

# COLNAGHI



Joaquín Sorolla  
(Valencia 1863 – Madrid 1923)

## *Little Elena at her Desk, 1898*

Oil on canvas  
90 x 83 cm.;  
35 3/8 x 32 5/8 in.

Signed in the lower left-hand corner  
“J. sorolla 1898”

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### Provenance

Elena Sorolla García, artist's daughter;  
Private collection.

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### Exhibitions

National Exhibition of Fine Arts, special room dedicated to Sorolla, Madrid, 1901  
Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, June 1906  
Berlin, Düsseldorf and Cologne, 1907  
Crafton Gallery, London, 1908  
International Exhibition of Art, Rome, 1911  
*La edad dichosa. La infancia en la pintura de Sorolla*, Sorolla Museum, Madrid, 1 February – 19 June 2022; Centro Fundación Bancaja, Valencia, 15 July – 13 November 2022.

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### Literature

Aureliano de Beruete *et al.*, *Ocho ensayos sobre Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida*, 2 vols., Oviedo, Nobel, 2009, vol. 1, p. 196  
*La edad dichosa. La infancia en la pintura de Sorolla*, Madrid, Palacios y Museos, 2022, p. 109, cat. No. 23.  
Bernardino de Pantorba, *La vida y la obra de Joaquín Sorolla*, Madrid, Mayfe, 1953 (second edition 1970), p. 134.  
Blanca Pons-Sorolla, *Sorolla. Vida y obra*, Madrid, Fundación de Apoyo a la Historia del Arte Hispánico, 2001, pp.160, 162, 180, 378, fig. 71.

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In front of a garnet-coloured velvet fabric, Elena Sorolla García, pencil in hand, sits leaning on a wooden desk in front of blank sheets of paper and a doll. The girl, around three years old, is dressed in a white dress adorned with lace and bows through which the masterful brushwork of her father, Joaquin Sorolla, excels. Biographical anecdotes tell the story of little Elena as a curious and pensive child; some days to the extent that her instructor found herself at her wits' end of how to catch the girl's wandering thoughts.



Antonio García Peris, María Sorolla García, c. 1901, albumin on cardboard, 23.3 x 32.1 cm.  
Museo Sorolla, inventory number 86390.

In *Little Elena at her Desk*, her father chose to delicately capture her in the act of daydreaming, deeply engaged in a child's serene internal world, pure and expansive like her gossamer dress. Sorolla focusses particularly on capturing Elena's facial expression, imbuing it with a complexity he relinquishes in rendering the rest of her body. As to be expected of a Sorolla painting, light plays a key role in the composition, especially in drawing attention to Elena's face. The light cascades from the top right, leaving a reflection of the child on the desk while casting shadows under it and to Elena's right. The masterful rendering of white coupled with loose brushstrokes and lively light are features of the Spanish palette, recalling the oft-repeated influence of the 17th-century master Diego Velázquez.

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A work titled *Elena drawing* appears on a list of works selected by the painter to be exhibited at the Georges Petit Gallery in 1906.<sup>1</sup> It is established that the present picture took part in this exhibition as well, suggesting that Elena is (taking a break from) drawing in the present picture as well. Family photographs, as well as Sorolla's own drawings and his paintings, attest that his children received an early education in which the painter took an active interest. When discussing a progress report that Elena had sent to his father, the painter said to his wife Clotilde: "Her letter is wonderful, she explains everything well and she gives me great pleasure by telling me everything she does".

*Elenita at her desk* or simply *Elenita*, as Pantorba catalogues it, is a portentous portrait of the painter's daughter that achieved great success with the public and critics alike. It is reproduced in the extraordinary issue dedicated to the artist in the magazine *Hispania* in 1901, with the title *Portrait of my daughter*. The work belonged to Elena and was housed in the Sorolla Museum for several years after the artist's death.

Initially, Sorolla, who would later be celebrated as one of his generation's preeminent portrait painters, harboured a reluctance towards this genre, reserving his efforts predominantly for family members. His family portraits are particularly important in his oeuvre as he used them as opportunities for experimentation. Those of exceptional quality, such as this one, were presented in his great exhibitions as 'bait' — a sample of what he was capable of, with the aim of attracting commissions rather than selling them outright — they were much too dear to him. The few that were sold were only offered to the market after the family gave their express permission to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> No.Inv.DA/00348