

THE ORIGIN OF THE BASQUE WATERCOLOURISTS ASSOCIATION

The liking for the watercolour in Bilbao is as old as its painting. The first painters from Bilbao: Pancho Bringas, Eduardo Zamacois, Juan de Barroeta, Anselmo Guinea or Adolfo Guiard, among the most outstanding ones, were consummate watercolourists. In the “*Exposición Provincial*” (“*Provincial Exhibition*”), held in the Institute of Biscay in 1982, a specific section for “*Acuarelas y Dibujos originales*” (“*Watercolours and Original Drawings*”) was established, where 17 artists gathered with their works. This fact is a sign of the introduction the watercolour in the town.

In spite of it, the creation of an organization to channel watercolourists’ worries to defend their interests will take more than seventy years to come true. Below, we are going to account for this event.

THE SCENE

The “*Agrupacion de Acuarelistas Vascos*” (“*Basque Watercolourists Association*”) arose last century, in the halfway through the 40’s; the hardest post-war period. The terrible decade of adjustments between winners and defeated, the endless decade of executed, repressed and persecuted people, prisons and exiles, unlimited shortage, hunger, rationing and illegal market, corruption and working exploitation, strikes, suppression of political parties and trade unions, police controls and fascists expressions. All these factors weren’t enough to defeat a liberal, hard-working and positive society as the one from Bilbao was. A society involved in continuous civil wars throughout history, but it always knew how to overcome them doing honour to its name “*invicta*” (“*the unbeaten town*”)

Life didn’t stop and the activities continued as out of habit, although the change of scene and the consequences of three years of war, joined with the international isolation, reduced the population expectations to the ideal unique of survival. Art, cinema and mass performances constituted the kind face for the people from Bilbao who, as the rest of the Spanish citizens, were plunged into despair. All improved vitally in the end of the decade, and Oteiza’s arrival in Bilbao in 1948, would mark a turning point in the future of the Basque Art, which some years later it would become aware of its lost identity signs, in case it ever had them.

The term “exile” has been the most convincing argument used to explain the split between the pre-war vigorous “*Arte Vasco*” (“*Basque Art*”) and the disappearance of all sign of our native art in the postwar period. The widespread idea that we have about it, is that some artist died in the conflict and many others saw themselves forced to exile, so, only the attached or tolerant with the system remained in our land. Because of this reason we consider necessary to clarify our artists’ situation when the war finished and the atmosphere they found in the “*Nueva España*”/“*New Spain*”. As of now, it is positive to register that only two artists, as far as we can remember, lost their lives in the war: Alvaro Alcalá Galiano, executed in Paracuellos de Jarama (1946), and Nicolás Lecuona, deceased

in Frúniz, when a bomb exploded when he was carrying a wounded person on a stretcher (1937). The rest of the artists survived the disaster.

From among all of the war survivors, the only one who died in the exile was Aurelio Arteta, victim of a tram crash in Mexico D.F. (1940). Also, other artists died far from the Basque Country, but not as civil war exiles, as it's the case of Pascual Escribano and Clemente Salazar, who emigrated to Argentina in 1920 and 1929 respectively, where they continued a successful artistic career until the end of their lives. We also have the examples of the Arrue brothers, Ramiro and Ricardo, who being children, were moved to live with an aunt in San Juan De Luz (1904) or José Benito Bikandi, who emigrated to Argentina (1925, where he lived until his death, or Julian Tellaeche, who went to Lima (1952), where the death surprised to him five years later.

There were some artists that running away from the war, crossed the border with France, and came back once the hostilities had finished. In this way, Benito Barrueta was in the Gallic country in 1937 and 1938, and he came back to his residence in Bermeo in 1939; Elias Salaventa thanks to Bienabe Artia's support, went out from Spain in 1937, and he had to return early as in 1944, he joined the Fine Arts Academy in San Fernando, Bienabe Artia himself, crossed to Hendaya when the war was declared, and after living in Paris he ended up in Buenos Aires (1941), Bolivia (1944) and Chile (1947), he came back to Irún in 1948.

The ones, who truly exiled, were the components of the Basque artistic performance "*Eresoinka*", such as the painters José Arrúe, José María Ucelay, Antonio Guezala, Julián Tellaeche and Juan de Aranoa. The one who had the worst luck was José Arrúe, who spent 2 years in prison, and he was seized all his works meanwhile, the other four artists continued in different directions. J. Tellaeche didn't come back to our land, he settled down in Paris in 1939 from where he sent works to exhibit in Bilbao (in "*Sala Arte*", 1946 not in "*Delsa*" as Llano Gorostiza mistakenly pointed out), He moved to Lima in 1952 where he died five years later. The first to come back was Juan de Aranoa (1940), followed by Antonio Guezala (1941), Whereas, Ucelay settled down in England between 1939 and 1949, date when he came back to our country. None of them was victim of a reprisal and they could continue with their careers, this is something that A. Guezala didn't do as he was in philately. More people also suffered prison hardships; Ciga Echandi (1937-1939) was condemned for being a renewed member of the Partido Nacionalista Vasco /the Basque Nationalist Party, and Enrique Rentaria, whose 66 works were seized and returned afterwards, was at Larrinaga prison in Bilbao for a short time.

The terrible post-war period that Bilbao suffered has been used in many occasions as a veil not to go into the artistic events of the decade. The social and economic misery didn't contribute to the best conditions for the artistic development and its commerce. A group of artistic events came after the civil war, which will be vital for the regeneration of the artistic fabric damaged by the civil conflict; all this was sheltered from a paradoxical revival of the art trade in the Basque Country and Cataluña.

As far as the plastic arts are concerned, the facts were very remarkable. In the associative field, the most important one was the creation of “*Grupo Del Suizo*” (*The Swiss’ Group*), antecedent of the “*Asociacion Artistica Vizkaina*” (“*Artistic Association from Bizcay*”) and “*The Basque Watercolorists Association*”, two active ideas throughout the decade which have extended their existence to the present day. In the museum field, the opening of a center in conditions for the town; “*El Museo de Bellas Artes*” (“*The Fine Arts Museum*”) unified two pre-war humbled art galleries. In the expositive chapter, the strong hand by the “*Sala Delclaux*” (*Delclaux Gallery*) (now called *Delsa*)” disappeared in 1948 to give way to; “*Arte y Hogar*”, “*Sala Arte*”; opened in 1936, “*Sala Alonso*” (1943): “*Sala de Exposiciones de Artesania Española*” (“*Spanish Craftsmanship exhibition gallery*”)(1944) and in a more sporadic way, the Carlton Hotel, to which “*Sala Studio*” will join in 1948 and will be the first gallery in the town with a modernist project. Along with them, other minor galleries of a briefer life but that livened up the artistic life in the town; “*Salón Alvarez*” “*Salón del mueble*”, “*Salón Albia*”, “*Galería del Mueble*” or “*Bar la Bohemia*”.

Wrapping and controlling all this activity that is gradually normalized after the diaspora of the war, appears the new “*Junta de Cultura de Vizcaya*” (“*The new cultural committee of Bizcay*”), its new regulations of grants concession, provincial exhibitions of Fine Arts and no end of activities that have to avoid inquisitorial censure, the prohibition of meeting rights and police presence, with an artistic criticism covered by the new Francoist language in the only three permitted newspapers: “*El Correo Español. El Pueblo Vasco*”, “*La Gaceta del Norte*” and the vespertine, “*Hierro*”; under the control of the regime.

In the negative aspects; assigning the death and exile of a high number of artists, the disappearance of the “*Asociacion de Artistas Vascos*” without knowing the reasons, the constant ups and downs of the “*Circulo de Bellas Artes y Ateneo*” until its disappearance and the sporadic appearances of the group “*Union-Arte*”, which will stoke its embers periodically to hold the annual exhibitions, which made them known during the Republic that will disappear in 1947, after holding the VII Collective Exhibition of this important association of artists from Bilbao.

El Grupo del Suizo / The Swiss’ Group

This is not the best place to remember the origin, development and dissolution of this “*The Swiss Group*”, ideas, which are gathering in the abundant bibliography about this topic, but its reference is worth mentioning to understand the origin of the “*Basque Watercolourists Association*”, from which it comes from.

It was born within the artistic gathering that the enthusiast artists; José María Quintana, Nicolás de Zubigaray, Juan de Aróstegui Barbier and the watercolourist and draftsman, Arturo Martínez Taubmann had in the disappeared “*Bar Pacho*” in *the Arenal* in the postwar Saturday afternoons. They started to make a list of other enthusiasts to add to their gathering and they looked for a more spacious and less noisy place than the bar where they

used to meet. They decided that their meeting would be on the last Saturday in 1949 at the “*Café Suizo*”, from where they took the name.

According to Aróstegui, “*Every week the number of attendees was larger and also the collection of works that they showed in the meetings. Because they not only had to speak, we were also led by the example, taking to the meeting the notes and pictures that we had finished the previous week*”. Although the group had a wandering phase because the “*Swiss Café*” closed, the truth is that the number of artistic members in the gathering didn’t stop growing and they soon thought about a collective exhibition that came true and was held in “*Salon Delsa*”; the gallery that Isidoro Delclaux would open in 1909, who gave his space from Gran Via street nº18. After a rigorous selection, as it appears in the edited catalogue, only 13 artists exhibited their works, coming to 54 works, with oil paintings, watercolours and drawings. That is to say that the watercolour was already represented from the very first exhibition in the “*Grupo Del Suizo*” by the painters; María Teresa Aguirre, Juan de Aróstegui Arturo Martínez Taubmann, José Suárez and Jesús Uribe.

Once the meeting was comfortably installed at the Carlton Hotel. The number of attendees started to grow, organizing a second exhibition a year after the first, and also at *The Salon Delsa/ Delsa Gallery*. The selection required a higher quality, giving entrance to 21 painters and reducing to 44 the number of works. The selected painters were; María Teresa Aguirre, Matías Álvarez Ajuria, Diodoro Anduiza, Juan de Aróstegui, J.M. Babio, María Luz Barasorda, Javier de Bengoechea that with time would be the director of the Fine Arts museum in Bilbao, Enrique Besora, Jesús Cristóbal, José María Escauriaza, Michel Ferrer, Antón Santafé Largacha, José Lorenzo Solís, Antonio Otaño, José María Quitana, Ricardo Ruiz Blanco “*Caricardo*”-the visible head of the group “*Unión-Arte*”-, Jesús de Uribe, Nicolás de Zubigaray, Fernando y Vicente Montilla. Juan Bayón Salado (“*Bay-Sala*”) didn’t turn up for the appointment because he had sold the works that he prepared for the exhibition.

The activities of the group continued growing in 1943, without any doubt due to the good reception and the kind criticism harvested in the mentioned exhibitions. In this way, they held an exhibition in Zaragoza (April), another one in San Telmo Museum of San Sebastián (August) and the traditional one of the “*Salon Delsa*” (September). The one held in “*La Lonja*” (Zaragoza), was especially memorable as it was converted into an “*Exhibition of Basque Art*” “with the participation of: Zuloaga and Salaberria, whose works were placed in the privileged position, Urrutia, Martiarena, Olasagasti , Olave, Aldecoa, Apellániz, Menchu Gal and so on.

Apart from the components of the “*Swiss’ Group*” selected for the occasion: María Teresa Aguirre, Álvarez Ajuria, Anduiza, María Luz Barasorda, Babio, Bay-Sala, Besora, Aróstegui, Canales Herrera (“*Nino*”), Escauriaza, Ferrer, Largacha, Legórburu, Martínez Taubmann, Mendaza, Otaño, Quintana, Rodet Vila and Uribe.

For its part, in Delclaux ’exhibition appeared for the first time in the group ,some promising artists that were distinguished by the critics, underlining Federico Echevarria’s

audacity, Lorenzo Buque's beautiful landscapes, and Lorenzo Solis's painting, "*maybe the one that sets his sights the highest of all the exhibitors*". Antonio Merino, a prominent portrait artist, also appeared in the group as well as the architect Jesús Rafael Basterrechea, Antonio Butrón, M.L. Bazal, Luis Bea, Benito Elorriaga, Tomás Santiago Álvarez, Ángel Serrate and Floro Urquijo Álvarez.

In 1944, the "*Swiss's Group*" held its "*IV Collective Exhibition*", that would be the last as it immediately would turn into the "*Artistic Association of Bizcay*". Before that, the group attended the "*XVII Salón the Otoño de Madrid*" which had been organized 20 years before by the "*Sculptors and Painters Association*", whose organ of promotion was "*Gaceta de Bellas Artes*". Afterwards, they exhibited in "*Sala Macoy*" of Zaragoza; it was opened on 14th April 1945, when the "*Artistic Association of Bizcay*" was a fact.

The group had been aware of the idea that it was necessary its participation in the cultural life in Bizcay, it was known that the *Corporations* "*(...) for a lot of years no artist has been given a pension ,and sponsored exhibitions haven't been hold by them for about ten years and if that wasn't enough, for about eight years we have seen ourselves deprive of modeling teaching, painting and life drawing, which we had before at the Arts and Professions School of Achuri*" accepting the responsibility for "*raising the art of our region to the position that it deserves, that is, between the firsts of our homeland*".

The origin of the Basque Watercolourists Association

As it was written down when we spoke about the "*Grupo Del Suizo*" (1941), from this group of enthusiast painters, the "*Artistic Association of Bizcay*" (1945) will be born, and within it the "*Basque Watercolourists Association*" will be created.

The constituent process of these two cultural societies was very different although both of them come from the same embryo. While the Artistic Association from Bizcay follows "*El Grupo del Suizo*" after a process of reflection and inner debate about the future of the cultural entity, which is reflected in some statutes (April 1944) and finally it's founded by a constituent Assembly (9th May 1945), the "*Basque Watercolourists Associations*" arises in a much more spontaneous way as we are going to see now.

As Aróstegui Barbier says in his well-known work "*La Pintura Vizcaina de la Postguerra*" ("*The postwar painting of Bizcay*") when el *Grupo del Suizo* held its "*III Collective Exhibition*" in *Salon Delsa* in Gran Via street in Bilbao in 1943, there were no journalist reviews for those artists that painted with the procedure of the watercolour. The omission infuriated the watercolourist, Arturo Martínez Taubmann, who directed the anonymous columnist of one of the three newspapers that were allowed in Bilbao (it is not said which one), resulting that the review was done by a young lady that hadn't made any reference to the watercolour as it was considered a minor art. With such offence it was thought to create immediately the group of watercolourists of "*Grupo Del Suizo*", that is a type of specialized section inside the group, although it would take more than a year for this new collective to come true.

It has already been mentioned that the watercolour had a significant prestige in Bilbao since mid the XIXth century, thanks to the painters of the first generation of Basque artists that had studied in San Fernando, especially those who had been granted in Rome or that had had a close contact with them. Rome's tendency to the technique of the watercolour was due to Mariá Fortuny, from Reus, an exceptional watercolourist that had risen the artistic and economic level of the water procedure up to unthinkable heights before he put it on fashion up to the point that *“everybody wanted to paint like Fortuny”* in the second half of the XIX century.

Among the Basque artists who painted an important number of watercolours, we can mention; Pancho Bringas Eduardo Zamacois, Juan de Barroeta, Anselmo Guinea, Adolf Guiard, José Echenagusia, Ignacio Ugarte, the Rochelt, the Amann, or Aurelio Arteta amongst others, but the ones who had trained themselves in Paris did it occasionally, such as Dario de Regoyos, Ignacio Zuloaga, Pablo Uranga, Francisco Iturrino, Manuel Losada or Juan de Echevarría because this technique was practised in the French capital in an habitual way.

On the other hand, in some sources it is said that there were collectors from Bilbao that had works of some of the greatest Spanish watercolourists that had died, Fortuny included, and of the contemporary ones, amongst which stood out Francisco Bonnin from Canarias, Esteve Botey from Madrid or the Catalan Sabatá Jaumá and Miguel Farré, without forgetting that in some galleries from Bilbao there were some water painters like Ruiz Morales, Barón de Myrbach, Drudis Biadas or our José Maria Amann.

Also, inside *“Grupo Del Suizo”* there was a group of watercolourists who after the incident mentioned above, would consider creating an association to defend this procedure, which had contemptuously been branded as a “minor art”; Juan de Aróstegui, Jesús Uribe, Arturo Martinez Taubmann, Antonio Santafé Largacha, Manuel Urquijo, Emilio Azarola, Antonio Urbezo, Carlos Arana, Antonio Frade, José Maria Legórburu, Juan Antonio Frade Prieto (“K. Toño”), Rogelio Blasco, M. Álvarez Ajuria, José Ribera Font (“S. de Albi”), Nicolás Alzola, Luis Astorqui and some other of minor relevance. Except for Salvo Largacha, who shared oil painting and the watercolour with the same skill, the rest painted preferably the watercolour. These first members made a note inviting all the lovers of this technique to participate in this watercolourist movement.

From the beginning of the XIXth century, the custom of the watercolourists to gather in societies to defend their interests was extended not only in Europe but also in America. The origin is in the foundation of the *“Royal Watercolours Society”*, which happened in London in 1804. Its intention was not other than to give the opportunity to watercolourists to exhibit in public as at those times the *“Real Academia de Londres”*, the only place where artists could exhibit, refused them this privilege. The support to the watercolour by the British society was so decisive that in 1833, a second society was founded dedicated in a more exclusive way to the watercolour, *“The Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolour”*, *“The Watercolor Society”* and *“The French Watercolourists Society”* and similar organizations in the main countries of the European continent.

In our country existed a veteran society in Barcelona which was refounded in 1919, under the heading of *“Agrupación de Acuarelistas de Cataluña”/“Association of Watercolourists from Catalonia”*, which had a great prestige in Barcelona. Precisely, in 1944, Catalan people held a great commemorative exhibition of its XXV years of productive activity, which seems to be an example for Basque people, who had established contacts with people from Catalonia and Madrid who also wanted to organize themselves into an association. So, the watercolourists from *“El Grupo del Suizo”* arranged to organize a *“Salón Nacional de la Acuarela”/“National Gallery of the Watercolour”* in Bilbao, opportunity that was given when the *Sala de Artesanía Española / Gallery of Spanish Craftsmanship* was opened in our town in 1944. It was the only place with capacity to house an exhibition of such magnitude.

Speaking of the so called *“Salones Nacionales” (“National Galleries”)*, we have to clarify that all the watercolourists’ exhibitions started to be called like this when painters from all the state took part in it. When the *“Consejo Nacional de la Acuarela”* was created in Madrid (1952) to coordinate the activities of the six associations that had already been created (Barcelona, Bilbao, Madrid, Valencia, Balearic and Canary Islands) , the organization of *“Salones Nacionales”* started to depend on this organization, renumbering from the origin of the former which created a lot of confusion. As far as Basque people are concerned, the *“Association of Basque Watercolourists”* organized the *“I Salón Nacional de la Acuarela”/“The first national gallery of the watercolour”* in 1945, the *“II Salón Nacional de la Acuarela”* (the old *“Fine Arts Museum”* of Bilbao, Achuri 1946) and the *“IV Salón Nacional de la Acuarela”* (1963), which was dependent on the *“Consejo Nacional”*.

The First National Gallery of the Watercolour in Bilbao

The criticism that was in the origin of the creation of the association, must have been hurting 15 months after the incident, judging by Aróstegui Barbier’s account: *“with the purpose of creating atmosphere and to show that the watercolour was not a minor art, we held our first National Exhibition, whose opening ceremony took place at noon on the 1st January 1945 at the Spanish Craftsmanship premises (...) to which authorities and the artists Maeztu and Quintín Torre attended (...)”*. In this exhibition appeared the best watercolourists from Catalonia, Madrid and The Basque Country apart from the works by the deceased artists as it was the custom in these exhibitions.

The location of *“Artesanía Española”* was the building of *“Seguros Aurora”* in the *Plaza Elíptica/Elliptic Circus* in Bilbao, work by the architect from Bilbao: Manuel Ignacio Galindez (1934) with clear inspiration in Viennese modernism. This entity, officially called *“Mercado Permanente de Artesanía”* dependent on *“Obra Sindical de Educación y Descanso”*, occupied a huge space of the building between the square and Gran Vía street. It had two floors, tread premises for crafts products at street level and a lower ground floor that was the place for exhibitions, which was opened by Ignacio Zuloaga at 12pm on 20TH August 1944, at the height of Bilbao’s fiesta, establishing the main and advertising act of

the general opening of the entity. The exempted painter from Eibar, who would die the following year, presented 20 splendid paintings, which made this exhibition the one with the highest number of works by Zuloaga in Bilbao. In this space, barely four months after Zuloaga's exhibition, which was closed on 10th September, the future "*Association of Basque Watercolourists*" was going to be known with the organization of its "*Primer Salón de la Acuarela*" / "*First Gallery of the watercolour*".

It was edited in a little catalogue in whose cover appears the anagram of the "*Grupo Del Suizo. Bilbao*" as the "*Association of Basque Watercolourists*" was not established yet. It was prefaced with a simple text signed by J. de A. (Juan de Aróstegui) in which he glossed very briefly and gave a broad outline of watercolour painting history. In the first paragraph, Aróstegui pointed out: "*This first gallery of the watercolour comes to stimulate the watercolour interest, so disregarded or undervalued in Bilbao, as it has been in all parts of the world*". In the paragraph that closes his writing, he finishes with a sentence that will be premonitory: "(...) *there is no doubt that this exhibition will be the first stage in the history of the exhibitions of the watercolour in our town*". In effect, Bilbao will be the protagonist of very important national and international exhibitions of the watercolour until today, as we can check by the numerous publications of the association.

At the "*I Salon Nacional de la Acuarela in Bilbao*", 76 works by 49 painters gathered in the "*Salon de Artesanía*" / *Craftsmanship Gallery*, which were divided into two groups: "*Pintura Retrospectiva*"; "*Retrospective Painting*" (9 authors with 14 works), corresponding to deceased artists, and "*Pintura Contemporanea*" / "*Contemporary Painting*" (40 authors with 62 works) by living artists.

The works of Retrospective painting corresponded to the following artists; Juan Amann, Juan de Barroeta, Francisco Bringas, M. Castaño, Mariano Fortuny, Adolfo Guiard, Anselmo Guinea, Eugenio Lucas and one Sanz. These works and some of the contemporary were ceded by the collectors from Bilbao: Vda. De Gaminde, Joaquin Urigüen, Julio Escauriaza, Severino Achúcarro, Agustín Herrán, J.Somme, Ramón Pradera, Luis Jáuregui, A. Martinez, the "*Artiach Museum*" and the "*Fine Arts Museum*" of Bilbao.

The Basque artists that took part in this first exhibition and that we can consider as "historic", were the following: Matías Álvarez Ajuria, Juan Aróstegui Barbier ("Tegui"), Luis Astorqui, Emilio Azarola, Rogelio Blasco Nicolas Alzola, Michel Farré, K. Toño Frade, Antón Santafé Largacha, Manuel Losada, Mario Losada, Gustavo de Maeztu, Arturo Martinez Taubmann, "Raur", José Ribera Font ("S. de Albi"), Ricardo Sancristán, Antonio Urbezo, Manuel Urquijo, Jesus Uribe ("Jeuri") and Valentín de Zubiaurre.

Especially remarkable was the presence of works by three artists of the first generations of Basque artists; Manuel Losada, Gustavo de Maeztu and Valentin de Zubiaurre, who were immediately proclaimed honorary members of the recent association.

This first exhibition of the watercolour was considered by its own organizers as the coming-out of the “*Association of Basque Watercolourists*”, that is how it will be known from then on. We have to remember that when the name of the “*Asociacion Artistica Vizcaina*”/”*Artistic Association from Bizcay*” was chosen, after an open debate, it seemed presumptuous to take the name of the ceased “*Asociacion de Artistas Vascos*”/”*Association of Basque Artists*” (1911-1937), of a much higher artistic size than the one that was being created, and in some authors’ opinion, they agreed to change “*vizcaina*” for “*vascos*”, because this last item appalled ruling authorities. However, the name of the “*Agrupación de Acuarelistas Vascos*” seems to contradict those who think in this way and it can support the idea that using the words “*Vizcaina*” and “*vascos*” is due to its geographic attachment. We have to consider that in the case of painters in oils, there was a group with a lot of artists, something that didn’t happen with the artist from Bizcay, to which very soon will join the ones from Alava and Guipuzcoa.

In any case, the name wasn’t chosen by the member of the still in force “*Grupo Del Suizo*” which took part in the exhibition. What happened was that on the same days in which the “*I Salon Nacional de la Acuarela*”(“*First National Gallery of the watercolour*”) was being hold in Bilbao, the “*Agrupacion de Acuarelistas de Cataluña*” (“*The Association of Watercolourists from Cataluña*”) was carrying out its 34th Exhibition. In the preface of the catalogue of the mentioned exhibition, the president of the Catalan watercolourists and great watercolourist, Manuel Risques, among other things said that. “*We fulfill now another duty, which is extremely pleasant for us, that is to greet effusively LA AGRUPACION DE ACUARELISTAS VASCOS /THE ASSOCIATION OF BASQUE WATERCOLOURISTS, which is currently holding its first exhibition (...)*” And this was the that was adopted although the initials AAV of the three mentioned societies (*Artistas Vascos, Artistica Vizcaina* and *Acuarelistas Vascos*) is not by chance.

The first National Gallery caused “success” and “surprise”, as it was the first time the artists that we have mentioned above had exhibited a showing of watercolour, with big size formats, away from the commercial exhibitions held in the galleries of Bilbao. These artists gave the possibilities of a procedure which was presented as a “minor art”. “*Luis de Andia*” from the pages of “*El Correo Español- El Pueblo Vasco*” and Enrique Besora from the station “*Radio España*” in Bilbao, dedicated extensive comments to this surprising exhibition. “*La Gaceta del Norte*” and “*Hierro*” also echoed about it. All their comments were highly favourable, and of course, the “*Boletin informativo Del Arte*”, edited by “*El Grupo del Suizo*”, which reproduced entirely the criticism by Fermín García Ezpeleta (“*Luis De Andia*”).

The artists appeared in the catalogues gathered in their different associations in “*Salones Nacionales de Acuarela*”, organized by the “*Consejo Superior Consultivo de La Acuarela*” since 1954. This wasn’t possible in Bilbao because in January 1945, the only established association was the “*Agrupacion de Acuarelistas from Catalonia*” as we have already explained. This classification will happen for the first time in the great exhibition by the “*Association of Spanish Watercolourists*”, name that they adopted from the watercolourists from Madrid, newly founded (on 18th May), successor of “*The Society of Watercolourists*”

and which was closed at the end of the XIX century. It was sheltered in humbled premises in Chinchilla Street, where old contemporaries of Fortuny went to paint, among them, our Eduardo Zamaois in his return from Paris in 1870. The exhibition took place on 15th November 1945, showing 342 works of artists representing the “*Association of Watercolourist from Catalonia*” “*Association of Watercolourists from the Canary Islands*” “*Association of Basque Watercolourists*” and the “*Spanish Association of Watercolourists*”. Also, this exhibition held in “*Salones de la Sociedad Española de Amigos de Arte*” (Madrid) was named “*Primer Salón de la Acuarela en Madrid*”/”*The first gallery of the Watercolour in Madrid*”.

This gallery was opened with an extraordinary solemnity; it was presented by the General Director of Fine Arts, Sr. Marqués de Lozoya, on behalf of The National Education Minister. Mr. Saracho Ibáñez de Aldecoa (the Foreign Minister’s wife), Sr. Martin Artajo;; Mr. Iñiguez (commissioner of the provincial Cultural heritage), Sr. Esteve Botey (director of General Security), Mr. José Francés (president of the organizing organization), Mr. Marqués de Bellamar (lifetime secretary of the Fine Arts Academy) and other distinguished personalities also attended the gallery.

As far as Basque artists are concerned, the association selected 34 works of the following 19 artists; Juan Diaz de Munain and Enrique Suárez Alba; *San Sebastián*, Agustín Ansa and Luis Hoyos de Castro; *Bilbao*, “S. de Albi”, Álvarez Ajuria,, Aróstegui, Azarola, Bengoa, Lorenzo Borque, Landa, Largacha, Legórburu, Lerchundi, Martínez Taubmann, Sancha, Uribe, Urquijo and Maria Luz Zaldúa. It is observed that our new-born association starts to organize itself in provinces; it’s also remarkable the presence of a woman, something unusual up to this time and which is not going to happen again until recent times.

Our painter A.S. Largacha, was in the mentioned gallery and after emphasizing some watercolours by Bonnin, Esteve Botey, Felipe Trigo, L. Butler, Vargas Ruiz and so on, he summarized saying that “ *The Gallery is pleasant, it has the artistic standards and I think, without showing off too much, that the Spanish watercolourists can rub shoulders with the best foreign watercolourists*”, which is a temerarious statement, as Largacha hadn’t gone abroad, except for Morocco, and he had not seen more watercolourists apart from Turner’s reproductions, Constable, Boninton, Delacroix or Ingres, whose artistic height was unachievable for the participants of the gallery in Madrid. As far as the mates from the “*Association of Basque Watercolourists* ”are concerned, he didn’t want to go into detail about specific artists, he adopted a firm, elegant and diplomatic attitude towards the association asserting that” we have a team”

Also Arturo Martinez, appeared in “*Boletín Informativo del Arte*” (35th issue November 1945) to point out the artists that in his view, would send the highest quality works: Miguel Farré, Ramón Reig, Francisco Bonnin, Federico Lloveras, Ceferino Olivé, Roig-Ennseñat, and Genaro Lahuerta. In relation with the Basque artists, Taubmann relied on “*simply playing a discrete role*”

If we have extended too much about this event held far from Bilbao is exclusively due to the fact that it became a milestone in the history of the Spanish Watercolour and it supposed a very important encouragement for the newly created associations, among which the “*Association of Basque Watercolourists*” will show an enthusiastic activity.

Although the “*Association of Basque Watercolourists*” soon had its denomination that identified it as “*Artistic Association from Bizcay*” lived for a while in the shadow of this entity, taking advantage of the fact that all members of the Association also belonged to the one of Basque Watercolourists”. They used their own premises in Gran via Street. N°20, 1°Izda, with large windows to Ledesma Street. The news about its activities appeared in “*Boletin Informativo Del Arte*” as it’s mentioned above. The Association is officially founded on 20th October 1953, when its regulations are established. This was due to the “*I National Gallery of the Watercolour*”, organized by “*Consejo Consultivo Nacional de La Acuarela*” (Barcelona 1954), established that to take part in it, it was compulsory for the association to be officially registered.

Aróstegui, in his mentioned work, points out in chapter, after the “*The first National Gallery of the Watercolour*” in Bilbao, the following: “*the new board of directors of the Association of Basque Watercolourists as a result of its foundation*”. Once the General Meeting of the Association of Basque Watercolourists gathered, apart from assuming important agreements referred to the watercolour, its board of directors was renewed and constituted in the following way:

President	Juan de Aróstegui
Vice-president	Jesús de Uribe
Vice-president in Guipuzcoa	Agustín Ansa
Vice-president in Álava	Enrique Suárez Alba
Secretary	Arturo Martínez Taubmann
Vice-secretary	Emilio Azarola
Treasurer	José Ribera
Board members	Antonio Santafé Largacha
	Juan Frade K’Toño
	Manuel Urquijo

It’s surprising the idea of a “*new board of directors*” when it wasn’t still constituted, as for it to be new, there have to be a “*former*” one, whose charges were renewed. All this leads to the conclusion that there was a first board of directors that was the one which organized the National Gallery and as it was successful, the board of directors was renewed. What is clear is that in spite of the affiliation, the “*Association of Basque Watercolourists*” operated, at organizational level, independently from the Association.

Among all the members of the primitive association that worked in the popularization of the art of the watercolour and in raising this procedure to the level of artistic category that it deserves, its compulsory to mention Juan Aróstegui Barbier (Guernica, 1899 - Bilbao, 1988) its first president, and afterwards, Honorary President of the “*Artistic Association of*

Bizcay” and of the “*Association of Basque Watercolourists*” until his death. He was MD, in the branch of dentistry, he was also a productive writer and a passionate watercolourist, he was a tireless worker of the creation of the “*Grupo Del Suizo*” until his last days. We don’t want to stop showing our memories about him and our gratitude on such an important date, to the real author of these two cultural associations.

As it happens with “its sister” the “*Artistic Association of Bizcay*”, the “*Association of Basque Watercolourists*” keeps its activity nowadays with a strength that Aróstegui Barbier himself or the most optimist members could imagine. As a proof of this, we have this 200TH Collective Exhibition, which we hold after 68 years of uninterrupted activity. Also the associations from other communities remain as it has been explained before, such as; Salones Nacionales de Acuarela,, Canary Islands, Catalonia, Madrid and Valencia, to which other associations have joined over the years as the ones corresponding to Andalucía, Aragón, Asturias, Baleares, Castilla y León, Ceuta, Galicia, Girona and Segovia, as well as, the Museu de L’Aquarel.la Fundacion Martinez Loano (Llança-Girona).

We wish all of them a long and productive life.

February 2013. Bilbao

Juan Manuel Lumbreras Cañada

Member of the Association of Basque Watercolourists