

From the Time Out *Barcelona* and *Madrid* Guides

***Time Out Barcelona, 2000* – Editor's Introduction**

Barcelona is sometimes a very showy city. It always seems to be asking you to look at its new bridge, new gallery space, new parks, all-rebuilt state-of-the-art opera house or the perfectly-toned grey suits on the pretty staff at an exhibition, and stand up and admire the sheer style with which they were put together. And it's hard not to, which is why Barcelona basks in a near-unequaled aura of international acclaim. Hard on the heels of the Royal Institute of British Architects' Gold Medal, awarded for the first time ever to a single city, comes a survey by *National Geographic* rating Barcelona as one of the 50 Wonders of the Modern World – rare praise coming from Americans, who of all foreigners seem to have the greatest tendency to find the winding streets of the old city scuzzy and threatening rather than the concentrated urban experience they have always been.

It's possible to suffer from 'design stress' in Barcelona, a sensation of vague unease at everything around you having been so cleverly thought out. Recently, the ever-active city council has taken to removing the old wooden benches from streets and squares and replacing them with single seats with concrete legs, scattered at odd angles as if they'd been left behind after an outdoor party – most visibly in the Plaça Reial, where the benches used to be occupied all day by drunks and the lost having rambling conversations. This was apparently done at the behest of none other than Oriol Bohigas himself, the guru of Barcelona's urban renovations since the 1970s. Instead of something to sit on, you have an art object, which you can appreciate in solitary thought without the risk of an undesigned drunk sitting down beside you and slobbering on your sleeve.

Similarly, before the cement has set on any of the city's giant-scale urban renovation schemes – the Olympic buildings, the transformation of an old industrial harbour into the 'Port Vell' leisure zone – the Barcelona authorities are already announcing some new grand plan that is going to grab everybody's attention and redefine urban life as we know it for the next decade, or six months. Sometimes, one wonders if Barcelona is ever going to stop projecting and becoming, and just be.

And Barcelona has long been a great place just to be, even without the project-junkies tinkering with it. Its people have many other qualities, besides architectural ability. Catalans are contradictory. To take shopkeepers (iconic figures in Catalonia): many may seem positively lugubrious in style, dry and ungiving, but go a little further, maybe ask for something specific, and you are served in a way that could not be more personal or concerned. The relationship between warmth and reserve is not an obvious one here. One very marked Catalan characteristic is a notably individualistic determination, if there's something that someone is interested in, to go about it, not in a showy way, but to its conclusion, however strange anyone else might find it. This is a city of obsessives, who pursue their interests – whether it be in design, in putting together a cool bar, in collecting spoons or producing fine food – with devotion. This makes it all the more interesting for visitors from outside, who reap the benefits. A relatively small city in world terms, Barcelona nevertheless has a very special, quirky – obsessive – variety.

Barcelona has for centuries lived with the tension of having the attributes and outlook of a capital city without officially being one. It has compensated for the absence of the pomp of state-capitalhood precisely through the creativity, imagination and sometimes intensity of its people, which is an essential reason why so many others like to come here. And this energy sometimes expresses itself in showy ways. It's an occupational hazard.

And showiness, and obsessiveness, have their very human side. One of the showiest things in Barcelona is the dancing fountain on Montjuïc, which is utterly silly and something that more workaday cities would never have even given street room, but is also somehow wonderful. Some of Barcelona's obsessives have reached the point of being deeply eccentric – Gaudí is the glaring example – but the city has given them room to live and even revered them. This all helps give the city its special density, a concentrated sense of life. You never know what may be going on inside the head of the next person whose eyes cross with yours as you walk along the Rambla. *Nick Rider*.

From Time Out Barcelona, 2004

Characters departed

Barcelona's standing as a mecca for table-squatters is not a recent invention. The city has never hosted more eccentrics and oddities than during the golden age of Barcelona bohemia, from the 1880s to the Civil War. Here are three *Ramblistes* gone by.

José Fola Igúrbide

Around 1910 the most popular plays in the many theatres on the Paral·lel were those of José Fola Igúrbide. His sweeping dramas had titles like *The Sun of Humanity*, and in them symbolic heroines called *Idea* or *Fuerza* ('Strength') struggled against oppression to redeem the human race. They were also pretty wordy, but this combination of melodrama and high ideals was a huge success among Barcelona's radicalised, revolutionary-minded working class audiences.

Fola was not just a playwright, for he also wrote equally big-brush philosophical works like *The Harmonious Nature of Space*, and was a scientist and inventor. He claimed to have solved the problems of flight, and that the Wright brothers had stolen his ideas, and his shabby flat on Ronda Sant Antoni was full of hundreds of model aeroplanes. When impatient theatre managers called to ask when his plays would be delivered, Fola would play the guitar or run around the room demonstrating his models and babbling endlessly about flying machines. He died in the flu epidemic of 1918. His plays fell out of favour, except among Barcelona's anarchist theatre groups, for whom

they remained favourites right up until 1936.

Lluís Capdevila

In the 1960s, this long-forgotten Catalan writer published in exile a memoir recalling a life of idleness of truly heroic proportions in the Barcelona of the 1910s and '20s. A near-archetype of the local *culs de café* or 'café-arses', Capdevila was already part-familiar from other memoirs of the era: he aspired to be the classic bohemian, wearing a long cape, big hat and a monocle, and smoking a pipe for which he often couldn't afford any tobacco. He was theoretically a radical journalist, writing for tub-thumping revolutionary sheets called *Bohemios* or *Los Miserables*, but at best would scribble a few words between cabarets.

Capdevila's only homes were several cafés around the Rambla. Around 1917 his cronies noticed that he would disappear for weeks at a time, to re-emerge unusually well-dressed. It transpired he had acquired a protector, a rich American called Marion who had decided wartime Paris was too drab and moved south. She was bisexual, and would alternate between lavish gowns and jewellery and tweeds and riding outfits. It was in the latter she turned up one day on the Rambla to beat up Capdevila with a riding crop, providing a great show for the other *culs de café*.

Santiago Rusiñol

If Fola and Capdevila were hand-to-mouth bohemians, Rusiñol – one of the most important *Modernista* painters – represented 'golden bohemia'. Not only did he inherit a textile fortune, but many of his paintings sold for high prices. He was generous with his money, and it was known that if you caught the great man on his way home in the early hours from his favourite café, the Lyon d'Or on Pla del Teatre, to his Passeig de Gràcia flat, you could touch him for a 'loan'.

Critics have long complained that Rusiñol's paintings and writings were often superficial. Artistic seriousness was perhaps not helped by his legendary and relentless commitment to having a good time. He once had to have a kidney removed during Carnival time, and insisted that he be operated on wearing a false nose. He discovered Sitges for the outside world, and the *Festes Modernistes* he orchestrated there in the 1890s brought a new idea of sophisticated entertainment to Catalonia and ensured unheard-of publicity for the new artistic movement.

He went on a tour of Argentina as the literary director of a theatre company, but disappeared on arrival, only to be discovered days later in a café, where he'd acquired

a new circle of young followers. A statue of some Argentinian worthy was to be unveiled nearby, and Rusiñol suggested they inaugurate it themselves. He amassed a crowd, delivered a grand but nonsensical speech and was solidly applauded... much to the bemusement of the official inauguration party, which arrived on the scene a few hours later to a deserted stage.

From *Time Out Madrid*, 2000

Man with a Sad Countenance

Philip II may have launched the city as a capital, but a more pervasive presence in Madrid is his grandson Philip IV, whose gloom-laden face looks out from so many Velázquez portraits. He ruled for over 40 years (1621–65), and the grandest buildings, plays, celebrations and public displays were all created for him.

A central figure in Philip's life was the Count of Olivares, appointed one of his gentlemen-in-waiting when the then-Prince was ten, in 1615. Olivares became Philip's mentor in all things, and later his chief minister, with the unique title of Count-Duke, *el Conde-Duque*. Olivares' overriding aim was to reverse the slide in the power and prestige of the Spanish empire since the great days of Philip II: for this to happen, the solitary figure at the heart of the monarchy, the King, had to be able to play his part. The Count-Duke put Philip through an intensive programme of education, in languages, philosophy, politics and the arts, designed to make him into the grandest, most cultured prince in Europe. In some areas the course was very successful: Philip IV gained an abiding love of theatre and painting, and became the greatest art collector of his day. Aided by Velázquez, appointed court painter when only 23 years old in 1623, he built up a huge art collection that forms the core of the modern Museo del Prado.

Otherwise, however, the raw material that Olivares had to work with was terribly unsuitable. Philip IV was shy, weak-willed and indecisive, furtively pleasure-loving, prone to lethargy and depression and, like his father Philip III, racked by feelings of guilt and inadequacy when he looked towards the example set by his great ancestors. Olivares wrote frequent memoranda to his charge reminding him of his responsibilities, which only made him feel worse.

To bolster the prestige of the monarchy, and the King's own confidence, Olivares pursued a policy of keeping up appearances to an extraordinary degree. In 1632 he began the construction of huge new royal residence on the eastern side of Madrid, the **Palacio del Buen Retiro** or 'Good Retreat'. More than one palace it was a complex of

palatial buildings, with huge formal gardens, centred on a great courtyard for royal ceremonies. Olivares' aim in building it was to make an emphatic statement of the greatness of the monarchy he served, creating a self-contained compound in which the Court could be displayed at its maximum splendour. Louis XIV took the idea as his model for Versailles.

The Retiro was an essentially theatrical building, and the Court theatre was central to it. Philip IV had a special fascination for elaborate sets and visual tricks, and an Italian craftsman, Cosimo Lotti, was brought in to create extravagant productions with mechanical devices that dwarfed the human actors. Writers such as Calderón created dramas, mostly on mythological themes, to fit. Productions spread out to feature the Retiro's giant lake, with battles between life-size ships, sea-monsters appearing from the depths and angels flying through the air.

Philip IV combined devout Catholicism with an active if guilt-ridden sex life, and is believed to have fathered 30 illegitimate children. The Habsburg court was not one, though, like that of Louis XIV of France, where royal mistresses were displayed in semi-queenly style; it was far too formal and decorous for that, and the King's affairs had to be carried on very much below stairs. As Spain's difficulties mounted, the Court retreated more and more into rigid ritual. Philip personally added new intricacies to the already-elaborate Court etiquette, as if he thought he could stave off disaster by ceremony. A Dutch visitor wrote in 1655 that, 'the King of Spain adopts such a degree of gravity that he walks and behaves like a statue'. The only residents exempt from etiquette were the royal dwarfs and clowns, of whom Philip IV was especially fond, to the extent of having Velázquez paint portraits of every one of them.

And yet, this man who behaved like a human monument was also a compulsive confessor. Today he would be an automatic candidate for therapy. He wrote a scholarly history of Italy, and in the preface indiscreetly described how intimidated he was by state business. Later, he was beset by dread that the decline of his empire was divine punishment for his own failings and sexual misdeeds. He corresponded for years with a nun in a convent in Soria, Sister María de Agreda, to whom he confided everything from problems of state to worries about sexual impotence. 'I fear myself more than anything else,' he wrote to her, '...Oh, Sister María, I fear my weakness will prevent me from achieving the good things you desire.'