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Maria A. Dorofeeva

“Lombroso Transformed Into Painting”: Art, Criminology, and the Re-invention of the Spanish Gypsy

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Abstract:

This article examines the reception of Roma-themed paintings by the Spanish painter Isidre Nonell in relation to nineteenth-century discourses of degeneration, criminology, and hygiene. Its analysis reveals how criminal anthropology shaped the Spanish public’s response to Roma, informing its understanding of Nonell’s “gypsies” on canvas, and their imaginary relocation to Andalusia.

“Lombroso Transformed Into Painting”: Art, Criminology, and the Re-invention of the Spanish Gypsy

by Maria A. Dorofeeva

Introduction

In November of 1903, the prominent Sala Parés art gallery in Barcelona introduced its Catalonian public to a group of paintings representing Roma women by the thirty-one year-old artist Isidre Nonell (1872–1911). Oppressive, large-scale canvases of dark, slouching women in various states of misery and degradation confronted the exhibition visitors. The figures were placed in ambiguous in-door spaces and sometimes backed into architectural corners (fig. 1). The rich earth tones of the backgrounds offset their sullen olive-tinted complexions, while their eyes, turned away from the viewer, reinforced an overall sense of alienation. These dejected and immobile women represented Catalonian Roma or *gitanas* (fig. 2).^[1]



Fig. 1, Isidre Nonell, *Young Gitana*, 1903. Oil on canvas. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras, 2016. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Isidre Nonell, *Two Gitanas*, 1903. Oil on canvas. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[larger image\]](#)

Dolores was one of the largest and most imposing paintings in the show, measuring approximately 5 x 4 feet (fig. 3). The work combined key characteristics of the other pieces in the exhibit and instantly became the focal point for the contemporary criticism of Nonell's art. The painting depicts a gitana, whose features are roughly sketched in except for the smoothly painted nose and the cheekbones, seated in the corner of a room, with her head facing downward, as if immersed in sleep. A muddled red shawl, speckled with green, envelops her body like a cocoon, obscuring it from the viewer. The jarring contrast between the scarlet hues in the shawl and the muddled green tones of the background brings out her sallow pallor. Her placement in a corner literally reflects her position in society as an abject being on the margins, a visual allusion to the impoverished neighborhoods on the outskirts of Barcelona. She represents the antithesis of the progress Catalonia prided itself on at the turn of the century and disrupts the traditional representation of the Roma as a romantic, frivolous, transient, and exotic race, thus failing to perform the expected conventions of "gypsy" representation.



Fig. 3, Isidre Nonell, *Dolores*, 1902–03. Oil on canvas. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.
Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[larger image\]](#)

Renowned Catalan art critic, Raimon Casellas (1855–1910), previously supportive of Nonell's work, was taken aback by the new direction the artist had taken in his work. "They cause true repulsion," he wrote, "these mid-length figures of women, with hunched backs, arms crossed, as if immersed in the sleep of an alcohol-soaked marmot. It is a representation of human bestiality made all the more poignant and upsetting, as those who incarnate this kind of degradation are female."^[2] In a similar vein, Alfredo Opisso (1847–1924), generally favorable toward the artist, wrote, "None of these faces look straight ahead; all heads are bowed down, violently foreshortened, hidden away from the light, yet their expression is unequivocal, their attitude leaves no room for doubt about what is inside these foreheads. It is the animalism that remains at the core of a human being, stripped of all the makeup of civilization; it is Lombroso transformed into painting."^[3] Decades later, Joan Baptista Parés i Carbonell (1847–1926), the owner of the Sala Parés gallery, referred to the 1903 exhibition as the greatest folly of his life.^[4] The artist himself was so taken aback by the reaction to his works that he did not hold another solo exhibition until 1910, the year before his death.

Why did Nonell's exhibition produce such an outrage? What did the viewers see in these "gypsy paintings"? And, finally, how did the name of the Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso (1838–1909) come to be associated with this art show? This article engages with the reception of the November 1903 exhibition at the Sala Parés to suggest ways in which art criticism and the newly formed discipline of criminology mutually informed one another. Moreover, it seeks to uncover the reasons behind the critical failure of Nonell's 1903 exhibition by demonstrating how, through the appropriation of the rhetoric from criminal anthropology, art critics of the period solidified the image of the gitana as an icon of abjection and danger to the viewing public. In her 1982 book *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines the "abject" as that which "disturbs identity, system, order." The abject is that which "does not respect border, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."^[5] This article employs Kristeva's notion of the "abject" to argue that the reception of Nonell's gitanas was rooted in the rhetoric of degeneration and filth, grounded in the popular perception, and further promoted by contemporary criminal anthropologists, of gitanas as criminals who possessed "polluting bodies" and the destructive potential to destabilize the integrity of the Spanish social body.

Prior to his 1903 exhibition, Nonell had received wide acclaim in Spain and in France for a series of drawings, known collectively as *Cretins of Boí* (1896). By virtue of the subject matter, the series came to be linked with the contemporary discourses of degeneration. The drawings, including *Female Cretin of Boí* (fig. 4) and *The Annunciation* (fig. 5) depict individuals afflicted by goiter (or *bocio* in Spanish), a condition common in certain mountainous regions, which causes physical deformation and stunted mental growth, understood by the contemporary viewing public as idiocy or cretinism. Late nineteenth-century discourses often conflated various terms to designate physical ailments manifesting similar symptoms. Thus, the distinctions between goiter and cretinism were frequently blurred, and both terms were used for a number of pathologies, which, it was believed, could eventually lead to mental illness. For that reason, the two conditions, both associated with humid, swamp-filled geographic areas, became viewed as degenerative diseases.^[6]



Fig. 4, Isidre Nonell, *Cretina de Boí* (Female Cretin in Boí), 1896–97. Ink and colored pencil on paper. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 5, Isidre Nonell, *The Annunciation*, 1896. Charcoal, conté crayon, and sprayed ink on paper. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[larger image\]](#)

While the contemporary reviewers' perception of the *Cretins* series was grounded in degeneration, these works, in contrast to Nonell's 1903 exhibition, were received enthusiastically. Nonell was hailed as a "modern Goya" in Paris, where he lived and exhibited regularly between 1897 and 1900.^[7] In Barcelona, Luíz Ruíz de Velasco called *Cretins* "cruel for their exact truth," interpreting the images "as a reminder to those who can and ought to lend their spirits to compassion toward those unfortunate people, who committed no other crime but to be born in the insalubrious valleys, where they were kept away by the selfishness of our society."^[8] Ruíz's response to these images echoed many other glowing Spanish reviews. And yet, by 1898, a kind of uncertainty about the artist's motivation for focusing on the poor, marginalized, sick, and abject subjects began to creep into the criticism. For instance, Alfredo Opisso, while bestowing high praise on Nonell's stylistic innovations and deeply personal mode of expression, concludes his article of that year by saying that "Nonell does not appear to feel the least of an altruistic emotion in his representation of his heroes, and that is cruel."^[9]

Present-day scholars situate Nonell's work within the stylistic currents of the Catalan Modernisme art movement, concerned with the exploration of "pure painting," rather than with making bold political statements.^[10] This pattern of engaging with Nonell's work was established by the artist's earliest biographers, Alexandre Plana, writing in 1917, and Rafael Benet in 1947. Plana suggested that Nonell's selection of models from gitano communities was motivated by the "temperament of the colorist painter,"^[11] while Benet claimed that in serializing his work Nonell had eliminated the subject in favor of "pure painting."^[12] Subsequent generations of art historians viewed Nonell's artistic production as far removed from social concerns. Enric Jardí suggests that Nonell's choice of gitanas was guided by financial reasons, as they consented to pose for less money than professional models, and social critique never factored into the artist's motives.^[13] According to Jardí, gitanas, like cretins and other marginal characters populating his works, "served [as] a pretext [for Nonell] to work his material in an ample and generous way," allowing the artist, for whom "the aesthetic sense always far outweighed the ethical" to explore pictorial concerns, with no real sympathy for his subjects.^[14] However, in 2002, María Carmen López Fernández suggested

that Nonell's gitana-themed paintings worked against the traditional nineteenth-century iconography that conflated the gitana and the prostitute, and were interpreted by the contemporary critics not just within the category of "modern painting," but also within the discourse on "the primitive and the criminal." Nevertheless, the author arrived at the conclusion that Nonell's images functioned as part of the middle-class consciousness, circulating the representations of misery that cannot be eliminated, evocative of the pessimistic spirit of the Generation of 1898.[15]

Nonell vis-à-vis *Flamenquismo*

To gauge the public's response to Nonell's images, it is first essential to understand contemporary conventions underlying gypsy representations at the end of the nineteenth century and the way in which they informed Catalonians' understanding of their own identity. Colorful depictions of sensuous, highly eroticized, dancing gitanas, portrayed against backgrounds depicting Spain's southernmost province of Andalusia, flooded the European art market by the mid nineteenth century. Catalonia, a province with the second highest concentration of gitano communities in Spain, was largely excluded from this visual narrative. Moreover, Catalan artists, even when portraying Catalan gitanos, often chose to displace them to the Andalusian setting by making references to Andalusian landscapes and famous sites, such as Sacromonte and the Alhambra within their images and in their titles. Why would that have been the case?

During the second half of the nineteenth century, when it became the center of Spain's industrialization, Catalonia gained a reputation for hard science, logic, and, above all, progress. In contrast, Andalusia acquired connotations of backwardness, idleness, and carefree living. In the words of the contemporary philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, Andalusians were "the only Occidental people that remained faithful to the paradisiac ideal of life." [16] By the end of the century, the "myth of Andalusia" had transformed the region into the "Orient" of Spain. [17] Andalusian intellectual Diego Ruiz explained it this way: "*Andalusia* is the Spanish land that has preserved the most influence of the Arab race; as brilliant and vigorous as was its past, it is now in degradation." Ruiz's 1878 article summarizes the popular perception of Andalusia, "Nature's favorite child," as heir to Arab and African cultures and a source of authentic Spanish culture, inhabited by the "Oriental" people whose formerly magnificent civilization is now in decay. Moreover, Ruíz presents Andalusia as passionate and free, an earthly paradise in decline, contrasting it with Catalonia as the nation's "head . . . a thinker, rather than a poet." [18]

European travelers often attributed the decline of Andalusia, made manifest in the decrepit state of the formerly magnificent Alhambra, to the backwardness and the sloth of southern Spaniards, considered a race polluted by the blood of Moors and gypsies. [19] Susan Martín-Márquez asserts that the severe depopulation and loss of skill caused by the expulsion from Spanish territories by Philip III between 1609 and 1614 of the remaining *moriscos*, or former Muslims forced to convert to Christianity after Spain outlawed the practice of Islam in the early seventeenth century, allowed the gitanos instead to occupy the social positions left vacant by the Moors. [20] By the mid 1800s, Spanish gitanos, and especially the iconographic motif of the dancing gypsy, became synonymous with Andalusia and by extension came to epitomize Spain itself, as the lavish illustrations executed by Gustave Doré for Baron Jean

Charles Davillier's 1874 *Spain*, such as *Gypsy Dancing Vito Sevillano (On the Outskirts of Seville)* (fig. 6) demonstrate.[21]



Fig. 6, Gustave Doré, *Gypsy Dancing Vito Sevillano* (Gypsy Dancing in the Outskirts of Séville), *L'Espagne* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1874): 392. [\[larger image\]](#)

Understood as “successors to the Moors . . . incapable of entry into modernity,” gitanos became essential to tourists’ “authentic” Spanish experience.[22] While nineteenth-century France had a large Roma population of its own, French artists including Doré often visually transposed their country’s native Roma populations, portraying them as imagined inhabitants of Andalusia. Marilyn Brown points to a significant correlation between the increase in Spanish gypsy-related works exhibited in the nineteenth-century Paris Salons and the rise of the Roma populations in France. In this way, French artists succeeded in displacing potentially rebellious social content from geographical associations with France by depicting “the gypsies” as imagined subjects in an Andalusian setting, just as they continued to portray the gypsy with the stereotypical, ethnographic marks of the Spanish gitanos.[23]

In his 1983 essay, “The Other Questions,” Homi K. Bhabha proposes to read the stereotype, which is a “complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation” in Marxist/Freudian terms of fetishism, linked closely to the “the impossible desire for pure, undifferentiated origin,” where it is assigned a function of normalizing the differences that interfere with the fantasy of racial purity.[24] Certainly, the situation of gitanos in Spain can be viewed as a type of internal colonialism.[25] The turn-of-the-century criminal anthropologists promoted the view of gitanos as an archaic race that could not be properly integrated into the Spanish national body, whereas the gitanos’ representation in art and literature of the nineteenth century suggested that the gitana was a stand-in for Spain, but ultimately herself not Spanish. Continuous repetition of the stereotype, which ensures its lasting hold on the social imagination, is richly illustrated by the nineteenth-century explosion of the gypsy culture in all spheres of European visual production. One especially prevalent mode of representation involved the dancing gypsy women, associated with Andalusia, which had its literary model in Prosper Mérimée’s tragic gypsy girl in his 1845 novella *Carmen*. [26] In Spain, this mode of representing the gypsy, and by extension Spain itself, in the visual arts and literature, came to be known as *flamenguismo* as a result of its

association with flamenco song and dance. Although Roma existed on the margins of modernity in all regions of Spain, Flamenquismo conceptually displaced them to Andalusia, a region that toward the end of the nineteenth century came “to embody a form of primitive but authentic national identity.”[27]

A prime example of Flamenquista iconography is Catalanian artist Maria Fortuny’s 1872 painting *Gypsy Dancing in the Garden of Granada*, based on a Catalanian gitana model, Carmen Bastián. Despite Bastián’s Catalanian origin, Fortuny placed her in an Andalusian garden setting deemed more suitable for a gypsy (fig. 7).[28] Fortuny composes this open-air scene in vibrant dots of green, blue, and scarlet against a luscious cream backdrop. Carmen is enveloped in a red shawl and performs her “gypsiness” by dancing across the canvas while gazing seductively at the viewer, as if inviting him to enter the scene. Another young gitana off to one side engages in a conversation with a man whose features are purposefully obscured in order to render him unidentifiable. The couple hints to the presumably heterosexual male observer that he too might become Carmen’s escort. Subsequently, Fortuny’s formula for representing the playful dancing gypsy contributed to the creation of the myth that conflated the Andalusian and *gitano* identity and was endlessly reiterated in images, such as Enrique Estevan’s 1900 gouache drawing *Carmen la Sevillana* (fig. 8).



Fig. 7, Mariano Fortuny, *Gypsy Dancing in the Garden of Granada*, 1872. Oil on canvas. Palazzo Fortuny Museum, Venice. From: Eduardo Quesada Dorador, ed., *Gitanos: Pinturas y Esculturas Españolas 1870–1940*, exh. cat. (Madrid and Granada: Fundación Caja de Granada and Fundación Rodríguez-Acosta, 1995): 27. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 8, Enrique Estevan, *Carmen la Sevillana*, *Blanco y Negro* 484, August 11, 1900: n.p. [\[larger image\]](#)

Estevan's drawing was published in the popular magazine *Blanco y Negro*. It portrays the protagonist, Carmen, posed like a flamenco dancer, with her back arched gracefully away from the soldier observing her, conveniently allowing the viewer a full glimpse of her comely features. She wears flowers in her hair and a vibrant red shawl over her shoulders, reminiscent of Bastián's attire in Fortuny's 1872 painting—the trademarks of a Spanish gypsy. Incidentally, this Carmen lacks any physiognomic racial markers, suggesting that by one simple change of costume she could easily be transformed into a bourgeois lady, thus eliminating any potentially threatening racial undertones. Estevan's commodified image of the gypsy dancer was designed for and printed in a popular magazine for a middle-class Spanish audience. The artist's rendition of a popular gypsy subject effectively erases gitanos' racial differences, reinforcing their representation as harmless, costumed dancers—"gypsies" in fashion, but not in race.

Granada-born artist José María Rodríguez Acosta wryly commented on the marketability of the Andalusian gypsy in his 1908 oil *Gitanos of Sacromonte* (fig. 9). The Caves of Sacromonte were one of the popular tourist sites in Granada, where the travelers went to meet the "real" gitanos. According to Lou Charnon-Deutsch, by the 1880s the site was already well-known as a "tourist trap."^[29] Acosta's painting draws on these tourist associations by portraying a group of bored gitanos in the customary colorful garb, staring out somewhat scornfully at the viewer. The eerie stillness of Acosta's figures counters the conventions of flamenquista representation. The twentieth-century art critic Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño noted that Acosta's subjects unsettle the spectator precisely because they are "composed too much by the pose, too little gypsy, as if they were waiting for the tourists."^[30] The discomfort with the immobility of Acosta's models reinforces the dominance of gitano representations through dance, influencing the popular understanding of gitanos as entertainers.



Fig. 9, José María Rodríguez Acosta, *Gitanos of Sacromonte*, 1908. Oil on canvas. Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla, Seville. Photograph courtesy of Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla. [\[larger image\]](#)

Nonell and the Gitanos of Barcelona

Nonell deviated from the flamenquista iconography by refusing to portray the gitanas in their traditional roles as objects of spectacle. In doing so, the artist directed attention to the physical and socially marginalized state of Barcelona's gitanos, whose presence was limited to poverty-stricken communities on the outskirts of the city. Nonell's work dismantles the potency of the iconic, imagined gypsy in order to reveal the destitute and marginal gitano reality. Nonell's invocation of abjection in his portrayal of gitanos offers contrast to the stereotypical flamenquismo-based works of his contemporaries. While the perception of Barcelona residents visiting the exhibition would have doubtlessly been filtered through flamenquismo and printed images of Spanish gypsies, it is important to note that Nonell's gitanas were Catalan. The artist insisted on using models from the gitano communities in and around Barcelona, such as Somorrostro and Barri Pekin, thus highlighting Catalonia's own gitano population (fig. 10).



Fig. 10, Francesc Serra Dimas "Retrato del pintor en su taller (Portrait of the Artist in His Studio)," 1904. Silver gelatin on baryta-coated paper. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. [\[larger image\]](#)

Famous Catalan Noucentisme writer, Eugeni d'Ors, a few years after Nonell's death, produced a striking portrait of the artist as a true son of sinister Barcelona, "a city that was at

once a toxic mixture of anarchists' bombs, *petites religions de Paris*, and satanic rites of decadence," all of which found reflection on the canvas of the artist, whose brushes "portrayed the face of the devil."^[31] This demonic vision of Barcelona as a sinful city, shared by some of d'Ors's contemporaries, was tied to the rapid industrialization of Catalonia. In 1848, the first railway line was inaugurated. In 1859, the new city plan, proposed by Ildefons Cerdà, Baron Hausmann's Barcelona counterpart, was approved. The new layouts and grid plans were designed to widen the streets to accommodate pedestrians, carriages, and urban railway lines, supply large-capacity sewers to prevent frequent floods, and to alleviate dangerous social conditions of overcrowding and lack of workers' housing, believed to be responsible for high levels of crime in metropolitan centers.^[32]

Nevertheless, despite the social reforms of the city, Barcelona at the time of Nonell's Sala Parés exhibition knew abject poverty and economic inequality. The lower-income regions were largely concentrated in Barcelona's beachside communities, such as Somorrostro, which were inhabited predominantly by the gitanos and sketched by artists, including the Modernistes, on many occasions. Nonell started to make drawings of gitano settlements in the late 1890s and continued to do so well into the twentieth century as *The Shacks of Somorrostro in Barcelona* of 1908 (fig. 11) demonstrates. Executed in sanguine and watercolor on paper, these drawings are strikingly similar to one another and represent shabby, often abandoned structures, as if viewed from a distance. It is illuminating to compare Nonell's drawing with a 1915 photograph, taken by Joan Vidal i Ventosa, entitled *Shacks of Fishermen at Somorrostro* (fig. 12). As in Nonell's drawings, the flimsy constructions shown in the photograph appear to leave the residents exposed to the elements, offering little protection from the outside world. Minorcan writer Màrius Verdaguer Travesi (1885–1963), described the toxic environment of Somorrostro in 1898 as follows, "The shacks did not have windows. The ceiling made from old petroleum cans, would heat up in the sun, and the door would exhale a foul and tepid smell."^[33] The poverty of gitanos in Barcelona was part of a reality that Spanish regional and national governments refused to acknowledge because it threatened Catalonia's self-promotion as a region of social and industrial progress during the second half of the nineteenth century.



Fig. 11, Isidre Nonell, *Shacks of Somorrostro in Barcelona*, 1908. Sanguine and watercolor on paper. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 12, Joan Vidal i Ventosa, *Shacks of the Fishermen of Somorrostro*, 1915. Silver gelatin on paper. Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona, Barcelona. [\[larger image\]](#)

Criminology, Art Criticism, and the Gypsy

Nonell's portrayal of gitano reality forced viewers to confront not only poverty-ridden marginalized communities, but also their notions of degeneracy. Austrian degeneration theorist Max Nordau, whose 1892 book *Degeneration* was widely read in French and Spanish translation in Spain, famously prophesized the imminent threat of the *fin de race* in his argument that all the formerly "great European races" were in decline because of "miscegenation" with the "inferior" ones, such as the Roma.^[34] Nordau's negative take on racial mixing had earlier roots in Joseph-Arthur Gobineau's highly influential book, *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, published between 1853 and 1855, which constitutes one of the earliest examples of scientific racism in modern Europe.^[35] As demonstrated by the cultural historian Joshua Goode, certain Spanish social theorists, in contrast to their northern European neighbors, saw racial mixing, rather than racial purity, as a vital component of Spain's national health.^[36] This seemingly paradoxical take on miscegenation is one of the key features of Spain's constructions of degeneration, which distinguished it from the other European countries, such as France and Great Britain. Theories proposed by turn-of-the-century criminologists make explicit the correlation between the gypsy, degeneration, and criminal behavior.

Spanish criminal anthropology was greatly influenced by the ideas of Nordau and Lombroso. The latter famously defined Roma as a criminally inferior race with "improvidence of the savage and that of the criminal," incapable of carrying out any kind of work and "so low morally and so incapable of cultural and intellectual development . . . that they devour half-putrified carrion. . . . They murder in cold blood in order to rob and were formerly suspected of cannibalism."^[37] The Spanish criminologists argued that their nation, made stronger in the past by the amalgamation of all the races that passed through it, was now being threatened by the excessive racial purity of gitanos. Expanding upon Lombroso's ideas, they ascribed gitanos' criminal tendencies, already a sign of their biological deficiency and atavism, to the group's prolonged isolation and resistance to becoming part of the Spanish nation through physical and social mixing. Leading Spanish criminologists Rafael Salillas and Constancio Bernaldo de Quirós argued that the gitanos' insularity made them physically different from and inferior to the Spaniards on whose territories they resided and whose well-being they threatened. Quirós insinuated a connection between high levels of theft and murder and the presence of gitanos in particular regions of Spain, especially Andalusia.^[38] Likewise, Salillas identified the gitanos as a source of current Spanish atavism,

made manifest in the overall mental and physical decline of the Spanish population, requiring the state's immediate attention. He went so far as to suggest that the atavistic blood of the gitanos, along with that of other deviant racial mixtures, was the source of anarchism in Spain.[39] The discourses on criminology, degeneration, and the gitanos' racial threat informed the critics' negative reactions to Nonell's 1903 exhibit, contributing to their revulsion at being reminded of the gitanas' status as citizens of Barcelona.

Nonell's *Dolores* was read as an agent of degeneration, incompatible with conceptions of Catalanian modernity. The heuristics employed by critics to understand, and language they used to describe, Nonell's paintings and models in terms of "degeneracy," "filth," and "degradation" reveal racial and gender insecurities, characterizing the visual and literary culture of the century.[40] In her 1966 book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas suggests that "dirt" is never a unique, isolated phenomenon, but part of a system, where it functions as "matter out of place." [41] In several sections of his work, Oscar E. Vázquez, following Mary Douglas and others, has shown how the rhetoric of degeneracy has strategically employed representations of spaces, topography, and human bodies in order to identify particular sectors of society as atavistic.[42] Against the convenient trope of the gypsy as a dancer and a tourist attraction, Nonell's *Dolores* displayed at once the deviance of the degenerate gitano, and the defiance of the inaccessible feminine.

We must now return to the subject of Raimon Casellas's criticism of the 1903 exhibition. Casellas focused his criticism specifically on the body of the gitana and felt that the "degradation" and "human bestiality" of Nonell's figures was magnified by the artist's choice of women to incarnate these ideas. Casellas's connection of Nonell's paintings with pollution was echoed in critical responses by other Barcelona critics of the exhibit, so much so that an anonymous writer composed the following poem for the satirical magazine *iCu-Cut!*[43]

The author of the poem questions the artistic merit of Nonell's works, calling the artist a "fraud" and referring to his paintings as a "a mess," potentially suggesting that Nonell's models themselves constitute human garbage. The words "pastarada" and "adob" both have connotations of filth. The expression "tu no tens adob" literally translates into "you do not have fertilizer/manure," whereas "pastarada" refers to a messy, unsuccessful mixture. Thus, the anonymous writer suggests that Nonell's muted, dark, muddled, "messy" palette is a form of expression of an artist incapable of high art, while potentially alluding to the filth of Nonell's gitana models.

Conclusion

Nonell's portrayal of gitanas works against the established iconographic trope of the dancing gypsy, engaging instead with the nineteenth-century conceptions of degeneracy, presumed to be embodied in the gitano. Opisso's view of the show as "Lombroso transformed into painting" underscores the anxiety the public must have experienced in the gallery, faced with a racial threat. His article uses animalistic references to emphasize just how little in common Nonell's models have with the public that visited the gallery to view the paintings. He points out "the savagery in the faces" of the figures, how "almost sexless" they are,[44] with their bodies wrapped in shawls and blankets that "are more reminiscent of animal skins worn by the prehistoric men than the dresses of our time." [45] Moreover, Opisso explicitly links Nonell's images and themes to the concept of degeneration, explaining the painter's subjects

in the following terms, “It is the savage humanity, these are the remnants of primitive ages or degeneration to which certain races are subject.”^[46]

Nonell’s contemporary biographer, Rafael Benet, expressed the opinion that the artist created his works with “intentions similar to the anarchists of his time, who planted bombs in urinals and at the entrances of houses of Barcelona.”^[47] By showing his paintings in Barcelona’s most popular bourgeois art gallery, famous for the ethereal nymphs of Joan Brull i Vinyoles (1863–1912; fig. 13), wistful landscapes of Modest Urgell (1839–1919; fig. 14), and society portraits of Francesc Masriera i Manovens (1842–1902; fig. 15)—all wildly popular with the Catalanian bourgeoisie—Nonell committed an act of rebellion against the institution and his own class. Despite his promising beginnings with the *Cretins of Boí* series, Nonell’s subsequent artistic career was marked by a failure to gain favor with the public in his native city. Even though the artist’s paintings can be read as stepping outside of the established gypsy iconography to expose racial tension in Catalanian society and to criticize Catalanian treatment of gitanos, left unaddressed by previous artists, his representations may also be interpreted as caricatures that do little to humanize them. Thus, in stripping the gitanas of agency and individuality and representing them as abject beings, Nonell also becomes a participant in the making of the mythical gitano culture.



Fig. 13, Joan Brull i Vinyoles, *Dream*, ca. 1905. Oil on canvas. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 14, Modest Urgell, *Boat on the Shore of the Lake of Banyoles*, ca. 1897. Oil on canvas stuck on cardboard. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 15, Francesc Masriera i Manovens, *Portrait of My Wife*, 1898. Oil on canvas. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[larger image\]](#)

Maria A. Dorofeeva is a PhD candidate in Art History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She is specializing in modern European art with a focus on the visual cultures of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spain. Dorofeeva received the Dahesh Museum of Art Prize for Best Paper at the 13th Annual Graduate Student Symposium in Nineteenth-Century Art, co-sponsored by the Dahesh Museum of Art and the Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art in 2016. Her dissertation, “Fantasizing Manhood: Art, Sexual Politics and the Rise of Queer Counterpublics in Spain, 1898–1939” investigates the relationship between the visual constructions of masculinity and queer aesthetics and the expanding discourses on sexuality in medicine, criminology, and psychology.

Email the author: [dorofeev\[at\]illinois.edu](mailto:dorofeev[at]illinois.edu)

Notes

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All translations by the author, unless otherwise specified.

[1] In this paper I use the term *gitano/gitana/gitanos* when referring to Spanish Roma. The term “gypsy” has been applied historically to any given Roma population and, as such, it will appear in this paper in lowercase letters when referring to the construct of the Roma people in visuals arts and literature.

[2] “Causan veritable repulsió aquelles mitjas figuras de dona deixadas anar demunt d’una cadira de boga, ab el cap penjant, l’esquena corvada, els brassos caiguts com sumidas en una són de marmot xopa d’cohol. Es una representació de la bestialitat humana feta més punyent y més sensible, per esser sers femenins els que encarnan m degradació.” Raimon Casellas, “Saló Parés,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, November 12, 1903, 2, accessed August 2, 2016, <http://mdc2.cbuc.cat/cdm/compoundobject/collection/veupl/id/10126/rec/21>.

[3] “Ninguno de aquellos rostros mira de frente; todas las cabezas están agachadas, violentamente escorzadas, escondidas á la luz, pero su expresión no escapa, su actitud no dá lugar á dudas acerca de lo que hay dentro de aquellas testuces. Es la animalidad que subsiste en el fondo de ser humano, despojada de todos los afeites de la civilización; es Lombroso hecho un cuadro.” Alfredo Opisso, “Notas de Arte,” *La Vanguardia*, November 13, 1903, 1.

[4] Carolina Nonell, *Isidro Nonell: Su Vida y Su Obra* (Madrid: Editorial Dossat, 1963), 66. The author quotes from a conversation she had with Juan Bautista Parés, who said: “No m’en parli, es el disbarat mes grand que fet en la meva vida.”

[5] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

[6] E[tienne] Esquirol, *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity* [1838], trans. by E. K. Hunt (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845), 476; A. Mosso, “Pesamiento y movimiento,” *La Escuela Moderna* 11, no. 125 (August 1901): 89; and Elena Castillo Ortega, “Bocio y cretenismo en España: Aproximación histórica,” (PhD diss., Universidad Complutense en Madrid, 1992), 101–3.

[7] Frantz Jourdain, “Notes d’Art,” *Le Jour*, January 20, 1898.

[8] “Cruel por su exacta verdad, debe server de recordatorio a quienes pueden y deben inclinado su espiritu a la compasión hacia estos desgraciados que no tuvieron otro delito que el de nacer en los valles malsanos, donde los encerró el egoismo de nuestra sociedad.” Luíz Ruíz de Velasco, “Los Cretinos de los Pirineos,” *Barcelona Comica* January 16, 1897, 78.

[9] “Como ni tengo autoridad para dar consejos, ni tampoco entiendo sea ese el camino, me limitaré á dejar sentado que el señor Nonell no parece sentir la menor emoción *altruista* al representar á sus heroes, y esto es cruel.” Alfredo Opisso, “Arte y Artistas Catalanes: Isidre Nonell,” *La Vanguardia*, January 18, 1898, 4.

[10] Catalan Modernism or Modernisme was a Spanish artistic and literary movement centered primarily in Barcelona that emerged during the final decades of the nineteenth century and culminated in 1911, the year of Isidre Nonell’s death. It was characterized by a mixture of Impressionist tendencies, influenced by Degas and Whistler, that were introduced to Spain in the late 1880s by painters Ramón Casas and Santiago Rusiñol. Nonell is generally considered to belong to the second generation of Catalan Modernistes, along with Hermengildo Anglada-Camarasa and young Pablo Picasso. For more information see José F. Rafols, *Modernisme i Modernistes* (Barcelona: Destino, 1982); and Francesc Fontbona, Francesc Miralles, and Francesc Català Roca, *Del Modernisme al Noucentisme: 1888–1917* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2001).

[11] Alexandre Plana, ed., *Vida de Isidre Nonell* (Barcelona: Publicacions de “La Revista,” 1917), 61.

[12] Rafael Benet, *Nonell y Su Epoca* (Barcelona: Editorial Iberia, 1947), 89.

[13] Enric Jardí, *Nonell* (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1969), 124.

[14] Ibid., 194, 128. See also, Francesc Fontbona, *Isidre Nonell* (Barcelona: Gent Nostra, 1987).

[15] María Carmen López Fernández, “Aproximación a la mujer marginada: Las gitanas de Nonell” in *Luchas de Género en la Historia a Través de la Imagen: Ponencias y Comunicaciones*, ed. Teresa Sauret Guerrero and Amparo Quiles Faz (Málaga: Centro de Ediciones de la Diputación Provincial de Málaga, 2002), 353, 357.

[16] José Ortega y Gasset, *Teoría de Andalucía y Otros Ensayos* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1944), 29.

[17] For more information on Orientalist constructions of Andalusia in the nineteenth century, see Luís Cifuentes Fernández, “Southern Exposure: Early Tourism and Spanish National Identity,” *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 13, nos. 2/3 (August–December 2007): 136.

[18] “Situada en el extremo más meridional de España y unida á la región africana por el hercúleo estrecho; hija predilecta de la Naturaleza, pon un cielo azul, purísimo, que encanta; rodeada doquiera de perfumados vergeles cuyas flores parecen haber robado la dulzura de sus aromas á las rosas no corrompidas de Paraíso; cuña de encanto y embelesos miles, *Andalucía* es la tierra española que más conserva la influencia de la raza árabe, tan vigorosa y genial há siglos, como degradada en la actualidad. Pues así como es distintivo del catalán la prudencia, el andaluz sobresale por su genialidad, ese chispazo dimanado directamente del

Altísimo y que brilla en el cerebro de todo pueblo grande, como en los planetas se agita la luz de sol.” Diego Ruíz, “Cataluña y Andalucía,” in *Luz*, January 31, 1898.

[19] Susan Martin-Márquez, *Disorientations: Spanish Colonialism in Africa and the Performance of Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 22.

[20] *Ibid.*, 152.

[21] Lou Charnon-Deutsch, *The Spanish Gypsy: The History of a European Obsession* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004): 69.

[22] Martin-Márquez, *Disorientations*, 22.

[23] Marilyn R. Brown, *Gypsies and Other Bohemians: The Myth of the Artist in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 47–48.

[24] Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question,” *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 26.

[25] “Internal colonialism” is a concept, attributed to Leopold Marquard, that refers to political and economic inequalities between regions within a single society and suggests exploitation of minority groups within the wider society, mirroring similarly exploitative and unequal relationship between the colonizer and the colony. The members of internal colonies may be differentiated by ethnicity, language, or religion and excluded from prestigious social and political positions by the nation-state from within (rather than from outside as is the case with colonial subjects). See Leopold Marquard, *South African Colonial Policy: Presidential Address Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Council of South African Race Relations on January 16, 1957* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1957).

[26] Mérimée’s novella served as the inspiration for Georges Bizet’s famous 1875 opera *Carmen*.

[27] Cifuentes Fernández, “Southern Exposure,” 133.

[28] Susan Martin-Márquez identifies Carmen Bastián, a woman of Catalan Gitano origin, as the model for this painting. Martin-Márquez, *Disorientations*, 152.

[29] Charnon-Deutsch, *Spanish Gypsy*, 126.

[30] “Gitanos, si pero demasiado compuestos para la *pose*, demasiado poco gitanos, como si estuvieran esperando a los turistas.” Quoted in Miguel Ángel Revilla Uceda, *José María Rodríguez-Acosta, 1878–1941* (Granada: Fundación Rodríguez-Acosta, 1992), 117.

[31] Eugeni d’Ors, introduction to Plana, *Vida d’Isidre Nonell*, 15.

[32] The rebuilding of Barcelona according to the grid plan proposed rationalization of the city based on hygienic, mathematical, and aesthetic grounds. For more information, see Jordi Olivà, “Writing Barcelona: Reflections on City Planning and Urban Experience, 1854–1888” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2010), accessed August 2, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/17004>.

[33] “Las barracas no tenían ventanas. El techo de viejas latas de petróleo, se recalentaba al sol, y por las puertas salía el aliento tibio y pestilente.” Màrius Verdager Travesi, *Medio siglo de vida íntima barcelonesa* (Barcelona: Editorial Barna, 1957), 118.

[34] Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1895), 2–3.

[35] Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau, *Essai sur l’Inégalité des Races Humaines* (Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot et Cie, 1884).

[36] For more information, see Joshua Goode, *Impurity of Blood: Defining Race in Spain, 1870–1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

[37] Cesare Lombroso, *Crime, Its Causes and Remedies*, trans. Henry Pomeroy (London: W. Heinemann, 1911), 40, accessed August 2, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/crimeitscausesre00lombiala>.

[38] Constancio Bernaldo de Quirós, *Modern Theories of Criminality*, trans. Alfonso de Salvio (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1912), 105–6, accessed August 2, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/details/moderntheoriesof00berniala>.

[39] While the general consensus among the late nineteenth-century Spanish criminologists was that gitanos in Spain succumbed to atavism through willful avoidance of mixing with the rest of the Spanish population, Salillas has argued that Spanish anarchists were the heirs of atavisms produced by the intermixture of Spanish lower classes with gitano populations. Letter from Rafael Salillas to Francisco Giner de los Ríos, March 12, 1903, item #1, folder 336, box 14, Fondo Giner de los Ríos, Archivo de la Institución Libre de Enseñanza, Madrid, cited in Joshua Goode, “Corrupting a Good Mix: Race and Crime in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Spain,” *European History Quarterly* 35 (2005): 255, accessed August 2, 2016, [doi:10.1177/0265691405051466](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691405051466) [login required].

[40] Art critic, José Francés, writing fourteen years after the Sala Parés show, continued to characterize Nonell's gitana subjects in terms of degeneracy, describing them as afflicted with tuberculosis and melancholia, symptoms most associated with degeneration. Francés wrote that "Las gitanas de Nonell son unas mozas tuberculosas y melancólicas, abrumadas bajo la fatalidad de su éxodo permanente." José Francés, "La obra de Isidro Nonell," in *Año Artístico* (1917), ed. José Francés (Madrid: Editorial "Mundo Latino," 1918), 321–22, accessed August, 2, 2016, <https://books.google.com/books?id=Q0kfAQAAIAAJ>. Tuberculosis was considered to be both a symptom and a cause of racial degeneration in Spain. For more information, see Ricardo Campos Marín, José Martínez Pérez, and Rafael Huertas García-Alejo, *Los Ilegales de la Naturaleza: Medicina y Degeneracionismo en la España de la Restauración, 1876–1923* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000), 162–66.

[41] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966), 36.

[42] Oscar E. Vázquez, *The End Again: Degeneration and Visual Culture in Modern Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming), 140–41.

[43] "Nonell," *iCu-Cut!*, November 12, 1903, 732.

[44] Lack of sexual differentiation or sexual ambiguity at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century was viewed as a characterizing element of a "primitive" society, in contrast to a "civilized" one, where the two genders would be complimentary to one another. According to Nerea Aresti, early twentieth-century sexologists, notably Gregorio Marañón, defended traditional sex roles as a means of creating a healthy nation. Nerea Aresti, *Médicos, Donjuanes y Mujeres Modernas: Los Ideales de feminidad y masculinidad en el primer tercio del siglo XX* (Bilbao: Servicio Editorial, Universidad del País Vasco, 2001), 103.

[45] "Cubiertas de harapos parduzcos, azulados ó violáceos resaltan siniestramente sobre los tonos verdosos de los fondos; sus crines negras y cerúleas como el ala del cuervo, acusan todavía más el salvajismo de los rostros; pañolones y mantas recuerdan más las pieles de animales que revestían los hombres prehistóricos que no los vestidos de nuestro tiempo." Opisso, "Notas de Arte," 1.

[46] "Es la humanidad brutal, son los resabios de las edades primitivas ó bien la degeneración á que están sujetas ciertas razas." Ibid.

[47] Benet, *Nonell y Su Epoca*, 26.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Isidre Nonell, *Young Gitana*, 1903. Oil on canvas. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.
Photograph by Jordi Calveras, 2016. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Isidre Nonell, *Two Gitanas*, 1903. Oil on canvas. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.
Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Isidre Nonell, *Dolores*, 1902–03. Oil on canvas. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.
Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Isidre Nonell, *Cretina de Boí* (Female Cretin in Boí), 1896–97. Ink and colored pencil on paper.
Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Isidre Nonell, *The Annunciation*, 1896. Charcoal, conté crayon, and sprayed ink on paper. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[return to text\]](#)



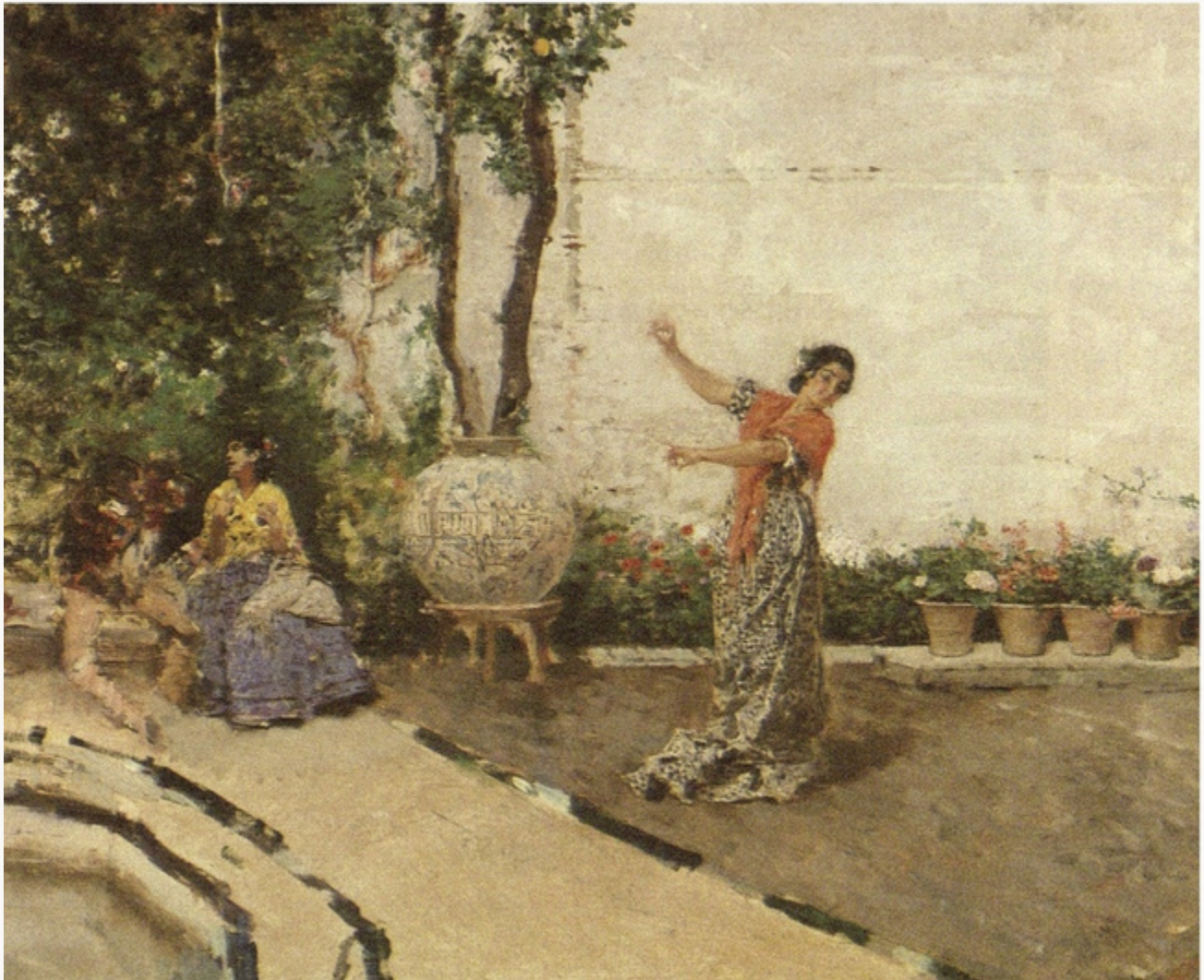


Fig. 7, Mariano Fortuny, *Gypsy Dancing in the Garden of Granada*, 1872. Oil on canvas. Palazzo Fortuny Museum, Venice. From: Eduardo Quesada Dorador, ed., *Gitanos: Pinturas y Esculturas Españolas 1870–1940*, exh. cat. (Madrid and Granada: Fundación Caja de Granada and Fundación Rodríguez-Acosta, 1995): 27. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Enrique Estevan, *Carmen la Sevillana*, Blanco y Negro 484, August 11, 1900: n.p. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, José María Rodríguez Acosta, *Gitanos of Sacromonte*, 1908. Oil on canvas. Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla, Seville. Photograph courtesy of Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Francesc Serra Dimas “Retrato del pintor en su taller (Portrait of the Artist in His Studio),” 1904.
Silver gelatin on baryta-coated paper. Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, Isidre Nonell, *Shacks of Somorrostro in Barcelona*, 1908. Sanguine and watercolor on paper. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, Joan Vidal i Ventosa, *Shacks of the Fishermen of Somorrostro*, 1915. Silver gelatin on paper. Arxiu Fotogràfic de Barcelona, Barcelona. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 13, Joan Brull i Vinyoles, *Dream*, ca. 1905. Oil on canvas. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 14, Modest Urgell, *Boat on the Shore of the Lake of Banyoles*, ca. 1897. Oil on canvas stuck on cardboard. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras.

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Fig. 15, Francesc Masriera i Manovens, *Portrait of My Wife*, 1898. Oil on canvas. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. Photograph by Jordi Calveras. [\[return to text\]](#)