



PARRISH ART MUSEUM

Joaquín Sorolla & Esteban Vicente: In the Light of the Garden
Introduction Text, Wall Texts & Wall Chats

LOBBY

The Parrish Art Museum enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship with the artist Esteban Vicente (American, born Spain, 1903–2001) and his wife Harriet Godfrey Vicente during their lifetimes, featuring the artist's paintings and collages in exhibitions and catalogues and building strong holdings in the Museum's collection of this important twentieth-century artist. We are grateful to Harriet and Esteban Vicente Foundation President Andrew Stein for proposing a further alliance between the Parrish and Vicente's museum in Spain, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente, in Segovia. The Director and Curator there, Ana Doldán de Cáceres, was planning an exhibition that would look at the work of Vicente and his compatriot, the great Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla (Spanish, 1863–1923) through the lens of their mutual love of the garden as both theme and inspiration. Soon the idea for a museum collaboration blossomed and plans for an exhibition here at the Parrish began.

Many painters have depicted flowers in their work. Fewer have created and nurtured their own gardens and found there a sustaining vision. *In the Light of the Garden* illuminates the worlds of Sorolla and Vicente in their late creative periods, when both were drawn back to nature, abandoning the urban centers where they lived. Sorolla purchased a plot of land in what was then Madrid's northern outskirts, building a house by 1911, and over the next seven years created a garden that would become the singular focus of his paintings. In 1964, Vicente, who had lived in New York City since the 1930s, purchased an old Bridgehampton farmhouse surrounded by open fields in the storied art colony of the Hamptons. Both artists placed their home and studio in close proximity to the garden, and for both artists, nature as an all-encompassing sensory experience would usher in a period of late efflorescence in their painting.

GALLERY 1

Joaquín Sorolla

In 1905, the internationally celebrated artist Joaquín Sorolla chose for his new home a plot of land far from what was then central Madrid on Calle General Martínez Campos. It pleased him immensely that his closest neighbors were wandering goat herds. Renowned not only for history painting and portraits but also seaside vistas in the Impressionist mode, Sorolla wanted above all to unite his three passions—for family, painting, and being outdoors in nature. He designed the house and adjoining studio in meticulous detail, creating three separate gardens and a courtyard that would integrate seamlessly with the architectural elements and unite the site into a functional and harmonious whole. By 1911 his wife Clotilde and children were living there. It would take another five years to complete the gardens.

The first garden contained a central fountain surrounded by four paths that define the flowerbeds. Here low boxwood hedges encircle tall-footed hybrid tea roses, a favorite flower of the artist and used throughout the gardens. Set against the porticoed façade of the house, is a climbing yellow rose that was a source of pride for the artist. Each element in this garden, including a tiled bench, is a strong evocation of the Alcázar, the historic 10th-c. Muslim fortress in Seville, one of the sites that inspired Sorolla's design and guided his collection of tiles and fountains.

The second garden draws on the Italianate influence with replicas of classical statuary. A third garden features a pergola for shaded afternoons. Climbing roses, camelia, and oleander impart their color and fragrance throughout. "Sorolla House," noted a contemporary writer, "is Valencia, it is Seville, it has something that calls to the soul of Italy." In the late paintings on view in this gallery, Sorolla is no longer concerned with describing the individual elements that he has so carefully orchestrated. He is capturing in paint the color, light, and atmosphere of his beloved gardens and this is his enduring legacy.

GALLERY 1

ESTEBAN VICENTE

Esteban Vicente was born in 1903 in the Spanish countryside village of Turégano. His father, himself an amateur painter, moved the family to Madrid and often took young Esteban to the Prado Museum and entered the art academy in Madrid as a teenager. Following periods of work and study in Paris and Barcelona in the 1920s and 1930s, Vicente immigrated to New York and in 1940, became an American citizen. He soon formed close friendships with many painters of the New York School, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko among them. Although considered an Abstract Expressionist, Vicente never totally abandoned the formal precepts of his academic training in form and color. Yet the work of his last decades became looser and more diffuse and deeply grounded in nature.

In 1964 a move to Bridgehampton on Long Island's bucolic East End allowed for an extended period out of the city. He soon began a garden, just footsteps from the door to his studio, and with no formal planning, took his cue from the surrounding meadow. Vicente's favored a naturalistic setting marked by large swaths of native plants massed to spectacular effect. The garden evolved over the years, yet certain favorites predominated: the intense purples of loosestrife, fragrant pink and white phlox, black-eyed Susan, Queen Anne's lace, sunflowers, and day lilies played against the green of the meadow furnished continual inspiration for the late paintings.

GALLERY 2

IN THE STUDIO

Photographer Laurie Lambrecht's lyrical images of Esteban Vicente and his wife Harriet at home in Bridgehampton give testament to the seamlessness of the connections among the house, the studio, and the garden that bordered the main Hampton's thoroughfare known as The Montauk Highway. Vicente was well known in the neighborhood for his daily half-mile walk to the post office, stopping on the way back at the convivial Candy Kitchen, a popular café and ice cream parlor known for strong coffee, daily newspapers, and the local gossip.

Though he drew inspiration from the garden, Vicente did not bring easel and paint outdoors but carried the sensory experience of being in the garden—the light, the color, the air—into the studio. He did not make preparatory drawings for paintings yet found drawing essential to the process. "There are times when it is difficult to paint because you don't have anything to say," Vicente once told students. "In order to paint again, you must keep drawing until you find yourself." In the last year of his life, the artist spent much time indoors and found solace looking out at his beloved garden from the screened porch or a sunny window. Sitting with a board balanced on his knees, Vicente drew in pastel with a newfound delicacy of line and color; a suite of these expressive works is on view here.

Vicente made his first collages in the summer of 1949, when a teaching stint in California found him without studio space or room for painting. He began to experiment with strips of newspaper and torn and painted papers pinned to paper or canvas, allowing the artist to freely investigate form and color in a highly personal collage technique that he later described as ". . . the marriage of accident and intention."

Vicente began his studies as a sculptor, attending the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in Madrid but by 1928 began to focus solely on painting. In later years, Vicente started again to work in three dimensions by constructing small sculptures out of scraps of wood from the studio floor or found objects, like an empty salt shaker. These "Divertimentos," or toys, gave Vicente a welcome chance to play freely with three-dimensional form.

GALLERY 3

OTHER ARTISTS OTHER GARDENS

Many artists have used their own gardens as inspiration for art. French Impressionist painter Claude Monet (1840–1926) is celebrated for the famous gardens at Giverny, where he painted his water lilies for the last twenty years of his life. Public parks also became popular subjects in the late nineteenth century. William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) painted Central Park and later parks in Brooklyn near his home. He also gained renown for his depictions of flora and fauna on Long Island’s East End at his home there. Artist Jane Petersen (1876–1965) studied in Spain with Sorolla, who introduced her to artist Louis Comfort Tiffany and his estate Laurelton Hall on Long Island’s North Shore. She later made many paintings of the Tiffany gardens. William Lamb Picknell (1853–1897) traveled to the south of France to paint his gardens in the brilliance of Mediterranean light. Jennifer Bartlett (b. 1941) was disappointed by the gardens she found at a European vacation rental but created an endlessly captivating body of work from the sketches and photographs she took during her stay.

Some artists felt they had only to look to their own backyard for inspiration. Charles Burchfield (1893–1967) once said that he wanted to paint no further than what he could see from his own back door. Fairfield Porter (1907–1975) found ample subject matter in the fields and woods that surrounded his home on Great Spruce Island, Maine. Robert Dash (1934–2013) often painted guests, like poet John Ashbery, seated at his dining table with views to the Sagaponack garden beyond. Saul Steinberg (1914–1999) was content to look out his window in Springs to depict the garden beyond. Joseph Stella (1877–1946), Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), and Robert Jakob (b. 1948) made exquisite, close-up studies of gardens and flowers in approaches from exacting naturalism to expressive abstraction.

GALLERY 3

WALL CHATS

Jennifer Bartlett

Responding to her surroundings, the artist Jennifer Bartlett once observed, “. . . has been a habitual thing for me.” During and after her travels to a villa in Nice, France, in 1979–80, Bartlett embarked on an ambitious freehand drawing project of nearly 200 unique perspectives, experimenting with countless modes of representation of the villa’s garden. What is remarkable about these re-imaginings of her surroundings, in this instance an unremarkable scene, is that each can be so different and so emotionally charged.

It is with sadness that we at the Parrish note the passing of this boundlessly inventive artist who lived and worked for many years on the South Fork at her summer home in Amagansett. Inspired as always by her surroundings, she often depicted a lone garden chair, looking small and vulnerable in the lush green surroundings.

Arshile Gorky

By the early 1940s, the artist Arshile Gorky had already begun to move away from artistic convention, forging a powerful, if enigmatic, visual language that built upon the freewheeling lyricism of Surrealism and anticipated the concerns of Abstract Expressionism. A breakthrough to his unique style came in the summer of 1943 when Gorky traveled from New York with his wife Agnes Magruder and infant daughter to the Magruder family’s Crooked Run Farm in Virginia. Enthralled by the surrounding countryside, Gorky would spend hours drawing in the fields, responding to the blooms, patterns, and colors, often returning to idealized memories of his early life on the shores of Lake Van, in Ottoman Anatolia, “I view nature in America, but memory plays favorites. And for me, that which we had in Armenia had a distinct essence.”

Robert Jakob

Robert Jakob is perhaps best known as a garden designer and the extraordinary garden that he cultivated for many years at his home in Springs. Begun in the English style with old roses and perennials, the design evolved into a series of “rooms,” and a mix of irises, roses, foxgloves, peonies, geraniums, forget-me-nots, lavender-- “A garden is hard to tame,” he has observed. Jakob finds the same constraints when approaching his art—lyrical works on paper that chronicle the changing display of the garden. “One tends to want to be in control if you make a painting or a drawing,” he says. “Yet things happen that you don’t plan for—they just sneak in. But you can erase them, fix them, paint over them . . . In nature it’s different, because things never stand still and you can’t do anything about them.”

Joseph Stella

Joseph Stella was one of the first artists that Vicente met when he came to New York in the 1930s. The younger artist was immediately drawn to Stella's visionary works that combined modernism with interpretations of the natural world. Stella's studies of flora and fauna were perhaps inspired by his home in the Bronx located across the street from his beloved Botanical Garden. Stella once wrote that his devout wish was ". . . that my every working day might begin and end, as a good omen, with the light, gay painting of a flower."

Billy Sullivan

Looking out from his dining room table in East Hampton, the artist Billy Sullivan has for many years documented the avian activity in his wooded backyard, capturing the social goings-on of East End birds in much the same way he has chronicled family and friends since the 1970s. Unlike Sullivan's vibrant oil portraits, which begin from his own photographs, the bird drawings are executed in a matter of minutes. Each time span is noted in the drawing's title, giving the works an evident immediacy. "One of the reasons I wanted a studio out here in the country is because I started drawing those birds. It wasn't about relying on a photograph anymore, but on what I was seeing, and memory."