

FRANCISCO ASOREY

A Necessary Reappraisal

Francisco Asorey occupies a special place in 20th-century Spanish sculpture: few artists achieved such recognition; few produced so much important, enduring public work; few aroused the interest of writers and intellectuals, who saw in his proposals values that were even ethical, capable of synthesising or announcing a new era or moment; and few succeeded in proposing an iconography and a formal repertoire that connected with a broad public, unacquainted with the latest aesthetic trends. And yet, after his death, how rarely is he remembered when accounts of the finest Spanish sculpture of his time are drawn up.

In Galicia the situation is especially acute. During his lifetime Asorey enjoyed great prestige, both artistic and social; his work was represented in leading institutional and private collections and, significantly, in the principal cities and towns of Galicia, where important monuments and public works remain. He maintained active contact with writers, intellectuals and politicians who debated what the present and future of Galicia should be, and in his thinking, there was always a defence of historical values in culture, of materials that were close at hand and considered native, and of the need to demand education and training. Asorey also entered popular imagination through widely distributed ceramics that reproduced some of his most celebrated works. Yet, as with other Galician artists, this objective presence did not guarantee him the later recognition that the quality of his oeuvre warrants. For these reasons, the legacy of Asorey deserves renewed recognition – a legacy deeply rooted in values that remain very much our own.

Miguel Fernández-Cid, exhibition curator

The Monument

It is often said that a sculptor is revealed by the way he draws: attentive to detail, he notes, highlights and weighs tactile qualities, volumes, hollows, contrasts of form, sharp shadows, elements of weight and direction. This activity – this support – allows him to outline the ideal forms with which to embody an idea.

For many sculptors, drawings are valued only as notes, sketches or preliminary attempts, a search for the true dimension of the work, of the object. By both his time and his aesthetic outlook, Asorey belonged to those who understood sculpture above all as a monument – as presence, as public dimension. He tested ideas on paper, refined them by modelling with his hands, and in the final stage determined which material best served to embody each concept.

He often declared his kinship with Master Mateo's work in Santiago Cathedral, which he admired as a compact yet diverse programme in which every sculpture responds to its site, its purpose and its intention. Each of Asorey's own projects followed a similar path: analysis of the space and the perspectives from which the work would be viewed; study of the life of the figure to be commemorated, their principal deeds and earlier artistic representations; then his own proposal – and the immediate conviction that each form called for a particular material. In this way, he infused his works with a plastic quality approaching the pictorial. When the subject required, he did not hesitate to incorporate historical references – almost always to heighten the impact and lend the whole an epic tone. MFC

A workshop artist

Asorey understood art as universal, grounded in the study of tradition yet renewed in technique, symbolism and iconography. His aim was not so much to connect with the expert – though he welcomed this – as with a broad public, in whose response he saw the true success of his endeavour. When asked to explain the keys to his work, he would return to concepts such as honesty, or the search for mystery and spirituality, because at heart we are dealing with a fundamentally religious sculptor, committed to the idea of the monumental work, and resistant to other directions.

A workshop artist, distanced from the bustle of the art world, his difficult historical moment and the tendency to pigeonhole every artist into a movement have contributed to his being one of the great unknown (or, better, misunderstood) figures of 20th-century Spanish sculpture.

A sober sculptor, who looked with interest to the great moments of sculpture but also to solutions taken from painting and architecture in order to integrate them into a highly complex and seemingly solitary project, he surprises with resources such as his way of painting wood without first applying gesso; of choosing familiar materials; of mixing different tonalities of granite to create pictorial, graded effects; of playing with volumes to generate different spaces within his monuments; of devising a new iconographic model for the Crucifixion. Asorey *dreamed* on a grand scale, yet shaped each detail with his fingers – that mysterious extension of the eye that sculptors are born with – and he *saw* the work take form in his hands, or unfurl before him. MFC

Asorey by Asorey

'If you were an art critic, what would be your judgement of Francisco Asorey?

He is an individual who does nothing but work and seeks a way to survive. I admit in Asorey's work an excellent will, that it has some good things, and that, if he did not achieve something greater, it is due to the economic circumstances of Galicia, where the necessary stimulus is lacking, leaving this artist, as happens to many, reduced to a mere amateur sculptor. When the accounts are done, one realises that praise, embraces and press reviews do not feed a family's stomachs.

My art, at the service of Galicia, has as its foundation Prehistory, the Romanesque and the Baroque adapted to the age in which one lives. I believe I am satisfied with what I do, and I also hold the opinion that I have succeeded, since rendering homage to the local in art, by applying technique and inspiration. Art is universal: when one hears a melody and understands nothing of musical technique, yet likes it, it means the work has value; and in this case, do you not think that when a work pleases or attracts public attention, its resonance is universal? To serve Art one must not be in a hurry; one must think through the work, mature it, and seek for its vibration to reach all, regardless of the nation. What matters is that a work should have substance: that it should offer spirituality.'

Francisco Asorey

El Correo Gallego, Santiago de Compostela, 22 May 1959

The first decisions

The first Asorey, who appears focused on religious sculpture alongside portraits, maternities and allegories, is capable of transcending two seemingly banal subjects: the encounter and conversation of five clerics in Compostela, *Black Knights* (1915), and the more sensual dialogue between a guitarist and a dancer, *The Jondo* (1914). Both works were created in Madrid, at a time when, despite his youth, he already possessed significant plastic resources and, above all, close contact with other artists. The first is often compared to Rodin and *The Burghers of Calais*; the second to the imagery of Romero de Torres – one of his Madrid friends and probably the link that brought him closer to Valle-Inclán. In both, one can already sense echoes of the world of caricature.

Asorey's works are on a small scale, controlled from above in their entirety, yet they surprise through the skill with which he employs subtle shifts and inclinations to suggest the natural ease of a stroll or a conversation, characterising each figure through the slightest details and anchoring them to the ground from which they emerge as self-contained organic forms. Alongside that serene and extraordinary image stands the daring dynamism of *The Jondo*, a twisted work, difficult yet perfectly executed, with the singular grace of having been created by a Galician sculptor of Franciscan spirit. Asorey's interest may perhaps be aligned with that of other Central European artists of the time, and revisiting his work in such a context is no unworthy exercise. In the same way, his children's heads might be better understood in relation to the proposals of Medardo Rosso (1858-1928) than to those of Rodin. MF-C

Portraits

As a recognised sculptor, Asorey received commissions for portraits – a genre familiar to him and strongly present from his earliest works, as was the case for many sculptors, since portraiture provided both direct training and practical opportunities when resources were scarce.

In these early pieces, Asorey could be meticulous in detail, drawing heavily on Roman or Renaissance models; yet he could also allow himself greater freedom, in step with the impulses of his time. Whatever the approach, he always managed to draw something distinctive from each work: a head might emerge from an almost formless block, or the idea might contrast strikingly with the classical precision of a child's features.

In the 1930s he created a series of popular figures in polychromed wood – technically innovative and so captivating that they soon became objects of desire. He also portrayed figures close to him, often because of their support for his work, though rarely in wood. Taking a step further, he experimented with granite of varying tonalities, sometimes combined with marble, to achieve sensual plastic effects more akin to painting, while reserving sculptural values for the way each form, each surface, was worked in search of the qualities that best suited the subject. Although his portraits were produced at different times and are now widely dispersed, when several are brought together the viewer perceives a thread of exploration – the attempt to shape a portrait in a way that was always personal and different. MFC

The Christ of Moià as Testament

The work originated in a commission from a Catalan businessman who had visited him in his Santiago studio: 'The first suggestion that came to the artist when Don Pedro Viñas, brother of the famous Catalan tenor, entrusted him with this work for the church of his native town, was a Romanesque one. This is amply proven by one of the initial studies, cast in plaster and now placed among the multitude of sketches in Asorey's workshop. It is the hieratic Christ, head erect, whose hair and thorns radiate like a crown, arms almost horizontal, four nails and suppedaneum, following those precedents so familiar in the province for which the colossal carving was to be made' (Otero Túnñez). From this sketch there survives a photograph by Ksado, in which those Romanesque qualities that the artist believed would appeal to the patron – well versed in that art – can be perceived.

Soon, however, Asorey brought to bear his knowledge, his curiosity and research, not only in art history, iconography, and anatomy, and the work acquired a striking sense of mystery. Seen alongside Ksado's photographs and his surviving preparatory drawings, we come to understand the innovative process by which Asorey captured a decisive moment: the expression of human suffering, yet with the serenity of one who cannot die. The representation is striking: Christ appears flattened, as if lying down, deflated, almost fused with the cross. The idea of pain, the presence of death, exhaustion – yet expressed with serenity. The result is, once again, a masterpiece: unsettling, contemplative, capable of seizing the viewer's attention, but at the same time complex and deeply personal. MFC

Woodwork and Galician woman

In *Little Girl* (1921), *Offering to Saint Raymond* (1923), *The Treasure* (1924), *The Saint* (1926), or *Saint Francis* (1926), a great deal takes place on both the plastic and aesthetic levels. For different reasons, Asorey takes risks, moving away from orthodoxy, and revealing the theoretical and artistic reflections he reached by varied paths: a maternity figure that seems to emerge from the earth itself, rooted in it, nourished by it, its form evoking ancient, pre-Columbian cultures, though the Galician origin of the scene remains palpable; or the devout pregnant woman kneeling before a saint who need not be present, in an agile, innovative iconography that places the popular element at the centre, even though the scene is religious; the synthesis of Galician culture symbolised in the encounter between a peasant woman carrying a calf, with striking liberties taken in the woman's attire; the condition of the Galician woman, depicted in a daring nude that is drastic rather than sensual; or the suggestive reworking of Franciscan symbolism.

The recent rediscovery of *Mother of Sorrow* lends the group a particular significance: Asorey takes advantage of the part where the wood widens to bring the image closer to the tradition of deities linked to the earth. Furthermore, observation allows us to discover how Asorey, orthodox in carving, did not make the pieces in blocks – at least in this case – but rather divided them once finished, seeking the appropriate place to integrate the cut and conceal it visually.

Taken together, they convey the feeling that they are claiming, that they need, their own space: a kind of dressing room in which to remain closed, in order to enhance their intensity, their mixture of mysticism and closeness. MFC

Popular Reach – The Timeless Gaze

When assessing an artist's work, discrepancies often arise between what we call critical thought and popular taste. Asorey received early and explicit support – even open admiration – from intellectuals such as Ramón Cabanillas, Castelao, José Francés and Ramón Otero Túñez. Yet his work also found an immediate public echo through reproductions: high-quality ceramic editions produced in large numbers, prints and postcards of his monuments and key works, and even its use in advertising – a practice then also applied to Velázquez and Goya.

For some, he was the artist who captured the cultural spirit of an era; for others, his iconography resonated with their own sense of identity. In this way, Asorey bridged two traditional paths of access to art: the world of ideas and the world of forms.

Asorey and the Writers – Asorey's Library

Reviewing Asorey's career, one is struck by his close ties with intellectuals, writers and artists during the 1920s and 1930s – and by the fact that he never left Spain, never travelled abroad to see the works that interested him directly, despite his deep knowledge of art history and of the solutions developed by other creators.

Two details help to explain this. First, his early contact with writers and poets – most significantly his friendship with Ramón Cabanillas of Cambados – with whom he could share an *epic* voice close to his own sculptural sensibility. His close relations with Cabanillas, Villar Ponte, Castelao and Valle-Inclán, his well-demonstrated knowledge of Curros Enríquez, and his defence of Galician cultural values reinterpreted in contemporary terms, all reveal his affinity with those most committed to the renewal of Galician culture and society.

Second, the remarkable quality and breadth of his library. It contained the best histories of art, guides to the world's leading museums, monographs on past and present artists, exhibition catalogues, treatises on sculpture, ornament, anatomy, iconography, and studies of different cultures and of themes directly related to his own work. This was a working library, unusually rich for an artist of his time. Combined with his sharp eye for scale, dimension and volume, it made him, in a sense, a kind of *immobile traveller*. MFC