

The Guardian

A lusciously perverse view of a backward land - Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light review

National Gallery, London

He was the global face of Spanish art, a quirky and flamboyant painter of a sun-kissed country. But this sensual Spaniard could never paint more than he could see



He seemed unconscious of what he was presenting ... Sad Inheritance, 1899, by Joaquín Sorolla.
Photograph: © Joaquín Sorolla/Colección Fundación Bancaja, Valencia

Jonathan Jones Thu 14 Mar 2019

Luis Buñuel called the first chapter of his autobiography “Growing up in the Middle Ages” because he remembered Spain at the start of the 20th century as a country barely touched by the modern world, dominated by the Catholic church and near-feudal poverty. If you want an eyeful of that archaic Spain, stand in front of Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida’s almost three-metre-wide 1899 canvas, *Sad Inheritance*.

If you squint your eyes and look only at the turquoise sea rippling into light blue waves, it’s a vivid seascape reminiscent of Manet. The scene on Sorolla’s beach, however, is a far cry from the parasols and picnics of impressionist art. A black-robed monk towers over a crowd of naked disabled boys as they head into the sea for a therapeutic swim. They are the victims of hereditary syphilis, implies the title.

Sorolla, an artist of immense style, juxtaposes blue sea, pale bodies and the raven-like priest to truly unsettling effect.

Sad Inheritance won a prize at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900 and helped make Sorolla the global face of Spanish art. Few people as yet knew anything about a teenager called Pablo Picasso, who journeyed from Barcelona to Paris that same year to see the exposition. Today Sorolla is doubly archaic. Not only do his paintings capture the claustrophobia of traditional Spain before surrealism, anarchism and civil war shook its pieties, but his flamboyant academic style, touched by French innovations in painting yet wedded to much older ideals of figurative art, is blatantly pre-modern. Why would anyone today want to spend time and money visiting a retrospective of such an oddity? The National Gallery does not seem to think that question needs answering, and perhaps it doesn't. Instead this show takes you on a journey up Sorolla's quirky garden path into a luscious, sun-kissed and ambiguously sensual place.



Joaquín Sorolla, *Sewing the Sail*, 1896.

Photograph: © Photo Archive - Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia

Spanish gardens were a Sorolla speciality. One of his last paintings, done in 1920, depicts his own, speckled with silver and gold sunlight, cooled by pale green leaves. His chair stands empty, a premonition of his death – like Van Gogh's picture *Vincent's Chair*. All his garden scenes are melancholic under the sunny sheen. Sorolla lingers over the formal gardens of Granada and Seville, sightseeing in the shade of their Moorish palaces – yet there's not a soul in sight. His 1908 painting *Gardens of the Alcázar of Seville in Winter* is a shiver of sadness.

But Sorolla can't raise these pastoral moments to the symbolic grandeur of his contemporary Monet's great waterlilies, because he lacks something as an artist. He's a sensualist, not a thinker. The absence of concept in his paintings makes him the slave of sight. Led by his eyes, he seems incredibly unconscious of what he's doing. This has frankly embarrassing results. In 1909 he painted *Boys on the Beach* – a picture of three nude adolescents lying in sunlit water. The National Gallery's catalogue comments without irony on the way he explores "the texture of their wet skins ..."

Painted shortly before Thomas Mann wrote *Death in Venice*, the story of a middle-aged writer who falls in love with an adolescent boy he watches on the beach, this and other Sorolla beach scenes have a *Death in Valencia* quality.



Joaquín Sorolla, *Female Nude*, 1902. Photograph: Joaquín Sorolla

Well, this is odd place to be – a confused and perhaps self-deceiving Spanish middle-class psyche at the dawn of modernity. But it is one of the joys of art to take us where we never thought of going. Sorolla's painted reality is perverse but heartfelt. He's at his best when he teeters towards sunstruck madness, getting his wife to pose nude on lurid pink satin on a baking afternoon. Elsewhere he can be a crashing bore.

The tensions of Spanish identity would soon produce the surrealist visions of Picasso, Dalí and Buñuel. Sorolla lacks their courage or depth. But if he's no surrealist, he is at times utterly surreal. And that's something to take from this meander.

At the National Gallery, London, 18 March until 7 July