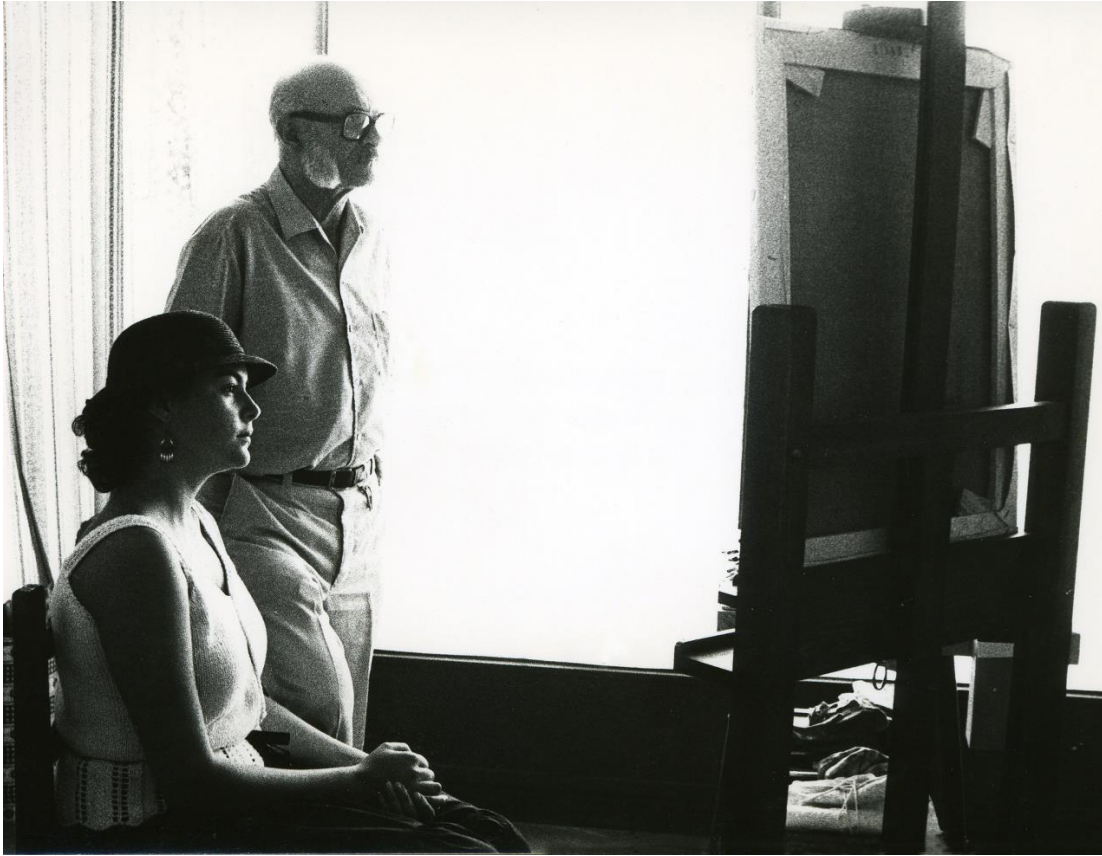


morató, aragonès

a quiet passion

english version
translated from original book





Josep Maria Morató Aragonès and Maria Elena Morató Pàmies in 1979 in Reus (Tarragona, Spain)

MORATÓ ARAGONÈS: A Quiet Passion (only text)

This biographic text is a translation of the original in Catalan, written by the art critic and daughter of the artist, Maria Elena Morató. The text is the first part of the book published in 2023 by the *Associació Cultural Arxiu Morató Aragonès* in commemoration of the painter's centenary.

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MORATÓ ARAGONÈS: A Quiet Passion

Foreword

I look back and gaze inside the work of someone – my father – who was passionate about painting yet also a quiet man. Now that I have exhaustively reviewed all the material I have to hand, now that he is no longer here, I am constantly discovering nuances, works I have never seen, about which I have no idea where they may be, but which, thanks to the virtual world, we can now add to the catalogue compiling his prodigious output.

I realise that Morató Aragonès is a painter yet to be discovered, yet to be positioned properly in the place where he belongs. Over the years, due to the lack of anthological exhibitions, we have been left with a limited overview of his output, especially of the style that characterised his work from the mid-1970s onwards. All his work from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s is practically unknown today.

This book presents an overview of the man and his work from the dual perspective of history and analysis. The first part, written by me, is a chronological narrative replete with shared personal memories and anecdotes that help to understand the painter's career and position it within the periods and circumstances of the time in which he happened to live. The second part is a text by Cornudella native Anna del Valle, an engineer with a doctorate in the History of Art, that more deeply explores the aspect of figure and portrait painting, which, as we shall see, has certain specific characteristics within his artistic production as a whole.

I have always regretted never having been able to conduct an interview with him in the intimacy of home that would have truly captured his voice and image. Naturally we talked about painting, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, but from those conversations there is only a partial record left in the form of some writings published in the four books on which I collaborated as an art critic. Despite making every effort to compile his memoirs from the year 2000 onwards, I could not get him to sit down in front of me (first, with a notebook to hand, or later with a voice recorder) to elaborate on anecdotes and events from his life. He became literally mute: "It's just that right now I don't know what to say", he used to say. But then as soon as I put the notebook or recorder away, he would start explaining things. He seemed to be doing it on purpose. In particular, in the last few years, at home, he absolutely refused to collaborate. Yet at exhibition openings, being in the presence of friends somehow not only activated his memory but also his extreme conviviality and humour. On the odd occasion he would explain some anecdote or other to me, and if he repeated it two or three times I would jot it down to remind me, and these recollections are now contained within these pages as his testimony.

From the age of seventeen, Morató Aragonès had only one goal in life: to be a good painter. He chose a personal path of convergence that avoided squandering his skills (he was an excellent draftsman, for example) and resisted the onslaught of fashions yet maintained a language that was the fruit of his time.

In 1988 he recalled, with a touch of disappointment: “When I was at the height of my creative power, my works went unnoticed”. He was referring to the 1960s, when the confrontation and synthesis between apparently antagonistic worlds (Impressionism, Expressionism, Informalism and Abstraction) caused the emergence of a pictorial explosion (albeit rational and restrained) which did not necessarily go unappreciated but did not achieve the success it probably deserved, as several art critics have since acknowledged. For this same reason, paradoxically, his oils (on canvas, wood panel or cardboard) and drawings (in ink, wax or pastel) from that period are difficult to view because they are all held in private collections, making it hard for us to evaluate their scope and importance. We are cataloguing them little by little thanks to individual collectors and auction houses that have provided their images.

If we look back over the painter’s bibliography, we find numerous press reviews due to his very lengthy career, which encompassed sixty-nine years from 1937 through to the year of his death, 2006, as well as references in art encyclopaedias and dictionaries. On the other hand, only three monographs and one miscellany have addressed his career from a more schematic approach, which only reaches as far as 1989. And in the 1990s and 2000s, Morató was still painting and producing a last evolutionary period in which the concision of his strokes and the strength of colour sprang from a pictorial spirit that was still in top form. His physical strength may have diminished, but not his will.

This book, dedicated to the life and work of Morató Aragonès, is thus intended to fill a conspicuous bibliographical gap that encompasses the generation of painters who emerged onto the art scene just after the end of the Spanish Civil War: young people who were longing for freedom, glimpsing distant horizons, and making the search for new forms of expression a means of breaking with or overcoming the constraints of the past. Following in the steps – in some cases legendary ones – left by the great masters of previous generations, who were also often friends, these young artists surpassed their personal goals in creating their own paths and trails.

We are going to more deeply explore the routes of these creative pilgrimages that led many artists not only to Rome (in search of the great classics) and to Paris (on the quest for modernity), but also, on very specific occasions, to a colonial Morocco where vestiges of Reus natives Fortuny and Tapiró, so close to Morató’s heart, still remained.

Morató Aragonès, with his calm, restful disposition, yet at the same time orderly, constant and active, deeply experienced everything that related to art and painting, experimenting with all its challenges and capturing all the opportunities that the world placed within his reach, whether through his multiple trips or his relationships of friendship and companionship.

Everyone always remembers Morató (which is how many of his artist friends called him, by his surname) as a man who loved good manners, took great care over how he appeared in public, was extremely courteous and furthermore a good person and excellent companion, always ready to help people out. But his serious persona (and he really was a serious person) concealed a fun-loving man with an acute and caustic sense of humour.

Today, while preparing this book and reviewing his work, the words written by Alexandre Cuéllar i Bassols in 1983 about Ivo Pascual spring to mind: “Nowadays, with few exceptions, he is almost unknown to current generations”.¹ In some way this is also true of Morató, as a figurative painter who did not fit within the discourse of contemporaneity that became established in the wake of abstraction’s rise. Despite meeting great favour with both public and collectors (bearing in mind he won around thirty prizes), he fell outside the interests of the critics when there was a generational turnover among those who wrote about art in the media. A series of clichés were left in the general imagination that have simply been repeated without ever delving deeper into studying the broad scope of his work, which has been very poorly represented, if not absent, in public collections.

The commemoration of the centenary of his birth has provided us with the best opportunity to revisit his figure and his contribution to the world of painting. This book thus provides a starting point for all those who wish to delve deeper into the fascinating world of the ever-nuanced (and sometimes quite unsuspected) work of Morató Aragonès.

My own contribution, for reasons of my relationship with him, is one in which sentiment and rationality converge. Because I have lived part of his journey from the inside, yet at the same time I have tried to distance myself emotionally. A beautiful journey, shared partially with the person who taught me to look at the world through the eyes of a painter, and instilled in me a passion for landscapes and a great love of the master artists.

Maria Elena Morató

Reus, March 2023

¹ CUÉLLAR I BASSOLS, Alexandre. *Ivo Pascual. Biografia íntima* (“Ivo Pascual: An Intimate Biography”). Olot: Ed. Dalmau Carles, 1983.

1 - A FAMILY FROM REUS. AN AWAKENING IN CORNUDELLA

When speaking of Morató Aragonès, one usually remarks upon his dual geographical origins, something the painter himself was always keen to point out: both Reus and Cornudella, because in addition to family relationships, his circumstances meant that both towns played a key role in his development, both as a person and as an artist, to a certain extent defining his character and his attitude to life.

On a personal level, I was particularly interested in delving into certain aspects of the painter's forebears, both the Reus branch of the Morató-Esteve family and the Cornudella de Montsant branch of the Aragonès-Mas family, because their history, which is also the history of a people and a society, provides clues to understanding his character. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the inertia of a class-ridden society of bosses, workers and artisans in the cities, or the landowners, farmers and fieldworkers in the villages, defined their children's future. In some cases, belonging to certain families was a privilege; in others, this same advantage could end up becoming a burden for the person concerned. Personal freedom was always subservient to customs that could not transgress certain social limits and conventions that had been anchored in place over the centuries, whether for the privileged or for the unfortunate.

Morató, born in 1923 to a modest yet comfortably well-off family with a long lineage, experienced this contradiction in person, and overcame it thanks to art. He willingly disregarded the past, history, and imposed rules and regulations, and despite maintaining certain formalities he focused on what really fulfilled him: painting.

Ancient histories and family legacies

Discovering the Morató Aragonès family history did not start until after his death, when we began looking through the documents stored in his many, diverse personal files, which had been handed down through seven linear generations. We found notarised documents from the eighteenth century, exquisite nineteenth-century love letters, records of family misfortunes during the war with the French and the Malcontents' War, anecdotes about farmers and honest

citizens, the testaments of great landowners, the last wills of pious widows, and a handful of photographs that gave us a closer insight into characters from Reus and the Priorat region. These were stories and circumstances that he had never explained to us, despite having some idea of them, but this was very sketchy, partial or anecdotal.

Indeed, in our family tree we find treasurers, notaries, mayors, Carlists, liberals, paramilitaries, monarchists, ironmongers, veterinarians, nuns, draughtsmen, embroiderers, militiamen and propagandists. It is impossible not to become fascinated, and hard not to get carried away by their overlapping stories, which are, at the end of the day, the history of our people.

It has to be said that once you start delving into these papers you tend to put your life on hold. In fact, you start living other people's lives, and for that reason I immediately understood why my father would turn his back, in a manner of speaking, on the varied, fascinating family histories that these old papers turned up – instead devoting all his energies to what made him happy: art.

From Valls to Reus

In the late nineteenth century, Reus was the second-largest city in Catalonia with a population of around 30,000 people. It enjoyed a privileged economic position as a result of unremitting industrial and agricultural activities and was home to a number of illustrious sons who managed to position the town as a leading light in the movements of Catalan national and cultural renaissance. “Reus, Paris, London, Carrer de Monterols and Plaça de les Cols” was a refrain our parents used to recite proudly when we were little, making us even prouder of being among the descendants of this exceptional city of Reus. Unsurprisingly, the city that was the leading market for nuts, spirits and industrial textiles would become a magnet for young people from other parts of Catalonia looking to carve out a professional career.

This is the context in which we find the artist's grandfather, Rafael Morató Morlà, originally from Valls,² an artisan who set up in Reus as a blacksmith and farrier and whose home and business premises were at number 1, Plaça del Teatre (later Plaça de Catalunya, right next to Carrer de les Galanes), and later, on the second floor of number 12, Carrer Jesús. Married to a native Reus inhabitant, Maria Esteve Romero, the family must have been quite comfortably off, as they had four daughters and one son: Maria, Elena, Amàlia, Rafael and Encarnació. The eldest girl studied art at the turn of the century in Barcelona's La Llotja School, while the other three sisters feature

² From Valls the two Morató Morlà brothers – Rafael, a blacksmith and Miguel, a weaver – moved to Reus with their mother, Elena Morlà Guasch.

in the municipal records as seamstresses, embroiderers, dressmakers and draftswomen. The only son went to Zaragoza to study veterinary science.

Maria attended the Higher School of Arts, Industries and Fine Arts in Barcelona from 1900 to 1903, finding living quarters close to Virreina Palace, at a time when the Rambles was the city's focal point. We still have some of her drawings: a portrait of her father, in charcoal, and a pretty decorative watercolour, along with a couple of magazine clippings showing the School's students painting in a Barcelona park, and some handwritten notebooks of notes taken in class. We also still have her qualifications for the subjects of Perspective, Theory and History of the Fine Arts, and Drawing and Painting as applied to domestic work, all three of which merited a grade of Outstanding. Somehow a friendship developed between one of the teachers and the Morató Esteve family, as far as we can surmise from a letter that Maria sent to professor José Calvo Verdonces in which, as well as thanking him for his interest and support, it mentions the aggravations and shortcomings of the institution where he worked.³

The younger sisters also spent time in Barcelona, but there is no record of them having enrolled in any schools there. What we do know for sure is that they stayed there, perhaps travelling back and forth, through to the events of the Tragic Week in 1909 (a workers' rebellion) when, as explained by Encarnació (the youngest, born in 1890), she and Maria had to flee the capital hidden among boxes on a truck that took them to the outskirts of Barcelona.

As far as Rafael José Antonio Morató Esteve was concerned, born in 1887, his decision to study veterinary science was connected with his father's trade, being accustomed to dealing with animals. He enrolled in the Veterinary School of Zaragoza and obtained his degree in 1909.

³ José Calvo Verdonces (Valencia, 1840 – Barcelona, 1924) was a draftsman and stage designer who joined the Catalan artistic movement in 1872, introduced by painter and stage designer Francesc Soler i Rovirosa, with whom he worked until 1900. In 1875 he painted for the Principal Theatre of Reus (demolished in 1890) and from 1896 he taught Perspective at the School of Fine Arts, obtaining the professorship in 1907. He published *Apuntes sobre perspectiva para uso de los alumnos de Bellas Artes y Oficios* ("Notes on Perspective for the Use of Fine Arts and Crafts Students, 1912). Many of the most famous Catalan stage designers were pupils of his. The Museum of Art of Catalonia held an exhibition in his honour in 1935. See below the literal transcription of an excerpt from Maria Morató's letter (from the Morató Aragonès Archive, hereinafter AMA):

[...] With regard to what you said about drawing from nature, it's impossible for me at the school since all the models are prints, something I absolutely detest, and as the School does not have all the necessary facilities and the premises are not even set up properly, the fact is that I cannot do what I really want to do.

The school is funded only by the City Council and the latter does not want to spend any money, and they always say it's held up by sheer force, so as you can see it is very different from the one that has all the essentials for modern teaching. [...] Now, when I'm at home I can do what best pleases me for the good of my students and myself.

Before setting up his practice in Reus, he worked as a veterinarian in Tivissa.⁴ In 1915 we find him practising his profession in Reus again, where he started work as the municipal veterinarian and livestock health and hygiene inspector for Reus City Council.

Reus in the 1920s

In the early 1920s, Maria by now having died, the other three sisters set up a shop at number 15 Carrer Monterols in Reus where they became known as dressmakers, draftswomen and embroiderers. The business closed down as a result of the failure of the Bank of Reus in 1931.⁵

We do not know how Rafael Morató Esteve and Maria Aragonès Mas met, but society in those days was much more closed – or rather, social circles were very small – so all the families knew each other. Rafael and Maria married on 26 September 1918 in Cornudella and spent their honeymoon in October travelling in Spain, visiting Toledo and Madrid, from where they sent postcards to Aunt Josepa. They then set up home on the second floor of number 16 Carrer de Sant Jaume, which was also the registered address of Elena, Amàlia and Encarnació. Whatever the case, the fact that the sisters were involved in the world of drawing must have aroused his interest in art, because we still have a document from the Reading Centre dated 1922 which accredits him as one of the benefactors who contributed to the purchase of Fortuny's painting, *La Vicaria*, intended for the museums of Reus.

On 17 January 1921, their first son, Rafael, was born. Two years later, on 21 May, came Josep Maria Rafael Gabriel, christened in the parish church of San Francesc on 2 June, whose godparents were Elena Morató Esteve and Vicente Maré Figueras, aged 72 and a farmer from Albarca, who for health reasons could not come down to the city and appointed Reus resident Miquel Aragonès Miarnau to represent him.⁶ The third child, daughter Maria Elena, was born on 24 September 1925.

⁴ Letter from Rafael Morató to his parents. Tivissa, 27 September 1912 (AMA).

⁵ They used to have the main fashion magazines of that time delivered to them. When the store went bankrupt, they were left with so much material that when Encarnació died in 1990 there were still stacks of boxes of buttons and threads of all kinds and colours, in addition to the sheets with embroidery designs.

⁶ In the book *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània* (Santes Creus: Ed. Roger de Belfort, 1981), on page 21, there is a copy of the document from the parish church of Cornudella, signed by the rector Cándido Llebaria, granting power of attorney. Manuel Aragonès explained it thus: "My father, by virtue of a formal power of attorney before the Rector of Cornudella, acted as godfather on behalf of the child's uncle in the pompous Tridentine ceremony of his baptism in Reus".

A tragedy that would mark the future

While Spain was engaged in the Rif wars and under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, in 1926 Rafael Morató, holding a Class 8 personal ID card with number 7,276, issued in Reus on 7 August 1925, joined Anton Cavallé⁷ and Salvador Vallverdú Gebellí in setting up the company *Empresas y Contratas, S.L.*, with which he also signed an employment contract on 1 April 1926 for the position of technical director, providing veterinary services, for a monthly salary of 150 pesetas, plus professional fees of 15 pesetas a year per horse and three pesetas per pig.

It seems that the company did not perform as they hoped. The few references we have available are dubious stories told by Encarnació Morató, who explained an incident of an intimidating assault with a pistol on her brother Rafael right in front of his house, as a result of which he had a heart attack while shaving that led to his death a few hours later on 27 May 1927. Encarnació always said it was because of the shock and upset, and that the assault had something to do with the company. *Empresas y Contratas, S.L.* published a heartfelt tribute to him in the *Diari de Reus* and *Las Circunstancias*,⁸ but he left a widow and three children destitute. In view of the situation, Maria Aragonès had no other choice than to transfer the whole family to the family mansion on the main street of Cornudella de Montsant, under the auspices of the elder sister of her late mother Maria, who was in delicate health and needed special care. Aunt Pepeta – Josefa Mas Maré – was the heiress of a not inconsiderable family legacy, and the mother's two properties in Cornudella, though small, generated sufficient income to maintain the three children.

Shortly afterwards, Rafael's embroiderer sisters, who were registered at number 1, Carrer de Sant Francesc in Reus, also moved to Cornudella, we believe around 1931, after the failure of the Bank of Reus where they had all their savings. As far as we know, Maria Aragonès had warned them that the bank was about to fail, but such was the aunts' naivety – they actually went to the bank to ask if this information was true – that they failed to rescue their capital. Anna Maria Frexinet informed us that at that time the three Morató sisters were living in a rented apartment on the second floor of the property on Carrer de la Vileta, on the corner with Plaça de la Vila (where the little alley or passageway above the street was located), when their grandparents bought the house before the war. She also explained the friendship between the sisters and her own family: "My mother was very small and was always upstairs with them,

⁷ Anton Cavallé Pla, the uncle of Josep Maria's wife.

⁸ The obituary said: "[...] are invited to attend the mortuary at. Number 16 Calle de San Jaime today, Saturday, at five forty-five, to accompany the body to the Parish Church of San Francisco and from there to Plaza de Cataluña, where the funeral will take place [...]"

learning to sew and embroider. They were very well known for the high quality of their embroidery. During the war they hid their work and all their fine fabrics, which were worth a lot, in a hidden trestle in their home”.⁹

The three sisters reopened a workshop and school in Reus at number 20 Carrer de l’Alcalde Manuel Sardà (today known by the name of Sant Jaume again, the original name having been restored), under the name of *Morató Germanes* (Morató Sisters), as we can see in an advertisement in the Reus weekly *Semanario Católico* of Saturday 18 July 1936 (after the war, the sign over the school’s doorway had to be changed to the Spanish spelling, *Morató Hermanas*). Several generations of young Reus ladies passed through their doors, seeking to learn what were known as “tasks” and prepare their bridal trousseau. I myself had the privilege – which is how I see it now – of attending their lessons as the youngest of the students when I was only eight or nine years old. I remember the place perfectly: an open-plan space with all the students’ embroidery frames hanging on the wall, perfectly arranged, the wood and wicker chairs that I and my siblings used to play trains with, and other details such as the jugs of fresh water distributed all around the room, the boxes full of thimbles and fabric erasers, and the razorblades for sharpening tailor’s chalk, which were used until only half a centimetre was left (thanks to some metal extension devices). My father explained that after the war, when they had to go and do some chore or other at the aunts’ house, the aunts used to get in a tizzy because they had a very strict rule with their young lady students: boys were not allowed to accompany them even to the door on the street, they had to stop at the corner of Raval de Jesús. Encarnació lived to the age of 102, leaving a vast amount of documents, magazines and drawings that show the evolution of fashions in the early twentieth century. One amusing anecdote relates to the parakeets she kept for company. She used to teach them to talk and say things like “Long Live Christ the King”, “I’m from Reus”, “My name is Encarnació” and “I live on Carrer Manuel Sardà, at number 20”, and of course every time you went to visit her she would make them repeat these phrases.

Cornudella de Montsant: the family haven, where painting was discovered early on

I find the Cornudella branch of the Aragonès Mas family, on which we have a great deal more information, fascinating. My father had always told us that they were known as the Notary Mas family and the Regiments family. It wasn’t until after his death that, looking through the documents, we were able to clarify the Priorat family tree and discover that one thing was the

⁹ Anna Maria Frexinet. Interview in Cornudella, 22 August 2022.

Mas family and another entirely different one was the so-called Regiments, a nickname that came from the late eighteenth century.

The Mas family consisted of a chain of notaries, uninterrupted since 1745,¹⁰ from Josep Mas Roger, who was appointed as Apostolic Notary by the Vatican and a *Notario de Reynos* (Royal Notary) by King Ferran VI, through to Gabriel Mas Compte, who died in 1879 without a male heir but leaving two daughters, Josepa and Maria, Morató Aragonès' grandmother. The inheritance that Josepa received from her father came to her through the Domingo branch of the family. Her aunt, Josepa Domingo Fortuny, who died childless, was the heir of Francisco Domingo Mas, aka Regiments, a nickname he inherited from his father, who belonged to one of the most prominent families in Cornudella in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From him they inherited not only tracts of land in the municipalities of Cornudella, Siurana and Prades, but also several properties, including the house at number 30 Carrer Major (Cal Regiments, now number 31) and the Regiments farmhouse,¹¹ which they kept until after the death of the artist's mother in 1954.

In Cornudella, the Morató children formed part of the village 'gang', went to the local state school and grew up as regular Cornudella residents, while their mother, apart from looking after the children, was involved in religious events (she was a tertiary Carmelite nun), social activism and, before the 1936 elections, was even involved in politics. Over the years, Maria's personality was forged as a charitable woman with a strong character, an "authoritative" woman, as remembered by the philosopher Octavi Fullat and farmer Ildefons Gomis, childhood friends of Josep Maria. It should also be mentioned that Maria had grown up fatherless, as her mother, Maria Mas Maré, and father, Rosendo Aragonès Olivé, both from Cornudella, had separated early on. At home we never knew why; we only knew that the Morató Aragonès children were forbidden from going down certain streets in the town and that they could not go into some of the shops. Later on, Carme Secall Aragonès, from the Rosendo branch of the family, from Cal Dominguet, told us the version that they had been told: Maria's father, the notary Gabriel Mas Compte, had forced them to separate for reasons of class difference, though the real reasons are not at all clear. Rosendo, an electrician by profession, lived for a time in Barcelona, working at his family's hardware store in the Gràcia neighbourhood.

¹⁰ It should be remembered that in the eighteenth century, following the War of Succession, there was an in-depth restructuring of the notarial system.

¹¹ The Mas de Regiments farmhouse, previously known as the Parreu Mill, stands next to the River Siurana in the area of Coll Negre, almost at the level of La Venta d'en Puvill. The history of the farmhouse and the mill goes back many centuries.

In Cornudella, Maria Aragonès (who many people called Marieta Mas, like her mother) was friendly with the Rodés family (the family of painter Ivo Pascual) and the Piñol Massot family from Mas de Sant Marcell; the children used to meet up to play at the family farmhouses, especially Mas de les Moreres, which belonged to the Rodés family. These included the Morató, Aragonès and Fullat children, among others. However, in some of the photos from that time we can see the three little Morató children playing games with the children of the farmers and the women who used to help the ladies with the housework.¹² Years later, when they were adolescents and had started going to the town festival dances, Josep Maria explained that he had precise instructions as to which girls he could and could not dance with – yet another example of the classicism prevalent at that time – something he was very upset about because the girls he fancied were precisely the ones he was told not to approach. Because of all this, I think that when the two boys had the chance to go to Barcelona they felt relieved to leave such a strict regime behind and each of them, in their own way, cut themselves off from both the family history and the “duties” imposed on them by the matriarchs of the Mas clan.

Of his early years in the village, the memories that Josep Maria passed on to us were like flashes, discontinuous photo snaps that, later on, his friends helped us to fill out a little. I remember that between jokes (and he knew a lot of them) he told us anecdotes, especially when we were little, so I must have forgotten a lot of them, because back then I still did not realize how important it is to make a note of everything your parents tell you. When I wrote the text for *Miscel·lània*, in 1981,¹³ the words were much fresher because as we got older the stories about Cornudella gradually stopped being a topic of our leisurely conversations. So I have had to reread my own texts to remember certain things and pick up the thread of others. What is true is the feeling we all had, which I described in the text, that Cornudella was a singular town (“if you haven’t been to Cornudella ...” my mother used to say) where unusual things used to happen, so we *de facto* bestowed upon our father the invented title of Cornudella Storyteller.

With regard to his schooldays, he remembered that every day they went out to the playground to exercise, which basically consisted of them moving their arms around and stamping hard on the ground, stirring up clouds of dust. Of the shared wooden desks, which included an inkwell, he said that often the ink would be spilled by an involuntary knock, staining books, papers and

¹² Emília Pallejà Adzeries explained in 2009 – in the Morató Aragonès family album exhibition held in the hall of Cornudella Town Hall – that one of the boys, whenever he went to Mrs. Maria’s House to play with the Morató children, said his mother made him wear his best clothes.

¹³ *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània* (Santes Creus: Ed. Roger de Belfort, 1981), with texts by Manuel Aragonès Virgili (under the pseudonym Roger de Belfort), Maria Elena Morató, Josep Calaf Genovés, José-Luis Fernández Flores, Xavier Amorós Solà, Claude Magnan, Llorenç Jaume Grau, Antoni Correig Massó, Torrell de Reus, Rafael Santos Torroella, F. González Cirer and Juan A. Valls Jové.

blotters; that the children played with the quills as if they were paper aeroplanes – I think he said that they used to stick paper to them in the shape of wings – and that the tips became so bent from launching them over and over again that they were useless for writing with. And he spoke about the ubiquitous tandem of the slate and the slate pencil, joined by a length of string. Of the school textbooks, a few copies are still in the possession of the current owner of the house on Carrer Major, as after the sale a lot of belongings were left there, some of which they kept.

Josep Maria loved going up and down hills (“he went up to Siurana twice a day ... running!”), like any wild village boy at that time, although, as Ildefons Gomis recalled, the two Morató brothers were very quiet and sensible: “My mother used to go to the farmhouse to help Maria and we became very good friends with Josep Maria and Rafael. I often used to go over to their place, and they came to our home too. I was very naughty, but they were very good children”.¹⁴

Here then are some anecdotes of what they used to get up to, which seem quite wild to us today. The children saw a group of cyclists going by on the road and started cheering them on until someone shouted: “Hey, they’re from Alforja, they’re from Alforja!”, at which point they started throwing stones at them.

A small group of strongmen used to take turns hanging from the Íntim bridge, on the side facing the ravine, holding on just with their hands. The game consisted of hitting their hands to try to make them fall off into the ravine! As far as I know, none of them fell in.

They also used to play a joke on credulous people by taking them to the “tweeting rock” to listen carefully to the rock to hear the little birds singing, before banging the victim’s head badly against the rock. That “joke” is still remembered today by Cornudella’s older residents.

Among the more normal games were running circle games and the famous *bèlit-bòlit* (a type of rounders game) which my father really liked.¹⁵ He also explained that whenever the children saw a snake they would run in zig-zags because hearsay suggested that if they did that the snake would break. Another of the children’s pastimes was to hunt birds using mistletoe lime traps (a practice that used to be very popular but which is now illegal throughout the European Union), or to explore the many caves that perforate the Montsant mountain range. Apart from their purely natural interest, it is worth noting that all these caves were the repositories of numerous stories, such as hermits hiding out there during the earliest days of the Crown of Aragon’s

¹⁴ Ildefons Gomis. Interview in Cornudella, 7 May 2015.

¹⁵ *Bèlit-bòlit* is a very old traditional game in Catalonia and the Valencian Community, which consists of throwing a wooden stick (*bòlit*) in the air and hitting it with a bat to make it go as far as possible. The idea is for the opposing team to try and catch it.

advance into Muslim territory, and the scars left from the repeated violent conflicts the county experienced over the centuries, especially the eighteenth and nineteenth, and also in 1938, when “the Montsant mountain range and the Prades mountains, which represented an important natural stronghold, were the scene of extremely violent fighting for several days”.¹⁶

The three brothers spent many hours at the farmhouse, entertaining themselves with all kinds of things, playing dress-up or going to the river that passed right in front of the house, which at that time was always rushing down with fantastic pools, such as the Coco pool, which today seems to have disappeared due to the water shortage. All the children used to swim there – “but we didn’t go as far as the farm, as otherwise Mrs Maria Aragonès would scold us”, remembers Ildefons Gomis – and they used to catch crabs and fish.

One of Maria Aragonès’s friends was Dr Fullat d’Alforja – from the Metge (doctor’s) farmhouse, as it was known – who for a time was treating Rafael when he had pleurisy. As the visits progressed, so a friendship was also forged between the children. Octavi, the doctor’s son, explains his relationship and experiences with the Morató family and Cornudella:

I came to Cornudella when I was between eleven and thirteen because there was some friendship and even distant kinship between the Fullat family from Alforja and the Morató family in Cornudella. Before and after the Civil War, I spent several summers there. I used to alternate with your auntie Maria Elena: she would come to Alforja, to the Cal Fullat farmhouse, for fifteen or twenty days, and I would go to Cornudella for fifteen or twenty days. I remember my mother telling me that your uncle Rafael taught me how to play the piano and that your father taught me how to paint. I saw them as older boys, but with Maria Elena, who was closer in age, we used to go down as far as La Venta, where you had a farm with some very good white peach trees, which we didn’t have, and I would bring back a basket of them that your grandmother gave us. We used to go there in the afternoon, when the sun was no longer so hot; we used to talk about what we had done that morning, about the pieces Rafael played, and I started to learn about musicians, like Chopin. At your house, as a child, it was an interesting artistic experience because one day you were playing the piano and the next day you were painting. Josep Maria used to go and paint his pictures in Sant Joan del Codolar. I used to watch how he did it, and then he would give me some very simple

¹⁶ GORT JUANPERE, Ezequiel. *History of Cornudella de Montsant. A town in the County of Prades*. Reus: Roger de Belfort Foundation, 1994, p. 366.

instructions, on perspective for example. I admired him because to me he was someone who could do something that I didn't know how to do. Your father, as a young man, used to make me fall about laughing because he had a very particular sense of humour. He had a certain irony.¹⁷

In his memoirs, Octavi mentions some of his conversations with Josep Maria, now grown up, and reflects on his art:

“What would Madrid be without the Prado Museum?” Josep Maria Morató Aragonès asked me.

“Nothing”, I reply smartly.

“*Sur terre tout se recommence*” (in the earth, everything begins again), wrote Charles Péguy. This verse sums up Josep Maria Morató's painting. Where does that birth take place? *Sur terre*, in our poor, dry, ephemeral yet also colourful natural world. Beyond the Greek *Physis*, the Latin *Natura*? The ice from nowhere. Their colours, those of Morató's paintings, spring from light, from a milky, white, virginal, childlike light. As if trying to deny the emptiness.”¹⁸

In Alforja, Josep Maria had taken up tennis, a sport he only practised for a short time but which inspired in him an ongoing passion for watching tennis tournaments, which he tried not to miss. As far as Aunt Josepa's character goes, it is obvious that she liked to be seen and on Sundays, despite living just five minutes from the church, she got the pony cart to come and pick her up at home and drop her at the bottom of the steps. We have already mentioned that classicism was alive and well in this rural society, and that “people from good homes”, as they used to call the wealthy back then, had to demonstrate it, even if they were going through hard times. Among other things, my father explained to us that neither he nor his brother Rafael were allowed to work so as not to disgrace the family name. But in that kind of family, with none of the men working as the breadwinner and with no income, it was obvious that their income would diminish year after year: survival was ensured by gradually selling-off of assets. As a real example of the situation the two women and three children were experiencing, they explained that Pepeta – Rafael's godmother, but whom all three of them called “godmother” – used to

¹⁷ Octavi Fullat. Interview at his home in Gràcia, 3 June 2015.

¹⁸ FULLAT, Octavi. *My Beauty*. Barcelona: Angle Editorial, 2010.

give them the traditional Easter cake every year on Easter Sunday, but she always spent the same amount on it and consequently it got smaller and smaller until she simply stopped buying it for them. Similarly, on the main public holiday she used to give them a certain amount of cash to go to the cinema and buy some sweets, but as the years went by they had to choose between the cinema and the sweets because the money was not enough to cover both things.¹⁹ Seeing the way things were going, my father, who was a restless spirit and unwilling to sit idly by, went to the town's Union on Plaça de la Vila a few times when he was 12 or 13 to unload sacks of stones that weighed thirty kilos, that poked into him and ended up causing him serious back pain. He told us this more than forty years ago, even how much they paid him as wages, but I can't remember now. He also told us that his mother and aunt did not allow him to keep working as a porter.

Pepeta and Maria were dyed-in-the-wool monarchists, as you can see in the documents in the family archive, which shows that at least part of the family was also Carlist.²⁰ In this respect, Josep Maria recalled that his brother Rafael was the one chosen from a small group of children to present a bouquet of flowers to King Alfonso XIII on the day he visited Cornudella, and that the children and the welcoming party waited for hours by the side of the road and in the end the car passed by without stopping. This incident was also recounted by Ezequiel Gort in his book *Història de Cornudella de Montsant (The History of Cornudella de Montsant)*:

On 25 May [1930] the monarchs visited Tarragona, leaving at noon for the Riudecanyes reservoir and then the Castle of Escornalbou, where they had lunch. After lunch, by now behind schedule, they left for Poblet [...]. On this day, says Martorell, the monarchs were also due to pass through Cornudella. On hearing the news about the royal entourage, the town readied itself to receive them and built a triumphal arch – made of ivy – at the level of La Renaixença. On that day, the esplanade before the church was packed with people waiting for the monarchs' arrival. The boys and girls at

¹⁹ With regard to the cinema in Cornudella, I was amused that my father explained that they had seen *Battleship Potemkin*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein in 1925, when it premiered in the village. Who knows whether this was months or years later? He also told us about an MGM series from the 1920s or 1930s featuring comedy stories about a group of American children from a poor neighbourhood called *Our Gang*. Interestingly, I was able to watch the episodes, with great interest, when Spanish state television broadcast them again in the 1980s.

²⁰ We have photos and prints of Carlos Bórbón of Austria and a photo of Jaime de Borbón-Parma, taken by Ogerau (18, Boulevard Montmartre, Paris), and signed in Paris on 14 April 1907. Josep Maria also told us that every year his mother sent a birthday greeting to the Borbón family at their summer residence in Estoril.

the school had made coloured flags (in purple and green) with silver stars attached to the corners in order to welcome them.

When the entourage arrived, the queen and her attendants got out of the first car and admired the church façade; the king was in the second car. Just as he was about to get out of the car, the mayor approached and uttered a formal “Your Majesty, please do not trouble yourself”, which it seems the king took literally because he remained in the car and the entourage immediately resumed its journey to Prades.²¹

Taking a break from Cornudella, Maria Aragonès decided that her children should take their first communion in Reus. On the occasion of Rafael’s communion, a commemorative verse signed A.M. was published in the *Diari de Reus*. Josep Maria’s turn came on 22 May 1932, and the commemorative stamps included a verse signed A. C., which almost certainly corresponds to Antoni Correig. The studio photographs of the three children’s communions, beautifully coloured, were the work of photographer Puig at number 12 on Carrer de Monterols in Reus.

With Aunt Pepeta’s death in January 1934, what remained of the family inheritance gave the family greater economic relief and Maria was able to consider returning to Reus and enrolling her children into schools in the city.

In the midst of all these circumstances, it was close contact with nature fostered by village life that sparked off little Josep Maria’s early interest in art. If you had walked along the many paths in the Cornudella region, you would have observed the extraordinary variety of colours featured in the different layers of soil, in even more stunning contrast after rainfall: ochres, blacks, whites, reds, browns and maroons, in an unimaginable, spectacular variety of shades. It was at this time that the boy, who was very observant, became aware of colour and began making his own pigments using water and the different soils in the area, going on to paint on paper and shoe boxes (and one assumes whatever other support he had to hand)²² and entertaining himself by making small clay sculptures in the road, especially when it rained, as he used to tell us. Without ever having seen a painting, young Morató began to copy prints and trading cards (there were some lovely collections made by chocolate companies) and became more and more interested in drawing. Two of the earliest works in our possession are precisely such copies: a watercolour

²¹ GORT, *Op. cit.*, p. 351.

²² It was Francesc Alzamora who explained about the shoe boxes. It seems that when the Ferran-Besora family bought the Regiments farmhouse in 1954 they found a lot of painted cardboard boxes which unfortunately were not kept either by my father or the new owners. In a house full of country utensils, objects of all kinds and old furniture, some old boxes would not have attracted anyone’s interest.

country scene of a detachment soldier falling from his horse, and a pencil drawing of the face of a man wearing a *barretina* (a kind of floppy red beret), done as a school exercise for his teacher Ramon Saumell.

The war, shortages and shelter

While her children were learning and playing, Maria became actively involved in politics. Far from being content to play a passive social role, she found in the CEDA party²³ a place to uphold her traditionalist ideas on order, especially as a religious person and believer. According to my father, who was 12 or 13 years old at the time, Maria used to go to the villages to take part in rallies for the party in the lead-up to the 1936 elections.²⁴ Seen in perspective, knowing what she did between 1934 and 1939, we might assume that the key factor that led her to affiliate herself with this party was its defence of Christian values.²⁵ Indeed, during the years of the Second Spanish Republic, the most radical Anti-Fascist Committee of all those established in Catalonia was in Reus. Possession of religious objects was punishable and many families were forced to express their religious beliefs in absolute secrecy, hiding religious images and celebrating mass behind closed doors in their own homes. Maria moved back to Reus in 1935, at the same time as her older children were enrolled in the La Salle Christian Brothers School in Tarragona. They lived on the second floor of number 12 Carrer Llovera, a beautiful building next

²³ The Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rights (CEDA) was a political party led by José Maria Gil Robles.

²⁴ We have a document (the official translation of an earlier document), stamped 9 December 1939 by the Local Chief of the FET and the JONS of Cornudella, which says literally:

“In Cornudella de Montsant, on 6 April 1938, the Popular Front of this town met in the Secretariat of the Town Hall, chaired by its president, Gaudencio Bodro Volto, and also attended by the presidents of the anti-fascist organizations listed on the back.

After explaining the reason for the meeting, it was agreed to send a list of those disaffected with the current regime to the Popular Front of the county of Bajo-Campo, whereby this Popular Front of Cornudella de Montsant requests that said defeatists, speculators and provocateurs are sent to work on the fortifications at the front. The names and surnames of whom are as follows: [...]” [There follows a list of 34 men and just one woman: Maria Aragonès Mas, ‘CEDA propagandist in the 1936 elections’].

This is an exact copy of the original and translated scrupulously, having been written in Catalan. And for the record and at the request of comrade María Aragonés Más, I hereby issue this copy.

²⁵ To learn more about Reus politics at that time, see the book by Joan NAVAIS and Frederic SAMARRA, *The Extreme Right in Republican Reus (1931-1936)* (Reus: Association of Reus Studies, 2003). It names people who Maria knew, such as the priest Atanasio Sinués, close to the catholic groups of the Cercle Tradicionalista and Acció Popular Catalana political parties, who was a professor of history in Reus and of Latin in Barcelona, a translator, researcher and author of historical studies on the Kingdom of Aragon. When we used to meet Don Atanasio (who christened me) on the streets of Barcelona in the 1960s, we used to greet him by kissing the ring on his hand.

to the birthplace of the painter Josep Tapiró, which at that time was owned by the Jofré family, friends of Maria. When in 1936 the militia burned the baroque wooden altarpiece of the church of Santa Maria de Cornudella, Maria secretly rescued from the ashes the figure of the archangel Michael, which for 80 years remained hidden in the Morató's house and was returned to the village and restored in 2018.

During these turbulent times, she devoted herself to hiding objects of religious worship to safeguard them from destruction: icons, chalices and niches, which were passed from house to house and shared by families on certain days of the week. Josep Maria was tasked with this, carrying them from place to place without raising suspicions. But someone must have reported her, or perhaps she was discovered, because she was accused of possessing and trafficking in religious objects. She was put in prison and the Central Anti-Fascist Committee, "by way of a sanction imposed upon her due to her actions in opposition to the provisions laid down with regard to religious objects", fined her 102,000 pesetas²⁶ which, according to my father, was paid by a marquis friend of hers so she could be released.

Back in Reus, the Morató boys attended business classes at the La Salle Brothers school, where Josep Maria, whose love of drawing was already firmly implanted, started drawing caricatures of his schoolmates at recess. (He remembers adding a fly on the nose as a distinctive feature.) He used to sell them for 25 cents and with that money he could buy an extra breakfast pastry. This sparked the development of his character as a tireless worker who took advantage of any spare moment to do what he really loved doing. But it must also be said that Josep Maria was a very hard-working boy and an excellent student, and his school report books suddenly began to fill with qualifications and excellent grades. When we were little and he showed us those grades, we were amazed because we never managed to achieve them. We always thought he was special.

During the war, the Tarragona school was closed down and the family moved back to Cornudella. The Morató Aragonès family lived through the war in this rural setting, in a heavily disputed territory behind the front line, in the mountains that eighty years later still bear witness to shattered lives and still-operational military hardware. Whenever there is a forest fire it is not unusual to hear the occasional boom of abandoned bombs and ammunition going off.

Their mother Maria, who never left again, used to send Josep Maria to neighbouring villages to seek out the groceries they were often short of. He remembers she used to make them eat "boneless fish", which was actually parsnips. She used to sing us a kind of nursery rhyme that

²⁶ The document, kept at the AMA, is typewritten with handwritten annotations.

was popular at that time: “I want *aixaculata*, from the *xaculatera*”. Another delicious treat, typical of the Priorat region, were *orelletes*, a type of fried pastry, which Josep Maria knew how to make, passing on the family recipe to us. At home, every so often my mother would make a tray of *orelletes* which never lasted more than one day.

Josep Maria told us that once his brother Rafael was cut off in Montblanc because troop movements prevented anyone from crossing the front line. It seems that Maria had to deliver something to her son and all she could think of was to send Josep Maria, all alone, across the mountains to secretly cross that same front line to get to his brother. He managed to get to the town, but once he was there the soldiers would not allow him to be so reckless as to repeat the journey home. He needed a permit to return by road, which was granted the next day.

As was the case in all the wars and battles that had assailed the town of Cornudella in previous centuries, in this conflict too the Regiments farmhouse was forced to welcome and house soldiers. And, as always, the soldiers used to steal things, but sometimes they also used to bring things in a kind of exchange that was sometimes surreal. I was surprised that, among other interesting history books, the soldiers left at the farm the six volumes of the fantastic *Diccionario Popular Universal de la Lengua Española* (Spanish Language Dictionary), published by Pablo Riera y Sans of Barcelona in 1897. I would love to know what they took away in their place!

I have to mention that there was a big difference in the personalities of the two Morató boys. While Josep Maria had a restless, hard-working spirit, Rafael was a much more contemplative character. For me, Rafael (who was my godfather) was a true dandy, an intellectual, a sharp, incisive gentleman who was passionate about reading and spent the day reading and playing the piano (he adored Bach). He once said to us: “Through books, I can experience many lives without leaving home”. I think my father disliked this attitude, because he told us that Rafael never worked when he was at the farm, he was always off with his books doing nothing. Once, after telling him countless times to come and help him with something, he took a hoe and cut his foot. The outcome was that he had to rest for the remainder of the summer. For this reason, my father admitted to me that he was not very fond of reading because as a young man he developed a kind of reaction to his brother’s hyper-intellectuality.²⁷ It must be said, however, that Rafael was a great support to him during his early years in Barcelona as a student, and they always had an excellent relationship.

²⁷ This came back on me as a young girl, as I had the same craze for reading as my uncle – he once told me off one day when, at the age of 13 or 14, I was mopping the dining room floor the old-fashioned way (putting newspaper down on the damp floor so as not to slip). He said to me: “You can’t *still* be reading! You’re even putting old newspapers down on the floor to read!”

The young Josep Maria was struck by the cruelty and absurdity of certain actions perpetrated by the *exaltats* (radical intellectuals). He told us that once they killed a man just because he looked like a priest. In 1936, the war also brought a large group of refugees from Andalusia to Cornudella. The Morató family took in a little girl, Magdalena Peralta Abadía, who died of disease on 21 January 1938 and is buried in the Morató family niche. It seems that the little girl was always at Josep Maria's side, except for once when he and Rafael were playing carelessly with a shotgun, which they thought was unloaded, and it went off. My father mentioned more than once that the little girl had been saved by a miracle. In the 1980s he tried to track down her family, but to no avail.

All these experiences must have left their mark on the spirit of a young man who saw how his playmates, only a little older than him (those in the “Lleva del Biberó”, the name given to the levies of 14–18 year-old boys called up to fight), who lost their lives in the dreadful carnage of the Battle of the Ebro. So from one thing and another Josep Maria Morató began to build his own particular world whose axis would be the contemplation of beauty, enjoyment of nature, and the peace of friendship and family, isolating himself from situations that would lead to any form of disquiet or conflict. He was not, therefore, a man of ideologies or specific opinions, but rather a man of order and logic, of deliberation and solidarity (both social and personal). He had a conscious and deeply-rooted Catalanism, an ideal he worked tirelessly to achieve all his life.²⁸ Something that his friends did remember about him was his, let us say, “rigidity” in terms of manners: he could not tolerate rudeness, bad manners or swearing, and he had no qualms about stating this openly, as remembered by Josep Cruañas,²⁹ a regular attendee of their get-togethers from the 1970s.

2 - DISCOVERING PAINTING IN THE MOUNTAINS WITH IGNASI MALLOL

The arrival of the painters from the Tarragona School

²⁸ As children, he never subjected us to any kind of political lecturing. He just made a few points when talking about events or history. Short and sweet. Without making an issue about it, Catalan-ness was somehow present in our family's day-to-day life. At home, through books, we studied and polished our spoken Catalan, full of mistakes and Spanish-isms. To me, personally, the only thing he explicitly recommended, when I was 16 years old, was: “What you should do is learn to dance *sardanas*”. The funny thing was that we had never talked about *sardanas*, but he spoke to me so seriously that I felt it was my duty to comply with his request. So, as I always listened to what he told me, I went and learned with a *sardana* group from Reus, and I found it a very inspiring dance and a very good all-round exercise, far from the insipid nature that is attributed to it (to denigrate it) in certain circles.

²⁹ Josep Cruañas. Interview in Capmany, 23 May 2015.

In this rural setting with so much freedom of movement (where the Montsant Range and the Prades mountains could be considered a huge playground), a couple of characters arrived in Cornudella, immediately attracting the attention of the town's youngsters. These two were Ignasi Mallol and Joan Rebull, who came with their friends and students of the Generalitat's School of Painting and Sculpture in Tarragona (opened in May 1935) to practice landscape painting, which Josep Calaf called an "ephemeral dream" and which he remembers thus:

At the end of the 1936 academic year, Mr Mallol told us that he had decided to spend the coming summer in Cornudella and Siurana, where he had painted previously. He suggested that anyone interested could accompany him. He had a rather large house at his disposal, belonging to our colleague Esteve Roig. Enric Pinet was very keen on the idea and quite a few of us went.³⁰

Morató, then aged 13, came into contact with real artists for the first time – seeing them "in the flesh", as he said – and was fascinated. To him, who already harboured an interest in drawing, a whole world suddenly opened up, into which he threw himself and would never leave again.

Straight away, this small group of youngsters became companions and guides to the painters, showing them the most beautiful spots and how to get there, and helping them carry their painting implements around town. Morató used to carry Mallol's parasol, easel and canvases, and stayed close by him to carefully watch how he painted and learn how to interpret the landscape. One of these young men, a friend of Josep Maria's, Joan Mestres, remembers it thus:

A few of us used to go to Carrer Major, to the Aleu house, where there was a painting school, and they took us on as models. As we were small, they made us pose as if we were little angels. Or they would say to me "Today we're going to Siurana", and I would say "Well let's go this way or that way, which is a better way of getting there", and that's what we did. While they painted, I sat. And when we came back, I can't remember what they gave me (a couple of cents, a few pesetas), but they always paid me.³¹

³⁰ CALAF GENOVÈS. Josep. "Record de l'amic Pinet", in ARAGONÈS I VIRGILI, M. [et al.]. *Miscel·lània Enric Pinet: una paleta màgica*. Santes Creus: Fundació Roger de Belfort. Santes Creus, 1977, p. 57–62.

³¹ Joan Mestres. Interview in Cornudella, 17 July 2015.

Among the younger students were Josep Calaf, Enric Pinet and Gonzalo Lindín, and among Mallo's friends who occasionally went up to Cornudella was Emili Bosch Roger. Over the years, all of them, despite the age difference, ended up becoming Josep Maria's friends.

There is a beautiful photograph from this period, when they were going to Ca l'Aleu, in which you can see some of these painters with their wives and children who also came along, with little Morató sitting in the foreground. Ca l'Aleu, an imposing house on Carrer Major, was home to the Roig family, friends of both Mallol and Ivo Pascual. One of the sons, Esteve Roig Pallejà, was a student at the Tarragona School. They stayed there many times privately, and took advantage of the family's generosity to use it as a base of operations when they decided to go up to Cornudella with the School's students.³²

Josep Calaf, who was the first winner of the Fortuny Medal – created to honour the Reus painter on his centenary, which due to the war could not be celebrated until 1939 – has the following memories of the times he spent in Cornudella:

I often remember my first stay in Cornudella, with great pleasure. It was at the end of my teenage years, at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. The peace and calm that reigned there allowed a group of young students from the Generalitat's School of Painting and Sculpture to pursue their studies there. The kindness shown by the townspeople was very important, but what really captivated us was the beauty of the landscape with which we fully identified, as well as being influenced by our teacher, the great painter Ignasi Mallol, who interpreted it beautifully.

Like a sequence engraved on my mind I still remember the beauty and stillness of those autumn mornings when I was painting the wonderful fields of almond trees near the road to Prades, above the stubble, over a reddish earth; the leaves, already autumnal, were silhouetted against the silvery Montsant and the red cliffs of Gritelles and Siurana, all immersed in a warm atmosphere that melted the blue of the sky into a symphony of golden tones. [...]

A young boy, very quiet and hence not a bother at all, often used to come with us and was very interested in what we were doing. You were barely aware of his presence.

³² The Tarragona Museum of Modern Art holds documents belonging to Ignasi Mallol among which are notes of accommodation expenses in Cornudella and a handwritten draft of the Memoir of the 1934 to 1936 academic years that the heads of the painting and sculpture workshop, Mallol and Rebull, sent to the Councillor for Culture of the Generalitat, Ventura Gassol.

That boy was Josep Maria Morató, who then – as now, in his prime – liked to go unnoticed.³³

And also:

That summer, which promised to be very fruitful for the young painters who had just tasted the scenic beauty of Cornudella and unleashed all the passion restrained by the precepts of the School, was suddenly truncated by the outbreak of the Civil War.³⁴

From then on, every time the painters went up to Cornudella, Morató and other children were “hooked”. The painters used to go there for a few days in the summer, and Josep Maria, who by then had moved back to Reus, also returned there during the holidays. After three seasons of watching the artists and paying close attention to everything they said, Josep Maria plucked up the courage to pick up a brush, some paints and a small piece of wood panel, and in 1937 he painted his first picture “in nine work sessions”, he recalled: a view of the mountains of Cornudella. In 1938 he painted his second painting, and in 1939 the third. That same year, Morató had the chance to go and see the great exhibition on Marià Fortuny in Reus.³⁵ He was entranced by the paintings, having never seen an exhibition before. Fortuny’s exhibition was shown at the Escola del Treball institute and supported by other exhibitors: works by Fortuny’s contemporaries, works by local artists who aspired to win the Fortuny Medal, and a room full of modern painting.

Soon after, Morató began to take an interest in the most well-known painters of the time, particularly those from Reus such as Tomàs Bergadà, Ceferí Olivé, Constantí Zamora, Ferré Revascall and Magda Folch. Thus 1939 was a key year for him, as after all these experiences and at the age of sixteen, he decided that he wanted to devote himself professionally to painting. Somehow he plucked up the courage to write a letter to an already very sick Joaquim Mir in Alforja, though he never received an answer.³⁶

³³ CALAF GENOVÈS, Josep. “La revelació de l’artista” (The Artist’s Revelation), in *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània*. Santes Creus: Fundació Roger de Belfort, 1981.

³⁴ CALAF. “Record de l’amic Pinet” (Memories of the Friend Pinet), in *Miscel·lània Enric Pinet ...*, p. 57–62.

³⁵ The celebrations to commemorate Fortuny’s centenary were presented as a form of propaganda by the regime to the glory of the Falange Party and Franco, as evidenced in the texts in the catalogue leaflet.

³⁶ The Library of Catalonia has kept the epistolary documentation of Joaquim Mir, but I was unable to find Morató’s, written a few months before the painter’s death.

A vocation in post-war times: Ivo Pascual and the Fortuny Medal

After he decided that he wanted to be a painter, Morató's mother came into play, noticing her son's keen interest and encouraging and supporting him as best she could. In Cornudella, one of the illustrious names that the town has given to the world of painting is Ivo Pascual – “lo l'Ivo” (“*the the Ivo*”, as some called him, stressing the article – a painter extolled by his friend Josep Carner, who was captivated by the setting of Cornudella, which he described in several poems. He was from Cal Rodés on his mother's side,³⁷ and Maria Aragonès knew the family very well. As proactive as ever, she wrote a letter to the painter, who often came up to the town, to talk about her son and ask him for advice on how to get his incipient vocation on track. Ivo Pascual replied in a letter written in Olot on 8 October 1939:

Dear Madam,

I received your kind letter and it so happened that it arrived at the same time as one from my cousin Ramona announcing her forthcoming wedding on the fourteenth of the month in Barcelona, so I am very sorry not to have been able to give your enquiry the full attention it deserves which I would have been more than pleased to provide.

I recommend that your son draws a great deal using a regular pencil (of lead), that he studies a lot of still lifes with their gradations of light and dark, and the quality of the objects studied. That to vary his studies he should draw well-structured landscapes with detailed views of the whole; that he takes advantage of market days to sketch life in motion (just as an impression), and that when he has completed a few drawings you can send them to me in Olot, rolled up, so I can take a look at them and give him guidance where necessary. I hope that your son will work hard, and I send you my best wishes along with warm regards to my Aunt Tula.

Your affectionate friend, Ivo Pascual.^{38 39}

³⁷ Ivo Pascual spent almost all the summer holidays of his childhood and adolescence in Cornudella, and it is there where he first started drawing, as recalled by Alexandre Cuéllar (*Op. cit.*, p. 26). It should be remembered that he wrote this letter at a time of great anguish as he was pending military sentence for being a “red separatist”, for which he was finally acquitted in early 1940.

³⁸ Letter from Ivo Pascual to Maria Aragonès (AMA).

³⁹ Author's note on language: I have respected the language of the original written texts, whether personal letters, press releases or literary quotations. It should be remembered, however, that after the Spanish Civil War of 1936, the Franco regime banned the use of the Catalan language, even in private correspondence, so the postcards that the Morató family sent to each other and their Catalan friends were written in Spanish by law, under threat of a fine.

With this reply in his portfolio, Morató abandoned his business studies when he was already in his final year, and managed to spend the summer months of 1940 painting with Ivo Pascual (who was recovering from the ravages of the war) and his friends Emili Bosch Roger and Josep Ventosa. Noting young Morató's interest in art, Ivo Pascual advised him to go to Barcelona to study Fine Arts. As Cuéllar relates in Ivo Pascual's biography, he used to say to his friends and cousins: "This kid is going to have a career".⁴⁰ However, that decision had to come a little later. Having completed this pictorial summer season, so to speak, Morató had already completed a few small paintings, all views of the town of Cornudella and its surroundings, in a tentative but quite successful landscape style inspired by the master Mallol.

The role played by Cornudella in Morató Aragonès's landscapes would be very important not only when he started out but throughout his entire career. I have no doubt that he was the painter who produced the most works based on the subject matter provided by these landscapes. This profound, intimate attraction to the surroundings of Montsant, the Gritelles mountains and Siurana, as well as the town of Cornudella itself, would bring him back to the land year after year, without fail, in a kind of pilgrimage to some magical place. In contrast to his brother, Josep Maria never broke the emotional bonds with the town of his childhood, the town where for him it all began; as the years went by, these ties strengthened, as evidenced by the drawings and paintings made in Cornudella and other parts of the Priorat region, which represent a very significant part of his output. We only have to consider that his first oil was a small picture of Cornudella painted at the age of fourteen, while his final oil was also a view of Cornudella, painted in 2006, a few months before his death at the age of eighty-two. We might remember here the answer he gave me in the late 1970s to the question in the Proust questionnaire: "Where would you want to die?" And without a moment's thought, he said: "Montsant".⁴¹

The enthusiasm of the apprentice painter was great, and Josep Calaf, also a great enthusiast and from that moment on his great friend, encouraged him to enter the second call for the Fortuny Medal. In addition, his unconditional support would greatly contribute to Morató's first and unexpected success in this competition. This is how Calaf tells the story in *Miscel·lània*:⁴²

⁴⁰ CUÉLLAR, *Op. cit.*, p. 244.

⁴¹ It took me twenty years to understand this answer (emotionally), even though at a young age I joined the annual pilgrimages, because in some way it transmitted to me that "obsession" (as my mother put it) for Cornudella. "I don't know what you see in this town" she used to say to us, but over the years, and especially after Josep Maria's death, those mountains also managed to captivate her. Today, they both lie in the town's cemetery.

⁴² CALAF, "La revelació de l'artista" (The Artist's Revelation), in *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània...*, p. 34.

After the war, I returned to Cornudella and went to pay my respects to the Morató family. As that year I had won the Fortuny Medal, which was created to celebrate the centenary of the great artist's birth, thus giving it a certain importance, Morató's mother, who was a very nice and intelligent woman, was keen to show me the boy's paintings. I didn't want to, because I had always been disappointed by child prodigies and self-taught artists. But mothers see things differently, so both out of courtesy and because of her insistence, I went to see them. I was really astonished. They impressed me so much that I was almost embarrassed, because although the paintings were somewhat naïf they had the stamp of a good painter. The lack of skill and the absence of playfulness could not hide the intensity and sensitivity with which they had been executed. The painter was there within. It needed to be recognized and, moreover, everything possible had to be done to develop his personality.

Those times were very difficult for everyone, but I advised his mother to send him to the School of Fine Arts because I was certain he had a talent that should not be ignored and that there was no risk of him becoming disenchanted. I begged him to be sure to enter the next call for the Fortuny Medal, because I was confident that my predictions would be proven at that event and that this would be enough for the family to heed my recommendations.

In 1940, Morató entered for the Fortuny Medal. Perhaps because there were already many entries from established artists⁴³ and Morató's paintings were smaller scale and perhaps a little rough, they went pretty much unnoticed by the visiting public, who were more accustomed to admiring the visible anecdote than looking within to find the explanation.

That year the jury was made up of four prestigious individuals from the world of art, now unfortunately deceased, who I remember with love and admiration. I was also on the jury because I had won the Medal the previous year. It goes without saying that Morató was not among the candidates. When I proposed his name there was great

⁴³ The II "Fortuny Medal" Exhibition of Local Artists, part of the programme of festivities to celebrate St Peter's Day and held at the former Centre de Lectura (Reading Centre) premises. (The Organization was closed a few years after the Civil War and occupied by the National Confederation of Trade Unions and the Falangist archives.) It featured the paintings of Matías Auqué, Josep Calaf, Pere Calderó, Constantí Zamora, Antoni Correig, Vicenç Ferrer, Isidre Garola, Josep Llusà, Josep Maria Morató and Ceferino Olivé, and some pen drawings by J. Blay. The sculpture section featured Antoni Agudé, Marià Bofarull, Francisca Colom, Francisco García, Modest Gené and Josep Llusà. Artists could present a varying number of their works at these early calls.

surprise, as no-one had even considered him. The discussions went on for a long time, we looked at his work countless times; you could not compare such modest paintings with the large-scale canvases of well-known artists. It was almost impossible that my considerations would be taken into account. But sometimes miracles happen. [...] The announcement of the verdict was greeted with obvious signs of displeasure [...], but my conviction did not waver and it would not be too long before the opinion of the nay-sayers changed, since the following year Morató won the Medal of the Sant Jordi Academy in Barcelona, and later the first Tapiró Medal.

On 26 July, the mayor of Reus, Juan Bertran, sent Josep Maria the following notification: “At the meeting held yesterday by the jury appointed for the purpose, it was unanimously agreed to award this year’s Fortuny Medal to the painting entitled *Calle de las Eras* [...]”. The rules of the award stipulated that the Town Council has the preferential right to buy the winning work, but on this occasion (as was the case with the first Medal), it waived this right and *Calle de las Eras* was purchased by a collector from Reus. According to the explanation given by Flamisell in an interview with the *Setmanari Reus* weekly in 1952,⁴⁴ the Fortuny Medal was won by the sixth picture painted by the young Morató. The newspapers of that time only reported the awarding of the Medal for information purposes. The painting, which in the painter’s own record of sold works features as number two (he sold it for 400 pesetas), was again exhibited in public on the occasion of the exhibition of Fortuny Medal winners at the Prim-Rull Museum in Reus in October 1979.⁴⁵

Thus having won the Fortuny Medal at just seventeen years of age and against all the odds, Morató – ignoring the controversy sparked by his win (though perhaps he was not even aware of it) – took full advantage of the momentum of this moment and decided to enrol in the School of Fine Arts. The prize was awarded in July, but organising all the logistics involved in moving to Barcelona to study was neither straightforward nor easy.

During this impasse, for the Christmas holidays of 1940, his first solo exhibition was held at the Tarragona Initiative and Tourism Union, organised by Manuel Aragonès, who at that time was

⁴⁴ Flamisell. “Morató Aragonés Exhibition”, *Semanario Reus*, 13 December 1952.

⁴⁵ Salvador Sedó, a member of the Executive Committee of the first Fortuny Medal, noted in the austere leaflet published for that occasion: “[...] Suara, forty years on, the Municipal Council of Museums and Archives, with great success, a success that is most agreeable and fortunate for all lovers of painting, is organising – for the first time this noble event is taking place – a GROUP EXHIBITION that very much deserves the epithet of extraordinary, of all the paintings that have won the FORTUNY MEDAL since its year of inception [...]”.

the head of the Provincial Propaganda Office. The twenty-one paintings shown were all, apart from one *Study*, scenes of Cornudella and Montsant. The press wrote: “We have no doubt that this young painter – if he follows the regime of a good painting school – will manage to reach the heights, in a surprising way, of fine pictorial art”.

The support of Maria Aragonès proved decisive at this time, as she decided to change the family residence and all four of them (the mother and the three children) moved to Barcelona in early 1941 once the academic year had already started.

We should remember that among the requirements for enrolling in the School of Fine Arts, as indicated in the registration form, applicants had to present, among other things, a political endorsement of support for the Regime. Maria pulled every string of her acquaintances and at the end of January obtained the document from the Cornudella delegation of the Falange Española Tradicionalista and the JONS, accrediting Josep Maria as being “a member of our local youth organization, thus being a devotee of our Glorious National Movement”.⁴⁶

Josep Maria, who had not been able to enrol for the preparatory course, joined the 1940–41 year as an unofficial student on 30 January 1941 in order to take the free entrance exam (which consisted of drawing a statue in chiaroscuro) at the end of April. He obtained the card accrediting him as a student of the 1940–41 academic year on 20 June 1941. He did not miss any opportunities, since the following year he had already enrolled in the first of three of the School’s specialist painting courses. That same August he obtained a certificate from the Cornudella Falangist delegation stating: “from the outset he held the position of local secretary of the OJ, a position from which he was relieved at his own request so he could devote himself to the study of pictorial art”.⁴⁷

Now, when we peruse the archives and libraries for documents from those years, we become aware of the sense of anguish and oppression that permeate the pages of the newspapers, which are practically official bulletins of war reports and information. The social atmosphere and the newspapers were impregnated with warmongering, and the articles on art that appeared in them generally did nothing more than fill the tiny space of a written advertisement. Spain was deeply immersed in the post-war period, but beyond our borders a world war was in the process of mapping out an utterly bleak news landscape.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ AMA.

⁴⁷ AMA.

⁴⁸ For further information, see A.D. *Art i cultura de postguerra. Barcelona 1939-1962*. Barcelona: Àmbit Serveis Editorials: Barcelona City Council, 2018.

The Morató Aragonès family was therefore looking to settle permanently in Barcelona while gradually selling their properties in Cornudella in order to survive. Initially they stayed at Doctor Fullat's house in the Poble Nou neighbourhood. Josep Maria enrolled in the School of Fine Arts, Rafael found work in a paint company (A. & J. Sirvent) and Maria Elena was enrolled in the Teresianes school on Diagonal Avenue, in Casa Serra,⁴⁹ the mansion house of Josep Puig i Cadafalch just in front of the parish church of Pompeia. This marked the start of Maria Elena's friendship with young Adela Molins, which soon became a firm friendship between the Morató Aragonès and Molins Gomila families. The two little girls appeared regularly as models in Josep Maria's paintings, and he produced drawings, portraits and compositions of everyday scenes for them. This is how Maria Victòria Molins, a Teresian nun, remembers Maria Elena and Adela:

We used to live on Rambla de Catalunya, next to Palau Robert, and your family often used to come to our house. Maria was lovely. Rafael and Adela were very firm friends, up until she became a nun and he said he would only marry the piano! Rafael was more serious, but Josep Maria was extremely nice, he really amused the children. I still remember his eyes, he is one of those people who really made their mark on me in childhood and my mother was very fond of him. I even thought he was my uncle, because he was one of those people who came to the house as if they were family. He used to say that our gallery was one of the places with the best light for painting, and he came to paint us sisters. He always brought us some delicious coffee candies at a time when you could only eat sweets on Sundays. And if I kept still, he gave me some. Afterwards I would look at the picture and say: "But I'm not like that, and the dress is a different colour!" He taught me that Impressionism had to be looked at from a distance through half-closed eyes. And that appreciation of painting and art has really stayed with me.

Since Adela had asthmatic bronchitis and it was not good for her to spend summers on the beach, Maria offered us her farmhouse. We were city girls who weren't allowed to go out on our own, and had to go out with the maid, so to

⁴⁹ Palau Serra, dating from 1903, was annexed to an adjacent building, the work of Enric Sagnier in 1910, which was demolished despite being a beautiful space. Can Serra was saved *in extremis* thanks to a public petition. Since 1987 it has been the headquarters of Barcelona Provincial Council.

be able to go out on the street in a town that wasn't just a resort, to go and see the donkeys ... for me, Cornudella was like a dream.⁵⁰

The Morató family soon rented an apartment on Carrer Monistrol, in the lower part of the Gràcia district, in a building that had been finished just after the war (as construction had been halted during the hostilities). The rental contract specified that you could not have plants on the balcony or keep chickens (remember this was a time of food shortages). The original layout of the apartment, like many Barcelona apartments of that time, included a laundry room but there was no space for a bathroom, so once or twice a week they went to shower at the public facilities in Plaça Urquinaona. (In this same square, if you needed a specific job done, you could find casual workers among the crowd of men who gathered in the square every morning looking for work.) At home, the adults washed as best they could and the little ones bathed in the typical metal basins. This little apartment of sixty square metres was first the Morató Aragonès family's home and studio, then the Morató Pàmies family home from 1957 to 1972, and the painter's studio until, in 1984, he moved to what used to be the studio of his friend Frederic Lloveras, on Carrer Congost, in the upper part of the Gràcia neighbourhood.

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Despite settling in Barcelona, the Morató Aragonès family returned every summer to Reus and Cornudella, so the bonds with those towns and the friendships they maintained there never diminished. In Reus, in an oppressive social and political scenario, Morató frequented the Artistic Circle⁵¹ along with Josep Calaf and Modest Gené. Firm friendships were forged at this time – with Josep Torrell, Miquel Ferrús, Juli Garola, and many others – which he took care to maintain through frequent meetings and coffee shop gatherings. Art historian Antoni Salcedo comments:

It is not surprising that Josep Torrell remembers the atmosphere at the Circle as being wonderful. Josep, together with Josep Maria Morató and Joan Pere Berenguer, were big friends with Juli [Garola]. Within the atmosphere of the city they seemed a bit strange: they were boys who didn't go to football at weekends, but on Sundays they

⁵⁰ Maria Victòria Molins. Interview in Barcelona, 6 September 2022.

⁵¹ The Artistic Circle association, founded in 1852, was dissolved by the Civil Government in 1940 and reopened in 1943 (DUCH PLANA, Montserrat. "El segle XX. La dictadura franquista" (The 20th Century: The Franco Dictatorship), in: ANGUERA NOLLA, Pere (dir.). *Història General de Reus*, Volume IV. Reus: Ajuntament de Reus, 2003, p. 282.

used to take their paintboxes and bicycles and go up to the mountains near Reus to paint [...] they used to paint where Joaquim Mir used to go.⁵²

3 - BARCELONA IN THE 1940s: FINE ARTS AND THE PATRONAGE OF PUIG PERUCHO

The Barcelona of the 1940s was an extraordinarily restless capital that was avid to open breaches in the suffocating general atmosphere of repression being experienced throughout Spain, trying to survive by projecting itself towards the future and determined to lighten the burdens of everyday life. The convergence of different worlds (with waves of immigrants from Castile and Andalusia), along with geographical and interim circumstances of a strategic nature (as one of the biggest ports in the Mediterranean, and a refuge for many intellectuals and artists fleeing the European war), made Barcelona a melting pot of avant-garde movements from Europe that would become a breeding ground for the evolution of new generations. Young artists debated between inertia and the spirit of renewal, which we might call “revolutionary” if we bear in mind that during those years even Impressionism was considered to be an excessively disruptive movement.

In Barcelona, Morató discovered a completely different atmosphere to the one he had experienced up until then. His perspectives were multiplying at every level, and his activity took on an increasingly relentless pace. Here he discovered painters such as Nonell, Sorolla, Villà, Puigdemolas and Mallol Suazo, whose imprint we find in the paintings made during his early exploratory years in the Catalan capital, allowing him to develop some of his traits in his own paintings. In November 1941, the National Exhibition of Fine Arts opened in Madrid, and in its official catalogue Morató found the work of many other painters illustrating the trends promoted by the official bodies: traditional scenes exalting Spanish-ness and folklore, the new benevolent view of Morocco as a Protectorate, and a pre-eminently classical figuration in which changes in trends can be perceived in the works of Rafael Llimona, Fernando Quero, Ramon Rogent and Vila Arrufat.⁵³

In contrast to most of the works in this catalogue, the sensation caused by writer and promoter Joan Merli's book, *33 pintors catalans (33 Catalan Painters)*, published in 1937 by the Commissariat for Propaganda of the Generalitat and republished by him in 1976, is one of a vigorous freshness, with that “French aftertaste” that the Catalans managed to make their own, in the author's words. Tógors, Alfred Sisquella, Pere Pruna, Grau Sala, Francesc Labarta, Manuel

⁵² *Juli Garola Monné: pintor (1927-2002)* [exhibition catalogue]. Reus: Institut Municipal de Museus, 2003, p. 23.

⁵³ *National Exhibition of Fine Arts 1941. Official catalogue*. Madrid: National Ministry of Education, 1941.

Humbert and Josep Obiols were some of these artists who Morató also observed with interest. We should recall that Merli was the cultural manager of the Sala Parés gallery, and that in the 1930s he had exclusive contracts with Rebull, Bosch Roger, Villà, Grau Sala and Granyer, who were thus able to turn professional.⁵⁴

At the School of Fine Arts, Morató found support in teachers such as Bonaventura Puig Perucho, a much-loved and motivating teacher, the author of a small but interesting manual on landscape painting.⁵⁵ He also remembered Ernest Santasusagna and Ramon Sanvisens, recalling their excellent teaching methods, with whom he continued to meet outside the academic world to the point of forging a friendship with them. His relationship with Puig Perucho, who lived at number 246 Gran de Gràcia Street, went far beyond simple cordiality and continued until the teacher's death on 8 January 1977, to the point that Morató considered himself his disciple and stated this explicitly in all his catalogues published between 1972 and 1985, probably as a form of tribute and public recognition.

Talking about the artistic atmosphere in that stimulating, somewhat schizophrenic Barcelona, Jaume Muxart, one of Morató's fellow students at the School of Fine Arts, explained:

In the past, there were only higher schools of Fine Arts in Madrid, Valencia and Seville. In Barcelona, it was an Arts and Crafts school. With Morató, Aleu and a number of other people, about 15 or 16, we were the first batch to study at the Higher School of Fine Arts in Barcelona. After six months or so we had to do landscape studies with Puig Perucho. Morató and I became quite friendly with him, and he invited us to the get-togethers he used to hold on Saturdays at his studio in Lesseps.

I had never painted. I started at the School of Fine Arts with an untouched palette, but he was already familiar with painting and we used to go and see exhibitions, especially Impressionist ones. By way of an example of the atmosphere back then, one day we had the art historian Monreal y Tejada and there was only a handful of us, and it was raining, so Monreal said: "As there's only a few of us here, today I'm going to talk about whatever you want". It occurred to me to say French Impressionism. Impressionism! He derided me, called me Frenchified and I don't know what else, as if it were a sin to talk about Impressionism. It was a completely academic environment. I remember that in the entrance exam for the School of Fine Arts there were painters like Lluís M. Güell

⁵⁴ MARAGALL, Joan A. *Història de la Sala Parés*, Barcelona: Ed. Selecta, 1975.

⁵⁵ PUIG Y PERUCHO, Bonaventura. *La pintura de paisaje*. Barcelona: Sucesor de E. Meseguer, Ed., 1948. (Manuales Meseguer)

and Ramon Rogent who already had a bit of a name, but they were rejected because they were too modern. Meanwhile, Morató, Aleu and I adapted pretty well to the school.

We used to go and see exhibitions and we were lucky that they opened the Museum of Modern Art in Ciutadella park. And there we would see Anglada Camarasa, Mir – whom we particularly liked – Casas, and so on. And we created a sort of “modern pre-war” atmosphere. And then we would go to the Artistic Circle where we would look at magazines, especially foreign ones.⁵⁶

The School, at that time, was in some aspects a rather chaotic operation, to the point that according to Josep Maria, the paintings of all the students who had attended the Llotja School (under all its different names since it had opened in 1775) were kept in the attic of the building. But the care taken of these collections was so poor that a janitor kept selling them without anyone in charge stopping him. However, a group of students realized what was happening and were so angry about it that as an undeclared protest they organised a clandestine painting raffle among themselves: whatever painting you got, you would take home. But Josep Maria “won” a huge painting by Antoni Casanova Estorach, which was so big he didn’t dare take it home. “Now they have it hanging in a prominent place”, he told me in the 1980s when he related the anecdote.⁵⁷

In the 1940s he was a regular at the Royal Artistic Circle, where he would meet up with some of the teachers and students from the School of Fine Arts. In contrast to many of these teachers and his friends, Morató did not take part in the activities of the Sant Lluc Circle. We do not know the reason for this.

Morató’s first friendships in Barcelona were with Ramon Sanvisens, Santiago Prevosti, Josep Verdaguer and, later on, Alexandre Siches. With two of his fellow students, Ferreny and Alfredo Sanjuan (who would later leave Barcelona, the former to Mexico and the latter to Brazil), he would go from time to time to the get-togethers at the Astòria club on París Street. Later on, with Aguilar Moré (whom he met on a tram and turned out to be the son of the doctor who treated his mother), he frequented the Kansas club, which brought together doctors, writers and painters. It was there that he began to make café sketches, an activity he would continue to

⁵⁶ Jaume Muxart. Interview in Barcelona, 4 July 2015.

⁵⁷ Francesc Fontbona confirmed that when they were putting together the catalogue of paintings at the Sant Jordi Royal Catalan Academy of Fine Arts in 1999, many of the paintings referenced in the archives were missing.

do at all the various gatherings he attended. Each of these gatherings had its own personality, depending on the participants' cultural interests, but many artists used to attend several of them and meet up with each other all over the city.

Morató was introduced to various artistic circles in Barcelona through the painters he had met in Cornudella, such as Joan Fluvià and Bosch Roger, who took him for the first time to the gathering at La Punyalada at number 96 Passeig de Gràcia.⁵⁸ The successor of the artistic gathering that years earlier, around 1914, had featured artists such as Francesc Pujols, Santiago Rusiñol and Joaquim Mir, this second post-war version of the gathering was promoted by Bosch Roger himself along with sculptor Martí Llauradó and, later on, Gustau Camps, Granyer and Humbert. The gathering quickly grew in size until, as the years went by, it exceeded thirty participants.⁵⁹

Other groups also met up periodically in other places, such as the Glaciar Café on Plaça Reial, where some artists, such as Muxart, had a studio; at the Òpera Café, a bar that Morató would continue to visit for the rest of his life, every time he went for a walk down the Rambles; or around galleries such as La Syra, La Pinacoteca and Galerías Layetanas. The most famous galleries of the time were a magnet for learning about the work of the most revered artists and masters, but they also became an alternative place for intellectual conversation and exchanges. As Beulas once told me, "there was so much curiosity to know what others were doing ...".⁶⁰

These multiple gatherings would therefore be the key elements, along with the School of Fine Arts, for Morató's rapid integration into the Barcelona art world. His brother Rafael was also a part of this scene, but with another circle of friends, among whom we find the historian and critic Jaume Socias, who tells us that this circle was made up of artists such as Manolo Díez, Joan Sirvent and Jordi Esteve (who exhibited twice at the Syra gallery as part of the *Los Últimos* group), and that they used to meet up at the Terminus bar in front of the Passeig de Gràcia bus station along with other painters and lawyers, all of whom were intellectuals.⁶¹ Rafael Garcia Esmatges, talking about those regular gatherings, told us:

⁵⁸ Morató recalled that in the beginning there were very few of them: "Bosch Roger, two or three others, and the owner of Vinçon".

⁵⁹ Some of the documents that mention the new stage of the La Punyalada group were written by members of the gathering who joined the group later on, pointing to 1964 as the official date of the resumption of the group, but in fact much earlier than that a few artist friends were already meeting up regularly there, as explained very well by Sempronio, who knew it very well, in his essay *La Penya d'ara* (The Group Today) for the catalogue of the I "La Punyalada" Painting Prize, in 1965, which we will talk about further on.

⁶⁰ Josep Beulas. Interview in Osca, 15 June 2015.

⁶¹ Jaume Socias. Interview in Barcelona, 18 June 2015.

I took over the running of La Pinacoteca gallery in 1939, with my father. Everything has changed a lot. There used to be a group of artists here ... What was once the Punyalada group was here. Everyone came along: artists, non-artists, Plandiura (the collector) came every day, morning and afternoon. There was never a problem among the group (not like now when, scratching beneath the surface, you find jealousy between each other). That happened when it disbanded. Many evenings we ended up going in search of some bottles of wine, grabbing a *porró*, getting a few snacks in and arranging an informal drinks party, which one day one of them would pay for, and the next another ... but the talk was all about painting. Among the big buyers there was also Josep Sala Ardiz, who was addicted to La Pinacoteca (his collection, donated in 1982, was the seed of the Museum of Montserrat).⁶²

Nor should we forget another of the artists' meeting places: the fine arts supply stores. Vicenç Piera relates the following:

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When I started working at the age of eighteen, Morató was already a customer at the store at number 13 Cardenal Casañas. I remember him perfectly, of all the classic painters who used to come by every week. Your father was a very serious man, very orderly, very reliable. He was a customer we all liked very much.

The store was opened by my father in 1941. I was born there, because we lived on the first floor. The leading fine arts store was Teixidor, on the Rondes; later there was one on Petritxol Street, which was called Rigol, and the oldest one still running is our store, having served artists for 75 years. Even Joan Miró came to the shop, one of my father's first customers, because he was already a customer of his from before the war when my father used to work for the Lloret widow on Carrer Sagristans, which was destroyed by a bomb and never reopened. All kinds of customers came through our doors, such as Dalí, Antoni Tàpies and the big group of bohemians at that time: Alumà, Casaus, Planasdurà, Planas Gallés, Curós ... those who went on to form the Punyalada group.

⁶² Rafael Garcia. Interview in Barcelona, at La Pinacoteca, 31 January 1994, the morning of the fire at the Liceu Opera House. "Twenty-five years ago there was a fire at the Gerplex stores which burnt the old archive, and there's no longer any record of many things apart from in my memory. The collection of catalogues from all the exhibitions vanished. [...] If I was ever interested in a particular fact, I had to go to the National Library and search their records". La Pinacoteca closed in 2004.

At the Cardenal Casañas store, in those early years, we had a room at the back of the shop and in the morning many artists would come by before they went off to paint and stop for a chat and to have breakfast together. It was a very pleasant gathering. My father had a notebook that he called “the black book” in which he wrote down all their debts, and years later those same painters paid tribute to him at the Liceu in gratitude for all his help at that time.

When I was little and the galleries used to open on Sundays, every couple of weeks my father and I would do a tour of the exhibitions all over Barcelona. It was like a duty, to go and greet them and see how they painted.

The Piera family grew and I opened this store on Carrer Còrsega and then we opened other ones. The whole family is dedicated to fine arts. Painters used to have more time than they do these days. In the Cardenal Casañas store in particular we used to hold a lot of social gatherings. Not so much here, but when the Punyalada group were out and about, two or three of them always dropped round to buy something or discuss the materials they used. It was like a post-gathering gathering, which ended up here.⁶³

In the 1940s, the point of reference for painting was still Impressionism, a movement that established its own pattern in Catalan painting in the first third of the century and, along with the Geometrization that emerged through the art of Cézanne and his followers, it would be the starting point for most of the painters from the generation that emerged during this decade.

Manuel Ricart Serra remembers that “in the forties and fifties there were two trends: one, spearheaded by Syra, which included Villà, Bosch Roger, Pau Roig, Sunyer and occasionally Plandiura, who brought it all together; and the other, more conservative, was the one of Sala Parés”.⁶⁴ The critic Joan Cortès, talking about Bosch Roger, said:

Our man appeared continually standing in the trenches, from where he attacked with courageous assiduity the bastion of quietism of an ambience which, though having received the powerful shocks of post-Impressionism from the promotion of Nonell and

⁶³ Vicenç Piera. Interview in his store on Carrer de Còrsega, 27 June 2021.

⁶⁴ Manuel Ricart Serra. Interview in the Gràcia neighbourhood, 31 January 1994. I often used to come across Ricart Serra, who lived close to Morató Aragonès, in Plaça Joanic and we always stopped to chat for a while. He was extremely friendly and convivial.

his companions, would first, like other searchers later, continue submerged in the morass of the most inert sub-academicism.⁶⁵

Despite the conservative panorama and the fact that in calls for national exhibitions those of most merit were often left out, the young artists saw these exhibitions as a stimulus and an opportunity to make themselves known.

Personal contact with professional artists through the School and the gatherings were accompanied by repeated visits to the Museum of Modern Art in Ciutadella Park and regular pilgrimages to the openings of the most popular Barcelona galleries of the time.

In Barcelona, Josep Maria set up one of the rooms in the family apartment on Carrer Monistrol as a studio where he could work permanently. Nevertheless, in his search for a space with a more suitable artistic atmosphere, most of his painting in those student years was done in a studio on Baix de Sant Pere Street, along with six fellow students. This was a tiny flat without any natural light that was rented from a teacher, who banned them from bringing any young ladies to the rooms and forbade them from doing figure painting. Shortly afterwards, looking for a little more peace of mind, he moved into the Samper studio with Santiago Prevosti, a Fine Arts model who devoted himself to painting.

In the midst of this social scene, the teachings at the School pointed more towards a search for depth and perfection, and “the model was undoubtedly Velázquez”, recalled Morató. However, students’ imagination at La Llotja was illuminated by two distant lighthouses. The first was still Rome, and the second was Paris. For the artist, the weight of Rome and Italy had the endorsement of the much-admired Fortuny, yet this was counteracted by the modernity that emanated from the French capital. Classic artists such as Titian, Tiepolo, Leonardo, Tintoretto, Giotto and Raphael pointed in one direction, while Corot, Degas, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Cézanne, Monet and Soutine pointed in another. The past and the future; history and discovery; study and experimentation; rules and freedom.

Whatever the case, the longed-for pilgrimages to Rome and Paris to see the works of all these artists in person, and where Morató would take giant steps in forging his own style, would have to wait a few more years.

Meanwhile, touring the Catalan capital in search of subjects proved very stimulating, and he threw himself into painting urban landscapes in the different neighbourhoods and surroundings of Barcelona: the Gothic quarter, Horta, La Ribera, Sarrià, Sant Andreu del Palomar, popular markets such as the Boqueria and Santa Caterina, the busiest squares in the city (Catalunya,

⁶⁵ CORTÉS, Juan. *Bosch Roger*. Madrid: General Directorate for Fine Arts, 1959.

Urquinaona, Tetuan), the beaches of Barceloneta, Sant Cugat and so on. He also started focusing on the different types of characters who lived on and swarmed the city streets. As well as *portraying* the streets, he also immersed himself in the nocturnal universe of theatre cafés and wine bars (Hostal de la Bona Sort, Café Sevilla, Bodega Bohèmia, etc.). He used to tell us, for example, that in some places there were more Fine Arts students than customers. These nocturnal sessions served a dual purpose: to work on drawing naturally to gain competence and ease, and to enjoy the party atmosphere of the city which, by legal imperative, had to end by midnight.⁶⁶ This was an atmosphere that went from the verve of flamenco to the showiness of music hall, to the variety shows, all the while training the ear: from Parisian *chansons* to effervescent jazz and Latino rhythms, all, of course, with their own colours. And many of their stars were, naturally, drawn by Morató.

This was a world full of contrasts that was portrayed exceptionally well by the writer and critic Sebastià Gasch, always with the broad vision and perspective that embraced art as a whole, in a “perpetual struggle between intelligence and sensitivity, between head and heart”.⁶⁷

It was in this constant wandering in search of subjects that Morató’s urban oils started moving away from the peacefulness of his early landscapes, and began to feature figures. His small sketches had the air of rapid impressions, with blurred characters treated like compositional marks that merged into an inseparable whole. The people in these works are not placed within the landscape but are part of the landscape itself. The few works we have seen from this early urban period, in which he portrayed the bustling life of the markets, squares and popular festivals, have the flavour of Goya’s random sketches, Nonell’s black marks, the luminous imprint of Sorolla and Joan Roig, and even the “undone” figuration of Anglada Camarasa. Morató’s visual artistic baggage was growing noticeably, and the young painter was eager to incorporate the discoveries he was making into his work.

The fleeting acquaintance with Mallol that took place in Cornudella and his great respect for this painter meant that some time after Mallol’s death in Bogotà in 1940, Morató went to his studio – we think the one in Tarragona – because the family wanted to dismantle it, and that was when my father took two of the paintings from the studio. We do not know what kind of deal he made with the widow: whether he bought both paintings, or if he bought one and they gave him the other unfinished one ... that we do not know. One is an unfinished scene of the cliffs of Siurana that belonged to the family collection, and the other was a large picture of a view of Siurana

⁶⁶ VILLAR, Paco. *Cuando la riqueza se codeaba con el hambre. Vida nocturna en la Barcelona de postguerra. 1939-1952*. Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020.

⁶⁷ GASCH, Sebastià. *De la danza*. Barcelona: Ed. Barna, 1946.

which Morató donated to the Cornudella de Montsant town council in 1998, along with a small drawing by Ivo Pascual.

In Reus, he held his first exhibition in April 1941, at the Orfeó Reusenc, where, of the fifteen works he presented, most were of Cornudella landscapes and only two featured Barcelona subjects: the Encants market and the Hostal de la Bona Sort. A reporter for *Diario Español* said of him in a report: “It is now, having moved a month ago to Barcelona and begun his academic studies, seeing exhibitions, perusing libraries, listening to his teachers, that this boy is almost infected with the fever of encountering so many perspectives”.⁶⁸

Just one month later, the Academy of Fine Arts awarded him a Silver Medal in the Josep Masriera Awards for his work *Vallcarca*.

Morató’s work, enriched by the osmosis of the different pictorial ideas and languages he encountered, was hailed by the critics on the occasion of the 1942 exhibition at the Reading Centre, presented in the catalogue by Luis Monreal y Tejada: “[...] In few cases are the fruits of a painting student so seasoned and so succulent. Morató, in his few years, has earned the noble title of artist in his own right. He has all the necessary qualities, including a burning fervour for his tasks”.

One of his memories of the first exhibitions at the Reading Centre was of being there on Sunday mornings waiting for people to leave Mass at the church of Sant Pere; first the 10 o’clock mass and then the 12 o’clock one, who were the wealthier ones: “*Here they come, here they come ...*”, waiting to be visited by potential customers.

Following the curriculum of the School of Fine Arts, which had a healthy programme of outings for its students, in summer 1943 he and some fellow students took a trip through Catalonia. Some of the impressions he came away with are evident on the postcards he sent his mother, forming a kind of telegraphic travel journal. On 19 August, he wrote: “Dear Mama, after a journey through almost all the lands of Catalonia, we have come to Palamós. I think we will continue this afternoon. I won’t write any further because I’m exhausted. Hugs to my brother and sister, and a kiss for you from your son”.

In 1944 he won the first call for the Tapiró Medal of the Tarragona Provincial Council, which bought his work *Paisaje (Landscape)* and exhibited it at the Reading Centre. Antoni Correig dedicated a long critique in which he remarked on him as an “outstanding painter of sketches” and referred to his great talent and constant artistic restlessness, with an art that was “too rich

⁶⁸ P.V. “Oil Landscapes by J.M. Morató”. *Diario Español*, 15 April 1941, p. 3.

to confine it to a single formula”;⁶⁹ in other words, it could not be properly classified under any of the *isms* in vogue.

In June 1944, Puig Perucho wrote to him: “In the last few days I was in Barcelona it was very difficult for me to visit you at the agreed time. I hope another opportunity will present itself. Let’s see if you do a lot of work and I can see it on my return. Please give my kind regards to your mother and best wishes from your friend. Puig Perucho”. A courteous correspondence and friendship would continue until his death in 1977. When Puig Perucho was already very ill, Morató went to see him at his home on Gran de Gràcia Street, and left with two or three easels that the master gave him, one of which had belonged to Modest Urgell. Many years later, he had a commemorative plaque placed on this easel and gave it to the director of the Sala Rebull in Reus, one of the sons of the old jeweller Pàmies, with whom Morató had an almost family-like friendship.

In 1945, the former professor of History of Art at the School of Fine Arts, Luis Monreal y Tejada, published the volume dedicated to Catalonia in the collection entitled *Pintores españoles contemporáneos* (Contemporary Spanish Painters), written in conjunction with Ramón Eugenio de Goicoechea, from the National Artistic Heritage Protection Service (SDPAN). Among the fifty artists chosen was young Morató, alongside other established painters, some of whom had been his teachers at the Llotja. He wrote:

The most notable thing about this young painter is the tenacity and determination he has applied to the progressive stages of achievement, which can already be determined in his brief artistic career [...]. Because Reus is not a small city like so many others [...] it is the land of Fortuny, the most vigorous and individual painter of the second half of the nineteenth century in Spain. In Reus, Fortuny’s shadow and the name are cast over every corner of days and objects. [...]

If his biography is brief, it is because he is very young [...] Morató has not yet tried his luck with all his weapons and his tremendous sentient possibilities. The figure – in solitude or as a fundamental element of a composition – and the still life have not yet passed onto canvas from this study period. [...] José M. Morató will go far, because he is gifted, in nature painting, first and foremost, and because he knows the way to get

⁶⁹ CORREIG, A. “On Art”, *Diario Español*, 14 December 1944, p. 5 .

there. [...] In Morató there is a strength and endeavour, the desire and opportunities that not everyone has, with which not everyone can underpin the commonplace.⁷⁰

On the occasion of the VII Exhibition of Local Artists – the Fortuny Medal, in 1945, the reporter Viech spoke, not without a certain disdain, of the landscapes of the Costa Brava presented by Morató —“he poetises the pines of these pink lands, and his seas, rather than a sea of tritons, are seas of Undines” — pointing to the greater strength of his mountain landscapes. On Morató’s exhibition that same year at the Reading Centre, Viech again spoke about his impressionism that was on the verge of ceasing to be impressionist, focusing on the light as the most remarkable factor: “Each of his paintings is a piece of atmosphere placed on the canvas”.⁷¹

During the 1940s, Morató came into contact with collectors who would buy his work on a regular basis during those early years of his profession, along with many others who occasionally helped to bolster young Morató’s career, which was still linked to the School of Fine Arts. In the book *Morató Aragonés. Dibujos* (“Morató Aragonés: Drawings”), the artist refers to Fernando Casajuana, an early art dealer who bought his work over a three-year period.⁷² In his archive, on a separate sheet (and hence not accounted for in his logbooks of the works he sold), it states that between 1945 and 1948 he bought 46 pictures from him, mostly 8F, some 12F and 20F, and one 25F; therefore, these works tended to be on the small side. The subject matter varied: markets, taverns, wineries, women ironing, washerwomen, courtyards, hostels, the streets of old Barcelona, the districts of Horta and Granada, *capgrossos* (big-headed festival characters), *Barri xino*⁷³, and a curious “Harem”. Many of these subjects would form part of his first exhibition at the Pictòria galleries in 1948.

⁷⁰ MONREAL Y TEJADA, Luis; GOICOECHEA, Ramón Eugenio de. *Pintores españoles contemporáneos*. Volume I. Catalonia. Barcelona: Ed. Artigas, 1945. Morató would use this book to note the painters he knew in person and those who had passed away.

⁷¹ VIECH. “La exposición de José María Morató” (“José María Morató’s Exhibition”). *Diario Español*, 4 November 1945, p. 4.

⁷² We do not know if Fernando Casajuana was a member of the ONED’s Artisan Section and a member of the Fortuny Medal’s Organising Committee.

⁷³ *Barri xino*, or “Chinatown”, was the name given to the area of Barcelona between the Rambles and Avinguda Paral·lel between the 1920s and 1990s, better known today as the Raval district, which due to its proximity to the port was a hotbed of prostitution-related activities. Marked by poverty and marginalization, it was made famous by writers and photographers of that period.

His first scholarship and first tour of Spain

In 1946, having completed his degree course, he managed to obtain a travel grant through the School of Fine Arts from the R. Amigó Cuyás Foundation that would take him around Spain in the company of Jaume Muxart and Franc Aleu. Before they left, his fellow student Alexandre Siches wrote a postcard to Morató from the former municipality of Aramunt:

Dear friend, I hope you will let me know your news [...]. The postcards of this place are sold out. This one I'm sending shows a type of mountain typical of this region, its colour is a base of pinks and cadmium with grey veining. [...] With the grey of the olive trees in the foreground and the little town of Airemunt crowned by the typical silhouette of the church, I have done a painting. Morató, give my regards to your mother and your brother, and tell Muxart and Aleu not to work too hard. Send me your news soon and tell me what itinerary you are following and what date you are leaving.

Your friend hopes you thoroughly enjoy your grant and wishes you every success, and looks forward to seeing you soon to have a look at your paintings.

P.S. Write soon, because I am completely surrounded by goats and farmhands!

Over four months they visited Ordesa, Torla, Madrid, Toledo, Granada and Seville, discovering not only the landscapes but also the works of the great Spanish artists (most notably Velázquez). In Madrid they got a permit from the Prado Museum to copy one of the paintings on show there. He chose *Danaë and the Shower of Gold* by Titian. As he explained to us, the act of copying was the same as a master class, as you learn a lot of technical solutions by copying the works of the great masters. On this trip he also got to know the work of El Greco, a painter he admired for his dramatic treatment of figuration through colour.

The spectacular view of Toledo, so often painted by artists; Seville, with its beautiful Maria Luisa Park; the Alhambra of Granada and its gardens, the Albaicín neighbourhood and the Sacromonte district with its caves, were all subjects that appealed greatly to the young Morató. This first encounter with the diverse, fascinating landscapes of Spain opened his eyes to other thematic possibilities, which years later he would continue to discover and explore.

Muxart remembers that trip as follows:

We won a grant, Morató, Aleu and I [grants were awarded in order of merit]. They gave us a bit of money, and as we all liked the landscape and it was summer, for the first month we went to the Aragonese Pyrenees: Torla, Benasque ... I used to get up very early in the morning because there was a mountain nearby that was really

beautiful before the sun came up, and at seven in the morning I would open the window where we were sleeping and set myself to painting. Morató would paint little landscapes all day long and from time to time he would sell one to the tourists visiting the area. Back then Morató stood out because he painted in a slightly more modern way than us. Afterwards we went to Madrid for a month and made copies in the Prado Museum; both Morató and I chose Titian: I chose *Venus and Music*; and we took them to show Marés and he liked them. Then in Toledo, we saw *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* by El Greco. We were pretty hungry there because at that time there was no bread; we used to eat a bowl of soup and you could count the noodles in it! And we were lucky enough that during the last month when we went to Granada there was bread, eggs, omelettes ... everything! In Granada we painted the Alhambra a lot, but then in the afternoons we would go to the Albaicin and Sacromonte neighbourhoods. We were painting away and we heard: "Hey, there's a *zambra!*" (a flamenco dance performed by the Roma people), with the best dancer there, who was called La Guarrana (a young, very pretty girl) and then everyone would disappear and we could paint in peace, because it was very beautiful. Later on we went to Cordoba, to Seville, where we went to the Julio Romero museum. Then we went back to Madrid and home. It was a lovely summer because we got on really well. Morató used to smoke more than anyone else at that time, and Aleu used to say: "Hey, slow down on the roll-ups, eh?" Later on Morató, Aleu and I used to meet up.⁷⁴

That same year in Reus, 1946, Josep Maria became much more friendly with one of his brother Rafael's schoolmates, Josep Callizo, who was a big fan of hiking and photography.⁷⁵ Along with other illustrious hikers from Reus (Josep Maria Sugranyes, Ramon Quadrada) he used to set off every week on his own personal photographic safari through the lands of Tarragona. He often accompanied Morató on more leisurely outings to different villages in search of subjects or pictorial sessions in nature. This is how we still have some lovely photos of Morató painting in various parts of the country. Pepe (as everyone knew him) always showed him unconditional loyalty, both personally and pictorially, becoming one of his best collectors. As far as we were concerned he was always a kind of uncle, because their friendship extended to their respective

⁷⁴ Jaume Muxart. Interview in Barcelona, 4 June 2015.

⁷⁵ Josep Callizo Soler's archive not only contains an extensive collection of photographs from the trips he made with friends such as Ramon Cuadrada around Montsant and the Sierra of Llaveria, but also invaluable first-hand graphic evidence of the Colonial Guinea period which merit publication.

families. His daughter, Maria Teresa, who also posed as a model when she was a little girl, has these memories:

My father was his dearest friend, and was devoted to him. I remember that he lived in Barcelona and whenever he came to Reus he would stop by our house and they would both go out for breakfast. It was like a ritual that eventually turned into a Sunday morning gathering at the Soler Pont patisserie, which was on the corner below the house in Plaça Llibertat. He was someone of few words but, I believe, a great deal of feeling. He was always impeccably dressed, with a tie, a hat and, as he got older, a cane. He used to carry it to look good!

As he really liked France, we often used to ask him which places he recommended for us to visit. He always said that the ideal age to take children's portraits was three years old, and he dreamed of having a studio with the perfect light for painting.⁷⁶

Even though he lived in Barcelona, Morató maintained close contact with the artistic life of Reus, despite the difficult and oppressive situation society was experiencing at that time. In addition to attending exhibitions at the Reading Centre and other organizations, he demonstrated his commitment to studying and promoting the city. Years later, Morató would be one of the founding members of the Friends of Gaudí Association that was established in Reus in March 1955.

With Garola, Morató would go on frequent painting trips over the years, many of them around the town where he had grown up and knew like the back of his hand. Thus it is hardly surprising to find paintings by both of them portraying the same spots in Montsant and Siurana. Even today, the very oldest residents of Cornudella remember the group of painters around the town. Everyone knew Morató, and whenever he got the chance he would visit with fellow painters. Many painters from his circle in Barcelona discovered and toured these spectacular mountains guided by him.

Straddling continents again, in 1947 Morató took part in a group exhibition of Catalan painters in Santiago de Chile and Buenos Aires, which would be his second foray into the American market (the first being in 1945 in Buenos Aires with a group exhibition of Spanish painters). In fact, he would no longer have any links with South America, but he did with the United States and Canada (in spite of never having been there), because thanks to several art dealers – among

⁷⁶ M. Teresa Callizo. Interview in Reus, 27 July 2022.

them the Maragalls from Sala Parés – and other collectors, his works reached North America, especially during the 1960s.

Montserrat, where spirituality and art converge: the encounter with Miquel Villà

Apart from the fascination that its landscape arouses in any painter, a man with an avowedly Christian character such as Morató was particularly sensitive to the spiritual energies that Montserrat undoubtedly exudes, so climbing up to Montserrat was something he did regularly from a very young age and for the rest of his life. He later shared this religious bond with his wife Montserrat, who was a member of the Montserrat congregation. This devotion was evidenced by the couple in the 1970s when they placed a painted image of *La Moreneta* (the Virgin of Montserrat) on the entrance façade of the Mas Carpa villa to welcome visitors.

As Josep Maria explained to us, the gathering of artists that took place in Montserrat on the occasion of the painting competition organised by the Mountain of Montserrat Trust in 1947, which had them painting and living together in the sanctuary's cells for a month, had a huge impact on his work. Fundamentally this was due to his acquaintance with Miquel Villà, of whom Ferrater said: "he turns the most neutral and simple greys into opulent colour".⁷⁷ They immediately hit it off: they used to play chess and talk about painting. And Josep Maria made a radical change in the way he painted: "Vilà changed the way I saw the landscape", he used to say. And indeed, after meeting him, there was a change in the way he analysed colour and light, and the way he structured masses. It disrupted his chromatic perception of the landscape.

From that moment on, he stopped looking outside (at the landscape as an external reality) and concentrated essentially on learning to look inside, on releasing the expression suggested to him by the perception of a reality that would primarily be internal.

The legacy of Impressionist affiliation, with that bucolic nature distantly inspired by Corot that can be seen in Morató's early landscapes – via Urgell-Mallol-Puig Perucho and also some of the late Mir landscapes – quickly dispersed, and his chromatic ranges became more forceful with stronger contrasts. His painting became flatter, simplifying the organization of spaces: spatial depth ceased to interest him and disappeared, and he opened up to styles that provided him with new instruments of observation and expression.

⁷⁷ FERRATER, Gabriel. *L'Art de la pintura* ("The Art of Painting"). Published by Batalla-Carbonell-de la Cruz. Ed. Edèndum, 2021. p. 236.

In Montserrat, therefore, he began an evolutionary path that would be rounded off after his trips, now in the 1950s, to the two European capitals that were places of pilgrimage for young artists: Paris and Rome.

An unfortunate circumstance happened at a call by the School of Fine Arts in 1948 to award grants to go to Paris, which would affect him in the final years of the decade. As he explained to us, there were two places and three candidates: himself, Muxart and another artist who submitted his application outside the deadline. Morató was not given a place, and as compensation he was offered a grant to go to Paular,⁷⁸ but he was so enraged that he refused it. He told me that some time later he regretted that decision, taken in the heat of the moment, because the Paular scholarships were regarded as a third national medal and a great place to promote your paintings. So left without Paris or Paular, he absented himself from the School for three years.

Jaume Muxart also remembers the affair of the Paris grants below:

There was a grant for Paris. There were two: I was given the first one, and he submitted some paintings I really liked; as far as I saw it, he should have had the second scholarship, but they gave it to someone who wasn't as good as Morató, for whatever reason, maybe because he was more classical. Anyway they gave it to him. And I was sorry because I would have really liked Morató to come with me to Paris because apart from our friendship we would talk about painting.⁷⁹

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In August 1948, Muxart wrote to the still pained Morató in the Montejaque summer camp: "I'll write to you from Paris to tell you what I think about the museums and the atmosphere. How are you all? Give my best to all our friends, Garcia, Fornàs, Sirvent, etc. etc. [...]"⁸⁰ And in November he wrote:

I got your letter. I adore Paris [...] it's a great life. I think you would really get into the action, but in that case you wouldn't be able to paint [...] so if you can come with

⁷⁸ The Paular grants were landscape painting scholarships that provided room and board at the Royal Monastery of Santa María del Paular. The grants were awarded between 1918 and 1953. Today, following a restoration, the Benedictine monastery offers an extensive cultural and exhibition programme under the name of Paular Contemporáneo.

⁷⁹ Correspondence from J. Muxart (AMA).

⁸⁰ Correspondence from J. Muxart (AMA).

money it's worth being in Paris, for an artist it's absolutely fascinating. [...] On Saturday I went to see Miró's exhibition. It's wonderful, and I met Picasso, Clavé, Miró and some of the French artists, Desnoyer, Matisse [...]. Give my regards to your family, your mother and brother. And most importantly, paint. Over here I appreciate how well you're doing, it's a shame you're not in Paris, where the two of us would be working our socks off. I am intoxicated with so many new things, some of them have made a big impact on me, others not at all. Above all I like Primitive art, but more along the Cubist lines like the latest things by Picasso. [...] I like Paul Klee a lot, also Miró, Cézanne and Gauguin. From the old school, Uccello, Fra Angelico, Leonardo, Rembrandt, in the Louvre. Goya, I admire more than ever, and I love Romanesque painting, Egyptian art, African art, etc., etc. (to be continued)⁸¹

In December he wrote:

How is the exhibition going? [...] Here in Paris I'm very well, as always. [...] As I keep saying to everyone, take the train and come to Paris, it will do you good and it's essential for any painter to have visited Paris. There is such a huge amount of works of art from every period, and an atmosphere of hard work and restlessness that you won't find anywhere else in the world. *Paris c'est toujours Paris, tra-la-la-la*. Well, Morató, I'm being silly, but seriously if you could just come for the shortest time you would love the Black art; Egyptian art, admirably represented; Assyrian art, Roman art, Chinese art, etc., etc. The few Modiglianis I've seen are fantastic, five or six. For me, Cézanne is the best of the French painters. Van Gogh is very good, as is Gauguin. Of the modern artists, Picasso above all, then Paul Klee, Rouault, Marc Chagall, Miró. There is currently a Miró exhibition in Paris, and one on Picasso's ceramics; although Miró has his place, Picasso is much better. The Munich Pinacoteca currently showing in Paris is very good, especially the early Flemish paintings which left me awestruck. Abstraction, in painting, I only consider to be the first phase of the picture, but not the full story [...].⁸²

⁸¹ Correspondence from J. Muxart (AMA).

⁸² Correspondence from J. Muxart (AMA).

And in his New Year's greeting, he reminded him: "As soon as you can, come to Paris".⁸³

After this year, Muxart remembers that although their friendship continued, there was more distance between them, with each of them going their own way:

When I came back, a few of us got together and created the Tahull group, which lasted a few months [...], but Morató didn't continue with us. He followed his own way of doing things, which was not the same because his technique had improved, his composition was better, but still working along the same lines [...].

And then we would see each other at the Artistic Circle... Morató was a man with a strong will and a good conscience; if he could do you a favour, he would. He introduced me to Balart, a tailor who made you clothes in exchange for paintings, and I used to go there... and keep changing.⁸⁴

The militia in Andalusia and pictorial forays in Morocco

In 1946, Morató had joined the so-called "university militias",⁸⁵ an option offered to university students so they could comply with the mandatory military service. It entailed going to their assigned destinations during the three-month academic break. One story he told us was that you could get out of it in certain circumstances, and he claimed to be "narrow chested", but they didn't believe him. He had no interest in doing military service, but eventually joined the engineering corps as a Fine Arts student.

The various stages of military service over successive years – he ended up as a staff ensign – represented a kind of break from routine for Morató and offered him the chance to get to know other places, during which time he drew constantly. First of all he spent three months at the Santa Fe del Montseny camp, where he met the surveyor Miquel Villanueva, with whom he forged a strong friendship that would remain intact over the years. With Villanueva, who would also end up becoming a good collector of his work, he made several trips and outings to the south of France, especially in the 1960s. He also forged new friendships at the camp that would

⁸³ Correspondence from J. Muxart (AMA).

⁸⁴ Jaume Muxart. Interview in Barcelona, 4 June 2015.

⁸⁵ There were various different types, but after going through mandatory training they were appointed as ensigns or staff sergeants and did six months of service at the destination of their choice. See the article by Rafael DÁVILA ÁLVAREZ, "Las milicias universitarias" ("University militias"), at: <https://ame1.org.es/milicias-universitarias/>. Association of Spanish Soldiers, 6 August 2021.

last the rest of his life, such as José Luis Fernández Flores and Ramon Estany Volart.⁸⁶ The members of this intake of militiamen met every year without fail at an annual lunch in Barcelona. I remember how, towards the end of the 1990s, he would say sadly: “Look, every year there are one or two fewer of us at lunch...”

He was then assigned to the Montejaque camp in Ronda. This beautiful Malagan town, spectacularly cleaved by the River Guadalquivir, had a huge impact on Morató, who fell in love with it. The first time he saw Ronda, he wrote on 29 June 1948: “I have just arrived and I only have an hour to spare. What little I have seen looks very beautiful. On Sunday I plan to come and spend the day painting.”⁸⁷

In fact, as far as he was concerned, Montejaque was not so much a military base of operations than an artistic one, because it helped him to get to know an Andalusia and a Morocco that fascinated him. He would take advantage of any moment to escape to paint: he calculated to the minute the times he would not be needed, or he would swap shifts with colleagues in order to achieve his ends. In *Miscel·lània* I explained it as follows:

All the soldiers, hiding away from the midday heat, played dice or took a nap; no-one noticed that one man was missing who, after walking around the camp for a while for everyone to see his face, went off to put on his civilian clothes and sloped off to paint the town and its surroundings. After a couple of hours he put his uniform back on and, as if nothing had happened. In the space of three months he created around sixty canvases, which he painted on Sundays and sold on Mondays.⁸⁸

He used to sell his works to fellow soldiers. One day, a superior officer saw him with his sketch pad and asked him what he was doing. He told him and evidently the officer gave him his blessing and suggested holding an exhibition in the camp ... and even ended up buying one of his works. The particular atmosphere of those military encampments was explained very well by Antonio Burgos:

⁸⁶ A curious thing happened with Ramon Estany. One day in 2004, reading *La Vanguardia* after a coffee, we saw Mr Estany and both my father and I exclaimed at the same time: “Mr Ramon!” And my father said to me: “How do you know him?” And I said to him: “How do you know him?” It turns out that I had worked a few years earlier as a draftsman in the creative department of the hundred-year-old Volart lace factory, and Mr Ramon (who was also a prominent equestrian in the 1960s) never knew that the daughter of his friend was working for him. My father was very amused by the coincidence.

⁸⁷ Personal correspondence (AMA).

⁸⁸ MORATÓ, M. Elena. “Entorn de Josep M. Morató Aragonès”, in *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània*. Roger de Belfort Foundation, 1981, p. 29.

They wore khakis like soldiers, but they weren't soldiers, strictly speaking. They wore a field jacket with a belt and lots of pockets, just like the ones worn by the boys in the Soria 9 or the Cerro Muriano regiments, but they wore it in a different way. [...] These were the boys of the University Militias. The students, who had the privilege of doing military service during the summer holidays and leaving at least as a sergeant, and almost all of them as ensigns. [...] They used to stroll about all over Seville in their uniforms, drinking vermouth at the bar of the Hotel Madrid and showing off their girlfriends and uniforms in the Parrilla del Cristina, which, since it was summer, had been set up above, on the terrace, and along with the bolero music, the murmur of the evening tide from the river rose over the honeyed liquid of the Picon Punch cocktails on the checked tablecloths on the tables. And the girls were crazy about going with them to the terraces of Bilindo, or Líbano or El Gibraltar the night before they left, so early, on the train to Montejaque. That was the power of a uniform in the uniformed Spain of that time, even if it was just a simple soldier's uniform with the addition of the CCAAOCC epaulettes (Assistant Staff Officer Candidate) of the IPS (Higher Pre-Military Training). [...] We all felt the heat of the stories of those marches, and even the hunger with which they devoured the fried eggs and chorizo that were served to them in the inns and farmsteads of the Ronda highlands. And we all felt the sleepiness of the siesta hour, when they had to go to theory classes. The theory class consisted of a captain standing under an oak tree while a company sat on the ground in the shade, explaining all about taking cover from sight, taking cover from shots, and slipping away.

Slipping away ... That was what the handsome gentlemen aspiring to be staff officers tried by every means to do from the captivity of the Montejaque camp. Apart from those who suddenly discovered a hidden military vocation. These were the ones who later got top marks and were given an officer's sabre.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ BURGOS, Antonio. "Alféreces de complemento en Montejaque" ("Staff Ensigns in Montejaque"), in *El Mundo de Andalucía*, 12 July 1997. From 1946, the epaulettes referred to were white for Fine Arts students (https://uniformesp.blogspot.com/2015/10/Uniformes-espa%C3%B1oles-contempor%C3%A1neos), 23 October 2015)

Morató told us a few anecdotes about life in camp. I remember this one:

An instructor asked a recruit: "Let's see, young man! What is the flag?". Reply: "The flag is my mother!" And to another: "What about you! What is the flag?" And this one replied: "The flag is his mother, Ssir!"

4 - IN THE WAKE OF FORTUNY AND TAPIRÓ: A FRESH INTERPRETATION OF THE MAGHREB

On a pictorial level, references to Fortuny and Tapiró and the whole misnamed Orientalism movement were very much present in Morató's imagination.⁹⁰ Fortuny's "Battle of Tétouan", a masterpiece that he almost certainly studied to the millimetre, undoubtedly sparked a growing interest in the place it portrayed and the characters who inhabited it. Morocco, at least as far as mainland Spanish artists were concerned, was the point of reference for this movement they were seeking, geographically so close at hand yet full of iconic visions of an often forced exoticism.

The romantic vision exuded by the painters and writers of the late nineteenth century contrasted sharply with another memory that had left its scar in Spain: the Rif War, which had shaped public imagination, thanks to propaganda, into a vision of a hostile land whose inhabitants were caricatured as little more than savages.⁹¹ After the Spanish Protectorate was established in the north-eastern area of Morocco in 1912, the Spanish authorities were keen to reverse this negative image of the Moroccan people by promoting a kinder vision centred on the landscapes and everyday life of the local population. It was at this time that a painter emerged who would become a benchmark for a new way of approaching the neighbouring country: less fanciful, more realistic, and also more respectful, this was Mariano Bertuchi (Granada, 1884 – Tétouan, 1955). This painter was also the director of the School of Indigenous Arts and the arts editor of the magazine *Revista de Tropas Coloniales*, later known as *ÁFRICA-Revista de Estudios Hispano-Africanos*.

One of the painters who Morató had met in Cornudella, Enric Pinet, had made the journey to Morocco ten years before him, and undoubtedly passed on to him this artistic or exotic fascination with the country that was shared by a good number of painters. In addition, as well as the work of the two great Reus artists, he had also been able to see the work of Francisco Lameyer, Francisco Iturrino, Tomàs Moragas, Arcadi Mas and Claudi Lorenzale in various museums and exhibitions, and even Claudi Carbonell's Maghreb photographs.⁹²

⁹⁰ When it came to academic tests, Morató produced some work in the genre of decadent orientalism. We have a very poor quality photo of an oil entitled "In the Harem". He abandoned this vision as soon as he set foot in Tangier.

⁹¹ To learn more about the manipulative construction of myths about Moors and Africans, see the magnificent work by Eloy MARTÍN CORRALES, *La imagen del magrebí en España* ("The Image of North Africans in Spain" Manresa: Bellaterra Edicions, 2002).

⁹² Claudi Carbonell (1891–1970) photographed the cities of Morocco in the 1920s and 1930s. His collection is held at the MNAC.

At the time when Morató started visiting the cities in the Protectorate, other artists had also established themselves there, such as Cruz Herrera in Casablanca, and Iturrino and Bertuchi in Tétouan. Even the “Algerian” Alfred Figueras – known as Sempronio – spent a season painting in Morocco.⁹³

While in Ronda, on 1 August 1948, Morató was granted his first leave of five days to go to Tétouan. He went back twice in 1949: once on a mission, and the second time on an eleven-day leave in June. Three days later he was granted a passport to return to Barcelona, by now a graduate, and moved to reservist status – in other words, available in the case of a military call-up – until at least 1955. During this time he had to get express authorization from the *Negociat de Mobilització* (Mobilization Office) every time he wanted to leave Spain.

During these two visits, as well as walking through the alleyways and sketching the characters he met there, Morató made friends with a family from Tétouan who acted as his guide around the Medina and welcomed him into their home.⁹⁴ They ended up becoming so close that when the head of the family died while he was still there, he was put in charge of burying him. As he explained, it was an emotionally powerful situation. On subsequent trips, he tried to contact the family but was unsuccessful: “I asked people on the street for the address, but nobody gave me any directions. I didn’t dare go into those labyrinths on my own. And I never heard anything of them again”, he told us.

Those initial tastes of the lands of the Maghreb, quite short but already bearing fruit in the 1948 exhibition in the Pictòria galleries, spurred him to seek a longer stay that would allow him to explore the landscapes and villages of the Rif in greater depth. Thus in late August 1950 he obtained a permit to travel without restrictions in the area of the Protectorate with a thirty-day visa that would be extended by a further ten days. So now he could go to Tangier, Tétouan and Chefchaouen to explore them at a more leisurely pace. He was much more interested in the urban environments than the landscapes, and made countless drawings, sketches and small oil paintings of life in the markets of the old town, the Medina, the narrow streets and the tiny squares, and their people. When he wasn’t working, he met up with other Spaniards who were there on business, and he liked to collect little everyday items: ceramics, clay pipes, traditional

⁹³ Figueras lived for a few years between Paris and Algeria. Morató admired his work. When I accompanied him to an opening at the Royal Artistic Circle in Barcelona in 1979, he wanted to introduce me to him and said “He’s a good painter”. When I found out about his relationship with the North African country and that he had collaborated with Jean Cocteau, I wanted to speak to him... but I didn’t make it in time. One day my father said to me: “Do you remember that old painter you wanted to interview? Well, he just died”. I was very upset.

⁹⁴ They lived in the so-called Babus House, according to correspondence kept at the AMA.

instruments ... fully immersing himself in the pictorial universe of the new Africanist trend. This movement was encouraged by the Franco regime with the creation of the *Premio Pintores de África*⁹⁵ (Painters of Africa Prize, open to painters and sculptors) which was subsidised by the Institute of African Studies. This in turn reported to the Spanish Ministry of the Presidency, which acted as a propaganda department with a more cultural leaning. The tourist brochures and leaflets published by the Spanish State about the cities of Tangier, Tétouan and Chefchaouen offer a sympathetic image of the places and people, moving away from the unrealistic exoticism of the previous century and featuring more quotidian events that attracted young painters. As a Reus native, Morató, who had studied Fortuny's work in great depth (especially his later period), continued to keep this painter as one of his benchmarks, close to the approach with which he developed his first pictorial phase.

These first sketches from Morocco were very similar to Bertuchi's approach, but they would soon take on another character, closer chromatically to the brighter period of Alfred Figueras, another member of the group La Punyalada, who, in his paintings in the book *Images d'Alger* ("Images of Algeria", 1948, with texts by André Gide)⁹⁶ showed a preference for cool tones. But while the works in oil on wood panel or oil on canvas may recall this pictorial movement, which extended through all the North African countries with common characteristics, his rapid sketches of the characters he encountered along the streets (in pencil or in ink on paper) bear a strong resemblance to some of the same characteristics featured by another of his favourite painters, Nonell. This painter also influenced his gypsy compositions, even if only chromatically, although on the other hand, we can sometimes perceive the more amiable view of Ricard Canals. Despite these clear parallels, Morató's gypsy paintings already had the melancholic, dreamy aspect that would come to characterise his figurative paintings.

At this time, while on the one hand Morató was trying to accomplish open landscapes while retaining a naturalistic character, and on the other he was working on urban subjects (with a much closer depth of field), you begin to glimpse an increasingly loose, free brushwork, while also noticing his struggle to break away from the tendency towards rationality that was always so characteristic of him. The subjects of his first exhibition in Barcelona in 1948, at the Pictòria

⁹⁵ Most of the works that won medals or were purchased in these exhibitions, held between 1950 and 1970, were exhibited at the Museum of Africa, opened in 1961 at number 5 Paseo de la Castellana in Madrid, run by the Institute of African Studies that was created in 1945. The museum was closed down in 1973. Having consulted the General Archives of Alcalá de Henares in 1995, nearly 400 pictorial works appeared in the inventories, dispersed around the different ministerial offices. Artists such as Genaro Lahuerta, Núñez Losada, Juan Francés, Gregorio Prieto, Carlos Tauler, Josep Beulas, José Cruz Herrera, José Acosta and Reus native Modest Gené took part and won some of the medals.

⁹⁶ The book was republished in 2019 by the Sant Fruitós de Bages town council.

galleries, were Granada, Tétouan, the neighbourhoods in Barcelona's old quarter, the beach, the port and Chinatown. By now he was no longer being compared solely to the Impressionists, and critics were beginning to use the vague, ambiguous term "modern" to describe him.

However, this slight internal rumbling that caused him to change, evolving his artistic approach, was interpreted by critics as a weakness, with commentators agreeing on the imbalances in his style. On the occasion of this exhibition, Fernando Lience said: "It balances on a well-grounded Impressionist naturalism, but by wanting to lean towards "*jeune peinture*" it falters, because he cannot manage to acquire its essence".⁹⁷ The critic also said that his figure of "a white corpse is not the most suitable tone to apply to the plane of the beauty of a woman's body". Written in a derogatory tone, the critique actually illustrates the way in which much of the general public viewed the minor innovations of most painters who sought to evolve their languages. In the case of Morató, figuration was not so much a representation of reality but rather a free field for chromatic experimentation.

Alberto del Castillo, who on 24 December 1948 wrote his first review on Morató in *Diario de Barcelona*, also echoed this stylistic exploration:

He insists on the indefinite and imprecise in the play of colour, obsessed with denying his time at the School. [...] The intention is better than the outcome. [...] It is in the return to order of *Marina* and *Girl's Head* that he finds a point of equilibrium equidistant between academic aftertaste and anti-scholastic chromatic entanglement.

On the other hand, the newspaper *El Correo Catalán* of 18 December 1948 voiced a more favourable opinion: "He deals with figuration in a very well-considered way, in terms of both colour and structuring. In the landscapes and seascapes he composes well, the colour is bright and clean, he applies the paint with ease and stains the canvas with great panache". And Juan Francisco Bosch, on Radio España, spoke of "an artist of unveiled sensitivity, although he does not yet have a clear pictorial script".⁹⁸

Whatever the case, his path was already marked and Morató would not stop until finding his own language while experimenting and enjoying the act of painting.

⁹⁷ LIENCE, Fernando. "De Arte: José M.^a Morató". *El Mundo Deportivo*, 19 December 1948.

⁹⁸ JF Bosch. "José M.^a Morató y su pintura, henchida de promesas". El año artístico barcelonés ("José M.^a Morató and his painting, full of promise": Barcelona's Artistic Year), Radio España de Barcelona. (typed copy, no date) (AMA)

In mid-March 1949 he returned to Ronda, first spending a month in Madrid. “I got here very easily. A fantastic trip (games of poker, etc.), but it’s very cold”, he explained. On 26 March he wrote from Ceuta: “Tonight or tomorrow we’re going to Tétouan, where I plan to stay as long as I can, the longer the better, to see if I can paint something beautiful”.⁹⁹

Once in Tétouan, he wrote to his brother Rafael: “[...] I’m in the Casino having a coffee and I’ve just met your friend Manuel Caubet”.¹⁰⁰ The latter, he explained, was doing a pottery internship while looking to build a cement factory.¹⁰¹

In early May we find him back in Ronda and Seville.

In December 1950, he exhibited at the Syra Gallery (*6 Pintores Jóvenes*) together with Valentí Blasco, Casaus, García Martín, Planas Gallés and Alexandre Siches. Morató was still struggling to find his personal aesthetic, but the critics were already seeing a progression that met with their approval. A. del Castillo wrote: “We then lean towards Morató, whose compacted still life contrasts with the lightness of his Moroccan paint sketches and with the perfunctory *Landscape 19*. More than one of them allows us to believe in the possibilities that this painting may contain, as yet incipient”.¹⁰² And Fernando Lience wrote: “Morató achieves the greatest effects in his paint sketches of Tétouan and Chefchaouen. Those who are familiar with these lands, with their light and unusual atmosphere, will see the soul of them through the fleeting impressions of this painter”.¹⁰³

When we observe the different affiliation of the subjects of the still lifes and landscapes, we realize the reason for the different approaches. While the landscapes are the logical and evolutionary result of his studies at the school and the established aesthetic, the still life is instead a space for experimenting with as yet unfamiliar or unassimilated trends, such as Expressionism and Cubism, which he already sensed as being similar. The outcome is this obvious duality. Morató would gradually abandon the security of a path that was perhaps too easy and repetitive in order to plunge into a new and exciting world, changing his pictorial values and searching for a more personal language.

But this change, this active discovery of Cubism and other non-figurative movements, was a trend shared with a good proportion of the new crop of artists. As Sebastià Gasch said: “Between

⁹⁹ Correspondence. (AMA).

¹⁰⁰ Correspondence. (AMA).

¹⁰¹ Correspondence. (AMA).

¹⁰² DEL CASTILLO, A. “6 Pintores Jóvenes” (“Six Young Painters”), *Diario de Barcelona*, 31 December 1949, p.19.

¹⁰³ LIENCE, Fernando. “6 Pintores Jóvenes” (“Six Young Painters”), *El Mundo Deportivo*, 1 January 1950, p.3

1945 and 1950, abstract art spread like a gushing jet throughout the world”.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, Joan Cortès liked to talk about movements of anti-representation, evidencing the sometimes extreme polarization that was instilled in the art world by both artists and critics, which to a certain extent forced them to take a particular stance.

Gabriel Ferrater himself, who between 1954 and 1955 cultivated an analysis of art in the newspaper *Diario de Barcelona*, also spoke of this dichotomy between realistic and unrealistic art, in his words, as well as reflecting on another concept in vogue at that time: “The various forms which, one after the other, have taken on the semi-mythical entity that is ‘modern painting’, have hot-headedly been greeted with hostility. But the day inevitably came when hostility gave way and finally all these forms were accepted.”¹⁰⁵

This was a time of pictorial effervescence. In Spain, names such as Benjamín Palencia, Ortega Muñoz and Zabaleta came to the fore. In Paris, Antoni Clavé triumphed and in Catalonia, Will Faber, with his abstract style. Meanwhile, groups were created, with more or less ephemeral lifespans, which sought to shake up the art scene. One of them, Dau al Set, would define a hugely important period in the history of contemporary Catalan and Spanish art, so much so that its imprint would change the framework of creation and the intellectual estimations made of it.

In the midst of all these aesthetic movements, during the second half of the 1940s, Morató put himself to the test and we witness the artistic reflections of a painter who, after all his studies, was experimenting and searching for his own path. During these five years we see him starting to speculate in the field of aesthetic positioning, which over the first half of the 1950s would lead him to experience a true metamorphosis that would bring to the surface the stylistic and chromatic features of his new pictorial language. There was a marked duality: on one hand, the naturalist tradition of the landscape still weighed heavily, while on the other, through different approximations, the tendency towards constructivist rationalization that would characterize his work for the next two decades was fighting to emerge. It was, indeed, through the paint sketches he made in Tétouan, Ceuta and Chefchaouen – in a Morocco that vividly impressed him – when he started to free himself from the previous aesthetic framework (influences inherited from various masters) and delve into experimenting with other trends and other approaches that reached Barcelona from abroad through the continuous flow of artists across the Pyrenees. The

¹⁰⁴ GASCH, Sebastià. “La evolución del arte abstracto” (“The Evolution of Abstract Art”), *Revista Nacional de Arquitectura*, no. 143 (1955). Morató had a lot of respect for Gasch. I remember going with him to Gasch’s funeral, where I was surprised at how few people I thought were there.

¹⁰⁵ FERRATER, *Op. cit.*, p. 247.

flame of abstraction and other non-figurative movements would shape Morató's work – like that of other young painters, to a greater or lesser degree – during the next decade.

During those years we also witness a definitive change in his signature. When Morató started painting, he signed his work “J.”, “J. Morató” or “J. M. Morató” (or exceptionally just “Morató”) with minor script variations. The change to Morató Aragonès was due to a misunderstanding with Gaspar, the gallery owner. He had to go and view some paintings in a studio and due to a fortuitous confusion with the painter Lluís Morató Guerrero (1903-1963), went to the wrong studio.¹⁰⁶

5 - ALL ROADS LEAD TO PARIS ...

The nineteen-fifties: when painting was revolutionized

In June 1950, he made his first trip to Paris, for ten days, thanks to a group travel grant from the School of Fine Arts, in order to visit museums. As part of an agreement with the International Exchange Centre, they visited Versailles, Chartres, Bonneval, Châteaudun, Blois, Chaumont-sur-Loire, Amboise, Chenonceaux, Montrichard, Chambord, Orleans, Étampes and Montlhéry. On 16 June he wrote to his mother from Chaumont to report on the journey by coach. In Paris they stayed in Montmartre and in the morning, before breakfast, Morató would already have taken a number of walks to make sketches and notes. Morató arrived in the city with his soul still tied to Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, and left it with his pictorial perception completely overturned, with the scale of the representation of reality tipped towards a breakdown of forms. It was on this trip to Paris that, exploring its museums and galleries, he came into contact with the bubbling atmosphere of a city that had just witnessed the birth of *jeune peinture*. It was the first time he saw a work by Picasso *in situ* which, in contrast to what he had assumed, made a good impression on him. From that moment on he became an admirer and expressed this on many occasions, such as when the controversy arose in 1962 over Picasso's mural for the Barcelona Architects' Association.¹⁰⁷

Over the course of the decade, faced with the new pictorial movements and the perceptive influence of painters he admired, a profound and definitive change started to take place in his

¹⁰⁶ With Lluís Morató, as well as having friendships in common, he coincided in several group exhibitions at the Royal Artistic Circle. Frederic Lloveras' son recalls that when anyone mentioned Morató they always asked: “Which Morató?”. And once Lluís Morató had died, Sanjuan used to say: “The skeleton!”

¹⁰⁷ On the subject of controversies, Morató was among those who, in 1965, took a stance against the continuation of the Sagrada Família church. He used to say that they should leave it as it was, a little like a sculpture.

career, which would spark the beginning of one of his most fruitful and doubtless most powerful stages.

“Je tiens la rue comme un verre plein de lumière enchantée”. A postcard with this phrase by Paul Éluard, bought for his friend Miquel Villanueva, reveals the intimate dimension that the city of Paris would have from this moment on for Morató: a light whose nuances would amplify and diversify until they transformed Paris’s atmospheric greys (initially supposedly sad) into wonderful bursts of light. This perception would stay with him forever, so that many years later, when it was raining in Barcelona, I remember we used to say “Today is a Paris day” as a synonym for a day of beautiful pictorial light. Obviously, our outlook – I discovered and shared this perception the first and only time I accompanied him to the French capital – was loaded with aesthetic emotions filled with memories and myths: artistic, literary, cinematographic and musical. *“Paris, tu n’as pas changé”*, said that song by Jean Sablon that Morató always hummed when strolling along *“sur les quais du vieux Paris”* ... In his memory, Paris never changed.

In June 1950 he took part in a group exhibition at the Syra gallery with Baixeras, Ràfols, Bosch Roger, Villà, Mercadé, Ports, Blasco, García, Siches, Roda, Domingo, Hurtuna, Roig, Plá, Sacharoff, Soulek, Leemans, Lloyd, Villa and Gomis. This gallery was frequented by Morató for many years – in fact, until it closed in 1986 – both for its social gatherings and as a pleasant place to meet up with other friends who occasionally visited the city.

He then returned to Ronda (where he stayed for a month) and Morocco, in what would be his last African trip. On 24 August, the Directorate General of Morocco and the Colonies gave him a thirty-day leave to visit the Protectorate zone. He left from the port of Algeciras on 13 September and returned on 10 October. As his fascination for Paris grew, Morató forgot about his southern path. This foray was in some way ephemeral, but at the same time deeply experienced, so much so that he continued to paint Moroccan subject matter for a few more years. But the light and the chromatic and urban universe evoked by the south were in such stark contrast to the aesthetic sensations exuded by France that Morató would definitively follow the pictorial path to the north.

The two exhibitions that followed these experiences (one in 1950 at the Reading Centre in Reus and the other in 1951 at Barcelona’s Sala Rovira) were those that featured the majority of his works with a Moroccan theme.

The *Diario Español* newspaper featured an interesting interview about his career:

If you want to know what my activities have been over the last four years, I can tell you that I have not stopped travelling and painting for a moment, wherever I go

capturing the physiognomy of the different places I have visited and learning to interpret ambiences and resolve the speculative challenges of art.

I have travelled Andalusia and Castile, and in June of this year I went to Paris. A little while ago I came back from the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco where I was painting intensively.

Although I have painted a lot of landscape, I love painting figures, even more so when they are in the open air. I also engage in portraiture. I look for a unity and uniformity of concept in everything, and I strive to achieve a pictorial formality, because anyone can attract someone's attention; the difficult thing is to attract it for a justified reason.

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The people and urban landscapes of Morocco made a big impact, attracting the attention of critics due to their very unusual grey tones, as the more habitual practice was to present them in warm, vivid colours with stark contrasts. According to A. Del Castillo: "The best works are those he describes as paint sketches. This is also why the lively souk scenes in Tétouan and in Barcelona's *barrio chino* also have a lot of character".¹⁰⁹ The critic Ipsus singled him out as "one of the most positive assets of our local painting" and spoke of "Impressionism at the service of concepts and forms that go beyond the objective values of this school,"¹¹⁰ while Ernest Foyé wrote: "*Barrio chino* – among the aspects of Barcelona – brings the vigorous note of a brush that in the Moroccan landscapes prefers to avoid easy effects and contrasts of blue and white to seek out grey accents, timeless modulations which still manage to faithfully translate the exotic climate and characteristic atmosphere of the Moorish streets and souks".¹¹¹

Despite the fact that commentators recognized his rejuvenated spirit, after the exhibition at Sala Rovira his sales and commissions began to decline and he had to look for an alternative source of income. He leant towards the field of advertising design and in 1951 he started work at the Esteban Trochut Bachmann agency in Barcelona as a draftsman and designer, getting involved in the publication of Volume IV of *Nov Adam. La precomposición y el dibujo tipográfico*.¹¹² The publishers dedicated a copy to him: "To Mr J. M. Morató, who knows so much about drawing, even with lead pencil. With great affection from the publishers". For eight months he focused

¹⁰⁸ "La interviú del día" ("The daily interview"), in *Reus. Diario Español*, 3 December 1950.

¹⁰⁹ DEL CASTILLO, "José Maria Morató at Sala Rovira". *Diario de Barcelona*, 14 April 1951.

¹¹⁰ IPSUS. "Morató. An impetuous and vital painter". *Diario Español*, 10 December 1950.

¹¹¹ FOYÉ E., *Art Chronicle. Official Monday Bulletin*, 16 April 1951.

¹¹² Barcelona: New Modern Art Typographic Archives. Alianza Society of Graphic Arts (SADAG), 1952.

on the company and did not paint any pictures. Later on he would only paint in the afternoons. His contemporaries, such as Siches and Aguilar Moré, worked occasionally in the world of illustration and comics.

Ricart Serra spoke to us about the relationship between the artists of those generations and the advertising industry:

Of the painters I met when I started out in 1936, there were very few who made a living; most worked part-time and many of us did advertising (before they were called commercials): Clavé did cinema advertising; Palet, a good painter, did covers; I used to do graphics and Hurtuna worked somewhere for half a day; Capdevila, a great painter, was a jeweller.¹¹³

Ricart Serra was of the same generation as Modest Rodríguez-Cruells, who made engravings on stones: “First I was at the Baixas Academy, where almost all of us were at some point; on finishing there I went to the Llotja with Mallol Suazo and a group who later became well-known painters. We went to the Llotja for about four years”.¹¹⁴

Rodríguez-Cruells, who took part in the Salons de Maig exhibitions and was vice-president of the *Associació d'Artistes Actuals* (Contemporary Artists' Association) during the time of Santi Surós, joined the world of art criticism at *Europa* magazine when Tharrats and Corredos Matheos, who were leaving, put his name forward:

Between the magazines *Gran Vía* and *Europa*, I used to cover all the exhibitions in Barcelona. I did hundreds of reviews. [...] We were very interested in the Impressionists (which were very hard to get into) and apart from that there seemed to be nothing else. Then came the avant-garde and abstract movements, which seemed revolutionary and used to shock people; depending on what was being presented, it was a scandal [...] we had to battle to convince the public, who didn't understand what they were doing. [...] We liked their painting because it was both a revelation and a revolution.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Manuel Ricart Serra. Interview in Barcelona, 31 January 1994.

¹¹⁴ Modest Rodríguez-Cruells. Interview at the Bagués jewellery store on Passeig de Gràcia, 1 February 1994

¹¹⁵ Modest Rodríguez-Cruells. Interview at the Bagués jewellery store on Passeig de Gràcia, 1 February 1994.

In July 1952 the XXXV International Eucharistic Congress took place in Barcelona, on the occasion of which an exhibition of contemporary religious art was held in May at the Ciutadella Museum of Modern Art, and the Royal Artistic Circle of Sant Lluç organized a competition entitled “Holy Suppers”. Morató won the Painting Prize, endowed with 5,000 pesetas, for a painting that would be exhibited that same December at the Reus Reading Centre together with other works featuring themes that were very significant at the time (many of them portrayed by the majority of artists): street vendors, cobblers, women ironing, women reading or after bathing, washerwomen, dancers, and so on, of undeniable Classical and Impressionist heritage. In this exhibition we see for the first time the maritime and port themes that Morató would so much enjoy working on in the 1960s and 1970s. And indeed it was in the catalogue for the Reading Centre exhibition that he used his definitive signature, Morató Aragonès, for the first time.

I have to make a point here on the subject of religious painting, which he cultivated in some way or another throughout his life. It should be stated that Morató was a believer and a practitioner. Aside from the fact that society in general in the 1940s and 1950s was more religious than it is today, he and Montserrat were devout Christians. At home, when we were little, every Sunday afternoon we gathered in the dining room to say the Rosary and recite endless litanies.¹¹⁶ The fact is that he painted quite a number of Holy Supper and Mother of God scenes, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, most of them commissioned. What is interesting is to see how his stylistic transformation also extended to this type of composition. With regard to religious themes, his most important work was the St John Triptych, produced in 1968, about which we will talk later on, but he also painted some commissions for the Chapel of Sant Joan del Codolar in Cornudella in 1981 (a St Bruno) and the Sanctuary of Mercy in Reus (portraits of the Hospitaller brothers Antoni Llauradó and Eusebi Forcades) in 2003.

Morató exhibited at the Montblanc Biennale with the painting *Casa Desclergue*. He did not win any awards, but with this same painting he won the second prize at the Reus Provincial Art Exhibition the following year. The mayor of Montblanc wrote to him to congratulate him and tell him that the work would be selected to receive an honourable mention in the Biennale’s call for entries.

In 1953 he planned another trip to Paris and in June he requested a letter of recommendation from Francisco de Alós y de Fontcuberta, Marquis of Dou, who at that time was secretary to the

¹¹⁶ In this sense he was very strict. Once, when I told him as a young girl that I was not a believer, he said to me: “You have really disappointed us [referring to himself and my mother]. To us, it’s as if you had died”. And I did die inside a little when I heard those words.

mayor of Barcelona, so he could issue him with a passport and authorize him to travel in Italy and France “for a maximum of three months”, but on 20 August he wrote from Montblanc to a friend: “The trip to Paris has gone up in smoke because the strikes are still going on in France”. That year he changed his studio twice. First he spent a couple of months with Armando Martínez on Banyes Nous Street in Barcelona. Those weeks turned out to be very fruitful, he told us, as they used to bring up the neighbourhood gypsies they found on the street to act as models, paying them for the sessions. The theme of gypsies, and their unusual costumes, was a subject that painters often featured in those years. In Morató’s case, the influence of Nonell and his dark colours was noticeable in this subject matter and in this particular period. Another theme that we see repeated with other painters is that of women ironing; this may seem surprising to us today, but it was one of the jobs that was very much in demand in society back then, and was also a job that women could do (dressmakers, seamstresses, laundresses, etc.) and these were aspects of everyday life that painters liked to portray.

He later moved to the studio of Ramon Aguilar Moré on Rosselló Street, on the top floor of the same building as the restaurant La Punyalada. There he shared space with other painters (Morató remembered Carrasco, Aguilar Moré and Emili Porta),¹¹⁷ until the studio was transferred to his name in 1953. The changes of premises also brought about a change of habits, and he became a regular at the well-known bar-restaurant. As he explained to us, at that time there was more of a smell of rice than of coffee, which made him decide, along with Planas Gallès, to move the gathering on weekdays to the Samoa bar, on the other side of Passeig de Gràcia, and to only use La Punyalada for the Saturday get-togethers, when the big group used to gather. The Samoa bar gathering gradually attracted other artists such as Ricart Serra and Vives Fierro.

In January 1954 his mother died in Cornudella. Nevertheless, this was a year that marked the beginning of a very propitious period for his painting. In January, at the Municipal Museum of Mataró, together with Prat-Giné and the sculptor Jordi Puiggalí Clavell,¹¹⁸ he exhibited many interiors and figures and some landscapes of Montblanc, Barcelona and Sant Cugat. With

¹¹⁷ SANTOS TORROELLA, R. *Quince años de pintura de Aguilar Moré* (“Fifteen Years of Painting by Aguilar Moré”). Barcelona: Ed. Miguel Lerín, 1965.

¹¹⁸ Puiggalí, in the 1970s, taught drawing at the Teresiana School in Gràcia, and by coincidence I was one of his students. Puiggalí was a bit of a curmudgeon, but such a good person that in class the only person who paid attention to him was me, who sympathized with him because he was my father’s friend. I remember that he was constantly saying: “Shut up! Shut up! Sit down!” amidst the constant cacophony of teenage girls.

Puiggalí, who also lived in the Gràcia neighbourhood of Barcelona, he had an ongoing friendship and would hold two more exhibitions, at Busquets in Barcelona and in Tarragona.

That year he received an honourable mention at the Sant Jordi Awards of 1954 and a subsidy of 2,000 pesetas, as well as the Viscount Güell Prize at the “Victoriano Seix” competition of the Artistic Circle. It was at the Circle that he met another of his best friends, Bernat Sanjuan, with whom he would also share time in the French capital. Sanjuan, who befriended Picasso in Paris, had a dual approach to his work: he simultaneously worked on purely figurative lyrical landscapes – in which he captured, above all, the landscapes of Mallorca from his Som Dos estate in Deià – and developed a Cubist-inspired style in his still lifes, with a quite remarkable chromatic strength and vigorous brushwork. However, despite the value of his work, in his later years he had difficulties in finding an outlet for it, as he himself lamented in May 1979: “I work a great deal, but what I don’t understand is why I’m not selling anything”.¹¹⁹

That year, 1954, thanks to a travel grant from the National Ministry of Education and the faith placed in him by some of his friends – some forty people, many of them from Reus, who paid him in advance for works that he undertook to deliver a few months later – he was able to make another trip to Paris with the intention of spending two months there, which would turn into four. Initially he attended the Spanish College with Àngel Bertran, both of them later moving to the studio that his friend Miquel Ibarz had on Rue Campagne Première. This little street, a road between Boulevard Montparnasse and Boulevard Raspail, conceals a rich history due to the large number of cultural luminaries who lived there during the twentieth century.¹²⁰ He told us that every day he got up at six in the morning to walk up to Montmartre (easily an hour-and-a-half’s walk) and by mid-morning he was back in his studio. This trip enabled him to explore in much greater depth the work of Clavé and Bouffet, Abstraction and Surrealism, and the magical painting of Chagall. In a postcard written (but not sent) to his friend Calaf, he said: “Dear Calaf, I have just seen an exhibition of this painter, which left me really enthused, and as far as current

¹¹⁹ Sanjuan, a very nice man, brings to mind an image from the 1960s when my father used to take me on Saturdays to school in the SEAT 600, and before that we used to stop to pick him up. After dropping me off they would go off to their social gathering.

¹²⁰ Painters such as Giorgio de Chirico, Modigliani, Óscar Domínguez, Foujita, Edmond Poullain, Yves Klein; photographers such as Eugène Atget and Man Ray, and writers such as Rilke, Rimbaud, Louis Aragon and Elsa Triolet, all had a house or a studio on this street, and the architect André Arfvidson built a house there in 1912, intended for use as artists’ workshops. Today, every two or three buildings, you will find a plaque commemorating some of these figures. In addition, it was the location for the final sequence of Jean-Luc Godard’s film *A Bout de Souffle*.

painting is concerned this is the only one I have really liked so far. As you know I brought a lot of work with me, and if I had the time I would like to tell you more ...”¹²¹

His stay coincided with that of Frederic Lloveras, who was living with Lluís Morató in a *chambre de bonne* next to Boulevard Saint Germain. Lloveras, who from that moment on became a great friend, explained in his memoirs:

When Morató Aragonès was there, we used to go to eat at the University City for one hundred and fifty francs, and we ate quite well, it was a self-service; the atmosphere was lovely, there were people from all over the world and of every colour. [...] I remember one day when we were going to dinner, it was 14 July, a big holiday in France. They told us we had to see the festivities; I was in the company of a female student and we said that we had to find another girl. The three of us left and by the time we got to St. Germain des Prés there were four of us. I don't know how Josep Maria did it, he only had to look at a girl and she was entranced.¹²²

During this trip, he fully embraced the life of a bohemian artist. He would walk the streets and set up his easel, working amidst a crowd of onlookers, some of whom would buy his paintings there and then, with the paint still fresh. In fact, this was also a good way to make acquaintances. Thus while painting on the quay of Notre-Dame, he met someone who would become a good friend: Mark Clifton, an American pilot with a passion for art and the bohemian lifestyle that was so prevalent living at number 29 Rue Cambon – yes, right above Chanel – like a ship anchored in the Seine. With Clifton he used to visit the fashionable Parisian cafés and bars where the most restless young people and the best musicians used to hang out. Between paintings, Morató liked to sit at the bistros frequented by workers from Les Halles market, the Latin Quarter and Montmartre, or in the select cafés on Rue de Rivoli with its elegant ladies dressed in the latest fashions accompanied by their little *chouchou* dogs.¹²³

¹²¹ Postcard dated 27 June 1954 showing a print of Marc Chagall's painting *L'Acrobate*. The fact is that many of the postcards the artists used to send to each other were reproductions of works by Cézanne, Matisse, Miró, etc. (AMA).

¹²² MORATÓ, M. Elena. *Lloveras. Memòries* ("Lloveras: Memoirs"). Barcelona: Ed. Tibidabo, 1990.

¹²³ He told us that in Paris, at that time, when people saw children on the streets they paid no attention, but if they saw someone with a little pet dog everyone would stop and say: "*Oh, le petit chou, c'est mignon!*" ("Oh, your little dog is so sweet!")

Morató experienced an era that for many of us, in the next generation, has always been mythical. A spiritual opening, the dawn of longed-for freedoms, and intellectuals and artists who offered new pathways of thought and action in a world that augured a better future.

The music and the atmosphere, both by day in the cafés (Aux Deux Magots, Le Café de Flore, etc.), and at night in the clubs (Le Caveau de La Huchette, La Cave du 38 Riv, Le Tabou, etc.) meant that these were places where creators from every discipline went to meet others and find inspiration. In those years you could read the newspaper, have a coffee, or drink a beer next to people like Juliette Greco, Eric Rohmer, Jeanne Moreau, Jean-Luc Godard, a veteran Sidney Bechet or a young Miles Davis.

Morató would often meet up with Mark Clifton in different European cities, which provided him with contacts in the United States. It also provided him with fine arts material that could not be found in Spain, such as the Wunder brand of drawing pens (these, along with the large Sheaffer ones, were his favourites). Mark, who liked to paint as a hobby, would accompany him on many occasions and introduce him to many towns in France, which he would later incorporate in his personal catalogue of iconic locations: Moret-sur-Loing, Collioure, Marly-le-Roi, Louveciennes, and more.

In May 1954, a group exhibition was held at the Spanish College featuring the sixteen artists who had been given a travel grant by the Spanish State, including Àngel Bertran, Maria Girona, Ràfols-Casamada, Antonio Saura, Trinidad Sotos, Xavier Valls, Armando Altaba and Antonio Saura. The fact that people bought his works meant a lot to Morató: “I arrived there with the burden of knowing there were sixty thousand painters in Paris, so to sell a painting, far away from the people you know, made me incredibly happy”.¹²⁴

In those years there was a constant stream of Catalan painters passing through Paris, who went there on a type of pilgrimage, since masters such as Picasso, Grau Sala, Créixams, Rebull and Clavé had homes there or spent long periods of time in the city, and every young painter made his or her way to visit one or more of these artists according to their personal style or preferences. Many of his friends and schoolmates went there: Bernat Sanjuan and Manolo Ruiz Pipó,¹²⁵ to Picasso’s house; Lloveras, to see Clavé, and Morató himself, to meet up again with Grau Sala, whom he knew from the gatherings at La Punyalada, which the Paris-based painter

¹²⁴ CERVERA, “Jordi. Morató Aragonès, la pintura íntima i silent” (“Jordi. Morató Aragonès: intimate, quiet painting”). *Nou Diari*, 24 October 1990.

¹²⁵ Manolo Ruiz Pipó, an Andalusian painter living in Barcelona, would become his brother Rafael’s brother-in-law much later on. When some time later he settled in the French town of Bonaguil, he wrote: “I think you would do some excellent painting here; it’s here at your disposal whenever you like” (AMA).

visited regularly when he returned to Barcelona.¹²⁶ In fact, we might say that these painters formed a veritable convoy, because many of them stayed at the same hotel – the Providence on Rue de l'Échaude, now long gone, right at the heart of the Saint Germain district – or they transferred their studios there for short or longer periods. As for the Catalan artists of the 1940 generation, their capital of reference was indubitably Paris. Conxita Guinovart, Sanjuan's widow, explained: "In the 1950s, things were going downhill in Paris. The merchants used to come here [Barcelona] in search of paintings, and then discovered that a whole lot of painters in Paris were actually Catalan".¹²⁷

In fact, the Parisian pilgrimage of Catalan artists had already begun towards the end of the nineteenth century, with Utrillo, Casas and Rusiñol, and this legacy defined the travelling trend and point of reference for the next two generations.¹²⁸ Some settled in Montmartre, but not everyone. Rebull, for example, had a studio on Rue du Bac.¹²⁹ And Enrique Lafuente Ferrari explained that Zuloaga "ended up sharing his bourgeois furnished apartment on Quai Bourbon on Île Saint Louis with a group of Catalan artists", referring to Rusiñol and Utrillo.¹³⁰ Indeed, Zuloaga was one of the artists that many young painters, including Morató, looked up to with admiration. There is something in the commissioned portraits that Morató produced in those years of the uniform, rugged, grandiose atmosphere found in the second drafts of Zuloaga's work from the 1930s.

At the end of his stay in the French capital, the Spanish Embassy gave him a certificate for the customs authorities stating that the painter Josep Maria Morató was returning to Spain with luggage that included seven paintings and forty-two paint sketches, specifying in the list the size and title of each work.

We know that correspondence with friends and colleagues talking about their discoveries and artistic impressions, or just to send a greeting, was both systematic and reciprocal from the postcards and letters held in the AMA, written by, among others, Puig Perucho, Bosch Roger, Miquel Villanueva, Antoni Picas, Pepe Callizo, Jaume Muxart, Mark Clifton, José Luis Fernández

¹²⁶ There is photographic evidence of many of these meetings between the painters and the established artists living in Paris. However, we do not have any photos of Morató in the AMA.

¹²⁷ Conxita Guinovart. Interview in Barcelona, 1 February 1994.

¹²⁸ The writer Ferran Canyameres, a real connoisseur of the Parisian artistic world at the turn of the century, described the ambience in his book *Josep Oller i la seva època, l'home del Moulin Rouge* ("Josep Oller and His Times: The Man of the Moulin Rouge", Barcelona: Editorial Aedos, 1959), a biography about Josep Oller, the Catalan founder of the famous cabaret show.

¹²⁹ SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. *Rebull*. Bilbao: La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, 1974 (Maestros actuales de la pintura y escultura catalana; 17).

¹³⁰ LAFUENTE FERRARI, E.; AMÓN, Santiago; MARAGALL, Joan A. *Ignacio Zuloaga* [exhibition catalogue]. Barcelona: Sala Parés, 1980.

Flores, Jordi Puiggalí, Frederic Lloveras, Bernat Sanjuan, Àngel Bertran and Ramon Barnadas (“Hey, you old Reus bastard ... When are you taking a holiday?”, he wrote¹³¹). To date, however, we have only been able to get access to half a dozen of the letters from Josep Maria to his fellow artists. Fortunately we have the postcards that he sent to his mother and, from time to time, to his brother, which give us an idea of the sensations he experienced during his initial trips. What does become evident through his correspondence is his early obsession with collecting sugar sachets, because many of his friends wrote to him from different places telling him they had kept some for him.¹³²

At the exhibition at the Los Madrazo gallery in Madrid that same December of 1954, almost all the paintings shown, apart from one from Ronda, were from Paris, and the impression the city made on him is palpable. Some of the works date from this period, when he developed a taste for a primitivist aesthetic, with black figures, defined outlines and accentuated features bordering on caricature, with a preference for greys and blues (with greens, reds and oranges as a counterpoint); cool tones that with his approach acquired a dense and intimate character. This was echoed by the critics in the press. For example, on 21 December, *ABC* reported: “This painting could serve as an exemplary illustration of the most sensitive and personable contemporary French art. Do not seek in this work what it does not contain nor what its creator intended to do. Very well executed plastic language, and a very refined vocabulary”, and Antonio Cobos mentioned in *Ya* on 29 December the influence of the symbolist pictorial concept of Paul Gauguin, “and this is even more notorious in the compositions featuring figures at Montmartre cafés”. On the other hand, Galindo entitled his article “The works of Morató, a good example of modern painting”, and wrote:

Austere painting, with muted tones but very resilient framing, in terms of both its concept and its accomplishment and technique. Morató Aragonés’s palette, which shows his preference for greys and blues, has close associations with the French paintings of Cézanne and Gauguin, in his accomplished way of distributing lines and volumes in a desire for corporeality without false chiaroscuros. In the manner of Ortega Muñoz, the colour spreads in muted chords that make it extraordinarily

¹³¹ Barnadas was very sardonic and we have correspondence from him in which he accompanies his greeting with his characteristic touch of humour: “Oh, Morató, what a good painter you are, but as these are days of goodness you are forgiven for this fault,” he said in a Christmas greeting (AMA).

¹³² As my brother Jordi reminds me, Morató gave this collection to a friend of his who was also an avid collector.

pleasing and soothing to the eyes. Within the pictorial revelry of the average exhibition, Morató Aragonés represents a haven of piece and a rest cure.¹³³

In 1955, the VI Exhibition of African Painters took place. As already mentioned, this call aimed to give artists a closer insight into the lands of the Protectorate, with an emphasis on brotherhood with the neighbouring peoples. Up until that point they had achieved their purpose, since Morocco had become a fashionable subject within that exoticism that appealed to painters as well as critics and the general public, but this year – which also witnessed the start of the process of Moroccan independence – the competition started to falter because Africa no longer held the appeal or the expressions that young artists were looking for, now driven to look north in search of new artistic languages. Thus the 1955 medal was not awarded, but some prizes and runner-up awards were given, one of them to Morató's work *The Souk of Tétouan*.

That year, Reus City Council commissioned him to design and illustrate the Holy Week programme – we should not forget that Morató had experience in the field of advertising – and the *Semanario Reus* newspaper dedicated a special cover to him for the festivities of St Peter, the city's patron saint. The painter's collaboration with Reus institutions and publications, both public and private, recurred regularly over the years and it is interesting to see the evolution in Morató's style, which showed he was no stranger to the trends of the times.

Rome and studio-based painting

The time had come to make the leap to Italy, a centre of classical art and an essential destination for any artist. Morató wanted to go to the Spanish Academy in Rome, but he was told it was very difficult to get a scholarship as they were so sought-after. But not content to hang around and waste time, he upped sticks and arrived in the Italian capital. On 3 May 1955 he wrote to his friend Siches from Rome: "I arrived a week ago and I'm in full action mode. At the moment I'm concentrating on painting, as I had a real urge, and this is how I let off steam. At the same time I'm walking around the city to get to know it and find subject matter. Life here is very expensive. I guess you'll be getting ready for your trip to Paris".

On 10 July he wrote to his brother: "Capri is wonderful. I didn't think I would like it so much. I'm going crazy with so much subject matter and I'm thinking of staying one more day. I had only come for a day. I'll spend another day in Pompeii and so when Bertran arrives I'll already

¹³³ GALINDO, Federico. "Exposiciones de la semana" ("Exhibitions of the week"). *Dígame*, 4 January 1955.

be back in Rome. I made a couple of friends on the boat and we'll spend these two days together. They are really nice".¹³⁴

We then find him in the Residenza Ottaviani (7 Via Plinio, an iconic historical site at that time), from where he sent a request to Madrid. He was lucky that there was a place available due to a last-minute cancellation, and received permission one week later to move into one of the rooms at the Academy. As he explained in an interview years later, the rooms were very spacious, they had access to a studio, and the food was half the price of anywhere on the street. In those years, Rome was a Mecca for artists from the Sant Jordi School in Barcelona and the San Fernando School in Madrid: Muxart, Aleu, Beulas, Tasio, Bertran, Riera Serra, Ibarz, and so on.

Morató spent the first month there and devoted the remaining weeks to travelling around the country, visiting Naples, Assisi, Florence, Venice, Padua and Milan. It seems he was unable to get to Sicily, although we know he was extremely interested in visiting it from the large number of brochures he kept. On 26 July, he wrote from Florence to Rafael:

Dear brother, I passed through Assisi and arrived here this afternoon. The day after tomorrow I will leave for Venice and I plan to stay there for several days. Nothing in Rome has impressed me as much as Giotto's paintings in the Church of Assisi and an exhibition on Angelico that I have just seen.

Bertrán wanted to spend several days in Rome but I couldn't wait for him and I don't regret having left earlier. I think we will meet again, but just for a few days, in Venice. If I get everything finished I will travel to Barcelona on 12 August in a friend's car [...].

As he explained to us, he liked Venice more than he expected and stayed for a longer time. He devoted himself so thoroughly to visiting museums and working that in mid-July his sister Maria Elena, already on her way to America to serve as a missionary, where she would stay until her death in 2003, wrote to him at the Spanish Academy in Rome from Cadiz:

My dear brother,

[...] I can now tell you that I am going to the foundation in Ciudad Juárez (Mexico). [...] I would very much like to receive some of your letters during the crossing. You can write to me at Caracas, Puerto Rico or Ciudad Trujillo. Use this address: Aboard the

¹³⁴ AMA

Satrústegui. MM. Teresianas, Cabin 9. I received your letter when I was in Barcelona. Rafael was getting impatient as he hadn't heard from you.

August found him in Venice, lodging on the Rio dei Frari, next to the church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari. While there he met his colleagues Àngel Bertran and Francesc Riera Serra, who had just come from visiting Florence.

On his return, he wrote on 9 August from Milan: “[...] I am now going to see the Duomo and tomorrow Leonardo’s *Last Supper*. That’s all I plan to see”.

In Italy he took a very important step in his creative career when he “discovered” studio painting. Until then, Morató had begun his career following the school of nature painting, which both benefits and suffers from the light and colour variations of passing time and inclement weather conditions, which are often unpredictable. In Rome he changed this custom and from then on he would focus on landscape work away from the challenges and limitations involved in painting in the open air. The studio allowed him to paint for very long sessions without the weather having any kind of impact on whatever he was working on¹³⁵ and this enhanced his concentration. This change in approach would allow Morató to make a substantial U-turn in his pictorial concept, allowing his own character to start coming through thanks to the more elaborate treatment of the subject matter.

His pace of work must have been intense, since an Italian artist who often met up with the group of Academy residents used to say: “That man is always working”, because instead of going out partying he often stayed on in the studio painting.

The imprint of Italy stems essentially from its historical background, although we can find traces of aesthetics that point to Giotto, Leonardo or Modigliani in his figures and works of a religious nature. Nevertheless, the reality of 1950s Italy also had an impact on Morató through the cinema:¹³⁶ the neorealism of an emotional Vittorio de Sica and films such as *Miracle in Milan* and *The Bicycle Thief*, in contrast to the comedies of Alberto Sordi in *An American in Rome*, for example, or family portraits featuring some of the universal muses of those days, such as Sofia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida, whose style was reflected in some of his figures in the 1960s, suitably stylized and “subdued”. The forceful image of Italian women would never be reflected

¹³⁵ With regard to the pictorial process (and the level of enjoyment or suffering involved in it), I went with him to see Víctor Erice’s film *El sol del membrillo* (*Dream of Light*, 1992) which perfectly depicts this struggle in the shape of painter Antonio López. We both liked it very much.

¹³⁶ We do not have any records as such, but there is no doubt that Morató went to the film sessions organized by the Italian Institute of Culture in Barcelona.

in Morató's work, which was much closer to his mental image of the Parisian woman. Despite following other paths, Morató always yearned a little for the years of Impressionism and Belle Époque – it would be fair to say that these images held a mythical status for him. He would have loved to have lived in those times, which he considered to be one of the most beautiful for the painter, constantly in contact with nature, experiencing the painting while immersed in the landscape and forming a part of it.

This was the period of his cabaret dancers, gypsies and mulattoes, a sign of the times in which he lived, in a mixture of Spanish, Catalan and French traditions, with the atmospheres of the jazz clubs, the variety shows, and flamenco. At that time, dance and music were ever-present in his works and he portrayed them mainly through quick sketches, gouaches and oils on paper, so that the impromptu nature inherent in any work that aims to convey linear movement or agility was not hampered by technicalities.

In March 1955 he exhibited at the Queralt tailor's shop, now long gone, which was one of the most popular traditional establishments in Reus. Mr Queralt's fondness for painting was well known, and Joan Miró himself used to go there to get his suits made, and they used to sit and chat together in Plaça del Prim.¹³⁷ Morató, who over the years was also a good customer of Cal Queralt, agreed to hold a public exhibition of his most recent paintings and a selection of works on paper and sketches done in Italy.¹³⁸ Ipsus spoke of: "All the grace and strength of barely sketched but extraordinarily complete paintings",¹³⁹ which showcased his gift for drawing and the firm yet light hand that characterized his work on paper.

The dynamic art promoter Baldomer Xifré Morros, who in *Destino* magazine classified him as "an accomplished painter",¹⁴⁰ included him in the group of young Catalan painters he took to exhibit at the Dintel gallery in Santander one month later: Alumà, Planas Gallés, Verdaguier, Morató Aragonès, Aguilar Moré, Suñer, Navarro Rodón, Llovet, Picó, Siches, Abelló, Casaus, Fossas, J. M. Miró, De Solà, Muñoz, Macià and Rebés.

In October he exhibited his work featuring Rome and Venice, and some paintings of Paris and Barcelona, at the Argos gallery in Barcelona, and Josep Maria López-Picó,¹⁴¹ who observed in his work that duality between the real and the poetic, dedicated one of his "compliments" to him:

¹³⁷ AMORÓS, Xavier. *Històries de la plaça del Prim* ("Stories of Plaça del Prim"). Barcelona: Ed. Empúries, 1997.

¹³⁸ Another emblematic Reus establishment, Cal Niepce, made the photographic report.

¹³⁹ IPSUS. De Arte. *Diario Español*, 23 March 1955.

¹⁴⁰ XIFRÉ MORROS, Baldomero. "Poesía en color de José M^a Morató Aragonés" ("Poetry in colour by José M^a Morató Aragonés"). *Destino*, 22 October 1955.

¹⁴¹ Josep Maria López-Picó (Barcelona, 1886–1959). Writer and poet. Member of the Institute of Catalan Studies, academician at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts and editor of *La Revista* between 1925 and 1936.

*Alieu realitat
i somnis de poesia
on vostre pinzell ens guia
enyors d'haver retornat.
No cal a vostra pintura
el bateig de cap tocom:
basta un sol i mateix nom
a fantasia i natura.
Contra-Baedecker¹⁴² feliç
dels viatges del poeta:
vos, en la vostra paleta,
n'acoloriu el somris.*

*[Farewell reality
and dreams of poetry
where your brush guides us
to longings of having returned.
Your painting is in no need
of the baptism of any place:
one and the same name is enough
for fantasy and nature.
The happy anti-Baedecker
of the poet's travels:
you, in your palette,
put colour into his smile.]*

This writer was a regular gallery visitor in those years, and liked to present the artists with short poems interpreting their works. On the one hand, the critic remarked: "A painter with a robust personality, who offers the unique interest of a strongly encouraging plasticity";¹⁴³ and defined

During the 1950s, his "lyrical compliments", or greetings, short verses and improvised poems that he dedicated to painters when he visited their exhibitions, became famous. Many of these visits were recorded in his *Dietari 1929-1959*, published in 1999 by Curial i Publicacions of the Abbey of Montserrat.

¹⁴² The *Baedecker* travel guides, published between 1828 and 1945 in German, French and English, were very popular and an important reference for travellers due to their thoroughly researched information and accurate maps.

¹⁴³ *El Correo Catalán*, 24 October 1955.

his character as “serious and poised, in cool, dense colours; light and optimistic in lively intonations”.¹⁴⁴ Carlos Rojas wrote: “In all his paintings, Morató Aragonés leaves the indelible imprint of his mastery as a draftsman and his profound interpretative capacity. [...] In contrast to so many de-personalized, hieratical and chilly versions of Paris that we have had to endure for too many years, we will never cease to admire his interpretation of the docks of the Seine, imbued with restlessness, drive and poetry”.¹⁴⁵ Both Rafael Manzano, in *Solidaridad Nacional*, on 29 October, and J. Benet, in *Revista*, on 2 November, highlighted two sections of the exhibition: the oils, mostly figures, which they felt lacked “morbidity”, volumetric and structural values, and his drawings (including watercolours and oils on paper), which they found “admirable, with a very powerful descriptive and evocative value” (Manzano) and “circumscribed in a graceful and dapper graphic [...] of strokes cut through by well-arranged stains of colour with undeniable taste” (Benet); Lience highlighted his “plasticity of musical feeling” in *El Mundo Deportivo*, on 29 October, and Marsá wrote in *El Correo Catalán*, also on 29 October: “Expressive singularity with a strong evocative breath. [...] Realism appears attenuated by a slight poetic concordance that is barely perceptible but enormously emotional. [...] It is advisable to pay the utmost attention to this painter’s name, who is on an upward trajectory of positive and abundant achievements”.

Indeed, in those years of so much moving around, Morató found paper to be a great support that meant he could carry a large number of works in a folder. The folders were approximately 55 x 40 cm and were his inseparable companion on all his art outings and trips. It should also be mentioned that oil painting on paper – a technique he only used in the 1950s and 1960s because it saved him the inconvenience of using canvas – despite suffering from the deterioration inherent in this medium in the long term (oxidation, changes of tone and darkening of the paper), was a very rewarding and quick-drying technique. Morató felt very comfortable with this medium and managed to achieve a language that, by the end of the decade, with the incorporation of all he had learnt in Paris, would be syncretic and brilliant.

The following year, at the III Provincial Art Competition of Reus, held at the Reading Centre, Morató submitted two works, *Gypsies* and *Nude*, and won the prize for the best painting for the latter, which the *Diario Español* newspaper said was influenced by Mallaol Suazo. The nude was not, however, a recurring theme for Morató and the few nudes he painted all corresponded to his early period. We can find them in the late 1940s in some of his compositions, many of which related to the world of theatre and show business – they have a hint of Josep Mompou – and in

¹⁴⁴ CORTÉS, J. “Morató Aragonés in Argos”. *La Vanguardia Española*, 4 November 1955.

¹⁴⁵ ROJAS, Carlos. “Morató Aragonés”. *Momento*, 3 November 1955.

the 1950s in several works and the series he produced of the model Júlia, who appears in the title of some of these paintings. What is worth noting is the non-sensual nature of the nudes, devoid of any sexual connotation. Quite the opposite: they are extremely refined and elegant portrayals of women, somewhat in the manner of Joaquim Sunyer – there is also an affinity with Sunyer in his treatment of greens and trees as rather compact masses. Morató did not paint women but rather forms, or perhaps idealizations, so the women ended up being simply an excuse for chromatic and compositional play. With regard to the absence of nudes after a certain period, in the 1990s he explained to me what might have been the reason for definitively abandoning nudes as a pictorial subject. It seems that he painted a series of them and my mother, on seeing them, was so offended (they were only recently married) that she said almost as a curse “I hope you don’t sell any of them!” And since he didn’t sell any, my father was so dismayed that he didn’t paint any more.¹⁴⁶

In March he held an exhibition with Puiggalí Clavell at the Initiative and Tourism Union in Tarragona, where he presented eight Italian landscapes, five figure paintings, and two interiors from Paris. Marcelo Riera said of them on Radio Tarragona:

He comes to us with a very comprehensive set of resources and a bright, clear vision of the Italian landscape, mainly around Venice and Naples, managing to offer us a bold and contrasting impression of the atmosphere with a flowing palette of tones. The Paris interiors are a pleasant surprise for the eyes, harmonious in colour and very modern in design, as well as the drawings that demonstrate an admirable technical background and, especially, an enviable quality of simplification in the quest for magnificent effects of agility and movement of forms.¹⁴⁷

In an interview with Castillo for the Tarragona newspaper *Diario Español* we find some of his concerns and a clarification of what most impressed him in Italy and Paris:

I studied at the *Hermanos de las Escuelas Cristianas* school in Tarragona. I remember that almost immediately after I wore my first long trousers I exhibited there. That would have been in 1941 [...] with much more success than today; the exhibition

¹⁴⁶ In 2005 he painted a composition entitled *Painting Class* which included a model, but the forms are so stylized that it cannot really be considered a nude.

¹⁴⁷ Marcelo Riera Güell. Radio Tarragona, 3 March 1956.

attracted a lot of visitors, but the paintings are still there. [...] From Italy, I remember the Naples Museum. I was impressed by Giotto in Assisi, and also in Padua. And I very much liked the blessed Fra Angélico, whose paintings I saw in the convent of San Marcos in Florence. [...] In Paris I was very pleased by a modern painter, Marc Chagall, a symbolist painter. [...] Every painting excites me. There is no recipe in painting; if there were, I think it would cease to be art. [...] I am in search of an interpretative painting of what I experience, everything I see, but not in an objective way, rather of what I feel. [...] I think the time has come, after so many tests in one way or another, to devote myself to things of greater scope.¹⁴⁸

On the occasion of the September 1956 exhibition at the Dintel gallery in Santander, the critic Benet Aurell had this to say at the presentation:

Like so many others, he started with that Luminist Impressionism that predominated the years of his training. He has clearly gone beyond this style today, achieving a more schematic and transfigured formulation, but without relinquishing its essentially realist background. Morató's merit lies precisely in this sympathy with the spirit of the great modern universal movements without falling into the limitations of overly sectarian mimicry. He has achieved a balance between intuition and speculation. [...] He is equally proficient in oils and watercolours, and his edgy graphic sketches demonstrate the intensity and suggestive lightness of his strokes. The artist reaches, however, the maximum schematic vibrancy in his magnificent oil paintings on paper, radiant with light and grace.

His oils already evinced the personality that would always, with some variations, define him to the end and this was confirmed by the Reus writer Antoni Correig in the *Semanario Reus* weekly on 15 December 1956:

He returns in a certain way to the Romantic, to flat painting, indulging in forms subjected to a spiritual agreement, expressed by the firmness of the structures, which is equivalent to the solidity in the drawing. And in this, colour appears, which plays a

¹⁴⁸ CASTILLO. "Quién y Qué: Morató Aragonés" ("Who and What: Morató Aragonés"), *Diario Español*, 11 March 1956.

very important role in his art, since its values, served by rich ranges of austere tone, transcribe the plastic emotion that the painter wishes to communicate.

On cafés, figures and landscapes

The café, as a portrait of an era, through which Morató captured specific social realities, was also a workshop for artistic experimentation, primarily because it included the concepts of both landscape (urban) and figure. The female figures of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s were a mirror of styles and fashions as they reflected the way people on the streets dressed at that time. Morató, as well as focusing on the everyday life around him, perused fashion magazines (and kept clippings) in search of hairstyles, dresses and hats that he could use in his compositions. If we look closely, we can see in his works characteristic elements of Chanel, Yves Saint-Laurent, Pertegaz and Dior, who were at that time the height of modern, elegant fashion.

The scenarios in which the painter moved were the real frames in which he captured and constructed everyday scenes (the spectacle of life), in which his protagonists, men and women, waited, drank coffee or read the newspaper. The attitudes of the characters would always be the same, but they reflected different social realities.

In terms of figures, over time Morató would establish a definitive, timeless canon for the clothing of his female figures. The women no longer reflected reality but rather a mental space, non-existent, with characters anchored in stereotypical styles of dresses and hats which were the ones the painter liked, and served him exclusively for focusing on the resolution of compositional structures and pictorial and chromatic qualities. The women, despite retaining their contemplative poses, ceased to be real women to become, as he himself explained to me, theatrical dolls with faces and arms made of cardboard – with their own life, like Pinocchio – who were the extras necessary for an atmosphere full of chromatic sensations. This tendency to present “*pepes*”, as he called them, in a specific period (identifiable by the exaggerated almost circus-like blush on their cheeks) would gradually disappear in the early 1980s, until reaching a figure that in actual fact was a landscape with soul, an emotion that was embodied with features recognizable to the eye.

There was one character that Morató included from time to time who remained unchanged over the years: the naval marine in the typical costume of the 1930s and 1940s, who we find in many of his café scenes from the 1950s and 1960s and occasionally in some of the later ones. These were the sailors who docked in Barcelona and frequented the taverns and inns of the Ribera

district (such as Agut)¹⁴⁹, and remained in his paintings like time travellers to remind us that we are, in fact, standing before a nostalgic window into the past.

I always found it noticeable that in many of his landscapes Morató maintained the testimonial – and anecdotal – presence of humans when, pictorially speaking, he could easily have done without it. We may find the odd solitary figure, but usually they are in groups of two people, always the same, placed there as if to show that behind a landscape there is a story that is not just that of the painter.

The French critic Claude Magnan referred to this as follows:

Sometimes, fleeting silhouettes emerge to soften the impressive solitude magnified by the painter, thin shadows pressed against façades, an umbrella crossing a rainy square, women in hats chatting on a street corner, a peasant hunched over on the path to his farm, walkers lost in thought along the pathways of a park ...¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Cal Agut opened in 1924 as a tavern and inn and over the years it became a benchmark of traditional Catalan cuisine.

¹⁵⁰ MAGNAN, Claude. *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània...*, p. 51.

Forming a family

In 1956, at one of the Carnival dances held at the Reus Circle, Morató met the woman who would become his wife a year later: Montserrat Pàmies Cavallé, from a well-known Reus family.¹⁵¹ Montserrat, who worked as her father's accounting assistant at Cal Coder,¹⁵² explained that the only painting in her house was a reproduction of the Virgin Mary by Murillo, and that when she saw Josep Maria's works in the 1956 exhibition at the Reading Centre (she went to the opening with a group of girlfriends) they caught her attention. As painters were regarded as little more than starving wastrels with a rather dubious reputation, especially in certain circles, at the beginning of their relationship Josep Maria had to send letters to Montserrat at a PO box. After overcoming a few obstacles put up by her family, they married on 23 April 1957 at the Sanctuary of Mercy in Reus and held the wedding banquet at the Gran Hotel de Londres,¹⁵³ the favoured venue of the Reus bourgeoisie at that time. Immediately afterwards, the couple set up house in the apartment on Carrer de Monistrol in Barcelona.

In 1957 and 1958 he returned to work part-time as an advertising designer to be able to afford these lifestyle changes. By day he painted in the studio and in the evenings he drew at home for

¹⁵¹ Montserrat's father was Josep M. Pàmies Llevat, who had a manor house and farmland in Maspujols, and her mother was Nieves Cavallé Pla, who owned the Cal Coder establishment. Morató's father-in-law was a man with an extremely tough and inflexible character, the result of certain social trends and the experiences he underwent in the 1930s when, in addition to having his house at 9 San Llorenç Street, in Reus ransacked and his possessions burned in a bonfire in the middle of the street (in that house of nine siblings, every room was decorated with the image of a saint), search and capture posters had been put up about him because of his status as treasurer and member of the Catholic Action Board. During that perilous time for people of his status, he lived in Maspujols and came down to Reus every day to work by bicycle (so as not to arouse suspicions, since he had a Hispano Suiza motor car that would later be confiscated). On one of those mornings he spotted the poster on the side of the road and immediately turned tail and organized his escape to France together with the priest, his cousin Higiní Anglès Pàmies. Once in France their paths diverged: Higiní went to Rome and Josep Maria returned to Spain after a few months. It was he who, after the war, in 1940, as the treasurer/president of the Precious Blood Congregation, commissioned Modest Gené to make a sculpture of the Holy Christ to replace the one that had been burned in the riots of 1936. Whatever the case, Josep Maria Pàmies never approved of Morató and never lifted a finger to help him. Yet, as so often happens, this antipathy towards his son-in-law turned into love for his grandchildren. My grandfather never admitted that he had been mistaken about my father, but somehow he planned a symbolic act of contrition: he instructed my grandmother to buy a picture from me when I held my first exhibition, which was in Reus one year after his death. I immediately understood the gesture and explained it to my father (who was not exactly convinced). This tender though tough grandfather taught me from a very young age (I must have been six or seven) the value of your word and a promise with an action that I never forgot: when I spent a few days with them at Maspujols, he made me accompany him on his daily round of the farmlands, where at a certain time the course of the irrigation water had to be changed; with his watch in his hand, at the appointed time, he moved the stone so the water would flow onto his neighbour's land. I asked him: "Why don't you leave it for a little longer, if no-one can see us?" And he answered categorically: "This is sacred".

¹⁵² Casa Coder, a landmark establishment in Reus, was a drugstore founded in 1790 which was passed down from generation to generation through to the end of the twentieth century.

¹⁵³ It was renamed in 1939 as the Hotel España, but people still referred to it by its former name.

the agency, as Montserrat recalled. In August, however, we find Josep Maria back in Paris, in the studio on Rue Campagne Première. There was no way he could miss this rendezvous with the French capital, as it was *mana* for spirits hungry for art. Their daughter Maria Elena was born in February 1958, and in June 1959 he travelled to the French capital again, this time with his wife but without their daughter. They stayed at the Hotel Providence and threw themselves into experiencing the City of Light to the full – cafés, art and music. The soundtrack to this period was provided by the nostalgic *chansons* of *vieux* Paris, the Mediterranean airs of Marino Marini, Renato Carosone and the San Remo Festival, the jazz of Sidney Bechet from his Parisian era, the *cuplés* of Marujita Díaz and Sarita Montiel, the Line Renaud band, the intellectualism of Gilbert Bécaud, the wonderful soundtrack of the *Orfeu Negro*, Jack Hammer's twists and Jorge Veiga's samba dedicated to Brigitte Bardot, one of Morató's muses for many years. An extremely evocative and vibrant musical universe.

In addition to all this, the dual nature of his work, straddling traditional and modern, was highlighted on the occasion of his 1959 exhibition at Sala Busquets (together with Jordi Puiggalí) by critics such as Àngel Marsà and Lina Font:

He manages to infuse his painting with a lyrical spirit and an evocative grace that places it at the forefront of current concepts, while still maintaining an incorruptible fidelity to the pictorial formulation of deeper and more essential traditional roots.¹⁵⁴

Without losing his racial spirit, his Mediterranean roots, Morató Aragonés's work reflects the human pulse of universality, gathered with the breadth of horizons of someone who, like him, is an inveterate traveller and a creative spirit, open to all understanding. [...] The palette is contained within a muted chromatic range. [...] He achieves a highly up-to-date way of expressing himself within expressionism devoid of extreme pathos and without relinquishing any of the basic determinants of timeless painting. [...] He looks for an expressive synthesis that summarizes the meaning of the real forms by means of suppressing all accessory elements, and always in pursuit of the maximum plastic essentiality.¹⁵⁵

Rafael Manzano alluded to his oils on paper, highlighting them for their fresh and vivid colours, "full of a very French winged grace",¹⁵⁶ which, when transferred to canvas, would turn greyer

¹⁵⁴ MARSÀ, Àngel. *Gaceta de las Artes*, 7 February 1959.

¹⁵⁵ FONT, Lina. Radio Barcelona, February 1959. Typed copy (AMA).

¹⁵⁶ MANZANO, R. *El Noticiero Universal*, February 1959.

and heavier. F. Lience, in *El Mundo Deportivo*, associated his “vigorous drawing” with the decorative sentiment of Grau Sala (whose style was described by Sebastià Gasch as “fragrant and poetic”¹⁵⁷) and with the “Japanese principle adapted to the Western ideal”.¹⁵⁸

In August 1959, the IV National Painting and Drawing Competition organized by Amposta Town Council was held, where he won the First Painting Medal for his work *Casa Perrin* and an honourable mention for his drawing *Apuntes*. If we analyse the works done in Paris, we can see a big difference between 1954 and 1959. He is a different painter, without a doubt. He had internalized the teachings of the pioneers of modernity, taking on their challenges and starting to develop a new language of synthesis.

In this way, finalizing the stage of learning that we might call “of the streets”, Paris and Italy were the two poles that provided Morató with the necessary elements to find his own vocabulary and a style that would be the result of a fusion of opposing trends: naturalism and abstraction. These were the years that would usher in the era of ultramarine and Prussian blues, of dark, dense and earthy colours with tremendous expressive power that would be accentuated during this decade. As the critic Grafim would say: “The colour and the subject matter are due to the abstract influence; the rationalization of his landscapes, to Cubism”.¹⁵⁹

During those years he entered for many awards throughout Catalonia, winning a good number of them. The calls also enabled him to meet other painters and escape from the creative solitude of his studio from time to time.

In September he won the first prize for oil painting at the III International Rossa Prize for Rapid Painting. Tossa de Mar, that *Babel of the Arts* by Rafael Benet,¹⁶⁰ was unquestionably a magnet for many painters. Apart from the undeniable appeal of this spot on the Costa Brava, there was the added attraction that during the interwar period many European artists lived there (Marc Chagall, André Masson, Georges Kars, Olga Sacharoff, etc.), whose works would form the embryo of the Tossa Municipal Museum, opened in 1935. The baton was then picked up by groups of Catalan artists from the following two generations, including Créixams, Bosch Roger, Francesc Serra, Casanovas, Lloveras, Ricart Serra and many more.

In December he exhibited at the Reading Centre, mainly paintings of Paris, some figures, and some scenes of Tossa, Montblanc, Setcases and Segovia. José Banús remarked:

¹⁵⁷ Reproduced in *Grau Sala*. Bilbao: La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, 1975 (Maestros actuales de la pintura y escultura catalana; 12).

¹⁵⁸ LIENCE, F. *El Mundo Deportivo*, February 1959.

¹⁵⁹ GRAFIM. *Baleares*, 11 February 1973.

¹⁶⁰ BENET, Rafael. “Tossa, Babel de les Arts” (“Tossa: Babel of the Arts”), in *Art*: a publication of the Municipal Art Exhibition Board, vol. II, issue 1 (October 1934).

[...] Without completely abandoning his style, some kind of influence from the pictorial movements and concerns of this period emerges. [...] The vivid and cheerful colours, occasionally strident, show a very bold conception and realization. The restlessness he portrays is extraordinary, and expresses a vehement desire to imbue his current production with the yearnings of the moment. Morató Aragonés paints for today's generation. [...] When a painter knows how to turn his style around with the aplomb and success of Morató Aragonés, it is a sign that he is a complete artist of great merit.¹⁶¹

And Antoni Correig said:

Morató's painting is an admirable example of a process that is growing in intensity. [...] Sensitive to what constructivism represents in today's trends, Morató Aragonés is constantly in motion with complete independence of spirit, guided by a well-defined aesthetic ideal that leads him to the conquest of a style, "his" style, which is entirely personal. [...] Paris, where our accomplished artist found the ambience and the themes that could best help him to reveal his pictorial possibilities. Certainly, through the greyish atmosphere of the *Barrios Populares* (working-class neighbourhoods), Morató has discovered a wealth of colour that is reflected in his canvases with prodigious nuances. [...] He thinks more about lightening than accumulating, so that his expressive media can reach full efficacy. [...] And while the canvases delve into depth, in search of plastic transcendence, the oil paintings on paper have the freshness and agility of what has been captured for visual charm, by means of simple and unerring insinuations full of suggestive charge. Morató is not a slave to chromatic accident like the Impressionists, but demonstrates great freedom in his interpretations of nature, which corresponds to his lyrical temperament, interested in the essentials of the subject. We can confirm that the current exhibition is one of the best that has been presented in this venue.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ BANÚS, José. "Carnet Reusense". *Diario Español*, 10 December 1959.

¹⁶² CORREIG, Antoni. *Reus. Semanario de la Ciudad*, 12 December 1959.

De la Fuente Torrón, in an interview, spoke of “a special tinge of sadness that impresses” in his painting, and got him to reveal some of the secrets to his pictorial conception:

De la Fuente Torrón: Do you suffer when you paint?

Morató Aragonés: I find myself in a state that is neither suffering nor enjoyment. When I finish the painting, I realize I have not been aware of anything.

FT: I'd like to show you a painting that represents a scene from a Parisian tavern, with languid, sad women. Why do you seek out these types of women?

MA: The women in the poor bars better reflect their interior. The ones in elegant bars know how to hide it.

FT: Do you disdain technique?

MA: I try to suppress any concern about a finger, an arm or any other trait. Of course, that doesn't mean I disdain technique. What I look for is a free technique, which seems thoughtless but is not.

FT: Why don't you do more agreeable paintings?

MA: I avoid it, because I find this type more attractive.

[...]

FT: Do you think the world understands your painting?

MA: Yes, it's becoming more widely understood. A few years ago people used to say my painting was too modern. They don't say that any more.

FT: Does it pain you that the world around you is sad?

MA: The truth is that I find it attractive.

[...]

FT: Are you tired of everything?

MA: No, I feel very optimistic.

FT: Are those who find your painting a little strange correct?

MA: I find it very classical, though others say it is very much ahead of its time.

[...]

FT: What are you like?

MA: Free. I don't want to be constrained by technique or form.

FT: Do you have the authority to say that?

MA: I have already reached my own conclusion.¹⁶³

Indeed, Morató had reached a point at which what we might call “early maturity” had begun to emerge, in which the main characteristics of his personal and recognizable language were already defined. Despite the fact that his work would still evince changes in colour and workmanship, the structure and the themes would remain fixed.

The construction stage would be fully resolved thanks to a good friend with whose assistance he was able to make another trip to Paris. It was then that he was in a position to buy his first car. Those last years of the decade were crucial in that a series of circumstances took place that would define and set his career on track in a particular direction (in this case, geographical), with his definitive consolidation in the world of painting and the achievement of consolidated recognition by the critics of that time.

Morató had to decide at the end of the 1950s whether to move to Paris or stay in Catalonia. He had received a job offer from a Parisian company in the advertising industry¹⁶⁴ which would have enabled him to enter a market coveted by any painter. In a way, he had to choose between dream and reality, and the reality was that in the lapse during the crossing of letters (including a postal error), his sales were starting to go well and, with his newly formed family, embarking on an uncertain path did not convince him. Xavier Amorós spoke about it in 1980:

Morató preferred to stay and become an artist of petit-bourgeois habits, seeking, nevertheless, the recognition of his artistic adventure in the much more attenuated setting – in terms of impact, compared to Paris – that was Barcelona. For those who thirsted for the bohemian lifestyle and freedom, the decision seemed incomprehensible. [...] Having given it some thought, it is very clear that what made him stay in Barcelona, in Catalonia, close to Reus and Cornudella, was his decided preference for its landscapes and its true setting.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ DE LA FUENTE TORRÓN, Daniel. “Quién y qué: Morató Aragonés” (“Who and what: Morató Aragonés”), *Diario Español*, 11 December 1959, p. 12

¹⁶⁴ Through the French painter and publicist Paul A. Rousset Pernez, whom he met at the exhibition held at the Argos gallery in September 1952, Morató came into contact with the Paris agency of fellow artist Roger-Louis Dupuy (AMA).

¹⁶⁵ AMORÓS, Xavier. *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània...*, p. 48.

In Barcelona, Morató came into contact with a key player in the Barcelona artistic scene, the dynamic, multifaceted art promoter Baldomer Xifré Morros.¹⁶⁶ Xifré collaborated over the course of several decades with many galleries (Argos, Mirador, Rovira, Galerías Layetanas, Grifé & Escoda, etc.), organizing exhibitions and showcasing the work of young artists not just from Catalonia but from all over Spain and even abroad. Xifré was a facilitator of sorts, and was part of the social and artistic gatherings that took place, for example, at the Agut restaurant on Carrer d'en Gignàs in Barcelona. A whole bunch of artists of the time went there, many of whom exchanged their paintings for meals, which the proprietor Mr Castellví, a true art enthusiast, used to hang on the walls.¹⁶⁷

Although he did not take part, like some of his colleagues, in the regular gatherings of the Maillol Circle, the *Associació d'Artistes Actuals* (Contemporary Artists Association) or the different groups that were established during those years, Morató maintained links with other painters in the strictly personal sense of the *tertúlia*, or informal gathering. To some extent he wanted to preserve his artistic freedom without feeling constrained by any approach that would limit his intuition and his desire. This is why we do not see his name in some of the exhibitions which, over the years, have become benchmarks for understanding a certain period, where it seems strange not to find his work. In the same way, we now realize that Morató was the victim of the “and others” effect, whereby in various studies made of his generation a number of artists are named (participants in an exhibition or an event, for example) while his name disappears in the catch-all term “others”, which was reproduced in successive referenced texts.

The sixties: an evolution that ruptured languages

The 1960s was the decade in which Morató reached a peak in his pictorial career, rewarded by numerous awards and distinctions everywhere, especially Catalonia. This was when he reached the limits of his figurative work, without actually relinquishing it, and started using the palette knife as his main tool to the detriment of the paintbrush, which became residual.

The year 1960, when his son Jordi was born, marked a change in a style that had already been in transition since the mid-1950s and which, with his trip to Paris in 1959, was definitively defined and channelled. Here we should highlight the fact that there was a notable fork in his career at the end of this decade, because the success he achieved with the boom in portrait commissions (especially ladies and children) meant that in this particular genre he would

¹⁶⁶ See his career in the blog created by his daughter Judith: <https://xifremorros.blogspot.com>

¹⁶⁷It seems the deal was a month of lunches in exchange for a painting. The room is still decorated today, like a museum, with paintings by many significant painters from that time.

maintain an elegant, restrained style, very much to the taste of his clientele, along the lines of a Mallol Suazo or an Armand Miravalls. On the other hand, his personal painting, including figure painting that was not commissioned, experienced a 180-degree turnaround at the beginning of the 1960s; we are not talking here about an evolution but rather a rupture. The changes, the trials that his painterly spirit demanded of him, his refusal to settle for the easy way, instead choosing freedom of approach and execution, gave rise to visual trends that caused something of a scandal among the public, a case in point being his women with red or blue hair.

In May we find him taking part in the National Exhibition of Fine Arts organized by the Ministry of Education in the National Palace of Barcelona. He was awarded numerous prizes, including medals of honour and first, second and third placings (seventeen State prizes, twenty-five provincial ones, and twenty-three council ones). The published catalogue, featuring black and white reproductions of works by 69 of the 633 artists taking part, provides a wonderful graphic testimony of the fascinating pictorial movement of those years, where excellent artists of the most varied movements converged, whether figurative, abstract or crossover.

When, in February 1960, he exhibited at Bernad de Castelló and the favourable review published in issue 118 of the weekly *La Plana* said: "It reminds us somewhat of his spiritual kinship, whether occasional or certain, with the school of Santapau", Morató published a rectification: "The review of my current exhibition contains an error, and because I consider it to be fundamental I wish to make it clear that I do not agree with being included in this "school", because were this the case I could never express my feelings and every brushstroke would be a wound to my sensitivity".

Lina Font, on the occasion of Morató's exhibition at Mirador de Barcelona, said:

A painter of unequivocal and robust personality, his intelligent and restrained plastic conception is not sufficiently valued in our artistic circles, despite its excellence. Perhaps this is due to his independence, his withdrawn and isolated comportsment. This is a painter who works outside of groups and movements, locked in his own personal studio environment. [...] Dense painting, with a serious expressive intent, unequivocal and structured. [...] In his oils (still lifes, landscapes and figures) lies the essence of the object, because there is a solid architecture that maintains its essential values intact, and the subject matter, which the painter likes to recreate with delight, is rich in qualities and subtle impasto, dainty and nurtured like a jewel.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ FONT, Lina. *Estampa de Arte*. Radio Barcelona, 28 October 1960. Typed copy (AMA).

It is true, as Lina Font points out, that Morató was very much about “him and his paintings”. His personality had this dual aspect very well compartmentalized: the personal and the pictorial. At a time when it seemed that if you were not part of a group you were nobody, or you didn’t count – theoretical stances helped critics to craft their discourses – he followed his own path, dictated by his own experience with painting, without worrying about being part of anything. This pictorial individuality (which to a certain extent harmed him in terms of media coverage) was accompanied, paradoxically, by intense social activity in the form of social gatherings in the few moments of leisure he allowed himself. Morató was one of those people who had a perfectly organized day: he used to get up at five or six in the morning and have his first coffee. He would then go to the studio and work until lunchtime. Then he would meet up with members of his social circles before returning to the studio for an afternoon session. On the evenings when there was an inauguration, he would be there to support his friends without fail, and when he returned home he always had something to do in the study. As a child, I watched him countless times at home stretching canvases, framing pictures using wooden slats and sticking gummed paper on the back (quite a ritual), carving out linoleum or large erasers to make a small engraving or Christmas greeting card. Or else, when cutting cardboard to make picture mats (called *paspartú* in Catalan):

“Daddy, what are you doing?”

“I’m making a *paspartú*.” (In Catalan, this sounds like “pass for you”.)

“For me?”

“No, it’s just that it’s called a *paspartú*.”

“For me?”

...

The 1960s were among the most productive of times for Morató, changing the way he worked, which had already been shaped during the second half of the previous decade, as mentioned earlier. He restricted his forays abroad due to irregular sales, which forced him to question the wisdom of frequent trips across Europe. Nevertheless, this meant that he managed to achieve greater economic and professional stability. The fact of cancelling a planned trip with Casaus, just after the I Sant Pol Painting Competition (1961), led to a series of prizes and commissions

(mainly portraits), after which his working pattern became more fluid. Indeed, it was during this decade that he won the most prizes and awards.

Thus, in September 1961 he won the second prize for painting at the IV Montblanc Art Biennale, and exhibited at the Reus Circle. The weekly *Semanario de la Ciudad* featured two reviews on his work: Domingo Blay, looking back over his twenty years of dedication to art, said on 25 November: "He has earned an indisputable position in Catalan painting. And that place has been won by battling against the current". And on 2 December, Antoni Correig wrote:

His art has found an admirable point of balance whereby his great pictorial faculties and the sensibilities of our era come together in perfect harmony, from which he has captured its finest essences [...]. As isolated from non-figurative trends as he is from the cold maintenance of realist traditions, he stands at a centre of equilibrium, deserving to be cited as a classic of our time.

The change of era also manifested itself in a change of studio: shortly after Aguilar Moré left the studio on Rosselló Street, he rented a top floor (actually an attic) at number 3 Rambla de Catalunya, almost on the corner of the square of the same name. It was not a very large space, with a floor of old wooden planks that creaked when you walked on them, very much in line with what you would expect of a bohemian painter, but where he worked tirelessly and planned the means of publicizing his own creations. I now think that the space itself favoured, to a certain extent, Morató's full and dense painting of those years. The Reus photographer Josep Ornosa Soler, a relative of Montserrat, took a photograph of him in 1962 (one assumes in this same studio) which was presented at the XXXVIII International Photography Exhibition in Zaragoza.

In 1962 his son Rafael was born and he held two exhibitions, also winning several prizes. José Banús said: "Morató's painting, which is excellent, gives me the impression that he has been able to take advantage of the finest of modern painting and apply it to the classical mould".¹⁶⁹ The catalogue for the December exhibition at the Estil de València gallery said:

Morató Aragonés' painting is an admirable example of a process that gradually increases in intensity, strength and expressive power. Conscious of the most pressing problems of pictorial art, the vocation of this young creator knows how to deal with

¹⁶⁹ BANÚS, José. "Carnet Reusense". *Diario Español*, 7 July 1962.

them with an intrepid, humble spirit [...]. He moves with complete independence of spirit, guided by a well-defined aesthetic ideal that leads him to the conquest of a style, “his” style, completely personal.

On top of this, it seemed that the fervour for Paris had subsided a little among painters, because on 8 November Lloveras wrote the following to him:

Dear Morató: I arrived a week ago. I have already painted a lot. As always, it’s wonderful and the autumn is very beautiful. I wish you were here, you are the best of companions. Let’s see if another time we can make it together. I hardly see anyone I know. Paris is as it always was, but the people seem changed. Well, time flies of course. However, the cafés look lovely and I’m doing some sketches. I’m at Échaudé until the twentieth. Best regards to your wife.¹⁷⁰

Thus in the midst of awards and exhibitions, Morató’s family life continued between Barcelona and Reus. Barcelona’s Gràcia neighbourhood still had a kind of village atmosphere. The small, narrow street of Monistrol was two-way and you could park on either side (the regulation of changing the parking side every fifteen days came later on). It had a grocery where they sold blocks of ice and a farm where they had a cow and sold two types of milk. During the annual festival in August, the street was decorated and closed to traffic so the residents could hold their traditional brotherhood supper. On the corner of Còrsega and Santa Tecla streets there was a popular family-run restaurant, Cal Batista, where the family used to go to eat paella and cannelloni on Sundays, and we children were treated to the most celebrated dessert of that time: *pijama* (a concoction of crème caramel, canned fruit and ice cream). Another classic Sunday restaurant was the 7 Portes, where we would meet up with Uncle Rafael and the children were given one of Calleja’s short stories, which we loved collecting. Traditions like that of the *tió* (Christmas log), which in country villages were collected in the woods, required a little more creativity in our house. Our *tió* was a character who appeared on the balcony, knocking on it for us to open the doors. And it wasn’t a log but the work bench disguised in the most original ways – “Don’t touch its blanket” my mother used to say – which evolved from the orthodox to genuinely performative presentations: the face might be an old paella pan or a piece of

¹⁷⁰ Correspondence (AMA).

cardboard painted Picasso-style, with hair made from waste material as if it were a totem pole. My parents had great fun creating those Christmas logs.

It is interesting, thinking about the symbolism of certain things or circumstances, to remember, when I was small, our perception of our family's financial straits. I vaguely remember that the Three Kings brought me a storybook, a notebook for drawing and a small box of six Alpino pencils; realizing that at school a little girl could have an *ensaimada* pastry for breakfast every day seemed to me the height of luxury (we used to eat bread with chocolate, quince jelly or *sobrassada*). I guess I started turning these little everyday things around in my mind, so one day – when I must have been seven or eight years old – I asked my father directly: “Dad, why are we poor?” and with all the composure in the world he replied “If I had wanted to be rich or have money, I would have gone into business, but I chose painting because it is what I like to do”. His answer seemed so overwhelmingly logical that I thought that, if this had been a voluntary decision, there was nothing more I could say. I was so impressed by his reasoning that I still remember it today. And with his studio, it was a similar thing; when I realized it was on Plaça de Catalunya, I thought: “Oh! My father is an important painter!” And that made me feel really happy.

In Reus we spent many summers at Aunt Encarnació's house, from where our parents took us to Salou beach on the old wooden *Carrilet* train that looked as if it were straight out of the Wild West, loaded with the parasol, the beach chairs, the beach towels and the lunch box full of omelettes and flatbreads for lunch. Shortly afterwards, Morató bought his first car, the ineffable and glorious SEAT 600, which (if you included the trunk) could fit everything: children, suitcases and the caged parakeets. This gave the family greater mobility, travelling from Barcelona to Reus on certain dates and going on Sunday outings to have lunch in the pinewoods of Castelldefels, the thermal waters of Caldetes, to Montserrat and other lovely villages around Catalonia. We were the typical family as portrayed in many of the *Familia Ulises* cartoons that used to be published by the ubiquitous *TBO*.

In 1964, Morató returned to Paris and this also marked the beginning of an era that would last a little over ten years: that of the Grifé & Escoda gallery in Barcelona, which, as he explained, was “when I showed some of the best things I've done that went almost unnoticed at the time”. Joan Cortés, who presented the catalogue, said: “Without having anything to do with Luminism, in his paintings luminosity plays the leading role [...]. The brushwork plays at seeking textural effects in the timely use of the pigment mordant, in the overlaying of strokes, in scumbling and

underpainting, enriching the material of the canvas through its sensitive application”, speaking of “the refined maturity that his expression has reached”.

Morató entered La Grifé (as painters called it) through a group exhibition at its gallery in Palma, almost by chance, but he immediately became part of its team of permanent painters. The exhibition held there in October was permeated with themes from the French capital, with a clear predilection for the blue and violet colour range. The palette knife technique (which was neither simple nor especially common) was also one of the main appeals of his work during this period, and would be one of the defining characteristics of his style for many years. The palette knife propitiated progressive geometrization that would give his work a forcefulness on the boundaries of figuration, as the critics remarked, and at the same time allowed the painter to revel in the creation of textures and chromatic combinations that required a high degree of skill. With the palette knife he unravelled forms but kept the essence, he played with the fills, making the pictorial matter another element of his language. This geometrization led him to create increasingly cerebral works, bringing to the fore his concern for formal and technical perfection. The identification of Morató Aragonès’ name with the palette knife painting process would last until a few years after the artist gradually returned to the more widespread use of the brush in the mid-1970s.

That year’s exhibition (and henceforward all his exhibitions) would receive a lot of coverage in the press, garnering favourable reviews from the critics of that time: Santos Torroella, Lina Font, Rafael Manzano, Fernando Gutiérrez, Joan Cortés and Joan Gich. Many years later, Francesc Fontbona would speak of him as one of the landscape artists who “began to look for different approaches that would make them stand out from conventional figurativism”,¹⁷¹ and Arnau Puig, in the exhibition catalogue, wrote: “Figure and Portrait in the Iluro Foundation Art Collection”¹⁷² position Morató’s work in the type of figuration that “models based on nature”.

Even so, fully immersed in this intensive research towards an evolution (with spectacular results) of the landscape painting that he had nurtured when he first started out, Morató spent some time thinking about painting, fashions and movements and reached the conclusion that despite wanting to break away from conventions (both the old and the new), he did not want to

¹⁷¹ FONTBONA, Francesc. *El paisatge en el Fons d’Art de la Fundació Iluro* (“Landscape in the Iluro Foundation Art Collection”) [exhibition catalogue]. Mataró: Iluro Foundation, 2014.

¹⁷² PUIG, Arnau. *La figura i el retrat en el Fons d’Art de la Fundació Iluro* (“Figure and Portrait in the Iluro Foundation Art Collection”) [exhibition catalogue]. Mataró: Iluro Foundation, 2015.

relinquish that essential figurativism, either in the representation of the landscape or the portrayal of the figure.

Almost all painters want to distance themselves from the old conventions (academicism) but far fewer wish to distance themselves from the new ones (abandonment of everything that smacks of the figurative). This is how he would sum this up some time later: “Whoever works in the field of art, rather than subtracting qualities must add them. I intend to show that nowadays you can still create art using drawing and form”.¹⁷³

Among the reviews of his work, Fernando Gutiérrez said in *La Prensa*:

It has a poetic value that vacillates between mystery and reality. Shapes and colours respond to that atmosphere of soft and recent light which surrounds everything like a mystery that is starting to be revealed but will not be unveiled completely because it wishes to preserve its role. Hence he deliberately ignores violent colours, or if he is aware of them he veils them with something we might call luminous shadow. From this point too he seems to build the light, arranging it in broken nuances that are harmoniously subject to an intense chromatic lyric. The painter traces with a sure hand that geometry of lights that organize landscape and figures, as if everything had begun to emerge from the newly born morning, and halted it to preserve the pale magic of dawn.¹⁷⁴

El Mundo Deportivo commented: “The quintessence of his artistic baggage is poetic and magical, profoundly strong and prodigiously delicate”.¹⁷⁵ And Juan Cortés wrote: “A few samples of his figures, so delicately stylized, and of his still life, simple in composition and exquisite in their harmonies, without a hint of verism, accompany the main bulk of the exhibition, which consists of this genre of architectural landscapes with which the painter identifies so well”.¹⁷⁶

In *El Noticiero Universal*, Santos Torroella explained: “Morató handles the palette knife with exquisite wisdom and from it extracts subtleties of all kinds, ranging from the multiplication of nuances in the impasto to a delicate modulation of angles and edges that make each of his

¹⁷³ Included in “Introspecciones alrededor de una obra visual” (“Introspections on Visual Work”). *Morató Aragonès*. Bilbao: La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, 1979, p. 9 (Maestros actuales de la pintura y escultura catalanas; 53).

¹⁷⁴ GUTIÉRREZ, Fernando. *La Prensa*, November 1964.

¹⁷⁵ *El Mundo Deportivo*, November 1964.

¹⁷⁶ CORTÉS, Juan. *La Vanguardia*, 8 November 1964.

canvases appear to be navigated, on the surface and in depth, by formal rhythms and arrangements of great beauty”.¹⁷⁷

Àngel Marsà, in *El Correo Catalán*, said: “Morató Aragonés is a passionate painter who advances along paths where search and discovery constitute a predominant and permanent sign”.¹⁷⁸ And Corredor-Matheos wrote in *Destino*: “Dense palette-knife painting [...] A concern for light and austerity in colour. Calm and stillness in these landscapes and towns, too still [...] Care, neatness, scrupulous elaboration. Technical concern weighs more heavily over what should be emotion”.¹⁷⁹

Lina Font commented: “Serious, sober, in constant search for new pictorial elements with which to enrich his art, he has been climbing the ladder slowly and modestly, in no great hurry but at a steady pace. [...] Landscapes that are resolved with the usual restraint and intimacy so typical of him. [...] The textures, lovingly crafted, are achieved by superimposing the tone, scrapings, scratches and transparencies, always in an intimate and restrained manner”.¹⁸⁰

That year he came into contact with the recently-created IESE institute in Barcelona, which bought some of his works, and in 1966 commissioned him to paint a panoramic mural of Barcelona. Both the paintings and the sketches he made are on show in various rooms of the Institution. Through his relationship with the IESE, some of his works made their way to Harvard. The American dissemination of Morató happened during this decade through several channels. Through the Sala Parés,¹⁸¹ his work reached New York, and through Ramon Llovet, he came into contact with Benjamin W. Johnson, promoter and owner of the Left Bank restaurant on the Caribbean island of St. Thomas. Other galleries in New York and Los Angeles contacted him to request paintings, but they were mainly looking for work at very low prices. This, and the fact that he had already had a bad experience with shipping work that had been damaged in transit, cooled off his American contacts.¹⁸²

In June 1965, the first “La Punyalada” Painting Prize was announced, open to all painters, with the printer Joan Morral acting as secretary and the endorsement of Santos Torroella. Ninety

¹⁷⁷ SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. *El Noticiero Universal*, 11 November 1964.

¹⁷⁸ MARSÀ, Àngel. *El Correo Catalán*, 7 November 1964.

¹⁷⁹ CORREDOR-MATHEOS, José. *Destino*, November de 1964.

¹⁸⁰ FONT, Lina. Radio Barcelona, 9 November 1964. Typed copy (AMA).

¹⁸¹ Although having occasional contact with the gallery, Morató never exhibited there.

¹⁸² Documentation and correspondence (AMA).

artists submitted work, and the jury was made up of Joan Cortés, Grau Sala, Rossend Llates, Lloveras, Muxart, Josep M. Prim, Rodríguez Aguilera and Valls Taberner.¹⁸³

As Dr Sarró remembers: “The jury was chaired by Joan Ainaud de Lasarte. The good intentions behind setting up the prize, which was to be organized annually, came up against some conflict between members of the jury and the painters. This caused an atmosphere of general disquiet which led to the determination not to repeat the award”.¹⁸⁴ Despite significant media coverage, when the day of the dinner at La Punyalada arrived, where the presentation of the prize money of 100,000 pesetas was to take place (won by the Olot artist Josep Pujol), a few hours before the event the organisers said they did not have all the money: 50,000 pesetas were missing. There was huge consternation and, after giving it some thought, Morató offered a solution: “If anyone buys my painting, I will donate the money from the sale”, and one of the people gathered, who was not a painter, said “Very well, I’ll buy it then”, and in that way the matter was resolved.¹⁸⁵

In spite of everything, a booklet was published for the prize, with texts by Rossend Llates (“Rusiñol at La Punyalada”), Sempronio (“The Group Today”), Joan Cortés (“Martí Llauredó”) and Rafael Santos Torroella (“Pere Créixams”); the cover was by Grau Sala and inside there were reproductions of works by some of the artists: Florit, Prim, Lloveras, Morató Aragonès, Curós, Torroella, Pichot and Barnadas.¹⁸⁶

Sempronio, comparing it with those produced by Doria, Majèstic, Glaciari, Syra and the Artistic Circle, painted an accurate portrait of what this particular group was all about:

If you want to see painters in quantity, you have no choice but to go to La Punyalada. There you’ll find more than you could possibly imagine, of every age and every trend. But twinned. The abstracts, like sweetmeats, make the figurative paintings look earthy. And vice versa, when the latter want to take a look at the evening paper, the others lend you the *Ciero*¹⁸⁷ or the *Tele-eXpres*. Friendship, like eclecticism, presided over the gathering.

¹⁸³ Morató explained that the idea of creating the award came about after the success of a raffle that was held to buy a painting by Bosch Roger at the artist’s exhibition. It seems that the idea was to buy work from the artists of La Punyalada during their various exhibitions.

¹⁸⁴ Sarró acknowledges that “I can tell you about the affair even though I didn’t experience it directly, because people who were there explained it to me” (SARRÓ I PALAU, Manuel. *Penya La Punyalada. Record d’un tertulià 1976-1998*. Star-t Magazine Books, 2014, p. 24).

¹⁸⁵ Morató told me this anecdote three times in different years. The last time I wrote it down in a notebook.

¹⁸⁶ I “*La Punyalada*” *Painting Competition*. Barcelona: La Punyalada Restaurant: Barcelona City Council, 1965.

¹⁸⁷ This was the colloquial way of referring to the daily newspaper *El Noticiero Universal*.

The La Punyalada group became so porous because it had very good roots. It was founded by chance, with no transcendental purpose, by the sculptor Martí Llauradó and the painter Bosch Roger, who, as history shows, was a great mainstay of social gatherings. His good humour and Llauradó's infallible clinical eye attracted the first loyal members: Granyer, Humbert, Josep Pujol from Olot, Gustau Camps, Fluvià, Xavier Blanc, Amat the merchant, Prim, the recently deceased Créixams, who brought the atmosphere and café life of the legendary Montmartre to the gathering; the collector Farreró, Perrin and more. The painter Joan Serra and the sculptor Viladomat, both witnesses of a great period of artistic bohemia, were never too far from the embryonic social gathering.

The gathering burgeoned over the weeks and months. The second "intake" comprised Joan Morral, Jaume Martí, Planas Gallés, Aguilar Moré, Morató Aragonès, Aguilar Alcuaz, Muxart, Jordi Alumà, Lloveras, Barnadas, Curós, Sanjuan, Casaus, the art critic Rodríguez Aguilera and more. As its fame grew, new recruits kept arriving: Florit, Roca Sastre, Grau Santos and his father, Grau Sala, who came from his Parisian workshop in Montparnasse; Hernández Pijuan, Caixàs, Canyelles, Jordi Llovet, Agustí Rio, Tobal, Joan Ortínez, the writers Rossend Llates and Andreu A. Artís, the Pichot brothers, art critics Santos Torroella, Cortés Vidal and Joan Gich; architects Pratmarsó and Coderch, collector Miquel Lerin, Ventura, Monasterio, Abelló, Miquel Ibarz, Surroca, Ibars, Solé Jové, Jansana, Mundó, Hurtuna, Joan Sardà and more. Many, so many, I almost want to name everyone. Concerning the group La Punyalada, I would like to quote the verse by Maragall on the *sardana* dance: "My whole country would fit inside that circle". On busy days, the tourists were stunned by the number of artists occupying half the venue. At a time when the fiercest individualism was quashed, the merit of La Punyalada was to have found the sweet spot of discussion, of criticism without gall, of civilized controversy.¹⁸⁸

In 1965 Morató again won two prizes and held two exhibitions towards the end of the year. At the Grifé & Escoda exhibition in Palma de Mallorca he met Mr Rullán from the Dera gallery through the painter Josep Castellanas Garrich, with whom he established a friendship and kept in regular contact. In December he exhibited again at the Reading Centre in Reus. The Tarragona

¹⁸⁸ SEMPRONIO. "La penya d'ara" ("The Group Today"), in *I Premi de Pintura La Punyalada*.

critics echoed each other in highlighting his pictorial qualities on one hand and his lyricism on the other.¹⁸⁹

In 1966 he travelled to the Basque Country on the occasion of the exhibition at Art Hogar in Bilbao in May, and visited numerous places together with art merchant Arbaiza, including Bermeo, Lequeitio, Pasajes and Ondàrroa, collecting subject matter in the form of sketches and ink drawings that he would later use to create many important paintings. Also in May he won the VI Maria Vilaltella Medal awarded by the Lleida Fine Arts Circle for his work *Cadaqués Landscape*. This very important award had an endowment of 50,000 pesetas. It was around this time that Morató started going to paint every year in Cadaqués, which would become one of his most recurrent subjects and with which he would always achieve excellent results. His trip companions would alternate between Lloveras, Sanjuan, Llovet, Siches and Griera, but he would often come across a whole group of friends there.

Later on he returned to Moret-sur-Loing and, with his friend Miquel Villanueva, visited Saint Tropez and Le Grau-du-Roi, a trip he would often repeat during the 1960s and 1970s.

In those years, Morató established a trade with a textile manufacturer: paintings in exchange for tergal shirts (the very latest fashion in terms of consumer products) for the whole family. I still remember as if it was Christmas Day sharing out a whole pile of checked shirts between the three of us children. For two or three seasons we were constantly “in uniform” (and very happy about it), looking like North American farmers.

In October 1966 he won second prize at the II Olot Painting Competition with *Bermeo Landscape* (“solidly structured and revealing good skills, an example of honest painting”¹⁹⁰), held an exhibition at Art Hogar in Bilbao, on the occasion of which *El Correo Español* spoke of his “modern painting that does not turn its back on tradition”, and another exhibition at Grifé & Escoda. On that occasion he exclusively presented figures and landscapes, and the critics spoke of architecture, geometrization, structuring and modelling, though also pointing out that the works were a little rigid, singling him out as a very gifted painter and exceptional artist. Fernando Gutiérrez commented in *La Prensa*:

Sensitive elaboration, refined within a delicacy that is not immune to great strength, the vibrant, powerful rhythm that constitutes each painting. With a pictorial sense of architecture, he constructs his paintings as he would also construct a musical rhythm

¹⁸⁹ *Reus. Semanario de la Ciudad* (18 December 1965) and *Diario Español* (16 December 1965).

¹⁹⁰ GICH, Joan. *Tele/Estel*, 16 September 1966.

[...]. A painter of exceptional qualities, he is a serene creator with obdurate demands that make his work a painting of extraordinary quality and strength.¹⁹¹

And in *La Hoja del Lunes* we read:

His language remains as elaborate as it is efficiently constructive, as brilliant as it is intensely pictorial. His technical mastery, his structural rigour, do not stifle in this artist the creative and recreative inspiration of a world that, through the painter's accurate retina and opulent palette, appears to be captured in landscape compositions realized with vigorous impasto and harmonious chromatic accords [...]. His seascapes are characterized by the stormy power of the cloudscapes, in which the artist's brush and palette knife compete in an exercise of graphic efficiency.¹⁹²

Àngel Marsà remarked on the "texture-concept conjunction"¹⁹³ while Santos Torroella, in *El Noticiero Universal*, talked of "an almost crystallographic planning of volumes".¹⁹⁴ Meanwhile, according to the *Diario de Barcelona*, he was excessively concerned with technique, and that all his painting was cold, with "tormented cloudscapes", and that he seemed to "confuse art with science". And these comments are not baseless, because this was the time when the painter's rationalism was at its peak: in his concern for formal perfection, he created robust works that, far removed from any sentimental effectivism, were also distant from the intimate lyricism that he would gradually recover in the following decade.

During this season Morató made several trips to La Mancha, retracing the windmill-dotted landscapes of his fictional hero, Don Quixote. He liked towns such as Campo de Criptana and its people so much that he bought a black blouson, part of the traditional Manchegan country costume, and for many years he wore it to the studio to work in; we can see him wearing it in some of the photographs taken of him at that time.

There were only a few occasions when Morató Aragonès painted the subject of sport, and then only related to competitions. As a youngster he had been table tennis champion in Alforja and was a big tennis fan, always following the tournaments with interest. However, he started taking a greater interest in football after winning the Extraordinary Prize from the Royal Spanish

¹⁹¹ GUTIÉRREZ, Fernando. "El arte de hoy" ("Art Today"), *La Prensa*, 4 November 1966.

¹⁹² *La Hoja del Lunes*, 7 November 1966.

¹⁹³ MARSÀ, Àngel. *El Correo Catalán*, 5 November 1968.

¹⁹⁴ SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. *El Noticiero Universal*, November 1966.

Football Federation (RFEF) at the I Biennale of Sport and Fine Arts held in 1967 in Barcelona. The painting he submitted, currently held at RFEF headquarters, was conceived as a chessboard¹⁹⁵ seen from above. The other works of his we have seen (on basketball, football and hockey) are closer to a vision of choral movement, like an impression of dance.

In 1967, the “Flowers and Gardens” painting competition was held at the Royal Artistic Circle. For this occasion he produced several works featuring the florists of Les Rambles and some private gardens. However, this was a theme he would only touch on occasionally for very specific events, again usually in the context of competitions. The greens that appealed to him were those of the mountains and great forests, the greens of wide open spaces.

In 1968 there was a special event in Cornudella: the chapel of Sant Joan del Codolar was remodelled¹⁹⁶ and the great *Triptych of Saint John* was hung in the chancel, a donation from the painter who first obtained the agreement and approval of the Archbishop of Tarragona. The inauguration and mass that were held on St John’s day (I remember it perfectly) was a very festive occasion, with the chapel filled to capacity. An edition of *Goigs de Sant Joan* was commissioned at the Torrell printers in Reus featuring a reproduction of the triptych. After the painter’s death, the triptych was moved for safety reasons to the church of Santa Maria de Cornudella, where it was restored.

In August he won first prize and a gold medal at the I Cala Canyelles Painting Competition from Lloret de Mar town council for his painting *Lloret de Mar Rambles*. In November he exhibited again at Grifé & Escoda. On this occasion, the critics noted a slight change compared to the previous exhibition. In *El Noticiero Universal* (“An overview of exhibitions”), Santos Torroella wrote:

More delicate and refined than on previous occasions [...] in his usual faceting with the palette knife, he has now introduced subtleties of craftsmanship that cause a very sensitive vibration in the chromatic ranges – the opposite of what usually happens with the overuse of this tool – as well as the composition as a whole.¹⁹⁷

The *Diario de Barcelona* commented:

¹⁹⁵ Morató was a big chess enthusiast and also liked playing billiards.

¹⁹⁶ The chapel of Sant Joan del Codolar, at the foot of the stunning rocky outcrops of Montsant, dates back to the sixteenth century and has always been a much-loved spot by the people of Cornudella.

¹⁹⁷ SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. *El Noticiero Universal*, 27 November 1968.

He constructs artistically in a uniform and methodical manner, through a geometry whose rigidity is offset by the impasto and the chromatic autonomy of the forms.

The examples of Cezanne, Cubism and Abstraction continue to influence his formation [...]. His sensitive spirit has made him dispense with effulgence in the same way that it has led him to cast aside servile descriptivism.¹⁹⁸

And *La Vanguardia Española* spoke of Morató as “one of our young figurative masters with the most conscious sensitivity [...]”, noting that he owed to abstraction the negation of all referentiality in some aspects of his painting, and also that he was “a painter in love with light and, along with it, its colour and harmonies. [...] He creates accords and introduces his own original tonalities, and his drawing moves to the pace of a phrasing full of quiet lyricism”.¹⁹⁹

On the occasion of this exhibition, Àngel Marsà wrote: “The exhibition features a conceptual coherence and unity of workmanship that are extremely representative of the genuine model of this painter, between Intimist and Luminist”,²⁰⁰ and Joan Gich wrote: “He flees from contrasts [...], he manages to ensure that the excessive rigidity that his paintings would have (due to their structuring in geometric diagrams) is removed, turning them into pure atmosphere, full of nuances, flooded with light, full of discoveries [...] a secret, living, burning poetry surrounds all his work”.²⁰¹

Finally, the young Giralt-Miracle wrote in *Destino*: “He has once again exhibited his canvases, always faithful to the reproduction of external reality within a unity of coherent geometry and consistent rigidity of impasto. Portraits, landscapes and still lifes are the themes of his agreeable and luminous painting”.²⁰²

That year, the painter Barnadas took him to the drawing fair in Olot, along with Lloveras and Sanjuan. There he met Rafael Griera, who would become a good friend. It seems that the experience of this fair was not particularly gratifying to him, since, he explained, “the few drawings I sold, I later regretted having sold them there” – no doubt the exposure of a work exhibited in a gallery has more value and is more satisfying. But although he did not return to Olot for the fair, he did often paint its famous La Moixina fountain and the verdant mountain

¹⁹⁸ *Diario de Barcelona*, November 1968.

¹⁹⁹ *La Vanguardia Española*, 24 November 1968.

²⁰⁰ MARSÀ, Àngel. “Gaceta de las Artes” (“Arts Gazette”), *El Correo Catalán*, 23 November 1968.

²⁰¹ GICH, Joan. “Los viernes, Arte” (“Art on Friday”), *Tele-Exprés*, 29 November 1968.

²⁰² GIRALT-MIRACLE, Daniel. *Destino*, 14 December 1968.

landscape, which also enabled him to visit the restaurant in the park and savour its renowned Olot potatoes, a recipe that made a fortune.

In 1969, his contacts with North America continued. On the one hand, the promoter of the The Collectors Guild Ltd., in New York, commissioned a series of lithographs from him (Molins, Ondarroat, etc.), in which the flat language of synthesis associated with this technique and the chromatic treatment gave powerful results; while on the other, a dealer based in Los Angeles, a Toronto gallery and several collectors bought a good number of his oils.²⁰³

He also exhibited at the Dera gallery in Palma de Mallorca and the Fine Arts Circle in Lleida, on the occasion of which José Luís López Pedrol wrote:

The plastic language that leans towards the tectonic, in approaching material problems with difficult and interesting formulations, and on not a few occasions with a risky solution. Expressive direction with constructive figurativism of flat surfaces and a concern for volume, with a remote although definite Cubist affiliation. The palette knife is the tool of this painting, determined by its technical prowess.²⁰⁴

The Estrada Saladich Foundation and Mundi-Art

In the mid-1960s, a character emerged on Barcelona's art scene who would play a key role in the future of art in the Catalan capital and enjoy considerable media coverage: Fèlix Estrada Saladich (1901–1997). The founder of Mobles La Fàbrica (a furniture company) and a collector and patron of the arts, he opened the Mundi-Art gallery. Here, he organized calls for exhibitions and awards that brought together many of the most celebrated artists of that time (his heterogeneous approach meant that no genre was excluded). These were both at the gallery itself and in competitions or gatherings limited to invited artists only, in various places around Spain (Morella, Segovia, Salamanca, the four Catalan provinces, Olot and so on). He would pay for the artists' travel and accommodation costs in exchange for a painting or two. The gallery's director, Joaquim Bosch Tàtaret, told us about it:

²⁰³ Documentation (AMA).

²⁰⁴ LÓPEZ PEDROL, J. L. 13 April 1969 (AMA. Newspaper clipping with no headline date reference).

As far as Estrada was concerned, the gallery was a whim. He was an art enthusiast; every Thursday he went to Parés and bought the biggest and best paintings; he amassed an eclectic collection that started in the 1940s. Estrada was very friendly with Sempronio, and they used to get together with Santos Torroella, Tísner ... [...] The gallery was first called the Art Club and when I was appointed as director it was renamed Mundi Art. We organized exhibitions, published books, and together with the Estrada Saladich Foundation we organized competitions.²⁰⁵ Estrada instilled in us his idea that artists needed to be helped; he fostered a particular atmosphere and promoted painters. Cabané, a great guy, introduced us to many artists. [...] Initially there was a bit of reluctance to participate (because of the association with Mobles La Fàbrica), but later on, when they saw the special sales system in place, they signed up for the calls. There was a lot of advertising, a lot of people came along, and a big clientele built up. A dinner was held every month or two (for up to 500 people) and some really great people came along. Those were very good times [...]. More paintings passed through there, and more were sold, than in any gallery in Barcelona. These days, many people don't even remember to put it in their CV.^{206 207}

Ricart Serra also mentioned it: "One way or another he managed to get all of us, and I mean *all* of us, to go there. It had its ups and downs, but it was a great help. It opened up opportunities for many people who otherwise wouldn't have had a chance".²⁰⁸ Lloveras, in his memoirs, expressed the same sense of gratitude towards Félix Estrada.²⁰⁹

In March 1969, the Estrada Saladich Foundation and Mundi Art organized the I Morella Art Week in the Cardenal Ram hostel, a building dating back to the sixteenth century. This was a working week during which the painters exhibited the work they had completed and then they themselves acted as the jury to award the prizes. Some of the painters who took part included Florit, Lloveras, Llovet, Grau Santos, Jansana, Planas Gallés, Clapera Mayà, Martínez Lozano, Barnadas, Griera, Sanjuan, Aguilar Moré, Río, Ibarz, Antonia Albalat, Morató Aragonès, Josep

²⁰⁵ I International Painting Biennale, in 1967; I Sculpture Exhibition, in 1968; I National Painting Competition "Towns and Landscapes of Catalonia", in 1970; Floral Themes of Our Rambles, in 1972; 100 Years of Catalan Painting, in 1974; Grand Spring Exhibition and Grand Drawing Fair, in 1974; "Towns and Landscapes of Spain" Competition, in 1976, etc.

²⁰⁶ Joaquim Bosch Tataret. Interview on Rambla de Catalunya, 1 February 1994 (MEM)

²⁰⁷ With Mobles La Fàbrica, Morató made another deal in 1973, getting part of his new apartment on Carrer de Martí de Barcelona furnished in exchange for paintings.

²⁰⁸ Ricart Serra. Interview in Barcelona, 31 January 1994 (MEM)

²⁰⁹ LLOVERAS, Frederic. *Memòries* ("Memoirs"). Barcelona: Ed. Tibidabo, 1990, p. 109–111.

Perrin and more. At this event, Morató won the Estrada Saladich prize for the highest number of votes from other artists. There were also other prizes awarded by different entities.

In August, the family rented a ground-floor apartment with a courtyard in Cambrils (at the end of Rambla Jaume I, right on the promenade, which would also, obviously, become his summer workshop). If I remember the year it is because I well remember that one evening we watched the news of the Apollo 11 moon landing on the television of a bar on the promenade (with a big crowd of people at the entrance to the bar). During the day, while we children played, Josep Maria (who never took a holiday) shut himself away in the improvised studio to paint commissions (I remember seeing a couple of *Last Suppers*) or went down to the old port of Cambrils. He produced a magnificent series of views of the port, one of which is in the Museum of Montserrat. Sometimes, while he was drawing the fishing boats, I tried to make mine look like his. Images come to my mind of the women sitting on the wharf busily mending the immense green nets, and also going to watch the fishing boats returning from the night's fishing, and visiting the fish auction in the early afternoon on the harbourside, listening to that strange, unintelligible auctioneer's patter. My parents sometimes bought a box of fish from the fishermen outside the building. The apartment was very close to the Rovira Restaurant, where we often went for lunch and where I first saw Miró. My father said to us: "Do you see that man over there on that table? It's Miró. I'm going to say hello". He and Miró knew each other, but did not frequent the same circles. What they had in common were ancestors from the same lands, and this, in the Priorat region and in Cornudella, makes a big difference.

Few people know that in the 1960s and 1970s, Morató Aragonès produced some commissioned works for inclusion in public buildings: designs for paint or ceramic murals, very much in line with what was fashionable at the time – he was commissioned to produce a panel for the School of Arts and Crafts in Badalona in 1968, a mural for the Joan Boscà i Ausiàs March Secondary School in Barcelona, and the now-vanished ceramic mural that used to be on the corner of the Institut Poeta Maragall in Barcelona, between the streets of Provença and Enric Granados – as well as collages (for Miquel Martret) and even some sculptural pieces which he made in the 1970s (commissioned by Miquel Villanueva). In them, which in a certain way he treated as a diversion, he emulated the work of sculptors who had undoubtedly captured his attention, and occasionally made forays into the world of collage.

A new studio in Reus

During those years there was heated litigation between the developer of the Mas Carpa urbanization, Miquel Peirats, who owned the farmhouse of the same name, and the painter Maties Palau Ferré. It was a very controversial issue for a long time and attracted a lot of media coverage, since they had signed an agreement whereby the painter bought several properties in exchange for paintings and the valuation was made at 'x' amount of money per point (in other words, the valuation was made according to the surface area of the painted canvas). In the end, Palau Ferré made his own interpretation of the deal and what transpired in the press is that he had a humiliating contract that condemned him to slavery during a certain period of time, so he preferred to burn his work, which he did.²¹⁰ I explain all of this because my father paid for the villa he bought from Mr Peirats, on the same residential estate, with a certain stipulated number of paintings. In this case, both parties were happy: my father, with the villa and studio, and Mr Peirats with a magnificent collection of my father's work.

It is worth mentioning that at that time, wherever we went (especially in Reus, Salou and Cambrils), people always came up to say hello to my father. Even when we were on the beach he was taking painting commissions or firming up sales. It was a never-ending process.

6 - TRAVERSING GEOGRAPHIES: FRANCE AND SPAIN IN THE CONSOLIDATION OF HIS OWN LANGUAGE

After his stay in Morella, Morató began to travel more frequently again in the company of other painters, in Spain and France, the Netherlands and, later on, England. He discovered new cities and revisited his favourites on trips that were always short but very well spent. In these two or three working trips per season, Morató could produce an average of six drawings every day, collecting material for painting in oils the rest of the year. If the weather was good, he would set up his easel outside; if it rained, he would sit in a café, take out the cards he always had prepared in his knapsack, and do quick sketches.

I remember that one of the books he always referred to was *España. Pueblos y Paisajes (Spain: Towns and Landscapes)*²¹¹ featuring more than 400 photographs by Ortiz-Echagüe and a foreword by Azorín; he used to look at the pictures and thus decide on his painting trips: Alcalá

²¹⁰ The writer Màrius Serra published a novel based on these events which includes an appendix of documentary references: *La dona més pintada* ("The Most Painted Woman"). Barcelona: Ed. Proa, 2023 (Col·l. A Tot Vent).

²¹¹ ORTIZ ECHAGÜE, José. *España. Pueblos y Paisajes*. Bilbao: Publicaciones Ortiz-Echagüe, 1966.

de los Gazules, Turégano, Alquézar, Albarracín and Mojácar were some of the places he got to know in this way, and which he later painted.

He also told me that, following in the footsteps of painters such as J. B. Camille Corot, Claude Monet and Paul Signat, he wanted to explore Normandy and towns such as Honfleur, a coastal town that inspired the Impressionists. From then on these would become recurring themes in his work, and places he would visit on several occasions with other artists. In April 1970 he went there with Llovet and Lloveras, obviously passing through Paris first. His friend Marc Clifton, who had settled in the French capital, took him to discover towns and cities in central France that would later also become popular themes in his painting, such as Moret-sur-Loing and Donzenac.

In November of that year he held an exhibition at Grifé & Escoda. The critic E. Foyé said: “One of the most individual landscape artists, with an unmistakable style [...]. The cloudscapes are distinguished by their painstaking elaboration and imbue every landscape with something of the passionate signature of their author”.²¹² Indeed, during this period the painter’s cloudscapes impressed with their unusual strength, making them the focal point of the painting, becoming transformed into a bold foreground almost independent to the rest of the composition.

Many media outlets reported on the exhibition. *El Correo Catalán* opined that: “Textures play a decisive role in Morató’s expressionism. His painting is crafted with an overriding taste for the material, by means of superfluous impasto, veiled transparencies and delicate tonal play, in which pearly greys and tender, juicy greens predominate [...]. His current exhibition marks the height of this virtuosity”.²¹³

El Noticiero Universal said that his paintings “breathe better now, more broadly, without having lost that syntax of sparkles and accents, which in him are proverbial [...]. The whites, the subtle and exquisite use of that colour, alternating with gentle greys and blues, also lend an unmistakable air to that painting”.²¹⁴ According to *La Vanguardia Española*: “It seems that maturity is settling this wandering play of cut-out transparencies [...] his translucent lyricism acts both as an atmosphere and inhabits it with tones, of broken luminosities, as if the overall light had become implausible and at the same time harmonious shards. There remains, as if lingering in the air, that subtle melancholy of what has been gradually appeased during the course of a

²¹² FOYÉ, E. “Las exposiciones” (“Exhibitions”), *Hoja del Lunes*, 23 November 1970.

²¹³ “Gaceta de las artes” (“Arts Gazette”), *El Correo Catalán*, 21 November 1970.

²¹⁴ SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. “Ojeada a las exposiciones” (“Exhibition Overview”), *El Noticiero Universal*, 25 November 1970.

serene experience”.²¹⁵ And Cesáreo Rodríguez-Aguilera said: “He continues the already traditional line of his painting: naturalistic architectural composition, impasto created with a palette knife, equal consideration given to the different planes, the thoroughness and simplicity of each of the resulting forms. Thus emerges a harmonious work of line, light and colour, which in this current exhibition can be witnessed with even greater plenitude”.²¹⁶

In September 1971, at the VI Vila de Palamós Competition, he won the top prize, worth 50,000 pesetas, and the gold medal, both awarded by the Town Council, for his painting *Cafè Kylix Park*. After this award he would enter far fewer competitions as he was now getting a lot of commissions.

Thirty years of painting

In October 1971, Morató returned to the Reading Centre in Reus with an exhibition commemorating his thirty years of painting, which would be the last one he would hold in his home city. The thirty-five works he presented there included scenes of Cadaqués, Cambrils, Palamós, Salou, Cornudella, Ortells, Santa Pau, Morella, Iglesuela del Cid, Mirambel, Zorita, Honfleur, Donzenac, Saint-Tropez and Le Grau-du-Roi. However, there were only two figure paintings and one still life. It was not that he had left figure painting aside, but he was clearly focusing on landscapes. On this occasion, Antoni Correig spoke of his “fervour and refinement” and that he “masterfully handles a technique that is flexible to his concerns, achieving a certain virtuosity”.²¹⁷

In an interview conducted by Lluís Anglès, Morató elaborated on the inner meaning of his painting:

I never think of belonging to a certain school or style. I don't even know if my painting is modern or classic. Frankly, when I paint I do it for my own satisfaction [...] and I don't care if they tell me what I do is modern art or if they say it's classical art. [...] I am satisfied if my painting, once finished, brings back to me the emotions I experienced at the time of creating it.

²¹⁵ GUTIÉRREZ, Fernando. “Arte y artistas” (“Art and Artists”), *La Vanguardia Española*, 29 November 1970.

²¹⁶ RODRÍGUEZ AGUILERA, Cesáreo. “Morató Aragonés en Galería Grifé y Escoda” (newspaper clipping with no header reference). The author mentioned this exhibition in the annual summary published in issue 7 of the magazine *Bellas Artes* 71 (Jan–Feb 1971), published by the Directorate-General for Fine Arts.

²¹⁷ CORREIG, Antoni. *Reus. Semanario de la Ciudad*, 23 October 1971.

Because I don't paint "au naturel" [...]. I make some brief sketches, painting lightly as if taking shorthand notes [...] then comes the work in the studio, the moments of delight in recalling the subject and the intimate satisfaction that I like to make implicit in the painting. [...] My change is slow or evolving, which you can see through my works [...]. It is like a process of simplification that you sometimes see reflected in a painting by a detail, by a way of interpreting the things you paint differently.²¹⁸

In this sense, we might associate the satisfaction that Morató talks about, which is both pictorial satisfaction (for his technical accomplishment) and spiritual satisfaction (for having created a place where he finds himself reflected) with the comments made by Ferrater: "Art is nothing more than a form of thought, and thought is not a luxurious activity or reserved for certain select spirits, but rather something that obtains the little order that each person manages to put into his life."²¹⁹

In 1972 he made a trip to Segovia with some other painters, organized by Estrada Saladich, and in the summer months he travelled through the Pyrenees with his wife. In November, around the time of the birth of his daughter Eulàlia, he exhibited at Grifé & Escoda. There he met Mr and Mrs Quinteiro Giner, who shortly afterwards opened Anquin's gallery in Reus, where he would exhibit regularly from then on. On this occasion, which definitively ended not only his Grifé period but also that of his vehement chromaticism, Josep M. Cadena interviewed him and said that "the artist creates a time and manages to get us to want to dwell in it". Morató explained to him:

I paint from memories. I believe that the memory of something beautiful, of landscapes or people, is better than the reality. However, I need to have experienced the landscape. More and more, I need to have it close to home. I have to be "inside" what I paint. [...] I draw in nature and in Indian ink, ready to accept whatever emerges. If the wind causes stains and they have an aesthetic force, the result can be even better.²²⁰

²¹⁸ ANGLÈS, Lluís. "Morató Aragonés en la maduresa de la seva vida artística" ("Morató Aragonés in the maturity of his artistic life"), *Reus. Semanario de la Ciudad*, 16 October 1971.

²¹⁹ FERRATER, *Op. cit.*, p. 46.

²²⁰ CADENA, Josep M. "Morató Aragonès y su pintura de recreación" ("Morató Aragonès and his recreative painting"), *Diario de Barcelona*, 23 November 1972.

In the opinion of Fernando Gutiérrez: “To these geometries the serenity of a winged maturity has been added today [...] There is in these canvases something of the mural which has escaped, or rather evaded, its place, instead taking on mother-of-pearl nuances invented by a rather spectacular and intelligent surveyor”.²²¹ And Santos Torroella wrote: “Perhaps it is precisely the space that acquires in this painting a more original and expressive configuration: a space that is not reduced to a deepening of perspectives, but rather penetrates the forms themselves and which, turning into its own essence, redeems them from their heaviness and inertia”.²²²

Finally, Lina Font, for the *Estampa de Arte* programme, said on 1 December:

A painter who, step by step, has succeeded in forming himself with a singularity beyond all discussion, to the extent that today he is among the most prominent artists in the new Catalan school of painting. [...] His exhibition shows us the measure of the singularity of his expressive language, of his irrevocable mastery as a landscape painter who manages to transport us to environments with such different appearances: the Midi-Français, Castile, the Maestrazgo, the Pyrenees, etc. So subtly captured, with their faceted staining, the skilled touch of the palette knife and the breadth of sensitive chromatic registers.

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There is no doubt that we can consider the Grifé period to be a glorious one, not just because of Morató’s painting but also for the response from the critics and the atmosphere that imbued the Barcelona art scene at that time. There was a big following and an excellent response from the public, and the fantastic cocktail parties held at the inaugurations of exhibitions turned them into genuine social events. In addition, all the artists did their utmost to support their friends. In the 1970s a period of prosperity for painters began, despite the fluctuations of the economy, which would last well into the 1980s.

In 1973, the family moved to a more spacious top-floor apartment on Carrer Martí, and Morató kept the little flat on Carrer Monistrol as a studio, where he would work for another ten years. My brother Rafael remembers that whenever he went there on an errand or to help him set up canvases, our father would have Barbra Streisand playing as a permanent soundtrack. Though we kept the old records like a treasure, the cassettes from that time must have got lost in the

²²¹ GUTIÉRREZ, Fernando. *La Vanguardia Española*, 2 December 1972.

²²² SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. “Ojeada a las exposiciones” (“Exhibition Overview”), *El Noticiero Universal*, 2 November 1972.

different moves, so I no longer know what his musical universe was in those years. What I do remember perfectly is that when he moved to the studio on Carrer Congost in the early 1980s and we went to see him, what he was listening to were the songs by the exuberant Italian singer Rafaella Carrà. I once commented on it with friends: how was it possible that works which exuded such delicacy and tranquillity were painted with this kind of music playing in the background? But the fact is that they were.

Around the time of his fiftieth birthday he started teaching me to paint. Well, before this he had already given me the odd lesson in colour when we used to go on trips to Cornudella in the 1960s. Like all children, when you went to draw a mountain you painted them green (because of the trees) or at the most brown (for the earth). But then, of course, I saw mountains of a deep blue in my father's paintings, and understood nothing. One day, when we were close to the cliffs at Siurana, he said: "Look at those mountains that are farther away. What colours can you see in them?" I began to look and, as if I had been struck by lightning, barely able to believe what had just been revealed to me, I replied: "They're dark blue, pale blue, and grey!" And then he gave me a little dissertation on the mysteries of colour and atmosphere.

What really surprises me is when I see that nowadays the students at the local school in Cornudella – who have the mountains of Montsant right before their eyes every single day (and hence are not city children like me) – continue to paint green, pyramid-shaped mountains. Teachers: we need to show them how to *look* ...

Going back to my father's practical lessons, one summer in Reus, when I was thirteen, he told me that I had to learn to interpret reality, but before I went out to paint landscapes with him, he made me draw and paint still lifes. I remember starting to cry because they came out so badly, but he always said: "Keep going, don't give up, you'll see how it will come out right in the end". I then went for a short time to the Monistrol studio to continue learning, but what I really noticed was that he was a teacher who didn't give any instructions. Basically, he set you to drawing. He just used to say: "Today you're going to do this or that", but he never told me how to. He would make the odd comment once it was finished, but not much. It's the old learning-by-doing theory. What he always told me is that the most important thing in a painting is the composition, the structuring of the space; that in order to know if a painting is well-composed you have to turn it upside down, and to know if a picture is good you have to let it rest. "If it's a good painting you will like it more and more, and if it's a bad one you will like it less and less". It never failed.

I then started going with him on his walks in search of subjects and on nature painting sessions (sometimes my brother Jordi also joined us, who had fantastic drawing skills despite not wanting to specialise in art). So in the summers, based in Reus, we used to go and paint in the surrounding

towns: him, with his box and his tripod, and me with my little size 4 art box that my uncle Rafael had given me. I remember going to Maspujols, to the fields of hazelnut trees that grandfather Pàmies had there alongside the road, from where there was a magnificent view of the town which Josep Maria painted several times over the years; and to Morera de Montsant, to Febró, to the castle of Escornalbou, to the monastery of Escaladei, and other locations. But above all we used to go to the countryside around Cornudella and Siurana. There, I believe in some way he was remembering the old times with Mallol. We used to climb up to Siurana on foot along the old road with the easel and folding chair, and he would tell me stories and anecdotes: "Before the war, a lady fell from the top of the cliffs and her skirts acted as a parachute, but with such bad luck that she landed in a pond full of water and drowned", and things like that which I've now forgotten. On one of these outings, in 1977, he was still carrying his inseparable Voigtländer camera and I took a beautiful series of photographs that are now classic images for history.

Carles Callizo, the son of his friend Pepe, also accompanied him on several outings:

The time spent with him that I remember most strongly is when I must have been about fifteen years old. I had a certain skill at drawing and he suggested I learn with him. So I was going to secondary school in Barcelona. In the mornings I went to school and in the afternoons to his studio to paint. He would set up a composition with a pot, some fruit... and from time to time he would come and say something about what I had done, always in a positive way. He wanted you to express yourself according to what you were feeling or seeing. Sometimes we would go on outings to draw. I was there for a year. I loved his manner, the calm way he approached everything. It was a really lovely period, I had a great time with him.

One thing that revealed a little about his temperament is that many afternoons, when we had finished, we would go for a wander around Barcelona to look at the galleries. One day we went in to see an exhibition of a very modern painter, a kind of painting that was difficult to understand. One work was a simple pencil line and nothing else, and I didn't understand it. He said to me: "Carles, we might not understand this but it's certainly a laboured work that wanted to express something". He was always looking for comprehension, elucidation, the positive side of things.

We once went to paint in Santa Pau. He was a real coffee addict. I don't know if he used to drink eight or ten cups, but he was certainly drinking coffee all day. One day, it must have been about four or five in the morning, I saw him get up and start walking

round the room. I asked him: “What’s the matter?” and he said: “I need a coffee”. So we got dressed and then the two of us wandered around Olot, with everything closed of course, until we finally found a bar where we could get a coffee”.²²³

While Carles was telling me these stories, we came to the conclusion that my father would have liked a disciple, in the old-fashioned way. Because one of the strange things about his biography is that despite having completed his Fine Arts degree in 1945, he didn’t get his professorship until 1984, and he must have done it for some sentimental reason since he never actually worked as such.

In 1973 he took another trip, also organized by Estrada Saladich, to Salamanca, where he met Josep Cruañas, who would become a good friend. Morató sponsored his exhibition at the Contrast gallery in Reus and wrote the foreword for the catalogue.

That year he exhibited at the Dera gallery and travelled to Brittany, Paris and Moret, a very positive trip in painting terms because he found new and unfamiliar locations that would inspire him.

Also in 1973, as a result of the closure of La Punyalada for refurbishment, Morató started going every afternoon with Lloveras and Canyellas to La Cova del Drac, shortly afterwards setting up a new group with Siches, Sanjuan, Verdaguer and, later on, Tomàs Meca, Joan Mas, Arribas and Jansana. Later on some painters from the new generation joined the group, such as Josep Cruañas, Rollán, Rafael Griera and Benet Sarsanedas.

The Cova del Drac period is remembered fondly by artists. The bar, which also played live music, was on a street that the so-called *gauche divine* (used to refer to left-wing intellectuals) made very fashionable in 1960s Barcelona. *Tuset Street*, as they called it, was the most modern spot in the city, where luminaries from the worlds of art, photography and advertising used to gather, and today it still retains that aura of modernity that made it so famous. As well as being close to the painters’ workshops, its location meant that it was fairly quiet at street level. As Jordi Rollán said, “at La Cova del Drac the best of friends used to get together, the ones we were closest to”.²²⁴ Someone else who mentioned Morató’s friendly nature was Concha Ibáñez, who bumped into him from time to time:

²²³ Carles Callizo. Interview in Reus, 13 August 2022 (MEM)

²²⁴ Jordi Rollán. Interview in Barcelona, 1 December 2015 (MEM)

We used to meet at competitions and exhibitions and always talked as if we had known each other all our lives. Because our painting had a solitary spirit, we had things in common and we used to talk a lot about painting, which you can't discuss with many painters because they're not familiar with it. Your father is remembered very well by his friends.²²⁵

The painters alternated gatherings at Tuset with those on Saturdays at La Punyalada, which Morató would only go to infrequently because, having a house in Reus, he would be there with the family every weekend. Santos Torroella mentioned these absences in *Miscel·lània*:

Those of us who knew him well were familiar with his frequent and sometimes prolonged absences from our usual get-togethers, and we also knew that after these he would unfailingly reappear with a new and renewed collection of canvases and sketches attesting to how very active he had been during these absences.²²⁶

Dr Sarró, who joined the group in 1976 through Torras Bachs, wrote a nostalgic book²²⁷ in honour of those times and those artists, and as a kind of rationalization for the “incomprehensible silence of the institutions towards the memory of such a Barcelona-oriented group of people who defined an unrepeatable artistic era”.²²⁸ Of the gatherings at La Punyalada, he mentioned the tremendous respect and camaraderie that existed among all of them, despite their differing criteria. About Morató, he said:

I remember your father as a man of great discretion, a distinguished figure who was loved by all. With his prudence, his way of expressing himself and his characteristic hat. He was a true professional, he lived to work; he lived exclusively for his painting and treated his craft with respect. I met him at a time when he was doing café scenes and figures in very soft tones with which I fell in love.

Josep Cruañas, who also met him at La Punyalada, explained:

²²⁵ Concha Ibáñez. Interview in Barcelona, 3 December 2015 (MEM)

²²⁶ SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània...*, p. 76.

²²⁷ SARRÓ I PALAU, *Op. cit.*

²²⁸ Manuel Sarró. Interview in Barcelona, 17 April 2015 (MEM)

He was a real benchmark there, a man everyone held in high esteem. He was both a friend and a teacher for me [...]. Very elegant, he gave the impression of a gentleman who took care of his appearance. But when you got to know him and travelled with him, you realized he was an ironic man with a great sense of humour. [...]. One day, a painter was boasting about having been to New York I don't know how many times, and he said: "What about you, Morató, how many times have you been there?" And he answered: " Me, one or none". [...] At La Punyalada they were always talking about painting, but above all they spoke with respect about painters, with admiration and respect for the past, for the tradition of painting.

Over the years we had a studio on the same landing, the doors used to be open and we would go in and out without knocking... It was all one and the same space. We had a fantastic relationship of trust. With Morató and other painters, like Lloveras or Sarsanedas, I went to Paris, Honfleur, Venice, London ... He always went with his sketchpad, drawing constantly. He was a hard-working man. And later the conversations with him and all the other painters were very enriching. We had a great time, really. I could tell you many more anecdotes, such as when we got to Heathrow airport late and so as not to miss our flight we all started running down the runway, and suddenly the alarms went off and a big deployment of police surrounded us. Or one night when there was a fire alarm in the hotel where we were staying and Lloveras went out into the corridor in his pyjamas, but with his watercolour folder under his arm, which he would never leave behind.²²⁹

With regard to other anecdotes, my sister Eulàlia reminds me of an incident that must have happened in the 1940s or 1950s, we don't know where: Morató was painting with his easel in some solitary place when suddenly a man appeared and started throwing stones at him, forcing him to run off.

And speaking of humour, Morató was capable of dropping the most caustic and, depending on who was there, completely surreal and nonsensical things into the conversation, without batting an eyelid. Once, in the 1980s, he had us in fits of laughter talking nonsense about dead people, cemeteries, ghosts and apparitions, all under my mother's shocked gaze. We also – he and I –

²²⁹ Josep Cruañas. Interview in Capmany, 23 May 2015 (MEM)

liked to give nicknames to certain characters who were part of his everyday artistic life: “*Lo dallò*”, “*El trabucaire*”, etc.

I remember asking him pointed questions on burning topics and also Proust questionnaires, which were so fashionable at that time (the mid-Seventies). These were theoretical questions, mediatized like me with the movements and subtleties of the art world, often looking for the contradiction of a figurative painter in the middle of the bullring where the *banderilleros* were engraved in fire with the word “abstraction” (without exactly knowing what to do with it), but mainly seeking to understand the artist’s reasons for painting the way he did. Sometimes we can see his sardonic humour in some of his replies, some of which left me a little stunned:

“What would be your greatest misfortune?”

“To stop smoking.”

“What quality do you admire in a man?”

“Intelligence.”

“What quality do you admire in a woman?”

“Beauty.”

Now it is easy for me to understand that as far as he was concerned the woman (as a subject of his work) was a landscape of landscapes, a space, both real and unreal, in which to project the feelings of the spirit.

On 16 February 1974 he exhibited at Anquin’s gallery for the first time. Opened in 1973, at that time the gallery represented an antidote to the excessive centrality of Catalan exhibitions, focused on Barcelona. It was a high-flying, driving force, both because of the entrepreneurial nature of its director, Pepita Giner, and because of the quality of the artists and the works presented there. With the help of Xifré Morros, the Baix Camp county capital managed to resume the spirit of the gatherings of the historic May Salons in Barcelona. It was both an artistic event and a social gathering, achieving resounding success as up to 300 people, including artists, critics, collectors and personalities from Catalonia’s social and cultural worlds were invited to the openings and subsequent dinner gatherings.

Like a reflection of the times, the early years also bore witness to fierce controversies between abstract and figurative artists, which would subside over time. There was something of the absurd about this controversy, because it sought to invalidate the ingress of certain *raisons*

d'être, confusing styles and languages with qualities and excellence. Since it was quite obvious that with the excuse of *contemporaneity* – a term as ambiguous as *modernity* had been years earlier – you could not defenestrate a whole trail of good artists. Critics clung to the concept of “new figuration”, applied not as a movement but as a literary resource.

Morató immediately became part of the regulars at Anquin's, thus changing the venue where he would exhibit his works in his native city. Pepita, an elegant woman and great hostess, was also very imaginative and knew how to devise ways of opening exhibitions and showcasing exhibits that made every exhibition an event. This marked the end for Morató Aragonès of the Reading Centre period, that much-loved and convivial space that had watched him grow as a painter and where he had celebrated thirty years of his career.

What we might call the artist's second maturity was now beginning. A restful yet vibrant maturity in which his paintings, rather than exploring, revelled in the construction of pieces like jewellery, full of details, in which the canvas also breathed freely. This meant that the variations on a theme could be infinite.

From the interview that appeared in the Palma de Mallorca newspaper *Hoja del Lunes* on 24 March 1975, on the occasion of the exhibition at the Dera, we can summarize some of his answers:

I look for honesty in what I paint. I am looking for a form of painting that adapts to expressing my vision and my dream of things according to my temperament. To do this, I don't close the doors on everything there is to be discovered, nor what has already been done. You have to take advantage of all the qualities, you have to gather all your powers to achieve it, without letting fashion dominate. Fashion has to be created by oneself [...]. I go to many places seeking out subjects that satisfy me, and my best time is when I am painting the memory of what I have experienced, using as a base the sketches I have made in nature. This brings me closer to reality. If not, I might occasionally arrive at a combination of almost abstract colours and shapes.

The irresistible greys of the french landscape: a return to the paintbrush and chromatic tempering

It was in 1974 when I entered the universe of Morató Aragonès the painter more directly, coinciding with a period of change in his new creativity. I was sixteen, and had broken my collarbone, which stopped me from going to Portugal on a school trip (yes, the year of the

Carnation Revolution). To make up for the disappointment, my father said I could go with him on a planned trip to Paris. And that was my own personal coming-of-age journey: walking the streets, bistros, cafés and museums of legendary Paris – the myth was passed down once again from generation to generation. A privilege. As soon as we arrived, we headed to Rue Mont Thabor, a small street behind Rue de Rivoli; I saw on the right a spectacular entrance and headed towards it: “What a beautiful hotel!” And my father started laughing and said: “No, that isn’t ours. Ours is the one on the left”, pointing out a little hotel right in front. Then he explained that the great hotel Le Meurice that I had fallen in love with was where Dalí used to stay when he was in Paris. At that time, the first thing you had to do when you arrived in the city was to buy the *Pariscope*, the historic small-format cultural weekly (first published in 1965) where you could find all the information on exhibitions, films and shows; this was the only way not to miss out on anything that might have been of interest, so from this we made our list. Obviously we started by going to the Louvre. What I will never forget from that visit is my fascination with the *Venus de Milo* and the *Nike of Samothrace*, the little *Gioconda* (generally known as the *Mona Lisa* in English), the wonderful seventeenth and eighteenth century paintings of flowers, and the rooms dedicated to Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot. My father, a profound admirer of the Parisian artist (whom he had discovered at the beginning of his career through Mallol and, especially, his disciple Josep Calaf), examined every painting, usually small, for at least five minutes ... to savour them; in the end I despaired because I didn’t know where to look even though I have always liked Corot, like Urgell and Puig Perucho. Among other exhibitions that I can’t remember now, we went to see the tribute to Joan Miró at the Grand Palais; we almost raced through the rooms, until he said: “Let’s go, because I’ve got a headache”. Several times he told me: “Picasso is more than he seems and Miró is less than he seems”. Obviously their aesthetic sensitivities did not coincide, even though he recognized his genius and, above all, his sincerity. In an interview, Morató asserted: “Miró has shown that with a system of well-combined masses of colour and foregoing any kind of anecdotal resource, it is possible to express the ideas of optimism, sadness, and so on”.²³⁰

On the way to Notre-Dame (where we attended a mass in Spanish) he took me to see one of his favourite churches, the Sainte-Chapelle, which blew me away. We also met his friend Mark in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, at Les Deux Magots. Thinking about it with the perspective of hindsight, the visual contrast between the two men was so noticeable that it becomes difficult to understand their incombustible friendship. My father, at the height of the flower-power hippie

²³⁰ FLAMISELL. “José M^a Morató”. *Reus. Semanario de la Ciudad*, 13 December 1952.

aesthetic then dominating the streets of Paris, was dressed like a gentleman in a jacket and tie with a marengo grey fedora on his head. Mark, like a Marlon Brando alter ego in *Last Tango in Paris*, wore jeans, a black turtleneck sweater and a large silver medallion dangling on his chest. An entire afternoon of exhibition visits ensued, with them analysing the changes in the art world and the incipient economic crisis. On other days, we naturally walked the streets of Montmartre, where we saw the Moulin de la Galette and a ramshackle Au Lapin Agile. All the while he made sketches in his notebook with a pen. At the Place du Tertre we came across some of his painter friends who lived part of the year in Paris. I think the square still had a little of its charm back then, but a few years later the quality of the paintings on sale there became mostly iniquitous, like most street markets around the world.²³¹

It must be said that despite the upheaval caused by the 1973 oil crisis, the Seventies were good years for Morató: when he held an exhibition, he could easily sell forty paintings. In the summer months, far from taking a holiday, he worked non-stop in the studio in Reus. There was one year when he promised us that we would all go on a trip, but when the month of August came around he backtracked so as not to waste a good creative streak. He needed to have a lot of works to offer the constant stream of visitors to his studio. To a certain extent, as I mentioned earlier, some of the collectors in Reus bought paintings in the same way other people might buy chickens or hazelnuts in the Monday market in Plaça de Prim. This is not to detract from the work, it was simply their way of doing things. There is an anecdote which is worth explaining, well known among his painter friends (as Benet Sarsanedas recalled) that illustrates these buyers' attitude. It was when we already lived part of the year at Villa number three on the Mas Carpa development (in the semi-circular townhouses around the current Jaume II roundabout), which also served as a studio and social gathering place. Every day brought a stream of people coming to visit or buy paintings. On one occasion, one of these friends came and filled the trunk of his car with pictures; then another mutual friend arrived and the first one said: "You're late, I've already bought the best paintings". You would never guess the newcomer's reply: "Well, I'll buy your car with all the pictures inside it". It was a time of a lot of transactions and successes. There is another curious anecdote relating to this villa, which had a backyard where my parents planted three pine trees and built a pergola covered with beautiful bougainvillea plants. Over the years, my father closed off the pergola to make a garden shed but the town hall forced him to tear it down. Highly annoyed, he said that he was going to have his shed (poetically speaking) come hell or high water, so as if it were performance art we began to paint a trompe-l'oeil on

²³¹ Some painters produced two types of works: those they exhibited in their galleries, and those they sold to tourists in these squares. My father and I agreed that this was an "undignified" attitude for a creator.

the middle wall: an old wooden door with a gap for the cat, a half-opened window, ceramic tiles – some of them half broken – a swallow’s nest, cracks in the wall with a lizard and spiders with their webs, drops of rainwater running down the wall, a trellis with little flowers and a garden fork hanging by the door... It was so well done that the inspectors fined him for an illegal construction, because from the street it looked exactly like a shed.

In 1974, the Reus photographer Josep Branchat Cavallé presented his exhibition “Artist Friends” at the Reading Centre: a series of black and white portraits of 36 painters and sculptors from the Reus art scene with which he aimed to reflect his personal world and artistic identity. Morató was among those chosen artists.

I talked to Branchat about those sessions²³² and he explained that what captured his attention about Morató was that he was such a family man, so he went to the studio at Mas Carpa and did an extensive session with the whole family. In fact, he portrayed us all. What I didn’t know is that they censored the cover of the catalogue, which was a self-portrait along the same lines as the exhibition, and had to be replaced with a nondescript silhouette of the Prioral bell-tower. Branchat undertook a good photographic report, not just of the family but also took the last portrait of Morató with his friend Joan Rebull in Plaça de Prim, one year before the sculptor’s death.

In 1975, Morató exhibited at the Prisma gallery in Vilanova i la Geltrú and in the group exhibition entitled *Pintores Actuales* (Current Painters) at the Mitre Gallery in Barcelona, a recently-opened gallery on Ronda del General Mitre, near Ganduxer, which was a hub for many of the artists from the group for many years. He exhibited several times at the Mitre gallery (mainly in group exhibitions) until he started exhibiting at the Comas gallery and La Pinacoteca.

At La Cova del Drac the regular members of the gatherings there (Griera, Cruañas, Jansana, Lloveras, Morató Aragonès, Rollán, Sanjuan, Siches and Vives Fierro) organized an exhibition entitled “The painters of La Cova del Drac showcase our café”. This featured works and sketches that represented or were produced in that venue. The invitation featured drawings of the artists with a symbol to the side that characterized them. Morató was portrayed with the dove of peace. The painters of La Cova would later hold several exhibitions as a group in Tossa de Mar and Girona.

During the summer Morató went on an expedition with his brother Rafael and the whole family to Andalusia, passing through Aragon and the two Castiles (Monegros, Zaragoza, Chinchón,

²³² Josep Branchat. Interview in Reus, 21 October 2021 (MEM)

Granada, Cordoba, Úbeda, Malaga, Ronda, Antequera, etc). When we stopped in Ronda, where he wanted to show us all the places he had painted as a young man, he once again met up with his old friends from military service times, with whom he had lost contact, in front of the well-known Posada de las Ánimas tavern.

Morató experienced a turnaround in his use of colour at this time, unmistakably connected to French landscapes, and introduced a new predominant colour – grey – starting to develop a taste for light tones, subtle nuances and indirect light that would dominate the whole area of the painting in equal measure. In other words, this was a light that did not shed shadows but planes, which faceted spaces, masses and surfaces in a work that approached that of goldsmithing.

Angel Marsà considered the Mitre exhibition to be one of his best, and Fernando Gutiérrez spoke of “transparencies of almost unbelievable depth, tonalities and musical ranges that seem to cross and uncross on the canvas in clever and incisive brushstrokes or touches of the palette knife”, the sign of a full and resounding maturity where “everything in this painting seems to live in a crystalline yet vibrant silence”.²³³

Santos Torroella commented in two articles:

Here we have a painter, by preference a landscape painter, whose work stands out among that of his contemporaries for its solidity, its balance and, within its compositional rigour, for the fineness of its nuances [...]. [And, on the subject of his palette knife work, he said:] I doubt that anyone today knows how to handle this tool – which Rembrandt was the first to use properly – with the efficacy and elasticity with which Morató Aragonés uses it. In his hands, the palette knife is like a kind of magic wand, capable of imbuing everything with subtle vibrations, thanks to which this painter from Reus has managed to renew the landscape genre.²³⁴

This good painter from Reus is, as we know, a lover of the palette knife, a tool he handles with the utmost skill, with the real virtuosity of an expert. This gives his work that expert, choppy, slashed syntax, with glints like sleet, that is so characteristic of him and through which he has achieved a very individual interpretation of the landscape. [...] In all of his works there is a subtle elegance, with an equally elegant

²³³ GUTIÉRREZ, Fernando. *La Vanguardia Española*, 18 October 1975.

²³⁴ SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. A printed presentation that accompanied the publication of a paper reproduction of a painting of Besalú by Morató Aragonès (1975).

predominance of grey intonations, and the gravitas without stridency that is only usually conferred by skilled and lengthy craftsmanship.²³⁵

Imma Julián, introducing class interpretation, said in the *Gazeta del Arte* (“Arts Gazette”):

This painter presents us with a number of oil paintings and drawings in which his professionalism and craftsmanship are evident [...]. His mastery is highlighted by his handling of the palette knife, with which he achieves excellent material qualities, and also by his knowledge of colour theory. The textures he achieves manage to make his work stand out from classic landscape painting, despite the traditional nature of the chosen themes. In his drawings, made in pencil and Indian ink, we see the more spontaneous artist, freer and lighter in his lines.

In short, this painter’s work, of completely traditional characteristics in terms of the themes and techniques used, which might separate him from the concept of avantgarde, certainly make his work appealing to a certain bourgeoisie.²³⁶

In April 1976, Morató found out from reading the press that he had won second prize in the “Towns and Landscapes of Spain” competition, sponsored by the F. Estrada Saladich Foundation (“Goodness!” he said, while to me it seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to win another prize). The work in question, a landscape of Antequera, was acquired by the Barcelona Provincial Council.

In the new Madei Sala d’Art gallery in Barcelona, the exhibition entitled “La Punyalada 76” brought together work by Morató Aragonès, Cruañas, Ricart Serra, Siches, Vives Fierro, Jansana, Santos Torroella, Bestit, Barnadas, Planas Gallés, Rollán, Griera, Sanjuán, Bosch Roger, Lloveras, Ramon Llovet, Florit, Alfred Figueras, Curós, Torras Bachs, Lluís Vila Plana and the sculptor Viladomat. The catalogue’s foreword was written by Enric Jardí.

In 1976 a Drawing Fair was held on Rambla de Catalunya in Barcelona, in association with the galleries and promoted by Santos Torroella, who wanted to repeat an event that had already been held previously. Morató Aragonès exhibited on the stand set up by La Punyalada, where the artists and Santos Torroella himself sketched each other during the many hours they spent

²³⁵ SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. *El Noticiero Universal*, 21 October 1975.

²³⁶ JULIÁN, Imma. *Gazeta del Arte*, 15 November 1975.

there. At the 1978 call, on the other hand, he took part on the stand of the International Painting Collection.^{237 238}

That same year, 1976, some of the Mitre painters held a group exhibition at the Hubert d'Huckermann Foundation in Grenoble, and in 1977 they continued exhibiting in several cities in France. Under the name of *Peintres d'Espagne catalane* (Painters of Catalan Spain), they showed in February at the Grand Hotel in Saint Etienne and in June at the Maison de Lyon. Morató exhibited there along with Abelló, Badia, Emilia Castañeda, Florit, Freixas Cortés, Glyn Jones, Jordi, Munill, Rifà, Río and Vives Fierro. At the Lyon exhibition, one of Morató's paintings was stolen (he was showing seven) and the photographer Joseph-Marie Lafuente, one of the organizers along with journalist Claude Magnan, wrote to him: "The Lyon exhibition was very well received by the people of Lyon. We would have sold a canvas, but unfortunately it was stolen. The event was given maximum coverage in terms of publicity, and the written and spoken press reported it throughout France".²³⁹

To finish off this journey, Morató took part in Salon 1977 at the Grand Palais de Paris, organized by the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts and the Maison des Artistes Fondation Rothschild, with three works: *Rue à Montmartre*, *Marée Basse à Honfleur* and *Hiver à Londres*.

During the year, Morató had a one-off anecdotal epistolary encounter with the sculptor Jorge Oteiza ... because of me. I discovered Oteiza at the age of eighteen in one of those eternal reading sessions at the Library of Catalunya. I was struck by what people said about him, and when I managed to get hold of his book *Quousque Tandem* my mental universe was turned upside down, so much so that I spent months thinking that I simply had to meet this artist. When I found his address I wanted to write him a letter, but I didn't dare, until I asked my father if it would be alright with him. He encouraged me, saying that artists always like to hear from someone who admires their work. And so I did, with no expectation of an answer. But an extremely kind reply did, in fact, arrive, with a little note from Oteiza thanking my father for encouraging me to write to him:

Dear Mr Morató,

My kind regards, and thank you very much for encouraging your daughter to write to me. She has made me very happy. In addition, it has come to my attention through her

²³⁷ Catalogues of the I, II and III Drawing Fair.

²³⁸ VIDAL OLIVERAS, Jaume. *Gallerisme a Barcelona, 1877-2012* ("Gallery Management in Barcelona, 1877–2012"), Barcelona: Barcelona City Council: Associació Art Barcelona, 2012, p. 89.

²³⁹ Correspondence (AMA).

that both you and I are artists who are little known outside our own countries. Does this matter to you? To me neither. My warmest regards; I am now going to write a few lines to Elena.²⁴⁰

In March 1978 he exhibited at Sala Nonell in Madrid. Conchita Kindelán spoke of “Catalan landscapes seen through a unique prism and a gleaned chromaticism in very bold whites that nip with clever palette knife work at the soft, toned-down colours”.²⁴¹ In September he exhibited at the Gamma gallery in Tortosa and González Cirer wrote:

“He revels in muted tones, in harmonies of soft greys, faded blues, delicate siennas, barely hinted-at pinks and greens [...] there is an almost musical harmonization due to the demands of the mid-tones and the ambitious desire for reasoned perfection [...] exquisite range, attenuated atmospheric radiation, a realism enveloped in poetry that places today’s women and landscapes in the spiritual climate of an indefinite yesteryear”.²⁴²

That same year he exhibited at the International Painting Collection in Barcelona, a society with which he would collaborate from then on and which, in October 1984, would make him an honorary member. He also exhibited in April 1979, for the first time, at La Pinacoteca (*La Pina*, as the painters used to call it). Morató always told us that exhibiting at this gallery had been the dream of his youth, as all the greats of the time exhibited there. At La Pinacoteca, Ivo Pascual had introduced him to Puigdemogolas, Santasusagna and Muntaner. On that occasion, Rafael Manzano said: “He has always maintained his commitment to reality in this almost artisanal quest for quality”.²⁴³ Santos Torroella spoke of “a discreet originality, free from bombast in this regard, yet which makes him, in our opinion, one of the most interesting and consistent painters in his formulations of form and content on the current Catalan art scene in its figurative dimension”.²⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Lina Font said: “The versions he gives us of reality – his reality – are extremely ascetic”.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁰ Arxiu MEM. The letter to Oteiza can be found in the Jorge Oteiza d’Alzuza Museum (Navarre).

²⁴¹ KINDELÁN, Conchita. *Pueblo*, 5 April 1978.

²⁴² GONZÁLEZ CIRER, Francisco. “Morató Aragonés at Sala d’Art Gamma”. *La Voz del Bajo Ebro*, September 1978.

²⁴³ MANZANO, Rafael. *Solidaridad Nacional*, 2 May 1979.

²⁴⁴ SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. *El Noticiero Universal*, May 1979.

²⁴⁵ FONT, Lina. Radio Barcelona, 30 April 1979.

This, then, was the start of a period during which he changed his exhibition venues in Barcelona. La Pinacoteca, Kreisler (after he won first prize in their mini-painting competition) and the Comas gallery now came into play.

Following the sudden death of his friend Sanjuan in 1979,²⁴⁶ he took part in the tribute paid to him by Antoni Botey at the recently-opened AB gallery in Granollers, from then on becoming a regular exhibitor at the venue. The AB was also a delightful meeting place where all genres were welcomed and respected, and did a very good job of disseminating the Catalan creative scene outside the Catalan capital itself.

In November he exhibited at Bay-Sala in Bilbao on the occasion of the presentation of the book *Morató Aragonés*, part of the “Maestros Actuales de la Pintura y Escultura Catalanas” (Current Masters of Catalan Painting and Sculpture) collection, with texts written by Francesc Galí and M. Elena Morató. Luis de Lázaro Uriarte commented on 9 November in *La Gaceta del Norte*: “Parisian influences and very sparse Catalan accents, to which perhaps we should add indubitable reminiscences of certain contemporary Italian art, are in my opinion, as of today, the motivating and undeniably fertile triangle behind this balanced, restrained painting”.

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This new taste for a clarity that nuanced his colours – which first asserted itself in the 1975 exhibition at the Mitre Gallery and would reach its peak around the mid-1980s – was interpreted by Jaume Socías in his comments on the La Pinacoteca exhibition in 1979 as a new direction:

José Maria Morató has been painting successfully for years. He had achieved an unmistakable style, very much his own, based above all on the use of oil on flat surfaces and his own colour register, creating rich and suggestive paintings. Perhaps this very success has led him to seek new directions. [...] He has lightened his palette (to an extreme use of pale greys) and seems to seek greater expressiveness, together with a certain tendency towards abstraction. He is more inventive, as if he wants to create a new vision of the landscape, with an optical mobility that is very evident in his skies.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ On 25 June 1979, Sanjuan wrote to him for the last time from Deià: “Dear friend “*de bon de veres*” as they say here in Mallorca. Well, even thinking about the exhibition in Salou is a lot. Thank you so much [...]. I have such an urge, and every day more so, to stay on this island forever, because I didn’t know it but I have an impressively prestigious “cartel”, about which, believe me, I was completely unaware. [...] It seems I have more prospects in view. I work a lot and quietly here in the silence of the studio; the only thing I miss is the morning coffee and the chat. [...] I prostrate myself at the feet of your wife (my magnificent client), give your children a hug from me, and for you, all my gratitude and friendship, Sanjuan”. The painter died on 8 August.

²⁴⁷ SOCÍAS, Jaume. “Nuevo rumbo de Morató Aragonés” (“Morató Aragonés’ New Direction”), *Destino*, 17 May 1979.

Fernando Gutiérrez, meanwhile, wrote the following:

Years ago his painting reached the double maturity of execution and serenity, and so now we see it as an amalgam of time and wisdom, as if both came from very far away, from a very long and conscious experience. And yet, far from any stagnation, here he is with a constantly renewed freshness and his vigour – in his brushstrokes – is so intense and vibrant that, also as always, it seems brand new. And behind all this is that restlessness that never conforms with what has already been achieved, which is so much, but rather continues to seek more nobly and decidedly.²⁴⁸

In 1980, to celebrate the VI Centenary of the Elegy of the Athens Acropolis, sent by King Peter the Ceremonious on 11 September 1380, the Centre of Mediterranean Culture sent twelve paintings to Athens to symbolize the twelve crossbowmen of the King who preserved the Acropolis. The paintings, by d'Aguilar Moré, Xavier Blanch, Simó Busom, Commelerán, Rafael Durán, Isidoro Lázaro, Morató Aragonès, Pagans Monsalvatge, Ramon Pichot, Roca Sastre, Francisco Suñer and Vives Fierro, were a donation from the Reina Sofia Institute to Athens. Morató exhibited a landscape of Salamanca.

Towards timelessness in his work

Morató's work, as we have seen, took on a timeless character from the mid-1970s in which he consolidated a language that would be recognizable (with slight variations) until the end of his life.

In 1980 he began a long collaboration with the El Carme gallery in Vic which, through its promoter Joan Homs, convened the Spring Exhibition every year. In 1989 the gallery published a monograph on Morató as part of its collection entitled "Our Artists". Also in the 1980s he started a relationship with the Roglan gallery on Carrer Santaló in Barcelona, managed by Carme Roglan. This small but very dynamic gallery organized tributes and meetings every January with Catalan artists from different generations as part of the Drawing Fair. This was a major event for more than two decades and one of the few places in Barcelona where artists could still get

²⁴⁸ GUTIÉRREZ, Fernando. *La Vanguardia*, 5 May 1979.

together on the occasion of an exhibition and enjoy an art supper. Morató was honoured at the IX Drawing Fair in 1991.

In January 1981 he took part in the I Sketch Fair at the Kreisler gallery in Barcelona. In February he exhibited at the Dera gallery in Palma de Mallorca and Constanza Forteza asked him some interesting questions:

Constanza Forteza: Does getting over Impressionism mean getting over a desire for aesthetics?

Morató Aragonés: In a way, yes. Although I think all styles are good. The work of art is not made by style but by the artist, who can embrace any movement. For me, Impressionism was about capturing the light, an experience. But the painting I do now is an interpretation of nature, the memory of what has been experienced, of what is natural.

CF: Which painters have influenced Morató Aragonés?

MA: There are always painters who influence you because they are close to you. I am close to Villá. Among those who are now deceased I admire Corot. I admire the classical artists too, but in a different way, because you cannot strongly feel a bygone era. Goya profoundly impressed me, but I can't say that he has influenced me. Chagall? Chagall interests me, he is magical, very lyrical, ingenuous, but not enough for me to create a work like his.

CF: What would you say to those who think that art, as a movement, has already closed its boundaries?

MA: Artistic restlessness will always exist. That is the beginning. Then, in terms of movements, we go up and down. From the figurative we move to the abstract, and return to the figurative.

CF: How would you characterize your painting?

MA: As a kind of current classical painting. Classical, because let's say it is already established, everyone can understand it now. And current, because I am current [...], I try to ensure that my work is fresh.

CF: What importance do you give to the decorative, to the established aesthetic?

MA: The aesthetic is one of the elements that is integrated in the artwork as a whole. But it has to be produced without prior planning. At the time of painting, what counts

is intuition, without prejudging the aesthetic. The final aesthetic emerges from a good intuitive moment, without intention.²⁴⁹

Although in the interview he does not identify himself with the work of Goya and Chagall, it is undeniable that in his early period we find traits of Goya in his urban genre scenes and, from the 1950s, hints of Chagall in some of the ways he resolves his skies, which often take on their own identity and mobility.

In June 1981 he exhibited for the first time at the Comas gallery in Barcelona, holding a retrospective and presenting the book *Miscel·lània* that the Roger de Belfort Foundation dedicated to him. The book, as we have already seen in various quotes from it, contains interesting texts by Roger de Belfort (the pseudonym of Manuel Aragonès i Virgili), M. Elena Morató, Josep Calaf, José Luis Fernández Flores, Xavier Amorós, Claude Magnan, Llorenç Jaume Grau, Antoni Correig, Torrell de Reus, Santos Torroella, González Cirer and Juan A. Valls Jové. We will now see what all the contributors to the book had to say about Morató Aragonès's work. In the book, José Luis Fernández Flores says: "His almost unalterable personality made him mature while still young, and now it makes him young when he is already mature". "Colour in Morató's work is seen in terms of light [...], a light, incidentally, that is very original and is even found in the shadows – within them. [...] José María Morató has been true to himself for fifty years".²⁵⁰

Antoni Correig, meanwhile, associated Morató's artistic ideal with the poetic ideal of Tomàs Garcés: "Neither the poet nor our painter wish to reflect anguish but rather the beautiful confidence of existing. [...] The world evoked by Morató's paintings becomes perceptible only according to the restfulness of the atmosphere. [...] Ecstasy is resolved in a consoling melancholy, while the image seems to fade into the past. [...] The landscapes and towns interpreted by his palette are also in some way "interiors" [in reference to the title of many of his paintings], like still lifes, not to mention his figures, who seem withdrawn into their own individual worlds. [...] They are "chamber" landscapes, where the light is born from a sun that does not burn". To paraphrase Paul Valéry, Correig said that Morató's work had sweetness and vigour, sensitivity and a strong structure. "Morató does not contradict the natural image, but transcribes it, crystallized by a dreamy grey light".²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ FORTEZA, Constanza. *Última Hora*, 9 February 1981.

²⁵⁰ FERNÁNDEZ FLORES, José Luis. *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània ...*, p. 39-43.

²⁵¹ CORREIG, Antoni. *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània ...*, p. 61-68.

Santos Torroella, who had followed his career from the early 1960s and knew him extremely well, said: “Morató’s landscapes are like the man himself: balanced, serene and with a lot of background, of deep yet wisely contained diction. [...] His work is tremendously individual within the current Catalan painting scene, even though it might appear to us to be firmly planted in the finest modern landscape tradition, the one that emanated from Cézanne”.²⁵²

On this occasion, Fernando Gutiérrez, another critic who had closely followed Morató’s career, spoke of “his long-consolidated and brilliant maturity [...]. Morató has constructed his work as if it were his own life. [...] It is a work that was born from an almost mystical meditation on a given theme in the search for emotional and lyrical values”. And Rafael Manzano wrote: “It would seem that this artist is currently at the pinnacle of his work [...], hence that flowing sensation associated with the works of this artist of silent eternity”.²⁵³

In June he won third prize in the competition honouring Catalan painters organized by newspaper *La Vanguardia* at the Comas gallery. Curiously enough, he had already produced a painting thirty years earlier that portrayed a reader of this same newspaper. In fact, this newspaper is one of the constant features in his café interiors, as essential as the coffee cup or the teapot.

He would have a long exhibiting relationship with the Comas (which initially wanted him exclusively, but he did not consent), becoming part of the Passeig de Gràcia Group that was created by the gallery to gain media exposure. The Group consisted of Benet Sarsanedas, Casaus, Cruañas, Danés Jordi, Griera, Joan Mas, Joan Martí, Morató Aragonès, Pascual Bueno, Ricart Serra, Agustí Río, Rollán, Siches, Verdaguer and Vives Fierro, and was presented in various cities by Baltasar Porcel. In the October catalogue of 1981, the writer said about Morató’s work: “ochre and zinc, the rugged vibrations of the lands of Tarragona, the quality of vellum”. The Passeig de Gràcia Group exhibited in 1983 at the Kreisler gallery in Madrid and they were received by Queen Sofía at the Zarzuela Palace, accompanied by the gallery’s director, Paquita Comas, and the Mallorcan writer and journalist.

In 1982, on the occasion of the exhibition at the AB gallery in Granollers, Joan Sala i Vila held a theoretical interview with Morató:

²⁵² SANTOS TORROELLA, Rafael. *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània ...*, p. 76.

²⁵³ MANZANO, Rafael. *El Noticiero Universal*, 25 June 1981.

Morató Aragonès: [...] In every painting there is something of the people with whom you have dealt and others who you haven't met but, through painting, you have learnt lessons from, such as Mallol Suazo and Cézanne.

Joan Sala: What does the balance of one's own personality represent in the balance of a painting?

MA: I think I'm very balanced in all things. And I also put this balance into the painting.

JS: Colour and drawing, what role do they play in painting?

MA: It seems to me the absolutely essential thing in a painting is balance, composition. Colour is then a matter of interpretation.

JS: When you paint, what should your surroundings be like? Music playing, peaceful, silent?

MA: Perhaps the peacefulness should be internal, because I have painted amid noise and done so very comfortably. I have painted to music, even though I might not have listened to it. [...] ²⁵⁴

Cornudella, a place to stay over

As the family had not had a home in Cornudella since the 1950s, whenever we went up there and had to spend the night we stayed first at the Fonda Montsant (now gone) and then at the Fonda El Recó. The owners of the latter, the Estivill Franquet family, became part of our Cornudella family over the years; today three generations of continuous friendship have built up from meal to meal. We might say that the painter created his very own menu there: *escudella* (he even tried to get them to make it in summer) or cannelloni, baked eggs with *sobrassada* ²⁵⁵ or sausage with *escalivada*, red wine and soda water, and to finish *postre de música* (a mixture of local dried fruit and nuts). In 2015 Maria Franquet, who my parents had seen grow up, said to us: "The colours he put in his paintings were like him, sweet-natured and relaxing [...]. He felt so much that he put his life into his paintings" ²⁵⁶.

Among the visits we used to make there was to his friend Esteve Roig, the painter who we called "Lo dallò" because of his peculiar way of expressing himself. Years later, his son Josep Roig Aguiló also painted professionally, but his career, which began brilliantly, was brutally cut short by cancer. His unexpected and untimely demise left us all in shock. Another of his visits was to his

²⁵⁴ SALA VILA, Joan. "Granollers Art". *Vallès*, 13 February 1982.

²⁵⁵ When Kansas was still on Passeig de Gràcia, he loved their "broken eggs".

²⁵⁶ Maria Franquet. Interview in Cornudella, 7 May 2015 (MEM)

cousin Rosita Estivill, “Perocha”, and her husband Josep Juncosa, a farmer with a capital F who tended his land with true vocation until the last moments of his life and was a fount of rural wisdom.

In 1980, Morató exhibited for the first time in what was still the hall of the Municipal Library of Cornudella. I remember that in order to somehow unify the space we covered the walls with classic brown craft paper (an idea copied from an exhibition I had seen at the Brossolí²⁵⁷ gallery in Barcelona). After that, he continued to exhibit from time to time in the already established Municipal Exhibition Hall, bringing his best works and treating it as if it were a gallery on Barcelona’s elegant Passeig de Gràcia. With my mother’s stylish touch they filled the room with plants and flowers. The exhibitions were actually an excuse to spend a few days in town, meet up with old friends, and go on outings in the surrounding area to draw and paint. However, he could not sit still because whenever he had a couple of free hours he would jump in the car and go off to the surrounding towns.

During those years, Morató used to rent the house that Mercè Porqueres had in the church square for a month every summer. Mercè had married her childhood sweetheart Batista Espasa, a farmer who loved history and literature, who loved to write and who contributed to several publications by renowned historians. From that time on, every time we went up to Cornudella for lunch, a visit to the couple for coffee was an absolute must, and a very pleasant interlude it was because Mercè was a very kind and attentive person, while Batista knew lots of stories and was very funny. Through my brother Jordi’s publishing house, in 1986 we published the book *A l’ombra d’unes paraules*²⁵⁸ (“In The Shadow of Some Words”) a collection of poems about the land and the surrounding area that was full of literary intuition.

Back in Barcelona, the routine of studio, gatherings and exhibitions continued at a good pace. From time to time (but not often), my father would give me a recommendation, usually to visit the exhibition of someone he knew. One day, in 1980, he said: “You’ve got to go to the gallery of a friend of mine, Ignacio Lassaleta, because he’s opening an exhibition of a very good painter who you’ve got to see: Josep Beulas”. And of course I liked Beulas so much that I wrote an

²⁵⁷ The *Brossolí* gallery, on the street of the same name, belonged to Xavier Sabata, the publisher of *Artes Plàstiques* magazine.

²⁵⁸ ESPASA, Joan Baptista. *A l’ombra d’unes paraules* (“In the Shadow of Some Words”), Barcelona: Ed. MAP, 1986.

enthusiastic article about him for *Batik* magazine.²⁵⁹ Ten years later, we both paid him a visit at his house in Huesca.

In February 1983 he exhibited again at the Comas gallery. On this occasion, we could see how he had incorporated bright primary colours in his *Reus Markets* series;²⁶⁰ yellows and oranges and even some reds, which he had not touched for many years. But this would not be a new line, simply a parenthesis as a reminiscence of his experience of natural painting in his early years.

Manzano spoke on this occasion of a:

[...] compromise between intelligence and emotion. Intelligence leads him to order and discipline. The latter leads him away from simple geometrization, instead humanizing the discipline, illuminating the line, bringing the pulse of life back to the human figure [...]. We would be so bold as to classify his work as “elegant”. There is nothing less hazardous or explosive than one of his paintings: every millimetre of canvas is planned, analysed, conclusive. This condition may mean he loses out on popularity, as his work demands meticulous and measured consideration; it does not impose itself upon you violently but by the perfection of its parts.²⁶¹

Fernando Gutiérrez made an amusing comment: “[...] with the palette knife, Morató Aragonés manages to nuance certain qualities that only Dalí with his brushes of 465 rabbit hairs would be capable of surpassing”.²⁶² And Conxita Oliver said: “[...] he reconciles his compositions with ease and spontaneity, using a diction in which the stroke does not aim to stain the entire surface of the support, but rather lets the white of the background shine through as an entity in itself. Hence each of the features arising from his momentum represents an individual act of freedom [...]”.²⁶³

In 1984 he held an exhibition at Anquin’s with most of his figure and café paintings, where, in a special café-like atmosphere, he drew ‘live’ in public, with his daughters, wearing vintage hats,

²⁵⁹ *Batik*, no. 50 (Barcelona, 1980). Signed with one of my pseudonyms, Maria Mas, my great-grandmother’s name. I stopped using it when a critic with the exact same name started contributing to the magazine.

²⁶⁰ He produced this series when it was announced that the old fish market in Reus’ historical centre behind the Prioral Sant Pere church would be demolished in the mid-1980s.

²⁶¹ MANZANO, Rafael. *El Noticiero Universal*, 17 February 1983.

²⁶² GUTIÉRREZ, Fernando. *La Vanguardia*, 27 February 1983.

²⁶³ OLIVER, Conxita. *Avui*, 17 March 1983.

and Josepa Quinteiro as a model. Juli Garola, who visited the exhibition, said: “His figures are exceptional, and the faces of these women are a true lesson in pictorial art”.²⁶⁴ Conxita Oliver commented once again:

Based on a structural core – the result of drawing references that structure the composition – he manages to evoke in these scenes an intimate subjectivity of manifestly formal elegance. With the true expressive agility inherent in artists who are masters of their craft, and by means of a formal and chromatic sobriety – the essentialization of the elements used – he configures an almost immaterial lyrical world in which the forms are lightened and the features become flexible and fluid in a play of measure and balance. A calm, diffused light and livid, transparent colours imbue every element – while diluting the representation – to give them a melancholy breath that almost becomes the intimate murmur of a sensation.²⁶⁵

With regard to the fact that Morató had painted for several years in an extremely soft chromatic range and suddenly returned to using colour in all its power, my mother (after Josep Maria’s death) reminded me of something I had not thought of: Morató had cataracts in his eyes, which were detected when they were already very advanced. It was therefore impossible for him to distinguish colours properly, or at least their tonalities. This is probably why the shades of certain years seem to be subdued, only recovering their chromatic power after he had been operated on. He said that he had rediscovered colour.

In 1984, after the death of Frederic Lloveras,²⁶⁶ Morató left the studio on Carrer de Monistrol and rented what had been his friend’s studio on the top floor of Carrer del Congost, near Plaça Rovira, a studio that was right opposite Cruañas’ studio and not far from Sarsanedas’ on Plaça de la Virreina. As it did not have a phone line, I bought him one of the first mobile phones that had come on the market: very expensive, very big and heavy, about the size of a shoe. This district in the upper part of the Gràcia neighbourhood (which is more like a village than a city) was where some of the members of the Cova del Drac group, which by now had pretty much disbanded began to gather for a lunch at the Escarlata restaurant on the first Thursday of every month. This group started with four friends and over time many other painters joined it, as well

²⁶⁴ F. B. “L’Anquin’s, una festa: Morató Aragonès, el motiu” (“L’Anquin’s, a party: Morató Aragonès, the reason”), *Actualitat de Reus*. 31 January 1984.

²⁶⁵ OLIVER, Conxita. *Avui*, 4 February 1984.

²⁶⁶ That year, Anquin’s gallery paid tribute to him *in memoriam* at the XII May Exhibition.

as Santiago Arnau, the owner of the most popular framing shop in Barcelona and a friend of them all.²⁶⁷ Morató designed the restaurant's menu (now long gone) which, according to them, had a very good chef. Shortly afterwards these lunches moved to a weekly event and began to become extremely popular: word of mouth and the mythologizing of the concept of an "artists' gathering", at a time when individualism was already beginning to prevail, attracted a lot of curious people.

That year, 1985, was also a busy one. In May, Morató was the artist guest of honour at the VIII Drawing Fair in Granollers and he held several exhibitions. On the occasion of the one held in April at the Kreisler in Barcelona, Rafael Manzano wrote in *El Noticiero Universal*: "He is one of the painters with the most personality in the Catalan art world, starting with his masterful versatility. [...] his landscapes warrant in-depth contemplation, because the painter seems to conceal their transcendence with a layer of discretion". Josep Maresma Pedragosa, in a letter sent to him on 12 April, said: "Talking about his work is pretty difficult, since one might say that everything has already been said, and always in favour of his work".²⁶⁸

In 1986, however, he only held one exhibition, at the El Carme gallery in Vic. Nevertheless, in September the Young Chamber of Commerce of Reus, organizers of the Children's Christmas Park, commissioned him to produce the poster which, in his inimitable style, portrays a little girl with her doll, both of them wearing hats. The original artwork was presented to the press at an event held at Anquin's gallery in October. I remember that a letter to the editor (written by a young woman) was published in a newspaper, complaining that they had chosen such a classic design when there were so many young artists to choose from. Morató felt so bad about this comment that he wanted to write to the newspaper to reply and explain himself. I told him that he didn't have to answer to anyone, far less explain himself; that if the girl wanted to make those comments, she had every right. Against perceptions there is no need for polemics ... And those dolls with their old hats are so pretty!

Shortly after, in November, he travelled to Venice with Cruañas and Sarsanedas, revisiting some of those urban themes that recur so often among painters. At the end of the year, on the

²⁶⁷ Santiago Arnau opened his first shop on Carrer de Roger de Flor as a glazier, moving in the early 1970s, now as a framing shop, to Carrer de Provença, 376, next to Passeig de Sant Joan. Most Catalan painters passed through his workshop, many of whom became his friends. Whenever you went there to frame, you always found other artists there and an impromptu gathering was created. In 1999 he enlarged the store and opened a gallery space with an exhibition by Subirachs. Every year, around Christmas, he put on a group exhibition of small format paintings entitled "100 Catalan artists" which was very popular and well-attended, attracting more than 150 participants.

²⁶⁸ Josep Maresma used to visit exhibitions and send the artists a few lines of critique.

occasion of its centenary, the Reus Chamber of Commerce commissioned him to produce an oil painting, entitled *Monday Market*, to represent the city's traditional market square, Plaça de Prim. Later on this work would be used to illustrate the label of a limited batch of wine from the region.

7 - FIFTY YEARS OF PAINTING: A LOOK BACK AND FRESH PERSPECTIVES

And then his golden anniversary as a painter arrived, as if out of the blue. On 14 February 1987, he opened a commemorative exhibition of his 50 years as a painter at Anquin's gallery, on the occasion of which he was awarded the gallery's Golden Palette, presented by Josep Laporte, and he produced a limited edition of a drawing of the bell-tower of the church of Sant Pere de Reus. For the occasion, Morató sent a letter to his acquaintances: "I am pleased to inform you that on the occasion of my Golden Anniversary as a painter at Anquin's gallery in Reus, all my friends, from every era, who would like to be with me that day will receive a print published by the gallery to mark this special moment in my artistic life, which I offer in gratitude for all the kindnesses I have received".

Introducing the exhibition, M. Josepa Giner said:

Morató always returns, he is faithful to his origins, to his friends. He paints with heart and soul his present and his past, he paints his land and its people, over and over again, without losing creative enthusiasm; with real expressive agility he creates a lyrical, almost immaterial, world. Morató, always constant, meticulous, quiet, analytical, knows exactly what to choose and what to leave out, in painting and in life itself ... and this has always impressed me: when he speaks, you have to pay attention. However, he structures his few words and he places them deep inside, always schematizing, as he does when painting.

It is necessary to know the spirit of the painter to understand that in order to create this world it is absolutely essential for him to grasp onto his roots, where he finds the authentic sap to encourage himself and move forwards, always counting on friends who, like his painting, have endured through the passage of time. [...] We do not need to make any effort to reveal the pleasure that Anquin's takes in being the entity chosen to organize and host the golden anniversary of our painter friend, born in Reus, raised in Cornudella and resident in Barcelona; a fleeting traveller and faithful friend, who returns to his homeland to offer us an important part of his life.

In March, Morató donated two paintings: one to the Friends of Reus Centre and another to Reus city council. In April, the AB gallery in Granollers joined the commemorations of his fiftieth anniversary with an anthological exhibition.

During 1987, Morató showed his work in several group exhibitions, in Barcelona (in January in the City Council rooms on Plaça Rius i Taulet in the Gràcia neighbourhood, along with Gómez Bellvé, Pascual Bueno and Clota Gras, as well as at the Comas and Maria Salvat galleries²⁶⁹) and in the Dera gallery in Palma de Mallorca.

In 1988, the year of his sixty-fifth birthday, he held a new exhibition in February at La Pinacoteca in Barcelona, and was the guest artist at the Christmas exhibition held annually at Anquin's.

That same year, at the initiative of Giorgio restaurant, he travelled with some other artists to the Henry Abelé winery in Reims for the presentation of the posters that would illustrate the bottle labels of a special edition of champagne dedicated to Catalan painters, who also lent their name to the streets of the famous champagne producer.

In 1990, taking a break in his schedule, my father accompanied me to Huesca to see Beulas. It had been a long time since they last met (they had been in Rome at the same time, when he had also met Joaquin Vaquero, Guijarro and Tasio) and he wanted to say hello. As far as I could see there was a mutual goodwill between them and they followed each other's pictorial progress. When we arrived at his farm, he came to meet us at the entrance and said: "Don't get out of the car until I've shut the dogs in". Then, at the door to the house, he greeted my father with the words "Hello, great painter!" and the two of them plunged into a long conversation during which I was relegated (and delighted to be) to a mute onlooker. He took us on an outing to Loarre Castle and in the evening I stayed to work in the blue studio of García de Paredes while my father went to the hotel in Huesca.

The journalist Tate Cabré, who would come to have a close relationship with Morató (a legacy of the friendship between the two families), interviewed him on 18 December 1993 for *Diari de Tarragona* in his studio on Carrer del Congost:

²⁶⁹ Maria Salvat, the daughter of the descendent of a Cornudella friend of Morató, exhibited his work a few years ago in her elegant gallery on Carrer Muntaner, next to Travessera de Gràcia.

Morató Aragonès has green eyes, very green, if one hasn't been distracted by the leonine salt-and-pepper sideburns that hang down his cheeks, which pierce through the thickness of his heavy tortoiseshell glasses. He paints in blues – they envy him the neverending range of greys – and smokes black tobacco cigarettes, non-stop. He does not smoke Havana cigars, even though he has dozens of cigar boxes – brimming with photos and postcards of villages – all neatly stacked up [...] everything appears to be in its place, tidy, impeccable [...] ...the sensible artist, the antithesis of bohemian.

[...]

Morató Aragonès: I'm not one of those people who think you have to change constantly, because if you are always changing you can never reach the end of a stage. My evolution is natural, without premeditation.

[...]

Tate Cabré: Do you return often to Cornudella?

MA: These days I like going to those places of mine, which I knew as a child, more than I like travelling. I return with the heart, with feeling.

Those were already years of recession and crisis. The art market was suffering a general decline and many artists were beginning to feel the consequences. *La Veu de Reus* of 31 October 1993 echoed this situation in an article by Pilar Crua, "Paisatge amb boires" ("Landscape with Mists"), in which she asked gallery owners and artists how they saw the situation. She asked Morató if the crisis would affect the painter's work, and he replied: "The crisis affects the commercial side of art, and if you think of painting as a way of eating, then it affects painting and art. The recession could be a good time for many painters to give some serious thought to what they do".

During the exhibition he held at the Kreisler gallery in Madrid in 1994 we visited the Goya exhibition at the Prado entitled "Goya. El capricho y la invención. Cuadros de gabinete, bocetos y miniaturas" ("Goya: Caprice and invention; Cabinet paintings, sketches and miniatures"). I remember that the works he liked the most were the small-format oils. Speaking of the creative strength of many painters in their eighties, he said: "When you see this picture he painted when he was already 80 years old, it fills you with joy and hope". He was really worried that the years

would cause him to lose his artistic powers, and seeing those little gems by Goya soothed his spirit.²⁷⁰

In the introduction to the Kreisler catalogue, I said:

With this there are now five rendezvous with a Madrid that, for Morató Aragonés, represents the link between two pictorial worlds: the Mediterranean and the peninsular. It is no wonder that the marked austerity and strong plateau nature of his work has sometimes been noted as being more typical of inland regions than the chromatic bursts of the Mediterranean and its littoral smoothness. Perhaps – or certainly – his work flows in accordance with that region which, sheltering the tiny town of Cornudella, unfolds with disguised majesty the Sierra del Montsant: strong, dry, with unexpected but generous chromatic nuances for those who learn to dialogue with the land. [...] It is not common in an artist with such a long career to appreciate a freedom such as his, confronted with his own style, which arises without seeking yet does not in any way condition the constant quest for expressive renewal.

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In an article about this exhibition, *El Punto de las Artes* commented: “One feels in his work the universal blue that is noticeable in the dimension as the colour of the atmosphere; and one feels the blue mountain on which the chapel of San Juan, in Cornudella, brings the ground to the sky; also in landscapes closer to the coast where one seems to sense the murmur of the waves, among blues cured from sapwood. Morató Aragonés is a classic of Catalan painting, if by classic we think of magisterium”.²⁷¹

From this anniversary onwards, the critics would do nothing more than repeat the ideas they had outlined and established in previous years, and the interviews would be a means of hindsight in which the artist expressed his nostalgia and memories, and illustrated his thoughts on painting with a master’s words.

In 1995, at the age of seventy-two, he received what would be his last award for a painting: the first prize in the Painting Competition of the Mutual Association for a panorama of Barcelona seen from a terrace in the Gràcia neighbourhood. Some 565 painters entered the competition,

²⁷⁰ When Morató saw a painting that he found exceptionally accomplished, he would say: “It’s a fruit stone”. In the Goya exhibition he found a lot of fruit stones!

²⁷¹ “El azul sideral de Morató Aragonès” (“The steely blue of Morató Aragonès”), *El Punto de las Artes*, 17 February 1994.

both novices and established artists, and he was a little surprised but “pleased to know you are on the right path” as he said in the interview published in the Association’s magazine:

Painting loses all interest if it becomes something that is learned and always repeated. Its appeal lies in the fact that when you succeed in doing something, you immediately have to surpass it. And that is not easy at all. [...] The charm of painting is always searching for something and never finding it. It’s like a dream. A desire that is permanently inside you that you approach while you paint but which you never manage to grasp.²⁷²

Shortly before life set him a health challenge that would impact his final years, Morató celebrated his sixtieth anniversary as a painter with an exhibition at La Pinacoteca. Rafael Manzano, in the introduction, painted a portrait of the painter that is reproduced at the end of this text in celebration of his judicious approach to his pictorial career.

Life from the roof terrace: the final years

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Throughout his long career, Morató Aragonès won a large number of awards, distinctions and prizes. However, there were two that he particularly appreciated. One was the Gold Medal from Reus City Council in 1996, representing the satisfaction of seeing his artistic career recognized by his hometown, where he had always received the esteem and friendship of its people. The other was the distinction given to him by the Cornudella de Montsant Town Council, naming him Adoptive Son in 1999. This distinction, which he received at the age of seventy-six, was hugely moving for him because he appreciated it from the bottom of his heart, and it filled him with joy to see the esteem he had always felt for the small town in El Priorat county returned in this way. In 1998, Josep Maria and Montserrat took a trip to Paris that had been planned on the assumption that it would be their last to the French capital (in fact, it was their last trip abroad). My father was obsessed with the fact that he could not leave a single corner of Montmartre without drawing it. Thus, they settled into a hotel on Boulevard Clichy and every morning took a stroll through the neighbourhood. Not a single street went unvisited. When he came back, he said: “I was walking the streets and I was thinking: I’ve drawn this corner, and this one too ... and

²⁷² *Agrupació*, no. 12. Agrupació Mútua, June 1995.

it turned out that I had already painted everything!” So on an emotional level he was able to bring the Paris cycle to a satisfying close. It was a full-blown farewell.

In Barcelona, his life was suddenly impacted by the throat cancer he developed as a result of his history as a heavy smoker (his fingers were yellow from nicotine).²⁷³ The radiotherapy sessions made him lose his characteristic sideburns, and his strength began to wane. In 1998 he had to leave the studio on Carrer Congost and set up in a small studio space in the same house he was living in on Carrer de Martí, in a room that overlooked a large terrace with views of Tibidabo. There he adapted to the new circumstances, which forced him to change his habits, slowing down his mobility and pace of work. He opened old folders, went through old drawings, and ripped out the ones he didn’t like, already thinking about the legacy he wanted to leave.

In 2001, he suggested that Santiago Arnau host an exhibition as a homage to the group La Punyalada. Arnau immediately agreed and it was inaugurated in February 2002, exhibiting work by Jordi Curós (two from 1972),²⁷⁴ Josep Lluís Florit (1975), Rafael Griera (1975) and Manuel Ricart Serra (1976), reproducing the group with photographs and work by most of those who used to gather there. In the presence of all the artists who were still alive, Josep M. Cadena elucidated on its history. It was an endearing and emotional event, and I have no doubt that Morató had thought of it as a way to reunite all his friends and enjoy, for perhaps the last time, the jovial, relaxed atmosphere of those crowded social gatherings of old.

That Christmas, too, he wrote a last greeting, on 18 December, to his friend Mark which he ended up not sending, as he had lost track of him. In it, his hindsight captures his state of mind towards painting:

Dear friend: As always around this date, you remember the friends you have met by chance in life while travelling around the world. I have always remembered how we met in Paris and the many times we got together over the years, be it in Barcelona, Geneva, Paris, etc. I am still painting, but now in my home, where I’ve set up a little workshop where I paint whenever I can. I’m happy with the success I’ve had in my life

²⁷³ In fact, the habit of smoking suited him: on the one hand, as part of the construction of an image, an aesthetic pose; and on the other, he said that he always liked to have a cigarette in his hands, even if he wasn’t smoking it and it was burning away between his fingers while he painted. If we look at his photos, he acquired this habit at a young age – in addition to which it was common practice at that time; everyone smoked – and we always see him both in the studio and on the street holding a cigarette and brushes in the same hand while he painted. What brand did he buy? Ducados, naturally.

²⁷⁴ He painted a second painting of the gathering because the first one, displayed in the restaurant, had been bought by Julio Muñoz Ramonet, a regular at La Punyalada, who bought work from many of the artists in the group.

as a painter, and I paint very happily but for my own satisfaction. I hope that you too will paint some time. I haven't heard from you for a long time, I hope you are in good health and enjoying a peaceful life. My warmest regards, José M^a.²⁷⁵

When he couldn't go outside he would sit on the terrace and contemplate the rooftops of the La Salut neighbourhood, with the mountain in the background and the silhouette of the Sacred Heart Church perfectly outlined against the infinitely changing skies. During this period he painted a series of small oils with the chromatic variations of the sky seen from his roof terrace. His skies always had an entity of their own and now, in fact, they were almost his only contact with nature (apart from the magnificent rose bushes of every colour that my mother tended), as he could no longer get around like he used to. He wanted to go to the Costa Brava to draw, but he could no longer go out on the road in his car, so he resorted to the images captured over the years in the hundreds of sketches he kept, and the photographs he had taken during their outings there.

His strength was diminishing, but what did not diminish at all was his urge to draw and paint. Of course, the size of the works decreased to the smallest formats. Since over the years he had made so many sketches of cafés and pocket-sized urban views (easily more than one thousand) he devoted himself to colouring them in with watercolours. At the same time, he turned to his old sketches from the Moroccan period to recreate the memory of the Africa he had once known in his current pictorial style. It was curious that he had recovered his interest in the cities of those lands, which undoubtedly had something to do with the intense relationship I had had with them since the 1980s. Seeing the photographs I had taken of the old cities of Morocco and Tunisia sparked his interest again. As often happens in these cases, one's views tend to converge, and the views of many of my photographs coincided with those in his old sketches. And he also painted Tunisia, where he had never travelled. Talking with him about North Africa, he acknowledged that, for his own pleasure, he would have loved to go back there, to remember the old times walking through the narrow alleyways of the *medinas*, but that due to social and political circumstances in those countries (the growing problem of insecurity was really starting to wreak havoc in those years) he would not have dared to visit them.

Although he no longer went on painting excursions outside Barcelona, we did find him some mornings walking around in front of a Modernista monument, or sitting under a lamppost on

²⁷⁵ Josep Maria and Mark would not get to speak again. In 2007 we received a letter from him at home asking about his health, which we had to reply to ourselves (AMA).

Passeig de Gràcia, or in a café on the Rambles, or in Plaça del Rei, always dressed to the nines and with his ubiquitous fedora, engaged in doing one of his quick sketches. Even when he had to go to Sant Pau Hospital he made use of the waiting time to take out a piece of paper and make a few sketches. If he didn't have one of his usual notebooks on him (17 x 12 cm, the size that fit in his jacket pocket), or if he hadn't brought enough, he would use his business cards and even little 4 x 9 cm notepapers that he would cut himself to the size of the little diary²⁷⁶ he always carried on him.

In those years, which were characterized by his declining mobility, Morató did not want to be far away from what was happening in Cornudella. Since I went down there very often, I would bring back all the latest news of the town and his friends, and religiously fulfilled the task of buying him all the issues of the quarterly magazine *La Tralla*²⁷⁷. Many of the covers of this publication were illustrated with his work.

Thus going up to Cornudella from time to time helped him to raise his spirits, something he was unable to do in the city as there had been an exodus of artists from Barcelona (some of his old colleagues had moved outside the city), the social gatherings had disbanded, and the atmosphere of those meetings had disappeared. I was sorry to see that a person with such a sociable character could not enjoy the company of his friends in his final years. I remembered the many times he had worried about organizing dinners or helping to pay homage to the greatest painters, and now that it was his turn it seemed that nobody gave it any thought. Indeed, the times had changed.

In 2003 he held what would be his last exhibition in Cornudella. I remember, as an anecdote, that (like so many times before) he created by hand a few posters featuring original drawings, all different, and distributed them in various places around the town. Before the exhibition opened, a few posters had already "disappeared" as people took them to keep. He got quite angry, and said; "At the very least they could have waited until the exhibition was over". To alleviate his annoyance, we made him realize that this was actually an honour, because it meant that people valued his work.

In November 2004, his good friends from the Fonda El Recó in Cornudella invited the whole family to a stay in their farmhouse on Plaça de la Vila. Jordi and I accompanied our father on what would be his last walk around the village. While on previous occasions he made sketches

²⁷⁶ All his diaries, from 1940 to 2006, had the same format.

²⁷⁷ *La Tralla* published its first issue in Cornudella de Montsant in 2004, featuring historical and current affairs related to Cornudella and El Priorat region. The masthead paid homage to the magazine of the same name published in Barcelona in the early twentieth century.

along the route, or took notes and photos, this time (he was already walking with a stick and did not feel very well) it was me who took the photos, often following his precise instructions: “This view from here ... make sure you include the tree on the right”. As always, or perhaps even more so, he walked, observed and “inhaled” the landscape and the views of the village with the intention of retaining and affixing in his mind all the sensations of colours, light, sounds and silences he could find there. Back at the house, we went up to the upstairs lounge and on the terrace he made me take photographs of the view of the rooftops of Plaça de la Vila with the mountain of Montsant in the background, saying: “What a lovely studio to come and spend a little while painting in!” The air of Cornudella comforted him, and he was preoccupied with staying definitively in the village. This anecdote, which I have already told on other occasions, is very illustrative: Morató dreamt that he had died and St Peter told him that he would escort him to heaven. They started walking and Morató was thinking, “those mountains, I know them”. They walked a little further, and lo and behold they arrived in Cornudella. “What joy!” he thought. “This heaven is Cornudella!” He was very excited when he told us about this dream. It was so clear in his mind that he left his obituary written on a piece of paper, where he wanted it to be recorded that he had been an “artist painter, and adoptive son of Cornudella”.

In 2005 he held his last solo exhibition at Espai Lluís Ribas in Sant Cugat and at the end of the year my sister and I, to alleviate his social solitude a little, organized a tribute to him in our own way, with a group exhibition where we brought together the work of all three of us. We held the exhibition and party in the Arnau gallery and his friend, the painter Manuel R. Cabestany, made a short video recording of it. We fulfilled our objective, because our father was very happy with the event.²⁷⁸

In 2006, while he was preparing what would be his last exhibition, Morató painted his final oil painting, a view of Cornudella, and the journalist Tate Cabré bore witness with a magnificent photographic report on the painter in his studio on Martí Street, capturing the atmosphere and surroundings.

Morató also produced the drawing for the border of the new edition of the *Goigs de Sant Joan del Codolar*, as the previous one had been out of print for some time. The publication, which the painter was unable to see in print, was presented posthumously in the church of Santa Maria de Cornudella in June. This was Morató’s last contribution to support the events and traditions of

²⁷⁸ My mother once mentioned how proud my father was that Eulàlia studied Fine Arts in Barcelona.

his beloved town. Morató thus drew the circle of his art to a close, perhaps without knowing it, or perhaps intuiting it: a circle that began and ended in Cornudella, his own personal Paradise. The exhibition “Two painters, two views” opened at Anquin’s on 17 March 2006 without Aguilar Moré, who was absent due to ill health. That day, Reus Television conducted what would be the final interview with Morató Aragonès. He was very weak and at the opening we all suffered a little on his behalf, but it was a really happy day for him, meeting friends, talking about history, memories and painting with the younger ones, contented to see that the new generations were interested in his work.

The exhibition closed on 5 April and just one month later, after five days in hospital, the artist died at the Hospital de Sant Pau on 5 May at the age of eighty-two. We might say that Morató Aragonès died with his brushes in his hand.

One of the dreams of Morató’s youth, to have a large and spacious studio for painting – the endless search for the perfect light – would no longer be possible, and that was something he mentioned with regret when we talked about his life and his career during his final year. In fact, he could have had it, but he always put his family before any of his own wishes. Elegantly austere, he had managed to get by without luxuries, but never without his family and friendships ... Actually, that is not entirely true: there was one luxury he never gave up, and that was painting, to the point that the last words he said to me in the hospital, before they fitted the oxygen mask on his face, were a series of instructions regarding the delivery of works for an exhibition. Morató, always so obliging, directed his final wishes towards the world of art.

And his lifetime passed by so quickly; many subjects remained in his mind waiting to be interpreted by his brushes, journeys still to be made to make the last sketches of some place or other, and, while waiting to be painted, the infinite potential variations of his figures, his cafés, where the eternal longing for beauty and happiness were coming to an end.

As Marcel Proust said, “It is the ideal with which we fall in love”.

Maria Elena Morató

Reus, March 2023

8 - PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST: THE MEMORIES OF FRIENDS

In writing this book, in addition to the documents in the AMA, I have used interviews I conducted between 1995 and 1997 with Conxita Guinovart, the widow of Bernat Sanjuan, Joaquim Bosch Taret, Rafael García Esmatges, Manuel Ricart Serra and Modest Rodríguez-Cruells. After Morató Aragonès' death I held another series of meetings with friends and critics to encapsulate the retrospective memories of those who knew him. Many of these excerpts are included in the general text because they refer to specific periods or moments: Josep Branchat, Tate Cabré, Josep Maria Cadena, Carles Callizo, Maria Teresa Callizo, Josep Cruañas, Maria Franquet, Anna Maria Frexinet, Octavi Fullat, Ildefons Gomis, Concha Ibáñez, Joan Mestres, Victòria Molins, Jaume Muxart, Vicenç Piera, Pepa Quinteiro, Jordi Rollán, Manuel Sarró, Benet Sarsanedas and Jaume Sociás. And, naturally, my mother Montserrat Pàmies Cavallé. I would like to thank all these people for their help in filling in the documentary gaps with their first-person memories. As a conclusion, we have chosen those excerpts that we felt would bring to a close, in schematic terms, this portrait of him we have created.

Josep Risueño Granda, of *Emissora Punt 6 Camp*, remembered him 27 May 2006:

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Morató is on a surprise visit. I never knew anyone who said: "Morató is coming tomorrow". He doesn't make arrangements, he just appears, and he is a great conversationalist and listener, a lover of dialogue [...]. In Reus, I myself see him at breakfast time, deep in conversation. We meet at the Tropical bar on Carrer Ample first and then at Cugat, where a group then gathers consisting of Celestí Torres, Pepe Callizo, the pharmacist Baldrich, Garola, Besora, Prats, and myself.²⁷⁹

Josep Maria Cadena, a journalist who in later years dedicated himself to art criticism, said:

I met him in the mid-1980s at La Punyalada. He was a quiet man. I used to enjoy those café scenes with the girls with little hats stuck on their heads waiting for something [...]. For me, he was thought-provoking. Through criticism I discovered that there were different kinds of artists. There were people who didn't believe in art but did it well,

²⁷⁹ Typed copy of the broadcast (AMA).

and that didn't interest me [...]. That's why I felt good, because it gave me the feeling, which was true, that Morató believed in art. He believed it what he did.²⁸⁰

Llorenç Jaume Grau, who was a critic for the *Setmanari Reus* weekly in the 1980s, focused his article in *Miscel·lània* on the subject of cafés, which he considered the refuge of the lonely, where you could find a certain climate of human fraternity:

All of a sudden, I sympathized with Morató Aragonès for his fluent and interesting conversation that naturally revolved around the subjects of interiors and café scenes. [...] Morató Aragonès, on a café terrace, looks at everything with affection, understanding and benevolence, with a certain pleasure in life he gazes at *le tout Paris* passing by, what Edith Piaf sings and what he immortalizes in his paintings. And in the same way in Barcelona, in Morocco, on Via Veneto or on the Trastevere ... in none of these cafés, in none of these places, is anyone surprised to see Morató Aragonès making sketches *in situ*.²⁸¹

Rafael Manzano, in his text for the catalogue of the anthological exhibition held at La Pinacoteca in 1997, summed up his career as follows:

I do not believe there is a more serious, profound and reflective pictorial adventure in Catalonia than that of Morató Aragonès. He never devoted himself to the profitable trade of launching rockets or attracting attention by exploding firecrackers. His was always a serene and majestic progress, with no other goal than to paint better every day. [...] His first oil, painted in Cornudella in 1937 – he was still completely ignorant of technique – testifies to the birth of an irrepressible vocation.

It is possible we may never find a professional with a more thorough training: travels through Andalusia and Morocco like his fellow countryman Fortuny; a constant presence in England, in Europe, especially France and Italy; a qualified member of the first intake at the School of Fine Arts during our difficult yet at the same time hopeful post-war period. Among them moved a generation of young café-gathering regulars –

²⁸⁰ Josep M. Cadena. Interview in Barcelona, 23 March 2015 (MEM)

²⁸¹ JAUME GRAU, Llorenç. "Els ambients de café" ("The café ambiances"), *Morató Aragonès. Miscel·lània ...*, p. 55–58.

Aleu, Picas, Verdaguer, Siches, Muxart, Sanvisens, Aguilar Moré – who are all now masters. Despite following his own path, Morató had a keen eye for the ravaged aesthetics caused by the European crisis of 1945. Hence the modernity of his work, always in a harmonious and progressive rhythm until reaching full maturity in the 1960s.

What is the secret behind Morató Aragonès' work? I believe that underlying his formulations lies the innovative pulse of a Cézanne or Cubism. Morató countered the luminous dissipation of Impressionism with constructive passion. Meaty, yes; but also bone that keeps firm the discipline of the form. [...] This is the key to the work of Morató Aragonès. [...] This can be read in the progressive cultivation, over the course of sixty years, of one of the most beautiful and serious adventures in art today.

Pepa Quinteiro, the director of Anquin's gallery, remembered him in May 2015:

Your father was the core of the gallery, one of the most loved and esteemed artists, not only by my mother and myself but also by the people of Reus. The last exhibition he held here he was already very ill, I felt really bad when I went to the studio to select the works; it was tough for him, but he had the same enthusiasm as ever to put together an exhibition.²⁸²

Daniel Giralt-Miracle, who followed Morató's whole career, defined him thus:

Your father always seemed to me to be a very sensible and consistent man. In the midst of all the changing movements, he forged his way with great dignity, great elegance and great respect for the experiments that others were doing. I saw him as a man of peace, set apart from all the controversies and disputes of those times between abstract and figurative artists, always very close to his homeland without ever renouncing it.

For me he was the archetypal gentleman, first as a person, remaining consistent to an aesthetic and taking his own way of doing and understanding painting to the limit, very much within the Fine Arts concept. I don't know if he got the recognition he

²⁸² M. Josepa Quinteiro. Interview in Reus, 9 May 2015 (MEM)

deserved. I think we all remember him as a person of integrity and a profound artist.²⁸³

Finally, we reproduce below two excerpts of some words dedicated to him by the mayor of Reus, Carles Pellicer, and the councillor for culture, Daniel Recasens, at the unveiling of the commemorative plaque on the artist's birthplace at number 16, Carrer Sant Jaume. The ceremony, held on 3 December 2021, was also the last public event to be attended by his widow, Montserrat Pàmies.

Today is a cold winter's day, but full of feeling and replete with memories, because, in Reus, Josep Maria Morató is a paradigm, a beloved person and a highly individual painter, the winner of the city's Gold Medal in 1996. [...] He knew how to make art a means of creating a city, and he made Reus a city of reference. [...]

(Carles Pellicer)

Saramago said that we are the memory we have, and the responsibility we assume. This is an act of memory and also of responsibility. We must not forget our teachers, and Morató Aragonès is one of them. Now that fifteen years have passed since his death and almost 100 since his birth, we are here to remember him and affix him in our collective memory, [...] strengthening his role in culture and in our city, contributing to greater knowledge and recognition of his figure and his work. Both of them must endure, in terms of memory and responsibility.

(Daniel Recasens)

²⁸³ Daniel Giralt-Miracle. Interview in Barcelona, 27 May 2015 (MEM)