

ARTS CORNER

Are Moles Dangerous?

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One of the main characteristics of flamenco is its living and changing expressions, all of which are integrated into a single art form that is the clearest example of cultural identity in Andalusia.

“Support awareness of Andalusian identity, through research, dissemination, and knowledge of the historical, cultural, and linguistic values of the Andalusian people in all its wealth and variety.” (Calixto Sánchez).

A Brief History

Flamenco has a long history running from the so-called preflamenco period (up to the final third of the 18th century) and the primitive period (1765-1860), through the Golden Age (1860-1910) and the appearance of the opera flamenco (1910-1955), to its renaissance (1955-1985). Is it about to enter a new era? (Figure).

The first written information on flamenco is found in one of the *Moroccan Letters* by Cadalso (1774). The writer attributes its origin to the Gypsies, or at least points out that it is among these people that it is found. This is a partly true, since the non-European rhythms found in flamenco are curiously very similar to the complex Asian rhythms from India, and it is no coincidence that the Gypsies originally came from India. In addition, the Gypsy people were the ones to maintain flamenco as a living art and fully dedicate themselves to it.

I was musing, absorbed, winding
the threads of tedium and sadness
when I heard,
through the window of my room, opened
to a hot summer's night,
the wail of a sleepy stanza
broken by the somber tremolo
of the musical magicians of my land.

(ANTONIO MACHADO)

Another influence on flamenco that goes back to the time of Moorish Spain (from the so-called 'Moors'), came from various North African ethnic groups which established themselves in this country, especially in Andalusia, during the

Early Middle Ages. This influence can be clearly appreciated in its harmonies; flamenco has much in keeping with other North African musical traditions such as Moroccan music. The sound of the flamenco guitar often calls to mind not only such styles, but even ones from the deeper reaches of Africa.

“Flamenco is visceral poetry, an art of feelings and emotions, and to know flamenco it isn't necessary to know its forms and structures, whether this is a *soleá* from Cádiz or a *malagueña* from El Mellizo, or a *taranta* from El Guerra.” (José María Pemán).

And the women's dances, especially the hip and hand movements, resemble some North African dances. All these obvious influences should come as no surprise when we recall that Andalusia was influenced by this culture for so many centuries.

“But every facet of flamenco you unravel turns into multiple nuances, which shows its wealth and the nature of an art that “is greater than life” as the dancer Baryshnikov stated.

On Moles¹ and Spots

This is how the *soleá* (a usually sombre flamenco song or dance) views them:

The chair where I'm sitting
has lost its cane seat,
so many ordeals faced...
stop and look up at the roof
and you'll see my nightgown
with crimson spots.

The *bulería* (a usually happy flamenco song) of *bulerías* says:

I wanted to change and she didn't want to
a spotted neckscarf
for a plain one.

They are also found in the classical *ranchera* (a Mexican folk song) typically played by student bands and adapted as a *bulería* by Chano Lobato:

That beauty spot you have,
so close to your lips, my darling,
Don't give it to anyone, my darling,
because it's mine.

And in the Malaga tango *Quisiera volverme pulga* by Camarón de la Isla:

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Figure 1. La Macanita.

Oh! My soleá comes to you
In its spotted robes
Hair thrown back
And coral ear-rings

Sevillanas are danced by groups of couples and have a beat suited to singing *seguidillas*. The *sevillanas corraleras* were sung and danced in neighbors' inner courtyards which were so common in Seville and nearby villages in the past. They are very popular and simple:

By the patio fountain
I met you
and counted the spots
on your dress,
Ninety or more
green, blue,
crimson and white.

The *fandango* is a dance with Arabian roots, with 3 beats and lively movements, in which a young man courts a young woman. Mayte Martín says:

Waves of the calm sea
spotted conches
waves of the calm sea,
if you give me your love
I will give you my soul
María de los Dolores

The *zambra* is a Gypsy party where the *olés* and the flamenco songs mix with old dances like *La Cachucha* (the Cap), *La Mosca* (the Fly), and *Los Panaderos* (the Bakers), the latter so called because the men make movements like kneading bread.

On Feelings

A person understands flamenco to the extent that when they listen to it, it stabs them, inflames them, hurts them, bites them. It is not so different from being thrilled by a painting by Van Gogh or Velázquez without “understanding” about painting; all I have to do is stand in front of one of their paintings to have chills running through me.

I have been moved to tears by 2 extremely different voices, the *Vidalita* by Marchena and the *Romance del amargo* by Camarón. In this regard, I consider myself a privileged music lover and there are millions of people like me. All the voices lie between Camarón and Marchena. Like poets who from time to time need to reread their favorite writers, I can shut myself up at home for 3 months to listen to

recordings I listened to years before. “I need to listen to them again to refresh my memory and hear how La Niña de los Peines sang *bamberas*, how Antonio Piñana sang mining *fandangos*, how El Guerra sang a *taranta* at the beginning of the 20th century” (Piñana). However, our experience of the beautiful and the dangerous, the ability to perceive them and respond to them, continues to shape how we interpret the visual.

Nowadays, these trends are complementary rather than in conflict. Ongoing observation and curiosity bind dermatology and flamenco together through the *lunares*, but so does their extensive classification; in flamenco, the tripod of song, dance, and guitar admit many subdivisions, and in dermatology nevi and moles come in many shapes and patterns. Their many sources and the ongoing changes in approach and diagnosis bring them both alive.

But Moons and Stars... (Comment)

“And if she had one hundred moles like the one you mentioned, they would not be moles at all, but moons and brilliant stars.”

(Miguel de Cervantes 1547-1616. *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Part II, chapter X)

The author, José María Rojo García, Pepe to his friends, unites scholarship with feeling. From such a union a curiously beautiful hybrid is born: the dermatologist artist, who studies, learns, and teaches. His extraordinary writing on *lunares* takes us by the hand into the world of flamenco, to discover that it is almost a science, bursting with history, facets, changes, and mythical characters. After reading this we could almost say, like Oscar Wilde, that it is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure: it is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied.

“A chip off the old block” as the old proverb says. Indeed, in this case, genetics—and circumstances, as Ortega would say—have played their role: a journalist father who fills young Pepe Rojo’s heart with a love for words, and a mother, Toñi, who enjoys music, literature, sculpture, and architecture, especially if they refer to Andalusia, passing on to him a never-ending love that that is never disappointed. In this sense moles are not dangerous, but, as Cervantes said, moons and stars...

Let’s finish with another verse, since this is our theme. I listened to it once, and I understood it completely. Typically female, perhaps, but what do you think?

I don’t want you to go, or to stay,
I don’t want you to leave me alone or take me
with you,
I only want... but I don’t want anything,
I want everything.

A. GUERRA