

## A PORTRAIT OF ÁNGEL ARAGONÉS

The life and art of Ángel Aragonés is intimately linked to the past and present of the city of Madrid. During the last decade this painter, landscape architect, sculptor, and graphic designer has recombined his many skills moved by a profound social commitment that has led him to devise a variety of projects aimed at the humanization, embellishment, and restoration of the old quarter of Spain's capital.

I still hold a vivid image of the day when I went to meet Ángel Aragonés at a corner of old Madrid. He was not on the ground. I looked up and saw him fifty feet above the sidewalk, standing on scaffolding while putting the finishing touches on a huge mural that enlightened an otherwise unsavory thoroughfare eroded by neglect and urban decay. The mural reflected the street to its very end, a horizon of taller and nearer buildings. On the lower left side of the colorful tapestry of the mural, emblematic figures of a glorious past were subtly blended in, a reminder that on that site stood a great public theater in Spain's Golden Age. The man who stood smiling on that cold, winter morning high above the busy wayfarers was possessed by a vision that has urged him to tangle tenaciously with the most complex problems posed by modern urban landscape. This passion has taken Ángel Aragonés to large towns in Madrid's periphery that have grown chaotically during the past four decades, and where he has brilliantly solved knotty challenges posed by inordinate urban growth, where he has left his mark on fountains, parks, squares, and promenades that have substantially changed the urban nightmare and made colorful communities out of gray neighborhoods.

The social and historical dimension of Ángel Aragonés's work has deepened his constant reflection on the role of art and the artist in a society encumbered by the very forces that make it grow, the vertiginous growth of technology, uncouth capitalism, and demagogic democracy. The result of the negative aspects of these driving forces of modernity appear to Ángel Aragonés in the form of a historical amnesia of incalculable consequences, as rootlessness, as dehumanization, and as spiritual penury and repression.

Ángel Aragonés's artistic ideals and social concerns go hand in hand with his pilgrimage as a painter, an activity in which his solitude thrives far away from the maddening crowd and the turmoil that infringes into his public work where his creativity has to navigate the muddy waters of municipal and state bureaucracy and the thoughtlessness and greed of developers. This artist talks with eloquence and precision. His discourse reveals an unusual alertness to the prerational forces that inform it. His is a way of speaking that moves as fine concentric circles, harboring in its present search nature, man, and God as it backtracks constantly to a foundation that hides an abyss, a chaos that is the very source of his creativity. Conscious that his art is the offspring of time and entropy, Ángel Aragonés conjugates in his art a material alphabet which is constantly transmuting through an endless effort into artworks. After hearing Ángel Aragonés talk, one gains an intellectual and cordial grasp of his painting. For this man the word "art," *techné*, means a struggle and a conflict, the only valid ground to encounter real beauty and the terror that it inevitably carries with it.

The painter discourses with equal finesse on the secrets of Velázquez's pictorial technique as on the cosmic symbolism grafted throughout the centuries on the pilgrims Road to St. James. He will talk with passion on the essential thrust of abstract Expressionism or on the hermetic paradigms of the architecture of El Escorial, on the role of graphic design in a technological consumer society or on the pictorial alphabet of paleolithic man. This artist can pick three words such as "mud," "tree," and

“stone” and weave a multithreaded discourse that moves back and forth along the centuries, making ever present the transfigurations and uses of these materials in their manifold relationships to style and socio-historical circumstances, to the goals of representation and its physical and spiritual limits. His capacity to conceptualize and to construct metaphors corresponds in his painting and his graphic work to a restless and obsessive search for meanings, well aware that he lives in the era of non-meaning where both mental and physical objects all too rapidly acquire senses that just as quickly become senseless. His quest takes him up to the line, to the limits of representation.

Ángel Aragonés lives the paradox of a man conscious of those pre-predicative forces that thrust out of the unconscious and which he invites with temerity to burst through into his creative process; but not without irony and playfulness and an obedience that is dictated by humility, the fertilizer of his experience of the mystery of being. His sense of history and his sensibility to form make him doubly awake to the strange interplay of the diachronic and the synchronic, and of individuality and style, questions on which he continues to reflect and which prompt him to listen carefully with his eyes to the messages of the great paintings of the Western tradition. This unusual concern for the historicity of art and of man buttresses his existential and moral commitment as a person and as an artist, a resolution that has permitted him to escape the pitfall of unconscious imitation or any anxiety of influences, as it has also allowed him to skirt undesired novelties.

Ángel Aragonés has shunned fashions, an obstacle to the artist’s search if they become something more than one more step on the road, that is, if they turn out to be a deviation from a necessary faithfulness to the origin of the artist and his art. Free from the temptations of the marketplace as a painter, he has made his creations visible in the marketplace through his public works, moved by his needs and those of his fellow man. Ángel Aragonés’s restless mind continues to search, equidistant from discipline and imagination, and intimately close to the material medium of his art. Ángel Aragonés’s paintings and graphic design probe relentlessly into the shapeless turmoil of the imagination where the inner abyss lurks, a source of terror and repose, a nothingness that is paradoxically the source of creation. This is why we find in the work of this artist a certain equanimity, even when he touches on the grotesque and the extreme, for he does not lapse into melodramatic gestures, nor does he retreat into dogmatic seriousness; his irony played out in the skillful use of light, space, color, and he halts any demagogic postures, fully conscious that behind every self-proclaimed relativity hides the unreachable absolute, the secret source of the creative process. In his best work Ángel Aragonés has entered daringly into the storm of being and has found serenity in the center of that storm.

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