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Alvar: Thirty Years of Lithography by Betty Jean Craige

[From Betty Jean Craige, Alvar: Thirty Years of Lithography

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Alvar

To make a lithograph you have to think about the possibilities that it offers technically. Technically, the lithograph has nothing to do with either an oil painting, or a watercolor, or a gouache, or a drawing, or an engraving. It is something else. And you must appropriate its possibilities and then express them, creating a subject or a composition in relation to what the lithograph can do.

Alvar

Hacer una litografía es pensar en las posibilidades que técnicamente puede darte. Técnicamente, no tiene nada que ver ni con un óleo ni con una acuarela ni con un gouache ni con un dibujo ni con un grabado. Es otra cosa. Y estas posibilidades hay que apropiárlas y entonces, pues, expresarlas, creando un tema o una composición pensando en lo que puede dar de sí.

Alvar

Alvar Suñol Muñoz-Ramos, known by collectors around the world as Alvar, has mastered lithography, oil painting, watercolor, gouache, drawing, and engraving, as well as sculpture. His house in Tiana, on the coast of Spain outside Barcelona, displays the variety of media in which he has worked since he painted his first still life at the age of fourteen. But Alvar has distinguished himself from other artists of his time most clearly in lithography, because of his physical involvement in every step of the lithographs production and because of the complexity of the lithographic image. At once artist and artisan, Alvar works directly on the zinc plate when creating his images, simultaneously employing his imagination, his artistic skills, and his knowledge of the mechanical process.

From the days of his youth in Paris, when he was just beginning to develop the imagery that was to form his life-long artistic identity, to the present, Alvar has explored the possibilities of the lithograph. Now, in his sixties, he enjoys both fame abroad and affection at home for his achievement in the whole range of arts he has practiced. In the summer of 2000, a retrospective exposition of his painting, *Retrospectiva Alvar: Empremtes en el Temps*, was mounted in the Sales Gòtiques de l'Abadia de Sant Miguel del Fai, opened by Catalonia's

President Jordi Pujol. The catalog for the show carried an introduction by Eduard Carbonell Esteller, Director of the Museo de Arte de Catalunya.

With this official acknowledgment of his importance to the history of Catalan art, Alvar assumes a well-earned place among the regions other twentieth-century greats: Pablo Picasso, Isidre Nonell, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, Antoni Tàpies, and Antoni Clavé.

Catalan Painter

Good art, says Alvar, speaks to the world but reflects the artists origins. In his own work he has endeavored to address the passions that he believes are universal in the human community at the same time that he expresses the sensibility of his own culture, that of Catalonia.

Catalonia lies in the northeastern part of the Iberian peninsula, bordering France. Its capital Barcelona is an ancient port city, founded by the Romans in 15 B.C.E., whose inhabitants have spoken Catalan as their native language for over a thousand years. After the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39, in which they unsuccessfully opposed the Fascists in their struggle to maintain their cultural identity, the Catalan people suffered repression from General Francisco Franco.

Alvar, who was born in the fishing village of Montgat, near Barcelona, on January 29, 1935, remembers the Civil War, because his father was a soldier in the Republican army. He also recalls the measures the triumphant Franco regime took to destroy the Catalan language and culture in the post-war period, when the dictator prohibited the speaking of Catalan in the schools and on the streets, outlawed publication of materials in Catalan, imposed strict censorship, and maintained secret police in Catalonia. For Franco, thriving cultures such as the Catalan and the Basque, which the languages kept alive, threatened Spains strength as a nation-state. Franco's aim from the beginning was to unite all of Spain under one language, castellano, that is, Spanish, and under one government, situated in Madrid.

Alvar's parents Tomás Muñós and Antonia Ramos, like their compatriots, preserved Catalan traditions throughout this period by speaking Catalan in their home, and Alvar and his older siblings Jordi and Amadea became equally fluent in Catalan and Spanish. After Franco died in 1975, King Juan Carlos relaxed the language restrictions and instituted democratic governance procedures in Catalonia. Today Barcelona is probably the most politically progressive, the most industrialized, and the most economically prosperous of Spain's major cities. And its street signs are all in Catalan.

Alvar showed an exceptional ability to draw since his early childhood, when he revealed more interest in sketching in the margins of his school books than in learning their contents. At the age of thirteen, he began contributing to the family income by taking jobs in which he used his artistic talent, such as decorating ceramic cups, bowls, and vases. His self-portrait, which he painted at the age of fifteen and which hangs in a sunlit hallway of his house in Tiana, reveals the intensity of his youthful obsession with art and attests to the skills he acquired on his own.

Encouraged by his parents and by his brother-in-law, the painter Joaquim Lerma, who helped him discover his vocation as an artist, Alvar applied to and was accepted at the age of sixteen into Barcelona's famous Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes de San Jorge. He was highly motivated and already convinced that only self-discipline could make him the artist he wanted to be: Every artist must impose upon himself a discipline, he would say. In 1953, Alvar won a scholarship to study in Granada, the Bolsa de Viaje Alhambra de Granada, which gave him the opportunity to travel around Spain and become acquainted with El Greco, Velásquez, and Goya. That same year he also won First Prize in Barcelonas Young Painters contest with a painting that is now in the permanent collection of Barcelonas Museu dArt Modern. After graduation from the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes, Alvar served his mandatory two years in Spain's army stationed in Morocco.

In 1957, Alvar had his first one-man show at the Galleries Layetana in Barcelona, about which the Catalan critic Sebastià Gasch wrote enthusiastically in the catalog: Emotion tempered, contained throbs in the work of Alvar Suñol. . . [B]ecause of the importance he gives to the paintings conception and because of the constant presence of spirit in his work, Suñol reaches the summit of poetry, and the emotion we experience in front of his canvases matches that which pure poetry produces. The earth-colored still lifes and depictions of peasants, influenced by cubism, inclined another critic later to think of Alvar as a portrayer of sadness.

In 1958, Alvar received a grant from the Institut Français in Barcelona for a springtime study-trip to Paris, and in the summer of 1959 he moved there. In 1960, he married his childhood sweetheart, Rosella Berenguer, in Barcelona, and they returned to Paris to stay for more than a decade. They had three children, Gemma, Noemi, and Alvar.

Shortly after his arrival in Paris the art critic Jacques Lassaigne, whom Alvar had not yet met, put one of his paintings in the School of Paris groups annual exposition at the Galerie Charpentier. The notion of a School of Paris had originated in the early 1920s as a category for the artists associated with

Montmartre, Montparnasse, or Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and while it carried little meaning other than geographic by the time Lassaigne designated Alvar a member, the attention boosted Alvars visibility in the French capital. Lassaigne saw in Alvars art the impact of the late-nineteenth-century Catalan naturalists, relatively unknown outside Spain, who had inspired Alvar to paint in a style which future critics would compare with that of the Mexican muralists. At the start, Lassaigne wrote in 1970 as Curator of the Musée dArt Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Alvar Suñol painted big peasant figures which seemed to be carved in a wooden mass and in which the body formed a cross. He wishes to illustrate the mysteries of life, work, birth, and death. The objects and backgrounds of these scenes participate in the emotion and tenderness that inundate human relations. Alvar, who knew nothing of the Mexican muralists at the time, was working in the tradition of social denunciation, as he later described his youthful endeavors on behalf of social justice. Lassaignes artistic support served him well in Paris and around the world, bringing him opportunities for shows elsewhere in Europe and in the United States and Japan.

In Paris, Alvar came to know the Spaniard Juan G. Fuentes, director of the Galerie Drouant, who in 1963 gave him a one-man show of the paintings he had completed since coming to France. It was Alvar's first exhibit of his paintings, and it was by all measures a success.

Lithographer

During his decade in Paris, Alvar experimented intensively with lithography. But not until the 1970s did Alvar develop the imagery and the thematic obsessions that characterize his mature art. Paris brought him into contact with Marc Chagall, whom he admired both for his artistic fantasy and his fidelity to his Russian Jewish heritage. The painting of Marc Chagall is one hundred percent poetic, Alvar said, echoing in his praise of Chagall's images the tribute Gasch had paid to his own. Chagall is a poet without ceasing to be a consummate painter. Never an imitator, Alvar obtained from Chagall neither a style nor a vocabulary but rather the freedom to abandon naturalistic verisimilitude. In 1967, Alvar painted Làngel in a manner that would henceforth be recognizable as uniquely his. The works that followed featured figures floating through a space marked by emblems of Spanish life: domestic interiors, musical instruments, plates of fruit, vases of flowers, doves, village skylines. The face that appears in all his art, the Romanic face with streaming hair, signifies for Alvar all humanity. In the end we are all alike, says Alvar, with the same emotions, the same needs.

Ten years later, art critic María Fortunata Prieto Barral, in a book presenting a sample of Alvar's lithographs of the 1970s, described his accomplishment as a joyful lyricism. She went on to say:

In his canvases and lithographs there is a delicious repertoire of angel-women, virgin-muses, celestial musicians, poets that appear as a blessing in ideal places where violence or fear or impiety cannot exist. It is like a remote transplant of an archaic Romanesque expressiveness to a spiritual humanism of a more civilized universality. Figures and objects, villages and invented landscapes, fruit and flowers that want to be more than a mere still life, pigeons that might be the messengers of ineffable announcements, everything appears weightless, even the churches and villages seem to float in the sweet immateriality of dreams. Rather than human substance, the characters seem to suggest an immortal soul; rather than places lived in by human beings, the villages are a decoration for happy tales.

The imagery Alvar produced in the 1970s appeared in all of his art thereafter, but in the lithographs it assumed a diaphanous quality impossible to achieve in other media. Alvar found in lithography a way to superimpose textures upon images and images upon other images to create illusions of translucency and immateriality.

Despite his youthful social denunciation, Alvar has not sought to be an iconoclast or a revolutionary, either as an artist or as an individual. María Fortunata Prieto Barral views him as more a guardian of universal values than a non-conformist. Alvar considers himself a happy man, *un hombre contento*, whose anxieties these days center mainly on the creation of the next artwork. Yet he also considers himself *un romántico*, a romantic, in that he is attempting to preserve Catalan culture in the face of globalization and to do true lithographs, using traditional techniques, in competition with well-marketed, factory-made, artist-signed reproductions. In these efforts Alvar wonders whether he is futilely holding on to the past.

Lithography, which literally means drawing or writing on stone, was invented in the late eighteenth century by Alois Senefelder, an aspiring young German playwright who discovered the printing technique accidentally while seeking inexpensive ways to reproduce his plays. Lithography quickly became an effective means to disseminate images of daily life to a broad audience. In the nineteenth century photography began to take over this purpose, but Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix, Francisco Goya, Honoré Daumier, Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, and a few other skilled painters and draftsmen adopted lithography as a new and different art form. It is the artists engagement in the production of the lithograph that Alvar wants to keep alive. To him, that is what the term original lithograph indicates. Lithographic art is indeed a production of multiple images, but it

differs significantly from the mechanical reproduction executed by technicians doing offset lithography.

For twenty-five years Alvar has worked with Juan Rodríguez, master printer and owner of the atelier ArtLitho in the town of Rubí some forty kilometers or so northwest of Barcelona. There Alvar transfers onto the zinc plates the picture in his mind, adding the colors successively to the evolving image by using a separate zinc plate for each color. Like many of his contemporaries, Alvar uses large zinc plates instead of stone, because the size of his prints and the number of his colors would make stone prohibitively expensive. For his recent lithographs Alvar has used as many as fourteen colors, each of which requires its own zinc plate, its own drawing.

The process Alvar uses is standard for lithographic artists. Alvar draws his initial image on the zinc plate with a black grease crayon or a greasy liquid called tusche, after which he or Rodríguez, or another master printer at the atelier, bathes the zinc plate in nitric acid and then in gum arabic to prepare it for printing. The acid makes the surface around the image more receptive to water, and the gum arabic fixes the greasy image so that it will not spread under repeated inkings from the roller. Alvar or the printer sponges turpentine onto the zinc to wash off the black, leaving the image barely visible, and then sponges off the zinc plate with water, which penetrates all but the greasy image area of the surface. With a roller the printer spreads a greasy ink, in the color of Alvars choosing, over the zinc. Because grease and water do not mix, the greasy ink will adhere to the greasy image, but not to the wet part of the zinc. The image suddenly appears in color. At this stage Alvar manipulates the image, etching portions of the image on the zinc plate or placing lace, for example, or crumpled paper, or drops of water upon the plate. Finally, the roller press, by picking up the image from the zinc plate, transfers the image to paper. If Alvar finds the print to his liking, he has the printer make the number of copies that will constitute the edition. He repeats the process for each color he adds to the lithograph.

Alvar will usually take an entire afternoon to print a single color, experimenting with the ink to get the results he desires. Although he generally uses French Arches paper for his editions, in the 1980s he often made an additional edition of the same image on *Japon nacré*, a more expensive, more fragile, translucent mulberry-bark Japanese paper that is more difficult to print and therefore more time-consuming for each color laid down. If a lithograph has fourteen colors, Alvar will have taken the paper through the press fourteen times and will have spent two or three weeks in the pieces creation. Upon completion of the lithograph Alvar takes the edition, which may be as large as 250, to another

workshop where he designs and oversees the embossing. Finally he signs each piece.

Lithography is an art, says Alvar, that is both cerebral and emotional. The artist must be able to imagine the completed work, know well the materials, determine what colors to use and in what order to apply them, understand the consequences of applying colors on top of each other, reserve white space as desired, and be ready to modify plans according to what occurs in the process. At each stage the artist is making artistic decisions.

Guardian of universal values

In maturity one acquires a sense of calm, Alvar said recently. And his art communicates his serenity. Although he remains in mourning for Rosella, who succumbed to cancer in 1996, Alvar acknowledges the good fortune he has enjoyed in his life, with a caring family and many friends. He sees the lithographs he created in the late 1960s and early 1970s as expressive of an inner struggle he has not experienced since. In fact, from the mid-1970s through the present, his art celebrates life, conveying to the spectator an appreciation of the values and habits of simple people, values and habits that he considers universal: romantic and familial love; talk over food and wine; nostalgia; the pleasures of the senses; the joy brought by music and the other arts. Ever present are flowers, doves, apples, watermelons, checkered floors and tablecloths, musical instruments, and Spanish lace, all icons for Alvar of Mediterranean life.

The titles of Alvar's lithographs reveal his interests: Barcelona, 1977; L'Inspiration (Inspiration), 1980; Le Chevalet (The Easel), 1980; Suite Biblique (Biblical Suite), 1981; Les Elements de la Nature (The Elements of Nature), 1983; The Five Human Senses, 1984; La Nature Humaine (Human Nature), 1986; Carnations and Poppies , 1987; Les Plaisirs de l'Esprit/Les Plaisirs de la Terre (The Pleasures of the Spirit/The Pleasures of the Earth), 1987; Suite Lyrique, 1993; Dona amb Flor (Woman with Flower), 1995; Rhapsody in Blue, 1997; La Pintora Mexicana (The Mexican Painter), 1999; Suite Musicale (Musical Suite), 1999; Las Musas del Artista (The Muses of the Artist), 2000.

The six-part Barcelona suite typifies Alvar's work of the late 1970s, when embossing on white space became a major component of his images. It has two lithographs devoted to Las Ramblas, Barcelonas long walkway famous for its flower stalls and venders of caged birds; two devoted to Gaudí, the art nouveau architect and designer who brought modernism to the city; and two devoted to the Sardana, the traditional Catalan circle dance. The suite is one of Alvar's favorites, for it both represents the Catalan culture he wishes to preserve and achieves the level of lithographic artistry, with six colors, that he always aims to

reach. Moreover it is filled with the personal symbols: the dove, for him symbolic of peace; the flute; the flowers; the lace; and the face that will become the hallmark of his work.

Ten years later Alvar was using more colors, making more ethereal the feminine floating figures, and making more elaborate and enigmatic both the colored and the white spaces of the lithograph. *Carnations and Poppies*, a two-piece suite from 1987 printed on both Arches and *Japon nacré*, which has a companion suite titled *Roses and Daisies*, presents his love of flowers in the context of tranquil domesticity. Alvar's flowers are most often cut flowers, though he depicts in *Poppies* the poppies growing in the midst of yellow wheat. *Poppies* is typical in its structure of many of Alvar's works on paper and canvas in which a tension between the designed world and the natural world is expressed by the contrast between the angularity of windows and tables and the roundness of human forms and the dove. Alvar derives aesthetic pleasure from the juxtaposition of geometrical forms, such as checks, tables, windows, and window sills, with the curves of the human body, a juxtaposition which implies the tension all humans experience, he thinks, between the realm of daily life and the realm of the spirit. In *Poppies* the window frames a sleeping figure, presumably affected by the narcotic of the poppy, as well as a wakeful one, in front of which hover two women at a table covered with a checkered tablecloth. On the table are a vase of cut poppies and a bowl of fruit. The gradation of color tones, the flowing etched lines of the women's hair, the lace on the sleeves and in the dark shadows, and the embossed dove, flowers, and sprigs of wheat in the white space combine to make a highly complex image with extraordinarily varied surface textures.

Rhapsody in Blue, created in 1997, is a technically more sophisticated and more labor-intensive piece than either *Barcelona* or *Carnations and Daisies*. Giving the impression of being a fairly monochromatic deep blue, it required over ten colors of ink and incorporated individually painted watercolor remarks. In it are three women, one playing the mandolin, another playing the flute, and the third listening through a window. Exemplifying Alvar's artistic development over the years, *Rhapsody* shows his love of music and his fascination with musical instruments, which appear again and again in his work; his love of flowers; his love of Spanish lace, which makes his work unmistakably Mediterranean; his intrigue with checks, seen in many of Spain's tiled floors and tablecloths; his mastery of embossing, which in *Rhapsody* includes, in ornate lettering barely detectable, the words Gershwin and *Rhapsody*; his interest in creating mystery through a diversity of surface textures, accomplished by placing different materials on the zinc plate during the inking process; and above all his profound comprehension of the interaction of colors in lithography. Across the bottom of the print is a drawing, which Alvar has hand-painted himself, of human beings

playing a variety of instruments. Alvar had initiated the practice of painting the watercolors on lithographs in the early 1990s.

For Alvar the flute, the mandolin, the fruit, the flowers, the dove, the lace, the tiled floor, the table, the checkered tablecloth, and the window are not only references to the world he wishes to recreate but also forms intriguing in themselves. He likes the symmetry and the color of the sliced watermelon, with its regularly spaced seeds, the comparable symmetry of the sliced apple and the cut flowers, the geometric pattern of checks, the graceful shape of musical instruments, and the elegance of the dove. The windows provide a visual echo of the frame of the entire image, and Alvar frequently plays with both.

In the late 1990s, upon his return to Spain from a visit to Mexico, Alvar created several lithographs commemorating his encounter with Mexican traditional culture. The ceremonies, legends, and folk art of the Indians in the southern state of Oaxaca had charmed him and would leave their mark on his imagination. Yet even while he was immersed in the magic of the Oaxacan universe Alvar realized again the importance for him of the artists faithfulness to his or her own culture, to his or her own region of the world. Alvar would always be a Mediterranean artist first and foremost. The image of Pintora Mexicana, a fourteen-color lithograph with water-color remarks, is structured like a number of his previous works, with two human figures floating in front of a window through which can be seen a village. One of them holds a paintbrush and a palette and the other a dove. However, amid the allusions to Mexico, such as the decorated pottery, the painted fish, and the hare, are familiar Alvar icons: a dove, an apple, a watermelon, a table, a tiled floor.

In thirty years Alvar has created an imaginary universe where people commune with one another in intimate spaces: talking, eating, painting, playing music, gazing out of windows, caressing one another in the peace that comes from re-enacting the simple, basic, millennia-old rituals of human life. It is a world without industry, without technology, without the pollution and violence that accompanies the growth of cities. It is a world whose center is an ancient Catalan village of the nostalgic imagination untouched by globalization. It is a world that is not described but rather evoked by the obsessive rearrangements of the same figures, the same icons, the same embossed patterns.

Alvar Today

Alvar lives in an ancient Catalan village, Tiana, twenty minutes from Barcelona. His house sits high on a hilltop, visible to most of the villages inhabitants. It is white with a red tile roof, multi-level, contemporary in style, and comfortably large, set on a carefully tended garden where in the summer grow such flowering

plants as purple and red bougainvillea, pink begonias, and impatiens. To reach the house one must enter the grounds through wrought-iron gates and then ascend a steep, winding driveway delineated by large pots of red geraniums. Beyond the house, farther up the hill, are an abandoned pigeon coop, where Alvar once raised doves, a swimming pool, which Alvar seldom uses because it takes time away from work, and Alvar's studio. From the studio Alvar can see the Mediterranean.

Inside Alvar's house, into which sunlight flows through floor-to-ceiling windows, the white plaster walls are covered with works of art. Some of them are Alvar's creations: paintings, lithographs, and etchings from different periods of his life. Others are prints and drawings Alvar has collected, including a small print by Picasso, who remains for him the greatest artist of the twentieth century. Embedded in the wall of an interior patio is a ceramic and bronze wall sculpture that he has made. On the tile floors are oriental rugs. In the dining room is a large oil painting that Alvar completed in Paris over thirty years ago, which he had sold at a low price in the 1960s and had bought back at a high price when it appeared in a Barcelona art auction in the 1990s. Alvar is eager to recover early paintings which he had sold to support himself. The impression the house gives to the visitor is one of spacious simplicity and serenity.

Alvar's entire family is devoted to the arts. His older daughter Gemma is a visual arts instructor at a local secondary school, and her nine-year-old daughter Duna draws, dances, plays the flute, and writes stories in Catalan, Spanish, and English. His daughter Noemi is a professional dancer, married to a graphic designer, Roger Cisa, who makes Alvar's exposition catalogs and arranges music for Noemi's dances. And his son Alvar is a publicist.

Alvar takes great pride in his offspring, satisfied that he has given them what they need to have fulfilling lives of their own. The most important inheritance children can receive from their parents, he says, is the ability to know themselves and to find a vocation that makes them happy. He believes that Gemma, Noemi, and Alvar have all found rewarding positions in which they can exercise their talents, though he recognizes that his daughters, like most women, confront greater difficulties than do men in complying with the competing demands on their time from their families, their homes, and their work.

Like relatively few of his contemporaries, Alvar has been able to make a living from his art to support his family well. Even so, he shows little interest in the details of commercial transactions and seeks the tranquility of a more reclusive existence at home. In the past few years he has used his Barcelona studio mainly for storing lithographs and meeting friends. His preferred entertainment is to go to movies with friends and then to discuss what they have seen. Increasingly,

however, he spends most of his time, when not in Rubí at ArtLitho, in his Tiana studio, where he sculpts, paints, and sketches the images he will turn into lithographs. There, surrounded by canvases in various stages of completion, with a cigarette in his mouth and the radio turned on, he works happily and peacefully while listening to the music of Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Bach, Vivaldi, Grieg, Gershwin, and Albéniz.

Alvar advises his protégés, younger Catalan artists, that the way to become an artist is not to spend time in cafés talking about art but to do it and to work very, very hard. *Hay que ser muy, muy trabajador*, he repeats. Alvar himself, since his childhood, has worked very, very hard at his art, from early morning till late at night, day after day after day. And although he stays abreast of current events and enjoys lively political debates, he is at heart a solitary artist, most contented when at home in the world he has created through his art.

Betty Jean Craige
Notes

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