



Modest Urgell

Barcelona 1839–1919

Village, figure and cypress tree

Oil on canvas

96 × 186 cm

Signed “Urgell”

Museums

Madrid, Museo del Prado

Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

Barcelona, Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya (MNAC)

Girona, Museu d’Art de Girona

Girona, Fundació Rafael Masó

Vilanova i la Geltrú, Biblioteca Museo Víctor Balaguer

Málaga, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle

Awards

1876 Second medal at the Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes de Madrid

1894 First medal at the Exposición de Bellas Artes de Barcelona

1895 First medal at the Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes de Madrid

1896 First medal at the Exposición de Bellas Artes de Barcelona

1897 Awarded in Munich and Brussels

1898 First medal at the Exposición de Bellas Artes de Barcelona

Born in Barcelona in 1839, Modest Urgell studied at the School of Arts and Crafts in Barcelona (popularly known as La Llotja), where he was taught by the realist painter Ramon Martí Alsina and met other important painters such as Joaquim Vayreda and Marià Fortuny. At the end of his studies he went on a trip to Paris where he met Gustave Courbet, Camille Corot, Charles-François Daubigny and became acquainted with the new artistic currents such as Realism, Symbolism and the Barbizon School. Fleeing yellow fever, he settled for some time in Olot, about 80 miles to the north-east of Barcelona. His friendship with the local painter Joaquim Vayreda, who had created a school of landscape painting there, had a strong influence on his work.

From the 1870s his work became increasingly popular with critics and audiences. He received numerous commissions and exhibited his works in art galleries, in Spain –in the Sala Parés in Barcelona since its foundation in 1877 – and abroad – Philadelphia, Munich, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Chicago. He also took part in numerous competitions and received the first medal of the National Fine Arts Exhibition in Madrid in 1895.

In 1894, on the death of the artist Lluís Rigalt, Modest Urgell was appointed professor of perspective and landscape at La Llotja in Barcelona. His teachings had a deep influence on the work of artists such as his son Ricard Urgell, who was also a painter, Joan Miró, Hermen Anglada-Camarasa, Pablo Picasso and Joan Ponç.

This painting by Modest Urgell depicts an isolated village in a desolate landscape bathed in twilight. The silhouette of a cypress tree – a running motif in Urgell’s work – stands out to balance the composition with the human figure advancing on the path towards the viewer. The layout of the painting, sober and horizontal, is typical of the painter’s work. The originality of Urgell’s paintings lies in their homogeneity, sometimes verging on the monotonous. Aware of the criticism about the reiterative nature not only of the subjects but also of the formats and approaches he used in his paintings, he often gave them such titles as “Same old, same old”.

Variations on one theme, his works depict desolate landscapes, cemeteries, hermitages, lonely boats, emanating a mysterious atmosphere of loneliness. Urgell is regarded as one of the great painters of nature in Catalonia at the close of the 19th century and his works provide a true reflection of the Catalan rural world of that time.



Modest Urgell, *Landscape*, oil on canvas. Madrid, Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection



Francesc Serra Dimas, *Modest Urgell in his studio*, 1903