

SOROLLA AND SUMMER

Far from experiencing his summers as a time of relaxation, Joaquín Sorolla (Valencia, 1863 - Madrid, 1923) devoted them to his favourite and most successful pictorial theme: life on the seashore, painted from first-hand observation.

Sorolla's earliest paintings on this subject focus on the tasks of fishing, with boats, fishermen at work and their wives waiting on shore under the fierce Mediterranean sun. Together with these scenes, depictions of summer holidays on the beach were the most popular within the artist's oeuvre. They offer a reflection on the concept of the sea as it evolved from the mid-19th century: from an appreciation of its therapeutic properties to the emergence of the fashion for the summer holiday as a time for entertainment and socialising.

Through a carefully chosen group of works, *Sorolla and summer* introduces visitors to the way in which the artist reflected these new ideas in his work. Sorolla himself adopted the new custom of summer holidays and his depictions of this subject reveal two principal concerns centred on his own activities at this time of year. Firstly, his scenes on the Mediterranean coast, with a particular interest in his native Valencia, capture all the pleasure of the local people, with naked children, girls in light bathing robes and swimmers in contact with nature. Secondly, and in parallel to his growing reputation and consequent social ascent, Sorolla stayed at various places on the Cantabrian coast which were favoured by the social elites in the summer. He conveyed the distinguished tone of Biarritz, Zarauz and San Sebastián under a very different light, in compositions centred on elegantly dressed women located in spaces devised for socialising. This context particularly encouraged the artist's creation of his "colour notes", as he himself called them; small-format paintings in which he depicted his impressions of the natural world in the most direct manner.

The group of works presented here thus shows how the subject of summer allows us to follow the evolution of Sorolla's painting and to appreciate the modernity achieved by his visual language. The exhibition concludes with the painter in the final phase of his career when, during breaks from the major project for the *Vision of Spain* commission for the Hispanic Society of America, he found rest and relaxation in depicting scenes of work and leisure on the seashore, once again delighting in his favourite subject.

Valencian Fisherwomen

1903

Oil on canvas

Diputació de València

INV. 2412

Following Sorolla's significant success with *The Return from Fishing* at the Paris Salon of 1895, a work represented by a study displayed at the start of the exhibition, the subject of coastal activities started to predominate in his work. These are compositions which reflect a general interest in realistically depicting scenes of daily life that was characteristic of naturalist painting of the last third of the 19th century, works in which the depiction of light and atmospheric effects plays a key role.

In his Valencian scenes Sorolla reveals an idealised vision of classical Mediterranean culture, a theme rediscovered by an entire generation of modern artists. The sensation of harmony and solemnity in the figures, concepts characteristic of classical antiquity, combine with the vitality and dynamism contributed by the Mediterranean light and landscape. In this oil the artist translates these characteristics into the dignity of the work being carried out by a group of Valencian women who prepare to take the freshly caught fish to the market for sale. In the middle-ground various boats wait to be dragged on shore by oxen at the end of the working day.

Sorolla executed this painting in the summer of 1903 at a time when he was intensely engaged in creating works for an exhibition in Berlin the following year. In comparison, *Valencian Fisherwoman with Baskets* or *Bringing in the Boat*, both painted in the summer of 1916, illustrate a completely different moment when the artist, then staying in his native city, gave himself over to these subjects in the manner of a metaphor of his own leisure and relaxation.

Sketch for Sad Inheritance!

1899

Oil on canvas

Colección particular

Sad Inheritance! is one of the most important works of Sorolla's entire career, earning him the Grand Prix at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900 and fully establishing his international reputation. This study, painted in Valencia in the summer of 1899, depicts a group of sick and disabled boys from the San Juan de Dios home for sick children, who in the final version of the work are shown as being watched over by a monk from that Order. The painting focuses on the important theme of the therapeutic properties of the sea, an idea that emerged in the 19th century in the context of hygienist theories. With the Industrial Revolution cities had become unhealthy places and medicine of the time recommended trips to the coast in order to enjoy the healing powers of clean air and sea bathing. The location of this Valencian home for sick children was in fact chosen in order to maximise the health benefits of the coast.

The boys seen in the background are enjoying sea bathing and it is these figures that mark the origins of Sorolla's scenes of leisure and enjoyment on the beach which would become such a popular part of his output and which we can associate with the emergence of the fashion for summer holidays in the second half of the 19th century. Coastal villages soon began to develop into locations that attracted a growing number of visitors who left the city in summer in search not only of clean sea air and the benefits of bathing but also of places to relax and socialise.

Swimming Woman, Jávea

1905

Oil on canvas

Museo Sorolla, Madrid

INV. 718

In 1905 Sorolla spent the summer in Jávea in search of motifs for the works he would be exhibiting at his major solo exhibition at the Galerie Georges Petit in Paris the following year. His works from this painting campaign focus on dazzling sunbeams reflected on the waters of the Mediterranean and on the landscape of jagged rocks which provide the setting for scenes of girls playing on the shoreline in small bays or depictions of swimmers whose bodies blend into the water under the surface.

The latter subject is depicted in this canvas, in which Sorolla shows a woman who has been identified as his wife Clotilde. She wears a long white tunic and is seen swimming in water tinted a vibrant yellow by the setting sun. The painter captures a typically modern leisure moment that reflects the new enthusiasm for swimming, employing a language which has been associated with both Symbolism and Fauvism as well as Pre-Raphaelite painting. The use of an exceptionally free, vigorous brushstroke with its vibrant tone means that line gives way to areas of colour which dissolve the outlines of the figure in one of the most expressive examples of the fusion between man and nature.

Within Sorolla's work this is one of the essential aspects that differentiates his depictions of the Mediterranean summer from his Cantabrian summer scenes: the figures abandon themselves to the pleasure of the feel of the sand, the movement of the waves, the gentle sea breeze and sunbathing in compositions that explore the connection with nature as a state which modern society was losing.

María on the Beach at Zarauz

1910

Oil on canvas

Colección particular

Throughout his life Sorolla alternated his time in the summer between periods spent on the Mediterranean coastline and on the elegant beaches of Cantabria, either Biarritz, Zarauz or San Sebastián. He started to visit the latter, which attracted members of the elite classes, at the time when his growing professional success led to social ascent. The northern Spanish coastline also offered him the chance to capture a different type of light which was more changeable and softer than that of the Mediterranean. Sorolla's wife and daughters, wearing hats and elegant white dresses, are usually the principal motifs in these canvases where we see them enjoying the pleasures of summer holiday leisure such as taking a stroll or relaxing on the beach protected by awnings.

As with the artist's Mediterranean beach scenes, these compositions were notably successful at the international exhibitions in which Sorolla participated. For the first part of his summer holidays of 1910 the artist and his family went to Zarauz, which became a notable gathering place of the aristocracy after Queen Isabel II chose to spend her summers there in the 1860s. During this time in Guipuzkoa Sorolla also concentrated on preparing for his solo exhibitions scheduled for Chicago and St. Louis the following year.

In this work Sorolla depicts his daughter María with the beach at Zarauz in the background. She is enjoying what was known as an "elegant stroll", a subject that reveals how the seashore was transformed into a place for socialising frequented by those who wished to see and be seen. Paintings of this type also show how locations on the northern Spanish coast, which began to be popular due to what were considered the therapeutic benefits of their cold waters, soon evolved into places for entertainment and socialising in which bathing was no longer the centre of summer activity.