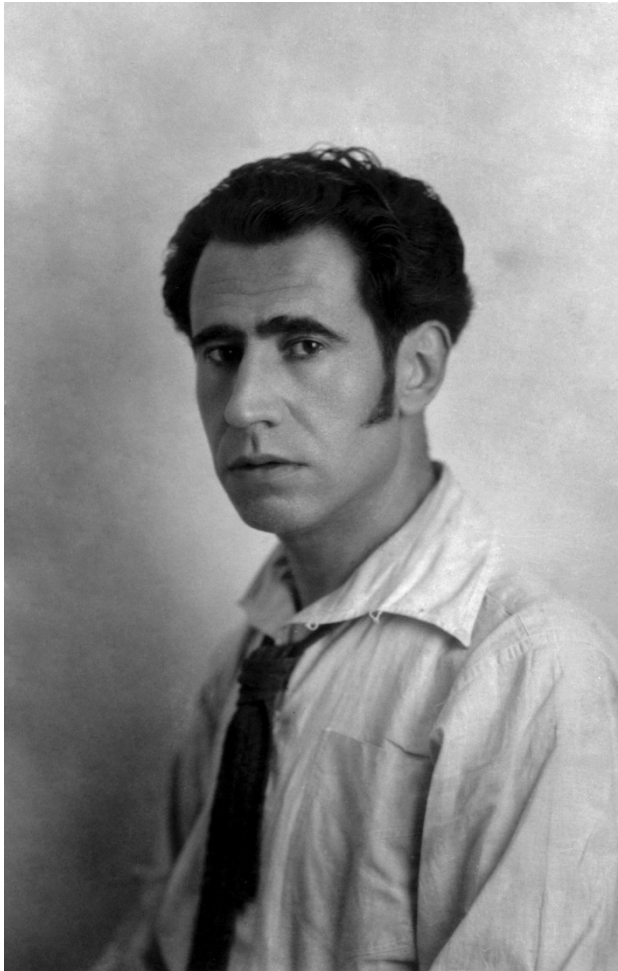


Ramón Acín: Three Times

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Ramón Acín around 1927-1928

1. His Work, Six Years On

It was precisely six years ago that the first anthological exhibition on the late Ramón Acín was held. In that year, 1982, no key date in his biography was being commemorated. Rather, it was simply a chance to celebrate, in a fledgling democracy, the rediscovery of the life and work of an artist who died for the eternal revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. Now, in 1988, we celebrate the centennial of his birth in Huesca, on August 30,



1888, the feast day of St. Arsenio and the eve of St. Ramón, which were his given names. In the half a dozen years that have passed since that exhibition at the Museo del Altoaragón (Upper Aragon Museum), his biography and work have come to the fore. Then, 92 works were catalogued. Now there are 323, and there are many more minor artistic productions that have not been included in this catalogue, as they are drawings from his youth, quick notes, or abandoned drawings produced on varied and provisional materials. Some illustrations, humorous cartoons and caricatures that were published in the press have not been included either, as they are slated to be featured in an edition that will contain more than 200 written and graphic documents by Ramón Acín, as noted by Miguel Bandrés in his recent publication. A good number of the engraved wood pieces and plates used to print these illustrations for the press have been preserved.

This catalogue is based on the one we created in 1982. It is structured into four sections (Drawings, Printed Works, Paintings and Sculptures), facilitating a better understanding of his entire body of work and allowing one to better assess, in its fair dimension, its quality.

Each of the works and files has been reviewed, and some technical and chronological aspects have been adjusted accordingly. One of the most remarkable is the drawing system that, as of 1928-1929 onwards, the artist began to use continuously for portraits and to depict scenes and figures. It is a technique of drawing on rigid, greyish cardboard with a very fine brush and a single brown or sepia-red oil color. The result is discontinuous strokes of uneven priming. This was not, as I will explain later, a mere technical innovation or aesthetic experience, but rather reflected and arose from a conceptual and ethical attitude embraced by Ramón Acín. Because of the predominance of these single-color sketches, these abundant works were catalogued among the drawings.

Their precise dating posed a greater challenge, and is still open to further chronological verifications. While in the years of his youth, from 1904 to 1912, he signed and dated almost everything, over time his signature became increasingly intermittent. The works from the last ten years of his life, as of 1925, usually lack a date and signature, and, when there is one, it has been reduced to his first surname, in small letters and italics. Although only consisting of a period of ten years, there were many stylistic variations in his papers and cartoons. In addition, Acín regularly commenced several works that he would alternate between before ultimately giving them what we might call a final finish, but which our artist understood in a different way; or until he left them in a state of simplified coloring. Precisely, simplified or elementary plastic representation was also a firm aesthetic aim of Acín's, because, as he himself stated with nonchalance in the presentation of the catalogue of his 1930 exhibition at the Rincón de Goya: *"Mine is not an art of initiation, it is not for those who go to art, but rather for those who are coming back to it."*

Identifying most of the portraits is more problematic.

We know that many of the subjects, since they are young, were students at his private Drawing School, or in his classes at the Escuela Normal de Maestros teacher training institution. Few were painted in oil on canvas, some more on cardboard, but most were done, as I have already said, with a brush and brown oil on cardboard, or in pencil on watermarked paper, or on reused and printed yellowed sheets, corresponding to the years 1880-85, on the



back of which farms in villages in Lower Aragon, in the provinces of Teruel and Zaragoza, are annotated and marked out. His father, who had been a surveyor, as his eldest son Santos would later become, worked for these villages, forming the company Empresa de Trabajos Topográficos-Catastrales Gorria, Acín y Rallo.

Ramón Acín's sculptures were few and far between. Two are found in the park of Huesca and one in the park of Zaragoza. The funerary relief forming part of the project for which he was commissioned for the common grave in the cemetery of Huesca is now on his tomb. Only the work entitled *El agarrotado (Garroted Figure)*, dismantled after his death and after remaining bent and rusted for years, has been restored for this exhibition and installed again on its original mount. This sculpture, like the others in sheet iron or aluminum, was cut out and molded from models that he made of cardboard, which have since disappeared, but that we know about thanks to photographs that he took himself, or had made by the Huesca professionals Ricardo Compairé and Fidel Oltra.

This exhibition and catalogue, therefore, includes some photographs of these sketches of monuments in cardboard, and others, more complete, in plaster, ready to be cast at the Averly workshops in Zaragoza, but that have disappeared, such as the plaque featuring an effigy of Joaquín Costa in front of the navigable Ebro River as it passes through Zaragoza, for the street of the same name in said city; or the destroyed reliefs for the monument to the Captains Galán and García Hernández, in Jaca.

The manuscripts and personal documents preserved include many sketches and ideas for statues characterized by a severe classicism, monoliths, obelisks, garden benches, tombs, fountains featuring the classic sculpture of a girl with a tunic and a pitcher on her shoulder, and reliefs and designs for monuments informed by Art Deco geometric conceptions.

2. Ramón Acín, 50 Years On

After almost half a century of sustained oblivion, neglect and indifference, the artist from Huesca has been emerging as a historical figure, with renewed life, resuscitated through the documents and works preserved by his daughters Katia and Sol, pages in the contemporary press, patient research, and the recollections of numerous friends, former disciples, and fellow anarcho-syndicalists. These memories, stifled by forty years of silence, have given rise to successive evocations and commemorations of Ramón Acín, and touched and inspired young people, interested in the work and, above all, the life of this character, unique for his human virtues, such as his altruism, elegant spirit, the consistency and coherence of his private and public lives, between what he thought, said and did; and his civic virtues, such as his love of peace (the "war on war," a phrase he pioneered in 1923 in the title of an ultimately aborted publication), and, above all, his tolerance. In an act of striking timeliness, he made a public profession of faith in this virtue in the pages of the press in 1930 when he painfully acknowledged his irreconcilable ideological differences with his old friends Andrés Nin and Joaquín Maurín:

I am a man upon whom perhaps the concepts of friendship and tolerance weigh too heavily. The world to which I aspire is a world of tolerance and friendship, and I gladly bear the moral



responsibility that these concepts entail in the world of today, until the world of tomorrow arrives.

These virtues, so difficult to uphold in a time of irreconcilable political and social stances, but that Ramón Acín embodied and shared with his wife, Conchita, could not be silenced by those rifle-bearing men who dragged them from their home at around 5:00 in the afternoon on 6 August, 1936, before shooting him around 11:00 that night; a few days later, on the 23rd, his wife met the same fate. Nor has the slab of silence, jealousy and suspicion spanning this almost half-century been able to crush them.

Time is rebellious and reality is stubborn.

It is in this context that we must understand, then, the numerous public acts of remembrance by institutions, researchers and sensitive and cultured people who have evoked or paid tribute to Ramón Acín, the most recent being the following:

1980. Ramón Acín acquires his own voice in the Gran Enciclopedia Aragonesa.

1982. The Provincial Council of Huesca sponsors the first anthological exhibition of the artist, in November, and publishes a catalogue with excellent illustrations.

1983. The newspaper *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona) features in its special Sunday issue of January 30 an extensive report entitled: *Ramón Acín: 40 años bajo los escombros (40 years Under the Rubble)*.

1982-86. Commentaries, reports and programs on his life and work in the Aragonese media.

1986. Restoration of the monument Las Pajaritas (The Little Birds) and its inauguration on April 22nd, together with the Paseo (promenade) that bears the artist's name in the Parque de Huesca.

1986. Reading, in June, at the School of Fine Arts of the University of Barcelona, of Miguel Bandrés' degree thesis on La obra artigráfica de Ramón Acín: 1911-1936 (Ramon Acín's Artistic Work), published the following year by the Instituto de Estudios Altoaragoneses (Institute for the Study of the Upper Aragon), attached to the Provincial Government of Huesca.

1986. The residence hall of the University College of Huesca is named after Ramón Acín.

1987. The magazine Caracola publishes, in its first issue, a work by Miguel Bandrés, illustrated with great aesthetic finesse.

1988. Presentation, in April, at the Provincial Council of Huesca, of the re-release of the album of the artist's humorous cartoons from 1923: Las corridas de toros en 1970 (The Bullfights in 1970) and of the new Cultural Association bearing the artist's name.

1998. Exhibitions commemorating the centenary of his birth, during the months of November and December, in Huesca and Zaragoza, sponsored by the respective Provincial Councils. Publication of this catalogue, of a biographical/artistic video and of a cartoon film based on the humorous book by Ramón Acín: Las corridas de toros en 1970, (Huesca, 1922

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3. A Life Cut Short

When I described Ramón Acín's artistic work in the catalogue of the 1982 exhibition, I used this same heading. Now I employ it once again because it is that which best captures his personal adventure. Firstly, because he was killed at the age of 47, when he was at the peak of his artistic maturity, and one could expect at least a dozen long years of creative activity and even surprises yet to come. He was planning to move, immediately, to Madrid with his family so that his daughters could continue their studies at the Institución Libre de Enseñanza. In the 1930s, the Spanish capital would have been sure to provide him with abundant cultural stimuli, to which Acín was always very permeable.

It is also true that his biography as an artist was also hampered by frequent interruptions, some forced, due to his imprisonment and exile, while others were of his own volition, as he chose to teach and to dedicate himself to serving as an anarcho-syndicalist leader.

His restless and often artistically impatient temperament, although he was a patient pedagogue, his need to experience everything, and a creative system in which he began works that were not ultimately brought to fruition, all favored the dispersion of his undertakings. Thus, Ramón Acín's work abounds with more brilliant and clever ideas than diligent completions. In his defense, we must also recognize that the cultural environment and demand in a small provincial capital like Huesca must have been quite limited in the first thirty years of the 20th century. Ramón, whenever his teaching obligations allowed him to, travelled to Barcelona, Madrid, Zaragoza, and to Paris, in 1926 and 1931, with photographs revealing his artistic contacts and friendships in these places.

Acín's merit as a practicing artist in Huesca is even more impressive when we consider that he was self-taught. His "teachers" were the life around him, El Prado, his trips to cities with varied but precise artistic interests, his older and younger friends and, of course, his inexhaustible curiosity and the innate prowess of his sensitive hands.

His artistic talents were soon manifested in his drawings. His first sketches and studies of life in the pages of small albums, his caricatures of friends and domestic characters from Huesca, and the humorous cartoons from 1910-12, which largely appeared in *El Diario de Huesca*, contain hardly any original features. The young Acín, nevertheless, ably mastered the descriptive and anecdotal fashion of the national press's illustrators at the beginning of the century, to whose list of famous artists the names of Aragon's Teodoro Gascón and Pedro Antonio Villahermosa, aka Sileno, could be added. He also assimilated easily and in passing Modernist graphic forms, but they must have been too easy and decorative for the temperament of this restless young man who sought to express himself through humor, caricature and cartoons of political satire.

His stays in Madrid during those two years, in Barcelona the following year and in Granada, Toledo and again in the nation's capital, while he was funded by the of the Provincial Government of Huesca between 1913 and 1915, made him familiar with these kinds of urban illustrations. In Huesca his humorous works, which he would sign *Fray Acín*, were sometimes anticlerical, as he would lambaste, with 19th-century flair, an idle clergy that defended the established order. He also produced rural scenes featuring quaint social types and customs



associated with the region, as something of the *baturrismo* (the depiction of traditional Aragón and its cultural peculiarities) practiced by the prose writers and literary portraitists of Zaragoza at the beginning of the century must have rubbed off on him.

In his political cartoons, however, he is more forceful — almost as much as in his journalistic writings. During the years of the first great European war Acín used his humor to take a stand against militarism and Prussianism, along the same lines as Bagaría, for example, in the Madrid press. The young artist from Huesca seems to have been interested in European illustrations, such as those found in the French magazine *L'assiette au beurre*, whose August 1901 issue ridiculed Europe's monarchs, and that reached the artist's hands.

As of 1916 he temporarily suspended his travel plans when he obtained a position as a Drawing teacher at the Escuela Normal de Maestros (teacher training school) in Huesca, and his graphic style became more personal. He would find an expressive channel in simplified lines stripped not only of anecdotal details, but even of any shading suggesting volume, or any *chiaroscuro* techniques. At most he used short, parallel lines inside contours to achieve the well-known effects of such shading. Like Bagaría and Castelao, or the young Zaragozaan artists Ramón Martín Durbán and González Bernal, he opted, decidedly, for the visual effectiveness of elementary and flat figures.

Probably related to this stylistic change in Acín's graphic work, apart from this widespread fashion in the 1920s, was the influence of Bagaría and his drawings which, as Miguel Bandrés has made known, illustrated some issues of *El Diario de Huesca* in 1917. There may have also been somewhat more remote influences, such as the Japanese engravings that Ramón Acín collected. Among them, he owned a booklet of *ukiyo-e* engravings, signed by Katsushika Hokusai in 1843, others of mere calligraphic interest, and some assorted plates like the one we have reproduced, also identified by Sergio Navarro as "a beautiful woman reading a letter," dated 1893.

The pictorial work of our artist's youth offers few relevant original aspects either, though he does reveal, for one who was self-taught, a fine hand at mixing colors and capturing the landscapes of Loarre, Bailo, Salillas and the Somontano of Huesca. They are realistic, like those of Félix Lafuente (1865-1927), a scenographer, landscape painter and illustrator from Huesca of whom Acín would be considered a disciple and with whom he would profess a fervent friendship. He also exhibited the ability to exploit the resources of Modernism, especially for theatrical decorative sketches.

After his July 1926 trip to Paris, where he had a fruitful artistic relationship with the Granadan painter Ismael González de la Serna, ten years younger than Acín, his pictorial conception underwent a radical change. As he said about his drawings, it was also during these years that he began to define his personal style. The painting entitled *La feria* (*The Fair*), in my view, may be considered a symbol of this change. He painted it between the autumn of 1927 and the winter of the following year, achieving in it a harmonious synthesis between a realistic figurativeness enriched by a sanguine luminosity, with a debt to Impressionism; and neo-Cubist depictions of the lively fair's booths, Ferris wheel, slide and merry-go-round. This theme became fashionable in the early 30s among illustrators and poster designers, such as the late Félix Gazo (1900-1933), from Huesca. From this moment on



he would never again create a painting of these dimensions, and would rarely use canvas, replaced by cardboard or paper for gouaches.

The most valuable aspect of this new style, however, would be its simplification, the desire to abbreviate figurative procedures that arose, as I have already stated, from a wish to make his works understandable for simple people, or that would appeal to those who, as he himself said, are “coming back to” art. In short, what Acín was looking for was to capture the instantaneous and fleeting expressions. To this end he disregarded even proper finishes, as his brushes could not keep up with his whirlwind of ideas. With his reduced range of colors, but with a delicate register, or with his austere brown, he achieved portraits superb for their naturalness and deep expression, like the one of *Isadora*; and produced a brilliant syntheses of artistic avant-gardes in works like *El Tren (The Train)* and in *Bodegón con frutero y cuchillo sobre una mesa (Still Life with Fruit Bowl and Knife on a Table)*, and fantastic portraits and dreamlike visions in his personal interpretation of surrealism.

As an artist committed to the cultural reality of his time, he sought the most effective and dynamic systems of representation that would offer a comprehensive vision of life. This is why he was committed to cinema, financing in 1932, as is well known, Luis Buñuel's documentary *Tierra sin Pan (Land Without Bread)* in whose credits he appears as assistant director, along with his friend and colleague Rafael Sánchez Ventura. Some time later, Acín himself was thinking about making another film that he had defined as surrealist, in which the main characters would be children. Its emblematic ending was to feature the collective suicide of a crowd of children in the sea as adults looked on, their busts emerging from the water, a vision recalled by his eldest daughter, Katia, in whom Acín confided these last creative ideas shortly before that fateful and fatal 1936.

His sculptural work, scarce and mostly small in format, as I noted above, went hand in hand with the development of his graphic and pictorial concepts from the mid-20s onwards. Again, his monumental works were all the more meritorious because they were the creations of a self-taught artist, but one well versed in approaches to standard public sculpture, an example being the simple monument to the Huesca geologist and “regenerationist” Lucas Mallada, or the more rationalist reading bench in the Art Deco style dedicated to Huesca-born writer Luis López Allué, in formal harmony with the contemporary building of the Rincón de Goya, of whose construction Acín was a fervent defender; and also with their uses, as these two simple benches at an angle were an open-air spatial extension of the library that the García Mercadal building was to house.

This stimulating educational idea, inherited from the Institución Libre de Enseñanza, was perfectly understood by a pedagogue like Ramón Acín, who, moreover, would go so far as to design a model for a kind of library or open-air reading place in the manner of an initiatory labyrinth, which we only know about through photographs.

The most avant-garde of his sculptures were the works he made in cut sheet metal, which reflect and accord with the same concepts of simplification and formal elegance as his painting, in which he succeeded in his aim of reducing things to their most evident essence: the silhouette of a dancer, a swimmer, a crucified person, or origami birds (*Pajaritas*), in which his technique in the work, installed in the Parque de Huesca, elevated it to the



category of a singular monument.

El agarrotado (Garroted Figure) is also a unique work of its kind in Spanish sculpture, as an unusual monument depicting this peculiarly Spanish system of execution, which remained in use until a few decades ago. The scenario was barbaric when the garrot was used in public in the last century, and always entailed a pathetic kind of disfigurement. Thus, it seems as if Ramón Acín had preferred to convert the body's contorted grimace and violent death throes into a harmonious silhouette cut into soft curves, as an artistic homage to those garroted bodies forming part of the dark story of Spain's daily history. □



El Agarrotado. Ramón Acín. iron sheet and wood, around 1929-30

