

THE TWO WAVES

A short while ago I visited the studio of my friend, Casado, when he was giving the finishing touches to a painting whose subject caught my attention. I am saying “subject,” although even when I took a quick look at it, it lacked one, because it was only a portrait of a person whose sex, age, and type of beauty, together with the nature and size of the background, made an unusual contrast and a strange harmony, all of which suggested an idea. And what more can you expect of a work of art?

The best indication of courtesy a painter can give, as we enter his studio, is to continue painting. Putting down the palette and the brushes is equivalent to saying to the visitor: “Hurry up, I have to continue painting.”

So when I arrived, Casado continued working; I lit a cigarette and began to smoke and, because neither of these things kept us from speaking, we chatted about different matters, until we got to the point where I had to mention something I always asked about when I talk to a writer or an artist:

“When are you going to give us something for *La Ilustración de Madrid*?”

“Whenever you want,” Casado answered; “but as you can see, I don’t have anything... that is... nothing that is appropriate.”

“Appropriate? For a newspaper like ours anything of an artistic nature or anything that might interest people is appropriate. For example, this portrait... Why don’t you give us this sketch?”

“This portrait?... Of a little girl who is only four or five years old, who is adored by her parents, and her governess? And what should we put below it? Because the first thing a picture like this needs is a title. Should we put, ‘Portrait of the painter’s niece’? That would be amusing. Because, for the portrait of a person who is not known, all that matters is whom it resembles, or the way it is presented... The first thing would only be important to members of the family and, as for the colors or the execution, what do they matter on the pages of a newspaper?”

“You mean to say,” I objected, “that you think a portrait..., this one that we have here, is just a mere human photograph..., and that art is nothing more than that?...”

“No, it is certainly more than that: the warm feeling that the model inspires in me, the tenderness that I and my family feel for her, something special that surrounded her when I painted the beach at Biarritz with the Cantabrian sea in the background, that sea whose waves come from some distant shore (perhaps the remote place where she was born), what do I know?... a few of these things that I felt then, and still remember, have perhaps given this portrait something special for me, something like the confused echo of an idea that does not have much meaning, but relates to some vague feeling, perhaps of joy..., perhaps of sadness...; but who could feel all that except for me?”

“Yes, now we have it!... There is *something* in that figure, and *something* in that background. And do you think that when an artist’s hand trembles when he has an idea, or some feeling, that the brush doesn’t leave a trace so the lines show something unique, something impalpable and indefinable, but that still continues to be visible there, like the wake some goddess leaves behind as she disappears, which tells us that an inspiration has passed through here?”

“Yes, I do believe something like that happens; but it is only when the artist wants to express the most important things, his deepest impressions, and the universal ideas that can leave an echo in everything else.”

“And do you mean that you want nothing more important than the ideas this figure represents? You speak of resemblance; I don’t know if it looks like the original, but it is beautiful, and that is enough. It certainly looks like someone; and not just some ordinary person who appeals to me, a neutral onlooker; it looks like the ideal type of beauty that we all relish in the depths of our soul. Is there anything that is the source of more inexhaustible ideas and sentiments than that which is simply beautiful. No, I didn’t put that right, because that which is truly beautiful, is all things at once. When I admire a beautiful woman painted by Van Dyck, I never wonder if she looks like the original. What does that matter? She looks like a woman I have not seen, but she reminds me of some beloved image.”

“Based on that...”

“It is indisputable,” I hasten to add, so he wouldn’t go on to say something that was contradictory, which he could easily have done. So I continued: “And if we consider this matter differently, as the image of a woman who stands out as charming and graceful over the waves of the sea and the broad horizon, what sentiments does she awaken in us?, and how could she be more poetic? One immensity that reflects another and, suspended between them, something smaller, and larger at the same time: two eyes in whose depths you see, not the reflection of the sun, but a swarm of ideas... The relationship between a woman and the sea is infinite. ‘Beautiful like the sky, bitter like death,’ a poet once said of women. And who wouldn’t say the same thing of the sea? ‘Tracherous like a wave,’ a great English writer of tragedies added sometime later.”

“That is nicely put,” the artist interrupted me, as I was barely getting started, “and it would seem even nicer if, in fact, it was a woman in whose eyes there *were* great depths, and in whose heart there *were* storms..., but in a girl who is barely four years old?”

“A girl?, and what does that matter?” I continued, without being disconcerted. “In the seed is the entire flower with all its flexible stems, its green leaves, its calix full of honey, and its colorful petals. In the girl is the entire woman, because her spirit is already there. As her organism develops, is one part going to disappear and another be added? No, the soul is there, the same soul that will struggle through different battles, and tremble with many passions. After all, the young girl is like a wave that rises from the sea?... There, in the depths, next to the white sand, an imperceptible wave is rising; it barely sighs, like silk, and it seems like a sheet of a blue cloth; and this same wave can be seen anywhere in the sea, because it never dissolves; no, it rises and falls, and then rises again farther away, where it is crowned with foam and reflects the sun, as it sings a somber hymn... But it is the same, the same wave that jumps and turns into tiny streams against the rocks and then slithers and twists like an angry snake along their flanks; the same wave which, tired of struggling, falls back into the sea, and then goes to die, who knows?..., perhaps on some deserted beach, where it utters its final lament! And in that sea of Humanity, what is the child but a wave that rises up singing to finally go and crash into the stone of the grave, just like it crashes against a rock on the deserted beach of an unknown country?”

“But, my God!, you’re saying all that is seen in my painting? Impossible; maybe you see it, or perhaps you believe you see it, which I accept... but what everyone else will see is a larger girl doll that is playing with a little boy doll, *et pas plus.*”

“A doll?,” I said, looking again at the object of our discussion where, in fact, I saw that the girl who was looking up serenely and sweetly with an expression that was also a bit domineering, had, dangling from her arm with a posture that was awkward and laughable at the same time, a sort of puppet which she wasn’t paying much attention to, except to keep it from falling through the elaborate folds of her pink, velvet skirt.

This observation began to disturb me a bit, but I was still determined to have him give me the sketch.

“Yes, it is true; there is a doll here I hadn’t noticed before,” I replied, speaking slowly, as I tried to use my imagination to think of something that would strengthen my request; “however...” I finally continued, with a certain air of triumph, “this same doll might also give us the fruitful basis, not for a lengthy poetic discussion, but for some interesting philosophical speculations. This shows the entire woman, and it also gives us the phrase that provides a title for the sketch: ‘A man is the plaything of a woman’; and this is true: for these poor puppets, the world is too narrow for their ambitions; this one is a hero, that one is a genius, and another has a big heart or a great character; one preaches and another fights; this one paints and that one writes; they all struggle, and they worry, and they sometimes succeed... until the woman appears. It is the woman who is always able to take charge of things and, lavished with praises, while still covered with dust from the battle, she grabs us by the hair, or by any part of our body she can reach, and drags us after her, like this girl carries the doll, so we have no other recourse than to ask God that our posture not be completely ridiculous, or distorted.”

“Oh, come now; this whole thing is becoming very exaggerated, and I doubt that there is anyone who would think of things like that at first glance.”

“Well, most men certainly would.”

“And women?”

“Women?... Mothers always see other children with delight: it makes some recall the angels they have lost; others sigh for the one they are waiting for; and they would all kiss one they have in their lap, and show them this charming image you have sketched.”

“These sweet thoughts would be more representative of an artist who tries to awaken them, using some ideas that are not completely forgotten in his memory.”

Casado was trying to defend himself by changing the subject, but his defense was still rather weak.

I decided to take a chance and try to change my plan of operations, making one final attempt.

“So we are agreed that you will give me a sketch for *La Ilustración de Madrid*; well, this is the one I want...; there is no longer any question of poetry or sentiment...; we are done with philosophical discussions and pretty speeches, and if it is for modesty, that can be no excuse... In our newspaper, all styles are in fashion; this child is distinguished and elegant; her appearance is both simple and charming, at the same time. So give us a copy of the painting to use as a fashion plate.”

Casado broke out laughing and said: “This would be some fashion plate... Have them send me the request, and before the week is out you will have the copy.”

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The artist kept his word, and in the pages of *La Ilustración de Madrid*, our regular readers will have seen the sketch, which has been given the title, *The Two Waves*.

Any of the topics that we touched on in our lengthy conversation would have been a suitable basis for an article to accompany the sketch. However, for me the thing that seemed most convenient, and most appropriate, was to include our entire conversation so that the readers could chose whichever topic they preferred.