

Pilar Vélez

Santiago Rusiñol

The modern artist and Modernist Barcelona

Rusiñol was born in 1861, in Carrer de la Princesa number 37, into a family of industrialists with a cotton factory in Manlleu, the office of which was on the mezzanine floor of the building where they lived. He died in 1931 in Aranjuez, while painting what was to be his last garden. In other words, he lived seventy years that coincided with one of the most agitated stages of the socio-political, economic and cultural life of Barcelona.

He was a leading figure in the transformations the city underwent, lived through them and, more important, contributed notably towards them, especially during one particular stage of his life.

In 1861, Barcelona had some 240,000 inhabitants and, with the centralist political system that prevailed in Spain at the time, it had been relegated to the status of provincial city. By 1931 it had reached the figure of a million inhabitants and had consolidated as a modern city. To be brief, this transformation was characterised above all by sweeping and radical social change which was generalised throughout Europe and very far-reaching in Barcelona. The birth of the proletariat led to major tensions and very bitter conflict. This was the time, too, of

the beginnings of democratisation, with the rise of the liberal professions and new figures like the intellectual and the artist. It was also when the phenomenon of the progressive construction of the Catalan national identity appeared, along with the need to confront Spain, a decrepit, broken-backed, ruined Spanish state that had lost its last American colonies, and was cut off from Europe.

A single-minded artist's vocation

From his childhood, Rusiñol had wanted to be a painter and defined himself as a painter. Nonetheless, his grandfather, the industrialist Jaume Rusiñol Bosch, had decided he would go into the family business. He did indeed work there but he also went to the Llotja Art School. He was mad about art, passionate about art

and it went very deep, so deep that in a letter written in June 1886 during his honeymoon in Paris and addressed to his great friend Enric Clarasó, the sculptor with whom he shared a studio in the neighbourhood of l'Eixample, he said, "The only thing that interests me is the demon of art"! It is more than somewhat significant that a young man of twenty-five, in the midst of all the excitement of getting married, should make such a statement which, on the other hand, was more than sincere, as he would demonstrate not long afterwards and throughout the rest of his life.

Hence, his grandfather's death in 1887 represented his liberation, enabling him to leave the business, in agreement with his brother Albert with whom he had always had a warm and close relationship and, shortly thereafter, to leave his family behind as well and head off to Paris to become an artist, which was his highest aspiration. In other words, he forsook the materialist world of business, economy and industry, supplanting it with a world of paintbrushes, aesthetics and the pen.

The young Rusiñol was well aware of the reality of his country because he too had been immersed in the greyness of the years of the Bourbon Restoration, with its narrow-minded, restrictive conservatism. The group around the review *L'Avenç*, which first appeared in 1881, embodied the introduction of Catalan nationalist and progressive ideas by the young intellectuals of his generation (heirs of Valentí Almirall) who proposed cultural reflection as a way of overcoming the stagnation of the times.

Until this point, artists had gone to Rome for their training. But the Rome of Fortuny was gradually replaced by the Paris of Rusiñol. His teacher, the painter Tomàs Moragas, was still in favour of

Rome but his pupil did not go there with a grant from the Academy, which he hastily eschewed, but sped off to Paris because regeneration, as they called it, was going to come from the north, which is to say from Europe. Rusiñol wasted no time, then, in pigeonholing himself as anti-academic and swimming against the tide of official art teaching. In 1927, in his booklet *Màximes i mals pensaments* (Maxims and Bad Thoughts), he affirmed that art academies were "good for teaching but not for learning".

Rusiñol left for Paris in the autumn of 1889, borne by his desire to be an artist and leaving everything behind: his family, his wife and a very small daughter. One might speak of the metamorphosis of the Rusiñol of business who became the Rusiñol of art as if his aim was to demonstrate the dignity of the figure of the artist, to vindicate the artist as an autonomous social element with an influential role to play in society.

In Paris he discovered new ways of painting: Impressionism, post-Impressionism and also James Whistler, with the possibility of painting everything, any corner, any theme, going well beyond the virtuous and nicely-framed picture of the "subject" that had thitherto been presented by Barcelona painters in the Sala Parés gallery. His Montmartre cityscapes —of the neighbourhood in which he first lived— in other words of the marginal city of Paris, given a special atmosphere with the grey light of the north, were the first result of putting sensibility before anything else. Sensibility was a synonym of sincerity or truth, a concept that was not yet explicit in the Catalan artistic framework, apart from some exceptions that were admired and upheld by Rusiñol, for example

Joaquim Vayreda who, he said, was able to paint the “essence” of a landscape.

Freedom was also everything that Rusiñol wanted for the modern artist. Anything could be painted. The texts he wrote from Paris —still in Spanish— *Desde el Molino* (From the *Moulin*), *Desde otra isla* (From Another Isle) and *Impresiones de Arte* (Impressions of Art) also sustain this change, this reorientation of the paths of art that was now being wrought by the artists from Barcelona who had gone to live in Paris (Rusiñol, Casas, Canudes, Utrillo ...). Thus begins the myth of the bohemian artist, the artist that, in short, he wished to incarnate.

The first exhibition of the Rusiñol-Casas-Clarasó triumvirate, held in the Sala Parés in 1890, presented in Barcelona works of a kind that had never been seen before, the paintings of Montmartre, suburban corners, grey light, characters, often couples and generally with no feeling of communication between them (in which some commentators have wished to see a reflection of Rusiñol’s being cut off from his family). There is no doubt that these works made a great impression on the Barcelona public. In January 1889, Raimon Casellas, then a critic for *L’Avenç*, embarked on a project, with the review as his base, of extolling these works and these painters as well as the novelty of their work and their artistic stance. Casellas¹ was thus to become the great defender of modernity in painting and he discovered in Rusiñol, with whom he formed a close friendship, the ideal figure of the modern Catalan artist. He was, in fact, one of the clearest and most

influential voices in speaking out for a new aesthetics and in reflecting on the roles of art and the artist in society. In the number of *L’Avenç* dated 30th November 1891, he discussed an exhibition of Rusiñol and Casas in Sala Parés, highlighting in their paintings the love of truth, sincerity, emotion and ingenuity that contrasted with the conventionalism, the love of virtuosity and affectation that characterised Barcelona painting at the time. He saw in their work a rupture, a new path to follow, and everything that was not what Rusiñol and Casas were producing was, according to him, “museum painting”².

His defence coincided with the review’s discourse in opposition to the Spain of the Restoration which, to put it in artistic terms, meant its rejection of the “Valencian artists”, or those —many of them coming from the sister-land— who longed to triumph in exhibitions in Madrid with large-format works of historic themes. Countering this “restoration” was the “regeneration” blowing in from the north. Even at the 1892 National Exhibition of the Arts, the Madrid jury heaped scorn on the work of the Catalan artists, “Modernist art” as it was already being called by Casellas, who was there as a correspondent, now with *La Vanguardia* as his platform. This fact, which had quite an impact and set rivers of ink a-running, meant, from the critic’s standpoint, the definitive rupture with official, antiquated and outdated Spanish art.

Naturally all of this gave off a whiff of the political backdrop and the reaffirmation of a nationalism that was united with the

■ ¹ Casellas’ role has been exhaustively analysed by CASTELLANOS, J. in *Raimon Casellas i modernisme I-II* (Raimon Casellas and Modernism I-II), Barcelona, Curial Edicions Catalanes i Publicacions de l’Abadia de Montserrat, 1983.

² CASELLAS, R., “Exposició de pintures. Rusiñol-Casas” (Exhibition of Paintings. Rusiñol-Casas), *L’Avenç*, 2nd period, year II, N^o 11, 30th November 1891, p. 334.

conviction that “art is the nation”. This is another reason why Casellas praised Rusiñol and his pleasure in collecting old iron objects in his quest for roots. Rusiñol and Casas were already Modernists, as far as the critic was concerned, by 1891. Casas’ *Plein air* (In the Open Air) and Rusiñol’s *El laboratori de la Galette* (The Laboratory of la Gallette) were Modernist, “the very latest in modernist painting”³ or, in other words, works that were at last modern.

One should also recall that, meanwhile, Barcelona had hosted the 1888 World Fair, a first step in the city’s opening up to Europe. Josep Yxart, a key name at the time, recorded the transformation the city was undergoing in a series of articles where the word “modern” was now frequently appearing as a way of describing the changes that were occurring in Barcelona. Rusiñol had taken part in the World Fair, not only by showing three paintings but also loaning a considerable number of objects, especially some of his pieces of Gothic ironwork for the Archaeological Section.

This fact draws attention to another crucial aspect of this way to modernity: the aforementioned predilection for old ironwork. Rusiñol was a great heritage defender, as a true heir of the Romantic tradition that had opened his eyes and awakened his interest in heritage, whether it was monumental, artistic or literary. It was a gaze directed back to the past in order to project the future, a close bond between old and new, or between tradition and modernity. The modern artist was, thus, also a collector. Art for art’s sake, the religion of art and beauty, are the objectives of the modern artist

who dreams of a different, a new world, an artist who strives to be an intellectual as well, and to contribute towards making the world a better place. This also explains the fact that, in an excursion to Sitges in 1891, Rusiñol should fall in love with the town and that in 1892 he should buy some fishermen’s houses which, with the help of the architect Francesc Rogent, he turned into Cau Ferrat, which was somewhere between a house and an artists’ refuge, a roof for his collections, a meeting point and a base for his group from which he would propagate the philosophy and aesthetics of “his” Modernism. It was a haven of freedom, a long way from Barcelona and the home of his family from whom he still kept a distance in his comings and goings to Paris.

The contact with Sitges transformed the feeling of his paintings when the Paris mists were replaced by Mediterranean luminosity. The courtyards of Sitges began to appear in his canvasses and (later) in his writings. Blue courtyards, pink courtyards, which he exhibited in the Sala Parés in 1893. This is the first time he gazes at the garden, when it is still a simple courtyard, a household exit with an order and a pulse that were to become the seeds of Rusiñol’s eventual exultant enthusiasm for gardens.

Meanwhile, the premiere of the Catalan version of Maeterlinck’s *L’intruse* (The Intruder) introduced what was then a prototype of modern literature in Europe, as opposed to the 19th century realism and naturalism that had been so highly prized until then. Maeterlinck was, in fact, the modern artist incarnate, a model for Rusiñol.

■ ³ CASELLAS, R., “Exposició General de Bellas-Arts de Barcelona” (The General Fine Arts Exhibition in Barcelona), II *L’Avenç*, 2nd period, 1891, p. 175.

The social tensions in Barcelona were rising by the day, reaching such a point that, on 7th November 1893, there was a bombing attack on the Liceu Opera House, the work of an anarchist, Santiago Salvador, which killed twenty people. It took Barcelona some time to recover from this blow. Sitges was then a refuge, perhaps?

Now well-established in Blanca Subur (the Latin name for Sitges), Cau Ferrat was to become the hub of a group of artists, musicians and intellectuals who, coming from Barcelona and in the milieu of Rusiñol their leader, would consolidate a path of new modern and Modernist guidelines. This was in great part because Rusiñol organised a series of encounters that he explicitly called Modernist festivals where he would impart the new philosophy of art of which he became the leader and guide of the “regeneration”.

In 1894, the Third Modernist Festival was held in Cau Ferrat. A literary contest was held—in which the participants included Casellas, Maragall, Narcís Oller and Puig i Cadafalch—opened by a speech made by Rusiñol in which he said, “We come here fleeing from the city, to get together and to sing together what comes from the depths of feeling, to rid ourselves of the chill that runs in everyone’s veins, taking refuge under the banner of art”. And he continued, “... the religions of all hearts have died, the old and the new, and now they want to kill ours, the holy and noble religion of art and poetry”. He called for a renaissance, referring to Cau Ferrat (literally: Iron-clad Den) as a “refuge giving shelter to those who feel the cold in their hearts” and solemnly concluded, “that we prefer to be symbolists, unbalanced and even mad and decadent rather than drooping and tame; that common sense is throttling us;

that there is too much prudence in this land; that it doesn’t matter if one goes around being Don Quixote where there are so many Sancho-Panzas feeding off the land, or if one reads books of wonders where nobody reads books at all.”

Rusiñol’s position is perfectly clear. He officiates in the priesthood of art and plainly emphasises the validity of symbolism, decadentism and the validity of art for art’s sake. He distances himself, therefore, from the style of the Paris paintings, conceived as spontaneous expressions, at any time and in any place, and begins to move—evermore manifestly—towards symbolism, with Italian, but also French, Belgian and pre-Raphaelite influences. His art and literary work would take a turn in this direction at the apogee of his influence as a leader of the Modernist movement. The three soffits in the ogival arches of Cau Ferrat dating from 1895 and devoted to Painting, Poetry, and Music, are the best pictorial witness to this and they constitute a clear symbol of total art, the sum of the arts, an idea that was increasingly widespread in the European cultural milieu.

In 1894, Rusiñol had travelled with the painter Ignacio Zuloaga to Pisa and Florence, where he discovered, and where his admiration was born for the Italian primitive painters, as he describes in *Impresiones de Arte*, and as the aforementioned triptych reveals. *La morfina* (Morphine), painted in Paris the same year, is an oil painting produced under the influence of the decadent and Symbolist sensibility, while also being a symbol and product of his growing addiction to the drug, which he was taking to ease severe pain resulting from a fall. It caused a huge uproar when he showed it in the Sala Parés. (In 1905, he





| Burano (Italy), Toni Catany (2007)

would write *El morfiníac* (The Morphine Addict), an even more terrible and more tremendously autobiographical story.) However, by then, Rusiñol was beyond good and evil.

Thenceforth, until 1897-1898, Rusiñol is the reference point of modern-Modernist art in Barcelona, although this modern spirit is increasingly a stance rather than action taken by a particular group of artists and intellectuals. And the Symbolist model began progressively to wane. Nonetheless, in spite of everything, 1897 was a crucial year for Rusiñol, for the Catalan cultural movement and for Barcelona in general.

A paramount year

In 1897 —the year that Barcelona absorbed six surrounding municipalities— the tavern Els Quatre Gats was opened. This venue, founded by Ramon Casas and Pere Romeu, brought together many artists of the time, with great names such as Casas and Rusiñol and young men like Nonell, Mir and Picasso, who breathed new life into art in the concluding years of the 19th century and the dawning ones of the 20th. To some extent it might be stated that the Cau Ferrat gang had opened up the way for the gang of Els Quatre Gats, which was located in the heart of Barcelona in a neo-Gothic building by Puig i Cadafalch.

In 1897, too, Rusiñol published his literary work that was most representative of the new Symbolist airs: *Oracions* (Orations), the first book of prose-poems ever to be published in Spain. It consisted of texts by Rusiñol “with musical illustrations” by Enric Morera and drawings by his friend Miquel Utrillo. It was a book-object in which all the ingredients were perfectly selected: the linen paper, the inks, the typography, the asymmetrical composition of the cover, the photomechanical reproduction of the 32 drawings, the binding in pink cloth... Published by *L’Avenç*, a leading light in publishing renewal, this is a complete work of art, the Modernist book *par excellence*.

Oracions was well received by almost all the cultural factions of the day even though it

expressed ideas founded in a pantheist conception of Nature. In fact, it outlined a kind of homage to Nature in a collection of brief texts devoted to rain, the dawn, mist, and so on, and also to neglected gardens as symbols of forgotten culture. It was written in homage to gardens because, for Rusiñol, “they are landscape turned into verse”. He had discovered them two years earlier, on a trip to Granada that was unquestionably decisive in Rusiñol’s taking this new direction.

At the start of the book, Rusiñol addresses the reader, saying, “most of what are known as the conquests of progress do not seduce me and nor do I like them”. We can understand this as a reaction against the materialism of industry and the much-vaunted progress of the times. The artist contrasts it with Nature or, rather, an exaltation of Nature in literature, interpreting it in aesthetic terms. Rusiñol reveals himself as longing to achieve a new society and the way to it, for him, is art. Yet this is an intimate, personal path, not a group project, or a programmed manifesto but, as the title suggests, fervent prayers. Could we surmise that Rusiñol is starting to go into his shell, into his inner world, his abandoned garden? Does his morphine addiction *in crescendo* play a part here? Is he bestowing on morphine some special creative status?

In 1897 there were other notable cultural events, beginning with the premiere, as part of the Fourth Modernist Festival of Sitges, of *La fada* (The Fairy), a symbolist opera with music by Enric Morera and lyrics by Jaume Massó i Torrents, which represented both a Catalan-spirited endeavour and a musical revolution

under the aegis of Richard Wagner and his idea of total art. Also appearing that year was the review *Luz* (Light), of highly significant name since it represented the quest for the light that was still needed for the regeneration of society, especially Spanish society. In October 1898, this publication reappeared after a short absence stating, “We wondered for a while whether we should publish *Luz* in Madrid or Barcelona but since the latter is the true artistic capital, in both the modern and universal senses of the word, we have reappeared in the capital of Catalonia, which we regard, in artistic terms, as the true capital of Spain.”⁴

To return to Rusiñol, one year after *Oracions* appeared, he published *Fulls de la vida* (Pages of Life), with photo-engraving illustrations by Ramon Pitxot, another utterly Modernist or, in other words, Symbolist and decadent book where Rusiñol brought together a great number of his memories. As in the previous book, he presents himself as a modern writer, a man of his times, and a leading light of a modernity that recognises emotion as the basic path for gaining access to a work of art. Rusiñol was an autonomous, solitary artist, both as a man of letters and as a painter, since he was by now involved with the theme of gardens, with which he was moving away from the nascent artistic vanguard, which is close to Expressionism, to remain until the end of his days losing himself along the pathways of gardens, abandoned or perhaps not, but always surrounded by trees, fountains and statues. It is now that Casellas, who had defended his status as a modern artist, distances himself from his friend’s work and their relationship cools.

■ ⁴ DE BARAN, A. L., “Arte Joven” (Young Art), *Luz*, second week of October, 1898, p. 2.

However, Rusiñol's personal situation had to change soon because his ill-health brought on by morphine abuse had reached the point when it was a matter of life and death. The Spanish state, too, was hovering between life and death as the key player in the final bangs and crackles of an absurd and debilitating war.

In 1899, now *in extremis*, Rusiñol underwent treatment for his morphine addiction in a sanatorium in Boulogne-sur-Seine, and also went back to his wife and daughter. These steps were decisive for him and also for his career. I would go so far as to say that Rusiñol would no longer be modern or Modernist, but would be Rusiñol and his myth. Some ten years after he had left for Paris wanting to be an artist, a rebel and a critic of society and family ties, when he had established himself as such, demonstrating to the world and to himself that the artist did have a role to play in social life, he would now consolidate his fame but henceforth it would always be personally and individually, in both painting and literary domains.

Nonetheless, this did not prevent him from exhibiting that year in Samuel Bing's Parisian gallery L'Art Nouveau—the mythical venue that gave its name to the international turn-of-the-century style—a series entitled *Jardins d'Espanya* (Gardens of Spain), which was highly successful while, in Barcelona, he published *El jardí abandonat* (The Abandoned Garden). Another clear sign of this change is the reaction of Casellas, who was not at all impressed with *Jardins d'Espanya*, perhaps because he now believed that the longed-for regeneration of culture and art was no longer possible if left to Rusiñol.

In brief, between 1889 and 1899, Rusiñol made the leap from the Montmartre paintings to the abandoned garden, which is to say from his quest, from renovation, and from his desire for regeneration to consolidating a kind of aesthetics and a range of forms that, initially Symbolist or decadentist, aimed above all to be poetic and sincere. In the end, what was demanded of the modern artist was sincerity. Let artists produce what they feel, but with sincerity.

In 1900, Art Nouveau “officially” triumphed with the Great World' Fair in Paris, the last word in the compendium of decorative arts in the style that was such anathema to the critic Casellas, who condemned its “little snippets and snails”⁵. Rusiñol himself, in his *L'Auca del senyor Esteve* (The Life of Senyor Esteve, 1907), also lampooned the appearance of shops “that were Modernist in name, with windows aslant and doors set askew”.

In 1900, Rusiñol exhibited his *Jardins* in the Sala Parés, where he would return in 1903 with *Jardins de Mallorca* (Gardens of Mallorca). But his contributions to the Catalan pictorial arts were now on another completely different track, one that was leading a long way from bourgeois tastes.

Modernism or modernity?

If we survey the history of Modernism in Barcelona, we see that the years around 1900 are crucial. In what sense? Is there some discrepancy between Rusiñol the modern artist, a synonym for the Modernist movement in the late 1880s and early 1890s, and the Modernist Barcelona of the great architectural projects of the Eixample district? What

■ ⁵ *La Veu de Catalunya*, Barcelona, 2 July, 1900.

happens in Barcelona when Rusiñol stops being “Modernist”? When the modern Rusiñol comes to an end, does Modernism “officially” begin?

It is true that, today, all the writers who have given this some attention, from both literary and artistic perspectives, are in agreement that the word “Modernism” is such a wide-ranging and ambiguous concept that, above all and before anything else, it means a new attitude. Modernism is an attitude, as we have seen written more than once. And, in fact, this new, modern attitude was seeking a new path, new ways —diverse, to be sure— to make society better. The way to do it was to be modern.

Hence, if we wish to describe formal features that might help us to identify this standpoint in both letters and art, we find that we are up against an infinite array of possibilities and forms and even contradictions, sometimes in one single author, which lets us corroborate what we have seen when speaking of Rusiñol and his milieu: this something new, this something modern, was a synonym for what was true, sincere and free. And these concepts that are so wraithlike cannot be bound to any norm or scheme because then they would not be free and sincere. In other words, one thing is an intellectual and aesthetic movement that is born from the literary world, the press and art criticism —Rusiñol’s world at the end of the 80s and the 90s— and quite another is the Modernism that imbibes at the fountains of Art Nouveau.

Just as artists and intellectuals headed off to Paris in the period we might call pre-Modernist, to steep themselves in the latest trends and bring them back home, the artists (and architects and industrialists) of the following generation

would continue to go there and to import new ideas and forms. The most outstanding fact, however, or at least the most visible, is the significance of Art Nouveau, which is quintessentially decorative and, without a doubt, a long way from the regenerationist spirit of *L’Avenç*. It was a tardy importation in relation with the first manifestations of change, but it joins the thrust of the early Modernist movement, which began in the 1880s and was given impetus with the World’ Fair of 1888. Under the aegis of what were doubtless romantic roots, which meant that our artists and architects recovered the spirit of medieval artisans and began to produce works that were historicist in tone, the exuberant, floral and sinuous decorativeness of Art Nouveau progressively joined the flow.

In other words, Modernism and hence modernist Barcelona is a whole in which local roots are mingled with forms imported from the north. This was modernity but without forsaking the positive elements of tradition because the symbiosis was seen as the way to achieve a new role as a society and as a European city. From the first regenerationism to art for art’s sake and then back again to a certain regenerationism, all this toing and froing reflects the vicissitudes of a society that, in one way or another, is striving to transform itself. Towards the end of this process, with society now sensitised by the social crisis and the repercussions of the loss of the Spanish colonies, Catalanism began to consolidate as opposition to Spain. Modernist Barcelona, therefore, contains a good dose of national identity and hence the great architects —Gaudí, Domènech i Montaner and Puig i Cadafalch— coincide with their counterparts of the European Art Nouveau but without ever



| Harar (Ethiopia), Toni Catany (2007)

renouncing their own tradition: as a result, they use materials and techniques of medieval origin that they recover and adapt to the new technical formulas of their time, and that they have also been upholding through their penmanship since as early as the 80s and 90s. For them, it is perfectly clear that working in architectural creation means working at creating a country or, better said perhaps, constructing a country. This is why, in Barcelona and Catalonia today, we speak of Modernism and not of Art Nouveau, which is the name given to this wide-ranging and heterogeneous movement beyond our frontiers.

Art Nouveau iconography and style were not firmly established, however,

until 1900 after the World' Fair had been held in Paris as the culmination and thus the beginning of the decline of the style. The decorative and applied arts in architecture, along with the graphic arts, were then the great propagators of the supple and symbolist forms of a style that was little more than a decorative fashion, although one that was wildly successful, to be sure. Rusiñol, who was never an Art Nouveau artist, remarked on it in 1907 in his *L'Auca del senyor Esteve*, referring to the transformation of houses and shops in Barcelona's new Eixample neighbourhood: "workers were unceasingly sticking on adornments and stone flowers and eye-catching calligraphy wherever there was a patch

of wall; blacksmiths everywhere were forging pieces of ironwork with dragons, eagles, fabulous beasts, symbolist flowering lettuces and aesthetic broccoli leaves and, wherever they saw railings, they encumbered them with more adornment [...].

Regeneration through art, seen from the intellectual standpoint, was perhaps impossible. In other words, as a few people noted at the time, it was a bourgeois position that was as bourgeois as the materialism of the bourgeoisie they opposed, or an ingenuous utopia, like that of socially-directed art that educates and ennobles spirits and peoples through awakening their sensibility, which were widespread ideas in Europe some decades ago. Yet, for all that, it is true that those whom we today call Modernist wanted to make Catalan society and the city of Barcelona better, transforming them through culture. This involved a process of cultural renovation that was not just artistic or literary.

In fact, in 1900 and the first years of the 20th century, Barcelona had taken the leap and was now a vibrant and vigorous city, a modern city. However, as Margarida Casacuberta sagely observed⁶, by the end of 1898 it was practically only the satirical press (which lasted for quite a while at the cost of bohemian and modernist artists) and some more traditionalist sectors that talked about Rusiñol-style Modernism.

■ ⁶ *Santiago Rusiñol: vida, literatura i mite* (Santiago Rusiñol: Life, Literature and Myth), Barcelona, Curial Edicions Catalanes i Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1997, p. 250.

⁷ An urban-based, classicist-tending Catalan cultural movement in reaction to Modernism but with some common features, glorifying order and the spirit of the 20th century with an idealist expectation of change [translator's note].

This makes one think: the Barcelona of the dawning years of the 20th century, which we call modernist today, is “Modernist” but is it perhaps not totally modern because the modern school was that of the *Noucentistes*⁷ who followed in their wake? Would they be the ones to “finish off” a programme of action that was born in Romanticism?

Nevertheless it is true that great architectural works were still being produced throughout the first decade of the 20th century, even while “Xènius”⁸ was upholding other postulates. Of course, it is easier to pick up a pen and put one's ideas on paper than it is to paint a canvas, produce a sculptured work and, still more, construct a building. Each art has a very different tempo and that of architecture is naturally more exigent than all the rest.

In brief, the term “Modernism” —originally a synonym of regeneration or the desire to be modern— was often adopted simply as being synonymous with the reiteration of graceful alien forms, those of Art Nouveau, which were particularly visible in the decorative arts, the graphic arts and architecture. In this regard, the comment made by the painter and critic Sebastià Junyent in 1901 is very significant: “Let us find a substitute for the word Modernist [by which he meant modern] because here, where everything is adulterated, they have prostituted it by using it to baptise the worthless plagiarism of foreign decorative art

⁸ The *nom de plume* of Eugeni d'Ors, one of the leading proponents of Noucentism who coined the term after the Italian style of naming movements by centuries (e.g. *Cinquecento*) and playing with the double sense of the Catalan *nou* (nine and new) [translator's note].

[Art Nouveau], most of which offends the eyes and good taste”⁹. Again, Josep M. Jordà, reviewing the evolution of aesthetic taste in 1900, noted, “This Modernist business was becoming fashionable [...] And it was then that they began to have solo exhibitions of Casas and Rusiñol, which coincided with the invasion of over-elaborate Modernism. A few English advertisements, three or four French and German decorative art magazines [...] brought about the miracle [...] and what a harvest of blue lilies, of drawn-out purplish leaves, and of ladies of perfected profiles and turbulent hair! The public dived into it, headfirst into the curlicues [...]. And the good Barcelona bourgeoisie also erred! The poor bourgeois is a pitiable wretch when it comes to art!”¹⁰.

However, as Jordà himself recalled, it is in this latter phase when the acceptance by the bourgeoisie of European fashion and the need of this bourgeoisie to demonstrate its power, not by brute force but by the power of the arts, are most evident. And this is the meeting point between artist and bourgeois citizen. The former has lowered his sights while the latter has at last accepted a form of modernity, even if only of a formal order. There emerges, then, a reciprocal need between art and industry, artist and bourgeois citizen. This was the view of the always-critical Sebastià Junyent: “Between the bourgeois who pays and the artist who abdicates, the guiltier party is the artist because he knows all too well that this is the true way of seeing and

doing [meaning painting without being a slave of Nature or of any argument] yet he does not devote his efforts to this but instead kneels down before the money that buys him”¹¹.

There is no doubt that Rusiñol has portrayed this alliance or put it into writing better than anyone else in his autobiographical novel, *L’Auca*, which was published in 1907 in personal and socio-political circumstances that are very different from those of ten years earlier. This is the year of the electoral triumph of Solidaritat Catalana, a great electoral alliance of most of the country’s political forces that would bring about sweeping changes in Catalan politics *vis-à-vis* the Spanish state. The tensions that were generated between artist and bourgeois, the opposition of the former to the order of the latter (Rusiñol’s own struggle with his family) that was present in his work thitherto, now definitively disappears in the utterances of his characters, Ramonet and his father (representations of Rusiñol and his grandfather): Ramonet will be a sculptor or, in other words, an artist, because his bourgeois parent pays for the marble.

Finally, the pact, the understanding occurs. If we start out from this fact, we can understand the Barcelona of the great patrons of the arts, the Barcelona of the Eixample, the bourgeois Barcelona that needs to ennoble its image with new architecture that will turn the city into a showcase of decorative feats

■ ⁹ JUNYENT, S., “L’art y la moda (Ampliació)” (Art and Fashion (Expansion)), *Juventut*, Barcelona, 21 February 1901, p. 140. Included in J. L. Marfany, *Aspectes del Modernisme* (Aspects of Modernism), Barcelona, 1978, p. 57.

¹⁰ “Jardins d’Espanya” per S. Rusiñol. Comentaris y Recorts. 1” (“Gardens of Spain” by S. Rusiñol.

Comments and Cuttings 1), *Juventut*, Barcelona, 8 November 1900, pp. 611-614.

¹¹ “La honradesa de l’art pictorich” (The Honour of Pictorial Art), *Juventut*, Barcelona, 8th November 1900, pp. 614-615 (jointly signed with Hermen Anglada).

(or “blunders”, according to Junyent), that straddle tradition and modernity.

After 1900, Rusiñol (following “a certain personal and professional pact-making”) devoted himself to his gardens, while he continued producing a literary opus that was increasingly removed from the symbolist and decadent world. Gaudí, too, focused his efforts on the Sagrada Família in the last third of his life. These were inner paths they had taken and Rusiñol’s cannot be deemed modern because it was sincere, because “it was sincere with his gardens”, as Jordà recognised, considering that he was now more an artist that he had been, even though the public no longer understood him as a painter while applauding him when he wrote¹².

While the “neutral class” of *L’Auca*, grey, anti-progress and dull, upholders of order —“order in eating, order in loving one’s wife and offspring, order in living and in dying and even order in the afterlife” — the man of moderation —“everything in moderation and small doses” — the archetypal symbol of the *aurea mediocritas*, personified by Senyor Esteve, had become the Modernist bourgeoisie (yet never so resolute as the Parisian bourgeoisie, Rusiñol lamented). Whatever the case, the change had been wrought.

Nonetheless, the man who was now starting to be the mythical Rusiñol, a

highly popular Barcelona personality, was still responding mockingly in *Joventut* (the Catalan “nationalist-leaning” magazine, let us recall) when they asked about the crisis of the textile industry: “Today, there are only two ways to dominate the market, either by brute force or artistic force. The first we’ve lost and the second we haven’t yet found”. And when the journalist said that people work hard in Catalonia and that is why everyone calls us “labouring Catalonia”, Rusiñol replied, “It will take us a long time to shake off this label of labouring and it won’t be until they call us the intellectual Catalonia. And everyone knows that from labouring to intellectual there is the same distance as there is between a bricklayer’s mate and a bricklayer. We work so as not to work so hard and to think more because thinking doesn’t take up space and working only overfills the warehouses. We are being bricklayers and not bricklayers’ mates”¹³.

Rusiñol still has a lot more for us to plumb, analyse, evaluate and that will surprise us. He is one of those characters one never gets to the bottom of... ||

This text is a shortened version of the lecture of the same title given on 15th June 2007 in the Casa Llotja de Mar, as the closing event of the programme of activities in celebration of the Rusiñol Year, Barcelona 2007, which was an initiative of the Barcelona Institute of Culture.

■ ¹² JORDÀ, J. M., ““Jardins d’Espanya” by S. Rusiñol. Comentaris i Recorts 1” (“Gardens of Spain” by S. Rusiñol. Comments and Cuttings 1), p. 613.

¹³ “La crisis industrial. Declaracions de Don Santiago Rusiñol” (The Industrial Crisis. Declarations of Don Santiago Rusiñol), *Joventut*, Barcelona, 11th October 1900, pp. 552-553.