

Overview

Manuel Colmeiro. Spaces and framings is designed as an interpretation of the work of Manuel Colmeiro (Chapa, Silleda, 1901-Salvaterra de Miño, 1999), a fundamental figure of Galician painting of the last century.

We review his career since the beginning of his Argentine training until his definitive return to Galicia, influencing his relationship with the artistic spaces where he developed his work: Buenos Aires in early twenties; Galicia before the Civil War; the exile and the link to the American artistic context, again in Argentina, between 1937 and 1948. Also, his insertion in post-war Paris and his close relationship with the Galician and Spanish cultural environment, since the fifties.

Colmeiro's key contribution to the formation of the Renovation Movement of Galician Art is highlighted, through a painting arising from popular elements to shape a new perception of Galician social and historical reality. For this purpose, we compare his works with those of other Galician artists —Maside, Souto, Torres, Laxeiro, Virxilio Blanco— and with “divergent” contexts of international modernity, especially Argentina.

The project aims to show how the work of our painter is marked by the determination to create an alternative to the dominant cultural *construct*. A painting that reinforces the identity character in a (Galician) society in which a markedly self-referential speech took shape, while discovering the possibilities of an identity formulation from modernity.

Manuel Colmeiro's career begins in Buenos Aires towards the end of the 1910s and the beginning of the 1920s. There, the atmosphere resounds with the echoes of the international avant-garde and fondly concerned about social issues. Upon returning to Galicia in 1926, Colmeiro's work orbit around a the *Os Novos* movement. His work is debtor of an interwar figurativeness, inspired in elements from popular tradition focused in topics such as the landscape or scenes resonant with social content. In his early Galician works he uses a sober palate, with static figures, avoiding the individualization of any of the faces and giving the pieces somewhat of a sculptural aspect. Works from this period show their testimonial value. In Colmeiro's hands, anonymous, popular figures become iconic references.

The artist develops powerful iconic images of several of his core themes: peasants at work; mother-goddess motherhoods that conceal a subterranean and even dramatic sense; female models in the way of emblems of peasant women that allow him to build generic values of allegorical root.

Colmeiro's works from the Civil War are very singular, with more expressionist strokes than his previous works. They show the traces of the conflict, they transform his characteristic compositions, as with his maternities, representing suffering. They are expressions of the pain, of the tearing that the brutality and drama of the war provoke in the artist. They show a certain oneirism, sometimes starting from an iconography that reminds us of religious piety wrapped in a Goyesque scent.

HALL/ ENTRANCE

In exile, after the Civil War, Colmeiro constructed a language of strong lyricism, in which the evocation of the Galician world is a constant. The memory and the dream of the distant land come to the front. His painting works as a reunion, but it also serves as a permanent analysis and formal refinement, which reaches a successful balance.

Colmeiro's mature work keeps its figurative principles and the same thematic motifs, which constitute real series. He gives greater primacy to chromatic and light values and returns to his native and nurturing landscape. It is a painting that constantly returns to the deepest sources of the authentic sensations of life.

Xosé Carlos López Bernárdez
Exhibition curator

Buenos Aires, 1913-1926. A portrait of the artist in training

Colmeiro spent his childhood between the villages of Chapa — where he was born — and San Fiz de Margaride, both within the municipality of Silleda. When he was just twelve years old, he abandoned Galicia so that he could be reunited with his parents who had emigrated to Buenos Aires.

It was in the Argentinian capital that he would become a painter, and he would live there until 1926. The future artist moved from the rural reality of his Galician childhood to a Buenos Aires marked by a yearning for modernization within the cultural environment. Argentina moved in a dilatory aesthetic environment, and it wasn't until the period between 1916 and 1930 that the avant-garde movement would emerge with its clearly Parisian influence. Buenos Aires underwent profound cultural changes. A perfect example of this was the exhibition organized by Emilio Pettoruti in the Galería Witcomb, this exhibition featured abstract and cubist pieces which had been produced by the Argentinian painter in the 1910s, in Europe. display arrived at a time in which new art was gaining traction amongst groups of artists, poets and intellectuals.

Colmeiro trained with a group of artists; figurative painters who adapted international art by introducing a local flavour. This “pictorial dialect” adopted the form of a painting for observation and social critique, and Antonio Berni, Lino Enea Spilinger, Raquel Forner and Demetrio Urruchúa were amongst the most prominent artists in this genre.

Colmeiro began his art studies at the Asociación Estímulo de Bellas Artes, however, he ended up leaving this formal training programme after just two years. it was at this school that he met Demetrio Urruchúa in around 1919, and he ended up leaving the centre, accompanied by Urruchúa and the Catalan artists José Planas Casas and Pompeyo Audvert, as they all considered academic teaching to be a waste of time. The four of them, alongside several others, set up a studio where they were able to work in an environment which was filled with staunch cultural and political concerns. They now found themselves at the beginning of the 1920s, the years immediately following the Russian Revolution, and the Marxist influence was becoming visible. As a result of this societal concern, Colmeiro actually ended up working in a factory, because “he wanted to see how the labour unions worked”.

As a result of this experience, the painter ended up producing a certain type of paintings which clearly demonstrated his progressive ideologies, in these pieces he incorporated the port theme with scenes of boats and workers. This theme was already gaining popularity thanks to the works of artists from Buenos Aires, such as Benito Quinquela Martín, and it would be brought to a certain poetic imagery, similar to that of the New Objectivity movement, by the work of Horacio Coppola in the photographs that he took in the 1930s, in which he captured the artistic value of these fragments of life and the objects inherent of work activity in his port scenes.

Galicia, 1926-1937. Colmeiro and the *Os Novos* movement

Since his arrival in Galicia, Colmeiro's work has maintained cultural, ideological and formal affinities with the reformist movement of *Os Novos* –Carlos Maside, Manuel Torres, Laxeiro or Virxilio Blanco.

The search for inspiration in folkloric elements in the core of popular life and in certain aspects of the peasant world is evidenced by a very intense social commitment.

Colmeiro's approach to the female figure, *Mater Gallaeciae*, becomes referential: *Mujer con niño* (1930), *Maternidad* (1931). Here, female representations have a deep archetypal meaning, also shown in Maside's or Laxeiro's works.

In this way we must also understand the creation of choreographic images of the working classes, as can be seen in the peasants of the oil painting *Labranza* (1931) or in the watercolours *Bilbao* (1933), depicting the proletariat, as in Arturo Souto's works. Through these types of work which had a very coherent epochal context; that of a European art representing the social realisms of the inter-war period, Colmeiro presented the vision of the workers, a point of view which was antagonistic towards bourgeois humanism, in which compassion was a symptom of class superiority. To the contrary, Colmeiro depicted the dignity of the popular classes, with their "works and their time", as can be seen in *Bocetos de mural* (1931), among other examples included in the exhibition.

His work is in the political tradition of historical realism, creating an atmosphere and simplified characters, but always accompanied by a baggage of mimetic, expressive and schematic details.

Regarding his social concern, unequivocal works such as *La Muerte* (1928), *Mineros* (1929) or *Vagón* (1930), among others, bear witness though "monumental" figures. A reduction in the use of visual language can also be perceived in these works; a result of his attempt to eliminate the painting's narrative element by bringing together the figures in an organic manner by means of their expressivity and nature; these were elements which no longer simply served as external or internal decoration, but which now looked to participate in the vital drama. In *Campesinos* (1928) the schematism of the flat figures carrying tools is worth mentioning. The intense planimetry of this work made sure that there was no shadow of any costumbrist purity, reinforcing this message of identification with the popular, rather than just the pure contemplation of a scene.

Colmeiro's landscape paintings broke away from the characteristic elements of naturalist regionalism, setting itself apart and subjecting the pictorial themes of the previous generation (rural landscapes with farmers or classicist scenes) and the new ones (urban landscapes) to a stylization process; one which resulted from an aesthetic contemplation of reality. He did not approach these themes from a substantialized understanding of chromaticism, but from a subtle subjectivism.

“How will I be able to paint happiness?” The Civil War and exile.

The Civil War would mark a vital and artistic turning point for Colmeiro. The works that he produced during the years of conflict and during his first years in exile clearly showed the manner in which his life had been shaken by this situation, and likewise they demonstrated the stance that he adopted; one that had already been apparent in his works at the end of the 1920s in which he depicted social themes and evidencing the reinforcement of his ethical commitment

The body language which was evident in these pieces, the dramatisms of the faces and the sorrowful expressions all reflected this nightmare and the sombre world he had to live in. “How will I be able to paint happiness?” the painter lamented in a letter to writer Eduardo Dieste, who we are familiar with thanks to his response dated the 19th of May, 1937. A clamour which was portrayed in the art he produced at this time.

In general, the view of war from Galicia is marked by the denunciation of repression and assassinations as a key issue, as well as the defence of republican legality and of identity values devastated by the rebels.

This first matter prevails in Colmeiro’s work. The artist has been denouncing massacres since the beginning of the war, ink paintings dating back to 1936, before he went into exile in Argentina at the beginning of 1937. It is worth mentioning that some of Colmeiro’s illustrations were included in publications by the Republican faction such as *Nova Galiza*, which was edited in Barcelona between 1937 and 1938 and which was directed firstly by Castelao and subsequently by Rafael Dieste. His work with its strong social content continued into the beginning of the 1940s and reproductions of his works were included in *Galicia*, a strongly antifascist publication by the Federación de Sociedades Gallegas in 1940 and 1941.

From the beginning of the war, Colmeiro produced some ink works in which the theme was the cruel repression, based on an iconography that evoked religious piety, and the others were clearly “framing themes” that were enshrouded in the Goyesque air of the *Disasters of War*. Frequently, the symbolic and oneiric universe that he had previously incorporated: mother-child, partner, cow... joined this violence, destroying this balanced universe in communion with the Earth

His paintings in this period were much more expressionist than his previous ones; they portrayed conflict and reflected the mark that violence had left on him. He converted his characteristic compositions, for example his maternity pieces, into reflections of suffering. A piece such as *Tragedia* (1937) is not that different from the surrealist formulas in which a specific image of the Civil war was created.

Colmeiro’s work during the war period must be considered in connection with the most combative art produced by the side loyal to the Republic. Linked to writers, sculptors and painters such as Castelao himself, Rafael Dieste, Lorenzo Varela, Luís Seoane, Uxío Souto, Federico Ribas, etc., was an example of a Galicia which identified with the progressive, Galicianist and Republican values, that is to say, a society that was committed to social transformation as opposed to the negating reaction that fascism represented.

Buenos Aires, 1937-1948. Galician exile and integration into the Argentinian context

When Colmeiro arrived in the Argentinian Republic in 1937, he did not settle himself in an environment which was unconnected to his own experience, in fact, our painter had already established relationships in the 1920s which made it easier for him to settle in the cultural fabric of Buenos Aires, and his entry into this society was combined with a deep loyalty to the Republican exile culture, and in particular to the Galician one.

In his early years, some of Colmeiro's creative proposals were very similar to those of other artists working in Argentina in terms of their antifascist social perspectives. In this line it is important to understand Colmeiro's collaborations in books and magazines the content and intentionality of which was linked to the anti-Franco struggle. An example of this was the collective volume *Homenaje de escritores y artistas a García Lorca* (1937).

In other illustrated books such as the beautiful reprint of Manuel Antonio's poetry collection, *De catro a catro*, some of the drawings offered variations on this theme of drowning, which originated from the repression of the Civil War.

In the 1940s, Colmeiro's paintings, drawing and book illustrations continued along the same line and this can be appreciated in his attractive illustrations in the Galician medieval poet, Juan Rodríguez del Padrón's poetry collection *Siervo libre de amor* (1943). With the classicist style of these drawings he sought to reveal some recurring themes in his works, themes which formed a fundamental part of all of his works during his life in exile: the evocation of land reconstructed from his memory and the feminine universe. Galicia appeared as the dreamt land, and this can be seen clearly in the melancholic faces of thoughtful young women (*Mujeres y mar*, 1947-50), often painted naked. He depicted figures and spaces which transmitted an original air, somewhere between the Biblical earthly paradise and the classicist Arcadia. The sea and the forest which were dominant backdrops for his drawings and oil paintings were delineated as a border, as a realm of dreams, but nonetheless it still appeared as a barrier between two distant worlds, separated by the absence, the memory and the harsh reality of the exile which had been caused by the Civil War.

There was a clear Picassian influence in his drawings from the first 40 years of the century and this can be appreciated in *Figuras en el paisaje [diálogo]* (1945) [*Cuaderno de pintor*, 1947], which portrayed the memory, the row of balconies from Costela's family home, the evocation of the agrarian landscape and the figures from the Ingres classicism of Picasso from the *Vollard Suite* (1930-1937). In general his pieces dealt with the topic in a novel and timeless fashion, with classic references which ranged from Greek sculpture to archaic and Attic ceramics. Nonetheless we never have the sensation that we are in front of simple quotes, quite the contrary in fact, we feel that we are bearing witness to a world full of nostalgia; a world which is intensely bound by experience. Colmeiro used a classic form of contour drawing which reminds us of the free and sketched white ground technique (*lekythos*) used for decorating the Attic vases; and likewise he was inspired by the repetition of topics such as sculptural nudes, Apollonian heads and rows of balconies.

Mural Art Workshop

The clearest evidence of Colmeiro's integration in the Argentinian art scene was his participation in 1944 in the *Mural Art Workshop*.

In 1944 the *Mural Art Workshop* was founded, and it was formed by Castagnino, Berni, Urruchúa, Spilimbergo and Colmeiro. The group's programmatic texts, which were much more pragmatic than those proclaimed by Siqueiros in the previous decade, maintained a strictly professional tone, manifesting their desire to revive the muralist movement in Argentina and establish a connection with architecture — they even wrote a letter to advertise their work amongst architects. Through the professional tone of this text, they introduced the idea integrating the arts as an underlying suggestion, and likewise offering a progressive vision of the role of art within the social context.

The group's greatest accomplishment was the paintings on the cupola of the Galerías Pacífico, a shopping centre located in the heart of Buenos Aires. They carried out this work from the end of 1945 until June of 1946, producing one of the most important and significant set of murals in Argentina. The "Workshop" designed the project's compositional structure, producing a plaster miniature which they used to create geometrical constructions. They also established a thematic, conceptual and compositional unit using coloured sketches as a starting point having firstly discussed and approved these, and they went on to produce to-scale drawings which corresponded with the cupola's dimensions. The unity that existed between the five painters can also be appreciated in their elaboration of the theoretical texts which were to be displayed at the inauguration. Colmeiro was responsible for explaining the methods they had used to bring the drawings to life through these paintings, and he did so in a lecture that he gave on the 16th of June, 1946, entitled "Procedure and colouring."

They decorated the tympanums over the four doors (lunettes) and the cupola (four panels and pendentives). The collective thematic content was highly symbolic, humanistic and clearly progressive, although far from a propagandist political intent: "*El amor*" (love), produced by Berni; "*La vida doméstica*" (domestic life), by Castagnino; "*El dominio de las fuerzas naturales*" (the dominance of natural forces), by Spilimbergo; "*La Fraternidad*" (fraternity), by Urruchúa and "*La pareja humana*" (The human couple), by Colmeiro

The Galician painter produced two pendentives, which, as he recalls, represented: family, maternity, the sky, the earth and the sea, and he developed a paradisiacal scene, a lyrical song to the mythological sea that drank from the primordial and classicism.

Another of Colmeiro's murals from his time in Argentina has also been preserved; this was the one which was erected in the Avellaneda cemetery. An outline for this mural (Colmeiro Family Collection) indicated that it was to be stationed in the southern part of the cemetery. We now know that this project produced on a new wall of niches ended up consisting of two murals, one, the work of Colmeiro himself, and the other by Castagnino. The murals by these two painters remain in Avellaneda.

Between the School of Paris and the Galicianism of the post-war era

In January 1949, Colmeiro returned to Europe and he settled down in Paris where he would live until 1986, although he made frequent trips to Galicia, and in particular to Vigo and San Fiz de Margaride. In 1950 he visited Galicia for the first time since the Civil War and he met his friends from the cultural Galicianism movement. There he also met with writer, Francisco Fernández del Riego, a key figure of the Galician cultural resistance and one of the painter's links to this Galicianist world, as represented by the *Galaxia* editorial. He began steady correspondence with him at the end of 1948, a month before the painter left for Paris. In his letters, Colmeiro constantly emphasized this idea that his painting had been nourished by the Galician reality, likewise mentioning his desire to live in Galicia, something that he would not end up doing on a definite basis until 1986, when he was much older.

His inclusion in the Parisian cultural environment was a consequence of his incorporation into the group of Spanish painters of the School of Paris, a heterogeneous group of artists who would be canonized as a collective by Mercedes Guillén in her book *Artistas españoles de la Escuela de París* (Taurus, Madrid, 1960). In this volume Colmeiro shared the pages with Picasso, Miró, Luis Fernández, Óscar Domínguez, Francisco Bores, Hernando Viñes, Antoni Clavé, Pedro Flores, Ginés Parra, Apelles Fenosa, Manuel Ángeles Ortiz, Baltasar Lobo, Ismael González de la Serna, Orlando Pelayo and Joaquín Peinado.

In terms of the evolution of his work, Colmeiro, now settled in Paris and in contact with a completely new stimulus, would end up constructing a pictorial language with strong lyricism; an aspect which had already been evident in much of his previous work. Likewise, the evocation of the feminine universe and the Galician world remained as constant factors. In his paintings he placed emphasis on volume, light, density and line, enabling him to achieve a total balance and produce a sense of calm, similar to what he managed to transmit in his still life pieces.

From this time, the outlines of his work became much more subtle than in his previous pieces; he used a lighter palette, with an almost *fauve* use of colour, and he demonstrated a new concern for the basic geometry of the figure. We can also appreciate the conceptual sense of construction in his paintings, just as we would in one of Cézanne's pieces, a reference which can also be perceived in comments by French critics on the Galician painter's works. When the artist exhibited his work in the Camille Renault Gallery (1970), the critic, Pierre Gascar wrote: "I find in his paintings the same thing that absorbs me in Cézanne's works: the brilliant message of reason". This comment can be fully understood when contemplating some of his mature landscapes such as *Paisaxe gris* (1957) or his still lifes (*Bodegón* (1956-1958)).

In Paris he also incorporated French themes, in particular, city landscapes and the bridges of the Seine. However, his new contact with his native land would be even more important in this era, and for him this was a revitalising vital and artistic experience.

From that point on, Colmeiro's works demonstrated the absolute coherence of his pictorial process, faithful to the same figurative principles and thematic motifs which constituted his authentic series: "Ferias"; "Panaderas"; "Siegas"; "Mujeres y paisaje"... We can sense the reworking of popular themes which he approached with the same convincing nature as he had done in the previous periods, however these were now diffused with a conception in which colour and lyricism dominate, and in which the human figure, and especially that of the woman merged in symbiosis with the land (*Paisaje con vaca*, 1960). During these years he would stay true to those presuppositions, giving precedence to the chromatic and light values (*Mujer leyendo*, 1956), he remained loyal to his world and to his essential principles, and the proof of this lies in works such as *Panaderas* (1960-64) and *Las tres gracias* (1967).