

Urgells

Modest Urgell was born in Barcelona on 13 June 1839, fifteen years before the city walls started to be demolished. From a wealthy class, he soon showed a strong inclination to the arts, especially theatre and painting, which he finally took up.

He studied at the Llotja School in Barcelona and, under the guidance of the painter Ramon Martí Alsina, he began in realistic painting. He married the painter Eleonor Carreras Torrescasana (1843–1907), with whom he shared profession and exhibitions in the early years of marriage and of whom little is known and no paintings survive. They had a son, Ricardo Urgell (1873–1924), who would also take up painting with notable success, albeit with a very different theme from his father, and a daughter, Modesta, who we know exhibited her works - along with her father and brother - in 1896 in Barcelona.

Most of the surviving accounts about Urgell describe him as a man who - for good or ill - left no one indifferent. His confrontations with the academy, event organisers, members of the jury, critics and other artists denote a strong character, a person with clear ideas - whether modern or quite the opposite - and who acted on them. Urgell never followed the prevailing realistic current. He opted for a very personal, introspective, melancholic Romanticism that fused with the landscapes he encountered. Along with Urgell's inclination for the land, the popular, its festivities and characters, he admired writers such as Maurice Maeterlinck and Edgar Allan Poe.

This would influence the plays he wrote in the late 1870s and subsequent decades, when he became a successful painter and could cultivate his passion for the stage again, and the paintings and drawings marked by twilight, darkness or the hereafter. For Urgell, sunny paintings lacked interest, they were "the prose of landscape".

«¿D'ahont es aixó?... ¡Quántas vegadas, contemplant un quadro, ó be regirant apuntes ó dibuixos, m'han fet semblant pregunta, y ¡quántas no he sabut qué contestar! Generalment, son quatre ratllas ó una nota de color, quelcom íntim, ingenuo, sentit.»

Urgell, M. (1905) *Catalunya*, Barcelona: Miquel Seguí, ed.



Unal y Marca. Modest Urgell painting (Girona), c. 1869–1870. Private collection

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Modest Urgell. Platja amb barca (Berck), 1873 (before). Oil on canvas, 38 x 77 cm. Museu d'Art de Girona

Modest Urgell

– beyond the horizon –



Temporal exhibition

From the 19 December 2019

to 24 May 2020

Museu d'Art de Girona

Àmbit 3

Modest Urgell. Beyond the Horizon

Modest Urgell (1839–1919) was one of the most successful painters of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the 1870s he regularly exhibited his paintings at national shows (Barcelona, Olot, Girona or the National Exhibitions of Fine Arts in Madrid) and international shows (Paris, Munich, Brussels, Berlin, Chicago or Philadelphia). He won fame and recognition and managed to drive and maintain a solid career, making his art his livelihood.

Admired and criticised intensely, his work maintained a constant theme: seascapes, village streets, hermitages and cemeteries, desolate landscapes, ruins, witches, bats, twilights, stillness and solitude. Nonetheless, his painting evolved from scenes of local customs and manners to evocative landscapes imbued with crepuscular light, of which he eventually made versions and variations. This repetition earned him the reputation as a painter of "more of the same" or "the same old scene", which Urgell justified as a constant search to paint the definitive landscape: "for not having done 'the same old scene' as I would like to, as I dreamed."

On the centenary of his death, the Government of Catalonia is holding the Modest Urgell Year to revive the artist and make him better known. This exhibition seeks to highlight all aspects of Urgell, beyond his crepuscular horizons: the eternal nomad who settled in Paris decades before Catalan art nouveau followers, the irreverent artist, the commercially successful painter, the frustrated playwright and, above all, the inspirational master of young artists, and the painter admired, among others, by Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí and Joan Hernández Pijuan.



Francesc Serra. Modest Urgell, standing in his studio, 1903. Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona

Nomadism

Modest Urgell often changed home. He lived temporarily in Barcelona, Girona, Paris, Toulouse, Tarragona and Arenys de Mar and travelled around much of Catalonia in search of inspirational landscapes. His nomadism and isolated and contradictory romanticism, as well as his life mindset, broke with the image of a conventional artist.

From Barcelona to Girona

Modest Urgell's beginnings were not easy. His work did not have the support of the academy and it was hard for him to make his way in the Catalan capital. After marrying Eleonor Carreras, the couple moved to Girona, a city where, years later, he would say he spent the quietest years of his life despite economic hardships. The year of their arrival and departure are not clear, but it was a long period, around the 1860s and 1870s.

From Paris to Berck

Although there are still many gaps in Urgell's biography, it is certain that he made several trips to France. We know that in 1862 he was among the foreign students accepted at the École Impériale Spéciale de Dessin et de Mathématiques in Paris; that in 1867 he presented a winter landscape at the Paris Universal Exposition; that the following year Francisco Miralles portrayed him in his Paris studio; that in 1872 he exhibited at the Salon held at the Palais des Champs-Élysées; and that in 1878 – when the railway connection with France opened in Catalonia – he returned to the French capital as one of the artists selected to participate in the Spanish pavilion of the Universal Exposition. Once there, he said, he would deal with people of the standing of the painter Camille Corot, the actress Sarah Bernhardt or the writer Alexandre Dumas (fils). He was also able to see the landscapes of Charles-François Daubigny, possibly the artist most in tune with his sensibility. Apart from Paris, Urgell was one of the first artists to paint the spa village of Berck, which, near the Pas-de-Calais, would become a site of pilgrimage for many painters, such as Édouard Manet, Eugène Boudin and Ludovic-Napoléon Lepic.



Modest Urgell. *Paisatge amb tren de fons*, ("Landscape with Train in the Background") c.1864-1871. Oil on canvas. 12,5 x 31,5 cm. Private collection

Catalonia

Since the 1860s and for half a century, Urgell made endless trips throughout Catalonia and, occasionally, the peninsula. He did it before, during and after his time in Girona, with only two variables to bear in mind: the intensity - as he got older, he decreased the frequency of the trips - and the ease when painting due to his economic situation. As he recorded, his objective was very clear: to paint "this Catalonia of mine, small, bare, dismantled, without flowers or plants, without forests or mountains, or alder groves; this still, sad and solitary Catalonia." Aiguafreda, Albons, Amer, Arbúcies, Banyoles, Bellcaire, Bigues, Borgonyà, Caldetes, Campdevà-nol, Camprodon, Centelles, Cinc Claus, Corbera, Espinelves, Flaçà, La Granada, Gualta, Hostalric, Mata, Ocata, Olot, Pardines, Parlavà, La Pera, Peralada, Ribes, Tamarit, Torroella de Montgrí, Ultramort, Vallfogona, Viladrau, Vimbodí... were some of the towns and villages that inspired him.



Modest Urgell. *Carrer del poble* ("Village street"), c. 1886. Oil on canvas. 147,5 x 88 cm. Cercle del Liceu. (Detail)

In demand

With the medal he received for El toc d'oració ("Call to Prayer") at the 1876 National Exhibition of Fine Arts in Madrid, Urgell's status definitively changed. The hardships of past times were overcome and the material progression was dazzling: the State and the then newly-opened Museu Provincial de Girona bought some of his works; the orders from direct or indirect relatives of the royal family proliferated; he enlarged his studio (once he had definitively returned to Barcelona); he became a member of boards of directors of associations; he appeared on many front pages; the critic Francesc Miquel i Badia called him "the Spanish Corot"... The best summary of this ascent was provided by Josep Roca i Roca when, in an article in 1891, he posed the following rhetorical question: "Who doesn't know Modest Urgell in Barcelona?"

People liked Urgell's painting and he fully exploited this by trying to sell as much as he could, repeating his works and with the help of the students in his studio. This commercial spirit also encouraged him, in 1900, to promote the Artistic and Literary Society of Catalonia. Negative reviews came but Urgell ignored them: he took it with a pinch of salt, began calling some of his works The Same Old Scene and defended himself by saying that at least he had made a contribution, in contrast to others who had not contributed anything, or "the same old scene."



Modest Urgell. *El toc d'oració* ("Call to prayer"), c. 1876. Oil on canvas, 102 x 182 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid (in deposit in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona)

The appropriation

The adjective Romantic is fully justified in Urgell, mainly because this is how he saw himself. But he was a contradictory Romantic who always did his own thing: first, because when he achieved his style no one was doing the same thing (only some occasional imitations by his friend Joaquim Vayreda or the young Rusiñol) and, later, because the world kept changing and he did not want to know anything about it.

Urgell put emotion before identification, and in such a discreet manner that the viewer can only intuit it. The definitive Urgell does not depict characters that express the emotion he seeks to share but draws a landscape and adds a laconic "that is how I felt it." The Romantic sublime in Urgell has a sense of limitlessness, of going beyond the horizon, but never of excessiveness.

If being in silence is the way of being oneself or the closest thing to it, the simplest, emptiest and most silent landscape should be the one that enables us "to [better] listen" to the painter. Urgell emptied and simplified the landscapes that he made his own systematically but, as a man born in 1839, he had some limits in this process. Artists from later generations, such as his pupil Joan Miró, would break all the barriers.



Modest Urgell. *Paisatge* ("Landscape"), c. 1885-1895. Oil on canvas, 95 x 184 cm. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona

The appeal

Apart from the collectors who wanted to own one of his landscapes, Urgell was a painter who appealed to contemporary and later artists. In the first place, the students in his studio and those at the Llotja School, where he began teaching in 1894. The most significant examples are his son Ricardo Urgell (they never separated, despite their differences in how they understood painting), Hermen Anglada Camarasa (who always saw him as his only master and, at first, imitated him) and Joan Miró, who was obsessed with some of Urgell's forms and with whom he shared his love of landscape and solitude.

Urgell died in 1919. Later artists who admired him knew nothing about his personality or his stories; they only were familiar with his works, the infinite melancholia they exuded, his thematic obsession and his success as an artist, because his paintings formed part of almost all the collections in the country. In the 1970s, Joan Miró and also Salvador Dalí and Joan Ponç created some works in which Urgell is mentioned. In the case of Hernández Pijuan, the link consisted of their obsession with making the landscapes that inspired them their own, although they had very different approaches: one, from mystery; the other, from memory.



Joan Miró. *Paysage. Hommage à Urgell*, 1976. Pen on paper, 15,5 x 21,4 cm. Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró a Mallorca. © Successió Miró 2020