

Menchu Gal (Irun, 1919 - San Sebastian, 2008) is one of the few women artists in Spain who enjoyed well-deserved recognition while still alive. In 1959 she became the first woman to be awarded with a Gold Medal at the National Painting Competition and she took part in countless solo and group exhibitions throughout her long career. Her vast output may be divided into portraiture, mostly of women, still life and landscape, a genre in which she particularly excelled. It is only to be expected that this Basque painter would be included in the BBVA Collection, which possesses two superb works by the artist—a seascape and a landscape—both dating from the seventies. The artist had the fortune of being born to a well-off cultivated family that encouraged her vocation from a very early age—they sent her to Paris while still a teenager—and allowed her to grow up in progressive circles in Madrid in the 1930s. The Spanish Civil War drastically change her family's fate: her father died and the whole family had to go into exile to France, where they settled in Tardets. Afterwards, Gal's paintings became the family's main source of income.

In the early stages of Franco's regime, it was not strange for women to devote themselves to art, seeing as it was deemed a suitable activity for them. In the case of Gal, there is evidence that she sold all the paintings exhibited in one of her earliest shows, held in 1943 at Sala Libros in Zaragoza.

In spite of the hardships she endured on returning to Madrid—which the painter spoke of later, when referring to that period—she was quite at ease in a predominantly male milieu and in a society that frowned on women choosing a professional career instead of getting married and having children. Gal had close ties to the School of Madrid and also the School of Bidasoa, with whose members she shared painterly motifs but also an interest in renewing art. Due to Spain's isolation, she had to look for her references in the European avant-garde movements, often fuelled by artists who had moved to Paris in the early-twentieth century. Gal exhibited extensively in the 1950s and 1960s. Worth mentioning is her participation in highly significant events, like the 1st Hispano-American Art Biennial in 1951, the 1950 and 1956 Venice Biennales, where she had already taken part in 1940, or the annual National Fine Arts Exhibitions.

The reviews of the time frequently praised the masculine qualities of Gal's work—and indeed of her person—highlighting her strength, vigour and forcefulness. Sometimes she was directly questioned about women's artistic abilities, to which she vehemently responded by citing women artists

MENCHU GAL

Inspirational Women Artists
in the BBVA Collection



Image: Menchu Gal by Dani Blanco



Menchu Gal
Port of San Sebastian, ca. 1970
Oil on HDF board
50 x 65.5 cm
Inv. no. P01569

like Berthe Morisot (1841-1895), Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938), Marie Laurencin (1883-1956) or Carmen Rodríguez de Legísima (1896-1980). Her systematic defence of women artists could be seen in other ways, like her acceptance of the honorary invitation to the 7th Salón Femenino de Arte Actual (1963) or to sit on the jury of Guipuzcoa's competition for women painters. In 2010, two years after her death, her hometown of Irun opened the Menchu Gal exhibition hall with the specific mandate of providing support and visibility to women artists.

Meanwhile, her work and person became an example and an influence for later generations

of women artists who, like Marta Cárdenas (1944), recall Gal as a self-assured and determined artist. Her career was recognized during the early years of this century with distinctions such as the gold medals of Guipuzcoa and the Irun City Council (2005) or the Manuel Lekuona Prize (2006) awarded by Sociedad de Estudios Vascos, as well as many surveys of her work. Unfortunately, with the passing of time her work was often written off as purely decorative and was excluded from more complex readings which paid greater attention to the work of male colleagues, many of whom were, like herself, members of the School of Madrid and the School of Bidasoa.

In 2005, Maia Aguiriano and Carmen Monreal took an important step in defending Gal's reputation when they undertook the arduous task of putting together the catalogue raisonné of a painter who, over seventy-five years, was responsible for a prolific output and whose canvases—often untitled, undated and unsigned—may be found in public and private collections throughout Spain.

Menchu Gal
Landscape
Oil on canvas
37 x 44 cm
Inv. no. P01568



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