



Rusiñol and the Alhambra

The awakening of a painter and poet

The *Patronato* (Board of Trustees) of the Alhambra and Generalife is organizing the first exhibition dedicated exclusively to the Catalan painter Santiago Rusiñol (Barcelona, 1861 – Aranjuez, Madrid, 1931). It will be held at the Alhambra, where this artist produced a large part of his many paintings linked with the city of Granada. Here he forged close links with the Granada intelligentsia of the first decades of the 20th century thanks to Antonio Barrios “El Polinario”, whose tavern in the Calle Real was frequented by local and visiting intellectuals, and became a busy hub for artistic exchanges of all kinds.

This important episode in Rusiñol’s career became a historic milestone in the future of modernism in art, as he set out on an alternative path which consisted of rebuilding the relationship between painting and nature. In this way, he rejected the traditional way of accessing and understanding the myth of modernity to take quite a different approach. Far from placing the city in the centre of his painting, Rusiñol decided to make nature the foremost feature of his art, crystallizing his aesthetic ideas in his images of the symbolic, poetic garden. His particular artistic vision also helped erase the romantic view of Granada, which from then on began to be reinvented.

Few pictures from his extensive Granada-based oeuvre remain in the city today, which means that this exhibition is a unique opportunity to explore in greater depth the life and work of the brilliant Catalan painter within a context of change in the art world.

The story behind the exhibition

AN OUTSTANDING FIGURE OF SPANISH ART in the late 19th and early 20th century, Santiago Rusiñol maintained a long-standing romance with a city, Granada, and a landscape, especially that of the gardens of the Alhambra and Generalife, which became a foremost feature of some of his most emblematic compositions. After his first trip in 1887, he made several more intermittent visits which intensified from the year 1895. These encounters helped turn his painting into a poetic experience in which the picture was a pretext for laying bare his most heartfelt emotions.

In this sense it could be argued that Rusiñol’s approach to painting started Spanish art down a path of no return and

pioneered a tendency that was to have a strong magnetic effect on other painters who, like him, felt the need to adapt their pictorial language, accommodating it with the passing of time to the future of a landscape which, with its cyclical transformation, warned against idealizing a modernity that tended to look condescendingly on nature, regarding it as a sentimental association that should be eliminated.



1907 photograph at Cau Ferrat, from left to right: Genís Muntané, the printer Oliva, Santiago Rusiñol and Adolfo Mas. Institut Amatller d'Art Hispànic. Arxiu Mas, Barcelona.

The exhibition offers an insight into some of the sources behind Rusiñol's art, which range from impressionist painting, picture cards, Japanese visual culture, symbolist aesthetics or the use of photography. All these references were assimilated and converged in a fluid,

enriching dialogue that the artist maintained with his natural environment. This creative dynamic crystallized in a very original visual offering in which some of the most trivial and insignificant of things, such as flowers, plants and vegetation, appeared as the central features of an oeuvre that helped breathe new meaning into the image of the Alhambra and by extension of the entire city.

The exhibition is divided into six different sections:

1. THE STEREOTYPE IMAGE

In spite of having made an earlier trip to Granada in 1887, Santiago Rusiñol's close familiarity with the city really developed 8 years later. The trip he made in autumn 1895, accompanied among others by his fellow painters, Arcadio Mas y Fondevila and Macario Oller, was a turning point in his career as a painter and opened the gates to a creative period in which he devoted his attention to painting gardens at the Alhambra and Generalife. However, this fixation on one particular theme, which helped place him firmly on the map of European painting, coincided initially with an interest in repeating some of the stereotypes which, over the course of the 19th

century, most contributed to reinforcing the traditional, folksy image of Granada.

To some extent, a lot of the exhibits in this part of the exhibition underline the success of a formula, that of stereotypical Andalusian figures, which in spite of the time elapsed, remained a source of strong consensus amongst the majority of artists that visited the city. In this sense, in the construction of this typical image of Granada within Europe, a series of cultural prejudices came together to strengthen the myth of a city which retained the aura of purity that many of the cities of northern Europe had lost.

For example, Rusiñol's iconic picture, "Woman from Granada", also known as "Gypsy Woman from the Albaicín" (Cau Ferrat Museum), owes a great deal to traditional stereotypes and is presented as an ethnic emblem.

2. THE IMAGE OF GRANADA AND THE ALHAMBRA

Following in the footsteps of earlier Catalan painters, such as Mariano Fortuny, his drawing teacher Tomás Moragas, and his friend Ramon Casas, Santiago Rusiñol arrived in Granada for the first time in autumn 1887. He was awestruck by the beauty of the city and captivated by the magnificent palaces of the Alhambra, the gardens of the Generalife, the *cármenes* of the Albaicín, the immense fertile plain, known as La Vega, at the foot of the Sierra Nevada, and the gypsy quarter in Sacromonte. All of this was fascinating for the young painter who came in search of the beauty of landscape, hungry for impressions that would make his artistic strings vibrate.

His fascination for Granada would be strong and enduring, as evidenced by his five long stays in the city in 1887, 1895, 1898, 1909 and 1922.

It was in Granada where Rusiñol discovered the path he was searching for and which established him as a painter. The beautiful gardens of Granada with their peculiar, imposing arbours, with cypresses pruned into fanciful shapes, enlivened by the joyful play of the



Arbour and box-hedges (Granada), 1898.
Private collection.



Green architecture (Granada), 1898.
Private collection.

water in their fountains, the Alhambra with its dreamlike architecture, the Court of the Pool full of dazzling light and reflections, the intimate cloister-like Courtyard of Lindaraja, the Court of the Sultana, and the High Gardens of the Generalife are all recurring motifs in his paintings, expressed with the emotion and sensitivity of a painter and poet, evoking memories of a glorious past that was about to disappear.

3. THE POETIC SENTIMENTAL GARDEN

The practice of painting gardens intensified the symbolic nature of Rusiñol's aesthetic vision. In the garden, the apparent spontaneity of an ecosystem (plants, flowers, woods, vegetation, water, etc) governed by the rhythm of its own biological cycle was altered by man, who brought order to the chaos, who organized and even on certain occasions subjugated the instinctive and unpredictable behaviour of a living organism that did not follow any logical laws of action.

To a certain extent, the garden became a refuge for the nostalgic, Rusiñol transformed these spaces, some of which were idealized and embellished by his colour palette, certain in the knowledge that drove him to live in communion with beauty. In this exercise, the value of nature was also present as a source of inspiration, as a muse that obliged him to maintain a creative discipline to reconnect, in the most literal sense of the word, man with his surrounding environment.

The model of the garden, above and beyond forming its own small microcosm, epitomized a situation that was somewhere between order and chaos. The painter strove to reflect the states of mind inspired by the passing of time, the ephemeral nature of a feeling, that of beauty, which far from being enduring, could not possibly become a lasting experience, and instead was like a flash of light that helped light up the dark areas of our existence.

4. NATURALIST PANTHEISM

Santiago Rusiñol cultivated the painting of both gardens and landscapes. Throughout his career he proved to be highly skilled at converting the landscape into a mirror that reflected a vast array of emotions and states of mind.

From his earliest compositions with quite conventional characteristics, Rusiñol managed to evolve and cast aside traditional models to adapt the genre to the transformations in figurative language, incorporating new aspects into the practice of *plein air* painting and into compositions with new aesthetic stimuli. One of the most important effects was the adoption of a more avant-garde language that helped him break away from the traditional Western perspective and make advances in terms of form.



Santiago Rusiñol in the garden of the González de Vega family. Granada, 1922. Private collection.

His compositions resembled a stage set whose decorative effects allowed him to convert nature into a visual spectacle. In some of his works, a bright, luminous nature emerges, with no rational limits to its regenerative capacity or to the unpredictable behaviour of the natural environment.

For Rusiñol, photography became an essential tool for understanding painting as a space that was open to experimentation, to convert the canvas into a medium for expression in a language of light, colour and atmospheric effects, so helping broaden his outlook and include new ways of framing and looking at the subject that altered the closed, one-directional perception of the painting space.

5. GARDENS OF SPAIN, 1903 AND 1914

In 1903, the Thomas Publishing House in Barcelona published *Jardins d'Espanya* or “Gardens of Spain”, an album of 40 photogravure prints of paintings by Santiago Rusiñol, preceded by poems and prose in Catalan by well-known authors such as Joan Alcover, Gabriel Alomar, Miguel Costa y Llobera, Emilio Guanyabens, Apeles Mestres, Joan Maragall, Miguel de los Santos Oliver and Francesc Matheu, and a prologue by Rusiñol himself, in which he explained and defended the poetic beauty of gardens that were slowly disappearing.

Made with the most modern and sophisticated printing technology of the time, *Jardins d'Espanya* offers excellent reproductions of the paintings that had made Rusiñol famous as a modern artist in both Paris and Barcelona. Once the 1903 edition had sold out, the Antonio López printworks produced a

new edition with some changes in terms of content, including poems in Spanish by other renowned authors including Juan Ramón Jiménez, Manuel Machado, Eduardo Marquina, Ramón Pérez de Ayala, Enrique Díez-Canedo, Francisco A. de Icaza, and María Lejárraga, who signed as Gregorio Martínez Sierra. Likewise, the initial series of paintings of gardens in Granada, Aranjuez, Mallorca, Barcelona, Montserrat, Sitges, La Granja and Tarragona was completed with more recent pictures of gardens from Gerona, Valencia, Mallorca and Aranjuez.

“Gardens of Spain” was a milestone in Rusiñol’s literary output due to the aesthetic principles it presented. It also aroused great interest due to its poetic timeless vision of gardens, and in particular of the gardens of Granada and the way they inspired leading composers such as Claude Debussy and Manuel de Falla in the creation of their music.

6. THE ARTIST’S LEGEND

Rusiñol was one of the most frequently portrayed personalities of his time. He always felt comfortable having his portrait done and was normally happy to participate in the process. Photography offered him the perfect tool for disseminating the image of a creator who, in spite of his tendency for melancholy and social detachment, gratefully accepted the beneficial effects of a system of reproduction with which he closely identified.

The Catalan painter exploited some of his own character traits, attracting cartoonists who discovered that he was an inexhaustible source of material, emphasizing his most caricaturesque features to the point of offering an ironic, satirical image. Some of these cartoonists belittled and banalized his complex personality, unfairly tending to highlight an allegedly phony side of his character, while overlooking the depth of his poetry.

Once Rusiñol had become one of the most highly regarded specialists in garden painting, many of the cartoonists of that period sought to highlight some of the contradictions created by the distance between his idealist motives and the insatiable appetite of the market. On the one hand, he always sought to present a carefully prepared image of a man at the outer limits of social conventions, rejecting the values of bourgeois society, while at the same time the dynamics of the art business brought him huge economic returns from the sale of his garden-related pictures.

TEMPORARY EXHIBITION

From 2nd June to 14th September 2025

Temporary Exhibition Rooms of the
Granada Fine Arts Museum. Palace of Charles V.
Alhambra and Generalife Group of Monuments

From Monday to Sunday, from 10.00 to 20.00 hours

Free admission

FREE GUIDED VISITS

Times

Mornings 11.00 and 12.00 hours

Afternoons 18.00 and 19.00 hours

Bookings

Places must be booked in advance. Groups of no more
than 10 people. Each visit will last 45 minutes

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Cover illustration:

Santiago RUSIÑOL
(Barcelona, 1861 – Aranjuez, Madrid, 1931)

Generalife water-channel, 1898

Private collection