

THE DRAWINGS OF ANTONI CASANOVAS



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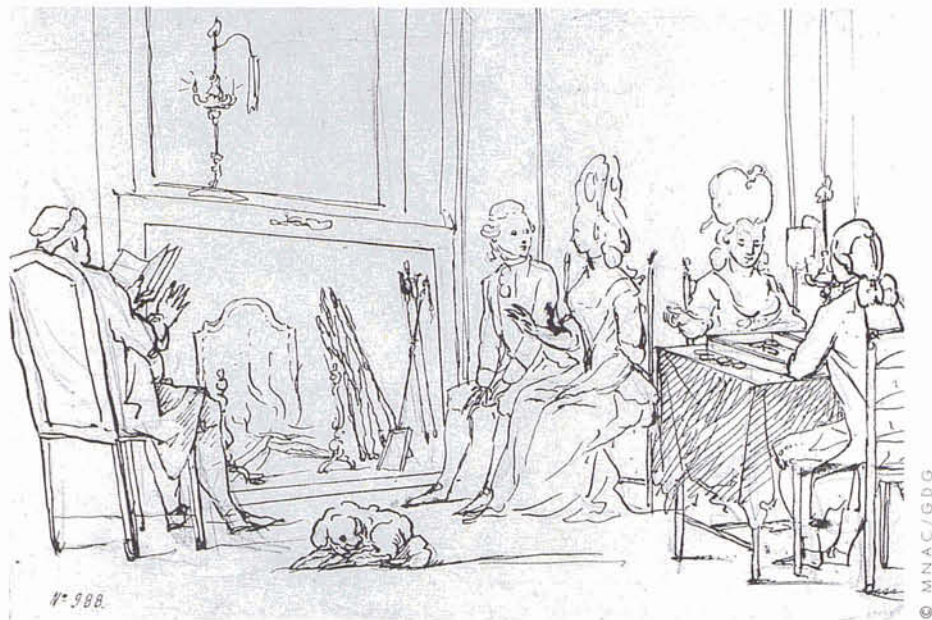
THE DRAWINGS OF ANTONI CASANOVAS ARE A DIRECT, SPONTANEOUS RECORD OF A LIVING SOCIAL REALITY. EACH CONTAINS THE SHEER PLEASURE OF STORY-TELLING, OF DESCRIBING ONE MOMENT IN THE LIFE OF A BARCELONA THAT WAS SHAKING OFF ITS PROVINCIAL CHARACTER AND BECOMING COSMOPOLITAN.

BONAVENTURA BASSEGODA MUSEU NACIONAL D'ART DE CATALUNYA (MNAC)

The Catalan pictorial tradition has left very few graphic records on the daily life of the Ancien Régime. The painting presents scenes from the New and Old Testaments, saints, martyrs and scenes from the

lives of venerable and exemplary men. Some still lifes, a few portraits and the occasional exceptional historical episode aren't exactly enough for us to speak of secular art, and even less of an art of social customs. There was nothing

in our country comparable to the marvellous Dutch tradition of the seventeenth century, where, thanks to Vermeer and his magical use of light, we can see what was happening or might have been happening inside people's



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homes. The more than one hundred pictures we have today by the Barcelona painter Antoni Casanovas i Torrents are therefore an exceptional document, a direct testimony of social customs in Catalonia at the end of the eighteenth century.

Catalan artistic drawing can not be taken further back than Antoni Viladomat (1678-1755). He is the first person in whom we find a modern use of drawing as an exercise in anatomical research or composition, or as a guide and a model for transfer to canvas, but no longer as a mere artisan instrument—that is, as an illustration for the client or carpenter. Viladomat was a draughtsman, and it was undoubtedly from him that his pupils Manuel (1715-1791) and Francesc (1722-1773) Tramulles learnt their practice and techniques. The drawn and engraved graphic work of the younger brother, Francesc, is especially valuable, with pieces of great quality, like the originals for the series of engravings of the *Màscara Reial*, in honour of Charles III in 1764, now preserved at the Museu d'Història de la Ciutat de Barcelona. We know that Manuel had some kind of private drawing academy in his home, where the future artists of the time were trained, not long before the foundation of the *Escola de Nobles Arts*, in 1755, promoted by the Board of Trade and later to become the famous *Escola Llotja*.

The information available on Antoni

Casanovas is scarce. He was born in Barcelona in 1752 into a family of artists. He was admitted as a master at the College of Painters in 1779, but it is more than likely that he was a pupil at the Manuel Tramulles Academy. In 1784 he applied for the post of painter for the City Hall. We have it on record that he was “second consul” at the College of Painters in its last year of existence, 1785. He wrote a will in July 1796 and died before 1797. It has not yet been possible to attribute any painting to him with complete certainty, while he does figure as the draughtsman/inventor of two engravings. The stylistic study of these two items and the near certainty of the signature, A.C., Anton, which we find in some originals amongst the large collection of drawings kept in the Drawings and Engravings Room of the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, give us an idea of his unique artistic personality.

As a draughtsman, Casanovas was neither detailed, academic or learned. It is precisely this that gives him his strength: the speed of the penstroke and his skillful grasp of movement and foreshortening. With very few lines he confidently shapes a figure or gives credibility to a gesture, an expression or a dramatic action. Normally there is a brief pencil sketch, a sort of preliminary attempt that is not always stuck to in the definitive pen-and-ink version. This final version is independent and, above

all, fresh and quick. The liveliness of the technique is parallel to and strengthened by the surprising subject matter: scenes from social life, dances, concerts, theatrical performances and events from day-to-day life: “drinking-chocolate time”, “at the barber’s”, market scenes, etc. What is most fascinating is that these drawings are not studies for paintings or engravings. They are drawings that are justified in their own right, a direct, spontaneous record of a living social reality. Each contains the sheer pleasure of story-telling, of describing one moment in the life of a Barcelona that was shaking off its provincial character and becoming cosmopolitan.

We could look on the graphic work of Antoni Casanovas as the ideal complement to the enormous written production of Rafael d'Amat, Baron of Maldà: the famous *Calaix de Sastre*, a detailed, minute by minute account of life in Barcelona at the end of the eighteenth century. The work of both men seems to exude the same subtle, undefined understanding, a kind of awareness of their being the last witnesses of a world and a culture that were doomed to come to an end very soon. Casanovas and Maldà present homey, innocent scenes, like items of ancestral busy-bodding, but at the same time this pleasure in detailed narrative is also modern, because it conveys to us a veiled sense of nostalgia. ●