

THE ART OF THE BULLFIGHT



La plaza de Toros de la Real Maestranza, Seville (1855). Oil on canvas by Joaquín Domínguez Bécquer

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If you want a more complete picture of Spanish culture, study bullfighting. Famous writers of various nationalities have eloquently expressed that sentiment from Federico García Lorca to Ernest Hemingway, most notably in the American author's *Death in the Afternoon*. "It is impossible to believe the emotional and spiritual intensity and the pure, classic beauty that can be produced by a man, an animal and a piece of scarlet serge," Hemingway wrote in 1932.

Although he never visited the country, Georges Bizet (along with *Carmen* co-librettists Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy) knew that no story set in Spain would be complete without channeling the passion and myths

intrinsic to the bullfight—or *torero* as it is known in Spanish-speaking countries. That fascination continues today with films such as *Blood and Sand*, based on Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's best-selling novel, and Pedro Almodóvar's *Matador*.

Yet for outsiders there are still a number of misconceptions surrounding this vital aspect of Spanish culture. First, as Edward F. Stanton writes in his comprehensive *Handbook of Spanish Popular Culture*, bullfighting is neither sport nor entertainment. It is ceremony, a way of life deeply rooted in Spanish society—in effect, a solemn and sacred dance of life and death. What's more, bullfighting is theater, as cathartic as ancient Greek tragedy. Not a

competition between man and bull, but, as Stanton writes, “a mutual participation in a prescribed ritual, or as some have suggested, a kind of sublimated lovemaking.”

But isn't bullfighting inherently cruel and savage, in which the bull or (less likely) the man must die? Spaniards also fervently debate the question. “Take away the bull and we'll see what is left,” wrote Spanish author Antonio Gala. “Would we recognize ourselves without the passion for and against the bull?” For the bull is the country's most identifiable symbol. As early as the first century A.D., the Iberian Peninsula was described by the Greek geographer Strabo as a dried, stretched bull's hide. Cattle still populate the Spanish countryside—in actuality and as 20-foot-tall, black billboards in the shape of a fighting bull (*toro bravo*). Originally advertisements for Soberano (Sovereign) brandy, these billboards have become national artistic monuments.

Fans will trace the origins of Spanish bullfighting as far back as ancient cave paintings and Roman hunts, although the historical record isn't so certain. What we do know is that for centuries, the Catholic Church in Spain registered its displeasure with bullfighting's pagan associations, including one edict dating from 447 A.D. Two popes even attempted to outlaw the spectacles in the sixteenth century. During the age of the Enlightenment, Spanish monarchs also tried to prohibit the bulls, yet with little success. Government policy changed entirely during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939–1975), when bullfighting was promoted owing to its strong connection to Spanish tradition. Today, in spite of protests by animal rights advocates and increasing government regulations, bullfighting remains popular.

According to one count, there are approximately 8,000 bull-related events celebrated each year in Spain. These include not just the formal bullfight or *corrida de toros*, but the *encierro* or running of the bulls immortalized by Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*; *capeas*, the informal caping of calves, cows, or bulls during fiestas in thousands of town squares; and *recortadores* or competitions of bulldodgers practiced by amateurs. In contrast, bullfighting is a centuries-old profession. Nowadays most bullfighters or *toreros* are trained in formal bullfighting schools, including one in San Diego. In 1976, it became legal for women to be professional bullfighters in Spain.

In Bizet's *Carmen*, there are notable inaccuracies about bullfighting, including the very term *toreador* which does not exist in Spanish. (It was purportedly invented by Bizet so that the syllables of the word would correspond with the music for the Toreador Song.) However, as Stanton



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notes in his history of bullfighting, “the most marginal ethnic group in all of Spain, the Gypsies, have made up a disproportionate percentage of matadores,” particularly in more recent times. The hot-blooded Carmen has met her match not with the cool and aloof Don José but with the brave Escamillo.

In the end, passion, dignity, and tradition have become synonymous with Spanish bullfighting. Without bullfighters, as the aficionado Fernando Claramunt López remarked, “Spain would be like any other place in the world. They are modern man's last connection to the ancient, heroic past.” ❀

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