

THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF
MARINE ARTISTS

Art We Love IV: Bill Farnsworth, F/ASMA

“Sewing the Sail” by Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida



Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida's *Sewing the Sail* is an iconic painting--a favorite of a lot of artists. It's seven feet by almost ten and is in the Ca Pesaro museum in Venice, Italy.

Sorolla did a series of these folkloric paintings of Spain, and this would have been an archetypal scene. You can see how hot it is, just looking past the man at the end, the bright, bright sunshine out there.

Sorolla was a master in the use of light and studied it reverently. He moves your eye through the painting by use of the shadows and the light. And he has an idea of what he wants to say, because he starts in the lower center, and pulls your eyes up to the women, and then around, and back down again. There's constant movement, and he gives you lots of fun things to look at--the flowering

bushes behind the women--you want to be there.

Everything has movement, everybody's doing something different. It keeps you moving--keeps you thinking. You can almost hear what's going on. The time of day--he gives you a little look through the door. You know it's probably high noon, somewhere around there--the sun's coming directly down on the people.

They're in there because it's cooler to work.

One woman's kneeling, there's movement the way one is pulling the thread through with her left hand, and the other is pulling with her right in the opposite direction. There's a yin and a yang thing going on there, a push and a pull, and it draws your eye back to her, and another is gossiping and smiling. He thought about all of that. And many of his shadows have a greenish color back where the lady's sitting down. And more blue on the side and more green in there. He has all these different things going on to show where the light is coming from.

You have cool colors and high chroma, you've got neutral color, and he played that back and forth. The first thing I notice is the value pattern. If you broke this work down to a black and white photograph, the painting would have an interesting strong dark and light pattern, because on the left and the right the left side's a different shape. And you know it's this conical thing that he created with the sail. And that holds the painting together, those light and dark patterns. Some of the other stuff is just a little bit of eye candy. But the bones of the painting are perfect. And there's a beautiful color harmony going on with the blues to red, the reddish sienna color, a dash of red on the sash.

And what grabs me as I'm looking at it right now is that he put grapevines everywhere. He gives you just enough information to say that the shade that's coming down on those sails is the grapevines, only actually including their leaves by the bluish post on the right.

And look at how he used the shape of that hat (of the man in the plaid shirt), using the shadow by the doorway, and that beautiful sort of shape of the silhouette of the gentleman there. There's not a single element where you would say, "Gee why did he do that." And the values are perfect. And he really nailed down the post that's holding the sail. That's a heavy duty piece of iron that's keeping it in place.

I was an illustrator, so I have always gravitated toward story and narrative work where there's something more than just a pretty painting. I've never actually seen the original, but would love to. But I would really love to see the preparatory work he did for this painting. He might have sketched or painted just one figure, by himself. And then all the women. It's almost reminiscent of Norman Rockwell. He would have painted that woman's hand in the foreground. I mean, that is deftly painted. It's just beautiful, just that gesture. You've got the thick and the thin passages, He was able to create these beautiful believable edges. That's the mark of a master. It's very very difficult to play that edge there, he's got everything going on.

If you look at the underside of her right arm, he left the underpainting, he's got some green on the top of her arm, probably reflected from the greens in the grapevines above, got a little bit of blue there, but the underside he left open, with the warm coming through.

Sorolla would have been up there with all the best illustrators of the day, Howard Pyle among them. He could draw like nobody's business, and the narrative part of his work is

what makes it so compelling. It would be a painter's dream to have the kind of subject matter Sorolla had access to.

The intricacy of the challenge of making the sail and getting that canvas looking like canvas--it is an homage to his skill level but beyond that there is that strong narrative, and every person is perfectly in perspective. And you could walk right into that painting. I think that's what he was after. He knew that the value of everyday life, of painting people as they were, working people especially, that this would immortalize his culture, and I think it did.

- Bill Farnsworth, F/ASMA