Worth the Pilgrimage: Eugenio Granell

By Charles Reeve, translated from the French by Janet Koenig

In Praza do Toural, a square in the beautiful old city of Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain, you will find Pazo de Bendaña, a baroque building that since 1995 has housed the Granell Museum. The Granell Museum contains a superb collection of objects from the cultures of Central American Indians interspersed with paintings by Pablo Picasso, Victor Brauner, Joan Miró, André Masson, Wifredo Lam, Toyen, Man Ray, and many others.¹ The surrealist painter Eugenio Granell (1912 – 2001) bequeathed this collection to the city along with his own paintings and the collages of his wife Amparo Segarra (1915 – 2007). Tourists searching for a haven from the plethora of religious knick-knacks and the hoards of pilgrims (who are following instructions provided by the application GPS Camino de Santiago) will find no mention of this unique place in any guidebook. But the well-known guidebook, named after the multinational tire company, gives tourists this warning about works exhibited in the city’s cold granite Museum of Contemporary Art, a collection we admit is pretty weak and uninteresting: “The contrast between the pious atmosphere that prevails in the city and the subversive, indeed, disturbing side of certain works, is nevertheless surprising.”² So, we can understand the omission of any reference to the far more subversive Granell Museum!

We heard about Eugenio Fernández Granell and Amparo Segarra well before the opening of the museum. In our little Parisian milieu, post May ‘68, there was a dear friend who, despite his reserved manner, made a great impression on us: Francisco Gómez, or Paco for those who knew him. Paco often spoke of Granell and Segarra as the friends he used to visit in Madrid and Santiago de Compostela after the 1977 “transition to democracy” in the post-Franco regime, when socialist and neostalinist leaders signed on in the hopes of securing for themselves a place in the sun in the post-war Spain that capitalism was rapidly modernizing.³ Paco and Granell shared a common political trajectory and kept up a strong friendship despite their geographic and social separation. They shared a similar outlook about their past. They were among those beings who carried one of the great historical narratives in their own little personal histories. If guidebooks are reluctant to expose the Saint James pilgrims to the Granell Museum, it is also because the museum’s founder, along with his legacy, evokes the spirit of revolution, that of the most radical and universalist currents of the 1936 Spanish Revolution and its tragic aftermath. This is further demonstrated in the museum’s archives and library that house an impressive number of books, documents, and testimonies about Surrealism and 20th-century revolutionary movements.

Granell was born in 1912 into a well-to-do family in La Coruña, Galicia; his father was a merchant. Granell next lived and studied in Santiago de Compostela. A lively and rebellious kid at the age of fourteen, Granell along with his brother Mario and other friends briefly published the magazine SIR (Sociedad Infantil Revolucionaria).
His path was set.

In 1928, he studied the violin at the Royal Conservatory in Madrid, all the while participating in the radical political life of the capital. While reading Leon Trotsky’s autobiography (“a gentleman I didn’t know”), he attended a clandestine meeting of followers of this same “gentleman.” There he first learned about Surrealist ideas from Pierre Mabille, who was passing through Madrid. In 1934, while Granell was finishing his military service at Gijón, the insurrection of Asturian miners was savagely repressed. After refusing to join a platoon ordered to shoot the arrested miners, Granell was arrested, tried by court martial, and sentenced to death. The night before his execution, a republican officer who knew his family helped him to escape; this officer was assassinated by Franco’s troops a few years later. As one might imagine, this near death experience marked him forever. He had become a member of the fraternity of the “survivors” of totalitarian bestiality.

A few years earlier in Madrid in 1928, Granell had met and become a close friend of Juan Andrade, a prominent figure in the communist Left Opposition in Spain. In 1935, after his experience with the Asturian insurrection, Granell joined the newly formed POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista, The Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification) along with a great many comrades from the Trotskyist communist left. At the beginning of the Spanish Revolution, Granell participated in the attack on the army barracks in Madrid, alongside comrades of the anarchist CNT-FAI (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo – Federación Anarquista Ibérica). Despite his rudimentary military knowledge, Granell was considered “the military expert of the party.”

Granell became part of the POUM column commanded by Hipólito and Mika Etchébehère who fought the fascists on the Madrid-Guadalajara front. Later, Granell was a “commissar” of a CNT brigade on the Aragon front. A passionate and committed spirit, Granell was present at the start of the POUM’s radio broadcasts from Madrid. He participated in organizing POUM militias; he wrote about military matters in the revolution; and he directed several of the party’s publications, including the magazine El Combatiente Rojo, which Stalinist Republicans quickly banned. In Barcelona in 1937, Andrade introduced him to the Trotskyists Kurt Landau, Mary Low, and Juan Bréa, as well as to George Orwell and Benjamin Péret, with whom Granell formed a strong friendship that resisted the test of years. After the May 1937 revolt in Barcelona and the Stalinist-led assassination of the POUM leader Andrés Nin, the ongoing Republican-Stalinist persecution of POUM and CNT-FAI revolutionaries forced Granell to live underground. He narrowly escaped several raids that the PCE (Communist Party of Spain) commandos, whom the revolutionaries dubbed the chekistas, carried out in neighborhoods to search for participants in the “May Days.” CNT militants hid Granell, a member of the now clandestine POUM leadership, and moved him to Valencia. Granell next joined a Republican army unit on the Aragon front where anarchists were in the majority. But Stalinist military leader soon spotted him and sent his group to the most difficult positions in the hopes of decimating it. An expert (a Surrealist one, of course) in bombs and explosives, Granell and his regiment were ordered toward the end of the war to blow up bridges in the Catalan Pyrenées in order to protect the retirada, a task he scrupulously fulfilled, despite refusing to blow up the region’s Roman bridges.

Next, Granell took the classic refugee journey into the country of the “Rights of Man,” that is, into refugee concentration camps under the fraternal “protection” of
the glorious French army. Granell and other comrades made several attempts to escape and finally succeeded in hiding out in Perpignan and then going to Paris, where he received support from Paco and members of the POUM who were already there. At the end of 1939, when the Nazi army was at the gates of Paris, Granell and other comrades were lured by an offer of the Chilean government to receive Spanish refugees.

Now began the second part of his adventure. Hoping to obtain a visa in exile, Granell joined SERE (Servicio de Evacuación de los Refugiados Españoles), which the Communist Party indirectly controlled. In 1940, the Stalinist poet Pablo Neruda happened to be in Paris and was just then supervising the assignment of visas at the Chilean Consulate. Granell never failed to recall this sordid episode of poetic dishonor. Coming across the name of Granell, Neruda must have exclaimed to himself, “This one is a Trotskyist, we must take his name off the list!” Those subversives struck from the list were given over to another refugee organization and found room, along with many Jews, on a boat leaving from Bordeaux for South America. On the train to Bordeaux, Granell made the acquaintance of another refugee, Amparo Segarra, who would become his companion for life.

After much wandering, the Spanish refugees ended up in 1940 in the Dominican Republic, where the government assigned them to an agricultural colony on the Massacre River, a place Granell considered idyllic, despite its name. Granell was writing a lot, including news articles and plays. He threw himself into painting and had his first exhibition. An accomplished musician, he gave music courses and was the first violinist in the Dominican National Symphony Orchestra, where he became a close friend of Yehudi Menuhin. He and Segarra provided lodging for another pair of exiles, Victor Serge and his son Vlady, for a while before their departure for Mexico. André Breton, Wifredo Lam, and Pierre Mabille arrived later on the island, and Granell and Breton became friends.
In 1947, Granell, Segarra, and their family fled Trujillo’s dictatorship and settled in Guatemala, where they were the center of a circle of creative revolutionaries. They found the power and magic of indigenous culture very seductive and it influenced their work: Granell’s writing and canvases and Segarra’s collages. Granell said, “We couldn’t become Indians because that is very difficult. But it would have really pleased me.” He resumed his writing collaborations with Péret and began to participate in the international Surrealist movement. Granell exhibited his work in Guatemala and also in the *Surrealisme* exhibition at the Galerie Maeght in Paris. He continued to pursue both his creative work and his revolutionary commitments, as can be seen in the vast correspondence and many discussions with his POUM comrades in exile. Granell criticized the Socialist Realism of artists close to the Communist parties, as well as the poet Rafael Alberti’s silence concerning Stalinist
actions. At the same time, Granell did not refrain from debating in many of his writings the difficult relationship between the Trotskyist concept of revolution—necessarily authoritarian—and the creative freedom he grew attached to. The affirmation of this liberty implied Granell’s anarchist attitude, or in any event, his independence from any orthodoxy or closed system of thought.9

While in exile, Granell’s confrontations with Stalinists inevitably continued. Barely settled in Guatemala, when he had begun to publish Art and Artists, Stalinists there violently attacked him, forcing Granell and his family into hiding. Granell then alerted his friends in Europe and received a letter from Breton, who intervened on Granell’s behalf, including asking for support from Camus and Sartre. In 1950, Granell succeeded in leaving Guatemala for Puerto Rico where he published his major book, Isla cofre mitico. Two years later, he traveled to New York, where he met Marcel Duchamp, and in 1954, he spent part of the year in Paris, where he exhibited work and participated in a Surrealist group. The fifties were the years of his greatest artistic output. Beginning in 1960, Granell started producing more abstract artworks, while still keeping strong ties with Breton, Péret, and other Surrealists. He also established close ties with Mário Cesariny and Cruzeiro Seixas in Portugal and the young North Americans Franklin and Penelope Rosemont.10 In 1958, he moved to New York, where he published La Novela del Indio Tupinamba, a Surrealist novel about the Spanish Civil War. After completing a doctoral dissertation, “Picasso, Picasso’s Guernica: The End of a Spanish Era,” Granell became a professor of Spanish literature at Brooklyn College. In 1969, he returned to Spain for the first time since his exile; he settled permanently between Madrid and Santiago de Compostela in 1985.11

During his last years, Granell found himself receiving accolades from professionals of the Spanish left, who were already well entrenched in the power structure. He received praise, homage, and recognition from the heads of institutions and he was honored as a great national artist. We know the human cost of such honors coming from mediocre individuals in the service of a detested system. This is why it would be wrong to make too much of the vicissitudes of this period. A talented individual, Granell was never someone who was politically lost, or, to use Trotsky’s formula for expulsion, “a man at sea.” He was a man who sometimes took questionable political positions, but remained true to himself, faithful to the Société infantile révolutionnaire of his fourteen-year-old-self, to his revolutionary commitments and friends. One day in 1988, Granell and other comrades presented themselves at a notary in order to register the Andrés Nin Foundation. When asked to state his profession, he replied, “Antistalinist!” In his autobiographical text of 1968, Lo que sucedió (What Happened), Granell summed up the basis of his lifelong commitment: “I don’t like the proletariat at all, and that is why I don’t want it to exist as such any longer.”

Eugenio Granell died in Madrid on October 24, 2001; Amparo Segarra died on August 4, 2007, also in Madrid.

We do not have much to add to this condensed narrative of Granell’s adventurous life. Everyone is free to read his books and to look at his paintings. And we are all free to dream with him about another world that is humane and free of exploitation, alienation, and the brutality of people acting in the name of political systems and thus losing their conscience. One day, in the autumn of their lives, Granell had an exchange with Joaquin Maurin, the old and tired combatant and former head of the POUM. Granell asked him how the Stalinists could sleep with clear conscience after
the crimes they committed. Maurín replied, “Granell, I thought you were more intelligent. They sleep better than you or I. They don’t have any conscience.”

Thanks to Eugenio Granell and Amparo Segarra, Santiago de Compostela is no longer just a pilgrimage site; it is their city, a fecund page from the Spanish Revolution in which dreams took on all their subversive force.

3. On Francisco “Paco” Gómez, see Raul Ruano and Charles Reeve, Le Suspect de l’Hotel Falcon, L’Insomnieaque, 2011. On his political trajectory from the POUM in Madrid to Socialisme ou Barbare and Informations et correspondances ouvrières in Paris, see also Ngo Van, In the Crossfire: Adventures of a Vietnamese Revolutionary, AK Press, 2013. Ngo Van is another member of the fraternity of “survivors.” A Vietnamese revolutionary of the anti-Stalinist communist opposition, Ngo Van was involved in social revolts in Saigon in the 1930s and 40s. He participated in the Saigon revolt of August 1945, which was nearly crushed by the supporters of Ho Chi Minh; French colonialists tortured and imprisoned him. In 1948, Ngo emigrated to France where he became a factory worker and grew politically close to workers’ councilism. Francisco Gómez and Ngo Van became friends for life after they met in a factory in the mid-1950s.
4. After Hipólito’s death, the column was led by his companion. This was the only militia commanded by a woman (Mika Etchebéhère, Ma guerre d’Espagne à moi, Actes Sud, 1998). See also the novel by Elsa Osorio, La Capitana, Éditions Métailié, 2012.
7. SERE (Servicio de Evacuación de los Refugiados Españoles) was created in March 1939 by Juan Negrín, head of the republican government from 1937 to 1945 in Spain and then in exile. Negrín was close to the Communist Party. Five months later JARE (Junta de Auxilio a los Republicanos Españoles) was created, which was less subservient to the Communist Party.
10. Claude Tarnaud, Braises pour E. F. Granell, Éditions Phases, 1964 (out of print). This is the only book in French on Granell’s work. Claude Tarnaud (1922 – 1991) belonged to the group that put out the Surrealist review Néon. He was friends with Granell, as well as with Victor Brauner and Gherasim Luca, and also with Franklin and Penelope Rosemont.
11. It would be unfair not to mention the neighborly presence of Andrés García de la Riva (1911 – ?), known as Andrés Colombo, another painter in the Surrealist scene. Also from Galicia, a POUM militant and combatant in the militia, Colombo drew close to Trotskyist groups after the war; returned clandestinely to Spain in 1947, and was arrested and imprisoned. In 1965 he settled in Valencia. His works are shown in the Lugo Museum (Galicia). Francisco Gómez was also a close friend of Colombo during the revolution and later in the French camps. The contact between these two comrades was never broken despite their political disagreements.

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