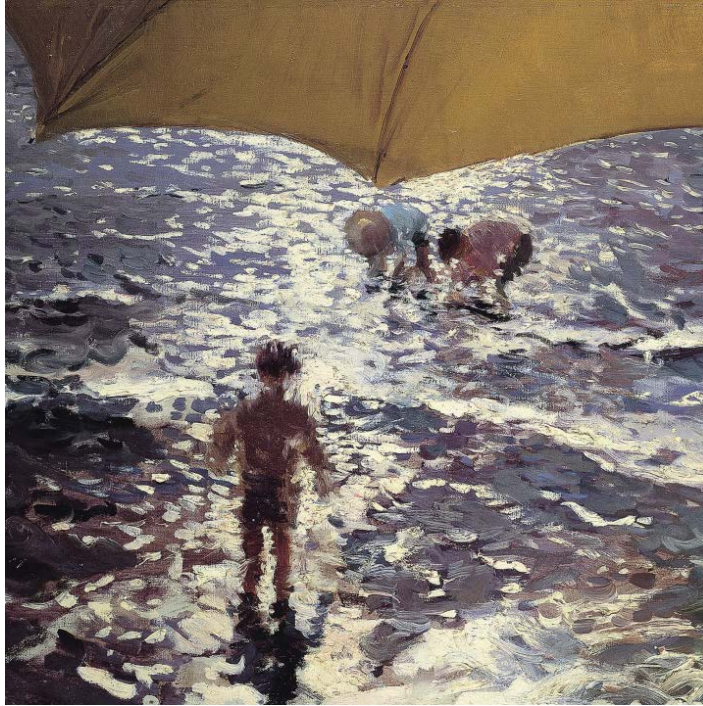


Visual Arts

## Boldness and brilliance: Joaquín Sorolla at the National Gallery

A new show brings the Spanish painter out of obscurity



Jackie Wullschläger MARCH 14, 201

For Joaquín Sorolla, “the only discovery of importance in the art world since Velázquez” was the colour violet. How it glitters, vibrates, caresses the surfaces of his bravura paintings in the National Gallery’s pleasurable new exhibition *Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light*. Long, fluid violet and white strokes outline the pool hedged with cypresses and orange trees in the secret Arab garden “Lindaraja Patio, Alhambra, Granada”. Rocks on a sunlit bank glow pink and violet against a dark silhouette cast by the Roman arch across the river in “The Shadow of Alcántara Bridge, Toledo”. Violet and mauve shading evokes water lapping around and reflecting young bodies on moist sand in “Boys on the Beach”, set in Sorolla’s native Valencia.

In these sun-filled optimistic pictures, painted between 1906 and 1909, Sorolla expressed everything he loved about Spain, its historic grandeur, regional colour, the promise of its youth at the dawn of a new century. Sorolla acknowledges modern life — in “Snapshot, Biarritz” (1906) his wife, windswept on the dunes, holds a Kodak, in a cropped, blurred composition imitating a photograph — but expresses scant interest in the ferment of contemporary painting at the time.



'Snapshot, Biarritz' (1906)

In Paris and Catalonia in 1906-09 Sorolla's then unknown compatriot Picasso was inventing Cubism. The virtuoso, Impressionist-inflected naturalism of international Salon masters such as Sorolla was what the early 20th-century rebels were challenging. Soon positions would reverse and Sorolla would become obscure; this is his first UK show since 1908. Such a lapse would then have been unimaginable. In Sorolla's cream-white-grey tonal "Sewing the Sail" Mediterranean light, filtered through trellises and geraniums, bathes the sail worked on by a united family. Each member is individually delineated and linked by arms rhythmically extended as they thread the fabric. It was the star exhibit at the 1905 Venice Biennale and purchased by the city.

The Musée d'Orsay's "The Return from Fishing" is an epic depiction of oxen hauling a boat laden with the day's catch through zigzag waves on a turquoise sea, the sail catching glaring midsummer sun and distorting the masts' shadow. It won a gold medal at the 1895 Paris Salon and was acquired by the French state.





'Sewing the Sail' (1896)

This is a compelling revival, not least because it demonstrates how battle lines between Salon and avant-garde artists were not as clearly drawn as we tend to think. Most audacious of the monumental social realist storytelling canvases here is “Sad Inheritance”, a jumbled procession of naked boys on crutches, blind, helped to bathe by a monk in black habit. Sorolla witnessed such a scene — “so beautiful and so sad at the same time” — at Valencia’s Malvarrosa beach, where a religious order ran a hospital. He transforms it into a frieze, pale, fragile bodies set in relief against intense, darkening sea beneath the last trails of sunset. This won the Grand Prix at Paris’s 1900 Universal Exhibition — beating Klimt and Whistler, with whom it shares aspects of modernist flattening. Picasso’s blue period frail waifs are contemporaries; Goya’s victims of war and disease, misery elevated to dignity, are antecedents.



'Lindaraja Patio, Alhambra, Granada'

A place in the proud tradition of Spanish painting was what Sorolla was after. He forged it too in portraits whose stately subjects, fluid modelling in flamboyant, gestural brushwork, compositions of mirrors and paintings-within-paintings opening like doors to extend pictorial space, are all homages to Velázquez.

Sorolla's wife "Clotilde in a Black Dress", wasp-waisted, fine aquiline features, high cheekbones, strikes a powerful pose before a picture of a praying saint whose halo echoes



her own head. In the family group “Lucrecia Arana with Her Son”, the eight-year-old in sailor suit stands bolt upright, dominant, beloved, alongside his mother reclining in a froth of pink silk. In a mirror behind them, reflecting the scene in a few deft marks, the father, sculptor Mariano Benlliure, sketches the pair.



‘Sad Inheritance’ (1899) © Colección Fundación Bancaja, Valencia

There were long daily queues when these paintings were exhibited and sold at the Hispanic Society of America in Manhattan in 1909. You can see why young aspirational America loved Sorolla’s combination of majesty, glamour, warmth of spirit and modern look. “Elena with a Yellow Tunic” (1909) celebrates Sorolla’s bob-haired teenage daughter in a figure-hugging Delphos gown of tightly pleated silk, its vertical striations shimmering; the design had just been patented by Mariano Fortuny, and Isadora Duncan and Peggy Guggenheim wore it.



'Clotilde in a Black Dress' (1906)



Returning to the US for a Chicago show in 1911, Sorolla depicted Illinois artist “Ralph Clarkson” in a two-hour performance of verve and dash, a few details — gold-rimmed spectacles, curling moustache — sparkingly picked out, the fleeting form anchored against a copy of the figure of Infanta Margaret Theresa from “Las Meninas”. The Spanish theme was a winner: that year railroad heir Archer M Huntington commissioned from Sorolla 14 murals — totalling 210 sq metres, at wraparound movie-screen scale — depicting “The Provinces of Spain” for the Hispanic Society.

Large preparatory paintings for these, occupying much of Sorolla’s final decade (he died in 1923) are dull realist narratives, but another pathway from “Sad Inheritance” led after 1900 in the opposite direction and yielded Sorolla’s greatest paintings. These are depictions of children at play as pure distillations of light and movement: dazzling technical feats which, exceptionally for Sorolla, go beyond mere brightness — they are infused with the heartbreak of time slipping, ephemeral, lost, eternal.



'The Return from Fishing' (1894)

“Skipping Rope, La Granja” (1907) is a whirlwind of circular motion, Sorolla’s daughter hovering mid-air above her shadow, pleats of her skirt spinning as she follows younger skippers around a fountain whose concentric ripples amplify the movement of the ropes. The boys in “Afternoon at the Beach” are ethereal silhouettes dissolving in an infinite watery surface, blinding light engulfing their contours beneath a curving fragment of Sorolla’s parasol — the scene is cropped like a Japanese print. The young sailors in “The White Boat” merge into scintillating highlights as they pull their vessel, their impastoed creamy bodies becoming translucently green under water.



'Lucrecia Arana with Her Son' (1906)



The dresses of the line of girls in “Summer (Verano)” billow like drapery in Hellenistic sculpture; the frieze “Running Along the Beach” (1908) simplifies that composition into three darting figures positioned where water meets sand in blue and pink stripes. Short, stabbing strokes for the waves recall Monet’s treatment of water; Picasso’s classicised “Two Women Running on the Beach” (1922) comes to mind too, and Proust’s band of little girls at the beach in Baalbec, impossible to pin down, “outlined against the sea, like statues exposed to the sunlight on a Grecian shore”. Proust began writing *À la recherche du temps perdu* in 1909, and it was rejected for publication by André Gide as an old-fashioned society novel. Modernity, as this illuminating show demonstrates, is an ever-shifting construct.



'Skipping Rope, La Granja' (1907)

*National Gallery, London, March 18 to July 7; then National Gallery, Dublin, August 10 to November 3*