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Beyond Noucentisme: Joaquim Sunyer’s Mediterranean *Pastoral*

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**Abstract**

Taking as case study the painting *Pastoral* (1910–11), one of the iconic works of the Catalán artist Joaquim Sunyer (1874–1956), this paper examines the established link between Mediterraneanism and Noucentisme in Catalan culture in the first decades of the twentieth century. A look at how this work was received when it was first exhibited, and the subsequent re-reading of its iconography, enables us to understand *Pastoral* nowadays not as much as a symbol of Noucentisme, but more as a potential meeting point between the different aesthetic trends of the period.

**Résumé**

En prenant pour cas d’étude la peinture *Pastoral* (1910-11), œuvre emblématique de l’artiste catalan Joaquim Sunyer (1874-1956), je me propose dans cet article de revenir sur le lien tissé entre le méditerranéisme et le noucentisme dans la culture catalane des premières décennies du XXe s. L’accueil que reçut l’œuvre au moment de sa première exposition, ainsi que la relecture de son iconographie, nous permettent aujourd’hui de comprendre *Pastoral* non tant comme un emblème exclusif du noucentisme, mais plutôt comme un point de possible rencontre entre les diverses tendances esthétiques présentes dans la culture de l’époque.

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On 11 April 1911, the doors of Barcelona’s Fayans Català Galleries opened to the Exhibition of the Works of Joaquim Sunyer, the Catalan painter Joaquim Sunyer’s (1874–1956) first individual exhibition. A total of 60 paintings were on display until 30 April of the same year, many of which had been produced during his most recent artistic period marked by his return to his native Sitges in 1908. Although Sunyer had started his education at Barcelona’s Escola de la Llotja, in 1896 he had left for Paris, the city where his artistic and exhibition career would begin, and which would eventually be considered by many of his critics to be his initial period. It was not until his return to Catalonia that he began to produce the subject matter and style for which he would be most recognised and would be presented at the abovementioned exhibition, generally considered as “Sunyer’s definitive consecration as the leading figure of visual Noucentisme”.¹

Of all the works exhibited, the one that attracted most attention was the canvas Pastoral (1910–11) (Fig. 1). As we will see later, the critics immediately considered this to be the piece that best characterised the work the painter was producing at the time, and which in time historiography would consecrate as “the paradigm of noucentista Catalan painting”.² This canonisation of Sunyer’s painting as an icon of Noucentisme is based first and foremost on the fact that it has always been considered as an exaltation of the Catalan Mediterranean landscape, the poet and critic Josep Mª Junoy (1887–1955) declaring that it “irradiates, from the four cardinal points, the rhythm, the serene exaltation, of the blue life of the Mediterranean, and the balance of its infinite harmony”.³ As we will now explore, Mediterraneanism was without doubt one of the keystones of noucentista ideology.⁴

¹ Panyella, Vinyet, “Cronologia”, in DD.AA., Joaquim Sunyer. La construcció d’una mirada (Barcelona: Fundació Cultural Mapfre and MNAC, 1999), 269. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

² Cristina Mendoza and Mercè Doñate, “Pastoral”, in Joaquim Sunyer. La construcció d’una mirada, 178

³ Josep Mª Junoy, “Exposición Joaquín Sunyer”, La Publicidad, April 16, 1911, 2

⁴ Noucentisme was a Catalan political and cultural movement of the early 20th century (1906–1923 c.), that originated as a reaction against Modernisme and the fin-de-siècle Decadentism. It involved both the Catalan nationalist bourgeoisie and the artists
which precisely in the year 1911 was at its pivotal moment in terms of its social and cultural dissemination and impact in Catalonia. In this regard, this paper has two main aims. First, to reflect upon the sense of the Mediterraneanism evoked by Sunyer’s Pastoral, and second to discuss whether we should read it exclusively from the perspective of Noucentisme, under the claim that in this painting the reference to the Mediterranean landscape takes on overtones that do not fit only with those to which the movement subscribed.

**Noucentisme and Mediterraneanism**

It is certainly true that Noucentisme and Mediterraneanism have been seen as inextricably linked. We can trace this link back to the philosopher Eugeni d’Ors (1881–1954), who on January 1, 1906, began publishing a daily column entitled “Glosari” in a Catalan newspaper. On January 19 of the same year, he wrote the following in a column headed “Emporium”: “. . . And sometimes I think that the ideal sense of a redeeming achievement of Catalonia could today all boil down to discovering the Mediterranean, to discovering what there is of the Mediterranean in us, and proclaiming it to the world. . .”\(^5\)

This was the first time\(^6\) Ors was to assert the Mediterraneanism of a nation that would eventually lead him to be considered as the main spokesman of Noucentisme, whose conceptual foundations as a regenerative political and cultural movement were then just beginning to be laid. Asserting the need to “discover” the Mediterranean served the philosopher three main purposes: first, it was a clear means of differentiating the new young generation of the 1900s from the preceding generation of the 1800s, the *fin-de-siècle* Modernistes\(^7\) who had tended to seek their cultural references in northern Europe (mainly in Paris) and in movements such as Impressionism and Symbolism. Second, he identified it with classicism; in the words of a renowned historian, “Classicism and Mediterraneanism referred – in a kind of historic and landscape-related alibi – to a past (the Greco-Roman past) and a place (the Mediterranean) in hypostatic union in which the origin of certain cultural and characterological constants, inherited also by the Catalan nation, could be found.”\(^8\) And third, and in conjunction with another key concept, “civility”, it allowed Ors to champion a new urban and metropolitan culture capable of offering a potent project of civilization that was a clear counterpoint to the localistic and anecdotal ruralism which, in his view, had excessively marked the country’s artistic production.

Like Ors, other intellectuals and artists of the noucentista movement were also insisting on the revitalizing and, at the same time, legitimizing nature of this assertion of Catalonia’s Mediterraneity. Thus, from 1910 onwards, the already quoted Junoy would identify the beginnings of a new “Latin Renaissance” of distinctly classicist-inspired art and poetry, which he named “the Mediterranean School”.\(^9\) For his part, in 1913 the artist Joaquim Torres-Garcia (1875–1949), whose then-contemporary paintings can be considered as the most iconic examples of the aesthetics of the movement, would write that artists should adhere to “the great tradition of the Mediterranean peoples. As we see it, we must choose [. . .] from what is old Catalan, that which responds to the concept of Classicism.”\(^10\)

And so Mediterraneanism and Classicism became virtually synonymous in the vocabulary of Catalan Noucentisme. As noted by the poet and art historian Narcís Comadira, the Mediterraneanism

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\(^5\) Eugeni d’Ors, Glosari, 1906–1907 (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1996; edited by Xavier Pla), 31–32.

\(^6\) Ors would again insist on this need to mediterraneanise Catalan art and culture in other columns published shortly afterwards, including “Artístiques raons” (April 10, 1906) and “Glosa mediterrània” (March 5, 1907); in Glosari, 1906–1907, 78–79 and 420–22.

\(^7\) The Catalan word “Modernisme” can not be readily translated as the English word “Modernism”, because it designates a very specific period in Catalan art, while the meaning of the word in English is much broader.


they proclaimed was that of Greece, Rome, and the northern Mediterranean, while “the ism of the rest was not Mediterraneanism, but exoticism.”11 There was a well-established dichotomy between the classical and the oriental in the noucentista artistic and cultural discourse which, along with classical versus primitive, comprise the two fundamentally opposite poles in modern artistic theory and practice.12 In fact, for the Noucentistes Classicism came to mean “a political, philosophical, ethical and aesthetical system”13 of universal aspirations, valid not only for the arts but also socially, and based on the values of equilibrium, rationality, measure, and harmony, while the cornerstones of Noucentisme were aimed more at constructing an idealized social project than at describing an existing reality. Furthermore, we can see that this willingness to “discover” the Mediterranean, selective as it was, was always presented as a project of the future, a characteristic feature of how the young generation of the new century were now approaching art. The assumptions made by subsequent critics and historians in the discourse on Noucentisme, and the interpretation that has for the most part been made of it, has led to the consolidation of two main ideas regarding Catalan art in the early 20th century: one, that the Noucentistes were the first to assert the Mediterraneanism of Catalan culture, and the other that this Mediterraneity meant acceptance of the Greco-Latin cultural tradition at its most classical and Apollonian as a guide to contemporary creation.

Views of the Mediterranean

However, it is true that interest in the Mediterranean was not limited to the Noucentistes. We would even go as far as to say that the very notion of the Mediterraneity of Catalan culture emerged, albeit much more imprecisely, in the context of the previous, modernista generation. By way of example, at a conference in 1894, Bishop Torras i Bages (1846–1946) had already praised “the artistic tradition that derived from the wellspring of beautiful Greece and discreet Rome”;14 a tradition he believed Catalan art should immerse itself in rather than seek its inspiration in Northern European art. By this time, the modernista magazine Catalònia had already introduced the concept of Mediterraneanism and praised some forms of classicism.15 It was the writer Miquel Utrillo (1862–1934), as director of the modernista magazine Pèl & Ploma, who would first appreciate and publish the earliest classicist works of Torres-García. Likewise, the architect Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926), whose Mediterranean outlook was expressed most especially in Park Güell, told his friends that they should “not go to the North to look for Art and Beauty, for it is to be found in the Mediterranean; from its shores—Egypt, Assyria, Greece, Rome, Spain, North Africa—all works of art have arisen.”16

The great modernista poet Joan Maragall (1860–1911), to whom we will return later, also championed the Mediterranean Catalan landscape. In his 1906 collection of poetry, Enllà [Over there], there appeared a series of poems entitled Vistes al mar [Sea views], to be followed later by Seguit de vistes al mar [Continuance of sea views] (1911), that evoke a wholly harmonious and serene gaze on the coastal landscape and mark his final goodbye to the mountains as a poetic topic.17 And one last example is the 1915 appearance of a short-lived art magazine, consisting in just 4 issues, entitled Mediterrània: revista d’art i lletres [Journal of art and letters]. The director was the son of Alexandre de Riquer (1856–1920), a key figure in the visual arts of Catalan Modernisme and active participant in the publication; and notably neither the writers of the articles nor the aesthetics of the magazine had any kind of connection with Noucentisme.

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11 Narcís Comadira, “Sobre el Mediterranisme. Unes notes”, in Forma i prejudici. Papers sobre el Noucentisme (Barcelona: Empúries, 2006), 28. In the same text, Comadira also recalls that neither Torres-García, nor by extension Noucentisme, take the Dionysian or tragic aspect of the ancient world into account, but only its Apollonian aspect (31).
14 Josep Torras i Bages, “De la fruïció artística”, in Obres completes, vol II (Barcelona: Publicacions de l’Àbadia de Montserrat, 1986), 252
16 Isidre Puig-Buada, El pensament de Gaudí. Compilació de textos i coments [Barcelona: Col·legi d’arquitectes de Catalunya, 1981], 91
17 Glòria Casals, “Pròleg”, in Joan Maragall, Enllà (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1989), 11
And so, the notion of the Mediterraneanism of Catalan culture was already being discussed prior to Noucentisme, even if in a way that entirely lacked any theoretical consistency or political weight. Concurrently, from the mid-19th century onwards, there also existed a certain tradition of painters who had already "discovered" the Mediterranean as a pictorial subject. Although Ors simplified the contrast between interest in the urban and the rural worlds in Catalan culture, with the latter being lumped together disdainfully as the "mountains",\(^{18}\) the fact is that Catalan landscape art at the start of the new century was, to a large extent, maritime. In this regard, while Courbet and the Provençal painters are considered as pioneers of the discovery of the Mediterranean Sea as a pictorial subject in French painting, in the Catalan context the same could be said of Ramon Martí Alsina (1826–1894), a realist painter who has so often been compared to his French counterpart.

Towards the end of the 19th century, there were several Catalan artists painting the Mediterranean coast from a personal perspective. Some such as Modest Urgell (1839–1919) were symbolist, and others somewhere on the spectrum between Naturalism and Impressionism, as is the case of Eliseu Meifrèn (1859–1940). However, it was the painters known as the Sitges Luminists, included among them Joaquim de Miró (1849–1914) and Joan Roig (1852–1909), who brought the specific clarity of light so characteristic of the Mediterranean into their paintings, and which we also find in a number of landscapes painted by two Modernistes par excellence, Santiago Rusiñol (1861–1931) and Ramon Casas (1866–1932). These Sitges-inspired artists were the first in the Catalan art world to relish the most hedonistic and sensual aspects of a Mediterranean that the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists were simultaneously discovering in Le Midi.

Probably the greatest Catalan painter of the Mediterranean in these years was Joaquim Mir (1873–1940), who discovered it during his sojourns in Mallorca between 1900 and 1904. His Majorcan paintings, resplendent with colourful, luminous landscapes half way between mimesis and abstraction, represented the pinnacle of his pictorial career. Another painter who offered a highly personal view of the Mediterranean landscape was Nicolau Raurich (1871–1945), creating a series of paintings that he eventually named Mediterranean visions, which included depictions of rustic coastal landscapes. One of the most representative of these works, Latin Sea (Fig. 2), was painted in 1906, the same year that Ors, as we have seen, began to proclaim the need for Mediterraneanism. It would seem, then, that for many Catalan painters of the time, this need was better met by searching for a personal connection with the landscape than by interpreting it through the lens of Greco-Roman Classicism.

**Pastoral’s Mediterraneanism**

So the presence of a Mediterranean iconography in Catalan painting was already a reality by the time Sunyer presented his works in 1911; and yet, he would come to be seen by many as the highest representative of this theme. Again, Junoy was ahead of the times in bestowing this distinction upon him; already in 1910, he saw Sunyer as the first among the Spanish painters to be truly captivated by the Mediterranean landscape, stating that “Beneath his inaccuracies in form and his psychological malaises, the sublime ideality of a Patinir of the Mediterranean can be distinguished in Sunyer.”\(^{19}\) Also, unlike the painters previously mentioned, including Mir and Raurich who can generically be called impressionists, the work of Sunyer, influenced more by Matisse, Gauguin, and Cézanne, reveals some constructive type values that were very appreciated by the theorists of Noucentisme. It should be noted here that they were resolutely anti-Impressionists, and their opposition to it was sustained precisely by their notion of Classicism and the vindication of Structuralism and construction as artistic values.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{18}\) Eugeni d’Ors, “La ciutat i les serres”, August 8, 1906, in Glosari, 1906-07, 211–12

\(^{19}\) Josep Mª Junoy, “Joaquin Sunyer. Pintor del Mediterráneo”, La Publicidad, January 27, 1910, 1

\(^{20}\) In April 1907, Ors dedicated a series of eight columns to Impressionism with the aim of presenting it as antagonistic to his own aesthetic option, underpinned by the idea of Arbitrarism. Eugeni d’Ors, Glosari, 1906–07, 465–479
To this effect, the new direction taken by Sunyer’s work seemed to compliment the artistic aspirations of Noucentisme entirely, as much in terms of its theme as the artistic language it acquired.

And yet, despite later historiography’s insistence on this identification, as previously discussed, what is certain is that Sunyer’s 1911 exhibition in general, and *Pastoral* especially, was not as unanimously or enthusiastically received by the ranks of the movement as anticipated. On the contrary, what we actually find are diverse reactions that demonstrate that the reading of the work was far from unitary. The first significant sign of this is that Eugeni d’Ors wrote absolutely nothing about it either at the time or later, despite being perfectly familiar with the work presented, as demonstrated in his article published in 1908 where he talks about visiting Sunyer’s study in Paris and seeing “painted canvases [that] ooze sumptuousness. There are magnificent sea and sky blues, hot flesh browns. They are the Sitges seas, the Sitges skies, they are the fisherwomen of the Catalan coastline (…)”.

Ors’s continued silence with respect to Sunyer and his work, to which he dedicated no written texts between 1908 and 1920, despite sometimes mentioning it in passing, is no doubt testament to the difficulty he had in fitting some elements of the

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21 Eugeni d’Ors, “Cròniques de París. Les tardes y les vetles de l’Octavi de Romeu”, *La Veu de Catalunya*, November 11, 1908.
painter’s work into the artistic discourse he had previously developed.

A second fact that warrants attention is the comparisons the exhibition provoked between the work of Sunyer and that of some of the other key figures of Modernisme. An anonymous author wrote the introduction to the publications written by Utrillo and Lleó Bazalgette about Sunyer’s work, stating that, “What [Joan] Maragall names “voices of the earth” can be heard in Sunyer’s canvases, but they are soft, full, evocative voices.”22 For his part, Joaquim Folch i Torres, another of Noucentisme’s key ideologists, wrote the following in his rather unfavourable review of the exhibition: “Walking past Sunyer’s paintings is somewhat like passing in front of the facade of the Birth of the Sagrada Familia; what I mean is that the people don’t understand it, and they don’t understand it because it is too clear.”23 This very curious comparison with the work of Gaudí, the figurehead of the Modernistes, is based precisely on the fact that they share an “extremely pure primitivism”; and is exactly why he compares him again with Joan Maragall, because according to Folch, both he and Sunyer are capable of making the child we all have inside us born again, and the woman in Pastoral is “simply that unconscious, undefined happiness that small children feel.”

Romà Jori also mentioned this same primitivism, described in terms of innocence and ingenuity, in La Publicidad, where he wrote: “Look for the simplicity in the form and the austerity of the colour, in an art that seems to be primitive and ingenuous, an absurd simplicity that can be believed to be innocent (…)”. And about Pastoral in particular, he said that it could be compared “with the canvases that some primitive maestros brought us, so full of grace and a charming spirit.”24 These allusions to primitivism are the third outstanding feature we can find in the critiques of the exhibition. No authors, however, make any reference whatsoever to the exhibition pieces’ possible affiliation with Noucentisme; and only Junoy detects in Sunyer’s work a Classicism he sees especially reflected in the last works he painted in Sitges, included among them Pastoral and Mediterrània (1910–11), attributing to them “a simultaneously geometric and lyric character, affirming a well-defined Classicism” which, he clarifies, is “inspired in Nature, not in the entertaining spider web of the systems of aesthetics or in architecture”,25 clearly distancing it from any direct evocation of antiquity.

This aura of primitivism detected by some critics is partly due to the formal simplicity of Sunyer’s work, but is also reinforced by its theme, and especially by the fact of having decided to ascribe his most iconic work to the genre of the pastoral. It is worth remembering that the highly subjective evocations of the landscape produced by Catalan painters at the turn of the century, including Sunyer’s, coincided with the phenomenon of the progressive and irreversible industrialization, urbanization, and transformation of the Catalan territory, which is why we can sense in their work an “ontological nostalgia for the only world where the modern schism between nature and culture has not yet occurred”.26 This nostalgia leads us to the subject of the pastoral, which recalls a mythical vision of an Edenic landscape, always representing, in one way or another, an idyllic natural world in which animals and humans live harmoniously in a version of the Golden age. It has been argued, however, that the very common theme of the pastoral, with its several variations in early twentieth century modern European painting, is fraught with tension: “While celebrating harmony and simple fulfilment, pastoral is generated by alienation and dissatisfaction. The ideal world of pastoral finds the real world wanting.”27 We know that Noucentisme, as we have already pointed out, can be understood as an ideological construction whose objective was precisely to propose an ideal model and an action programme for a Catalonia immersed in deep internal and external

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22 “L’exposició Sunyer”, El poblet català, April 10, 1911
23 Joaquim Folch i Torres, “Les pintures den Sunyer”, La Veu de Catalunya, April 14, 1911
24 Romà Jori, “Arte y artistas. Joaquín Sunyer”, La publicidad, April 9, 1911
25 Josep M. Junoy, “Exposición Joaquín Sunyer”, La Publicidad, April 16, 1911
26 Glòria Soler, “La recerca del paisatge essencial”, in La imaginació noucentista, edited by Antoni Mari (Barcelona: Angle editorial, 2009), 110
conflict.28 It was, therefore, approached as a regenerative and forward-looking project with its name, coined by Eugeni d’Ors in 1906, playing on the two senses of the Catalan word “nou”: nine (in analogy with the Italian concept of the Novecento) and new. The pastoral, then, as a theme was fundamentally antithetical to the ideology of the movement, since rather than an action project it offered a space to withdraw from the world and to evoke an Arcadian and idealized past.

As already mentioned, within the context we are talking about, these uncertainties were mainly brought about by the clash between the traditional farming world and the new industrial world that emerged particularly from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, which is why the pastoral evokes a natural, rural world free of all urban and mechanical pollution. Apart from being a project for the future, Noucentisme was also a project with an overriding city perspective. As Ors wrote, “In Catalonia, Noucentisme is characterised by this fact: The City is becoming aware of what City is. And the starting point of this characterisation is this other thing: the Serres awakening to what the City is.”29 As has been widely studied,30 the city here takes on a double meaning, the literal one (with reference especially to Barcelona and the consolidation of its profile as a modern nation capital) and the metaphorical one: civilization was one of the watchwords of the movement, the entire ideological lattice it navigated precisely because of taking on the civilizing mission of the urbanite Noucentistes: “The metropole seems to be returning, through your work, to its virile mission. Definitively, now?”31 Even the reference to classicism could work in this regard: it is worth remembering that already in 1905, Ors had written that “Paganism, in its essential meaning, does not mean Ruralism; on the contrary, it is Civism.”32

When Sunyer’s critics point out the primitivism of his work, then, they are implicitly acknowledging the fact that Pastoral evokes a space of assumed prordial innocence that serves more as a refuge than a driver to action. A lot of this presumed ingenuity also emanates from the reading we could make of the female protagonist of Pastoral. Woman as a symbolic element played a central role in the noucentista nationalist discourse, not only because in almost all cultural traditions the concept of nation is extensively feminised,33 but also because in Noucentisme it was precisely the figure of a woman, Teresa, the Statuesque, that embodied the main ideology of the movement.34 As has been studied in depth, Teresa not only symbolises the Catalan nation or homeland, but also the mother that guarantees the nation’s moral and biological reproduction and continuity: “The image Ors describes has two functions: that of the woman/homeland and that of the woman/mother; they are the same being, with all the characteristics of the Mother of God,”35 wrought by the Catholic and conservative leanings of the Noucentista movement.

The female figure who is the central element of Pastoral, however, could also symbolise the nation, given the fact that she is completely and organically integrated into the Catalan landscape surrounding her, as various authors have pointed out.36 But what she certainly does not yet represent is a maternal figure, despite the fact that the sexual availability suggested by her nakedness and her passive position juxtaposed with the phallic firmness of the pine tree, together with the lambs all around her and the lushness of the landscape, are clear indications of her fertility. The way she is presented, in fact, makes her an entirely erotic figure who blends in visually
with nature (shown in the shared chromatisms between her skin and the stone surrounding her, and in the curves of the mountain landscape, which replicate the shape of her body), which merges into her more physical, instinctive, almost animal aspects, in what is in fact a cultural constant of Western culture. It is unsurprising that Paul Gauguin’s painting *The loss of virginity* or *Awakening of spring* (1891), in which these elements are even more evident, has been cited as a reference for Sunyer’s work.

This sexual overtone is even more obvious if we link *Pastoral* with two other paintings that were likewise presented at the 1911 exhibition (both of which were reproduced, interestingly, in the article by Maragall that we will cite later). The principal figure in *La dona de les taronges* [*Woman with oranges*] (1910–11; Fig. 3), shapely, half-smiling, with languorous eyes, presents herself to us completely naked, openly displaying her left breast while barely concealing the right one with an orange that she is
peeling, clearly visually suggesting a tactile relationship with the female genitals. *Hortènsia* (1910–11; Fig. 4), who while clothed is smiling at us in a similar way, holds a tray of fruit under her breasts at waist-height in a composition that once again makes us think of Gauguin’s *Two Tahitian Women* (1899); and this takes us to how the north-American historian Linda Nochlin interpreted it, clearly identifying the fact that in images of this type (sometimes pictorial, and at other times pornographic) what is being put on a plate is not only the fruit but also the sexual pleasure of the girl carrying it. The fact that these paintings were so readily interpreted from this perspective by Sunyer’s contemporaries was directly suggested by Junoy himself when he felt obliged to

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remark that Sunyer knew how to conserve a certain classic sense in his work “despite his incursions into colourist harmonies and dangerous sexual interpretations”. And Maragall, talking about Pastoral, wrote that faced with a strong impression of a landscape “we [always] feel the mysterious affinity between our nature and that of the land and we begin to love it creatively, and we would like it to be the body of a woman, and it seems to be just that, to create in her (...)”, in acknowledgment of the strong sexual impulse this figure awakens.

Beyond Noucentisme

These last words were written by Maragall in the article “Impression of Sunyer’s exhibition”, which the poet, who was not usually inclined to write about painting, published in July 1911 on the insistence of the promoter of the exhibition, the aforementioned Utrillo. Many of the elements we have previously cited also appear in the article, which Maragall begins by declaring his interest in Sunyer’s work, and observing in the artist “a vision of primitive man, eyes fascinated by the corporeity (if I can put it like that) of things”. His perception of a certain pantheism in Sunyer’s work is accentuated as he moves through the exhibition; according to him the artist “did not see each thing in itself; what he saw was the rhythm of creation in all of things; for him, the human body, a tree, the sea, were deep down one and the same: matter in the throes of creation makes the unity of it felt.” Maragall is recalling here a kind of cosmic unity between nature and humans that has such archaic roots that it even predates the aesthetic foundations provided by Greco-Latin culture. And so, he finally reaches the painting Pastoral, a work that to him summarises, ennobles, and clarifies the artist’s entire work: that intuited yearning for unity makes him recognise (visually, but also he insists, tactiley), in what is perhaps the most well-known and cited extract from the text, “the flesh of the landscape: it is landscape that, enlivened, is made flesh. That woman there is not arbitrariness, she is there by fate.” It is important to note here his disdain for the concept of arbitrariness, the aesthetic keystone of Noucentisme proposed by d’Ors.

It turns out, then, that in the end the author of the reference text on Sunyer’s exhibition and Pastoral was not a noucentista intellectual, but a modernista poet; as we pointed out at the start, this fact may be a clue to help us rethink the role of this painting within the artistic panorama of the moment. It also seems clear now that for their leading figures the differences between Modernistes and Noucentistes were less significant that they have been for many later commentators and historians. In fact, this ambiguity is so deep that we can justifiably contemplate whether Sunyer really can be considered to be a Noucentista; it is worth remembering that he, unlike Torres-Garcia, was not one of the founders of Noucentisme, and nor did he participate in it at any theoretical or political level. Ors only considered him to be a Noucentista almost as an afterthought, and despite most historians simply assuming that he formed part of the movement, some authoritative voices have cast doubt on this assumption. Beyond this relatively anecdotal fact, we have seen how a painting like Pastoral complicates rather than resolves the debate about how we can isolate the characteristics of a specific aesthetic movement; and in this particular case, it also serves to demonstrate that the question of Mediterraneanism in the art of the beginning of the last century is nowhere near resolved by its mere affiliation to the noucentista ideology. While Sunyer’s paintings from the early 1910s are undoubtedly Mediterranean, perhaps they are not as quintessentially noucentista as we have commonly considered them to be; Pastoral celebrates a world of primitive, sexual, and natural simplicity, in contrast to the urban world of civilization, power, and order that Ors’s version of Noucentisme and classicism espoused.

82 Juny, “Joaquin Sunyer: Pintor del Mediterráneo”
83 Joan Maragall, “Impresión de la exposición Sunyer. A un amigo”, Museum, 1, nº 7 (1911), 251-261
84 Ibid., 253
85 Ibid., 256
86 Eugeni d’Ors, “Enric Casanovas, noucentista”, La Vea de Catalunya, October 30, 1911, in Glosari, 1910-11 (Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 2003; edited by Xavier Pla), 769-779
87 “Sunyer is not a Noucentista; he does not do Noucentisme, and neither is he trained in the movement,” Narcís Comadira, “Sunyer, 1908-1918: una dècada prodigiosa”, in Joaquim Sunyer. La construcció d’una mirada, 64
His Mediterraneanism, then, does not endorse any of the proposals which, as we said at the beginning, we attribute to Noucentisme: it is neither a differentiating criterion with respect to the modernista generation, and nor does it offer any interpretation of classicism based on reclaiming a national culture or present itself as an example of civilism juxtaposed with ruralism and its values. So despite having become used to seeing the Mediterraneanism of the Noucentistes as something that sets them apart, perhaps we should see it more as a common link that connects the noucentista artists not only with the preceding movements but also with other contemporary movements, placing them all together within the framework of shared European artistic interests. To this effect, it may be worth remembering the words of Carles Miralles: “if in some way there is no difference between Maragall and Xènies [Eugenio d’Ors], it is in their common gaze full of Mediterranean, in the landscape and the beauty, and especially in feminine beauty.”

Pastoral could quite easily be the place where these gazes converge.


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