

Joaquín Sorolla's, *Vision of Spain*, As a Map of Regional Identity in Spain

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Abstract

Spain has developed many different regional identities in each of its autonomous communities over the years. These identities exemplify the origins of the country and its regional evolution. When reflecting on quintessential perceptions of national Spanish identity, we often think of flamenco dancing, bullfighting, and siestas; however, these symbols better identify the existing regionalism in Spain, rather than some national idea of the country as a whole. Joaquín Sorolla (1863-1923), who was a Spanish impressionist painter, completed his masterpiece, the *Vision of Spain* in 1919, after working on it for eight years. This extensive piece of work serves as a map of the significance of Spanish regionalism, giving proof to the idea that humans may choose to identify with regionalism more than with nationalism. The fourteen unique canvases represent Spain through many cultural traditions and impose an interdisciplinary perspective, based on art history, geography, and sociopolitical thought. For example, in the Castilian region of Spain, at the heart of the country, Sorolla depicts a little known harvesting tradition, whereas for Seville, in Southern Spain, some of the most distinctive Spanish customs, such as flamenco dancing and bullfighting, are portrayed. This is because these are the homes of these respective traditions. According to art historian Felipe Garín, “[The idea] was intended to express iconic, popular scenes, the substance that each region or district identified with and what constituted it as such”⁵. By revealing these aspects in my research, I have given evidence to the regional evolution in Spain and created a correlation between art history and Spanish culture. The aberrant idea of regional identity in a country typically considered to hold the groundwork of a shared national identity can be reversed with the material presented in Sorolla's masterpiece.

Keywords: Regionalism, Identity, Spain

1. Defining Regionalism In Spain

Numerous kingdoms dominated Spain for many years, and as a result, the country acquired many different regional identities in each of its provinces. The result of these identities exemplifies the ancient origins of the country. Each province has its own traditions and rituals, which can still be seen to this day. Today, many outsiders of Spain do not think about the different regions of the country and how they have their own identities; Spain is only thought to be a united nation with shared traditions. The *Vision of Spain*, the largest work by Joaquín Sorolla, serves as a map of regional identity within Spain. The fourteen unique canvases form a complete representation of the country, which is contrary to our thought of the nation. The traditions, native costumes, and backgrounds of the canvases in this work show the diversity within the regions.

There are various ways to categorize what regionalism is. According to an article by Dr. Eric Storm, the idea behind regionalism is that humans have multiple identities or layers of identity, like an onion. “Territorial identities – local, regional, national and supranational – do not have to be conflicting; on the contrary, people have different layers of identity that supplement each other”. Professor William Beer confirms this with his idea that ethnic groups have two characteristics:

- 1) Ethnic groups are a relatively large group of people who are socially defined as belonging together because of a *belief* in their being descended from common ancestors, and 2) because of this belief they have a sense of identity and share sentiments of solidarity².

In his search throughout Spain for the ‘Spanish feeling,’ Sorolla was able to unearth a combination of these two regional ideas, which served as a basis for his painting. While working on this series, he found it hard to establish a feeling of Spanish identity, “... No buscando ninguna filosofía, sino lo pintoresco de cada región. ... sea necesario decirlo, es que estoy muy lejos de la españolada”⁵. This is interesting because he traveled throughout Spain, yet was not able to find or identify the ‘Spanish feeling.’ However, Sorolla was able to paint these feelings through the *Vision of Spain*. From the colors used in backgrounds to the traditional outfits, we are given insight into the regional identities in Spain and how they create the unique spirit of the country.

In eight years, Sorolla painted nine of the iconic seventeen autonomous communities of Spain for his masterpiece. Marcus Burke explains the iconography of the different regions with two traits:

...la iconografía de *Las regiones de España* presenta dos tipos de aspectos: uno científico y otro artístico-expresivo. Los aspectos científicos incluyen la etnografía, la historia de los trajes tradicionales, los monumentos arquitectónicos, la geografía e incluso la meteorología de cada región. Los aspectos expresivos incluyen las metáforas imperantes y las formas de combinar las imágenes y plasmar el carácter de las personas pintadas, y también valores artísticos como la escala, la composición, el uso del color y la capacidad del artista para utilizar sus recursos con fines icnográficos⁴.

Through these two iconographies, Sorolla was able to paint the spirit of the local territories and relate an accurate story of the history of Spain.

2. Joaquín Sorolla And His Purpose

Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida was born in Valencia, Spain in 1863. When he was 18 years old, he moved to Madrid to study art at the Prado. Beginning in 1890, Sorolla started to paint canvases for European expositions. The art shown in these expositions combined Sorolla’s mastery of light with Spanish backdrops from various provinces of the country. This type of expression won the attention of Archer Milton Huntington, the founder of the Hispanic Society of America, who made Sorolla a member of the Hispanic Society in 1908.

In 1911, Sorolla traveled to the United States to meet with Huntington and sign a contract with the Society. Sorolla was to paint a series of canvases depicting Spanish life called *The Vision of Spain*⁹. The proposition by Huntington and the Society was more than just canvases of Spain; it was a proposition of local affirmation within the territories of Spain. They wanted scenes of rituals that could show Spain to the world. After signing the contract, Sorolla began to travel throughout Spain to sketch the traditional norms of the provinces. These drawings depicted customs, costumes, and landscapes from the respective provinces and ultimately served basis for the *Vision of Spain*.

The purpose behind these oil paintings and sketches was to identify and preserve the uniqueness found in the regions; “[la idea] se pretendía de dicha emblemática que expresara las esencias populares, la sustancia que identificaba cada región o comarca y la constituía como tal”⁵. From the deciduous and green North, to the hot and dry coastal Mediterranean, Sorolla discloses, through his canvases, the climatic essence of each region. By the end of 1912, “pintó menos de 35 estudios de tipos a tamaño natural y más de 25 estudios de tipos de paisajes por los pueblos, comarcas y ciudades que visitaba”⁵.

There is a connection between the backgrounds and the actions of the figures in all of the canvases of the *Vision*. A study by Marcus Burke tells us that, “... los estudios pintados a modo de friso es precisamente la sucesión de edificios la que nos ofrece un telón de fondo siempre cambiante ante el que se suceden varias escenas locales”⁴. Through this interpretation, the backgrounds of the paintings give a feeling of locality and affirm that the regions have their own traditions. “España era un gran imperio tendido sobre muchos mares y albergador de gentes de la más variada condición”⁵. The idea behind this quote is that there would not have been an idea of a ‘Spain’ without the varied traditions within the country. Each of the canvases in the *Vision* is a look at the recuperation of the traditional outfits, countrysides, and regional customs through individual concentration and isolation.

Sorolla talked with a journalist about his feelings on the conservation of the traditions in Spain and his work with the Hispanic Society, “Ustedes los escritores debieron escribir mucho para convencer a la gente que lo bello es lo que rechazan, y no esta uniforme y fea manera de ser, de vivir y de vestir que a todos iguales”⁸. This quote sustains that Spain is a unique country and that this feeling can be lost if not conserved. Sorolla’s work with the *Vision of Spain*

was to recuperate what had been lost over time: the characteristics that made Spain a country full of different traditions and personalities. Sorolla wanted the journalists to write about these topics because without them, the identity and history would be lost. Sorolla began this fight of conservation through art.

3. Findings In The *Vision of Spain*

The first painting of the *Vision of Spain* was painted in Castile in 1913 and is called *La fiesta del pan* (fig 1). This painting contains New Castile, Old Castile, and León. Since Castile is in the center of the country, it is often considered the axis of Spain. In this painting, the people are illustrating the uniformity of Spain. The connection between the people and the background gives the impression of what Castilian life is. The painting is not of a particular festival, but of a representation of the similarities between the two Castiles. According to Sorolla, the painting of Castile made him very emotional, "...Castilla, siempre Castilla, no mirando el espíritu de pintor, sino a esta obra"⁸. This reaction is the result of Sorolla's partiality to old traditions.



Figure 1. Joaquín Sorolla, *La fiesta del pan*. 1913

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The figures to the left of the painting are from Astorga, Alberca, Salamanca, León and Zamora, all of which create Old Castile. We know that they are from these areas because the models are dressed in typical clothing from the various León regions. The girls that are carrying bread are wearing traditional dresses from the Maragateria region. The history behind these dresses dates back to Muslim influence, which has had a strong impact on much of the clothing and traditions of the Castile region¹. The white bread represents the innocence of the women and, perhaps, serves as marriage proposal from the men. According to *Costumes Painted by Sorolla in His Provinces of Spain*, these were traditions from this area of Castile.

The characters to the center and the right of the canvas are from Toledo, Talavera de la Reina, Lagatera, and Ávila (fig.2). Together, these areas create New Castile. These people are carrying sacks of wheat and ceramic objects because this area of Castile produces many crops like wheat, olives, and wines. Various critics say that these people are celebrating the Pilgrimage of San Isidro, the patron of farmers³. The rural outfits and dresses of these communities are very different, which is the result of the climate and the needs of the land. The men and women dress in jerkins to protect themselves from the cold and possible enemies. These outfits represent the agricultural traditions in these regions. The backdrop is a combination of Toledo and Segovia. We can see the city of Toledo and the Sierra de Guadarrama, which is the mountain range that separates Old Castile from New Castile. These mountains are a cold blue, topped with snow, while the sky over Toledo is a warm, hazy blue. This difference gives us the feeling of the identities that separate Old and New Castile.



Figure 2. Joaquín Sorolla, *La fiesta del pan*. 1913

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Sorolla painted in Aragón for his third canvas (fig.3). *La jota* represents a very interesting tradition in the Ansó region. The people of Ansó celebrate their harvest the day after Assumption Day. In this painting, the brotherhood of the Virgen de Pueyta dance on the threshing floor made from their harvest. The women are dancing a traditional dance called *matar la araña*, which is one of the most important integration rituals of the region because Ansó is a harvesting district in the north¹. In *La jota*, we can see a nation of energy, industry, and good looks. The women are dressed in clothing called *basquiñas*. Until the age of twelve, these women wore red dresses to distinguish themselves. After twelve years of age, they dress in green dresses to show their womanhood⁴. This tradition of transition is a celebration of being a woman. The clothes that the men are wearing are traditional outfits of the harvest celebration. As seen in the background of the canvas, Ansó is full of fields, pastures, trees, and snowy summits. This painting allows us to see the green and diverse vegetation of Ansó, as well as the Pyrenees Mountains.



Figure 3. Joaquín Sorolla, *La jota*. 1914

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The fourth painting, painted in Navarra, is called *El concejo del Roncal* (fig.4). This painting is very traditional because the people are celebrating a very old custom. According to Marcus Burke, this ritual is something that is celebrated every year in July, "...conmemora una sentencia de 1375 que puso fin a una disputa medieval sobre el uso de un arroyo cerca de la frontera entre España y Francia"⁴. This area of Spain has a strong French influence because it skirts the French border. The flag in the hand of the young man has a large red X, which is the symbol of the Duchy of Burgundy, a French territory⁴. This small detail illustrates the close ties Navarra and France share.

According to *Costumes Painted by Sorolla in His Provinces of Spain*, the traditional outfits of the valley have not changed over the years¹. In this manner, the Navarra community continues to dress in the traditional clothing of its ancestors. The outfits that the men wear are outlined with a red stripe, which gives the identity of "Sons of the Valley." The clothing that they wear is very heavy because this northern region is known for its forests and pastures which

receive high levels of rainfall and snow. The traditional Navarre feeling of this painting is cast through the green mountains, heavy outfits, and climate elements seen in the landscape of the painting.



Figure 4. Joaquín Sorolla, *El concejo del Roncal*. 1914

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Los bolos, the fifth painting in the series of the *Vision*, was painted in Guipúzcoa, Basque Country (fig.5). This painting perfectly captures the essence of the Basque people and countryside. The coastal area of Guipúzcoa is known for having much of the Basque Country's greenery¹. Sorolla created the spirit of the Basque through the climate, "...los nubarrones preñados de lluvia que complementan los troncos y las hojas verde oscuro"⁵. The Sierras, rich with wooden slopes, surround the valley of Guipúzcoa. The depiction of the terrain of the Basque Country, as seen in the painting, is very cloudy and rainy against the backdrop of the mountains.

Not only do we see the heart of the Basque Country through the background and climate of the region, but also through the characters in the painting. The Basque culture is known for its large noses, larger statures, and reddish faces¹. Like the Aragonese, other kingdoms never conquered the Basque people: "They have not moved the soles of their feet from the ground they now occupy"⁷. By being surrounded by mountain ranges, the Basques have developed strong traditions over the years⁶. As a result, they have been able to hold true to their old customs.



Figure 5. Joaquín Sorolla, *Los bolos*. 1914

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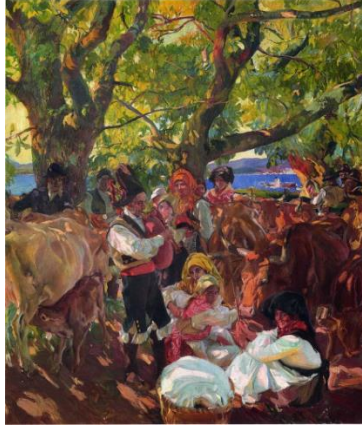


Figure 6. Joaquín Sorolla, *La romería*. 1915

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The ninth painting, *La romería*, was painted in Galicia (fig.6). Sorolla included different symbolisms of Galicia in the painting: “La vaca representa la fertilidad de esta tierra, como también lo hacen la cesta del mercado, llena a rebosar, y el agua que llegamos a vislumbrar, que nos da una pista sobre la abundancia de pescado en los mares gallegos”⁴. Cattle raising was the principle source of income in Galicia and perhaps the people in this painting are getting ready to sell their animals and goods at market. According to Tomás and Garín, Galicia leaves us with the most Italian and Greek impression of Spain⁵. We are able to see this through the blue coast, the bright sun shining through the trees, and the greenness of the trees. Together, the environment creates a Mediterranean feeling, even though the climate on the western coast is not as temperate as that of the eastern coast of Spain. Green pines, warmed by the yellow sun, as shown in the landscape, flourish along the Galician coast. The people in the painting are relaxing under the shade of the trees to keep cool, in preparation for a market. The Galician spirit is captured effortlessly by Sorolla’s ability to give character to subjects through his use of light.

Painted in Cataluña, *El pescado* is the tenth painting of the series (fig.7). The Mediterranean essence of this canvas can be seen in the yellow sun, blue coast, and steep cliffs of the Costa Brava. Like the Galician painting, Sorolla captured the Mediterranean spirit through bright colors warming the trees and sand, and cool colors giving freshness to the shade under the trees. The coastal area of Cataluña is known for trading and selling of crafts and fish from the coast. These fish markets are the sources of wealth for Cataluña. Sorolla painted a very important local tradition in this painting, las barretinas. Barretinas are a type of hat used by towns in time of rebellion. These hats represent “Catalanitat,” or the Catalan spirit. According to Anderson, the red hats denote the men and youth of the town, and the purple hats represent the seamen¹. In *El pescado*, the barretinas help to create the Catalan identity. Like the Basque Country, Cataluña is rich in tradition and would like to separate from Spain in order to be its own nation. The hats worn by these men show how different towns in Cataluña display their rebellion, which continue to this day.



Figure 7. Joaquín Sorolla, *El pescado*. 1915

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The next region that Sorolla traveled to is Valencia. While in Valencia, Sorolla painted two canvases. In a letter written to Huntington, we can see how emotional Sorolla was when he painted in Valencia: “He llorado mucho, de alegría, los colores, la música, el olor, el cielo, todo me conmueve...”¹¹. We can see his interest in his homeland in the bright colors that are able to warm our skin and the smoothness of his brushstrokes over this dry land. The two paintings of Valencia represent the Valencian lifestyle and the importance of fruit cultivation in this area.



Figure 8. Joaquín Sorolla, *Las grupas*. 1916

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The first painting is called *Las grupas* (fig.8). This painting is a celebration of Corpus Christi, which is one of Valencia’s largest celebrations. The characters in the painting are dressed in traditional clothing used during the festival. The two men on horses are carrying the Valencian coat of arms. The men carrying the clusters of oranges represent Caleb and Jacob, who carried grapes from the Promised Land. The carriers of the oranges are dressed in clothing typically worn by Muslims, which shows the magnitude of the Islamic influence in Valencia¹. This town cavalcade is carrying oranges instead of grapes because the coast of Valencia is lined with miles of orange plantations. This large-scale cultivation of oranges is what makes Valencia unique from other regions in Spain.

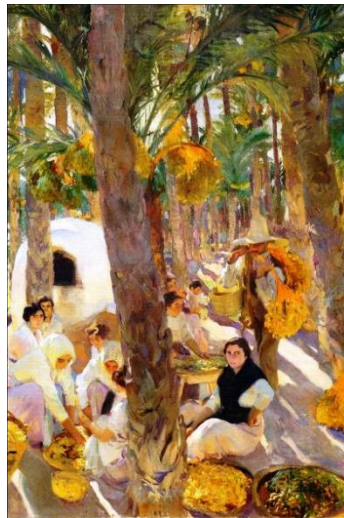


Figure 9. Joaquín Sorolla, *El palmeral*. 1918-1919

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The other painting from Valencia is called *El palmeral* (fig.9). It was painted in Elche, which is known for its date plantations. According to the Muslims, “The date palm must have its feet in water and its head in the fires of Heaven”¹. This quote is representative of the arid land near the Eastern coast of Spain. The canvas was painted in November, which is when the dates are mature. The men in the painting are picking the dates from the trees and the women are putting them in baskets with vinegar and palm leaves in order to start the ripening process. While cultivating the dates, the men and women stay cool from the Valencian sun under the shade of the palm trees.

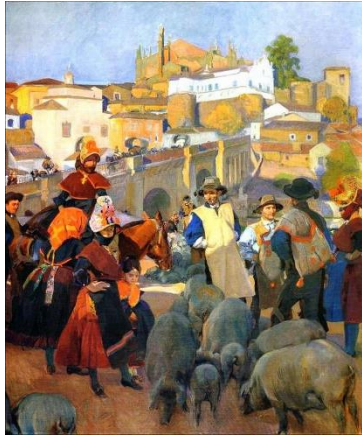


Figure 10. Joaquín Sorolla, *El mercado*. 1917

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El mercado, which is the twelfth canvas in the series, was painted in Extremadura and shows us an important custom well known to this region (fig.10). Under the reign of Phillip II, Extremadura was named one of the regions in which horses were to be bred for the army¹. Extremadura is very rich in large estates of open land, which is why animals are raised here. In addition to this, the climate of this region is very extreme on both ends, hot and cold. The name Extremadura denotes ‘extreme,’ like the winter grazing land that it is known as. For this, the area raises animals that can survive in this climate. This painting is an example of this tradition. On Sunday mornings, the towns gather together to sell pigs, cows, and other animals. Extremadura is known for raising black pigs, which are very large and can survive in cold weather. The freshness of the cold morning can be seen in the heavy clothes worn by the townspeople and the rough, grey skin of the pigs, as well as the dark colors used by Sorolla in the painting.

Since Andalucía is a large and varied region, Sorolla painted five canvases here. All of the paintings capture the Andalusian atmosphere. Four of the five paintings were painted in Seville because the city is full of tradition and outside influence. Together the canvases form a complete idea of the city and its old traditions. The first canvas of Seville is called *Los nazarenos* (fig.11). This painting captures the essence of Seville as a city, expressed in narrow streets lined with colorful windows and balconies. Holy Week, which is extremely important to the Sevillian community, is represented very religiously in this painting. We can see the bell tower of the church in the background, which is the only bell to sound in Seville during Holy Week. In the center, the Nazarenos are dressed black robes with tall hoods, like Jesus’ penitents. The people that line the street are dressed in dark clothing as well in order to give homage to Jesus. Although religion is not practiced often in Spain, the traditions that are carried out during Holy Week are very tranquil and sovereign, reflecting the importance of religious customs.



Figure 11. Joaquín Sorolla, *Los nazarenos*. 1914

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The next painting of Seville is *El encierro* (fig.12). The dry fields known to Southern Spain make Andalucía the farmer's region of the country. In this painting, the cattle herders are walking the bulls along a rural path to be used in a bullfight. The bulls of Seville can be considered the best to fight against because they are the most noble. The cattle herders are dressed in traditional Andalusian farmer garb. The white, strait jackets and leather overalls are representative of the hard and demanding work life on the field. In addition to this, Sorolla is able to capture the essence of the hot Andalusian countryside through his depiction of the sky, "las nubes altas y delgadas que se extienden como un manto sobre los paisajes infinitos"⁴.



Figure 12. Joaquín Sorolla, *El encierro*. 1914

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The third painting that Sorolla painted is called *El baile*, and is a celebration of the May Cross (fig.13). To the Sevillian women, this festival is a time of giving homage to the goddess Maya while having fun. The women sing and dance to express hospitality, freshness, and the innocence of the season. For this tradition, the women construct elaborate altars from orange palms and palm branches¹. The bright colors in the painting are mirrored by the flirtatious dance that the women are performing, which is a representation of the rebirth of spring and life.



Figure 13. Joaquín Sorolla, *El baile*. 1915

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The fourth painting from Seville is called *Los toreros* (fig.14). This painting represents an important affirmation of local territory and ritual integration in Andalucía. In a bullfight, there are two types of tradition, both of which are strongly represented in this Sevillian painting. The first form of tradition is the bullfight as a form of art. During a fight, there is light, color, rhythm, and sound from the crows. The other tradition of a bullfight is of ritual. In this manner, man shows his triumph of intelligence over nature by killing a strong and noble animal. In the painting, the men saluting the crowd are shown as champions, much like man's triumph over nature. In this manner, Sorolla is giving his honor to a city full of tradition.



Figure 14. Joaquín Sorolla, *Los toreros*. 1915

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The last canvas painted in Andalucía is *La pesca del atún* (fig.15). This painting shows an important practice done by the Andalusians on the southwestern coast of Spain. The large tuna, which are seen in the forefront of the painting, live near this part of the coast. The trading on this coast of the country is different from that of the eastern coast because the fishermen in this painting are working with Portuguese seamen as well. The importation and exportation of maritime goods on the two main coasts of Spain are important traditions to the country, and Sorolla was able to capture the growth of this industry in multiple canvases in his series.

The heat of Andalucía can be seen by the colors that Sorolla used in the painting. There is yellow light coming through the awning, silver light reflected off the tuna, and blue light from the sea. Together, all of these different sources of light create the atmosphere of the warmth of Southern Spain. “Cuando hay más luz en los cuadros, hay mucho más vida, verdad, y belleza”¹⁰. This quote represents Sorolla's use of light to depict the Spanish way of life.

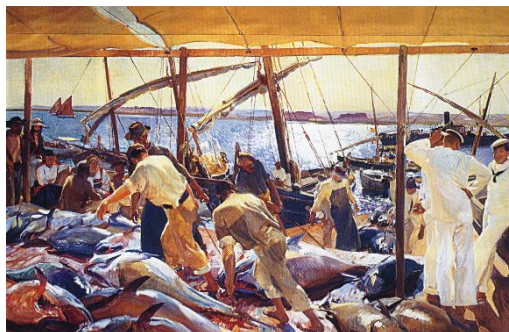


Figure 15. Joaquín Sorolla, *La pesca del atún*. 1919

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4. Conclusion

Felipe Garín and Facundo Tomás confirm the idea behind regionalism in the *Vision of Spain* by Sorolla: “Son catorce composiciones que relatan determinadas síntesis espacio-temporales de momentos característicos de nueve de las actuales comunidades autónomas, regiones europeas históricas cuyas imágenes son ensañadas unidas para dar una idea sumatoria de España”⁵. The meaning behind the series of canvases is to show how different the regions within Spain vary. The regions in the north differ as much as those in the south and the ones in the west differ as much as the ones in the east. These regional identities in the *Vision of Spain* show us the diversity that exists in Spain. It is hard to say that there is one single Spanish identity, because all the differences that exist within the country create the complete Spanish identity. We can use the *Vision of Spain* as a map to distinguish the regional identities of Spain. The fourteen unique canvases of the series form a complete representation of the country.

5. Acknowledgements

The author would like to express her appreciation to Westminster College for providing the necessary resources and funding to conduct this research. She would also like to thank Dr. Jeffrey Bersett, her faculty advisor, for his guidance and support throughout the project, as well as the Modern Languages Department.

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