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As Bullfighter Gains Honor, Peers Perceive a Grave Loss

MADRID — He is one of Spain's best-known toreros, a wealthy scion of the country's most illustrious [bullfighting family](#), whose handsome features regularly grace the pages of glossy magazines.

But judging by the uproar over his receipt of a coveted bullfighting prize, Francisco Rivera Ordóñez apparently lacks one vital quality: talent.

This nation's normally collegial bullfighters reacted with disbelief last month when the Culture Ministry awarded Mr. Rivera the prestigious Fine Arts medal, saying his technique had become "more aesthetic, poised and deep." [José Tomás](#), lauded as the most exciting bullfighter in decades, returned his own Fine Arts prize in disgust.

"The prize was an absolute scandal — an insult to the history of bullfighting," said Vicente Zabala de la Serna, a bullfighting critic for the newspaper ABC, in a telephone interview.

"Rivera's faced a lot of bulls, and for that he deserves credit. But he's boring to watch; he has no aesthetic merit."

The quarrel has stirred up the coterie of toreros, aficionados and bullring owners eager to maintain public interest in an iconic tradition that faces opposition from animal rights activists. It has juxtaposed contrasting images of the bullfighter: that of the noble, austere artist and of the dashing socialite, whose life outside the ring stirs as much public interest as his exploits inside it.

The spat began in February when José Antonio Morante Camacho, a 29-year-old bullfighter known as Morante de la Puebla, called the decision to decorate Mr. Rivera "an embarrassment."

Bristling with indignation, Mr. Rivera's brother Cayetano, also a bullfighter as well as a [Giorgio Armani](#) model, said he would no longer fight in the ring alongside Mr. Morante.

The drama took on operatic dimensions this month when it emerged that Mr. Tomás and Paco Camino, a former



Cristina Quicler/Agence France-Presse

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bullfighting star, had returned their own medals to the government. In a letter quoted in *Hola!* magazine last week, they said the Culture Ministry had "degraded the notion of bullfighting as art."

Leading toreros and critics chimed in from both sides, slamming Mr. Tomás as arrogant and churlish or condemning Mr. Rivera as shameless for accepting a prize he did not deserve.

Mr. Rivera's 14-year career began well, according to critics, but trailed off quickly into a characterless fighting style that lacks grace. Thanks to his good looks, blue-blooded lineage and taste for beautiful women, however, Mr. Rivera — like his brother — is a fixture of Spain's glossy magazines.

His father, Francisco Rivera, or Paquirri, died after being gored in the ring when Mr. Rivera was 10; his maternal grandfather was Antonio Ordóñez Araujo, one of the best bullfighters of his era and a close friend of Orson Welles.

Mr. Rivera's four-year marriage to the elaborately named María Eugenia Brianda Timotea Cecilia Martínez de Irujo y

Fitz-James Stuart, daughter of the Duchess of Alba, helped raise his standing in gossip magazines.

Meanwhile, Mr. Tomás's daring in the bullring — and determination to elude the news media outside it — have created a powerful mystique and made him one of the most admired toreros on the circuit. He is known for his breathtaking tendency to plant his feet in the sand and draw the bull past him so close that its blood stains his torso.

Some aficionados fret that the controversy will damage a tradition that faces competition from other pastimes and opposition from animal rights activists.

"The big loser in all of this is the bullfight," said Luis Corrales, president of the Platform for the Defense of Bullfighting, who said conceding an arts prize to bullfighters reinforced the claim that the tradition was, indeed, an art.

Many, however, relish the quarrel as a return to a more competitive era. With typical hyperbole, some suggested that Mr. Rivera and Mr. Tomás have a duel, or at least go head to head in the bull-

ing.

“These days bullfighters arrive at the ring, kiss each other on both cheeks and ask after one another’s wives,” Victorino Martín, a leading bull breeder, was quoted as saying in ABC. “Once upon a time, they would have said, ‘I’m going to tear you apart.’”

Critics complain that as the business of bullfighting and the number of fights have grown, the atmosphere of machismo and rivalry has dissipated.

“Bullfighting’s become so watered down, there’s no competition,” said William Lyon, a former bullfighting critic for the newspaper El País.

Albert Boadella, a playwright and friend of Mr. Tomás, said he believed his friend yearned for the bygone age of great rivalries, like that between José Gomez Ortega, known as Joselito, and Juan Belmonte García, at the beginning of the 20th century. “José Tomás wants to live in an era when the bull and the ritual had greater transcendence in Spanish society,” Mr. Boadella said.

Such nostalgia resonates among aficionados, who said the decision to decorate Mr. Rivera was a symptom of bullfighting’s decline to the status of a spectator sport. In their view, “el toreo” is a bastion of Spanish identity against the tide of global culture and must protect its standards.

Mr. Lyon said, “In a society that’s more and more homogenized, that someone should still dress up in a suit of lights and kill a bull with a sword — that’s mythic.” ■