

Sculpting One's Self in Sculpturesque Barcelona.

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Barcelona can boast many architectural wonders created to stir up the imagination of innocuous passers-by and individuals with a legitimate claim for artistry as well. Barcelona is a picturesque, vibrant city whose urban politics and local concerns seem to be characterized by a fondness for honoring its glorious past through the protection and embellishment of modernist buildings, Catalan events, and a desire to be the shrine of new cutting-edge and avant-garde buildings and venues.

From the Casa Mila, known affectionately as La Pedrera, to the Agbar Tower and the Palau de la Musica Catalana, elements such as glass, concrete, iron, stucco and stone have been sculpted into suggestive forms that undulate or loom over in the distance. The city itself resembles an organic body which was shaped by natural elements such as wind, sun and water, emerging from the depths of the Mediterranean sea and topped by hilly crowns such as Montjuich and Tibidabo. Barcelona's street artists who pause along the Rambles and inside Gaudi's Guell Park for the benefit of the rapacious gaze of tourists, contribute to make the city a tribute to the many expressions of sculpture. So do Catalan human pyramid dancers. Yet, when taking the stance of the active observer, one is tempted to ask: does the exploitation of sculpture, be it human, architectural or natural lead to a disneyfication of the city? Do the snapshots taken by tourists pervade the link that could have been otherwise created between sculpture, sculptor and onlooker?

After a reflection on how Modernist artists freed themselves from stereotypes by transcending reality when molding natural elements into shape, this essay will try to show to what extent originality and Catalan identity, reaching out to universality as expressed through past sculptures, seem to have led the way to the spreading of stereotypes, merchandising icons and a mocking of the past, emblematic of a sculptural art that belies its name.

I. Transcending reality, molding natural elements and freeing oneself from stereotypes.

Barcelona's hot spots for sculpture most often coincide with architectural tourist magnets. Indeed, what draws most foreign visitors to the city, apart from the promise of nice weather, beaches and cosmopolitan evening outings are the Modernist buildings erected and designed by representatives of the Catalan Art Nouveau movement. Modernist houses (Casa Batlo, Casa Mila, Casa Vicens),

palaces (Palacio Guell), churches (Sagrada Familia), music halls (Palau de la Musica) and hospitals (Hospital San Pau) dot the city and constitute a manifesto for Barcelona's Catalan identity and commitment to a bustling architectural activity in the past and present. Not only has Barcelona a tradition for being one of the favorite locations for architectural feats and innovations, it is also a place where buildings are molded and sculpted to mirror natural elements and landscapes in order to make the most of them.

One of the objectives stated by artists who embraced Art Nouveau's ideas and philosophy throughout Europe (as expressed by Modernism in Catalunya or by Jugendstil in Germany) was to celebrate Nature's inspirational curves. The undulating steel railings of Casa Mila and the carved wooden arches that frame Casa Batlo's windows give further proof of the architects' will to give what they considered natural shapes to the buildings they constructed. Thomas Buser claims in *Experiencing Art Around Us* that

the massive stone façade of (...) Casa Mila (...) curves like a sinuous vine or a surging wave (...) The iron railings of the exterior balconies (...) look like clumps of seaweed that have been clung across the stone. (Buser 2005: 424)

Observers from Gaudi's era were struck by the massive form looming into view on Passei de Gracia. They could not miss identifying it with a rocky formation and dubbed it the Pedrera which means the quarry. All spaces and structures of the house were designed to stir up the image of a hazardous marriage between solidity and fluidity, rock and water. The sinuous line of the tile roof is crowned by spiraling chimneys. The glass bottle fragments stuck on some of the chimneys constitute a joyful invitation to the sun whose rays of light sneak into the building and illuminate the house through a huge well situated in the middle of the Pedrera.

Similar suggestions of natural forms can be found in Casa Batlo whose main floors can be considered as observation decks where one can marvel at the suggestive caresses the sun bestows on the walls, windows and stairs. One of the paradoxes of sculpture is to suggest movement while framing and encapsulating natural elements (wood, iron and stone) into a creation that will be identified as architectural or sculptural by its stillness. Thus, contrary to the animals they are supposed to mirror, the bird of Palau Guell and the lizard of Park Guell are forever immobile, pausing under the affectionate gaze of children and the inhabitants of the neighborhood. While suggesting movement and life, sculpture is meant to capture the model in a certain position (wings wide apart, tongue sticking out) which might end up being a universal symbol of the model, the

sole personification of it, understood by all observers. Gaudi and the other modernist artists wanted to free themselves of stereotypes. They chose to use colors and materials that the onlooker would not associate immediately with the creation. Instead of being a mirror-image of their models, their artworks shocked and enraptured the imagination because they were a suggestion of reality; they transcended shapes, dimensions, measures and substances. One could easily recognize the lizard which was sunbathing on the stairs but one would never have dreamt of a multicolored lizard. Even when the artists wanted to allude to personifications of Nature that had already been made famous by renowned artists, they deconstructed reality instead of depicting it in accordance with the taste of the era or the previous work that had inspired them. The façade of Casa Batlo could be considered a tribute to Manet's portrayal of Lilacs but the building is more than that: it is a celebration of water and its myriads of personifications. The staircase is built to look like the dorsal spine of a sea creature, the ceilings ripple like water and the stain-glass windows let the sun in, creating rivulets of shimmering light that seem to undulate on the walls like tiny waves.

The ultimate aim of Modernist artists was not to depict accurately what they observed in nature but to defy its laws. They erected buildings whose shape and ornamentation was inspired by natural elements but contradicted gravity or biological growth. Thus, the flowers that decorate the Palau de la Musica designed by Lluís Domènech i Montaner, crop up from its ceiling and grow upside-down. Ultimately, once the viewers overcome their first feeling of astonishment, surprise is gradually replaced by awe. As David McKay, quoted in *The Palau de la Música Catalana*, states:

The concert hall is one of the most beautiful in the world (...) without exaggeration. It is one of its most important architectural treasures. Its pace, simple, complex, mystical and paradoxical- defies accurate description. (Carandell J.M., Pla R., Vivas P.: 2006, 62).

Geographical and physical limits imposed by natural laws get blurred to the extent that “the house as a defense and protected inner space has ceased to exist.” (Carandell J.M., Pla R., Vivas P.: 2006, 20). Blurring geographical and physical limits was used by sculptors willing to teach universal values to create spaces owned by the Catalan Everyman.

The sculptures and outlandish buildings designed by Modernist artists deserve praise because they are a testimony of Catalan skills. Under the command of ingenious architects, craftsmen and workers were able to mold, carve and shape different materials into what the talented representatives of Catalan genius

conjured up. Some of the buildings eventually disappointed the Bourgeois families who had ordered them: they were distraught and oddly upset by the result. However, Barcelona could boast about giving birth to Utopian houses. These imaginative mansions could actually compete with the most avant-garde Art Nouveau works in Europe. They also conveyed feelings of universality and social progress that were not shared by all in the Barcelona of the 20s.

Inside Casa Batlo, Gaudi built a servant staircase that in terms of decoration was just as beautiful as the staircase used by the master of the house. Gaudi replicated the undulation that could be seen on the spine of the main staircase. The Palau de la Musica's stained glass panels and dome were meant to let the sunshine in. They also enabled onlookers to have a glimpse of the world's best musicians who played for Barcelona's wealthy and important people at that time. When art could not reach the popular layers of society, it invited itself to public spaces that belonged to everyone. Art was present in work places where employees and guests lack the time, education or desire necessary to appreciate it. Thus, the San Pau Hospital, which has been declared a Unesco World Heritage, was the place chosen by Domenech i Montaner to display the soft curves of his art to the sick. Different sculptors, among them Pau Gargallo, collaborated on the project.

The hospital became the setting for arabesques, gargoyles, Saints and statues of Virtues. The sculptures had a practical use, too. Some of them were placed in specific locations to hint at the function of the different wings and services. Thus, a masculine sculpture was situated over the door of the former coach house on the right hand side of the Administration Pavilion. It was there to designate the area for men. Its feminine counterpart stood on the left hand side of the Administration Pavilion. Sometimes, the statues had a teaching role: instead of merely helping visitors associate one pavilion with one specific treatment center, they were there to remind employees of moral obligations. Thus, there is a statue representing the need for virtue to accompany all works. Barcelona's artists in the first part of the century were proud of their Catalan origins and the values they believed were exalted by the Modernist movement.

The Walkyries and the bust of Beethoven inside the Palau de la Musica had an obvious educational role. Yet, apart from reminding spectators of classical masters, the sculptures present in the main concert hall (the only one in Europe entirely illuminated by daylight during the day) were designed to proclaim the universality of music. The figures of 18 young women, commonly known as the muses, stand at the back of the stage. Their upper bodies, sculpted by Eusebi Arnau, protrude from the wall. Their lower bodies are ornamented by the work of Lluís Bru, colorful mosaics that form part of the wall. Each muse is portrayed

playing a different musical instrument. They are also wearing distinct costumes and hairdos. Modernist representatives believed that Catalan art had a claim to universality because it embraced different forms of art. Indeed, the Palau de la Musica Catalana is a mix of Mozarabe and Spanish art. As expressed by Domenech I Montaner, Modernism should encompass all arts while at the same time becoming one of the characteristics of Catalan culture. His article “En busca d'una arquitectura nacional” (In Search of a National Architecture), published in 1878 in the review "La Renaixença", paves the way for a modern architecture expressing the national Catalan character. ¹

Impressive sculptures may give testimony of the genius and craft of the sculptor. By stirring up feelings of awe, astonishment or even disgust, they possess the quality to become models which the onlooker can embrace or reject. They reveal something about the culture or the events the creator was faced with. By giving shape to something that was a mere mental image or a concept before getting sculpted, architectural works or sculptures also express the pride of displaying the desire to acknowledge something to the world.

Creating a work of art results in a triangular relationship between the creator, the art-form and the audience. The intention of the sculptor is paramount in defining the role of the object crafted and the nature of the triangular relationship. Whereas the sculpture was carved or molded to teach a lesson to the onlooker, to impress the passer-by or to make visible something deeply personal, a seduction is taking place. Does showing or representing mean that some amount of truth has been lost in the process? Even if every observer is entitled to form his own opinion of the sculpture, one can wonder to what extent the artist, in his attempt to facilitate the process of making his work of art understandable to everyone, has relied on poses. Is there a danger in turning human beings and concepts into statues? Is there a boundary the artist should not overstep, which would cause his/her statue to become a mere caricature or a stereotype?

I will try to show that to a certain extent, a disneyfication of the works of art most representative of the Catalan identity has occurred. Sculpture has become an attraction turning into a hotspot for tourism. The dominant majority of the people who marvel at the above discussed works of art are tourists and not locals. Today, sculpture is a medium for stereotypes and merchandising icons. Ultimately, identity seems to have been perverted.

¹ Domènech i Montaner, Lluís: “En busca de una arquitectura nacional”, in: *Arquitectura española contemporánea : documentos, escritos, testimonios inéditos* / coord. por Angel Urrutia Núñez, 2002, 46-54.

II. Sculpture as a medium for stereotypes: identity perverted and the reign of merchandising icons.

Tourists love strolling on the Rambles, a series of streets that link the Plaza de Catalunya to the seaside and the Colon Statue. Once an ideal setting for craft shops and thematic markets – you could buy a leather bag, belt, pets, stamps or coins there- the Rambles gradually lost their traditional atmosphere to become commercial streets with franchises and brand names similar to New York, Paris or London. One thing has remained though: the human statues that have entertained passers-by for centuries.

Along the Rambles, human bodies become artworks: they are covered with drapes, make-up and painting. They are tattooed. Limbs bend, twist or stop moving in an attempt to represent figures that have escaped from surreal visions. As with the statues created by Modernist sculptors, a seductive process will ensure the success of the artwork displayed. What criteria will artists depend on when choosing a specific figure to impersonate? The statues that decorate the Hospital San Pau were representative of an era and an artistic movement. Those that crown the top platform of Casa Mila (aka La Pedrera) came to be known as one of Gaudi's many signatures. Most of the Rambla artists will not content themselves with tourists' cheers or jeers. They do not merely impersonate a statue, they sell their bodies to the world. Without an affluent patron such as Eusebi Guell, they cannot allow themselves to be overlooked, despised or ignored by passers-by. Thus, they compete for the attention that will ensure their longevity on the top commercial avenue of the city. Some artists will choose to embody a recognizable figure such as the Statue of Liberty. They will also rely on tried and tested tricks that the passers-by are accustomed to, such as incarnating a decapitated man. Others will address themselves to a specific target audience: children and teenagers, for example. They will personify the trendiest movie character or the most acclaimed football player of the moment. Choosing a mythological, religious or historical figure, known to everyone from 7 to 77 is also a good bet. Cleopatra and the Devil have been immortalized by Carlos Lorenzo, a Barcelona-based photographer who owns and operates a blog devoted to promoting the city and its street artists abroad. ²

Different reasons account for the success of the living statues. They mirror the spectator's need to escape from reality. They personify symbolic figures that are part of our collective unconscious. The artists that impersonate living statues do

² <http://www.barcelonaphotoblog.com/2007/04/human-statues-in-la-rambla-de-barcelona.html>

not belie the Modernists' challenge to depict reality and at the same time transcend it as exemplified by this human plant statue.

They delve into our shared knowledge of the past and our assessment of universal archetypes to endorse a teaching role which might be enhanced when sometimes caricaturizing human frailties and shortcomings. They cater to our need to be acknowledged by those more famous than us and to express our gratitude and appraisal to role models chosen among stars. They enable the artist to bring back to life cherished celebrities that have passed away. The fame reached by some make them part of the urban landscape. Several human statues can boast about being must-sees. They have attained enough fame to deserve an entry in tourist guides. Thus, browsing the web for Rambles street artists shows that the biker is prominently featured. Carlos Lorenzo states that he has become one of the most popular attractions in the city, changing clothes according to the season or the mood of the moment.

However, do these living statues say something about Catalan identity to the onlooker? The statues created by the castellers who jump on top of one another to form ten person high human pyramids do say something about Catalan culture. They are part of a tradition whose birth can be traced back and located. They are performed during specific festivals such as the Sant Magi Festival in Tarragona which expresses the popular devotion in the region. As for human statues, the interest pursued by street artists is different than the ultimate goal of Modernist sculptors, which was to impress and astonish in order to prove the existence of the Catalan genius to the world.

The proliferation of human statues may illustrate a loss of communitarian values in art. There is no sense of belonging to a specific group of artists whose common vision has been conceptualized and whose understanding depends on the acknowledgment of cultural codes. Human statues exemplify the globalization of markets and the emergence of a corps of merchandising icons and figures whose origins or understanding do not matter.

The selling power of the icons that are deemed cultural by the mass media and the consumers triggers new behaviors that determine the relationship of the individual towards art. The interest shown by the passer-by for the artwork will not depend on the amount of curiosity aroused. The degree of recognition attained by the artwork will be influential in ensuring its success. Casa Mila has become a hotspot because it is mentioned in every tourist guide or web blog, hinting that everyone travelling to Barcelona should visit the Casa Batlo or take a picture of the many sculptures which decorate the Sagrada Familia's façade, because in doing so, the tourist will be able to claim to others or to ascertain for himself that he went through the same experiences that define what a trip to

Barcelona should be. Street artists that devote their time to impersonate human statues would rather embody well-known figures from past or present than impersonate a character devised by their imaginative minds. The latter will not be recognizable by their audiences and may be discarded as something useless.

‘Modernism was heavily conceptualized, each artist forming his own definition of what modernism should be. The scope of those concerned and thoughtful sculptors or architects was to create a consistent vision of art. Street artists cannot afford the time to do so. They will rely on stereotypes and caricatures to ensure the understanding and approval of their audiences. The juxtaposition of street artists and Modernist works of art sometimes lead to a belittlement of Catalan art. In some cases, the street artist perverts the very sense of the object he/she represents in an attempt to seduce and enrapture the greedy eye of the tourist. Thus, despite Cataluña’s uniqueness, notwithstanding the importance granted by the Spanish government to the acknowledgment of cultural heterogeneity in each autonomia (region), the Rambles will be overflowed by Spanish most common stereotypes such as a Flamenco dancer or El Quijote.

Both of them are part of Spain’s cultural heritage as a whole but they are not typical of Cataluna’s history. When the Rambles are not riddled with cheap caricatures of Spanish icons, Modernist places are made fun of by street artists disguised as human beings or animals that debase the codes associated **with** the work of depicted art. Thus, when visitors queue before the Palau Guell, someone dressed up as the bird of the façade assaults tourists. When entering the Park Guell, visitors are greeted by a despicable imitation of Gaudi’s multicolored Lizard. Today, unfortunately or not, Gaudi’s magnificent rock arcades at Park Guell are inhabited by a strange living statue: a cave man who is often photographed by a bunch of hilarious tourists.

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