

## Morató Aragonés. Landscape with figures

Josep M<sup>a</sup> Morató Aragonés was born in 1923 in Reus, but his artistic beginnings are to be located in the small village Cornudella de Montsant in the Priorato region, where he lived due to familiar circumstances between 1928 and 1941. It was here where he first entered into contact, in 1936, with artists like Ignasi Mallol and Joan Rebull, who had arrived with their pupils of the Art School of the Generalitat of Tarragona in order to practise landscape painting. It was also in Cornudella that Ivo Pascual, after passing the summer months in 1940 painting with him and his friends Bosch Roger and Ventosa, encouraged him to study the Fine Arts.

Morató's rewarded trajectory (Gold Medal of the city of Reus and he was given the freedom of the town Cornudella) started in 1941, when he won the Fortuny Medal being only 17 years old, a fact that caused his move to Barcelona in order to begin his studies of Fine Arts. In Barcelona, he initiated his friendship with Bonaventura Puig and Perucho, whom he considered his master, and coincided with Miquel Villà in his retreat in Montserrat, which influenced his way of analyzing the colour of the landscape. Thus initiated in impressionism, it was not until his first journey to Paris in 1950 that the synthesis of languages, which characterize his work, defined itself. This placed him in between the naturalistic tradition of landscape painting, the constructivist rationalization, a legacy of Cézanne and his followers, and some methods of informal art as well as abstraction in trace, colour and treatment of the material. His second journey to Paris in 1954 discovered him plane painting and the work of Clavé, Bouffet and Chagall, developing since then the preference for the aesthetics of an expressionist disposition, of pronounced outlines, accentuated strokes and a taste for the grey and blue shades of the cold colour scheme. He became famous for his rich greyish palette.

Paris and Italy (where he started in 1955 with indoor-painting, letting behind the impositions of painting from nature) were to be the two centres that provided Morató Aragonés with the necessary elements to elaborate his own style, the result of the fusion of opposite tendencies. This searching for the balance between the real and the abstract, trying to make his paintings sincere (working 'from inside'), is why he never felt bound to any movement. Although in the 60s being stigmatized as 'modern', he always remained true to representational art. In this context, he said in 1978, 'one who works in the arts has to add attributes instead of reducing them. I pretend to demonstrate that even today one can do a work of art by means of the drawing, the form, or as well: 'painting the reminiscence of what I lived, basing myself on sketches taken from nature, is when I feel at best. This way I get closer to reality. Otherwise, I sometimes might obtain an almost abstract combination of colours and forms.' In the sixties, after a new journey to Paris in 64, he started using a palette knife as a nearly exclusive pictorial instrument, which constitutes one of the principal attractions of his works at that stage and one of the defining characteristics of his style during a long time to come. The originality of this method favoured (or perhaps the other way round) the step towards a progressive geometrical tendency of his work ('crystallographic planning', according to Santos Torroella). We find these characteristics until the beginning of the seventies and they coincide with his period of exhibitions at the gallery Grifé & Escoda. The geometrical tendency induced him to produce more and more cerebral works, a characteristic that would disappear gradually later on. All this coincides with the return to the brush, the incorporation of an intimate lyricism and a greater smoothness of forms. 1975, the year when his range of colours reached a smoother quality using pastel, marked the beginning of an inverse evolution incorporating warmer shades and audacious contrasts, refining the language of brush and

palette knife to the utmost, proving increasingly an unbound diction and a vigorous trace, which he would never lose until the last moments of his production.

## Landscapes and figures

Morató Aragonés, being fundamentally a landscape painter, always wanted to maintain his bonds to his native town painting the landscapes of Cornudella and Reus throughout his 70 years of productive painting activity. This emotional interest for what he felt close alternated with the views of the places he visited during the periods he used to travel a lot. The French landscape with an architecture that favoured the geometrical tendency and the austere Castilian landscape that favoured the chromatic and compositional interplay of difficult solution, were two opposite highlights of a reality that he knew how to combine with skill. Nevertheless, it is in his sketches made from nature and his drawings in Indian ink where we can observe best the quality of his trace; here, his masterly skill when painting space and volumes becomes evident, while the subject is simply an excuse for the forms. The same counts for the little sketches of figures or the compositions of Café scenes, many of them incorporate watercolour, especially during his last years. The figure itself has to be analyzed from two different points of view. On one hand, Morató was an accomplished portrait painter (four generations passed through his brushes); on the other hand, we count on a whole series of figures, which he used for his own formal and chromatic experimentations. We might call them still life-figures or landscape-figures, as it is the chromatic structure of the spaces, which defines them. The persistence of a certain feminine typology responds to this constant searching for a formal ideal on which to build the search for this other impalpable ideal, which is happiness. In this case, he achieved it through aesthetics and painting. In his solid and vigorous personal work, Morató Aragonés knew how to synthesize some features of the principal tendencies of painting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The extensive list of works reflects his passionate dedication to painting, but he also enjoyed participating in the discussions of his group of regulars, gathering at emblematic places in the Catalan capital: Kansas, La Puñalada, Samoa, La Cova del Drac and Escarlata.

He died in Barcelona on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2006, just a month after closing his last exhibition in his hometown, and is buried in Cornudella, at the foot of the Montsant, forming part of the landscape which he painted so many times.

Maria Elena Morató