

L'ALBUFERA, VALENCIA



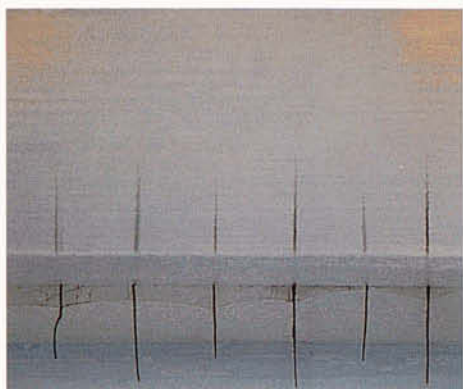
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JOSEP PIERA AUTHOR

IF YOU SHOULD EVER HAPPEN TO VISIT VALENCIA, YOU WILL SEE
THE LAKE IN ALL THE TOURIST GUIDES AND MAGAZINES, ON
VIEW AT ALL THE STREET NEWS-STANDS.



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Everywhere has its corresponding postcard image. There are always monuments, landscapes or objects that are typical of particular places and become permanently associated with them in the collective imagination. One of Valencia's emblems is l'Albufera. Whether photographed in the gentle light of evening or with the sun reflected on its blue waters, dancing in the wake of a passing boat, whether in old engravings or as captured by local landscape artists, this lake beside the sea—which the Arabs called *Al Buhera*—is one of the most representative spots in the fertile land of Valencia, part of the mythical landscape that surrounds the city of Valencia.

If you should ever happen to visit Valencia, you will see the lake in all the tourist guides and magazines, on view at all the street news-stands. The publicized image, romantic and stereotyped, will surprise you, because l'Albufera is in fact a magnificent natural landscape which, in

spite of the environmental threats facing it, still preserves the charm it is famous for in the eyes of fleeting travellers. True, the lake has shrunk and is no longer what is used to be as regards local customs or the nineteenth century flavour of its seafaring towns and villages, but it still gives us a glimpse of the joyful magic, the romantic exaltation or the dramatic realism attributed to it by writers in better times.

In the thirteenth century, Al Russafí, a great Arab poet from Valencia, singing his far-off native land, remembered his lost paradise with these words:

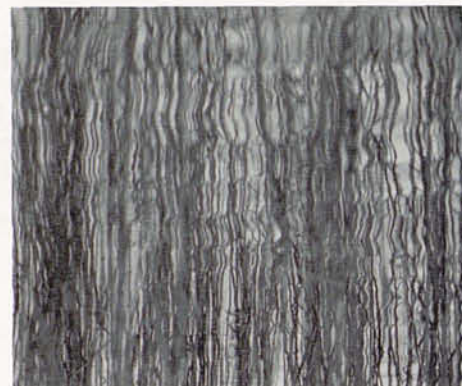
“In Valencia the mornings shine in the sun that plays with the sea and runs over l'Albufera.”

This tender, luminous vision has resisted the passage of time. Teodor Llorente, in my opinion the best Catalan poet of the nineteenth century, with his conservative romanticism tinged with Virgilian nostalgia, wrote:

“The river runs with crystal-clear water flowing among bunches of blue lillies; softly the nearby sea is murmuring; the trees are stirring in the gentle breeze.”

This vision was changed by Vicent Blasco Ibañez's energetic naturalism. In *Cañas y Barro*, as well as being the setting for an excellent rural novel of the time, l'Albufera becomes known across the world, thanks to Hollywood stage sets.

Historically, the land of l'Albufera—or rather the marshland—has always been prized for its fertility as well as its hunting and fishing, all a result of the lake. Jaume I, the king who won the Kingdom of Valencia for the Catalan crown (1238), was its first lord. It then belonged to a series of different nobles until 1761, when Carles III made it his own. The Bourbon king, who used to enjoy hunting on Lake Fusaro, in Naples, wanted to be the sole master of this little ecological paradise to which Marc Antoni Orellana was to dedicate his *Catàlogo i descripció dels*



pardals de l'Albufera de València (1795), a study of the sparrows of the region. After this, except for a brief period when Napoleon Bonaparte made marshal Suchet Duke of l'Albufera, the lake and the surrounding area belonged to the state until 1927, when the region was purchased by the Valencia City Hall.

Since then, as public land, l'Albufera and the surrounding Devesa del Saler, a magnificent seaside pinewood, have shared in the fortunes and misfortunes of the Valencians. Today, after everything that has happened, including the pressure from ecologists, the area has become a high-class tourist resort boasting a considerable degree of comfort. At the same time, the fenland watered by l'Albufera still produces rice and vegetables, es-

sential for subsistence in the past and now basic elements of the country's cuisine and the driving force behind an important rural economy. Furthermore, the Devesa del Saler and l'Albufera are amongst the Valencian's favourite spots, used by them for every imaginable sort of leisure activity, including love's most secret rituals. In short, the area has everything to offer, from camping sites and snack-bars to luxury hotels and apartments, golf club and beautiful natural woodland, not yet destroyed by forest fire.

So, if you should ever be on holiday in Valencia and decide to visit l'Albufera (a few kilometres south of the city, on the "El Saler" motorway), you must first submit to a preparatory ceremony. First

of all, especially in winter, you ought to try the *all-i-pebre*, a delicious dish made with eels, which, with luck, you will be able to find in El Palmar, a sort of seaside hamlet. Next, watch the sun go down from the side of the road. Of course, you could also take a trip by boat and, if you are keen on fishing or hunting duck or other waterfowl, find out about the *redolins*, or fishing places, and the shooting *en roda*, all part of a skillful tradition which is still kept up by the locals.

However, one thing you can be sure of is that you will hardly be able to grasp the full significance of the feelings and emotions, the special moments, that are associated with the area, in the minds of the Valencians themselves. But that happens everywhere, doesn't it? ■