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Joaquín Sorolla
La Sorpresa de Zahara

JOAQUÍN SOROLLA

(Valencia 1863 – 1923 Cercedilla)

LA SORPRESA DE ZAHARA, C. 1900

Signed lower left: "J. Sorolla"

Oil on card on canvas

50 x 73 cm; 19 1/2 x 28 3/4 in.

Provenance

Commissioned by Arturo Mélida, 1900;

Martín Esteban y Muñoz, The 2nd Marqués de Torrelaguna, 1901;

Thence by descent;

The Property of a Noble Family, Christie's New York, December 2002, Lot. 13;

Private Collection, Spain.

Exhibitions

De Delacroix À Kandinsky, L'orientalisme en Europe:

Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique (15. 10. 2010 – 09. 01. 2011);

Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung München (28. 01. 2011– 01. 05. 2011);

Musées des Beaux-Arts de Marseille (Réunion des Musées Nationaux de France, RMN) (27. 05. 2011 – 28 08. 2011).

Publications

Leyendas de Don José Zorrilla, Manuel Pedro Delgado, 1900–1901;

Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923), ed. José Luis Díez and Javier Barón, Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2009;

De Delacroix à Kandinsky: L'orientalisme en Europe, Odile Cavalier, Hazan, 2010, pp. 122–113.

Joaquín Sorolla's painting depicts an episode from *La Sorpresa de Zahara, Romance de 1481*, written by the Romantic poet José Zorrilla (1817-1893), first published in the broadsheet *El Español* in 1837 and collected in *Poesías*, vol. II in 1841. Zorrilla's poem commemorates a historic episode from the closing decades of Moorish Iberia: a surprise night raid launched by Abu'l-Hassan Ali of Granada on the Christian stronghold of Zahara de la Sierra on 28 December 1481. The Christians were seized while they slept, and a wretched train of exhausted and humiliated men, women and children was driven like cattle back through the city gates of Granada.

Sorolla's crowded, energetic and intensely colourful painting depicts that moment of arrival: a tumult of captors, captives and shaken onlookers pressing through the Puerta de Elvira. The chain of prisoners, men, women, children and babies among them, moves through the gate in a state of naked degradation that visibly disturbs the spectating crowd. To the left, a veiled woman raises her hands to her head in horror, in the very act of removing her veil to protect the modesty of the Christian captives: a gesture drawn directly from Zorrilla's poem, in which Moorish mothers spontaneously tear off their own veils to clothe the prisoners, only to be driven back by Hassan's fury.¹ In the foreground, a turbaned figure in a scarlet tunic bends towards a chained captive as if in an act of compassion, while chained men and women clutch their children. To the left, mounted figures in white cloaks survey the scene from the gate; one, distinguished by a crimson robe, is likely Abu'l-Hassan Ali himself, the author of this terrifying triumph.

Above the crowd flutter four grand battle standards, two green, one red, and one blue and yellow bearing crescent moons, likely Nasrid in origin, surge across the upper canvas, their momentum contrasting with the suffering below. The warm ochre of the horseshoe arch frames the scene but is almost swallowed by the press of bodies pouring through it. Sorolla's brushwork is rapid and urgent throughout, conveying the kinetic energy of the crowd with a technique that owes more to his luminous beach scenes than to the academic tradition of Spanish history painting. Yet for all its

¹ A full citation of Zorrilla's poem can be consulted on *Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes*, Universidad de Alicante. The scene depicted by Sorolla is described in Stanza III of the poem: https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/obras-completas-poesias--0/html/fe5c88c-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_86.htm

surface brilliance, the painting holds something darker in its depths, the precise ambivalence that Zorrilla captured in his poem:

"Thus, beautiful Granada foolishly dresses herself in celebration, singing today in madness the glories she will curse tomorrow."



Antonio María Esquivel (1806-1857), *Reading by Zorrilla in the Painter's Studio*,

Oil on canvas, 144 x 216.9 cm,

Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. P004299

The poem that inspired Sorolla's painting was the work of the Spanish Romantic poet, José Zorrilla (1817–1893), who, by the end of his long life, was the most celebrated poet in Spain. Born in Valladolid and educated in law, Zorrilla abandoned his studies for literature. He arrived in Madrid in 1837 in time to deliver an elegy at the funeral of the poet Mariano José de Larra, a gesture so dramatically timed that it launched his career overnight. His *Cantos del Trovador*, 1841 the collection in which *La Sorpresa de Zahara* first appeared in its collected form, established him as the leading voice of Spanish national legend in verse.

Zorrilla's favourite subject was the vanished world of Moorish Iberia, and his relationship with Granada was one of lifelong fascination. He had read Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra*, Richard Ford's *Handbook for Travellers in Spain*, Théophile Gautier's *Voyage en Espagne*, and the chronicles of the Kingdom of Granada with passionate attention. When he visited the city for the first time in April 1845, he described himself as seduced by what he called its "*turbulent unknown past*." It was this Granada: the city of the last Nasrid sultans, of chivalric conflict and splendour that inspired the imaginative landscape of *La Sorpresa de Zahara*.

The poem, whose full title is *La Sorpresa de Zahara, romance de 1481*, belongs to the *romance* tradition: a form of narrative ballad rooted in medieval Spanish oral poetry, and its subject is a historical event from the eve of the fall of Granada. On the stormy night of 28 December 1481, Moorish forces under Abu'l-Hassan Ali, Sultan of Granada, launched a surprise raid on the Christian garrison town of Zahara de la Sierra in Andalusia, seizing the sleeping population and marching them back through the gates of Granada as captives. Historically, this act of aggression proved catastrophic for the Nasrid kingdom: the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella responded by capturing Alhambra de Granada in February 1482, setting in motion a chain of events that would culminate in the fall of Granada itself in January 1492. This event closed the final chapter of eight centuries of Moorish Iberia.

Zorrilla describes Abu'l-Hassan's forces setting out by night, lightning flashing on shields and weapons, horses deep in mud, arriving at Zahara under cover of darkness while its inhabitants slept. But the poem's moral and dramatic centre is not the raid, but the procession of captives through the Puerta de Elvira in Granada. Zorrilla describes the crowd's initial reaction as jubilant: with drums, tambourines and cheering. However, as the chain gang of prisoners pass before them, naked and degraded, old men, mothers clutching children, young women stripped of their veils, the mood fractures. Some in the crowd weep openly. Others look on with what Zorrilla calls dark, "*cursing fury*". In one of the poem's most powerful passages, Moorish mothers spontaneously tear off their own veils to clothe the Christian captive women, only for Hassan to ride his horse into the crowd in rage, ordering the young women to the seraglio, the young men to the dungeons, and the old men to the gallows. The

king's words, as Zorrilla renders them in the fourth verse, are a measure of the poem's moral force:

"They are all my slaves / To the seraglio the girls / The young men to the dungeons / Where they do not come out more to light / And the old men to the gallows / For they are of no use to me."

It is this moment of triumph, overshadowed by horror, when celebration turns into grief that Sorolla chose to paint. And in painting the *Puerta de Elvira* at the precise moment when the crowd's joy begins to change, Sorolla was entirely faithful to the spirit of the poem. The painting's existence is inseparable from a story of royal friendship and dynastic memory. King Alfonso XII (1857–1885) had been a personal admirer of Zorrilla, and who better to paint the scene than Sorolla who was already a favoured court artist who painted portraits of Alfonso XIII and Queen Victoria Eugenia, and Princess Beatrice of Battenberg.



Joaquín Sorolla, *Portrait of King Alfonso XIII in a Hussar's Uniform*, 1917
Oil on canvas, 108.5 x 81.8 cm, Madrid Patrimonio Nacional (Palacio Real de Madrid)

The painting's immediate origins lie in a separate but related commission. Sorolla was approached by the architect and designer Arturo Mélida (1849–1902) to contribute to a luxuriously produced illustrated edition of Zorrilla's legends: *Leyendas de D. José Zorrilla*, published by Manuel Pedro Delgado in 1901.² The commission brought together a distinguished group of Spain's leading artists, each invited by the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando to illustrate one of Zorrilla's poems. Sorolla was paid 3,000 pesetas for his seven illustrations.³

Joaquín Sorolla was born in Valencia in 1863 and grew up under tragic early circumstances.⁴ Both his parents died of cholera when he was two years old, and he and his younger sister were taken in by their maternal aunt and her husband, a locksmith who attempted, without success, to steer his nephew towards his own trade. Sorolla's passion was drawing, and by his early teens, he was studying at the Escuela de Bellas Artes de San Carlos in Valencia. A chance encounter with the photographer Antonio García (1841-1910) proved transformative: in exchange for retouching and illuminating photographic plates in García's studio, Sorolla received access to a painting studio and a patron who would become, in effect, a second father.⁵ It was in the daily discipline of reading light through a photographic lens that the future painter of Mediterranean luminosity first learned to understand shadow, tone and the effect of light on surfaces.⁶

² Manuel Pedro Delgado was a publisher of fine illustrated editions in late nineteenth-century Spain. *Leyendas de D. José Zorrilla* exemplifies his approach: beautifully crafted, with superior typography, quality paper and original commissions from the period's leading painters, it belongs to a tradition of luxury literary publishing that elevated the illustrated book to an art object in its own right.

³ The working relationship between artist and patron is preserved in an undated letter from Sorolla to Mélida, held in the Blanca Pons-Sorolla archive, in which the artist apologises for missing his submission deadline: "*Dear friend Mélida: I beg you to tell me if I can finish the drawings for the Legend of Zorrilla — I say this because as I missed the deadline for the presentation (for a thousand things that I will tell you), before continuing I want to know if I arrive on time. His friend embraces him, Sorolla.*" The informality and warmth of the letter speaks to the creative milieu in which the painting was born.

⁴ Blanca Pons-Sorolla, *Joaquín Sorolla* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2005). This is the standard biography by the artist's great-granddaughter and the authoritative source for all early biographical detail.

⁵ Antonio García (1841–1910) became Sorolla's patron and, in September 1888, his father-in-law, when the artist married his daughter Clotilde García. The relationship thus proved doubly transformative: it gave Sorolla both his earliest professional formation and his life's companion.

⁶ Museo Nacional del Prado, *Encyclopaedia: Sorolla y Bastida, Joaquín*, <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/learn/encyclopedia/voice/sorolla-y-bastida-joaquin/cd8aad63-b518-4278-914c-2aa033df0f24>

In 1881, Sorolla visited the Prado for the first time, where the work of Velázquez made a lasting impression. A scholarship from the Provincial Council of Valencia took him to Rome in 1885, where he absorbed the lessons of Renaissance composition and the grand tradition of history painting that still dominated official exhibitions across Europe. He subsequently studied in Paris under the portraitist Léon Bonnat (1833–1922), whose rigorous academic discipline sharpened his technical command. It was in this milieu, Rome, Paris, the Spanish academic tradition of the Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes, that *La Sorpresa de Zahara* was conceived and executed. The Grand Prix at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 secured Sorolla's international reputation for his intensely moving painting, *Sad Inheritance*, depicting a group of children, disabled by a polio epidemic, bathing in the sea in Valencia.⁷ His American debut at the Hispanic Society of America in New York in 1909 was a sensation: the exhibition comprised 356 paintings, of which 195 were sold, and during five months in America, Sorolla painted more than twenty portraits. By then, he had found his great subject: the light of the Valencian coast, the dazzle of Mediterranean beaches, the shimmer of white cotton in brilliant sun, painting canvases of such luminous intensity that they seemed to dissolve the boundary between painting and experience.

Yet, *La Sorpresa de Zahara*, reminds us that before the beaches, there was history, and before the light, there was darkness. Late in his career, in 1919, Sorolla travelled to Tetouan in Morocco, painting the local population and setting up a Moorish corner in his Madrid home on his return: a final confirmation of an Orientalist engagement that had begun nearly two decades earlier with this painting.

⁷ For the Grand Prix in Paris 1900 and Sorolla's debut at the Hispanic Society, New York, see Díez and Barón (eds.), *Joaquín Sorolla 1863–1923*, Prado, 2009.

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