# Luis Quintanilla

**by Ernest Hemingway**

*In all their forms - religious, political, social - iconoclastic practices have always been among the risk factors for the integrity and very existence of works of art. The danger of vandalism is all the greater in the case of large-scale works decorating public spaces and fulfilling specific representational functions. Their location, symbolic power and association with a creed make them ideal targets both for systematic destruction and for acts aimed at removing significant details such as faces or inscriptions for the purpose of* damnatio memoriae*. Such events are particularly common during, or as a direct consequence of, armed conflict. In such cases, iconoclastic actions are charged with exemplary meanings in order to strike at what the opposing faction holds most sacred (the image of God, the Leader). Erasing hitherto intangible images, making a tabula rasa of them, can rise from time to time as a rite of purification, a delirium of power, a derisive and blasphemous challenge. The spanish painter Luis Quintanilla (1893-1978) became an emblematic figure of this type of phenomenon at the time of the civil war that engulfed his country between 1936 and 1939. A socialist activist, in the early 1930s he painted decorative cycles of frescoes in various places in Madrid: the Casa del Pueblo, the University and the Museum of Modern Art, and also worked on the monument to the politician and trade unionist Pablo Iglesias. With the outbreak of the civil war, during the battles that ended with the final victory of the nationalist forces led by General Francisco Franco, these works were almost completely destroyed. At the end of 1938, Quintanilla decided to go into exile in the United States, where*

*he lived for 20 years. He returned to Europe in 1958, living first in Paris and then, after the end of francoism and the return to democracy in Spain, in Madrid from 1976. The following is the text written by Ernest Hemingway, Quintanilla's friend of many years, for the exhibition of drawings on the spanish civil war he held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 15 March to 18 April 1938, a few months before moving to the United States. It is a precious and still unrecognised document. In these lines, Hemingway no longer turns to the figurative avant-gardes dear to his mentor Gertrude Stein, as he might have done long before in Paris, but to a realist and monumental imagery typical of the* retour à l'ordre *that took place in the years between the two world wars. A world of images that can be found both in the art of social-populist inspiration (the mexican muralists, the american artists of the Federal Art Project, various european and south american movements, Picasso himself in* Guernica*) and in that of totalitarian regimes (Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union). Hemingway's personal commitment to the cause of the spanish republicans gives this short text a similar tone to that of* For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the novel he was about to begin writing. In his icastical, affirmative style, Hemingway dwells on the destruction of Quintanilla's work and studio in Madrid. And destruction and ruin are the hallmarks of Quintanilla's drawings. The documentation of Quintanilla's exhibition at MoMA New York can be found on the museum's official website at www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2965. On Quintanilla's life and art, see two exhibition catalogues: López Sobrado, E. (ed.),* Luis Quintanilla (1893-1978). Estampas y dibujos en el legado de Paul Quintanilla*, Santander, Universidad de Cantabria, 2005; López Sobrado, E. (ed.),* Luis Quintanilla, testigo de guerra*, Santander, Universidad de Cantabria, 2009-10. See also website* The Art and World of Luis Quintanilla *(www.lqart.org) and the biography of the artist written by his son: P. Quintanilla,* Waiting at the Shore. Art, Revolution, War and Exile in the Life of the Spanish Artist Luis Quintanilla*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton-Chicago-Toronto 2014. On the relationship between Quintanilla and Hemingway: J. Meyers,* Hemingway and Luis Quintanilla, "*The Article*", *10 March 2024 (www.thearticle.com/hemingway-and-luis-quintanilla).*

A year ago today we were together and I asked Luis how his studio was and if the pictures were safe.

“Oh it’s all gone,” he said, without bitterness, explaining that a bomb had gutted the building.

“And the big frescoes in University City and the Casa del Pueblo?”

“Finished,” he said, “all smashed.”

“What about the frescoes for the monument to Pablo Iglesias?”

“Destroyed,” he said. “No, Ernesto, let’s not talk about it. When a man loses all his life’s work, everything that he has done in all his working life, it is much better not to talk about it.”

These paintings that were destroyed by the bomb, and these frescoes that were smashed by artillery fire and chipped away by machine gun bullets were great Spanish works of art. Luis Quintanilla, who painted them, was not only a great artist but a great man. When the Republic that he loved and believed in was attacked by the fascists, he lead the attack on the Montana Barracks that saved Madrid for the government. Later, studying military books at night while he commanded troops in the daytime, he fought in the pines and the grey rocks of Guadarrama; on the yellow plain of the Tagus; in the streets of Toledo, and back to the suburbs of Madrid where men with rifles, hand grenades, and bundles sticks of dynamite faced tanks, artillery, and planes, and died so their country might be free.

Because great painters are scarcer than good soldiers, the Spanish government ordered Quintanillla out of the army after the fascists were stopped outside Madrid. He worked on various diplomatic missions, and then returned to the front to make these drawings. The drawings are of war. They are to be looked at; not written about in a catalogue.

There is much to say about Quintanilla, and no space to say it, but the drawings say all they need to say themselves.

*Homepage: Luis Quintanilla, Soldiers, 1939, fresco on panel (detail, the whole 200 x 250 cm), part of the series "Ama la paz y odia la guerra", painted for the Spanish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair, Santander, Universidad de Cantabria (www.lqart.org).*
*Below: the four-page leaflet published on the occasion of Luis Quintanilla's exhibition, New York, MoMA, 15 March - 18 April 1938.*

From the Library of Alfred Barr

# QUINTANILLA

AN EXHIBITION OF DRAWINGS OF THE WAR IN SPAIN

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