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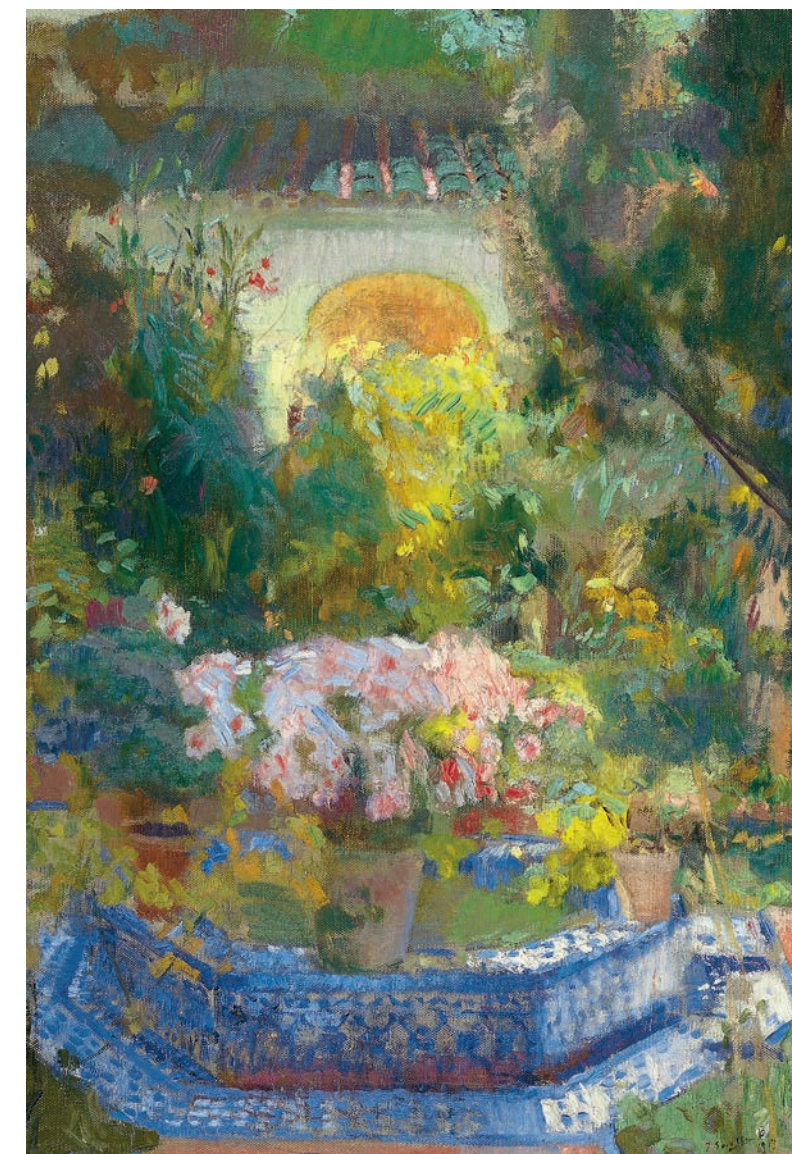
GLORY IN THE FLOWER

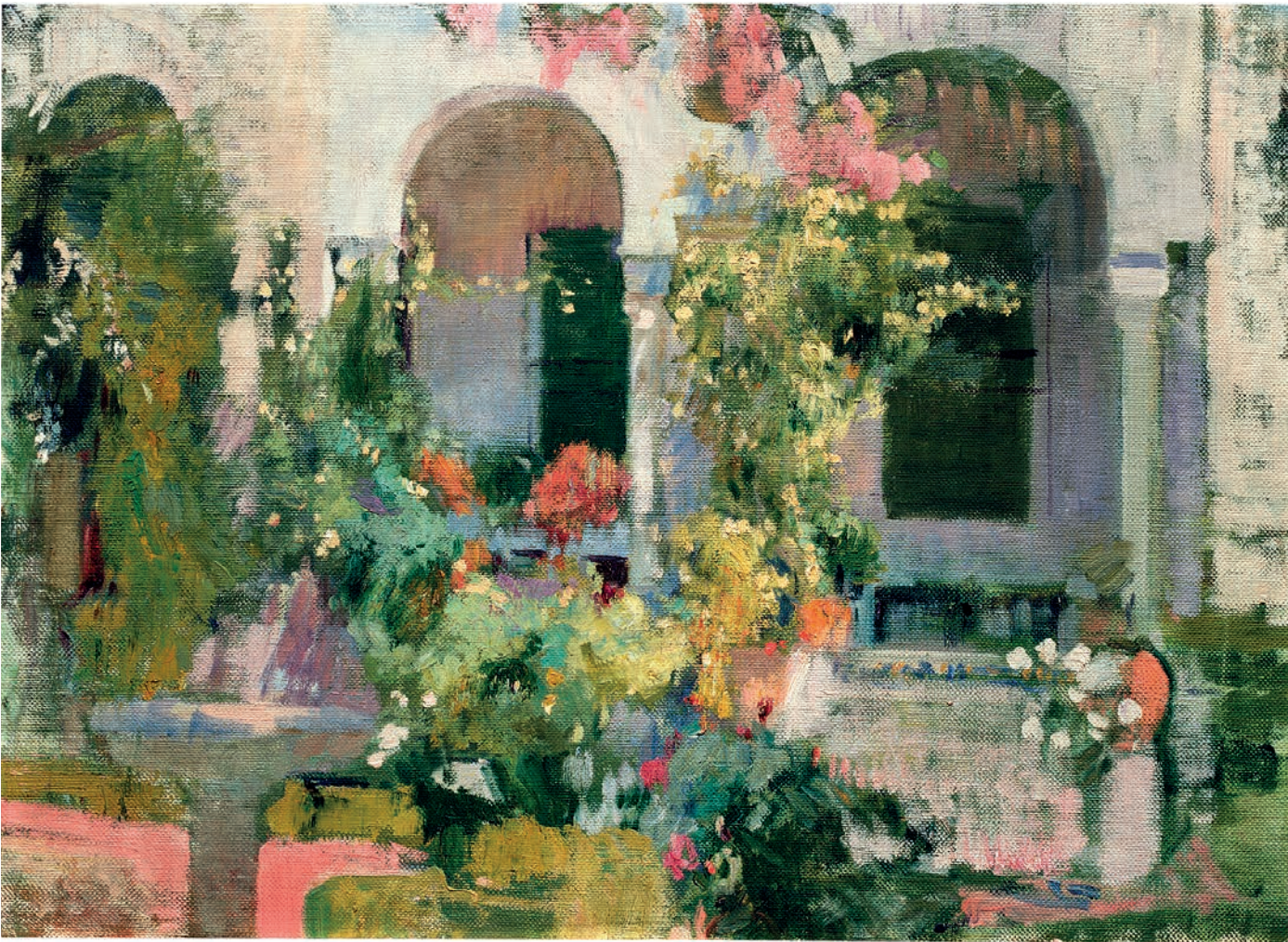
Lush and enchanting gardens were a continual muse for Spanish artists Sorolla and Vicente whose careers spanned different centuries. **By Lilly Wei**

“In the Light of the Garden” is a beguiling title for this equally beguiling exhibition of garden paintings. It should be especially welcomed by all of us eager to return to lazy summer days and a far less disrupted and distraught world, perhaps with a (virtual) glass of champagne in hand as we stroll through it. Organized by the Parrish Art Museum’s chief curator Alicia Longwell in collaboration with Ana Doldán de Cáceres, the director of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente in Segovia, it pairs Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923) and Esteban Vicente (1903–2001). The two esteemed Spanish artists who both had ties to Long Island, the former as a visitor and the latter as a longtime resident of Bridgehampton. Longwell has curated several exhibitions of Vicente’s works over the years and said she has always wanted to explore his garden paintings in greater depth. She credits Doldán de Cáceres for adding Sorolla, who, like Vicente, thought of his garden as a muse, painting it time and again.

Gardens are as old as human beings according to the Abrahamic religions, the Garden of Eden contemporaneous with Adam and Eve. And, if you are more historically inclined, the first written mention of gardens is in the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, the earliest literary text extant, circa 2000 BC, although gardens themselves predate it by millennia. There were also the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon, thought to be from circa 7th century BC, designated as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. And then there were Persian gardens, called paradises by the

Opposite page: Esteban Vicente (1903–2001), *Untitled*, 1996. Pastel and charcoal on paper, 27 x 22 in.; This page: Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923), *Patio de la Casa Sorolla*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 37 ¾ x 25 ½ in.





Top: Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923), *Jardín de la Casa Sorolla*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 28 7/8 in. Bottom: Esteban Vicente (1903–2001), *Untitled*, 1996. Paper and pastel on canvas. 17 x 24 in.



Greeks in a corruption of the word for garden in old Persian, and renowned as oases of extraordinary beauty. Through the spread of Islamic architecture and design across the Iberian Peninsula in the centuries of Muslim rule, elements of its gardens found their way into Spanish gardens, which are some of the most acclaimed in the world. And that cultural love of gardens, no doubt, influenced Sorolla and Vicente.

Images of gardens have flourished nearly as long. They have been depicted in Egyptian tombs, the wall murals of Pompeii and early Chinese scrolls. In Medieval and Renaissance paintings, gardens were often shown as a *hortus conclusus*, the walled garden and its flora symbolic references heralding the virtues of Mary. The motif of the garden in Western art became secularized and a standalone subject with the rise of a prosperous bourgeoisie. Landscapes, portraits, still lifes and objets d'art began to edge out religious art, as merchants replaced church and court as the primary patrons of the arts. And if these newly wealthy burghers didn't yet have the vast estates and parks of kings and popes, they could have sumptuous gardens and paintings of them.

Sorolla was a virtuoso portrait, landscape and his-



Esteban Vicente (1903–2001), *Untitled*, 1995. Charcoal and pastel on paper, 17 3/4 x 20 1/2 in.

tory painter who gained notoriety briefly for depicting the harsh realities of Spanish society in the 1890s but then switched gears to become the much sought-after artist of the good life. He was considered by many to be Spain's preeminent painter at the turn of the last century, acclaimed for introducing the luminous color and light of French Impressionists and Post-impressionists to artists who were still bound by the tenebrism of Spain's Old Masters. He traveled widely, exhibiting in Europe and the United States, stopping in New York and in Long Island. His American friends included William Merritt Chase, John Singer Sargent, Louis Comfort Tiffany and the philanthropist Archer M. Huntington. One of his most ambitious projects was commissioned by Huntington and is on permanent display at the Hispanic Society of America in New York. Called *Vision of Spain* (1912–9), it is a ravishingly painted record of the different regions of the country and their

disappearing traditions and costumes, even if more fantasia than gritty documentary.

Sorolla's paintings here are mostly late works. They gracefully epitomize a certain style of representational painting that would soon be eclipsed by abstraction, the dominant mode of the 20th century, but now rehabilitated, reconsidered. They show us the charms of his luxurious house in Madrid and its light-drenched garden (now the Museo Sorolla) from its arched loggia to a decorative colonnade of white pillars to tiled Moorish-like fountains, sculptures, shrubberies, trees and, above all, to its wealth of flowers, especially roses. Sorolla, once he discovered plein air painting, discovered that he was happiest painting in sunlight, surrounded by flowers.

Pink roses, not quite in full bloom, surrounded by a profusion of green leaves, dark and light, lean forward out of the picture

MUSEO SOROLLA, MADRID: © 2022 THE HARRIET AND ESTEBAN VICENTE FOUNDATION.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, SADDLE RIVER, NJ.



Top: Esteban Vicente (1903–2001), *Flower of Flowers*, 1997. Oil on canvas. 42 x 52 in. Bottom: Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923), *Fuente y rosas de la Casa Sorolla*, 1918–9. Oil on canvas, 27 7/8 x 34 2/3 in.



plane, as if offering their scent in a 1916 still life, the earliest work of his in the show. Bounty from the garden, they are casually thrust into a vase in *Rosas* (1916), the transparency of the water and the clear glass created with a few dexterous strokes, a testament to his technical prowess. The roses fill the entire field of the painting, conjured from an expert blend of expressive and concise brushwork. The other paintings are of the garden itself, from close-ups to more expansive points of view. *Rosal de la Casa Sorolla* (1918–9) shows the loggia festooned by swags of clustered roses in pink, white, yellow, the white walls delicately shadowed in mauves, pale blues and greens, a medley of pastels anchored by darker tints of reds, red browns, and ochres in the drawing of tendrils and stems, and slapped into odd corners, squiggled here and there—his prodigious color sense on full display. Another, titled *Fuente Y Rosal del la Casa Sorolla*, shows a fountain opulently draped in more roses, some parts of the picture rendered slightly out of focus, the sharpness of the edges blurred or erased to repli-



Top: Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923), *Rosal de la Casa Sorolla*, 1918–9. Oil on canvas, 25 1/4 x 37 1/3 in. Bottom: Esteban Vicente (1903–2001), *From Above*, 1997. Oil on canvas. 52 x 42 in.

cate the dazzling effects of light, the illusion persuasive enough to make you want to shade your eyes against its blinding glare or seek relief in the painting's cooler, greener niches.

You might look to see how Sorolla applies the paint and constructs the image, the strokes loose, broadly brushed, placed in small tessera-like daubs, or in a rapid-fire succession of short, parallel linear marks, among myriad variations. In some places, the paint is so thin the canvas's weave is visible while the roses, say, are often so thickly, lusciously painted they might be mistaken for frosting on a wedding cake, as in *Jardin del la casa sorolla*. Sorolla may have assimilated the palette and light of the French, but he was never truly an Impressionist.

Vicente, on the other hand, at the other end of the century, is best known for his abstractions. Vicente made his mark as a first-generation Abstract Expressionist, after several false starts, his paintings and collages celebrated for their vibrant colors, idiosyncratic forms and the poetic space he achieved by the canny juxtapositions of both. Vicente settled in New York City soon after emigrating from his native Spain in 1936 at the start of the Spanish Civil War, and was part of a circle of American artists that included Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, his studio on the same floor as de Kooning's on Tenth Street. These spirited, like-minded experimental artists would make New York the new Olympus of contemporary art, wresting the torch from Paris.

Vicente's paintings, however, relied less on gesture and spontaneity





Clockwise from top left: Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923). *Rosas*, 1916. Oil on canvas, 28 1/2 x 20 1/2 in.; Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923), *Patio de la Casa Sorolla*, 1918–1919. Oil on canvas, 31 1/2 x 19 7/8 in.; Esteban Vicente (1903–2001), *Untitled*, 1995. Tempera on rice paper, 21 x 26 in.



than others of the New York School, focusing on color and color as a structuring device to produce captivatingly buoyant, light-filled paintings. He, too, was a fearless but also nuanced colorist of instinctive brilliance, his color combinations often unexpected, as well as sophisticated, elegant. He, unlike many of his fellow AbExers, valued control over improvisation, and part of his sense of order consisted in painting every day, which he did for nearly his entire artistic life, considering each painting not as a singular effort, but part of the ongoing series that constituted his practice.

Vicente’s remarkable garden paintings form the bulk of the show: oil on canvas, pastel, charcoal, tempera and cut-up paper on paper, the collages suggesting topographical maps of sorts, or a schematic rendition of his garden. Many dated from the 1990s and bask in the sunstruck glow and colors of spring and summer. Vicente’s first visit to Long Island was in 1963 and by the next year, he had bought an old farmhouse in Bridgehampton, following the lead

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Clockwise from top left: Esteban Vicente (1903–2001), *Bridgehampton*, 1994. Oil on canvas, 50 x 42 in.; Esteban Vicente (1903–2001), *Countryside*, 1999. Oil on canvas. 52 x 42 in.; Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923), *Jardín de la Casa Sorolla*, 1918–9. Oil on canvas, 19 1/4 x 23 7/8 in.

of several Abstract Expressionist pioneers of the East End, where he and his wife lived for four decades. Vicente became enthralled by gardening, planting phlox, sunflowers, daisies, lilies, foxglove, morning glories and other similar species, preferring indigenous country flowers to cultivated hothouse blooms. Many of the works here seem to radiate from a central point or circle that could be read as the corolla of a flower, perhaps, or some other colored shape that Vicente extrapolated from his surroundings. Often these works are untitled and can be parsed as purely abstract—if such a thing exists—but their landscape associations are also evident, the shifting between the two modes an animating force.

One work is a small charcoal and pastel on paper from 1995. An angled, open rectangular form outlined in pink bands is quickly sketched at the center, subdued by grays, like a landscape in the middle of a deluge. Other highlights include a pastel and charcoal work from 1996, vertical in orientation. It is as much light as color—yellows, oranges, violets—and more or less at its heart there is a lime green shape to which a small bud of crimson has pinned itself, annexing the frontal plane, the rest pushed behind it. *Bridgehampton* (1994), a painting, is yet another, structured around two teal bands at right angles to each other bracketing the lower right corner, while drifts of white float against a pale jade green, summoning up the serenity of an early spring morning at daybreak.

An outlier in this group is *Autumn* (1993), an almost monochromatic painting. A warm vermillion blankets nearly the entire canvas over a deeper wine-colored ground, the surface furrowed

here and there with streaks of yellow and slightly paler orange-red curls, the color suggesting the earthier colors of fall and its reddening leaves, harbingers of shortening days, the coming darkness.

But despite intimations of (cyclical) mortality, “Light in the Garden” is a perfect summer show, offering us a temporary respite from too much reality through the steady, joyful vision of two masters at the end of their long illustrious careers—which, *ars longa*, and speaking of cycles, is also a beginning. **A**