

# Heard and Seen

## MODERN SPANISH PAINTING

Judging anything Spanish would be easier if one didn't have one's mind already cluttered up with preconceptions such as civil war, bull-fights, *sol y sombra*, and so on. All this makes one apt to forget the other, more important, side of the Spanish character; the preoccupation with truth, intense, serious, sober, magnificently limited and defined, such as one sees in early Velasquez, and Zurbarán, and Meña. There has always been a tension between these opposites, with marvellous achievements on either side, but the pictures which are the most interesting in the three recent exhibitions of modern Spanish painting in London are precisely those which succeed in balancing these two divergent tendencies. True, the idiom of most of the painting is not new, being what is now called the 'international style', but the colour is unique: it could not have come from any other country without looking forced and self-consciously ascetic; coming from Spain it looks what it undoubtedly is, the natural condition of artistic achievement. It is in the repeated use of ochres and earth-browns, the colours of their land—and townscape, that the Spanish excel; above all in the use of blacks. The black in these paintings is the lineal descendant of the black of Velasquez and Goya; it has every quality in it from a glowing soothing reassurance to a blank impenetrable mass, and all is painted with an elegance that in other hands might become slickness.

Outstanding in his use of black is Modesto Cuixart at the Tate Gallery Exhibition; the large 'Painting 1960', together with the three close by, show Cuixart at his best. These paintings have reconciled the opposite characteristics of the Spanish temperament with a sinister beauty, balancing the turbulent passages of metallic globules and cinders with large expanses of penetrable black; the imagery (perhaps a little derivative) of Klee, but the poetry of the blacks and the high textures entirely his own. Cuixart is usually bracketed with Tapiés and Millares as the three noteworthy painters of the modern Spanish movement, but the most impressive pictures in the Tate after Cuixart were undoubtedly those of Torner. Here again, I believe Torner has reconciled the two qualities of Spain in the three distinguished paintings he shows. He makes use of old oil drums flattened over the lower half of the picture; they tell against the finely adjusted painting or metallic surface of the upper half. The rusty metal, flaked and pitted though it is, has a curiously anti-dimensional look in spite of the high relief, and the resultant tension between the two surfaces is exciting, yet at the same time reassuring, lacking the sinister undertones of Cuixart's paintings. Ferreras is noteworthy not only for the extreme delicacy of his pictures, but because he was commissioned, amongst other things, to design stained glass windows for the Dominican Priory in Madrid.

Antonio Tapies (at the Marlborough) is represented by eight canvases, none of them recent, which demonstrate his extraordinary power of reassurance on the spectator, together with a horrifying capacity for destroying utterly the basis for any reassurance, and this simultaneously. The colour is reassuring, the textural discoveries and liberties are shocking, and yet the harmony between the two is perfect in nearly every case. The hermetic quality of these paintings does not detract from their authority as it would in a lesser painter. Saura, in the same gallery, makes use of fashionable trends in Paris, whereas Claret is typically Spanish in making use of classical values for expressive and romantic ends, a fatal miscalculation.

Millares (at Tooths) is an accomplished technician; if I liked his pictures more I would not perhaps mind the repetitious hackings and sewings, but he seems to have limited himself, not for the good reason of heightened expressiveness, but simply because the gimmick of field surgery on a canvas is rather a successful one. I prefer the gimmicks of Victoria with his decorative sense of placing and colour.

All together these exhibitions give me the impression of a movement, if it can be called a movement, in exile, despite the officially sponsored prestige exhibitions abroad. With few exceptions it is painting of great dignity but of immense distance and detachment from the traditional subject matter of Spanish art. It seems to have a greater portion of sadness than similar western art. Whether this is due to the loss of figurative subject matter is a debatable point—certainly if Spanish figurative art continued on the lines of Zuloaga it would have been a very unpalatable thing, but Nonell shows us that there were other tendencies. How far the traditional Spanish pre-occupation with human beings and human values is lost and how far it has merely gone underground remains to be seen.

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## Reviews

FATHER FABER, by Ronald Chapman; Burns and Oates; 35s.

To generations of English Catholics Father Faber has been a legend. His name conjures up the Brompton Oratory, the hymns of our childhood, Italianate devotions. When the authoress of *I Leap Over the Wall* wished to convey the less aesthetically attractive features of Catholic worship, it was inevitable that her description should include a reference to 'the more flowery and unctuous of