



# CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

*Documenting California's Traditional Arts Heritage Since 1909*

## José Segrelles – Painted Wonders of Space and Time

*by William Stout*

**JOSÉ SEGRELLES (1885–1969)** is among the finest artists to emerge from the Valencia region of Spain—and unequalled in his unfathomable imagination. His extensive oeuvre includes futuristic and outer space themes and, later in life, religious works. He can be considered one of the greatest mystical, fantasy, and science fiction artists ever to have existed. Yet today Segrelles is virtually unknown outside his native Province of Valencia.

### *Cholera and the Birth of Segrelles*

As part of Spanish custom, the mother's maiden name is formally given as the last name. Thus, José Gabriel Segrelles Albert was born at dawn on March 18, 1885 in the medieval town of Albaida, just 62 miles south of the city of Valencia. His birth took place at a turbulent time. The outbreak of the fifth cholera pandemic (1881–1896) claimed more than 900,000 lives, including 120,000 Spaniards. In Valencia the height of the epidemic occurred in 1885, claiming nearly 20% of the population. But the destined artist survived.

José was the youngest of four children, including brother, **Vicente Segrelles (b.?-1897)**, and sisters, **Dolores** and **Eduvigis**. Their father, **Vicente Segrelles**, was an artisan and craftsman by profession who specialized in script lettering and flourishes for documents. The family attended the local Catholic church where the surrounding artwork stimulated José's visual world and would later influence his own work.

### *A Burgeoning Artist*

The family encouraged José's artistic talents. By the age of eight, he had already painted accomplished portraits that were surprisingly lifelike. As a small child he studied art with Valencian painting master **Don José Fornás Gil (1855–1933)** who was also an historian and author of subjects pertaining to Valencia. At age nine, José and his older

brother Vicente moved to the capital city of Valencia where they would both have better opportunities for their future.

Vicente looked after José while the boy studied daily at the **San Carlos Academy of Fine Arts** under **Joaquín Sorolla (1863–1923)**, **Antonio Muñoz Degrain (1840–1924)**, **José Benlliure (1858–1937)**, and **Isidoro Garnelo (1867–1939)**. Seeing the quality of work his student was producing, Sorolla commented to Benlliure about the young Segrelles, saying, "Among my students I have a kid

who draws better than you." Segrelles also took additional classes at the **Escuela de Artesanos** (School of Artisans) with **Don Vicente Soriano**.

In 1902 when Segrelles was just twelve, his studies in Valencia ended abruptly with the sudden death of Vicente. José had to drop his schooling and return to Albaida. Two years later, he travelled to Barcelona with his uncle, **Antonio Albert**, who recognized the boy's rare talent and offered to support his art education if he would study in Barcelona. José enrolled at the **Escuela Superior de Artes** (Superior School of Art), also known as **La Lonja** (The Exchange). There, he was immersed in composition and colour principles under **Antonio Caba Casamitjana (1838–1907)** and drawing under **Vicente Climent (1872–1923)**, and subsequently earned his fine arts degree.



*Eroica Symphony, 2nd Movement, The Funeral March by Beethoven, 1927*  
Acrylic on paper 6 1/2" × 9 1/2"

While still in school, Segrelles worked for the well-known **Napoleón** photography shop as a touch-up artist. This was his first job. While there, he began to pick up illustration work from the **Granada Publishing House** and developed a body of his own work. In 1900 at the age of fifteen Segrelles held his first exhibition of oil paintings in the city of Valencia with remarkable success. Two years later, he was working at the Barcelona publishing house of **Araluce** alongside a select group of prestigious artists.

### *Bringing Stories to Life*

While working for Araluce, Segrelles illustrated thirty-six small abridged book versions of classic literature adapted for children, including many with fantasy imagery and fictitious themes, such as *Knights of the Round Table*, *Tales of Edgar (Allan) Poe*, *The Divine Comedy* by **Dante Alighieri (1265–1321)**, *Faust* by **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832)**, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by **Homer (ca. 850**

**B.C.)** and *Paradise Lost* by **John Milton (1608–1674)**. Unfortunately, Araluce's meagre payment for Segrelles' illustrations also included purchase of his original art. Segrelles left Araluce and signed a contract with Barcelona publisher **Gallach Calpe** with the same arrangement, however, for ten times the pay.

The prominent Valencian-born novelist **Vicente Blasco Ibañez (1867–1928)** asked to be introduced to the young artist after attending a 1918 exhibition of Segrelles' Gallach Calpe work in Barcelona. Ibañez was amazed by the profound, expressive quality of Segrelles' paintings. As a result of their meeting, the two began collaborating on projects to accompany Ibañez's novels, *La Catedral (The Cathedral)*, *El Intruso (The Intruder)*, *Los Muertos Mandan (The Dead Rule)*, and *Flor de Mayo (May Flower)*.

The artist and the author proved to be a perfect match. Ibañez found in Segrelles' pictures an effortless precision combined with an elusive quality that could capture

the atmosphere that Ibañez evoked in his own mysterious tales. This working relationship sparked in the artist a lifelong interest in creating book illustrations. Unfortunately, Ibañez suddenly passed away in 1928, without their collaborative books ever being published. In 1950 Segrelles bought back 115 of the illustrations he created for Ibañez.

On top of losing the potential international recognition that Ibañez' books would have brought Segrelles, Gallach Calpe unexplainably lost all of Segrelles' original illustrations of *Don Quixote*, which consisted of 54 oils, 38 watercolours and 126 ink drawings. Fortunately in 1955, the works resurfaced and were published in the 1966 edition of *Don Quixote*.

### *Work Ethic*

With several relatives to support, Segrelles took on extra work. He supplemented his fine art career by designing and painting sports subjects, mostly soccer and bicycling, in addition



*The Gold Bug*, 1935  
Acrylic on paper 10 3/4" × 8"



*Canto I of The Inferno: Divine Comedy*  
Acrylic on paper 10 3/4" × 8 1/4"  
Illustration for the *Illustrated London News*, Christmas, 1928  
Private Collection

to creating travel and other genre posters. He developed illustrations for Spanish magazines and news weeklies, including *El Nuevo Mundo Mágico*, *La Esfera*, *La Novela Semanal*, *Elegancias*, and *Blanco y Negro*, and illustrated numerous scenes from Spanish history for the publisher **Seguí**.

Segrelles' hectic work schedule eventually affected his energy and jeopardized his health. Certainly aware of his own fatigue, he also felt that his success was achieved solely through the "brute force", as he said of his efforts to financially survive. Nevertheless, he maintained this intense work ethic throughout his life. In later years he commented, "My doctor has advised me not to work too much, to seek distraction, but I am so accustomed to working that anything not connected to painting seems to me to be a useless waste of time..."

### *Achieving Commercial Success and International Acclaim*

Segrelles' powerful sense of graphic imagery is always present in his work. In 1923 the elaborately illustrated *Las Florecillas de San Francisco (The Little Flowers of St. Francis)* was published in Spain. Its first printing immediately sold out, as did that of the Italian edition. His other important finely printed limited-edition illustrated books include *La Celestina* (1946) by **Fernando de Rojas (1465–1541)** and *Cantar de los Cantares* (1946) by **Fray Luis de León (1527–1591)**. Today, these beautiful books often demand four-figure prices among rare book collectors.

While requests for Segrelles' illustrations were rising, he continued his attempts to develop an international audience for his fine art. Although his paintings received laudatory critical reviews, sales were few and far between. It wasn't until he paired his paintings with his popular illustrations that sales for his fine art began to increase.

In 1926 his career took an important turn. After doing some commission work for the London-based magazine, *The Sketch*, he was approached by its sister publication, the *Illustrated London News (ILN)* to provide four pages of full-colour illustrations for their special 1927 Christmas issue. The *ILN* was particularly distinguished as being the "world's first illustrated newspaper." Just twenty years after its founding in 1842, the publication had quickly risen to selling more than an astounding 300,000 copies each week, and continued its



*Self Portrait, José Segrelles, 1911-13*  
Oil 17" × 13 3/8"  
Collection of Casa-Museo José Segrelles

rapid climb for many ensuing decades.

In February of 1927 Segrelles travelled to Paris by train with his two older sisters, Dolores and Eduvigis, to sign the contract with *ILN*. The contract gave him not only carte blanche to paint whatever he wanted, but working for them meant that his art would be exposed to a new and far-reaching English-speaking audience. Also, in 1927 eleven new works were published, and two years later he received the Gold Medal in the **International Exhibition of Barcelona** for his illustrative interpretations of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Segrelles' star was rising quickly.

### *Motivated by Music*

As an ardent admirer of classical music, particularly the works of **Ludwig von Beethoven (1779–1827)**, **Richard Wagner (1813–1883)**, **Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)**, and **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)**, Segrelles created his own visual interpretations based on their musical compositions. For his first *ILN* project he chose Beethoven as his inspiration, which resulted in eleven music-themed paintings including the famous *Fifth Symphony*, the four bold opening notes reportedly described by Beethoven as "Thus, Fate knocks at our door..." In illustrating the *Fifth*, Segrelles



## CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

SUMMER-FALL 2015

### *Contents*

- Cover* José Segrelles - Painted Wonders of Space and Time  
by William Stout
- 8 Alicia N. Ponzio—  
Honouring Our Humanity  
by Molly Siple
- 12 Programs and Workshops
- 13 Collectors' Circle Corner
- 14 CAC Chapter  
News and Events
- 14 News Briefs
- 16 Donations
- 17 Museum/Gallery  
Exhibitions and Lectures
- 28–29 In Memoriam
- 30 Membership News
- 31 New Members

### *Advertisers*

- 15 Artworks Foundry
- 13 Fine Art Connoisseur  
Magazine
- 16 Hillside Fine Art
- 30 Plein Air Magazine
- 13 Vasari
- 16 Whittier Trust

*For subscription and membership information, call 626/583-9009 or join online at [www.californiaartclub.org](http://www.californiaartclub.org)*

also incorporated his own interpretation of the music, presenting Fate as the messenger "...to tell us of our sins and to announce the hour selected for our death." Despite Segrelles feeling "rushed" to complete the project, the colour section he created was so immensely successful that the *Illustrated London News* gave him similar commissions for their Christmas issues over all of the next eight years, from 1927 to 1935, the only exception being 1931. Segrelles was not only handsomely compensated by *ILN*,

but he also succeeded in establishing a more beneficial contractual precedent that allowed him to retain ownership of his original art.

The other subjects Segrelles chose to depict were Dante's *Divine Comedy*; *Don Quixote* by **Miguel de Cervantes** (1547–1616); *The 1001 Arabian Nights* (a precursor to the two separate volumes of *Las Mil y Una Noches* profusely illustrated by Segrelles); *Fairy Tales* by **Charles Perrault** (1628–1703); and tales by **Edgar Allan Poe** (1809–1849). In 1933 Segrelles

created his first important series of paintings depicting the Passion of **Jesus Christ**. However, the *ILN* rejected the pictures, preferring instead something more fantastic; hence, Segrelles instead illustrated the music of Richard Wagner.

### *Versatility in Paint Media*

For the most part, the often controversial chasm between fine art and illustration did not seem to concern Segrelles. Throughout his career he painted fantastic and otherworldly subject matter for himself, applying his own distinctive and personal forms of fine art expression. Segrelles' skills as an artist in various media were such that it soon became very difficult to distinguish if one were looking at a work in watercolour, ink, or oil. Occasionally, he worked in a very small scale, often using a magnifying glass to complete some of his tinier paintings. His skills with a pen, as evidenced by the sinuous ink drawings in his 1966 *Don Quixote* set, equalled his superb abilities with paint.

Few other artists in history can match Segrelles' anatomical knowledge and the brilliance of his sublimely precise drawing capabilities. The control of his pictures' values is awe-inspiring and, like **Maxfield Parrish** (1870–1966), he was renowned during his lifetime for his stunning sense of colour, with critics often referring to his distinct "Segrelles blue". Segrelles was unique for his use of abstract shapes and expressive colour harmonies that endow his work with a visceral sense of gravitas. One may not at first glance decipher what the artwork is about, but one is intrigued by the unusual design of the composition. After viewing the work for a few more seconds, one discovers obscure nuances and symbols that bring the art to life.

Among the more than 5,000 works credited to Segrelles, he created a fascinating series of four *Famous Dreams* that perhaps allows us to further probe inside the vast imagination of this prolific artist. One such painting is *Nightmares of Nero* that depicts the sinister Roman Emperor's vision of his own demise.

### *Life in New York City*

The illustrations for *ILN* were gaining Segrelles attention from an American audience. New York sales agent **Patrick J. McCartney** approached the artist offering him representation in the



*The Calling of Destiny*  
(Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*)

Acrylic on paper  
9 1/4" × 8 5/8"  
Illustration for the  
*Illustrated London News*, Christmas, 1927  
Private Collection

Richard Wagner's  
*The Ring Cycle*  
Acrylic on paper  
11 1/4" × 17 3/4"  
Private Collection





*Famous Dreams—Nero's Nightmares*

Acrylic on paper

Illustration for the *Illustrated London News*, Christmas, 1932

Private Collection



*Mogiana... was determined that each pitcher would have enough oil...*

Acrylic on paper 11 1/4" × 8 1/4"

Illustrated for *1001 Nights*

Republished in the *Illustrated London News*, Christmas 1930

Private Collection

United States as well as a dramatic leap in his illustration fees. Segrelles accepted and left for New York in 1929. Unfortunately, his arrival was at an inopportune time, as the stock market had just collapsed. Segrelles returned to his childhood home in Albaida; however, the town's remote location made it challenging for him to attain any illustration commissions. The following year he returned to New York where he remained until 1935, with only a short visit to Spain in 1931 when McCartney was under investigation by the IRS for not declaring his earnings from the sales of Segrelles' work.

In April of 1931 he held a solo exhibition at the **Nicholas Roerich Museum** in New York City. This was his first exhibition of work outside of Spain. Segrelles' biographer, **Vicente Gurrea Crespo**, noted that "The Segrelles exhibition at the Roerich had such an impact in the American press that it was said that the Spanish artistic news had

attracted more attention than the fall of its monarchy..."

The artist was given celebrity status in the U.S.; but, as in Spain, he never stopped working. Instead of delighting in his popularity, he picked up advertising jobs for the **Ford**, **Lincoln**, and **Packard** automobile companies. In addition he accepted numerous illustration commissions from the *New York Times* and various United States periodicals, including *The American Magazine*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Fortune*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Liberty*, and *Red Book*.

In 1930 Segrelles became the first artist to illustrate *Bongo* by **Sinclair Lewis (1885–1951)**, published as a short story in *Cosmopolitan*. This charming little circus bear tale was turned into a children's cartoon by **Walt Disney (1901–1966)** and released as part of the animated feature *Fun and Fancy Free* (1947). In 1934, Segrelles illustrated *The Tale of the Diamond*, a story by fantasy master **Lord Dunsany, né Edward Plunkett (1878–**

**1957)** written for *Red Book* magazine. **In addition, in 1932** his profusely illustrated *Las Mil y Una Noche* (1001 Nights) was published by **Salvat Editores Publishing House**. This work became a sensation in both Europe and America.

### *Dreaming of Albaida*

Nevertheless, with all the success and increasing demand for his work in America, Segrelles grew more and more homesick for Spain and his family. Dreaming about his Albaida studio, formerly his parents' home, he began redesigning the façade and interior on paper. Inspired by Spain's Moorish architecture, as well as his own Orientalist subjects, he designed his ideal building with prevailing characteristics of horseshoe arches, Arabesque columns, and geometric-patterned tiles. For the interior he incorporated a spacious, bright art studio, gallery, public library, and a combination music and



*My Rosita*  
Pencil on paper 13 3/4" × 19 5/8"

conference hall. Segrelles was able to implement his plans, completing his own museum-house in 1943 and naming it **Casa-Museo José Segrelles**, which remains open to the public today.

### *Personal Life*

The **Spanish Civil War** erupted in 1936 and Segrelles chose to spend all three years of that conflict in Albaida. On August 28, 1936 he married **Rosita Tormo**. Rosita was twenty-nine years his junior and the love of Segrelles' life. They had one child, a daughter named **Concepción "Conchita" Segrelles**. With the construction of his house-museum well underway, Segrelles was fulfilling his dream of spending long periods of time at home with his family. In his design for the house he included a private alcove from where he could sit alone, quietly listening to the classical musicians performing for his family and friends in the music parlour.

Sadly, just twenty-two months after their marriage Rosita passed away from heart failure at the age of twenty-four. His beloved father had also passed away a year earlier, and with the added loss of his wife, Segrelles went into a deep state of solitude. To cope with his emotional pain, he immersed himself in his work and devoted his paintings to religious themes, alternating with fantasies of the cosmos, often combining the two to



*The Muse*  
Pen and Ink  
Illustrated for *Don Quixote de la Mancha* by Miguel De Cervantes, 1966

create enigmatic effects.

For his local community, Segrelles created a set of oil paintings for the altar in the 13th century **Parish Church of the Asunción of Albaida** and Biblical scenes that were installed between the chapels. He also created paintings for the altarpiece in the 17th century Chapel of the Immaculate Conception in the **Church of Santa María de Ontinyent** to replace the original Renaissance painting that was destroyed during the Civil War. These spectacular paintings resulted in Segrelles becoming renowned throughout Europe as a religious painter. He received numerous

liturgical art commissions, including from the **Vatican**.

### *Visualizing Other Worlds*

In the 1950s Segrelles began painting a new genre—that of outer space. Initially he drew imaginary lunar craters in charcoal, which by 1960 developed into his creating other depictions of space in oil paints. Later, he focused his skills on themes inspired by the Apollo Space Program. Segrelles felt confident that man would eventually reach the moon.

His interest in space was nothing new. Many years prior he had produced a series of paintings inspired by **H. G. Wells' (1866–1946) *The War of the Worlds*** (first serialized in 1897), eerily depicting the Martian invaders with their long tentacles. Segrelles also became fascinated by other worlds closer by—the worlds viewed under a microscope, resulting in many paintings that depict the microscopic mysteries of the human body, particularly its circulatory system.

### *Concluding Years*

The year 1956 saw the publication of yet another stunning *Arabian Nights* volume, once again featuring new work, in this case thirty-two new paintings illustrating the tome. While still maintaining his painting career, Segrelles became a deputy and professor of fine arts at the **University of Valencia**. Shortly after retiring from university work, he was appointed permanent chamber painter of the Valencia County Council. He contributed more than seventy new works to illustrate the Council's *Gold Book* in the years that followed. In 1965 Segrelles was the focus of the Spanish version of the television program *This Is Your Life*, presented by **Federico Rooster (1930–1997)** for Spanish public television, TVE, which was broadcast from Barcelona throughout Spain.

A long overdue resurgence of appreciation and interest in the art of José Segrelles took place in 1966. Segrelles never lost his lifelong passion for the works of Miguel de Cervantes, having illustrated the writer's classic tales intermittently throughout most of his life. Upon its 1966 publication, Segrelles' *Don Quixote de la Mancha* was declared "the most important cultural event of the year"; the Madrid press proclaimed Segrelles as the "best illustrator in the universe." Segrelles responded by saying, "*Don Quixote* has been the pinnacle of my artistic career."

At 5:00 in the evening on March 3, 1969, the bells of Albaida's Church of the Asunción tolled in mourning for the passing of their beloved local artist José Segrelles. Even his passing was profound. It was just moments after watching the first manned American spaceship **Apollo IX** lift off into orbit that Segrelles took his last breath on Earth. In honour of his artistic contributions to his country, Spain presented José Segrelles with a posthumous Gold Medal for his life's work.

### *Segrelles' Art Legacy in Contemporary Times*

Thanks to the nine-years of work Segrelles did for the *Illustrated London News* as well as his other magazine illustrations, American and European artists continue to be exposed to his vast abilities. The exotic genius of José Segrelles transcends into modern times and has inspired a new generation of artists. Interestingly, his own nephew, **Vicente Segrelles (b. 1940)** is today an illustrator of fantasy-themed work in Spain. In America, the fantasy and comic book artist **Roy G. Krenkel (1918–1983)** discovered reproductions of some of

Segrelles' paintings in 1950s issues of the *Illustrated London News*. He was so intrigued with the mystical qualities of the artwork that he began focusing on collecting Segrelles' books and prints for inspiration in his own work.

Krenkel shared his collection with the renowned fantasy and science-fiction **California Art Club** artist **Frank Frazetta (1928–2010)** and Krenkel's fellow collector, cartoonist, and comic book artist, **Al Williamson (1931–2010)** who began to amass a superior Segrelles collection. Both Williamson and Krenkel shared Segrelles' work with many up-and-coming younger artists, including **Michael William Kaluta (b. 1947)**, **Bernie Wrightson (b. 1948)**, and the author of this article, **California Art Club** Signature Artist **William Stout (b. 1949)**. In turn, Stout introduced Segrelles' work to film director **Guillermo del Toro (b. 1964)** who acknowledges the influence of Segrelles' vision in the making of Torro's 2006 fantasy movie *Pan's Labyrinth* (Cinema has always been important to the citizens of southern Spain. In as early as 1912 there were 114 movie theatres in Barcelona alone). Such introductions to artists have

helped further spread Segrelles' influence.

After attending the recent reception of the exhibition, *Segrelles: The Labyrinth of Fantasy*, held from March 26 to May 31 at Spain's **Valencian Museum of Illustration and Modernity**, William Stout commented about his experience: "The evening opening of the Segrelles exhibition was just like a huge Hollywood premiere. There were movie stars, film directors, cultural icons, and prominent government officials. It was a massive event. The press coverage was extraordinary. Over the week I was there, I personally did dozens of interviews for newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio. It was extremely gratifying to see such a huge spotlight illuminating this underrated, but superb master purveyor of traditional art." 📷

#### *Notes:*

*William Stout is a Signature Artist of the California Art Club where he serves on the Advisory Board and is Managing Director of the California Art Club Newsletter. He is a multi-award winning artist and has worked on more than 40 feature films as a Production Designer and freelance Conceptual Designer. Stout has authored more than 30 books on art and art history, in addition to dozens of popular comic books. He has created numerous murals for natural history museums throughout the U.S. His work as an internationally acclaimed paleontological artist inspired Michael Crichton to credit Stout as an inspiration behind his book, Jurassic Park.*

*The exhibition, Segrelles: El Laberinto de la Fantasía (Segrelles: The Labyrinth of Fantasy), was displayed from March 26 to May 31, 2015 in Spain at the Museu Valencià de la Il·lustració i la Modernitat (the Valencia Museum of Modern Art and Illustration) and featured 260 original works of art in addition to more than 300 works in print. The record-breaking attendance resulted in the exhibition being held over for an extra month. A 448-page book that accompanied the exhibition is available. (See Book Reviews.)*

*William Stout wishes to thank Carlos Durbán Colubi, Casa-Museo José Segrelles' Juan Carlos Tormo, Fernando Tormo (the late nephew of Segrelles), Segrelles authority Joan Josep Soler Navarro, the Segrelles family and MuVIM (the Valencia Museum of Modern Art and Illustration) for their gracious hospitality, as well as for inviting him to speak at the opening of the Segrelles exhibition and for displaying two of his designs created for Pan's Labyrinth in that exhibition.*



*The Main Retablo Altar,  
The Parochial Church of  
Albaida  
Albaida (Valencia),  
Spain*