

Picasso's Malaga

Urbanism and Society

For those visitors arriving from the sea, Malaga presented a beautiful view, but it is true that the city had few monuments of beauty, although by way of compensation in its favour was the mild climate. The original town centre showed Arab influence; at the end of the 18th Century the walls were demolished and the sea line receded, yielding more land and the promenade of the Paseo de la Alameda was opened. During the following century, the centre



underwent a radical transformation, losing the ecclesiastical character afforded by its convents as a result of the stripping of unused church lands and new dwellings were built for the use of the middle classes. However, the city developed in line with its Hispano-Moslem roots, with

an irregular design consisting of narrow winding streets badly paved. The main hubs of the city were the Alameda, Calle Granada – which joined the Plaza Mayor (Central Square) or Plaza de la Constitución (Constitution Square) with Plaza de la Merced (Mercy Square) – and the Port dockyards, a nucleus of intense trading activity. At the end of the century, the new thoroughfare that formed the backbone of the town centre was Calle Larios, connecting the Plaza de la Constitución to the Alameda. With the planning and promotion of the Town Hall from the year 1880 and the building carried out by the Larios family between 1887 and 1891, the result was an indispensable cleaning-up operation in an area that had previously been old and in a state of poverty and decay, a focal point of continual epidemics.

On the west side, the city limits crossed the boundary set by the river Guadalmedina and saw the setting up of manufacturing centres and the emergence of a large working class population in the districts of Perchel and Trinidad. To the east, the city saw the creation of the Paseo de Reding, in an area in which the old aristocracy had moved to, and beyond that the Caleta and Limonar, districts in which the wealthy families had their mansions where they would spend their leisure time.

The Malaga Society



During the 19th Century, Malaga recorded, with some ups and downs, an increase in the city's population, thanks to the influx of immigrants drawn by the thriving economy, and went from 57,500 inhabitants at the end of the 18th Century to 130,119 in 1900. The port, with its constant traffic, gave the city a particular liveliness, and the presence of foreign traders and travellers contributed to a cosmopolitanism that set it apart from the rest of Andalusia. The ruling middle classes lived in the Alameda and the areas close to the port, in magnificent mansions that dazzled the foreign visitors. The public promenade adorned with trees, statues, fountains and benches, and illuminated since the middle of the century, was the setting par excellence for social and leisure activities. Other such places included Cortina del Muelle, la Plaza de la Constitución and the Plaza de la Merced.

This ruling bourgeoisie known as “the Alameda oligarchy”, a small but powerful group of traders and industrialists who controlled all the different areas of city life, set down the standards for a way of life, a political philosophy and a system of values resistant to change. Just below them in the social scale was a broad middle class consisting of liberal professionals, public employees and small owner industrialists. In this group one could distinguish both a progressive political sector, that actively promoted reformism and republicanism, and an intermediate middle class, conservative in character, whose higher elements could rub shoulders with the upper classes, but whose lower elements (teachers, journalists, civil servants) tended to lead a life of economic difficulties, which resulted in having to maintain constant outward appearances to differentiate themselves from the working classes. They professed a conservative, reactionary and moralistic ideology, and being of low income and low social status, they aspired to the way of life led by the classes above them: we refer to the class known as the “I want but I can't have” class.

Picasso's family could be said to fit into this category. The dwellings inhabited by this social class were specifically rented property in the city centre, the most typical district being that of “el barrio del chupa y tira” – ‘the suck and throw district’ - (situated between calle de la Victoria and Camino Nuevo), as it was known colloquially and satirically referring to the way in which the locals ate

clams, a cheap food source that was the only thing the inhabitants could afford on a daily basis. In general, in their houses, the living room, which was the best room in the house and thus reserved for receiving visitors, contrasted sharply with the poverty of the rest of the family dwelling, in what was yet another example of the differences between the public and private aspect of this social class.

Most of the population of Malaga was made up of workers, whose numbers increased with the influx of immigrants amongst whom the most populous were poor peasantry, for the most part labourers. Their most typical dwellings were the “corrales de vecinos” (tenement blocks), although it was also common to inhabit small rented houses around manufacturing centres. The conditions of life were very poor: they were paid very low wages and had to put in long exhausting hours of work, even the women and children, and suffered from overcrowded living conditions, lack of hygiene and illiteracy. The worst extremes of this situation were begging and a high incidence of crime. Against this backcloth we understand the painful contrast between ostentatious wealth and terrible poverty.

As a result of these circumstances, which could apply in general to the rest of the industrialised world, the 19th Century was a period of riots and revolutions, which met with severe repression from the ruling classes. In Malaga, as in other parts of Spain, the most violent uprising took place at the same time as the Revolution in September 1868: the colonials shared out landed property, the workers attacked public and private buildings (amongst them the house of Martin Larios), and many of the figures in power had to take flight. In the re-establishment of order, 64 lives were lost and 115 injured, which did not deter the proletarian organisations from continuing their activities. Both in the city and in the province, a movement that rose to a level of great importance was anarchism, which from 1890 onwards was cornered by the socialist movement; other notable associations also existed at the time such as the Republican Coalition, the Catholic Circles or the Freemasons.

With the end-of-the-century crisis, the working classes found themselves the victims of unemployment, and this led to a great increase in social problems; people went hungry and many peasants were ruined and forced to emigrate. Worker organisations were at the centre of powerful social conflicts, successfully holding frequent strikes and demonstrations.

But a panoramic view of Malaga society would be incomplete without referring to its cultural and leisure activities. Regarding customs and habits, among the middle classes the women were rigidly confined to the domestic environment, whilst the men spent most of the time out of the house, at work, in the cafeteria, with their circle of friends or in the brothels. One typical feature in the customs of this social group were the “close informal gatherings”, meetings that were held in the winter evenings at a house in which young ladies hoped to be the object of a suitor’s attentions. The entertainment might consist of one of these girls playing of a musical piece, or a recital by a guest poet, a diversity of games or simple conversation and gossip.

Another of the day to day diversions were the walks along the Cortina del Muelle, the Lighthouse, the Alameda or the Plaza de la Merced. These were city open spaces frequented by all the social strata, chaperones and events attracting large crowds. It was also customary on sporadic occasions to make trips into the countryside to nearby country estates. Bathing in the sea were common among the petit and middle bourgeois class: neither the wealthiest citizens nor the working classes tended to visit the beaches.

Cafeterias and inns were the most frequented public establishments. As far as public spectacles were concerned, the most popular were the bullfight; the theatre lacked adequate venues and had little public following, until the last third of the century: in 1872 the Teatro Cervantes was built, designed by the architect Jeronimo Cuervo, and its ceiling was decorated by Bernardo Ferrandiz and Antonio Muñoz Degrain.

The bourgeois elite used to gather at the Circulo Malagueño and the Lyceum Club, created in 1842 in the old convent of San Francisco. Until its closure in the initial years of the 20th Century, all the Malaga citizens with ancestral lineage were members. There, informal gatherings would be held, schools and lecture rooms run, and charity work carried out, there would be literary contests, anniversary celebrations, theatrical performances, opera and concerts, exhibitions of paintings and handicraft. The cultural aspect fell into decline after 1890 and was replaced by more leisure and social activities. The hall and some of the drawing rooms were decorated with pictures by native Malaga artists.

The press was experiencing a great boom, especially if we take into account the levels of illiteracy among the population: during the whole of the century, 322 periodicals were published (of which 73 were daily). The most long-lasting of the

published titles were those financed by the dominant class, “El Avisador Malagueño” (1843-1886) and “La Unión Mercantil” (1885-1911).

Regarding public education, the city had an appreciable number of schools, one that was free for orphans, a number of private ones and others maintained by the Trading Council. Among the higher levels of education the places worth mentioning include the Seminary, The Professional Nautical School, the Provincial High School of Secondary Education, the Normal Higher Education Schools for Male and Female Teachers, the Higher School of Trade and Commerce, the Maria Cristina Royal Conservatory of Music and the Philharmonic Society. The Provincial School of Fine Arts was founded in 1851, occupying part of the installations of the College of San Telmo. It was dependent on the Academy of Fine Arts and the University of Granada. Not only did it teach the ‘higher arts’ but also artistic professions. A considerable number of students were enrolled there and all the native painters of Malaga of the 19th Century both learnt and taught there.