

Telluric Art

In the early 1930s, sculptor Alberto Sánchez and painter Benjamín Palencia began a review the traditional forms in Spain through the templates of modern sensibilities. The Castilian countryside became the central motif of their works in their search for “pure art”, creating an indigenous version of surrealism, known as the Vallecas School.



Sculptures of tree trunks, their bark peeling away from the scrape of a bull's horns. Sculptures resembling bones from prehistoric creatures. Forms shaped by water and wind, by shaking leaves, by vast lowlands outlined in vibrant red...

At the end of 1929 and throughout 1930, sculptor Alberto Sánchez (1895–1962) and painter Benjamín Palencia (1894–1980) carried out a true aesthetic *reconnaissance* of rural plains in Castile and La Mancha. The intensity of this experience led them to formulate their plans to establish the Vallecas School. We know very little from documentary sources about the details of Alberto and Palencia's work together. Probably, the School was never fully formed. Nevertheless, Palencia and Alberto developed one of the most genuinely far-reaching proposals during the years of New Art, known as the reinvention of Spanish painting before the Civil War.

Familiar with the demands for “pure art” and the possibilities of “art for art's sake,” Alberto and Palencia found a wealth of ample forms from which to relate to modern sensibilities in their newly transformed perspective on agrarian physiognomy. Spontaneous, vital occurrences provided by agrarian life—motivated by chance and surprise, feeding from a synergy of all five senses—provoked a special kind of intense aesthetic experience that would likewise be invested in creating later works. Experience as art, and art as experience. Nature and art—but also nature and culture. For Palencia and Alberto, the human formed a primordial part of this natural fact, its active component. Citing ancestral art, together they composed a Vallecan poetics for the first aesthetic proposal in Spain that evoked prehistoric art from the Iberian Peninsula in its creations.

At the end of 1929, even somewhat before, avant-garde art followed a specific course, but the belief in progress and technology as a source of new elements in art underwent a severe crisis. Not only was there an upsurge in tendencies that reassessed intuitive, subjective and sensible characteristics in art, but representation also gave way to a reencounter with nature as its source of inspiration. The atmosphere created by Surrealism fostered this possibility. Rather successfully, Surrealism began to circulate certain values with romanticized ideals from nature. Yet, Surrealism transformed this possibility at the same time. It no longer entailed exclusively going to exhibitions or recreating features from nature. Nor did it merely involve underscoring the eccentric side of enigmatic natural phenomena. It attempted to capture *the absolute* in nature. Artists grappled with the notion of Earth as an entire planet, believing that a telluric poetics did indeed exist.

A tellurian poetic can be found in many figures from international modernism, from Max Ernst (1891–1976) to Jean Arp (1886–1966), making its way through Man Ray (1890–1976), Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) and Paul Klee (1879–1940). But most notably, the poetics of telluric art had a special development in creators interested in Spanish geography and cultural history.

In notebooks by Cannes (1927) and Dinard (1928) until well into the 1930s, and in the diverse repertoire of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), one constant powerful reg-

ister included using plants, organic and geological forms when developing anthropomorphic figures endowed with sexual allusions, recreated at times with a playful character or as an emphatically monumental enigma. An entire stage in Picasso's artistic production has been named for its suggestive notion of metamorphosis.

In some of his most important works, Óscar Domínguez (1906–1957) drew from recognizing either nature's psychological features—particularly in his dragon trees and in certain animals—or their organic evolution. This occurred during his surrealist phase, properly named as such. But Domínguez even highlighted the importance of telluric poetics in his work during his cosmic and "lithochronic" phases. In them, he alludes to earthly features formed through mechanisms close to automatism while withholding any specific temporal or spatial reference to them, making his landscapes transcend isolated works to become a genre.

After his experience with the Vallecan School, Palencia pushed his compositions' symbolic character to their limit, while Alberto moved closer to encountering places and characters that exist in the space of the real with his formal, methodical vocabulary. At that time, the poetic (or poetics) of telluric art had extended to other areas, serving as a catalyst for reinventing Spanish art. And it spread in step with Surrealism's diffusion and acceptance, which perhaps made it possible to speak of a kind of Telluric Surrealism in the context of "New Art," as is the case of work by Maruja Mallo (1902–1995). Its tie to the poetics of nature would transform positively in the postwar era.

Pancho Lasso (1904–1973), who created organic forms indebted to Alberto's work, formed part of the Vallecan School since its beginnings. Antonio Rodríguez Luna (1910–1985) would adapt Vallecan forms to rural Andalusia. Perfectly familiar with Picasso's work, José Moreno Villa (1887–1955) would depict stony anthropomorphous compositions in his *Lyrical Landscapes*, granting them iconographic forms from some of Plato's metaphors in *The Phaedrus*. Nicolás de Lekuona (1913–1937), together with his characteristically naked and intense landscapes, would evoke a tellurian aesthetic with allusions to Basque megaliths. Juan José Luis González Bernal (1908–1939) would allude to the harsh bleakness of the desert-like plateau landscapes and to nature's alchemic quality that can transform unpolished rock into precious stones. Finally, together with these artists, Rafael Pérez Contel (1909–1990), Jorge Oteiza (1908–2003), Ángel Ferrant (1890–1961), Julio González (1876–1942) and Leandre Cristòfol (1908–1998) move the poetics of telluric art beyond the Spanish Civil War, allowing us to understand that its identification in twentieth-century Spanish art is a register shared by a wide range of meanings.

Bibliography

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