

The Restoration and Investigation of a Spanish Factory-Made Guitar from around 1900

(Translation by Francis Montocchio)

1. Introduction

One day in 1999 I received a telephone call from a gentleman asking if he could show me a guitar he had found in a builder's rubble container in 1968(!). Experience has taught most Guitar makers that in nine out of ten such cases the instrument in question is either completely worthless or has suffered irreparable damage. Nevertheless this gentleman actually did come to my workshop brandishing an oddly shaped homemade plywood case. I removed the lid of the case and the first thing I said was "Do you realise what you've salvaged?"

While working on restoring this instrument, what I initially regarded as a matter of straightforward craftsmanship increasingly revealed itself to be a small but, in terms of the history of Spanish Guitar Making, significant saga reminiscent of a Sherlock-Holmes mystery. I could phrase the question like this: "Who was the perpetrator and how did the scene of the crime and circumstances surrounding the deed unfold?"

In this article, besides going into details regarding the issues surrounding the restoration itself, I would like to address the particular importance of the city of Valencia in the history of Spanish Guitar Making. I will also highlight specific aspects of this guitar's construction to show that the original maker was not only highly knowledgeable about handling of woods, but also keenly aware of economical factors ("Time is Money").

During the course of my research (which finally led me to Valencia itself) it became increasingly clear to me that this city and its surroundings – despite its century-long significance in the history of guitar making – represent vast uncharted territory on the map of the history of the Guitar in Spain. As far as I have managed to establish, in spite of a growing number of books and catalogues available on the subject in recent years, there are hardly any noteworthy references to the importance of Guitar Making in Valencia. A rare exception is the volume on the American, Sheldon Urlik's, collection of Guitars which at least features two guitars from Valencia (by Telesforo Julve, and Andrés Marin).¹⁾

But, before we see where the investigations of the origins of this guitar led me, let us follow the steps in the restoration of this interesting and (finally) fine-sounding guitar.

¹⁾ Sheldon Urlik: A Collection of fine Spanish Guitars from Torres to the Present. Commerce, 1997.

1.1. What Came of this (Almost!) Regular Visit to my Guitar Workshop



Figure 1

This (Fig. 1) was the guitar that the “mysterious” gentleman brought to show me.



Figure 2

At a first glance (Fig. 2) – the instrument was still in its case – the guitar appeared to me to be reasonably intact.

The true extent of the damage was only then revealed to me on lifting it out of the case, when the back, which was in pieces, some cross bars and a variety of small parts remained in the bottom of the case. (Fig. 3)



Figure 3

To add insult to injury, almost the entire sides, only partially and tentatively attached to the soundboard, hung down in a most unsightly way. (Fig. 4)



Figure 4

I will go into more detail on the damage to the instrument later. In the meantime, I would like to give you a formal description of the instrument.