

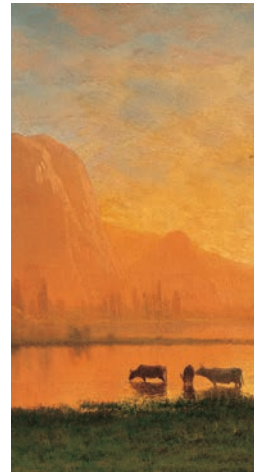
# Open Windows 7

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May 2016

**An Exception  
in European  
Collecting.  
Baron Thyssen-  
Bornemisza  
and Nineteenth-  
century American  
Painting**  
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# An Exception in European Collecting. Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza and Nineteenth-century American Painting<sup>1</sup>

Marta Ruiz del Árbol



Fig. 1  
View of room 30 of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, where some of the nineteenth-century American paintings in the permanent collection are on show



Fig.2  
Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza at Villa Favorita, Lugano, in the 1980s



Fig. 3  
Albert Bierstadt  
*Sunset at Yosemite*, c. 1863  
Oil on canvas, 30.5 x 40.6 cm  
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection on  
deposit at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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When dealing, as in this case, with a museum that originated from a private collection, the figure of the collector – the person who assembled for posterity all the works of art that surround us – is of paramount importance. What drove him to choose a particular painting? What prompted him to take interest in a particular artist, movement or period and ignore others?

*The Illusion of the American Frontier* exhibition provided us with an opportunity to focus on an artistic period in Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection that has always attracted historians' attention. What led a European to start collecting nineteenth-century American art when no one on the Old Continent was interested in it? What concerns and passions spurred him to develop an interest in artists who were completely unknown in Europe at the time and with whom people are still largely unfamiliar even today?

This was, no doubt, one of the rarities of the baron's taste and made him a *rara avis* in European collecting. He began acquiring nineteenth-century American painting at a time when America itself was only just becoming aware of its value. By embracing this revival movement that aimed to enhance appreciation for an art that was previously overlooked because it was considered inferior to its European counterparts, Hans Heinrich became a pioneer with an even more significant role on account of his European origin. His decision to acquire American artworks for his collection of western art made it possible to "to be perceived and studied with the context of Western art history".<sup>2</sup>

## Keys to understanding a passion: nature

"I am very attracted by all American artists, maybe because I am a quarter American, but also mainly because of the artists' profound love for nature, space and perfection."<sup>3</sup> With these words, written for the catalogue of the exhibition of a selection of his American collection that travelled to seven cities between 1984 and 1986,<sup>4</sup> the baron provides some of the keys to understanding his particular attachment to this art.

First, Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza pointed out that his family ties to the United States may have influenced his feeling drawn to the artists in question. His maternal grandmother, Mathilde Louise Price, came from Delaware. However, in his memoirs the baron always spoke of growing up alone and having little contact with his parents and other relatives. Could this absence have spawned his later interest in the art produced in his grandmother's country?

But more interesting still is the end of the sentence, where he states that "these artists' profound love for nature" was undoubtedly the main reason for his fascination with them. This assertion provides

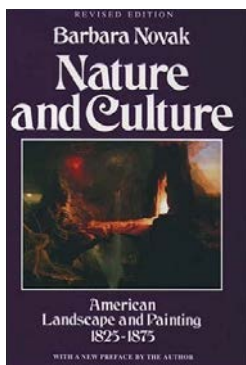


Fig. 4  
Barbara Novak's book *Nature and Culture* featuring *Expulsion. Moon and Firelight* by Thomas Cole on the cover



Fig. 5  
Thomas Cole  
*Expulsion. Moon and Firelight*, c. 1828  
Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 122 cm  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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an insight into part of Baron Thyssen's personal taste, which can be seen in the importance granted to landscape in the museum galleries. Above all it relates to the ideas upheld by the American historians who had begun showing an interest in their country's nineteenth-century art.

Turning once again to the baron's own words, we realise that these parallels with art historical studies are no coincidence, as Baron Thyssen had first-hand knowledge of the latter: "I visited art galleries and museums, but what made the biggest impression on me was a book by Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture*. All this encouraged me, in 1979, to start purchasing works by nineteenth-century American artists too."<sup>5</sup>

Barbara Novak's book *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting (1825-1875)*<sup>6</sup> was therefore fundamental reading matter in shaping our collection. Novak argues that one of the main features that distinguish American art from its European counterparts is precisely the strong influence of nature in its broadest sense. Unlike their European colleagues who had a whole tradition and culture behind them, the Americans approached a nature apparently untouched by man.

For American artists nature was imbued with the most deep-seated principles of the new nation: the concepts of homeland (brimming with possibilities owing to the abundance that surrounded them), religion (they saw themselves facing a new Eden in which the mark of the divine creator was still palpable) and science (the desire to record all the new species) were embodied in its mountains and valleys. By capturing it in their works, nineteenth-century artists in a sense became patriots, priests and scientists.

### Nature as a connection between American artists

But American artists' special bond with nature did not disappear in the nineteenth century. Literature of the second half of the twentieth century viewed it as a timeless national characteristic that continued to thrive in the string of avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. A fundamental exhibition in disseminating this idea was *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950* organised by the MoMA to mark the bicentenary of the United States in 1976.<sup>7</sup> It analysed the lingering Romantic concept of the sublime in contemporary American art<sup>8</sup> and presented nineteenth-century American artists as forerunners of abstract expressionism.

And it was precisely the emergence of the abstract expressionist movement, with internationally acclaimed figures such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, that made it possible to reinstate generations of forgotten artists. Nature as a link helped establish a genuine Americanness, a brand that distinguished and set them apart from European masters.





Fig. 6  
Jackson Pollock  
*Brown and Silver I*,  
c. 1951  
Enamel and silver  
paint on canvas,  
144.7 x 107.9 cm  
Museo Thyssen-  
Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)

Did Baron Thyssen see this famous exhibition? Or did he allow himself to be caught up in the enthusiasm generated by American society on rediscovering this hitherto little appreciated art? Both hypotheses are possible, as from the early 1970s onwards he spent many periods in the United States on business.

What we do know for certain is that Hans Heinrich Thyssen came into contact with American art through the works of the abstract expressionists. Even before his frequent business trips to the United States, Hans Heinrich had already acquired paintings such as Jackson Pollock's *Brown and Silver I*, c. 1951 (in 1963) and Mark Tobey's *Earth Rhythm*, 1961 (in 1968). As with the revealing exhibition at the MoMA, his discovery of the paintings on the other side of the Atlantic had apparently begun with more recent painting and later extended back into the past towards the twentieth-century artists' American forebears.

#### A folder of Karl Bodmer engravings

However, before he began purchasing in 1979 the Thomas Cole, George Catlin and Albert Bierstadt paintings now in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, and perhaps even before he bought the abovementioned Jackson Pollock in 1963, it seems that Hans Heinrich already owned one American artwork: the folder of engravings made by the artist Karl Bodmer after travelling to the American West between 1832 and 1834.

Karl Bodmer, a Swiss national, travelled with the German prince Maximilian Wied-Neuwied, a Prussian naturalist. Inspired by Alexander von Humboldt, Maximilian was eager to catalogue the geology, plants, animals and native tribes of the American West. His thirteen-month trip was captured in Bodmer's sketches, on which the series of engravings was later based, and also summed up in the aristocrat's diaries. Both were landmark contributions to the study of America and its first settlers.

Although it is not known for certain when the folder was acquired, Simon de Pury, chief curator of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection from 1979 to 1986, claimed that Baron Thyssen bought it at a charity auction in Germany 15 years before the rest of his nineteenth-century American collection.<sup>9</sup> This would mean that he had owned the Bodmer engravings since the early 1960s.

The first American artwork to enter the Thyssen collection was therefore a series of engravings designed to immortalise these unexplored lands of the Wild West. The lack of documentation on this folder is probably due to the fact that the baron viewed it as a personal possession rather than as a piece belonging to his collection. The acquisition of these engravings furthermore provides



Fig. 7  
View of the second room of the exhibition *The Illusion of the American Frontier*, showing prints after Karl Bodmer from the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection



Fig. 8  
After Karl Bodmer  
*Indians Hunting Buffalo*. Print from the series *Travels in the Interior of North America*, 1839–43, 1839  
Aquatint with traces of etching and mezzotint illuminated by hand on paper, 39.3 x 57.3 cm  
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection



Fig. 9  
Karl May as Old  
Shatterhand



Fig. 10  
Poster of *Winnetou II*, a Harald  
Reinl film of 1964 reflecting  
the passion for the stories of  
Winnetou and Old Shatterhand  
in the cinema



Fig. 11  
Charles Wimar  
*The Lost Trail*, c. 1856  
Oil on canvas, 49.5 x 77.5 cm  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)

another insight into his fondness for nineteenth-century American artists, as it speaks of one of Hans Heinrich's childhood passions: his fascination for the Far West.

### The baron and Karl May's American West

"As a youngster I was always especially fond of May's books – in fact I still have them", recalled Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza in his memoirs.<sup>10</sup> Despite being born in the Netherlands, he belonged to a German family and had his roots in his ancestors' country. This is why Karl May, the famous writer of adventure books, played an essential role in shaping his earliest imagination.

May's novels were read by generation after generation and the fame he enjoyed in Germany was comparable to that of Emilio Salgari in Italy and Jules Verne in France. And although his novels were set all over the world, his most celebrated tales took place in the Far West. In a country from which some four million people are estimated to have emigrated to the United States during the writer's lifetime, the adventures of Apache chief Winnetou and Old Shatterhand, a German émigré, soon became part of a powerful popular culture.<sup>11</sup> May's novels held the same fascination that had been aroused by the translations of James Fenimore Cooper's tales and numerous articles published in magazines like *Globus* and *Petermanns Mitteilungen*. In addition to literature there were shows featuring Native Americans that began travelling around various German cities, as well as many more scientific initiatives such as that of Prince Maximilian with Karl Bodmer.

The illusion of the American Frontier was fully consolidated in Germany by the time Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza was born in 1921. Like so many others of his generation, he was caught up in this enthusiasm for the American lands and their early settlers. The great Apache chief and his blood brother Old Shatterhand not only symbolised the Romantic desire for a simpler life in communion with nature. Speaking of brotherhood between racer and steeped in pacifism, their adventures were also the counterpoint to Germany's most recent past.<sup>12</sup>

As stated earlier, America's nature and its native tribes must have already occupied an important place in Baron Thyssen's imagination when he discovered nineteenth-century American painting. To what extent did those works spur him to relive the heroic stories of cowboys and Indians he had read as a young man? Did his fascination for the Wild West influence his acquisition first of Karl Bodmer's engravings and subsequently of works by Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt, George Catlin and so many others? By acquiring these works was Hans Heinrich not perhaps carrying out his own private conquest of the West?

## Notes

- 1 This text is a modified version of a lecture with the same title delivered on 16 January 2016 in the auditorium of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza (<http://www.museothyssen.org/thyssen/videoplayer/2064>).
- 2 Barbara Novak: "Introducción". In Tomàs Llorens (curator): *Explorar el Edén. Paisaje americano del siglo XIX*. [exh. cat.]. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2000, p. 203.
- 3 Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza in John I. H. Baur (intr.): *American Masters. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection* [cat. exp. organised and circulated by the International Exhibitions Foundation, Washington, D. C., 1984–86]. Milan, Electa, 1984, p. 11.
- 4 The exhibition was shown at The Baltimore Museum of Art, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Denver Art Museum, Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute de San Antonio, IBM Gallery of Arts and Sciences in New York, San Diego Museum of Art and The Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach.
- 5 Heinrich Thyssen: *Yo, el barón Thyssen. Memorias*. Carmen Thyssen (ed.) and Luis María Ansón (intr.). Barcelona, Planeta, 2014, p. 215.
- 6 Although Hans Heinrich recalls having read Novak in 1979, her book was not actually published until the following year. Barbara Novak: *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875*. New York – Oxford, University Press, 1980.
- 7 Kynaston McShine (ed.): *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950* [exh. cat.]. Barbara Novak, Robert Rosenblum and John Wilmerding. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1976.
- 8 A key to understanding the argument of this exhibition is Robert Rosenblum: *Northern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, published in 1975, a year before the show in question.
- 9 Simon de Pury: "The Thyssen-Bornemisza. Nineteenth Century American Collection". In Warren, David B.: *Nineteenth-Century American Landscape. Selections from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection* [exh. cat.]. Houston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1982.
- 10 Heinrich Thyssen: *Yo, el barón Thyssen. Memorias*. Carmen Thyssen (ed.) and Luis María Ansón (intr.). Barcelona, Planeta, 2014, p. 186.
- 11 A recent exhibition analysed the figure of Karl May: Sabine Beneke and Johannes Zeilinger (eds.): *Karl May. Imaginäre Reisen* [exh. cat.] Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2007.
- 12 Karl-Heinz Kohl: "Kulturelle Camouflagen. Der Orient und Nordamerika als Fluchträume deutscher Phantasie". In Sabine Beneke and Johannes Zeilinger (eds.): *Karl May. Imaginäre Reisen* [exh. cat.] Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2007, p. 95.

# “The New Mechanism for Picture Making”

## Early Works by Raoul Dufy in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection

Juan Ángel López-Manzanares

The growing interest shown in Raoul Dufy in recent years has considerably increased our knowledge of his work.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, a few aspects of his prolific, varied output have yet to be studied systematically. Such is the case of the period from 1903 to 1907, to which two of the Normandy-born painter’s most important works in the Carmen Thyssen Collection belong: *The Fish Market, Marseille* (*Le Marché aux poissons à Marseille*) and *The Little Palm Tree* (*Le Petit palmier*). The information gleaned from the latest research and in-depth analyses of both works now allow them to be reliably dated. This is the purpose of the present article.

### 1903–7. A period under constant revision

The years immediately before and after the emergence of fauvism in 1905 are unanimously considered the most significant in Dufy’s career. During this time, Dufy achieved early maturity in his artistic language in dialogue with the most ground-breaking painting of his day.

Nevertheless, few solid facts are known about this period. Barely any written correspondence survives, and the references provided by exhibition catalogues and known critiques of the period are scant. Moreover, only a few drawings from the autumn of 1903 have survived to this day and the most of his canvases do not bear a date. What is known for sure about those years?

In 1903 Dufy shunned academic teachings for good. By then the painter had lost interest in Léon Bonnat’s classes at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts. Similarly, whereas most of his fellow students regularly visited the Louvre to copy the old masters, he preferred to wander around galleries such as those of Durand-Ruel and Vollard to view the impressionist painters, whose language he was starting to embrace.

Dufy’s espousal of modern art in 1903 is indicated by his participation for the first time in the Salon des Indépendants (and again during the years that ensued) and by his ever closer relationship with the gallery owner Berthe Weill, whom he had met the previous year and in whose gallery he showed his work regularly until 1909. This may also explain his decision to spend August and September 1903 in the south of France. In Marseille and Martigues, stimulated by the bright Mediterranean light, Dufy enlivened his palette and experimented with more vibrant brushstrokes.

The following year, Dufy again took part in the Salon des Indépendants and the group exhibitions at Berthe Weill’s gallery. But more significant still was his summer sojourn in Fécamp with the painter Albert Marquet, close to Henri Matisse, who must have assured him that the path he had embarked on

in the French Midi region the previous year was the right one. He became even closer to Matisse the following year when, as well as showing his work at the Salon des Indépendants, he viewed the future fauvist leader's *Luxury, Calm and Pleasure* (1904). Dufy described that experience years later:

At the sight of that painting [...] I understood the new rationale for painting, and in contemplating the miracle of imagination at play in line and colour, impressionist realism lost its charm for me. I immediately understood the new mechanism for picture making.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years this assertion, repeated time and time again by modern historiography, has gained the significance of a key document in understanding the painter's early career. However, its late date – a quarter of a century after the events to which it refers – requires us to proceed with caution. In fact, what Dufy must have experienced on gazing at Matisse's painting was most likely the realisation that a new system of representation other than the impressionists' concern with retinal experience was possible. Nevertheless, as a language it was still in its infancy and owed much to neo-impressionism. It would be some time before Dufy shunned the impressionist concern with capturing the fleeting – at least until the definite establishment of fauvism at that year's Salon d'Automne.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, several testimonies show that until the autumn of 1905 at least – following another summer spent with Marquet at Le Havre – Dufy remained strongly attached to impressionism. This may be deduced from the painter's known statements made to Charles Morice and published by the magazine *Mercure de France* in August. When asked about the end of the French movement, Dufy replied: “If by IMPRESSIONISM we mean all of the different tendencies of the painters of 1870, no, impressionism is not finished.”<sup>4</sup> To these statements should be added a hitherto unpublished postcard that Dufy wrote to his painter colleague (Achille-Émile) Othon Friesz on 12 October 1905, in which he states, with clear admiration for Pissarro:

My dear Emile  
 Father Pissarro (sic) has definitely painted Rouen admirably.  
 I hope to see you in Paris and shake your hand  
 Raoul Dufy  
 Regards to your family.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, when Dufy again showed his work at Berthe Weill's gallery in October–November 1905 – this time alongside Camoin, Derain, Manguin, Marquet, Matisse and Vlaminck – he came up against the violent opposition of the fauves' leader.



In fact, everything indicates that it was in the spring–summer of 1906 when Dufy, like Friesz and Braque, shunned the impressionism of his early work to embrace the new fauvist language. The eight canvases Dufy showed at the Salon des Indépendants in March – among them three snow scenes and two of “large trees” – were described by the critic Jean-Aubry, in *Le Courrier du Havre*, as “somewhat violent impressionism” with rather unsettling [...] effects of colouring”.<sup>6</sup> Unlike in earlier competitions, this time Dufy was not referred to in the catalogue as living in Paris but rather in Sous-les-Rochers, Falaise (Calvados), in Lower Normandy, where, according to Berthe Weill, Dufy and his partner Claudine had rented a farm for a small sum.<sup>7</sup> A few scenes, painted in Falaise during the winter and spring,<sup>8</sup> attest to this shift away from impressionism, shunning a restricted palette true to the local colour of objects and its variations under ambient light for more vivid tones, although the colours continue to display impressionistic vibration.

At the end of May Dufy showed his work together with the fauvists Braque, Derain, Friesz, Manguin, Marquet, Matisse, Puy and Vlaminck, among others, at the exhibition at the Cercle de l'Art Moderne in Le Havre. But it was above all during the summer he spent on the coast of Normandy, once again painting alongside Marquet, that he truly adopted the new fauvist artistic language, using a few highly contrasting saturated colours in large patches of static colour. The places where Dufy painted during that summer include the bay of Sainte-Adresse, as evidenced by the title of a painting he exhibited at the Salon d'Automne. Based on this information, the artist's following testimony, also from a later date, might be attributed to those months:

In 1905 or 1906 [...] I was painting on Sainte-Adresse beach. Up until then I had done beaches in the impressionist manner and I had reached saturation point with them, realising that this method of imitating nature was leading me in the direction of infinity, right down to its slightest and most fleeting meanders and details. And I remained outside the picture.

One day, when I could stand it no longer, I went out with my paint box and a single sheet of paper. Arriving before some beach motif or other, I sat down and started looking at my tubes of color and my brushes. How, using these materials, was I going to render not what I saw, but what is, what exists for me, *my reality*? There, right there, and nowhere else, was the problem. [...]. Then, to each object I gave, with black mixed with white, the shape of its contours, each time leaving in the center the white of the paper, which I then colored with a specific single and extremely intense tone. What did I have? Some blue, some green, some ochre – few colors. [...] From that day forth it was impossible for me to return to my sterile



Fig. 1  
 Raoul Dufy  
*Le Marché aux poissons à Marseille*, c. 1903  
 Oil on canvas. 54 x 65 cm  
 Madrid, Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza  
 on loan at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza  
 [Laffaille, no. 98]

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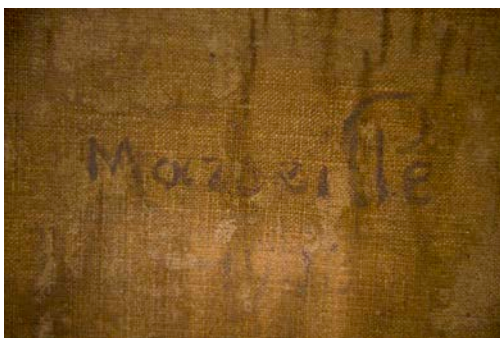


Fig. 2  
 Raoul Dufy  
*Le Marché aux poissons à Marseille*, c. 1903 (detail of reverse)  
 Oil on canvas. 54 x 65 cm  
 Madrid, Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection  
 on loan at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza  
 [Laffaille, no. 98]

struggles with the elements that presented themselves to my sight. No longer was it a question of representing those elements under their external form.<sup>9</sup>

That October 1906 Dufy viewed the major Paul Gauguin retrospective at the Salon d'Automne. He spent the end of the year and the first months of 1907 in Normandy, at his parents' house in Le Havre, as the 1907 catalogue of the Salon des Indépendants states. In the spring, as well as entering works for the Salon des Indépendants, he again took part in an exhibition of the fauvist group at the Galerie Berthe Weill and in the show at the Cercle de l'Art Moderne in Le Havre. The works he painted that year display the maturity of his fauvist style. They are dominated by highly saturated, often arbitrary colours, distributed in large areas – as in Gauguin – delimited by thick contours that accentuate the two-dimensional and decorative structure of the canvas.

Dufy's espousal of full-fledged fauvism, however, would soon come to an end. In October, after taking part in the Salon d'Automne and viewing the major Cézanne retrospective, Dufy travelled to Marseille, following in the footsteps of the painter from Aix-en-Provence. The previous year Braque and Friesz had travelled to L'Estaque with a similar aim. In the autumn of 1907 Dufy developed the same fascination with Cézanne's oeuvre that was common to many of the avant-garde artists of the time, ushering in a new constructive period in his work.

In the light of this information, to what moment in Dufy's early career should we attribute the two canvases in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza, *Le Marché aux poissons à Marseille* and *Le Petit palmier*?

### ***Le Marché aux poissons à Marseille***

The date of *Le Marché aux poissons à Marseille* [Fig. 1] has been widely disputed. In 1970 the painting was featured in an exhibition devoted to Raoul Dufy in Bordeaux as being executed in “1904–5” and two years later Maurice Laffaille dated it – together with the other three Marseille market scenes – to 1905.

Ronald Pickvance, who studied the reverse of the painting in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection in 1997, noted that it retains a painted inscription: “Marseille 190(?)” [Fig. 2]. Pickvance thought it was “1903”, but lent more credence to the date “1905”. According to the English historian, although *Le Marché aux poissons à Marseille* displayed evident impressionistic traits – particularly in the style of execution – it also foreshadowed the freedom of fauvism, specifically in the pink awning on the right.



Fig. 3  
 Raoul Dufy  
*Theatre, Martigues*  
 (*Théâtre aux*  
*Martigues*), 1903  
 Oil on canvas.  
 59 x 80 cm  
 (La Ville de Martigues-  
 Musée Ziem)  
 [Laffaille, no. 48]



Fig. 4  
 Léon-Augustin Lhermitte  
*Les Halles*, 1895  
 Oil on canvas. 404 x 635 cm  
 Paris, Petit Palais



Fig. 5  
 Raoul Dufy  
*Le Marché à*  
*Marseille*, 1903  
 Watercolour  
 on paper  
 Location unknown  
 [Guillon-Laffaille,  
 no. 30]



Fig. 6  
 Raoul Dufy:  
*Le Marché à*  
*Marseille*, 1903  
 Oil on canvas.  
 60 x 73 cm  
 Geneva, Musée  
 du Petit Palais  
 [Laffaille, no. 100]

Fanny Guillon-Laffaille, who also maintains 1905 as its date of execution, has spoken of the struggle in the painting between the contrasting light characteristic of nineteenth-century painting and the more modern contrasts of complementary colours.

The latter contrasts are no doubt the basis for dating it to the later year. But more than fauvism, it seems to recall the work of Van Gogh, whose retrospective Dufy may have seen at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in March 1901 and whose famous *Potato Eaters* of 1885 most likely inspired his *Theatre, Martigues* (1903) [Fig. 3]. The historian Maïthé Vallès-Bled, who has recently ascribed Dufy's series of Marseille markets to 1903, likewise underlines the strong influence of Van Gogh's work found in it.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the reminiscences of the Dutch painter in *Le Marché aux poissons à Marseille* are perceptible not only in the sharp contrast of reds and greens but also in the long, loaded brushstrokes of the crate in the foreground and, above all, the awning on the right.

Moreover, the chosen theme – still indebted to nineteenth-century naturalism – is more in line with Dufy's initial work than that of 1905 (suffice it to remember that at the Salon of the Société des Artistes Français in 1901 Dufy had shown *End of the Day, Le Havre*, based on the local port workers' strike). For the series of works devoted to Marseille market, Dufy may well have drawn inspiration from Léon-Augustin Lhermitte's large composition *Les Halles* (1895). [Fig. 4]

In fact, an early date is confirmed by a watercolour, its location now unknown, executed by Dufy and showing the same motif of the interior of the Marseille market of the Halle Delacroix, which bears the inscription “R. Dufy 1903 / Marseille” [Fig. 5]. A comparison between the two works is significant. The oil painting repeats the same photographic angle of vision, possibly influenced by Degas, but the figures have changed substantially. The stallholders in the middle ground are also identical, though the figure of a female vendor that Dufy does not seem to have satisfactorily captured has disappeared from the foreground. She is replaced by a frontally depicted housewife whose face is taken from another painting in the series – *Le Marché à Marseille* (1903) in the Petit Palais in Geneva [Fig. 6] – and a vendor with her back to the viewer whose pose recalls the woman in the foreground of Lhermitte's abovementioned composition. But the most significant change is in the background of the composition, where the entrance to the market, previously open, is now closed by several awnings, allowing Dufy to accentuate the contrast between the vermilion and the chrome green.<sup>11</sup>

If any doubts still remain as to the date of the work in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, recent studies have confirmed that there is no documentary evidence that Dufy travelled to the south of France in 1905,<sup>12</sup> as previously believed.





Fig. 7  
 Raoul Dufy  
*Le Petit palmier*,  
 c. 1906  
 Oil on canvas.  
 91.5 x 79 cm  
 Carmen Thyssen-  
 Bornemisza on loan  
 at Museo Thyssen-  
 Bornemisza  
 [Laffaille, no. 205]  
[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 8  
 Raoul Dufy  
*Le Jardin d'hiver*,  
 1907  
 Oil on canvas.  
 81 x 65 cm  
 Private collection,  
 United States  
 [Laffaille, no. 206]



Fig. 9  
 Raoul Dufy  
*Dans le jardin  
 au Havre*, c. 1906  
 Oil on canvas.  
 55 x 46 cm  
 Sold at Sotheby's,  
 New York, 12  
 November 1997,  
 lot 23  
 [Laffaille, no. 195]

### *Le Petit palmier*

The date of *Le Petit palmier* [Fig. 7] has also been subject of debate. In 1972 Maurice Laffaille dated it to “1905”<sup>12</sup>, though in the catalogue raisonné of the painter’s works he included it in a group of paintings of interiors dated to “1907”, prominent among which is *Jardin d’hiver* [Fig. 8], now in a private collection in the United States. In 1997 this similarity in theme led Pickvance to date it later, to Dufy’s trip to Marseille and Martigues in autumn 1907. However, its nuanced colour led him to state that Dufy took some time to assimilate Matisse’s lessons.<sup>13</sup>

Two years later, *Le Petit palmier* was shown with the date “1907” in the Raoul Dufy retrospective at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon and at the Museu Picasso in Barcelona. Christian Briend suggested that *Jardin d’hiver* had been painted at Dufy’s parents’ house in Le Havre and shown at the Salon d’Automne of 1907 as *La Serre* [Greenhouse], belonging to M. Druet’s collection.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, although similar motifs are repeated in *Jardin d’hiver* and *Le Petit palmier*, such as the motley vegetation and winding path, the style of painting is very different. Whereas the former is notable for the predominant contrast of blues, greens and lilacs in an essentially two-dimensional arrangement, the latter has a marked funnel-like perspective with powerful chiaroscuro contrasts and small touches of colour inherited from neo-impressionism. These differences led Fanny Guillon-Laffaille to rightly move its date back again to “1905”.

Despite the difficulty of establishing a certain date for *Le Petit palmier*, it seems most likely to be “c. 1906”. Indeed, *Le Petit palmier* is not related so much to the group of paintings of interiors executed in 1907 as to three slightly earlier canvases on a similar theme: *Dans le jardin au Havre*, c. 1906;<sup>15</sup> *Dans le jardin*, c. 1906 [Fig. 9]; and *Le jeu d’échecs*, 1906.<sup>16</sup> The indoor garden setting is the same, as are the folding chairs (which differ from those featured in the 1907 paintings). But there are further elements in common, for example the contrasting chiaroscuro between the foreground motifs and the surrounding vegetation, and the solid masses of certain objects such as the table and the flowerpot. Unlike from the summer of 1906 onwards, here Dufy does not yet outline forms with thick dark contours but juxtaposes tones instead.

But these are not the only elements that link *Le Petit palmier* to around 1906 in the painter’s career. The mosaic brushstrokes found in the canvas in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection can also be seen in other paintings produced that year, such as the aforementioned *Le Bal champêtre à Falaise* (private collection) and *L’Estacade du casino Marie-Christine à Sainte-Adresse*





Fig. 10  
 Raoul Dufy  
*L'Estacade du Casino Marie-Christine  
 à Sainte-Adresse*, 1906  
 Oil on canvas. 64.8 x 80 cm  
 Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Mr. Harry Lynde Bradley  
 [Laffaille, n. 214]

(Milwaukee Art Museum) [Fig. 10], whereas they disappear following the adoption of large colour planes in the summer–autumn of 1906.

### An unfinished puzzle

Despite the progress made in learning about Raoul Dufy's oeuvre, doubts still remain about the dates of some of his most important works, including a good many of those painted between 1903 and 1907. *Le Marché aux poissons à Marseille*, c. 1903 and *Le Petit palmier*, c. 1906, both belonging to the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, are two significant examples. This article sets out to provide a sound date for both canvases and to help understand the painter's early output. Nevertheless, any real breakthrough will necessarily involve systematic analyses of existing documentary sources and technical studies (X-ray, infrared, paint composition, etc.) of his paintings. We hope that this work, already underway at some museums, will shed new, conclusive light on them.

### Notes

- 1 Although Raoul Dufy's work fell somewhat into oblivion shortly after his death in 1953, increasing attention has been paid to his art since the 1970s and more so in recent decades. In addition to the huge task undertaken in 1972 by Maurice Laffaille and Fanny Guillon-Laffaille, who brought out the catalogue raisonné of his oils, watercolours, gouaches, pastels and drawings, in 1983 the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Hayward Gallery of London staged a major retrospective and Dora Perez-Tibi's splendid monograph was published by Flammarion in 1989. Historians, among them Christian Briend, Jacqueline Munck, Sophie Krebs, Maïthé Vallès-Bled and Brigitte Léal, have subsequently studied his oeuvre in greater detail – including his engravings and designs for textiles and ceramics – through exhibitions such as those held in Lyon-Barcelona in 1999; in Paris-Nice and in Le Havre-Céret-Roubaix in 2003; in Paris in 2008; in Sète in 2010; in Martigues in 2013; in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya in 2014; and in Madrid in 2015.
- 2 “Devant ce tableau, raconte Dufy, j'ai compris toutes les nouvelles raisons de peindre et le réalisme impressionniste perdit pour moi son charme à la contemplation du miracle de l'imagination introduite dans le dessin et la couleur. / J'ai compris tout de suite la nouvelle mécanique picturale.” Marcelle Berr de Turique : *Raoul Dufy*. Paris, Floury, 1930, p. 81. Dufy could only have seen *Luxury, Calm and Pleasure* at the Salon des Indépendants between 25 February and 25 March 1905, because it was immediately acquired by the neo-impressionist painter Paul Signac.
- 3 In Philippe Dagen's opinion, in 1905 Dufy was still practicing a modern realism related to impressionism. See Philippe Dagen: “¿'Preocupaciones técnicas únicamente'? Dufy, Cézanne, el impresionismo y el fauvismo” in *Raoul Dufy*. [Exh. cat. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts; Musée de l'Imprimerie; Barcelona, Museu Picasso-Museu Tèxtil i d'Indumentària]. Paris, RMN, 1999, p. 31.
- 4 “Si nous entendons par IMPRESSIONNISME l'ensemble des tendances si différentes des peintres de 1870, non, l'impressionnisme n'est pas fini.” Raoul Dufy in Charles Morice: “Enquête sur les tendances actuelles des arts plastiques”, *Mercure de France*, LVI, no. 196, 15-VIII-1905, p. 548.
- 5 “Mon cher Emile / Décidément le père Pissaro (sic) a admirablement peint Rouen. J'espère te voir à Paris et te la serrer. / Raoul Dufy / Amitiés chez toi.” Postcard from Raoul Dufy to Othon Friesz, 12 October 1905. Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Collections Jacques Doucet, Autographes 099, 80, 06.

## Notes

- 6 Georges Jean-Aubry, “Les artistes normands”, *Le Courrier du Havre*, 31-III-1906; repr. in *Raoul Dufy* [Exh. cat., Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Musée de l’Imprimerie; Barcelona, Museu Picasso, Museu Tèxtil i d’Indumentària]. Paris, RMN, 1999, p. 237.
- 7 Berthe Weill: *Pan !.. dans l’œil. Ou trente ans dans les coulisses de la peinture contemporaine (1900-1930)*, Paris, L’échelle de Jacob, 2009, p. 69.
- 8 See specifically *Rideau d’arbres à Falaise* (sold at Christie’s, New York, on 11 May 1995, lot 257); *Calèche à Falaise* (sold at Sotheby’s, New York, on 7 November 2013, lot 224); *Paysage aux masions à Falaise* [Laffaille 175] (sold Brist Scp., on 8 June 2000, lot 20); and *Le Bal champêtre à Falaise* [Laffaille, no. 182] (location unknown). The first three have been dated to 1905, but the fact that their subject-matter tallies with the information provided in the 1906 catalogue of the Salon des Independants suggests that they were in fact painted in the winter and spring of 1906.
- 9 “Vers 1905-1906 [...] je peignais sur la plage de Sainte-Adresse. Jusq’alors, j’avais fait des plages à la manière des impressionnistes et j’en étais arrivé à un point de saturation, comprenant que, dans cette façon de me calquer sur la nature, celle-ci me menait à l’infini, jusque dans ses méandres et ses détails les plus menus, les plus fugaces. Moi je restais en dehors du tableau. / Un jour, n’y tenant plus, je sortis avec ma boîte à couleurs et une simple feuille de papier. Arrivé devant un motif quelconque de plage, je m’installai, et me mis à regarder mes tubes de couleurs, mes pinceaux. Comment, avec cela, parvenir à rendre non pas ce que je vois, mais ce qui est, ce qui existe pour moi, *ma réalité* ? Voilà tout le problème. [...] Je me mis alors à dessiner, à choisir dans la nature ce qui me convenait. Puis, chaque objet, je lui donnai, avec du noir mélangé à du blanc, le modelé de ses contours, laissant chaque fois, au centre, le blanc du papier, que je colorai ensuite d’un seul ton spécifique et assez intense. Qu’est-ce que j’avais ? Du bleu, du vert, de l’ocre, peu de couleurs. [...] A partir ce jour-là, il me fut impossible de revenir à mes luttes stériles avec les éléments qui s’offraient à ma vue. Ces éléments, il n’était plus question de les représenter sous leur forme extérieure.” Raoul Dufy in Pierre Courthion: *Raoul Dufy*. Geneva, Pierre Cailler Éditeur, 1951, p. 66. English translation cited from Raoul Dufy [exh. cat., Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 17 February–17 May 2015], Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2015, p. 149.
- 10 Maïthé Vallès-Bled: *Dufy en Méditerranée*. [Exh. cat. Sète, Musée Paul Valéry]. Salles la Source, Au Fil de Temps, 2010, p. 34.
- 11 Data gleaned from the chemical analyses recently carried out on the painting by Andrés Sánchez Ledesma of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza laboratory, Madrid. *Fish Market, Marseille* also has the particular feature that there is a small portion of vermilion in all the pigments analysed.
- 12 Lucienne Del’Furia and Gérard Fabre: “Dufy, de la Manche à la Méditerranée”, in *Dufy. De Martigues à l’Estaque. 1903-1925*. [Exh. cat. Martigues, Musée Ziem]. Cologne, Snoeck, 2013, p. 22.
- 13 Ronald Pickvance in *Del vedutismo a las primeras vanguardias: obras maestras de la colección Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza*. Llorens Serra, Tomàs (ed.). [Exh. cat. Bilbao, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao]. Madrid, Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1997, n. 60, p. 192.
- 14 Christian Briend in *Raoul Dufy* [Exh. cat., Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Musée de l’Imprimerie; Barcelona, Museu Picasso - Museu Tèxtil i d’Indumentària], Paris, RMN, 1999, p. 86.
- 15 Laffaille, no. 195.
- 16 Laffaille, no. 197.

# Cézanne: *Portrait of a Peasant*, 1905–6

Paula Luengo



Fig. 1  
Paul Cézanne  
*Portrait of a Peasant*, 1905–6  
Oil on canvas. 64.8 x 54.6 cm  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
R952<sup>1</sup>

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 2  
The terrace of the studio at Les Lauves today,  
photographs by Guillermo Solana, 2014

*Portrait of a Peasant* [fig. 1] was painted by Cézanne at the end of his life, between 1905 and 1906. The man, positioned in the centre of the composition, sits on a chair by the wall of the garden of the artist's studio at Les Lauves [fig. 2] with crossed legs, his right hand resting on his lap and his left hand leaning on a stick; a white cloth is draped over his arm. He sports a straw hat or *canotier* to shield himself from the sun of Provence and the blue garments commonly worn by peasants of the region. The most striking feature of this portrait is that, although the painting is at an advanced stage of execution, the face is unfinished, making it impossible to recognise the sitter. This article sets out to analyse this intriguing faceless figure.

John Rewald notes that "although Cézanne's activity lasted for nearly fifty years, before settling into the Les Lauves studio he had hardly ever painted plein-air portraits. [...] Beginning in the summer of 1902, when he moved into his new studio, Cézanne made use of the terrace in front of the house, in the shade of a lime tree. Although his favourite model was his elderly gardener Vallier, he also got other acquaintances willing to pose to do so. They were always men, and among them this peasant with a straw hat..."<sup>2</sup>

The head, especially the face, is lightly sketched, contrasting with the rest of the composition which is more finished. It is not known why Cézanne did not complete it. It is strange in that "in most of the artist's unfinished portraits, the face is essentially complete, the facial features always recognizable, even if large parts of the canvas have been left blank. It is impossible to identify the man shown here, and this would seem to indicate that, in the *réalisation* of this portrait, Cézanne was concerned primarily with the composition and only secondarily with the depiction of a particular person."<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that the portrait is not intended to capture the likeness of a particular individual but rather to represent the human figure in nature, to the extent that the peasant's blue jacket is easily mistaken for the vegetation of the background garden because the foreground blends in with the background, as in many of his late canvases. The boundaries between the figure and what is behind him begin to be blurred, re-establishing the continuity between man and nature. It is the image of "a man wholly absorbed into his natural environment and entirely at peace with it".<sup>4</sup>

The "palette of rich greens, blues, yellows, browns and whites grants this portrait an extremely harmonious and balanced effect".<sup>5</sup>

Earlier on, in the last decade of the century, Cézanne often had local workers sit for him (as in the series of card players), and sometimes painted them with crossed legs in indoor spaces. For example, he painted a young male peasant full-face and almost full-length in this way [fig. 3]. The modest labourer, his hands resting on his lap, patiently waits for the long sitting to end.



Fig. 3  
*Seated Peasant*,  
c. 1892–96  
Oil on canvas.  
54.6 x 45.1 cm.  
Metropolitan Museum  
of Art. The Walter  
H. and Leonore  
Annenberg Collection.  
Gift of Walter H. and  
Leonore Annenberg,  
1997, bequest of  
Walter H. Annenberg,  
2002, 1997.60.2  
R827



Fig. 4  
*Portrait of a Peasant*,  
c. 1900  
Oil on canvas.  
92.7 x 73.7 cm.  
National Gallery  
of Canada, Ottawa,  
acquired in 1950, 5769  
R943



Fig. 5  
Émile Bernard,  
Cézanne sitting in front  
of the *Large Bathers*  
In his studio at  
Les Lauves, 1904.  
Photograph, Musée  
d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 6  
*Self-Portrait with  
a Beret*, 1898–1900  
Oil on canvas.  
64.1 x 53.3 cm  
Museum of Fine  
Arts, Boston. Charles  
H. Bayley Picture  
and Painting Fund  
and partial gift of  
Elizabeth Paine  
Metcalf  
R834

“By the late 1890s, Cézanne had grown increasingly fond of a group of Provençal regionalists known as the *Félibrige*. Among these, Joachim Gasquet maintained the closest relationship with the aging painter, becoming the now venerable master’s friend, biographer, and critical champion. Like the *Félibrige*, Cézanne came to believe in the uniqueness and fortitude, both moral and physical, of the rooted traditions of the south. In particular, the artist came to revere the dignity and strength of the Provençal peasants, for despite the pressures of modernity, they had succeeded in maintaining the traditions and mannerisms distinctive to the region. In their flesh and blood, Cézanne saw the land of his beloved Provence.”<sup>6</sup> By having them sit for him [fig. 4] in a pose previously reserved for key people such as his father Victor Chocquet and Ambroise Vollard, he sought to present them with utmost dignity and authority; he painted them with pride.

Cézanne himself adopted the same pose in 1904 [fig. 5], when Émile Bernard photographed him sitting in front of his *Large Bathers* in the studio at Les Lauves.

The painter clearly identifies with his peasants, even though they come from different social strata. It is therefore not surprising to find Cézanne described in terms similar to those used to refer to his Provençal peasants: “In Provence, as in the Orient, the sense of caste isn’t very strong, nor are the castes so well entrenched. Cézanne resembled a *petit bourgeois* and an artisan, with a decency, a dignity, a simple pride whose parallel would be hard to find in the same classes elsewhere. Peasant *finesse* and exaggeratedly polite manners were combined in him.”<sup>7</sup>

During this period, in which he isolated himself in his native city and suffered physical decline, Cézanne focused his attention on portraying ageing. He not only reflected on the passage of time and old age in his last known self-portrait, *Self-Portrait with a Beret* [fig. 6], but also paid tribute to his beloved Provence by posing in the typical regional headwear.

Around this time he also expressed his concerns by painting the inhabitants of Aix, especially those to whom he was most directly related: “I live in my home town, and I rediscover the past in the faces of people my age. Most of all, I like the expressions of people who have grown old without drastically changing their habits, who just go along with the laws of time.”<sup>8</sup> *Portrait of a Peasant* is a good example of this.

### The elderly gardener Vallier

The work in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza is closely related to the watercolour *Man Wearing a Straw Hat* in the Art Institute of Chicago [fig. 7]. It is likely that they were painted around the same time, though





Fig. 7  
*Man Wearing a Straw Hat*, 1905–6  
Watercolour over graphite on paper  
The Art Institute of Chicago. Gift of Janis H. Palmer in memory of Pauline K. Palmer, 1983.1498 R638



Fig. 8  
*The Gardener Vallier*, c. 1906  
Oil on canvas.  
65.4 x 54.9 cm.  
Tate, London.  
Bequeathed by C. Frank Stoop, 1933, N04724 R950



Fig. 9  
Paul Cézanne  
*The Gardener Vallier*, 1906  
Oil on canvas.  
65 x 54 cm  
Private collection R954

there are a few slight differences, chiefly in the tree and the balustrade, and a more obvious one especially in the model's face, which is more detailed in the watercolour.<sup>9</sup>

But there is no doubt that *Portrait of a Peasant* is directly linked to the Tate's canvas entitled *The Gardener Vallier* [fig. 8]. The elderly Vallier was very close to the artist, for whom he worked as a sort of odd-job man. He even nursed Cézanne, as he was one of the few people the artist allowed to touch him. This is borne out by a letter the painter wrote to his son Paul on 25 July 1906:

"My dear Paul:

[...] Vallier massages me, my ribs are a little better, Madame Brémont says that my foot is better – I follow Boissy's treatment, it is horrible. It is very hot. From eight o'clock on the weather is unbearable...<sup>10</sup>"

Cézanne asked Vallier to sit for him during the last two years of his life – he went on to paint six oil portraits and three watercolours of the old man – and a relationship of trust and affection developed between them.<sup>11</sup>

Cézanne continued to work on the portrait of *The Gardener Vallier* [fig. 9] until the end of his days (though according to Vollard, his dealer, the last portrait he painted was the one in the Thyssen collection). While he was painting outdoors on 15 October a storm took him by surprise and he fainted. He was carried home and got up early the next day to work on a portrait of Vallier beneath the lime tree in his studio garden. He passed away days later. The painter's sister Marie Cézanne describes this in a letter written to her nephew Paul on Saturday 20 October 1906.<sup>12</sup>

Cézanne thus fulfilled his wish to die while painting. In a letter of 21 September 1906 he wrote to Émile Bernard: "I am always studying after nature and it seems to me that I make slow progress. I should have liked you near me, for solitude always weighs me down a bit. But I am old, ill, and I have sworn to myself to die painting, rather than go under in the debasing paralysis which threatens old men who allow themselves to be dominated by passions which coarsen their senses [...]."<sup>13</sup>

Cézanne attached huge value to the series of portraits of Vallier, in which the Thyssen *Portrait of a Peasant* could be included – not only because of all the time and effort he put into them but because the *Portrait of a Peasant* is a sort of self-portrait. "It does indeed appear that the portrait of Vallier is, metaphorically speaking, a self-portrait, emblematic of the painter's mental and physical identification with his sitter."<sup>14</sup>

Gasquet himself believed there was a parallel between the two elderly men:



Fig.10  
Nicolas Froment  
Central panel of the *Triptych of the Burning Bush*, 1475–76  
Oil on panel  
Cathedral of Saint-Saveur,  
Aix-en-Provence

“He had the old man pose. Often the poor fellow was ill and did not come. Then Cézanne himself posed. He dressed up in dirty old rags in front of a mirror. And then by means of a strange transference, a mystical and perhaps intentional substitution, the features of the old beggar and those of the artist were intermingled on the dark canvas, both their lives [about to] issue into the same void and the same immortality.”<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting to end by also pointing out that Lawrence Gowing considered that in this last portrait of Vallier executed in 1906 [fig. 9] “the gardener in profile has not only the look of Cézanne but the look of a Michelangelesque Moses – another of Cézanne’s self-projections”.<sup>16</sup> Some time earlier, Émile Bernard had drawn the same parallel owing to the physical similarities between the Moses in Nicolas Froment’s *Triptych of the Burning Bush* [fig. 10] and the painter: “In the past I had seen Cézanne in that same place, beneath the large picture of the *Burning Bush*, whose Moses bore such an uncanny resemblance to him. No doubt his soul still returned there.”<sup>17</sup>

During this final period Cézanne himself had identified with Moses more than once, especially in relation to his work: “I am working doggedly, for I see the promised land before me. Shall I be like the great Hebrew leader or shall I be able to enter?”<sup>18</sup> Underlying this and other statements is his constant worry that he might die without finishing his task. Indeed, it is more than likely that the artist sensed that the end was near while he was working on the portraits of Vallier...

The last visitors to his studio – Charles Camoin, Francis Jourdain, Émile Bernard, R. P. Rivière and Jacques Félix Schnerb – recall seeing pictures of the gardener and the bathers there. “Cézanne was also painting the portrait of a man, in profile, wearing a cap. He told us, moreover, that he had always carried on parallel studies, work from nature and work from the imagination. He appeared to attach great importance to this portrait, saying, ‘If I succeed with this good fellow, it means that my theory will have proved true.’”<sup>19</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The photograph captions of works by Paul Cézanne include a number preceded by the letter R, which in the case of the oil paintings refers to their number in John Rewald’s catalogue raisonné: *The Paintings of Paul Cézanne, A Catalogue Raisonné*. Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1996. For the watercolours see John Rewald: *Paul Cézanne. The Watercolours. A Catalogue Raisonné* by John Rewald. Thames and Hudson, London, 1983.
- 2 John Rewald in Hélène Adhémar, Maurice Sérullaz (ed.): *Cézanne les dernières années 1895-1906*. [Exh. cat. Paris, Grand Palais, 20 April–23 July 1978]. Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1978, p. 82. “Quoique l’activité de Cézanne se fût étendue sur presque cinquante années, il n’avait pratiquement jamais peint de portraits en plein air avant de s’installer dans l’atelier des Lauves. Les exceptions son étonnamment rares: ...” “Dès son installation aux Lauves, en été 1902, Cézanne se mit à profiter de la terrasse qui s’ouvre devant l’atelier, ombragée par un tilleul. Bien que son modèle favori fût son vieux jardinier Vallier, il faisait

## Notes

- aussi poser d'autres personnes de sa connaissance qui s'y prêtait. C'étaient toujours des hommes, et parmi eux, ce paysan coiffé d'un canotier..."
- 3 See Christina Feilchenfeldt's article in Felix Baumann, Evelyn Benesch, Walter Feilchenfeldt, Klaus Albrecht Schröder (eds.): *Cézanne Finish Unfinish*. [Exh. cat. Vienna Kunstforum 20 January–25 April, 2000; Zurich, Kunsthaus 5 May–30 July 2000]. Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, 2000, p. 199. "The portrait appears less as the representation of a particular individual than as a realization of a specific pictorial subject, that of the human figure in natural surroundings. The cursorily indicated face contrasts with the fairly detailed execution of the rest of the composition. It is likely that Cézanne never found an opportunity to complete the face in this portrait."
  - 4 Theodore Reff: "Painting and Theory in the Final Decade". In William Rubin (ed.): *Cézanne: The Late Work*. New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1977, pp. 22–23.
  - 5 In Baumann, Benesch, Feilchenfeldt, Schröder 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
  - 6 Steven Platzman: *Cézanne The Self-Portraits*. London, Thames & Hudson, 2001, p. 166.
  - 7 Edmond Jaloux: "Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne", *L'Amour de l'Art*, Paris, May 1920, p. 285.
  - 8 P. M. Doran (ed.): *Conversations avec Cézanne*. Paris, Macula, 1978, p. 21: "[...] je vis dans la ville de mon enfance, et c'est dans le regard des gens de mon âge que je revois le passé. J'aime sur toutes choses l'aspect des gens qui ont vieilli sans faire violence aux usages, en se laissant aller aux lois du temps". English version: Michael Doran (ed.): *Conversations with Cézanne*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001, p. 23.
  - 9 For more information see Guillermo Solana: *Cézanne site/non-site*. [Exh. cat. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 4 February–18 May 2014], pp. 33–34.
  - 10 Paul Cézanne: *Paul Cézanne, Letters*. [John Rewald (ed.)]. New York, Da Capo Press Inc., 1995, p. 319.
  - 11 Philip Conisbee and Denis Coutagne (ed.): *Cézanne in Provence*. [Washington D. C., National Gallery of Art, 29 January–7 May 2006; Aix-en-Provence, Musée Granet, 9 June–17 September 2006]. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 242. "There was trust and affection between these two elderly men, to the extent that Vallier was the only person attested to have been permitted to touch Cézanne (who reportedly could not tolerate physical contact)."
  - 12 Paul Cézanne: *Paul Cézanne, Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 337. "[...] He remained outside in the rain for several hours, he was brought back in a laundry cart; and two men had to carry him up to his bed. The next day, early in the morning, he went into the garden [of his studio at Les Lauves] to work under the lime-tree, on a portrait of Vallier, he came back dying [...]."
  - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 330.
  - 14 Steven Platzman: *Cézanne The Self-Portraits*, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
  - 15 Joachim Gasquet: *Cézanne*. Fougères, Encre Marine, 2002, p. 205. "Il faisait poser le vieillard. Souvent le pauvre malade, ne venait pas. Alors Cézanne posait lui-même. Il revêtait devant le miroir les sales guenilles. Et un étrange échange ainsi, une substitution mystique, et peut-être voulue, mêla, sur la toile profonde, les traits du vieux mendiant à ceux du vieil artiste, leurs deux vies au confluent du même néant et de la même mortalité ». English translation cited from Steven Platzman, *Cézanne: the Self-Portraits*, *op. cit.* p. 190.
  - 16 Lawrence Gowing: "The Logic of Organized Sensations". In Rubin 1977, *op. cit.*, p.70.
  - 17 "J'avais vu Cézanne autrefois à cette place, sous le grand tableau du Buisson Ardent, dont le Moïse lui ressemble si étrangement. Sans doute son âme y revenait encore." Émile Bernard: *Souvenirs sur Paul Cézanne*. Fontfroide, Bibliothèque artistique & littéraire, 2013, p. 82.
  - 18 "Je travaille opiniâtrement, j'entrevois la Terre Promise, Serais-je comme le grand chef des Hébreux ou bien pourrais-je y pénétrer?". Letter to Ambroise Vollard, Aix, 9 January 1903. Paul Cézanne: *Cinquante-trois lettres* [transcribed and annotated by Jean-Claude Lebensztejn]. Paris, *L'Échope*, 2011, p. 58. English translation cited from *Paul Cézanne, Letters*, p. 293.
  - 19 Rivière and Schnerb, visit of 1905, in Doran 2001, *op. cit.* p. 90.

# Lucio Fontana between Venice and Milan: *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold*

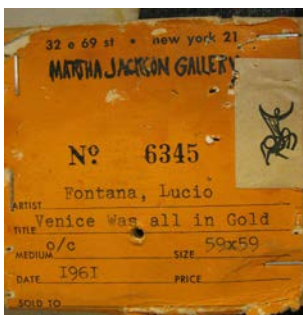
Carolina Olmedo



Fig. 1  
Lucio Fontana  
*Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold*, 1961  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)

In 1961, the year it was executed, *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold* [fig. 1] was featured in two of the most important exhibitions in the career of the Italian-born Argentine artist Lucio Fontana (1899–1968). As the “highlight” of the shows held in Venice<sup>1</sup> and New York<sup>2</sup> [fig. 2 and 3] – both important cultural capitals in the post-war period – this piece displays the technical and intellectual complexity of the mature work of Fontana, whose international acclaim among critics and fellow artists was then growing. His tireless ground-breaking attitude was visible in three main aspects: a shift away from pictorial tradition through monochrome colours, the creation of a new concept of artistic space by slashing the painting, and the practice of destruction as a creative process. His art, which combines these three strategies to varying degrees, is thus one of the most representative examples of the defiance of post-war “ugly art”.<sup>3</sup> This tendency towards experimentation with material led Lawrence Alloway to dub him a “man on the border” in the catalogue of the abovementioned exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York.<sup>4</sup> Through this description, Fontana earned international renown at his first solo exhibition in the United States as an artist comparable to American figures such as Allan Kaprow and George Brecht: the value of his output lay in its blurring of the boundaries between painting, sculpture and the applied arts to the extent that in some respects it came close to kitsch and pop art,<sup>5</sup> and also in the underlying intellectual work that urged the spectator to rebel against disciplinary divisions.

Owing perhaps to this critical attitude, the exhibitions of the Venice series were not properly understood until several years later when Fontana’s name went down in history, facilitating a careful analysis of the layers of operations at play in his mature work.<sup>6</sup> The 22 pieces that make up the series were never reunited once they left the artist’s studio,<sup>7</sup> and their formal appearance intimidated critics of the day with the precious display of gleaming gold and silver incrustated with Murano glass.<sup>8</sup> These attractive features partially diverted spectators’ attention away from the gash in the canvas and the presentation of the slashed picture space open to the incorporation of real space as a compositional material. On account of the difference between the title of this work and the more abstract titles of earlier works, it was not until several years later that the presence of a narrative in Venice was interpreted by many as a change of direction from a cryptic to an openly critical stance verging on parody. To cite Luca Massimo Barbero, “To many Fontana seemed to suddenly veer, with the ease of a bird, in the opposite direction in order to take an antithetical stance: Venetian baroque and the fascinating decadence of the Serenissima.”<sup>9</sup> Through the artist’s gaze, two Venices are contrasted and brought face to face: the commercial and cultural jewel of the Adriatic, with its byzantine and baroque universe; and



Figs. 2-3  
Labels on the reverse:  
*Arte e Contemplazione*  
(Venice) and Lucio  
Fontana: *Ten Paintings of Venice* (New York)  
exhibitions, 1961



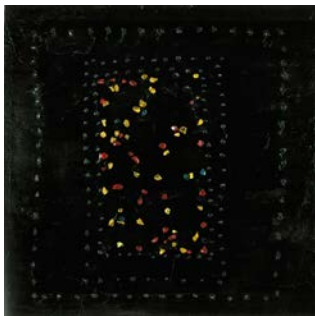


Fig. 4  
Lucio Fontana  
*Spatial Concept.  
In St Mark's Square  
at Night with  
Teresita, 1961*  
Private collection



Fig. 5  
Lucio Fontana  
*Spatial Concept.  
Night of Love  
in Venice, 1961*  
Fine Arts  
Unternehmen AG,  
Switzerland

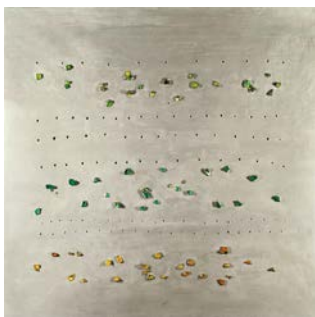


Fig. 6  
Lucio Fontana  
*Spatial Concept.  
At Dawn Venice  
was All Silver, 1961*  
Private collection



Fig. 7  
Lucio Fontana in Venice, 1961. Photograph reproduced  
in the catalogue of *Ten Paintings of Venice*, Martha Jackson  
Gallery, New York



Fig. 8  
Salvador Dalí on the Grand Canal, Venice, 1961

the city that emerged from "Italy's economic miracle" of the post-war period, a tourist attraction consolidated by mass culture through films and literature. In the *Venice* series, 18 of the titles of the work draw from stereotyped postcard views of the city: the baroque, a wedding, a romantic night, the carnival by the Grand Canal and romance in St Mark's (one piece even features Fontana himself and his wife Teresita) [fig. 4 and 5]. Others incorporate references to the climate and times, with specific ranges of colour: according to the symbolism of titles and tones, gold is thus the sun, black is the night, and silver is the moonlight [fig. 6].<sup>10</sup> They all seem to mockingly pursue the image promoted by the films full of gondolas, carnival masks, sumptuous churches and gold galore that were designed to attract tourists: romantic encounters or tragic destinies among alleyways and canals, evenings spent to the voluptuous drone of Charles Aznavour's *Que c'est triste Venise*.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, irony was present in his canvases from the outset, and accompanied them throughout their journey from the artist's studio in Milan to the abovementioned *Arte e Contemplazione* exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi. However, this interpretation was reinforced when the work crossed the Atlantic to be shown in New York, as the first page of the catalogue featured a bold photograph of Fontana in a gondola outside the basilica of Santa Maria della Salute [fig. 7]. His irreverence is evident if we compare it to similar photographs published around that time, such as the portrait of Salvador Dalí on the Grand Canal that same year [fig. 8]. The careful arrangement of the elements inside a gold frame can be taken as an attempt to exoticise Venice, but also as an open self-exoticisation: the mocking incarnation of the artist who displays in a photographic portrait his passage through an iconic geography.

### The immortality of Venice

For Fontana, this contradictory city that was both sentimentalist and redundant<sup>12</sup> was a well-known place: he had taken part in its International Art Biennale in 1930, 1948 and – with a gallery of his own – 1958. He also maintained considerable correspondence with the directors of the Biennale during those years; these letters are imbued with the postulates of Spatialism at its most dynamic.<sup>13</sup> Fontana was already known to Venetian audiences, who had witnessed a particularly vital moment in his production marked by the exploration of *buchi* ("holes", 1949) and *tagli* ("cuts", 1958). *Spatial Concept, Venice was All in Gold* belongs to a special moment in his career, as during the cycle that began in 1960 – and lasted until his death – the artist combined extensive exploration of materials with a passionate return to painting: a return in which pigment is not just *colour*, but chiefly

a material whose physical properties make it possible to model the painter's graphic gesture on the canvas. Enrico Crispolti has stated of the *Venice* series that Fontana "has formal similarities with a vague erotic accent", "a faithful and personal fanciful interpretation from the perspective of lyrical contemplation and imaginative response to the Venetian baroque".<sup>14</sup> The combination of materiality, sensuality and baroque was also highlighted by Italo Tomassoni: "For Fontana this is a means of re-possessing an image [that of Venice] and then breathing completely new life into it... to incorporate its forms and lines into this conscious, understood and intellectually dominated territory."<sup>15</sup> The idea of rewriting the baroque, an interpretation derived above all from material observation of the use of gold in the series, takes us back to Fontana's assertions in the famous *Manifiesto Blanco* (White Manifesto), a document written in Buenos Aires together with his students in 1946, which would later become a milestone in the founding of Spatialism in Italy. In it his statements on the representation of space in early painting and his ambition to increasingly expand represented space led him to view the baroque masters as forerunners of modern practices, as it was they who were "a leap ahead" and "represent [space] with a magnificence that is still unsurpassed and add the notion of time to the plastic arts"<sup>16</sup>: whereas before the modern period art was unaware of "the workings of nature", the baroque as a modern expression incorporates notions of time, matter and space stemming from the advances of science in understanding the world. Far from being isolated, Fontana's thought is linked to a generation of Italian intellectuals – of whom the art historian Lionello Venturi is an emblem<sup>17</sup> – who during the interwar period attempted to reconsider the relationship between tradition and modernity, showing "the error of the rationalist invasion"<sup>18</sup> in order to establish new experiential-material links between the twentieth-century artists and "the primitives".

Part of this reworking of the connection between modern and early painting is visible in the technique used in *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold*: on a creamy base of alkyd paint – a material derived from polyester – Fontana used red synthetic paint as a ground layer for the gold with which he later covered the painting's surface.<sup>19</sup> These three steps are a direct reference to the technique used to execute the illuminated altarpieces produced in northern Italy before 1400 by masters such as Duccio and Cennino, in whose workshops the wooden panels were covered with a light gesso base before applying the traditional *tronco*: a reddish-brown clay pigment used as a base for the gold leaf, in order to enhance its warmth.<sup>20</sup> In relation to this inspiration drawn from early art, Pia Gottschaller puts forward the hypothesis that Fontana – just as Venturi praised Giotto – views the gold of medieval and byzantine icons as a strategy of spatial

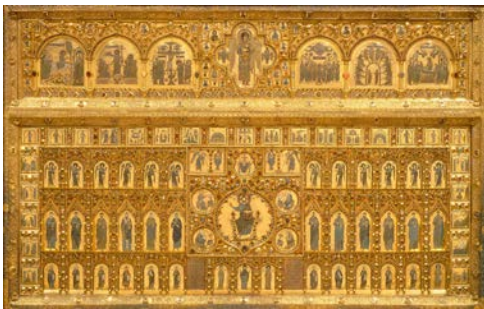


Fig. 9  
Pala d'Oro  
St Mark's Basilica, Venice



Figs. 10-11  
Materials found  
in Lucio Fontana's  
studio on Corso  
Monforte



Fig. 12  
Fontana in his studio on Corso Monforte

synthesis: the appearance of the indefinite space of the divine.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the inclusion of coloured Murano glass in several pieces in the *Venice* series is based on a direct reference to the hundreds of gems adorning the *Pala d'Oro*, the main altarpiece in St Mark's and an emblem of the city, which was embellished by various craftsmen between the tenth and fourteenth centuries [fig. 9].

Although the use of gold in *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold* and other works by the artist is widely discussed, it is evident that its contingent context suggests a host of connections between past and present. This material exploration of the history of Italian art found its way into Fontana's oeuvre in the 1930s, when his investigation of craft techniques in Italy and Argentina led him to produce pieces in vitrified terracotta, coloured ceramics, gilt bronze and mosaic. From this perspective, the use of gold and glass is both symbolic and historical: it is the link between his work and earlier material tradition, but also proof of the misguided academic distinction between "fine arts" and "applied arts". The replacement of gold and jewels with their industrial and craft equivalents – polyester and glass – is not mockery but an attempt to create an art unfettered by nostalgia for the past [fig. 19, 11 and 12].

### Milan and the emergence of the new

Reviewing the exhibition *Arte e Contemplazione*, Gillo Dorfles writes that "with a valiant fantastical streak, Fontana has once again triumphed in creating a new and original genre",<sup>22</sup> underlining the artist's bold use of an industrial plastic material instead of oil paint. The conflict on the merger of "fine arts" and "applied arts" that pervades Fontana's whole career is embodied in his artistic praxis by the incorporation of various materials whose disparate origin questions the validity of established artistic genres. Fontana engaged in this task as part of a truly modern pursuit: the construction by the artist (as an intellectual) of new genres that attest to mankind's advance. This self-imposition allows us to gauge the tone of the debates that arose in the cultural context of 1950s Italy, in which art and design shared the same stage in a fluent dialogue between artistic production and industrial and artisanal processes.<sup>23</sup> Fontana himself stated in an interview granted around this time that "I really used paintings for decorative purposes, and I don't see anything wrong with that, as walls can be decorated... It was later that decorating acquired its pejorative sense."<sup>24</sup> *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold* recalls some aspects of the artist's previous work focused on ornamental uses, such as the ceramics executed for the Cinema Arlecchino (1948) and the balcony of the Lanzone 6 tower (1951–52) in Milan [figs. 13 and 14], the city where Fontana spent most of his life and from which his family hailed.





Fig. 13  
Lucio Fontana  
Ceramic figure designed for the Cinema Arlecchino, 1948

Fig. 14  
Cover of the Italian design magazine *Domus* devoted to  
Fontana's intervention in the Cinema Arlecchino, 1948



Fig. 15  
Sardinian immigrant  
outside the Pirelli  
skyscraper, Milan, 1968  
Photograph by Ugo Mulas

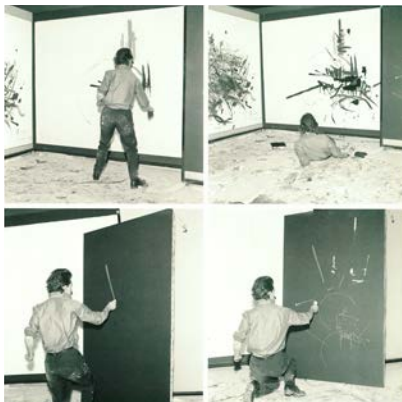


Fig. 16  
Georges Mathieu at the Galleria del Cavallino,  
Venice, 1959

Unlike the Venice of golden basilicas, Milan of the early 1960s was illuminated by the steely gleam of the Pirelli skyscraper [fig. 15]: the emblem of the modernity and economic boom of the "Italian post-war miracle", which Lucio Magri defines as an act of creating wealth from destruction (exploitation of workers and peasants and forced industrialisation of artisanal production).<sup>25</sup> Milan made an art of what Maoism then called "using backwardness as a developmental resource" as opposed to American Fordism, an appealing modernisation that reached homes through television, avoiding the gaze of the old city that stood in ruins following the war.<sup>26</sup> Its industry gave rise to motor vehicles, fashion and books for the rest of the country and in its art galleries art informel – the main art trend of the day in Europe – was beginning to give way to sharp criticism of the traditional art model through the monochrome colours and cutting conceptualism of Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani and Fontana himself. With respect to this critical stance towards gestural art, the use of hands in the Venice series indicates a second level of parodic criticism that underlies his mockery of the city: according to Benjamin Buchloh, Fontana's use of hands is merely "an evident sign of negation of the falsely expressionistic and subjectivist attitudes of gestural painting typical of neo-surrealist automatism, which had flooded the scene in post-war Europe."<sup>27</sup> Like other artists who biting criticised the Milan scene, Fontana regards art informel and the institutionalisation of the historical avant-garde movements as an output stuck in the rut of "exploring petit bourgeois subjectivity", a retardataire and nostalgic art.<sup>28</sup>

*Venice* is thus a criticism of post-war expressionism's famous visits to the city of the canals, such as that of abstract painter Georges Mathieu in September 1959 [fig. 16]. The French artist treated the select audience at the Galleria del Cavallino to a controversial paint performance as a tribute to Tintoretto and his legendary work on the Battle of Lepanto: the art-historical citation and "shamanic and frenzied" gestuality<sup>29</sup> of the monumental paintings resulting from this action reflect the use of myth as a quest for the identity of European post-war art, promoted by the practitioners of art informel.<sup>30</sup> Along the same lines, in 1960 the abstract expressionist Franz Kline showed his work in a much publicised exhibition in the American pavilion of the Venice Biennale, linking himself in his statements given in interviews to old masters like Rembrandt and Velázquez.<sup>31</sup> In *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold*, these aspects – quotation and the gestural – are used to highlight the contrasting commonplaces present in expressionist production: in Fontana's piece the fingerprints are covered by several layers of a new industrial material, making it impossible to distinguish the paintbrush or spatula; the reference to the splendour of the olden days is shown to be sickly-sweet and easy to look at through the use of gold and gestuality, elements that are deliberately intended to provide





Fig. 17  
Lucio Fontana working on *Spatial Concept*.  
*New York 10*, 1962  
Photograph by Carlo Cisventi



Fig. 18  
Lucio Fontana visiting his Milan studio after  
it was bombed, 1946

the spectator with a pleasant shock. Far from the meaningful experience proposed by art informel (which he judges to be an evasion of the European post-war culture scene), Fontana attempts to adopt a position as an artist who is aware of the aims of modern art and promotes them by using the best pigments and supports to be had in his own day.

### From baroque metropolis to contemporary metropolis

Far from being univocal, Fontana's mature oeuvre combines the lucid visual economy of a foreigner, a returned migrant's romantic encounter with his homeland and the sarcasm of a Milanese who entrusts himself with the modern reinterpretation of his own cultural past. Crispolti believes that the impact visiting New York in 1961 had on Fontana – the sight of the haven of metal and glass skyscrapers – and his subsequent execution of a new series on the city using metals (*New York*, 1962 [fig. 17]) attests to a prediction of the material progress made by modern art through technology. Fontana also stated of the city in a postcard "It is more beautiful than Venice! Its glass skyscrapers resemble cascades of water that fall from the sky"<sup>32</sup> and decided to change both the support and its functions, establishing in the comparison of his two series an imaginary journey between the baroque metropolis and the contemporary metropolis.<sup>33</sup>

Fontana harnesses his creative impulse of decades to achieve acclaim as an artist and intellectual through the series *Venice* and *New York*. Just as the war destroyed his studio [fig. 18] and gave him the chance to start from scratch after returning to Milan in 1947 (when he publicised the idea that he had begun his professional career when the war ended), the crack that divides *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold* into two is a gesture of culmination and closure of this imagined trajectory: a monument to the *tagli* at the peak of his international career and an act of destruction which he converts into a space for invention. As Giulio Carlo Argan stresses, not even at the peak of his career did he cease to use *Spatial Concept* as a title for his canvases, likening the space he worked on to endless scientific praxis albeit – fortunately – different from the kind that can be approached using numbers and formulas.<sup>34</sup>

## Notes

- 1 *Arte e Contemplazione*, Palazzo Grassi, Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, Venice, July–October 1961.
- 2 *Lucio Fontana: Ten Paintings of Venice*, Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, 21 November–16 December 1961.
- 3 Luca Massimo Barbero, “Lucio Fontana: Venice / New York”. In Luca Massimo Barbero (ed.): *Lucio Fontana: Venezia / New York*, Venice, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, 2006, p. 26.
- 4 Lawrence Alloway: “Man on the Border”. In *Lucio Fontana: Ten Paintings of Venice*, op. cit. note 2, n.p.
- 5 Anthony White: “Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch”. In *Grey Room*, no. 5, autumn 2001, p. 56.
- 6 Barbara Hess: *Lucio Fontana*, London, Taschen, 2006, p. 22.
- 7 Whereas *Arte e Contemplazione* featured 19 pieces, *Ten Paintings of Venice* showed only 10, though it included three that were not included in the Palazzo Grassi exhibition: *Spatial Concept*, *Moon in Venice*; *Spatial Concept*, *Baroque Venice* and *Spatial Concept*, *Sun in St Mark’s Square*.
- 8 Barbara Hess 2006, op. cit., note 6, p. 62.
- 9 Barbero 2006, op. cit., note 3, p. 26.
- 10 Paolo Campiglio, “I Only Believe in Art”. In Barbero (ed.) 2006, op. cit. note 3, p. 204.
- 11 Although Aznavour’s song is from 1964, it is a magnificence example of the cultural products that arose from the bucolic image described above.
- 12 Opinion of Fontana gleaned from his correspondence by Luca Massimo Barbero, in Barbero (ed.) 2006, op. cit., note 3, p. 28.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 14 Enrico Crispolti (ed.): *Fontana, Catalogo generale*. Milan, Electa, 1986, p. 23.
- 15 Italo Tomassoni, “Per una ipotesi barocca”, Rome, Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1963, p. 128: quoted in Campiglio, 36.
- 16 The *Manifiesto Blanco* assumes that all art up to the avant-garde movements is shaped from nature, which moulds the artist’s subconscious (like that of any men) from the origins of reason. Modern art is thus a space for transition that does not succeed in fully breaking away from this dynamic and contemporary artists must take a “second leap” and generate a materialist art suppressing natural forms. [Lucio Fontana et. al.]: *Manifiesto Blanco: nosotros continuamos la evolución del arte* [1946]. Reproduced in *Lucio Fontana: el espacio como exploración*. Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura, 1982, pp. 115–22.
- 17 The prospective view of modern art in relation to the past in the *Manifiesto Blanco* comes close to Venturi’s postulates. One of the most controversial passages deals with the representation of space in Giotto and Cézanne, artistic synthesis and “the three-dimensional effect through pure intuition, without following any rules of perspective” at which both painters arrived. In Lionello Venturi: *El gusto de los primitivos*. Madrid, Alianza, 1991, pp. 207–8.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 19 Pia Gottschaller: *Lucio Fontana: The Artist’s Materials*. Los Angeles, The Getty Conservation Institute, 2012, pp. 97–99.
- 20 David Bomford et al.: *Art in the Making: Italian Painting before 1400*. London, National Gallery, 1989, p. 21.
- 21 Gottschaller 2012, op. cit., note 19, p. 102.
- 22 Gillo Dorfles: “Arte e Contemplazione a Palazzo Grassi”. In *Domus* no. 382, September 1961, p. 43.
- 23 Luca Massimo Barbero, “Milano / Europa”. In Luca Massimo Barbero (ed.), *Gli irripetibili anni ‘60: Un dialogo tra Roma e Milano*. Milan, Skira, 2011, p. 26.
- 24 Carla Lonzi: *Autoritratto*. Bari, De Donato, 1969.
- 25 Lucio Magri: *El sastre de Ulm: El comunismo del siglo XX. Hechos y reflexiones*. Buenos Aires, CLACSO, 2011, pp. 154–55.
- 26 Vanni Codeluppi: “Milano, città della modernità”. In *Gli irripetibili anni ‘60*, op. cit., note 23, p. 13.

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**Notes**

- 27 Buchloh also stresses that until the mid-1950s Fontana signed some of his paintings with a fingerprint – an initial gesture in this mockery of the liberal subjectivist model of art production. Benjamin Buchloh, *Formalismo e historicidad. Modelos y métodos en el arte del siglo XX*. Madrid, Akal, 2004, pp. 43–55.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 29 Toni Toniato: “The Cavallino Constellation”. In Luca Massimo Barbero (ed.), *Venice 1948–1986: The Art Scene*. Milan, Skira, 2006, pp. 105–106.
- 30 Buchloh 2004, *op. cit.*, note 27, p. 15.
- 31 Luca Massimo Barbero and Sileno Salvagnini: “1948 1954”. In Barbero (ed.) 2006 (*Venise...*), *op. cit.*, note 29, pp. 65–67.
- 32 Quoted in Barbero (ed.) 2006 (*Lucio Fontana...*), *op. cit.*, note 3, p. 37.
- 33 Enrico Crispolti: “The Originality of a Master of Anticipation”. In Barbero (ed.) 2006 (*Lucio Fontana...*), *op. cit.*, note 3, p. 53.
- 34 Giulio Carlo Argan: “Comentarios”. In *Lucio Fontana: el espacio como exploración*. Exh. cat., Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura, 1982, p. 114.

# El Tío Paquete: Goya's Prefiguration of Esperpento

Maité Metz

With reality before him Velázquez sees what his eyes really see, El Greco sees what his eyes do not see, Goya sees what no eye sees... Velázquez presents human reality; El Greco, celestial reality; Goya, demoniac reality... And while Velázquez offers serenity and El Greco anxiety, Goya creates unease.<sup>1</sup>

On my first visit to the impressive collections of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, I was struck by a strange painting in the gallery devoted to the nineteenth century. Surrounded by German Romantic landscapes, and sharing a wall with the French artists Géricault and Delacroix, Goya's *El Tío Paquete* attracted my attention. More than that, it fascinated me. It had nothing to do with the other portraits by the master hanging alongside it (an intimate portrait of his friend Asencio Julià and an official portrait of Ferdinand VII). Crudely brushed-in and granular of surface, the face of a laughing blind man looming out of a dark background and filling the picture surface presents an uncompromising display of the accidents of nature.

Painted sometime around 1820, the picture bears comparison to the *Black Paintings* in the Prado, which are typical of Goya's final style. And just as the *Black Paintings* may create an odd sensation, so too does *El Tío Paquete* unsettle the spectator, disturbing as much as fascinating him. The painting is compelling, depending on the circumstances and the individual; it gives rise to attraction or repulsion but leaves no one indifferent.

It's all the more compelling if one is acquainted with Goya as a court painter and the creator of tapestry designs on more frivolous subjects. Ortega y Gasset tackles this issue head on: "The man and the artist who paints *The Crockery Vendor*," which is the fantasy of the best of all possible worlds, "are the same man and the same artist who assassinated the walls of his own house by covering them with the frightening daubs of his 'black paintings.' Everything that is not speaking of this is not speaking of Goya but precisely avoiding the conversation about him."<sup>2</sup> Starobinski reworks this paradox, one which is intrinsic to the artist himself: "Here, the extreme independence of expression is here the achievement of a man who has experienced the most extreme dependence."<sup>3</sup>

No commission is involved in this instance, it seems. Goya is evidently interested in this figure in its own right.

In consonance with the non-academic reading of Malraux,<sup>4</sup> who links the genius of Goya to his refusal to seduce, we will see how *El Tío Paquete*, the image of a harmless, infirm old man, seems emblematic of the break made by Goya with classical aesthetic codes during the 1820s.

It has to be remembered, as well, that at the time Goya was stone deaf (following his serious illness in 1792) and that there is something ironic about the fact that he paints a blind man singing. Ironic, yes, but



Fig. 1  
Francisco de Goya  
*El Tío Paquete*, ca. 1820  
Oil on canvas  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza  
[\[+ info\]](#)





Fig. 2  
Francisco de Goya  
Portrait of Padre José de Lacanal, c. 1826  
Oil on canvas  
Museo Lázaro Galdiano



Fig. 3  
Francisco de Goya  
Lazarillo de Tormes, 1808-12  
Oil on canvas  
Private collection

certainly not gratuitous. This is a popular figure that recurs in his work, one which testifies to his attraction to the faces of the unfortunate.

Alongside other works by the artist, *El Tío Paquete* provides eloquent testimony, therefore, to Goya's incessant search for an ever-greater artistic freedom that makes a definitive break with classical constraints: "1792: illness is to sweep aside all these dreams. [...] He is beyond recall. One of the most alluring artists of the eighteenth century has just died."<sup>5</sup> Henceforth, and thanks to Goya, something decisive and fundamentally new would come to pass: modern art. "Modern art was no doubt born the day the idea of art and the idea of beauty found themselves at odds. Maybe because of Goya."<sup>6</sup>

#### "The famous blind man"

This inscription, discernible on the back of the painting prior to its relining in 1887, has permitted the figure to be identified as Tío Paquete (*Paquete*, Packet or Bundle in English, is a play on *Paquito*, a diminutive of Francisco), a blind man famed for his gifts as a singer and guitarist who used to sit on the steps of the church of San Felipe el Real.

José Gudiol<sup>7</sup> dates the painting to the years 1823-24: "Two portraits may likewise date from this period: they are both expressionist, the first moderately so, the other to that point of caricature and horrendous distortion that constituted one of the essential poles of Goya's aesthetic, counterbalancing and offsetting the refinements of beauty." The more measured is the one of Padre José de Canal and "the more deformed portrait – in which the painter manages to almost entirely eliminate the eyes by depicting his model in a gale of dark laughter – is Tío Paquete's: his resemblance to the figures in the *Black Paintings* is total, but with greater, not to say overweening, intensity due to the isolated nature of the portrait and the absence of any allegorical or literary meaning."

Following Gudiol in his commentary, it is already a question of an "expressionist" quality, of "caricature and horrendous distortion," and of "dark laughter" (which we will come back to). What strikes him, in the meantime, is the fact that the face is particularly isolated and devoid of any reference to an iconographic motif. This blind man is a person with a disability whom Goya "obliges" us to contemplate. He has nothing to do with any literary character, as was the case with the figures representing an episode from *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* in 1808-12, the literary illustration of which added refinement to the triviality of the scene represented.

Our protagonist, in head-and-shoulders format, his puffy face thrown back, is seemingly shaken by joyous laughter. He stands out against the dark background, loosely painted in thick paint. His large head is surrounded by concentric brushstrokes that accentuate the



Fig. 4  
Detail of fig. 1

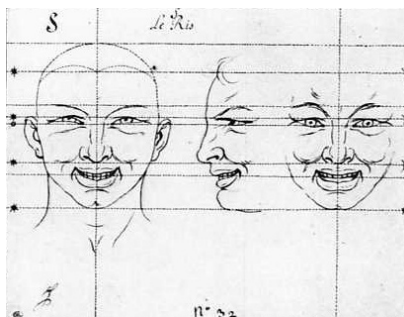


Fig. 5  
Charles Le Brun  
*Mirth*, 1690  
Drawing. 200 x 256 mm  
Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 6  
Charles Le Brun  
*Mirth, Expressions of the Passions of the Soul*, 1727  
Engraved by Gérard Audran

bust's impression of vivacity. His coarse physiognomy is reinforced by the lightness of touch and the impasto (above all on the forehead), typical of Goya's much more relaxed final manner. The infirmity of the personage is painted in all its crudity: the eyes with their sealed eyelids are swollen, the flat nose presents two flaring nostrils, while the toothless open mouth with its thick lips causes his expression to waver between smile and rictus. The loaded brushstrokes at mouth level accentuate the obscenity of the gap teeth. We are a long way from Charles Le Brun's subtle theorization of the passions (see, in particular, "Mirth" in his *Expressions of the Passions of the Soul* of 1727, engraved by Gérard Audran). The uncertainty of expression is what gives the face its strange quality, somewhere between bonhomie and a grimace: we hesitate between laughing with him or turning away from such a repulsive physiognomy.

### The refusal to seduce

What strikes one in this portrait is Goya's refusal to embellish his model. On the contrary, he accentuates its monstrous traits via a particularly crude handling of the anatomy (ravaged eyes, flattened nose, gaping mouth). This deliberate bias places him radically at odds with an entire classical tradition of pictorial representation.

It has to be remembered, however, that Goya has an ambiguous relationship to academic tradition. The man who was admitted to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in 1780, then named Court Painter to Charles IV in 1788, begins, and for a time pursues, his career in the very bosom of officialdom, occupying different posts of the most prestigious kind. All the same, the artist soon takes exception to this form of institutional discipline, which is liable to curb the imagination and even the talent of an artist in the making. He chooses, by degrees, to break with decorum and the cult of Ideal Beauty that was prevailing at the time in every aesthetic conception. In that respect Malraux considers him "one decorator among many [...] who discovers his genius the day he dares to stop pleasing people."<sup>8</sup>

And so little by little he defines his own rules and "claims he has had but three masters: nature, Velázquez, and Rembrandt."<sup>9</sup> He rapidly becomes part of a naturalist tendency and seeks to draw inspiration from what is before his eyes: "My brush ought not to see better than I."<sup>10</sup>

He demands ever greater artistic freedom, which depends on the promulgation of caprice (*capricho*) and invention (*invención*). He paints non-commissioned cabinet pictures, some of the subjects of which haunt him during his illness. In 1794 he sends the Academy a series of small paintings, about which he says, "I have managed to make observations that are not usually allowed in the case of commissioned works, in which caprice and invention are not given free rein."<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 7  
Francisco de Goya  
*Yard with Lunatics*, 1794  
Oil on tinplate  
Meadows Museum, Dallas

Henceforth, “caprice” and “invention” will become two basic concepts in his work. In 1797 he retires from his position as Director of Painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando. And he gives ever greater prominence to printmaking, which becomes the medium of choice for a more intimate vision: the declaration prior to the publishing of *Los Caprichos*, which appeared in *El Diario de Madrid* on Wednesday, 6 February 1799, is a veritable profession of faith.<sup>12</sup> We may also follow Malraux in his analysis of the artistic change wrought by Goya with *Los Caprichos*: he “transforms the function of painting, which is no longer meant to seduce the art lover, nor to annex his imaginary world by adorning it. He proclaims a new declaration of the rights of the painter.”<sup>13</sup> And Malraux elects to present the new Goya (after the tapestry cartoons) as “the first *metteur en scène* of the absurd and the greatest performer of anguish the West has ever known.” This evolution in the direction of deliberate subjectivity – which calls on the blackness of printing ink – seems to culminate, then, in the murals that go to form the *Black Paintings*, before lingering on in his exile in Bordeaux.

In a nutshell Goya firmly pursues the greater advocacy of the power of the free imagination in his work.

### An iconography of the ugly

In *The Fascination of Ugliness*<sup>14</sup> Murielle Gagnebin studies Goya’s oeuvre as being the precursor of an art which uses ugliness as an aesthetic category in its own right. If the first chapter of her book is called “The Emergence of Ugliness in the Work of Goya,” it has to be remembered that the manifestations of ugliness in the artist do not appear *ex nihilo*, out of the blue, but are part and parcel of a history of representation: of the twisted and disproportionate body to begin with,<sup>15</sup> of witchcraft, Satanism and sadism, and of the taste for cruelty.<sup>16</sup> Of the emotions too (melancholy, madness, furor).<sup>17</sup> And in the artistic tradition of the painting of Northern Europe in the sixteenth century, of Bosch, Grünewald, Dürer, Brueghel, Teniers, Callot (*The Miseries and Misfortunes of War*), Ribera, and of course Velázquez.

Ugliness in Goya is not a potential ugliness, it is an active one. It is genuinely actualized. Rather than hiding the overwhelmingly human ugliness omnipresent in reality, Goya shows it. How does Goya depict the common people? “The fleshy, derisive faces of the carnival, dwarfs, hunchbacks, old hags: outlines are fractured everywhere, hands and legs are twisted by rheumatism and hard work, smiles are toothless. In the public squares drunks and potbellied monks rub shoulders with jaundiced, gaunt procuresses and bawds. [...] Generally speaking, the people is not an attractive proposition in Goya. Worn down by the daily grind, deformed by the vagaries of life, their bodies and faces are ugly. What’s more, Goya seems to be fond of contrasts:



Fig. 8  
José de Ribera  
*Democritus*, ca. 1630  
Oil on canvas  
Private collection



Fig. 9  
José de Ribera  
*The Sense of Touch* (detail), 1632  
Oil on canvas, 125 x 98 cm  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid



Fig. 10  
Francisco de Goya,  
*Aesop*, copy of  
Velázquez, 1778,  
etching, Museo  
del Prado

he freely juxtaposes young *majas* full of sap and old women huddled over their woes and failures in the same scene. In his painting the conflict between beauty and ugliness attains a degree of fascination never attained before then.<sup>18</sup> On that score, rather than the refusal of seduction that we referred to above, and which we have taken to be specific to the new artistic attitude of Goya, the latter “seems to have been particularly interested in the degradation of Beauty, conceived of as an archetype.”<sup>19</sup>

The concern with ugliness is by no means an anachronism in Goya's time. Admitted to the Royal of Fine Arts of San Fernando in June 1780, Jovellanos presents a “Eulogy to the Fine Arts” in which he traces the history of Spanish painting. He considered the chief traits of a number of painters, including Ribera, in whom he admires the fervor of his brushwork, the vigor of his chiaroscuro, and his incomparable skill in intensely expressing “the effects of agitated humanity, now wizened with age, now steeped in penitence, now broken, and moribund in the agony of its torment.”<sup>20</sup> In Velázquez he sees the painter who rejects “the *duende* known as ideal beauty.” And let us not forget that Moratín had, with his friends, formed a cod society of *acalophiles*, or lovers of ugliness, of which Goya may have been a member.<sup>21</sup> One source of influence could also have been the appearance in 1789 of Arteaga's *Philosophical Investigations into Ideal Beauty Considered as an Object of the Arts of Imitation*, in which numerous disagreeable and even horrible objects drawn from nature acquire “luster” and beauty on the canvas.

### A taste for the “lower orders”

We know how much Goya admired Velázquez, some of whose buffoons he reproduced in an etching. He could also have been influenced by the paintings of Bosch in the Royal Collections, whose monstrous figures and whose denunciation of the vices may have struck him (the link between Bosch and Goya remains to be studied). In his refusal of appearances and his immersion in the semi-darkness of existential truths, Goya sets in motion the social spectacle of illusions. He inverts the moral codes and their traditional visual treatment (aesthetic ugliness being associated with moral ugliness). And he effects a complete change of perspective.

As Velázquez was rehabilitating the mendicant, in the shape of exemplary figures of wisdom like Aesop and Menippus, Goya (who copies these figures in his prints) takes an interest in the beggars that painting had disdained until then, endowing them with a special kind of dignity. Furthermore, it was said of Aesop that “the main defect he had, apart from his ugliness, was his inability to speak; moreover he was toothless and couldn't articulate properly.”<sup>22</sup> Is not the mute





Fig. 11  
Francisco de Goya  
*The Blind Guitarist, and detail, 1778*  
Oil on canvas  
Museo del Prado



Fig. 12  
Francisco de Goya  
*Majo with a Guitar, 1779*  
Oil on canvas  
Museo del Prado



Fig. 13  
Diego Velázquez  
*The Buffoon Calabacillas, 1637-39*  
Oil on canvas  
Museo del Prado



Fig. 14  
Francisco de Goya  
*The Pilgrimage of St Isidore, and detail, 1820-23*  
Oil on canvas  
Museo del Prado



Fig. 15  
Francisco de Goya  
*Blind Singer, 1624-28*  
Etching with aquatint  
Museo Lázaro Galdiano

the finest guardian of the truth? Just as, paradoxically, the blind man is the most farsighted of all.

Among the many popular figures Goya presents (the *majo*, the *maja*, and the *alcahueta*, for example), the guitarist-singer appears time and again in his work. Likewise part of the picaresque tradition of Spain, he is a public entertainer, a modern clown of sorts, like the dwarves of Velázquez who amuse the rich and famous. In his denunciation of appearances, this figure serves as a mirror, as a revealer of the truths masked by the social comedy. Is not the buffoon the only one can get away with anything under the pretext that laughter excuses all? In that respect Goya appears to have learned the lesson of Velázquez.<sup>23</sup>

As for the figure of the guitarist-singer: this is a motif Goya develops from his first tapestry cartoons onwards, and is one he reworks throughout *Los Caprichos*. Whether he be part of a crowd and stands out from it – the motif of the *muchedumbre* (throng) or *masa sin persona* (faceless mass) also recurs in his oeuvre – or whether he appears alone, the manner in which his depiction evolves is significant. Like the general run of Goya's work, which becomes increasingly "black," the artist causes this figure to evolve into something ever more disturbing. The song changes into a lament. The features are transformed into something more and more contorted. And what is there to say about the totally deformed countenance of the person in the foreground of *The Pilgrimage of St Isidore*, who opens his gaping mouth and rolls his eyes? He appears to be the guide of a crowd of deformed human beings who are literally sticking closely to one another.

*El Tío Paquete* is apparently in keeping with the increasingly somber vision described during the course of Goya's oeuvre. One of his last *Caprichos* presents the figure of *The Blind Singer*, his physiognomy sketched in crudely. Inasmuch as it reworks an already utilized motif and offers an exaggerated version of it, the painting of *El Tío Paquete* examines the question of Goya's "aged style," "how (not via which decision) an artist completes his work [...], such a decision is not precisely that of organizing the *real* (history, "life itself") more efficiently, it is a paradoxical enterprise that consists of starting over. Of convening the actors, the old subjects, so as to have them perform once more without costumes."<sup>24</sup> For Goethe, growing old involves "the gradual withdrawal from the world of appearances."

### From gaping mouth to cruel laughter

One of the forms of the veritable destruction of the ideal implemented by Goya in *El Tío Paquete*, over and above the actual infirmity of the blind man (and his desperately closed eyes), appears to us to be personified by the extreme gape of his mouth. It is this exaggerated



Fig. 16  
Agesandro,  
Polidoro y  
Atenodoro  
*Laocoön and His  
Sons* (detail)  
50 BCE  
Vatican Museum



Fig. 17  
Caravaggio  
*Medusa*, 1597  
Oil on canvas  
Uffizi Gallery



Fig. 18  
José de Ribera  
*Titius* (detail), 1632  
Oil on canvas  
Museo del Prado



Fig. 19  
Francisco de Goya  
*Disparates, 4, Simpleton's Folly*, 1815–19  
Etching, aquatint, drypoint and burnisher  
Museo del Prado

rictus that makes him monstrous. For it must be remembered that the representation of an open mouth in pictorial tradition is profoundly improper: the torments and disorders of the soul which deform the countenance being prohibited and the expression of the passions needing to be measured.

Fichte, in his *Foundations of Natural Right*, draws attention to three characteristics that distinguish man from the animals, one of which is the human mouth and the snout of the beast. Also the mouth “which nature destined to the lowest and most egotistical office, alimentation, becomes, thanks to culture, the instrument of all social sentiments, just as it is the organ of communication. The more the individual or the more the race, since in fact stable elements are what are involved here, reveal themselves to be animal-like and egotistical, the more their mouths have the look of prominent jaws. On the other hand, the more the individual grows in moral stature, the more his mouth is effaced beneath the arch of his meditative forehead.”<sup>25</sup> Judging by the protruding chins and all the open jaws in Goya, we see how his figures are closer to the animal than to the human, and are far from conveying the least “moral grandeur.”

Besides, more than open or prominent mouths, Goya has knowingly depicted vociferous mouths. For Winckelmann (*Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*), in classical representation the act of crying out is incompatible with greatness of soul, the criteria of propriety and plausibility. And the gaping mouth cannot be depicted because of the incompatibility of vehement expression with the beauty of the countenance. According to Lessing in the *Laocoön*, a cavernous, gaping mouth gives the face a repulsive look. For him, the cry is one of the first motifs of the non-representable in art. This is the reason why Laocoön, despite his suffering, controls himself and does not cry out.

To this canon of classical representation, which prohibits the open mouth, the painting of Caravaggio responds with an initial break by opting for the depiction of the disagreeable, the disgusting. Ribera steps into this new breach and makes himself the representative of a veritable “aesthetic of horror,” in Giambattista Marino words.<sup>26</sup>

Goya is inscribed, therefore, within the advance in picture-making initiated by Caravaggio and Ribera, among others, an advance which shakes up the categories of the beautiful and the ugly. He introduces the monstrous, the deformed, the grotesque through character types that will become recurrent in his artwork. As non-exhaustive examples, we may cite the gnomes and *duendes* (elves) that proliferate in *Los Caprichos*, above all; the madman, be he mirthful or ferocious; and the fool or idiot (*el bobo*). All the figures in this imaginary “bestiary” have deformed countenances, due in large part to their disturbing rictuses.



Fig. 20  
Francisco de Goya  
*Phantom Dancing with  
Castanets*, c. 1825–28  
Black pencil and  
lithographic pencil  
Museo del Prado

Fig. 21  
Francisco de Goya  
*The Threshing Ground  
or Summer*, and detail, 1786  
Oil on canvas  
Museo del Prado



Fig. 22  
Francisco de Goya  
*Los Caprichos*, 30,  
*Why Hide Them?*, 1797–99  
Etching, burnished aquatint  
and drypoint  
Museo del Prado

Fig. 23  
Francisco de Goya  
*Los Caprichos*, 26, *They  
Already Have a Seat*, 1797–99  
Etching, burnished aquatint  
and drypoint  
Museo del Prado



Fig. 24  
Francisco de Goya  
*Two Women and a Man*,  
1820–23  
Oil on canvas  
Museo del Prado



So it is with No. 4 of *Los Disparates*, *Simpleton's Folly*: the giant idiot “who was dancing licentiously to the sound of the castanets at carnival time” has a terrifying smile; enormous in size, he is accompanied by ghastly heads and appears before two smaller figures who recoil in horror. The engraving reworks the drawing entitled *Phantom Dancing with Castanets* in which a mocking figure, half-smiling, half-grimacing, dancing to the sound of the castanets, presents the same simpleton's face with his big flat nose, his beady eyes, and his wide smiling mouth.

Speaking of the male figures Goya paints, Murielle Gagnebin also arrives at the conclusion that “More often than not they have their mouths open, and they either smile beatifically, which gives their faces a smarmy, soft look, or they yell and gesticulate like puppets moved by some invisible string. Their countenance is never seductive.”<sup>27</sup>

A tremendous violence suffuses all of Goya's work, and this as early as the tapestry cartoons in which the faces of the figures can express great cruelty beneath the outer appearance of joyful amusement.

*Los Caprichos* abound in the most disturbing of worlds, the laughter of the figures represented in them being intended, more often than not, to underline the corrosive critique that is under way.

And the mocking laughter of the woman in the background of *Two Women and a Man*, one of Goya's *Black Paintings*? The scene was described for the first time, along with the remaining scenes, in Charles Yriarte's 1867 monographic study of the artist by, under the title *Two Women Laughing Their Heads Off*. At the same time the expression of the man in the foreground is indefinable: is he opening his mouth in pleasure or in pain? Also called *The Onanist*, his face seems to indicate the spasms of a solitary pleasure.

Light-hearted or solemn? We can never grasp the real nature of the laughter of the figures depicted by Goya. For the artist creates a new world, a universe of men with animal traits and of anthropomorphized animals, a mélange of genres which converts all farce into ferocious satire. The accusation Goya levels is striking in its radicalism, and fascinates the spectator just as much as it disturbs him.

This is because Goya stems from a tradition for which *caricare* means to exaggerate something in the service of a didactic process. But Goya goes much further than the kind of caricature that strives to be corrective and which remains bounded by characterization. His personal indictment is taken to its most extreme point. The comic aspect, which mitigates the cruelest caricature, is gradually effaced in his work, becoming no more than the actual expression of violence, of human perversion. This is why Baudelaire will say of Goya that he is an “artistic caricaturist” due to the universality and the atemporality of his critique, which means that his caricature is not uniquely subject to the politico-social context. But while the caricaturist aims to provoke





Fig. 25  
Francisco de Goya  
*Group of Caricatured  
Heads, 1797–98*  
Private collection, Paris



Fig. 26  
Francisco de Goya  
*An Entertainment with  
Masks (The Burial of the  
Sardine), 1814–16*  
Museo del Prado



Fig. 27  
Francisco de Goya  
*The Burial of the Sardine,*  
detail, 1808–12  
Museo de la Real Academia  
de Bellas Artes de San  
Fernando



Fig. 28  
Francisco de Goya  
*The Blind Guitarist ca. 1778*  
Etching  
Biblioteca Nacional Española

laughter, for his part the expressionist seeks to provoke dread, revolt, horror. Goya is both of these.

Regenerative exorcism, beneficent catharsis: in Gracián–Goya (the *descifrador*) the contemplation of ugliness begins, or rather ends, in redemptive laughter. Even if the period of calm is generally short-lived, once the laughter dies down the anguish returns. “The abandonment of seduction does not give Goya his new style, to be sure, but it allows him to find it. And a whole crowd of new figures, whose description [*écriture*] is a description in two dimensions, is proliferating before his eyes: caricatures.”<sup>28</sup>

It is also particularly appropriate to read the oeuvre of Goya through the prism of Carnival, as Victor I. Stoichita has done.<sup>29</sup> With its excesses and its absurdities, Carnival, a moment of absolute freedom in which all is permitted, would show us the somber and nebulous landscape of the Spain or the world of his time. In many of Goya’s works particular value is placed on the generalized system of inversion (the world upside-down). An inversion in the deeply revealing sense because in turning representation into “the hyperbole of the lie” a new illumination and a new meaning are given to reality.

If we compare the preparatory drawing for *The Burial of the Sardine* with the final painting, we see just how much laughter always ends up winning the day. The preparatory drawing was supposed to illustrate the expression of joy of what seems to be a group of nuns and monks, and therefore the return to civil and religious norms on Ash Wednesday (the word *mortus* features on the banner). There is a radical change in the final painting: the inscription on the banner has given way to a face at once jovial and grimacing, the crowd is jubilant, the masks and disguises worn by the figures have replaced the soutanes.

### “Goya was the one who invented esperpento”

This is how, through the character of Max, Valle-Inclán puts it in his *Bohemian Lights*.<sup>30</sup> In his view, only a systematically deformed aesthetic can give an account of the tragic meaning of Spanish life. When Valle-Inclán formalizes the conceptual contours of this category, which combines the grotesque, the absurd and the tragicomic, it is manifestly clear just how much he is indebted to Goya.

The laughing, even mirthful, figures of the painter conceal a degree of depravity and pain that renders them disturbing and pitiful. From laughter to tears, Goya proposes a sort of dialectic of sadness and derision. This dialectic had already found expression in the ideas of Heraclitus and Democritus. In Goya it seems to come together in this grotesque face worthy of tragicomic Greek masks.

Laughter would be at once the symptom of, and the remedy for, melancholy. It is the manifestation of the close, paradoxical relationship





Fig. 29  
Copy of Francisco de Goya y Lucientes  
*The Guitarist*  
Gouache on white paper  
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen

between farce and horror (later on, the words *astracanada*, buffoonery, and *esperpento* will be used),<sup>31</sup> between sarcasm and pathos. It is the means par excellence for the expression of the grotesque peculiar to Goya. By grotesque we mean all kinds of deformation that reveal an intimate, more authentic state of things, the expression of hybridity, and the place where contraries are in confrontation. It is the ambiguity of expression, somewhere between smile and grimace, pleasure and suffering, which prefigures the intuition that “everything in creation is not humanly *beautiful*, that the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the unshapely beside the graceful, the grotesque on the reverse of the sublime” (Victor Hugo in the preface to *Cromwell*).

Faced with the cynical facts of the world depicted by Goya – he is the “disenchanted disenchanter” – is there a glimmer of hope? At least the deaf painter appears to attribute to song – the inaccessibility of which must fascinate him – a prophylactic virtue. A copy of a Goya etching of *The Blind Guitarist*, centered on the figure of the singer, is accompanied by this refrain from *Don Quixote* (Part I, Chapter 22): “He who sings scares away his woes.”

## Notes

- 1 Martínez Ruiz, José. “Con Goya un momento.” *ABC* (29 March 1945).
- 2 José Ortega y Gasset, *Velázquez, Goya, and the Dehumanization of Art*, tr. Alexis Brown (New York: Norton, 1972).
- 3 Jean Starobinski, 1789, *Les emblèmes de la raison* (Paris: Flammarion, 1973), p. 144.
- 4 André Malraux, *Saturne: Le destin, l’art et Goya*, in *Oeuvres Complètes IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989–96).
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 André Malraux, note to the preface to *Saturne: Le destin, l’art et Goya*, *op. cit.* This was expressed in 1945, in the preface to the catalogue of Fautrier’s *Otages* exhibited at the Galerie Drouin, Paris.
- 7 José Gudiol, *Goya, 1746-1828. Biographie, analyse critique et catalogue des peintures* (Paris: Weber, 1970).
- 8 Malraux, *op. cit.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Letter to Bernardo de Iriarte, 4 January 1794.
- 12 “A collection of prints of imaginary subjects, invented and etched by Don Francisco Goya. The author is convinced that it is as proper for painting to criticize human error and vice as for poetry and prose to do so, although criticism is usually taken to be exclusively the province of literature. He has selected from amongst the innumerable foibles and follies to be found in any civilized society, and from the common prejudices and deceitful practices which custom, ignorance or self-interest have hallowed, those subjects which he feels to be the more suitable material for satire, and which, at the same time, stimulate the artist’s imagination. [...] The author has not followed the precedents of any other artist, nor has he been able to copy Nature herself. It is very difficult to imitate Nature, and a successful imitation is worthy of admiration. [...] Painting (like poetry) chooses from universals what is most apposite. It brings together in a single imaginary being, circumstances and characteristics which occur in nature in many different persons. With such an ingeniously arranged combination of properties the artist produces a faithful likeness, but also earns

## Notes

- the title of inventor rather than of servile copyist." Translated in Nigel Glendinning, *Goya and His Critics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 49.
- 13 Malraux, *op. cit.*, pp. 100–1.
- 14 Murielle Gagnebin, *Fascination de la laideur. L'en-deçà psychanalytique du laid* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 1994).
- 15 For the phenomenology of torture see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, 1977); Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Edward Peters, *Torture* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985).
- 16 See Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), Ch. VIII, "Witchcraft, Satanism, Sadism." Also see Lucienne Domergue, *Goya: des délits et des peines* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000) who considers Goya a pioneer in Spain for his systematic exploration of "all forms of legal violence" in the context of the increasing critique of the prison system, as in Beccaria's *Dei delitti e pene* (1764) and John Howard's *The State of the Prisons in England and Wales: With Preliminary Observations, and An Account of Some Foreign Prisons* (1777). See, lastly, Daniel Arasse and his analyses of pictorial scenes of execution in *La Guillotine et l'imaginaire de la Terreur* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987).
- 17 See Nadeije Laneyrie-Dagen, *L'invention du corps* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), notably the chapter entitled "The Body, Mirror of the Emotions."
- 18 Gagnebin, *op. cit.*
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 20 Edith Helman, *Trasmundo de Goya* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1963), p.103.
- 21 Enrique Lafuente Ferrari, quoting Helman, *op. cit.*, p. VIII: Helman, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
- 22 "Vida de Esopo," in *Fábulas de Esopo. Vida de Esopo. Fábulas de Babrio* (Madrid: Gredos, 1978), p. 189.
- 23 "With his six or seven freaks Velázquez is offering up a mirror and a lesson to kings and courtiers, since they have finer apparel but are as limp, freakish and ugly as their 'men of pleasure,' that is to say men of wit, laughter, fun, and grotesque vacation. The nobles need buffoons, dwarves and *meninas* at hand, the better to constantly contrast with their own arrogance, (relative) perfection, and flamboyance. But Velázquez paints a dwarf with the same solemnity, majesty and intention as if he were painting a princess or a prince. He is indirectly degrading his 'noble' painting style. (Goya would be more daring, later, and directly paint real freaks). The 'other' Velázquez, in short, wreaks his revenge and gets his own back for his Court painting by exalting the buffoon, and this is buffoonery indeed. In *Las Meninas* he manages to mix the two; all the more reason for this being his finest picture. As for modernity, for there are still those who dispute this, Velázquez flings the aesthetic of the ugly, *feísmo*, in our faces, and out of this there would come Goya, Solana, Picasso, Nonell, and many another. [...] Painting dwarves and buffoons evades the commission and unmasks ignoble nobles, finger-snapping ladies. The decadence of Spain, which begins in its painting." (Francisco Umbral, *Mis placeres y mis días* (Barcelona: Espasa Calpe, 1994).
- 24 Jean-Louis Schefer, *Goya, la dernière hypothèse* (Montrouge: Maeght, 1998).
- 25 J.G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, ed. Frederick Neuhouser, trans. Michael Baur (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- 26 See the catalogue of the exhibition curated by Miguel Falomir, *Las Furias. Alegoría política y desafío artístico*, Museo del Prado, 21 January–4 May 2014.
- 27 Gagnebin, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
- 28 Malraux, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
- 29 Victor I. Stoichita and Anna Maria Coderch, *El último carnaval. Un ensayo sobre Goya* (Madrid: Siruela, 2000).
- 30 Ramón del Valle-Inclán, *Luces de bohemia. Esperpento* (Barcelona: Austral, 2010), p. 168.
- 31 See Alonso Zamora Vicente, *La realidad esperpéntica* (Madrid: Gredos, 1969) and Valle-Inclán, *op. cit.*