

Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 2, Episode 8

Sonia De Los Santos and Auguste Renoir's *Young Spanish Woman with a Guitar*

National Gallery of Art

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome back to Sound Thoughts on Art, an audio series from the National Gallery of Art. I'm Celeste Headlee. When we engage with art, it kick starts our five senses. We hear music or feel the beat of a drum in our chests. We see the vivid colors of a photo. We take in the three dimensions of a sculpture. We savor the taste of fine food. Sometimes, you can smell the carved wood or the smeared oil paint.

But when there's crossover, when a piece of art activates multiple senses, and they begin to interact and intertwine, that's when things really get interesting. When we listen to melody, what images flash through our minds? When we study the brush work in a painting, what do we hear?

This podcast lives in that crossover, in the space at the center of our five senses' Venn diagram. In each episode, you'll learn about a work at the National Gallery, and you'll hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. Sound Thoughts on Art delves into our personal relationship with art and the unique response we have to beautifully made things. For the final episode of Season 2 of Sound Thoughts on Art, we turn to one of the greatest painters the world has ever seen, Pierre Auguste Renoir, a giant in the world of impressionism. Renoir's paintings are known for their use of color and their sensuousness, particularly in his depiction of women. Though he was a very capable realistic painter, his work often took liberties with form, with anatomy, even with the story that was being told.

Take, for example, his 1898 work titled *Young Spanish Woman with a Guitar*. In it, a young woman in a really opulent jacket, a hair scarf, and a kind of pillbox hat picks at a guitar. Her left hand on the frets is fluid and bent in ways that the human hand doesn't really bend. It suggests motion and complete comfort with the instrument. Whoever this woman is, she seems to be a seasoned performer, which, as Mary Morton, the National Gallery of Art's curator and head of French paintings will tell you, is inherently funny because this woman was neither Spanish nor a guitarist. She was one of Renoir's many models. But is the young lady that's in this painting actually Spanish?

MARY MORTON: No, she would be a model. And he's not really that interested in her individuality. I mean, you can't really see her face. This is a costume that he owns, and he has dressed her in this beautiful bolero jacket. And he's always loved fashion and costumes, and he will frequently dress up as his models in outfits that have a rich texture and color and, particularly in this case, a reference to an "exotic" culture that he's trying to conjure.

And one imagines because she's wearing this bolero jacket, and she has that fantastic red scarf tied around her head, that she's probably playing Spanish music as well. And I think the guitar was the Spanish instrument par excellence in the 19th century, certainly conceived so in France.

I mean, I think Spanish guitarists were coming to the scene in Paris and playing for audiences. So there's an association between the guitar, guitar music, and Spain that he's also gesturing to here.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[SINGING IN SPANISH]

CELESTE HEADLEE: But the amazing thing about visual art, like music, is the way its meaning changes depending on the person who views it. For singer- songwriter Sonia De Los Santos, it really doesn't matter how the painting got made. She sees herself in it, and that's enough.

Can I start by asking you what kind of a guitar this young woman is holding?

SONIA DE LOS SANTOS: That looks to me like a Spanish classical guitar, six-string guitar, nylon-string guitar probably. It's pretty common in Spain and in Europe in that time.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It's clear that you're drawn to this picture. What draws you in?

SONIA DE LOS SANTOS: Well, I guess I see a sense of awe in this woman, of discovery of this musical instrument, and I perhaps see a younger version of myself looking at a guitar when I first got a guitar as a gift from my godfather on my 13th birthday. And I was not looking for it, but I grew up singing, and I was singing all the time. And he showed up to my birthday party with a guitar and said, You sing, but one day you're going to accompany yourself on guitar. And that's exactly what happened, but it took quite a while to get there.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MARY MORTON: I would characterize his painterly career as one that is quite musical in the sense that he's really interested in color and touch and the kinds of pleasures, sensory pleasures, that you get from music can be had in a similar way from his paintings. So we're talking about harmony and counterpoint and tone. And in fact, the critical literature that builds up around Renoir's work and impressionism more broadly does start to use musical terminology to account for the kind of increasingly abstract nature of the pleasures to be had from impressionist painting. It's not so much about— well, it's not so much about the subject matter.

So for instance, in this case, this is a very charming subject, but I think the real power of this painting is about the color, the color of that incredible red against the black and then these greens and yellows, soft greens and yellows, sort of creating a kind of tonal backdrop to these very poignant notes. And so just the language that I'm using right now, it's a language that has been conjured to— I mean, how do you translate musical pleasures, musical sensations, into words?

You have to come up with a vocabulary, and it has been documented that in French art criticism in the 1870s and '80s, art critics started to use musical terminology to a degree then that they had not before to talk about paintings by Corot, particularly paintings by Monet, but also by Renoir. I

mean, if you have a paintings movement that is increasingly about color effects, I think it makes a lot of sense to think about music and almost a kind of synesthetic pleasure to be had.

(SINGING) It's not only yours. I'm proud to say I love it.

CELESTE HEADLEE: So when you look at this painting, or if you can remember when you first looked at it, what music came to mind?

SONIA DE LOS SANTOS: More Spanish. I don't know if flamenco, but more like a style of music that I don't really know exactly how to play, but I know I have influences of that because I'm a mix of obviously Spanish and an Indigenous and who knows what else. We're all very mixed in the region where I'm from in my family in Mexico.

And also just growing up, we used to listen to songs from this time too and from songs from Spain and the United States and Mexico and everywhere.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Tell me about the music that you chose to accompany, to respond, to this picture.

SONIA DE LOS SANTOS: I wrote a song called "Sueña," and that means dream. And it just broadly talks about following dreams. Everyone has a dream. And when I see this young woman, I wonder if she had a dream of continuing to play this guitar or follow her dream somewhere else or maybe she was going to migrate to another country, which was ultimately my case. So this is a song that's very, very close to my heart, and it's called "Sueña."

CELESTE HEADLEE: And what are the sounds of this song?

SONIA DE LOS SANTOS: Well, let me get my guitar, and I'll show you a little bit. What I'm holding now, it's a six-string guitar. And this guitar is actually from Mexico, but it looks very similar to what she has in the painting.

[MUSIC PLAYING] [SINGING IN SPANISH]

CELESTE HEADLEE: That is so lovely. Can you tell me a little bit about what the lyrics mean?

SONIA DE LOS SANTOS: Thank you. Yes. It says we all have dreams we want to accomplish. Doesn't matter where you are from, know that you can make them come true. Don't let others discourage you and make you stop halfway there. Just keep walking, and one day, they will come. That's generally what the song is about.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Was it common for impressionist paintings of that time to take on Spanish subjects?

MARY MORTON: Well, yeah. I mean, impressionism as a proper movement is over—the last exhibition was 10 years earlier. But yes, there was a real Hispanomania, Hispanophilia, that

starts in the Second Empire. The empress of the second empire, Napoleon III's wife, was Spanish, and so the French had long been enamored of infatuated with Spanish culture.

In the 1860s, Manet makes Spanish subjects very much kind of avant-garde thematics. He paints— everybody's really excited about bullfights and Spanish music. And it's thought— I mean, you have to think about Paris in the late 19th century, which Paris actually for all of its reputation for being the city of light, a good part of the year, the sun sets early. And it's a very rainy city, very urban, dense.

And so I think there was a kind of fantasy about Spain as a land of sunshine and sensuality and colorful costumes and music. And so I think Renoir's kind of playing into that sort of mythology about Spain. I mean, it's not entirely mythical. Those things are accurate. Spain is much more complicated than that, but this is the theme that runs through French painting in the 19th century, a real sort of— it's fantasy, fantasy about a kind of "exotic" other that is Spain. And I think, I mean, I would qualify this as almost an orientalist picture, and, of course, Renoir participated in that movement with a vengeance.

CELESTE HEADLEE: For our listeners for whom the word orientalist may seem unfamiliar, can you explain what that means?

MARY MORTON: Yeah, it's a term that art historians and historians use to describe cultural movement that went hand-in-hand with fantasizing about the lands that France was colonizing. And there's— well, we're not going to get into this with this picture, but there's this insidious way in which orientalism aids and abets imperial power. But this is way too much for this podcast, especially since we're talking about Spain. So I think maybe we sidestep the whole—

CELESTE HEADLEE: Itself a colonial power.

MARY MORTON: Yes, exactly. Yeah, yeah. I mean, one of the things that I think is really interesting about this picture, Renoir doesn't paint young women with guitars very often. There's a handful. But he's very well known for painting young women with pianos, young women at the piano.

And Renoir himself did love music. He was a melomane. He went to concerts. There is a wonderful portrait that he does of Wagner, for instance, the German composer. He was a very talented singer himself as a young man.

SONIA DE LOS SANTOS: (SINGING) My dear old Mexico. This land is also mine. It's not only yours. I'm proud to say, I love it—

CELESTE HEADLEE: How has it been for you as a performer during this really kind of volatile time where people who are not just Latino or Hispanic, but from Mexico specifically, have to endure a lot of stereotypes and prejudice? How has that been?

SONIA DE LOS SANTOS: It's been a roller coaster, really. I've been really lucky that to have found incredible people here in the US that have seen something in me and have given me an honest and generous chance to do what I like to do. But that's not always the case where we go. That's unfortunately not every door is open with that smile that we want to see in other people's faces.

But it's one day at a time. I try to keep positive and try to spread a message of inclusion, of avoiding just horrible stereotypes, and being supportive also of migration as a fundamental human right. And I know I'm speaking as an immigrant here myself, but I do believe in that, and I try to capture that also in the messages in our songs.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Is there a part of you that feels the music can communicate on that deeper level?

SONIA DE LOS SANTOS: I sure hope so. I do. I give it a lot of thoughts to the messages and songs and what the music also does not lyrically, but just the music itself and the melodies and what they evoke.

And sometimes hearing a melody and a violin, to me, that sounds like home and sounds like Mexico. It's all I need. It's a beautiful thing that it can really take you somewhere else and lift your spirits.

So I do hope that this message does translate musically even if people who are listening to our songs and doesn't necessarily speak the language. But there's something in the music and in the spirit of the music and how it's performed and how people are on stage smiling at each other, reminding each other that we could be friends, for example. I hope that reads the way I intended it to be.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Which— we're connecting this art form of music which is absorbed through the ears to this art form of painting that is absorbed entirely through the eyes. What's the connection between visual art and musical art?

SONIA DE LOS SANTOS: I love visual art. I think about how things look too, how I present just like a cover of an album, for example, which seems very obvious. But a lot of people don't put a lot of effort in that, and I think it communicates so much. And it can bridge many different meanings, just like an image is— it opens a whole other part for the imagination. And just like me looking at this painting and figuring out how would it sound, I think people who look at an album cover or look at a photograph of me performing, or anybody else in that case, would wonder, how does that sound like? How do I imagine it sounds like?

[SINGING IN SPANISH]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks once again to Sonia De Los Santos for joining us. You can learn more about her and Renoir at the National Gallery of Art's website, nga.gov/podcast. Sound Thoughts on Art will enjoy a break over the summer, but we'll have more details on what's next soon.

In the meantime, keep tabs on everything the National Gallery is working on at nga.gov. Sound Thoughts on Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art's music department. The show was created by Danielle Hahn, the National Gallery of Art's head of music programs, and it was mixed and produced by Maura Currie. To support the show, share Sound Thoughts on Art and subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or wherever you listen. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until we meet again, be well.

[MUSIC PLAYING]