

**Exhibition** May 14–September 8, 2025  
Sabatini Building, Floor 1

# Néstor Reencountered



*Poema del Atlántico. La tarde* (Poem of the Atlantic: Evening), 1917–1918. Museo Néstor, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

**MUSEO NACIONAL  
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The objective of the exhibition *Néstor Reencountered* is to enable the rediscovery of the multifaceted artist Néstor Martín-Fernández de la Torre (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1887–1938), a figure who has practically fallen into oblivion outside his native Canary Islands, and to help broaden public knowledge of an oeuvre that was unusual in the context of early twentieth-century Spanish art.

The show is arranged in ten sections that reflect the many different facets of this artist, who developed a fruitful and extremely interesting career in the fields of painting, muralism, scenography, design, and publishing.

### **The Beginnings: In Search of an Artistic Identity**

Brought up in a well-to-do family that frequented artistic and musical gatherings, Néstor acquired a great sensitivity for art thanks to encouragement from his mother, who managed to engage the Catalan painter Eliseu Meifrèn i Roig to give him lessons. The determined support of his mother and Meifrèn allowed him to move to Madrid in 1901 and join the studio of Rafael Hidalgo de Caviedes, where he began producing portraits and street scenes as well as exploring symbolist imagery, as seen in his work *Adagio* (1903). During his time in Madrid, he attended the literary salons at the Café de Levante, frequented by the likes of Valle-Inclán, Zuloaga, and Romero de Torres, and at the Café de Pombo, where he met Ramón Gómez de la Serna.

From 1904 onward, he continued his formative period in London, where he immersed himself in the beauty of Pre-Raphaelite art, the chromaticism of James McNeill Whistler, and the transgressive drawings of Aubrey Beardsley. He then moved on to Paris, where he steeped himself in symbolism. His contact with the two cities made a cultural and aesthetic impact on him that is palpable in his work from this early period.

### **The Barcelona Years: 1907–1913**

In 1907, the young painter took up residence in Barcelona, attracted by the dazzling art nouveau architecture of the Catalan capital and its artistic and intellectual soirees, such as the gatherings attended by Santiago Rusiñol, Ismael Smith, and Adrià Gual. His work was well received by local collectors, and he was soon given major commissions, like the one for four wall panels at the Saló del Tibidabo, which were inspired by two poems by Jacint Verdaguer. His painting in those years was characterized by a vibrant use of color with art nouveau echoes and by the representation of mythological figures, as in *Berenice* (1909) or *Hércules prepara la tumba de Pirene* (Hercules Shaping the Tomb of Pyrene) (1908–1909). His work thus moved away from naturalism and realism to draw on a visual repertoire of androgynous bodies that escaped the binary canons of masculinity and femininity.

Although the Barcelona of that period was a stimulating and attractive city, it was also the site of malicious comments on one of his principal works, *Epitalamio (o las bodas del príncipe Néstor)* (Epithalamium [or the Wedding of Prince Nestor]) (1909). In spite of disapproval from certain quarters, which were critical of the painting's sexual ambiguity, the work was exhibited in Brussels in 1910.

### **The Decadent Circle**

His second clash with the critics took place as a result of the exhibition held at Fayans Català in 1911, which showed works by Ismael Smith, Mariano Andreu, and Laura Albéniz, as well as pieces by Néstor himself. The show, exuberant and aestheticist, was criticized for its decadence and preciousness.

At the time, the artist was fully immersed in the concept of art for art's sake and in creating a series of androgynous figures, such as *Un caballero inglés* (An English Gentleman) (1910) and the homoerotic composition *Los vicios* (The Vices) (1910–1913),



*Epitalamio (o las bodas del príncipe Néstor)* (Epithalamium [or the Wedding of Prince Nestor]), 1909. Museo Néstor, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria



*Poema de la tierra. La primavera* (Poem of the Earth: Spring), 1934–1938. Museo Néstor, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

works that share a certain air with those of Ismael Smith and Mariano Andreu.

### **Poem of the Elements**

During much of his career, Néstor gave shape to an almost chimerical project that he began in 1913 and that accompanied him until his death. This was the construction of the Palace of the Atlantic, where he intended to display an iconographic program of large paintings dedicated to the four elements of water, earth, air, and fire. The first work to result from the project became the germ of the finest set of paintings of his mature phase, *Poema de los elementos* (Poem of the Elements). Although incomplete, as he only had time to conclude eight paintings of *Poema del Atlántico* (Poem of the Atlantic) and five of *Poema de la tierra* (Poem of the Earth) this project was ambitious and singular for several reasons, including its symbolist and protosurrealist underpinnings, its incorporation of the esoteric principles of freemasonry, and its emphasis on an exuberant eroticism with a certain homoerotic character.

The outbreak of World War I prevented Néstor from going to Paris, so he took up residence in 1914 in Madrid. During his time there, his friendship with Federico García Lorca led him to frequent the Residencia de Estudiantes, where he met the future composer Gustavo Durán Martínez, his partner for a decade.

### **Femininities: Between the Hispanic and the Cosmopolitan**

Néstor lived life as if it were an act of faith driven by his conception of the dandified aesthetic, but this did not exempt him from having to face the material realities of life in order to secure financial independence. Among the works he produced to meet the demands of the market are a number of paintings, drawings, and prints of the archetypal Spanish woman dressed in a traditional *maja* or *manola* costume. When working on these commissions, however, he did not always bend to the canons that called for representing a graceful femininity subjected to the





*Sátiro del Valle de Hespérides* (Satyr of the Valley of the Hesperides), 1918. Private collection of Loro Parque S.A.

male gaze, but instead produced figures marked by symbolism, cosmopolitan art deco, and Spanish folklore.

### **Sexualized Mythologies: The Satyr Series**

Like many artists, Néstor was able to find a way of contravening moral norms by using figures or symbols to transgress the social conventions of his time. An admirer of classical art, his choice of the satyr was not a matter of chance. This minor forest god with the horns and legs of a goat and the body of a man is associated with deities like Dionysius and Pan, infused with great sexual potency. We can observe that energy in their fleshy lips, their lascivious gazes, and their concupiscent phallic gestures. The artist gave the satyrs names—Taoro, Tafir, Tarajal, Tacoronte, Taburiente—and linked them with the Valley of the Hesperides, a mythological place that he situated in the Canary Islands, thus anchoring his own autochthonous roots in the collective imaginary. The use of satyrs also concealed a Masonic sign. On one of them, seen from the rear, we see that the thumb of the right hand is raised and pointed away from the other fingers to form a set square, the symbol of conciliation between the spiritual and the earthly.

### **A Talent for Stage Design**

After the success of his first solo exhibition in Madrid in 1914, Néstor turned his creativity to the field of scenography. In 1915, he designed the sets and costumes for Manuel de Falla's *El amor brujo* (Love, the Magician), distancing himself from the focus on local color that was characteristic of productions at that time. From then on, he became more and more involved in stage and costume design. Especially noteworthy was his collaboration with the dancer Antonia Mercé, "La Argentina," on *El fandango de candil* (Fandango by Candlelight) (1927), a work with music by Gustavo Durán Martínez that enjoyed great success in France and Germany. The sets reveal a boldly avant-garde concept of stage space, with their use of high-angle perspective and the construction of volumes along diagonals. In July 1936, shortly before the fascist coup d'état, the artist created some dazzlingly



*El fandango de candil* (Fandango by Candlelight), 1927. Stage design for *El fandango de candil*, by Gustavo Durán Martínez, 1927. Museo Néstor, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria



surreal sets for a production of Alejandro Casona's *La sirena varada* (The beached mermaid) (1934).

### **Néstor as Muralist**

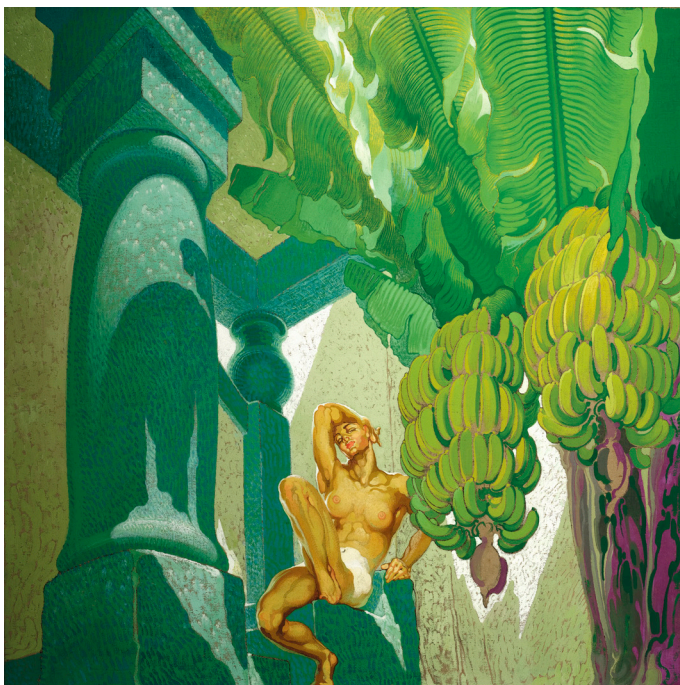
Néstor built up his oeuvre with the aim of living in a world surrounded by beauty. Mural painting was one of the means he used to achieve this end. His first works of this type were the large wall panels for the Salón del Tibidabo (1909). He later painted the murals for the Teatro Pérez Galdós in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (1925–1928), for which he positioned a series of canvases over the stage with a unique classical and baroque aesthetic. Also notable are his murals for the Salon Saint-Saëns, where he filled a frieze with sensual putti making scurrilous gestures, earning the reproach of the most conservative sectors of the time. His last mural, *Alegoría del mar* and *Alegoría de la tierra* (Allegory of the Sea and Allegory of the Land), was painted for the ballroom of the Casino de Santa Cruz de Tenerife (1932–1936).

### **The Multifaceted Néstor**

Impassioned by every type of creative activity, he saw the arts as coming together and merging to the point where every element acquired importance and served to create a refined atmosphere in which fabrics, curtains, objects, jewels, furnishings, and artworks by him and others all played a fundamental role.

Among his different occupations during his stay in Paris (1928–1934), special mention should be made of his designs for printed fabrics that combine abstract motifs with surrealist-inspired figures, as well as his architectural designs in a rationalist vein for the Portuguese pavilion at the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition.

Back in the Canaries, he also produced some exceptional drawings for the Albergue de la Cruz de Tejeda (1937–1938) that were brought to light by his brother, Miguel Martín-Fernández de la Torre.



*Visiones de Gran Canaria* (Visions of Gran Canaria), 1928–1934. Museo Néstor, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

### **Being a Canary Islander: Promoting Popular Culture**

Néstor's artistic career would be incomprehensible without the Canary Islands. The sea and its myriad creatures are key elements in his oeuvre. Therefore, particularly from 1934 onward, he engaged in countless activities encompassed by the concept of "typicality" in which he promoted the popular culture of the Canaries (music, dance, architecture, handicrafts, costume, sports, festivities) and the landscapes of the islands in order to attract tourism, regarded as a source of wealth. Still, his allegiance to the Canaries did not mean hewing to a fixed identity but rather an appreciation of his own local values enhanced by what he had learned in other cultural climes.

Juan Vicente Aliaga

**Exhibition curator**

# Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

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Closed on Tuesdays

Exhibition rooms in all venues  
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*Sátiro del Valle de Hespérides*

(Satyr of the Valley of the  
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NIPO: 194-25-004-9

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