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THE ENSEMBLIER GASPAR HOMAR: A PIONEER IN THE REVIVAL OF MARQUETRY WORK

Abstract

The National Art Museum of Catalonia, MNAC (Barcelona) displays a collection of furniture by the leading cabinetmaker Gaspar Homar from private homes, some of the most outstanding of which are the pieces from the drawing room of Lleó Morera House, designed by architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner. One of the hallmarks of this furniture (together with carvings and stained glass) are the marquetrys, after a design by Josep Pey, with a varied number of imported woods: mahogany, Majagua, doradillo, magnolia, lemon Ceylon, amaranth, sycamore and jacaranda, among others. With these Symbolist compositions Homar breathes life into furniture and also creates separate panels that have become true icons of Catalan Art Nouveau.

This lecture will deal with the work of Gaspar Homar from different perspectives. On the one hand, his essential contribution as one of the best ensemblers working with Catalan fin-de-siècle architects; on the other, the working process in his workshops from the analysis of the materials and the study of the lignic palette of the marquetry. The different problems of conservation and restoration will be also considered, after the recent admission in the MNAC of the magnificent sofa-display, by Homar, until then being part of the furniture of an everyday use space.

Introduction

In 1998 I curated an exhibition on Gaspar Homar jointly organised by the MNAC's Museu d'Art Modern and the Fundació "la Caixa" which was also shown at Lluís Domènech i Montaner's Gran Hotel in Palma de Mallorca. This was the first exhibition devoted to this cabinet-maker (who it presented as an *ensamblier*), who designed everyday objects as works of art. The different rooms showcased his furniture and also other works like ceramic tiles, marquetry, metal work, textile designs and his water-coloured plans, revealing documents that shed light on his workshop's designs. The work gathered there reflected different angles of *Modernisme* and showed how Homar, without forgoing his idiosyncrasy and the local traditions, swung between the effervescence of a floral, poetic and symbolic *Modernisme* and sober, contained forms with a Secessionist flavour.

One of the difficulties of our project laid in locating the works and, especially, in persuading their owners to lend them for the exhibition. Furnishings are living artefacts and form part of day-to-day life. People who have managed to preserve them and who make use of them are reluctant to lend them. Even so, we were able to get together almost one hundred objects, mostly from the private owners. As the artist belonged to the ephemeral, uncertain world of decoration, some works had not survived. It's well known that *Modernisme*, was very much criticized in the period of *Noucentisme*. This movement, which extolled the virtues of Mediterranean classicism, banished it in the 1920s. During the 1930s, the rationalist architects of the GATCPAC, under the influence of Le Corbusier, designed light, hygienic furniture, following the model of standardisation, and rejected the superficial ornamentation of *Modernisme*. For example, the magazine *AC*, the mouthpiece of the GATCPAC, published a photograph of furniture by Homar as a paradigm of the cult apparent luxury and intended for showing off. During the Spanish Civil War many workshops were destroyed and extensive documentation was lost. This happened also with the work of Gaspar Homar. When we began our research for the exhibition in 1998, we had no corpus of furniture by Homar and we had to undertake a multi-sectoral investigation centred on his collaborators. During Franco's dictatorship, many

Modernista buildings were destroyed and the interior decoration of these houses suffered the same fate. During the 1950s, the heritage of *Modernisme* didn't have any value until Alexandre Cirici published his book *Arte Modernista Catalán* in 1951, which marked a turning point in the study and appreciation of the decorative arts of *Modernisme* period. This book rescued its main actors from oblivion and devoted a long chapter to Gaspar Homar, whom Cirici had the chance to meet. During the 1960s, a series of exhibitions were organised on *Modernisme* in the museums and galleries, which contributed to its recognition in academic and official circles. Most important was, that the Museum acquired a very valuable *Modernista* heritage. One of the jewels of this collection were interior decorations by Gaspar Homar from the main floor of Casa Lleó Morera, refurbished by Lluís Domènech I Montaner, and almost one hundred water-coloured designs, which are currently kept in the MNAC's Cabinet of Drawings and Engravings.

The collection marked the best of Homar's creations, refined and luxurious furniture and other works, which were presented in the ephemeral exhibition of 1998 devoted to this key figure of the *Modernista* decorative arts at the pick of his career.

Life and education

Gaspar Homar grew up surrounded by wood shavings. He was the son of a Majorcan carpenter who made a living constructing coffins, oil presses and 'colonial-style' furniture. According to family accounts, he left the island, when he was just 13 to make his way in Barcelona, which was in the grip of a building boom, had a prosperous industry and was preparing to host the 1888 Universal Exhibition. Father and son joined the workshop of the furniture-maker Francesc Vidal, who headed a large manufacturing firm producing furniture, glass and metal objects, a foundry and even a photographic laboratory for publicising the models produced for the market. The *ensemblier* Vidal, who competed with architects, satisfied the demands of a bourgeoisie who lived surrounded by stodgy furniture and objects that perpetuated historicist or exotic clichés. One of the chief activities of this workshop was cabinet-making. Its furniture was made from dyed walnut and Slovenian oak and stood out for its carving, crested decoration, moulding and metalwork appliques. In this workshop Gaspar Homar was trained as a designer-decorator and also learned lessons in the different trades. Homar also preserved certain traits of Vidal's style in his approach to furniture, such as the inclusion of gilding, the profuse carving, the burin work and took the inspiration from certain traditional types such as the settee which Philip Webb of Morris & Co. had made fashionable. Vidal was a man with a cosmopolitan mentality. He introduced novelties which he saw on the international events of Paris, Philadelphia and Vienna. He also visited London, where he made contact with an English manufacturer of *cloisonné* stained glass which he imported to Barcelona.

Work

One of the first sets designed by Gaspar Homar was a living-room cupboard and two chairs for the private home of the furniture-maker's daughter. The light-coloured wood, like the pink post and the sycamore, predominates over the chocolate-coloured walnut of F. Vidal's furniture. The structure and its decorative details show reminiscences of Gothic and, in particular, of Viollet le Duc. Homar's bold and precocious interpretation of the spirit of *Modernisme* is exemplified in one of its most emblematic leitmotifs, the *coup de fouet* or whiplash.

In 1893, having spent ten years with Vidal, Homar set up his own business in partnership with his father. He opened a shop in Rambla de Catalunya 129 and, a few years later, at Carrer de la Canuda 4, along with his brother-in-law and partner, the furniture-maker Joaquim Gassó. One of the first important contracts he received during that period was the furniture for the board room of the Lawyers' Association, commissioned by the architect Lluís Domènech I Montaner. The professional ties between the decorator and the architect were crucial and culminated in the work for Casa Lleó Morera in Barcelona and Casa Navàs in Reus, paradigmatic works by the Domènech-Homar partnership. Lluís Domènech, posthumously described as an orchestral conductor for his group work with different craftsmen, entrusted the soloist Gaspar Homar with the wrapping of these private rooms of the main floor where the owner's family lived: lamps (that complemented the electrical lighting system), textile elements (drapery, tapestries and carpets), mantelpieces and ceramic tiles and, in particular, the work of cabinet-making and carpentry (from furniture to floors, good

heat conductors on account of their isolating properties). Domènech and Homar developed together many sets of great wealth and comfort that mirrored the taste and the new lifestyle of the Catalan bourgeoisie. The set from Casa Lleó Morera- part of the furnishing for a living-room is permanently exhibited in the MNAC, while that from Casa Navàs in Reus, made at the same time, is preserved *in situ*. In both cases, Homar used models based on modernising traditional types such as caskets, bench-sofas with a medieval flavour, Latin ceremonial seats and folding furniture from the 15th century. These works date from the same time as the furniture in Gaudí's Casa Batlló. Just as Gallé carved decorative motifs from his homeland, French Lorraine, Homar in his furniture, used the citrics, blackberry leaves, olive leaves and other elements of local flora thus showing his Majorcan and Mediterranean origins. Gaudí's transgressive furniture, on the other hand, stands out for the physical qualities of the raw materials, with their textures, grain, knots and cracks, highlighting the essence of nature. Homar's furniture, made from olive wood, Spanish walnut, American oak and Cuban mahogany, is striking for its bas-reliefs, the fretwork carving, leaded glass, upholstery and, very especially, its marquetry designed by numerous collaborators. His marquetry, a traditional artistic technique in Catalonia, was one of his most distinguished hallmarks and the key to his success. He combined a wide range of imported woods to create harmonies of reds, greys and purples, gold and light green. In addition, with the technique he used in making them, involving between six and eight sheets of wood, he could incorporate this element in a given item of furniture or use it as an independent element and make various



1. Gaspar Homar: Dance of feries

series. One of his most popular works of marquetry is his *Dance of the Fairies*, whose format is reminiscent of *kakemono*. During the preparation of the Homar exhibition, other versions of this panel were located. The panel was designed by his habitual collaborator Josep Pey on the basis of a composition by a Czech artist published in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* in 1901 and reproduced in the Barcelona magazine *La Il·lustració Artística*, as documented by Pavel Stépanek. To identify the palette of wood types used in the marquetry we consulted a spoken testimony of the Sagarra marquetry experts, the grandchildren of one of Homar's collaborators. These craftsmen still preserved the workshop tools and material and worked with marquetry. They were able with the naked eye to identify many of the layers of wood in this marquetry panel, despite the fact that they are impossible to find today. We also had information from the descendants of the wood importers, who travelled all over the world with the Tayà Line fleet of steamboats. One of their grand daughters had fond memories of the undyed blue wood from the forests of Canada and the characteristic grain, with a texture like alabaster, of the ash from Hungary. We also recorded that one of Homar's clients was Francesc Oliva, a dealer in timber from northern Europe, who could have supplied Homar with raw materials. The marquetry adorned the furniture as though it was an art book, an illustrated magazine or a poster. In this respect, one outstanding piece is the hallway settee I located in an old people's home run by Badalona Town Council, which had a marquetry panel built into it. The wood, discoloured by the abrasive agents used to clean it, had lost its bright, silky appearance. It was missing the original upholstery and was decorated with Makassar cloths that were out of keeping with the rest of it. The side cabinets, with their leaded glass, still had bottles of anisette in them. In fact, the piece had come from the former home of the Badalona industrialist Vicenç Bosch, the manufacturer of the popular aniseed-flavoured liqueur, Anís del Mono. Homar had also done the decoration for his commercial office. The house, which at that time belonged to Badalona Town Council, was converted into an old people's home and the settee stayed with the old people. Before being exhibited, it was put in the hands of the MNAC's restorers. The designs and, above all, the location of a fragment of the original fabric preserved on the settee itself were the key to the choice of apple-green, one of Homar's favourite colours, for the upholstery. Since then, the settee has figured in *Paris Barcelona 1888-1937* (at the Picasso Museum and the Grand Palais in Paris in 2000) and in *Barcelona and Modernity Picasso Gaudí Miró Dalí* (The Cleveland Museum of Art,

Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York, 2007). The work is currently displayed at the MNAC thanks to the long-term loan by Badalona Town Council. This item is of exceptional quality and belongs to Homar's best creative period. The subject of the marquetry, figures dancing in a forest, once again reflects the popularity of dances as highlighted at the World Fair in Paris in 1900. Let us not forget that one of the attractions at this event were the Cambodian dances by the famous Cleo de Merode, the Annamite dances in the section on Indochina, as well as belly dancing and, above all, Loïe Fuller's dazzling dances, performed in a pavilion that bore her name. This composition was designed by Josep Pey, who called it *The Sardana*, the name of a traditional Catalan dance, as corroborated in the diary he kept, in which he recorded the different commissions he received from Gaspar Homar and other furniture-makers. Precisely in 1903 he received the commission for this marquetry, of which he made different models. The design also has affinities with the poster advertising the *Prima Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte Decorativa Moderna* in Turin made by Leonardo Bistolfi in 1902.



2. Gaspar Homar: Sofa with side vitrines

Like all the furniture-makers and interior decorators of his generation, Homar also worked for the clientele customers who requested historical styles, and he alternated his *Modernista* production with other types of furniture. However, unlike other manufacturers of the time, such as Ribas or Busquets, Homar imposed his own decorative criterion and this less creative type of work makes up a very small part of his career. He also adapted modern designs by Viennese and French artists, from chairs like Francis Jourdain's *siège de bureau* to furniture by Victor Valabrega or Josef Niedmoser.

The crisis that arose in Europe as a result of the First World War had far-reaching effects in changing people's tastes and habits. In addition, the increase in social and labour conflicts affected the furniture industry between 1916 and 1919. The wood-working sector was faced with a shortage of technical resources and, fundamentally, of raw materials and the strikes that wreaked havoc in the carpentry sector.

The crisis in *Modernisme* was obvious after 1910 and by 1915. The style had exhausted its expressive possibilities and its ability to say anything new. From then until the end of the 1930s, coinciding with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent break-up and closure of Homar's workshops, the situation brought an end to Homar's career as a furniture-maker and his intense devotion to the world of antiques. In preparing the Homar's exhibition, we also located a set of furniture made during his final period for Casa Garí in Sant Vicenç de Montalt. The costly noble woods and the marquetry and carving were no longer the central features of these objects covered with lacquered painting in blues and silver. We considered exhibiting them as evidence of the adoption of the 1925 style in his work, but we were not able to acquire them, because they were in use by their owners. Only some years later, when the house and its furnishings passed to new owners, who wanted to refurbish and get rid of these objects, the Museum managed to buy them. This fact once again spotlights the nomadic, fragile nature of furniture.

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