

Artists & ILLUSTRATORS



JOAQUÍN SOROLLA

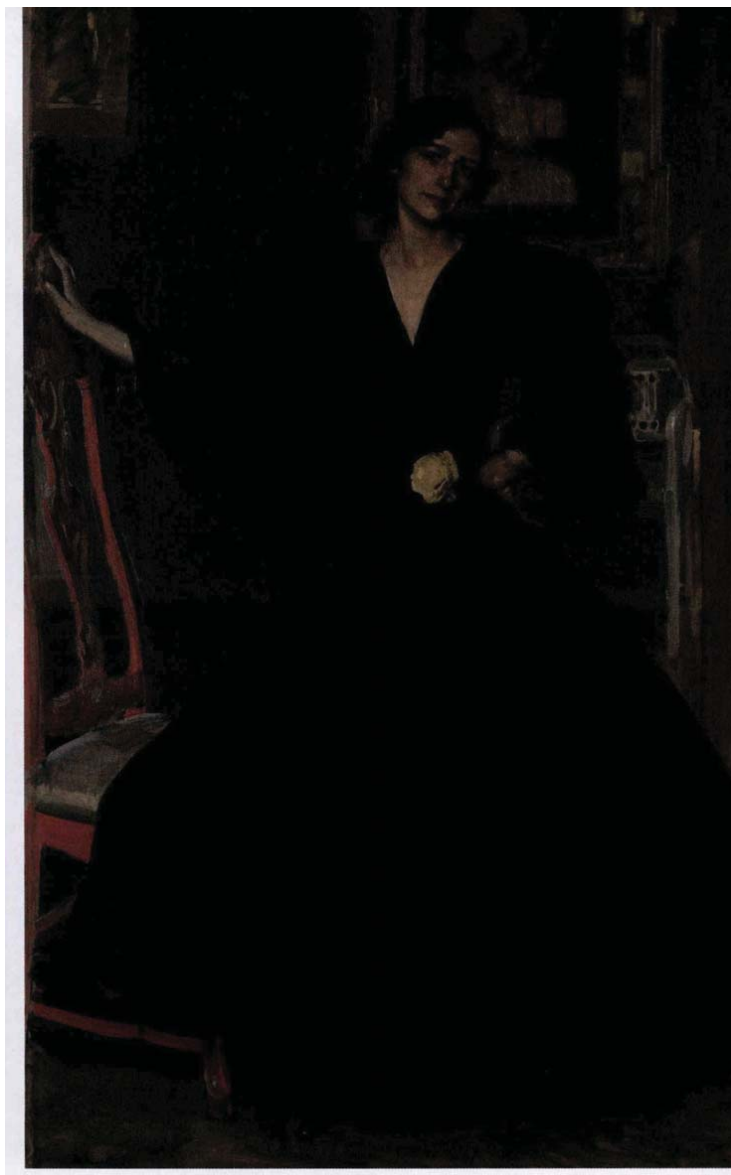
A first major London exhibition of the Spanish artist's work for a century gives us a rare chance to admire his light-filled paintings up close, as **ROS ORMISTON** discovers

ABOVE *Running along the Beach, Valencia, 1908*
oil on canvas,
90x166.5cm

An outstanding painter of the early 20th century, Valencia-born Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida is the focus of a new exhibition at the National Gallery, London. Remarkably, *Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light* is the first major exhibition in the UK in over a century, to explore the Spanish master's work. There are few examples of his art in Britain yet at the turn of the 19th century, in Spain and across Europe, Sorolla was critically admired, his work readily collected and exhibited. A 1908

poster by Grafton Galleries, London, created for an exhibition of Sorolla's art, named him "The World's Greatest Living Painter". The National Gallery introduces significant works by this master of Spanish impressionism.

Sorolla initially built his reputation on works of social commentary. Painting on monumentally-large canvases the realism in his paintings exposed the realities of life in Spain. He painted marginalised characters, such as disabled children and a woman arrested for murder,



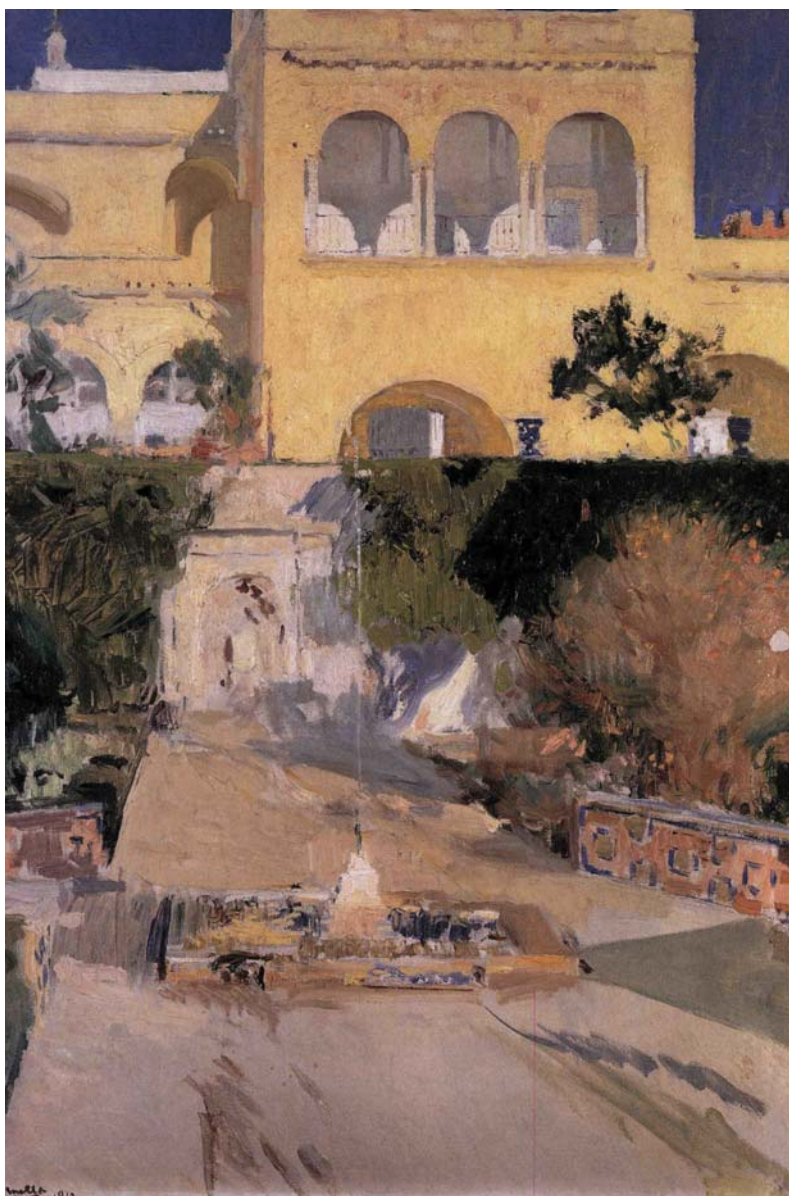
as well as focusing on Spain's fishing communities in paintings such as *Sewing the Sail*. The title of 1894's *And They Still Say Fish is Expensive!* is a comment on the risks taken daily by fishermen and captured a boat-hold crammed with well-worn marine paraphernalia and dead fish.

As much as the subjects and compositions of his paintings astound, it is Sorolla's method and technique that attracts attention. Photographs reveal he created works on location, painting quickly and directly on to large canvases with long, thin brushes, in scenic, plein air settings. He often used a screen of sorts to reduce the glare of bright sunshine. Sand blown accidentally onto wet canvases was an unintentional addition to his paintings. "There is no underdrawing," explains curator Christopher Riopelle, with Sorolla favouring *alla prima* sketching with paint to establish "the big, principal forms".

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"Sorolla only paints what he sees," adds Riopelle. "He is committed to a kind of accuracy in the transcription of nature onto his canvas, but he does it very quickly with an economy of brushstrokes. Often the strokes are broader when painting fabrics, water or sand than they are when painting facial features, where he slows down. But like [John Singer] Sargent, there is this facility, an innate knowledge of how paint can equate to flesh or fabric."

ABOVE *Clotilde in a Black Dress*, 1906
oil on canvas,
> 186.7x118.7cm



LEFT *Sunny Afternoon at the Alcázar of Seville, 1910*, oil on canvas, 94x64cm

Sorolla's portraits often paid homage to other artists. His wife Clotilde posed for 1902's *Female Nude*, a contemporary adaptation of Diego Velázquez's *The Toilet of Venus* ('*The Rokeby Venus*'), which can be found in London's National Gallery collection today. "It's such a striking painting," says Riopelle of *Female Nude*. "It's a modern equivalent, using modern tube painting. Sorolla is a great editor, he does not include extraneous details."

Clotilde in a Black Dress, meanwhile, encapsulates the Spanish tradition of dress and pays homage to Goya's portraits, using thin, graded layers of black, grey and neutral shades to represent lace and the skin's luminosity underneath.

Sorolla was also a superb landscape painter and he considered Andalusia as a 'garden of light', reflected in painterly works such as 1910's *The Alhambra*, *Tower of the Points*, which was characteristic of the artist's change in form and tonal content after 1900. That year's Exhibition Universelle in Paris had been a turning point for Sorolla. After viewing hundreds of other artists' works on show, he was dissatisfied with his own, even though he won a Grand Prix medal. Thereafter he altered his technique to use a lighter, richer palette, and make his work more painterly and less dark in both emotion and subject matter.

Outdoors, only rain halted his work. *Running Along the Beach, Valencia* denotes the subliminal spirit of what he saw, that sense of the observer's presence on the beach, where two young girls run fast along the

shoreline, their feet and dresses mirrored in the glassy surface of the seawater's edge with a naked young boy, his wet skin glistening in the sun, chasing behind them. The horizontal format of this painting echoes that of the Parthenon Frieze at the British Museum, which Sorolla has studied during his 1908 London visit. His short, rapid brushstrokes, using deepening blue-to-purple tones for the sea, gives dynamism to the waves, complementing warm neutrals for the beach and the children's tanned skin, each connoting the warmth of the sun and heat of the day, engaging the viewer to be part of this world.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, ARCHIVO FOTOGRAFICO BNS

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– Christopher Riopelle, National Gallery



In 1904's *Afternoon at the Beach in Valencia*, that heat is connoted in a limited palette, deep browns to bright, creamy whites, to capture the brilliance of shimmering reflections on water. The solidity of deep yellow colour for the parasol – probably Sorolla's own, protecting him from the sun's heat and glare – is a contrast to the short, quick strokes of colour for the waves. It dominates the upper third of the composition – cropped, as in a snapshot photograph, to focus attention on the primary subject of his picture, the astonishing effect of bright sunlight on water. The small children playing in shallow water create perspective. Sorolla stated that it was meant to be a small study of light, and like the French Impressionists, he sought to capture the essence of that light.

This photographic quality of cropping, bringing the observer closer to Sorolla's subject, is a signature style, a technique that he repeated often in paintings such as *Young Fisherman*, *Valencia* and *Portrait of Amelia Romea*, *Señora de Laiglesia*. He cut out distracting background objects to focus attention on the subject, much like the Japanese woodblock prints that were popular at this time.

In another example of this technique, 1905's *The White Boat*, Jávea, the bodies of the boys are viewed above and below the waterline, colours changing from warm skin tones, to an ethereal blue-green translucency underwater, where the body shapes are loosely formed. Sorolla's brushstrokes followed the horizontal movement of the



ABOVE, FROM TOP
Sewing the Sail,
1896, oil on canvas,
222x300cm;

*Alhambra, Tower of
the Points*, 1910,
oil on canvas,
81.5x106cm

SOROLLA

waves with vertical highlights to express movement. The deep purple-blue colour was painted on a priming layer of blue, then overlaid with accents in turquoise, yellows, white, and darker purple tones. The whiteness of the boat reflects creamy warm tones on the water's surface, highlighted with dashes of purple and green to suggest movement.

It is a stunning example of Sorolla's oeuvre, belatedly being celebrated in England and Ireland this year. *Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light* runs from 18 March to 7 July at the National Gallery, London, and then 10 August to 3 November at the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin. www.nationalgallery.org.uk, www.nationalgallery.ie

TAKE FOUR STEVE PILL ON LESSONS WE CAN LEARN FROM SOROLLA'S TECHNIQUES

1. PICK A PALETTE FOR PURPOSE

When it comes to selecting the colours for your palette, it is easy to rely upon the same favourite or trusted pigments for all occasions. Sorolla, however, regularly changed up his selection to suit his subject.

Once he had established his mature style, his bright plein air landscapes and garden paintings were often created with a similarly fresh palette characterised by Chrome Green, Cadmiums Red and Orange, and Cobalt Violet. He once called violet "the only discovery of importance in the art world since Velázquez".

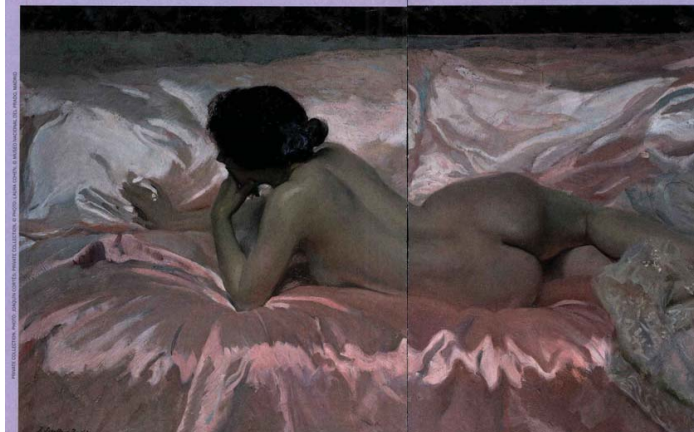
His portraits, meanwhile, were almost exclusively painted indoors, so his palette was deliberately warmer and richer to reflect the changing light conditions (though note that shadows are often still cool in the paintings supposedly made in warm light). He often sidelined the bright hues listed above in favour of earthier colours such as Burnt Umber, Raw Sienna and Naples Yellow.

2. STUDY MASTERS UP CLOSE

Sorolla was unabashed in his admiration of his favourite artists, absorbing new influences whenever possible and paying tribute through his own works. His family portraits showed a debt to Goya in their dark tones, a print of a Vermeer interior hung in his Madrid home, and he even admitted to studying Velázquez's masterpiece *Las Meninas* "with a lens" during a visit to the Prado.

When you visit an exhibition or gallery permanent collection, don't just admire a composition from afar. To really better understand a favourite artist's technique, get close (but not too close!) to the surface of one of their paintings and really try to pick apart how the individual brushstrokes were made and layered together.

Likewise, small individual strokes of colour aren't always obvious when a picture is seen in reproduction, especially when they are shrunk to fit on the page of a book or a magazine, so pay close attention to any tints or unexpected flecks that help build the picture. Properly examining a work rather than just idly admiring it is an important skill for an artist to develop.



CLOCKWISE FROM
BELOW *Female
Nude*, 1902,
106x186cm;
Young Fisherman,
Valencia, 1904,
75x104cm; And
*They Still Say Fish is
Expensive!*, 1894,
151.5x204cm.
All oil on canvas.

3. DRAW TIGHT, PAINT FAST

There is a real urgency to Sorolla's handling of paint that makes hundred-year-old paintings still breathe with life in the gallery. "I could not paint at all if I had to paint slowly," he once said. "Every effect is so transient, it must be rapidly painted."

From 1901 onwards, he created some 500 paintings in four years as he truly embraced a new naturalistic, luminous style. The artist was able to do this thanks to a rigorous grounding in drawing from an early age, even though he rarely made more than a few marks in pencil or charcoal on the canvas itself.

Sorolla painted from life, often taking huge stretched canvases with him and setting up his tripod on a beach or in a field. "The great difficulty with large canvases is that they should by right be painted as fast as a sketch," he opined. To achieve this effect, he scaled up his practice. When painting on supports measuring five or six feet wide, he matched that scale by using long-handled filbert brushes that forced him to stand further back and make the same sweeping, direct strokes as if painting on a smaller canvas with standard brushes.

4. CONTROL THE TEMPERATURE

A mastery of warm and cool hues is perhaps the greatest lesson that Sorolla's work offers. Writing in *Art and Progress* in 1912, Duncan C Phillips Jr. noted that the Spaniard understood "that shadows are not brown and opaque, but transparent spaces of intercepted light".

Painting quickly outdoors on a large scale in direct, overhead sunlight was relatively unheard of during Sorolla's day, so his ability to identify and capture the effects of reflected light were key to the success of his paintings. A painting such as *Young Fisherman, Valencia* is tightly cropped on the figure, yet the green and blue tints on the boy's chest hint at his surroundings. Also pay particular attention to the way that he paints white clothing – while the overall effect is identifiable as 'white' fabric, the creases and folds are depicted in everything from soft mauve shadows to creamy yellow highlights.