

Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light

The extraordinary everyday

National Gallery, London, 18th March - 7th July

At first you don't even notice the heavily-laden trio nearing the top of their perilous ascent. You can see the join where Sorolla extended the canvas by a third, using symmetry to blend them into the rock face. The blinding panoramic brilliance of sun-drenched boulders meets risk and illicit thrill. Both are answered by the deep glinting Mediterranean azure. Playful, joyous, and technically consummate, 'The smugglers' was commissioned by the American 'king of tobacco' and perfectly encapsulates the artist's breezy quintessence.



The smugglers, 1919.

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

It is easy to understand the appeal. The sixty curated paintings demonstrate astounding technical range, a keen eye for social observation, and – above all - consummate mastery of movement, texture, and sunlight. His first job as a young photographer's lighting assistant was clearly formative and imbued a keen eye for composition. Many of Sorolla's works resemble snapshots, often featuring gleaming skin and extravagant bolts of fabric overlaid with daringly perfect shocks of white.



The pink robe. After the bath. 1916

Critics scorn Sorolla's lack of originality and his inability to elevate gorgeous pictures to the level of meaningful art. The first charge is right-on. A true generalist, Sorolla mastered a bewildering range of styles and often imitated his contemporaries for commissioned works. This makes the show quite a dislocating experience; moving from vivid, soul-opening gardens and seascapes to rooms hung with dark classical portraits or quasi-anthropological studies of Spanish traditional dress, seemingly from a different artist altogether. The disorientation is doubly frustrating because Sorolla is at his best when his brushstrokes are long, fast and arcing; describing the play of light in billowing linen and dancing aquamarine in his own inimitable style. I found myself wanting to skip past clever imitations and dense brushwork to the crowd-pleasing joyful abandon of bold, colourful vim.

The second accusation – that he largely fails to imbue his work with deeper meaning – is accurate but misplaced. Sorolla's most winning paintings depict carefree and blissfully uncomplicated events like children playing at the beach and his family just hanging out. Where his subjects are totally at

ease, incognizant of the artist's gaze, Sorolla's paintings are characterised by a beautiful trusting intimacy – as simple and as significant as silence with a friend. Deep symbolic meaning isn't needed here, indeed it would rob these paintings of the very quality that made me smile involuntarily.



The white boat, Javea. 1905

The extraordinary everyday is also captured in a number of works that confront viewers with the value and lived experience of people on the margins of society; disabled children, a wounded Christ-like fisherman, a convict, a drunk. However even in his painting of humble factory workers it is Sorolla's impossible sunbeam that steals the show (Boxing raisins, Javea 1901).

Protean and prolific, I think the Spaniard's most unassuming paintings find the deepest resonance for today's audience. His offering of simplicity, trusting familial intimacy and fun are a welcome respite in a complex, busy, and fragmented 21st century. Sorolla's unapologetic joie de vivre justifies the steep entry price. This show shouldn't be missed.



La siesta, 1911 (if there's space)