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modernist barcelona

**Modernist art and architecture flowered in Barcelona like in no other city in the world. You will find entire districts spattered with Modernist buildings. For those with a keen interest in learning more about this artistic current there is the Modernist Route a program that identifies 115 of the most important sites. Tickets are available at the Modernist Route Centres located in the Turisme de Barcelona main office (Plaça Catalunya) and the Güell Pavillions.**

The first Modernist architect we shall illustrate is Domènec i Montaner, two of his buildings in Barcelona have been declared Unesco World Heritage Sites.

With the 1908 **Palau de la Música Catalana** he created one of the Modernist masterpieces, declared a Unesco World Heritage site. It took 3 years to complete (1905-1908) and was built as the home for the Orfeó Català, a leading local choir. Sheet iron was used precociously in this building, and the lavish decoration makes it feel like a piece of jewellery. The auditorium has an inverted cupola made of stained glass that will take your breath away, as will the mosaics that can be seen both inside and outside. Sculpture and painting are also a crucial part of the building's decoration and this synthesis of all the arts perfectly illustrates the Wagnerian influence on Catalan Modernism. With a busy concert schedule you can easily find out how good the acoustics of this building are.

**Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau** This unique hospital

*Palau Baró de Quadras by Puig i Cadafalch (currently Casa Asia)*

complex is an unqualified masterpiece of Modernism and shouldn't be missed by anyone interested in Modernist architecture. It is located not far from the great Sagrada Família, at the other end of the Avinguda Gaudí, and it is open to the public for viewing (temporarily closed for restoration work). This hospital originated in the 15th century, when the six hospitals that existed in Barcelona at the time were joined into one large complex. Its original location was in the old quarter, in what is today the National Library of Catalunya. By the late 19th century the original gothic premises were clearly insufficient and a major expansion of facilities was required. Thanks to Catalan banker and philanthropist, Pau Gil, construction was undertaken on the present day complex for which Modernist architect Lluís Domènec i Montaner was chosen. He in turn surrounded himself with some of the best tradesmen and artists of the time, such as **Pau Gargallo** and **Eusebi Arnau**, which goes a long way towards explaining the extraordinary richness and harmony of the building. Construction stretched over a long period of time, and the official opening was actually in 1930. Anecdotes abound, as that of the young Pablo Picasso painting a dead woman there in 1903. Recently this building, along with the **Palau de la Música Catalana**, was declared to be a World Heritage site by the UNESCO.

At number 35 of the Passeig de Gràcia is another of Lluís Domènec i Montaner's brilliant masterpieces. The **Casa Lleó Morera** is on what is known as the "block of disagreement" because of the contrast between the major Modernist buildings, including this one and those by Gaudí (**Casa Batlló**) and Puig i Cadafalch (**Casa Amatller**). The **Casa Lleó Morera** was originally built in 1864, and in 1902 Domènec i Montaner was contracted to carry out

a complete reformation. It was finished in 1906 and won the first prize of the City's Artistic Buildings Contest (held yearly between 1900 and 1930). The Lleó Morera family eventually sold the property in 1943, when drastic and ill-advised modifications were carried out. In the 1980's it was partially restored to its previous splendour. You can spend quite some time discovering and admiring all the decorative details on the exterior, but the inside has also managed to keep many original Modernist elements intact. The decoration

*Palau de la Música Catalana interior by Domènec i Montaner*



is again an overwhelming synthesis of all the arts, like in the **Palau Güell** or the **Palau de la Música**, and the sheer richness can easily keep you busy for quite a while.

The Passeig de Gràcia probably has the highest concentration of Modernist buildings in the city. Starting at the **Plaça Catalunya**, the first building to impress us is the 1890 **Casa Pascual i Pons**, (Passeig de Gràcia, 2-4) by Enric Sagnier, whose neo-gothic tendencies can be plainly seen. At number 6-14 stand the magnificent and stately **Cases Rocamora** (1918) by J. Bassegoda, one of the districts largest group of buildings. He also used a lot of neogothic elements which helps to make this stretch of Passeig de Gràcia one of Barcelona's most monumental. This part of the Passeig offers many opportunities for shopping or enjoying a good meal while sightseeing and discovering Modernist Barcelona.

At number 41 we come to the **Casa Amatller** (1898-1900) by Puig i Cadafalch. From the outside this building surprises for its combination of a rigid stepped gable with floral neogothic details. The surface decoration brings associations with metalwork miniatures and caskets from the middle ages. The façade shows St. George fighting the dragon, which is a Catalan nationalist theme once again. Right next door is the crowning piece of the "Block of disagreement" Gaudí's spectacular **Casa Batlló**, an apartment block which has an unreal appearance. The facade is cov-

ered with multi-coloured tiles and the roof uses glazed ceramic "scales", following the theme of St. George and the dragon. The cross can be read as piercing the dragon's backbone, while the eerie balconies are the bone's of the victims. The inside is stunning, especially the first floor salons and the central courtyard, but the innovative attic and spectacular rooftop are also well worth visiting up close.

Just around the corner on c/ Aragó you can visit one of the earliest Modernist buildings, the **Editorial Montaner i Simón** built by Domènec i Montaner between 1880 and 1885. It has now become the **Antoni Tàpies Foundation**, one of Barcelona's most innovative and active art centres. It is well worth visiting the inside, which has been beautifully restored and is an unbeatable setting for the Tàpies art library and exhibition space.

Another interesting feature of Catalan **Modernisme** is its early adoption by all kinds of patrons, especially shops such as pharmacies, bookstores, bakeries, etc. There are two of these on the Ramblas. The **Antiga Casa Figueras** (Rambla, 83) was decorated by Antoni Ros in 1902 and is richly decorated with mosaic and stained glass. The 1911 **Farmacia Genové** (Rambla, 77) by Enric Sagnier includes gothic elements as well.

The **Park Güell** was originally intended to be an English style garden city, this enchanted world was projected

Interior of the Hospital de Sant Pau by Domènech i Montaner



by Antoni Gaudí but most of it was actually executed by his extraordinary disciple **Josep Maria Jujol**. The undulating benches are covered with fragments of brilliant ceramic tile, all sizes, kinds, colours and qualities. The resulting mosaic is a favourite subject of photographers, who enjoy the challenge of striving to capture every nuance and detail. The main entrance to the park is flanked by a couple of buildings that look like they illustrate a fairytale, and actually they do: Hansel and Gretel. Next comes the famous staircase, with a multi-coloured dragon or lizard like creature keeping watch over the falling water that spouts from its mouth. Then the staircase bifurcates and leads the visitor to the impressive and monumental hypostyle hall. The ceiling is completely covered with the characteristic mosaic of broken tiles and there are several "suns" that break the monotony of the white tile. The roof of the hypostyle hall is the famous undulating bench terrace, a perfect vantage point to get a general view of Barcelona looking out towards the Mediterranean sea. The mosaic bench is a tour de force of colour arrangement, with an iconographic meaning (from strong and deep colours to white or near white) which recalls the rising of

Modernista decoration of restaurant in Hotel España by Domènech i Montaner



gothic cathedrals (from dark to light). This is another of Barcelona's Unesco World Heritage sites and nowadays it attracts huge numbers of visitors, try getting there early in the day or at lunchtime to avoid crowds.

The **Palau Güell** was projected by Antoni Gaudí in 1886 and benefited from the fact that Eusebi Güell, who commissioned the building of this palace which was originally intended to host social and community events (political meetings, concerts, etc.),

instructed him to use the best of everything. In other words, he had an unlimited budget to do as he saw fit. And that is evident in the result, with superb metalwork, stone masonry and woodwork that includes ebony and rare Brazilian woods. The metalwork on the façade includes Catalan national iconography, illustrating the fact that Modernism in Catalonia was identified with nationalist aspirations. Due to extensive restoration work being undertaken the Palau Güell will remain closed to visitors until 2011.

The **Casa Milà** (Passeig de Gràcia, 93), more generally known as "**La Pedrera**" (The Quarry), is Antoni Gaudí's most mature work. If any one building had to represent Modernism in Barcelona this would be it. Built between 1906 and 1912, it was the last apartment block to be built by Gaudí and it was full of revolutionary and pioneering details that demonstrated a brilliant mastery of technique and creativity. Originally lampooned and ridiculed for its naked and rough appearance (to the eyes of Gaudí's contemporaries), it was badly mutilated and reformed over the years. In 1984 it was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO. Today it is the headquarters of a local savings bank, La Caixa de Catalunya, which has invested huge amounts of money in ten years to restore the building back to the way Gaudí created it. And they have succeeded beautifully. This is a mandatory stop if you want to learn about Barcelona and Modernism. There is an exhibition space in the restored attic, and a conference hall in the basement, as well as the excellent free exhibition venue on the main floor (see our Museums section for current exhibition details). The view from the rooftop is priceless. Check our **Gaudí** section for more details.

Moreover, when speaking of *Modernisme*, we cannot forget that *Modernista* architecture integrated all the arts, both on the fronts and in the interiors of the buildings. Resulting from this integration are the *Modernista* buildings that were built in L'Eixample in Barcelona, outstanding among them the so-called "mansana de la discòrdia" (block of discord), with three emblematic buildings: Casa Amatller, Casa Lleó Morera and Casa Batlló. The wealth

Ramon Casas and Pere Romeu on a Tandem by Ramon Casas (1866-1932) . Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.



of *Modernista* decorative arts that can be admired in the **Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya** makes it possible to exhibit a remarkable number of works that were part of the interior décor on the main floors of all three buildings.

In the **Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya** the presence of works by two of the foremost artists of new Catalan painting is notable: **Ramon Casas** and **Santiago Rusiñol**, the promoters, together with **Miquel Utrillo** and **Pere Romeu**, of **Els Quatre Gats**, an establishment decisive for the consolidation of *Modernisme*. The work that has become emblematic of *Els Quatre Gats* and also of Catalan Modernism is **Ramon Casas and Pere Romeu on a Tandem**, which can now be admired in the galleries of the **MNAC**.

So, *Modernisme* embraced aspects as diverse as architecture, music, the plastic arts, the graphic arts and the decorative and industrial arts, and in all of them it achieved an extraordinary personality and quality. Nevertheless, it was the architectural side, overshadowed by the genius of Gaudí, that scaled the greatest heights.

The Block of Disagreement

