



**NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS  
AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE**

**VOLUME TWO**

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand  
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

With contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen,  
Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House,  
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Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán,  
James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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Sorolla with vast quantities of the material, which he used for most of his career. Although the sketches were spontaneous and informal, Sorolla exhibited and marketed them alongside his larger, more ambitious paintings. In fact, due to their extraordinary quality and their comparatively low prices, these sketches sold extremely well. This painting was no exception. It was one of approximately one hundred sixty sketches that Sorolla took to New York, Buffalo, and Boston, to be exhibited in his 1909 solo exhibition organized by The Hispanic Society of America, and it was sold during the course of the exhibition. MR

**PROVENANCE** The artist, sold 1909; private collection (from 1909); Harding F. Bancroft (until 1984, given to the Clark); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1984.

**EXHIBITIONS** New York–Buffalo–Boston 1909, no. 238 (Buffalo–Boston, no. 126), as *Playa de Valencia*.

**REFERENCES** Beruete et al. 1909, vol. 2, p. 157, ill.; Roglán 2003, p. 392.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a section cut from a photograph card 0.2 cm thick bearing the photographer's name "A. García" pressed into the prepared surface. The image is painted on the back face of the card, which now has a convex warp. The blank reverse has a shiny and crazed photosensitized paper adhered to it. Viewing the reverse, the top and left edges have been cut, suggesting this support was perhaps one corner of a larger photo card. Across the reverse are large black numerals "238" on a mustard-colored painted rectangle. This paint covers an earlier large red number that may read "407." There are filled holes at the centers of the left and right edges, probably where the artist pinned down the support during painting. The impastos are slightly pressed and grimy. There is an old impasto loss in a pale passage of the central area. The image was cleaned of discolored varnish in 1984, shortly after it was given to the museum.

The ground layer is a textured gray paint applied by the artist, possibly with a palette knife. The artist also accidentally applied some to the unpainted side of the card. No underdrawing was used. The paint layer is fluid and abbreviated, using the exposed gray ground to create the middle tones of the scene. The surface, with only a light spray coat of synthetic resin, looks unvarnished.

1. For more on Sorolla's supports for small format paintings as well as his sketches, see Puerto de Valencia 1995.
2. For more on Antonio García Peris, see Traver 1990, pp. 476–77.
3. See Pons-Sorolla 2005, p. 18.

### 309 | La Concha Beach, San Sebastián 1906

Oil on panel, 13.7 x 19.3 cm

Lower left: J Sorolla. B.

Gift of Harding F. Bancroft in memory of his wife, Jane Northrop Bancroft

1984.166

A group of swimmers wearing fashionable bathing suits of the period are enjoying a day at the beach. On the right side of the composition are several covered mobile structures that were used by the bathers as changing rooms. The background depicts a partial view of the Basque city of San Sebastián, in which can be seen the silhouette of the monumental façade of the Grand Casino, a building constructed between 1882 and 1887. It was converted into the present-day Town Hall after renovations in 1941 and 1947.

San Sebastián is one of the most beautiful cities on the northern coast of Spain, and during the first two decades of the twentieth century, it developed into one of the most important summer resorts for members of the European aristocracy; the Spanish royal family vacationed there nearly every summer from 1893 to 1928. Sorolla visited this important Basque city early in his career, paying his first documented visit in 1889, one year after his marriage and following his return to Spain after several years spent working in Italy. This visit would be repeated many times until his death. Sorolla usually visited San Sebastián accompanied by his entire family, and would combine leisure time with work, making portraits, sketches, and more elaborate paintings. Although he mainly produced beach scenes, Sorolla also depicted impressions of the port, boats, the ocean, landscapes, and figures dressed in fashionable summer attire.

In June of 1906, the year this sketch was painted, Sorolla spent the summer with his family in Biarritz and San Sebastián following an extraordinarily successful showing of four hundred and ninety-seven works at the prestigious Galerie Georges Petit in Paris. Capping off his success, Sorolla was decorated as an *officier* of the Legion of Honor that year. In fact, the body of work he created during this period, roughly between 1900 and 1913, is considered among the most original and creative of his career. During this decade, Sorolla developed a singular artistic language that, although formally similar to that of the Impressionist painters and other important artists





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such as John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) or Anders Zorn (1860–1920), was unique in its subject matter and technical execution. It was during this epoch that Sorolla became the foremost painter of beach scenes, in which the pure joys of life were depicted through a combination of fluid brushstrokes, vigorous color, and the masterful reproduction of light.

The beach scenes of the Spanish and French Atlantic coast, in this case the cosmopolitan setting of the popular beach of La Concha in San Sebastián, contrast sharply with Sorolla's other favorite site for beach scenes, the shore of his home town, Valencia. This difference is apparent not only in the varying intensities of light, that of the Mediterranean being much more powerful, but also in the different classes of people. In the sophisticated setting of San Sebastián, children wore bathing suits and adults were fashionably dressed. In Valencia, children swam at the beach in the nude and Sorolla's subjects also included the hard life of the fishermen and their families. Sorolla succeeded in capturing the atmospheres of both settings with the same vibrant eloquence and realism.

Many of Sorolla's artistic characteristics are pres-

ent in this tiny sketch, executed rapidly *en plein air*, yet with notable care and attention. The painter used the brownish color and uneven texture of the unpainted panel, possibly a cigar-box lid, to represent portions of the sand on the beach and the cityscape in the background. The figures are modeled quickly, as are the reflections on the calm ocean and the cloudy skies over the city. This interest in depicting volumes using masses of color, sometimes in a nearly abstract manner, is balanced by Sorolla's attention to detail, which is evident in the way he recorded the patterns on the suits of some figures with a very thin brush. Sketches like this one were not usually intended to serve as preparatory studies for future works. Rather, they were simply impressions that permitted the artist to train his hand, indulge in his passion for studying light, and take "snapshots" of the world around him.

Sorolla and his family had to leave San Sebastián abruptly and return to Madrid when his eldest daughter Maria became ill with tuberculosis. During his stay in San Sebastián, he executed more than two dozen color sketches similar to the Clark's.<sup>1</sup> One of these studies, also entitled *La Concha Beach, San Sebastián* (private



Fig. 309.1 Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, *La Concha Beach, San Sebastián*, c. 1906. Oil on laminate cardboard, 13.5 x 19.5 cm. Private collection

collection), is closely related to the Clark's (fig. 309.1). It depicts a broader panoramic view of the same side of the bay and beach where Sorolla painted this sketch.

Sorolla brought this small-format painting to America in 1909 to be included in his solo exhibition organized by The Hispanic Society of America. It was catalogued as number 164, the same figure that is prominently inscribed on the back of the panel. It sold when exhibited in New York, never traveling to the other two venues of the exhibition in Buffalo and Boston. MR

**PROVENANCE** The artist, sold 1909; private collection (from 1909); J. Otis Wardwell, Boston (d. 1940, sold to Northrop);<sup>2</sup> G. N. Northrop, possibly by descent to his daughter, Jane Northrop Bancroft, d. 1984; Harding F. Bancroft, her husband, by descent, given to the Clark; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1984.

**EXHIBITIONS** New York–Buffalo–Boston 1909, p. 122, no. 164 (exhibited in New York only); Williamstown 1988b, no cat.; Williamstown 1998–2000, no cat.

**REFERENCES** Beruete et al. 1909, vol. 2, p. 25; San Sebastián 1992, p. 300, ill.; Roglán 2003, p. 392.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The support is a pale wood panel 0.2 cm thick, possibly a cigar-box lid, with the grain running horizontally. Roughness on the left and right edges suggests that they were hand-trimmed, possibly by the artist. The right

edge has a slightly wavy warp and a glued crack 3.2 cm long, located 5.1 cm up from the lower corner. Stains from many old framing nails along the reverse perimeter suggest that the complex edge warp was the result of framing restraint. A large black numeral “164” is painted over an olive-colored painted rectangle, and there are large pale red numbers below the paint, which may read “No 167.” There is a penciled “322,” as well as other stray pencil marks on the back. Scattered age cracks run in the direction of the wood grain, and traction cracks appear in the deepest blue. Some detail impastos are flattened and grimy. There is an old loss in the face of the central male figure in the white-and-red bathing costume. The signature is abraded, and under ultraviolet light, small retouches can be seen in the brushwork surrounding the inscription. A small hole appears to the left of the signature. The picture was cleaned in 1984. The surface has a very slight sheen, more from the paint layer's gloss than the light sprayed coat of synthetic varnish.

There is no ground layer. The surface of the wood, which was left exposed in many areas, has been scratched as if to give it some tooth to better accept the oil paint. No underdrawing was found. For the most part, the paint layer is applied in quick, dry, oil-based strokes. A different translucent medium was used on the raised red stripes of the purple-and-white bathing costumes. Small areas of pitted paint in the red stripes of the right foreground white costume may have been damaged by heat or cleaning. The clear, yellowish round inclusions in the white costume in the right foreground may be sand.

1. Many of these color sketches, including the one at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, appear reproduced in black and white in *San Sebastián 1992*, pp. 298–301, 303, 307.
2. Two labels on the reverse of the frame indicate that this picture was “bought at sale of J. O. Wardwell” by G. N. Northrop. Two other labels indicate the business address of Wardwell, who was a lawyer in Boston. No public sale of Wardwell's collection is known, and the relationship between G. N. Northrop and Jane Northrop Bancroft is uncertain.