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## BOOKS & ARTSART REVIEW

# 'Joaquín Sorolla and Esteban Vicente: In the Light of the Garden' Review: Art in Full Flower

This exhibit at the Parrish Art Museum pairs the late-career works of two Spanish-born masters who found inspiration in the green spaces of their homes



*By Richard B. Woodward*

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Gardens are dynamic but predictable—useful qualities if you're a painter. Grounded in lowly earth, sensitive to water and air, they're photosynthesizing swatches of color and texture that respire, bud, wither and die, more or less on schedule.

Monet planned Giverny around the turning seasons. Frida Kahlo's still lifes glorified the bounty ripening outside her windows at La Casa Azul in Mexico City. Imogen Cunningham planted flowers and vegetables in her Oakland, Calif., yard in order to photograph them. Raising three children while making art, she needed to grow her subjects close to home.

"Joaquín Sorolla and Esteban Vicente: In the Light of the Garden" at the Parrish Art Museum through Oct. 16 pairs two Spanish-born painters who oversaw domestic green spaces in their old age, knowing that changes in weather and time of day would bring them regular surprises.

It's a lopsided show. Only eight of the 63 works are by Sorolla, and all of those can be found intermingled with Vicente's in the main gallery on the left. (Chief curator Alicia G. Longwell is the organizer.) Placing artists from different eras side-by-side, however, can bring out unsuspected affinities. The energy of the sun and of painting itself animated them both.

Sorolla (1863-1923) was born in Valencia, studied art in Madrid and Rome, and by the end of the 19th century was being honored internationally for his virtuosic portraits and landscapes. He may be best known in the U.S. for "Visions of Spain," a series of 14 monumental murals of the Iberian peninsula that are now installed at the Hispanic Society of America in upper Manhattan.

All of the paintings at the Parrish are modest in size. Done at the large home he had built north of Madrid between 1905 and 1916, they reflect his careful plantings in his three gardens and courtyard. (Tea roses, camellias and oleander were favorites.)



He was a committed Impressionist and worked quickly outdoors, usually finishing a canvas in one day. Like his longtime friend John Singer Sargent, he could seduce viewers with his suave, creamy brushstrokes.

The petals and leaves in “Rosas” (1916) have an almost edible lusciousness. He flirted with Modernism. The profusion of shaded flowers and shrubs (greens, pinks, beiges, yellows) above a blue-tiled fountain in “Patio de la Casa Sorolla” (1917) verges on cloudy abstraction.

Vicente (1903-2001) was born in the province of Segovia but spent most of his life outside Spain. After studying in Madrid and exhibiting in Paris, he left for the U.S. in 1936 at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, becoming a citizen in 1942. In New York he formed friendships with De Kooning, Rothko and other Abstract Expressionists who by 1950 accepted him as a voting member of The Club, the informal assembly of the New York School.

The paintings at the Parrish were done mainly during the last decade of his life at the farmhouse in Bridgehampton (not far from the Parrish) that he and his wife, Harriet Peters, bought in 1964. Vicente was inclined to paint how he felt about something rather than to transcribe its appearance, and most of these works, despite being produced in his adjacent studio, gesture in one way or another toward the natural world that surrounded him.

More attenuated and open-ended than his abstractions from the 1970s, with their sometimes intensely pulsing color, these canvases are uncommonly gentle, as if sharp edges had been filed off. The 21 collages and pastels on paper lining the central hall of the museum are even more pale and ethereal.



Full of vivid greens and muted yellows, the compositions evoke the creeks, ponds, beaches, marshes and parcels of farmland of the East End. “Blossom” (1997) and “Flower of Flowers” (1997) are centered on overlapping yolk-like forms, while “Verde” (1998) and “Countryside” (1999) are more diffuse, like fields without clear borders. At times it’s as if Vicente were looking down on his neighborhood from high above.

At either end of the transept gallery are blown-up photographs of Vicente in his Bridgehampton garden and studio (taken by Laurie Lambrecht in the 1990s) and of Sorolla and his family at their home (uncredited). Wearing a blue workshirt, Vicente stands amid waist-high wildflowers, whereas Sorolla is seated at his easel under an umbrella in his garden, wearing vest and cravat. He suffered a stroke while painting there in 1920 and never fully recovered.



A co-production between the Parrish and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente in Segovia, which has overseen a handsome dual-language slipcase catalog, “In the Light of the Garden” is an attempt to revive his name for a new generation.

Filling out the show is a gallery titled “Other Artists/Other Gardens,” landscape and nature paintings from the Parrish’s own collection by William Merritt Chase, Michelle Stuart, Billy Sullivan, Saul Steinberg and Jennifer Bartlett, among others.

It’s not too late to take a walk around these bucolic spaces (partially illumined, alas, by fluorescent lighting) before this tribute to summer disappears.

—*Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.*

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