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## THE DRYPOINTS OF LUIS QUINTANILLA

By BASIL BURDETT



PAIN has always been a land rather of painters than of engravers, the country first of all of Velazquez and El Greco, of Zurbaran and Murillo, and of Goya the painter. Goya, greatest of Spanish engravers, was primarily a painter. The same is true of Luis Quintanilla, by far the most important of contemporary Spanish engravers, perhaps the most important since Goya. The likeness does not end there. Quintanilla's general spiritual and racial affinities with the author of the *Caprichos* are unmistakable. The affection for the common life, the spontaneous irony, the humour at times sardonic, these provide irresistible parallels. But the differences are important. Unlike Goya, Quintanilla, as an engraver, does not mix his mediums. His expression on metal is limited to drypoint. Though not without its implications, more important than this technical consideration is the fact that each engraving by Quintanilla is a complete expression, as carefully considered and presented as his paintings. They have, too, a purely objective quality only rarely found in Goya's engravings and their impulses are frankly visual. The late Blamire Young, in his brilliant book, "The Proverbs of Goya," has, I think, deduced convincing arguments for regarding the *Caprichos* and *Disparates* as something more than pictorial fantasies. According to his argument, these



LUIS QUINTANILLA. A GALICIAN  
Size of the original drypoint  $14 \times 10\frac{3}{4}$  inches

engravings expressed a personal ideology, indulging social comment of somewhat dangerously liberal tendency in the engraver's own private pictorial code.

Quintanilla's works could never be so interpreted. Their plastic intention is clear, their psychological overtones spontaneously ironic, merely humorous, sardonic, the logical result of that completeness with which the Spaniard gives himself to life, or allows life to possess him, in all his activities. Their true affinity is with the Goya of that exquisite drawing in the Prado in Madrid, in which a mendicant guitarist, tossed by a bull, automatically murmurs the formula of his profession, "Dios se lo pague a Usted" (God will repay you, sir). To Goya the creator of intellectual images, such as that in the Prado drawing, *Confidence*, in which two figures are depicted unlocking each other with keys, Quintanilla has no relation.

In his devotion to one engraving medium only Quintanilla is perhaps unique, almost certainly so among Spanish engravers. Within that medium he has developed a gamut of tone wide and flexible enough to respond equally to the most dramatic and the most lyrical demands of his subject-matter. Attracted first of all by the suave richness of the banked drypoint line, Quintanilla has developed his scale by the somewhat unusual employment of six points, ranging from a stout, burin-like, tool to a very fine needle. With this equipment he secures linear gradations which yield an infinite tonal scale, varying from the characteristic spreading line of velvety blackness to a spidery trace, like a whisper on the metal. He uses nickel or nickelled zinc only and his method of modelling his figures is by a system of cross-hatching in which all his linear resources



LUIS QUINTANILLA. EMIGRANTS  
Size of the original drypoint  $14 \times 10\frac{1}{2}$  inches

are frequently exploited, achieving a remarkable expression of volume. Quintanilla, in fact, uses drypoint frankly as a medium for full rather than for suggestive expression. Incapable by temperament of any ultra-aesthetic attitude to the medium, he assumes no limits to its exploitation. He is interested in its special qualities, but more interested in what it can be made to yield in pure expression. For Quintanilla, true Spaniard, it is the comprehensive possibilities of a medium which count, and drypoint, in his hands, reveals to the limit its dramatic and realistic possibilities. His predilection for it is partly the result of a distaste for the bitten line and its chemical processes, partly of the spur of its added difficulties and of its closer relation to pure drawing. Apart from the lure of the wide potentialities of its mysterious and sonorous blacks, of its silvery harmonics, its directness makes a strong appeal to the quintessential Spaniard who is Luis Quintanilla.

Like more than one prominent Spanish artist of to-day, Quintanilla is self-taught. A Basque, born in Santander 40 years ago, he was destined for an architect's career. But he did no more than the preparatory studies. At seventeen he went to Paris and, during several years there came within the ambience of the modern group, of which Picasso and Juan Gris were the leading spirits. He painted a number of pictures in cubist style and, returning to his native Santander, had the courage, or the effrontery, to exhibit some in a tailor's shop there. This must have been about 1915. The scandal caused in the Basque town by the sight of what were probably the first cubist pictures seen in Spain was enormous.

Quintanilla, to-day, believes that science is not art; but he is conscious of a debt to cubism. The evidence



LUIS QUINTANILLA. AN ESTAMINET  
Size of the original drypoint 14 × 10 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

of that debt is in many of his prints. A course of cubism, he considers, would be an admirable part of any artist's training. Among other facts of his years in Paris an intense interest in Daumier and Toulouse-Lautrec is worth noting. But it is impossible to imagine any outside influence modifying in any degree the tenacious Spaniard in Quintanilla. In spite of the wide experiences which extensive travel has given him, he remains as Spanish as Goya, with whom, despite important differences already noted, he has the closest affinities. Like Goya and so many other Spanish artists, in his gusto for life in all its forms, he has sought and found it in the common round. Ernest Hemingway writes that Quintanilla has given us the first true Madrid since Goya. The motives for his engravings, like the motives for Goya's decorations and tapestries, are from the daily happenings, the ordinary sequence, constantly and inevitably renewed, of Spanish life. Not that he has sought the picturesque for its own sake. On the contrary, whatever the immediate qualities of an incident from which the original impulse is derived, it is always made to yield much more, not only as formal design, but by instinctive comment and reference, by the heightening touch of caricature or of some parenthetical pictorial aside, such as the two cats on the window-sill in the print of a girl playing a lonely game of patience, called *Solitude*, which has much the same irresistible melancholy as pervades Sickert's *Ennui*.

Quintanilla's career as an engraver commenced about twelve years ago as a result of seeing Segonzac at work on a drypoint. Asked how it was done, Segonzac held up his point and said, "You simply draw on the metal with this"; with which somewhat broad and general

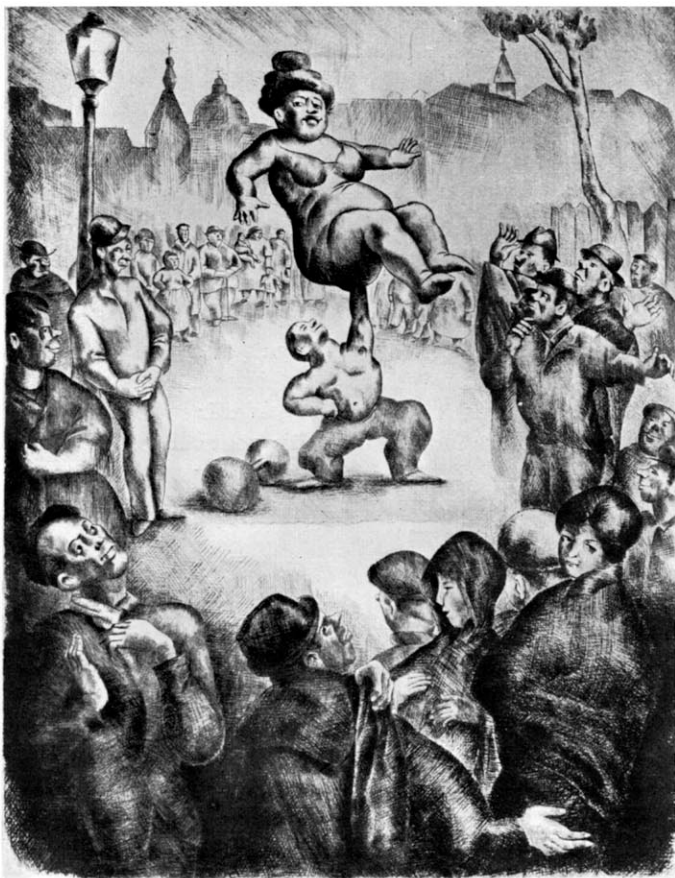


LUIS QUINTANILLA. *INSIDE A TRAM*  
Size of the original drypoint  $14 \times 10\frac{3}{4}$  inches

direction Quintanilla set out to explore the medium for himself and produced his first plate. It has a lean, angular feeling, this first drypoint, rather like a very tall and gaunt and, perhaps, hungry Spaniard, a half-starved *campesino*, a sort of skeleton of the later work, a skeleton which Quintanilla has since covered with the tonal flesh which he evolved himself, unaided, from a reluctant medium. In his latest prints he has achieved a splendid union of the purely technical qualities which have intrigued him in drypoint and of his own vision. In nearly all is an overtone of irony, more effective for being the direct expression of a natural angle of vision, unconscious and unstudied. He himself insists on that. "I am not a preacher," he says. If this sounds strange to some who are familiar with his political associations, it nevertheless seems to me not only true but an important point in the real understanding of his work.

Monumental are many of these later designs. Inspired, perhaps inevitably, by baroque rather than by classic models—there is even a direct reminiscence of El Greco in the print of the Madrid street series in which lovers are seated on a park seat while a woman with a baby occupies a closed ellipse within the design—almost every print shows an inventive genius which results in what seems as inevitably the appropriate formal solution. This quality of design is an impressive counterpart of the psychological and realistic aspects of Quintanilla's art, and it is remarkable that the formal completeness of these engravings seldom minimizes the fresh actuality of something really seen. The print called *The Strong Man*, for example, in which the diminutive strong man balances a fat lady at least twice his size and weight with one extended arm (the





LUIS QUINTANILLA. THE STRONG MAN  
Size of the original drypoint  $14 \times 10\frac{3}{4}$  inches



LUIS QUINTANILLA. AN INTERIOR OF CASTILE  
Size of the original drypoint  $14 \times 10\frac{3}{4}$  inches

subject would have intrigued Goya), is it possible to imagine a more effective formal solution than that of balancing the tension of the central pyramidal group with the receding ellipse of the crowd? At the same time the realism of the actual scene is admirably sustained.

Another masterly design is that in which the familiar *limpia botas*, the shoeblick, is plying his profession at a pavement café. The scene is rich in its sense of the daily round in the Spanish capital. The shoeblick, after the lottery-ticket seller and the mendicant, is the commonest figure in any Spanish town. The client is submitting voluptuously to his ministrations. He is a large man, whose backward tilted figure is held miraculously by the correspondingly tilted figure of the shoeblick at his feet, while the whole design and the diagonal tension of its central group is stabilized by the upright figure of the beggar, by the lamp-post with its leaning man, by the female figure on the right, and by all the other upright lines grouped in the upper part of the plate. But it is in the print called *Emigrants* that Quintanilla reaches his most acute psychological intensity. The nostalgia in the eyes of the two youths in the railway station waiting room, their few poor bundles about them, looking through the damp panes to the vaporous platform, is infinite. It has an empathetic quality, this print, in contrast to the irony which so often charges his work. One of the most impressive of all Quintanilla's engravings is *A Galician*, a monumental study of a Northern Spaniard from the province of rain, mist and mountains which, apart from its splendid realization of dignity and character, is a full and comprehensive demonstration of the engraver's technique.



LUIS QUINTANILLA. GYPSIES  
Size of the original drypoint  $14 \times 10\frac{3}{4}$  inches



The variety of these prints corresponds to life itself. The streets, the cafés, small fishing villages, interiors of old Castile where lurks a fatalism which is the legacy of the Moor, all have yielded material for Quintanilla's art. He has touched them to a quicker life and meaning by an instinctive quality of vision and wrought them in artistic form by his resources as an engraver and his invention as a designer. He is not a preacher, as he has said himself. He is interested in life for its own sake, as a Spaniard and a man of passion, and the psychological overtones of his work are the natural expression of a personality. There is irony, there is humour, even fantasy in his work ; but, above all, the sense of life seen and felt and comprehended in one process. Quintanilla is a true Spaniard.