Naturalness: Notes on the exhibition *Helena Sorolla García (1895-1975), Sculptor*

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The attention that Joaquín Sorolla has received in recent decades by cultural institutions and the general public has allowed lovers of his painting to get a more complete, veracious idea of his persona and work following decades of oblivion. This revival has brought to light many facets of his life and career which had either been obscured or forgotten. In the last twenty years or so, the public gaze has turned to questions such as the Valencian artist's smaller works, his role as a landscape artist, the influence of photography on his painting, his relationship with certain geographical areas or localities such as Granada, Guipúzcoa and Jávea, the colonial debacle of 1898 and Spanish national identity and the painter's focus on regional, popular and folk culture, among others. Truth be told, although these approaches may be limited, they have been and continue to be necessary in order to give the public a full understanding of Sorolla's imaginary world, which had been increasingly simplified since his death almost a century ago now. In this overall effort to show the lesser-known facets of the artist's personality and milieu, one direction has already been explored to a certain extent; but there is still a lot of ground to cover, as it will surely give us a better understanding of his artistic calling. We're talking about to the painter's private world. A priori it seems to be the total opposite of

our idea of Sorolla, such a public, *outward* figure. Yet as Garín and Tomás pointed out several years ago, one of the features in which we can detect the Valencian painter's modernity consists of *subjectivizing all that is exterior and objectifying all that is interior, thereby eliminating the boundaries artificially constructed between the two concepts* (Garín; Tomás 2006, 189).

Along these lines, the family home – now the Sorolla Museum – has an attraction that goes beyond the artist's paintings. Apart from admiring his work, visitors who stroll through its rooms share the space with the people who once lived there, they admire the porcelain and antiques that Sorolla collected, study the family's taste in decoration and enjoy their garden just as a guest would have done a century ago [ill.3]. Well, it's not exactly the same, of course. The construction of apartment blocks has taken away a lot of light – and flowers – from the garden; the bedrooms are now exhibition halls, and the paintings and many pieces of furniture have been moved around; but you can still recognize the atmosphere that the family created for itself. And this includes, of course, a number of sculptures. Like so many other things in the house, the pieces date all the way from the 4th century B.C all the way to the 1920s. The bulk of these sculptures are probably from around that decade and many of them are the work of the painter's youngest daughter, Helena Sorolla. They are not the most valuable pieces in the collection, but they are of a very high quality, and their historic importance lies in the pioneering status of their creator, a woman in a traditionally male-dominated field. They also help us understand the importance that the painter attached to the arts in the education of his children, particularly his daughters. They also show Sorolla's desire for his students and admirers to follow their own personalities rather than imitate him. They might also allow us to understand certain things about the classicist, modernist facets of his painting, since they also appear in his daughter's work and in various elements of the home. There are probably many reasons that justify the attention that has been paid to

the Sorolla home and Helena's sculptures in particular, but we shall draw attention to one of them: the more we know about the environment in which Sorolla lived, the better we understand the naturalness with which he incorporated very different styles in his work. Joaquín de la Puente expressed this in 1973: *With no style, by virtue of naturalness* (de la Puente 1973, 23). That naturalness infects visitors to the Sorolla home, and Helena's sculptures also share this quality.

THE TWILIGHT OF AN ART FORM

It is a well-known fact that sculpture understood in the traditional sense – that is, the activity that consists of carving wood, sculpting stone, or making pieces cast in bronze – gradually lost its importance in the visual arts over the course of the 19th century. In fact, just naming or listing these techniques transports us to an indefinite, remote past: to Antiquity, the Middle Ages or the Renaissance. Sculpture exudes something atavistic, prehistoric; and the animate beings represented thanks to it have a strange eternal quality to them; you could almost say a secret, infinite life. Curiously, the more motionless the figure is, the more intense this sensation becomes. A similar phenomenon occurs with bronze sculptures, although its echoes are not so old. There is something about those bronze figures of felines leaping or bulls charging that seems to push their expressive medium to the limit. We think of bronze casting, and huge church bells or giant equestrian statues from the Italian Renaissance immediately come to mind. The feeling of nostalgia generated by sculpture is accentuated in the case of statues, whose continuity in the 20th century is closely tied to totalitarian regimes and their use in funerary monuments, which are increasingly rare. This ancient art form reached its most critical moment at the turn of the 20th century, and it is significant that the transformation in three-dimensional contemporary art was due to the appearance, in Paris, of strange creatures sculpted by dark, remote wizards in places like Africa and Oceania, or

the work of two painters, Pablo Picasso and Marcel Duchamp. Constantin Brâncuși was the only one who managed, during that tumultuous period for sculpture, to meet the challenge posed by the extraordinary convergence of the tribal and the avant-garde in his work. None of them were probably aware, at the time, that they were rescuing one of the most venerable disciplines in the history of art from imminent death.

In those twilight years, however, there were still some great artists who provided a brilliant end to the art of statue-making. In Paris, the artistic capital of the world, Auguste Rodin was the most notable of them all. Movement, expressivity, an interest in the fragment, multiple points of view and the use of clay are key features of his work. A great admirer of Michelangelo, Rodin also produced sculptures characterized by extremely eloquent anatomy and great emotional tension. Unlike the Tuscan master, however, Rodin conceived of his sculptures in a much more visual than structural way. It comes as no surprise that the sculptor started out by studying the nude bodies of his models in motion, sketching them in clay. The biggest difference between Rodin and Michelangelo lies in their handling of material. The latter mainly worked in stone, controlling every single aspect of his own work as well as the tasks that he delegated to his assistants. Rodin, on the other hand, focused on modeling and left many of the final phases – translating from clay into bronze or marble – to his assistants, paying little attention to the completion of his sculptures.[1]

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1. According to Rosalind Krauss (1985, 167): "Rodin's relation to the casting of his sculpture could only be called remote. Much of it was done in foundries to which Rodin never went while the production was in progress; he never worked on or retouched the waxes from which the final bronzes were cast, never supervised or regulated either the finishing or the patination, and in the end never checked the pieces before they were crated to be shipped to the client or dealer who had bought them." And Rudolf Wittkower (1977, 276-277) explained that Rodin "Thought clay, felt clay and handled clay, as we have seen, with incredible skill and dedication, but he hardly worked in stone at all. [...] Following the master's death, Bourdelle said he had personally done a good number of Rodins. And in 1931 Madame Bourdelle told the dealer René Gimpel that Rodin never touched marble. Gimpel immediately phoned up Mademoiselle Cladel [sic.]. Mademoiselle Cladel replied: 'He didn't do everything,

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

In Spain, Mariano Benlliure Gil, a contemporary and friend of Sorolla, produced an oeuvre that is closely tied to the latter's. Like Sorolla, Benlliure had was an artist of great skill with a total command of his craft, which allowed him to take on a large amount of work of great quality. The two friends started out with a clearly naturalistic approach, gradually enriching it with various stylistic innovations from the international scene, particularly those that were consistent with the Spanish artistic tradition. This included the fostering of expressivity, attention to the superficial qualities of artworks, a departure from the polished finish and an in interest in light. They also shared a progressive assimilation of modernism of the early 20th century. The friendship between Sorolla and Benlliure must have contributed to Helena Sorolla's inclination toward sculpture. Yet as far as the particular development of her abilities and stylistic orientation go, a younger sculptor, José Capuz Mamano –her unofficial teacher– may have been an even greater influence. Capuz, who was from a family of engineers, completed his studies in Rome and his travels through Europe shaped his work, which had a renovating mission. Aesthetically it strayed from Academic Art and the style represented by Benlliure. He belonged to a group of young Valencian artists called the Juventud Artística Valenciana, and took part in the two exhibitions that it organized, in 1916 and 1917, with great success. In fact, in the 1916 show he received an award for his sculpture *El ídolo* ("The Idol"). These exhibitions, in which Helena also participated (in the first one, but not in the official competition because her father was one of the judges), determine the artistic context of his generation. In Helena's work we can see naturalistic features that fall within the overall trend of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and a vision of modernism that resembles her teacher's in many aspects.

but... he left the mark of his genius. His students went as far as they could go... he [Rodin] guided the student's will and elevated it to his own idea'".

The sculptures selected for the exhibition *Helena Sorolla García (1895-1975), Sculptor*, include excellent examples of both of these characteristics, among other interesting peculiarities. The show also includes a painting of Helena Sorolla done by her father and another portrait by José Capuz.

THE EVOCATION OF TIME

If the viewer is willing to linger, contemplate and ponder this selection of works, they can feel how art gives material form to the yearnings and dreams of the artist or her milieu, and from that moment it transcends time, loaded with these yearnings and dreams, so that others - years, decades or centuries later - can recognize themselves in them. Each figure carved out of stone contains eternity, but the eternal is presented here to us in clear opposition to the historic, the temporal and the ephemeral. We look at these four marble heads – three by Helena, the other by José Capuz– and we perceive the geological existence of those white stones formed before hominids ever walked the Earth. We can see the glint of their crystals, so similar to that of sugar cubes. Those stones, which have revolved around the sun a million times, now bear the shape of people who have lived until recently, whose voices we have heard. When we walk among these ancient statues it is exciting to feel all of the sudden, from some angle, the corporeal presence of a living man or woman. It is a fleeting sensation; these people go back and hide in the stone in order to surprise another distracted visitor. Yet in this room we face the archaeological remains of the Mediterranean Basin. This bust sculpted by Capuz (see ill. 2) suggests, with its big classical HELENA engraved on its chest, the presence of a young Greek woman, but the forms of her hair immediately transport us to modernism. There is, then, something old and something new mixed up in there. Looking at this woman from the 1920s and the vain girl in Sorolla's portrait, we realize that she has no desire to go back or look to the past. That girl and that young woman have fashionable hairdos and clothing; they represent a

Spain that is entering the 20th century with a view to the future. The young Helena contains the impulse of the telephone, the automobile, the streetcar and an endless number of other inventions. As her son Víctor wrote, she was very modern for her time: *she walked around the Madrid Sierra with her classmates from the Institute* [of Free Learning], *she skied, wore trousers and smoked Egyptian cigarettes!"*.[2] The classical statues give us a vision of Greeks or Romans from over twenty centuries ago, but together with this sculpture by Capuz, eternal yet modern, there is a photograph in which we can see the work resting on its stand: Capuz is working and Helena is sitting, smiling [ill. 4]. We cannot see the Esquiline Venus accompanied by photographs of the girl who posed as model, or of the sculptor at work. However, here the eternity of the sculpture is shown together with absolute transience of the photograph of the sculptor and model. Capuz's work poses for that photograph, and it is the only one of the three that still survives. But not so long ago, so did they.

The exhibition suggests, then, various temporal allusions. Some –the stones– transport us to inscrutable pasts; others transport us to a past that is more familiar to us –the Greek echoes of that face with the name HELENA, or a wood carving with a Renaissance air to it. Still others look to the future, like that young woman with blue eyes and black hair (see ill. 1) that tests the potential of her charm in a masterfully-executed oil. She, in the most pure instantaneousness, is the main subject of four photographs: almost an adolescent in the first picture, with a bun and curls framing her cheekbones and earrings, wearing a robe or kimono; young and vain in a lovely dark dress in another. In the third photograph –the one we referred to earlier– she appears in shawl with long fringes, posing for Capuz; and finally, in the fourth picture, she is wearing a white shirt and a wool knit jacket. In the abovementioned e-mail, her son Víctor told us that

2. Víctor Lorente Sorolla, private e-mail, March 19, 2012.

> Helena had a very personal style of dress. In the portraits that her father did of her and photographs from the period [...] you see an elegance that does not wish to be obvious, or dazzling; a bit bohemian. She was very fond of kimonos, of comfortable clothing, original hats and turbans. And she liked to wear exotic clothes [...] whenever she had the chance (*ibid.*).

This fourth photograph reveals her fun way of understanding fashion. The comb and the gold and emerald earrings make her look like someone who has dressed for some occasion; the stone bead necklace has a popular or old-fashioned look to it, her wool jacket and shirt tell us that she hasn't dressed up for anything at all, not even for the picture. Helena often wore jewelry in unusual ways. In her odd, innocent way, she managed to combine them with necklaces made of snail shells that she herself had threaded together. From the time she was a child, she had always been surrounded by small animals. In her letters to her father she tells him about her silkworms; and later she asks him – when her father is in New York City, painting the Valencia panel for The Hispanic Society, and Helena 21 years old! – to find some little white mice for her there. In the family home, now the Sorolla Museum, the young Helena had a giant birdcage, and as an adult she kept singing canaries, as well as several other relapses with rodents. And also, of course, dogs, from the *Canelos* of her childhood that can be seen in some of Sorolla's[3] paintings, to the *teckel* she had as an old woman. As a reminder of this lifelong love of animals, we have chosen to include this bronze she did of a crouching little bunny with upright ears [ill. 5].

THE WOMAN, WOMEN

There are three bronzes in the exhibition. One of

3. Véase por ejemplo, *En el jardín de la calle Miguel Ángel*, de 1906, conservado en el Museo Sorolla de Madrid.

them vaguely resembles the naturalistic, erotic world of Auguste Rodin, whose studio Joaquín Sorolla visited in 1913. It was probably during this visit that the great French sculptor gave Sorolla a little plaster figure, which was cast in bronze in Madrid by José Capuz. The bronze can now be seen at the Sorolla Museum with the inscription *To Sorolla / A. Rodin*. Many years later, Helena told one of her daughters-in-law that the sculpture was hers, since that had been Rodin's wish. Surprised, the daughter-in-law asked her why it had remained in the Museum if it belonged to her. To which Helena replied: *They were going to do an inventory of everything, you see, when I realized that it was already on the list and erasing it would have been too much trouble*. Perhaps Rodin gave it to Sorolla as a gift for his sculptress daughter, although it is more probable that it was the painter who decided to give it to his daughter, embellishing the story when he arrived from Paris. The difference doesn't matter anymore: Helena never claimed it, and it's natural that she did not. In the end, the piece's sentimental and economic value was insignificant compared to everything that the family had donated to create the Museum. But the story that she told allows us to deduce that she always felt connected to that gift from Rodin.

Helena's little *Rodinian* bronze [cat. nº 1] is of a nude reclining woman whose internal dynamic is that of a slight twisting motion. The model is captured in the position that characterizes someone who goes from lying on her side to on her back, and is in no hurry to roll over. Her legs, one over the other, maintain their original position, but the hip is slightly turned and her torso faces upwards. Her hands are folded behind her head, which rests on the pillow, and her arms just out forward and upward, with the elbows pointing in two different directions in space. At first glance, we would make a connection between her posture and that of the *maja* painted by Goya, but this would be erroneous. Although Goya's *maja* is lying down, she is not resting: everything in the *maja* projects outwards and is exhibited to the viewer. Her posture does not suggest abandon: she is looking at us in a seductive

pose and although her pose – her nudity in one of the paintings –makes her vulnerable, she is active and has got the situation under control. On the contrary, the thin young woman in this little bronze doesn't seem to be trying to seduce anyone. The sensation that she generates in us has to do with the idle abandon of one who decides to lie in bed a bit longer, shifting from one side to another, naked. This young woman is not trying to provoke us. In fact, she might even be sleeping, totally unconcerned about the sexual appeal of her body. Her eyes are closed and she appears before us in total familiarity. Model and sculptor recreate for us one of the most pleasant scenes of everyday life, the combination of nudity and idleness, eroticism and indolence. There is always something Eden-esque about that. One who wakes up and goes back to sleep, without any hurry, disdains the hustle and bustle of the city around her. She can allow herself to indulge in taking her time.

The second bronze in the exhibition is of a young nude woman sitting on the floor [cat. nº 10], with her legs half-bent, her hands propped up behind her and her head tilted slightly to the left. Its usual location is the living room of the Sorolla home, but due to its dimensions and theme it would be an excellent garden sculpture. We can see it – still in plaster – in a photograph next to Helena [ill. 6], who is retouching it, illuminated by a beam of sunlight from above. It bounces off the lower part of the girl's chest, nose and eyebrows. There is something very beautiful about that photograph. It was taken by the grandson of the photographer Antonio García and the son of the painter Joaquín Sorolla; and though his dandy lifestyle would lead him to take his love affairs more seriously than art or work, he knew how to capture the beauty of that ray of sunlight. With so much light, it's easy to imagine that figure posing on the soft grass, or next to a fish pool. The sculpture combines a soft naturalism with the relaxed, decorative, formalist elegance of modernism. The geometry of the composition simplifies and reinforces the directions of the figure in space. Its composition is a capital T and the side elevation features wide angles that are connected to one another, like the one formed by the bent

legs, the one formed by the arms, and the one between the upper part of the thighs and the belly. The effectiveness of the composition and the stylistic balance create a sensation of total naturalness. It is also very significant that in the sculpture, there is no exaltation of feminine attributes, unlike the little bronze of the voluptuous sleeping woman. The beauty of this young woman is not sexualized, and she has managed to avoid archetypical depictions of nude women of previous decades: pagan goddesses or regular fallen women. In this representation, the girl needs no one but herself: she does not need a man's gaze to be fulfilled. There is a little figure [cat. nº. 7] whose spatial composition may be connected to this one, but in which the intention and style are very different: the finish is less naturalistic and the posture – the hands go from the floor to the knees – is less natural, it's stylistically more modern, and perhaps more of an adornment, less of a woman.

COSTUMBRISMO AND FOLK CULTURE

The third bronze in the exhibition is entitled *Saeta* [cat. nº. 21]. It is of a woman singing, with her chin raised to protect her voice, the muscles of her forehead pulled taut by the emotional tension that characterizes this form of flamenco singing. The instable, strained nature of her facial expression are a daring choice in the traditional visual arts, and immediately bring to mind other, equally difficult depictions: paintings of people dancing, laughing or singing, like some of the ones by Frans Hals and other painters of his period that push the limits of static representation.[4] How long can these people stay poised like that, and how long can the audience wait to finally hear them sing or laugh? Anyone who dares to tackle

4. Offhand, the following four works of 17th century Dutch painting come to mind: *The Jolly Drinker* (1629), by Judith Leyster, at the Franz Hals Museum in Haarlem; *Malle Babbe* (1633-35), by Frans Hals, at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin; *The Merry Fiddler* (1623), by Gerrit van Honthorst, at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam; and *Self-Portrait Playing the Lute* (1655), by Jan Steen, at the National Gallery in London.

such as figure is playing with fire. Helena did so on at least two occasions: in this life-sized head and in a small bronze of a woman from Seville dancing [cat. nº. 35], a work from 1915 which has the slightly awkward charm of arts and crafts. Both sculptures fall within the genre of *Costumbrismo*, which first rose to popularity in the early 19th century and began to fade in the third decade of the 20th century. *Costumbrismo* –or regionalism– had played a crucial role in the success of the Valencian school during the 1860s, thanks to the painting of Bernardo Ferrándiz. Later, Ignacio Pinazo had changed the way popular characters and scenes were depicted, making them more profound and authentic. Joaquín Sorolla – Helena's father – who was an admirer of this artist, helped expand the possibilities of representations of popular, folk subjects in Spanish art.

The exhibition includes a stone sculpture that is technically related to this third bronze and its genre. *Gypsy* [cat. nº 20], as it is called, is an imposing female head carved out of white marble with deeply racial features. The woman has a narrow face with very pronounced volumes, prominent cheekbones, sunken cheeks, a thin nose and eyebrows that protrude considerably from the sockets of her eyes, which are almost closed. Her lips are plump, and she's got a mole next to her right nostril. She is wearing a comb in her hair, which is pulled back. This representation of a gypsy woman strays from the hackneyed folk liveliness of other contemporary images of members of her ethnic group. Here there is a primitive solemnity to her: the model's serenity combines harmoniously with the qualities of the stone, the product of blows of the chisel. In effect, the stone itself, enhanced by the action of chisel against marble, is like a second theme in this work. It subtly surfaces in the narrow lengthwise lines that define, with a tooth chisel, the texture and direction of the hair; and it flourishes in the big cube that forms the base of the sculpture. The front side of this block is carved with a point chisel applied to the surface in a straight angle, although a flat chisel has also been used to a lesser extent. We can see

the characteristic points made by the former and the short straight lines produced by the latter. The left and right side of the cube are scored with wide strips made by striking the stone repeatedly with the point chisel in an oblique angle to the surface. On the left these strips are parallel and horizontal, and on the right they form concentric curves. The back side reveals a large area of rough chisel work, the result of a chisel held perpendicular to the surface, although we mustn't rule out the use of other more powerful tools. On the top part of the block of the base, however, the point chisel draws groups of parallel lines near the right part of the neck, lifting up big chips of material on the lower part and sides of that upper face. This whole combination of strikes of the chisel on the base and the resulting textures contrasts with the extremely fine, polished finish of the figure's skin, producing an opposition between the stony and the human, which is one of the most oft-visited commonplaces in the history of sculpture. Due to its compositional approach and treatment, this work must be tied to *The Thinker*, done by Rodin in 1886, which Helena may have been familiar with. In it, Rodin simplified the opposition between the head and the block of the base as much as possible, even depriving his figure –whose features are those of Camille Claudel– of a neck. The contrast between the head of this *Gypsy* and the block that supports it is not so dramatic. On the front face there is a recessed rectangle with Helena Sorolla's signature on it, written in red in capital letters; and on the back we can see the signature and emblem of the workshop Cuñat, which saw to translating Helena's plaster mold into the marble of the final sculpture. Fortunately, there is an earlier plaster that invites us to ponder its relationship with the finished marble figure [cat. nº. 19]. The plaster head insinuates a leftward movement that makes it more lively and lifelike, it has a vibrant surface and a naturalistic treatment, and its base is defined by a shawl wrapped around the neck, reinforcing the model's ethnic, folk qualities. When it was put into marble it lost some details and some of its naturalistic vibration, but the more erect posture and the substitution of

the shawl for the block are aesthetic decisions that stylize and modernize the initial figure a great deal. Taking into account the changes that she made, we must ask ourselves if Capuz influenced Helena's decision to give her sculpture this new appearance. The one thing that is beyond any doubt is the decisive role played by the Cuñat workshop in the treatment of the base and the final finish; thus, we must favorably assess the fruitful collaboration between sculptor and workshop. It is only fair that both of them have left their signature on this sculpture, which is truly striking.

Temporal confusion

In this exhibition there is only one wood carving, which is usually on display in the studio, or Room II, of the Sorolla Museum [cat. nº. 18]. It is a bust of a young woman who has her hair pulled back at the nape of her neck, with a thick bunch of curls around her ears. Ringlets fall over them, framing her face. The top part of her face is wide, but the jawbone is fine; she is a thin woman who is looking down with a serene smile. When looking at this sculpture, one is confronted once again with temporal questions. Stylistically it is close to the Renaissance, but certainly this retrospective vision must be connected to the trends which, a century earlier, combined a tendency to look back to an idealized past and an avant-garde, forward-looking spirit. Of these movements we must mention the Nazarenes, a group that formed around Overbeck, which had a major influence on Academic art circles in Madrid and Barcelona during the second half of the 20th century, although not in Valencia; the pre-Raphaelites; the Symbolists and related groups and of course, the various manifestations of this complex, indescribable movement that is usually called Modernism. Most of these artistic trends implied a classicist or archaic composition, often based on simple geometric forms; a more or less naturalistic treatment of part of the subject, but not all of it; a taste for recreating the past in the setting, the props and the costumes of the characters; and a significant

inclusion of ornamental details. Several of these characteristics are found in this bust, and help give it a Renaissance/Modernist air, in which the second of the two is more dominant. This time the symmetry of the composition has no hieratic connotations, partly due to the pleasant forward tilt of the head and partly due to her faint smile. As for the moderate naturalistic treatment, limited to the young woman's face and neck, it includes a delicate finish with rasps and abrasives whose final goal – to suggest the appearance of the skin [ill. 7] – is totally successful in the young woman's décolleté. More evident than its naturalistic dimension is its decorative intention, very marked in the stylized curls – which resemble a floral arrangement– the ringlets of her hair, and in the golden motifs that decorate the wood at the border of her dress.

Portraits of children. End

We have already discussed the marble figure sculpted by Capuz and Helena's *Gypsy*. The other two marble pieces in this exhibition are two little children's heads, very white and bright. The first one is a lovely head of a little boy [cat. nº. 25] who looks forward with a serious expression. His hair parted on the right-hand side, falling in soft waves around the ears. There is something very serious and formal about the boy, carved out of marble as if it were a tribute to a great man. But it is clearly a very young child, just three years old, who cannot conceal his tenderness. The child is none other than Francisco Pons-Sorolla, *Quiquet*, the Valencian painter's first grandson, and one of the very few sources of joy for Sorolla in the second decade of the 20th century, when the artists begins to be defeated by the misfortunes around him. During this decade the painter had to spend long periods away from home to paint his *Vision of Spain* for the library of The Hispanic Society of America, based in New York. These absences become more and more difficult for him. Though he is just over fifty years old, he feels tired and has aged prematurely. He constantly begs his wife to accompany him, to no avail, and laments how far away his loved ones are in every

letter he writes. Other subjects that he revisits in these letters are the vicissitudes surrounding the creation of his paintings, his concern about the health of his family, the beauty of nature, comments about his accommodations, which were often terrible; and, as almost the only cheerful notes, allusions to his grandson *Quiquet*. Decades later, the latter would become the director of the Sorolla Museum, and would protect his grandfather's legacy with determination, sometimes in difficult circumstances. But that was much later. When Helena did his portrait he was just a boy, the center of the family's attention, the son of her sister María.

The other little marble head in the exhibition is of Elena Lorente [cat. nº. 27], the second of Helena Sorolla's seven children. The young Elena appears to be around five years old and has the amusing face of a smart girl. Her short, curly hair allows the sculptor to create a lovely interplay of waves that are fuller near the temples. The torso, which is worked out in four nearly vertical walls before reaching the base, is sheathed in a little dress with a ribbon across the middle of the top, two flowers to the left and a large button on either side of the neck. The sides of the torso are rendered with thin irregular lines that wind and fall down from the front edge to the back edge, made with a fine point chisel, and perhaps with a tooth chisel as well. The back wall is rendered with perpendicular strikes of the point chisel and flat chisel. The front wall is smooth and in it, the decoration of the ribbon on the top part of the dress continues, although it becomes flatter to in order to merge with the vertical plane. In the lower part of this front plane, in the middle and in classical upper-case letters, the name HELENA is written with an H, and an inverted N. In the name of the little Elena, this misspelling is repeated, but opposite from her mother's. Unlike Helena Sorolla and the engraving on this statue, her daughter Elena did not spell her name with an H. No one knows for sure why Helena Sorolla added an H to her name. One might think that the decision was motivated by a preference for Helena of Troy over St. Helena from the Catholic Church, the mother of the Roman

emperor Constantine. Yet we do not think that this is the case. Our supposition is based on the fact that Helena Sorolla was always religious, and it finds even greater justification in her work, which includes a St. Helena in polychrome plaster that was inherited, naturally, by her daughter Elena [cat. nº. 36]. As is usual in iconography of the saint, she is wearing lavish attire, which consists in this case of a bluish tunic, a red cape, a white scarf on her head, all embellished with gold embroidery work. Her head is also adorned with a tiara or a crown. The saint is wearing sandals and is holding Christ's cross in both hands. The mere existence of this little image clears up any doubt as to Joaquín Sorolla's daughter's devotion to St. Helena. It is reasonable to believe, then, that the reason why Helena Sorolla added the H to her name has to do with the original name of the Christian saint Helena, which was Flavia Iulia Helena. We assume, then, that this choice is due to an intention to maintain the original spelling of the saint's name. The girl in the bust, Elena Lorente, also named one of her daughters Elena, and Helena Sorolla had other granddaughters who also had this name. However, Helena Sorolla sometimes expressed her aversion to the name, explaining that Helenas *are not lucky in love*.[5]

As it is noted in other parts of this catalog, after her marriage Helena only returned to her artwork on sporadic occasions. After her wedding, it was practically limited to the series of portraits that she did of her seven children, the second of which – as we have already mentioned – is included in this exhibition. These portraits are made out of various materials, but they can still be viewed as a series because they are all similar in size and were made during her offspring's childhood [cat. nos. 26-32]. The children are not all captured at the same age; the eldest, José María, is just a baby in his portrait, while

5. As it is commonly known, the woman who ended up being St. Helena was chosen in her youth by the tetrarch Constantius Chlorus to be his consort and later as his wife; she was ultimately repudiated by him in the year 292 for political reasons. She is the patron saint of difficult marriages.

Joaquín, Helena's fourth child, looks like a young lad in his. Some of the sitters still bear a surprising resemblance to their statues as children, eight decades after their mother sculpted them. With this series of heads of her children, Helena Sorolla gradually abandoned sculpture. As her son Víctor wrote,

> This was her personal legacy for each one of us. Then came years of silence, of not working. One day in the late 60s, she set up her stand in the living room of her home in [Avenida] Reina Victoria and did, for her own satisfaction and to come full circle with her artistic life, a magnificent head of herself.[6]

This final return to painting came as a surprise to her entire family, but it must not have been unplanned. In fact, the characteristics of this self-portrait reveal a shift in attitude that would not have taken place spontaneously. In effect, while the vast majority of Helena Sorolla's sculptures usually combine naturalism with a certain degree of classicist, modernist stylization, this *Self-Portrait* [cat. nº. 24] is marked by a sober realism. In other words, whereas the contemporary ideals of beauty tend to define or correct much of the naturalistic treatment of her previous works, this time Helena sets aside stark naturalism in order to look herself straight in the mirror: to see herself as an old woman without trying to avoid reality. Self-portraiture has its own particular motivations, which change over the course of an artist's life. During youth, it is not free of vanity, but during old age it is related to an examination of the one's conscience or the balance of one's life. As a general rule, self-portraits of older artists are much more interesting when they don't try to hide their true selves, which is why realism is the most appropriate style. Perhaps for all of these reasons, long series of self-portraits are so poignant. One of the most famous, the series by Rembrandt, allows us to accompany him from his youthful ambitions, games and studies to the

6. Víctor Lorente Sorolla, private e-mail, January 8, 2010.

bitter disappointments of old age. A shorter series, this time by Goya, reflects a quite similar trajectory. In contemporary art, where the reference to the artist's own body and immediate surroundings is constant in art from all over the world, the passage of life and its tragic end has been documented many, many times. Going back to the case of Helena, it is significant that both she and her siblings had been painted many times by their father since early childhood, to the point that portraits of them almost constitute a genre of their own in Joaquín Sorolla's painting. From this perspective, the decision to add another self-portrait to such a big pile of depictions must have been difficult, to say the least; although perhaps also necessary. Helena reacted to that impulse in her youth, but perhaps due to the overwhelming influence of such a colossal, incomparable body of work, that first self-portrait was a little bronze bust, just ten centimeters in height [cat. n°. 23], which vaguely recalls a little table bell. This tender, complacent little figure is a far cry from this powerful final self-portrait, which brings together self-affirmation in the face of the hardships and heartaches of life, the passage of time and introspection. This was Helena's last sculpture. Her farewell to the genre had been a conscious, carefully meditated decision, which is why it is not just another work, but probably the most interesting one of all. Though she never did another sculpture, she did not lose the desire to keep on modeling. Years later her hands still yearned to give form to material, and no one failed to notice her predilection for Edam cheese, nor how she would peel off its red wax coating and roll it into a ball after dinner to keep for herself. Although her work had a remarkable ending with her farewell self-portrait, sculpture accompanied her for the rest of her life.