



# Conference Proceedings

## CIVAE 2020

**2nd Interdisciplinary and Virtual  
Conference on Arts in Education**

October 28-29, 2020

Edited by

**MUSICOGUIA**

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|---|-----|
| La implicación del alumnado en el desarrollo de proyectos artísticos en entornos reales<br><b>Paula Santiago Martín de Madrid</b>   | 369 |
| La nueva educación en pandemia: espacio y nuevas tecnologías<br><b>Ángela María Pérez Castañera</b>   | 371 |
| Arte y educación social: el arteterapia aplicado a la intervención primaria en los servicios sociales<br><b>Eva Mayo Ramos</b>  | 376 |
| An approach to the construction of the myth of the Spanish Gypsy Woman. From <i>La Gitanilla</i> by Cervantes to the nudesi n the aesthetic of Julio Romero De Torres<br><b>Carmen Heredia Martínez</b>   | 379 |
| Música en educación, ¿para qué?<br><b>Rebeca Piernagorda Pérez, Reina Capdevila Solà, Montserrat Prat Moratonas</b>   | 384 |
| Estrategias para un enfoque de género en la asignatura de música de Educación Secundaria<br><b>Beatriz Hernández Polo</b>   | 387 |
| The Teaching of Engineering Concepts through Arts: Filling the Interdisciplinary Gap<br><b>Jorge Torres Gómez, Karel Toledo de la Garza, Carmen Peláez-Moreno</b>   | 392 |
| Competencias transversales en Bellas Artes y Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible<br><b>Paula Santiago Martín de Madrid</b>   | 399 |
| Construyendo lugares de aprendizaje. Metodología Aprendizaje–Servicio desde el arte<br><b>María Enfedaque Sancho</b>  | 401 |
| La investigación artística desde la confluencia disciplinar<br><b>Paula Santiago Martín de Madrid</b>   | 406 |
| Aprendizaje-servicio a través de la música de Andrés Valero-Castells<br><b>Noelia Barros da Cuña</b>  | 409 |
| Teaching outside the classroom: Developing Student’s Beauty, Functionality and Citizenship Through Means of Art Education Based on the OntoArt Movement<br><b>Clarissa Mazon Miranda, Claudiane Weber, Tatiana Vereitnova, Victoria Dmitrieva</b> | 414 |
| La perspectiva de género en las enseñanzas artísticas<br><b>Blanca Machuca Casares, M<sup>a</sup> del Mar Cabezas Jiménez</b>   | 417 |
| El Arte de cantar en Lengua de Signos<br><b>M. Belén López Casanova, Iciar Nadal García, Borja Juan Morera</b>  | 422 |

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## **An approach to the construction of the myth of the Spanish Gypsy Woman. From *La Gitanilla* by Cervantes to the nudes in the aesthetic of Julio Romero De Torres**

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### Abstract

A review is proposed around the formation of the stereotype of the Spanish woman through the image of the gypsy woman in the arts. Different sources are used such as texts, prints and paintings. Analysis of the various sources will help us to study some common themes in the image of the formation of the stereotype of the Spanish gypsy woman with other precedents, finding congruence with the universal myth of Venus which makes a common link between the stereotype of the sensual woman picked up in iconography and reflected in visual and literary works highlighting Carmen by Prosper Mérimée.

*Keywords:* gypsy, Carmen, stereotype, painting, romanticism.

### **Una aproximación a la construcción del mito de la mujer gitana española. Desde *La Gitanilla* de Cervantes hasta los desnudos en la estética de Julio Romero De Torres**

#### Resumen

Se propone un recorrido, a través de la imagen de la gitana en las artes para la formación del estereotipo de mujer española. Se utilizan diferentes soportes como lecturas, grabados y pinturas. El análisis de las diversas fuentes nos servirá para estudiar algunas coincidencias en la imagen de la formación del estereotipo de la mujer gitana española con otras precedentes encontrando coincidencias con el mito universal de Venus que nos hace de hilo conductor entre el estereotipo de mujer sensual recogida en la iconografía y reflejada en obras plásticas y literarias destacando Carmen de Prosper Mérimée.

*Palabras clave:* gitana, Carmen, estereotipo, pintura, romanticismo.

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## Introduction

This study aims to show the development of the myth of the gypsy woman and the evolution of her image in literature and painting, from the character of *La Gitanilla* created by Miguel de Cervantes in one of his twelve *Novelas ejemplares* (1613), to the paintings of Julio Romero de Torres in which the naked body of a woman takes centre stage to endow her identity through the use of symbolic elements that accompany her such as the shawl or comb.

Over the course of modern times (15th, 16th, 17th and 18th Centuries) the artistic image of gypsies was rare and stereotyped. Pierre de Brantôme (1540-1614), the author of *Life of the Charming Women*, left with us a canon of beauty as his personal legacy, which brings together the thirty details that a perfect woman should have:

As a certain Spanish lady once told me in Toledo (where there are very beautiful, very pleasant and very well-mannered ladies), a Spaniard says that for a woman to be of perfect and absolute beauty, she must fulfil thirty aspects of beauty, [quote] Three white things: skin, teeth, and hands. Three black: eyes, eyebrows, and eyelashes. Three coloured: lips, cheeks, and nails. Three long: body, hair, and hands. Three short: teeth, ears, and feet. Three broad: chest, forehead, and glabella. Three narrow: mouth, waist, and front of foot. Three deep: arm, thigh, and calf. Three slim: fingers, hair, and lips. Three small: nipples, nose, and head. (Brantôme, 1565, cited in : Mérimée, López Esteve, & López Jiménez, 2010, p.123)

Painting and literature have been fundamental elements in the making of the image of the Spanish gypsy woman. Artistic works referring to her have been diverse, beginning with the character of Preciosa in *La gitanilla* (Cervantes, 1613/2001). Spain's exotic image did not go unnoticed by romantic travellers thanks to the stories of Gautier (1878) and other travellers who described a very pictorial idea of the image of the Spanish woman through the stereotypes attributed to Andalusian gypsy women.

## The construction of the Spanish gypsy myth

There is official record of the presence of gypsies in Spain since 1425, and in 1499 before the new century began, the first assumptions against them were made, Initiating a process of discrediting by means of standardised assertions which continued throughout that time and lasted until 1978. During this period "a semantic field" was developed, "which brought about discourse that resulted in the creation of *the gypsy*". (Motos Pérez, 2009, p.57).

An ideology of standardisation had the ability to "control the existence of gypsies, their lifestyle, their way of dressing or speaking and, as it gets perfected little by little throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, its result would be the complete destruction of a people". (Leblon, 2017, p.11).

By taking *the gypsy* as the body of discourse alongside the outcome of a cultural facet called racism, it is possible to visualise the importance even nowadays of the fact that the gypsy woman participates in a relevant way to the formation of the image of Spain's national identity. Motos Pérez (2009) states "One cannot consider the call of racism in Western society without framing it within the institution of the State. Racist practice and the functioning of the State work in the same way and produce the same effects." (p.68)

Various disjointed accounts try to arrive at a generalisation from the small distinctive features that shape the image of *the Spanish*, Spanish woman, and *the gypsy*, just as they appear in the exotic Spain of travel guides. There were many artists who travelled through Spain in search of having an experience related to Spanish gypsies and their unique way of life. Spanish gypsies are viewed as a people full of authenticity who attracted romantic and traditional artists who fed off the myth of Spanish gypsies without ever being fully satisfied.

The gypsy woman acts as a symbolic model in the shaping of the image that foreigners may have of Spain, while at the same time Spanish citizens have taken *the gypsy* as 'somebody else' in the formation of national identity, establishing clear ties of subordination of *the gypsy*.

*The gypsy*, as a symbol of *the Spanish*, has been assigned an ostentatious personality within the collective imagination of foreign travellers: one which is extraordinary and, in many cases, unjustified, and which at the same time appears mysterious. Curiosity for discovering this final characteristic was what led many foreigners to travel around Spain to discover the less visible and more romantic aspects of gypsies.

### **Stereotypes of the Spanish gypsy woman**

#### *Cervantes and Rembrandt*

The master of Baroque painting and printing, Harmenszoon van Rijn Rembrandt, overwhelmingly opposed Brantome's perspective in his interpretation *Preciosa, La Gitana Española* (1641-1647) which served as inspiration for *Preciosa* in *La Gitanilla* by Cervantes (1613/2001). This same work initiated the inclusion of the image of the gypsy woman in literature in a very different way from the State's assertions based on ethnicity.

#### *The Nude Maja by Goya (1795-1800)*

One of the most famous masterpieces of Spanish painting is the painting of *La maja desnuda* by Francisco de Goya, known in its time as "The gypsy woman". This nickname was due to the fact that in 1807 King Fernando VII confiscated Godoy's art collection and in 1808, the Frenchman Frédéric Quilliet, who was in charge of writing up the inventory of Godoy's collection, described the paintings of the two majas, calling them *Gitanas*. (Luna, 1996, pp.368-369).

A lot has been written about the identity of the woman portrayed, reaching speculation that it was the Duchess of Alba herself. In the image we can see the naked woman reclining on her bed following the traditional typology of *Venus de Urbino* (1538) by Titian, or *Venus Dormida* (1508-1510) by Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco.

#### *Gustave Doré in Davillier 1874*

The literary work of Prosper Mérimée with his character Carmen can be highlighted as an example of how one may imagine the gypsy woman. This work is inspired by the prints of Gustave Doré in the book *L'Espagne* in Davillier and Doré (1874), which gave rise to the operatic work under the same name and was premiered in the Opéra-Comique in Paris on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1875 with music by Georges Bizet and libretto in French by Ludovic Halévy and Henri Meilhac.

Regarding the work of Davillier and Doré (1874), the gypsy women are first of all represented with tambourines and basic clothing. It tells us about the mystery of the dance in Las Zambras (traditional flamenco singing and dancing spectacles) in order to subsequently bring us closer to the world of dance in the dance schools - the bolero and the fandango without forgetting the dances of candil and some scenes by the dancer Amparo Álvarez, *La Campanera* (Davillier, 1874, p.381). These dances and other settings are what give Spanish gypsy women this mystery loaded with sensuality that makes them attractive to foreigners.

Les bohémiens sont une race dégradée par la misère et l'abandon. Leur type étrange, leur mystérieuse origine, prêtent sans doute à la poésie, et, à l'époque où je faisais cette recontre, ils étaient à la mode en littérature.

Mais j'avais assez lu un peu de tout pour connaître la réalité des choses et pourvoir, à côté de ce charme pittoresque que l'on voit le caprice de leur prêter le mépris trop fondé qu'ils inspirent aux nations ... de leurs rapines, de leur malpropreté, de leurs ruses, de leur objection en un mot. (Sand, 1853/1863, p.28)

Such were the mental images that were being created among gypsies and Castilians and thanks to foreign visitors, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between non-gypsies and gypsies in the eyes of romantic travellers who crossed Spain, especially south of the Despeñaperros in search of the wild, abrupt, exotic, mysterious and picturesque qualities of the lands of María Santísima, as Andalusia was called at that time.

#### *Carmen by Prosper Mérimée's*

It was the Frenchman Prosper Mérimée who elevated the stereotype of the Spanish gypsy woman with *Carmen* to the height of the myth. Mérimée embarked on a journey through Spain from the end of July until the start of December in 1830, a period that was more transcendental for him than he could have imagined at the outset. Fate made him forge a deep friendship with the Counts of Teba (later known as the counts of Montijo) and with Serafin Estébanez Calderón (1799-1867) whom he met in the hall of the Counts of Teba. Estébanez Calderón "was his guide and companion for adventures in the world of prostitution, which both writers did not hesitate to frequent." (Mérimée, López Esteve, & López Jiménez, 1989/2010, p.16). "On finishing the novel he wrote a letter to the countess of Montijo in which he stated that he had used the story she told fifteen years ago, and he claimed that he had written it in eight days" (Mérimée, López Esteve, & López Jiménez, 1989/2010, p.17).

Mérimée's story carries us once again back in time to the image of La gitanilla by Miguel de Cervantes which he shapes as he pleases, endowing her with almost a wild animal identity with mythological characteristics that make her the spitting image of the femme fatale. Carmen is loaded with an overwhelming beauty, exuberant, conjuring up the image of the myth of Pandora sowing all the evils of the world. Breaking away from the traditional theme of fatal love, according to Mérimée, López Jiménez, and López Esteve (1989/2010) it is stated that: "Carmen renews the myth of the femme fatale, allowing her to share in several earlier myths." (p. 25). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter she appears as an allusion to the myth of Venus, the goddess of love (coming out of the water) when she comes up from bathing in the Guadalquivir, where it passes through Córdoba. Mérimée provides us with such an artistic description of Carmen's sensuality that you could say we are able to smell the perfume of the cassia on the chest of the wild gypsy.

#### *Carmen Bastián by Mariony Fortuny (1871-1872)*

The artist Mariano Fortuny Marshal came across the model of the adolescent gitanilla Carmen Bastián. To portray her in the style of the sleeping Venus, showing her sex in the style of *El origen del Mundo* (1866). Carmen is shown lying down on the frame of a wooden sofa. Compared with his predecessor Courbet, Fortuny's originality lies in the gaze of Carmen herself. At that time, one could not imagine anything more daring than the woman's own gaze falling on the painter while he painted her naked (this left little to the imagination of the observer). In this work the gypsy woman presents herself as strong, blatant and more obscene than sensual. In the portrait Carmen takes on a cheeky look that makes Mérimée's Carmen look merely like a common gypsy.

*Ignacio Zuloaga and Julio Romero de Torres*

The gypsy theme inspired various Spanish painters from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Example of these artists are Nonell, Anglada-Camarasa, Zuloaga and Romero.

Zuloaga was the prime example of this artistic and aesthetic trend and he was the first to gain success in Paris with his themes related to Flamenco and gypsies. His representations of Spanish women (*majas*) only increased interest from abroad towards the myth of the Spanish gypsy women and their naked bodies accessorised again by shawls, making reference to the myth of Venus myth and to Mérimée's Carmen herself.

Romero de Torres was a Spanish symbolist painter whose work was steeped in the aesthetic of the Generation of '98 and bathed in the modernism of the time. In *La nieta de la Trini* (1929), the gypsy woman appears lying down on top of the bed looking openly at the observer. In the work of Romero de Torres, the shape of the flamenco ladies stands out and is defined more by the imagination created in their surroundings than by the clothes that they can wear. Treated as a true *souvenir*, the status given to the naked pictures of the women that appear on canvas allows us to imagine the antagonistic viewpoint of the spectator who looks at and commissions the works.

## Conclusions

The myth of the gypsy woman has been defined thanks to the publication of the work of *Carmen* by Mérimée which is capable of focussing virtues of other mythological, wild and human beings in the protagonist. Venus, along with *la gitanilla* by Cervantes who in the end was not a gypsy, stands out among other forms of art idealising the Spanish gypsy woman, and contrasted with the myth of Pandora, who, acting as a *femme fatale*, is capable of bringing us all evils. The authors Davillier, Gautier, and especially Mérimée have contributed to the characterisation of the myth of the Spanish gypsy woman, hand in hand with artists such as Rembrandt, Goya, Gustave Doré, Fortuny, Iturrino, Zuloaga and Romero, who have carried out transcendental displays of a pictorial character for the collective imagination of 'the Spanish gypsy women'; in all of their works, the nude woman is the protagonist.

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