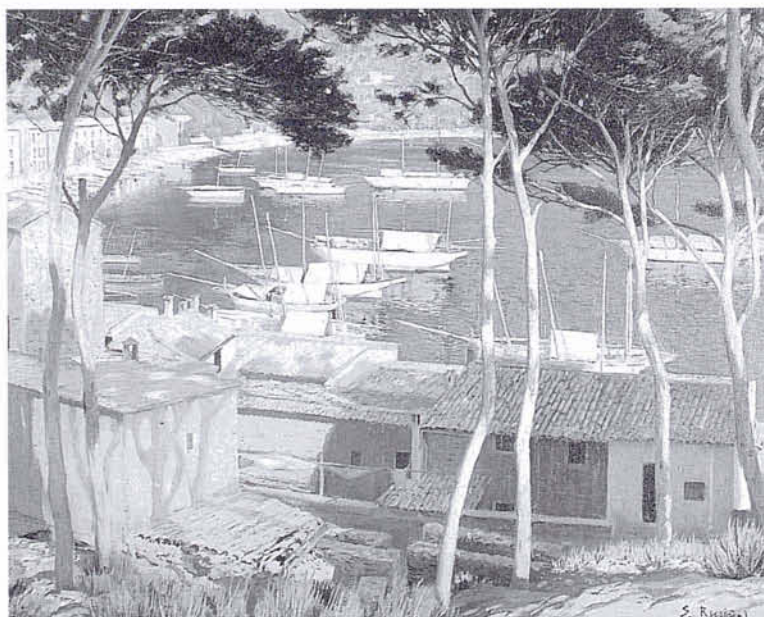


# THE MEDITERRANEAN LANDSCAPE IN CATALAN PAINTING

LANDSCAPE PAINTING DEVELOPED AS A CATALAN STYLE IN ITS OWN RIGHT IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, FOLLOWING THE RISE OF OUTDOOR PAINTING.

MARIE-CLAIRE UBERQUOI ART CRITIC



SANTIAGO RUSIÑOL, *PORT DE SÓLLER* (100 x 127)

**T**he attraction of the Mediterranean for artists in general and for landscape painters in particular –both locals and outsiders– has become a commonplace that has given rise to many interpretations, the result of changes in taste and fashion and of developments in art itself. Landscape art developed as a Catalan style in its own right mainly in the second half of the nineteenth century, following the rise of outdoor painting under the influence of the Barbizon School and of Parisian Impressionism. From a historical point of view, Catalan landscape painting has produced rich and sometimes brilliant work, though not revolutionary if we exclude Picasso's views of

Horta de Sant Joan (1909) and Dalí's evocative representations of the sky over the Empordà (1928-35). In fact, it was not until Casas and Rusiñol returned from Paris at the end of the last century that Catalan painting managed to free itself of the weight of academic tradition.

The landscape began to feature in Catalan painting in the work of Antoni Viladomat (1678-1755), though only indirectly, as it is used as a backdrop more than anything else. In the nineteenth century, Pau Rigalt (1778-1845) helped to give it greater independence within a context dominated by Romanticism. Although Marià Fortuny Marsal painted views of beaches in Italy in 1874, a

few months before his death, seascapes are nevertheless an exception in his work.

One of the people responsible for the introduction of landscape painting to Catalonia was Ramon Martí i Alsina (1826-1894), who, under the influence of Courbet, painted pictures with rural or maritime themes using a realistic approach which sometimes takes on an epic character. The subject of the sea first became a central feature in the work of Modest Urgell (1839-1919). A pupil and admirer of Martí i Alsina, Urgell painted seascapes wrapped in tenuous light, contemplated in silence from a perspective still tinged with Romanticism.





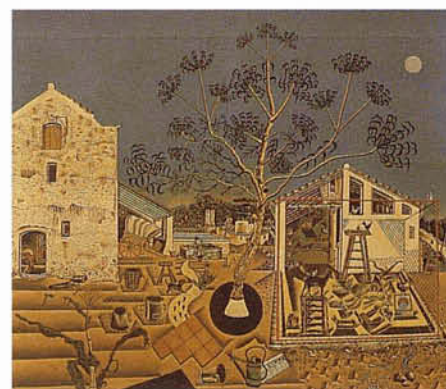
FRANCESC GIMENO I ARASA, AIGUABLAVA



PICASSO, FÀBRICA DE L'HORTA DE SANT JOAN



JOAN LLIMONA I BRUGUERA, COSTA DE VILASSAR



JOAN MIRÓ, LA MASIA (MONT-ROIG, 1922)

Leaving aside the painters of the Olot School, who conjured up misty, bucolic landscapes, it was the generation of artists born in the mid-nineteenth century who first studied and exalted the qualities of the Mediterranean light. The “Escola Luminista” of Sitges is particularly representative in this respect, especially Joan Roig i Soler (1852-1909) and Arcadi Mas i Fontdevila (1874-1956), who immortalized many parts of the coast in pictures that make the legendary blue of the Mediterranean vibrate in all its intensity. Sitges, home town of Joaquim Sunyer (1874-1956) –a leading figure in nineteenth century landscape painting–, held a special attraction for the artists of the Modernist period such as Eliseu Meifrén (1859-1940) and Santiago Rusiñol (1861-1931). Influenced by the Sitges luminists, Meifrén devoted a large part of his work to maritime themes, with Cadaqués as one of his favourite settings. Rather than limit himself exclusively to landscape painting, Meifrén, who was also sensitive to the

human element, often portrayed the day-to-day life of the fishermen, a subject which also seduced his colleague Dionis Baixeras (1862-1943). Together with Ramon Casas (1866-1932), Santiago Rusiñol was the instigator behind a revolution in Catalan painting which affected not only landscape but all styles. The two artists had first-hand experience of Parisian Impressionism, which they helped to spread in this country on a large scale. Casas was undoubtedly the most gifted and original artist of Catalan Modernism; nevertheless, he painted mainly urban views, with a light which is more evocative of Paris than of the Mediterranean. Rusiñol, on the other hand, gave more importance to landscape painting, from the suburbs of Montmartre to the gardens of Aranjuez, without forgetting Sitges, Valencia, Girona, Majorca and Granada. Although from his house at Cau Ferrat in Sitges he had an unequalled view over the Mediterranean, maritime themes do not abound in his work, except for the picture from

his youth, *El port de Barcelona* (c. 1875), now property of the Museum of Modern Art in Barcelona’s Parc de la Ciutadella. The artist preferred painting courtyards or views of parks and gardens, in a style that evolved from subtle naturalism to a more realist and more academic symbolism.

Coinciding with Modernism, the discovery of Majorca held a powerful fascination for the Catalan artists. Santiago Rusiñol stayed there towards the end of his life, and painted peaceful views of Majorcan ports which are fairly conventional if we compare them with the work from his Parisian period.

Ricard Canals (1876-1931) also came under the spell of the contrasting beauty of the Balearic island; but the two artists who most brilliantly immortalized the Majorcan landscapes are Anglada Camarasa (1871-1959) and Joaquim Mir (1873-1940).

Anglada Camarasa, who in 1914 settled in Port de Pollença, far from the avant-gardes, painted in an exuberantly decorative style, using bright colours to





JOAQUIM MIR, REFLEXOS (MALLORCA)

emphasize Majorca's idyllic nature. Joaquim Mir, one of the most outstanding landscapists in Catalan painting, produced some of his best work in Majorca between 1900 and 1903, his subtle use of colour and transparency bestowing a magical and surreal air on the landscape. This work belongs to the most interesting moment in his artistic career, which evolved towards a more anodyne form of post-Impressionism. At the beginning of the twentieth century, before setting out on his cubist adventure, Picasso painted a number of views of Barcelona rooftops and a few pictures with a maritime theme, such as the oil-painting *Mediterrània* (c. 1901), recently included in an exhibition on Catalan Modernism. In it, the artist uses a deep blue which prefigures fauvism. The avant-garde movements arising at the beginning of the century had no direct influence on Catalan landscape painting, though towns in Catalonia North, such as Ceret and Collioure, were settings frequented by fauvists and cubists. It is, however, important to

mention the views of Horta de Sant Joan, in which in 1909 Picasso displayed the striking cubist approach inspired in the geometrical forms of the town's architecture. The phenomenon was repeated the following year, when the genial painter from Malaga visited Cadaqués and brought out the abstract character of its structures, as can be seen in the painting *El guitarrista* (1910).

During the second decade of the twentieth century, Catalan landscape painting experienced a certain return to the true values of the land, which gave rise to the emergence of *Noucentisme*, the style which best expresses the myth of "Mediterraneanism" through works of a pleasant, joyful nature. In *Paisatge de la costa* (1915), dominated by a pale, transparent blue, Xavier Nogués offers a highly representative example. But the artist who best captured *Noucentisme's* idyllic vision was Joaquim Sunyer, who, under the influence of Gauguin, evoked the harmonious, paradisiac universe of the southern seas in oil-paint-

ings such as *Mediterrània* (1910-1911). The Mediterranean heritage played an important part in the work of Joan Miró, who, during his training, was inspired by the Catalan town of Mont-Roig to produce rural landscapes of a precise, detailed realism. The most striking work in this respect is the famous *Masia* (1921-22), whose enormously complex iconography makes it a legend from the time before Miró's surrealist period.

Subsequent developments in landscape painting, whose many followers include Gimeno, Mercader, Mompou and Raurich, present few novelties and continue a tradition of eclecticism. The only original contribution is the irruption of the surrealist landscape in Salvador Dalí's work between 1928 and 1935, in which the vision of the Empordà and Cape Creus takes on a metaphysical dimension. This way of experiencing the landscape of the Empordà was to be taken up with less intensity by another surrealist, the painter Angels Planells, a faithful follower of the work of Dalí. ●