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## *The Mancorbo Canal: meanings of a landscape*

### ARTISTIC AND INTELLECTUAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The painting *La Canal de Mancorbo* by Carlos de Haes, painted in 1876 and now in the Museo del Prado, is, in principle, an excellent landscape painting. And the place that inspired it is also a magnificent rocky mountain range.

Art and mountain culture, in general, have clear European roots, which developed especially in the Alps, were born with the Renaissance, flourished with the Enlightenment and reached their peak with the Romantics. Alpine painting responds to these broad cultural contexts, constituting one of the most important sources of influence in Spanish landscape painting. The cultural appreciation of the Alps gave rise to multiple manifestations, from science to poetry, and it was international. Still, about painting, the British painter William Pars went to the mountains in 1770 and returned with an innovative collection of illustrations of picturesque landscapes, including glaciers. These are the beginnings of a series of visits by travelling English painters and poets, such as Cozens and Towne, the latter belonging to the Lake District artistic group, culminating in Turner's intermittent trips to the mountain range from 1802 to 1844. Ruskin's refined alpine work from 1833 onwards, in which he incorporated the most characteristic mountain landscapes, and that of his followers, such as J. Brett in the mid-19th century, are not to be underestimated. The English line continued to ascend the mountain with the mountaineer E. T. Compton, author of formidable views of peaks and glaciers.

Contemporaneously, the well-known French author Joseph Vernet painted the storm in the mountains occasionally in 1775 or the pastoral atmosphere in 1763. Wüest depicts the Rhone glacier as early as 1775. The Swiss artist Samuel Birmann, who from 1823 onwards drew, painted and engraved the high alpine mountains with a strong personality, is remarkable. However, it was in 1776 with the Swiss painter Caspar Wolf that the alpine landscape was shown as a canon of beauty. Other artists of external origin, such as Courbet in 1874, also masterfully retain views of the Alps, and a particular case of originality is that of Friedrich, with his travellers, clouds, summits, and well-known desire to sacralise the landscape.

Diday was the first master of alpine landscape specialists. His Swiss pupil A. Calame (1810-1864), who marked a decisive step forward in the painting of mountainous nature, was particularly influential. As a teacher, he had many direct students, his fame spread far and wide and the publication of his landscape lessons was widely disseminated. Around 1845, in Madrid, the painter Villaamil had his pupils copy and illuminate his lithographs in watercolour. In 1862, Haes published his *Essays on etching*, which also showed the literal influence of Calame's *Essais de gravure a l'eau-forte* of 1838.

The pictorial and geomorphological contribution to the Mont Blanc massif, between art and science, of the architect Viollet-le Duc was of particular interest for the beauty of his works, his attention to the mountain relief and the dates of his work. It was in the same year as the exhibition of *La Canal de Mancorbo* in Madrid, 1876, that he published his book *Le Massif du Mont Blanc* in

France. It should be noted that, as in Barbizon and Fontainebleau, there was also a Swiss landscape school or colony in Meiringen, Switzerland, devoted to depicting the mountain in its natural state. It was active in the mid-19th century and masters such as Calame and pupils such as Loppé lived side by side. Other painters continued this school in various ways. Haes de Mancorbo's painting is therefore supported by a European artistic production in which he integrated Spanish landscape painting.

The Alpine model became universal. It came to America as a natural extension of European art in a new landscape, maintaining concrete relationships. Thomas Cole (1801-1848), of English origin and specialised in Europe and a follower of Turner and Constable, discovered North American nature for art using European means and began a cycle of his own, known as the White Mountains group, with many painters. Durand (1796-1886) also painted with affinity to Cole. F. E. Church's style (1826-1900) had a recognised and direct influence of Humboldt, which reached other painters, such as Bellerman (1814-1889). Along the same lines, the German artist A. Bierstadt (1830-1902) depicted the Rocky Mountains in an alpine style. In the Hudson School, T. Moran (1837-1926) painted Yellowstone influenced by Turner, and J. M. Rugendas (1802-1858), who came from Munich and was again a Humboldtian and Turnerian, depicted Latin American nature in a large body of work inspired by the ideas of the father of modern geography. There are also numerous examples of the extension of this line of landscape painting, as is to be expected, throughout Central and Eastern Europe, reaching as far as the mountains of Asia and even Australia.

In Spain, the interest in the Sierra de Guadarrama of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza had a great influence. When a *Society for the Study of the Guadarrama* was set up there in 1886, the painter Aureliano de Beruete, himself a disciple of Carlos de Haes, was one of the driving forces behind it. In the same year, Giner de los Ríos published the article "Paisaje", which focused on the same mountain range. It was a cultural movement. Giner turned the vision of the mountain in our culture on its head and advocated the introduction of hiking as an educational, intellectual and moral resource. Spanish culture had not been so decidedly landscape-oriented until then. And that article by Giner, which expresses a clear regenerationist ideal, has a substantial focus on the mountain. It explicitly contains what he called a "geological aesthetic" and, without doubt, a notable model of such an aesthetic was Haes's painting of Mancorbo, exhibited ten years earlier in Madrid.

It is likely that Haes's choice of the Picos de Europa for the artistic journey of 1874 was influenced by the well-known geologist Casiano de Prado's popularisation of their peaks and canals in 1860. However, Martín Rico had also visited Covadonga before 1874 and Pérez Villamil had composed paintings of the Picos de Europa from travels in 1846 and 1850. It even seems that Haes himself had taken his brushes out in the Picos de Europa in Asturias, in 1871. However, his painting of that date entitled *Mountains of Asturias. Picos de Europa*, depicts fir trees typical of the Pyrenees, which do not correspond to this Cantabrian mountain and they could be a geographical licence by the painter. Likewise, *La vereda*, dating from 1871, which has been located in the Picos, contains wild pines that are more characteristic of the Guadarrama. His *Mountains of Asturias*, dated 1872, has a peak similar to that of the painting with fir trees mentioned above, all of which suggests that it was painted in a workshop. Haes's naturalistic study in Mancorbo in 1874 is realistic, with a rocky outcrop at the bottom of a high valley, in an enclosure of its own. To reach it from the area from which it is painted, that of men, cattle and groves, it is necessary to pass through a rocky gateway.

In continuity with the pictorial landscape painting of Haes and his disciples, and with the importance given to landscape by the 1898 generation, a wide arc of intellectual and artistic contributions was woven. In keeping with the rest of the "generation", the 98th pictorial period was fertile and particularly landscape-like. The 98 built a literary, reflective and pictorial image of Spain, elaborated by great artists and thinkers such as Machado, Unamuno and Beruete, which would last until the middle of the last century. This cultural image has remained engraved as an interpretation of something more than a territory, going beyond the field of letters and, in the pictorial field itself, through Haes' disciples, who evolved with their particular geniuses and following multiple trends, including the powerful force of impressionism. Martín Rico, Morera, Campuzano, Regoyos, Beruete, Sorolla, Zuloaga, Ricardo Baroja, Espina, Lhardy, Martínez Vázquez, Arredondo, Zubiaurre, Arteta, and perhaps Solana, among others can be related with the group of 98. Beruete may be considered the key figure in this line. But Regoyos, for example, without losing the landscape painter's desire, was a highly independent painter, focusing on the pictorial styles of the moment with originality. And Sorolla's genius is also of indisputable personality, without losing his close relationship with Beruete and the intellectual keys of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza and 98. The same independent character, while maintaining its link

to the view of the landscape of the 98 and modernism, can be said of Zuloaga's painting. Ricardo Baroja, on the other hand, is the painter and engraver par excellence of the Generation of '98. The Cantabrian Mountains also had specific renovating painting, as in the case of Nicanor Piñole, Casimiro Sainz and Riancho, and received foreign artists who were experts in the mountains, such as the Pyrenean artist Charles Jouas.

#### HAES'S PAINTING IN THE PICOS DE EUROPA

Almost in the middle of the 20th century, Pantorba proclaimed that it could no longer be said that "landscape painting was an inferior genre", listing a list of Spanish painters who would corroborate this. Referring to Martín Rico (1833-1908), the author noted that he painted extensively in the Sierra de Guadarrama and even in Covadonga, in the Picos de Europa. In 1862, he moved to Switzerland, where he met Calame and painted a picture of the *Cascade of Eternal Ice in Rosenlain*, a significant precedent of the desire to insert this landscape school into the already established Alpine style of painting. Pantorba wrote that Haes, from 1855, "was the first landscape painter among us who went out into the countryside, into the open air, to paint the landscape directly from nature". The Prado Museum's current room of Spanish landscape painters exhibits 16 paintings by Haes, with *La Canal de Mancorbo* presiding over the group. This work is accompanied by another one on summits near the Canal in the Picos de Europa, which we will comment on later, both of which are the result of the excursion of 1874, and a varied sample of views from his travels, among others, of Holland, Normandy, the surroundings of the Monastery of Piedra, Madrid, Majorca and Andalusia. Also on display in the same room is a landscape by Martín Rico and other landscape painters, and above all, a large scene with a mountain in the background by Muñoz Degrain, specifically entitled *Paisaje del Pardo* (1867), a composition in the traditional style.

Haes himself expressed his ideas on landscape painting in 1860. According to him, the landscape painter should identify with country nature, "understand the language of forests and valleys". Moreover, for Haes, the landscape painter cannot be just a colourist, as a form is needed to fulfil the need for "accuracy". Despite that, he added, "in Spain, the landscape is still in its infancy". As we have been saying, on one of his trips to the Iberian Peninsula in 1874, he went to the Picos de Europa with his pupils Beruete and Entrala, which led to the creation

in his studio, from an evocative sketch taken from life, of the painting *La Canal de Mancorbo* in 1876. This channel is both on the edge of the Ándara massif and penetrates its rocky outcrops, adapted to the morphological system of the mountain. The abrupt bend in the course of the Mancorbo stream towards the west in its upper part, in the channel itself, has been inserted between two steps or rocky blocks, entering the area at the edge of the abrupt massif.

In the obituary Beruete wrote about Haes in 1898, it is noted that he spent the summer travelling to paint in the field. He kept the studies made on such trips and used those sketches for his final paintings. Haes, writes Beruete, "was never idle and, when the rain made it impossible for us to paint in the countryside, [...] he made the most of the time by painting from the window of the inn". And among his numerous studies was, as we know, "the one he used for his painting *La Canal de Mancorbo*". From then on, Haes came to prefer the mists and northern lights, and one of the European paintings of this third period was distinguished at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1878. Beruete also went to the Alps much later, between 1905 and 1907, producing works of the high mountains, their snows and glaciers in his best freestyle, thus closing the "Haesian" cycle of mountain painting.

The summer of 1874 was a period of intense work for Carlos de Haes and his pupils Beruete and Entrala, which was reflected in numerous paintings, studies and sketches. It is to be imagined that the journeys to the places where they decided to make a sketch took a long time on horseback. The paintings from that summer can be divided into identifiable groups on the land. Of La Hermida, we know the image taken from Estragüeña towards Pico Tiolda. In Liébana, they spent a good part of their stay working between the Argüébanes (Mancorbo) and Lon (Las Arredondas) canals. Of this group, there are three paintings called Picos de Europa depicting steep crags. One corresponds to Peña Jumales; another is done from the contact of the limestone escarpments at the interfluvium with the Lon channel, in Peña Manjón; the last one represents the Alto de los Cabezos, above Brez. Completing the Argüébanes group are the main protagonists of Haes' dedication to the Picos de Europa, the paintings on the Mancorbo path. From the bottom of this channel (655 m), we can see the panorama of the painting called *Nieblas*. From a higher point of view, following the path towards the Espigüel pass (850-900 m) we find the view of the *Canal de Mancorbo en los Picos de Europa*. Its central sector is occupied by the strait opened by the Mancorbo river. Behind it, the rocky walls at the bottom

form three different levels; first the Crieras crests (1.480-1.670 m) with its continuation on the right of the picture, the Robru crest (1.836 m). The second plane is formed by the convex trellis of the Torca crag (1.914 m). The third plane, the furthest, is the Morra de la Jonfría (2.064 m).

Another group of views in Liébana comes from the routes through the Cereceda Valley (Vega de Liébana). They are small panoramas, sketches and notes taken in the field, sometimes unfinished. The so-called *Picos de Europa* represents the centred silhouette of a distant isolated mountain reminiscent of the Peña del Castro (1.353 m). The one entitled *Montañas del Puerto de Pajares* which, as has been identified on other occasions, represents the Peña de Dobres from the Vega valley, may also come from this valley. A final group is made up of a series of mountain landscapes, generally of small dimensions, which are difficult to identify as they are centred on details of trees and rocky areas. They are generally detailed studies that will later be used to introduce details in the subsequent larger workshop paintings.

#### OTHER CONTEMPORARY PAINTERS OF THE PICOS DE EUROPA

Other pupils of Haes would continue his dedication to the mountain painting, although the Picos de Europa would no longer have the same prominence. Among them, only Antonio Gomar y Gomar left a good selection of landscapes of the Picos de Europa. He was initially trained at the Academia Valenciana and he continued his studies, from 1871 with Carlos de Haes. Although landscapes and nature were his artistic passion, mountains did not represent a principal subject in his paintings.

However, his presence in Santander allowed his closeness to the Cantabrian Mountains. He met Juan Manuel Mazarrasa, owner of mines in the Picos de Europa, who was enthusiastic about his landscapes and, around 1890, commissioned Gomar the decoration of his mansion in Villaverde de Pontones. He made a dozen of panels with different landscapes which mostly represented the rocky environment of the mines. Two of them (*Desfiladero de la Hermida* and *Subida a las minas*) show the difficult access to the mines. Three pieces of smaller dimensions (*Bocamina y lavadero*, *Cueva en las minas* y *Casetón de Mazarrasa*) represent the infrastructures and landscapes related to the mining activity. Finally, two artworks of bigger dimensions show the main mineral rough terrain, *Paisaje de los Picos de Europa*, and the most characteristic of the series, *Vista del lago de Ándara*.

It is by the end of the century when some landscape painters in the wake of Haes showed a certain dedication to the Picos de Europa. Among them, Ovidio Murguía de Castro (1871-1900) and Tomas Campuzano who, in 1900, painted *En los Picos de Europa*. Later, from 1912 onwards, Nicanor Piñole (1878-1978) started doing his first landscapes of the Cantabrian Mountain. Nuñez Losada, who was indirectly influenced by Carlos de Haes, had already had numerous landscapes in his work about Picos in the XX century.

Finally, the landscape school of Madrid had, among its derivations, one by the sea, in the so-called "Colonia" of Muros de Nalón, in Asturias. The painter Casto Plasencia visited Muros between 1888 and 1890 due to his relation as a professor of the artist Tomás García Sampedro and from then on, he attracted to that place landscape painter, some of them his disciples, some Haes' disciples. The painters were joined by writers and musicians, so the "colony" became open-ended. This sea derivation closes the landscape cycle in which to place the *Canal de Mancorbo*. Haes himself had his last landscape phase on the Atlantic coasts of France and Spain.

#### THE PLACE

The Canal of Mancorbo is a remote cleft, opened in the southern front of the Macizo Oriental of Ándara, in the Picos de Europa towards Liébana. In its verticality, it connects two contrasted domains: the one of the steep calcareous rock of the Picos de Europa with one of Liébana and its detrital siliceous rocks. Liébana is a circular intramountainous depression, articulated by three principal valleys, Vadelprado, Valle de Cereceda and Valdebaró. The depression leans on the South in the dividing line between the Cantabrian and Atlantic waters, marked by massifs over 2.000 meters. The Peña Pieta massif (2.539 m) occupies the central sector of the dividing line. The Liébana valleys converge near Potes (208 m) forming the Valle de Cillorigo, traversed by the Deva river on its way to the limestone barrier of the Picos de Europa where it forms the Garganta de la Hermida. The front of the Macizo de Ándara towards the Liébana depression has a marked course NE-SW and a great elevation (2.200-2.400 m) and it is presented as a continuous and solid wall.

The morphologic duality between Liébana and the Picos de Europa responds to lithological and tectonic differences generated during their geological evolution. The distribution and disposition of rocky materials respond mainly to the Hercynian tectonics developed during the

Carboniferous. Its terrain as we know it nowadays, however, is the product of the alpine orogeny and the erosive processes that characterize it. The Picos de Europa area was in its sedimentary origin an extensive submerged carbonate platform that finished, southward, in the continental slope that connected with deep seas. At this basin arrived the siliceous sediments from the south and southwest emerged lands. The compressive deformation (N-S) of these sediments produced a shortening of the surface area of the lithological series and there was a movement of the calcareous unity, which produced a thrust fault over the siliceous series, creating a sharp contact front (E-W). Furthermore, the carbonated series of the Picos fragmented, some fragments overlapping others, like fish scales. These tectonic scales were the response to the compression and the Hercynian shortening, which could have been about 60 km. This compression was followed by a prolonged extensional phase that generated faults of important horizontal component and WNW-ESE direction. They are faults that cut the previous scales and thrust faults, like it happens in Ándara, in the Collado de Cámara and the Canal de San Carlos. With the alpine tectonics, the Hercynian thrust fault interplay is produced, and new faults and breaks are created. The vertical movement associated with these breaks could have been important, sometimes reaching 1.000 m. This orogenesis would be responsible for the major traces of the reliefs that we know today. So, the elevation of the Picos de Europa over Liébana is a structural one, and its contact corresponds to a calcareous fault scarp that dominates the siliceous materials of Liébana overlapped by those. This scarp is a major form. Likewise, if the shortening style of the scale-shaped limestone sediments is reproduced, a dissymmetric form is observed to occur frequently: the front of the scales glances rugged southward while north, the limestone layers form a smoother back, less steep.

Despite all, the walled front of the Picos is not continuous due to the fractures WNW-ESE that compartmentalize it. The fractures are frequently exploited by great channels which descend from the calcareous wall towards Liébana. Their accumulated vertical energy leads to an intense erosion over Liébana's softer materials. Their pouring joins to gravity slumps, landslides, debris flows and effects of avalanches. In the past, the colder Pleistocene conditions allowed the action of glaciers that partially descended from the walled front towards Liébana.

The channels of San Carlos and Mancorbo have a bayonet layout, typical of the structural adaptation of watercourses and torrential streams. Both channels follow the

WNW-ESE layouts of the tardi-hercynian fractures and, their interfluvial offers a profile of heavily trimmed rocky ridges, articulated in different minor tectonic scales that depart from Pico de San Carlos (2.212 m). This ridge is the one represented by Carlos de Haes in two of his paintings, *La Canal de Mancorbo* and *Nieblas*. In its steep slope southward-southwestward, towards Mancorbo, the fronts of the Crieras are placed, a central motif of Haes' painting. Their connection is possible thanks to the abrupt change of course of the channels, facilitated by the cross of fractures. The Mancorbo channel cuts the limestone strip that conforms to the Espigüel strait, around 850-900 m, and configures the foreground of Haes's painting, *La Canal de Mancorbo*. Leaving behind the rugged limestone crests of the Picos, the Liébana siliceous are strong slopes but not a cliff-edged one, with multiples branched incisions and round appearance interfluvial culminations. In the transition of the limestone from Picos to Liébana forms shaped by the ancient glaciers located in these summits during the Pleistocene are preserved. From the glacial cirques of La Jonfría, Castellín and San Carlos, Samelar and La Aurora, the glacier tongue occupied the channels of San Carlos and Mancorbo. After fitting in the Gárgola, it reached the convergence with Mancorbo, creating slender morainic cords.

Starting from the inert world of the described mountainous architecture, a unique and living landscape is created where the atmospheric environment, together with the vegetation cover and the transformations made by the cultivation and use of these lands by man, provide a well-set image that Carlos de Haes knew how to compose.

The nature of the Liébana climate was already pointed by Lautensach: an island of the Dry Iberia placed in the Damp Iberia. The mountains that surrounded it provide a barrier effect that is particularly effective with the west, northwest and north humid winds. That is the effect captured through the fog in the rocks in multiple Haes' paintings of the Picos. Besides the decreased precipitation in the basin, Bertrand noted two major traits of the Baja Liébana climate: one, the existence of at least two months of summer drought; and another, the sweltering summer with an average monthly temperature over 20 degrees Celsius. These peculiarities make that the vegetal coating shows Mediterranean features in these Atlantic mountains. Below 800 m grow oak groves and, to a lesser extent, cork trees. According to Bertrand, one-third of the species living in the clearing or tree-free sectors are characteristic of Mediterranean areas, among them the lavender, the mastic tree, or the Montpellier cistus, as well as some ericaceous. Over Argüébanes, grows a broad oak

grove of *Quercus pyrenaica* almost reaching 1.000 m high. The space is shared with some specimens of maple tree and ash tree. There where the forest starts to clear the oaks alternate with pines and broom. Already in the proximities of the Espigüel pass, in the shade of the Picos de Santaolaja, is located the beech grove of Monte Mancorbo until the limestone rock walls block its progress in altitude (1.300-1.400 m). Here, the toponymy shows the use to which it was subjected its forest cover, the Carboneras. Haes presents too in his scene of Mancorbo, on the underside and at the forefront of the painting, a pattern of relationships between man and nature, in which appear pastures, trees and cows with calves and the cowherd who look after them.

In the Cantabrian Mountain, the “valley” has been the territory that allowed combining agriculture and trasterminant livestock. During winters, the livestock remains in the lowland areas, near the villages, and it is moved to the mountain pass in summer. Cowherds went up to these mountain passes, assisted by young men that spent the summer in the mountain pass, and who came down to the village every heigh or ten days to get provisions or anything required for the stay. The herds of each village were in the care of the neighbour or neighbours that had the shift, “la vecera” or “vecería”. The rest of the year, the small and big livestock stayed in the private areas of the villages, sometimes shared with the neighbouring villages. There was livestock that did not go up to the more distant mountain pass (Áliva), taking advantage of the near ones (Espigüel), when the spring and the beginning of summer kept well the freshness of the meadows. By its appearance, maybe the livestock represented in Haes’ painting was from Liébana descendant of the Monchina cow.

#### GEOGRAPHIC ELEMENTS OF THE PAINTING

In the passage from sketch to painting, Haes reduced the size of the natural porthole in the foreground, while increasing the size of the large rock in the background. He emphasized and detailed the inner reliefs of the rocks and slanted the profile of the great buttress making it more elusive; he intensified the distance between planes in the painting, moving away from the last crag on the left; he brightened up the forefront and with thus placed importance to the cows and added the trees of the lower section. The composition of the painting rests on an angular system or fractal treatment of the elements. In fact, the general angles of the relief frame the major shapes in a dissymmetric rhomboid. According to what is shown

in the painting, the internal structure of the rocky area is setting the scarp with geological plausibility, through cracks, ledges, breaches, and spurs. In short, a physiographic classification would distinguish the components that are marked in the landscape: above the limestone towers split by the erosion between fractures; on the wall, the backs and fronts of overlying scales forming a large set within the same system; and finally, the opened channels in the massif by erosion, some of them, verticals, perpendicular to such front, leaving between them the rocky spurs, and the one of Mancorbo, the main one, placed in the base, traced according to the guideline of the main scarp. One could say, then, that the characteristic forms of the Picos de Europa are represented in a single view in the painting.

As seen in the preliminary painting of 1874, the painter placed his easel in a landing close to the exit of the Canal, on the right bank of the stream of Mancorbo.

Nevertheless, in our tour around the place, we concluded that Haes had to move his easel at least in two other positions to capture the full landscape as it appears in the picture.

1: The depicted landscape is arranged as follows: on top of the summits and needles of the main peaks. In the middle part, the rocky front takes the forms of spur, ledges, and needles. The lower part of the front has a trident tower-shaped spur. At the foot of the mountain, the remote high valley of Mancorbo is placed, with meadows between rocks and some grove. Thus, the abrupt rocky front of la Torca presents a difference in height over 600 m. In the painting, the treetops and tree trunks on the forefront have a damaged appearance caused by browsing. The fold, paths and men are, then, behind the painter. But with this additional touch, is the sublime which dominates the global scene of *La Canal de Mancorbo* in the majestic peacefulness of the nature kingdom.

Geography has demonstrated to be, again, a great tool for landscape understanding. The art has created a mountain parallel to the physic reliefs, which is also part of this landscapes. To fully understand these it is, thus, necessary to go to the works that represented them. Cultural geography is thus a tool and an intellectual field in which to broaden our concept of landscape. The landscape has a perception and representation in the culture field, that leads to his image. This image returns on the landscape giving it entity and values. *La Canal de Mancorbo* is a milestone of the Spanish mountain culture but is not an isolated one. For these reasons, its analysis shows the desirability of broadening specialities and exploring their contacts.

