Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Edward Burra (South Kensington 1905 - Hastings 1976)

Spanish Civil War

Circa: c.1935-7

c.1935-7
Watercolour and gouache over pencil on paper
63 x 45 cm (24 ³/▌ x 17 ³/▌ inches)

Edward Burra fell in love with the idea of Spain before he had even arrived for the first time in 1933. Having read a great deal of modern Spanish fiction as well as poetry, his inventory of books included works by Gómez de la Serna and Ramón del Valle-Inclán, significant Spanish writers of the 1930s. Burra's own choice of subject matter in his painting was heavily influenced by the Spanish painter José Solana, in particular his book La España Negra or 'The Seamy Side of Spain'. Brothels, slum carnival scenes and bullfights became part of Burra's vocabularly in depicting the bustling but also the rapturous underbelly of Spanish society. As Solana asserted; Painting is a magnificent art, not when it is a reflection of nature, but when it attains realism. In his book, he persistently qualifies 'realism' with 'disquieting'; Indeed, if there is one theme that Burra's painting evokes above all, it is disquietitude.

Burra's visit to Madrid with his friend Clover Pritchard brought him to the Prado where he was exposed to and subsequently heavily influenced by Goya's Black Paintings. According to Pritchard:

'For Ed it was like entering the familiar world of his inmost, unspoken thoughts…the Napoleonic

invasion of Spain and deafness after a serious illness [darkened] Goya's vision. The Spanish War and increasing ill-health revealed the tragic sense of life in Ed that had long been latent in him'.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 had an immediate and radical effect on Burra's art. From then on, it was characterised by a more solemn note, and tragedy became a more consistent theme as can be seen in the present work. For Burra, the civil war was a revelation of the inherent horror of life; a glympse into the abyss. Spain suddenly become a place where people were dragged from their homes in the early hours, with bodies found in the early morning which no one lay claim to. To Burra, it represented a collective insanity which shocked him to the core, precisely because of his liking and respect for the Spaniards as a people and his sense of affinity with them.

Between February and June of 1936, some 160 churches were destroyed in Spain. Having witnessed this first-hand, Burra developed a certain interest in the occult and believed strongly in the existence of the power of evil. According to his letters, Spain was in the grip of a demonic force. A powerful painting of his called Beelzebub (1937) accurately expresses this principle of human evil. Among the stones of a wrecked church, a large group of thugs are energetically destroying. The scene is dominated by a tall red demon, his face suffused by a grin of malignant idiocy; it is Spain, at its most self-defeating, witnessed by a man who loved it dearly.

Similarly to Burra, and unlike many of his contemporaries, Salvador Dalí did not take sides

during the Spanish Civil War. He seemed to vacillate from one extreme to the other, and his refusal to renounce Nationalism brought much ire from his peers. Nevertheless, his art is no less poignant. Soft Construction with Boiled Beans, Premonition of Civil War depicts the state of Spain just before the war. In torment, a disjointed, tortured body tears itself apart. The Chaotic absurdity hints at a malevolence that is to cause immeasurable pain to a confused nation. The meaning of the mysterious addition of boiled beans can only be guessed.

While the vast majority of Burra's contemporaries supported the Spanish Republicans by creating art and protesting in the streets of England, Burra had sympathies for the Nationalist cause. Like Dalí's works, Burra's art makes no moralistic pleas but simply depicts the absurdity of a land gone completely mad. Burra's The Watcher depicts faceless figures; an ominous being in a flowing red cape confronts another in a cardinal's hat amongst surrounding ruins. Like Beelzebub, the present work presents a rapturous scene of destruction and strife; the central demonic figure wields a spear and wears a horrific grin as masked figures emerge from the broken architecture beyond. The foundations of Spanish society, now seeimingly in ruins, are supported by a pair of male caryatids. Both appear to uphold the fragments of Solomonic columns, perhaps representing the Church, now rendered useless, from which demonic figures appear. Beyond is a scene of red-eyed demons in gondolas, pushing innocents into the water and feeding them to the crocodiles.

Provenance

The Artist

Redfern Gallery, London, 1944

The Robert Helpmann Collection

Sotheby's, London, 11 March 1992, lot 105

Private collection, to 2025

Acquired from the above.

Literature:

Stevenson, J. (2007). Edward Burra: Twentieth-Century Eye, Jonathan Cape.