Until 1855 the city of Madrid was supplied with water from underground aquifers. In that year the Canal de Isabel II, the company responsible for bringing water to the Spanish capital, was created. Between 1907 and 1911, the company built the First Elevated Reservoir (designed by Diego Martin Montalvo, Luis Moya and Ramón Águilarragat), which supplied water to the high points of the city. By 1932, however, the reservoir was obsolete, as new infrastructure and technology for storing and distributing water was put in place, and it was taken out of service. Elevated reservoirs traditionally have been subjected to various kinds of camouflage. Their basic cylindrical shape has been transformed into a fortified tower, as in Perigueux; a castle, as in York; or a lighthouse, as in Massaneu. But the Canal's elevated reservoir looks like a reservoir and is valuable evidence of early twentieth-century industrial engineering in Madrid.

The Canal de Isabel II elevated reservoir, after conversion into a gallery.

Photos by M. Angel Gomas, courtesy Canal de Isabel II.
In 1966 the reservoir was restored and converted into an exhibition hall by Canal de Isabel II and architects Antonio Lopera Arranz and Javier Alba Mesa. The project sought to maintain the original characteristics of the reservoir and to introduce the minimum necessary modern systems, such as air conditioning, lighting, an elevator and communications equipment, necessary to support the new use.

An adjacent building, which housed the elevator station that pumped the water, also was preserved and converted into offices. An auxiliary pavilion was constructed to house complementary services and facilities that were difficult to fit inside the reservoir. And the reservoir's immediate surroundings, including the landscape, also were restored. These projects, along with four modern office blocks, an underground reservoir and spacious gardens, constitute the central offices of Canal de Isabel II.

The reservoir, approximately 125 feet tall, is constructed from brick and steel. Its polygonal shape is derived from the position of the radial brick buttresses that support the water tank, which is crowned by a decorative cupola. The tank is supported on a brick hoop at the base of the crown and by a metal structural tunnel. The tunnel also houses a staircase, which provides access to the exterior of the bottom of the tank.

(A small elevator, installed between two of the buttresses, also provides access to this level.) A passage cut through one of the buttresses provided access for preservation work in the gap between the interior wall of the cupola and the exterior wall of the water tank. Housed within this ambulatory is a vertical metal staircase that leads to the gallery in the center of the tank.

Today the gallery is an important part of Madrid's cultural life; the work of artists like Salvador Dalí, Alice Weibel, Inge Morath and Elkit Erkitt has been exhibited there. This year, in which the Spanish capital has been chosen as the "Cultural Capital of Europe," the gallery will house exhibitions from other European capitals, such as Athens, Paris and Berlin.