

About the Cover Art

Cover Essay: Big Fish Eat the Little Fish

My father, Luis Quintanilla, did this watercolor sometime in the mid-1940s. We were living then in New York, in Greenwich Village, on Eighth Street just off MacDougal. The studio was up on the third floor of what was once the Whitney townhouse, which went back to the 1860s. It had a huge studio window, with a northern exposure: the glass was thick, very thick, beautifully fluted, and allowed only an even modulated light into the studio—a perfect light for painting, and to see paintings in. My father claimed it was the best studio he ever had.

My father, at the time he did this watercolor, was in exile. He could not go back to his native Spain; if he had, he would have probably been shot, or he may have simply disappeared. In fact, the Franco government wanted him badly enough to attempt to kidnap him in New York sometime in the forties, not long after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) had come to an end. My father had been one of the leaders on the Republican side. In fact, he had antagonized Franco enough to be put on his first blacklist, the first 12 names of those to be shot in the Burgos bullring.

When he arrived in the United States in 1939, he had many good friends there: the American ambassador to Spain, Claude Bowers; Elliot Paul, the novelist; Ernest Hemingway; John Dos Passos; the journalist Jay Allen and his wife, Ruth; William Shirer; Herbert Matthews of the New York Times; and many others, mostly writers, fellow artists, a few politicians. And it was in New York that he attempted finally to start a new life, far from his native Spain, and far from his home in Madrid, a city with quite a different culture.

At the time he arrived here, he was a mini-celebrity, experiencing the uniquely American experience of “fifteen minutes of fame.” But whereas in Spain he had received the recognition and respect due an important artist, in America

he soon became overwhelmed by celebrity’s fierce demands, and it soon exhausted him. “In America,” he tells us in his memoirs (Quintanilla, 2004), “the dilemma is fatal. Either you allow yourself to be loved or you will commit social suicide.”

He chose the latter. And rather than exploit the celebrity, which rubbed off onto him by so many famous people, to advance his own career, he chose, instead, to paint, to work. For what good is it to be famous if fame keeps you from the work you are famous for?

So he immersed himself in his work, with perhaps a fresh surge of energy and enthusiasm for having been forced to stay away from his easel and brushes for so many years. And in his large studio on Eighth Street, with its magnificent studio window, he could work undisturbed, pursuing that ancient private aesthetic quest which is at the core of any artist’s life, and sought to develop his own aesthetic personality—one which was quite different from the artistic fashions circulating in Greenwich Village in the forties.

This watercolor is part of a series of small 15" × 22" watercolors he did of animals in the early 1940s; all in all, there are 14. They are of deer, bison, antelope, pelicans, deep sea fish, and other wild animals (see <http://www.lqart.org/waterfold/animals/animals.html>). The influence of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s famous ink drawing on this watercolor is also quite apparent (see <http://www.mystudios.com/art/northern/bruegel/bruegel-big-fish.html>).

To what extent did he, my father, feel the import of the Latin proverb? A world of big fish devouring so many little fish? The scene in my father’s watercolor appears gentle compared to the one he had only recently left in Europe, where fascism had devoured his own world. Where Hitler appeared as if he might be the biggest fish of all, though the Allies would eventually prove to be far larger.

The big fish in this watercolor appears almost innocent as his belly is ripped open to reveal all the fish he had devoured, as well as the smaller ones within the mouths of the larger—somewhere between death and life itself, all flopping out. The men themselves in this vivid scene appear innocent: mere fishermen ably processing their large catch. And the wash of the gray fishlike watercolors are also gentle. The touch is delicate and exact, the sweep of the watercolors highly controlled, without any blurring or smearing. Compared to the original Bruegel, the scene here is uncrowded, almost tranquil, and relatively lacking in activity. Only the large red fish portrayed in the forefront, with his ferocious row of sharp teeth, accents the predatory violence of the scene.

Why, besides an artist's caprice, such an ironic character? Perhaps because he did this watercolor and the rest in this series for me, a small child. As we know, the adult horrors of the world, those adult horrors my father was so intimately familiar with—fascism, human carnage, war—should be reasonably kept from a small child, for he will have to become aware of them soon enough, when he grows up. And the great irony in the scene is expressed through the contrast of its gentle execution and the awful worldly reality it depicts.

So he settled into his studio on Eighth Street, shunning the outside world, surrounding himself, for the most part, with fellow Spaniards, some of them exiles, all hoping, waiting over the years for Spain's dictator, General Francisco Franco, to finally go, or to simply die; these Spaniards all hoped to go back to Spain. And Franco was to live another 37 years!

I wonder how much of all this was in my father's mind when he calmly studied the famous Bruegel and redid it as a watercolor in his own manner? Thinking of adding it to the other watercolors of animals to give to his very young son? Knowing he, too, will someday be a fish in the sea. Or perhaps hoping that, like some of the fishermen in the scene, he would also set some of the little fish free?

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REFERENCE

Quintanilla L (2004) *Pasatiempo: La Vida de un Pintor*. Santiago, Spain: Edicios de Castro

THE ARTIST

Luis Quintanilla was born on June 12, 1893, in Santander, Spain. In the spring of 1912, at the age of 18, he abandoned his university studies in architecture and ran off to Paris to become an artist. There he met Juan Gris and, under the influence of his fellow countryman, became a Cubist. During the First World War, he returned to Spain, living in Madrid. In 1922, he met Ernest Hemingway in Paris, becoming a lifelong friend. The Duke of Alba became his patron in 1923 and, seeking a more personal, representational style of his own, he moved to Florence, Italy in 1924, to learn the art of fresco painting. Coming home in 1926, he received several important commissions and became recognized as an artist. On the night of April 13, 1931, he and Juan Negrin (Premier of the Spanish Republic, 1937–1939) placed a Republican flag on Madrid's royal palace, ensuring the revolution ousting the king would remain bloodless. While spending a term in jail for hosting the Committee for the October 1934 revolt, his drypoints of Madrid street scenes were shown at New York's Pierre Matisse Gallery, with a catalog by Hemingway and John Dos Passos. In July 1936, when the military rose up against the Republic, he led the attack on the Montana Barracks which saved Madrid for the government. During the spring, summer, and fall of 1937, he traversed the fronts of the war to do more than a hundred drawings of the war. These were shown in Barcelona and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in April 1938, with a catalog by Hemingway. Upon the fall of the Republic, he moved to New York and entered into an exile lasting 37 years. In February 1939, he married Jan Speirs, an American; the following January, their only child, Paul, was born. In 1976, following the death of Spain's dictator, Francisco Franco, he returned to Madrid. On October 16, 1978, at the age of 85, he quietly died in bed. To see a representative selection of Quintanilla's work, go to <http://www.lqart.org>

COVER ART

The Big Fish Eats the Little Fish by Luis Quintanilla, 1940s (watercolor on paper, 15" × 22")

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