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XAVIER BUENO

Exécution d'un paysan espagnol

1937

TEFAF Maastricht

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XAVIER BUENO

Vera da Bidasoa, 1915 – Fiesole, 1979

Exécution d'un paysan espagnol (fusillé), 1937

Oil on canvas

200 x 101 cm

Signed and dated lower right: *Javier Bueno 1937*

Titled on the back: *Exécution d'un paysan espagnol (fusillé) / (signé Javier Bueno*

EXHIBITION

Paris, Salon d'Automne, 1937, n°245

PROVENANCE

Given by the artist to Mateo Hernandez (1885-1949), sculptor, in 1940

Fernande Carton Miller (1895-1972), partner of Mateo Hernandez

By inheritance, private collection

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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S. Sbarbaro (ed.), *Doppio ritratto, Antonio e Xavier Bueno, contrappunti alla realta tra avanguardia e figurazione*, Florence, 2016, p. 18 et 35



Xavier Bueno was born in Vera de Bidasoa on January 16, 1915. His father Javier's profession as a journalist - correspondent in Berlin and later in Geneva for the Madrid daily *ABC* - meant that Xavier's family, which also included his brothers Guy and Antonio, was always travelling and moved frequently.

In 1925, the family settled in Geneva. Five years later, Xavier was already enrolled at the Geneva Academy of Fine Arts, showing a precocious talent. After returning to Spain with his mother in 1936, he attended the S. Fernando Academy in Madrid and took a painting course given by Vazquez Diaz.

A year later, he moved to Paris and began to show his work, characterized by a strong imprint of Spanish realism, at

the Salon des Tuileries, the Salon d'Automne and the Salon des Indépendants.

In 1938, Xavier was joined in Paris by his brother Antonio, three years his junior, who was also dedicated to painting. From that moment on, and for a period of about ten years, a total artistic and material partnership was established between the two artists. In 1940, Xavier, Antonio and their mother Hannah went on a study trip to Italy.



Xavier and Antonio Bueno, *Doppio autoritratto*, 1944, Ivrea, Museo Civico Pier Alessandro Garda

What was supposed to be a temporary stay - the classic trip to Italy that every European artist wishes to make - turned into a definitive and global life experience for them, as they decided to settle in Tuscany.

In 1947, together with Antonio Bueno, Pietro Annigoni and Gregorio Sciltian, Xavier Bueno founded the group "Pittori Moderni della Realtà" (Modern Painters of Reality), whose *manifesto* proposed an "objective" observation of reality, of nature and its most faithful reproduction.

Another fundamental milestone in Xavier's career was his trip to Brazil in 1954. The artist returned from this experience full of enthusiasm and with a series of sketches whose main

protagonists were children, young people and workers. From that moment on, the theme of childhood became more and more recurrent in his work.

The portraits of little girls and boys represented in a rarefied and intensely sad calm will become the most recognized and distinctive stylistic trait of the artist among the general public. Xavier died suddenly on the night of July 17, 1979 at his home in Fiesole.

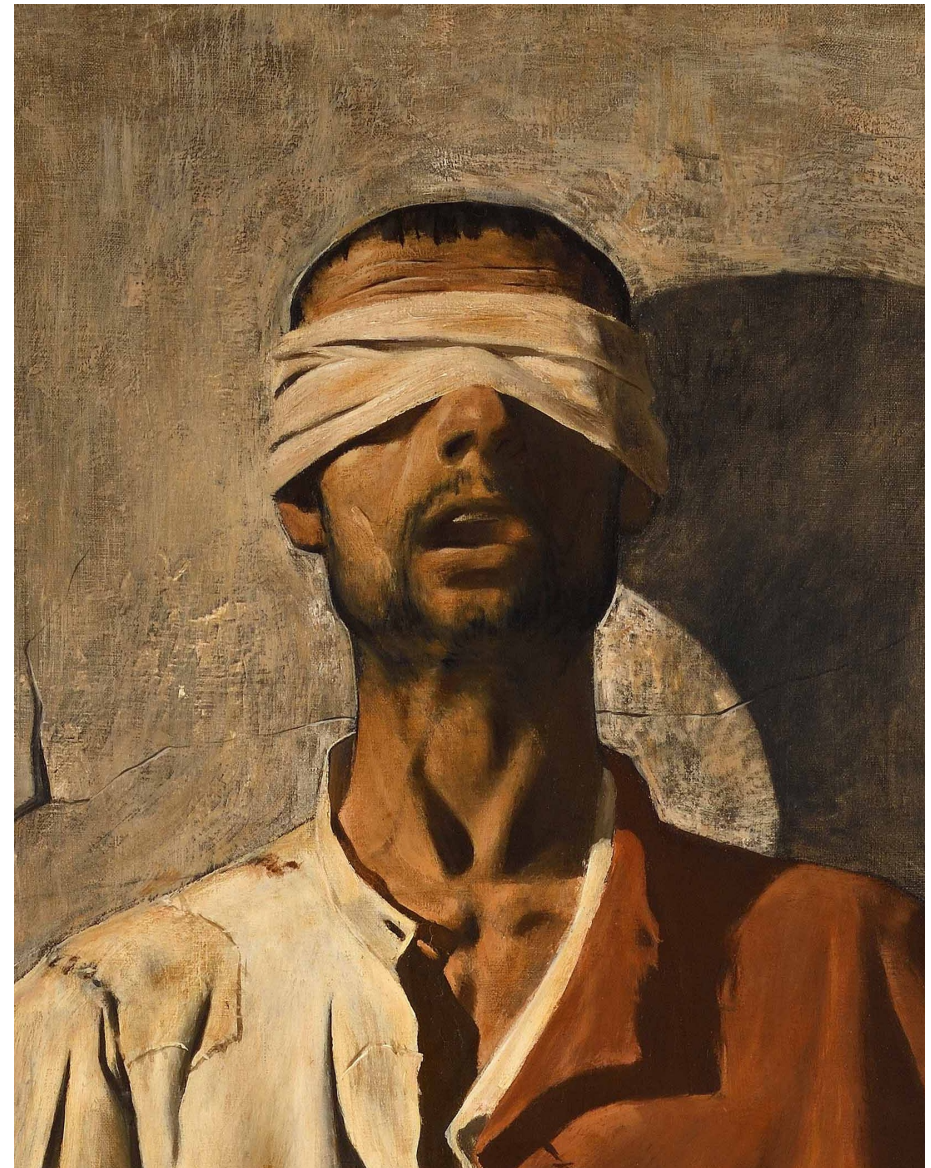


Xavier Bueno, *Due fratelli*, 1971, private collection

When Xavier Bueno moved to Paris in 1936, the artist was only twenty years old. That same year, the Spanish Civil War began on July 17, 1936. It opposed the Republican camp, in power since 1931, and the Nationalists led by General Franco. A communist activist by family tradition and personal taste, Bueno could not but support the Republicans. He decided to do so in his own way, denouncing the horrors of the war and the massacres carried out by the Nationalists.

As a novice painter, Bueno was not asked by the Republican government of Francisco Largo Caballero to decorate the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 Universal Exhibition. It was in this context that Pablo Picasso painted his large *Guernica*, a denunciation of the bombing of

the city of Guernica in April 1937, while Joan Miro painted a panel entitled *El Segador* (The Reaper), an incarnation of the revolt of the Catalan peasants. Julio Gonzalez with *La Montserrat*, Juan Navarro Ramon with *Te vengaremos* and Alberto Sanchez Perez with *El Pueblo espanol tiene un camino que conduce a una estrella*, a 12-meter high totem pole, also participated in the project.



The Universal Exposition does not appear, however, opened on May 25, 1937 and during its exhibition. The cautious attitude adopted at the time can easily be explained by the controversies that the Spanish war raised in France in 1937. The allusion, however, must have been clear to contemporaries.



Under number 245, Bueno presented *Exécution d'un paysan espagnol (fusillé)*. This large painting, measuring 2m by 1m, shows a full-length figure, his hands tied and blindfolded: the image is clearly a denunciation of the massacres carried out by Franco's troops. The "republican" political connotation of the painting

Although Xavier Bueno was no longer a beginner, this was his first participation in a Paris exhibition. At that time, instead of looking to the triumphant École de Paris, Bueno ventured into the little-visited territory of the great Spanish realist tradition, from Zurbaran to Velazquez and Goya, his own cultural roots giving his painting a personal style which was quickly appreciated by the Parisian critics.

Exécution d'un paysan espagnol (fusillé) can only be understood if one is familiar with Francisco Zurbaran's *St. Francis*, which has been in the musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon since 1807. Although it does not seem that Bueno could have seen the painting himself, the formal similarities are such that it is

impossible that he should not have known at least one reproduction of it. The economy of means with which this *St. Francis* is treated had enough to attract a young painter of the 1930s: almost monochromatic, harmonies of white, grey and cream, but also simplification of forms, stylization of the heavy religious



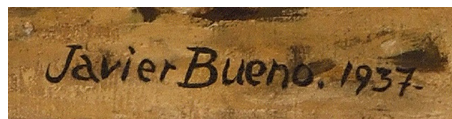
Francisco de Zurbaran, *St. Francis*, Lyon, musée des Beaux-Arts

Like the Zurbaran's *St. Francis*, the figure painted by Bueno stands out against a neutral background where the shadows are strongly marked. The position is frontal, the figure is massive, the hands are clasped in front, the head is slightly raised upwards. The dimensions of the two works are exactly the same.

The figure of Bueno, however, is not an ecstatic saint, but a defeated man who does not accept his defeat. The Christian resignation of *St. Francis* is contrasted with the impotent rebellion of the fighter in Bueno; the trust in God of the former is contrasted with the loss of all hope in the latter. Like Zurbaran, Bueno portrays his figure full-length and accentuates certain details with ferocious realism: the hollowed-

out face, the open mouth, the rope that binds the wounded and blood-stained hands, and the bare feet firmly planted on the ground.

Bueno's painting can thus be seen as a response to the work of his great seventeenth-century predecessor. In 1937, we are far from the Counter-Reformation and there is no longer any question of faith or trust in God. For a young Spanish artist who witnessed a civil war, in which the clergy had taken sides against the Republican cause, only revolt, anguish and the bitterness of defeat remained.



A year later, in 1938, Bueno continued in this vein: at the Salon d'Automne of that year, the artist presented *Le Combattant espagnol*, now in the musée Goya in Castres. In a smaller format than the *Exécution d'un paysan espagnol (fusillé)*, this work, with its expressive realism, is a tribute to Nazario Cuartero, a friend of the artist who was killed on the Madrid front in October 1937.

Here, the *St. Serapion*, also by Zurbaran, is the artist's source. Here, too, Bueno knew it only through a reproduction, as the work was then kept at Easton Hall in England; since 1951 it has been at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. "An energetic painting transports us to the land of Zurbaran", wrote then the art critic René Jean¹.

1. *Le Temps*, 3 juin 1938

Exécution d'un paysan espagnol (fusillé) remained in the artist's studio. In 1940, when Xavier Bueno left for Italy, he gave the painting, along with other works, to Mateo Hernandez (Béjar, 1884 - Meudon, 1949).

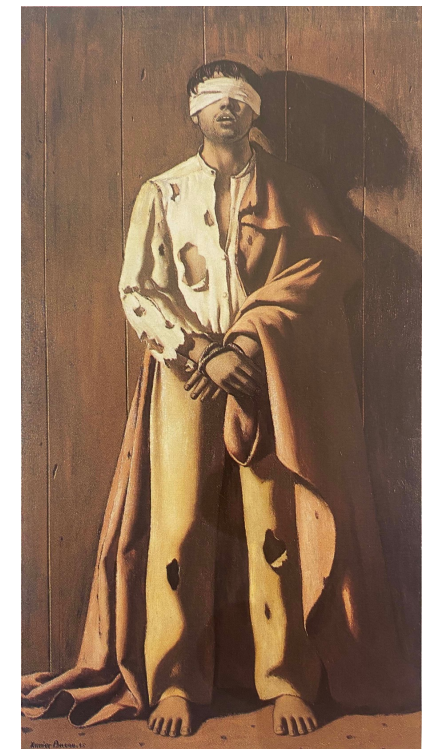


Xavier Bueno, *Le Combattant espagnol*, 1938, Castres, musée Goya

Mateo Hernandez was a Spanish sculptor who had lived in France since 1912 and a close friend of Xavier Bueno. After the death of the sculptor, the painting was transmitted to the artist's companion, Fernande Carton Millet (1895-1972). She, in turn, gave it to a friend of hers, whose descendants it has remained to this day.

1. P. Levi & T. Bueno, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 72 et 84.

Bueno seems to have regretted not having kept the masterly work of 1937: in 1945 the artist produced a second, slightly reduced version (179 cm x 94 cm, Fiesole, private collection)¹.



Xavier Bueno, *Le Fusillé*, 1945, private collection.



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