EXHIBITION TEXTS

The Bécquers: A Lineage of Artists

This exhibition offers a fresh insight into the members of a dynasty of painters who dominated the art scene in Seville during the central decades of the nineteenth century. Recent years have furnished a deeper knowledge of their oeuvre, revealing a set of common characteristics that permit consideration of the individual artists as a cohesive unit with a distinct evolution. The works on display show how these family traits were captured on canvas and also, most eloquently, on paper.

Each member of the family contributed to the definition of Andalusian Romanticism, especially the Sevillian variant. While José, Joaquín and Valeriano did this through painting, Gustavo Adolfo used poetry, although his facet as a skilled draughtsman is now coming to light.

The family laid the foundations for the artistic celebration of typically Andalusian forms of expression. José Domínguez Bécquer was the author of printed illustrations of scenes from daily life that enjoyed enormous popularity throughout Europe. Joaquín was a prolific artist who introduced a more academic style to the genre painting he had learned from his cousin. Under Valeriano, Joaquín's pupil and nephew, the painting of typical customs evolved into a realism which, in his later years, turned those scenes into quasi-ethnographic documents. In keeping with the norms of the time, all four painted portraits, also incorporating figures who had previously been largely omitted from the genre, such as children and people of modest means.

Gustavo Adolfo trained as a painter with Valeriano in his Uncle Joaquín's studio. The two brothers shared travels, hardships and aspirations. As the author of the *Rhymes* said, "He drew my verses and I put his pictures into verse." The young painter died in Madrid in the autumn of 1870 and Gustavo Adolfo passed away only three months later at the age of 34, marking the extinction of one of the most prominent lineages of artists of nineteenth-century Spain.

Genealogy of the Bécquers

At the end of the sixteenth century the brothers Miguel and Adán Bécquer, originally from Brabant, Flanders, settled in the parish of Santa María la Mayor in Seville. A noble family with a large fortune, they achieved great social standing in the city. In 1662 they sponsored a chapel in the cathedral, and Miguel's son, Guillermo, became a *caballero veinticuatro*, or alderman, and established an entailed estate.

By the mid-eighteenth century the family were struggling to maintain their former position, which perhaps explains why they preserved the illustrious Bécquer surname. At the end of that century, Juan José Bécquer was a member of the Real Escuela de las Tres Nobles Artes in Seville and the Real Academia de San Fernando in Madrid, having become a noted engraver. He likely trained José, the son of a relative. José was the grandson of Martín Bécquer, a *veinticuatro* in Seville and lord of the entailed estate. At the age of 22 he married Josefa Bastida and the couple had eight children, including Valeriano and Gustavo Adolfo. José died young in 1841 and his wife followed him soon after, leaving the family broken and practically destitute. Joaquín, José's cousin, took charge of the brothers' artistic training until they each went their own way.

José Domínguez Bécquer (Seville, 1805–1841). The start of the dynasty

José Bécquer, the founder of this family of artists, started painting at the age of 11 at the Real Escuela de las Tres Nobles Artes in Seville. He would eventually become a teacher at this academy, occupying the position of head of painting from 1835 until he passed away.

The reconstruction of his oeuvre is somewhat complex, due not only to its scarcity and dispersion but also to the artist's premature death. For this reason, he has received limited attention over the years, beyond the fact of being the father of the poet Gustavo Adolfo. Some of his twenty known works are displayed here and reveal a common thread: a focus on typical figures and scenes. Based on his life observation of figures and landscapes, whether urban or rural, he creates both simple compositions, as in *The Cigarette Girl and the Bullfighter* (1838), and more complex ones like *Dance in a Country Inn* (1840), with a richness of attitudes and gestures that are rendered with ease and a natural flair. José Bécquer was the leading exponent of this type of painting, although precedents can be found in the engravings of typical costumes and customs and the pottery produced in Triana, which had already explored these themes.

Most of José's paintings and watercolours left Seville almost as soon as they were completed, contributing to the dissemination of typical Andalusian figures and customs throughout Europe—thanks also to the wide circulation of collections of lithographs—that were greatly admired by a large international clientele. Ten of his paintings were exhibited at the Musée du Louvre between

1842 and 1848. His death at barely 36 years old brought an abrupt end to his promising career, although his cousin and artistic heir Joaquín continued the work begun by José.

Joaquín Domínguez Bécquer (Seville, 1816–1879). Portraitist of an era

Joaquín was the disciple, most direct collaborator and artistic heir of his cousin José, adopting genre painting as the hallmark of his style. In this early stage of his career, browns and earth tones predominated in his palette, lending a certain chromatic monotony to his paintings that he gradually corrected.

By 1840 he had become a painter in his own right, although his style was still reminiscent of that of José. This is clearly illustrated by the two scenes on display in this room: *Rendezvous in the Street* and *Indoor Dance* (1941). He was also influenced by other painters, such as David Roberts, creating a version of the latter's work in *Corpus Christi Procession inside Seville Cathedral* (1845). From 1842 he was involved in the restoration works of the Alcazar and had his studio there, which was frequented by art enthusiasts and foreigners. He came into contact with influential figures like the Duke and Duchess of Montpensier, with whom he maintained a close relationship for the rest of his life. His finest works date from the late 1840s onwards, when he started producing a more refined style of painting with a sound and meticulous draughtsmanship achieved by his conscientious life studies of both the human figure and the landscape. This combination of figures with the urban and monumental landscape is splendidly illustrated in the three panoramic views of the city, works from the Museo de San Telmo, which depict traditional Sevillian celebrations. In 1860 he accepted the invitation from the city council to create the large historical painting *The Treaty of Wad-Ras*, which took him ten years to complete and marked a radical departure from the painting he had practised hitherto.

The abundant corpus of work he left upon his death in 1879 elevated genre painting, until then considered a minor category, to a style respected by a select clientele and the cultural and artistic elite. It is with good reason that he enjoyed an excellent reputation among his contemporaries, received official honours and distinctions, and was close friends with many artists and writers of his time.

Joaquín Domínguez Bécquer and the Duke and Duchess of Montpensier

In 1848 Duke Antoine d'Orléans, son of the deposed Louis Philippe of France, and his wife María Luisa de Bourbon, sister to Isabella II of Spain, moved to Seville to get away from the political instability at the court of Madrid, establishing what came to be known as the "small court" at the Palace of San Telmo. Open to technical and artistic innovations, the duke surrounded himself with local and foreign painters, prompting a renewal in these fields.

The Montpensiers' first residence in Seville was the Alcazar, where they met Joaquín Domínguez Bécquer, engaged at the time in the restoration of the monument. The close relationship that sprang up between the couple and the artist led to significant commissions and acquisitions, such as *A Bolera Dancing the Vito*, *Dandies Playing Cards in a Tavern*, and the portraits of the duke and duchess and kings Alfonso X and Peter I, all present in this room.

The Montpensiers entrusted Joaquín with the artistic training of their children, to whom he taught drawing at San Telmo. The dramatic scenes he painted as a graphic testament to the premature death of some of the royal infants belong to this later period. One of those paintings is displayed in this room.

Portraiture in the oeuvre of Joaquín Domínguez Bécquer

Predominant in nineteenth-century European painting, portraiture is a genre to which the artist returned time and again. The works in this room bear testament to this interest and to how his portraits evolved during the course of his career.

The first examples denote models borrowed from early Romantic painters, such as Antonio María Esquivel in *Portrait of a Baby Girl*, and the one of Manuel Moreno López, whose composition is reminiscent of the Murillesque tradition.

Without abandoning these models, in 1850 he started incorporating a subtle realism, as may be observed in *Portrait of a Lady (Fernán Caballero)* and *Portrait of the Duchess of Montpensier*. Of all these works, *Self-portrait Dressed as a Hunter* is undoubtedly his finest, although he demonstrated the same skill in the portrait of Fernando A. González de Aguilar, the future Count of Aguilar.

Occupying pride of place in the room are the portraits of the two kings, Isabella II and Francis of Assisi, inspired by the models of Federico Madrazo. The one of the queen is a replica of a portrait held in the Embassy of Spain in Rome, while the one of the king was likely conceived expressly for Seville since it features elements associated with the Sevillian artistic tradition.

Valeriano Domínguez Bécquer (Seville, 1833–Madrid, 1870). A bid for realism

Valeriano is a unique case in the art world of the day since he remained at the margins of the official structure and hardly ever took part in public exhibitions. Together with his premature death and the scant documentation about his output, this has rendered the study of his life and work somewhat complex. Even the religious and historical themes that young artists cultivated to enter competitions are absent from his oeuvre, which is essentially focused on portraits and scenes of typical figures and customs.

Valeriano practised portraiture throughout his career. Both well-to-do personages and modest typical figures sat for him, and he portrayed them with a serious disposition. This is exemplified in his portraits of children, from as early as the one of the little girl, from the Museo Nacional del Prado, that he painted when he was 18 years old. Also on display are two family portraits, an unusual category in the Spanish art world, and one of his finest works: the portrait of his brother Gustavo Adolfo, with whom he shared a deep connection for reasons of his profession and family affection.

It was thanks to him that Valeriano travelled to Madrid in 1862 and embarked with his brother on a tour of the whole of Spain after receiving a commission from the Ministry of Public Works to create “a collection as complete as possible of pictures that will leave a testament for the future of the characteristic clothing, traditions and customs of our provinces today”. These works, which represent his finest output, reflect scenes of people at work and at play or celebrating, as well as typical figures, and many of them are related to texts by Gustavo Adolfo. Although they tend to depict the pleasant side of rural life, they are still an example of sincerity and veracity. This close observation of scenes from life and the bid for realism and objectivity are at odds with the Romantic tradition. Indeed, Valeriano can be seen as one of the first painters to present innovative proposals.
“Traditions and customs of our provinces”

In 1865 the Ministry of Public Works commissioned Valeriano to create a series of paintings for the Museo de la Trinidad, the aim being to form “a collection as complete as possible of pictures that will leave a testament for the future of the characteristic clothing, traditions and customs of our provinces today”.

Valeriano produced preliminary studies, paintings and texts explaining the subjects selected. He had complete freedom to choose the themes and sizes, although they all share the same attention to detail in both the execution and the descriptions. The first set he sent, in 1866, featured Aragón; in 1867 he delivered the works on Soria, and in 1868, when the project was halted, the ones on Ávila.

On display from the Aragonese set are *The Offering*, which alludes to the bread that was offered to the retinue during the procession of the patron saint through the town, and *Chocolate*, depicting a group gathered to play and drink hot chocolate. Also shown are two works from the Valley of Amblés (Ávila): *The Chapel Fountain*, in which pilgrims drink from the miraculous spring near the chapel of La Virgen de Sonsoles; and *Village Girl from the Valley of Amblés*, showing the young woman offering a basket of eggs to the Virgin Mary.

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (Seville, 1836–1870). Poet and draughtsman

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer grew up in a family of painters, although he benefited little from the paternal teachings due to the premature death of José in 1841. Nevertheless, like his brother Valeriano, he had a close relationship with his second uncle, Joaquin, his father's cousin and disciple. Orphans, the two brothers continued their pictorial training with Antonio Cabral Bejarano. Later on, they discovered the novelties offered by photography and the revolution of industrial technology applied to the creation of images, which enabled them to unlock imagined worlds.

For the poet, painting and literature were inseparable. Many of the defining traits of Gustavo Adolfo's writing emerged from his deep connection with the visual arts, the texts illuminated by images and the images by texts. The genre painting of José and Joaquín reveals analogies with the themes and techniques favoured by Valeriano, while Gustavo Adolfo seamlessly incorporated all of these images into his writings throughout his career. For example, the paintings of festive celebrations and typical Andalusian figures clearly inspire some of Gustavo Adolfo's texts. This is particularly the case of the press articles illustrated with typical and festive figures by Valeriano, which establish common visual sources with his drawings of the Corpus Christi procession in Seville and the dance of Los Seises in the cathedral. The poet invited readers of his lines to form an idea of what he was describing and imagine the scenes, and in this way his poems served as vignettes.

Gustavo Adolfo was a keen draughtsman throughout his life and frequently illustrated his manuscripts. His drawings were much sought-after, and he was generous in gifting them, which means that they are relatively dispersed. The two albums presented here, on loan from the Biblioteca Nacional, provide a fascinating insight into the poet's universe and his pictorial output.

The Bécquers: Works on paper

Drawing was an essential practice for the Bécquers, a technique that allowed them to convey ideas and images in their works with a rare realism, highlighting the most typical or comical dimensions. They used it as a tool of communication and information to show their innovative and, at times, incisive expressiveness, unprecedented at the time and far removed from the academic world.

The painting of typical Sevillian customs began in the 1830s with José Bécquer as its principal practitioner. Greatly sought-after by important national and international collectors, his watercolours and lithographs disseminated typical Andalusian figures and customs throughout Europe among a public fascinated with Spanish culture. Thanks to the recent advent of lithography, numerous illustrations based on his gouaches were printed by the leading French and British publishers, providing him with an international reputation that practically no other artist of romantic Spain could emulate.

José Domínguez Bécquer was the author of numerous watercolours that constituted a repertoire of typical individuals, what he called *figurines*, who reflected Andalusian society in the early nineteenth century. These typical figures can be seen in the watercolours displayed at the beginning of the room: bullfighters and *boleras*, women wearing mantillas to attend religious services, cigarette girls and sellers, etc. Some of the figures appear alone against a white background, while others are presented in an urban setting. For these drawings, the artist used graphite pencil and watercolour enhanced with opaque pigments.

Displayed on the central wall in the room are a series of lithographs, a relatively new printmaking technique at the time that permitted the international dissemination of the typical Andalusian figures he had created. The first work on this wall is a lithograph from 1836, one of the earliest experiments with the technique in Seville. An example of the success of these prints is the series by Goupil-Vibert, lithographed by Achille Devéria and published in Paris on drawings by Bécquer. The lithographer interprets the original models loosely, adapting them to a more European taste. Displayed next to this series are four state proofs prior to the final edition.

Also printed in Paris but for a Spanish publisher, José made five illustrations of genre scenes for one of the most famous books of the Romantic era, *España artística y monumental* by Pérez Villamil. Four of the illustrations are displayed here.

The next panel shows the Bulla-Stampa series, lithographed by Adolphe Bayot and more faithful to José Domínguez Bécquer's originals.

The lithographs were printed in two inks and then illuminated by hand with watercolour in the same lithography workshops.

Joaquín's drawings evidence his exceptional command of the technique, achieved through sound academic training, which he manifested in typical themes like the bullfighting world and also in humorous scenes. As an exceptional witness of the life of the Duke and Duchess of Montpensier, he captured details of different scenes of their daily existence in descriptive drawings, employing a variety of techniques: crayon, gouache and ink.

His section begins with four drawings of typical themes. The bullfighting scenes were preliminary studies for his painting *Bullring of the Real Maestranza de Sevilla*, on display in the previous room. He made the drawings carefully from life, faithfully rendering the scene before his eyes.

Next, the series on the funerals of the Montpensier infants highlights his skill in documenting real events and figures, which he portrayed with great precision.

His oeuvre also has a satirical and mocking dimension, as may be easily observed on the following wall. Two of the works are preliminary pencil drawings for paintings, while the other four, made with agile ink lines, illustrate humorous anecdotes from the hunts he shared with the Duke of Montpensier's circle.

Valeriano depicted typical figures with the particular realism that became the hallmark of his output, which culminated in the series of Spanish provincial figures. His collaboration with the press led to witty satirical sketches, influenced by the French caricature of the day and great draughtsmen like Honoré Daumier.

As part of this brief selection, Valeriano offers two youthful drawings on typical themes, similar to most of the ones by his father that are displayed here, and others with a more Romantic tone. The last drawing dates from the period when he travelled through Aragón and Castile with his brother Gustavo Adolfo.

Gustavo Adolfo also cultivated the art of drawing with astonishing competence. His works demonstrate a rare, imaginative creativity, as may be observed in the room dedicated to the poet.