

Rey Vila, AKA Sim - Artist

When the army rebelled against the elected government of Spain in July 1936 it was largely ordinary people, not any preexisting military force, who kept the generals from success. All over Spain informal people's militias had sprung up to defend their Republic against the military uprising. They broke into military barracks and armed themselves, and in the mountain passes north of Madrid and in the bullet-torn streets of Barcelona, they put down the military rebellion and gave their country free ground to hold. There was a young artist, born in the twentieth century's first decade, who took up the name "Sim" and travelled with those militias in the summer and fall of 1936 to document their story. He took with him linen paper, india ink, and a box of water colors to chronicle the men and women of the militias in battle and at rest. With his sketches, in particular, of women brandishing rifles from commandeered trucks or moving across a field of battle with pistol in hand, Sim could not help but catch the world's attention. And he did. *Estampas de la Revolucion Espanola* 19 Julio de 1936 -- a spiral-bound book of reproductions with captions in Spanish, French, and English -- became the most widely known art of the Spanish Civil War until Picasso unveiled his wartime masterpiece, "Guernica," in the fall of 1937.

Sim's 1936 sketches were done in a distinctive style -- quick, angular black brush strokes overlaid with swaths of diluted primary reds, blues, greens, and yellows. No one else would imitate this style during the war; it became his signature. Sim was actually the pen name of Rey Vila, a small, thin, blonde, blue-eyed young man who had studied at the School of Fine Arts in Barcelona and was then radicalized by military service in Africa. In fact he was with the Spanish army in Morocco at the time of the disaster at Anual, on July 21, 1921, when general Fernandez Silvestre and a force of 20,000 Spaniards were lured beyond their supply lines and defeated by the Rifians under Abd-el-Krim; 12,000 Spanish troops died in the battle, and it suggested to Vila at once the futility of military occupation and the nightmarish nature of war. So his chronicle of the heady first months of the Spanish Civil War was not done in romantic naïveté. As the editors of Sim's 1937 portfolio *12 Escenas de Guerra* put it in their introduction, "he had experienced the terrible effects produced by shameless politicians and mercenaries on the affairs of State, and as a result had become a stout defender of the people. This is why his sketches have so impulsive a style."

Sim's 1936 sketches are dominated by the red and black colors of the FAI, the group of theoreticians and activists who made up the ideological vanguard of Spanish anarchism. Sim's pseudonym, too, amounts to a flamboyant gesture of anonymity, comparable to the many anarchist artists and writers who issued their work unsigned. *Estampas* was followed by a new portfolio of drawings, *12 Escenas de Guerra*, in much more muted colors, and by a series of Sim reproductions and transpositions in multiple forms -- wartime calendars for 1937 and 1938, postcards, and full-sized posters that became equally widely known. He did a number of posters for the "week of the children" in 1937. Taken together, Sim's sketches constitute what Carles Fontserè has called an "iconography of the revolution," the people's spontaneous resistance to the military coup. With individual portraits and group scenes of men and women in battle, marching through streets among celebratory flags, tending to the wounded, aiding comrades under fire, Sim's art captures the egalitarian spirit of the people's armed resistance to fascism. Distributed abroad, his work left behind its local political context to become an international symbol of solidarity and resistance. Indeed *Estampas* was widely distributed in the United States and in Europe.

After the war, Sim eventually made his way to Paris, where his studio in the Buttes Chaumont, shared with numerous pet doves, was home both to his series of bullfight paintings and to his numerous illustrations for *Don Quixote*. Indeed, decades after the civil war was over, diners in Spanish restaurants in various cities across the world might well have noticed reproductions of bullfight paintings done with angular black brush strokes overlaid with swaths of primary colors. If some of those diners were veterans of the Spanish Civil War, as they may well have been, they may have felt more than a twinge of recognition as matadors and bulls stared one another down over the dinner table. For once upon a time -- when the world was occupied with the first great battles of what would become the apocalyptic confrontation between fascism and democracy -- sketches in exactly that style had travelled the world to introduce everyone to the remarkable events taking place on the Iberian Peninsula. These postwar bullfight paintings, however, were not signed with the name "Sim" but rather "Rey Vila," a name generally unknown during the war.