

Arts

Monumental metal works by two of Spain's most famous abstract sculptors are landmarks on the Basque Country's storm-battered coast. The rusted claws of Eduardo Chillida's "The Wind Comb" face the jagged portal of Jorge Oteiza's "Empty Construction" across San Sebastián's La Concha bay. Chillida died in 2002, and Oteiza the following year. Now they are among a constellation of artists to whom the Atlantic city — known in Basque as Donostia — is paying tribute in its year as European Capital of Culture.

The larger theme of the year is coexistence. Its inauguration on January 23 (in tandem with Wrocław in Poland) featured a light show renaming the bridge over the Maria Cristina river a "Bridge of Co-existence", and the diversion of La Tamborrada, a drumming parade, to the golden curve of La Concha beach. Fittingly for a gastronomic capital, marchers in Napoleonic-era uniforms and scarlet-and-blue *boinas* (berets) were outnumbered by white battalions of cooks drumming on barrels.

The idea of coexistence is no bland nod to heritage. The title was awarded in 2011, shortly before that year's October ceasefire by the Basque separatist group Eta ended an armed conflict that had lasted half a century and cost more than 800 lives. Although issues such as prisoners' rights persist, many have their eyes fixed on the future and on healing a bitter past.

Gaur Constellations, an exhibition at the San Telmo Museum, was the surprise highlight of the inaugural weekend. It marks the 50th anniversary of the Gaur group, of whom Chillida and Oteiza were already known abroad, founded in 1966 by eight Basque artists from Gipuzkoa (the province of which San Sebastián is the capital) in defiance of the Franco dictatorship.

On the losing side of the civil war of 1936-1939, Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia were branded "traitorous provinces", and public use of the Basque language, Euskadi, was banned. Decades of Francoist repression helped incubate the most violent strains of Basque nationalism. But when even to express Basque identity was dangerous dissent, the Gaur artists did so with a wit and beauty that remain arrestingly powerful. Resuming contacts with international art movements that had been severed by civil war and dictatorship, they found paths to being both Basque and modern.



Above: La Tamborrada drumming parade, headed towards La Concha beach. Below: 'Empty Construction', by Jorge Oteiza — Juan Manuel Serrano Arce/Getty, Fernando Zabala/Alamy

Past pain, future shock

Cultural politics | Maya Jaggi visits San Sebastián, a city hoping to mend its bitter past through the arts



As well as iron and steel from the industrial heartland, Oteiza and Chillida used local stone while Remigio Mendiburu's sensuous wood sculptures allude to the prowess of Basque lumberjacks and craftsmen. "Tribute to the Txalaparta" (1961) is his monumental take on a folk instrument while the seemingly organic "Three Bridges" (1968-1977) is intricately joined with dowels.

The sublimation of totems of Basque culture into abstract or avant-garde art ranges from José Antonio Sistiaga's psychedelic magenta-and-turquoise espadrilles (seen alongside his pioneering hand-painted celluloid), to Néstor Basterretxea's "Pelotari" (1964), a splendidly surreal 12-minute film of balletic, white-clad pelota players practising the Basque ball game with exaggerated athleticism. In Rafael Ruiz Balerdi's abstract painting "Guernika" (1964) the

Basque town is not Picasso's vision of war but a pastoral garden.

From its headquarters in the Barandiaran gallery, the Gaur became the nucleus of a Basque revival extending to avant-garde poetry, folk music and dance. Less a school than a momentary starburst, it lasted less than two years, but its artists continued on stellar paths. As José Luis Zumeta, 76, one of two surviving members, tells me in his hilltop studio outside San Sebastián: "We didn't have that much in common. Our goal was reached, then we separated and each led his own life."

Zumeta was born the son of a fisherman in Usúrbil 19 days after the civil war ended and recalls the early Franco years as a "sad and grey world". Self-taught, he was drawn to Jean Dubuffet's Art Brut in Paris in 1959, along with Sistiaga and Balerdi. "We came from an empty region

without modernity or creativity. Paris opened our minds." His untitled semi-abstract paintings blaze with colour, as do the show's bird mobile "Mobile+Txoriak" (1969). In Usúrbil town centre, his vast 1973 mural composed of 3,000 ceramic tiles ("the city council had to buy an oven") graces the wall of a pelota court. Abstract work, he says, "was more difficult to censor. From that perspective, we were free."

Like his friend Sistiaga, Zumeta remains prolific. "I paint what I see every day in the street," he says. Yet "colour is the starting point and the most emotional thing". Like his tributes to Picasso's "Guernika" in 1966 and 1999, his paintings reflect the violence of ensuing decades. "It is unavoidable... but it's not conscious," he says. "I've done posters with political context, but never a painting. Nothing should interfere." More recently he worked with his daughter Usoa, a screen printer, on "Oh! heart", 38 prints inspired by the poems of local psychiatric patients.

The most important thing, he recalls of Gaur, "was the audience who responded well". The sentiment chimes with this year's emphasis on participation. For Xabier Paya, director of the cultural programme, San Sebastián — which lost more than 120 lives to terrorism — is already a "laboratory of learning to live together. We were killing each other four years ago, so we can't pretend we're all friends and everything is fine."

The city is still intimately riven, even within families, along complex ideological and nationalist faultlines reaching back to the civil war: some topics are off limits. Paya is using the arts to broach these silences. Couched in maritime metaphors, from "lighthouses of peace" to "waves of energy", he hopes these cultural tools will provide a lasting model far beyond region. As Pablo Berástegui, the cultural year's chief executive, says, it is about "software not hardware".

This software is exemplified by the Theatre Forum project in which two actors perform six tense domestic sketches before asking the audience of eight to 40 people, mainly teenagers and their parents, to change the endings. Aitor Zabaleta, 28, a co-ordinator, attended all 40 performances last year. "When people come to our theatre, it's a personal process to find their own peace," Zabaleta says. One man whose brother-in-law was killed was "totally moved. He said, 'I have my pain, but I should accept that other people have suffered too. Even if we're not friends, our kids can grow up peacefully.' Another man who still has pain from injuries suffered from an Eta bomb, said, 'Even if we have our differences, our kids deserve better than us.'"

For the Basque writer Kirmen Uribe, "the end of Eta was finally the end of Francoism". In Morgan restaurant, a surviving haunt of the Gaur artists in a lane of pintxos bars, Uribe, 45, tells me his was the first generation with the freedom to grow up entirely in Basque. Beneath a poster of Zumeta's "Guernika", he pays tribute: "Gaur was the beginning of cultural, artistic and intellectual resistance to Franco — not violent resistance. It was art against dictatorship. Colour against darkness."

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From Thebes to Rochdale

Egyptology Rachel Spence on an exploration of ancient beliefs and Victorian obsessions

For many visitors to London, the British Museum's Egyptian Sculpture Gallery, with its monumental gods and pharaohs, is a non-negotiable part of the itinerary. Yet it is only the tip of a large pyramid: there are more than 200 public and private collections of ancient Egyptian artefacts in Britain. Now some of those objects have been assembled into a superb exhibition, *Beyond Beauty: Transforming the Body in Ancient Egypt*, at Two Temple Place, London.

There could be no more fitting residence. Built for the wealthy American William Waldorf Astor — it was previously known as Astor House — and now owned by a charitable foundation, the Bulldog Trust, Two Temple Place is an example of late Victorian Gothic at its most exuberant. With its mahogany panelling, geometric flooring and stained-glass windows, the house encapsulates the same cultural grandiosity with which the Victorians set out to the Middle East in search of other nations' treasures.

The curators are sensitive to the controversy raging around restitution. "We decided to only show objects that were in public collections, where at least they can be seen by everyone," says assistant curator Heba Abd el Gawad, who is herself Egyptian. Museums in Bagshaw, Bexhill, Bolton, Ipswich, Macclesfield, Brighton and Rochdale are among those that have contributed, and the tale of precisely how they acquired their artefacts forms part of the show. With admirable lucidity, text panels and photographs narrate the journey by which, for example, a gilded mummy mask from Hawara ended up in Ipswich and a lime-

Part of a mask placed over the mummy of a woman (30BC-395AD); four canopic jars to hold organs from a mummified body (945-715BC)

Facing page: figurine of a goddess (1985-1550BC)

Courtesy of Macclesfield Museum, Touchstones Rochdale, Royal Pavilion & Museums



stone vessel from Thebes found itself rehoused in Rochdale.

Twin catalysts for this migration were Amelia Edwards and William Flinders Petrie. Edwards, a popular novelist, visited Egypt in 1875. On her return, she set up the Egypt Exploration Fund to finance annual excavations. Sponsored by museums around the UK and by private individuals, these were carried out with the approval of Egypt's Department of Antiquities, which also permitted the artefacts to be carried back to Britain.

Edwards's right-hand man was Petrie, Britain's first professor of Egyptology. Petrie's passion for archaeology was kindled by childhood visits to Stonehenge, and from 1884 onwards he carried out more than 60 excavations in Egypt. On many of them he was joined by other wealthy Victorians, such as Walter Amsden, a doctor from Bexhill, Frank Llewellyn Griffith, an Oxford classics graduate, and Amelia Oldroyd,

CHILLIDA

Rhythm-Time-Silence

9 February–23 April 2016

Eduardo Chillida, *Elogio del vacío VI*, 2000, Chillida Belzunce Family Collection © Zabalaga-Leku, DACS, London, 2016

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