So near and yet so far: Spain and its painters in nineteenth-century France

Pierre Sérié

If one questioned a French person today about his or her artistic culture, would there be anyone who would draw a blank on Spain? Everybody, even the least erudite, would be bound to name at least one artist, be it Picasso. And then those very sonorous words, most of them never Gallicised (Goya, the Alhambra, the Escorial), as against their Italian equivalents, which to a French audience have become too close to home through the use of translation (for, in France, one says 'Léonard de Vinci', 'les Chambres et les Loges de Raphaël', 'la Chapelle sixtine de Michel-Ange'), have preserved their exotic colouring, a whiff of Otherness. These things are archaic and yet still escape the status of 'classics'. Objects which, despite the distance of the centuries, retain an element of the unexpected (the unconventional poses of the figures portrayed by Velázquez), of excess (the very raw realism of Ribera or Zurbarán), if not of savagery (the *Black Paintings* of Goya) and whose subversive power was such, in their time, that it has still not completely receded: Picasso retains intact, in the collective imagination, his status as the iconoclast par excellence. How can this still be the case?

The reason is that, in the long view of history, in an expanded chronological perspective and looking beyond the literary field alone, contact with Spain is, in the end, quite a recent phenomenon. Despite the frequency of Hispanic subjects on the theatrical stage in the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries (Corneille's *Le Cid*), despite Spain's centrality in international diplomacy, as exemplified by the three Franco-Spanish royal marriages of the seventeenth century, and even despite what constituted the great geopolitical issue of the second half of that same century in Europe – the Spanish Question, caused by the imminent but indefinitely postponed demise of Spain's last Habsburg (1665-1700), and the ensuing War of Succession (1701-14); despite all this, then, Spain did not exist in the field of the fine arts in modern times. France was poorly and inaccurately informed about the country's painting until the first half of the nineteenth century: El Greco and Zurbarán were totally ignored; Ribera owed his fame to his attachment – through his Neapolitan career – to the Italian school; Velázquez suffered from the interdict that struck the minor genre of portraiture. Only Murillo – the very figure least familiar to today's average art lover – enjoyed great consideration for the moment. What was later to be called the Spanish 'Golden Age' therefore boiled down to Murillo alone. In fact, art history then revolved around three poles: the Northern school, the French, and the Italian. So true was this that even in Spain itself, when the Prado opened in 1819, the place of honour was reserved for Raphael's *Virgin with a Fish*.

It was not until the second third of the nineteenth century that an educated public really became interested in Spanish art. But from then on, what enthusiasm! What had been despised up until then was suddenly praised to the skies. Thus, in 1852, the biggest financial effort ever made by the administration of the Beaux-Arts went towards the purchase not of a sixteenth-century Italian painting, but of an *Immaculate Conception* by Murillo, which was fought over by Tsar Nicholas I, Queen Isabella II of Spain, the National Gallery and the Louvre Museum. It took no less than a special vote in the Chamber of Deputies to raise the sum requested and to allow the canvas to enter the Louvre (it is now in the Prado, but that is another story). And it was in the Salon Carré – the holy of holies where the masterpieces of the museum are assembled without distinction between schools – that it was hung, just below Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*. From being nothing, Spanish painting had become almost everything. At

least if we refer to those who made art what it was in that period – Gautier, Courbet, Manet, the Goncourt Brothers, and so on:

- Velázquez is the greatest painter who ever existed. (Théophile Thoré-Burger, 1857)
- Ribera, Zurbarán and above all Velázquez: I admire them [...]. As for Monsieur Raphael, he undoubtedly did some interesting portraits, but I do not find any thought in his paintings. That is probably why our so-called idealists adorer him. (Courbet)
- I should like to swallow Velázquez whole. He is the world's foremost painter. (Henri Regnault, 1869)
- True painting amounts to three men: Rembrandt, Rubens, Velázquez. (Edmond de Goncourt, 1889)

To Ingres, for whom Raphael was 'God descended among men', Manet retorted that 'the painter of painters' was Velázquez. This substitution, to which both Courbet and the Goncourts subscribed, says it all. What had been adored yesterday (at least since the sixteenth century in France) was burned today: it was all over for Raphael and Italy; from now on they were to be regarded as the counterexample for 'modern' art and even to be blamed for so-called 'academic' art (the term appeared, in its pejorative sense, at this precise moment in history). When Courbet pits the Ribera-Zurbarán-Velázquez trio against 'Monsieur Raphael' in Manichean fashion, he is aware that he is shattering an idol: to precede Raphael's name with 'monsieur', a true oxymoron, is to secularise him in the deri-sory form of a bourgeois in a cardigan, to deprive him of his aura. Manet proceeds in the same way in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, where he explicitly attacks Raphael's *Judgment of Paris*, which, revived at the Spanish source, he can ridicule in the form of a judgment *from* Paris. We might seem to be talking a little too much about painting here. But that is precisely because the notion of 'modernity' was born of painting: Baudelaire writing *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* and Manet painting that same modern life. And this notion of modernity, even more than the

earlier notions of Romanticism and Realism, is intimately linked to the discovery of Spanish art and the exploration of the Iberian Peninsula. Romanticism made France aware of Spain, Realism was influenced by it, and the modernising movement – through Manet who went there and made Spain one of his favourite themes – made it a symbol of a paradigm shift.

When Gautier declared 'Spain is the Romantic country par excellence; no nation has borrowed less from Antiquity', he was already pointing out that everything there seemed new to observers trained in the Humanities, knowing their Greek and Latin by heart just as they knew Franco-Italian art like the back of their hand. Not only did Spain offer the artist (and the public) the possibility of going off the beaten track; it also constituted a lever enabling one to reverse the principal rules of art, and first and foremost the rule according to which painting had moral value and should necessarily make the viewer better (such is the notion of *exemplum virtutis* dear to David, for example). Just as the protagonist of Romantic drama was the anti-hero, so did Spain offer a repertory of anti-heroic subjects and motifs, the embodiment of the uncivilised, the savage, the 'barbarian' as compared to the classical Greco-Roman hero. The same held true for the bull, which, in the Spanish bestiary, is the counterpart of the ancient horse. Whereas in Rome Géricault had painted the horse races on the Corso, Manet was to depict the bullfight: brute force, the undomesticated animal that could be tamed only by putting it to death. Picasso would remember this emblematic motif, from the Minotaur paintings to *Guernica*. Spain is the land of disturbing figures (Gypsies, beggars, inquisitors, ascetic monks). Evoking Goya's series of prints *The Disasters of War*, the Goncourts would sum the matter up as follows:

> The genius of horror is the genius of Spain. There is torture, inquisition almost, in these plates by its last great painter. His etching burns the enemy for posterity, just as once the auto-da-fé burned the heretic for hell.
> (Goncourt, 1863)

And indeed, even if the cause were noble (resisting the Napoleonic invader; promoting political liberalism), the upheavals of contemporary Spanish history are akin not so much to the Parisian revolutions of the nineteenth century (the terrible year of 1870-71 excepted) as to a permanent civil war (the French Expedition to Spain of 1823, the First, Second and Third Carlist Wars, 1833-39, 1846-49, 1872-76), so that, in the end, nothing changed from the old order, with its misery and injustice. In Spain, blood flowed in vain; it was that anti-Enlightenment soil where everything worked towards denying the idea of progress dear to the nineteenth century, a land to make one despair of the human condition. In that respect, already, Spain did not belong symbolically to Western Europe, it was different, and it was this 'savagery' that artists would seek there in the second half of the century. Artists such as Regnault, already quoted above, to whom the critics significantly referred several times in their accounts of *Le Tribut de Zamora*, most especially at the point, at the beginning of Act Two, when Hermosa made her entrance:

> The role of Hermosa, the slave, the madwoman, did not seem to call for especially dazzling costumes. But it was discovered, not inopportunely, that the Orientals used to dress mad people in sumptuous clothes, which means we are presented with a purple silk kaftan embroidered with gold, with cuffs lined with amaranth red rolled up on the shoulders and displaying bare arms. The dishevelled hair reminded us of Regnault's Salome. This first appearance of La Krauss created an enormous effect.
> (*Le Figaro*, 2 April 1881)

Such mentions of Regnault's *Salomé* occur at least three times in reviews of *Le Tribut de Zamora*. To be sure, the biblical subject is not Spanish in itself. But, ever so surreptitiously to our eyes too little aware of the subtleties of this kind of painting, Regnault shamelessly subverted here the codes of 'Great Art' and looked well beyond the Pyrenees. For there is nothing antiquarian in this canvas, nothing noble or ancient either, just a model displaying herself as such by her inappropriate smile and

her deliberately neglected pose: one hand on her hip, one foot on the other. To express their total disapproval, the critics spoke in these terms: this is not Salome, but a Gypsy; not the Old Testament, but trashy Spanishry. And then, by way of chromaticism, there is the overabundant jet-black hair that stands out dark on light, black on yellow, a symphony in yellow, as Gautier would say. Regnault admitted that the idea for this painting – what Poussin called the 'concetto' and the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture the 'dessein' – had come to him from a vulgar piece of yellow cloth. In the end, the only historical thing about this picture is its title. And Regnault had conceived this profession of faith on behalf of purely formal painting, concentrating on colour and light, in Spain, where, despite having won the Grand Prix de Rome, he had taken refuge, fleeing the Italian masters. For the music critic of 1881, there was therefore nothing absurd in invoking this immensely famous *Salomé*. Better still, the connection with the Moorish subject of *Le Tribut de Zamora* was all the more obvious because, in Spain, Regnault had visited the Alhambra in Granada at length before descending as far as Tangier: Spain was his way of familiarising himself with the East. And indeed he had brought back from there another famous 'anti-history painting' (the last one before he was killed in action in January 1871): *Summary Execution under the Moorish Kings of Granada*, a drama without explanation, a painting without motivation other than arbitrary (who is executed, why and when is he executed?). Everything remains in abeyance in this canvas of unprecedented violence which is, at the same time, exclusively decorative, a little-known manifesto of art for art's sake.

This evocation of Regnault undermining the most elementary rules of art within the very institutions that guaranteed it (the École des Beaux-Arts, the French Academy in in Rome, the Salons) is revealing of the stakes represented by Hispanophilia around 1860-70. Italy embodied the Tables of the Law; Spain was the testing ground for researchers. In the immediate future, Regnault's posterity was to be immense and, at the Salon, it led to a whole corpus of Hispano-Moorish works that would delight the public for a good thirty years. Among these, Benjamin-Constant

illustrated several times themes very close to *Le Tribut de Zamora*, such as *The Cherifas* (1884), which shows, larger than life, the women of a harem as they had been depicted in Act Three Scene 1, in Ben-Saïd's palace: 'When the curtain rises, all Ben-Saïd's women are lying on cushions. Little black slaves fan them.' But it was a few years earlier, in 1876, that Benjamin-Constant had made his name with the immense *Entry of Mahomet II into Constantinople on 29 May 1453* (immense because it is 7 metres high), a canvas iconographically very close to what was soon to constitute the causal episode of Gounod's opera, the massacre of the Christians depicted in words (hypotyposis), first of all in Act One Scene 5 and again in Act Three Scene 8. For this *Mahomet II* which was to establish his reputation once and for all, Benjamin-Constant borrowed from Regnault's *Summary Execution* the device of 'high arches' that the set designers Lavastre and Carpezat themselves would take over in the third act of *Le Tribut de Zamora*, merely translating from left to right 'a sort of cut-out corner facing the public'. This cut-out horseshoe arch obviously had a connotative function on account of its exotic character, but above all, in the case of the painter, it enabled him to energise his canvas, inscribing it in a mobile space – a place of passage – that could transgress the limits between the art of time (the text) and the art of space (the frozen image of history painting). The effect of emergence created by this device drew viewers into the picture all the more readily because it was not parallel to them, but, being placed obliquely, moved virtually towards them, came to meet them. Finally, the low-angle view gave the spectators the sensation of being crushed by this gigantic, immensely high image, and, logically, meant they would identify with the corpses trampled by the mounted victor's horse. The illusion of being part of the canvas was total.

Following Benjamin-Constant came a fellow traveller of Regnault's in Spain, Georges Clairin, who was present at the premiere of *Le Tribut de Zamora* according to the review in *Le Figaro* on 2 April 1882. The article also specifies that this 'young painter of such great talent, who has travelled extensively in Spain and Morocco, gave some precious advice'. The theme of the victorious Moorish chieftain entering on horseback 'stage

right', passing under 'high Moorish arches' and seen at an angle, became one of his recurrent motifs, found in *After Victory: the Moors in Spain* (1885, currently rolled up in the reserve of the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Agen) and *The Last Mass: the Moors Ransacking a Spanish Cathedral* (1894, formerly in the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Vienne, now considered lost). Given Clairin's links with the world of the theatre (a friend of Massenet, he was to design, for example, the poster for *Le Cid* in 1885), it is not absurd to see a causal relationship between *Le Tribut de Zamora* and his great Hispano-Moorish blockbusters. If only in their proportions, extravagant even for the Salon (*After the Victory*, showing in its foreground the wives of the vanquished lying on the ground and destined for slavery, measures 6.50 by 9.60 metres, i.e. 64m²), these works, which can no longer be viewed today but are known to us through reproductions of the period, are in fact more a representation on canvas of a contemporary spectacle than history painting proper. Let us observe, in this respect, that Clairin does not show exactly what he promises: the victor is about to come onstage, but only about to. We imagine him more than we see him, which is the artist's way of engendering suspense in his viewers and sustaining their interest, placing on them the onus of conjuring up in their minds what is only hinted at. So should we regard this as theatre painting rather than history painting? For the *salonniers* of 1885, this double game was unbearable and they complained of it:

> One does not know whether to view [this] immense Turkery as a page of history or the decor for a ballet.
> (Paul Mantz, 1885)

Let us conclude with the testimony of an aspiring history painter, Gustave Surand, who entered the artistic arena in the early 1880s (he was therefore contemporary with *Le Tribut de Zamora*) and was destined to travel the world for a year as the recipient of a scholarship awarded at the end of the 1884 Salon. He owed this prize to a particularly ferocious historical episode, entirely commensurate with a certain Spanish vein (the

corpses of crucified lions rotting in the sun). If Surand is of interest to us, it is because, free to organise his journey as he wished, he hesitated between yesterday's promised land (Italy) and its modern equivalent (Spain). Like a docile pupil, he began by visiting Italy. But boredom very quickly set in. 'Florence surprised me with enthusiasm,' he explained, 'but the city of the popes thoroughly disillusioned me.' Raphael seemed 'meagre and small' to him and, in Rome, only one painting really moved him: the portrait of Innocent X by Velázquez. Was Rome and, more generally, the whole of Italy, 'an old acquaintance, rather like the fables one learns by heart at school', worth the trip? It would seem not. Even the landscape wearied Surand:

> The countryside is too sad; it is the source of the overwhelming and classical monotony that envelops everything.

He could stand it no longer: he had to meet living beings, and he hastened to embark for the Iberian Peninsula. There, at last, everything 'seem[ed] big, broad' to him: 'Nature occupies a very dominant position and suffices to impress anyone who loves it.' Sixty years later, the horse races on the Corso captured by Géricault appeared academic to him; Surand – a future animal painter – saw something altogether grimmer in Madrid with the bulls: 'It is fiercely beautiful and ignobly savage.' Here, finally, he felt fulfilled. Surand's correspondence with the administration of the Beaux-Arts demonstrates the extent to which, after 1870-80, Hispanophilia, hitherto reserved for rebellious spirits, had now become the common coin. He belatedly regained in Spain that inspiration which had nourished Gautier fifty years earlier (*La Vie dans la mort*) and Baudelaire (*Une charogne*) shortly thereafter: the beauty of horror and that lesson of vanity which Valdés Leal – another famous figure of the Siglo de Oro – had made his speciality in Seville (*Finis Gloriae Mundi* in the church of the Hospital de la Caridad).

Entry of Mahomet II into Constantinople on 29 May 1453, by Benjamin-Constant. Musée des Augustins, Toulouse.

Mahommed II le 29 mai 1453, par Benjamin-Constant. Musée des Augustins, Toulouse.