

Antoni Gaudi



By Lluís Permanyer

A Review by Garry Victor Hill

Antoni Gaudi

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Other photographs:

Fons Branguli page 4

Doctor Comas Llaberta page 5

Salvador Vilaseca page 7

Robert Justamente pages 12 and 13

Pere Vivas pages 22 and 23 above 28 29 and 54 above

Juanjo Puente page 23 below

Francesc Català-Roca pages 46 and 47

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Written without prejudice

Review

Writer Lluís Permanyer and Major Photographer Melba Levick both went on to do larger, more detailed works about Gaudi after seeing this work published in 1998, but this remains a fine if brief introduction to his work. Permanyer packs into 64 pages an amazing amount of information, description and observations, a chronology, a bibliography a detailed index of Gaudi's works, a further reading list and eighty-seven illustrations. Of those, eighty are of Gaudi's work and all are in color. The

remaining seven are etchings, cartoons or are very old photos. That hateful habit of using black and white photographs for colorful art has wisely been eschewed.

The biographic details of Gaudi's life are brief, but it seems little is known, right from the start. Apparently born a Catalan in June 1852, his exact birthplace remains disputed. His father was a town coppersmith, so aged sixteen or seventeen Gaudi moved to Barcelona to further his education. From then on he rarely travelled outside that city and when he did it seems those few trips were within Catalonia. He began working as a draftsman in 1876 and graduated as an architect two years later. His first works date from the 1870s. From then on his life seemed absorbed by his work. His friends were involved in architecture, either as patrons or financiers. One of his few breaks was in 1911 when he nearly died of fever and was forced into a prolonged rest.

He once said he had conquered all his vices except irascibility. It would be interesting to know if he said that as an obvious joke because if he did not, the contradiction shows a great personal failing. He certainly was irascible and stubborn in his attempts to create his way. His prolific output shows that he must have also been sedulous. This was fortunate for without all of these characteristics his art would never have been achieved.

Romance, politics, personal economics, hobbies, dislikes and likes all seem not to exist in his life. He was a practicing Catholic, but how he interpreted this remains uncertain. He may have left documents behind which were destroyed in the 1930s civil war, but that also remains uncertain. From 1905 he did live with his widower father and niece in one of the Güell Park houses. In 1925 he took up full-time residence in his workshop within the Sagrada Familia cathedral.

That act shows his dedication, focus and lack of a life outside his work. His work was his life and his life was entwined with his powerful imagination, frequent humor and flexibility. His originality and ability to blend different styles, from the medieval Arabic and Gothic to the new Gothic and Art Nouveau, went beyond being eclectic. He would frequently decorate the exteriors while having an austere interior in terms of decoration, yet those interiors would have a luxurious feel by the use of expensive building materials and his shrewd use of natural light. He elevated art in his architecture into the work of a genius. It becomes more obviously so when viewed against the architecture of his predecessors, frequently so humorless, so grey in color and squared or rectangular in form. That architecture should be bright in color, flowing with interior light, asymmetrical, curvaceous and whimsical appeared as

something new when he created his first examples in the 1880s. Earlier Arabic architecture and Medieval decoration had combined some of these aspects respectively, color and humor, but rarely together and never with those other qualities.

In Catalonia there was something in the air in his lifetime which led other Catalan architects to a similar originality and greatness. His frequent co-worker Francesc Berenguer I Mestres (1866-1914) who built Gaudi's Güell Park home, was one of the great architects of Art Nouveau, while Lluís Domènech i Montaner (1850-1923) did much to encourage and finance others, as well as achieve his own striking architectural output and restore important Catalan works. Gaudi apparently never had trouble finding craftsmen to carry out his visions, which also suggests that "something was in Catalonia's air" indeed. Yet as Permanyer points out, he was so far ahead of his time and so different from it, that he often got hostility from locals and ridicule from the famous. One wife of a client so disliked his interior that she destroyed it and replaced it in nouveau rich style. Prime Minister Clemenceau reacted by fleeing Barcelona on the next available train, recounting later that he had seen homes fit only for dragons and dinosaurs. A group of clerics saw what Gaudi was doing to restore their cathedral and begged their superiors to replace him. George Orwell described the Sagrada Família Cathedral as being so ugly that when the Anarchists took over Barcelona in 1936 they should have destroyed it, not saved it.

One thing Permanyer gets wrong is that not all Gaudi's plans and models for Sagrada Família were destroyed during the Civil War. In a personal 1986 tour given by one of the volunteers working there I was shown old architectural papers and a model of the future cathedral, both from Gaudi. They were being used to develop the cathedral as it was intended. However the model looked incomplete, lacking all the towers Gaudi intended and the papers were few, uncolored and lacking in the detail obviously needed. Gaudi's sudden death in a 1926 traffic accident left much unresolved.

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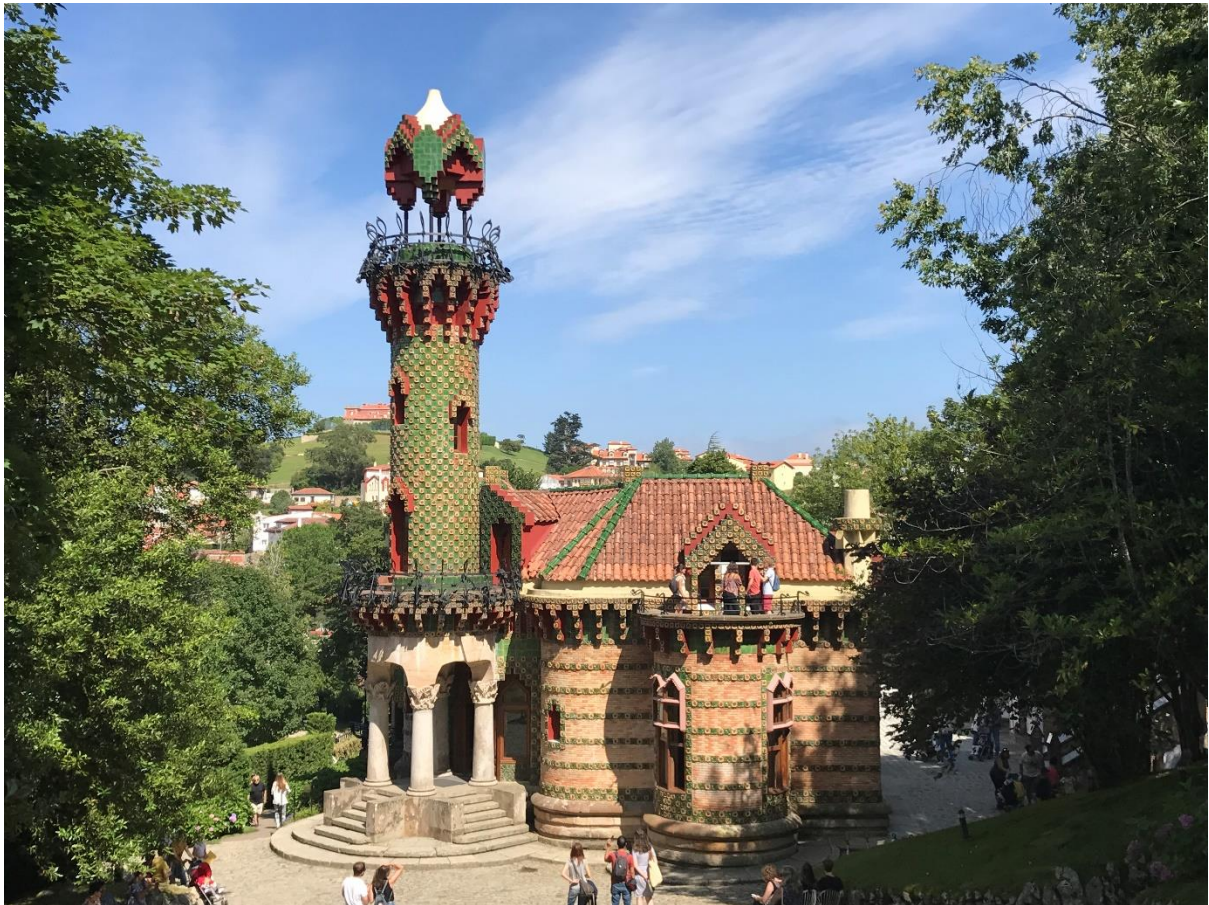
Sagrada Famiflia under construction

Catalan homes, palaces, offices and a park all in or near Barcelona.





- Casa Batlló, Barcelona -











Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926)