

No singing allowed

Flamenco & photography



Celebration of La Chunga's family. Barcelona, 1955
Francesc Catalá Roca



Antoiña La Singla. Barcelona, 1962
Xavier Miserachs



Tía Juana la del Pipa and her granddaughter Manuela. Seville, 1983
Gilles Larrain/Contacto

Whether as social phenomenon or musical expression, flamenco has been of enduring interest to photographers, from the middle of the nineteenth century to nowadays. Some of them, from other parts of the world, went in search of it or encountered it by chance; others have lived with it and its practitioners on a daily basis.

This artistic form –also a way of life, a way of being in the world– has generated fascination in cultured urban circles, but even into our age of cultural industries, it remains one of the most secret, unknown, mysterious, and seductive manifestations of twentieth-century European popular art.

Marginalized and long condemned to ostracism, the world of flamenco has developed since its beginnings in an economically backward region of southern Europe, culturally peripheral and marked politically by a past of authoritarianism and local despotisms.

In spite of the cultural banishment it has suffered, flamenco exerts its powerful attraction for many reasons. Its presence in the word of photography has to do with the anthropological curiosity awakened by its singular everyday spaces. It has inspired a documentary desire to bear witness to the places in which its protagonists have lived and interacted. It has provided the possibility of capturing those magical moments in which the masters of the art transmit their knowledge to their children, and the mesmerizing public dimension of its figures, expressing at the same time the ethical commitment of the professional photographer in a world of inequality. Or it has simply offered the interest of surprise and perplexity in the face of unexpected encounters. Over time, flamenco earned its place in the world of the performing arts. Professionalism has entailed a corresponding documental record of flamenco performances and artists, favoring a specific history of studio photographs and live shots.

The visual history presented in this volume comprises one hundred and fifty-three images selected from the total of more than two hundred photographs on display in the exhibition. It shows how flamenco music moved from the roadside inns and taverns to the urban *tablaos* and *café cantantes*,

before gaining entry into the academy and theaters and tourist venues, finally to form part of the fashion world and international artistic circles.

Traveling photographers came across flamenco in nineteenth-century Spain, performing double duty as ethnographers, sociologists, and anthropologists. The art form was documented in provincial capitals and awakened the curiosity of intellectuals in Paris in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Judging from the scarcity of surviving evidence, it would seem that during the Spanish Civil War flamenco disappeared, for obvious reasons, from the world of photography. In the 1950s, on the other hand, the Franco regime found a place for it. In need of easily-controllable signs of national identity, the dictatorship took full propagandistic advantage of the “soul” and visible essences of flamenco, fostering a stereotypical image of it which could be offered up as a cultural reference free of controversy.

Later on, the alternative lifestyles of the 1960s –along with rock music and its world of protest and hallucinogens– would lead in the following decade to a certain transformative liberation on the part of some of the younger performers, helping to make flamenco what it is today: an artistic expression of the highest order.

Photography has used the setting of flamenco –especially since the middle of the twentieth century– to reveal the fracture between avant-garde culture and popular culture, between art and show business, and between the spaces of everyday life and the stage. The camera has been there on countless occasions, at the most intimate moments of birth or death and the most public celebrations of rejection or recognition.

To greater or lesser surprise, it has sought in multiple circumstances to capture a possible metaphysical notation of flamenco expression. By capturing its ephemerality, by revealing its genuineness, it has constituted a specific way of representing and understanding flamenco. Thus, more than one hundred and fifty years of photographic images, frequently taken by foreigners rather than Spaniards, have fostered an association of flamenco with passion, exoticism, marginality, irrationality, melancholy, nature, deviation, excess, and sexuality. Few of the interesting photographs assembled here fail to evoke these themes in one way or another.

Alongside this approach, which in a certain way contributed to the idealization of flamenco, the appearance of “street photography” offered another method of addressing the theme: a critical, documentary vision of the world of flamenco, of its public and anonymous figures, as also of its followers (and persecutors), which reveals the complexity and social contradictions of its origins. In recent decades, yet another way of seeing things has developed, more integrated as a recognized artistic language and therefore more normalized and less provocatively “exotic”. A perspective which dignifies the performance, its public and intimate settings, its myths, its acolytes, its places, in an attempt to display the specific glamour generated in an intensely consumerist society by flamenco artists and their surroundings.

This exhibition comprises a synopsis, an exemplary sampling of how photographers of different ages have approached the universe of flamenco. It represents an attempt to overcome the dispersion of images in time and space, focusing attention on flamenco as a theme in the history of photography. In general, aesthetic considerations have determined the selection of images, but in a few cases the medium of photography has offered the opportunity to bear witness to unusual situations, stellar moments, or the worlds of fashion and contemporary dance –realities closely related to the gestures of flamenco– in order to complete the repertoire of images.