

Mark Gredler: So tell us a little about how you got interested in the subject of the erotic Romanesque.

Paz Buenaga: Well I'm a historian, I studied history in the University of Cantabria and my specialty is ancient history, so within what is the Greek Roman world, the erotic subject is something that is natural and can be found in the paintings of Pompeii, in the ceramics, so you see it as a freedom that the Christian morality doesn't exist within all that art. And it seems curious to me that when you study history of art in the university and study the Romanesque art, all these images are overlooked and even more so living in Cantabria and studying in the University of Cantabria, because here is where there is really an important concentration of erotic Romanesque art. However it's not mentioned, it's always overlooked.

Mark Gredler: Is that so? Still a bit of shame nowadays?

Paz Buenaga: Well it has been a long time since I went to the university, but it is not mentioned, so it's curious.

Mark Gredler: Is it still that way?

Paz Buenaga: I think it is, it has been considered a type of... there is a veil on this, I think it's because there is no interpretation, so no one dares to say why, and since we don't have an answer we don't talk about it or it's not known.

Mark Gredler: Well this Angel del Olmo had published the first book on the subject in 1988 and it was called *El románico erótico en Cantabria* and one thing I noticed is that he has a new book and it's not called that, it's called *Iconografía sexual en el románico* and one of his things is that actually this Romanesque art is not erotic, not in the sense of Hindu art for example, but rather it's sexual but doesn't have the intention to get people horny.

Paz Buenaga: Well, I think it's a mistake to use the term erotic, it's an anachronism because we can't use a concept from now for an art that is from so many years ago. In the XIII century the erotic probably doesn't exist, it's simply sex, not even sexuality; it's sex, nothing else. But sex forms a part of life, of all life, so in those moments you have to take into account that this normally appears most of all in the rural Romanesque, isolated zones and I think that it simply forms a part of life, the same as with birth, death, sex and other things. So to talk about erotic is not a concept that we can... one which can be used to define it; it's not obscene either, because it's also defined as obscene art.

Mark Gredler: Yes, but neither is... it wasn't at least...

Paz Buenaga: There is no obscene intention nor is there erotic intention.

Mark Gredler: Yes, but some centuries after that, a few centuries and even in the last centuries, a lot of people have taken them as obscene and have mutilated and taken off...

Paz Buenaga: Of course, but we already said that after the Council of Trent the church was already trying to straightjacket and trying to eliminate the relaxation of customs of the time.

Mark Gredler: Yes, one of the difficulties is that it's very hard for us to try to put ourselves into the mind of a person from then, of the XI or XII century, but there is a lot written and there are many sculptures but it's hard to think like them, we just can't.

Paz Buenaga: The concept we have nowadays is completely different, this was often said by Mircea Eliade in the *Lo sagrado y lo profano*, our concept of sacred and religious forms a part of our being human, back then you couldn't live outside of God, and you had to live with God. Nowadays nonreligiosity is what dominates.

Mark Gredler: Yes, but one of the theories, not only of Olmo, is that these sculptures were to aid in reproduction and repopulating the country, do you agree with this?

Paz Buenaga: Well I have had different opinions, and I've thought about many different theories. Arriving at a single interpretation is impossible I think, you have to have many and you can't reach a definite single interpretation either, you can give multiple interpretations. With the subject of repopulation, in the beginning I thought yes it was for that, after reading many articles it seemed to me that no it wasn't, but then I have thought again that yes it is.

Mark Gredler: At least for one part.

Paz Buenaga: One part of them yes and it's for a reason, you need to take into account that all this art is basically concentrated in one century, the XII century, well at the end of XI but basically almost all the churches are from the XII century or beginnings of XIII. The greatest concentration of art of this kind is in the north of Spain, although we can also find it in Britain or the Irish isles, which have a different concept than the one here, and because the iconography is different, they are not the same. So the fact that in the north of the peninsula they appear in the XII century in such a high concentration of this sort of images, it is curious at the very least. Especially because we have to think that for many years the peninsula was invaded by Arabs, we were in the middle of the Reconquest and the Reconquest starts from the north of the peninsula towards the south. So that is right where the Christian realms are pushing to reconquer Spain. The Reconquest wasn't just battles, you not only needed people to fight because mortality was high, because of wars, hunger, epidemics; you also need people to colonize because you don't conquer a territory if you haven't colonized it. So if you have many men in the battle that are fighting but then you don't have colonists to occupy the territories, you have not really conquered them. So Olmo's idea doesn't seem crazy to me, especially because of the zone where they are concentrated, because really it's from there that the repopulation and reconquests take place.

Mark Gredler: So like I told you I'm a fan of the Libro de Buen Amor (Book of Good Love) also and there are some similar things, although it's one or two centuries later. There is not one single interpretation, there are many interpretations, but also a great part of the Libro de Buen Amor is humor and I think humor also has something to do with the erotic Romanesque, that one intention, to a certain extent, was to give laughter.

Paz Buenaga: Yes, probably. I also... look, now that I have been reading a little bit because this is a subject that I studied twenty years ago and hadn't looked at it since (until preparing for this interview), but I have learned about a rite, the *risus paschalis*, have you heard about it?

Mark Gredler: No.

Paz Buenaga: It's a very curious rite described in different letters and documents of the century... it is mentioned up to the XVI century and it developed in all the churches of the Middle Ages. On the eve of certain holidays, especially on the eve of Easter, there is a rite in which the clergyman makes all the parishioners laugh, but makes them laugh based on obscenities and based on a sometimes erotic game. So not only do scenes appear in the corbels, but in the capital, scenes called erotic, wrongly called... troubadours also appear, musicians also appear, dancers, then it's like the festival. I think in reality the festival was not only outside the temple, but inside the same temple as well. It brings to attention one of the theories for defining, or to provide an answer for this the art and it's that those represent the sins, the sin of lust. And that interpretation would be correct as long as these were only in the corbels outside the church, taking into account what profane space is and what sacred space is; profane space is the exterior and once you cross the door of the church, you're inside sacred space. So, how could there be these sort of images inside sacred space?

Mark Gredler: But there are.

Paz Buenaga: Yes there are. And in addition to that, there are some on capitals, on capitals that are at the arc of triumph that goes to the apse. What little is known of the Romanesque, it is known that everything is symbolic and that nothing is put there randomly, so that if a capital is put to the right of the apse, it is not by chance, it has a meaning. So that is where the theory that it's an image of sin and lust is broken for me, because if that were the case it wouldn't be inside sacred space.

Mark Gredler: Yes, that's one of the most popular theories.

Paz Buenaga: The easiest one.

Mark Gredler: The easiest one and Cesar del Valle also said he believed that we're trying to make it more complicated than it really is.

Paz Buenaga: Sometimes the simplest is the likeliest.

Mark Gredler: Yes, the good versus evil.

Paz Buenaga: I don't know about that, it's just that good versus evil would be that there are images that show what is bad and next to it would be the sorrows of hell or would be the devil saying if you do this you go to hell. If you do this type of act that is impure, you have the devil, you have the sorrow... but this doesn't appear in many churches.

Mark Gredler: No, it's just that in some there are things like snakes that are biting a woman's breasts or her sex.

Paz Buenaga: That is the image of lust.

Mark Gredler: Yes... but just like you say, there are many other images that have nothing to do with the devil or hell, Well, I'm a fan of festivals as well, and Olmo talks about festivals and the attempt to make pagan things more religious, but he talks of the festival of the night of San Juan that is a cult to fire and to water and talks of... in Galicia there is a legend that this fire makes sterile women fertile and in Cataluña they jump over the bonfires, and the most famous is in San Pedro Manrique, where the young men walk barefoot on the embers of the bonfire. But he doesn't talk much of the relation between these festivals and the erotic Romanesque, but as you say there is something of the festivals...

Paz Buenaga: Those are pagan rites that persist in society and in rural society. I think that taking into account that almost everything is from XII century, society still has certain customs and certain rites that have not been lost and we can't talk about pagans because since the church exists and they are already Christianized. But the church is not capable of eliminating those, and can't eliminate them from one day to the next. So it assimilates them and makes it look like part of the church, part of the Christian cults.

Mark Gredler: Putting a saint...

Paz Buenaga: Putting a saint or putting some sort of festivity that assimilates the rite.

Mark Gredler: So another interesting thing to me is the relation of the ancient Romans that had the phallus like a symbol of good luck and protection against the evil eye, and Olmo says that until medieval times the phallus was being used by people this way. And I haven't seen a lot of this in medieval art but the higa (fig sign- an obscene gesture of the fist with the thumb sticking out between the index and middle fingers) was also an obscene symbol as well, but even nowadays is being used for protection against the evil eye in some places. So then, do you think that the Romans had impressed any of this to the medieval?

Paz Buenaga: Because of the phallus subject? I don't think so, there is no relation; I don't see any relation. There is a very interesting article of a lady called... I really like the interpretation she gives, her name is Maria de los Angeles Menendez Gutierrez, and she has an article called *Un Mito en Piedra*, where she explains that she considers that there are two periods within this type of iconography; there are two differentiated parts. I do think she has studied the north churches of Castilla long enough. And you can see the difference she sees, she says those are not interpretations of sin nor do they have a morality intention, but rather are, I agree with her, consequence of a way of thinking and living of the people in a certain moment, meaning it's really part of life, a cosmic cycle; it's the birth, death and resurrection and that shows in all the iconography. So the differences she finds between the first half of the XII century and the second half of the XII century, that I'm about to tell you, are that in the first half of the XII century the churches in this case, for example here we can talk about Cervatos, there is no religious theme in the church sculptures nor scenes of the Old or New Testament, the carving style is much more primitive, rougher. The images occupy the corbel or capital completely, are considerably bigger in size and there is special emphasis on highlighting the genitals, that are shown bigger, so there we can see women that raise their legs and show their sex or men that show their phallus. Nakedness is constant in all the images and also the position is an ostentatious position, showing the sex. Starting the second half of XII century, there are another

sort of churches, the religious theme remains, meaning it's present, the obscene theme is blended with religious theme and the obscene theme begins to be treated differently, the characters appear dressed, there's more of a French influence, it's a more delicate sculpture, not as rough, better carved but also the images lose intentionality in charging emphasis in the genitals, they don't flaunt it, it's a different type of scenery. Coitus might show up, women in labor show up. Figures get smaller and the genitals appear normal sized, not exceedingly big, figures are not treated independently but are compositions, there is a combination of images, so there we can read why apart from obscene images appearing the devil or the sorrows that might happen if you commit this sort of acts also appear; there is a more moralistic intention starting the second half of XII century.

Mark Gredler: So in the second half there is more...

Paz Buenaga: It begins to change.

Mark Gredler: There's more, as we had talked about, of the good versus evil.

Paz Buenaga: Exactly. A little change begins, and the art of the calendar of saints' days also appears because there is the virgin with the child, there is San Jorge with the dragon, there is Daniel among the lions. But these images can be considered sin because the devil is there, while in the first half of the XII century it wasn't considered sin because there is no one, there is no other image that tells you that it is sin.

Mark Gredler: But then also the sculpture of the women that the snakes are biting... is that only in the second half of the XII century?

Paz Buenaga: I don't know, I don't have those... it's not clear to me, I would have to see in the churches and... but this study is interesting because it gives me a different perspective that I didn't have before, so according to this there is an iconography that is much more pure and more primitive that afterwards changes, and with the cluniac influence, along the Camino de Santiago (the path to Santiago was a very important Medieval pilgrimage, and continues to be an important one to tens of thousands every year) arrives a current, different, more moralizing art, and continues through the years. So it's like there is an intermediate phase between the pre-Romanesque phase and the fully cluniac Romanesque phase, it's in the middle. So this is the natural cycle of life, I think the priests at this point formed part of the village, the instruction they had was minimal and they follow with the festivities and with the customs of the village even both inside and outside the church, in sacred space but also in profane space.

Mark Gredler: And is there a big relation between the Camino de Santiago and this subject of erotic Romanesque?

Paz Buenaga: I think what the Camino de Santiago has done is to spread it, I don't know if a concrete relation between the Camino de Santiago and this type of art exists, but there is an influence that extends along the Camino de Santiago.

Mark Gredler: Alright, let's see what else...

Paz Buenaga: Now this interpretation is a new path of thought that Olmo didn't consider and no one so far has thought about it.

Mark Gredler: So this came out after Olmo's book or...

Paz Buenaga: No, this is a 1998 article.

Mark Gredler: Maybe Olmo is not aware of it.

Paz Buenaga: Probably not, the articles are very disperse, the available books are very few but people can't gather all the works so of course each one comes up with their own interpretation.

Mark Gredler: Yes, Olmo says one interesting thing was the Nicolaism, this obedience to chastity and celibacy among the clergy. The clergy, the church didn't want clergy to have children in order to...

Paz Buenaga: Well, those are the changes through time with the church, until the IV century the priests married. It is in the First Council of Nicaea where that changes and then celibacy is imposed, but I think that after the Council of Nicaea there wasn't much attention to these sort of rules. And the proof is that in every council in the XII century and in the XIII century, there was continuous allusion to the clergymen having a greater morality. They have to obey celibacy... if during three continuous centuries this is mentioned, it is because it's not being obeyed. So then there's the figure of the concubine, the one that lives with the priest and has children and this exists socially and it appears reflected in the literature...

Mark Gredler: Yes, but a lot of it had to exist or it wouldn't appear so much in the literature or the rules.

Paz Buenaga: I think it was something normal and accepted.

Mark Gredler: And when does this change? Because in the XIV century there were these rules also ...

Paz Buenaga: I think in the Council of Trent is when they really are beginning the reform, the counter reform, the protestants, Lutherans... this is when the church begins to set rules, in the Council of Trent. And it's when this changes that they attempted to instruct church men better, seminaries are created to teach people, but until that moment that's not the way it was, only the upper hierarchy and not the lower clergymen. The turning point is at that time.

Mark Gredler: Another important thing for monasteries and churches were the economic things, tax collection, and the tithe and since there are many references to it, there must have been abuses.

Paz Buenaga: With tithe?

Mark Gredler: Yes and with taxes that they were collecting, they were taking an extra part for themselves.

Paz Buenaga: Yes well, I think that we're talking about a society that is tremendously organized in hierarchy, each one has its function, the village folk have the function of cultivating the land, to procreate, then there is the church with its function, then there are the upper hierarchies that have their function, each one has their part to do. So

then the life was a tough life because you simply dedicated yourself to work, harvest, pay your taxes to the church, pay your taxes to the lord - period and there is nothing else, the few joys they had were maybe the festivals.

Mark Gredler: And since there was so much misery...

Paz Buenaga: Scarcity, sickness...

Mark Gredler: The festivals were the most important, right?

Paz Buenaga: The festivals were a way of being able to handle all the rest of the sorrow.

Mark Gredler: it was almost the only way to be happy. Very well, so Olmo talks about many theories, the sexual exhibitionism theory related to the calendar that represented different periods of the calendar, but this is well...

Paz Buenaga: And how is that supported? I;m not familiar with that one, maybe that theory is in the new book.

Mark Gredler: Yes, it's in the 2015 book.

Paz Buenaga: Well, it's true that many of the holidays have to do with the cycles, the carnival parties that are in the beginning of spring, the natural cycles of earth are the ones that determine the festivities but this comes before, from pagan times, the church assimilates those, the winter solstice, the summer solstice...

Mark Gredler: The maypole and he talks about that as well.

Paz Buenaga: About the spring festivals.

Mark Gredler: Yes. Well he talks about the theory of the theology of sexual pleasure, but talks as well that procreation was one thing that the church tried to regulate, that sex was only for procreation and even then had a set of rules that you could only have sexual relations on Sunday night or this day, not that day... such that if a person was following all the rules there would be very few days in the year in which they could have sex. We have talked about the theory of the sin of lust and he says, Olmo says, that lust was the most wide-spread vice of the time.

Paz Buenaga: The most wide-spread vice?

Mark Gredler: Yes.

Paz Buenaga: Well I think that if sex formed a part of life, if he considered that sex is a vice that is wide-spread but that it's within reach of everyone. You don't need to be rich or poor to enjoy it, so I think that I don't know... in all cultures sex forms a part of life, if we get to thinking for example, the pre-Hispanic cultures, the ceramics that are in the Mochica culture, there are images of sex as well. So, why do you think that in different cultures of different times, of different parts of the world, there appear these same images? Well, because it's something that forms a part of life.

Mark Gredler: There are representations of other sins as well in that case, gluttony for example, and as you said right now about lust, that while lust was a thing that didn't depend on being poor or rich, gluttony did... so you could represent against gluttony from the standpoint of the poor.

Paz Buenaga: Could be. Well, there is lent. Lent is established such that there is a period in which you have restrictions, you have fasting and you have to obey fasting... fasting with no eating meat. No eating meat and also not having sexual relations, meaning full fasting. And what about this, what precedes lent? The carnival festivals, because it's a release of self control (release of the brakes).

Mark Gredler: So tell me again what you were saying about lent.

Paz Buenaga: Well you were talking about gluttony, so in that sense there is carnival that precedes lent and lent is fasting, and in fasting you can't eat meat and you can't have sexual relations either. However it's preceded by a moment of lack of self control and full permissiveness because those are the carnival festivals. So because I think this is associated with the end of winter, the beginning of spring, the change of cycles, the beginning of a good time, the harvest... in the end everything goes back to the same - that is the cosmic cycle of the land, the earth cycle.

Mark Gredler: Yes, the carnivals were like a lack of self control in everything, it was not just lust and the flesh but the meat to eat and the gluttony as well.

Paz Buenaga: I think gluttony and lust are intimately associated, because when it's forbidden... the excess of eating meat also is like an excess of sexual lust, one thing is associated with the other.

Mark Gredler: Yes, it's interesting. Anthony Weir who wrote this book in 1986, *Images of Lust*, well he also said to me that he thinks the greatest intention is portraying images of the sin of lust, but as you said this art has more to do than just portray sin.

Paz Buenaga: Well but it's just that for that image to be sin there has to be the contraposition, the good and evil has to show up together and many churches have only the evil part, so how does that tell you it's wrong if it doesn't show you the sorrows that you can have if you do this. The moralizing intent, what we were talking about before, starting in the XII century in the churches, does appear with that moralizing intent, if you do this you're going to hell or this monster will show up and is going to eat you, but earlier churches don't have it.

Mark Gredler: Well then another part of this would be that the churches before weren't saying as much then, just do as told, by the church, so you don't end up in hell, rather it was more of a representation of normal life.

Paz Buenaga: Exactly, yes, I think so. It formed part of... daily life shows up and daily life is reflected in those churches.

Mark Gredler: Well last night I was gathering things from this new Olmo book to talk about and we have talked about most of these...

Paz Buenaga: There is one thing that for example, not all images have the same interpretation. I for example have found a case of an image that I didn't know appeared in the Cologne Cathedral, are you familiar with it?

Mark Gredler: No.

Paz Buenaga: Well then, it's the image of an archbishop that comes with his name, that is Konrad von Hochstaden, and the bishop and his name of who he is appears and he's practicing self-felation. It's curious, because for this to appear in the Colonia Cathedral (and I have been there before and have never seen it), it must be very high. In this case of course the interpretation we're giving to these churches doesn't fit and in this case there is an answer. It's a revenge of the stonemasons because the bishop provoked their wrath by imposing taxes on the price of beer in order to get funds for completing the construction of the church. So not all images that appear in the churches will have the same interpretation, there could be many and there could be concrete cases like this one, for example.

Mark Gredler: Interesting. Another thing, you were talking about the church that has a woman on top of a column there, a capital, an image of an exhibitionist woman, and that this image is very much like the best known one on the South window of Cervatos.

Paz Buenaga: Yes, they are practically the same, I think it's the same stonemason school.

Mark Gredler: I was going to ask that, if it had to be at least the same school, if not the same sculptor.

Paz Buenaga: It's just that the churches are close and then the sculptors worked in crews, so these crews worked from one church to another. They probably had a style as well, a form... and they were creating their own iconography and were taking it from one church to another, so you can see schools with the same characteristics that probably have been the same people that have worked on them.

Mark Gredler: But I was interested in the subject in the 80s when I was living here and found this first book of Olmo but didn't know about much more, like the many articles that are now on the internet.

Paz Buenaga: Apart from these books there isn't anything else written anyway, meaning, the famous book of the enchanted Romanesque, the Romanesque in Santander of Garcia Guinea, passes over all of this, it doesn't mention it.

Mark Gredler: It's curious.

Paz Buenaga: No one studies it thoroughly.

Mark Gredler: I thought that many people here in Spain knew the subject and studied it in the universities, but it's not like that? But it's even more unknown in the United States I think.

Paz Buenaga: Yes, also the north American mentality, I don't know much, but I think they descend from puritans so the excess of morality is greater than here.

Mark Gredler: Yes, I think so.

Paz Buenaga: They would just look at it with bad eyes. It's just that sometimes the interpretation we're using to see it is with the eyes that we look at it with, not what it shows, not the images that are shown, but how we see them or want to see them.

Mark Gredler: Yes, that is a tendency especially among people that they see what they want to see.

Paz Buenaga: The images of the exhibitionists of a woman that is showing her sex, what she's showing is the beginning of everything, where life comes from. So you can't see it as an obscene image.

Mark Gredler: No, but you also said and I agree with it, that images that are in Ireland for example, the *sheela-na-gigs* had to have a meaning completely different from the one here in Spain. There are some images in France and Britain as well.

Paz Buenaga: Britain has many images but I think it has more Irish influence than Spanish. That is, the meaning of the images would be different. That's why Olmo's theory of reproduction is based in the context that all these images of the Iberian peninsula form a combination and although images are shown in other countries, for example this German one, or images appear in Italy, they would have different meanings, and wouldn't have the same explanation.

Mark Gredler: Yes, but the archbishop in Cologne thing is...

Paz Buenaga: It's revenge.

Mark Gredler: It's interesting. I think we have talked about the subject a lot.

Paz Buenaga: Yes, we have talked about everything... well, there is one thing we haven't talked about and you were asking me this question, and I would like to talk about it and see if we think the same... we're talking about for example, the motivations people have to walk the pilgrimage path, whether it's faith or lust. Along the path you can mix everything and you assimilate it (the Camino to Santiago) to the pilgrimage of Rocío and I do not agree. Because each of these pilgrimages have a different meaning at the time of their beginning. When you begin the Camino de Santiago it's a search for yourself, and it's a solitary pilgrimage. You set forth on the Camino de Santiago for the motivations you want. But during the stages there are and those that you develop, whether it's fifteen or twenty stages, the normal thing is that you're in search of something, of what you want. You can meet other walkers, other pilgrims, create teams with them but it's a personal decision. But the Rocío pilgrimage is not like that, Rocío is a celebration, it's a religious pilgrimage because all the holidays in the south of Spain have a religious meaning, it's an exaggerated exaltation of religiousness but they begin to pray and pray but pray singing and pray dancing (and pray drinking – ed). It has little to do with the characteristics of the Andalucía society, very different from the north society. But in the pilgrimage of Rocío you go with brotherhoods, you get in groups, so it's not the same. I don't think you can associate one with the other.

Mark Gredler: Well someone else here told me not long ago that the pilgrimage to Rocio, the festival of Rocio, well maybe even though it's related to religion, it's less spiritual than the Camino de Santiago.

Paz Buenaga: I think it's just as spiritual, those who really want to do it with spirituality, do it; the Camino de Santiago just as the Rocío pilgrimage. What happens is that with this type of festivals, there is always a percentage of people that go simply to have fun. Or with the Camino de Santiago because they have a cultural desire or a tourism desire, - tourism on the path, tourism of seeing churches, of gastronomy, anything you want. There will be a percentage of people that will do the path for that and do the Rocío pilgrimage simply to join the fun. But there are those who do it in the sense of a religious pilgrimage, there are people on both sides.

Mark Gredler: And it would be the same more or less.

Paz Buenaga: Yes, it's the same, it's just that one you do accompanied by your brotherhood and the other alone, but the search is the same. It's the search for God. Some do it by themselves and some don't.

Mark Gredler: Yes, it's interesting.

Paz Buenaga: It's just that this Rocio thing got me thinking a lot because just recently I was considering doing the Camino de Santiago, I have been thinking about it for a few months and it's tough to think about it, you go alone and through many phases and you suffer... so I don't know. I don't know if you have... anyway, you start the path without a religious end, but it's likely that when you get there you will have it, you acquire it. I think that's it.

Mark Gredler: Very well, now to visit some churches.