

# APEL·LES MESTRES



APEL·LES MESTRES, WRITER AND ARTIST, CHARACTERIZES THE MODERNIST PERIOD, AN OUTSTANDING MOMENT IN CATALONIA, MARKED BY THE FUSION OF ART AND LITERATURE.

M. ANGELA CERDÀ LITERARY CRITIC

ILLUSTRATION FROM *LILIANA*, 1907

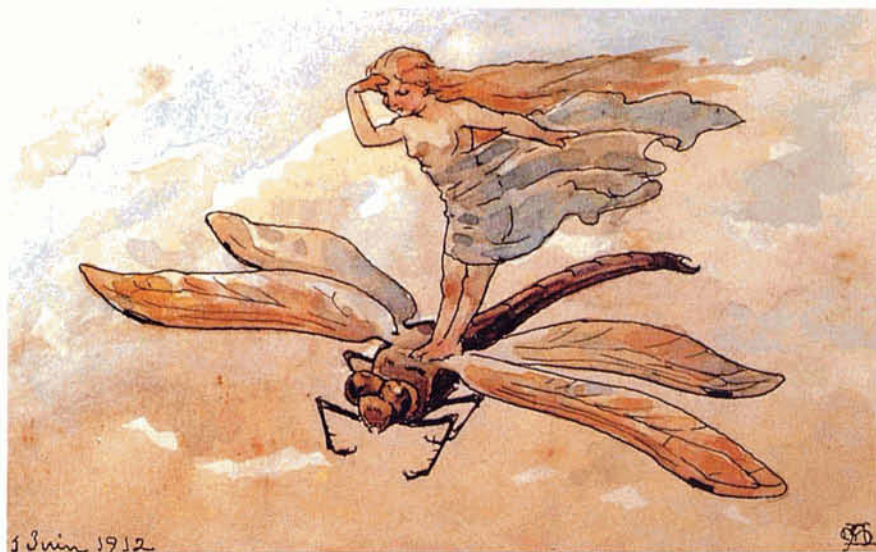
**W**ith his paradigmatic figure and work, the multi-faceted artist and consummate author Apelles Mestres i Oñós (Barcelona, 1854-1936) characterizes the Modernist period, an outstanding moment in Catalonia, marked by the simultaneous integration of multiple "isms" and the fusion of art and literature.

Having chosen to make art his profession, Mestres started out as a press cartoonist in 1877 in well known publications like "La Campana de Gràcia" and continued as an artist and illustrator. After publishing the book of poetry *Avant* in 1875, he cultivated various li-

terary genres and, after receiving a number of awards at the Jocs Florals, was proclaimed Mestre en Gai Saber in 1908. As well as his devotion to gardening and collecting, in 1922 he put music to his own songs, some of which, such as "Minuet", "Birondon" and "Cançó de taverna", achieved well deserved popularity and success. While his work as a cartoonist and highly individual illustrator, from ironic caricaturist to delicate stylist, was intense and extensive –it is estimated he produced some 40,000 drawings of different kinds–, no less so was his literary devotion as a consummate writer of fiction

and comedy, as a translator and as a poet, an artistic symbiosis which produced a series of books, many of which he illustrated himself, reflecting the Modernist concept of global art, which is also the symbolist ideal.

Marked by a singular childhood spent in a world of genteel rusticity and artistic refinement, Apelles Mestres, through intensely lived traditional celebrations and the stories he received by word of mouth from his grandmother and mother, inherited images and legends which were to be valuable ingredients for his varied production. Born during the *Renaixença* but a prototype



of the *fin de siècle* author, the artist-poet also attempted to fuse realism and idealism, reconciling a series of opposites in literature, from humorous or sarcastic expression to lyric poetry, and from cosmicity to morality and intimacy. The end of the 19th century was an important moment in his poetic production, and the beginning of the new century was marked by his foray into drama, a poetico-musical theatre –which has a precedent in the dramatic idyll *La nit al bosch* (1881)–, at which he excelled and obtained popularity with more or less fantastic works, some, such as *Picarol* (1901), *Follet* (1903) or *Gaziell* (1906), set to music by the composer Enric Granados. Going against the tide of the novel, and a forerunner of the Golden Age of Short Stories in Catalonia, he always wrote in a spontaneous language in his short stories, for example, *Records i fantasies*, (1896), and in legends and popular tales such as *Qüentos bosquetans* (1908).

Alongside the *Idil·lis*, the medieval *Balades* and *Cants íntims*, he also published a remarkable series of narrative poems such as *Margaridó* (1890), *En Misèria* (1896), *Poemes de mar* (1900), *Poemes d'amor* (1904), *Poemes de terra* (1906) and the poetic legend *La perera* (1908). A compendium and the culmination of this work was the narrative book-poem *Liliana* (1907), a fusion of text and image considered one of the jewels of Modernist bibliophily, with an autonomous artistic value and a product of global inspiration.

Mestres had the innate gift of being able to transport the reader to any period, and two principal sources, the twin mysteries of nature and the medieval world, fed his fertile imagination. Strongly attracted by the Middle Ages then, the author wrote in his childhood autobiography *La Casa vella. Reliquiari* (1912) that "the middle ages throbbed within me, more like a dream, like the memory of a previous life, of another, remote childhood", because, in his much loved "old house" tucked away beside Barcelona cathedral, "one could quite well believe in giants and dwarfs, witches and goblins, Moorish kings and enchanted princesses".

The work of Apel·les Mestres also exemplifies the cultural phenomenon of the transference of religious feeling both in artistic activity and in nature, and therefore, his temple, the forest or woodland, populated with striking, illusory images, becomes a holy place contemplated with adoration:

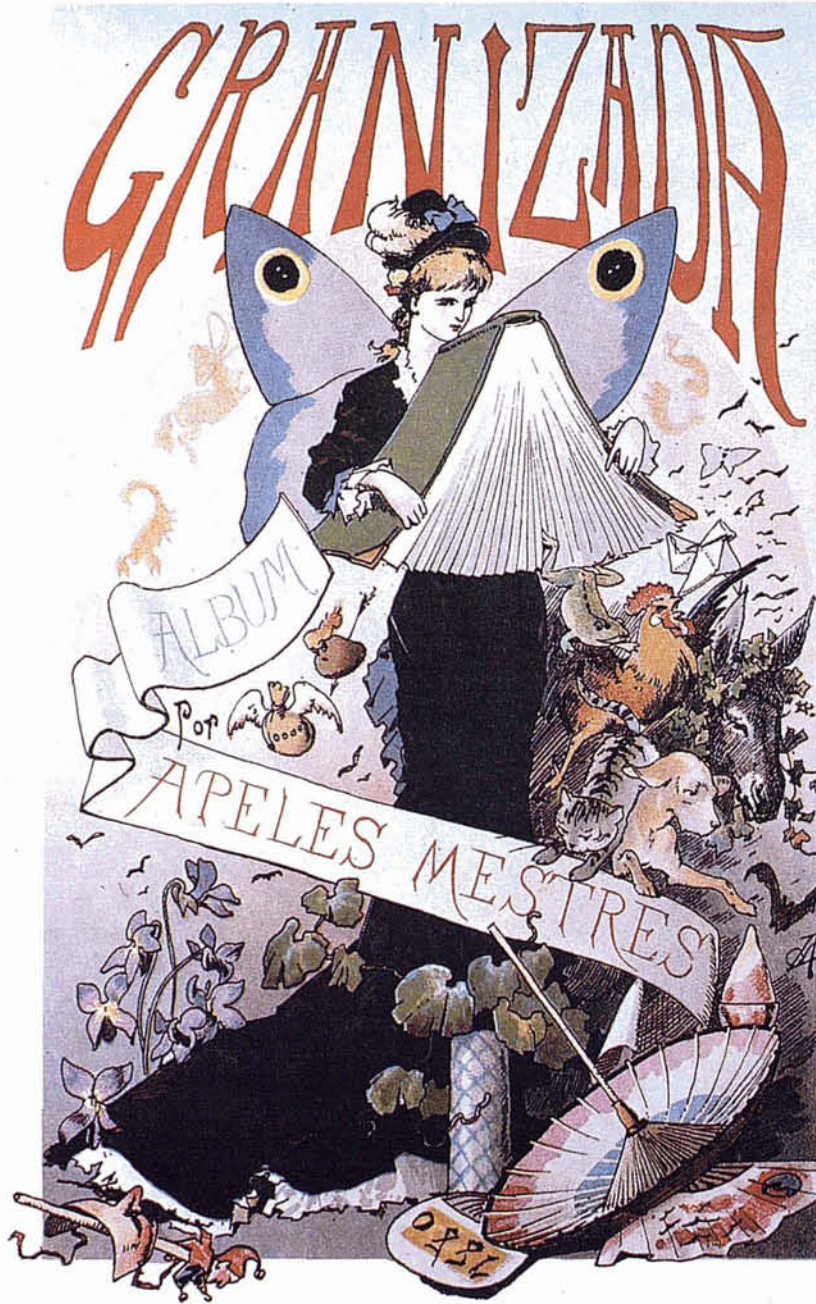
*At the temple I am making for  
very few of us attend;  
it was not made by man,  
it was made by God himself.*

And it is in this ineffable school of poetry and esoterism that he captures a semi-divine message which he transforms, with his alchemy, into a magic world of illustrations, poems, songs, etc. "Borne along by the adoration I profess for Nature, seduced by the melody and the wisdom of the voices I hear in all

that lives (...) I have on occasions tried to go further and present Nature herself, speaking as I hear her speak". By faithfully and minutely copying Nature, he first of all gives her life, autonomy, and then he magnifies her with his art, which projects her towards a primordial, Edenic time, like "La non-non dels papallons", an emblem of Modernism:

*Sleep, sleep, butterflies of gold,  
the last flower is sleeping now on its  
bed of moss  
(...)  
Sleep thinking that there is no winter,  
that the sky is blue, the summer eternal...  
and that the flowers never die!*

A master of pathetic fallacy, the artist-poet personifies a natural microcosm of oaks, mushrooms, violets, narcissi, poppies, butterflies, crickets, frogs, nightingales... and an imaginary one of dwarfs, elves and mermaids, all of them enigmatic creatures living together in exemplary harmony, in the eternally repeated cycle, because for Apel·les Mestres Nature is at once altar and pulpit, aesthetics and ethics. And the singular heroes that inhabit the natural scenery belong either to the author's medieval mythology or else to the fascinating iconography of Mestres's bestiary, those "petits vius", artists of sound and colour, that perfume and sing and, like the pure artist, "know neither slave nor tyrant":



*These I prefer, that live a single day  
a humble existence of love and har-  
mony (...)  
these little ones that are for me the big-  
gest.*

Also, these pre-industrial paradises re-  
created by the author's imagination  
—like the poem *Liliana*—, in which exist-  
ence takes place outside historical time  
and within the Grand Time, are the re-  
pository of an arcane science, exorcising  
destructive chronology and a world  
which is profane, oppressive and hos-

tile to poetry, and are also the recepta-  
cles of archetypes which, having a  
symbolic and spiritual category, trans-  
mit recondite messages with the magic  
incentive of the mysterious processes of  
nature:

*there where the shadow is iris  
and silence is music;  
where everything lives in dreams,  
where everything gently waves,  
there was I born...*

Apel·les Mestres died in Barcelona, at

the house in the Passatge Permanyer  
where he lived some forty years —to-  
wards the end, having lost his sight and  
his wife, like a recluse surrounded by  
memories and looking after his gar-  
den—, that fateful 18th July 1936 when  
the revolution broke out: the funeral,  
which would otherwise have been a  
multitudinous event because of his great  
popularity, took place in the midst of  
death and desolation in the city where,  
for sixty years of his life, Apel·les Mes-  
tres practised with admirable devotion  
the religion of art. ■