

A LATIN AMERICAN IN PARIS: CRISTÓBAL ROJAS (1858-1890)

BETWEEN ACADEMICISM AND MODERNISM

by

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## Introduction

The apparently natural division of the history of art into different periods, movements and styles, while appearing to facilitate the study of art history and the categorization and evaluation of artists, has condemned significant figures to obscurity. This traditional stratification complicates the legacy and study of such figures not only by excluding them from the canon based on their detachment from a particular movement but also by confusing the work of the scholars who study them and, guided by tradition, seek to confine them to specific categories. The situation can be further complicated by additional aspects of the artist's personal life, geographic setting, artistic surroundings, etc. The career of Cristóbal Rojas, a Latin American artist working in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, epitomizes the problem presented by this historiographical tradition. Nearing the turn of the century (and what a century his had been in terms of changes and transitions!), juggling his Latin Americanism and his Parisian life as well as his academicism and the Modernism that surrounded and tempted him, Rojas stood at the crossroads of many paths. Such intersections render him and his work unsuitable for the clear-cut stylistic categories art history encourages its practitioners to embrace. In this study, I place Rojas in a *juste milieu*, a sort of middle ground between the academic style he had mastered by the end of his career and the modernist tendencies of 1880s Paris in which he became increasingly interested. Far from acting as a confining category, this placement liberates him from the conflicting categorizations in which he has fallen at the hands of those who have studied his life and work, all while revealing his individual artistry. I will show how Rojas dealt with the two traditions and how his ultimate compromise culminated in paintings whose intimism and Modernism were unprecedented in Latin American art history.

The existing literature on Rojas comes primarily from twentieth-century Venezuelan scholars and is heavily biographical. Some of the works form part of series or collections about Venezuelan artists or otherwise-significant figures, which probably explains their biographical nature.<sup>1</sup> However, this is not to say that Rojas's art has not been carefully studied. All of the authors have offered their views on Rojas's artistic skills and many of his paintings, with some of them even making significant claims regarding Rojas's place in the history of Latin American art. For example, art historians such as Rafael Páez and Enrique Planchart find clear signs of Modernism and specifically Impressionism in Rojas's late works, a view which Alfredo Boulton refutes. But this is the extent of disagreement or variety to be found in the literature, as most works seem to tell the same basic story about our artist. The publications often recognize the progress of Rojas's oeuvre, dividing it into different phases and discussing the unprecedented light and color of his later works; yet they fail to firmly place the artist into the history of art. They also tend to misleadingly link their analyses of Rojas's work to what I hope to show are unfounded biographical arguments. I hope to resolve these problems in Rojas's scholarship by providing a more objective and useful biographical account and study of the artist's context. This will reveal Rojas's true artistic concerns and explain how he arrived at his valuable compromise between academicism and Modernism.

Rojas was born in Cúa, Venezuela, in 1858. The transition from the first to the second half of the century was the first of many that would define Rojas's career. The nineteenth century opened in most Latin American countries with the Wars of Independence. In the case of Venezuela, the process of independence from Spain began in 1810 with the Declaration of Independence and the initial battles. It was finalized eleven years later. As Ramón Gutiérrez

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<sup>1</sup> Alfredo Boulton, Juan Calzadilla, Francisco Javier Duplá and Rafael Páez all published works on Rojas that were parts of such series.

explains, the independence movements, its battles and the civil wars that followed in most Latin American nations during the first half of the century did not make for propitious times for the development of the arts.<sup>2</sup> Latin America's preoccupations during the first half of the nineteenth century were political, not artistic. Also, the disconnection between the new nations and Spain that resulted from Independence, if only temporarily, affected the progress of the arts in Latin America—especially the visual arts such as painting, which relied so heavily on technical instruction, equipment, etc.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean, however, that Latin America produced no artists during this time or that its political concerns did not find an outlet in the arts. Although a distinctive Latin American artistic style is difficult to find, given the embrace of European values and the imitation of European styles, the political events of the nineteenth century provided artists with original, national subjects that differed from the unoriginal, often religious works of the previous three hundred years. As the role of the Catholic Church, which had been so prominent during the colonial years, diminished with Independence, the popular representation of religious figures was replaced by images of Independence heroes.<sup>4</sup> The attention given to images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints and religious events for three hundred years during colonial times ceded to representations of the revolutionaries and military figures to whom the new nations owed their freedom. The popularity of this national art persisted well into the second half of the century and, in fact, it was a nationalist subject (specifically, one from Independence) at a nationalist exhibition that sent Rojas on his journey to Paris in 1883.

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<sup>2</sup> Ramon Gutiérrez, "El Siglo XIX Americano. Entre el Desconcierto y la Dependencia Cultural," in *Pintura, Escultura y Fotografía en Iberoamérica, Siglos XIX y XX*, eds. Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales and Ramón Gutiérrez (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1997), 13-29.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelis C. Golsinga, *Venezuelan Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, Ltd., 1967), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Ramón Gutiérrez and Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, *Historia del Arte Iberoamericano* (Barcelona: Lunwerg, 2000), 186.

With the start of the second half of the century, Venezuela saw the emergence of art schools and academies as well as the birth of three of its four most notable (nineteenth-century) painters. Accompanying Rojas not only physically in some of the most important stages of his career but also in the literature and history of Venezuelan art were Antonio Herrera Toro, who was two years older than our artist, and Arturo Michelena, five years Rojas's junior. The fourth and oldest figure in the group is Martin Tovar y Tovar, who served as director of the Museum of Painting created in 1852 and who, through his own experiences in Paris, influenced Rojas's (as well as Michelena's) decision to train under Jean-Paul Laurens at the Académie Julian in Paris.<sup>5</sup> Like virtually every scholar who has ever written about Rojas, I have found it appropriate to speak of Rojas as part of this historic group. The connections and relationships among the four painters will become evident as we explore Rojas's story.

The artistic tendencies in the Rojas family can be traced back to Cristóbal's grandfather, who was a sculptor, and his father (also named Cristóbal), who took drawing and painting classes in the early 1840s and who showed great ability in the subjects.<sup>6</sup> Although these facts may account for our artist's probable early exposure and consequent interest in the visual arts, few scholars have paid significant attention to them or even mentioned them. What most art historians tend to emphasize concerning Cristóbal's father and his early years are the devastating effects that Cristóbal Sr.'s death had on the family and particularly on our artist. The death occurred in 1870 and rendered Cristóbal, at just twelve years old, the new head of a family which was struggling economically.<sup>7</sup> In much of the literature on Rojas, the discussion of this event opens up the writers' argument concerning the artist's misfortunes and depressive character. The

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<sup>5</sup> Goslinga, 49.

<sup>6</sup> Alfredo Boulton, *Historia de la Pintura en Venezuela, Tomo II, Epoca Nacional* (Caracas: Editorial Arte: 1968), 196.

<sup>7</sup> Francisco Javier Duplá, *Cristóbal Rojas* (Caracas: Editora El Nacional, 2008), 24.

argument is always supported by some of the comments in Rojas's letters to his mother and the nostalgia that some who knew him claim he professed. Additional support to the thesis of Rojas's pessimistic character and work is usually found in superficial analyses of Rojas's dark (both literally and figuratively), Realist works.<sup>8</sup> These paintings comprise the majority of the work he made in Paris between 1884 and 1890, which in turn constitutes the most significant stage of his career. Although the nostalgia and sadness suggested by the traditional scholarship on Rojas is evident and the misfortune of certain events undeniable, their presentation as a sort of explanation for his Realist paintings results in an unsatisfactory view of such an important group of works. This interpretation, rather than exploring the artistic context of Rojas's work, begins and ends with an unreliable connection between a supposed personality and a vaguely interpreted group of paintings. I plan to take into consideration Rojas's letters in relation to his context in an attempt to develop educated, reliable interpretations of his pictorial choices. In doing this, I will also challenge the myth of his depressive character and its reflection in his Realist works. Rojas's misfortunes and their significance will not be denied, but I will explore them as indirect influences on the artist's path, not as causes of his artistic choices.

### **The Beginning for Rojas and Guzmán Blanco**

Rojas's early struggles led him to a job at a tobacco factory, which eliminated any opportunities he may have otherwise had to get an early start on what was the greatest passion of his life, painting. In 1878 an earthquake destroyed the Rojas's home, a tragedy which not only serves as further evidence of Rojas's misfortune for many scholars, but also results in some of the earliest works we know by Rojas, the paintings of ruins in Cúa from 1882 (figs. 1, 2 and 3). The paintings reveal the untrained hand and observant eye of a self-taught young artist. They seem to have been painted quickly, as sketches rather than paintings, and may have been based

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<sup>8</sup> The darkness is sometimes due, in part, to Rojas' use of bitumen.

on photographs (as suggested by the lack of depth and the posing men in fig. 3)<sup>9</sup>. Although careful planning seems to have gone into the design of the ruins (much more so than into the human figures or the natural elements of the paintings, such as the sky and clouds, mountains, cliffs, bushes), Rojas seems to favor the coloring over the drawing of the work. It is the browns and dirty whites dappled on the destroyed buildings that both present them as ruins and allow them to stand in the apparent absence of any clear delineation. Both a personal artistic preference and his lack of a traditional academic education could explain our artist's lack of reliance on line drawing.

The tragic events that took place around Rojas in 1870 and 1878 were paralleled by two other occurrences that were significant in a greater scheme—the beginning of Antonio Guzmán Blanco's government in 1870 and, in 1878, the changes made to the “recently created Institute of Fine Arts, which now featured an academy of drawing and painting, one of sculpture and another one of music.”<sup>10</sup> The significance of this institute is unquestionable and its implications regarding the country's concern with the arts are clear. However, as the most recent catalogue on Rojas suggests, teaching at the Academy was mediocre and reactionary.<sup>11</sup> As in the case of the rest of Latin America, the arts in Venezuela continued to assimilate the styles preferred and promoted by the academies of Europe. History painting and its inherent backward-looking perspective, its dependence on the classical figure and its resistance to progress dominated the classrooms of Latin American art schools and academies. Ironically, it was a desire for progress that accompanied the new nations' admiration and adoption of all things European. In the late eighteenth century, France had first inspired the colonies of the New World with its Revolution.

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<sup>9</sup> Duplá makes the observation regarding the lack of depth and the pose of the men, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Boulton, 152.

<sup>11</sup> Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después* (Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 8.

In the new century, Europe's modernized, progressive cities, of which Paris was the prime example, became the cultural and ideological model for Latin America.<sup>12</sup>

Guzmán Blanco, who served as President of Venezuela on three separate occasions between 1870 and 1887, was a major and successful proponent of progress and modernism. His model was, of course, Paris. Cornelis C. Goslinga argues that the President, who had spent some years in the French capital in the 1860s as minister plenipotentiary, even modeled himself after Napoleon III.<sup>13</sup> Goslinga goes on to describe Guzmán Blanco's beautification of Caracas through the construction of buildings such as the Pantheon and the Federal Palace as a program that turned the Venezuelan capital into a "Petit Paris." The pseudo-novelty of such urban innovations, the idea of which was anything but original, parallels the teaching of history painting and Neo-Classicism in the Venezuelan classrooms of the mid-nineteenth century. Although Guzmán Blanco's urban projects were meant to be read as Venezuelan and to represent Venezuela's progress and modernism, however French or European they were in origin, Venezuela's political dependence on Spain was succeeded by a cultural dependence on Paris.

Although Rojas had moved to Caracas with his family following the 1878 earthquake that destroyed his hometown, there is no evidence that he enrolled in any official, academic training. In addition to some painting instruction at a university in Caracas, Rojas's only other training under another artist occurred in 1881 when he became Herrera Toro's assistant for a project that entailed the decoration of the Caracas Cathedral. The influence Herrera Toro had on Rojas may have had more to do with the former's experiences and previous travels in Europe than with his artistic style. Alberto Junyent assures us that our artist received advice from Herrera Toro, who had seen great museums and had witnessed the art of the second half of the nineteenth century in

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<sup>12</sup> Gutiérrez and Gutiérrez Viñuales, *Historia del Arte Latinoamericano*, 208.

<sup>13</sup> Goslinga, 28.

different parts of the world.<sup>14</sup> At this point, Rojas's abilities had developed mainly from his autodidacticism. Yet, in spite of his lack of official training and his detachment from the art institutions whose rise coincided with his artistic formation, only two years separated him from a government scholarship which would send him on his life-changing journey to Paris. What made this possible were the ambitions of both Rojas and Guzmán Blanco; ambitions that intersected in 1883, changing the history of Venezuelan painting.

### ***Girardot and the Exposition of 1883***

The veneration of Independence heroes took its greatest form in the adoration of Simón Bolívar, the Venezuelan leader who, after leading a great part of South America to independence, became known as “the Liberator.” Venezuela's formation and strengthening of a national identity would not be a foreign task for a president as involved in, and concerned with, the development and progress of his country as Guzmán Blanco was. As Pedro Enrique Calzadilla argues, Guzmán Blanco understood the importance of bringing order to the cult of Bolívar which had existed since the first half of the century and knew the great role that patriotism could play in the unification of the nation.<sup>15</sup> The diffusion of national identities relied (not only in Venezuela but in the rest of Latin America) on the preservation and display of visual nationalist symbols—what Calzadilla calls “symbolic identifying systems”—which would occur at ceremonies and festivities whose general purpose was to honor and commemorate the nation's founders.<sup>16</sup> The reliance of these programs on visual symbols rendered the visual arts an appropriate vehicle for the dissemination of nationalist feelings. In addition, Guzmán Blanco's

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<sup>14</sup> Alberto Junyent, *Cristóbal Rojas (1858-1890)* (Caracas: Ediciones de la Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, 1958), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Pedro Enrique Calzadilla, “Las ceremonias Bolívarianas y la determinación de los objetos de la memoria nacional en Venezuela, 1872-1874,” in *Galerías del progreso—Museos, exposiciones y cultura visual en América Latina*, eds. Beatriz González Stephan and Jens Andermann (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2006), 89-115.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

strong interest in the arts rendered the inclusion of the visual arts in these events all the more logical.

Though other ceremonies had taken place previously, the Exposition of 1883 might be the most significant and is certainly the one that concerns us in this study. The year marked the centennial of the Liberator's birth, which provided perhaps the grandest national holiday of Guzmán Blanco's government, or the rest of the century, for that matter. Calzadilla, while explaining that the realization of this event was by no means an overnight phenomenon or strictly a product of Guzmán Blanco's power, admits that the event could be considered the peak of the effort to gather and exhibit memorial national objects.<sup>17</sup> As in the case of Guzmán Blanco's modernization projects, the idea of such an exposition may not have been a novelty as it had its precedents in Europe, but it was still an innovation in Venezuela and had an unprecedented effect on Venezuelan art. Our interest in this event, of course, concerns Rojas's involvement in it.

The art exhibition was not the only event in the celebrations of the Centennial; there were other ceremonial and commemorative acts. However, Juan Calzadilla explains that, because all artists residing in Venezuela were invited to participate, this was the first exposition of this magnitude to take place in the country and the most attractive part of the celebrations.<sup>18</sup> Along with Tovar y Tovar, Michelena and Herrera Toro, Rojas participated in the great event with his submission, *The Death of Girardot* (fig. 4). Rojas depicted an episode from an 1813 Independence battle—the moment at which the Colombian hero Atanasio Girardot was defeated by Spanish forces. The national subject chosen by Rojas is logical given the circumstances. Rojas had been born in a newly independent nation, grown up in a well-established “Bolívar

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Juan Calzadilla, *Cristóbal Rojas* (Caracas: SIDOR, 1978), 12.

cult”, moved to Caracas in the midst of Guzmán Blanco’s nationalist and progressive programs and was now exhibiting his work for the first time at a national exposition commemorating the birth of his country’s Liberator. It will be important to know now and to remember later, when questions of his Latin Americanism arise, that *The Death of Girardot* was Rojas’s only nationalist painting.

It seems that Rojas knew exactly the kind of feelings and reactions his work should evoke at such an exhibition. More than the figure himself, the heroism of Girardot, who gave his life for the freedom of his land, is the protagonist here. As the hero falls, the flag seems more alive than he does, and the message is clear. Certain limitations in the artist’s abilities are revealed here, most obviously in the figure of Girardot (for example, in the execution of the arms, which consist of flattened, deficiently modeled long sleeves). Nevertheless, the complicated poses of the hero and the foreshortened dead soldier on the ground suggest ambition on the part of the autodidactic artist. The contrast between the upward and backward direction of the falling hero and the downward and forward projection of the dead soldier both complicates the composition and adds to the drama and the theatricality of the work. This contrast is further suggested by the highlighted rocks and pebbles that seem to emerge from Girardot’s front foot all the way into the surface of the painting, at the bottom. In this, his first major work, peculiarities regarding the artist’s personal style can already be found in the pale coloring of Girardot’s face and in the graceful rendering of the hero’s left hand, both of which will reappear later in some of his Realist and best-known works. Rojas’s progress is evident even this early. The firmness of the drawing, the modeling of the figures and the underlying psychological effects present in *The Death of Girardot* dramatically surpass the sketch-like paintings of the ruins of Cúa done only one year

earlier—one year, it is worth reminding ourselves, in which no official and only limited academic training took place.

That same firmness of the drawing, the dominance of line over color, has led some scholars to classify this example of heroic history painting as Neo-Classical, while others, such as Goslinga, have referred to the Exposition of 1883 as the culmination of Romanticism.<sup>19</sup> Anna Gradowska, who challenges the views and time divisions of Goslinga in fact describes “patriotic feelings, the cult of the hero who does not hesitate to give his life for his country and the fight for liberty” as main elements of Romanticism.<sup>20</sup> These characteristics are essentially what I have described as the true protagonist and the main message in Rojas’s *Girardot*. Gradowska cites Giulio Argan and argues that both David’s Neo-Classicism and Delacroix’s Avant-Garde are Romantic. Are the heroism and the patriotism of David’s *Oath of the Horatii* what we see in Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* and what assigns the latter its Romanticism? If so, is that enough to also make David’s work, as well as Rojas’s *Girardot*, Romantic? And if it is, how would this attribution be affected by the fact that Rojas never again painted a heroic or patriotic work? I pose these questions to emphasize the confusion that such labels may cause. The views above suggest that *Girardot* could be both Neo-Classical and Romantic. But could it be neither? Rather than subscribing to any particular movement(s), Rojas was painting what he had to paint in order to fulfill the needs of late nineteenth-century political painting in Venezuela. *Girardot*’s romantic heroism as well as the painting’s historical subject were necessary for, or called for by, the Exposition’s audience, the Bolívar cult. Rojas was doing what he had to do, as he knew how to do it. Even though his involvement in art schools was limited, Rojas had still grown up in a

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<sup>19</sup> Goslinga, XVI.

<sup>20</sup> Anna Gradowska, “Romanticismo, Realismo, Simbolismo en el Arte Decimonónico Venezolano,” in *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después y Otros Ensayos* (Caracas: Editorial Ex Libris, 1993), 21-35.

tradition that, as Goslinga states, insisted on accurate drawing, balanced composition and mastery of technique.<sup>21</sup>

*Girardot* was a success, winning Rojas a medal and a scholarship to travel to and train in Europe. It was also bought by the government following the Exposition. Whether it was the pictorial quality of the work or the subject that was ultimately responsible for the positive reaction might be an irrelevant question. The truth is that the choice and execution of the subject—however logical or pre-determined it might be considered given the circumstances—were ultimately a product of Rojas’s remarkable artistic aptitude. Junyent seems to share this view and, in his account of the work’s success, suggests that some recognized the young artist’s promising talent over the superficial aspects that may have attracted the ingenuous audience who may have first and foremost been seduced by Girardot’s heroism.<sup>22</sup>

### **Paris**

Rojas’s autodidactic days were over. Now our artist had the opportunity to take the next logical, traditional step in his career—to join a European art academy. His scholarship allowed him to pursue his artistic studies and training in Europe, without any specifications regarding the exact place. In the late nineteenth-century art world, two countries were regarded as the foremost authorities: Italy and France. Why Rojas chose to go to Paris is a question worth addressing. We know that Tovar y Tovar, having worked with Laurens, influenced Rojas’s decision to train at the Académie Julian in Paris. Moreover, Herrera Toro’s influence on Rojas may have had more to do with the former’s experiences in Europe than with any aspects of style. In fact, Junyent argues that as a young man, Herrera Toro (only two years older than Rojas) was able to compare

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<sup>21</sup> Goslinga, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Junyent, 15.

what he saw in Italy and France without traditional prejudices.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Junyent stresses that, to artists, Rome was equated with the past, while Paris equaled an active, evolving process.<sup>24</sup> If this led Herrera Toro to recommend Paris over Rome to his colleague, then it is valid to consider Paris as a progressive outlet that appealed to the youth of the art world. Paris was the model of progress and modernism in the eyes of Guzmán Blanco and the young, developing Latin American nations. It is possible that in his greatest artistic achievement and ahead of his greatest opportunities, Rojas saw the French capital as a similar model.

The only mention of this issue that we have by Rojas himself is in a letter written by the artist soon after his arrival in Paris. Here he reveals that travel to Rome is still a possibility. He states that everyone advises him to stay in Paris since he is already there, but that there is more to learn in Rome. He goes on to say that he will stay in Paris for at least two months.<sup>25</sup> Even though the prospect of Rome seems to still exist during Rojas's early days in Paris, the fact that the two months he stated as the minimum amount of time he would stay in France became not only seven years but, in fact, the rest of his life, speaks of our artist's clear preference. Rojas's arrival in the exciting art world that was Paris in the 1880s and his decision to stay in spite of the rumors that "there was more to learn in Rome" tells us something about his priorities. That Rojas chose progress over tradition speaks of his goals and ambitions.

More than three decades before Rojas moved to Paris, by 1850, Gustave Courbet had created canonical examples of Realist painting such as *Stone Breakers* and *Burial at Ornans*. With these works, Courbet was shifting the focus on traditional styles and subjects (such as Romantic or idealized historical scenes, for example) to more realistic depictions of contemporary life. The Modernism initiated by Courbet lay not only in the modernity of his

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> José Antonio Hedderich, "Documentos de Cristóbal Rojas," *Revista Nacional de la Cultura* (1939): 29.

subjects but also in the rawness of his style and depictions. This raw style was taken much further by Édouard Manet who in 1863 exhibited his work at the Salon des Refusés. The name of this exhibition alone suggests its significance in art history. Not only did it consist of works previously rejected by the official Salon, but it was sponsored by the government, making its defiance of official academic standards all the more official. Manet shocked viewers with his nude women and their flat, painterly rendition. Nearly a decade later, in 1872, Claude Monet exhibited the painting known for giving Impressionism its name.<sup>26</sup> If Manet represents a transition between the modern but still finished look of Realism and the painterly Impressionism, Paul Cézanne signifies a bridge between both of these traditions and even more modern styles. For example, his combination of different perspectives and angles in a single scene, as well as the break-up of his forms (most clearly seen in his landscapes and still lifes) precedes the abstract, Cubist works of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. With the rise of these artists—all French—the tradition of the visual arts had forever changed. Modernism was being born through the modernity of the new subjects and the increasing autonomy of the artwork.

### **The Myth of His Pessimism**

Rojas's arrival in Paris in 1883 marks the beginning of his essential oeuvre. The move to a different country and a different continent must have been difficult, especially for someone as nostalgic and susceptible as Rojas's biographers claim he was. The immense affection Rojas had for his mother and his preoccupation with her and the rest of the family's well-being and financial stability would have naturally grown deeper with the physical distance. This is often stressed by those who dwell on the artist's depressive personality and its connection to his Realist paintings. Francisco Javier Duplá dramatizes the artist's journey from Caracas to Paris by commenting on the difficulty that the date of his arrival in France—December 24—presented for

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<sup>26</sup> *Impression, Sunrise.*

the artist, who was spending the holidays away from his family.<sup>27</sup> Duplá adds that the gray port and the cloudy skies did not help Rojas's mood. While Rojas does, in fact, mention the darkness and cloudy skies of Paris in the first letter he wrote upon his arrival, the comment stands as an observation, with no indication whatsoever of his mood. In fact, before his comments on the weather, Rojas provides an actual reference to his feelings, which seem far from negative. About taking the 6:00 p.m. train from Saint Nazaire to Paris, Rojas writes,

It was good to have traveled at night because, even though I don't think I slept at all, only three hours had gone by before I heard them say: "Paris!" I felt so much joy that I doubted it, but I finally had to convince myself that I had come from Saint Nazaire, in three hours!<sup>28</sup>

It seems that any valid indications of Rojas's gloominess have led to an exaggeration of the negativism that may have surrounded or inhibited Rojas at certain times. Such exaggerations not only create a particular character that may be far from Rojas's true character but also attribute the ideas behind his Realist works to false causes. As the quote above suggests, there is at least as much evidence of Rojas's happy times as there is of his less joyful moments. A particular reference to Rojas's nostalgia often quoted in the literature about the artist comes from the writings of Carlos A. Villanueva, a Venezuelan student and writer in Paris who knew Rojas personally and published a valuable account of his experiences as a Latin American student in the French capital. In an essay about Michelena, Villanueva writes about finding Rojas in the gardens of the Luxembourg Museum one afternoon:

We found him sad, with the sadness of he who foresees that he will not make it. "The nostalgia is killing me," he told us. "I need to go to Venezuela to find strength in my mother's caresses and, once I am strong, I will return to make the work I will present at the next Salon."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Duplá, 36.

<sup>28</sup> Hedderich, 29. All translations are my own. "Me fué muy bien en haber venido de noche, porque aunque yo creo que no dormí es lo cierto que a penas habían pasado 3 horas ó que decían: ¡París! Tanta dicha me parecía que lo dudaba, pero al fin tuve que convencerme que había venido de Sant Nazaire, en 3 horas!"

<sup>29</sup> Carlos A. Villanueva, *Paris* (Paris: Librería Española de Garnier Hermanos, 1897), 27. "Le encontramos triste, con esa tristeza de quien presiente que no podrá llegar. --La nostalgia me mata,-- nos dijo, --necesito ir á Venezuela para fortificarme en las caricias de mi madre, y fuerte ya, regresaré para hacer el cuadro que debo presentar al próximo Salón."

Villanueva goes on to lament that our artist would not find strength in the love of his mother, but would instead kiss her for the last time. As reliable as Villanueva's account might be, the writer's own nostalgia as he writes about Rojas after his untimely death might be carried onto the account and easily picked up by those scholars who see the tragic in Rojas's life and work before anything else.

In a different essay in *Paris*, Villanueva mentions Rojas again. This time, he discusses Rojas's involvement in the inauguration of a university (University of the New Sorbonne) and the Centennial of the French Revolution. Villanueva relates that universities from across the continent were invited to participate in the festivities and that people from the Americas were also invited through their respective commissioners for the Exposition. Villanueva and his countrymen, disappointed that Venezuela had no representatives and eager to participate in what he calls an "international party for the youth," requested a place for their country which was immediately granted. The group of enthusiastic students had a Venezuelan flag made for the inauguration of the university (which would display flags from all the countries there represented), which Villanueva claims was one of the most beautiful flags to parade the streets of the "Barrio Latino," or "Latin Neighborhood," in Montparnasse. They also had a Venezuelan crest made by our artist.<sup>30</sup> Rojas's participation at such an apparently cheerful event suggests that our artist had a socially active life in Paris. Unlike the depressing account of Rojas in the gardens of the Luxembourg Museum, this other anecdote provided by Villanueva, as far as I know, is not to be found in any of the literature on Rojas.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 13.

The excerpts from Rojas's letters (sent to his family in Venezuela) discussed in Jose Antonio Hedderich's "Documents of Cristóbal Rojas" offer a sense of the duality (and, I would argue, normalcy) of Rojas's emotions:

I have been having fun and yet I have not stopped thinking that, while I am enjoying myself, who knows how things are going over there.<sup>31</sup>

We sense his fears:

This week I will join an academy. I am very scared... The worst one of the group knows more than I do... I have another difficulty: I don't understand a word of (French)...<sup>32</sup>

as well as his humor among the difficulties,

I have been having some good drinks (of wine). It is so necessary that I drink it like water. It always gets me a little dizzy, but I think I will learn soon—it is easier than French!<sup>33</sup>

If Villanueva's account was not enough to convince us of the fun and happiness that surrounded Rojas, the artist himself tells us,

Thursday I went to another dance. All I can say is, remember what I told you about the dance at Boggio's, [another Venezuelan painter living in Paris] and multiply it times ten and you will have an idea of the pleasure, the happiness that I felt that night. I was crazy, delirious, drunk with joy, and how could I not be? Is it possible to feel any differently in the midst of an outgoing French society where elegance and beauty go together with the glad and sparkly spirit of the *parisien*?<sup>34</sup>

The letters and sources that reveal Rojas's nostalgia and sadness also reveal his humor and joy. Despite any difficulties he may have had leaving his family or any insecurities he may have felt as an inexperienced foreign painter in a Parisian academy, Rojas made friends and enjoyed himself in a culture and society which he clearly admired. The presence of other Venezuelan and Latin American artists and students must have eased Rojas's transition into his

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<sup>31</sup> Hedderich, 29. "Divertido he estado en estos días, y sin embargo no he dejado de reflexionar, que cuando yo estoy gozando, ¡quien sabe como andaran las cosas por allá!

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. "En esta semana comienzo en una academia, tengo un miedo horrible... el más chambón de la pandilla sabe mas que yo... Tengo otra gran dificultad: no entiendo una palabra del idioma..."

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. "Ya me pego unos buenos palos de vino, tan necesario es, que lo tomo como agua, siempre me marea un poquito, pero creo que pronto aprenderé: es menos difícil que el francés!"

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 31. "El jueves estuve en otro baile, todo lo que puedo decir es que recuerde lo que le dije sobre el baile de la casa de Boggio y multiplique eso diez veces y tundra una idea del placer, de la felicidad que experimenté esa noche; estaba loco, delirante, ebrio de dicha, ¿y cómo no? puede estarse de otra manera en medio de una saliente sociedad francesa, donde la elegancia y la belleza van unidas al espíritu alegre y chispeante de la parisien."

new life. The existence of a “Barrio Latino” (in which Rojas lived) proves the strong sense of community that Latin Americans in Paris formed. Rather than an extremely negative character, I sense from the sources above a combination of bad, good and better moments. Even accepting Rojas’s possible sensitivity, I find in his letters normal, as opposed to pessimistic, reactions to his particular circumstances. By approaching Rojas’s Realist paintings with the understanding that his negativism is simply a myth, I hope to make more reliable analyses of Rojas’s Parisian work than currently exist.

### Parisian Work

The first two works Rojas painted in Paris are two still-lives (1884) (figs. 5 and 6). Rojas writes about these paintings:

I had made in January and February two small paintings (what they call still life). I thought for a moment about submitting them to the Salon but did not think they would be accepted, and on submission day I took them to the studio where I work and everyone liked them; the students told me to submit them to the Salon but it was too late...<sup>35</sup>

This quote is important because it reveals that Rojas did not consider submitting the works to the Salon until after they were finished. Being aware of this and the early date of the paintings (made the month after his arrival in Paris) provides good reason to believe that in them we can find some of Rojas’s personal artistic concerns. *Still Life with Rags* shows an open box, rags, a jug and other objects that are cropped by the left edge of the painting. The lid is the only visible part of the open box, as the overflowing rags cover the rest of it. The beauty of the painting lies in Rojas’s ability to captivate the viewer with a limited palette and the most casual of objects. The folds and composition of the rags are not there to aggrandize them (as these elements did for the flag in *The Death of Girardot*) but rather to reveal their materiality and, in turn, their interaction

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 30. “Yo había hecho en enero y febrero, dos cuadros pequeños, (de naturaleza muerta que llaman), por un momento me pasó la idea de mandarlos al salón, pero me pareció que no serían aceptados, y justamente el día del envío los llevé al taller donde trabajo, y gustaron mucho, diciéndome los mismos discípulos de la Escuela, que los mandara al salón, pero ya era demasiado tarde...”

with light. Rojas contrasts the darkest and the lightest part of the painting by placing the one—the darkest rag—against the other—the inside of the lid of the box. With this contrast, Rojas provides energy while maintaining the softness his brush has achieved when laying down the earth tones.

The other work, *Still Life with Open Book*, again shows Rojas's ability to convey a captivation with the mundane, although this time the artist has taken his composition a bit further. Here, Rojas shows a wider range of objects and materials. He convincingly conveys the copper of the pot, the wooden figure, the weight of the book and its thin page caught in the air. The objects are not only greater in number and variety compared to the other still life but they also reference the arts, thus calling special attention to Rojas's artistry and hand. They also seem to have been more carefully arranged. Yet, the careful attention Rojas paid to the composition and textures of these objects does not diminish the captivating simplicity that is present here as well as in *Still Life with Rags*. Ultimately responsible for this is Rojas's handling of light and color, which provide these works with an admirable, soft atmosphere. Notice the soft lighting that falls on the objects and lights up the center and left side of the background, leaving the right side in a quiet darkness that subtly sets off the books in front of it.

Also, as the viewer spends time with *Still Life with Open Book*, a certain loosening of the brush reveals itself among the firmness of the drawing and the apparent smooth finish of the painting. For example, observe the right foot of the figure and its emergence from the pinkish fabric (fig. 7), or the end of the brushes that seem to emerge from one apparent brown bulk (fig. 8). Such details reveal to the viewer the hand of the artist. Rojas was neither concerned with a sleek, *fini* style nor with a painterly, sketchy look. At this point, Rojas seems to be concerned simply with being a painter of simple, casual, intimate truths. This conclusion touches on two

issues which appear only briefly in the literature on Rojas and which are worth exploring here—Rojas's stance between the *fini* and the painterly and the sense of intimacy found in his work.

The first issue is important to note in this study because it reveals one of the many crossroads at which Rojas stood during his life and career and the *juste milieu* to which he belonged. In her essay on Rojas, Gradowska speaks of the fall of the Classical tradition and its succession by Realist tendencies in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. This was unknown in Venezuela at the time of the Exposition and Rojas's *Girardot*. We should remember that although the art of Europe had an immeasurable influence on Latin America at every moment of the nineteenth century, the crossover of European values and ideas was often delayed. This perhaps further explains *Girardot*'s Neo-Classical character. Gradowska clarifies that the Realist movement adopted two different styles, the painterly one, which stressed the artwork's autonomy, and the *fini* treatment, which should reveal no trace of the artist's hand.<sup>36</sup> The former rendered the work novel and modern in its execution as well as its subject, while the latter retained traditional academic pictorial standards. Rojas's arrival in Paris coincided with the triumph of the Realist movement and the coexistence of these two styles. His still lifes reveal no absolute adherence to either style; he embraces both ideas. Although the idea might seem contradictory at first glance, we begin to see Rojas's artistic individuality in his compromise of two extremes.

The second issue concerns the intimism of Rojas's work, the quiet character of his casual, private scenes. This idea has been proposed by Francisco Da Antonio, who finds in the work of Rojas traces of the light of Dutch artists, their chiaroscuro and their "intimist concept."<sup>37</sup> Da Antonio references Jean-Siméon Chardin, not necessarily attributing a direct influence, but

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<sup>36</sup> Gradowska, "Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después," in *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después y Otros Ensayos*.

<sup>37</sup> He specifically discusses *The Tavern* in "Carta a Juan Calzadilla sobre Cristóbal Rojas," in *Textos sobre Arte (Venezuela 1682-1982)* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1980), 76-79.

facilitating our recognition of Rojas's intimate qualities. Let us recall the still lifes or single-figure interior scenes which Chardin would set against plain backgrounds, in warm atmospheres (figs. 9 and 10); or Johannes Vermeer's women in the domestic interior, often set in the intimacy of a corner next to a window which dictated the work's chiaroscuro (fig. 11). These ideas, already recognizable in Rojas's early still lifes, will become more evident in his later paintings.

### **Realism**

The works that followed the still lifes were for the most part created for participation at the Salon. This distinction between what he made and did not make for the Salon is extremely important to our understanding of Rojas's artistic character and concerns. Most of Rojas's "Salon works" are examples of Realism. Let us look at the first seven of these works: *The Beggar* (1884) (fig. 12), *Motherhood* (1885) (fig. 13), *Misery* (1886) (fig. 14), *The Sick Violinist* (1886) (fig.15), *The Tavern* (1887) (fig.16), *The Eviction* (1888) (fig. 17) and *The First and Last Communion* (1888) (fig. 18). A look at these works together reveals their unification by an apparent social commentary. These paintings show the less fortunate—a lonely beggar, a poor mother and her child, a sad man who has lost his wife, a dying boy, a waitress attending the drunk (perhaps the most distinct of this group in terms of both content and form), a woman and her children being evicted and a dying young girl.

On his *Beggar*, after explaining that he did not finish the work in time to submit it to the Salon, Rojas wrote,

I don't know if I am deceiving myself, but I find it superior to the one I did there... and this one is no more than one figure, an old beggar in the worst ruins, sitting with a sad and contemplative attitude, with a piece of bread at his side, as if he had set it aside to think about his misfortune.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Hedderich, 30. "No se si me engaño, pero me parece superior al que hice alla... y este no es más que una figura, un viejo mendigo en la ruina más grande, sentado en una actitud triste y pensativa, teniendo un pedazo de pan al lado como si lo hubiese apartado para pensar en su desgracia."

Many have seen the misfortune of the beggar as a reflection of the artist's own hardships and the work to which Rojas compares his *Beggar* must be *The Death of Girardot*. I verify this information in order to explore what this quote reveals about Rojas—any insecurities or negativism on the part of Rojas are countered by the confidence evident in his own comparison. Regarding the artist's character, the quote reveals confidence; regarding his artistic achievements, it represents improvement and the exchange of the Classical and nationalist for the Realist. If his audience at the Exposition of 1883 was primarily attracted to, and interested in, the superficial, heroic character of *Girardot*, Rojas's priorities clearly differ greatly from those of that audience. Rojas has decidedly abandoned the genre of history painting and embraced Realism (which was supported by the Academy in its *fini* style and its often accompanying moralizing, sentimental character, as opposed to the more formalist work of artists such as Courbet and Manet)<sup>39</sup> That Laurens, Rojas's teacher in Paris, was a proponent of history painting (see figs. 19 and 20) speaks to our artist's individualism and refusal to conform to the values held by his instructor and the Academy.

In fact, a story survives that suggests Rojas's detachment from Laurens: another Venezuelan student of Laurens in the early twentieth century claimed that, having been asked about his Venezuelan students, Laurens could not remember Rojas, sixteen years after his death.<sup>40</sup> I am by no means implying that Rojas's art or style was unprecedented and absolutely original. By this time, Realism had already triumphed in Europe and was even adopted as official art when done in a certain style. However, Rojas's rejection of the most traditional genre which was still so closely tied to academicism and his distancing from his academic teacher are

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<sup>39</sup> Gradowska, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Duplá, 40. The author states the story has been told by Juan Calzadilla.

significant. If Rojas consciously chose progress over tradition when he chose Paris over Rome, then he made a similar choice when he rejected history painting.

Still, Rojas's Salon works remained fairly safe and conventional. The misfortunes of the subjects in the seven paintings we are considering come with a significant degree of sentimentalism and moralizing qualities. The poverty of the subjects in *The Beggar*, *Motherhood* and *The Eviction* carries a social tone and conveys a sense of injustice. The sadness and contemplation that Rojas himself described in his *Beggar* is there to evoke the viewer's sympathy. If *Motherhood* were displayed next to *The Beggar*, the pair would resemble a diptych.<sup>41</sup> As she holds her sleeping child, the mother looks down, as if staring at the same floor at which the beggar is staring, as if contemplating the misfortunes she shares with him. The viewer is also expected to sympathize with the woman, who tries to keep her barefoot child warm, as she wraps him in a blanket. The simplified background in both paintings works together with the contemplative faces and downward glances to stress the subjects' troubles.

The sentimentalism is even greater in the works where Rojas is ending or has ended the lives of his subjects. *Misery*, which won Rojas an honorable mention at the Salon, is based on a neighbor of the artist who lost his wife to illness (presumably due to their inability to afford the necessary medication).<sup>42</sup> Here, Rojas emphasizes the devastated, numb husband, who stares down at the ground as do the beggar and the mother. The role of the couple's poverty is suggested by the plainness of the room and the rough condition of the bed. The deteriorated floor and its diagonals draw the viewer in and lead to the ultimate focus of the painting, the husband. The subtle light from a presumable window hits the man's limp right hand and highlights his face just enough for the viewer to see his raised eyebrows and sense his shock. The darkness of

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<sup>41</sup> I am not considering the size of the works.

<sup>42</sup> Rafael Páez, *Cristóbal Rojas* (Caracas: Edime, 1968), 214.

the situation is paralleled by the literal darkness of the painting. The grays and browns support the mood of the scene, and all of the above elements contribute to its intimacy.

A similar tragedy occurs in *The Sick Violinist*. A sick, apparently agonized child, with his eyes rolled upwards and his mouth open, seems to be taking one of his last breaths. Rojas's contrast of light and dark is much greater here than in *Misery*. This time, the window through which the light enters the room is visible. The light colors the wall, the bed and some of the figures with yellowish browns. The face of the child is the same color as his clothes, the pillow and the wall. While the figures on the left side of the painting are also struck by the light, the two figures on the right are in deep shadow. The woman (distinguishable as such by her barely discernable skirt) is nothing but a silhouette and the man next to her, perhaps a doctor or the father of the child, stands in profile and is seen pouring what must be medicine into a bowl. The clear medicine jar and the bowl appear directly in front of the bottom panel of the window. With a thin, small stroke of white paint over the hand holding the bowl, Rojas depicts the pouring liquid. This small detail brings a sense of energy to the room of static figures and, despite the drama of the scene and perhaps influenced by Da Antonio's arguments, I am reminded of Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* (fig. 21). Rojas's depiction of the pouring of the medicine, much like Vermeer's depiction of the pouring of the milk, is a key element in the simple narrative of a domestic interior scene. The proximity of both episodes to a window and the crucial role of the window's light contribute to the paintings' intimism.

Rojas's treatment of light on the dying child becomes more melodramatic, even symbolic, in *The First and Last Communion* (fig. 18). The dying girl not only occupies the center of the scene but is completely covered in a white mantle, which leaves only part of her hair and her face visible. The white mantle carries religious connotations, recalling images of the Virgin

Mary. The priest and the altar boy also wear white, which is repeated in the cloth covering the table on which a candle and a crucifix stand. The light enters the room through a window at the top left and shines on the priest, the boy, the dying girl, the woman next to her—presumably her mother—and part of the bed, leaving in deep shadow a girl and a man on the right side of the painting. The brightness of the girl’s white mantle is so strong that the figure seems to glow, conveying spiritual ideas. Rather than portraying a natural visual effect, the glow represents a supernatural manifestation, a heavenly light, perhaps. In this case, Rojas’s strong light and darkness serve more to dramatize and sentimentalize the scene than to render it intimate.

Why does Rojas insist on painting such tragic scenes? I have attempted to distance our view of these works from the myth that Rojas’s own misfortunes are reflected in his paintings and have addressed his letters to counter allegations of the artist’s nostalgia and pessimism. Let us turn to another of the seven paintings we have been considering and, once more, to Rojas’s letters to answer this question. *The Eviction* is one of the darkest (literally speaking) paintings Rojas ever did. The men who have come to evict the mother and her children are in such deep shadow that their figures are quite hard to make out—especially that of the man on the right side of the painting who seems to be taking a portrait down from the wall (see fig. 22). In a letter to his mother, Rojas writes:

It is about the eviction of a family; an unhappy mother who has no means to pay the rent and the policeman has come to throw them in the streets. This is the subject of the painting on which I am working at the moment. I have placed the mother with two little kids and three or four men who come to throw their things in the streets in order to force them to leave. We’ll see how this project turns out and if, using tears and sadness, I can move the Members of the Jury of Painting and they give me a medal...<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Hedderich, 32. “Se trata de la expulsion de una familia,; una madre infeliz and no ha tenido como pagar el alquiler del cuarto y viene el comisario de policia a echarlos a la calle. Este es el sujeto del cuadro que estoy en tren de hacer en este momento. He puesto la madre con dos chiquitos y tres o cuatro hombres que vienen a echar los corotos a la calle para obligarla de ese modo a salir. Veremos cómo queda este Nuevo proyecto y si a fuerza de lágrimas y tristezas puedo conmover los Miembros del Jurado de Pintura y me dán de ese modo una medulla...”

Rojas himself tells us, quite clearly, why he paints such sad subjects. He feels he knows what his audience wants to and must see in order for him to succeed. He knew on the Centennial of the Liberator's birth that his Venezuelan audience wanted to see heroism and patriotism. He now believes his Parisian audience wants sadness and melodrama. In this letter, Rojas continues to tell his mother that if he is awarded the medal and consequently sells the painting, he will be able to bring her to Paris. Evidently, financial reward as well as official recognition serves as motivation for Rojas's Salon works. As was the case with *The Death of Girardot*, Rojas's Realist Salon paintings reveal his artistic abilities and progress but, as they were made with a particular audience in mind, they do not reveal Rojas's personal concerns.

I am not sure Rojas's perception of the jury's priorities was completely accurate. Though Realism was popular and accepted at the Salon and by the State, it was not the only genre seen at the Salon and it did not have to be sentimental. Gabriel Weisberg argues there are three types of Realist artists—the dangerous ones, such as Courbet; those like Jules Breton, who occasionally painted social themes but presented no threat to the social order; and those like Isidore Pils, who painted official propaganda and “formulated an official Realism palatable to the bourgeoisie and the government.”<sup>44</sup> It is difficult to think of Rojas's works as representative of any kind of threat to the social order (perhaps in part because he came so much later than the novel and dangerous Courbet); however, they do present the poor and suggest social injustice. This makes it difficult to assign him to either of the first two groups, and it is evident that he does not belong to the third group. This also emphasizes the difficulties presented by the division and stratification of art styles and periods mentioned early in this essay, as well as Rojas's distance from any specific movement. Things can only become more complicated when we consider the idea of Rojas's

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<sup>44</sup> Gabriel Weisberg, *The Realist Tradition, French Painting and Drawing, 1830-1900* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980): 13-14.

work as Naturalist instead of Realist, an issue which we can discuss along with *The Tavern* (fig. 16).

The obvious relationship between Rojas's *The Tavern* and Naturalism lies in the painting's inspiration in the Naturalist novel *L'Assommoir*, by French writer Émile Zola. The painting reflects the novel's principal issues of social economic hardships and alcoholism. Whether Rojas's painting is Naturalist or Realist is an extremely difficult question which underlines the difficulty of assigning artists to supposedly clearly divided art movements. Questions regarding the difference between Realism and Naturalism linger over a century and a half after the movements first appeared. Writing on the definition of Naturalism in French nineteenth-century painting, Geneviève Lacambre begins by addressing the "ambivalent relationship between Realism and Naturalism [which] has troubled artists and critics since the middle of the nineteenth century."<sup>45</sup> She continues to say that Naturalism, "with its emphasis on scientific exactitude, psychological examination and a large-scale format," had triumphed at the end of the century. She also cites the art critic Jules Antoine Castagnary, whose writings played a significant role in the development of the terminology here discussed. According to Castagnary, the new naturalistic tendencies differed from the old attraction to the picturesque.<sup>46</sup> Castagnary's criterion fits well with Lacambre's criteria—if the picturesque signifies something that is visually pleasing, something that looks like a picture, then it is safe to assume that such a scene might often be far from a scientifically exact representation.

Reluctant to dig too deep into the issue, I suggest we consider this brief description of Naturalism together with Weisberg's distinction between the different types of Realism to tentatively conclude that Naturalism lacks the social and political undertones of, and depicts the

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<sup>45</sup> Geneviève Lacambre, "Toward an Emerging Definition of Naturalism in French Nineteenth-Century Painting," in *The European Realist Tradition*, Gabriel P. Weisberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 229-241.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-231.

visible truth of things more accurately than, Realism. A work like Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Hay Making* then, with the simplicity of its subject and its lack of a moral message, differs from socially-conscious Realist works and falls under the Naturalist category (fig. 23). I take the time to address this issue not in an attempt to solve the ambivalent relationship Lacambre addresses, but rather to further explore the context in which Rojas was working. If we consider this conclusion, Rojas's *Tavern* seems more Realist than Naturalist, despite its direct connection to a Naturalist work and its possession of some of Lacambre's naturalist characteristics (the large-scale format and perhaps even the psychological examination). Do we not find the laughing and smiling drunkards a bit picturesque? As one leans back with a pipe in his mouth and another one with rosy cheeks rests his head on his hand, the group adds a certain charm to the scene. Also, the roughness of the drunken men is conveyed by the roughness with which Rojas has painted them; for example, notice the lack of detail in the rendition of the leg of the man in brown. In addition, does the contrast between the graceful waitress (notice the elegance of her left hand, the same elegance Rojas assigned to the heroic Girardot's left hand) and the sloppy drunkards not contain a moralizing tone? In his different depictions of these figures, Rojas assigns the waitress a dignity that he denies the men.

The contrast between the waitress, on the left half of the painting, and the drunkards, on the right half, is addressed by Da Antonio, who sees a clear vertical division suggested by the waitress and the line of the wall behind her figure. Da Antonio describes the left side of the painting: "... the young waitress, the shelves on which each object is a poem of color, of transparency, of perfect stillness, and the intimate sepia environment in which *she alone lives...*"<sup>47</sup> Rojas's sensibility for the quiet intimacy of his subjects and environments appears once again. The gentleness, the cleanness of the light hitting the waitress and the objects she

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<sup>47</sup> Da Antonio, 79.

almost seems to guard does not compare to the lighting on the rough, sloppy men. However, the treatment of the woman at the table, of her smooth skin, resembles the soft lighting of the waitress.

### **Toward Modernism**

The next and last three paintings Rojas did for the Salon belong to the last two years of his life. Departing dramatically from the tragedies and social misfortunes of the first seven Salon works, these paintings reveal Rojas's new concerns, which are also seen in the works Rojas did for himself and not for the Salon or any particular audience.

In 1887—the year of *The Tavern*—Rojas painted *Self Portrait with Red Hat* (fig. 24). The artist has dressed himself in red, the vibrancy of which he exalts with dramatic, large, diagonal brushstrokes. His body is understood to be in profile as his head is turned toward the viewer. However, the suggestion of his arm or sleeve becomes lost under the wide brushstrokes. If Rojas does not obviously present himself as an artist—providing no specific attributes, only his figure against a blank background—the plasticity that he conveys through his clothes represents his identity as a painter. He pays careful attention to his likeness and provides the most details in the face, the dimensionality of which is achieved through the use of light. The light shines on the left side of his face, projecting his forehead forward—toward the picture plane—and leaving the right side in subtle shadow (thus reminding us of the artist's now established concerns regarding light and shadow). The true personality of the work, however, arises from the hat, which consists of a brighter, less deep red than that of the clothing and whose materiality is suggested by the thick traces of paint (see fig. 25).

That this is a portrait of Rojas, for Rojas, provides reasonable ground for us to seek and find in it clues to the artist's essence. A comparison between this and other portraits by Rojas

(figs. 26 and 27) further contrasts the artist's personal concerns with those of his audience and patrons. Unlike Rojas's self-portrait, his portraits of Dr. León Ponte and President Rojas Paúl portray the sitters' full bodies in detailed settings. The self-portrait's plain background made of disordered brushstrokes differs greatly from the backgrounds of the portraits. A golden folding screen which exalts his blue jacket separates León Ponte from a wall on which a drawing and a frame hang. Rojas Paúl sits on a leather chair, on an elaborate rug and also in front of a folding screen, behind which are red drapes. The realism of the portraits is enhanced by the attention paid to detail and texture. Such details reveal what was important to these sitters as the painterly style of *Self-Portrait* reveals what was important to Rojas.

Of the same year as *Self-Portrait* is *Still Life with Lamp* (fig. 28). If Rojas's concerns regarding light were not so evident before, they are difficult to deny in the presence of this study. A similar work, not dated but presumably done around the same time (fig. 29), reveals the same interests. Unlike his early still lifes, these works portray and, in fact, are based on the light source. That the only purpose of a lamp is to provide light leaves no doubt as to what Rojas is exploring. He is also considering the texture and luminosity of glass and perhaps ceramic in the plates and bowls. Also, that the shade of one lamp is red and the other one is green demonstrates Rojas's concern with color, light through color and colored light. With these works, by 1887 it is impossible to deny our artist's modernist pictorial concerns.

Two years later Rojas painted a still life that differs from the ones discussed so far. *Still Life with Pheasant* (fig. 30) possibly reveals the most confidently free hand we have seen by Rojas at this point. The weight of the bottles, the bowl, the glass and the bird is unquestionable despite the lack of a clearly defined ground. The objects are placed directly in front of the viewer, who does not look down upon or up at but straight at them. However, Rojas treats the

ground on which they stand and the apparent background behind them as one single surface. If all the objects except the body of the bird were absent, the viewer could exchange the current straight-on view for a bird's-eye view. The horizontal division between the two grounds is implied by the objects themselves, starting with the long tail of the pheasant at the left and ending with the bowl and glass at the right. Rojas abandons any consideration for the smooth illusions he attempted and achieved in *Still Life with Open Book* four years earlier and creates one of his most autonomous paintings. His always evident brushstroke, the dynamic traces of paint and the energetic strokes of red, blue and yellow that seem to ignite in the bottle at the left and on the ground to the left of the bird, all distance Rojas from the more conventional, generally *fini* style of his earlier, Realist works. The unclear perspective and the plasticity of the figures might even evoke thoughts of Cézanne. In this sense, we see Rojas's work become Modernist, as it comes closer than ever before to the progressive tendencies of the late nineteenth century which abandoned the traditional illusionistic detail in favor of the visible, sensible brushstroke and its resulting autonomous paintings. This is Rojas working for himself.

As he continued to work for the Salon, those particular works might be expected to retain certain conventionality. *The Baptism* (fig. 31), from 1889, adapts the large scale that would be expected from a Salon work. The subject could be considered religious, although a religious or spiritual message is not necessarily conveyed. The supernatural light, the heavenly glow of *The First and Last Communion*, are absent here, as is the melodrama. Rojas returns to the Realism of his previous Salon paintings but abandons their sentimentalism. He returns to the earth tones but avoids the darkness. There are no sharp contrasts of light and dark. The pale faces resemble that of *Girardot*, but here they form part of the illuminated atmosphere that occupies the whole scene. The transition from floor to wall and from one wall to the next is only suggested by the

positioning of objects and the use of light and shadow, it is never delineated. The orange marks on the dark marble are perceived as the stone's own marks no more than as Rojas's brushstrokes (see fig. 32). The small bouquet of flowers on the floor consists of raw strokes of white, green and gray (see fig. 33). In isolation, the bouquet could pass for an example of Impressionism.

In fact, this painterly style and increasing concern with light has led scholars such as Planchart to suggest that with *The Baptism*, Rojas embraces the Modernist genre of Monet.<sup>48</sup> The argument is countered by others, such as Boulton, who notes Rojas's continuous use of black and suggests that basic knowledge of the Impressionist school is enough to disprove such claims as Planchart's.<sup>49</sup> As an artist in Paris in the 1880s, Rojas could not have avoided exposure to Impressionism. However, any reluctance to embrace the movement is not shocking when we consider the circumstances. As Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales explains, many Latin American artists studying and working in Paris were not inclined to "modernize themselves" because, upon returning home, their careers would consist of either teaching or working on commissions, both of which required them to follow academic norms.<sup>50</sup> In addition, we know that for at least five years, Rojas's main interests lay in achieving recognition from the judges at the Salon.

However, Rojas may have been closer to Modernist painters than we might think. We know of Rojas's friendship with his countryman Boggio (we learned of the former's attendance at a dance at the latter's home in an excerpt from one of our artist's letters), who adopted the Impressionist style in the early twentieth century (see fig. 34). It has also been suggested that Rojas was close with a group of young artists (his colleagues at the Académie Julian) whose rebellious, progressive, modernist tendencies led them to be known as the Nabis.<sup>51</sup> Such

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<sup>48</sup> Boulton cites Planchart and makes this observation in *Historia de la Pintura en Venezuela*, 200.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Gutiérrez and Gutiérrez Viñuales, *Historia del Arte Iberoamericano*, 208.

<sup>51</sup> Juan Calzadilla, 31.

connections and the change we have begun to see in Rojas's work hint at a significant transition on the part of the artist. While I agree that associating Rojas with Impressionism is unfounded, the artist's ever-increasing interest in light is undeniable. It eventually leads him to Modernism and transforms him into one of the first Modernist Latin American artists.

### **His Latin American Colleagues**

Latin American artists at this time, whether at home or abroad, continued to be deeply influenced by the values of European academies. However, among the conventions and traditional styles, the countries of Latin America developed original, national concerns which provided subjects for the native artists. Inspired and influenced mainly by the nationalism that persisted throughout the nineteenth century, artists in Latin America used the European artistic language they knew to express that which was their own. Many artists turned to history painting in order to promote their national identity. Artists such as the Venezuelan Arturo Michelena and the Uruguayan Juan Manuel Blanes contributed to the history and legacy of their countries' independence and art with works like *Miranda in La Carraca* (fig. 35) and *The Oath of the Thirty-Three Easterners* (fig. 36). Also, artists like the Mexican José Agustín Arrieta engaged in the genre known as *costumbrismo* (from the word *costumbre*, meaning *custom*) to depict their people's customs—their food, their dress, their traditions, etc. (see figs. 37 and 38). A new way of reaffirming their heritage and nationalism was popularized in the late nineteenth century by Mexican artists who turned to their Pre-Columbian past, producing works such as *Senate of Tlaxcala* and *Torture of Cuauhtémoc* (figs. 39 and 40). Other artists, of which Mexico's José María Velasco is the prime example, turned to their countryside, to their unique sceneries to create distinctively Latin American landscape painting. In fact, in 1889, the year at which we have arrived in our study of Rojas, the Universal Exposition of Paris received sixty eight works

by Velasco, which, Ida Rodríguez Prampolini explains, were well received by the French public who was not yet fully accustomed to see nature through the Impressionists' view.<sup>52</sup>

Latin American art in the late nineteenth century, then, can be said to be “national,” “original,” or “modern” strictly in subject. Independence, native history and local costumes and sceneries were being portrayed in the most academic (sometimes even classical) of ways. I briefly touch on this matter in order to propose two questions worth considering. The first is how the “Latin Americanism” of these artists compares to that of Rojas. Rojas’s only national work was *The Death of Girardot*. Given his abandonment of national themes, is Rojas less of a Latin American artist than Blanes or Velasco? This is a question I plan on leaving somewhat open. Opinions are likely to vary on whether the birth place of an artist carries less, more or the same weight as the content of his/her art or the context of the artist. I believe that the claim of Rojas’s work as Latin American is absolutely valid, however universal or European the work or the artist’s context might be. Charles Lenman argues in his discussion of American painting, “there are two requisites for the formation of an American school of art: that there shall be American painters and that these painters shall paint well.”<sup>53</sup> Lenman was denying the necessity of subjects from American history for the constitution of American art. In agreement with this argument, I suggest we apply it to any school of art, to any nationality and in our study, to the question of Rojas’s Latin Americanism. As a Latin American painter who paints well, Rojas belongs to the school of Latin American art.

The second question I would like to consider involves the Modernism of Rojas against that of the artists mentioned above. That Latin American artists, both at home and abroad,

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<sup>52</sup> Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, “Mexico: Pintura y Escultura de 1880 a 1920,” in *Arte Moderno en América Latina*, ed. Damián Bayón (Madrid: Taurus Ediciones, 1985), 147-159.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Lanman, “On the Requisites for the Formation of a National School of Historical Painting,” in *American Art to 1900: A Documentary History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 428-431.

continued to employ the traditional style promoted by European academies until the very end of the nineteenth century, even in their national/modern subjects, complicates any consideration of them as Modernist artists. Rojas's discreet but ever-increasing distance from the values of the Academy, his ever-lighter palette and looser brush represent a much clearer progress, artistically speaking, than do national or contemporary subjects.

### Essential Studies

The year 1889 is the most revealing in terms of the progress for which I argue. Following *The Baptism*, Rojas engaged in a series of studies which serve as the strongest evidence of his modernist tendencies. *Seamstress*, *Girl Getting Dressed* and *The Balcony* (figs. 41, 42 and 43) all share a basic subject and pictorial concern—the effects of light on women in the domestic interior. If the pictorial concern with light can be associated with Impressionism, the subject of women in the interior can be associated with the Nabis (see figs. 47-49). It is worth remembering the difference we noted between Rojas's treatment of women and men in his *Tavern*. Can we deduce a special sensibility for women on the part of our artist?<sup>54</sup> In any case, whether there was an early personal interest in women as a subject or not, these late studies place Rojas among the Impressionists and the Nabis. However direct the influence of these groups may have been on our artist, the Modernism signified by their interests and pictorial explorations (those of the Impressionists, of the Nabis and of Rojas) is unarguable.

Rojas's red and green lamps (figs. 28 and 29) are succeeded by an orange one which, hanging over the head of the *Seamstress*, illuminates the room. The brightness of the light is strongest on the wall, the green fabric that has been lain down across from the woman and the white fabric on which the woman is working. This concentration of light and brightness in the

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<sup>54</sup> Duplá cites and disagrees with Planchart's reference to Rojas as "painter of women" ( and cites Gradowska's comments on Rojas's passion for women, 87-88.

center and the surrounding darker areas along the edges of the sketch (note the dark skirt of the woman in the lower left corner and the shadow in the upper right corner) give the work that intimate feeling for which we have come to know Rojas.

The artificial light of this study is replaced in the next two studies by natural light. The *Girl Getting Dressed* stands in the middle ground, between the (light) window in the background and the (dark) drape and the footboard of the bed in the foreground. In raw brushstrokes, Rojas conveys the reddish brown wood of the footboard, the transparent quality of the white curtains and the bright light outside the window. The highest contrast of light and dark occurs at the bottom, in the center of the work, between the shadows under the bed and the part of the floor that is lit by the light coming in through the window.

We find a similar compositional arrangement in the third study, which is undoubtedly one of Rojas's most fascinating works. Before we move on to the analysis of this work, let us address the status of these works as studies rather than completed paintings. My discussion and the time I have spent on these works reveals the importance I attribute to them. However, it should be noted that Boulton claims that "logically, it is in the finished works that we find Rojas's true pictorial language" and that "the freedom of the execution of his studies cannot be valued beyond their objective."<sup>55</sup> The first statement I reject. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this study, Rojas's most traditional, academic works were realized for the very specific purpose of furthering his career, which entailed, as he very well understood, pleasing his audience. It is in the works done for himself—not for the government, the Academy, his teacher, the judges or any patrons—that we will "logically" find Rojas's true pictorial language, his interests and concerns, his artistic essence. The second statement I can justify but not without adding on how exactly these studies can and should be valued. Given the nature and purpose of sketches and studies, it

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<sup>55</sup> Boulton, 198, 200.

is true that the loose handling of the brush cannot be considered a reliable indicator of the artist's style. However, considering the changes we have seen in Rojas's work, evident in *Still Life with Pheasant* and *The Baptism*, it is difficult not to value these studies beyond their objective. Also, it should be clear that even if the freedom of the brush reveals nothing about the artist and predicts nothing about the finished product, elements of light, color and composition—where the significance of these works lies—can and should be considered exactly the way they appear. To suggest otherwise would be to discredit the hand of the artist for its studies and experimentations.

The order in which I have discussed the three studies parallels the increasing scale of the works. With each study and concluding with *The Balcony*, Rojas seems to be progressively approaching a complete painting. *The Balcony* is not only the largest of the three but also contains the most figures and is, in turn, the most dynamic. A woman has stepped out onto the balcony, while a young girl who seems to be going back inside has caught her reflection on the glass panel of the balcony door. A third figure sits at a table inside. The figures are faceless; it is not with their personal physical features that Rojas is concerned here but rather with their placement under a particular kind of lighting. The woman in pink is outside, completely bathed in the daylight. The girl is in between the light from outdoors, which hits her blue skirt and the back of her blonde hair directly, and the dimmer light from inside, which renders the front of her blouse gray and the front part of her hair brown. The figure at the table, of which we can only see the front, is the darkest of the three, but it is the table—or the tablecloth, rather—that gives the work its energy and best represents Rojas's explorations of light and color. In my discussion of *Still Life with Pheasant*, I described the red, blue and yellow as “igniting” in the bottle and next to the bird. The word “ignition” seems appropriate again to describe what the light from outside has caused on the part of the tablecloth it is hitting.

I claimed I would turn to Rojas's letters not only to challenge the myth of his pessimism but also to explore his pictorial choices, and this analysis calls for a particular excerpt. In his first letter after his arrival in Paris, Rojas tells his mother about a theater he attended:

I went to a beautiful theater, it would be impossible to get an idea of such beauty, and the dance scenes are indescribable, hundreds of women dancers with very short blouses and bare legs, making a thousand beautiful turns with an admirable order, **dressed in fire, because there is no other way to refer to outfits that emit rays of light, with every hue from the iris.**<sup>56</sup>

This letter from 1883 and this study from 1889 both reveal Rojas's artistic eye and that eye's regard for the effects of light. The significance of these studies and their relevance to our understanding of Rojas's artistic essence is undeniable.

### Final Salon Works

Rojas submitted two more works to the Salon before his untimely death in 1890. Following a commission by the priest of a church in Caracas, Rojas began to work on *Purgatory* (fig. 44), which he exhibited at the Salon and whose receipt of a medal signifies the artist's ultimate achievement of his dreams of official recognition.<sup>57</sup> For inspiration, Rojas turned to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which inspired him to paint *Dante and Beatrice* (fig. 45). As a commissioned work (and such a specific one), *Purgatory* does not reveal anything new about our painter. As a work that originated from Rojas's personal research (although he ended up submitting it to the Salon of 1890), *Dante and Beatrice* is a different case. Our observations of Rojas's light, his brightness and his whites find a culmination in this painting—in the sky, in the flowers, in the water, in the atmosphere that renders the figures ghostly. Once again, Rojas gives

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<sup>56</sup> Hedderich, 29. Emphasis mine. "Fuí a un teatro lindísimo, imposible de formarse una idea de tal belleza, y luego las escenas de baile... no tienen descripción posible, centenarias de mujeres bailarinas con un camisoncito cortísimo y piernas a lo volantín, hacienda mil evoluciones preciosas con un orden admirable, vestidas de fuego, porque no de otra manera pueden llamarse unos trajes que despiden rayos, lampos de luz, con todos los matices del iris."

<sup>57</sup>As a commission of the sort, *Purgatory* is one of the few works whose destination and whereabouts following Rojas's death is clear. However, the fact that the majority of his paintings remain in the artist's country suggests that Rojas took them with him when he left Paris in 1890.

his women a softness of which he deprives his men. The human, conscious expression on Dante, who wears an earthly brown, contrasts with the graceful expression of Beatrice, who wears a celestial white and blue. The painting no doubt is a significant testimony to Rojas's increasingly light palette and Modernist style. Junyent even argues that "chronologically, it is the first manifestation of Modernist art realized by an American."<sup>58</sup> However, as a work of a literary subject—the only one besides the commissioned *Purgatory*—*Dante and Beatrice* is an exception in Rojas's oeuvre. Also, the fact that the painting was eventually presented at the Salon makes Rojas's intentions in his creation of the work unclear. Did he begin to paint the work purely as a personal project or was he considering submitting it to the Salon all throughout its execution? Perhaps the nature of the subject provided Rojas with a safe, traditional chance at exhibiting at the Salon and succeeding in front of the judges. But if *Dante and Beatrice* seemed to present a culmination of Rojas's artistic evolution, there is one last work left to discuss which, I believe, best embodies Rojas's artistic essence.

### ***The Reader: a Conclusion***

In 1890, Rojas painted *The Reader* (fig. 46), a work whose absence from the literature on Rojas I find inexplicable. The work is barely mentioned by those scholars who have addressed it at all. Only Páez seems to identify the significance of this painting, but even after referring to it as "the supreme creation of Venezuelan painting in the nineteenth century," he provides no more than a very brief description of the painting and a brief statement regarding Rojas's mastering of his craft. Only a study like the one in which we have just engaged can provide the necessary ground on which to understand not only the importance of the painting in and of itself but also its significance regarding Rojas's artistic evolution.

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<sup>58</sup> Junyent, 42.

Rojas gives us—this time not just in a study but in a completed painting—a woman in a domestic interior. She sits in a corner by a window (or perhaps a balcony door) reading a book.<sup>59</sup> To her right, a basket of flowers and a cropped table; to her left, a fireplace and an array of objects on the mantelshelf. The cleanest, purest light enters through the window and its white, transparent curtains—the embroidered, delicate patterns of which are beautifully painted—and fills the room with a soft atmosphere. The woman’s skin has the softness we can now associate with Rojas’s women; does her left arm and the hand she delicately places on her book not remind us of *The Tavern*’s waitress’ graceful arm and hand? And what about the objects on the mantel? Their delicacy calls to mind Da Antonio’s description of the objects on the shelf in *The Tavern* as “poems of color, of transparency, of perfect stillness.” The small aquamarine ceramic flower vase, the tiny silver cup and the clock with its clear face subtly receive and reflect the light. Their clarity and physical perfection enhance the scene’s quietness and intimism, as their materiality provokes our imagination to speculate on the sound we might hear if something were to touch them. The purity of the light is reinforced by colors such as the aquamarine of the small vase and the jar that has been cropped on the table on the left, as well as by the white on the dress of the *Reader*, the curtains and the window itself, whose variations of white and gray suggest both bright light and subtle shadows. A different kind of light is provided by the fireplace, whose warmth fits harmoniously in the whole atmosphere of the otherwise cool room. Another contrast exists between the cool objects on the mantel and the gray frame of the fireplace and the furry, brownish rug on the floor. Again, this contrast does not disrupt the harmony and tranquility of the room. These contrasts work together with the delicacy and the quietness given to every element, figure and object in the painting to form and convey Rojas’s intimism.

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<sup>59</sup> The features of the window resemble those of the doors in *The Balcony*.

The painting not only represents the culmination of Rojas's exploration of light and the intimate character of his work; it also demonstrates Rojas's approach to Modernism. If the quasi-religious *Baptism* still carried hints of tradition in its content, *The Reader* is a different case. The heroism of history and Neo-Classical painting, the moralizing lessons of Realism and renowned literary subjects have all been abandoned in favor of the most casual of subjects—a woman at home, sitting by a window, reading a book. The general subject was a favorite of the Nabis, represented by artists such as Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard (see figs. 47, 48 and 49). However, despite the similarities between Rojas's and the Nabis' choice of subject, one great difference exists between the styles of the two. As Modernist and unconventional as *The Reader's* subject is, the execution is quite academic. The painting has the *fini*, illusionistic look valued by the Academy, which shows Rojas's reluctance to completely embrace Modernism with all of its brave brushstrokes and abandon his academicism. Perhaps he felt that the combination of the mastering of his modernist explorations and the mastering of the academic style imposed by his training would result in the highest-quality work he could possibly produce. And if this was the case, *The Reader* shows us that he was right. His compromise of the academic style on one end and modernist interests on the other end formed in *The Reader* one of the most remarkable paintings of the nineteenth century, as well as the most complete embodiment of the essence of one of the greatest Latin American painters of that century.

Unfortunately, Rojas's *juste milieu* is not recognized as is the clear adherence of other painters to specific movements. His *Reader* is unknown to viewers who might be familiar with the more stylistically Modernist *Reader* of Vuillard, painted six years later. With this study, I hope to have demonstrated that his compromise, his position between the traditional and the

modern, takes nothing away from the quality and significance of his work. On the contrary, this compromise may have resulted in the most remarkable painting he could have painted.

Significantly, the crossroads between tradition and Modernism was not the only one at which Rojas stood in his career, and our understanding of this is crucial to our understanding of the artist. As a Latin American artist in Paris, as a painter arriving in Europe in the midst of several Modernist movements and joining an Academy, as an artist who divided the essence of his oeuvre between paintings for the Salon and paintings for himself, Rojas's career was defined by a number of intersections and transitions. This last duality might be the most revealing of them all, which is why I have made an effort to defy the myth of Rojas's negative character, of his misfortunes' role in his Realist works. The difference between Rojas's Salon paintings and his own personal works equals the difference between his dependence on tradition to further his professional career and his exploration of his actual, modernist artistic concerns. Of the two kinds of paintings, the latter presents the real contribution to the history of art—an unparalleled testimony of the luminous, intimate vision of a Venezuelan painter in late-nineteenth-century Paris.

## Illustrations



Figure 1.

Cristóbal Rojas

*Ruins of Cúa*, 1882

Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después* (Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 6.



Figure 2.

Cristóbal Rojas

*Ruins of the Convent, Las Mercedes*, 1882

Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después* (Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 6.



Figure 3.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Ruins of Cúa*, 1882  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 7.

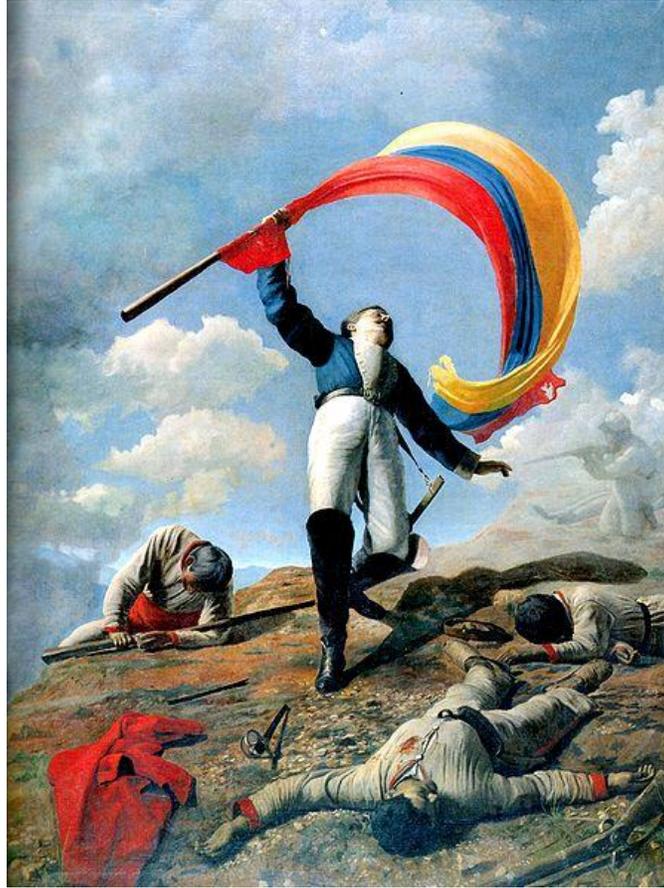


Figure 4.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The Death of Girardot*, 1883  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 11.



Figure 5.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Still Life with Rags*, 1884  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 26.



Figure 6.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Still Life with Open Book*, 1884  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 10.



Figure 7.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Still Life with Open Book, Detail*



Figure 8.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Still Life with Open Book, Detail*



Figure 9.  
Jean-Siméon Chardin  
*Pipes and Drinking Pitcher*, c. 1737  
Reproduced in ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>



Figure 10.  
Jean-Siméon Chardin  
*Young Draftsman*, 1737  
Reproduced in ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>



Figure 11.  
Johannes Vermeer  
*Woman Holding a Balance*, 1662-64  
Reproduced in ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>

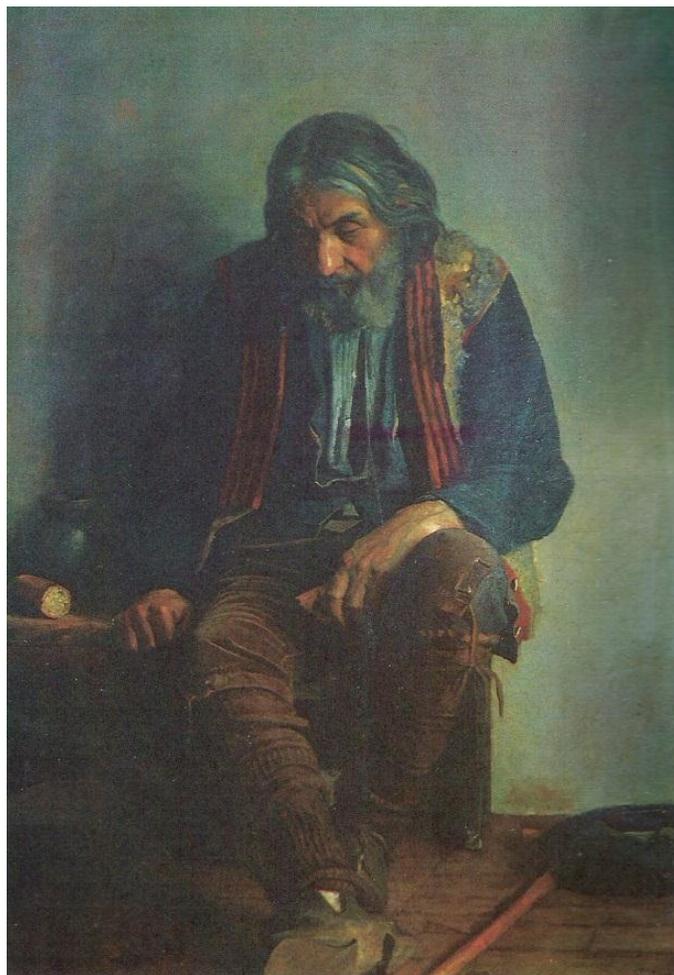


Figure 12.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The Beggar*, 1884  
Reproduced in Juan Calzadilla, *Cristóbal Rojas* (Caracas: SIDOR, 1978), 39.



Figure 13.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Motherhood*, 1885  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 15.



Figure 14.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Misery*, 1886  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 19.



Figure 15.

Cristóbal Rojas

*The Sick Violinist*, 1886

Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 27.



Figure 16.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The Tavern*, 1887  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 22.



Figure 17.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The Eviction*, 1888  
Reproduced in Juan Calzadilla, *Cristóbal Rojas* (Caracas: SIDOR, 1978), 58-59.



Figure 18.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The First and Last Communion*, 1888  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 35.

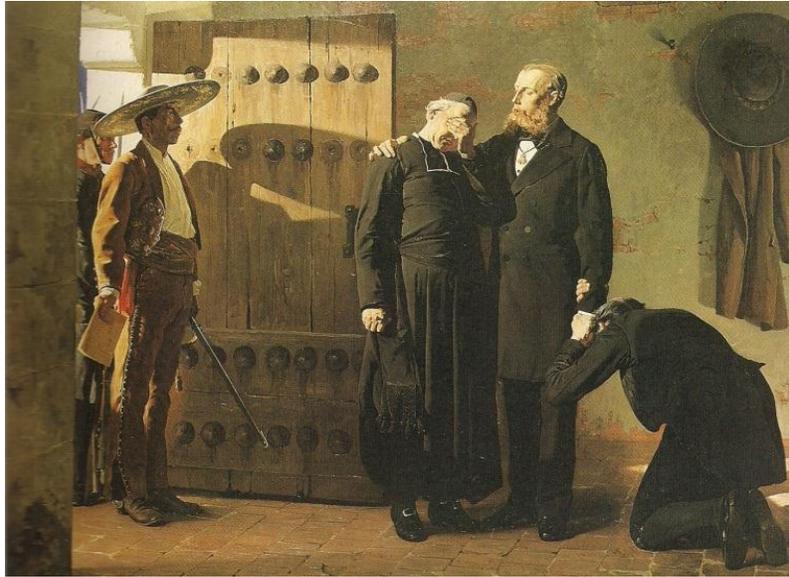


Figure 19.  
Jean-Paul Laurens  
*The Last Moments of Emperor Maximilian*, 1882  
Reproduced State Hermitage Museum, <http://hermitagemuseum.org>



Figure 20.  
Jean-Paul Laurens  
*The Excommunication of Robert the Pious*, 1875  
Reproduced in Musée d'Orsay, <http://www.musee-orsay.fr>



Figure 21.  
Johannes Vermeer  
*The Milkmaid*, c. 1658-60  
Reproduced in ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>



Figure 22.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The Eviction*, Detail



Figure 23.  
Jules Bastien-Lepage  
*Hay Making*, 1877  
Reproduced in Musée d'Orsay, <http://www.musee-orsay.fr>

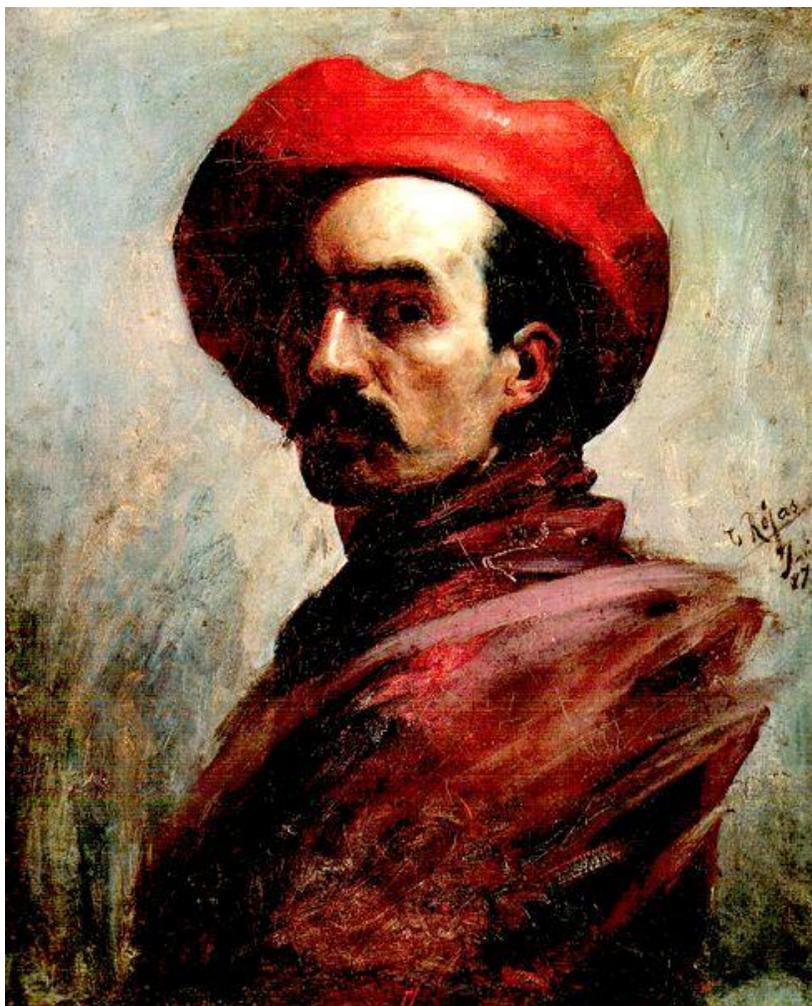


Figure 24.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Self-Portrait with Red Hat*, 1887  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 30.

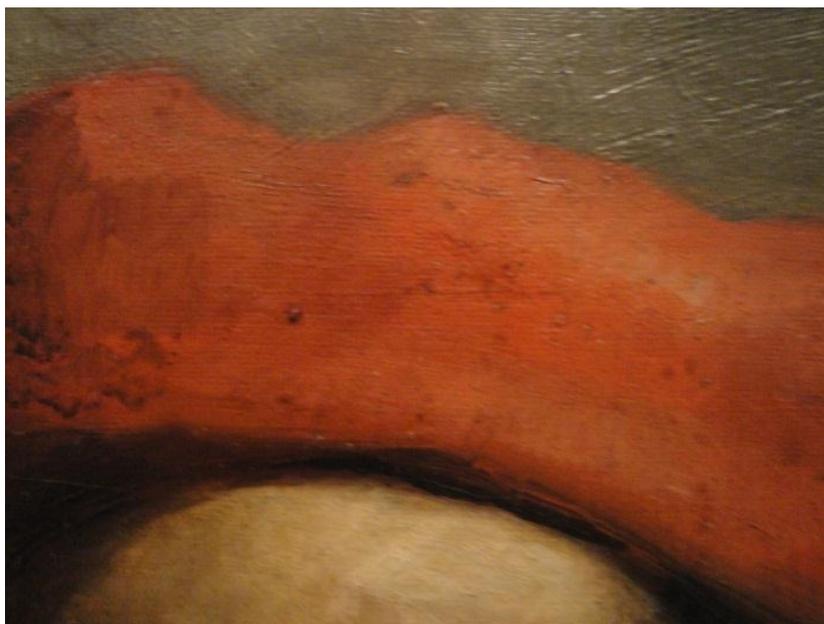


Figure 25.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Self-Portrait with Read Hat*, Detail



Figure 26.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Dr. Odoardo León Ponte*, 1884  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional,  
*Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después* (Caracas:  
Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 14.

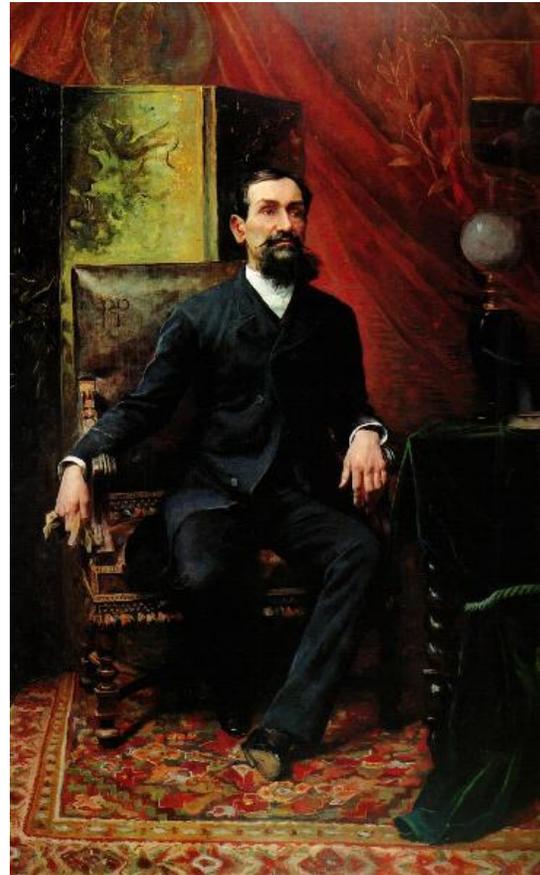


Figure 27.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*President Rojas Paúl*, 1890  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional,  
*Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después* (Caracas:  
Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 33.

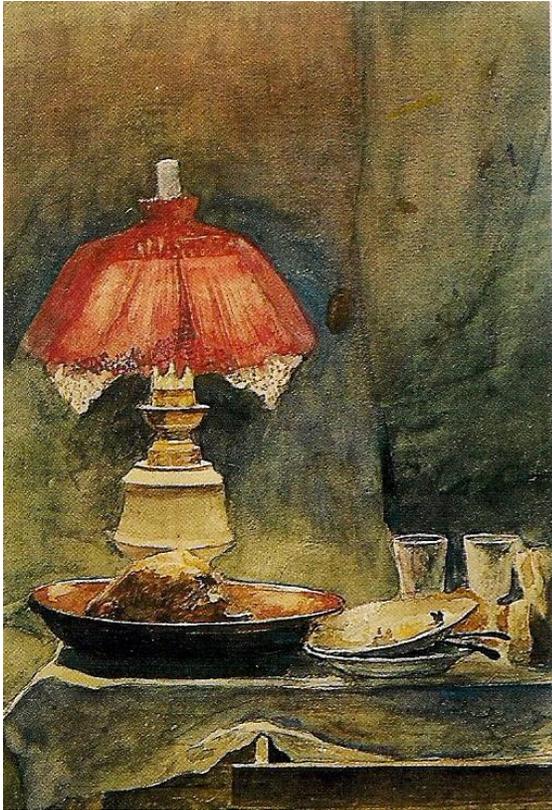


Figure 28.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Still Life with Lamp*, 1887  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional,  
*Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después* (Caracas:  
Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 26.

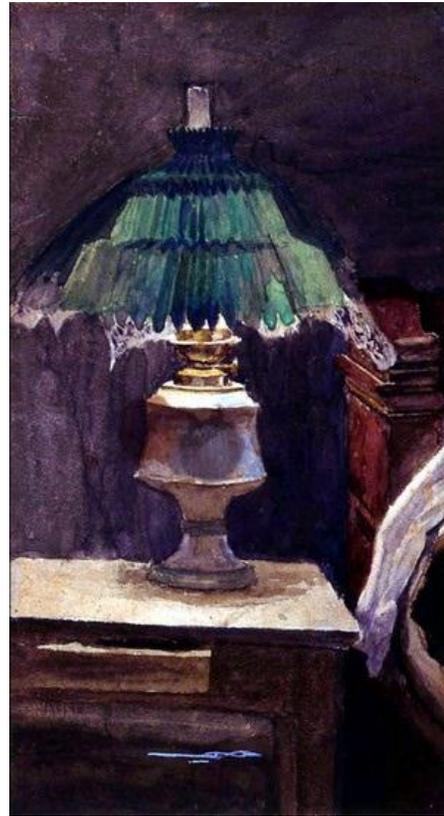


Figure 29.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Lamp*, n.d.  
Reproduced in Fundación Museos  
Nacionales, *Catálogo Digital*,  
DVD- ROM (Caracas: CONAC,  
2005-2006).



Figure 30.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Still Life with Pheasant*, 1889  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 45.



Figure 31.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The Baptism*, 1889  
Reproduced in Juan Calzadilla, *Cristóbal Rojas* (Caracas: SIDOR, 1978), 72-73.



Figure 32.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The Baptism*, Detail



Figure 33.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The Baptism*, Detail



Figure 34.  
Emilio Boggio  
*Wedding in Auvers*, 1913  
Reproduced in Fundación Museos Nacionales, Catálogo Digital, DVD-ROM  
(Caracas: CONAC, 2005-2006).

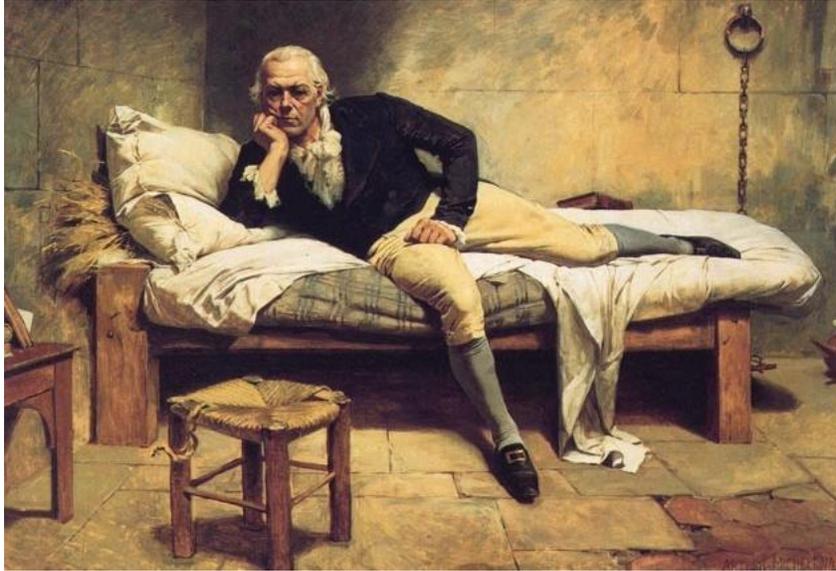


Figure 35.  
Arturo Michelena  
*Miranda in La Carraca*, 1896  
Reproduced in Ramón Gutiérrez and Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, *Historia del Arte Iberoamericano* (Barcelona: Lunwerg, 2000), 211.



Figure 36.  
Juan Manuel Blanes  
*The Oath of the Thirty-Three Easterners*, 1875-77  
Reproduced in ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>

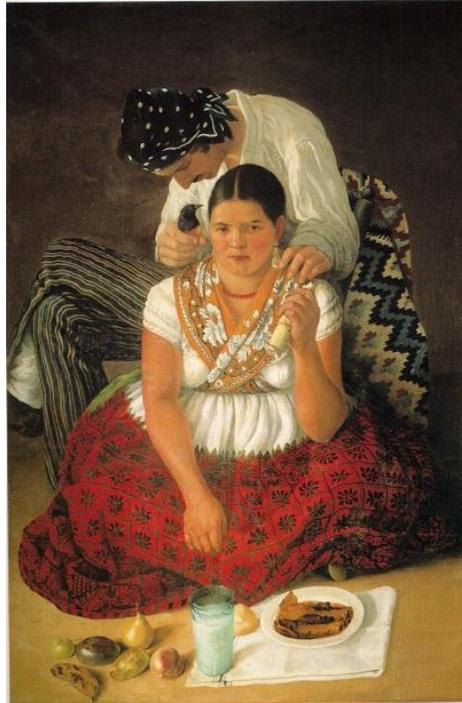


Figure 37.

José Agustín Arrieta

*El Chinaco y la China*, 19<sup>th</sup> c

Reproduced in Ramón Gutiérrez and Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, *Historia del Arte Iberoamericano* (Barcelona: Lunwerg, 2000), 207.



Figure 38.

José Agustín Arrieta

*Popular Market Scene*, 19<sup>th</sup> c

Reproduced in ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>



Figure 39.  
Rodrigo Gutiérrez  
*Senate of Tlaxcala*, 1875  
Reproduced in Ramón Gutiérrez and Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, *Historia del Arte Iberoamericano* (Barcelona: Lunwerg, 2000), 213.



Figure 40.  
Leandro Izaguirre  
*Torture of Cuauhtémoc*, 1893  
Reproduced in ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>

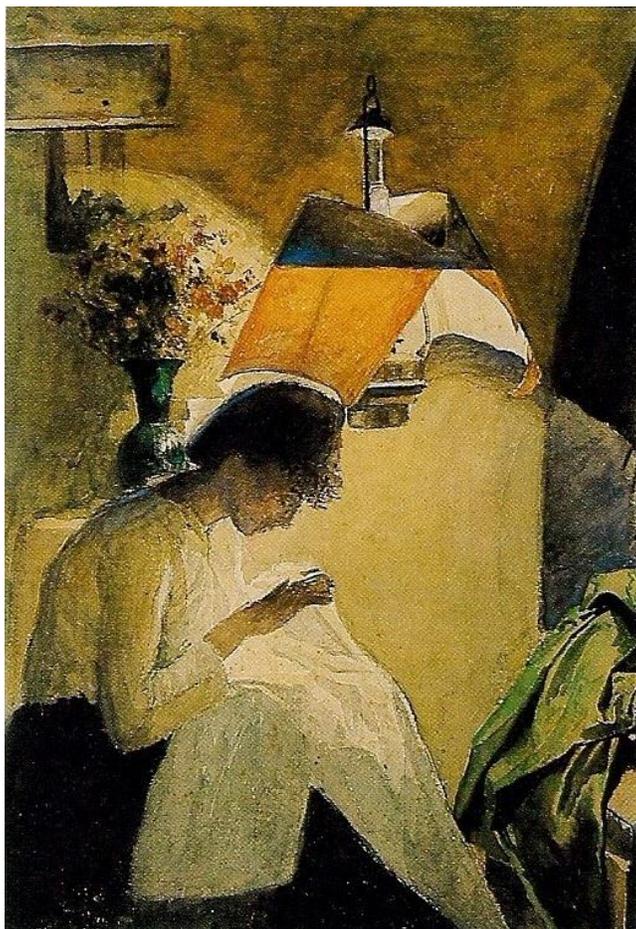


Figure 41.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Seamstress*, 1889  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 42.



Figure 42.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Girl Getting Dressed*, 1889  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 42.



Figure 43.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The Balcony*, 1889  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 43.

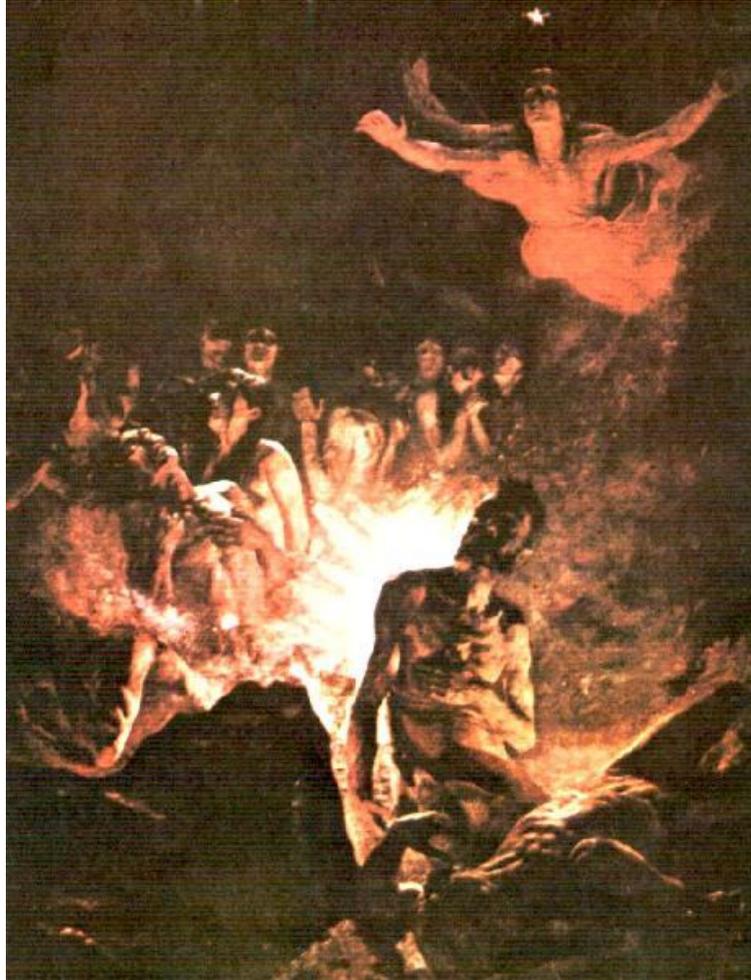


Figure 44.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Purgatory*, 1890  
Reproduced in Rafael Páez, *Cristóbal Rojas* (Caracas: Edime, 1968), 223.



Figure 45.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*Dante and Beatrice*, 1890  
Reproduced in Galería de Arte Nacional, *Cristóbal Rojas, Un Siglo Después*  
(Caracas: Galería de Arte Nacional, 1990), 36.



Figure 46.  
Cristóbal Rojas  
*The Reader*, 1890  
Reproduced in Sotheby's, <http://www.sothebys.com>

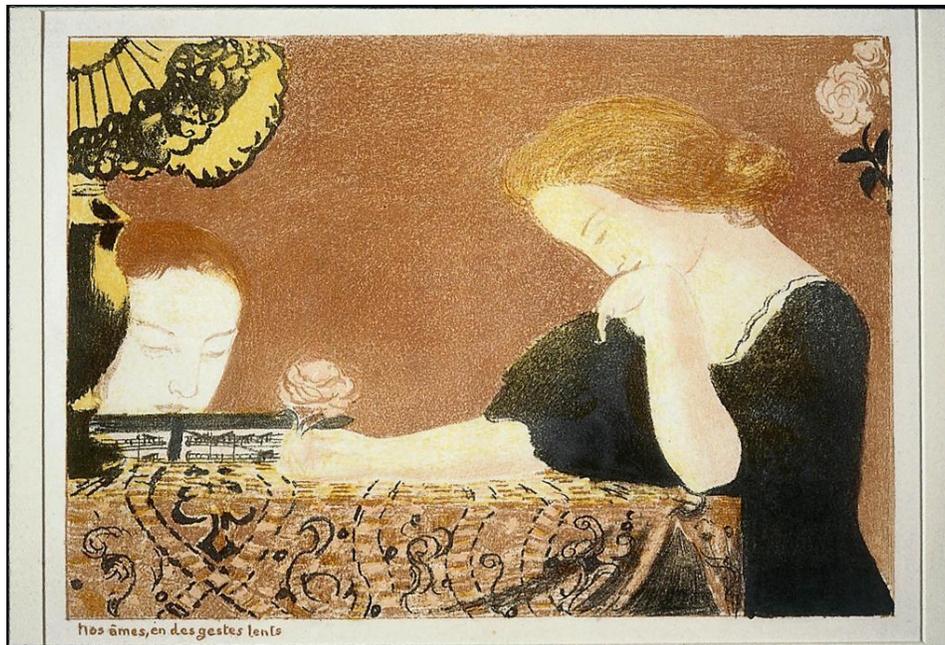


Figure 47.  
Maurice Denis  
*Nos âmes en des gestes lents*, 1899  
Reproduced in ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>



Figure 48.  
Pierre Bonnard  
*The Dessert*, c. 1920  
Reproduced in ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>

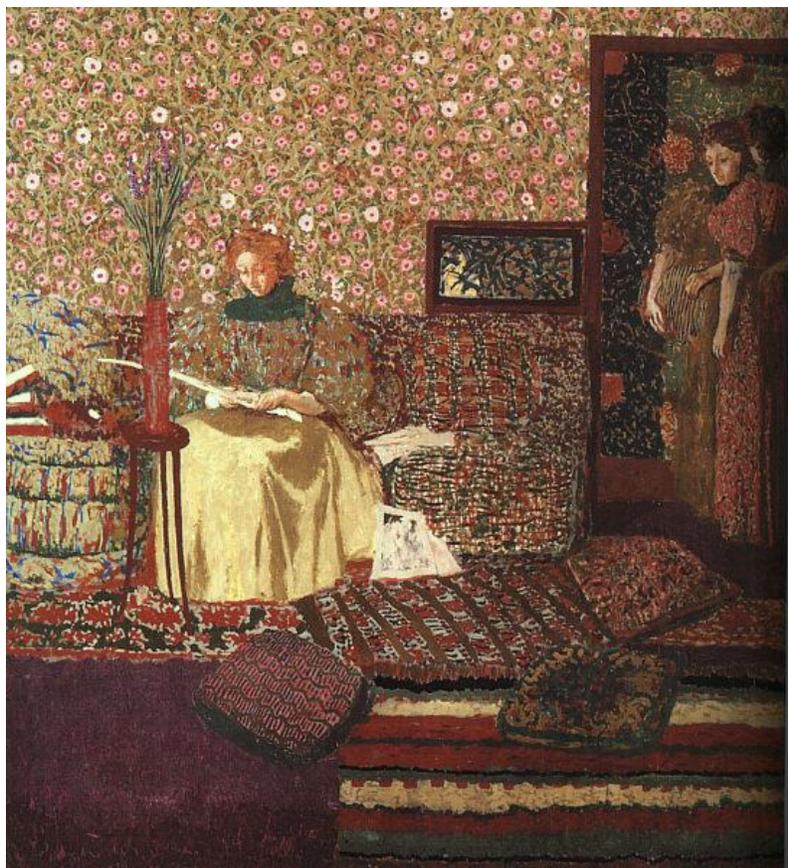


Figure 49.  
Édouard Vuillard  
*The Reader*, 1896  
Reproduced in ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>

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## ABSTRACT

As a Latin American artist living and working in Paris, Cristóbal Rojas (1858-1890) stood at the crossroads of many paths. His early artistic formation in Venezuela and his training at the Académie Julian in Paris instilled in him the academic artistic style visible in the works he submitted to the Salon between 1883 and 1890. However, it is not in his Salon works but rather in the paintings he did for himself that Rojas's significance and contribution to the history of art can be found. The increasingly Modernist works he painted for his personal artistic concerns reveal Rojas's valuable compromise between academicism and Modernism as well as his place as one of the first Latin American Modernist artists.