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Merayo

THE PILGRIMS' WAY TO SANTIAGO, A SOURCE OF ARTISTIC INSPIRATION IN ÁNGELA MERAYO AND ADOLFO ÁLVAREZ BARTHE'S PAINTINGS

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Around the year 820, a group of tombs was discovered at the western end of the Iberian Peninsula, hidden among weeds and marked by mysterious lights. Among them, one stood out and was immediately identified as the tomb of the apostle Saint James.

This event, which was considered miraculous, sparked pilgrimages to honour the saint's relic, and paths and ancient Roman roads were filled with pilgrims who directed their steps and their lives towards Compostela. Of all the possible routes, the one that ran through the north of the peninsula to France, and with it, to the whole of Europe, became the most popular: the so-called French Way. It generated a huge movement of people with important consequences, as it became a channel for cultural and artistic Exchange between Christian Spain and the Western world. People from all walks of life travelled along it, bringing with them material and ideological innovations and knowledge, which contributed to the creation of a common European identity. Its far-reaching significance was confirmed by Goethe in the 19th century, who defined it as the creative and unifying force of Europe.

Art also found ways to spread and take root by this means ever since the Middle Ages, when the architectural and aesthetic styles that came to be known as Romanesque became established. The relationship between the Pilgrims' Way and art has varied over time, although artists have always been sensitive to the undeniable power of suggestion that radiates from both the landscapes along the route and from the mystique of effort and self-improvement that it inspires. Modern León has also felt its influence, and its mark has appeared in artists such as Ángela Merayo and Adolfo Álvarez Barthe, who have both presented exhibitions inspired by the Way. This connection gives me the opportunity to take a quick look at these two artistic events, so different in terms of style and aesthetics, despite their common starting point.

In 1993, Angela Merayo presented the exhibition XACOBEO '93 - Paisajes al lado del camino (Landscapes along the Way). This is a series of paintings whose primary figurative references are pilgrims and the landscape of León, with a particular focus on the Bierzo region, as Ángela is firmly rooted in the surroundings and contexts of the Jacobean paths there, one of her defining places on Earth. Using the landscape as the main thematic motif, she delves into the essence of the Pilgrims' Way, in its physical and mythical reality, to connect with her personal biography through emotion and memory.

Angela turns to nature and makes a personal interpretation of it, embodied in chromatic fields somewhat intellectualised, as they respond to a more conceptual than naturalistic approach. Her works explore the spiritual dimension of the landscape, in compositions in which large segments of colour are presented in a contained and firm manner, balanced in wise and harmonious combinations of colour and form. Thus, the earthy ochres and vibrant yellows appear warm and passionate alongside lyrical and emotional pinks and greens, while with the blues reality is transformed into dreams of seas and even of times past. She does not paint realities but atmospheres onto which she projects archetypal elements of the Way: churches, arches, oculi... But above all, she is interested in the presence of people, the pilgrims, to whom she alludes through signs/symbols represented by formal elements, such as the staff, the scallop shell, or, most eloquently, their shadows crossing those chromatic fields, a reflection of the real fields that lead to Compostela, a childhood vision that she undoubtedly still preserves in her mind's eye.

The Way presented by Ángela is one of continuity and tradition, in which emotions are woven together with her sensitivity and wisdom as a painter using contemporary language.

In contrast, Adolfo Álvarez Barthe raises his gaze to the stars, where the Milky Way points with its whitish trail to the route of Compostela and the finis terrae. He imagines -paints- the constellations that make up the Zodiac, immersing himself in this mysterious world with a bold proposal that is all the more risky as it intertwines two opposing mystical territories: the Christian and the esoteric. The result is *Zodiaco Peregrino* (Pilgrim Zodiac), a series of thirteen tondos, twelve of which are each dedicated to a zodiac sign. The choice of the tondo (circular format) already places us in the realm of the symbolic, as the circle is the perfect geometric shape, signifying unity, perfection, infinity, and harmony. Its essence is related to eternity and the protection of everything within it.

Inside them, they feature imaginative iconography based on the defining element of each zodiac sign. No image is arbitrary. He constantly draws on symbols and allegories with a language that originates in the painter's ability to connect worlds, images, spaces, and ideas. Thus, history, mythology, philosophy, oriental poetry, literature, bestiaries, religions... blend in a fusion that is a pure plastic and poetic creation, although for the painter, it may involve a reflection that eludes the rest of us. Compositionally, the tondos refer to theatrical settings with such an enigmatic and arduous background that it requires the viewer to look closely and take time to assimilate their content.

Adolfo develops his Zodiac within the classical figurative style, with impeccable formal purity achieved through the meticulous and difficult technique of tempera painting, which supports refined and exquisite drawing and a colour scheme resolved in a palette of cool tones in which glazes and transparencies define planes and add depth to the artistic space, as well as an unreal effect. A poetic, cultured, and esoteric atmosphere, but above all, symbolic.

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