THE OCHARAN'S PHOTOGRAPHIC "QUIXOTE":
BETWEEN THE SPANISH HISTORICAL
PICTORIAL TRADITION
AND THE NEW CINEMATOGRAPHIC AESTHETIC

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The figure of "Don Quixote" has been converted into a symbol which represents the nature of "what is spanish". The personality and the world created by Cervantes is a literary metaphor which has greatly influenced the world or universal art. Painting, sculpture, poetry and the cinema tried to embody D. Quixote. Photography also, and from very early times has tried to recreate this figure. In 1855, William Lake Place surprised cultured Victorian society with a photography which represented "D. Quixote in his study". This image is still conserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum of London as I'm sure you know. It was the time in which photographers and painters struggled in the long battle to affirm or deny that photography was a form of art. Some photographers had decided to take their creations in the direction of emulation of painting to demonstrate that the camera was capable of doing more that just a mechanical reproduction of reality. As some of this Pre-Rafaelists authors commented: "Photography has new secrets to conquer, new Madonnas to invent and new ideals to imagine. Perhaps there will exist -in the future- Rafael and Tiziano photographers." But photographic creativity took new turns more in tune with the very nature of the Medium, and aesthetic movements oscillated between accurate representation and pictorial emulation.

As with many other debates, that which arose between photography and painting appeared rather later in Spain. Practically at the end of the nineteenth century when a tradition of painting which cultivated the reconstructions of important historical events had been consolidated from many years before. This tradition has recently been studied in depth by the Spanish professor Carlos Reyero.

At the turn of the twentieth century a lot of things had happened in Spain which were forming the basis of an initial modernization of the country despite the structural and political problems which weighed upon a society which was to a great extent rural. Some of these changes were due to technological advances which slowly changed habits. These advances at first seemed to be unimportant and which until now had not been valued sufficiently. Others factors of more importance such as the incipient development of the urbanizing of the country, was generating new habits and bringing to light newly affluent people coming from the Nobility and the upper classes made rich through industry. They were care-free young people interested in the multiple opportunities which modern life presented: cars, continuous travels, interest in photographic techniques, of which had been obtained substantial advances in equipment and sensitive materials in the last decades of the nineteenth century. They were the same enthusiasts who would later be dedicated to the practice of cinema.

In the north of Spain in regions like Cantabria there were such people, as in other parts of the country which were actively urbanised. In family archives
collections of plates of this type of enthusiast are today found who were aware of the new techniques which appeared in Madrid or Barcelona and which were often sent to them directly from France. Some of them connected with Cantabria have already been studied by us before(4) For instance Fernando Cevallos de Leon or Eduardo Rétola and there are many more who are becoming known. Some of them would later practice Pictorialism like Julio García de la Puente, also studied by us in the same book. Among them there was a special amateur who transcended the regional to become an important figure in Spanish photography at the beginning of the Century: Luis de Ocharán.

Luis de Ocharán: merchant with Great Britain, artist and wealthy man of his time.

Luis de Ocharán Mazas was born in Bilbao, in the north of Spain near Cantabria, in 1858. Iron exporter to Great Britain and possessor of a great personal wealth, he lived most of the time in Castro Urdiales, a village near Bilbao but under the administration of Cantabria, where he had a luxurious mansion. Due to his fortunate position he became the protector to some artists and was able to practice freely all his hobbies which were numerous: painting, music, cars, astronomy, writing novels, one of which "Marichu" published in 1916 was considered "an accurate and picturesque image of Castro Urdiales Society" (5)

But Luis de Ocharán had also great interest in photography, and like him a new generation of others coming from upper classes of Spanish society were appearing from the beginning of the century. Ocharán shared glory and prestige together with photographers like Antonio Canovas "Kaulak" nephew of the politician responsible for the return of the crown of the Borbons. The politician, it is said, did not allow the family name to be used as an artistic name in such a bohemian activity.

These enthusiasts with means and money were establishing new tendencies in the practice of photography, they had resources which professional photographers did not dispose of. They saw themselves as the vanguards of creativity, and understood that they were the ones who should find new aesthetic proposals in photography. It was not a new posture; given that in Europe this proposition had been debated and accepted as such hardly two decades before. According to this idea, the enthusiasts were the forerunners in art who found visual solutions which were later use by the professionals.

In 1900, Ocharán, together with an active group of enthusiasts from the upper classes, founded from the Círculo de Bellas Artes the Sociedad Fotográfica in Madrid which later, in 1907, King Alfonso XIII named the Real Sociedad Fotográfica (Royal Photographic Society) which still exists today.

From 1901 the Sociedad Fotográfica of Madrid had its own publication dedicated to debating and presenting technical and artistic subjects. Lead by "Kaulak" in this first period "La Fotografía" was the place where Ocharán would start to present his photographic work on "The Quixote" and to publish his ideas on the function of photography as art. Later, Luis de Ocharán, who signed his work as "An amateur of Castro Urdiales" would also publish in a new magazine "Graphos Ilustrado" which appeared in 1906 and whose editorial committee were involved from the beginning.(6)
The Quixote of Ocharán or literature converted into photography.

Luis de Ocharán produced in Castro Urdiales two ambitious projects which consisted in photographically recreating scenes from Dante's "Divine Comedy" which participated in a national exhibition in 1904 and later showed his scenes from "The Quixote" coinciding with the third centenary of the publication of Miguel de Cervantes' book.

Of the two photographic collections produced and published by Luis de Ocharán the most interesting and well known was "The Quixote scenes" which began to be published in the first years of the century, and with which he intended to transform into photography the tradition of historical painting, a type which as we have already commented, was very characteristic in the second half of the nineteenth century in Spain.

Ocharán who disposed of unlimited time and resources in that period, and of whom it was said in the specialist magazines that he "was capable of buying thousands of plates and shooting hundreds in a moment". He published at first in specialist magazines like "La Fotografía" (from 1904) after in "Graphos Ilustrado" (from 1906) and for the general public in "La Esfera" (as late as 1916) his scenes of Quixote recreating crucial moments of the book reconstructing Manchegan landscapes on the outskirts of Castro Urdiales with a setting which anticipated that of the newly born cinema.

For this work he did not save effort or money. For almost a year he looked for a model which personified "Don Quixote", he hired a group of models for the secondary roles which he kept for several years and to whom he payed punctually even when he only used them on certain occasions. The photographs were laboriously constructed with great detail. The whole setting was the work of Francisco Pradilla, a painter of the historical type considered at the time to be one of the most important, an artist protected by Ocharán who had risen to the post of Director of the Madrid Prado Museum.

The painter Pradilla, well connected with the upper classes of Madrid for which he worked frequently, was the creator of the scenography used by Luis de Ocharán in Castro Urdiales to recreate D. Quixote and his world. He was the bridge between historical painting and the cinematographic aesthetic. Ocharán conceived photography to be the art of absolute accuracy of most reliable information and prepared each scene with the patience of a painter who slowly constructed his work with absolute precision.

In order to have his models ready every time he was inspired to work on D. Quixote, the two characters who had the roles of "Don Quixote" and "Sancho Panza" lived permanently in his mansion in Castro Urdiales where they were treated like "princes" this created photographic problems for Ocharán because his D. Quixote became too fat for the role and consequently his diet had to be controlled.

The photographs presented here were all taken in Castro Urdiales, a little fishing village in Cantabria, in the first years of this century and form part of an ambitious work which aimed at reconstructing literary scenes from "The Quixote"
with the accuracy of photography. It was an attempt to imitate historical painting and was done with the utmost seriousness by this *Amateur of Castro Urdiales* as he modestly signed the foot of his photographs in which was also indicated which part of the book the image referred to.

Not all the scenes designed for Ocharán could be taken, so the recreation of the famous adventure with the windmills converted into giants could not be resolved because of the technical difficulties which instant photography still had which didn't take the movement of the sails well. However those which we include allow us to understand the immense effort made by the photographer living in Castro Urdiales.

Luis de Ocharán was considered in his time to be one of the greatest amateurs photographers alive. And also he was a theorist of Spanish photography. In his writing he defended laboratory work on the part of the photographers as a final and decisive element of the artistic quality of the image. He indicated that photography should be considered to be art, science, sport, history and poetry. His entire theoretical and aesthetic philosophy was based on concepts which were already overcome in European photography but which in Spain had been debated very little.

The innovative tendencies such as the pictorialist movement had not been totally introduced into the country in those years when Ocharán was at the height of his fame. After his work was respected even when his concepts on the artistic function of photography were replaced by other more modern ideas.

But the work of Ocharán, his attempt to transfer the literary to photography must not be understood as an isolated case within the context of Spanish photographic art at the beginning of this century, but was rather the inspiration for other works. In January 1904, a Bilbao magazine dedicated to photography commented on an article appearing in "El Heraldo de Aragon" a newspaper of Zaragoza, where the Ateneum of Zaragoza was trying to organise a photographic competition: *the subject is to be the adventures of D. Quixote and Sancho Panza in Aragon, these photographs can be very useful studies on popular and aristocratic costumes of that time; serving at the same time to accurately make known the places were Cervantes situated his heroes.*

The imaginary converted into historical truth and the mechanical accuracy of photography as a confusion of the actual reality was a problem which has taken a long time overcome and which in 1904 was not even conceived by Spanish intellectuals as can be appreciated in news like this.

The immense effort of Luis de Ocharán giving life to "Quixote" in Castro Urdiales can be seen today as an amusing anachronism which should make us reflect more deeply on the aesthetic role which photography in Spain attempted to play in the hands of restless cultured spirits like that of this creator who tried from Cantabria to find artistic answers with a camera at the time when the historical type of painting was fading away and the historical story was going be reborn in the flickering images of the recently invented cinema.

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NOTES


3.- Carlos REYERO, IMAGEN HISTORICA DE ESPAÑA 1850-1900. Ed. Espasa Calpe. Madrid 1987. As this author says referring to this national pictorial school: "The ability conceded to painting to recuperate space-time by way of conventional signs a inexistent past reality, and elevate it in virtue of the erudition, to the rang of truth"


5.- See in Enciclopedia Espasa Calpe voice: "Luis de Ocharan" Page 668.

6.- In the second number of "Graphos Ilustrado" in 1906 two photographs of the Quixote of Ocharán were given special importance in the publication.


8.- As it was perceived by Luis F. de Heredia who dedicated an ample report of "Quixote" of Ocharán on 22nd April, 1916 in the illustrated magazine "La Esfera".

9.- See the analysis of his work and that of other enthusiasts done by Isidoro COLOMA in LA FORMA FOTOGRAFICA. A propósito de la fotografía española desde 1839 a 1939. Ed. Colegio de Arquitectos y Universidad de Málaga. Málaga 1986. Especially pages 113-164.


11.- "El centenario de el Quijote" en Boletin Mensual "Lux". Bilbao. January 1904 nº 28. It refers to a piece an information of "Heraldo de Aragón" published by this newspaper on 26th December, 1903.