

LUIS FERNÁNDEZ



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The early years in the life of Luis Fernández (Oviedo, 1900–Paris, 1973) show him to have been born into a family with a solid cultural background that undoubtedly influenced his later inclination towards the most diverse branches of knowledge. An art lover from an early age, he received his first drawing lessons when he was six years old in one of the schools in Oviedo. The death of his mother around that time and that of his father three years later cut short this formative stage in his life, as he was forced to move first to Madrid with his three siblings in 1909 and later to Barcelona on his own. The Llotja School of Arts and Crafts and Fine Arts in Barcelona provided him with his first formal artistic training. He remained in the city from 1912 to 1924 under the constant guidance of his first master, José Mongrell Torrent (1870–1937), a teacher at the Llotja and his main mentor in both artistic and personal development. Besides working as a salesman in a jewellery shop, an assistant in a photography workshop, a private drawing teacher, a leather craftsman and an operator at a printing house, Fernández also found time to begin learning to sculpt. It is likely that this activity overlapped with his several-month stint at the Museum of Industrial Arts in Madrid in 1921, where he seems to have practised the batik technique for dyeing fabrics.

In 1924 Fernández moved to Paris, where a whole new horizon of artistic and personal experiences opened up for him. From that time on he mapped out a course for himself that was mainly focused on painting. His arrival in the city also brought him emotional stability. His marriage in 1927 to his first wife Esther Chicurel (after whose death in 1954 he wedded Yvonne Bauguen in 1959) marked the start of a period of happiness. This contentment was further enhanced by his becoming a freemason that year, which made him feel fully integrated in a country that he rarely left thereafter.



Skull (Crâne), detail
1956-58
Oil on Masonite,
61 × 50 cm
Telefónica Collection,
Madrid



Of the two isms vying for artistic supremacy in late 1920s France, Surrealism and Constructivism, Fernández chose the latter. In close contact with groups such as Art Concret and Cercle et Carré and a member of Abstraction-Création, between 1928 and 1934 he subscribed to a geometric-abstract style with a strong mathematical underpinning based on the use of the golden section, which he did not consider incompatible with a certain symbolic dimension. Eventually finding this non-figurative style to be excessively dehumanised, between 1934 and 1936 he shifted towards an art of synthesis that sought to combine abstract components with elements borrowed from Surrealist poetics.

It was not long before the artist became more closely involved in this movement. In 1936 he was introduced to the Surrealist group by André Breton (1896-1966) and Paul Éluard (1895-1952). Attracted by the possibilities of exploring the subconscious and the realms of the imagination, he became an attentive reader of Sigmund Freud, whose writings led him to establish a close connection between the phenomena of painting and dreaming. Besides his anamorphoses, during this period, which lasted until 1939, he produced a number of paintings with a highly erotic content whose violent expressiveness was diametrically opposed to the restraint and formal austerity of his earlier compositions. This phase coincided with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), which prompted him to return to his native country, where he demonstrated his commitment to Republican ideals.

This political engagement and expressive turn were common to other Spanish artists living in Paris at the time, such as Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), who had become a close friend of his in the mid-1930s and influenced his art from the end of that decade to the



The Cat (Le chat)
1925
Black granite,
17.5 × 20 × 12 cm
Museo de Bellas Artes
de Asturias, Oviedo



beginning of the next. Although the two artists drifted apart after the Second World War, they never lost contact completely.

The end of the European war ushered in a new phase in Parisian artistic life that also affected Fernández. Exhibitions were resumed and his first dealer entered his life: Alexandre Iolas (1908-1987), who purchased his entire output from then until 1968. Although the two were initially on good terms—Fernández believed having a dealer would provide him with a more secure financial backing than he had previously enjoyed—they eventually broke off their relationship in the worst possible way. The period between 1944/45 and 1952 saw the artist adopt a post-Cubist style in which he produced his most important group of works, which can be divided into three genres: still life, portraiture and landscape.

However, it was not until 1952 that he began to attain his height of artistic development. Concerned by what he viewed as the fragmentary nature of the art of his time, Fernández set out once and for all to fulfil his dream of creating a 'total' painting by combining the best of contemporary art with the major accomplishments of past masters. To achieve this, it was necessary to master the manual, intellectual and spiritual methods of the craft, the first based on technical devices, the second on the correct use of drawing, colour and composition, and the third and most important on infusing the work of art with a supernatural dimension, through revelation and emotion.

That year marked the start of a new manner of painting. It involved executing series of works, in a style he called 'plastic realism', on the same motifs, such as a rose in a glass, another on a table, a skull, a seascape,



*Bullfight (Course
de taureaux), detail*
1940

Oil on canvas,
195.2 × 130.5 cm

Museo de Bellas Artes
de Bilbao



a stranded ship, rabbits, oxen, horses, a glass beside a piece of bread, a pair of pigeons, a skull with candles, and so on. By repeating these subjects, the painter sought to explore their essence, focusing on them with an intense gaze capable of isolating them from any contingency and revealing their unreal side in order to achieve what he referred to as 'hallucination from nature'. In his formal approach to these subjects, he returned to many of the guiding principles of his abstract period, such as refinement, simplification and paring down. Precise drawing and cold light, as if from beyond the grave, were two of the basic elements of these creations, which he imbued with a powerful spiritual dimension. The combination of a truthful rendering of the motif and intellectualisation of what he observed was decisive for the painter.

During his final years, from 1970 to 1973, Fernández further accentuated the constant ideals that appeared in his mature period, especially formal simplification and refinement. His split with Alexandre Iolas towards the end of his life brought him into contact with his last dealer, Claude Bernard (1929-2022).



Rose with a Candle
(*Rose avec une bougie*), detail
1971-73

Gouache and Indian ink
on paper,

245 × 350 mm

Museo de Bellas Artes
de Asturias, Oviedo



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COVER

Glass of Wine and Piece of Bread
(*Verre de vin et morceau de pain*)

about 1959-61

Gouache on paper, 218 × 160 mm
Fernando Masaveu Collection

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