

Ramón Gaya

Painter; Poet; Essay writer.

Active 1926-2005 in Spain; Mexico; Italy

Ramón Gaya Pomés, a prolific painter and an occasional, but insightful, poet and essay writer, would describe himself as “a painter who writes”. Contrary to what this self-description may seem to indicate, for him, painting and literary production go hand in hand as they both stem from the same creative drive.

Gaya spent his life in search of a type of painting that would constitute a living metaphor for reality, but his poetry and essay-writing are just as central to his commitment as a creator. According to him, a true creator perceives the underlying substance of reality. Genuine art is only the one that conveys this substance and therefore exposes a naked and unencumbered reality, which is normally hidden from us in the day-to-day experience. This is why for Gaya painting is about sacrifice; it involves stripping away the layers until reaching the centre of reality.

Born in Murcia in 1910, the son of a lithographer, Gaya hardly received any formal education. He left school at the age of 10 to train as a painter under the guidance of Pedro Flores and Luis Garay, who had soon spotted the boy's precocious talent. This coincided with the arrival in Murcia of some English painters, such as Christopher Hall, who chose this quiet Mediterranean town to convalesce from the Great War. They would bring with them images and news from Paris and the latest artistic trends.

Gaya had been participating in collective exhibitions with adults since the age of 10. Meanwhile, he was reading the books in his father's library and exercising his creativity through writing. His first texts, in poetic prose, were published at the age of sixteen in the journal *Verso y Prosa*.

In January 1928, thanks to a scholarship, he set off to fulfil the dream of every aspiring Spanish artist: visiting Paris, the most prominent artistic centre in Europe at the time. His first stop was Madrid, where he met Juan Ramón Jiménez, an eminent poet and eventual Nobel Prize winner, who would have a decisive influence on him and on the so-called generation of 27. While in the capital, he paid his first visit to the Museo del Prado, which forever captured his interest and imagination.

After some weeks, Gaya and his companions, Pedro Flores and Luis Garay, set off for Paris. There, at the age of only seventeen, the three of them had an exhibition at the gallery Aux Quatre Chemins, which was a commercial success. He also visited other galleries and museums and met painters such as Francisco Bores and Pablo Picasso.

Nevertheless, and despite all expectations, he returned from Paris disappointed with the art of the avant-gardes. Although impressed by painters such as Modigliani and Matisse as a child, upon coming face to face with their work, he deemed them too cerebral and lifeless. From this point onwards, his vehement rejection of the art of the avant-gardes and modern art in general would become a constant in his writing and in his painting. The only exceptions to this would be Cézanne, Paul Klee, Van Gogh, and Picasso.

Four months later, he returned to Madrid. He revisited the Prado and confirmed the conclusions he had reached in Paris, while re-affirming his life-long admiration of Velázquez as an absolute creator. He then rushed back to Murcia, due to his mother's illness. In August, she died. Gaya spent some time grieving with his friends and his father, first in Valencia and later in Barcelona. He

published some illustrations and texts for several journals, including a letter recounting his Parisian impressions [“Epistolario.” (Letters) *Verso y Prosa*, Oct 1928].

In April 1931, when the Spanish Second Republic was proclaimed, Gaya was in Barcelona, where he stayed until he left for Madrid at the end of that year. During the early days of the Republic, he collaborated with Federico García Lorca’s now renowned theatre company, La Barraca, as set and costume designer. Moreover, he was selected to participate in the Misiones Pedagógicas or Pedagogical Missions, an educational project closely linked to the ideals of the young Republic, which aspired to bring culture to remote rural areas. As part of this effort, he was commissioned, alongside other painters, to make copies of some of the masterpieces at the Museo del Prado. This resulted in an invaluable chance to gain an intimate knowledge of the old masters’ style and techniques. Upon completion, he joined other intellectuals such as Antonio Sánchez Barbudo, Rafael Dieste, Luis Cernuda, Arturo Serrano Plaja and María Zambrano in the Pedagogical Missions’ itinerary through some of Spain’s most isolated and poverty-stricken villages. Meanwhile, he continued publishing his illustrations, poems and articles in the journals *Héroe*, *La verdad*, *Luz*, *Entregas*, and *P.A.N.* His first publications on Velázquez date from this period.

In June 1936, he married Fe Sanz in Madrid, with whom he would have his only child, a daughter named Alicia. Barely a month afterwards, the Spanish Civil War broke out. He joined the International Alliance of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals and he became actively engaged in the defence of the Republican cause through cultural action. His flat in Madrid was soon bombed and he lost almost all of his paintings to date. Following this, he and his wife moved to Valencia, which had by then become the capital of the Republican government.

During the armed conflict, he published his illustrations, poetry and prose in pro-Republican journals, such as *Mono Azul*, *Nueva Cultura* and *Nova Galiza*. In Valencia, Rafael Dieste, Antonio Sánchez Barbudo, Juan Gil-Albert, and Gaya himself founded, in January 1937, the influential journal *Hora de España*. Gaya was the journal’s only illustrator, where he also published some open letters, reviews and poems. He shared the pages with established figures such as Antonio Machado, as well as emerging poets and intellectuals such as Octavio Paz (the Mexican Nobel Prize winner), María Zambrano, Joaquín Xirau, Luis Cernuda, Corpus Barga, Emilio Prados and many others.

Despite the war, Gaya continued painting. He exhibited two canvases in the Spanish Republican Pavilion at the 1937 Paris World Fair: *Palabras a los muertos. Retrato de Juan Gil-Albert* [Words to the dead. Portrait of Juan Gil-Albert] and *Espanto. Bombardeo de Almería* [Horror. Bombing of Almería]. The latter, a work denouncing the indiscriminate bombing of the civil population which preceded the better-known events of Guernica, would be awarded the National Prize for painting the following year. In July 1938, Gaya participated in the now almost legendary Second International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture, for which he created the poster and co-signed one of the papers presented.

The Catalonia offensive (Dec. 1938 – Feb. 1939) led to the exile of nearly 500,000 refugees, who, in the dead of winter, took to the mountains to get to France through the Pyrenees. On 9 February, Gaya crossed the border in the company of the co-founders of *Hora de España* and the defeated Eastern Army. They were sent to the internment camp at Saint-Cyprien. Sixteen days later, a group of British women from the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief arranged for the release of Gaya and his companions: Rafael Dieste, Antonio Sánchez Barbudo, Juan Gil-Albert. The request had come from Christopher Hall, one of Gaya’s childhood friends. Gaya joined him, his family and Alicia, his daughter, in Cardesse, a small village in the Pyrenees. It was not until they left the camp that Gaya found out that his wife had been killed when she and their two-year old daughter were trying to get a train out of Spain and were caught in the bombing of Figueras. The girl, Alicia, had been whisked away by Carmen Dieste, who was travelling with them, and she was already with the Halls by the time Gaya arrived.

The experience of exile would decisively mark his life, his outputs and his reception. Two months later, Gaya was amongst the over 25,000 Spanish Republican exiles who received political asylum in Mexico. However, faced with an uncertain future, it was decided that the Halls would take care of Alicia. He would not see her again until 1952. Numb with pain, Gaya boarded the *SS Sinaia* alongside over 1,500 Republican refugees who left the French port of Sète on the 25th of May 1939.

Gaya arrived in Veracruz on 13 June 1939, with empty pockets and full of painful memories of the war. He soon settled in Mexico City, where he restarted his activities as a writer and illustrator. At the request of Alfonso Reyes, he produced some illustrations for *El Colegio de México* and for *Fondo de Cultura Económica*. In September 1939, he joined the editorial team of the journal *Taller* and collaborated with several other Mexican journals such as *El hijo pródigo*, *Romance* and *Las Españas*.

During the almost seventeen years that he spent in Mexico, he only had two exhibitions (in 1943 and 1950). Nevertheless, his paintings were selling reasonably well, in particular his portraits and landscapes, principally of Cuernavaca, Chapultepec, Acapulco and Veracruz.

This is also when his tributes to the old masters emerged. In the absence of access to the European museums that hosted the paintings he missed, the works of Velázquez, Titian, Rembrandt, and many others would soon become the main theme of his own paintings. Gaya would reproduce the whole or part of one of the paintings he most admired and insert it into his own compositions. These would frequently include some fruit, a mirror and an almost ever-present glass, either empty, half-full of water or, on occasion, with flowers. Beyond his expression of admiration for the old masters, these homages must be read in reference to the circumstances of his exile. They constitute an effort to insert himself in the genealogy of European art, while, at the same time, making a visual statement about what, in his view, constitutes truly creative art. In this sense, it can be illuminating to look at his paintings with the light shed by his essays on the nature of creative art.

Gaya became a Mexican citizen in 1951. His friends included other Republican exiles, such as José Bergamín and Tomás Segovia and also some Mexicans, such as Xavier Villarrutia and Octavio Paz. Even so, he tended to keep to himself and he never fully integrated into the artistic or intellectual world in Mexico and longed to go back to Europe. Above all, he missed having access to the European galleries and museums. However, WWII and his financial circumstances would not allow him to return until June 1952.

His first destination was Paris, more specifically, the Parisian museums. He was also reunited with some old friends. From Paris he continued on his journey to Italy in the company of Concha Albornoz, Clara James and Juan-Gil Albert. He visited Venice, Padua, Vicenza, Verona, Florence, Rome, before returning to Paris. From there, he went to Portugal to meet up with his daughter, who continued under the care of the Hall's and then travelled back to Venice. Overall, this trip lasted a year. He recorded his experiences in *Diario de un pintor, 1952-1953 [A Painter's Diary, 1952-1953]*, published in 1984 by Pre-Textos.

In June 1953, he returned to Mexico with the firm intention of settling back in Europe. This only became financially possible in March 1956. This time, he decided to stay in Rome for an extended period, which he devoted principally to painting and to frequenting museums and galleries. In the eternal city, he rekindled his friendship with María Zambrano, whom he had initially met in the Pedagogical Missions. Despite his wish for solitude, through her, eventually he met the well-connected Elena Croce and other intellectuals and artists, such as Elemire Zolla, Cristina Campo, Pietro Citati, and Giorgio Agamben. Croce's friendship in particular had a significant impact, as she would be instrumental in the sale of many of his artworks.

During the years that followed, he painted prolifically. He continued with his homages, while also focusing on painting literary and mythological themes and on the study of light. Although established in Italy, principally Rome and Venice, he never fully settled in one place. His travels included France, Holland and in March 1960, Spain.

Encouraged by some friends, he made the decision to visit Spain after twenty-one long years of exile. He used this opportunity to visit the Prado once more. In May, an exhibition of his paintings took place at the Mayer gallery in Madrid, during which he presented his book *El sentimiento de la pintura* [*The sentiment of painting*] (1960). Here he developed his theory of how each of the four elements relate to each of the basic types of art, emphasizing that all painting stems from water and that creative painting must retain that fluid, living quality. The exhibition was met with a perfectly orchestrated silence; the book was well received. Many more trips to Spain would follow.

By 1 January 1962, he was back in Venice and later Rome. While in these cities, he received numerous friends, including Bergamín and Tomás Segovia. As always, he continued painting and writing. In 1966, while in Spain, Gaya met Isabel Verdejo, whom he would marry in 1987.

Years of reflection on the nature of art crystallised in Gaya's most emblematic essay: *Velázquez, pájaro solitario* [*Velázquez, lonely bird*]. Awarded the Italian Premio Inedito in 1963, the final extended version was published in Spanish by RM in 1969 and in Italian by *Conoscenza religiosa* in 1971. Inspired by St. John of the Cross' allegory of the soul as a solitary bird, Gaya reflects on the qualities of creative art while offering a provocative interpretation of Velázquez' work. Guided by this true creator, Gaya opposes creative art to artistic art, emphasizing the quality of creative art to reveal the sacred layer contained in reality, without violating its mystery.

In 1969, he acquired a studio in the centre of Rome and for many years he divided his time between Rome, Barcelona, Valencia and Murcia. In 1974 and 1975, he held exhibitions in Murcia and Valencia. However, the price for his originality and independence was to be misinterpreted as a traditional painter. The turning point for his career came in 1978 – three years after Franco's death – with a retrospective exhibition at the Madrid gallery *Multitud*. Thereafter, he gained recognition from the general public, scholars and critics alike, both in Spain and internationally. Several homages and exhibitions would follow, such as *Homenaje a Ramón Goya* [*Homage to Ramón Goya*] (1980), on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, which includes essays by Giorgio Agamben, Nigel Dennis, Tomás Segovia, and María Zambrano.

Gaya's later years were marked by a succession of prestigious exhibitions and talks. In 1983, he participated in the exhibition devoted to the Spanish Republican exile in Mexico organised in Madrid by the Ministry of Culture and, in 1987, he took part in the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the International Exhibition of the Spanish Pavilion in Paris in 1937 hosted by the Museo Nacional Reina Sofía in Madrid. In 1989, an anthological exhibition was presented in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid. This same year, he was a keynote speaker at the 1989 lecture series organised by the Prado Museum entitled “El Museo del Prado visto por doce artistas contemporáneos” [“The Museo del Prado as seen by twelve contemporary artists”]. In 1990, once again at the Prado, he delivered a conference paper on Velázquez. In 1995, Gaya's work gained further visibility and recognition internationally through two more exhibitions: one at the Instituto Cervantes in Paris and another one at the Spanish Academy in Rome. Back in Spain, there was an exhibition at the IVAM in Valencia in 2000 and at the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid in 2003.

In 1996, another key text was published: *Naturalidad del arte (y artificialidad de la crítica)* [*The Naturalness of Art (and the Artificiality of Critique)*] (Pre-Textos). Gaya criticized art historians and art critics for focusing on only technical and superficial aspects of art, while failing to engage with art as a living reality. Here, as he had been doing for decades, his analysis of art opposed established frameworks and periods. For Gaya, artists in a broad sense, creators, like Velázquez, but also Rembrandt, Saint John or Mozart are more contemporary than any of the avant-gardes or even

other acclaimed artists such as Botticelli, Vermeer or Mallarmé, whose work is bound to a specific time and culture and is ultimately lifeless. In contrast, the works of creators such as Velázquez are not life-like — they are living creations.

Poetry, from the start, also played a prominent role in Gaya's creative activities. Tomás Segovia highlighted his impeccable sonnets, most of which revolve around painting and sculpture. A representative example is "De pintor a pintor" (1977), where he elegantly condenses his key views on art. Several collections of his poems have been published, such as *Nueve sonetos del diario de un pintor (1940-1979)* [Nine Sonnets from the Diary of a Painter (1940-1979)] (1982) and *Algunos poemas del pintor Ramón Gaya* [Some poems by the painter Ramón Gaya] (1991).

During his final years, Gaya was the recipient of various honours that celebrated the different aspects of his work: in 1985, the Ministry of Culture awarded him the Gold Medal of Merit in the Fine Arts. In 1990, a museum carrying his name and devoted to his work was opened in Murcia, his hometown. In 1997, he was awarded the National Prize of Plastic Arts. That same year, Gaya's life-long involvement with books – as a reader, author and illustrator – was celebrated by the National Library of Spain with an exhibition entitled "Ramón Gaya y los libros" ["Ramón Gaya and books"]. In 1999, he received an honorary doctorate by the Universidad de Murcia. In 2002, the Ministry of Culture awarded him the first edition of the Velázquez Prize for Plastic Arts.

He continued creating nearly until his death in 2005 at the age of 95. A tireless worker, he left over 4,000 oils, watercolours, gouaches, drawings and illustrations. Many of his paintings can be found today in the Museo Ramón Gaya, which includes more than 500 works donated to the city by the painter. Others are scattered in private collections, mainly in Mexico, Italy and some in Spain.

Two publications edited by Nigel Dennis have been essential in facilitating access to Gaya's previously disperse works: the compilation of his interviews *Ramón Gaya de viva voz* [*Ramón Gaya in his Own Words*] (2007) and his complete works (2010).

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