

THE TIMES

Madrid hails the Scot who brought romance to Spain

Spain

Isambard Wilkinson Madrid

A Madrid exhibition is reviving interest in the Scottish artist who helped to create the romantic image of Spain in the 19th century.

Works by David Roberts, the son of a shoemaker born in Edinburgh in 1796, is on show at the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Art in the capital city, where crowds have flocked to see his drawings and paintings of the Alhambra, bullfights and popular life.

The pictures date from a nine-month tour in the 1830s, when he became friends with Jenaro Pérez Villaamil. The Scotsman influenced the Spaniard's work and the two men had a lasting impact on Spain's artistic history.

"Roberts was influential in creating a picturesque image of Spain," Claudia Hopkins, an art professor at Durham University and the exhibition's curator, said. "At that time Spain was hardly known visually. People had written about it... but people didn't really know how Spain looked. They didn't have paintings or lithographs of Spanish vistas."

Roberts's images range from elegant water colours of Malaga to sumptuous oil paintings of Seville cathedral. They were circulated widely in the 1840s through engravings published in popular travelogues.

"Today we would say his images went viral," Hopkins said. "These images get re-



The Fortress of the Alhambra by David Roberts, the son of a shoemaker from Edinburgh, captured the allure of Spain in the 19th century. His works achieved acclaim but became neglected, like much Romantic art

peated by artists travelling throughout the 19th century and later by photographers."

His pictures made their way on to British dinner tables, adorning ceramic plates and serving dishes. Hopkins said that Roberts and Villaamil were the first professional artists to depict the architecture and landscape of Islamic Spain in large format paintings. "Their work emerged in the context of a burgeoning fascination with the so-called Orient," she said. "This was bound up with the Romantic yearning for the 'exotic' and developed against the background of European political interests in the Middle East and north Africa."

Things are different today, however, she said. "In Britain Roberts is an

unfashionable artist, neglected like so much of Romantic art except for Turner."

Alfredo Pérez de Armiñán, the academy's deputy director, said that Roberts brought the British Romantic tradition of landscape painting to Spain. While Roberts was painting in Seville he attracted the attention of Villaamil. The two artists travelled together and changed Spanish art.

"Villaamil was a more passionate classical painter before he met Roberts," Pérez de Armiñán said. "His vision came from Roberts. It is a British contribution to cultural history."

Spain had a lasting effect on Roberts. On his return he won the praise of critics, even William Makepeace Thackeray, a stern critic of illustrated travel books except those produced by Roberts. His "prints are successful," Thackeray wrote. "The artist is skilful."

