Portraits of the Belle Époque

Press dossier

CaixaForum Barcelona
20 July - 9 October 2011
Portraits of the Belle Époque

The closing decades of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th were marked by enormous and far-reaching changes in the history of European painting. These changes affected both the stylistic conventions of the art of painting and the framework for the relations between the painter and his or her audience and market. The portrait was the genre that reflected these changes most deeply. As the academic tradition entered into a period of decadence, sustained economic expansion and the new forms for social intercourse generated by the growth of the great cities fuelled rising demand for portraits. This phenomenon spread rapidly around Europe, and new international aesthetic conventions were formed to imbue the portrait with a singular, easily-recognisable artistic style. The exhibition *Portraits of the Belle Époque* takes visitors on a journey through this genre, which was not only amongst the most important during this period, but also suggests iconographic and psychological keys that illustrate the connections between the history of painting and cultural and social history at the turn of the 20th century. It does this through seventy-six works by such artists as Giovanni Boldini, Oskar Kokoschka, Edvard Munch, John Singer Sargent, Egon Schiele, Joaquín Sorolla and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, loaned by some thirty museums and institutions in twelve countries.

Following its exhibition at the Centre del Carme in Valencia, *Portraits of the Belle Époque*, co-organised by the Consortium of Museums of the Community of Valencia and “la Caixa” Welfare Projects and curated by Tomàs Llorens and Boye Llorens, will be open to the public at CaixaForum Barcelona from 20 July to 9 October 2011.

Barcelona, 19 July 2011. Jaume Lanaspa, General Manager of “la Caixa” Foundation; Rafael Ripoll, Autonomous Secretary for Culture and Sport of the Government of Valencia; Xavier Solà, Secretary General, Ministry of Culture, Government of Catalonia, and Tomàs Llorens and Boye Llorens, curators of the exhibition, present *Portraits of the Belle Époque* at CaixaForum Barcelona. This presentation was also attended by Elisa Durán, Assistant General Manager of “la Caixa” Foundation
An anthology brought together for the first time

*Portraits of the Belle Époque* is the fruit of the cooperation agreement established between the Consortium of Museums of the Community of Valencia and “la Caixa” Welfare Projects, which was signed in September 2010 to the purpose of jointly producing the exhibition. This is the first time the two institutions have joined forces to jointly organise a show.

The exhibition features seventy-six works by forty artists. Three generations are represented in the selection: the precursors, born in the 1830s, and including Giovanni Boldini; the intermediate generation—which accounts for the largest proportion of the works featured—formed by artists born in the 1850s, such as Sargent, Sorolla, Zorn, Corinth, Munch, Repin, Serov, Vrubel and Toulouse-Lautrec; and artists born in the 1870s—Vuillard, Kokoschka, Schiele and Kirchner, amongst others.

Nearly thirty museums and institutions from twelve countries have loaned works for the exhibition, including, amongst others: from Spain, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, the Sorolla Museum, the National Heritage and the Casa de Alba Foundation; from Italy, the Giovanni Boldini Museum and the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence; from New York, the Metropolitan Museum and The Hispanic Society; from Austria, the Leopold Museum of Vienna; from Norway, the Nasjonalgalleriet of Oslo; from Sweden, the Nationalmuseum of Stockholm; from Switzerland, the Musée d’Art Moderne du Petit Palais; from London, Royal Academy and Tate Britain; from Albi, Musée de Toulouse-Lautrec; and from Russia, The State Tretyakov Gallery of Moscow. The show will also features works from private collections in Madrid, Barcelona, London, New York and Norway.

*Portraits of the Belle Époque: exhibition discourse*

The period between the Franco-Prussian War and World War One was characterised by sustained economic growth and notable political agitation that led to deep-reaching social change. The portrait, for which there was considerable commercial demand, was the outstanding painterly genre of the time, illustrating modern people’s new individualism and interest in the image they projected to their social milieu. From the art history standpoint, the genre helps to explain the changes that took place, as regards both stylistic conventions and in the relations between the artist and the audience or market. These changes helped to shape the modern artist.

Through the work of three generations of painters, the exhibition focuses on different aspects of the portrait in order to reflect on the transition from the initially triumphant, confident mood seen in the early years of this period to the deeply critical sense of
unease found in the expressionist portraits of the later years, which close the exhibition itinerary.

The exhibition discourse eschews the chronological order in favour of a distinction by type of work, structured into nine different sections: self-portraits; society portraits; temperament and character; group portraits; atmospheres and conversations; Toulouse-Lautrec; portraits in the landscape; the portrait as symbol; and the crisis.

1. **Self-portraits**
   The self-portrait testifies to the importance of the subjective consciousness—the root of the modern artist—and to our will to reaffirm our image before the world around us.

2. **Society portraits**
   The so-called society portrait was artists’ main source of commissions. The purpose of such paintings, which were based formally on 17th- and 18th-century “state portraits”, was to depict their subjects’ social position.

3. **Temperament and character**
   A characteristic of this period was the quest to penetrate the very essence of the subject, producing portraits that reflected different aspects of their nature, such as confidence, joviality, worldliness, sensitivity or respectability.

4. **Group portraits**
   Influenced by the naturalism that predominated during this period, artists and subjects would, on occasion, seek to emulate 17th-century group portraits as cultivated by such painters as Velázquez and Rembrandt. In such works, the subjects’ families were given a prominent role.

5. **Atmospheres and conversations**
   As occurs in literature, simple physical depiction is not enough to provide a full description of the subject’s character or personality. The context, the atmosphere in which the painting is created fosters deeper readings that give meaning to the portrait, providing a glimpse of the subject’s very spirit.

6. **Toulouse-Lautrec**
   In his paintings, Toulouse-Lautrec sought to capture the gesture and expression of characters from the period during the Parisian night, portraying them with an urge to leave a testimony that is reminiscent of the naturalist novel.

7. **Portraits in the landscape**
Besides reflecting new lifestyles, the portrait in the landscape also enabled the genre to satisfy one of the basic requirements of naturalism: the sketch from life, highlighting the spontaneity, the immediacy, in the artist’s representation of the moment when the subject is portrayed.

8. The portrait as symbol
The interest in penetrating the psychology of the subject or creating an atmospheric evocation of them found a natural ally in symbolism. In contrast to the positivism found in naturalist representation, such elements as spirituality, fantasy and dream offered new solutions to reflect the concerns of the human spirit in portraits.

9. The crisis
During the years leading up to World War One, the mood of bitterness and disappointment, along with a tragic vision of life, led portrait artists to adopt such themes as misery and solitude. In a reaction against the decadent positive spirit, expressionism focused on emotional, even irrational distortion of reality to vindicate the artist's subjective freedom.
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CaixaForum Barcelona
Av. de Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia, 6-8
08038 Barcelona

Times
Monday-Sunday, from 10 am to 8 pm
Saturdays, from 10 am to 10 pm

Free admission to exhibitions

Information Service
"la Caixa" Foundation Welfare Projects
Tel. 902 22 30 40
Monday-Sunday, from 9 am to 8 pm
www.lacaixa.es/obrasocial

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Multimedia Press Centre
http://press.lacaixa.es/socialprojects/
PARALLEL ACTIVITIES

Inaugural lecture
*Portraits of the Belle Époque*
Tuesday, July 19, at 7 pm
By Tomàs Llorens, art historian and curator of the exhibition
Places limited. Admission free.

Activities for senior citizens
Coffee-debate with the arts
Thursdays, from 4.30 to 6.30 pm
Activity free of charge

Activities for families
Mini-lab + 5
Monday-Sunday, from 10 am to 8 pm
The exhibition will include an area for families with activities centring on ideas related to the exhibition.
Activity free of charge and unguided

Special activity to celebrate Summer Nights
*Yesterday’s portraits, today*
We don’t need to bring anything with us to create portraits with the objects and settings that best define us.
Wednesdays throughout July and August, from 8 to 11 pm
Activity free of charge

Guided tours for schools
Tours adapted to different school levels
Advance reservation required on tel. 93 476 86 30

Guided tours of the exhibition
Guided tours for the general public
In Catalan: Wednesdays at 7 pm
In Spanish: Saturdays at 6 pm
*Evening visits during the Summer Nights season*
Places limited. Activity free of charge
Reservations: at the information desk or by telephone on 93 476 86 30
Tours for groups by arrangement
Groups: minimum of 10 people, maximum of 30
Advance reservation required on tel. 93 476 86 30
Groups with their own guide are also required to reserve date and time
Price: €15/group

Guided tours for people who are deaf or hard of hearing and with visual impairments
Advance reservation required.
Groups: minimum of 10 people
Activity free of charge
*Tours in Sign Language (SL)*
Reserve by fax on 93 476 86 35 or email to seducatiu.caixaforum@fundaciolacaixa.es
*Adapted tours for people with visual impairments*
Phone tel. 93 476 86 30.