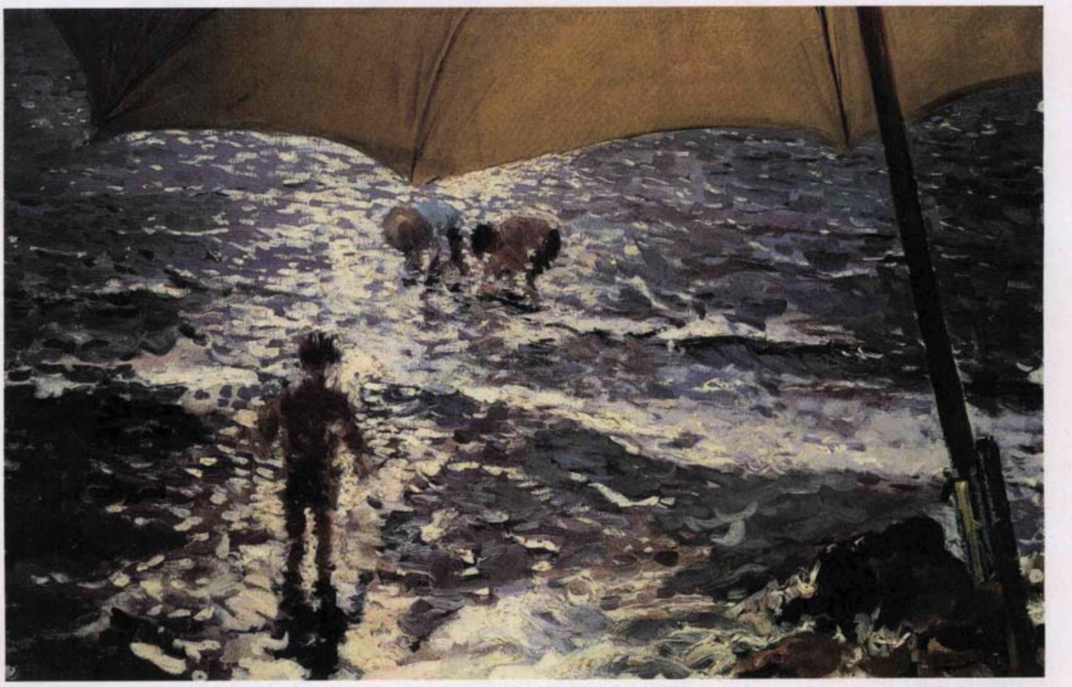
THE
SPECTATOR



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'Afternoon at the Beach in Valencia', 1904, by Joaquin Sorolla

ARTS

Master of white

Laura Gascoigne enjoys a blast of Spanish sun, courtesy of Joaquin Sorolla, whose paintings are being shown in London for the first time since 1908

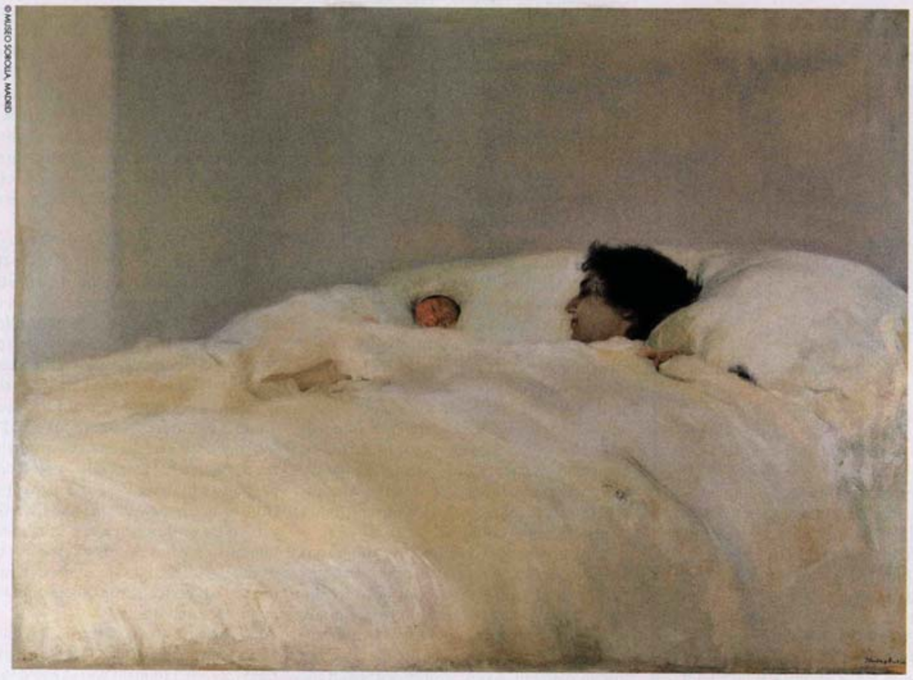
Artists can be trained, but they are formed by their earliest impressions: a child of five may not be able to draw like a master but he can see better and more intensely. The light of Valencia was burnt into Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida's mental retina and he could not get it out of his mind: 'I live here like an orange tree surrounded by heaters,' he told an interviewer in Madrid in 1913.

Never a studio painter, he worked best under the lamp of his native sun and returned to Valencia from wherever he was living every summer to set up his easel on the beach. His ambition was to develop 'a kind of painting that is frank, the sort of painting that interprets Nature as it really is', and he began to achieve it in the 1890s in paintings like 'The Return from Fishing' (1894).

As in the title of the National Gallery's new exhibition, Sorolla is often called a master of light when, technically speaking, he is a master of white. White sails, white shirts, white walls dominate his canvases, catching, reflecting or transmitting the sun's rays: in 'The Return from Fishing', only Sorolla could have achieved that balance between the butter yellow of the white sail with the sun behind it and the dirty blue of the same 'white' in partial shade. This kind of pure painting, though, won him no prizes. It was the social realist subject of 'Sad Inheritance!' (1899), showing disabled children from the local hospital of San Juan de Dios sea-bathing under the wing of a black-robed priest, that beat Alma-Tadema, Klimt and Whistler to the Grand Prix at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900.

Sorolla's social-realist paintings always feel uncomfortable and strangely emotionless, as if the choice of subject was tactical and his heart wasn't in it. His heart was in his paintings of his family, especially of his adored wife, Clotilde, the woman he called 'my flesh, my life, my brain'. 'Clotilde in a Black Dress' (1906), on loan from the Met, echoes Sargent — who repaid the compliment in garden paintings echoing Sorolla — but the gravity of Clotilde's expression lifts it above a society portrait. 'My Children' (1904) owes as much to Velazquez as to Sargent, but 'Mother' (1895-1900) is truly original: a double portrait of Clotilde and her newborn daughter Elena, their disembodied heads floating on a cloud of bedding — a Whistler symphony in white with no hard edges, relying on the softest manipulation of tones.

The last two paintings normally hang in the Sorolla Museum, the charmingly eclectic house Sorolla built in Madrid with the proceeds of his hugely successful debut exhibition at the Hispanic Society of America in 1909. New Yorkers queued in the snow for a blast of Sorolla's Spanish sun; 160,000 vis-



© MUSEO SOROLLA, MADRID

Symphony in white: 'Mother', 1895–1900, by Joaquin Sorolla

ited in a month and half the 350 works were sold. It was the making but also the ruin of Sorolla, as it prompted the society's millionaire founder Archer Huntington to commission a 60-metre mural cycle of Spanish costumes and customs for the institution's library that would take over the rest of the artist's life. He still managed to get away to Valencia occasionally, where he focused on paintings of nude children splashing in the surf and women bathers in clinging drapery, like 'The Pink Robe' (1916).

Today, out of season, the broad expanse of Valencia's Malvarrosa beach is empty. The modern fishing industry has migrated south to the city port whose cranes and derricks litter the horizon, and the building that once stabled the oxen that pulled loaded boats up the beach is now a yoga studio. Two doors down, pensioners are playing cards outside Sorolla's former studio, now a bar.

Orphaned aged two by the deaths of both his parents in the 1865 cholera epidemic, Sorolla was brought up in the Cuartel del Mar by a blacksmith uncle who recognised his talent and encouraged him to take drawing classes at the local trade school. By the age of 15, he could bash out a *bodegon* (still life) in the style of the masters — the Sorolla room in Valencia's Museum of Fine Arts has an impressive example — and after finishing his art education in Italy he began picking up medals for history painting. But the pictures that won him medals were not the pictures he wanted to paint. His inspiration came from the present, not the past.

Eventually the workload took its toll. 'I must limit the hours I paint,' he resolved, 'they're warnings that God is sending me.' His rate of production made Van Gogh at his most manic look like a slouch: in preparation for his 1909 New York exhibition he banged out 80 beach paintings in a single summer. As a plein air painter, he had an excuse for speed of execution: 'One must paint quickly,' he justified himself, 'because so much is lost in an instant, and you never find it again!' His larger works can look slapdash, but his sketches are perfection. Pictures that strive for meaning at four foot can exist quite happily without it at 12 inches, as the 200 *apuntes* currently on show at the Sorolla Museum (until 29 September) conclusively prove.

> One suspects that Sorolla's eternal sunshine was a means of chasing away the shadows

What drove Sorolla? Not money — he made more than enough of it — nor pride: Huntington describes him as 'simple and without vanity'. Painting, for him, was a compulsion. 'For him the practice of art was a vital function, like breathing,' said the writer Ramon Perez de Ayala, who sat for a portrait in 1908. One suspects that, as with Bonnard, Sorolla's eternal sunshine was not a reflection of a spotless mind but a means of chasing away the shadows from the 'lonely, sad person' he exposed only to Clotilde. She knew the truth, hence the grave expression. In 1920, the inevitable happened: a paralysing stroke condemned the workaholic to live out the last three years of his life in enforced idleness.

The National Gallery show is Sorolla's first in London since the Grafton Galleries presented him to the British public in 1908 as 'The World's Greatest Living Painter'. The hype was misjudged — only a few works sold, mostly sketches — and the WGLP title would go to a younger Spaniard who, a year earlier, had demolished the idea of interpreting 'Nature as it really is' in 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon'. But the idea has never lost its popular appeal, and Sorolla remains a persuasive exponent.

Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light *is at the National Gallery, from 18 March to 7 July.*