Life & Times Exhibition

Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light

*The National Gallery, London,
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THE EXTRAORDINARY EVERYDAY

At first you don't even notice the heavily laden trio nearing the top of their perilous ascent. You can just make out the join where Sorolla extended the canvas by a third, using symmetry to dissolve their packs into the rock face. The blinding panoramic brilliance of sun-drenched boulders meets risk and illicit thrill. Both are answered by the deep glinting Mediterranean azure. Playful, breezy, and technically flawless, *The Smugglers* (image below) was commissioned by the American 'king of tobacco' and perfectly encapsulates the artist's joyful quintessence.

Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida (1863–1923) is probably the most famous artist you've never heard of. Wildly successful in his time, his work was commissioned by governments, industrial magnates, aristocrats, and even the sitting US president (William Howard Taft, in 1909). New Yorkers queued in the snow to view his work and his last UK exhibition — 101 years ago — billed him as 'the world's greatest living painter'.

It is easy to understand the appeal. The 60 curated paintings in the exhibition demonstrate astounding technical range, a keen eye for social observation, and — above all — consummate mastery of movement, texture, and sunlight. His first job as a young photographer's lighting assistant was clearly formative and imbued a keen eye for composition. Many of Sorolla's works resemble intelligently

cropped snapshots, often featuring gleaming skin and extravagant bolts of fabric overlaid with daringly perfect shocks of white.

Critics scorn Sorolla's lack of originality and his inability to elevate gorgeous pictures to the level of meaningful art. The first charge is right. A true generalist, Sorolla mastered a bewildering range of styles and often imitated his contemporaries for commissioned works. This makes the show quite a dislocating experience; moving from vivid, soul-opening gardens and seascapes to rooms hung with dark classical portraits or quasi-anthropological studies of Spanish traditional dress.

The disorientation is doubly frustrating because Sorolla is at his best when his brushstrokes are long, fast, and arcing; describing dancing aquamarine and the play of light on billowing linen in his own inimitable style. I found myself wanting to skip past clever imitations and dense brushwork to the crowd-pleasing joyful abandon of bold, colourful vim.

The second accusation — that he largely fails to imbue his work with deeper meaning — is accurate but misplaced. Sorolla's most winning paintings depict carefree and blissfully uncomplicated events such as children playing at the beach and his family hanging out together (image above). Where his subjects are totally at ease, incognisant of the viewer's gaze, Sorolla's paintings are characterised by a beautiful trusting intimacy — as simple and as significant as silence with a friend. Deep symbolic meaning isn't needed

Joaquín Sorolla, *The Siesta*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 200 × 201 cm. Museo Sorolla, Madrid. © Museo Sorolla, Madrid.

Joaquín Sorolla, *The Smugglers*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 84 × 167 cm. Private collection. Archivo fotográfico BPS.

here; indeed, it would rob these paintings of the very quality that made me smile involuntarily. The extraordinary everyday is also captured in a number of works that confront viewers with the value and lived experience of people on the margins of society: disabled children playing on a beach, a wounded Christ-like fisherman, a convict, a drunken sailor. Yet these works serve to vindicate Sorolla's critics as his technical audacity prevents meaningful engagement with the underlying subject matter. For example, in his painting of humble factory workers a single impossible sunbeam completely steals the show (*Boxing Raisins, Javea*, 1901).

Protean and prolific, I think the Spaniard's more naïve and unassuming paintings find the deepest resonance with today's audience. His offering of simplicity, trusting familial intimacy, and fun are a welcome antidote to contemporary culture. Sorolla's unapologetic *joie de vivre* justifies the steep entry price. This show should not be missed.

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