

Federico Beltrán Masses. Under the Stars

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Gallerist Elizabeth Pierson Sainty has given us a coverage report in the media about the exhibition that she curated with her husband, Guy Stair Sainty, in their London Gallery from 10th February to 20th April, 2016. Here she presents the artist Beltran-Masses, and at the end of the article she includes the best press coverage from newspapers and magazines that have been covering this exhibition.

In the catalogue for the exhibition, Elizabeth Pierson Sainty wrote:

“This exhibition follows an earlier show in 2012 when we presented the work of Federico Beltran Masses in London for the first time since 1938. The gallery has for long pursued the best of Spanish art of the past and has sold works by El Greco, Murillo, Juan de Zurbaran, Arellano, Melendez, Bayeu, Goya, Maella, Vicente López, and Sorolla among other masters. Beltran, however, has a rather special place as an artist who, brought up in Spain, was born in Cuba and worked most of his life in Paris while exhibiting across the world.

In the 1920s and 30s he was widely known, a celebrity in his own right, whose exhibitions were visited by kings and princes, the stars of screen and dance, worldly plutocrats and an ever eager

public. At his 1929 London exhibition some seventeen thousand catalogues were sold and the King of Spain himself came to visit the show. During the exhibition he spent four months staying at the Ritz hotel, receiving visits from collectors and society figures whose portraits he painted.

The artist as celebrity was not of itself a novelty – contemporary fame was not enough, however, to insure his reputation and that the legacy would remain secure. Unlike the great sixteenth and seventeenth century painters who were eagerly courted by kings and popes and whose fame has seldom faded, twentieth century celebrity has proved more ephemeral [...]. Beltran, however, was isolated in Paris with the outbreak of the Second World War and as he had taken over the management of his own career he lacked a solid dealer relationships. By the time the Second World War ended, the art world was turning away almost entirely from figurative to abstract art on both sides of the Atlantic. The political isolation of Spain after the end of the war was not an environment hospitable to contemporary art and the leading Spanish born painters working in Paris were uniformly opposed to the Franco



Fig.1. Federico Beltrán Masses, *The Widow Narezo and her Daughter* (1910). London, Star Sainty Gallery, núm. 1, 2016 © M.Antonia Salom de Tord.

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Fig. 2. Federico Beltrán Masses, *Salomé* (1918). London, Star Sainty Gallery, núm. 5, 2016 © M.Antonia Salom de Tord.

regime. Beltrán's rapidly declining health removed him from public consciousness and his death in 1949 was unreported outside his native country. Beltrán was in many ways, however, progressive – he choose subjects which, while superficially ambiguous, dealt with the taboo issues of female same-sex relationships and the new world of film. His painting style moved away from the free realism of Sorolla and Zuloaga to concentrate on the relationship of colours, nearly always dominated by a deep, rich blue which became known as Beltrán blue. Although the paintings are themselves figurative, the figures are placed in a way that makes them subservient to a mosaic of colours which fill his canvases to form the composition. While many of his society portraits are conventional and typical of their time, he was also sought out by bold, independent women who wanted their portrait to make a statement and he readily obliged.

This show marks for this gallery a change of emphasis – while it is more and more difficult to find works of art from the more distant past of the first rank, the rediscovery of Beltrán Masses is evidence that there are still interesting and significant artists worthy of their stories being retold and having their

art reintroduced to the collectors of the twenty-first century.”

At the height of Beltrán's fame, his masterpieces were exhibited in London at the New Burlington Galleries of the Royal Academy in 1929. *The Observer* and *Daily Mail* critic and historian, Paul George Konody (1872-1933) wrote the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, and reviewed it for the *Daily Mail* in a one page article. Fame proved fleeting, however, and after that, the artist remained in Paris during the Second World War - as a citizen of a neutral power he was able to live relatively undisturbed by the German occupation. The art market suffered, however, Beltrán did not have a contract with any particular dealer and he was forced to move to a smaller home, giving painting lessons in his studio in order to make ends meet.



Fig. 3. Federico Beltrán Masses, *The Wicked Maja* (1918) between *Granada* (1929) and *The Venetian Sisters* (1920). London, Star Sainty Gallery, núm. 6, 14 and 8, 2016 © M.Antonia Salom de Tord.

The current exhibition presents an important number of paintings from private collectors and the heirs of the artist's widow, all being representative of his artistic career from 1910 to 1934. Their titles illustrate his Cuban and Spanish roots and feature subjects in which the artist took a great interest, such as *The Widow Narezo* and



Fig. 4. Federico Beltrán Masses, *Las Ibéricas* (1924). London, Star Sainty Gallery, núm. 11, 2016 © M. Antonia Salom de Tord.

her Daughter (fig.1); *La Mirabella*; *Under the Stars*; *Leda and the Swan I* (fig.5) and *II*; *Salomé* (fig.2); *The Wicked Maja* (fig.3); *The Lemons*; *The Venetian sisters*; *Freda Dudley Ward (Marquesa de Casa Maury)*; *In a Minor Key*; *Las Ibéricas* (fig.4); *Tropical I and II*; *Granadas*; *Passion*, and *Tres Para Uno*.

Many of the artist's more important works were not known until 2007 when the first of three public exhibitions in Salamanca (Spain) was held, followed in 2010 by Barcelona and, in 2012, at the Real Academy of San Fernando in Madrid. That is why M. Antonia Salom appreciates that the Alain Blondel Gallery in Paris, and Stair Sainty Gallery in London, made an excellent contribution in 2012 and especially in 2016, because this last exhibition offered the public masterpieces from different owners in one single exhibition.

The list of press and media reports features articles from around the world, most notably the United Kingdom, the United States and Spain, including *The London Times*; *The Sunday Telegraph*; *The Financial Times*; *The Weekend FT* (*Financial Times*); *FT* (*Financial Times*) *How to Spend It*; *The Art Newspaper*; *Harpers Bazaar*; *The*

Week; *Antique Trade Gazette*; *El Mundo*, *Cultura*; *El Mundo*; *20 Minutos*; *The London Magazine*; *The City Magazine*; *Art Attack*; *Wall Street International*; *Art Daily*; *Luxury London*; *Art Rabbit*; *ArtNet News*; *El Confidencial*; *Mayfair Times*; *Tendencias Magazine*; *El Espectadorartes*; *Artes Jacksons*; *The Art Newspaper*, etc.

We would like to highlight the article published in *The Sunday* the 14th February in which the author said that Beltran met with celebrities and "Every iconic Hollywood figure of the time seemed to fall at his feet". Two days later, the same critic Mark Hudson wrote that Beltran "... was one of the world's most successful artists, courted by film stars, monarchs and some of the most eccentric and wealthy celebrities of the Jazz Age".

Catriona Gray wrote in *Harper's Bazaar*, 10th February, the title of the article being "What to see: Federico Beltran Masses at Stair Sainty, Mayfair: The forgotten paintings of a society artist" saying that Beltran "...mixed with the people that he painted: Joan Crawford, Randolph Hearts and the actor Rudolph Valentino. The interwar years of the 1920s and 1930s were his heyday, with an entire pavilion devoted to his work at the 1920 Venice Biennale".

Finally, Guy Sangster-Adams wrote: "Seeing Beltran Masses's paintings for the first time is rather suddenly and fantastically being able to see black and white silent films in full colours [...] They give the imagination the most fabulous run, just as they did for the post-war generation; as Beltran Masses wrote in 1938 that 'Art is a safety valve for our imagination –an escape from the chains forged for our lifetime by the cursed war of 1914'." (*The London Magazine*, number April-May 2016).

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Fig. 5. Federico Beltrán Masses, *Leda and the Swan I* (1910). London, Star Sainty Gallery, núm. 1, 2016 © M.Antonia Salom de Tord.