

BAROQUE ART IN CATALONIA



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PERHAPS A FEW YEARS ARE STILL NEEDED BEFORE WE CAN ADOPT A MORE POSITIVE ATTITUDE TO OUR BAROQUE TRADITION AND SHAKE OFF THE PREJUDICES THAT HAVE HAMPERED OUR APPRECIATION OF THIS PERIOD IN THE HISTORY OF CATALAN ART.



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If one were to draw up a short list of significant monuments or names in Catalan art over the ages, it would be unlikely to include any works or artists from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. A similar survey would have different results in Castile, Andalusia or Portugal, not to mention France or, of course, Italy. There is an accepted historiography, supported even by some researchers in art, according to which the Renaissance and baroque in Catalonia are artistic styles of little weight, styles that never reached any level of development or quality because of the period of decadence the country was suffering at the time. In spite of efforts by important researchers into the history, literature, religion and art of this period to undo this simplistic and negative image, the mistake subsists. Whereas other nations have looked to the modern period for their roots, romantic historiography taught

us to value the medieval world and scorn the baroque, at the same time as the literary and political movement of the *Renaixença*, to which the political outlook of the period, and especially the Bourbon restoration, proved so distasteful, also put emphasis on this view of the past. This is neither the time nor the place to go into the irregularity and inaccuracy of these theses. What matters now is to show how this negative view has been the indirect cause of the destruction of a large part of our baroque heritage. Direct causes are to be found in the disenfranchisement of the religious orders following the Mendizábal Law of 1835, which led to the definitive loss of many convents and monasteries. The Carlist Wars and the urban revolutions of the nineteenth centuries continued to eat away at the possessions of the Church, which suffered a real calamity with the Civil War of 1936-1939.

Baroque art in Catalonia has the same importance, deep roots and quality as it has in Valencia, Castile or Andalusia. The fact that it did not enjoy the exceptional patronage of the court, which was established in Madrid, explains the relatively peripheral nature of the artistic culture of our baroque creators. But this does nothing to lessen the interest of the artistic production as a whole. In the field of the decorative arts—silverware, glass, pottery and furniture—the work is of a very high quality. Sculpture and altarpieces are the equal of those in other parts of Spain, or other countries within the sphere of southern baroque. The great altarpieces of Arenys, El Riner or Cadaqués are constructions with a composition showing great formal excellence and a richness of technical execution and finish comparable to that of the great masterpieces of Castilian or Andalusian polychrome statuary. In the field of painting, the seventeenth cen-



MONASTERY OF SANT RAMON DEL PORTELL

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tury lacked a forceful personality capable of creating a lasting school. The Catalan artists in a position to play this role had to find other places in which to develop their creative work. One case is that of Francesc Ribalta (Solsona, 1565 - Valencia, 1628), who left Barcelona in 1581 to study in Madrid, and who finally settled in Valencia in 1599, where he established the Valencian pictorial school of the seventeenth century. We have a similar case of emigration to other, more powerful cultural and artistic centres in the Roussillon painter Jacint Rigau-Ros (Perpinyà, 1659 - Paris, 1743), who settled in Paris in 1681 under the name of Hyacinthe Rigaud, where he became a famous court portraitist and a distinguished member of the Académie Royale. These and other reasons explain the delay in the creation of a baroque pictorial school in Catalonia, which finally took off in the eighteenth century with the exceptional figures of Antoni Viladomat (Barcelo-

na, 1678-1755) and his pupils, the Tremulla brothers Manuel (Barcelona, 1715-1791) and Francesc (Perpinyà, 1722 - Barcelona, 1773). There was intense building activity in Catalonia throughout the modern period. We are not fully aware of its importance because it was of a primarily religious character; churches and convents that are no longer standing or only in part. The church of Betlem in Barcelona and the Monastery of Sant Ramon del Portell are good examples of the magnificence of our religious architecture. In the eighteenth century, the new dynasty embarked on a series of building initiatives such as the Citadel and the Barceloneta district in Barcelona, the University of Cervera and the Castle of Figueres, which are works of great importance for their dimensions and design quality, but which as enterprises strongly marked by a particular political and dynastic slant have never been given proper consideration.

The start of serious, modern investigation into our baroque is related to the change in artistic and historical sensibility of the men of the *noucentista* movement. The architect Cèsar Martinell was one of the first to begin a systematic study of churches and altarpieces, to which he devoted many years of research resumed in his work *L'arquitectura i l'escultura barroques a Catalunya*, published in three volumes between 1959 and 1963, in the collection *Monumenta Cataloniae*.

This revindication of a classicist tradition in Catalonia came too late, the early sixties being a time marked by a return to the spirit of the avant-gardes and a clear move towards modernity in the arts. Perhaps a few years are still needed before we can adopt a more positive attitude to our baroque tradition and shake off the prejudices that have hampered our appreciation of this period in the history of Catalan art. ●



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