

Drawing in the Wake of Sorolla. Synaptic Landscape and Sensitive Cartographies from Lloret de Mar

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Abstract

The landscapes that Joaquín Sorolla drew and painted in the early 20th century cannot be understood solely as visual representations of an environment, but as perceptual assemblages that continue to influence the way we view the territory. This article proposes the concept of the synaptic landscape to analyze how certain drawing practices articulate relationships between representation, memory, bodily experience and the transformation of the landscape. Drawing on Sorolla's archive from the cove of Santa Cristina (Lloret de Mar) and a contemporary experience of on-site drawing carried out in the same location, a methodology is proposed that understands drawing not as a descriptive tool, but as a critical device capable of linking different temporal and perceptual layers. From this perspective, the landscape is conceived as an open relational network that is actualized through the act of drawing, allowing for a reinterpretation of inherited landscape imaginaries from a situated practice.

Keywords: landscape, on-site drawing, Joaquín Sorolla, Lloret de Mar, synapse.

Introduction. Towards a theory of the synaptic landscape

There are landscapes that survive in painting and landscapes that survive in the territory, but they rarely coincide. The places that Joaquín Sorolla depicted at the beginning of the 20th century belong to that intermediate zone where image and world overlap without ever becoming confused. His paintings do not constitute a capture of the environment, but rather a field of relationships that organizes the visible through light, matter and spatial arrangement. More than a century later, these places continue to exist, though not in the same way. What persists is not their physical correspondence with the painting, but the relational field that those images helped to activate and which continues to operate upon the territory and upon those who traverse it.

This article takes this premise as its starting point to propose the concept of the synaptic landscape. Far from being understood as a pictorial motif, the landscape is approached here as an active assemblage in which representation, memory, ecology and bodily experience converge. The notion of synapse –in the sense proposed by *disegno*– is conceived as a structure of connection between heterogeneous times and forms of perception. Within this framework, drawing in the places where Sorolla painted does not imply seeking a visual match, but rather activating that latent field. Drawing *in situ* allows for the articulation of temporal layers –archive, territory and experience– through a situated practice that replaces analytical distance with sensory engagement.

To explore this hypothesis, the article incorporates a case study in the cove of Santa Cristina (Lloret de Mar), developed through a series of drawings made during the summer of 2025. As will be developed throughout the text, this practice does not seek to reconstruct Sorolla's work, but rather to reopen the imaginary he activated, relating it to contemporary transformations of the territory. From this perspective, the landscape is understood as an open synaptic network that is actualized in the interaction between representation and experience. The article therefore proposes a theoretical and methodological approach that positions drawing as a critical device capable of generating knowledge through direct contact with the place.

Conceptual framework. Synapses, representation and situated gaze

In this context, it is necessary to clarify the use of the terms landscape and territory, which are not used here as equivalents. Territory refers to the material and tangible dimension of the environment: its physical, ecological and built configuration, in constant transformation. Landscape, on the other hand, is approached as a relational

Fig. 1. Joaquín Sorolla, *Coast of Santa Cristina, Lloret de Mar, September 1915*. Composite pencil and colored pencils on card, 24.2×31.5 cm (Sorolla Museum, Madrid, Inv. I 1582).



construction that emerges from the interaction between this material substrate, cultural memory and perceptual experience. It is not, therefore, a fixed image or a mere representation, but a field of meaning in which the visible, the lived and the imagined are articulated.

From this distinction, Sorolla's landscape can be understood not as a set of delimited places, but as a network of relationships that remains active beyond its materiality. As suggested in the introduction, these images do not fix an environment but rather configure a perceptual field that continues to operate in the present.

The notion of synapses helps to clarify this functioning. Knowledge is not presented here as a static repository, but as an emergent architecture generated when different bodies of knowledge come into contact. In this sense, the synapse does not denote a biological metaphor, but an operation of connection between times, perspectives and heterogeneous forms of experience. Applied to the landscape, this logic shifts the analysis from representation towards relation.

This shift finds echoes in various theoretical traditions. Gilles Deleuze y Félix Guattari [Deleuze, Guattari 1997] propose the figure of the rhizome to conceive knowledge as an open multiplicity, without a center or hierarchy. From this perspective, Sorolla's landscapes can be read as nodes within a constellation of affects, memories and territorial dynamics, rather than as closed scenes. Pictorial representation does not fix a place; it connects it with others.

Within this relational framework, the practice of drawing acquires a cognitive dimension. Following Tim Ingold [Ingold 2011; 2013], drawing and walking can be understood as forms of knowledge that establish continuity between perception and the environment. Thus, contemporary drawing is not aimed at reproducing a historical image, but at inscribing itself within the very relationships that structure the landscape: the light falling upon a wall, the spatial rhythm of an entrance, or the atmosphere emerging between architecture and vegetation.

This dimension is linked to the notion of the situated gaze developed by Donna Jeanne Haraway [Haraway 1995], which emphasizes the necessarily partial nature of all vision. Knowledge is not produced from an external position, but from the interaction between the perceiving body and the responding environment. In this sense, the synapse takes on an embodied dimension: it is not merely an intellectual operation, but also a sensory one.

From the artistic sphere, Nicolas Bourriaud [Bourriaud 2006] has described certain practices as generating relationships rather than objects. Along these lines, Sorolla's drawing in places can be understood as a form of interaction between representation, territory and experience. As noted, the landscape ceases to be a subject and becomes an interlocutor.

Finally, the ecological reading proposed by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing [Tsing 2021] allows us to situate these relationships within a context of continuous transformation. Environments are configured as unstable assemblages in which human and non-human agents interact. From this perspective, the material, vegetal and atmospheric variations of the territory do not constitute deviations from the pictorial image but rather form part of the same relational field.

Taken together, this conceptual framework shifts the analysis towards an understanding of landscape as a dynamic system in which drawing, territory and memory co-constitute one another. As will be developed in the methodology, this approach involves understanding drawing not as representation, but as a practice of activating relationships that makes situated knowledge possible.

Methodology

The methodological approach of this research is based on the relational framework of landscape defined above, understanding the territory as a material reality in transformation and the landscape as the field of meaning that emerges from its interaction with experience. Based on

Fig. 2. Synaptic map of fieldwork in the cove of Santa Cristina, Lloret de Mar. Diagram of the route and the main observation and drawing points (drawing by the author).

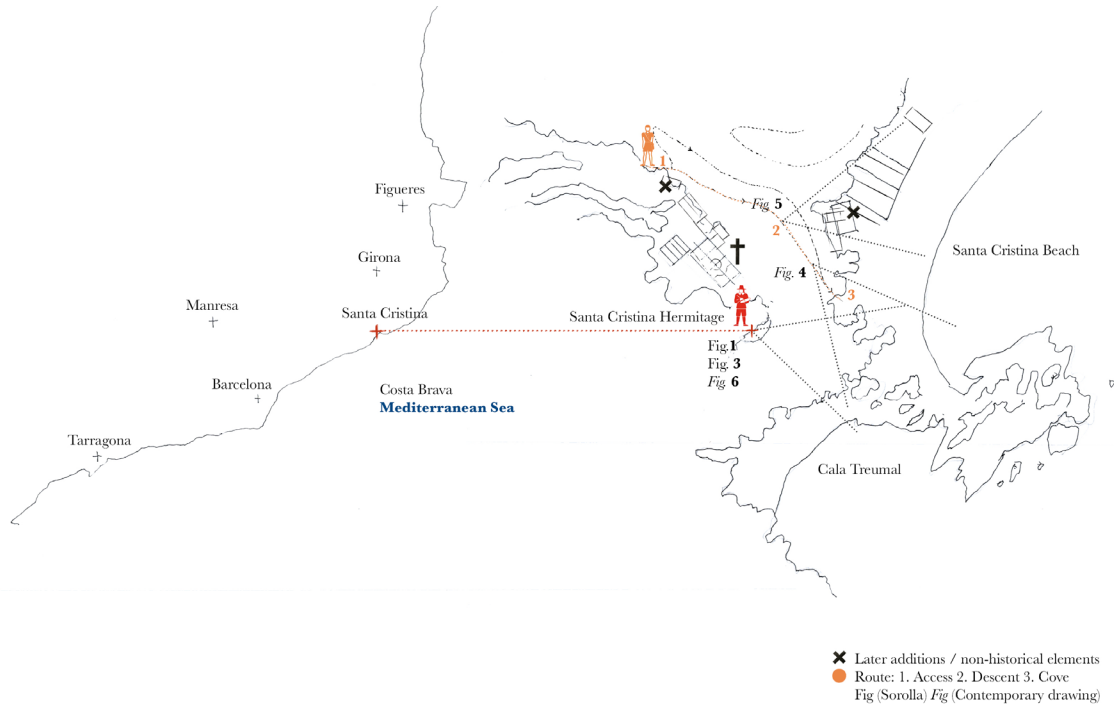


Fig. 3. Joaquín Sorolla, *Coast of Santa Cristina, Lloret de Mar*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 70×100 cm. Preparatory study for the panel 'Catalonia. The Fish' at the Hispanic Society of America (Sorolla Museum, Madrid, Inv. 01122).



this premise, a methodology is proposed that articulates three complementary dimensions: the pictorial archive, the bodily journey and drawing *in situ*. This articulation forms a synaptic cartography aimed at activating connections between times, materialities and forms of perception.

Joaquín Sorolla's own working process already suggests an approach to landscape based on the graphic exploration of the place. His drawings made in Santa Cristina do not seek to fix a definitive image, but rather establish relationships between light, vegetation, topography and atmosphere, functioning as a tool for situated knowledge (fig. 1). Firstly, the pictorial archive –Sorolla's works and the documents associated with his production– is approached as an active layer of the contemporary landscape. As noted in the conceptual framework, painting is not limited to representing, but rather organizes ways of seeing [Didi-Huberman 2011]. In this sense, the paintings function as an interpretative threshold through which the current experience of the place becomes legible.

In operational terms, the archive is not used as a model to be reproduced, but as a device for orienting the gaze. The works were analyzed prior to the fieldwork to identify spatial, luminous and compositional relationships that could be reactivated on site. These references do not determine exact drawing positions, but they do inform the selection of routes, frames and vantage points. During the on-site work, the archive acts as a latent reference that comes into tension with the present conditions of the territory, generating a discrepancy between the expected and the perceived that constitutes one of the core elements of the analysis.

Added to this dimension is the experience of the journey. As indicated, knowledge is not produced from a distance, but through movement and bodily engagement. Walking, stopping and seeking the vantage point from which to draw form part of the very process of observation. Following [Ingold 2011; 2013], movement can be understood as a cognitive practice that articulates the relationship between body and environment.

The route was structured as an open itinerary that gradually defined a series of observation and drawing positions, conceived as nodes of synaptic cartography (fig. 2). The selection of these points did not follow a pre-determined, closed route, but rather the interaction between references drawn from the pictorial archive and the conditions encountered on site –access, topography, visibility and use of space– which progressively guided the process. This mobil-

Fig. 4. Sketch made on site during the descent to Santa Cristina cove, Lloret de Mar, 2025. Pencil on paper. Records of the physical changes to the access route and the relationship between architecture, terrain and the route (drawing by the author).



ity allowed for the incorporation of unforeseen elements, such as variations in light, material transformations or human interventions, which enrich the reading of the territory. The on-site drawing constitutes the third dimension and acts as the central synaptic device. It is not used to reproduce a motif, but to establish a sustained relationship with it through sessions of prolonged observation at different points along the route. Each drawing is made from a fixed position for a set period, allowing for the recording of variations in light, spatial relationships and atmospheric conditions that are not perceptible in an immediate observation. In this sense, drawing functions as a temporal mediation that connects the historical pictorial trace, the current materiality of the territory and the draughtsman's bodily experience. As John Berger argues, the act of drawing compels the artist to look closely at the object before them [Berger 2011, p. 7]; in this context, it also entails thinking about space from within and detecting tensions between the remembered and the present.

The notion of the situated gaze allows us to integrate this embodied dimension of knowledge. All observation is conditioned by the position of the body, the circumstances of the moment and interaction with those who inhabit the place [Haraway 1995]. This condition introduces the social dimension of the landscape, in which encounters, everyday uses and dynamics of access influence the configuration of experience [Augé 1993].

As previously noted, the territory is in a state of continuous transformation. Field drawing allows us to record these variations –material, vegetal and atmospheric– as part of the very relational field that articulates the landscape, without seeking a direct correspondence with the pictorial image, but rather by attending to resonances, displacements and ruptures.

Taken together, this methodology allows us to engage with the landscape as a dynamic system in which archive, territory and experience are intertwined. Synaptic cartography does not reconstruct a past scenario, but rather activates the relationships that constitute it, generating situated knowledge through direct contact with the place.

Synapses between archive, landscape and experience

As has been suggested, Joaquín Sorolla's work can be understood as an archive capable of activating forms of relationship with the landscape beyond its representational

nature. His paintings do not fix a definitive image but rather operate as matrices of interpretation that organize light, architecture and atmosphere. In this sense, and in line with historiographical studies [Pérez Rojas 2012; Barron Abad, Justo 2007], his work shapes an experience of the environment that continues to influence contemporary perception.

Within this framework, the synapse between historical painting and the present-day landscape is situated not on the plane of comparison, but in the encounter between archive, territory and experience. Drawing in the places Sorolla depicted activates this encounter without establishing hierarchies: the painting guides the gaze, the territory introduces its transformations, and the practice of drawing articulates a situated process of reading.

A first connection occurs between the pictorial archive and present-day perception. As indicated in the methodology, the gaze cannot detach itself completely from Sorolla's composition, but the contemporary landscape introduces variations that compel a reformulation of it. This gap between expectation and perception generates a productive space in which temporal distance becomes visible. Rather than a comparison, a dialogue is established in which painting offers an interpretative framework and the territory reconfigures it.

This relationship can be observed in the spatial structure of the works created in Santa Cristina, where the light does not describe an isolated object, but rather connects it to a broader atmospheric setting (fig. 3). From this perspective, the painting functions as a node that guides ways of viewing the relationship between architecture, vegetation and the horizon, without establishing a direct correspondence with the present.

A second connection emerges in the relationship between the materiality of the territory and the pictorial atmosphere. In this sense, the environment manifests itself as a reality in constant transformation: buildings adapt, materials erode, plant species shift, and lighting conditions vary over time. Field drawing allows these variations to be recorded through bodily experience, incorporating the changing environment as an active part of the analysis. These transformations become visible in the drawing made during the descent to the cove, where the architectural access and the altered terrain play a direct part in the experience of the place (fig. 4).

A third synapse emerges when the social dimension is incorporated. As Marc Augé [Augé 1993] points out, the

Fig. 5. Drawing on site from the Santa Cristina viewpoint, Lloret de Mar, 2025. Watercolor and ink on paper (drawing by the author).



landscape is not reduced to its physical configuration but is also defined by the practices that traverse it. The places painted by Sorolla are not today neutral spaces, but settings for contemporary uses –tourist, residential or symbolic– which condition both access and perception. As drawing involves a prolonged presence in the place, it allows this dimension to be addressed indirectly. Shared routes, areas of lingering, or interaction with other bodies influence the configuration of the experience. This condition becomes visible in the drawing made from the viewpoint, where the vegetation, the opening towards the sea, and the observer's position organize the space beyond a literal description (fig. 5).

These three synapses –between archive and perception, between materiality and atmosphere, and between territory and social practice– do not operate in isolation, but simultaneously. They shape an experience of the landscape which, as noted, is not reconstructive, but relational. Drawing in these places does not seek to verify some correspondence with historical painting, but to activate the relationships that run through it.

From this perspective, Sorolla's work continues to act as an interpretative force in contemporary territory. This convergence is synthesized in a series of drawings that do not describe the landscape, but rather graphically condense the relationships activated during the fieldwork (fig. 6).

Drawing after Sorolla: activation and reinterpretation of the territory

Drawing in the places where Joaquín Sorolla painted is neither an exercise in historical reconstruction nor an imitation of his pictorial gesture. As has been suggested, the focus lies in the relational space that is activated when the contemporary gaze enters dialogue with the visual trace of the past. The knowledge that emerges from this process does not depend on formal coincidence, but on the connection between temporal, material and cultural layers. From this perspective, the landscape ceases to be understood as a representable object and is instead approached as a dynamic system of meanings in which pictorial memory, ecological transformation and social practices converge [Nogué 2007]. The practice of drawing reinforces this condition by demanding prolonged and embodied attention, transforming perception into a form of presence and presence into a tool for research.

In this context, Sorolla's work functions as an active visual memory that guides ways of seeing, imagining and traversing the territory. Drawing after Sorolla involves a constant negotiation between what the painting suggests and what the place offers. As has been developed, this relationship is not articulated as a comparison, but as an operative synapse in which archive, territory and experience come into contact.

Added to this dimension is the transformative nature of the territory. Environments cannot be understood as static units, but as systems in constant flux [Corner 1999]. Drawing allows us to attend to these variations through sustained observation, making visible processes that do not emerge in immediate perception and revealing the fragility of the landscape's memory.

The social dimension completes this reading. The places associated with Sorolla's work are today permeated by contemporary uses that condition both experience and interpretation. As Augé [Augé 1993] points out, space is also defined by the practices that sustain it. In this sense, drawing, by implying a permanence in the place, allows these dynamics to be recorded in a situated manner.

Taken together, drawing in the wake of Sorolla not only allows us to analyze the landscape, but also to reactivate it. This activation does not seek to restore a past state, but rather to generate a critical reading of the territory in which memory, perception and transformation converge. In this process, drawing operates as a synaptic device capable of producing knowledge through the interaction between what is preserved, what is transformed and what is reinterpreted.

Conclusions

The places painted by Joaquín Sorolla do not manifest themselves today as recognizable settings in their material continuity, but as territories in which memories, transformations and contemporary practices converge. As has been argued, what remains active is not the formal correspondence between the painting and the place, but the set of relationships that those images helped to articulate, and which continue to operate in the present.

The notion of the synaptic landscape allows us to understand this condition from a relational perspective, in which representation, territory and experience are intertwined. Within this framework, on-site drawing emerges as a

Fig. 6. On-site drawing of the vegetation structure in Santa Cristina cove, Lloret de Mar, 2025. Ink on paper. Graphic record of rhythms, densities and spatial relationships in the landscape (drawing by the author).



specific tool for activating these relationships, not from an external position, but through an engagement situated within the place.

The fieldwork carried out in the cove of Santa Cristina (Lloret de Mar) demonstrates how contemporary drawing can reactivate Sorolla's legacy without resorting to visual equivalence. Rather than establishing comparisons, the graphic practice allows us to detect resonances, displacements and transformations that reveal the dynamic nature of the territory.

From this perspective, the pictorial archive ceases to be understood as a closed reference point and instead operates as an active interpretative force within the contemporary

experience. The landscape thus appears as an open network that is updated each time a new gaze engages with it. The main contribution of this work lies in the formulation of an approach that articulates archive, journey and drawing as a system for activating knowledge. This synaptic cartography does not seek to reconstruct a past state, but rather to generate situated readings of the territory, integrating memory, perception and transformation.

In this sense, drawing asserts itself as a critical device capable of producing knowledge through direct interaction with the place, opening a field of research applicable to other contexts in which representation, territory and experience are in tension.

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