



Light and Color, Sorolla Style

How to use the full range of values and brilliant hues to capture the dazzling look of light.

BY CHARLES SOVEK

Few artists in any period of history have exploited the effects of light as impressively as Joaquín Sorolla. Sunsplashed beach scenes, dramatically lit interiors and a daring approach to outdoor portraiture made him one of the most important painters of the century. Equally skilled at capturing both the tonal and color essence of a subject, Sorolla dedicated his life to chasing the sun as it played over the people and places of his beloved Spain. He continues to inspire students and professionals alike.

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DIFFERENT SIDES OF SOROLLA

Sorolla first earned fame with his portraits. These were solid, convincing pictures, yet they lacked a vibrant use of color. With a palette of earth colors, similar to that of Velasquez, his pictures appeared brown and "old masterly."

Soon, however, he discarded black, umbers and siennas in favor of pinks, purples and oranges, and he began developing and completing his paintings outdoors. At the height of his powers during this "rainbow" period, Sorolla didn't hesitate to tackle even the most complex subjects with the confidence of a master. Children bathing against a sparkling ocean, pic-

nic scenes full of frolicking figures, townspeople mending nets and so on were all inspiration during this fertile period. Careful tonal modeling was replaced by staccato-like slashes of various color notes. His normally playful brushwork took on even more vitality, and his desire to catch a fleeting effect replaced his earlier passion for carefully defining a form.

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THE MASTER'S PALETTE

Varying with the subjects he painted, Sorolla used essentially two different color palettes. For studio portraits, he favored one that included black, burnt umber, raw umber, rose madder, burnt sienna, raw sienna, yellow ochre, Naples yellow, vermilion and cobalt blue. Occasionally he would add orange, pink or purple, but he usually emphasized strong tonal contrasts over ambitious color effects. His outdoor palette was completely different and included cobalt violet, rose madder, all the cadmium reds, cadmium orange, all the cadmium yellows, yellow ochre, chrome green (since replaced by per-

using Outdoor Light.

Constantly on the lookout for fresh ways of handling the figure, Sorolla often painted portraits outdoors. In Raimundo de Madrazo in his Paris Garden (37.5x44 he turned what could have been a typical academic indoor work into an animated representation of the sitter. Notice the soft but telling patches of dappled sunlight on the shoulders, chest and right arm and how they echo a similar theme in the background. Also observe the cool blue of the sky defines the lights of the form.

SOROLLA

manent green light), viridian, Prussian blue, cobalt blue and French ultramarine. In both cases, he used lead white.

A teacher I had in art school, who once saw Sorolla give a demonstration, said he worked on a palette as big as a dining room table, squeezed out *all* the color from the tubes, and laid in the painting with brushes that had handles three feet long!

JUGGLING TONE, LIGHT AND COLOR

Whether working outdoors in sunlight or painting from a window or lamp-lit interior, Sorolla kept reasonably close to the age-old axiom that every object in light should be painted a middle-gray value or above, and every object in shadow a middle-gray value or below. And a study of his work bears this out.

Observe the value distribution in *Beach of Valencia* by *Morning Light* (page 58), and notice how even the dark striping on the hulls of the boats is raised to a middle-gray value in light. Correspondingly, the shadows of the white clothing of the women bending over in the foreground, which is the lightest area in shadow, is painted no lighter than a middle-gray value.

Another device the artist used was to keep a consistent bracket of values between light and shadow. Be it the white clouds in the left background, the middle-value figures lying on the beach or the dark hulls of the boats, Sorolla maintained a consistent, two-value jump between light and shadow on every object in the composition.

Another contributing factor to Sorolla's masterly control of values is his treatment of halftones. Because of the



Crisp, Reflected Lights

Sorolla loved to paint white objects, and in After the Bath (68.5 x 43.75) we see him reveling in myriad reflected lights and colors displayed when cloth is struck with sunlight. Notice how the yellow from the woman's dress melts into the white drape held by the boy in a hat, and how the lavender-gray of the shadow is intensified by the addition of the complementary color. You can also see how the darker value of the water next to the top of the drape makes the white appear even crisper. Another quality that makes this painting successful is the feeling of wetness in the water and on the clinging dress of the figure. Sorolla gave dimension to the composition with the simple indication of the three small figures bathing in the distant surf.

Yellow ochre added to show the warm, reflected light from the yellow dressing gown.

Viridian shows the cool passages of reflected light from the sky and water.

Warm and cool colors model the arm: the light area is yellowish, the halftone reddish, the shadow bluish and the reflected light leans toward orange. A complementary blue-green in the highlight suggests wetness.



Handling the Hues

When working outdoors, Sorolla changed his palette completely from the darker, earthier one he used indoors. This demonstration shows how he created ambitious color effects with his palette of the cadmium reds, yellows and orange, plus cobalt violet, rose madder, yellow ochre, chrome green (permanent green light on today's palette), viridian, Prussian blue, cobalt blue, French ultramarine and lead white. Note the array of warm and cool colors used to model the forms and reveal the play of light



Captured Candidly

Beach of Valencia by morning light (29½ x 41) shows Sorolla at the top of his form. The clustered foreground figures show a candidness that a photographer would covet. So, too, with the frolicking children under the watchful eyes of the women in the middle ground. The massive sails of the fishing boats give scale to the scene. The daubed-in sails of the background boats indicate the distant horizon. Also notice the way reflections of the foreground figures lead the eye into the composition and a progression emerges from water to damp sand to dry sand.

glaring effect of the sun, the halftones are only slightly darker in value than the passages of light. If painted a deeper value, these modeling tones would assume an importance inconsistent with the subject's strong light and shadow pattern and thereby neutralize the raking feeling of light in the picture.

Vermeer and Rembrandt used light as a foundation for their compositions while Monet was the first painter to capitalize on the color of light and its corresponding effects in shadow. But instead of continuing to use both a full range of values and a full spectrum of colors—as he did so successfully when executing his Argenteuil paintings in the 70s—Monet chose to pitch his values ever lighter until his pictures resembled a fabric of shimmering, high-key colors. Sorolla, on the other hand,

invariably used both a full tonal range and striking color schemes.

The use of contrasting color temperature is another hallmark of Sorolla's work. In all of the paintings shown here, either the light is warm and the shadow cool or the light is cool and the shadows warm, as in the figure in *Raimundo de Madrazo in his Paris Garden* (page 54). This not only snares the unique quality of a lighting effect but also gives the paintings a colorful vitality. It was no accident that the white towel in *After the Bath* (page 56) is bluish in shadow and yellowish in light. So too with the fleshtones, clothing, sand and water.

CRISP HIGHLIGHTS AND LUMINOUS SHADOWS

Be it a bather, wave or boat hull, Sorolla knew how to

make something look wet. He accomplished this by carefully placing highlights and reflected lights on objects at direct right angles to the source of illumination. Study the two boys lying in the water in the foreground of *Beach of Valencia by Morning Light* and notice how the glistening highlight; on their bodies cause the skin to shine with wetness.

The way this effect works is twofold. First, like the corner of a piece of cut glass, the facet of form that picks up the highlight is painted with a crisp stroke of opaque paint. Second, because the color of a highlight is usually complementary to a form's actual color—in this case a bluish highlight against orange flesh—it sets up a color vibration that causes the passage to literally glisten with contrast.

In both *Beach of Valencia by Morning Light* and *After the*

Bath, Sorolla relied heavily on the effects of reflected light to achieve added luminosity. Notice, for example, the head of the figure with a straw hat in *After the Bath* and how the left side of his nose and cheek reflect the light-struck passages of the white cloth. So too with the underside of the woman's left wrist and arm, which shows the warm light reflecting off the sandy beach. In both instances, the addition of the reflected lights gives the forms a sense of belonging to the environment.

A most obvious example of reflected light is in *Beach of Valencia by Morning Light*. Here, the colors of the sky, water and sand reflect myriad effervescent colors into the shadows of the foreground figures. Following the previously mentioned rule of not going any lighter than a middle-gray value in shadow, however, the



Studying the Forms

Beneath the astonishing array of color and tonal changes in this busy subject lies a rock-solid treatment of the forms. Sorolla eliminated all but the foreground cluster of figures and their reflections and reduced the values to a light, halftone and shadow. Yet the forms still appear light struck and structurally convincing. Rather than pitching everything high key at the beach, Sorolla structured his work with a full range of values.

artist wisely resisted the temptation to overstate these important reflective devices.

BRUSHWORK, PAINT

HANDLING AND EDGES Some painters favor a broad-brush technique, others are more themselves using small, dot-like strokes. Sorolla explored both. Most of his works, however, fall into the broad-brush category. Like the French and American impressionists, he applied paint thickly to his canvas.

Study the paint handling in the collection of pictures shown and notice how the strokes follow the flow of water, growth of vegetation or direction of a fold, not only capturing the gesture but also describing its form. The treatment of the waves, for example, in *Beach of Valencia by Morning Light* appears

stabbed on the canvas with staccato-like daubs, while the strokes in the drapery in *After the Bath* sensuously caress the various forms. In both cases, however, the brushwork displays a vitality that creates an energy and a sense of movement impossible with a more flaccid treatment. Regardless of how the paint is applied, the work is stamped with the artist's style of expression.

Sorolla's treatment of edges can also be an education. Notice the contour of the standing figure in *After the Bath*. Beginning with the soft to firm edges of the face, neck and hair, the edges turn sharp when showing the black trim of the gown. Moving down the figure, the lower torso and legs are softer until reaching the hard edge of the toes. Without this kind of sensitivity to edges, the figure would cease to exist in space, appear

ing instead as a two-dimensional cut-out.

A SENSE OF CANDOR Except for some of Sorolla's portraits of dignitaries—and even here the gestures are credibly lifelike—he had the magical ability to capture a figure in its most natural attitudes. No one looks posed. Each person is either bending over, bathing, carrying a child or reaching for an object. Even figures in repose appear natural.

Because of his strong draftsmanship, Sorolla was able to catch the form and gesture of a figure with only a few lines of charcoal or colorful swipes with a loaded brush. While it's tempting to speculate that he used photographs and carefully reconstructed his complex scenes in a studio, it's on record that they were done completely from life.

There are 24 figures represented in *Beach of Valencia by Morning Light*, yet owing to the superior capabilities of the artist, each one is depicted in some sort of perfectly natural activity.

GOING OVERBOARD

Many students who look at a Sorolla want to paint like him. I know I did. The energy, feeling of light and color, and optimistic choice of subjects, when first taken in, can indeed be intoxicating. But try not to go overboard, because you have your own special gifts. When Edward Hopper was studying with Robert Henri his work showed the influence of Henri's tonality and brushwork. But Hopper's mature works bear little resemblance to that of his teacher.

Sorolla acted as a similar catalyst to generations of successful painters and illustra-

tors. But the ones who have made their mark are those who *used* the wealth of knowledge Sorolla has to offer. So absorb every possible bit of information you can. Make copies, diagrams and color notes. Try using a Sorolla color scheme as the basis for a subject of your own. Even take a shot at painting some similar themes. But don't forget, it's your uniqueness, just as it was Sorolla's, that will measure your success as an artist.

Charles Sovek is an accomplished painter who shares Sorolla's enthusiasm for light and its effects. He's a popular workshop instructor and is the author of Catching Light in Your Paintings (North Light Books) and Oil Painting: Develop Your Natural Abilities, due for release in March by North Light.



From the Background Haze

The Peppers (37.5x 50.75) *Is essentially a study in shadows. The background is reduced to thinly painted patterns that imply rather than define detail. This extends to the seated figure on the left, whose forms practically disappear into the background. The real center of interest here is the peppers, which Sorolla emphasized not only by the use of bright color, but also by having the heads of both figures turned toward them.*

About the Artist

Born in Valencia Spain on February 27, 1863, and orphaned two years later, Joaquín Sorolla overcame his humble beginnings by winning a scholarship to the Spanish Academy in Rome. Upon graduation, he began sending his paintings to all the leading salons, including Madrid, Paris, Munich, Chicago, Vienna, Berlin and Venice, continuously winning awards. Requests for portraits began about this time and, combined with his prize-winning exhibition pieces, secured his position as a world-class artist.

Soon tiring of the academic sobriety of his large studio compositions, he turned his attention to outdoor location work, and from 1901 to 1905 he produced the 500 works of his first one-man show in Paris (1906). This was followed by numerous other important shows, all of which led up to his greatest success at the Hispanic Society of America (New York). In 1911, he began a monumental set of murals for the society depicting life in the various provinces of Spain. The vast size and scope of the project (some pieces measuring 15x35 feet) forced him to trade his usual sense of compositional verve for a more rigid and stylized approach. The series took Sorolla seven years to complete. Exhausted by the end of it, he suffered a stroke in 1920, leaving him paralyzed and unable to work. He died three years later at the age of 60.

The murals were definitely a remarkable accomplishment, yet one can only imagine the creative heights Sorolla might have scaled if the seven years of mural painting had been devoted instead to outdoor painting.

