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Eternal stones, shifting light: Joaquín Sorolla's vision of Italy's built heritage

This study explores how Sorolla's lesser-known Italian works reveal his strong engagement with the built environment. Beyond his famous Mediterranean scenes, these paintings serve as valuable visual documents of Italy's architectural and urban conditions at a moment of tension between tradition and modernity.
By analyzing selected works from Rome, Venice, and Assisi, the research shows how Sorolla's treatment of light, color, and composition not only aestheticized but also carefully recorded architectural heritage. His views highlight the tension between permanence and change, emphasizing materiality, states of preservation, and the dialogue between buildings and their natural or urban surroundings.
Using a multidisciplinary approach that blends art history, architectural theory, and heritage studies, the paper interprets these paintings as both artistic achievements and historical testimonies. It considers how Sorolla's depictions reflect the technical and cultural knowledge of his time while revealing his strong connection to the Mediterranean built environment. The study also explores their relevance for current discussions on heritage preservation amid rapid urban and environmental transformation.
The study places Sorolla's Italian works within broader debates on how cultural landscapes are represented and preserved, highlighting the lasting importance of art in documenting and interpreting the built environment. It ultimately argues for reconsidering Sorolla's legacy, viewing him not only as a master of light but also as an unintended recorder of architectural history.

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Keywords:
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INTRODUCTION

At the crossroads between permanence and transformation—key notions in contemporary heritage debates—the artistic representation of the built landscape emerges not only as an aesthetic resource but also as an epistemological one. Within this framework, the work of painter Joaquín Sorolla during his Italian period constitutes a singular and underexplored corpus that deserves re-examination from the perspective of art history and heritage studies.

Thanks to his fellowship at the Spanish Academy in Rome (1885–1889), Sorolla had the opportunity to travel through cities such as Rome, Florence, Pisa, Assisi, and Naples, capturing with acute sensitivity the monumental architecture, urban corners, and everyday life of the Italian landscape. While critics have extensively celebrated his luminous Mediterranean scenes, his Italian production offers a more restrained gaze, focused on the relationship between built space and historical time. This research proposes a rereading of this corpus as artistic testimony with documentary value, in which the Valencian painter not only depicted Italy's architectural heritage but interpreted it through a modern sensibility, shaped by the tension between ruin and preservation, ideal beauty and temporal decay. In this sense, architecture becomes a visual and symbolic language, evoking the passage of time, the fragility of the built environment, and cultural memory. This study contributes to a renewed interpretation of the link between artistic representation and heritage, addressing both its visual dimension and its potential as a cultural archive.

By way of introduction, it is worth recalling the famous letter that Francesco Petrarca wrote to Giovanni Colonna in 1338, announcing his arrival in Rome: "I am drawn by the desire to contemplate the ruins of ancient glory" . Nearly six centuries later, another traveller—Sorolla—arrived in that same city, guided by a similar impulse. Through his drawings and paintings, the artist not only admired the remains but made them significant once again, re-signifying them in the light of his own time.

Figure 1 - Joaquín Sorolla, El monaguillo [The Altar Boy]. Rome, spring 1888. Oil on canvas, 44 × 88.5 cm. Museo Sorolla, Madrid. Inv. No.: 01427. The image has been divided using the rule of thirds to reveal its compositional structure. The main figure, dressed in red, is placed at the intersection of the first vertical third (left) and the second horizontal third (bottom), reinforcing its visual prominence..

This article examines a selection of works produced by Sorolla during his travels in Italy, with the aim of interpreting the relationship between art and architecture in his painting and analysing how these representations contribute to a richer understanding of the built heritage. Using a multidisciplinary methodology that integrates formal analysis, historical contextualization, and heritage theory, the study seeks to position these works as a visual record of a landscape in transformation, where time, light, and matter interact through the artist's gaze

A MULTILAYERED GAZE: VISUAL, HISTORICAL, AND SYMBOLIC CRITERIA FOR ANALYSIS

The methodological approach of this study is grounded in a critical and multidisciplinary reading of Joaquín Sorolla's Italian works, aimed at uncovering the visual, historical, and symbolic layers that shape his representation of built heritage. The objective is not merely to catalogue images, but to interpret them as cultural testimonies inscribed in a specific time and place.

The analysis draws on a selected corpus of paintings and drawings produced by the artist during his fellowship at the Spanish Academy in Rome between 1885 and 1889, mostly held today at the Sorolla Museum in Madrid. These pieces, created in cities such as Rome, Pisa, Florence, Assisi, and Naples, allow us to explore how the painter approached Italian architectural heritage with a gaze that was both sensitive and documentary. The selection responds to criteria of geographic diversity, architectural relevance, and the representativeness of Sorolla's artistic approach across different formats.

From a hermeneutic standpoint, the aim is to establish a dialogue between the images and

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their historical context, drawing on both formal analysis—which focuses on the use of light, framing, technique, and composition—and the reconstruction of the urban, social, and symbolic environments surrounding the works. In this sense, painting is considered a form of visual knowledge of space, as various studies on the representation of place in art and architectural history have suggested .
This methodological framework allows the artworks to be analysed not only as aesthetic objects, but as fragments of a cultural memory in transformation. By documenting buildings, urban corners, and architectural structures, Sorolla not only portrays a material reality, but projects a particular vision of the past—one in which light becomes an agent of interpretation, and painting, a sensitive archive of shared heritage.

REPRESENTING HERITAGE: ARCHITECTURE, TIME, AND MEMORY

Since the Renaissance, the artistic representation of architecture has served as a tool for reflecting on the city, history, and memory. In the transition toward modernity, this representational function undergoes a transformation: it is no longer just about describing the building, but about evoking its symbolic dimension, its relationship with time, and its inscription within a collective imagination.
In Joaquín Sorolla's case, this sensitivity is clearly manifested during his Italian period. Although his academic training prepared him for a precise and rigorous depiction of architectural motifs, his interest shifts toward atmosphere, context, and the visual experience of space. As Juan Calatrava has pointed out, "architecture in painting is not just a backdrop: it is a symbolic body that conveys cultural, historical, and emotional meanings".
This approach aligns with a conception of heritage not as a static object but as a system of meanings that is continuously being constructed—a perspective developed by authors such as Carlos Sambricio, who has analysed how heritage discourse in Spain was shaped by the emotional valorisation of ruins, monuments, and urban landscapes . From this perspective, heritage includes not only what is physically preserved, but also what is remembered, reinterpreted, or reimagined through visual means.
Within European tradition, the ruin emerges as a privileged symbol of the tension between permanence and disappearance, between past glory and present decay. The modern gaze upon ruins—from Romanticism to Walter Benjamin—introduces a melancholic and reflective dimension that is also perceptible in some of Sorolla's Italian scenes, especially those in which light glides across fragmented structures, walls eroded by time, or empty interiors that retain traces of past use.

Figure 2 - Joaquín Sorolla, Basílica de San Francisco, Asís [Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi]. ca. 1887–1889. Oil on panel, 17.2 × 27.5 cm. Museo Sorolla, Madrid. Inv. No.: 00176.

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In this sense, Sorolla's Italian work can be read as part of a visual discourse on architecture as memory, where what is represented is not simply a building, but a way of thinking about time. This idea also connects with Marina Llorente's reflections, who emphasizes that inhabited spaces are "archives of experience"—places where the artist's subjectivity and the materiality of the environment intertwine in a process of symbolic construction.
Based on this theoretical foundation, the article proposes that Sorolla's paintings should not be seen merely as beautiful images, but as interfaces between art and heritage, where the representation of the Italian built landscape becomes an act of cultural reading and historical re-signification.

ARCHITECTURE AS SYMBOLIC MEDIATION: THEATRICALITY, INTERIORITY, AND SPIRITUALITY

Joaquín Sorolla's stay in Rome, marked the beginning of his advanced artistic training abroad, within the framework of the aforementioned scholarship. This period represents a transition from traditional academic learning to the development of a more personal gaze, oriented toward atmosphere and narrative. Rome—laden with history and symbolic stratification—became a visual laboratory where the young artist experimented with relationships between figure, architecture, and cultural landscape.
A particularly significant work from this period is El monaguillo [The Altar Boy] (1888) [Fig. 1], painted during the Roman spring. The painting depicts a child in a red cassock, perched on a ladder leaning against a wall, observing a mundane scene on the other side. This seemingly anecdotal gesture reveals a more complex compositional and conceptual structure than it might initially suggest.
Compositionally, Sorolla employs an oblique viewpoint and a horizontal panoramic structure reminiscent of 18th-century theatrical staging. The background features barely sketched rural buildings, devoid of monumentality or precise identification, underlining their scenographic function. It is not about depicting a recognizable

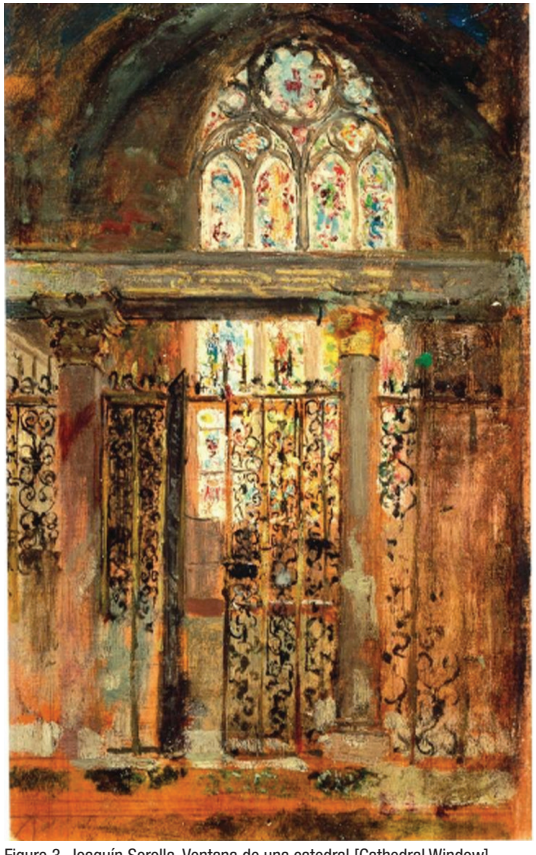

Figure 3. Joaquín Sorolla, Ventana de una catedral [Cathedral Window]. Italy (probably Assisi), ca. 1885–1889. Oil on panel, 27.6 × 17.1 cm. Museo Sorolla, Madrid.

Roman space but about constructing a narrative tension between two worlds: the religious interior, represented by the altar boy's attire, and the profane exterior of the pastoral scene. The wall operates here as a symbolic threshold between sacredness and everyday life—a boundary the child transgresses with his curious gaze.
This play of opposites can also be read metapictorially: the painter, like the altar boy, observes through a barrier. Architecture, then, acts as a framing device, as a visual and symbolic instrument of separation, while also serving as a motor for desire and narrative. In this sense, the work connects with a tradition in which architecture is not merely a background but a relational protagonist—a space that articulates tensions between the visible and the hidden, the permitted and the transgressed.
Aesthetically, the piece evokes the work of Mariano Fortuny, both for its meticulous execution and its fondness for theatrical and anecdotal scenes. Yet it also anticipates a more mature Sorolla, who would make architecture a recurring element in his symbolic and emotional compositions. El monaguillo, though not depicting ruins or monuments, explores architecture as a narrative and emotional structure—a mediation between social spaces and planes of experience.
In the final stage of his fellowship, Sorolla moved to Asís, where between 1887 and 1889 he developed a series of studies focused on sacred architectural spaces. Unlike the outdoor scenes or urban bustle of other cities, here the painter immersed himself in a world of shadow, silence, and introspection. Assisi—associated since the Middle Ages with Franciscan spirituality—provided a visual and emotional context suited to exploring the relationship between architecture and interior experience. One of the most representative works of this focus is Basílica de San Francisco, Asís [Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi] [Fig. 2], where Sorolla depicts the interior of the lower church, characterized by its ribbed vaults, bare walls, and dim light filtering through high stained-glass windows.
The slightly off-centre framing and presence of deep shadows shift the viewer's attention from the architectural object to its atmosphere. Far from monumental or descriptive representation, the painting conveys an emotional experience of space: the architectural becomes affective—almost liturgical. As Marina Llorente has pointed out, inhabited spaces are constituted as archives of experience, layered with memory, history, and symbolism. Sorolla captures precisely this: the emotional density of an interior steeped in memory.

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This representation recalls a long pictorial tradition in which religious architecture reflects the human condition, the passage of time, and mortality. Though not a ruin, the penumbra, worn stone, and silence of the scene evoke the transience of space—and of existence. Architecture becomes a kind of implicit memento mori—not through visible decay but through the sedimentation of centuries. A second work from the same setting, Ventana de una catedral [Cathedral Window] [Fig. 3], reinforces this reading from a more exterior and fragmentary perspective.
In this case, the painter focuses on an architectural detail: a window framed by composite columns and partially covered by a half-open grille. The low, lateral viewpoint and interplay of light through the leaded glass give the scene a shadowy and symbolic character. Architecture here appears as a threshold—a space of transition between exterior and spiritual, between the visible and the invisible. This kind of framing responds to a poetics of the fragment that Sorolla often cultivated: architecture is not shown in its entirety but in sections that preserve the evocative power of the whole. The viewer does not see a cathedral; they see an opening, a crack, a veiled access. This visual strategy turns architecture into a mediation between the world and the sacred—a motif deeply rooted in Christian iconography.
Works such as Casa de Asís [House in Assisi] or Rincón de Asís [Corner of Assisi] continue this search for intimacy, contemplation, and the essential. In all of them, Sorolla seems to suggest that architecture is not merely represented—it is inhabited, felt, and remembered. It is in this turn toward interiority that the artist finds in Assisi one of his most singular and conceptually powerful expressive veins.

Figure 4 - Joaquín Sorolla, Calle de Florencia [Street in Florence]. Autumn 1885. Oil on panel, 17.3 × 27.7 cm. Museo Sorolla, Madrid. Inv. No.: 00065.

LIVED ARCHITECTURE: CITY, BODY, AND ATMOSPHERE

In Joaquín Sorolla's Italian journey, Florence and Naples represent a key transition in his relationship with architecture: the monument gives way to the street, and structural analysis transforms into a record of lived experience. Moving away from monumentality and the sacred silence of earlier works, these scenes focus on flow, urban life, and the human body in interaction with built space. Here, architecture is not an object to be studied, but an environment to be inhabited.
In Calle de Florencia [Street in Florence] (1885) [Fig. 4], Sorolla places his viewpoint at a height from which he depicts a wide avenue filled with carriages, animals, and human figures. The facades are only roughly sketched, with no ornamental detail or clear stylistic identity. What prevails is movement, atmospheric light, and a perception of space as a living fabric. In this context, one might evoke Walter Benjamin's figure of the flâneur: the modern stroller who wanders the city aimlessly, attentive to the fleeting signs of urban life. Instead of seeking out the monument or solemn scene, the flâneur observes the everyday as an aesthetic experience. In these Italian scenes, Sorolla seems to adopt that wandering gaze, attuned to atmosphere and ephemerality—closer to the lived experience of space than to its monumental codification.
This de-hierarchization of the architectural motif reflects a modern sensibility, already present in urban painting in Paris, Madrid, or London in the late 19th century. Sorolla is not trying to represent the city as a monumental whole, but as a quotidian space animated by bodies, gestures, noise, and climate. It is a kind of city in which architecture loses prominence to atmosphere: air, humidity, movement, traffic, and mercantile activity.

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Figure 5 - Joaquín Sorolla, Calle; mercado en Florencia [Street; Market in Florence]. Autumn 1885. Oil on panel, 8.9 × 13.5 cm. Museo Sorolla, Madrid.

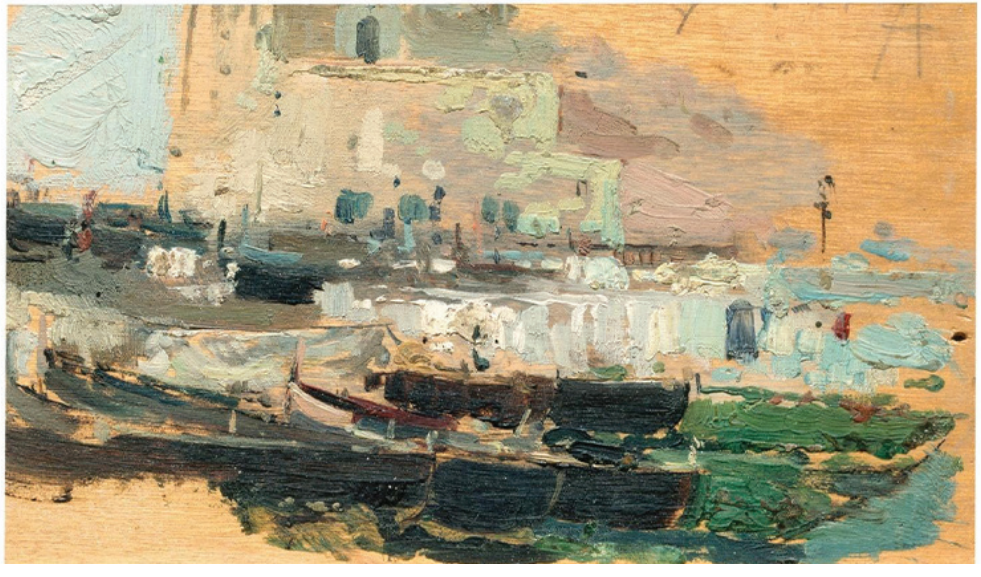

Figure 6 - Joaquín Sorolla, Puerto de Nápoles [Port of Naples]. 1885–1886. Oil on panel, 8.9 × 13.9 cm. Museo Sorolla, Madrid. Inv. No.: 00069.

This focus is intensified in Calle; mercado en Florencia [Street; Market in Florence] [Fig. 5], where the rain-soaked street, market awnings, and hooded figures form a fleeting urban landscape.
Here, architecture becomes a support for dwelling—an emotional infrastructure rather than an artistic object. The walls, roofs, and structures are merely indicated, but they reveal how the city contains, channels, and expresses ways of life. This relationship between built space and social body has been widely studied by theorists of urbanism and the phenomenology of place, and Sorolla's paintings offer a notable visual example.
In Naples, this attention to the lived environment takes on more open qualities. In Puerto de Nápoles [Port of Naples] [Fig. 6], Sorolla turns away from the interior city to observe architecture from the sea. The composition presents a succession of boats, calm water, and a barely defined architectural background—probably a church or state building (it sligthly recalls a part of Castel dell'Ovo). Here, the urban space appears as a distant backdrop, blurred by the marine atmosphere. Architecture is not represented—it is suggested. The city is present but veiled by light and brushwork. It is the gaze of a coastal stroller: observing without describing, recording without codifying.
This gesture is repeated in Sacando las barcas, Nápoles [Hauling the Boats, Naples] [Fig. 7], where architecture disappears entirely from the frame. What we see is a group of workers pulling a boat onto the beach. The city is the off-frame presence: it lies behind but remains unseen.
Sorolla turns the urban environment into an implicit presence—one that structures the action without dominating the scene. Architecture becomes the invisible coordinate of human activity. In the words of Amos Rapoport, the built environment is not exhausted by its physical form, but is activated through its use, its habitability, and its symbolic dimension. In these works, painting mediates between body and city, between landscape and gesture.

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ARCHITECTURE AS STUDY: MEMORY, MATTER, AND DRAWING

Whereas in other Italian cities Sorolla viewed architecture as atmosphere or a framework for life, in Pisa and in his travel sketchbooks a more precise and analytical approach is apparent: architecture becomes an object of study, almost a body to be visually dissected. This shift in attitude responds both to the academic demands of the fellowship and to the artist's growing interest in structures as carriers of material history.
The painting Púlpito de Pisa [Pulpit of Pisa] [Fig. 8] is emblematic in this regard. It depicts the famous pulpit sculpted by Nicola Pisano in the baptistery of the city. Sorolla adopts a low viewpoint, emphasizing the verticality of the structure and the monumentality of the sculptural ensemble.
The meticulous treatment of capitals, reliefs, and columns reveals a desire for formal understanding rather than subjective interpretation. Light is subordinate to volume, and the brushwork is restrained—almost dry. This stance can be read as an act of respect: the painter does not reinterpret but reproduces and documents. Architecture becomes a form of knowledge, and the painting, a visual record of heritage.
This approach coincides with a growing European concern for the preservation of sculptural heritage, especially present in Italy after unification. Within this context, painting functioned as a complement to historical-artistic discourse, contributing a visual sensitivity that transcended archaeology. As Carlos Sambricio notes, in the 19th century painting played a key role in the "visual construction of the past".
That same spirit is evident in Sorolla's travel sketchbooks, particularly in the drawings made in Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Naples. Many of these are pencil sketches on paper, revealing an interest in structural details: openings, arches, doorframes, museum interior fragments.
Despite their small format and minimal execution, these drawings show a type of attention that goes beyond technical training. They are architectural notes in the literal sense: records that condense proportions, dimensions, spatial relationships. But they are also valuable fragments of visual memory—quick observations that reflect an early awareness of heritage and light values.
Taken together, these works confirm that Sorolla's relationship with architecture was not limited to representing motifs but involved an intellectual and sensory exercise in reading space. Whether in oil or pencil, the artist displays a modern heritage sensibility that anticipates many of today's concerns about documenting cultural heritage through the gaze of the creator.

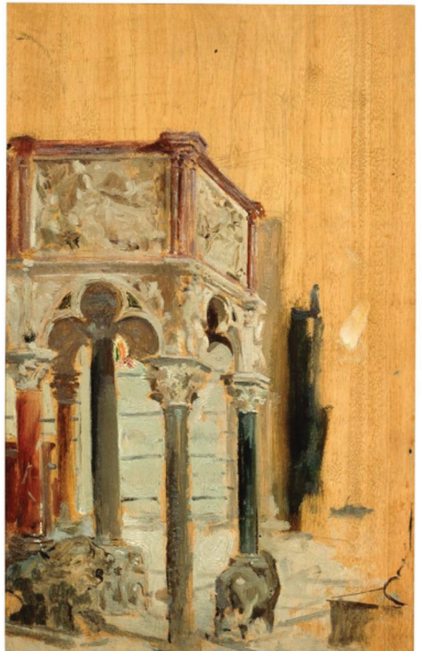

Figure 8 - Joaquín Sorolla, Púlpito de Pisa [Pulpit of Pisa]. 1885. Oil on panel, 27.5 × 17.3 cm. Museo Sorolla, Madrid. Inv. No.: 00064.

Figure 7 - Joaquín Sorolla, Sacando las barcas, Nápoles [Hauling the Boats, Naples]. 1885–1886. Oil on panel, 8.8 × 13.8 cm. Museo Sorolla, Madrid. Inv. No.: 00071.

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Figure 9 - Joaquín Sorolla, Vano con arco de medio punto [Opening with Round Arch]. Pencil on paper, 9.5 × 5.9 cm. Travel sketchbook, 1886. Museo Sorolla, Madrid.

Figure 10 - Joaquín Sorolla, Napoli, Museo [Naples, Museum]. Pencil on paper, 9.5 × 5.9 cm. Travel sketchbook, 1886. Museo Sorolla, Madrid. Inv. No.: 12455.

CONCLUSION

During his time as a fellow in Italy, Joaquín Sorolla developed a unique perspective on the built heritage. Far from limiting himself to academic reproductions
of monuments, his work reveals a more complex and modern approach, in which architecture is not only a pictorial subject but also a symbolic site and a visual experience.
From the shadowy interiors of Assisi to the rain-slicked markets of Florence, from the detailed study of the pulpit in Pisa to the harbour scenes in Naples, Sorolla constructed a fragmentary yet coherent reading of the Italian architectural landscape. In his paintings and drawings, the aim is not to fix an image of the past, but to capture the living relationship between light, matter, and memory.
This article has proposed a rereading of these works from a heritage perspective, understanding painting as a form of sensitive documentation—capable of registering not only what is visible, but also what is symbolically dense. Architecture, once represented, is not merely reproduced: it is interpreted and brought into dialogue with the experience of the modern traveller.
This interpretation is supported by an integrative methodology that combines visual analysis, historical contextualization, and heritage theory, allowing Sorolla's work to be situated within a broader reflection on art as a cultural archive. In this sense, his Italian output offers a significant contribution to the study of architectural heritage—not through material conservation, but through visual and emotional re-signification of space.
The corpus examined here represents only a portion of the artist's vast production, but it is sufficient to argue that Joaquín Sorolla should be considered not only a great painter of light, but also a sharp witness to the transformation of European architectural heritage at a crucial moment of modernization, musealization, and loss.
There remains the possibility of further exploring other still understudied series, of comparing his Italian work with his Spanish production, or of integrating these materials into interdisciplinary studies that examine the role of art in the contemporary construction of historical memory. This article, in that context, does not seek to close a discussion, but to open new questions about the relationship between art, architecture, and time. Ultimately, its goal is to reaffirm the value of the artistic gaze as a means of interpreting, preserving, and re-signifying the built heritage in contemporary contexts.

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NOTE

[1] The Royal Academy of Spain in Rome, founded in 1873 and located within the historic complex of San Pietro in Montorio, was conceived as an institution aimed at promoting the artistic training of young Spaniards in Italy. It occupies a former 15th-century Franciscan convent, adapted from 1878 onward by architect Alejandro del Herrero to accommodate the fellows. Over time, it has maintained a key role in Hispano-Italian cultural exchange and in the development of Spanish artistic and intellectual creation abroad (Jiménez Jiménez, 2013).

[2] Pons-Sorolla, Blanca (ed.). Joaquín Sorolla. Catálogo razonado. Colección de pinturas del Museo Sorolla. Madrid: El Viso, 2019.

[3] Calatrava, Juan. "Ruinas, destrucciones, demoliciones: vida y muerte de los edificios". En La arquitectura en la pintura. Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2021.

[4] Petrarca, Francesco. Familiares, XIII, 6. Carta a Giovanni Colonna (13 de marzo de 1338). Véase: Petrarca, Cartas familiares, ed. y trad. por Teófilo Ayuso, Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, 2001.

[5] Pons-Sorolla, Blanca (ed.). Joaquín Sorolla. Catálogo razonado. Colección de pinturas del Museo Sorolla. Madrid: El Viso, 2019.

[6] Llorente, Marina. La ciudad: huellas en el espacio habitado. Barcelona: Acantilado, 2015.

[7] Calatrava, Juan. "La arquitectura en la pintura: entre la imagen y la emoción". En Ruinas, destrucciones, demoliciones: vida y muerte de los edificios. Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2021.

[8] Sambricio, Carlos. La construcción del pasado: el patrimonio arquitectónico en la España del siglo XIX. Madrid: Akal, 2012.

[9] Benjamin, Walter. Tesis sobre la historia. En Discursos interrumpidos I. Madrid: Taurus, 2008.

[10] Llorente, Marina. La ciudad: huellas en el espacio habitado. Barcelona: Acantilado, 2015.

[11] Although the exact location of the scene depicted in El monaguillo [The Altar Boy] is not known with certainty, it can be hypothesized that it corresponds to the surroundings of the Gianicolo hill, where the Spanish Academy is located and where Sorolla resided during his stay in Rome. From this elevated point, one can observe rural areas and scattered structures similar to those seen in the background of the painting.

[12] Mariano Fortuny y Marsal (1838–1874) was a Spanish painter renowned for his technical mastery and for detailed scenes with strong anecdotal and theatrical content. His style influenced later painters such as Joaquín Sorolla, especially during his early period.

[13] The Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, built starting in 1228, is one of the main centers of Italian medieval art. It is renowned for its fresco cycle by Giotto and his workshop, depicting the life of Saint Francis, as well as works by Cimabue, Simone Martini, and Pietro Lorenzetti. This ensemble marks a key moment in the transition from Gothic art to the early Renaissance.Barcelona: Acantilado, 2015.

[14] Llorente, Marina. La ciudad: huellas en el espacio habitado. Barcelona: Acantilado, 2015.

[15] Walter Benjamin developed the figure of the flâneur as a symbol of the modern observer, especially within the context of 19th-century Paris. The flâneur is a stroller who walks the city capturing fragments of everyday life, not seeking grand scenes or monuments, but rather registering the ephemeral and the atmospheric. See: Benjamin, W. (2005). The Arcades Project. Madrid: Akal.

[16] Bosselmann, Peter. Representation of Places: Reality and Realism in City Design. University of California Press, 1998.

[17] Bosselmann, Peter. Representation of Places: Reality and Realism in City Design. University of California Press, 1998.

[18] Sambricio, Carlos. La construcción del pasado: el patrimonio arquitectónico en la España del siglo XIX. Madrid: Akal, 2012.

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