

**PERROTIN**

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**Jesús Rafael SOTO**

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*Treasures From Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida and More at the Hispanic Society*

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# Treasures From Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida and More at the Hispanic Society

The newly reopened Hispanic Society Museum & Library emphasizes underknown objects from its rich collection and mounts new exhibitions, including one on Jesús Rafael Soto

*By Mary Tompkins Lewis*  
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The Hispanic Society monuments PHOTO: ALFONSO LOZANO/THE HISPANIC SOCIETY

The partial reopening of the Hispanic Society Museum & Library last week as part of a continuing renovation was an auspicious event. With one of the finest collections of its kind in the country, it offers both superb Old Master paintings and an innovative interpretation of literary and visual culture that was unique at the institution's founding and remains impressive today.

The Hispanic Society, established in 1904 by the American scholar and collector Archer M. Huntington as a center for the study of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American art and

culture, is a little-known jewel located in New York's Washington Heights. It is currently in the midst of an ambitious project to upgrade its three landmark buildings and restore Audubon Terrace, where it sits.

The first phase of renovation has focused on the Main Building. Its central, Spanish Renaissance-style Main Court, a stunning, two-story interior space that previously housed masterworks from the Spanish Golden Age; a large gallery devoted to the monumental "Vision of Spain" (1913-19) by Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, a 14-painting homage to his native country; along with several smaller galleries are the first of its spaces to be refurbished.

Unusual for an institution reopening after a period of dormancy, the Hispanic Society has chosen not to display some of the foremost gems of its collection, paintings by El Greco, Velázquez, Zurbarán and Goya. These recently returned from a lengthy "Collection Highlights" tour while the museum was closed, and are scheduled to be reinstalled on a selective, rotating basis beginning this fall.



Jesús Rafael Soto's 'Venise' (1964) PHOTO: ADAGP, PARIS/ARTIST'S ESTATE/PERROTIN/  
PHOTO: CLAIRE DORN

In the meantime, visitors can enjoy some of the collection's holdings that are often overlooked, including an array of late Gothic and early Renaissance Spanish sculptures tucked away in a low-slung gallery just off the cavernous Main Court. Most are from the multilevel, alabaster monuments that made up the magnificent funerary ensembles erected for his family by the first Duke of Albuquerque, Beltrán de la Cueva (d. 1492), in the church of San Francisco in Cuéllar in northern Spain. Consisting of small sculpted biblical set pieces, single figures, life-size contemporary effigies and elaborately carved Gothic tracery and pinnacles, they reveal, according to the Hispanic Society curator Patrick Lenaghan, a range of disparate skills, styles and unidentifiable hands.

The best of these sculptures, presented close-up and at eye-level, invite viewers to marvel at their exceptional artistry: the richly carved fabrics that cloak many of the sacred personages; the extraordinarily beautiful figure of a seated God the Father, who balances a globe on his lap above tiny, elegantly shod feet; and the idealized Cuéllar effigies situated throughout the room.

The splendidly refinished Main Court, where Goya's alluring portrait of the Duchess of Alba (1797) once greeted visitors, is currently the site of centennial exhibitions marking the death of Sorolla in 1923 and the birth of the Venezuelan artist Jesús Rafael Soto (1923-2005), the latter a loan show. Portraits figured among the works Huntington commissioned from the Spanish painter, and a selection of them hangs in the court's arched wooden expanse. Sorolla's likeness of the poet and Nobel laureate Juan Ramón Jiménez (1916), captured in an elegant, pensive pose, aptly embodies the founder's vision of a gallery memorializing Spanish cultural elites.



Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida's 'Juan Ramón Jiménez' (1916)  
PHOTO: THE HISPANIC SOCIETY

Known for their kinetic, optical effects and dematerialized forms, Soto's constructions, such as "Venise" (1964)—in which suspended metal rods appear to vibrate as one's vantage point shifts in front of its painted support—offer a surprising contrast to Sorolla's nearby paintings, and even to the collecting habits of the museum's founder, who was no fan of modern art. But their presence conforms to Huntington's vision of a collection that celebrated the whole of Old and New World Hispanic culture. One of Soto's popular "Penetrables," made up of hand-painted, hanging PVC strands that create shimmering, dynamic spaces and invite viewers' interactions, is scheduled to be installed by late June on the museum's outdoor terrace.

To this visitor, the most vivid example of the enduring impact of Huntington's mission can be found in the small show just off the Main Court devoted to the artist Juan de Pareja, an Andalusian

slave and assistant of African descent to the illustrious Spanish painter Velázquez.



Artist Jas Knight's copy of Velázquez's portrait of Juan de Pareja PHOTO: JAS KNIGHT

Organized by Madeleine Haddon, a curator at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, it parallels a similar but larger exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. With only a few works, the Hispanic Society show explores, through the medium of copies, the power of a single image: the exquisite and astonishingly lifelike portrait of Pareja by Velázquez in the Met that has challenged generations of artists and copyists, and still speaks to painters today.

A staggeringly beautiful and unimpeachably faithful copy by Jas Knight, a gifted contemporary artist whose learned grasp of Velázquez's studio methods—including his virtually inimitable layered technique of oil painting—and of his subject's powerful, dignified presence is nothing less than breathtaking, dominates the small gallery. (As demonstrated in an accompanying video of Mr. Knight at work, it was painted as part of the Met's Copyist Program, where artists can apply to set up an easel in the museum's galleries.) It is easily worth a trip to the upper reaches of Manhattan and, as much as anything here on view, attests to the remarkable vision of the Hispanic Society's founder, and bodes well for

the museum's future.

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### **'Vision of Spain' (1911-1919)**

**Selections from the monumental, 14-painting celebration of his native country by Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida, the preeminent Spanish artist at the turn of the 20th century.**



1 of 10

Left: 'Navarra', 1914; Right: 'Aragón', 1914 COURTESY OF THE HISPANIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA

*Ms. Lewis, who taught art history for many years at Trinity College, Hartford, Conn., writes about art for the Journal and other publications.*