



ARTUR RAMON ESPAI D'ART

# Spanish Modern Landscapes 1880-1950

A project born from the collaboration between  
Colnaghi in London, Sala Parés and Artur Ramon Art

11.11.21 - 14.01.22

# Spanish Modern Landscapes 1880-1950

Artur Ramon Navarro

Spanish painting is known the world over for the sobriety of its Golden Age (Siglo de Oro) as well as for the joyfulness of its impressionist painting, with the genius of Goya acting as a bridge between the two. Painting is no more than the mirror in which the essence of a culture is reflected. And so, our painterly art, as Pacheco would say, is a metaphor for the Spanish soul which constantly fluctuates between light and shadow, day and night. From El Greco to Sorolla.

After the wonderful reception of our first project in July 2020 with the exhibition *The Golden Age of Spanish Modern Art*, Colnaghi, Sala Parés and Artur Ramon Art join together in a project, *Spanish Modern Landscapes*, and in a mission. The project is to show the evolution of Spanish landscape painting over the twentieth century through works of museum quality and the mission is to internationalise and disseminate our visual culture beyond our borders. From the first Romantic travellers to the most recent globalised tourists, travelling to Spain has been synonymous with celebrating life through our landscapes and their people. Artists have concentrated this nature in their landscapes, capturing the explosion of light and colour of the Mediterranean coast as well as the melancholy of inland sunsets.

Visiting our exhibition is akin to a mental and emotional tour of our country through its artists. It is an exploration of Spanish modern painting – still little-known outside of our borders – through one of its genres, landscape, which they best represent. And it is also, beyond the usual topics, a revindication of Spanish modern art.

## Landscape in Spanish painting

Landscape in painting expresses the dialectic which mankind has established with nature. From medieval visions, where the landscape is the embodiment of a divine work, to the notes of the Impressionists, which are a *tour de force* between the artist and the environment, one can trace a history of landscape in painting, so well described over seventy years ago by Sir Kenneth Clark in his book dedicated to this

genre, *Landscape in Art* (London, John Murray, 1949). From the earliest Ancient Roman wall paintings – especially the landscapes in the Villa Livia at Prima Porta, near Rome – and after a baffling thirteen-century hiatus that ended with the International Gothic style, artists have asked themselves the same question: how to represent nature?

The Spanish word for landscape is *paisaje*; however, in medieval and early-Renaissance Spanish the word *país* ('country') was used, meaning the representation of "towns, places, fortresses, country houses and fields" according to the *Diccionario de autoridades* (vol. V, 1737). Therefore, *país* could refer to landscape paintings as well as to the territory. It was not until the sixteenth century that Francisco de Holanda used the word *paisaje* for the first time. Soon, echoes arrived from Italy of the idealised landscape paintings invented by Annibale Carracci and continued by Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin. The landscapes that we see in Spanish Golden Age paintings, although usually real, have an element of idealisation in them. I am thinking of Francisco Collantes' views, painted in the fashion of almost Nordic daydreams, or the pair of *vedute* by José de Ribera, the most Italian of the Spanish painters, kept by the House of Alba. They are his only known landscapes and are so detailed in their realism that they almost seem imagined.

On the other hand, the views of the Villa Medici painted by Velázquez are real beyond doubt, even if so much has been written on their visionary nature. I believe that they are a change of paradigm rather than the seed of Impressionism. It is odd that Velázquez, the most intellectual of Spanish artists, should bequeath us two views that come from direct observation of nature and life, perhaps springing from his desire to breathe fresh air and release his hand and himself from his duties and his commissions. Paradoxically, Goya was better at expressing the sublime nature of landscape in his engravings than in his paintings, his enormous rocks and boulders in his etchings anticipating Victor Hugo's Romantic visions. In contrast, in Goya's paintings, landscape merely provides the background for his figures.



To the classical academic mentality, based on hierarchy, landscape was a lower genre, below historical painting and portraiture, only above still life and flower vase painting. It should be borne in mind that in the Academy of Barcelona, it was not taught as a subject until 1824 and twenty years later in Madrid. Similarly, in France it was not until 1817 that the first grand prix to historical landscape was created.

Landscape painting is a nineteenth-century invention, and during Romanticism it was a means to convey emotions. In Spain, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando) in Madrid created the first chair of Landscape Painting in 1844, with Jenaro Pérez Villamil as its pioneer and champion. At that time, a distinction was made between romantic and historical landscapes, i. e., painted from life as opposed to painted in a studio. The Belgian painter Carlos de Haes was a promoter of realistic landscapes, occupying from 1857 the chair of Landscape Painting at the Escuela Superior in the Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid. He advocated an objective approach to nature and *plein air* painting, thus forcing a transition from the Romantic to the Impressionist landscape. From that moment on, the artist leaves the studio and goes to the countryside or the coast in search of a subject on which he can project his painting skills. It is not necessary to insist on the mark left by the famous Impressionists, both French – Manet, Monet, Degas – and from elsewhere – De Nittis or Hammershøi – or on how other painters revolutionised the landscape – Van Gogh, Gauguin or Seurat, all of them well-trodden peaks of painting.

Around the same time, Joaquim Vayreda created the Olot School of landscape painting in Catalonia, where the spirit of Barbizon could be felt, with a group of painters formally close to Corot. Nature was transformed into a life ideal, a triumph of the rural. Martí Alsina represents this realism rooted in the French tradition, a synthesis of Courbet and Corot, so successful in Europe at the time, with his deserted landscapes and seascapes. Modest Urgell stuck to the romantic vision of landscape, with his compositions full of melancholy, in which light plays a key role. His enigmatic rural landscapes painted in 1891-1911 were highly successful, not only in his hometown of Barcelona, but also in the major European and American capitals. Salvador Dalí was a great admirer and collector of his work, which he regarded as a forerunner of his own.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, a reaction against the romantic model has been underway,

and the artist does not only search for emotion in the landscape. At the turn of the twentieth century, painting changed its voice – in its new language, landscape was not as necessary because of its absence of strict boundaries. In fact, when Picasso and Braque invented Cubism, they had Cézanne's lessons in mind, but not his landscapes because they focused on the representation of objects. Once the fever of *Fauvism* passed – Matisse and Derain painted the villages of southern France using primary colours while the Swiss Félix Vallotton turned his landscapes into chromatic kaleidoscopes – painting followed science in its distancing from nature as ideas carried more weight than objects, forms more than materials, concepts more than abstractions.

And the fact remains that landscape painting is, at its heart, an abstraction, a human representation of nature. Catalan landscape painting does not constitute a school, but it is among the best of its time. Santiago Rusiñol – painter, collector and patron – soaked in the solitary landscapes of the parks of Valencia or Aranjuez with forced perspectives where time seems to stand still. Joaquim Mir is a great landscape artist, and his art is not contaminated by any influence because he never left his home territory. He focused on projecting colour and light on his canvasses to produce delirious visions that were close to abstraction. His best works date from his stay in Majorca in search of hidden landscapes in the Tramuntana mountains, near Deià – where he fell and sustained serious wounds while trying to get a particular view – and from the years he spent near Tarragona, convalescing in a hospital, where he painted with the energy of a *Fauvist* and the technique of a pointillist. It was the architect Antoni Gaudí that recommended Majorca to Hermen Anglada-Camarasa, who settled there (1919-1936 and 1947-1959) and left us superb views of its bronze-like cliffs and crystal-clear waters in a highly personal post-Impressionist idiom suffused with symbolism.

A unique landscape by Nonell's early period, touched by the colour saffron; a work by Laureà Barrau, with a view of Tossa de Mar before Ava Gardner visited it; the pasty and brave painting of Gimeno; the impressive view of the Besalú bridge by Meifrén; the lonely view of the beach at twilight by Lluís Graner that is a counterpoint to the mountainous landscape of Pradilla. They all form a mosaic in this exhibition, a metaphor for the modern history of our landscape.



Santiago Rusiñol, *The Tagus River (El Tajo)*, 1898, oil on canvas, 66 x 85.5 cm.

### **Santiago Rusiñol, *The Tagus River (El Tajo)***

Rusiñol is one of the most prominent figures of Catalan Modernism, he was a student of Tomas Moragas and is one of the forerunners of Catalan landscape painting. With his friend Ramon Casas, he begins a journey through Catalonia, an immersion in the countryside and in the villages of the region. The result will be evident in the paintings he made at the end of the century, which also show the influence of the painter from the Olot school, Joaquim Vayreda.

Our painting, similar to another one enhanced fourteen years later, crystallises a view of the Tagus River (el Tajo) surrounded by trees and bushes in the spring season. The composition follows a general scheme characterised by compositional rigour: taking advantage of the shore, Rusiñol seeks a vanishing point to give depth to the canvas. The wild vision, which constitutes one of his greatest attractions, thus finds a harmonious and almost symmetrical order. Its vivid colours and various shades of green enliven the scene with vibrant light.

## Isidre Nonell, *Morning sun*

A very unusual and particular work of Isidre Nonell's catalogue, *Soleil matinal* (*Morning sun*) is a canvas from the painter's first period, when he was only twenty-four years old. At this early stage of his artistic career, unhappy with the academicism of the schools and painting academies he had frequented, Nonell founded with his friends Canals, Vallmitjana, Pichot and Mir a group called "Colla del Safrà" (Saffron group) to paint outdoors. Having adopted the luminist painting of the Escuela de Sitges, Nonell progressed to yellowish suburban visions of Barcelona. Catalan painters influenced by the Impressionists had as their common interest to capture light at different times of the day and at different seasons.

Our painting is one of the few oil landscapes in Nonell's catalogue. The composition focuses on two large haystacks in a wheat field. In the background, a group of cottages surrounded by trees and green meadows stand out against a celeste blue sky. Three working peasants are the only figures in this luminous rural setting, in which colours and light play a significant role.



Isidre Nonell, *Morning sun*, 1896, oil on canvas, 72 x 90 cm.





Hermen Anglada-Camarasa, *Majorca landscape*, 1914-1936, oil on board, 38 x 50.5 cm.

### **Hermen Anglada-Camarasa, *Majorca landscape***

Since his arrival in Majorca in 1914, Anglada-Camarasa left aside the feminine figure and folkloric subjects and recovered his favourite subject before his stay at Paris: landscape. However, at that time he approached the matter with a new look, totally different from his early works. He resorted to a much more daring colour palette to represent nature, following the Fauvists trends, and made his compositions juxtaposing stains and fillings of colour in the manner of the Impressionists. Unlike the impressionist painters who worked *sur le motif*, directly *in situ*, he took notes which he then used to create his works in the studio.

This view of a cove in Mallorca reflects the new orientation of his work at that time, both by the palette and by the brushstroke, recreating the shapes of the rock, sand and sea through patches of bold colours, which move away from the real colours of the landscape, but give the composition a lot of light and a great evocative force.



Eliseu Meifrén, *Bridge of Besalú*, c. 1923, oil on canvas, 100 x 110 cm.

### Eliseu Meifrén, *Bridge of Besalú*

When Meifrén made his first trip to Paris in 1879, he came into contact with the work of Impressionists such as Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), Edgar Degas (1834–1917) or Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), as well as with the revolution of colour and light that they had initiated. The impact of this new French painting on Meifrén was key in the evolution of his work. From then on, the *plein air* and the desire to capture the light in the landscape were the protagonists of his pictorial approach until the end of his days.

Our painting perfectly reflects that influence: the majestic Romanesque bridge of Besalú (Girona) at the centre of the composition, represented in a bottom-up perspective, allows the artist to give prominence to the Fluviá River and to the sky crossed by some clouds. As in other compositions of the time, the artist wants to capture the passing of time in the incessant movement of water and air.



## Francisco Pradilla, *Mountain pass*

In addition to his historical paintings and portraits, for which Pradilla is a well-known painter today, he also worked in other genres such as landscape. The work which motivates this text is an example of notable quality of Pradilla's work in this area. It represents a view of high mountains, perhaps the Peaks of Europe, where the far-off fog blends into a sky that forebodes a storm. The painting is done in loose brushstrokes, *alla prima*, and seems to have been executed quickly *in situ*, following the *plein air* principles of the Barbizon school. The thick dabs of paint mix with the smoother areas and there is work with a spatula or with the handle of the brush to scratch the pictorial surface and simulate grass. This work is related with sketches from life, documented by Wifredo Rincón García in his book on Francisco Pradilla (Madrid, 1987, pp. 142-148) of similar measurements and included in the inventory with the same type of numbering in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection.

<sup>1</sup> Wifredo Rincón García, *Francisco Pradilla. 1848-1921*, Madrid, 1987, pp. 142-148.



Francisco Pradilla, *Mountain pass*, c. 1918, oil on canvas, 37 x 57 cm.





Joaquim Mir, *Landscape*, c. 1917-1919, oil on canvas, 115 x 130 cm

## Joaquim Mir, *Landscape*

Joaquim Mir is the great Spanish landscape painter of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His personal, bold, and intuitive pictorial approach was the result of constant, courageous, and limitless experimentation, which led him to achieve unique results. From his beginning, the artist decided to distance himself from the art circuit in order to find a personal language with which to express himself freely. In 1899 he settled in Majorca, where he became fascinated by pure and wild nature and landscapes became the protagonist of his compositions. There he would develop a new way of painting, where colours and brushstrokes create intuitive and free compositions. Patterns, impressions, arbitrary colour and spontaneity and freedom of brushstrokes shaped works that surpass the initial approach of Fauvism and even advanced towards abstraction and avant-gardes of the early twentieth century.

A free brushwork, longer, spontaneous, and energetic, charged with expressivity manifests in our landscape. The few elements that inhabit the composition are worked in a synthetic manner, suggested to the spectator as a rhythm of colour and tones painted with free and wide brushstrokes. The work was presented in 1920 in the *Exposición de pintura española* organised by Justo Bou in Buenos Aires.



From top to bottom and left to right: Santiago Rusiñol, Isidre Nonell, Hermen Anglada-Camarasa, Eliseu Meifrén, Francisco Pradilla and Joaquim Mir.





