



THE TIMES

Shield your eyes and step into the sunshine

The Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla's unashamedly pretty pictures made him very popular, but he is barely known in the UK. A new exhibition at the National Gallery is bringing him into the light, says **Nancy Durrant**

Even on a winter's day in February, the Valencian sun is pretty searing. Strolling along the palm-lined promenade that runs alongside the city's sandy beach, you end up awkwardly hanging your coat from your shoulders like a spiv so that you can shrug it on and off between boiling sunlight and suddenly chilly shade. How about that sunlight, though? Brilliant, slightly hysterical, the light of Spain's Balearic coast seems almost to vibrate around your ears, like the first shaft through the curtains on a hungover morning.

All of which makes it a nightmare to capture in paint. Unless, that is, you happen to be Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, a Valencian painter of whom you probably have not heard, but who, according to the National Gallery's director, Gabriele Finaldi, was not only "the painter par excellence of Mediterranean sunlight", but also "the [Spanish] artist who achieved the greatest international renown before Picasso". A railway station in Valencia is named after him, there's a street in the city dedicated to him, and a bronze bust of the artist sits on a pedestal within a very grand stone arch in the Plaza Armada Española.

Nonetheless, the National's forthcoming exhibition, *Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light*, will be new to

most people in Britain. Nineteenth-century Spanish painting isn't much known outside Spain — there's a gap between Goya (1746-1828) and Picasso (1881-1973) during which everyone seems to have stopped paying attention. And there have been few opportunities to see Sorolla's work in Britain, with only seven of his paintings housed in public collections (the best are five small, rapidly executed oil sketches of beach scenes, at Lotherton Hall in Leeds).

This is only the second exhibition devoted to Sorolla's work to be held in this country.

Sorolla was born in Valencia in 1863. When he was two his parents, who were shopkeepers, died in a cholera epidemic, so he was brought up in the home of an uncle, José Piqueres. Piqueres encouraged his nephew's artistic talent and sent him to an artisan school. Aged 15, Sorolla transferred to study fine art, and by his late teens was exhibiting paintings at the annual *Exposicion Nacional de*

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were admirers

Bellas Artes in Madrid. He got a colourising job with the photographer Antonio García Peris, who supported the young man's development by giving him a room on the top floor of his house to use as a painting studio. This was where Sorolla met his future wife, Clothilde, who was García's daughter and who appears, named and unnamed, in countless of the artist's paintings. (Sorolla had two passions — painting and his wife. Clothilde kept all her husband's letters and after his death gave them to the Museo Sorolla

in Madrid. In them he repeatedly declares his love for her; more even, he confides, than he has for their three children, Maria, Elena and Joaquín, all of whom he used as models.)

Aged 20, Sorolla was given a gold medal at a regional exhibition for his painting *Nun in Prayer* (a stodgy figure with rather manly hands, not in the National's exhibition), but to get anywhere he was going to have to win gold at national level. History painting was all the rage at the Exposición Nacional and, although it was not to

his taste, Sorolla knew that "to be somebody in this world you have to paint dead people". He painted the 6m canvas *The Second of May 1808*, depicting the people's uprising that was also painted by Goya in a work of the same name, and entered it into the competition in 1884, but had to be content with a second-class medal.

He began to notice that the pictures that were winning were those that tapped into the growing trend in art and literature for exploring social issues and their impact on moral responsibility. Sorolla was not naturally a social campaigner (he liked the finer things in life and everybody said that the best paella was to be had at Sorolla's house), but like his friend the naturalist novelist Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, he cared about the poor and he knew an opportunity when he saw

it. In 1892 he exhibited *Another Marguerite!*, a painting of a young woman travelling on a train in handcuffs to stand trial for the death of her illegitimate infant. To a contemporary viewer, the title would immediately have evoked the heroine of Gounod's opera *Faust*, who finds herself in a similar situation.

It earned him a first-class medal and kicked off a series of hard-hitting, emotive works that also offered an opportunity for Sorolla to display his virtuoso brushwork and handling of light and shade. *And They Still Say Fish is Expensive!* from 1894 explores the dangers faced by the men fishing off the Valencian coast — a seriously injured young man is tended by his older colleagues in the boat's hold, surrounded by the catch. A diffuse light streams down from the hatch, giving the scene a holy air that

enhances an obvious association with the tending by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea of the dead Christ. *Sad Inheritance!* depicts a group of disabled boys bathing on the shore, overseen by a lone, black-clad priest. It was inspired by a scene Sorolla had witnessed of boys from the Hospital of St John of God near Malvarrosa beach, where the painter habitually stationed himself to work (he painted extremely fast and always outdoors).

In the painting, which is coming from Fundación Bancaja in Valencia, the boys are sketchily painted in some cases, but each is an individual, doing his own thing or helping a fellow as he struggles across the sand on a crutch. They are acutely observed — the scrawny legs, the distended bellies, the twisted foot, the hollow buttocks, the poking ribs. One small boy squints into the sun that is on its way to setting behind the painter. The canvas, which won the Spanish grand prix at the Expo Universelle in 1900, will face *And They Still Say Fish is Expensive!* in a room dedicated to Sorolla's social works. It

was praised by the painters Giovanni Boldini and Claude Monet, who,

among others, including John Singer Sargent, Carolus-Duran and Anders Zorn, were great admirers of Sorolla.

Another theme the exhibition will highlight is Sorolla's influences. A section of the show will focus on portraits, picking out visual echoes of admired contemporaries, such as Sargent, Whistler and Manet, but also Goya, whose portrait of the Duchess of Alba is clearly the inspiration for Sorolla's painting of his daughter Maria in a black mantilla, *Maria with Mantilla*, or Velázquez, whose works he references often. Particularly *Las Meninas*, notably in *My Children*, in which the colour palette and heightened, expectant mood evoke

“ His beach works are outstanding displays of painterly skill

that great painting, as does the canvas visible in the foreground. The reclining *Female Nude* is a near-direct quotation from the *Rokeby Venus*, which Sorolla saw twice while on trips to Britain. The model is Clothilde, who was at first reluctant to pose for the picture. Sorolla seems to have won her round by showing her admiring her own engagement ring — this is not just any muse, the painting suggests, this is a respectable muse. Still, when it was exhibited at the Grafton Galleries in 1908, in the only other exhibition devoted to Sorolla's works in the UK, the picture was coyly titled *A Gypsy*.

Another fascinating highlight will be the studies that Sorolla did for his biggest commission, for the American collector Archer Milton Huntington's Hispanic Society of America. *Vision of Spain* was a vast series depicting the costumes and customs of the main provinces of the country, requiring Sorolla to travel all over the place and (because a lot of those costumes and customs were dying out) buy outfits

and impose them on bemused locals. The finished paintings are, alas, nailed to the wall in New York and cannot travel, but Sorolla's immaculately detailed studies, some life-size, will be at the [National Gallery](#).

The works that will probably be most popular, however, are those of

his family and his beach pictures. Sorolla was a family man, he loved to have them around and he painted them constantly. (Even when he was meant to be taking a rest, says Consuelo Luca de Tena, the director of the Museo Sorolla in Madrid, “that meant to paint 30 enormous paintings on the beach, because that's what gave him the most pleasure”.)

Lit by that crazy light, they are, at their best, outstanding displays of painterly skill — you feel the heat and the wind, hear the shouts of the children playing in the shallows.

Luca de Tena considers *After the Bath, the Pink Robe* — a life-size scene of two women, one of whom is wearing a clinging, wet bathing dress, making her look like a Greek statue, sheltering in a beach hut after a swim — to be his greatest work. “It's a tour de force in the representation of light,” she says. “What I like is he can take a classical sculpture and make something so fleshy and real.”

These paintings are hard to dislike, even if Sorolla does err sometimes on the saccharine side. They are unashamedly pretty pictures, which accounts for his popularity. And who wouldn't want a bit of that joyful, brilliant sunshine in their life? Go, and feel the warmth on your face.

Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light is at the [National Gallery](#), London WC2 (0800 9126958), from March 18 to July 7. Sponsored by Iberia



Strolling Along the Seashore, 1909



From top: Sewing the Sail, 1896; Female Nude, 1902



Sad Inheritance!, 1899, addressed the issue of the care of disabled children being left to charitable institutions. Below: **Couple from Salamanca**, 1912

