and then wandering that area or town to see what else I could find that was not in the guide books. I took over 1500 photos and I kept a travel journal of each day’s events and the specific things I saw that triggered or inspired some sort of response in myself—emotionally, spiritually, mentally, or kinesthetically. I collected the paper ephemera from each days travels and pasted them in the journal. This included ticket stubs, maps, post cards, pamphlets, Metro tickets, business cards and the like. I also spent time reading fiction that was set in Spain or written by a Spanish author. These included Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* which takes place around Segovia, Avila, and Madrid during the Spanish Civil War; Carlos Ruiz Zafon’s *The Shadow of the Wind* which takes place in Barcelona after the Spanish Civil War; and the writing of St. John of the Cross, a Spanish Catholic mystic, Carmelite friar and priest famous for his *Dark Night of the Soul*. I wanted to immerse myself in Spanish culture as much as possible in the time that I was there.

I rented a studio apartment in the centrally located Malasana neighborhood in Madrid for 2 weeks. It is reminiscent of the East Village in NYC. It has a punk/rock-n-roll vibe, and it was used as a location for several Pedro Almodovar films. My neighborhood was scattered with large graffiti stencils of musicians on the metal security screens that cover the windows of the shops at night. There was also a lot of layered poster graffiti. My apartment was right next to the gay district of Chueca with all it’s interesting shops, art galleries and promenades; and it was close to several metro stations that gave me easy access to all areas of Madrid.
I chose to stay in Madrid for a longer period of time than Barcelona, as there was easy access by train from Madrid to many small towns of historic significance that I was interested in visiting. I made 3 days trips from Madrid to Avila, Segovia, and El Escorial and an overnight trip to Toledo all by train. Amongst some of the highlights in Madrid are the usual suspects such as the Prado Museum where I was spent a day wandering and looking at the many religious paintings and sculptures including Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* & Rogier Van Der Weyden’s *Descent from the Cross*, and the Reine Sofia where I finally got to see Picasso’s *Guernica*, and spent another day wandering the galleries full of 20th century art. Another standout at the Reine Sofia was a room of prints from the group Estampa Spain. It was a group largely made up of printmakers. The only qualification was that you had to be anti-Franco. I had checked out a book on Estampa Spain form the U of M’s Art & Architecture library. It was a great surprise and a delight to see all those prints I had studied from that book “in the flesh”. The porcelain room and the chinoiserie room at the Palacio Real knocked my socks off with their over the top décor. There was also an extraordinary exhibit of books from the Spanish royal collection with a history of bookbinding and book related artifacts, including a letter and writing tools that belonged to St. Teresa of Avila, a Spanish Catholic mystic and nun, dating from the 1570’s.

For me, the standout site in Madrid has to be the Real Monasterio De La Encarcion, an Augustinian convent founded in 1611. It is filled with 17th century art donated by the wealthy and royal families who had daughters entering the convent. The most interesting part was the Relicario or Reliquary room where the skulls, bones, and other relics of saints are stored in a room floor to ceiling, wall to wall with over 700 reliquaries in every shape, size and material imaginable! It was like hitting the jackpot. This is what I was hoping to come across in my travels. Unfortunately I was allowed only 5 minutes in the Relicario, and no photos or sketching was allowed. (I found a postcard of it at the ticket counter on my way out.) Fortunately, I was able to photograph hundreds of other examples of reliquaries that I came across in Spain that more than made up for it. I had the opportunity to visit many other religious sites in Madrid, where I found many examples of the religious art and relics for which I was searching. These included Real Iglesia de San Gines, Iglesia de San Ildefonso, Catedral de la Almudena, and Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales. I also spent some time walking through the gigantic Retiro Park with it’s tree-lined avenues, man-made lake and half-moon colonnade, and the glass Crystal Palace and the Palacio de Velasquez which are used by the Reine Sofia as satellite galleries. I saw a retrospective exhibition in these 2 spaces of the Spanish experimental artist, Nacho Criado, that included installation, sculpture, photography, and video.
I travelled to Ávila by train from Madrid for the day. I was interested in seeing the reliquaries that contained St. Teresa’s relics, including the bone from her right ring finger (complete with ring!), a piece of cloth she wore, the felt sole of one of her shoes, her rosary beads, and a sulpice (or braided cord) she used to flagellate herself. They also had a relic form St. John of the Cross who was born in nearby Segovia. The center of the city is encircled by the finest preserved medieval walls in Europe. I was able to climb to the top of the walls and walk around parts of the old city. Many of the churches and convents in Ávila are linked to St. Teresa who was born in Ávila. I visited many of them including: Catedral de Ávila (Spain’s first cathedral in the Gothic style) which had a great attached museum full of religious relics, Convento de St. Teresa which was built on the site of her home and contains an over-the-top, gold smothered chapel to her, and the Museo de Santa Teresa containing all things related to St. Teresa. Also, just outside the medieval walls, is a spectacular Romanesque cathedral, the Basilica de San Vincente.

My second day trip from Madrid was to Segovia, the birthplace of St. John of the Cross. Outside of the old town is a spectacular and massive 1st century AD Roman aqueduct which has been preserved. Segovia is set high on a rocky spur, with wonderful views and some of the most beautiful light in Spain. There is a gigantic cathedral in Segovia. It is the last great Gothic church built in Spain. It looks like a giant tan and cream wedding cake with it’s pinnacles, flying buttresses, tower, and dome. Inside it is full of gilt altars, shrines, and chapels, sculpture, paintings, murals, and metal work. I also visited Iglesias San Martín, Iglesias de San Andrés, and the Alcázar (castle), on which Walt Disney based his designs for his fairytale castle. I also visited the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vincente. Vincente was a 20th century Spanish painter who lived in
Segovia and built a home and museum which houses his work. He was a well known teacher at Yale, Princeton, and the New School in New York City.

My third trip from Madrid was to El Escorial, which is an hour outside of Madrid by regional train. El Escorial is an imposing grey palace which has a look of severity because of it’s unornamented style. It was built as a mausoleum and contemplative retreat. Yet, despite the severity of the architecture, it is overflowing with artistic wealth. It has one of the greatest collections of painting in the world, a stupendously designed main altar in the basilica, murals covering many walls, a museum of paintings, plus most of the walls in the main halls and room are filled with art—El Greco, Reubens, Van De Weyden, Giordano, etc. I would have to say that if you have any interest in painting, this is a must see site in Spain. It was visually overwhelming and there was a lot to take in. Unfortunately no photos were allowed anywhere, and the place was virtually locked down with security everywhere.

My final trip from was an overnight stay in Toledo. I chose to stay overnight in Toledo as there was too much to see in a single day. The Cathedral de Toledo is another unbelievably beautiful Gothic cathedral with French influences. The detail inside is sumptuous and it is filled to the brim with art. You can gorge yourself on El Greco’s in Toledo. The are over 20 El Greco’s in the cathedral and more in the El Greco Museum, as El Greco lived and worked in Toledo. The Sacristy inside is really a large museum of painting, sculpture, and liturgical clothing from the 15th-17th centuries. You will find artwork by Caravaggio, Titian, Van Dyke, Goya, Bellini, and more. There is a treasury room filled with reliquaries and monstrances (to hold the sacrament) and other religious relics of gold, silver, and jewels. The main altar is a polychrome and gilt wood extravaganza. It also contains the largest choir in Europe made of carved wood with grotesques, gargoyles and other strange details.
I was able to visit cathedrals, synagogues, and mosques in Toledo because of the historic diversity of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in this city’s past. You can see this in the mashed up architectural styles from each of these cultures. These sites included Sinagoga Santa Maria La Blanca (with it’s all white interior), Iglesias de los Jesuitas, Mezequita Cristo de la Luz, Sinagoga del Transito/Museo Sefardi, Monasterio de San Juan de los Reyes, Museo de Convento de Santa Isabel de los Reyes, Convento Santa Ursula, Museo El Greco, and the Convento de Santa Domingo de Silos. All these sites provided me with more visual research and information into the religious relics in which I am interested.

I spent my final week in Barcelona, Spain where I rented a studio apartment a few blocks away from Antonio Gaudi’s Basilica de la Sagrada Familia in the Eixample neighborhood. I continued my visual research on religious relics here. My first stop was the Barcelona Cathedral another Gothic beauty full of religious art and relics where I took many photos. The highlight, for me, was the Museu Frederic Mares. This museum is right next to the Barcelona Cathedral. Mares was a 20th century Spanish sculptor and obsessive collector. He said he made sculpture, so he could buy sculpture. He amassed a collection of Romanesque and Gothic religious art, mostly made by Catalan artists and craftsmen that fill 3 floor of the museum. It is an outstanding collection and it left me speechless. I returned several times to view the collections at this museum, as there was more than I could take in during one visit. The collection of large wood crucifixes, often missing the cross, really captured my imagination. Without the crosses, the figures of Jesus look like they are suspended in air. I became fascinated with this effect. Also of great interest to me, were the upper 2 floors called the collector’s cabinet. Frederic Mares collected everything—clocks, crucifixes, cameras, pipes, fans, paper ephemera and more. It is a massive collection of mostly pre-20th century stuff. Of particular interest was his collection of reliquaries, milagros, halos and crowns from religious statues, and other relics. It was a jackpot of items in which I was interested. I spent many hours perusing these collections and taking pictures to reference when I returned to Ann Arbor.
I was able to visit several of Antonio Gaudi’s building in Barcelona. Besides the already mentioned Sagrada Familia, I visited Palau Guell, Casa Batllo, and La Pedrera, as well as Park Guell. My favorite was Park Guell where I felt Gaudi’s imagination was at it most interesting and innovative. Also in Barcelona, I visited Fundacion Antonini Tapies Collecio, a museum dedicated to the work of 20th century Spanish painter, Antonini Tapies. The Miro Museum dedicated to the work of Joan Miro. Fundacio Museo d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Barcelona’s contemporary art museum. The Museu Nacional D’Art de Catalunya (MNAC) which houses a vast collection of mostly Catalan art from the early Middle Ages to the early 20th century. The high point is a collection of Romanesque frescoes taken from country churches around Spain, along with woodcarvings and painted altar frontals, that is considered to be one of the most important concentrations of early medieval art in the world. It is an awesome collection, and I spent many hours looking at all the religious art in this museum. I also visited Fundacion Francisco Godia which has a small but well-preserved collection of Romanesque and Gothic wooden sculptures still vibrant with their original polychrome paint. I also took one day trip from Barcelona to Montserrat to see the Monestir de Montserrat, it’s basilica with the famous Black Madonna (La Moreneta) where I heard the famous Montserrat Boy’s Choir sing, and it’s Museu de Montserrat with it’s collection of both secular and religious art.

!["Suspended" wood crucified Jesus sculptures missing their crosses at Museu Frederic Mares (Barcelona, Spain)](image)

The experiences I had in Spain in May were invaluable to me as an artist, and I thank the School of Art & Design for their generosity and support with deep gratitude. It was an amazing experience, and I feel that it helped me to focus my ideas and the research for my thesis. I loved Spain and I hope I can go back to see more of it. Thank you.