

MAGALHÃES & SANTOS



Carlos VAZQUEZ
Sevilla



CARLOS VÁZQUEZ ÚBEDA
(Ciudad Real, 1869 - Barcelona, 1944)

Portrait of Fernando de Torres as "Mirko"
1938-1939

Oil on canvas

79.5 x 62 cm

Provenance: Collection of guitarist Carlos Santías

The archetypal appearance of this portrait, which at first glance could be interpreted as an obvious manifestation of the costumbrist trend so in vogue at the time, conceals a more complex interpretation. This work immortalises one of the most complex and turbulent historical moments in Spain, marked by great political and social upheaval. Beyond the main theme, the piece offers us certain information to consider: signed by the artist Carlos Vázquez Úbeda (Ciudad Real, 1869 - Barcelona, 1944), we see that the painting is located in Seville. There are several known moments in Carlos Vázquez's biography when he was in Seville, the first during a trip in his youth and the second, the period in which this portrait is contextualised, in 1938. This was when Vázquez returned from exile, a direct consequence of the Spanish Civil War. This situation led him to take refuge first in Marseille and later in Villefranche-sur-Mer (Nice), before finally returning to Spain via San Sebastián and settling in the bourgeois neighbourhood of Heliópolis in Seville, where he painted this portrait.

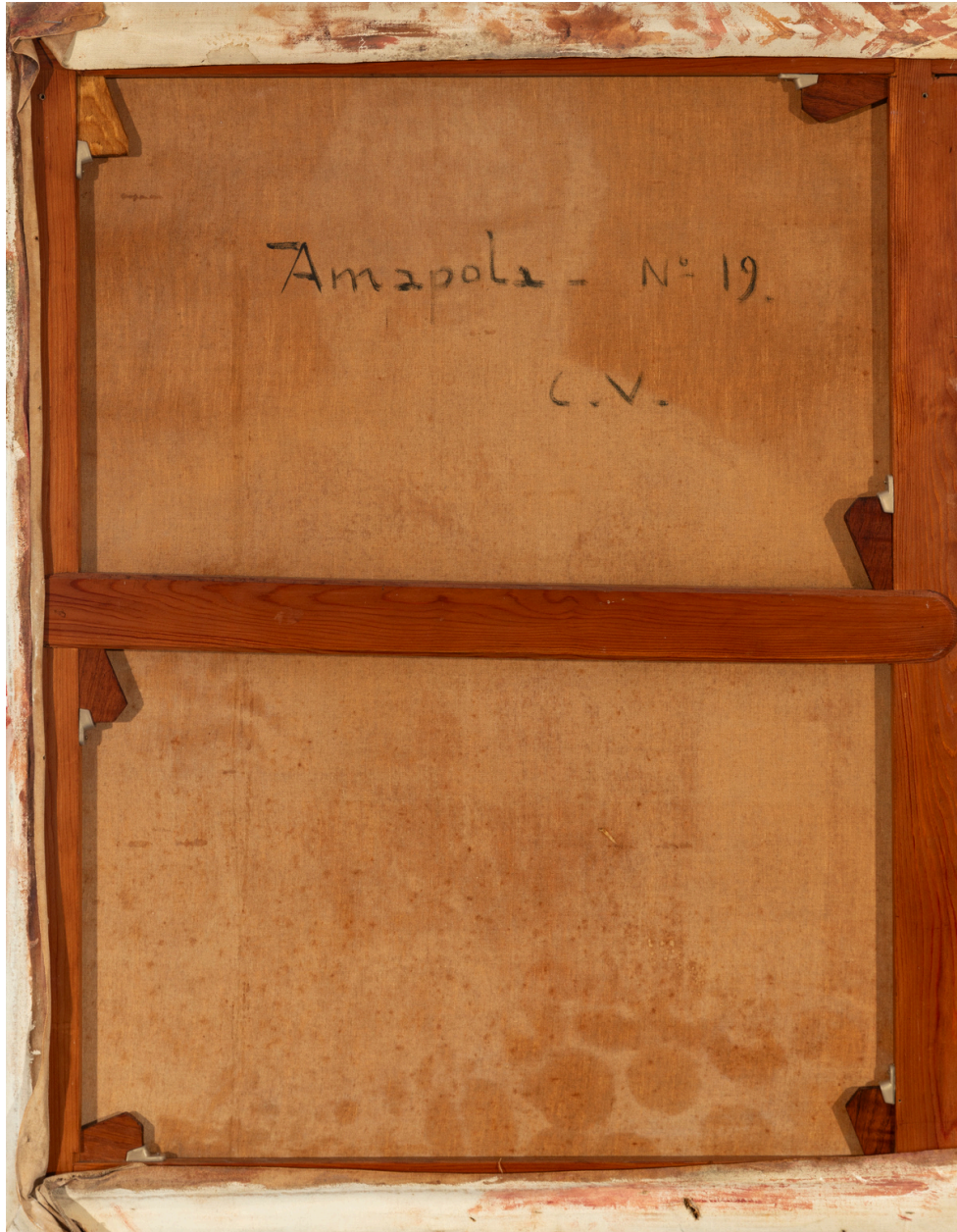


Photograph of 'Mirco', after 1939 for "Gipsy Songs" show. Note his name is published with a "c" instead of "k" after Franco made him change it.



Poster of Mirco as a "Bandolero" for a show in Barcelona.

The reverse side of the canvas provides additional information thanks to the inscription 'Amapola - N°19. C.V.' From this, it can be deduced that Amapola could be the name of the protagonist, although this reference introduces a certain ambiguity, as it can also be interpreted as an allegorical or symbolic name.



Focusing on the pictorial representation and its aesthetic analysis, we appreciate a classic portrait in terms of its composition, with its protagonist facing the viewer, his body turned and his face directed towards the front. His pose is very reminiscent of other portraits by Carlos Vázquez, such as his canvas 'Wedding Gift' (1911) from the collection of the Prado Museum in Madrid. In that painting, we see how the groom strikes a similar pose to the one in this portrait. Although in this case, the artist increases the prominence of the figure by avoiding any superfluous elements other than the physical presence of 'La Amapola'.



"Wedding gift" (1911), Museo Nacional del Prado.

Upon closer inspection of the brushwork, especially after the conservation and restoration treatment carried out by Marta Ortiz, one can appreciate the greater richness and depth of the colour palette used by the artist. This is evident both in the background, where a complex range of nuances emerges, lending greater depth to the scene, and in the dress, whose purification process has revealed folds that were previously almost imperceptible. Similarly, the facial features now reveal a renewed drama: the cleaning has brought to light a subtle tear, suspended in the right tear duct, while the left eye shows a more vivid redness, intensifying the emotionality of the gaze.

It is this last point that adds greater complexity to the identification of La Amapola. The marked expressiveness of the face, together with the forceful volumetric presence of the figure, is a notable departure from the usual softness of female portraits of the period. Works such as 'La portuguesa' from the Banco Sabadell collection or the portrait of 'Raquel Meller', kept at the São Paulo Museum of Art, show how Carlos Vázquez used to represent the female figure with a powerful presence but within recognisable canons.

In this case, although the portrait retains its characteristic strength, the features appear much more accentuated, almost exaggerated. The dimensions of the shoulders, the collarbone area and the arm shown to the viewer suggest a masculine anatomy. The face reinforces this impression: a firm jawline, prominent cheekbones, deep dark circles under the eyes, a broad nose and a clear forehead. The density of the brushstrokes on the eyelids accentuates the intense, even somewhat excessive, make-up, which is particularly visible in the design of the eyebrows. Likewise, in the chin area, there are shadows that are not in keeping with the traditional ideal of female portraiture, further suggesting the use of make-up which, with dense and strategic brushstrokes, seems intended to soften or conceal the anatomical masculinity of the chin.



Painting before cleaning.



Painting after cleaning.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the figure depicted corresponds to a male character characterised as a flamenco dancer.

It may be surprising that the subject of this portrait painted by Carlos Vázquez, who became a court painter, is a marginal or unconventional character. The fact that it is not a typical representation does not mean that it does not faithfully reflect a specific era or moment in time. Years of history hidden under the ideals of a fascist regime prevented the complexity of Spain from being appreciated and hindered social and cultural understanding of the country.

In Spain before the Civil War, although to a lesser extent than in Paris, there was a certain freedom with regard to practices and representations considered marginal. In fact, this atmosphere is captured in the story 'La columna de hierro' (The Iron Column), written between 1936 and 1937 by journalist Manuel Chaves Nogales, in which the following words appear: "The performances of an effeminate man dressed as a woman who sang the most fascinating love tragedies of Andalusia were also very honest [...] His plastered face, his androgynous gestures and the oriental pomp of his embroidered costumes."

In the artistic sphere, Lorca's 1927 work 'El beso' (The Kiss), currently in the Casa de los Tiros Museum in Granada, shows us a portrait of great ambiguity featuring three faces that merge into one another, thus seeking to reflect on identity and gender roles.

Returning to our portrait, it is worth mentioning that this context was not unfamiliar to Carlos Vázquez, whose studio was located half an hour away from Barcelona's iconic Chinatown, known for its drag shows. The artist's connection to the legendary Barcelona cabaret Els Quatre Gats is also well known. This was the venue where the famous transformist Leopoldo Fregoli (Rome, 1867–Viareggio, 1936) performed before arriving at Madrid's Apolo Theatre in 1897.



Participants in the 1934 Miss Barrio Chino transvestite contest, image reproduced in the book *La Criolla. The Golden Gate of Barrio Chino*, Paco Villar, 2017.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Spanish theatre scene featured numerous male performers linked to the world of entertainment, including Antonio Alonso, Loperetti, Luisito Carbonell, Freddy, Derkas, Edmond de Bries, Ramper, Puisinet, Genaro el Feo and Mirko.

Many of these performances were based on meticulous recreations of famous figures from music hall and variety shows, both in their appearance and in their style of performance. In the Spanish context, one of the first performers to follow this new trend was Ernesto Foliers, who around 1911 incorporated imitations of artists such as Fornarina, Goya and Raquel Meller into his repertoire.

It is in this cultural context that the portrait of Amapola emerges, painted between 1938 and 1939 after Vázquez's return from exile, having previously stayed in Marseille, near Raquel Meller's residence, and coinciding with a moment when all this artistic effervescence was marked and skewed by the Civil War. Vázquez returned to a profoundly transformed Spain: a Seville taken over by the fascists and, specifically, to a neighbourhood that housed the political prison centre known as El Colector.

It is therefore not surprising that this work was conceived as a tribute to a silenced Spain, featuring Mirko, the only artist of the transformist movement who continued to work during and after the war. It should also be noted that Mirko's photographic portraits bear a striking resemblance to the protagonist of this painting, reinforcing the connection between the work and the real figure who inspired its creation.



Finally, it is worth considering the provenance of this portrait, which was part of the private collection of composer and guitarist Carlos Santías Ferrer (1912–1976), a close acquaintance of figures such as Lorca, Dalí, and Manuel de Falla. It is known that the work has always been part of his collection; furthermore, the restoration study carried out by Marta Ortiz indicates the absence of varnish and the lack of repainting, characteristics that suggest that the painting was acquired directly, probably due to a personal connection with the portrait or its subject. This detail adds an additional dimension, as the work is a testimony to the cultural and artistic context that characterised Spain at the time.

This portrait, whose complexity has been largely overlooked, highlights the figure of Carlos Vázquez, whose artistic importance has not yet received the recognition it deserves. The passing of time has blurred a brilliant career, whose scope and international projection were evident from the outset.

Carlos Vázquez Úbeda (Ciudad Real, 1869 – Barcelona, 1944) grew up in a large family where his early artistic inclination was encouraged by his own mother. His initial studies at the Institute of Ciudad Real, under the tutelage of César María Herrera, soon revealed an uncommon talent that earned him a scholarship from the Provincial Council to enter the Special School of Painting, Sculpture and Engraving of San Fernando in Madrid (1886–1889). There he was a disciple of Carlos Haes, from whom he inherited his rigour in observation and solidity of drawing.

His career took on a clear international dimension from a very early stage. Thanks to successive scholarships, he travelled to Italy and later to France, settling in Paris between 1890 and 1898. In the French capital, he attended the prestigious workshop of Léon Bonnat, a cosmopolitan environment in which he consolidated his technical training and became familiar with European pictorial trends. During that decade, he presented works at various competitions and salons, obtaining numerous mentions and awards that established his career beyond the Spanish market.

After his stays in Italy, he returned to Spain and settled in Barcelona, where he was extremely active. His contact with modernist circles led him to collaborate with the artists of *Els Quatre Gats*, for whose magazine he designed one of the covers. In 1901, he married Matilde Garriga Coronas, with Joaquín Sorolla acting as his best man. Vázquez maintained a friendship and artistic affinity with Sorolla, who had a significant influence on his evolution towards a more luminous and modern style of painting.

Throughout the first two decades of the 20th century, Vázquez regularly participated in national and international exhibitions, winning awards in cities such as Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin and San Francisco. His prestige was reinforced when, in 1913, Archer Milton Huntington acquired one of his works for the Hispanic Society of America, a gesture that consolidated his presence on the international art scene. A year later, the institution named him a full member, underscoring the appreciation with which his work was received in the United States.

In the 1930s, Vázquez remained active in Barcelona's cultural life and was appointed professor of Decorative Composition at the School of Arts and Crafts. After the outbreak of the Civil War, his home in Barcelona was ransacked, forcing him into exile in Marseille and Nice. Once the conflict was over, he resumed his exhibition activity after successive stays in San Sebastián and a new period in Seville, before returning to Barcelona, where he resumed his production with vigour and presented various exhibitions in prominent venues in the city and in Bilbao.



Publication dated 27 November 1915 from the magazine La Esfera. 'Honeymoon in the Ansó Valley' (second page, lower left corner), piece acquired for the Hispanic Society of America.

In 1944, he was appointed Corresponding Member of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando, an honour that crowned a career marked by technical rigour, excellence in portraiture and a constant openness towards international artistic centres. He died in Barcelona that same year, leaving behind a solid and varied body of work, closely linked both to the Spanish pictorial tradition and to the dialogue with European modernity.

The figure of Carlos Vázquez Úbeda constitutes one of the most unique chapters in Spanish painting of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His artistic contribution is characterised by a balanced combination of rigorous academic training acquired in Madrid with Carlos Haes and perfected in Paris under the tutelage of Léon Bonnat, and a modern sensibility that placed him in constant dialogue with European artistic centres. This dual aspect, classical and cosmopolitan, explains the technical solidity of his work and his ability to incorporate innovative pictorial languages without renouncing Spanish tradition.











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