

Dark black bosom: The volcanoes

Malpaís (a very expressive and emphatic portmanteau meaning “badlands”) proper begins in San Borondón, extends to the right of La Laguna and surrounds Todoque, the crown of Puerto Naos, like a dirge or Dantean elegy.

On the way to the coast, the calcareous ribbon of the drainage channels quivers amid the ebony darkness of the lava fields.

Charred, blackened, slagged, slaked rocks have taken the shape of deformed, petrified monsters on the slope.

And in the dark black bosom of all this desolation, green fig trees or stunted grapevines laugh here and there, flowers of hope blooming in the badlands.⁸

Remarkably, for centuries the volcanic landscape of La Palma inspired no visual artworks other than a watercolour and a drawing (of more geographical than aesthetic interest) dated to 1677–1678 and approximately the 1840s, both depicting the eruption of San Antonio. Apart from these graphic records, the accounts of foreign visitors may constitute the earliest attempts to broach a subject which, despite the frequency of their descriptions, did not appeal to any artists, possibly because, as Charles Edwardes noted in 1888, the immensity of places like the Caldera “defies the artist [...] the colours of this great basin cannot be caught.”

German artist Bruno Brandt’s first sojourn on La Palma in 1923–1924 sparked visual interest in the island’s volcanic soul, a theme ushered in by his vision of the Caldera, the volcano of San Antonio and the lava flows by the sea. In the 1930s, the incursions of other landscape artists arrived with some members of the Sabatina group, who added new scenery to the Caldera. The art of photography, introduced in 1899 by Austrian professor Oskar Simony, flourished thanks to the passionate dedication of Manuel Rodríguez Quintero.

In 1949, marked by the eruption of the San Juan volcano, Francisco Concepción began depicting the settings to which he would devote his palette: erupting (less frequently) or dormant peaks in Las Cañadas del Teide, Timanfaya National Park and different phenomena on La Palma (including the San Juan and Teneguía eruptions, experienced firsthand) appeared in his painting, bringing chromatic boldness and evoking immensities and solitary spaces. Thanks to Francisco Concepción, Canarian volcanoes were spared the “censorship” that had deemed the island’s landscape unworthy, lifeless and anti-aesthetic.

⁸ Félix IDOPE GRACIA, “Malpaís: topografía palmera”, *Diario de Avisos*, 10 August 1944, p. 2.