

Glimpses of Glamour and the Urban Underbelly

What comes to mind when you think of art in the early 1900's? Maybe the small, thin brush strokes and the emphasis on light quality that typified Impressionism? Perhaps you see the drastically distorted, subjective experiences of Expressionism and Cubism? The fascinating thing about Telfair's *Spanish Sojourns* at the San Diego Museum of Art is that it projects something unexpected: realism that is at the same time poignant and emotional. This is the essence of Robert Henri and the Ashcan School.

Whereas their peers created art for art's sake, the Ashcan School took an approach to painting that was almost journalistic. They focused on gritty, urban realism that is ever-so-slightly removed from the personal experience. Robert Henri visited Spain several times between 1900 and 1926. During this period, Spain went through the restoration of the monarchy, the wars against Cuba and America, the rise of anarchism and fascism, World War I and the Great Depression; the time just before the Spanish Civil War. What came out of his visits were portraits of a culture that would soon be adrift in its tumultuous state. Walking through this collection of his works is like stepping through time in a very in-your-face way. Literally. The faces of the past look at you—their personalities reflected in their eyes—a sensation that is simultaneously of curiosity and intimacy.

The exhibit is organized by subject: portraits of bullfighters are in one room, while Flamenco dancers and landscapes flank either end of the show. The landscapes are the sparest (read: least interesting, visually) of the selection, and are fleshed out by photos, sketches, and historical timelines. Though the historical background is essential in laying the tone of the show, having the "Landscape Room" open is an odd flow. Why would the curator start off a series of portraits with a collection of monochromatic rolling hills that all look the same?

The Gypsy Room is by far the most striking. With dancers and bullfighters, the viewers are seeing people who are accustomed to posing and performing. Some of these subjects were the celebrities of their time; others seem to be lost as an afterthought, competing against their own lively costumes. Though those paintings are vibrant and energetic, the gypsies' expressions are raw and unguarded. It's in this room that the grittiness often attributed to the Ashcan school becomes apparent. In the painting "Gypsy Mother (Maria y Consuelo)", you see the tattered edges of the woman's shawl, the wary look in her eyes, and the way the child seems to be an extension of her arm. The brush strokes are almost

hurried, as if Henri wanted to capture a fleeting moment before it was lost. In some paintings, the white of the canvas is visible through the stroke, making the texture a landscape all its own in stark contrast with the smooth, even facades of the Spanish ladies posing with fans. In “The Spanish Gypsy”, the subject sits on her chair as imperiously as a queen on a throne, her eyes squinting as if daring the audience to look at her. Personal stories line the walls of this room, as opposed to historical ones in other galleries. These are the paintings that are fascinating to be close to, as they reveal Henri’s preoccupation with art documenting life.

The exhibit’s second greatest strength is the lighting. Each portrait has a spot on it that either just traces the edges of the frame or reflects the light within the painting. This is particularly notable because the viewing rooms are actually rather dark. The walls are painted a deep green that both sets off the rich jewel tones of the paintings and absorbs the light in the room. The lighting in and of itself becomes characterized by drama; the aura of mystery and contemplation is undeniable.

As with many traveling exhibits, there is an interactive room. Overall it’s well executed. There’s an early 20th-century backdrop designed to emulate the sitting rooms seen in Henri’s paintings that should resonate with the Instagram selfie crowd. Across the way is an elongated vanity where you can sit and draw a self-portrait on a postcard (because, you know, everyone in the 1900’s sent postcards when they went traveling to Spain). Though engaging the audience in relevant activities is understandable desirable, the placement within the exhibit is a little off. The interactive room is colorful and brightly lit but is located between the bullfighters and the dancers. The change in lighting as you enter the photo drop feels like an ending; the curtain has gone up, and the house lights have come back on. It’s surprising and a bit jarring to return to the subdued lighting of the exhibit just on the other side of the wall.

Small organizational drawbacks aside, the exhibition is a compelling one that presents a fascinating cross-section of society. The show consists of over 40 paintings borrowed from personal collections and institutions and offers an excellent opportunity to see these vibrant works, the first time that Henri’s Spanish period has received such attention.

Spanish Sojourns: Robert Henri and the Spirit of Spain is running now through September 9th. SDMA has arranged a series of events that interact with the exhibit, including two painting workshops, a teen art sketchbook project, a lecture series, and symposium. Please check their website for details.