

Mariano Benlliure y Nueva York

Edited by Lucrecia Enseñat Benlliure and Leticia Azcue Brea. 440 pp. incl. 311 col. ills. (Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, Madrid, Hispanic Society of America, New York, and Center for Spain in America, New York, 2020), €52.88. ISBN 978-84-15245-91-9.

by MORLIN ELLIS

Mariano Benlliure y Gil (1862–1947) was Spain's leading traditionalist sculptor in the first half of the twentieth century. His works, from public statuary and funerary monuments to ceramics and watercolours, can be found throughout Spain and in North, Central and South America. Most visitors to Madrid are unaware that he created the bronze equestrian sculptures of Alfonso XII and General Martínez Campos in Retiro Park, as well as a statue of Goya outside the Museo Nacional del Prado – sculptures that are notable for their expressiveness and textural variation. Born in Valencia to an artistic family, he is almost unknown to English-speaking audiences, in contrast to his brother, the painter José Benlliure (1858–1937), or his great friend contemporary and fellow-Valencian, Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923). Benlliure should be better known; he was highly acclaimed in his time, was Director of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Madrid, and had a prodigious and vigorous talent and a vast range of creative energy.

The book under review, published by the Centro de Estudios Españoles de Historia, Madrid (CEEH), and the Center for Spain in America (CSA) in collaboration with the Hispanic Society of America, New York, contextualises the appreciation of Benlliure's work by New York collectors, including Henry Gurdon Marquand and more specifically Archer Milton Huntington (1870–1955), who founded the Hispanic Society of America. It details Benlliure's commission from Huntington to produce a series of portrait busts of leading contemporary Spanish cultural figures (Fig.6) to complement the fourteen large panoramic canvases of Sorolla's *Vision of Spain* (1913–19). It also outlines Benlliure's thirty-year relationship with Huntington and his wife, the sculptor, Anna Hyatt Huntington (1876–1973), whom Benlliure affectionately referred

to as *mi ilustre colega*. The book, which is beautifully illustrated, is well constructed and full of interesting information. It contains eight essays and a catalogue of fifteen works in the Society's collection, some of which are extensive entries that constitute essays themselves.

The great-granddaughters of Benlliure and Sorolla, Lucrecia Enseñat Benlliure and Blanca Pons-Sorolla, have both dedicated their lives to the legacies of the artists. In her essay, Enseñat Benlliure describes Benlliure's associations with the Hispanic Society, whereas Pons-Sorolla's article is dedicated to the relationship between the two artists and their respective families; she compares their careers and draws parallels between their private lives and public careers. She also underscores the centrality of their families and the importance of their wives, who supported them unwaveringly and became the custodians of their legacy. The Hispanic Society is illuminatingly discussed by Constancio del Álamo, who was at the time of writing its curator of Archaeology, Sculpture and Textiles, a position he held since 1989. His essay will be of particular interest to those working in the area of Spanish and Latin American art and literature who are unaware that the Society holds the largest collection of works on Spanish culture outside Spain. Huntington's interest in sculpture was in part formed by his wife. She had studied in Europe and shared his cosmopolitan outlook. Together they forged enduring links with Spain, giving sculptures and making donations to educational projects. Among these gifts was an equestrian statue by Hyatt Huntington of the Spanish hero El Cid, which was presented to Seville. The choice was significant as the *Cantar de mio Cid* ('The Poem of the Cid'), the oldest surviving epic poem in Spanish, was a favourite of Hyatt Huntington's, who had translated and published it in English.

The essay by the coins and medals specialist Javier Gimeno highlights Huntington's important contribution to fostering the collection and exhibition of coins and medals, in particular his support for a medal exhibition organised in 1910 by the American Numismatic Society, in which Benlliure participated. Leticia Azcue Brea's invaluable essay examines figurative sculpture in Spain in the first third of the twentieth century, at a time when there was an explosion in demand – notably in South American countries. Each of the now-independent former colonies celebrated their centenaries by commissioning Spanish

sculptors to create monuments, which included Benlliure's impressive statue of Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1921) in Panamá City. Cristina Domenech, a specialist in modern and contemporary Valencian art, who, at the time of writing, was working at the Hispanic Society, examines the dramatic changes that occurred in the early twentieth century in European sculpture and its reception in the United States. She concludes that Benlliure's uncontroversial work pleased North American audiences, who regarded him as the best Spanish sculptor of his time.

Among the entries in the catalogue section are fascinating examinations of Benlliure's smaller works and his experimentation in other media. One details the artist's ceramic production and his interest in della Robbia ceramics; another discusses a commission from the duke of Osuna for four gilt-bronze *bonbonnières* for Alfonso XIII and his family to celebrate the birth of the Osuna's daughter, Angela María. An aspect of Benlliure's career that is not shirked is the effect of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Benlliure, who was not political, fled with his family and settled in Paris. Unable to either sell work or access his bank accounts, they moved to north-west Spain, where his wife owned a house. He tried to sell work to Huntington who refused, stating that due to

6. Bust of Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, by Mariano Benlliure y Gil. 1932. Bronze, height 92 cm. (Hispanic Society of America, New York).



the economic climate he was not buying, and forwarded Benlliure's request to the trustees, who in turn also rejected him. When the war ended, Benlliure was finally able to return to his Madrid studio, where he was inundated with commissions, not for public or private works but for religious statuary: sculptures for processions and for churches to replace all those that had been destroyed by Republican iconoclasm. It is in part this production that has contributed to his neglect. This book succeeds in restoring long-overdue recognition of Benlliure's prodigious talent by focusing on his early appreciation by important New York collectors, and simultaneously shining a light on his close and important family relationship with Sorolla.
