

Article

Reflection and Refraction: Multivalent Social Realism in the Work of Joaquín Sorolla

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Abstract: Joaquín Sorolla's Social Realist work *Sad Inheritance!* provides the grounds for this cross-sectional case study into Social Realism in Spain, Spanish politics at the turn of the twentieth century, and affect theory in art. By formally analyzing this work, presenting its differing receptions in France and Spain, and discussing the identity crisis that Spain experienced at the end of the twentieth century, all within the frame of Jill Bennett's conception of practical aesthetics and affect in art, this article will show how Sorolla produced an image that had differing valences of affect depending on the context in which it was viewed. Through his singular pictorial strategies, Sorolla successfully created an image that was political and sentimental, controversial and appealing, fraught with emotion, and ultimately affective.

Keywords: affect; realism; sentiment; politics; Sorolla; Spain

1. Introduction

On a warm morning in the summer of 1899, the painter Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida packed his easel, brushes, pigments, and canvases and, perhaps using a private horse and carriage or by taking a trolley or the newly established omnibus line, traveled to Malvarrosa Beach in his native city of Valencia.¹ He originally intended to sketch Valencian fishermen at work and had set up his workstation to do so when, from a distance, he saw a scene that would become indelibly imprinted in his mind—one that, by rendering it, would change the trajectory of his artistic career and define him as a renowned painter, both domestically and internationally. What Sorolla witnessed would eventually become the emotionally wrought picture *Sad Inheritance!* or *¡Triste Herencia!* (Figure 1).

In their 2009 monograph on Sorolla—published on the occasion of the artist's first show in Spain in over forty years—art historians José Luis Diéz and Javier Barón placed this work into the category of “social painting”, a genre that emerged in Spain in the late nineteenth century.² *Sad Inheritance!* is one of many such works that Spanish artists created to both show and comment upon then-contemporary issues present in Spanish life.³ Such a concept was not new for that time, as it had already existed in France for several decades under the designation “social realism”.⁴ But just as the wording of this designation was slightly different in Spain, so too was the way Spanish artists executed this theme. In this article, Sorolla's canvas will act as a case study for understanding the priorities and aesthetics of social painting in Spain, and how Spanish creators made use of visual devices to successfully, and affectively, render their works.

Affect is defined as “feeling before cognition” and can be applied to images by utilizing Jill Bennett's conceptualization of “practical aesthetics”.⁵ Bennett writes that practical aesthetics is “defined by an orientation to real-world experience” and allows for a “study of (art as a) means of apprehending the world via sense-based and affective processes—processes that touch bodies intimately and directly but that also underpin the emotions, sentiments and passions of public life”.⁶ By “aesthetics”, Bennett is invoking the more recent use of the term as a “general theory of sensori-emotional experience” that brings together art,



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psychology, and the social rather than being concerned with judgment and highly fraught notions of beauty and taste.⁷



Figure 1. Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, *¡Triste Herencia! (Sad Inheritance!)*, 1899, oil on canvas, 83.5 × 113 inches (212 × 288 cm), Fundación Bancaja.

When viewing *Sad Inheritance!* through this theoretical lens, it is possible to see this canvas as a work that evokes in its viewers certain emotions and experiences tied to real-world events. In fact, this work came about from a chance encounter the artist himself had. Down the shore from where Sorolla was observing the fishermen, he spotted a group of boys at the edge of the sea, with a solitary adult nearby. Investigating further, Sorolla moved closer to them, and the seemingly light-hearted moment transformed into a grim reality. The group was from the Malvarrosa Hospital, where the order of Saint John of God (San Juan de Dios) carried out its work of caring for sick and abandoned children.⁸ In an interview published in both English and Spanish language magazines in 1904, the artist described how this canvas came about:

One day, as I said, I was in the midst of one of my Valencian fisher studies when I descried, a long way off, a number of naked children in and near the sea, and, tending them, the stalwart figure of a solitary priest. It seems they were the inmates of the Hospital of San Juan de Dios, the sorriest refuse of society; the blind, the mad, the crippled, and the leprous. I cannot tell you how it all impressed me, so much so that I lost no time in securing from the hospital authorities permission to get to work upon the spot, and there and then, beside the water's edge, produced my picture.⁹

It is this emotional fulcrum that this article will examine: the reflection of a scene that the artist felt compelled to record, and the artist's intentional refraction of that scene's emotional and societal significance, its affect, to be interpreted by the audiences viewing it.

Those audiences were both international, when Sorolla exhibited this work at the Universal Exposition of 1900 in Paris, and domestic, when the work returned to Spain the following year and was shown at the Fine Arts Exhibition in Madrid. The reactions to and interpretation of *Sad Inheritance!* varied, depending upon the backdrop against which the audience viewed it. On an international stage, it was viewed as a masterpiece in subject matter, style, and technique. Within the instability of a divided Spanish society, its artistic merits shared the spotlight with the criticisms that a Spanish audience perceived

it to embody. This article will discuss these factors and frame *Sad Inheritance!* within the place and time in which it was made, thus explaining its success as an affective image.

2. Reading ;*Triste Herencia!*

The high horizon line in this canvas gives the viewer ample opportunity to pore over the arresting details of the scene that Sorolla has rendered. With so many figures in the sea and the atmosphere itself occupying so much of the canvas, it is logical to start evaluating this work at its center.

In the foreground, standing up on the sand before it slopes downward into the surf, are this work's central figures, separated slightly into two groups. To the left, where the sand slopes down to the sea, are three naked boys who are on their feet and one boy who is sitting with his arms crossed. They range in age from a young child to an early adolescent. Those who are standing hobble along the sand toward the other group of central figures: another naked adolescent boy receives help from the adult accompanying them. The man is a friar clad in voluminous and billowing black robes.¹⁰ Radiating out from this central pair are roughly two dozen other naked boys of various ages at different stages of bathing. Some are sitting on the sand, others are wading into the water, and others are splashing, swimming, or almost fully submerged in the sea.

The key to understanding the grim reality of this work lies in the central pair: the young adolescent and the friar. It is upon closer examination of them, and subsequently of the group to their left, that the viewer realizes this is not merely a light-hearted outing to the beach. The adolescent's precarious position, his use of crutches, and especially his lack of clothes make starkly apparent both his and the left-hand group's reason for hobbling: they are afflicted with physical disabilities. The boys who use crutches have bodies in which the musculature of their limbs is poorly developed, resulting in atrophied legs and spindly arms. The sun that shines on them provides warmth for them to bathe, but also reveals their deformities in its harsh, unyielding light. So, too, does it illuminate the dozens of boys in the background who are submerged in the sea, making evident the differences in their figures and their skin tones. They are all visibly sallow and discolored.

In addition to their bodily disabilities, the adolescent at the center and the boy at the far left are blind.¹¹ The leftmost blind boy has bowed his head and placed his left hand on the shoulder of his friend, who stands next to him and who is facing the viewer. With his right arm, the blind boy reaches outward from within his eternal darkness for purchase and security. This gesture would be futile if not for his friend's response to it: grasping onto his outstretched hand, providing guidance and support. The youngest boy of this triad, the blond boy who faces away from the viewer, holds himself angled downwards as if he too is attempting to assist his blind friend. And yet, he and the friend who faces outward are both in weakened states themselves. Although the latter's body is obscured and the former's body does not have any apparent deformities, the presence of crutches under their arms implies that they too suffer from physical handicaps. This makes them doubly sympathetic figures: while they themselves are suffering, they offer support to their friend whose fate is somehow worse than theirs.

The viewer finds another sympathetic figure in the friar, who exhibits tenderness toward his blind adolescent charge. As the friar helps the boy traverse the sand, he holds onto the boy's arm, not his crutch, to stabilize him. It is noteworthy, too, that the friar has placed his right hand atop the boy's head in a gesture that has no useful function for his task but is one that conveys a palpable amount of sympathy and emotion.

The friar is in mid-stride as he moves to support his charge, with his body and head bent toward the adolescent. The adolescent, too, is hunched over, his face obscured by the friar's arm. Without his face to identify him, the viewer focuses on his body, which is on full display in its nakedness under the sun's glaring light. The reasons for his weakened state and his need for the friar's assistance are evident. His legs, starting at the upper thigh and continuing to his ankle, are unnaturally thin, with the tendons at the back of his knees and the knee bones themselves protruding. They are atrophied, forever frozen in

that position due to some neurological or muscular disease. For, although he is mid-step, it is an unnatural step as both legs are bent and stiff.

His upper body offers no counter-strength to his weak lower half. The entirety of his spine is visible, starting from his coccyx and reaching its culmination between his protruding shoulder blades. His hipbone and ribcage jut out as well, their outlines visible from underneath his skin. His whole upper arm fits in the friar's enclosed hand, which gives his malformed limbs a sense of scale. The tendons in his lower arm are protruding due to the effort he makes as he places the weight of his body on that crutch. As a result, that arm is red with exertion. This contrasts with the pallid tone of his torso, which, in turn, contrasts with the sallow tone of his legs. This change in the color tones of the adolescent's body is deliberate and is not limited to him. Each boy in this canvas, whether on the sand or in the sea, has individualized skin tones that vary within his own body.

The paleness of the boys' bodies contrasts dramatically with the sea that surrounds them, a sea with tones that are even more intense than those in Sorolla's seascapes from that time period.¹² It ranges from teal and green to dark Prussian blue as its depth increases, and its opacity reveals little of the bodies it subsumes. Perhaps this is because it is late in the day. The narrow band of sky that is mauve and maroon, and the long shadows that the sun casts upon the sand, indicate that evening is approaching. These dark atmospheric tones serve to increase the feeling that the sea is a foreboding presence in this scene. Its verticality and size—it fills a great part of the composition—underscore its oppressive force as it bears down upon the figures whose weakened condition already make them vulnerable to the forces of the world.

Sorolla's color choices are not the only forum for his intentionality. Throughout this canvas, he renders certain details in sharp relief while leaving others surprisingly unfinished. This selectivity between tight and loose brushstrokes guides the viewer's gaze throughout the scene and emphasizes different moments, bringing to light unexpected—and, at times, harrowing—details. These details are what start to bridge the gap between merely viewing a difficult scene and understanding the message that Sorolla intended to send.

Although they are at different angles and are only partially visible to the viewer, the faces of the friar and the blind boy on the left are some of the most highly detailed areas of this canvas. They are individualized to the point of recognition. Whereas the identity of the boy is unknown, the friar is based on a man who was a Carlist revolutionary in his youth, fighting in the mountains during the civil war to end the Catholic monarchy.¹³ That Sorolla gives these characters distinguishable faces underscores his intent to humanize them.

The friar is a representative of the Catholic Church, an entity that had recently come under scrutiny at the time Sorolla made this canvas. That the friar's figure looms over these boys in billowing black robes makes for an ominous sight, and surely recalls the then-current sentiment that the Catholic Church was too entrenched in Spanish society. And yet, with his tender gestures and distinct face—all of which Sorolla renders in sharp relief—the viewer remembers that the friar is also just a man, and a sympathetic one at that. For he has dedicated his life to caring for the sick children that society has abandoned, a thankless task.

Sorolla emphasizes that thankless task by alternating between revealing and implying the painful realities of the boys. The left-most blind boy's face and upper body are highly detailed, but it takes close inspection to see that his left foot is afflicted with a clubfoot deformity. In contrast, the face of the boy who looks out at the viewer is rendered loosely, with dark shadows in place of his eyes and brow. The boy sitting on the ground near him hardly has a face at all, with only mere hints of a brow, eyes, and a nose. Yet the detail that stands out most clearly about him is how his left foot terminates in a bright red wound, potentially an open sore. Sorolla leaves it to the viewer to decide the specific affliction. Additionally, the presence of discoloration on the leg of the center adolescent also implies his difficult existence. It is likely a bruise resulting from the lack of control he has over the movement of his atrophied legs.

Sorolla renders the boys in the water with some of the loosest brushwork in this canvas. They are at a greater distance from the viewer than the boys on the sand in the foreground. But perhaps, more than conveying a realistic perspective, Sorolla wishes to portray their movements in the water, which he achieves at various intervals. To the left is a group of boys all in moments of play: one wades toward his friends who are sitting in the water, while another lunges forward toward a boy who is about to splash him. In the center grouping of boys in the sea, that movement becomes less natural, as seen in the sharp left-leaning tilt of the young boy wading into the surf. In the group on the right, the boys' afflictions are nearly hidden in plain sight. It is almost deceptive how the left leg of the boy on crutches terminates at his knee. At first glance, it originally appears as if the rest of his leg is hidden under the water. But upon closer inspection, it is evident that his shortened leg is the result of nature and not the artist's compositional choice. So, too, is the concentration of bright red paint. At first, this color choice seems odd, but after examining the boy sitting on the sand, it is likely that this concentration of red is a sore or a wound on a boy submerged in the sea. The off-kilter stance of the boy nearby makes the viewer question this child's health since he is with this group of disabled boys, even though his ailment is not visible from this distance.

The final character in this constellation of disabled children is one who is free from any afflictions: the boy standing to the far right. With his protruding belly and fleshy limbs, he is a foil to the boys from the Saint John of God Hospital. He does not belong with them. His age and curiosity prompt him to approach and inspect the unfamiliar plight of these boys near his own age who, in another life, could have been his playmates. In doing so, he throws into stark contrast their differing realities. Blindness and physical malformation make traversing the sand and bathing in the sea, activities commonplace to this able-bodied boy, tragically difficult. Even the act of shielding his eyes from the sun calls attention to how some of the friar's charges are blind and others need both hands for their crutches.

The artist and social critic Aureliano de Beruete, a close friend of Sorolla's, said of this boy that he is "a gracious figure, filled with color and life, the only joyful note in that scene".¹⁴ The able-bodied boy is not just a foil to the other boys in the scene but also serves as a reflection of the viewer's conscience. Just as the boy gazes unflinchingly at what is unfolding before him, so too does the viewer pore over every detail, every moment, every gesture in this scene. Is it to better understand what is happening? Is it to offer our sympathy to these boys? Or is it to reflect upon our own good fortune? Perhaps it is for all these reasons that we stare into this canvas. Our presence is implied by the shadow on the able-bodied boy's plump torso, a shadow in the shape of the head of another bystander just outside the picture frame.

Even in their carefree moments, these boys and their friar are still encumbered: the former by their disabilities, the latter by his responsibility. They will also have to eternally carry the additional burden of unflinching gazes; a multitude of scrutinizing eyes will always be upon them.

3. Debut and Recognition in France

Sorolla created *Sad Inheritance!* on a monumental scale. The painting measures approximately seven feet in height and nine-and-a-half feet in width. It is an imposing and dramatic canvas, especially when seen in terms of human scale (Figure 2).

It was seen in this manner at the Universal Exposition of Paris in 1900 in the Grand Palais, displayed as part of the Decennial Exhibitions of Fine Arts.¹⁵ Even though the exhibition conditions of the section in which it was displayed were not ideal—Beruete informed Sorolla that "the color, the bad quality of the walls, the carpeting, the poor lighting of the lower rooms", among other things, were issues with the Spanish section—it still made an impact on the jury.¹⁶ For the quality of the group of works that he presented, but especially for *Sad Inheritance!*, Sorolla was awarded one of twenty available Grand Prix diplomas.¹⁷ Beruete was a member of the jury and witnessed the impact that Sorolla's works made on his fellow jurors: they voted in a large majority for Sorolla to receive

that prize on the first day of deliberations.¹⁸ This achievement both cemented Sorolla's reputation as a formidable artist on an international scale and also presented the world with a different image of Spain. Rather than relying on Andalusian folkloric tropes, Spain had triumphed under Sorolla's masterful use of light and color to depict an exact reproduction of reality.¹⁹



Figure 2. Installation image of *Sad Inheritance! (¡Triste Herencia!)* at the Bancaja Foundation in Valencia, Spain. Image from 2018.

Although the reality of that canvas was a compelling one, it was the way in which Sorolla depicted that scene, rather than the content of the scene itself, that captured the attention of critics and artists alike at the Universal Exposition of 1900 in Paris. In a magazine that reviewed the entirety of the displays at the Universal Exposition, the critic Camille Mauclair stated that “Spain can be proud of Mr. Sorolla y Bastida”.²⁰ Years after this event, the Argentine writer and painter José León Pagano recalled that formidable artists such as the Italian genre and portrait painter Giovanni Boldini and the French master Impressionist Claude Monet had revered Sorolla's technical skill. Monet specifically commented that “the joy of light above all” was to be admired.²¹ In Pagano's estimation, the treatment of light and color in a work of art had never been more important, especially in France, as a result of Impressionism.²²

Abroad, in Paris, an audience of the artistic elite saw the content of this painting through the lens of its formal and technical achievements. Back in the country in which it was made, it was the content of *Sad Inheritance!* that proved at times to be a barrier to, rather than a channel for, accessing its merits.

4. Reception and Reaction in Spain

The following year, Sorolla submitted *Sad Inheritance!* along with other works to the National Exhibition of Fine Arts in Madrid.²³ Established by the Spanish monarchy in 1856, this was Spain's answer to the Parisian Salon—which saw little Spanish representation—and was the largest official exhibition of Spanish art both domestically and internationally. The stature of this competition was such that it offered the highest award that existed in Spain, the Medal of Honor, and in 1901, for the first time in the competition's history, those voting for who would receive it included exhibiting artists in addition to the jury.²⁴

As in Paris, Sorolla emerged triumphant from this competition. He won the Medal of Honor for the group of works he entered, especially for *Sad Inheritance!*, by a large majority of votes. The artists who cast their votes in his favor signed their ballots, which would

have otherwise been anonymous, and read them aloud. Critics on the jury had their doubts about the work—which they compared disparagingly to Spanish Baroque painters—but conceded that it would be incongruous to deny this prize to an artist who had already succeeded on the international scene.²⁵

Opinions surrounding this work were divided. Critics who had written favorably of Sorolla's works in the past were noticeably reticent in 1901.²⁶ The opinions of those who addressed *Sad Inheritance!* ranged from condemning its content as repugnant and morally vague, but conceding its painterly merits, to criticizing both the content of the scene and the manner in which it was rendered.²⁷

Conservative critics united around the figure of the friar, whom they viewed favorably. The rhetoric surrounding the friar ranged from describing him as the site of Sorolla's "flashes of genius" to praising him as the best part of the painting and commending his leading role in the scene.²⁸ In their estimation, the friar was emblematic, not only of Christian charity but of how Christian charity can remedy the afflictions from which the children in this work are suffering.

The criticisms of *Sad Inheritance!* expanded beyond the world of art. A caricature of this work appeared on the cover of the satirical magazine *Gedeón* under the title *Sad Majority!* (*¡Triste Mayoría!*) (Figure 3).



Figure 3. "What Don Segis is preparing (at the Electoral Fine Arts Exhibition) *Sad Majority!*" A parody of Sorolla's work, *Sad Inheritance!* ("Lo que prepara Don Segis (En la Exposición de Bellas Artes Electorales) ¡Triste Mayoría!"), *Gedeón*, 8 May 1901.

Conservatives co-opted the image of Sorolla's canvas to attack the supposedly corrupt methods that the liberal party, led by Segismundo Moret, used to win the elections that same year.²⁹ The caricature image saw the original figure of the friar being replaced with a depiction of Moret. By doing this, the image equated political evils to unfortunate childhood diseases, which, in turn, connected them to then-contemporary concerns about the physical, moral, and spiritual degeneration of Spanish society.³⁰

Sorolla originally titled this canvas *Children of Pleasure* when he submitted it to the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900, but changed its name in accordance with the sadness that resonated with both the press and his close confidants.³¹ Yet the term "sad inheritance" is more than just an acknowledgment of the fraught emotions in this work. It is a rhetorical device that underscores how these children are blameless for their suffering. Their unfortu-

nate fate is seen as the result of the failings of their forefathers, who, in turn, were failed by society.

The anxiety surrounding the degradation of Spanish society was representative of more widespread ideologies and fears about the degeneration of various societies throughout Europe, including Spain, which had taken hold in the mid- to late nineteenth century. By creating *Sad Inheritance!* when he did, the suffering of Sorolla's innocent boys can be seen as the visualization of these concerns, while the title of his work becomes their powerful and concise articulation.

In 1896, Dr. Rafael Cervera y Barat, director of the Ophthalmological Institute of Madrid and a good friend of Sorolla's, published a book defending the idea that illnesses were transmitted, and even augmented, among the children and grandchildren of alcoholics. These ideas about the inheritance of diseases like alcoholism and syphilis came from treatises written by the French psychiatrist Bénédict Morel in 1857. Morel established degeneration theory, which linked the mental, moral, and physical decline of society to poor housing, inadequate working conditions, and a lack of education regarding personal hygiene. It was believed that unsanitary living conditions in cities could produce little else but brutalized and immoral individuals who would continue degenerating both physically and morally—manifesting as destitution, alcoholism, prostitution, and other social evils—throughout generations of urban existence.³²

Back in Spain, some forty years later, in 1898, Dr. Cervera had written another text entitled *Alcoholism and Civilization (Alcoholismo y civilización)*. In it, he disseminated the idea that the effects of alcoholism were transmitted and intensified from generation to generation until the family line became extinct. He traced the progression of physical and mental pathologies—tuberculosis, meningitis, epilepsy, mental weakness, madness, violence, criminality, prostitution, vagrancy, and alcoholism itself—through three generations descended from an ancestor with alcoholism. This text, among others, reflects the increasing fear and alarm in Spanish intellectual circles regarding the harmful effects that social degeneration would have on human capital and, thus, on productivity and national growth.³³ These concepts would have been foremost in the minds of many Spanish citizens as a result of the destabilizing events of 1898, a particularly anxious and uncertain time in Spanish history.

That year, Spain signed the Treaty of Paris after four years of conflict with Cuba and nine months of conflict with the United States.³⁴ This agreement saw Spain surrender to the United States in defeat and saw it stripped of its last remaining colonies: Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. This event is called “The Disaster of ‘98” in Spanish history, and the anxieties about these impending events can be seen in a political cartoon from the Catalan satirical magazine *La Campana de Gràcia* (Figure 4). With this loss, Spain was no longer an imperial power. In 1898, the sun had finally set on the Spanish Empire.

Spain's identity crisis took place on the global stage and had immediate and lasting ramifications domestically. As a result of the colonial wars of the 1890s and the Cuban War of 1898, Spanish citizens coalesced into the representatives of a national identity predicated upon defending the Empire. Perhaps for the first time, this concept reached areas where local and religious identities had predominated over a national one. The values espoused by this national identity were politically and religiously conservative and advocated for a Castilian monoculture, which was in sharp contrast to Spain's multicultural, multilingual reality. Yet it was a reality that Spain's citizens could support since it enabled their country's access to power and preserved their way of life. The Disaster of 1898 invalidated that logic.³⁵ The loss of its Empire status now led to a nation divided once again by alternative national and political identities comprised of socialism and regional nationalism. This threatened not only Spain's cultural identity but also its political power. This crisis was no longer confined to the bounds of cultural reckoning but instead extended to Spain's political legitimacy.

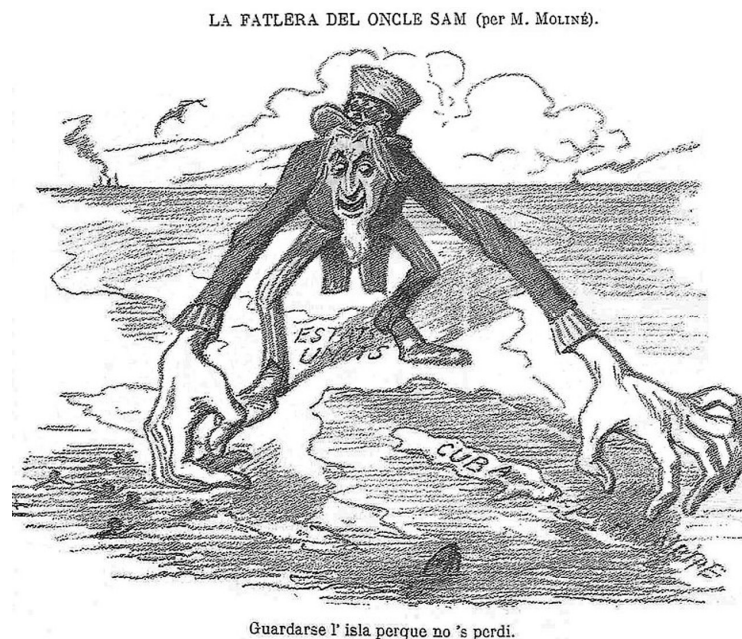


Figure 4. “Uncle Sam’s Craving: Saving the island so it won’t get lost” (“La Fatlera Del Oncle Sam”, Guardarse l’isla perque no’s perdi”), *La Campana de Gracia*, 1896.

It was against this backdrop of division, uncertainty, and anxiety that Sorolla presented *Sad Inheritance!* in Madrid in 1901. That is why the boys of the Saint John of God Hospital took on a different aspect when viewed in Spain. Internationally, they could be recognized as unambiguously sympathetic figures: boys who had tragically lost the use of their limbs and were struggling to enjoy an outing to the beach. For those individuals abroad who subscribed to degeneration theory, these boys could still be seen as sympathetic because it was not their own society that such illnesses were condemning. That condemnation could not be avoided in Spain. Within the borders of that country, the atrophied muscles, malformed limbs, and unseeing eyes all became sites of criticism, anxiety, and despair. As the progeny of Spanish citizens and in accordance with degeneration theory, the ailments from which these boys suffered were both a sign of the failures of Spain’s past and a lack of hope for Spain’s future. Upon seeing Sorolla’s canvas and noticing the late hour at which it was set, the Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez observed that “the setting sun was totally symbolic; the old sun of our nation”.³⁶

Sad Inheritance! occupied a unique place in the history of Spanish politics at the end of the nineteenth century, one in which divided sides engaged in discourse. The sociopolitical factors that intersect upon and outside this canvas are as compelling as the place it occupies in the history of Spanish and western European art.

The political debate associated with *Sad Inheritance!*, to which Spanish audiences were particularly receptive, likely prevented it from being acquired by the Spanish state. After winning the Medal of Honor in 1901, Sorolla gave the Spanish parliament the opportunity to acquire this work, but conservative members of the liberal government blocked its acquisition. Instead, Jesus Vidal acquired it for the same price at which Sorolla had offered it to the government.³⁷ It was then acquired by John E. Berwind and, when not on public view, was displayed in the Sunday school room of the Church of the Ascension in Manhattan, New York.³⁸ It remained there in the United States, divorced from its original cultural context, for almost seventy years.

5. Sorolla’s Social Realism and Modern Spain

From 1892 to 1895, Sorolla created three canvases with their own distinct characters, stories, dramas, and tragedies. *Another Marguerite!* (Figure 5) depicts a solitary young woman who has been handcuffed by the Civil Guard officers who are escorting her by train,

presumably for a trial, since she is accused of killing the child she bore out of wedlock. *And They Still Say Fish is Expensive* (Figure 6) shows a young sailor who has been gravely injured as the result of a fishing accident and who is being attended to below deck by his shipmates, while in *White Slave Trade* (Figure 7), several young girls are traveling by train from a rural location with an older woman who is their procuress, implying that upon arriving at their destination in a city, they will be involved in sex work.³⁹ While still moving, the tragedies in these canvases are quieter, more somber, and less visually scathing than *Sad Inheritance!*, which was the culmination and last example of this genre in Sorolla's oeuvre.



Figure 5. Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, *¡Otra Margarita! (Another Marguerite!)* 1892, Oil on canvas, 51 1/4 × 78 3/4 inches, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.



Figure 6. Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, *¡Aún dicen que el pescado es caro! (And They Still Say Fish is Expensive!)*, 1894, Oil on canvas, 59 1/2 × 80 inches (151.5 × 204 cm), El Museo del Prado.



Figure 7. Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, *Trata de Blancas (White Slave Trade)*, 1894, Oil on canvas, 65 × 77 inches (166.5 × 195 cm), Museo Sorolla.

These canvases demonstrate Sorolla's interest and participation in a genre of painting that explores the plight of ordinary citizens in daily life. In Spain, that genre is known as *pintura social* or Social Painting.⁴⁰ However, a more accurate translation into English of this genre is Social Realism, in which artists explored the everyday world of contemporary, commonplace people with the same attention originally reserved for subjects deemed important by the ruling class.⁴¹ Social Realism originated in France and stemmed from moral painting, a new category of subject matter that emerged in the latter half of the eighteenth century, one in which artists conveyed a morally instructive theme through the actions of anonymous, contemporary commoners.⁴²

It was an explicit goal of Sorolla's to modernize Spanish painting.⁴³ He achieved this not only through the subject matter but also by the manner in which he executed his work, which was modern and innovative. His painterly method was a measured mix of calculation and spontaneity. Just as he saw the boys on Malvarossa Beach and immediately began painting a picture of them en plein air, so too did he create upward of fifteen preparatory sketches, made both in his studio and outside. Additionally, Sorolla did not decide upon the final composition of the painting until the moment at which he was making it, as evidenced by various pentimenti.⁴⁴

Just as with *Sad Inheritance!*, Sorolla witnessed the scene that would become *Another Marguerite!*. To ensure that this canvas conformed to his exacting standards, he rented a third-class passenger train car and staged models to recreate the image he had seen earlier.⁴⁵ In fact, that same train car appears again in *White Slave Trade*, indicating Sorolla's interest in that form of transportation and his reflections on what it meant for Spanish society.⁴⁶ The young girls destined to become prostitutes in *White Slave Trade* epitomized what he felt to be the negative consequences of modernization.⁴⁷

6. Conclusions: A Prism of Affect

In 1981, the Savings Bank of Valencia bought *Sad Inheritance!* and returned it to Spain.⁴⁸ It is now in the collection of the Bancaja Foundation, which is also in the city of Valencia, where, unless it is out on loan, it remains on view (Figure 2). While it is a triumph in any

estimation for a painting to find a more public home in its country of origin, it is especially true here. Separated for so long from its original cultural context while in the Church of the Ascension in Manhattan, the work had been stripped of its affect, or its ability to evoke feeling before cognition.⁴⁹ Now back in Spain, it is defanged no longer. In front of an audience that is likely both Spanish and international, Sorolla's masterpiece can once again refract the emotions that its creator felt and impress upon a multitude of minds what Sorolla experienced that fateful day on Malvarrosa Beach.

The boys from the Saint John of God Hospital are forever frozen in their plight, their fates as atrophied as the muscles in their malformed limbs. And yet, with this painting, Sorolla advanced, both internationally and domestically, the Spanish version of Social Realism or *pintura social*. At a time when Spain was divided in its political beliefs and reeling from the Disaster of 1898, Sorolla produced a canvas that forced both himself and his viewers to reflect upon the events that led up to the present that he depicted and consider what trajectory Spain wished to embark upon in its future.

After submitting *Sad Inheritance!* to the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900, Sorolla wrote to his close artist friend Pedro Gil and expressed fear and doubt, not only about the painting's reception but about the painting itself. In a particularly vulnerable moment, Sorolla shared:

I am very uneasy about the latest painting I sent to the Fair. . . I have painted it with my soul, but as it is very personal, I fear it will not be understood. . . I fear they will attack me. I made it because I was struck by the power of the scene. It was so beautiful and so sad that I decided to put it in practice despite everything they could say to me, but I am afraid.⁵⁰

Sorolla did not turn away from these emotions. Rather, he used his canvas to impart them upon his viewers in a myriad of thoughts, sentiments, and experiences, the same way that a prism reveals a spectrum of colors when it refracts white light. Through his mastery of color, rhythmic brushwork, atmosphere, and light, Sorolla presents a political subject fraught with anxiety and paranoia in a sentimental manner and ultimately creates an Impressionistic masterpiece of Social Realism.

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Notes

¹ (Llopis 2008, pp. 10–13).

² (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 265).

³ For further discussion and examples of this genre of painting in Spain, see (Carbonell 2018).

⁴ The pioneering practitioner of Social Realism in France was Gustave Courbet. Born to a rural middle-class family in Ornans, Courbet helped establish Social Realism by channeling his own experience into his artworks. He depicted the lives of ordinary, often rural, citizens against the backdrop of modernization in mid-nineteenth century France (Rubin 1997, p. 4).

⁵ Bennett summarizes several prevailing definitions of affect and what links them together as follows: "Whether we think of affect, in the term proposed by the American twentieth-century psychologist Silvan Tompkins, as a subjectively originating energy that attaches itself to objects; or in the trans-subject terms of [French philosopher Gilles] Deleuze-inspired media studies, as a force within media itself; or, indeed, in [French psychoanalyst André] Green's . . . terms that cast affect as an aspect of the drives with a propensity to hook onto things real and imagined—we can concur that sometimes images and objects are simply in the path of an oncoming affect. Affect 'enlivens' objects and experiences because it invests them with joy, sadness, wonder, rage". See (Bennett 2012, pp. 21–22). This summary and theoretical framework come from Alpesh Kantilal Patel's chapter (Kantilal Patel 2017, p. 187).

⁶ (Bennett 2012, pp. 3, 36) and (Kantilal Patel 2017, pp. 187–88).

⁷ (Bennett 2012, p. 36) and (Kantilal Patel 2017, p. 187).

- 8 This order is still active today and states that in the first stage of its 130-year history, it focused on healthcare for hospitalized children at the Malvarrosa Hospital (Sjdv n.d.).
- 9 Quoted in English from “Joaquín Sorolla” (Williams 1904a). Published in Spanish: “Un día, decía, estaba yo trabajando de lleno en uno de mis estudios de la pesca valenciana, cuando descubrí lejos unos cuantos muchachos desnudos dentro, y á la orilla del mar y vigilándose la vigorosa figura de un fraile. Parece ser que eran los acogidos del hospital de San Juan de Dios, el más triste desecho de la sociedad: ciegos, locos, tullidos y leprosos. No puedo explicarle á usted cuánto me impresionaron, tanto que no perdí tiempo para obtener un permiso para trabajar sobre el terreno, y allí mismo, al lado de la orilla del agua, hice mi pintura”. (Williams 1904b).
- 10 Although the previous quote refers to this religious figure as a priest, the literature regarding this work—specifically a catalog entry in the retrospective *Joaquín Sorolla, 1863–1923* at The Prado Museum—has designated him as a friar (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 265).
- 11 (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 266).
- 12 See Note 11.
- 13 Quoted from Emilia Pardo Bazán in (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 266).
- 14 Quoted from Beruete in (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 267).
- 15 This canvas appears in the official catalog of the Decennial Exhibition (*Exposition Universelle Internationale de 1900 (Paris, France) (1900)*, p. 291). The Grand Palais was divided into two sections: the right wing was devoted to French art, while the left wing was devoted to the picture galleries of foreign nations, known as the Decennial Exhibitions of Fine Arts, which featured artworks made within the ten years prior to the Universal Exposition of 1900. Spain was one of several countries that participated in this display (Iwarere 2001).
- 16 The Spanish press described the conditions as “pitiful” while, according to Beurete, the works in the French section were “superbly hung” (Pons-Sorolla and López Fernández 2014, p. 23). For a deeper discussion on how geopolitics between France and Spain manifested at the 1900 Universal Exposition, see (Lasheras Peña 2009).
- 17 Sorolla submitted and displayed a total of six works at the Universal Exposition in 1900, but *Sad Inheritance!* was distinguished among them as particularly successful. (Pons-Sorolla and López Fernández 2014, p. 23).
- 18 He received 37 of the jury’s 52 votes. (Pons-Sorolla and López Fernández 2014, p. 23).
- 19 Quoted from the writer León Roch (the pseudonym for Francisco Pérez Mateos) in (Pons-Sorolla and López Fernández 2014, p. 24).
- 20 “L’Espagne enfin peut s’enorgueillir de M. Sorolla y Bastida”, (Mauclair 1899, p. 179).
- 21 Quoted from (Pons-Sorolla and López Fernández 2014, pp. 23–24).
- 22 Quoted from (Pons-Sorolla and López Fernández 2014, p. 24).
- 23 (Casa Editorial Mateu 1900, p. 141).
- 24 (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 270).
- 25 Information from this paragraph is taken from (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 270).
- 26 (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 269).
- 27 Information in footnotes 35 and 36 from (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 271).
- 28 (Díez and Barón 2009, pp. 270–71).
- 29 (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 271).
- 30 (Gamonal Torres and Caparrós Masegosa 2010, p. 254).
- 31 Sorolla trusted the opinions of the novelist Emilia Pardo Bazán and painter Auerliano Beurete, among others, but had already decided to change this canvas’s name prior to their studio visit in February 1900. (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 267).
- 32 (Cleminson and Fuentes Peris 2009).
- 33 “La mala vida’: Source and focus of degeneration, degeneracy and decline”, (Cleminson and Fuentes Peris 2009, pp. 393–94).
- 34 In Spain, this conflict is known as the Cuban War, but in the United States, it is called the Spanish–American War. The conflict started in 1895 when factions of Cuban rebels who wanted independence from Spain mounted insurrections throughout the island. They forced civilians to fight their cause and confronted Spanish soldiers for the next four years. While focusing on this conflict with Cuba, Spain also faced a growing independence movement in the Philippines. “Introduction—The World of 1898: The Spanish–American War (Hispanic Division, Library of Congress)”, n.d., <https://loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/intro.html> accessed on 24 March 2024. The United States became involved in this conflict when it blamed Spain for the explosion of one of its Navy ships, the USS Maine, which was anchored in Havana harbor. The US Navy has since concluded that the explosion was likely caused by spontaneous combustion in the ship’s coal bins (Rickover 1975).
- 35 Spain’s surrender to the United States and the subsequent loss of its remaining colonies is referred to as “The Disaster” in Spanish research and literature.
- 36 Quoted in (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 270).

- 37 See note 24 above.
- 38 (De Beruete et al. 1909, p. 202).
- 39 *Another Marguerite!* (¡Otra Margarita!) (Díez and Barón 2009, pp. 214–17); *And They still Say Fish is Expensive!* (¡Aún dicen que el pescado es caro!) (Díez and Barón 2009, pp. 230–32); *White Slave Trade* (Trata de blancas), (Díez and Barón 2009, pp. 243–46).
- 40 In a recent reorganization of its permanent collection, The Prado Museum intervened most ambitiously in the presentation of its nineteenth-century holdings by including more “social paintings”. One of the examples that the director Miguel Falomir cited as a masterpiece of this genre was Sorolla’s *And They Still Say Fish is Expensive!* (De Quijano 2021).
- 41 (Facos 2011, p. 221).
- 42 In the Salon of 1763, Diderot praised how Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s work expressed reformatory Enlightenment ideals in scenes of contemporary life (genre paintings) as “moral” paintings. (Facos 2011, p. 8).
- 43 In a letter to his wife in the summer of 1900 while he was visiting the Universal Exposition in Paris, Sorolla wrote: “There’s a great legend about the virtues of painting, which we [Spanish artists] do in the worst and most backward way in general. . . I go with the flow more than is generally done in our country, but I can and must do more, I will endeavor to as it makes my blood boil not to have started”. Quoted in (Pons-Sorolla and López Fernández 2014, p. 24).
- 44 The number of studies and evidence of pentimenti comes from the discussion in (Díez and Barón 2009, pp. 265–71).
- 45 (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 215).
- 46 (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 242).
- 47 Although there are no obvious indications that these young women are prostitutes, the Sorolla Museum confirms (Museo Sorolla n.d.).
- 48 (El País 1981).
- 49 As defined in (Kantilal Patel 2017, p. 187).
- 50 Quoted from (Díez and Barón 2009, p. 269).

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