

VICENTE MARTÍNEZ SANZ

VICENTE PUCHOL



It is a well-known fact that the art world is a risky one. Vicente Martínez Sanz's art has taken such a peculiar path that it requires quite an effort on my part to speak at length about its "discovery." My only claim to legitimacy is my long union with his favorite granddaughter, my wife, María Antonia Martínez Duart.

Despite enjoying worldwide esteem, participating in the most important international art and photography exhibitions, and receiving multiple first prizes in these same exhibitions, Martínez Sanz was a virtual unknown in his own country, except within the narrow confines of a limited circle of admirers. This shocking indifference on the part of the art world, which was initially at odds with his work's commercial value, and which is so characteristic of the Spanish bourgeoisie, is the greatest paradox of Vicente Martínez Sanz's life (it amuses me to note this as a contribution in some small way to those who study this country's bourgeoisie from a historical viewpoint). The photographs passed from the indifference of his countrymen into oblivion, and during many years were hidden away like a sprite's treasure-trove.

I believe that without my wife's timely mediation, this work would still be slumbering quietly in the old studio where it had been created. Her knowledge of the large amount of art hidden away, her appreciation of its artistic value, and – truth be told – her exceptional critical faculties were all reinforced by her great affection for her grandfather. With the idea of someday using them to decorate our Valencia home, she carefully framed a number of the photographs that had been put into storage. As luck would have it, the framer decided to contact two specialists, Vicent Monzó and Josep Benlloch. Astonished and anxious to learn more about these forgotten works, they appeared at my house, where they had the privilege of discovering for themselves the intimate and loving display that my wife, like "Giulietta of the Spirits," had arranged in her bedroom.

These two men were the first to assay the work of Vicente Martínez Sanz and they were able to convince regional cultural officials to support their efforts to bring these forgotten treasures back into public view. Thus, to them goes the credit for the magnitude of this exhibition. Nevertheless, the phenomenal magic behind it all is that of the granddaughter who wanted to give her grandfather's photographs their maximum significance, surrounding herself with them in the environment that was most precious to her, her home. It was as if her grandfather had deposited the seed of his work in his granddaughter's life, where it would later grow and flourish beyond her circle of intimates, so that two dazzled, curious passers-by, Monzó and Benlloch, would follow the vine back to its source, where they found the sprite's hidden treasure.

Having done justice to the events that led to the present exhibition, it is my hope that they also legitimize my interference in these miracles. I am not an art critic, but rather an author of fiction, that is, of human lives. I am now going to share a few biographical notes on the life of Vicente Martínez Sanz; these are colored by my own interpretation, because the true, complete story of his life is hidden, as is usually the case with reality.

The artist was born in 1874. Without even having drawn breath, he suffered the first blow of many that fate dealt him throughout his life – his father was shot to death by a competing Valencian businessman. The elder Martínez had known that he was sentenced to death by his rivals and had advised his wife to marry the manager of the family factory if he were killed. The widow, then pregnant with Vicente, followed her husband's advice.





Family life went on in the same economic circumstances, just as the deceased had foreseen. Our artist's childhood was thus marked by a tragic exchange: the man who acted as his father was merely a sham replacement for the one he would never know. One day, young Vicente would come to understand the mystery of his reality, which hid below the waves like an iceberg, in the depths of the unknown.

Chance, appearing to compensate for his orphaned condition, gave his childhood a spectacle that would influence his growing sensibility: his father's glass works. The child whose early life we are combing through, often visited this factory, fascinated by its devices and techniques. He watched as the melted, incandescent glass was shaped by the artisans' breath and inspiration; he saw how it became volatile, melted or hardened, taking on unexpected shapes and colors until it finally cooled and solidified into the product of industrialized art. Years after observing these magical, lightning-like visions among blazing furnaces, red-hot liquids, and shadowy workers who beat and cut the glass with skill and precision, our contemplative child was formed into a true artist, as if he were glass, shaped by man into a beautiful object, fragile and strong at the same time.

Martínez Sanz worked in his dark laboratory, creating delicate fantasies with silver bromide and potassium dichromate. These chemicals, used in his father's glassworks, were perhaps associated by the artist with the shadows surrounding his father's death, but he blended them into a new reality, one in which he awakened to the need to use these materials in his own way. Using them to prepare sensitive negatives, he later blew his artistic breath across them and created images. What moves an artist is his dissatisfaction with reality, the desire to transform it using the only legitimate procedure; one that will not lead to a false, unfaithful interpretation. This is artistic beauty.

Once Martínez Sanz had received his secondary diploma, unlike his brothers he had no doubts about pursuing a philanthropic degree: Fine Arts. I see it as philanthropy, given that it is impossible to imagine a greater benefactor than the man who bestows his beautiful creations on us simply for the pleasure of doing so.

His teacher, Agrasot, had had other well-known painters of the day – Ramón Stolz Seguí, Manuel Benedito, Filiol, Beut, and others – as his students, and he maintained ongoing relationships with them. Because art photography was then practically unknown, Martínez Sanz began his artistic endeavors as a painter. While still a very young man, he fell passionately in love with Mercedes Cros Bayá, who would later become his wife.

As sometimes happens, this woman channeled his life in practical ways; with the natural pragmatism of one who would parent a large family, she convinced him to open a business, relegating painting to a leisure activity. Obviously, this business could only deal in objects like those he had seen take shape in his childhood. His wife, with an eye to meeting the family's material requirements, ran the business, located at 17 Calle de la Paz, with such acumen that it quickly became the city's principal trader in crockery, crystal, and porcelain.

The family's comfortable economic status was due nearly entirely to his wife's efforts, as Martínez Sanz merely collaborated in managing the business. This permitted them to live in one of the era's most luxurious rental apartments. The building still stands at 74 Calle Cirilio Amorós; it is in the modernist style and serves as a reminder of early 20th century Valencia's architectural beauty. Sadly, later real-estate speculators demolished many of these lovely buildings.

From the confines of his business, Martínez Sanz observed his friend Ramón Stolz's difficulties and helped him generously. He also watched and pensively celebrated Manuel Benedito's successes. He finally abandoned his brushes and devoted his moments of leisure to a growing interest in photography. In 1905, he made his first series of portraits of





his children and friends; they are composed with the sure creative instinct of a talented artist.

In 1911, his wife's tragic death at age 40, and the loss of the passion he had felt for her, led him to change his life radically. He sold his business and moved into a more modest apartment that he owned, also located in Cirilio Amorós, at number 41. He had the pleasure of decorating its façade with two original busts by Alcora depicting the Count of Aranda; in the attic, he set up a studio that would allow him to fully indulge his life's other passion – photography.

When Martínez Sanz began to work as a photographer, the art form was still in its infancy; its techniques were as ghostly as they were rudimentary, and he was obliged to improvise materials and instruments that did not yet exist, making use of a mysterious innate skill. At the beginning, photographic negatives were large glass plates, held in a frame; lenses were up to 15 centimeters thick; cameras were mounted on cumbersome rolling tripods, and the artist was obliged to disappear under a heavy black cloth in order to compose the shot. It was risky to leave the studio with so much baggage if one did not wish to be subject to innumerable calamities, not to mention public derision. But Martínez Sanz was dedicated to his art; he was so devoted to photography that he was able to blend in with the populace, and to convince strangers on the street to enter his studio, where he captured the profoundly moving expressions of their inner life that hid behind their everyday faces. Like a painter, he composed new landscapes, using a combination of lights, shadows, and mists. He carried his heavy camera to the banks of the Albufera, or to the Salinas region of Alicante, where he owned a rustic property. He reproduced humanity's pathways, homes, and horizons with reflective shadings. Also worth noting are his studio compositions, based on psychological themes, and those that with surprising anticipation depict Bergmanesque landscapes; they lead one to wonder what the artist would have produced had moving pictures been common at that time.

Without ever leaving Valencia, he was in contact with artistic photography movements around the world, and even more surprisingly, was in their vanguard. He was the first photographer in Spain to work in color, using the three primary colors impregnated in grains of starch. Nevertheless, we know little of his work in the laboratory, how he perfected the techniques then in use, or of his method for applying a lyrical transformation to his images. His photographs demonstrate a mastery of framing and focus, and precision in capturing light, as swift as time itself. He combines reality's divers elements in order to extract a purer and more significant reality. The rest, as is common to artistic genesis, belongs to its creator's untransferable, intimate world.

A man of his era, like all true artists he educated his five children in physical and mental health, sending them to gymnasiums to clear the cobwebs from their blood and from their vision, a habit that was practically hidden at that time. He saw clearly how difficult life was, which inspired in him the need for a system of child-rearing that would allow them to confront it cleanly.

At the end of the Spanish Civil War, Martínez Sanz abandoned photography, and withdrew from an environment that was unfamiliar to him; he limited himself to recording his family's private moments – as it happens, his final photograph was of my wife. The Valencia Photo Club made him its president, holding a collective exhibition, which showed his work alongside that of other Valencian artists. His death in 1947, unlike those of so many of the era's elite, was not remarked on by the press.

This exhibit has been made possible by his descendants.