

Some Cultural Consequences In Spain Of The Spanish Invasion Of Morocco 1859-60

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The Spanish-Moroccan war of 1859-60 was a significant event for Spain, as much in cultural as in political and military terms. It was witnessed and participated in by the writer Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, author of the *Diario de un testigo de la Guerra de África* (1860) initially as a journalist, then as a soldier (1954, [pp](#). 882-1107),¹ and by his fellow writer, one of the leading Spanish officers, Antonio Ros de Olano who composed a short *rêverie*, *Leyendas de África* (1860), as he recovered in his tent from the effects of cholera. The Catalan artist Marià Fortuny was dispatched to Morocco by the Diputación de Barcelona, arriving just after the fall of Tetuan, on a commission to glorify Catalan participation in the war in paintings.² Though he never finished any of them, not even the *Batalla de Tetuán* on which he worked for over a decade, it is widely acknowledged that his style changed radically after his trip to Morocco, substantially due to his response to the light, and that this, and his subsequent two visits, as well as his not-unrelated [sojourn](#) in Granada was fundamental to his development and in consequence that of Spanish painting (Yxart: 1881, [p](#). 49; Carbonell 1999, [p](#). 9, [pp](#). 138-40; González López & Martí Aixelà 1989, [pp](#). 124, 135). (Fortuny also made comparisons between Africa and more still Andalusia, and Portici in Naples where he painted some important late works [[González López & Martí Aixelà 1989, pp.:107, 109](#)].) Whilst this essay cannot hope to cover all the issues the Moroccan experience raised, and does not pretend to, I hope at least to sketch out a line of enquiry, even whilst bracketing others. The same may be said of the analysis of Fortuny presented here: it obviously cannot pretend to be a comprehensive account of all the features of his art discussed in this essay. I aim instead to show how the evident importance to the artist of his relationship with Africa can be seen to have significant connections with his work as a whole.

Much thought about cultural issues and aesthetics in Spain in the previous decades had been connected to questions of identity in an historicist, Liberal nationalist tradition. Understandably, in consequence, North African, and more loosely ‘[Arabic](#)’ influence played an important role in the understanding of that identity as something which had and would develop through Spanish history,

particular, as it happens, for conservative Liberals. For example, one of the most influential of Spanish critics Agustín Durán emphasised the heterogeneity of Spanish culture as its central strength seeing the Golden Age, the benchmark of Spanish potential, as born of ‘el amalgama y fusión de las partes heterogéneas que constituyen todo el brillo, riqueza, armonía y originalidad de nuestra bella literatura’, incorporating in a flexible, daring, and dazzling combination all the resources of Europe and North Africa. Within this vision, the ‘Arabic’ elements are associated with words like *imaginación* and *fantasía*. We might call this a dynamic, energetic view of the role of Arabic culture within Spanish identity, apparently based on the kind of exoticism one sees in Hugo's *orientales* (1849, [p.lxi](#); Ginger 1999, [pp.135, 139-40](#))

Understandably, views of war with Morocco were caught up in a reconsideration of these fundamental relationships, and with it of cultural and aesthetic outlooks grounded in Liberal nationalism. This rethinking was tied to the more direct experience of contemporary Moroccan reality necessarily entailed by participation in the invasion and its aftermath. In Alarcón's *Diario de un testigo de la Guerra de África* we see a series of related, but not straightforwardly compatible concerns. The first is the reassertion of Spanish power and dignity as part of its national rebirth through military success, and with that the opening up of wider political and cultural issues about the Mediterranean (1860, [p.iii](#); Morales Lezcano 1988, [p.107](#); Lécuyer & Serrano 1976, [p.201](#)). The second is the assertion of a Christian civilising mission seen in peculiar terms, especially in Alarcón's short story *Una conversación en la Alhambra*, published in June 1859, some months before war broke out (conflict erupted in October of that year). There Alarcón argues that when Spain was stagnant, the Moors revitalised it with their invasion; now that North Africa is stagnant, Spain should return the compliment, reciprocating the earlier gift of the benefits of advanced civilisation (1954, [pp.165-170](#)). Thirdly, however, Alarcón's life-long dream had been to visit North Africa (1860, [p.iv](#)); he was fascinated by its supposedly poetic attractions, and linked them to his own origins in Andalusia, and thence to his own cultural identity (1954, [p.994](#); Lécuyer & Serrano 1976, [p.202](#)). The latter point is reinforced in the opening words of the 1880 edition (1954, [p.832](#)). In a sense, indeed, much of the diary is about a form of cultural tourism.

Alarcón's account is riddled with tensions, and even confusions, partly, one suspects, because he was a bit muddled, and partly because he explicitly wanted to convey a sense of immediacy of experience in all its variety (hence also, the reliance on photographs and sketches as the basis of most of the original illustrations). 'Personaje singular el de Alarcón, contradictorio en el juego de sentimientos encontrados', comments Morales Lezcano (1988, [p.108](#)). Lécuyer and Serrano attribute to the struggle between aristocratic and bourgeois aspirations the underlying tensions in the diary (between, for example, exoticism and realism, exaltation of war and political and economic expediency, admiration for a less prosaic past and desire for progress) (1976, [pp.181-209](#)). Nonetheless, it is less than clear that the binaries they detail can be transposed to the categories of aristocratic and bourgeois, and less evident still that the latter two genuinely correspond to a pair of opposed forces in Spanish politics.³ More to the point still, the tensions in Alarcón can be accounted for in ways that reflect broad concerns in Spanish Liberal ideology and without recourse to such suppositions. There are, at the very least, two major problems facing the writer: the first is the relative weight Alarcón lends to an independent, Moroccan identity, given that his own views are born of Liberal Nationalism. The second is whether this Moroccan identity actually turns out to match the imaginative Oriental model that had been a component in earlier Spanish nationalist aesthetics. It is these two questions, I would argue, which lend the diary its importance, not its supposed ability to reveal the limitations of aristocratic power (Lécuyer & Serrano 1976, [p.209](#)). In saying this, I want to argue too that, whilst unjustified prejudice plays a significant part in Alarcón's Orientalism, so does a complex receptiveness to what he found in Morocco. There is more to Alarcón's enthusiasm for North Africa ([?](#)) than just bad faith.⁴

The extent of Alarcón's difficulties can be seen by comparing two occasional poems written during the campaign. In the first '[A la Bandera](#)' (dated Málaga 1859), Alarcón celebrates how the war has cured him of '[torpe amor y vil mancilla](#)' and brought him back to the Catholic faith (1954, [p.292](#)). In the second written in Tetuan in 1860 and dedicated to a prominent Muslim man of letters (Chorby) whom he acquainted in the city, Alarcón exclaims '[Yo no sé ya quién soy, ¡oh Mahometano!](#)'. In this poem, Alarcón imagines that his Andalusian, and Chorby's [Chorby's](#) (as it were) exiled Andalusian

identities will be brought together. 'Pienso que soy... el mismo que tú eres' he says, and looks forward to a time when the Moorish crescent moon will fly again over Granada (1854, [p.292](#)).

Whilst, of course, not too much faith should be placed in occasional poems, similar problems are encountered in the *Diario*. On the one hand, Alarcón revels in the triumph of civilising Christianity, particularly his own role in founding the first newspaper in Morocco (1954, [pp.952, 1060-64](#)), claims that Islam is false, doomed, and defeated (1954, [pp.980, 1030, 1039, 1042](#)), leers at Jewish and Muslim women (even trying to spy on the latter bathing) whilst asserting that they are little more than animals and do not inspire true feelings in him, (his peeping-tom exploits, he tells us, have nothing to do with concupiscence but are born solely of artistic [curiosity](#)) (1954, [pp.1010-12, 1027-28, 1031-32, 1036-37, 1066-77](#)), and indulges in anti-Jewish prejudice, whilst happily enjoying Jewish hospitality and asserting how tolerant the Spanish invaders are (1954, [pp.999-1002, 1007, 1009-13](#)). Yet at the same time, he expresses deep sympathy for the Africans and finds himself troubled by being at war with them: 'yo siento hondo pesar al considerarme enemistado por las circunstancias con una gente que admiro y compadezco de todas veras' (1954, [p.1029](#)). At its most attenuated, this means injunctions to respect an opponent who is defending his own *patria*: 'No nos apoque ni desarme la intensidad de su bien merecida tribulación; pero seamos circunspectos con el infortunio de quien lucha por la independencia de su patria' (1954, [p.846](#)). At its strongest, however, it means deeper concerns about the Moroccans, and about the implications of Liberal Nationalism. Alarcón's [Alarcón's](#) fear is that the Spanish will try to turn the war into a conquest and occupation; he rejects 'las rancias costumbres españolas de convertir todas las guerras en conquistas' (1954, [p.1073](#)). He is worried that the situation is analagous to the War of Independence against Napoleon, and the famous battle of Bailén:

¡Porque debemos confesar que la actitud de los moros ante la invasión española es la misma que adoptamos nosotros con la invasión francesa!... ¡Y todo el mundo sabe lo que sucedió entonces en la Península! ([1954, p.1057; see also p.989](#))

Conquest would be both a practical and moral error, *‘un patriotismo mal entendido’* (1954, [p.1075](#)). In [Alarcón’s](#) time, an allusion to Bailén and to the conflict with the French would not be taken lightly: the war of 1808-14 was habitually seen as the founding event in modern Spanish nationalism. Thus, Alarcón effectively attributes to Moroccan resistance a similar status.

Such a tense and divided view as [Alarcón’s](#) seems to be reflected in the two of the most important pictorial representations of the war: [Fortuny’s](#) *Batalla de Tetuán*, and [Rosales’s](#) *Episodio de la Batalla de Tetuán* (1868), and in Ros de [Olano’s](#) account in *Leyendas de Africa*. On the one hand, [Rosales’s](#) painting can be seen as celebrating Spanish victory, through the placing of the officer at the top right gesturing forward as he captures a line of artillery, and in the lower right the Spanish flag-bearer advances into the Moroccan infantry. However, to the lower left we see a black Moroccan perhaps symbolically shot in the back, and with his arms stretched out apparently in a visual echo and mirror image of [Goya’s](#) *Tres de mayo*. Despite his high rank in the army, Ros is more scathing than Alarcón, comparing the Christian [army’s](#) changing of Moroccan street names (the sort of civilising act Alarcón applauded) to the Absolutist Carlists who had baptised Liberal Spaniards as a prelude to executing them. Ros derides those who suppose that the Moroccans are more superstitious than Europeans, and places as an epigraph to his work the words *‘La mayor virtud del príncipe es conocer a los suyos, pero nada sabrá de los extraños si se separa de la justicia’* (1884, [p.131](#); Ginger 2000, [pp.196, 198](#)). Certainly, in [Fortuny’s](#) *Batalla de Tetuán*, there is a sense of what he called, in a letter to a friend, *‘cette grande lutte’* (Davillier 1875, [p.25](#)), expressed in the placing of Spanish officers in a high position as the enemy scatters. Carbonell has remarked on [Fortuny’s](#) diffusion of the ideology behind the war, to the point of altering significant details of historical battle scenes in order to glorify the main Spanish protagonists (1999, [pp.112, 123](#)). Nonetheless (and despite Carbonell’s claims that Fortuny seeks to emphasise Moroccan cowardice (1999, [p.123](#)), it has been felt by critics since the nineteenth century that the Moroccans are, in other ways, favoured in this and other compositions. Separating the Spanish and the Moroccans at the middle of the work, Fortuny detaches the fleeing Moroccan cavalry, making it larger and closer, and allowing it to take on a life of its own (Yxart 1881, [pp.79-80, 86](#); Folch i Torres 1962, [pp.123](#)). (It is interesting at least that when Dalí reworked

the painting in 1962 he made the now airborne Moroccans one of the most dominant elements of the composition.) Thus, whilst none of the figures studied here actually negates the value of the Spanish war effort, all are concerned with the autonomous dignity of North African identity.

If Liberal Nationalism, and political expedience, imply a problematic respect for an autonomous Moroccan identity, that view is reinforced by [Alarcón's](#) attribution to the North African Muslims of an indomitable freedom of spirit, whatever their external material circumstances. Force will never make them Spain's slaves:

¡Bástales con su propia convicción de que jamás serán nuestros esclavos!

De todo esto se deduce que los Moros son inconquistables por la fuerza; que su libertad de espíritu en el vencimiento los hace y los hará siempre *independientes* ([1854, p.1026](#)).

If responses to the invasion rendered views of Moroccan identity and its relationship to Spanish nationalism more complex and ambiguous, so too did it lead to a qualification and even a questioning of the exoticism with which North Africans were previously treated. Alarcón's account of what he found is at least supposedly empirical: he is 'dispuesto a observar por mi propia cuenta, a creer solamente lo que vea y toque'. He explicitly seeks to find out whether there is any truth in the Orientalist clichés of heady violence, languid sensuality, and intense sexuality, the 'aire cargado de terror y deleite; calor, silencio, puñaladas, caricias'; he aims to 'averiguar si en pleno siglo XIX puede la realidad corresponder a tanta poesía' (1854, [p.910](#)). Lécuyer and Serrano aptly observe here a potential tension between Romantic and alternative aesthetic forms, and a consequent ambiguity about the distinction between literature and reality (1976, [p.184](#)). To a significant extent, Alarcón claims that his literary expectations were fulfilled. On encountering the North African forces he declares, '¡Conque era verdad! ¡Conque no era fantástica creación de los poetas!' (1954, [p.848](#)), and on observing the Moroccan cavalry pronounces that '¡Era el espectáculo soñado por todos los que han divertido su fantasía con héroes orientales!' (1954, [p.866](#)). However, in other respects, Alarcón comes closer to a depiction in *genre* or *costumbrista* scenes and details of life in Morocco to French artists like Decamps. We learn of the hunting of monkeys to protect vineyards, the consumption of alcohol

by some Moroccans, the closure of mines, wealthy families visiting beaches, even though all of these too are classified as '*misterios*' (1854, [pp.938-39](#)). Inside Tetuan, like a *costumbrista* back home, he aims to see the national character in details of buildings and districts (1854, [p.1004](#)). These interests are reflected in the illustrations to the first edition.

As critics have observed, again since the late nineteenth century, the encounter with the everyday is even more marked in Fortuny. Critics have argued that even the battle scenes he produced depart significantly from Romantic heroic epic, under the influence of Vernet, but exaggerating even the latter's style by reducing much of the action to sketchy masses (Carbonell 1999, [p.124](#)). Whilst heroic individuals are not absent, they are very much part of a group experience, in a way that critics have shown to parallel other photographs and illustrations of the war, and which echoes the French *genre historique*'s illusion of matter of factness (for the latter see Marrinan 1988, [p.35](#)). García-Felguera (1991-92) has argued that visual depictions of the 1859-60 war on the whole were notable for their lack of epic characteristics. More importantly still, it was suggested by Charles Yriarte, the French artist who was there at the time, that Fortuny seemed more interested anyway in Moroccan everyday life in 1860 than in the war and its significance (1889, [p.8](#); compare García-Felguera 1991-92, [pp.267-68](#)). Like Alarcón, Fortuny does not completely renounce the exotic: he painted a number of odalisques, and even in the late 1860s, depicted a snake charmer. But on the whole, his scenes are not just anecdotal, but pointedly subdued in their observation of daily life: the façade of a house, a street, a horseman on a beach, an ironmonger repairing a horseshoe, a family group, a guard on duty (Carbonell 1999, [pp.119-20, 136](#)). Whilst Moroccans are often seen armed or languorous, the intensity of luxuriant sensuality and violence is simply lacking. Gaya Nuño has commented that Fortuny lends his Moroccan figures a dignity that surpasses degrading exoticism (1966, [p.344](#)).

This is not just a matter of the choice of subject, but of its treatment. With rare exceptions, Fortuny does not share the enthusiasm for wild polychromy so often exhibited by Orientalist artists (on the latter, see Sweetman 1987, [pp.125, 134, 191](#)); nor, with the partial exception of the battle scenes, is he much interested in drama or passion, or strong ideas, as late nineteenth-century critics observed. Yxart remarks on the painter's lack of concern, dating from his first visit to Morocco, with '*los episodios interesantes y conmovedores que se imponen al alma*' and observes how figures in his

later works, lacking all passion and human drama, ‘no se mueven ni accionan’ (1881, [pp.53](#), 149-50). Yriarte, who had known Fortuny in Morocco in 1860, remarks that ‘le côté âme et passion semblait lui échapper’ (1889, [p.8](#)). This seems to be true in a sense even of such stock Orientalist scenes as *Corrida de la pólvora* (1863) and *Fantasía árabe* (1867). The horses of the former image, perhaps because of their relative separation and individual clarity, do not form the sort of violently energetic and impassioned composition that one sees, for example, sometimes in Delacroix, and in a Spaniard like Lucas. In *Fantasía árabe*, the swirl of the dancers is substantially off-set by the spectators and walls which occupy much of the image. In both, for all that there are polychromatic touches, what predominates is the golden light (and *chiaoscuro* in the case of *Fantasía árabe*) which envelops the entire image, and which itself does little to suggest energy or passion, and rather absorbs the images. In these respects, the African light, so important to Fortuny’s development, served to align him with the more reserved of French Orientalist painters.

The eclipsing of the passionate and energetic view of Orientalism, whilst itself [was](#) fuelled by ideas of which the writer was aware before travelling to Morocco, is very marked in parts of Alarcón’s diary. [This is evident](#) in [the](#) discussion of urban architecture, and particularly in his comments on the facades of private buildings; Tetuán, he comments, is anything but monumental. The private dwellings, he comments (apparently correctly) are almost blank, shutting off the private inner world from the public gaze in accordance with Islamic belief in Morocco. Alarcón attributes a wide significance to this fact, linking it precisely to the inner dignity and freedom of Moroccan identity (1954, [pp.998](#), 1004-05, 1026; Petherbridge 1978, [pp.176](#), 181-84, 195-97, 199). Alarcón summarises his observations in the Arabic saying ‘*La elocuencia es plata, el silencio es oro*’ (Alarcón 1954, [p.1026](#)). Ros in turn saw in Tetuan a city free from Renaissance obsessions with order and clarity, and fundamentally concerned with inner feeling, unaffected by the relentless march of change (Ginger 2000, [p.198](#)).

What is especially important here is the coming together of the two main revised views of Moroccan identity and of its relationship to Spanish nationalism. The movement away from an interpretation of North Africa as exotically passionate, violent, polychromatic, and sensual, and towards an emphasis upon restrained dignity, is intimately related to the inner independence and

freedom of the spirit that is the essence of Moroccan autonomy. Moroccan life and architecture turns inwards, its exterior is almost blank or silent, precisely because of the central importance of that inner liberty and independence which Spain will never conquer.

It is highly significant for our understanding of Fortuny that Alarcón specifically links the effects of light to such a view. Looking out onto the rooftops and seeing only blinding light, he remarks: ‘Su blancura es tan deslumbradora, que daña a los ojos [...] Nada más monótono que semejante aspecto de ciudad; pero nada tampoco más misterioso y característico’ (1954, p.997).

Such words seem to be echoed in several of Fortuny’s studies of street scenes, notably *Calle marroquí* (1861) with its single dominant colour in which there are subtle modulations of little touches, and little else. There are sketchy indications of the broad architectural forms to the back, and a couple of diminutive figures are just visible to the rear but are painted in the same colour as their background. Otherwise, the painting is virtually blank. Later, a house in Tangiers (*Casa en Tánger*) (1871) is portrayed in a very similar way. A famous watercolour of a Moroccan soldier on a beach, *Playa africana* (1867), shares the same characteristics. The work is dominated by broad areas of subtle golden and white tones across the beach, sea, and sky out of which we can see emerge a few sketchy figures, and most prominently a large pole which all but merges with its own background. The image almost vanishes in the modulated blankness.

This emergence of African (and related) light as the dominant subject has been universally seen by critics as the turning point of Fortuny’s art, and of his development towards Impressionism. In that respect, there are two major, related issues. The first is the question of Fortuny’s treatment of the surface of the paintings, in which one sees from the 1860s on, two tendencies in different sorts of painting: one to wrap everything in light and *chiaoscuro*; the second to dwell obsessively on preciously deployed (often ornamental) detail (known as *preciocismo*) which became a key component of his commercial success, particularly with *La vicaría* (1870). Both exhibit an obsession with light in the wake of the Moroccan experience, but do they have anything in common? Secondly, there is the question, which has been raised in regard to other European countries (notably Italy and its *macchiaioli*), of whether Fortuny is treated justly by the comparisons of his trajectory to the Impressionists, or whether this tendency in 20th century criticism distorts his concerns and

achievements (Boude 1987, [p.282](#)). It is widely thought that Fortuny's commercial *preciosismo* initially prevents, and then in his last few years of life even perhaps pollutes his more free personal manner, so that, with his death at an early age, he only gets part of the way down the official Francocentric path of modernity, making him something of a unfulfilled talent. Such interpretations are fuelled by Fortuny's own growing impatience with his commercial [commercial](#) contracts, his openly expressed view that his commercial paintings had cramped his style, and his desire to paint with his own personality, as he put it, something that he did, for example, in his Portici paintings which do indeed resemble French Impressionism in some respects (Carbonell 1999, [pp.140-41](#); González & Benito 1983, [p.76](#); Réunion des musées nationaux 1994, [pp.16, 54-56](#)).

What I want to suggest for the rest of this essay is that the Moroccan experience of Fortuny may have some analogies with Delacroix's in North Africa in the 1830s, who from then on sought a deeper form of harmony (Huyghe 1963, [pp.279-96](#); Trapp 1971, [p.127](#)). In Fortuny this harmony was related to the notions of autonomous North African identity that we have seen above, and yet is also linked to Fortuny's concern with detail. It is true that Fortuny came to question his commercial works, famously telling the Baron Davillier that 'je commence à être fatigué (moralement) du genre d'art et des tableaux que le succès m'a imposé, et qui (entre nous) ne sont pas l'expression véritable de mon genre de talent' (Davillier 1975, [p.113](#)). However, such doubts do not make them necessarily completely irrelevant to some larger concern, nor do they mean *per se* that a man obsessed with collecting antiquities and curiosities (not least Islamic items) (Davillier 1875, [pp.63, 78](#)), and whose studio was packed with a bewildering array of them, lost his interest in detail. Fortuny acknowledged in a letter to Antonio Sisteré that, whilst they lacked 'el sello de mi personalidad', there were 'cosas buenas en mis últimos cuadros' (quoted in González López & Martí Ayxelà 1989, [p.108](#)).

In *La vicaría*, the painting that made his international name, we can observe the eye-candy effect of delicious, anecdotal detail. However, it is also worth observing how much of the painting is abandoned to a rather uninteresting floor, and, as critics have noted, how limited a range of colours (yellow to green, with some gold) is used for most of the work (González & Benito 1983, [p.89](#)). The painting can be seen as a series of subtle and clever modulations of areas of dominant and related tones. Something similar might be said of *Elección de la modelo* (1874), drenched as it is in golden

light, and with precious variations between soft pinks, greenish-greys, gold, and shadows. In this work, Fortuny was accused at the time by a French critic of putting similar tones on top of each other, to which he replied that this was exactly what he intended to do (Yriarte 1889, [p.38](#)). In short, there is a parallel between the near 'blank' paintings and these more *preciosista* works: both sorts of painting are primarily concerned with subtle modulations within a dominant colour or tone (or interrelated dominant colours and tones).

Here the thoughts of the critic Yxart in his 1881 monograph on Fortuny are important. Essentially, Yxart's view is that the artist ceases to be interested in establishing a main subject in his paintings. Rather, he is preoccupied solely with the interplay of interrelated colours and light effects, such that even the composition of the paintings lacks a focus. Instead, there are multiple possible patterns and interrelationships between the various parts of the image. Yxart argues that in such works by Fortuny, with their delicate little brush strokes, and exquisite detail, the human characters and actions are placed on a level with the other material objects, the background is as important, if not more important than the foreground, and above all the fragment is more important than the whole. Indeed, he argues, one could cut away any fragment of the painting and it would be as attractive and valuable as any other, thus subverting the hierarchical composition of paintings and their orientation around an idea (1881, [pp.114-15, 131](#)). The microscopic dissection of effects of light, he argues, is such that

tan múltiple variedad se difunde y descompone hasta lo infinito, irisa, tornasola las diversas partes del cuadro con mutuos y repetidos reflejos que pasan del espejo al mosaico, o del mosaico a las marmóreas baldosas, o de los trajes a éstas lamiéndolas levemente con tintas delicadas ([1881, p.127](#))

It was this, says Yxart, which made Fortuny's work so controversial, particularly in France (1881, [p.131](#)). Charles Yriarte was particularly critical of the equal treatment of human beings and objects in *Elección de la modelo* (1889, [pp.27-28](#)).

There is, then, a similarity between the *preciocista* works and both the absorbent light of other paintings and the more 'personal' paintings, despite even Yxart's claims that the latter seem to be by a different artist (1881, [p.135](#)). Multiple as Fortuny's colours may be, they are often closely related to each other in subtle modulation and, on occasion, limited to two or three dominant areas of tone after the fashion of the Italian *machiaioli* (Boude 1987, [pp.38-39](#)).⁵ The result is a kind of constant visual meditation across subtly interrelated fragments of the light and colour which counteracts any sense of Romantic dynamism or energy just as in the 'absorbent' treatment of light Romantic energy is stilled. As Foch i Torres comments, Fortuny now is to be seen 'posant valors damont valors iguals, illuminant les ombres i acolorint-les amb transparències. Així obtingué una entonació general clara' [placing equal values on equal values, illuminating the shadows and colouring them with transparencies. He thus obtained a general clear tone – [put this translation in a fn?](#)] (1962, [p.170](#)). At the same time, little brush strokes and gentle shifts of tone characterise the subtle modulations on which Fortuny's vision reflects: Yxart remarks on 'las más [sútiles](#) modificaciones que en las formas y el color introduce' (1881, [p.155](#)).

It can be argued that it is this meditative vision that prevails in the personal pictures of the end of Fortuny's life. In *Playa de Portici* (1874), the main of the three areas into which the painting is divided is dominated by a subtle play of ochre and green, in which such detail as remains is important in effecting that play of interrelated colour. In *Desnudo en la playa* (1874), the child's well-lit body lies on a nondescript beach of subtle variations, the vibrations of light that critics have often highlighted, and which are seen too on the body of the *Viejo desnudo al sol* (1870-73). With reference to the latter and in contrast with its model in Ribera, González López and Martí Ayxelà comment on 'los toques lumínicos que indican volúmenes de gran fuerza y vibración' (1991, [p.301](#)).

Out of this subtly meditative blanking often emerges a vision, like the body of the child, or the more colourful groups of figures in *La vicaría*, or the women of *Playa de Portici*. Speaking of *Almuerzo en la Alhambra* (1872), the latter critics discern 'una de las características de Fortuny, el

tratamiento minucioso de las figuras destacando sobre un fondo esbozado de manchas de color mucho menos definidas' (1989, [p.132](#)). The significance of this repeated feature of Fortuny's work remains ambiguous. It might be seen in similar terms to Ros de Olano's contemporaneous autobiographical work *Jornadas de retorno escritas por un aparecido* (1873). There, a 'cuadro' (as Ros puts it) is built up of multiple, digressive incidents apparently irrelevant to the central point (the traumatic memory of an horrific killing of a man by a donkey), which point is introduced abruptly, and is left unexplained with a return to digression (Ginger 2000, [pp.91-110](#)). In parallel, Fortuny's paintings might be seen as the subtle emergence of a central vision out of reflection on a multitude of distracting fragments. Such a view would be consistent with Alarcón's interpretation of the monotony of Moroccan light, the blankness of façades, and the preference for silence: their purpose is to provide us with the profound resonance of inner depth, of the truly free mind. However, a version of Yxart's interpretation of the artist might equally be sustained by the available evidence: the central vision in Fortuny (unlike in Ros) is ironically of no more importance than the fragments that surround it, and nothing is more significant than the subtle interplays of light and colour. There is no intellectual depth. Yxart commented that Fortuny's work of the 1860s 'revela el único deseo de deslumbrar con la magia de su paleta' (1881, [p.88](#); compare González López & Martí Ayxelà 1989, [p.127](#)).

The impact of Morocco on Fortuny was to revolutionise his painting such that across his work, and through successive changes of style, there is a continual returning to the idea of a gentle, even monotonous, modulated, sometimes all-absorbing surface out of whose lingering meditation sometimes emerges a distinct image. His questioning of the wildly energetic view of North African identity, and its role in Spanish culture, his affirmation of the importance of a distinct Moroccan identity and dignity in relation to Spanish, led him to an alternative construction of visual images which departed from his Romantic predecessors. What is less clear is whether, like Alarcón, he intended the near-blank surface to suggest depths beyond. Perhaps instead, as some contemporaries suspected, only the surface remained as the subject of his reflections.

In that respect, Fortuny takes his place among the major artists of early Modernity, directing our attention principally to the work of art in itself and the medium in which it is produced, not beyond it to a subject or emotion to which it refers. His response to Morocco was in one sense

strongly related to the views of contemporaneous Liberal nationalists in their assertion that Moroccan life constituted an autonomous, meditative, silent profundity that could not be absorbed into Spanish identity, but that was nonetheless of crucial importance in defining the latter. But on the other hand, and as is clear from Yriarte's remarks on the painter's lack of interest in soul and passion, Fortuny reverses the dominant opinion about Moroccan 'blankness' and its significance for Spanish culture, that it was a sign of something more profound. What Fortuny drew from his Moroccan experience was the notion that the near blank surface might matter in its own right.

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¹ For the most part of this essay, I will refer to the edition used in Alarcón's *Obras completas*, as it is the most easily available to contemporary readers. However, since the latter is based on the edition of 1880, where certain peculiarities of the first edition arise, I will refer to the text of 1860.

² A wide selection of Fortuny's works may be viewed at www.artehistoria.com.

³ A useful summary of and discussion of the latter issue's consideration in recent historiography may be found in Burdiel 1999.

⁴ There are evident parallels between some criticisms of and alternatives to Said and what is said here. A useful compilation of recent debate about Said is to be found in Macfie's anthology (Macfie 2000).

⁵ For the influence of Italian trends (including the *machiaioli*) on Fortuny, see for example González López & Martí Ayxelà 1989, pp. 34, 40, 106. See also Santos Torroella 1988, p. 24. For Fortuny's apparent awareness in 1874 of the differences between his own art, that of the *machiaioli*, and the Impressionists, see González López 1996, p. 21.