



## Ocaña, José Pérez (1947-1983)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Spanish drag artist and painter José Ángel Pérez Ocaña was a fixture of the counter-cultural scene in Barcelona in the 1970s. He was the subject of a milestone film in Spanish cinema, *Ocaña, retrat intermitent*, by gay director Ventura Pons.

Although Ocaña is strongly associated with Barcelona, where he spent most of his adult life and where he came to public attention, he was a native of Andalusia, born on March 24, 1947, in Cantillana, near Seville. He loved the region, which he described as being "like a surrealist painting," and absorbed its culture and customs--even if he sometimes stood them on their heads.

Ocaña developed a sense of individuality early on. As a boy he failed to conform to masculine stereotypes. He was a gentle child who was attracted to art and enjoyed dressing up, which sometimes made him the object of abuse.

In adulthood Ocaña would stubbornly reject marginalizing labels; he did not wish to be known as a transvestite, insisting that he should merely be considered a person who enjoyed cross-dressing.

In 1971 Ocaña moved from Andalusia to Barcelona in Catalonia--a more cosmopolitan milieu yet also marginalized. Among the targets of the repressive policies of the Franco regime were cultural and linguistic minorities such as the Catalans.

In the 1970s Barcelona became a center of counter-culture, and Ocaña established himself as a player on the scene. He gained a following in the gay community, and gay cartoonist Nazario featured him as a character in his comic books. Especially during the "transition" period following Franco's death in 1975, he was a highly visible figure in the city, strolling along Las Ramblas, the main street, in extravagant costumes and staging "happenings" or *procesiones*.

The *procesiones* combined camp with the traditions of his native Andalusia, in particular the parades of Holy Week, for which the region is famous. In these, *cofradías* ("brotherhoods") of Catholic men carry huge, elaborately-decorated floats containing large statues of saints, often the Virgin Mary. Groups of penitents march behind them.

Ocaña created his own version. Using papier-mâché figures of virgins and little angels that he had exhibited in a leading underground art gallery, he led a procession throughout the city, causing a sensation.

Although Franco was gone, many of the repressive laws against minorities remained in place. Nevertheless, the political climate allowed somewhat freer expression than before.

Particularly vigorous demonstrations occurred in the summer of 1978, when, in defiance of the law, gay men, lesbians, transvestites, and transsexuals demonstrated in protest in Barcelona, supported by Socialists, Communists, feminists, Catalan nationalists, and members of other marginalized groups.

On one occasion, at a rock festival at nearby Canet de Mar, Ocaña and several friends took to the stage dressed as female flamenco dancers (another nod by Ocaña to the culture of his native region). At the end of the performance, Ocaña stripped off his costume and tossed it into the audience. Nude except for a carnation in his hair and a pair of high heels, he finished with a flourish of foot-tapping dancing, described as "intense" and "orgasmic," as the crowd cheered wildly.

Gay Catalan director Ventura Pons used this performance as the final scene in his first film, the documentary *Ocaña, retrat intermitent* (*Ocaña: Intermittent Portrait*, 1978). The majority of the film, however, simply has Ocaña sitting on his bed in a Barcelona apartment and speaking (in Spanish despite the Catalan title) about his life, his friends and lovers, his sexuality, his painting, and his sense of identity.

The film, which quickly became a cult favorite, was shown at the 1978 Cannes Film Festival, where it was well-received. It has been hailed as a ground-breaking work of Spanish cinema that helped open discussion of sexuality and sexual politics.

Ocaña's paintings are modern in style and show the influence of Chagall, Modigliani, and Matisse. In his earlier work he favored themes that reflected the Andalusian culture in which he grew up. Among these are paintings with religious content, such as angels and images of the Virgin.

Although Ocaña was aware of the complicity of the Church in the oppression of homosexuals, he was intrigued by the color, pageantry, and emotion of religious rites, as well as by the sensuality often found in religious art.

His later work included paintings of urban subjects.

Shortly before his death, Ocaña painted *Premonición* (*Premonition*, 1978), which shows him lying on his bed in Barcelona while friends hold a wake.

Ocaña died in Cantillana on September 18, 1983, of an AIDS-related disease. After his death, his family established a small private museum of his paintings.

## **Bibliography**

Mira, Alberto. "Ocaña, José Pérez." *Who's Who in Contemporary Gay and Lesbian Culture from World War II to the Present Day*. Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. 308-309.

"Ocaña." [www.galeria-cavecanem.com/expo/ocaña/expo\\_ocaña.html](http://www.galeria-cavecanem.com/expo/ocaña/expo_ocaña.html).

Trueba, Fernando. "La alegre marginación." *El País* (Madrid) (June 14, 1978): [www.venturapons.com/filmografía/retratp.html](http://www.venturapons.com/filmografía/retratp.html).

Vilarós, Teresa M. *El mono del desencanto: Una crítica cultural de la transición española*. Mexico City and Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, S.A., 1998.

## **About the Author**

**Linda Rapp** teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com).