



## *Modernista Interiors*

Teresa-M. Sala (Universitat de Barcelona)

### **RIGA, October 2006**

---

I would like to thank the organising committee for this invitation to present a lecture in this *European Colloquium* entitled *Art Nouveau & Decoration* hosted in Riga. I am going to talk about the various principles behind public and private *Modernista* buildings in Catalonia.

I would like to begin with three different photographic images:

- An aerial panoramic view of the city today, where you can recognize Gaudí's *Sagrada Família Temple* within Barcelona's urban city plan. On the one hand, I would like to point out that this building was called "the cathedral of the poor" and symbolised the religious ideas behind Gaudí's architecture. On the other hand, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Barcelona wanted to become an important cultural, business and industrial capital. What is interesting is the square-plan design by Ildefons Cerdà, who was responsible for the city's new urban layout.
- The second image is an interior shot of the *Palau Güell*, one of Gaudí's first buildings. As you can see, the cupola is a celestial ceiling where light filters in from the heavens. I wish to emphasize that this architect and various other architects of his generation (such as Domènech or Vilaseca) worked with brick, a tradition recovered from Mudéjar design, a Spanish-Arabic tradition. It is also interesting to note that light was extremely important for Gaudí and had a spiritual sense in all of his buildings.

- Moreover, I would like to show you a lovely picture by Joan Brull representing the Symbolist movement. Painted décor subjects were inspired by research into poetry and paradise lost, evoking landscapes.

With these images, I wanted to introduce you chronologically to the period 1880-90 – 1910 and also to its aesthetics doctrine. Three conceptual spaces: the town, building interiors and spiritual interiors, by which I mean interiorism, not only physical spaces.

First of all, I would like to outline the main points of my talk:

Firstly, *Modernisme* considered as a cultural project; secondly, the dichotomy between art and industry, and thirdly, customers and consumption (the influence of nature, a fascination for Japan, the role of architects and the role of artisans, some centres of production and commercialisation). I would like to show you some examples of inventiveness and ways of revitalising traditional crafts (ceramics, stained-glass windows, ironwork, textiles, wallpaper, flooring, etc).

And, finally, I will show you four examples of residential blocks on Barcelona's main street, Passeig de Gràcia.

### ***Per a èpoques noves, formes d'art noves (New Art Forms for New Times):***

#### ***Modernisme***

I would like to make a few remarks concerning *Modernisme*. I wish to emphasize that *Modernisme* was a **cultural project**, not a style. For that reason, the word “*Modernisme*” may create confusion because in English the word “modernism” refers to modern art from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main characteristic of *Modernisme* in Catalonia was its search for new, modern expressions for Catalan culture, placing language first, with new art, new literature, new architecture and comprising all cultural expressions. Barcelona became the capital of this modernist movement, with its cosmopolitan vocation and attempts to recover its identity. (On the left, you can see a postcard designed by one of the most famous *Modernista* artists, Ramon Casas. *L'Avenç* was the main journal behind *Modernisme*. And the word “*Modernisme*” appeared for the first time in its pages.)

And on the right, you can see *Casa Navàs* in Reus, a town near Barcelona. I believe it is the greatest masterpiece you can visit, preserving as it does all its decorative *Modernista* design. It is a good example of the collaboration between architect and artisans.

### **Fine Arts and Industry: *Modernista* Decorative Arts**

We must bear in mind that when we use the terms “decorative *Modernisme*” or “modern style”, we mean the *resolve for modernity in interior decoration*. This desire to integrate the arts, where “all can be art, all can become artistic”, is driven by the idea of obtaining a *global universe*, composed of artistically made places. These *Modernista* interiors reflect metaphors: the landscape of the soul, lost paradises, artificial nature. Although we must remember that in this period of industrialisation, the dirty reality of cities, as well as factories, appeared ugly. Generally speaking, there is a *need to design our environment*, with a common objective shared by artists, architects and designers: **design serves to express a sense of beauty.**

The dialectic about the relationship between **the arts and industry** was a difficult one at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its main point was that, in this culture of industrialisation, the only aim became a concern for the look of objects. On the one hand, the designer became a professional. He or she was responsible for creating and designing the concept of the artistic object. But on the other hand, the quality of taste was decreasing because these objects were being industrially produced. Customers wanted new things and changed their consumption habits (it would be interesting to trace the history of consumption). Certain European cities had representative shops and salons where the middle classes could see and buy all these new objects. (Here, you can see and compare two posters: on the left, a poster designed by Alexandre de Riquer showing an allegory of the arts for an official exhibition organised by the Barcelona City Council and, on the right, *Libre Esthétique* in Brussels).

### **Nature and Ornamentation**

We can say that new and modern tastes coexisted. This situation conformed the morphological variety of *Art Nouveau* styles. The repertory was very extensive, with nature used as a source of inspiration (you can see some examples of this: plates from collections such as *L'animal dans la décoration* by Verneuil from France or an image by Masriera in which women look like butterflies). These plates were in some

Barcelona workshops and artisans translated these patterns to their designs. As well as nature, there was also the cult of Japan.

### **Paying Homage to Japan**

There are many examples of Japanese influence in Catalonia, such as graphics, decoration and furniture.

### **Masriera's Folding Screen**

A lovely piece expressing this influence is Masriera's folding screen. As you can see, its composition and subject deals with feelings. The object was a wedding gift.

### **Morphological Variety of Artistic Styles**

All things considered, the morphological variety of the artistic styles of *Art Nouveau* adapted to *fin-de-siècle* poetic symbolism. In these images, you can see some lovely examples of this: jewellery by Masriera, furniture by Busquets and a Clarasó sculpture. As you know, this aesthetic vocabulary was an alternative to historical styles.

### **Role of Architects: Antoni Gaudí, Lluís Domènech i Montaner, Josep Puig i**

**Cadafalch** There are several fascinating buildings designed by architects who worked with an important team of collaborators specialised in arts and crafts. We are not able to fully examine *Modernista* architecture in twenty minutes, but we can describe the kind of buildings *Modernista* architects designed and the different styles they used in their most representative work. Here you have the most important architects of the School of Barcelona.

### **Gaudí: Inventiveness, Form and Ornamentation**

#### **The Path Towards Inventiveness: Original Form and Ornamentation**

Unique, singular forms were the characteristics of modern style. Gaudí invented new possibilities of expression using raw materials. You can observe his ergonomic solutions for seats, where the wood is like clay. Gaudí's furniture was designed so that the human body would adapt perfectly to it. Ornamentation was not added to structure; it belonged to the structure. This was an important change in the idea of design.

## **Emotions and Sensations**

***Pere Mata (Psychiatric Hospital in Reus by Domènech i Montaner)*** It is not easy to have the skill to create expressions and sensations using the elements that make up an architectural space. A sensitive play of forms is carried out by visual and tactile sensations. Like an orchestra conductor, an architect triggers certain reactions, as can be seen in this example.

To illustrate this point, let us first consider the function of this building. In this case, Domènech i Montaner believed that beauty could help cure people.

## **Revitalising Traditional Crafts: Ceramics, Stained Glass, Ironwork, etc**

The decorative arts combined with beauty and craftsmanship. The main *Modernista* ceramics factory was Pujol i Bausis. As you can see in these examples, the designs produced used plant motifs created by architects or artists for the *Pere Mata* hospital. A detail of original forged ironwork from *La Pedrera*. This design was by the architect Jujol in collaboration with Gaudí, who designed the building.

## **Textiles, Wallpaper, Flooring**

Observe the finishes used on floors and walls. Important manufacturing companies like Escofet in Barcelona were used and the repertory of designs was created by artists like Riquer.

## **Mosaics Escofet**

Marble, stone and wood.

## **Mosaics Decoratius Lluís Bru**

Lluís Bru travelled to Venice to study mosaic techniques and produced much work.

## **Bru**

In this image, you can see his advertising. He worked for all the architects from this period.

## **Example from the *Palau de la Música***

The design and completion of the ticket office. We can observe the process from the drawing stage to execution.

## **A Palace for Music:**

### ***El Palau de la Música Catalana* by Lluís Domènech i Montaner (1908)**

A garland of flowers unifies this artificial garden. The music world obtained a “palace” for local and international music with this building. The client was the *Orfeó Català*, the most important choir for Barcelona’s middle classes. And this building was the realisation of the ideal of a synthesis of the arts.

## **Granell, Rigalt i Cia**

I would like to comment on some other things about artisans and interior decoration. The arts paid tribute to their “mother”, which was nature.

There were a lot of workshops for stained glass windows and this company was very important. Granell and Rigalt were the artisans who recovered old procedures.

## ***Ars lignaria*: Woodwork**

Wood can be used for floors, doors or furniture. As you can see in this image, Casas and Bardés was the most important workshop. It created Gaudí’s furniture and some other commissioned work.

## **G. Homar and Joan Busquets**

Gaspar Homar and Joan Busquets were the most distinguished *Modernista* cabinetmakers. They were independent decorators who created their own patterns.

## **Furniture: Marquetry and Some Wood Engravings (Electric Pen Woodcut)**

Here you can see two examples of luxury and sensitivity. On the left, a marquetry model entitled “*La dansa de les fades*” (The Dance of the Fairies) by Homar and, on the right, one of Busquets’ furniture pieces with some plant engravings (design and object).

## **A Modern Path for Tradition**

### **Pottery and Statues: Antoni Serra**

He had one of the most important factories of the period.

## **Some Examples**

Collaboration with artists on designs, such as *The Annunciation* by Sebastià Junyent and another vase with a lovely plant design decoration.

### **Lambert Escaler**

Lambert Escaler was the most popular sculptor and he had a decorative arts studio with a large window at street level and some other terracotta objects. His complete catalogue comprised approximately forty different designs of “happy women”. These kinds of decorative objects were very popular in Barcelona in *Modernista* house interiors.

**Bibelots and Bronzes: Masriera i Campins** The Masriera i Campins company produced a large collection of bronzes and bibelots for homes. The workshop was located in Carrer Ferran and in the photo you can see some of the company’s objects (the interior is also *Modernista*). They participated in various international exhibitions and won some major awards.

### **Artistic Objects**

Reproduction from a period journal. Production and consumption.

### **Silver Cutlery**

A lovely example of silver cutlery with a cast made by Masriera.

### **Jewellery: Ornaments for the Body**

Masriera also made some of the most beautiful *Modernista* jewellery. This is an example of the body ornaments he made, which were mainly for women.

I would like to show you a very special piece that is an example of duality. **A bird and an artificial bird**, the first airplane. Nature and machine together.

### **“La mansana de la discòrdia”**

The most important houses of the *Modernista* period were built on Barcelona’s main street, Passeig de Gràcia. Let me show you the uniqueness of every building. Every house is very different from the others. That is why this area is called “La mansana de la discòrdia” (Block of Discord), because all the buildings are so different.

### ***Casa Lleó Morera* by Lluís Domènech i Montaner (1904)**

We can see here how the architect explored the possibilities of the language of *Art Nouveau*. Reconciling nature, industry and modernity, he created a beautiful synthesis in collaboration with Homar, Bru, Rigalt, Pujol i Bausis, etc.

### ***Casa Amatller* by Josep Puig i Cadafalch (1898)**

Puig's aesthetic vision is very different if you compare it with that of his teacher Domènech or Gaudí. With the *Casa Amatller*, he used tradition and created a masterpiece in an "archaeological" sense. The façade uses a northern Medieval design pattern.

### ***Casa Batlló and Casa Milà* by Antoni Gaudí (1902-1910)**

Let me conclude by saying that the houses by Gaudí on Passeig de Gràcia show an originality in architectural solutions for *Modernisme*. He combined imagination, function and symbolism in an excellent manner. The *Casa Batlló* was the renovation of an older building and, with it, he created the first colourful façade in Barcelona. The façade is also like a dragon and Gaudí signed it with a cross.

*Casa Milà*, also known as *La Pedrera*, was his last building. The façade was made from stone and forged ironwork and it looks like a stone quarry. In the image, we can see an aerial view that shows us two interior light wells. It was the first example of a freestanding building, without partitioning walls. The interior looks very spacious and Gaudí also used organic forms inside the apartments, as can be seen in these woodwork examples.

Another interior by Gaudí, the *Col·legi de les Teresianes*, is an example of "celestial" architecture. The client was a religious organisation and the building's white parabolic arch expresses the simplicity of its interior.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that *Modernista* decorative arts wanted to adapt the taste and mentalities of private clients and public architecture like a symphony.