Ramon Casas

Shadow Puppets at the Quatre Gats
Bohemia and the popular imaginary
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Irrespective of his unquestionable status as a canonical painter, the figure of Ramon Casas (1866-1932) has become a very popular icon, a cultural symbol that in the course of time has become an emblem of the artistic and sentimental education of several generations of Catalans, especially the post-war generation. With his nonconformist attitude, Casas managed to rouse a feeling of empathy and complicity in a public who looked on his works as a mirror reflecting a shared system of values. The public’s familiarity with Casas’s work, often summed up in an ironic smile, was also influenced by the actions of an artist who was seen as a mischievous child, a petit bourgeois playing a game of provocation, luckily an inoffensive one whose actions never altered the social order.

Born into a well-off family, the painter decided to take a different path to that of his social background and adopted a bohemian way of life. In fact, at first, this stance was put on and somewhat artificial, but it later evolved towards well-founded and more convincing ideas, which in the field of art would lead him to adopt bolder aesthetic thinking and to follow less conventional paths. Endowed with innate talent and skills, Ramon Casas played a part at the forefront of the Catalan painting of the late 19th century and helped to steer the short-sighted localist approach that dominated the work of most Catalan painters of the time towards a new, cosmopolitan horizon with more ambitious expectations. This change of direction was based largely on the emergence of a new attitude, a new cosmovision, which as well as assimilating the influences of an eclectic model was indebted to a modern revision of the European pictorial tradition of the 17th century, especially of the Spanish school, in which the young Casas mirrored himself.

Curiously, though, the artist took this route along an unorthodox path. Instead of taking the more direct route and familiarising himself with the great...
masters of Spanish painting by visiting the Museo del Prado, which had been the mandatory, canonical way throughout the 19th century, he got this experience in Paris. At first he didn’t go to the sources, but assimilated them indirectly through the filter of his French teachers and, particularly, Carolus Duran (1837-1917), in whose work he found reflected the painting of the past, which aroused in him a feeling of empathy towards French painters.

In the end, then, Casas was the ‘victim’ of a historic self-deceit, the trip to Paris in search of a fertile contact with Europe’s most avant-garde and dynamic pictorial centre, where he must have projected his personal wish for renewal, and from which he emerged as a representative of Baroque pictorial revisionism.

Nevertheless, he found other things to stimulate him in the city of Paris that stirred his innate curiosity and revealed his need to reinvent himself and adopt a provocative attitude of épater le bourgeois. While not achieving radical or maximalist results, this did materialise in bohemian activities fed by an open, broad-minded culture that was highly receptive to the introduction of new ways of understanding art. One of Casas’s most unusual and original contributions to the birth of the first episode of organised modernity to emerge in Barcelona, following the opening of the beer hall Els Quatre Gats on 14 June 1897, was undoubtedly the understanding, which became a practice (even though this movement didn’t survive long enough for the gesture to become a change of behaviour), that the traditional separation between high and low culture had to be overcome. In this respect, the atmosphere created at Els Quatre Gats favoured the apparition of unorthodox practices that illustrated cultural traditions of a popular nature, like Chinese shadows or puppets, which were rooted in the popular imaginary. The avant-garde elites were able
to connect with this type of expression, encouraging its use and even, in some cases, converting traditional practices to new formats more in line with the wish for renewal that was behind the rise of the cabaret show.

Anyway, the Chinese shadows were very popular in Barcelona, as we see from the large amount of graphic material documenting the dissemination of this repertory by Barcelona publishers. In general terms, these are single sheets on which are printed the silhouettes of figures making up a wide range of characters, creating a type of traditional storytelling with similar characteristics to the *auques*, originally intended to be passed on orally. The Amades collection keeps examples of a type of print used to publicise the shadow puppet shows held in Barcelona during the 19th century, especially in the 1860s, which also offered the chance to purchase the figures that featured in these performances. One of the most popular of the printing houses that published these sheets with pictures of shadow puppets was that of Juan Llorens, who sold them at his establishment in Carrer de la Palma de Santa Caterina in Barcelona.

One publication by the Llorens printing house, *El diablo de la cesta* (‘The devil in the basket’, 1864), a one-act play for performing in the shadow theatre, documents the fortunes of these practices in Barcelona. On the back cover of the script we find information for the public about the release of new titles in the collection which would be on sale at the M. Borràs establishment in Pujada del Teatre. In this list we find titles like, for example, *La tentacion de San Antonio* (‘The Temptation of Saint Anthony’); *Los lances del Carnaval* (‘The Events of Carnival’), *La enferma fingida* (‘The Fake Patient’), Merlin el encantador (‘Merlin the Bewitcher’) o *Celestina o los dos trabajadores* (‘Celestina or the Two Workers’).
In the case of the shadow puppets kept at the Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya, we have no way of knowing whether they were ever used in any of the performances held at the premises of Els Quatre Gats. Consulting the surviving documentation (including programmes of some of the events performed), we can find nothing to connect the surviving puppets with any of the performances mentioned there.

Presumably, the figures must have been easily identifiable for spectators and must have had some bearing on the subject of the event. The fact that many of them depict some of the ‘regulars’ who are part of the history of the establishment makes them difficult to identify as their features are caricaturish and stereotyped. Formally, the designer, who was very probably Ramon Casas, working with his great friend Josep Meifrén, who mechanised the puppets, emphasised the most characteristic features of each model and used an exaggerated, often comical, register. In this respect, we have been able to identify some of the protagonists from their exaggerated defects and, in other cases, propose a hypothesis which, with the natural methodological caution, seems plausible to us, as we can compare the puppets with portraits of the time, either in drawings, some by Casas himself, or in photographs. In this way, in some of the pictures we have managed to identify what could be portraits of Pompeu Gener (1848-1920), Àngel Guimerà (1845-1924), Pere Romeu (1862-1908), Miquel Utrillo (1862-1934), Maurici Vilomara (1848-1930) or a self-portrait of Ramon Casas himself.
The influence of Paris was a decisive factor in the formation of the core of Els Quatre Gats, the founding episode of a bohemia with a militant leaning. After all, this intergenerational stronghold owed a debt to the atmosphere the generation born in the 1860s had found in the most cosmopolitan and avant-garde city in Europe at the time.

Moving on from the anarchic, individualist trends of previous periods, the group behind Els Quatre Gats felt the need to gather somewhere where they could share experiences. This wasn’t part of a wish to break with anything or to transgress, but should be interpreted more as a rejection aimed at preserving an eclectic, unorthodox cosmovision that was open and receptive to all types of creative manifestations that involved a sense of playfulness, an urge to play that drove all the regulars who frequented the establishment. In short, it provided a venue in which to present all sorts of events, shows, exhibitions by up-and-coming new talent, in a move to channel underground trends that were excluded from the scenarios and showcases of official art.

In this respect, certain forms of traditional culture, such as auques, puppet plays or Chinese shadows, also showed the influx of an unembarrassed, hybrid aesthetic permeable to the influence of a tradition that already had precedents and conspicuous representatives. Forerunners of the bohemian spirit, they included legendary characters such as the versatile writer Pompeu Gener, commonly known as Peius, who became an icon and a point of reference in this extravagantly irreverent cultural tradition characterised by its highly unconventional social behaviour.

**Apel·les Mestres**

We mustn’t underestimate the activity of another artist who was at least as versatile as Gener. Apel·les Mestres (1854-1936), a figure difficult to classify and with a very versatile profile, always quick to extend his graphic repertory with the influence of end-of-century movements such as Japanese aesthetics, symbolism or other cultural references of different types. However, one of Mestres’ most important contributions was his ability to bring a substrate of traditional culture to the Catalan art of the period, showing an open mind when it came to spurring his fertile imagination inspired by the repertory of traditional legends, the universe of stories and legendary tales. The stars of his narratives are characters born out of the author’s fantasy and imagination.

Mestres cultivated a hybrid language in which archaic aspects of his repertory lived alongside elements copied from the most avant-garde visual movements. His aim was to code a new vocabulary, a new visual grammar intended to create a kind of metalanguage. His figurative culture became a true treasure trove, a kaleidoscope of variations, rich in nuance and contrast. The artist comes across as a tireless worker, a forerunner of informalist practices, captured in notebooks of which the Department of Drawings and Engravings keeps several specimens that reflect a time spent crystallising unconnected thoughts, ideas and themes with no narrative or discursive logic. These are schematic exercises, sketches, inventions, doodles that look like a child’s scribbling and that could answer to the model that Spanish writers of the Baroque, in referring to experimental drawing, used to call, rasguños.
We must also remember a very common tendency of 19th-century Catalan thinking and art to mirror itself in the medieval world. Mestres became a genuine admirer of this world and a great activist for it, following in the steps of Josep Puiggrà (1821-1903), who reproduced items of Catalan medieval costumes thanks to the study of Gothic painting, books of miniatures and other sources which for him were a wellspring of inspiration. As a complement to his creative side, Mestres was also a very eclectic collector of very heterogeneous items. Although he couldn’t be considered a true connoisseur or specialist, he did have a taste for collecting things, not so much with an eye on quality as for the sake of accumulating them. He became the typical end-of-century collector who turns his field of work into a varied scenario of objects and antiques dominated by a feeling of horror vacui and for whom the fetish for objects becomes a principle worshipped by the owner.

**Pompeu Gener**

Gener and Mestres, two members of an earlier generation with a documented friendship, acted as an intergenerational link and –Gener especially– were much admired by the first Modernista generation, to the point where Gener, with his extravagant and eccentric behaviour, became a reference to be admired and imitated. It’s significant that Ramon Casas, in his gallery of portraits in charcoal, paid tribute to the two characters and Gener, with his unmistakable tubby outline topped with his traditional wide-brimmed hat and his stick, also became a character in one of the shadow plays in the form of a caricature of the original.

Like Mestres, Gener also stood out for his love of collecting antiques. In particular, he had an acknowledged reputation as a specialist in arms and armour. This aspect of Gener is revealed in the documentation kept at the Barcelona City Historical Archives and in the collections of the Board of Museums at the National Archives of Catalonia, which also speak of his role in the purchase of prestigious foreign collections on this subject. The collections of the Barcelona City Photographic Archives contain various images featuring Gener himself, showing him dressed up in period armour or as a Renaissance knight. Though not very large in terms of the number of photographs, this portrait gallery connects perfectly with the drawing of Carles Casagemas (1880-1901) kept in the museum’s collections. In it the artist supplants the identity of the protagonist of Diego Velázquez’s (1599-1660) iconic work, the portrait of Gaspar de Guzmán y Pimentel, Count-Duke of Olivares, on horseback, putting Gener’s face in place of the Count-Duke’s.

Trompe-l’œil, creating an illusory and unreal visual effect in the image, something much appreciated in the Baroque period, was highly valued by some photographers in the 1860s. For them, the new reproduction technique was a very effective method for confusing and surprising the observer, creating trick pictures in which, for example, sitters were photographed holding their head in their hands. The Barcelona Photographic Archives keep an album with a collection of photographs in carte-de-visite format, which is a reproduction of a gallery of characters dressed up to attend the Carnival dances organised by the Sociedad Recreativa La Paloma.

At first, the dances were held at the society’s headquarters in Carrer Nou de la Rambla and, after 1862, at the premises of the Teatre Odeon in Carrer de l’Hospital. The pictures were taken between 1861 and 1864 by various photographers: Manuel Moliné (1833-1901), Rafael Albareda and the twosome Cric y Cram, pseudonym of the caricaturist and painter Josep Parera Romero (1828 [?] -1902) and the bookseller Innocenci López Bernagossi (1829-1895), founder of the satirical weeklies La Campana de Gràcia and L’Esquella de la Torratxa.

Returning to Gener, remember that the Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya keeps the bequest the writer left to the museums of Barcelona after his death in 1920. This very heterogeneous material reflects his equally eclectic taste in collecting. Work on paper and academic subject matters predominate –anatomical studies of different parts of the human body–, revealing the collector’s special predilection. The work give us an idea of 19th-century academic work produced as part of the learning and training process of future artists in these institutions. Most of them are anonymous compositions by unknown artists that seem to follow a model derived from copies of prints. Although it’s difficult to establish the authorship of these works, in one of them an inscription in the bottom right corner could be the signature of Vicenç Borràs (1867-1945). Though not very abundant, the collection contains a few examples of male nudes, the popular academy figures, whose authorship, unfortunately, is also unknown to us.
Among the curiosities relating to Gener is a work of his own kept in the collections of the Department of Drawings and Engravings. This drawing (7292), signed in the bottom right corner and dedicated to Ignacio Anzizu, is a reproduction of a composition that imitates the trompe-l’oeil so common in the Baroque period. The artist reconstructs a kind of collage avant la lettre in which he has drawn personal items: bits of letters where his name appears, a copy of plates from pharmacological or medical guides and newspaper cuttings –to be precise, the front page of the newspaper El telégrafo dated 1863. Though not considered an outstanding work, it’s a remarkable document as it speaks for his interest in producing works of art, even if it went no further than the dabbings of an amateur. It seems plausible, also, to attribute him with another unsigned drawing (4772) of a caricaturish nature, in which two figures appear in period dress with a dagger. As we have seen, these two motifs are part of the sentimental universe of Pompeu Gener and his circle of interests. The same can be said of two other paintings (MNAC 14502 and 45274). The first, signed and dated in 1873, is of the Head of a Girl and, though a very clumsy piece of work, is highly illustrative of his approach. The second, which bears the title Port of Venice and shares similar characteristics, is dated 1855. This poses an unlikely scenario as it would mean that Pompeu Gener painted it at the age of seven, in a fit of unheard-of precocity.

The City Historical Archives also keep a small number of letters that document the existence of a correspondence between Casas and Gener and confirm the friendship between the two. In one of these letters, dated in Barcelona on 22 January 1920, the painter asks Gener if he can arrange for him to see the works decorating Els Quatre Gats and, in the event that the price of the pictures was not too high, Casas even expressed a wish to buy them. We don’t know if Casas received an answer as Gener died in 1920. Whatever the case, the letter’s contents don’t tell us if the works belonged to Gener or whether Gener knew the owner and had to put Casas in touch with him or mediate to be able to see the works. What’s more, as they are mentioned in the letter as ‘the pictures from Els Quatre Gats’, we can only assume the author was referring to the paintings Tandem and Motor car, currently in the modern art collection of the Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya.

Ramon Casas, Study for the “Tandem”, c. 1897, Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya.
Ramon Casas, Ramon Casas and Pere Romeu on a Tandem, 1897.
Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.
Ramon Casas, *Ramon Casas and Pere Romeu in a Motor Car*, 1901, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.

Modest Urgell, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.
**The second Modernista generation**

Irony, a sense of humour or a comic view of the reality around them was precisely what came to define and fully characterise the group at Els Quatre Gats. This scathing look at the world around them, closely tied to a certain modern cosmovision that saw life as a parodic experience, influenced the subsequent generation of Catalan artists and fuelled the activity of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Isidre Nonell (1872-1911), Xavier Gosé (1876-1915) and Ricard Opisso (1880-1966). These and other artists, like Casas, Santiago Rusiñol (1861-1931) and Pere Romeu, made humour, parody, caricature and irony permanent guidelines for their activity, hoping to tear open the seams of a petit bourgeois social morality that corseted and restricted their urge to transgress. In fact, humour became an instrument of provocation for the modern artist, who saw the chance of subverting the established social order without making a social movement out of this creative act.

After all, the modern artist, over and above his bohemian attitude, is characterised by his not belonging to any social class. He therefore doesn’t aspire to acquiring class consciousness, with the intention of stirring up social revolt. Irony helps him keep his distance from the world, without taking sides or identifying with any social class. ‘Irony’ becomes the best resource for the sceptic who doesn’t aspire to change his social setting but who observes it with an intelligent eye and isolates himself from this reality without getting involved either socially or emotionally.

This attitude could be summed up in Nonell’s famous declaration ‘All I do is paint’, which went on to become a slogan, a true declaration of principles that shows great humility on the part of its creator.

**Modest Urgell**

A sense of humour also characterised much of the work by the painter Modest Urgell (1839-1919), one of the most conspicuous representatives of Catalan painting, known mainly for his reputation as a painter of commercially highly successful landscape compositions. Like so many other artists, he kept up a less well-known activity devoted to drawing caricatures criticising society. In my opinion, the great virtue of some of these images and what makes them especially significant is the tone of self-parody in them. The museum keeps some very illustrative examples of this repertory in the form of albums or artist’s notebooks which make up a kind of diary featuring the painter’s alter ego and including episodes of self-criticism in which the protagonist is Urgell himself. In an exercise of psychological exploration, he eventually becomes an object of the grotesqueness and the interpretation with which he ridicules his own professional activity, critics and members of art juries, who he used to represent with long donkey’s ears. In this work, artistic activity is seen without the lyrical or poetic aura his paintings of churches or cemeteries convey. In fact, the painter uses this comic register more to laugh at himself, in an exercise of sincerity that breaks with the seriousness, the reverential pomposity and the wish for transcendence that we find in his public image.

These notebooks are a door to the painter’s most unconscious side and reveal a private, hidden side to the man. In this work destined for his own consumption and not intended for commercialisation, Urgell finds release and a way of showing us a personality that conceals very different personal and social concerns than the ones he projects in public.
Some of these caricatures make up a kind of album with text that underscores the ironic message and the wish to ridicule those faculties that have contributed most to his acknowledgement by society and the economic success he had thanks to the mimetic repetition of formulas for composing a subject matter and a visual repertory. Many of these pictures suggest a sense of dejection at having become a painter trapped by the syndrome of repetition *ad nauseam* and mass production of compositions, of which he was the foremost victim.

**Pere Romeu**

The versatility of many of the protagonists of this ‘countercultural’ episode is exemplified in Pere Romeu, one of the most outstanding members of the group, who headed some of the most unorthodox proposals of this historic moment in Barcelona. As well as becoming a business promoter who was open and receptive to the incorporation of new forms of popular entertainment, through his activity he established an unclassifiable type of character, a bohemian with a wide range of concerns who liked to keep abreast of experiments in all sorts of activity, among them, sport took up much of his interest, without underestimating other occupations that centred his attention without any attempt at being professional. In fact, Romeu could be called a true avant-gardist, a kind of Dadaist *avant la lettre*, a counterpart to the famous singer, actor and club owner Aristide Bruant (1851-1921), because his lifestyle and cosmovision were perfectly adapted to and in tune with the pace of modern life, with the demands arising in a society in permanent transformation and in which the emergence of new forms of locomotion (first the bicycle, followed by the motor car) became the most symbolic icons of our time. His wager for risk, his fondness for sports like motor racing and motorcycling and the frantic activity that led him to take up fencing and boxing, draw the profile of someone anxious to permanently reinvent themselves.
Though perhaps less well known, his documented work as a photographer must not be underestimated either. In this respect, we can appreciate his interesting work as a graphic reporter in the images published in different issues of the magazine *La Il·lustració Catalana*, as well as the little material from the López publishers’ collection, kept at the Photographic Archives of Barcelona. These images focus on different social and sporting events held in the city of Barcelona between the years 1905 and 1906, to mention just two dates for which we have accounts of his activity.

Be that as it may, we must not overlook his provocative communicative strategy either, acting as an ideologue for some of the writings published in the sphere of Els Quatre Gats. These are characterised by their ironic tone and the use of an exacerbated rhetoric in a register akin to agitprop. And we mustn’t forget that the existence of a large number of his images (paintings, drawings, posters, invitations, photographs, etc.) also formed part of the same strategy which was to create a ubiquitous image with iconic characteristics that were highly effective in advertising.

Certainly, this little-known side of Romeu helps to emphasise the profile of a multidisciplinary figure who diversified his interests and illustrates his ability to get the most intense satisfaction out of any of the activities he engaged in. The idea of looking on life as a playful experience, keeping up a constant vital activity, intensely enjoying every moment, conjures up an image of the pursuit of a hedonistic ideal, a carefree and irreflexive view of the human condition that goes against the senses of social ambition or recognition.
In this respect, the lively atmosphere and the optimism that must have prevailed at Els Quatre Gats from the moment of its inauguration made it the ideal setting for an urge for freedom that moral conventions prevented from materialising. Within this context, no action or activity had any social repercussion and I don’t think it did anything to breach the bourgeois system of values or social conventions, though it probably helped strengthen the self-esteem and the convictions of the entire group of artists who were part of this cultural and leisure venture. The idea that the talent and creativity of the new generation of artists could find a platform was a very radical novelty in a society unused to fomenting the emergence of new aesthetic proposals arising from the need for a critical review of its hegemonic, pre-eminent ‘star system’. After all, the generation Santiago Rusiñol and Ramon Casas belonged to, or Pere Romeu himself, could have gone on using the same standardised and comfortable formulas used by the preceding generation, one well-established financially and socially thanks to the high purchasing power of its clients, who demanded certain artistic products that were representative of sumptuous aesthetic tastes. However, they chose to introduce new ways of understanding art that were a long way from the parameters mentioned above.

One of the great virtues we have to note in their favour was their eschewal of this model, even if it was just a temporary wager, to offer the next generation the chance to speak out in its own defence, to assert its own ideas. As an example of this we could mention the exhibitions of work by Nonell, Gosé and, especially, a young Picasso, who modelled himself on the example of Rusiñol and Casas and their attitude to life. In fact, Picasso’s early works show his admiration for and debt to the work of these two artists, especially Casas, as we see in the portraits emulating his models, which show similar leanings in typology, technique and composition.
Ramon Casas, Miguel Utrillo. 
*Sombras. Quatre Gats*, 1897. 
Postermil S.L., Barcelona.
The shadow puppets on permanent loan to the Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya make up a unique and very unusual set. They are a testimony to a very popular practice which in this particular case combines the talent of their designer, Ramon Casas, and the technical ingenuity of the creator of these articulated beings, the doctor Josep Meifrén, with whom Casas always kept up strong bonds of friendship.

The set constitutes a model of hybridisation, of synthesis, which gathers the forms of popular amusement that were well established in 19th-century Barcelona. This is borne out by the existence of prints depicting this type of traditional performance and also by the Modernista revival of this type of artistic practice. This reinvention brought it added artistic value, combining Ramon Casas’s creativity and the influence of new languages, new art movements like poster art or Japanese aesthetics, which also had a visual influence on developments in Chinese shadow theatre and on the figures used in it. In this respect, the design of the figures, with their sketchy features, exemplifies the process by which these models were assimilated.

However, the images also adopt Casas’s personal style, which gives them a charm and an unmistakable note of authority which is especially felt in the caricaturish air with which he draws the outline, the silhouette of each of the puppets, and in some cases emphasises certain facial features that help identify the character. The tubby outline and wide-brimmed hat, along with the stick, are typical, stereotyped attributes of Pompeu Gener, one of the people represented.

Although there are few records of what plays formed part of the shadow puppet performances scheduled at Els Quatre Gats, we do know of a religious repertory, an aspect that complicates the possible purpose of the shadow puppets that now enrich the museum’s heritage. Though no more than mere speculation, it’s possible that Casas, with the complicity of Meifrèn, decided to create these works to preserve the memory of some of the most iconic figures centred around the hard core that met in the tavern in Carrer Montsió. It could also suggest some kind of activity intended to advertise the show being staged in the establishment. In the same way that in the posters for Els Quatre Gats or the one for the shadow puppets he used the faces of the best-known of the regulars (Casas, Romeu, Rusiñol, Meifrèn and Utrillo), devotees and leaders of the cultural initiatives they organised, there could have been a similar strategy, in this case centring on the use of the most prominent members of the group for publicity purposes.

In fact, the shows at Els Quatre Gats were indebted to the Chat Noir cabaret opened in Paris in 1881 and founded by the businessman Rodolphe Salis (1851-1897). In 1893, a collection of programmes of the Chinese shadow plays performed at Le Chat Noir was published in Paris. With the title Ombres Parisiennes. Programme, the booklet contained a list of titles of the plays and the names of the authors and performers who had taken part. As well as quite well-known artists like Théophile Alexandre Steinlen (1859-1923), the author of two plays, Le Virtuose and Une page d’amour, the list of contributors also included the name of Michel Utrillo, author of the play La Conquête de la Lune, one of the plays.
performed, and Pierre Romeu, who we must obviously assume was Pere Romeu. The fact that the two most conspicuous representatives of Els Quatre Gats took part in staging these performances of Chinese shadows helps us understand the contagion effect that would explain why years later the café in Carrer Montsió also chose to hold this type of traditional show.

Similarly, we mustn’t underestimate the contributions by Emmanuel Poiré (1858-1909), known artistically by the name of Caran d’Ache, a caricaturist and set designer for the Chinese shadow plays. Poiré worked at the Chat Noir cabaret, for which he wrote some plays, specialising in military subject matters, for which he always showed a certain predilection. The Museu del Cinema in Girona keeps posters from the time, dated between 1885 and 1900, which with the title *Représentations de d’ombres françaises*, advertised the Chinese shadow plays based on military works written by this artist.

Other productions of advertising art speak for the scope and scale of a phenomenon and its international growth as a highly popular event. In particular, the poster by Mosnar Yendis (1881 – active 1924), *Terry’s Theatre. The Shadows on the blind* (1899), a copy of which is kept at the Museu de les Arts Escèniques, provides a glimpse of the history of the theatre founded by Edward Terry in the City of Westminster in 1887, which had room for 800 spectators. In 1910, the theatre, where plays and Chinese shadows were performed, was turned into a cinema.
As I said earlier, the visual aesthetics of the Chinese shadows had a direct influence on changes in the language of advertising art. Many illustrators, such as Steinlen, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) or Ramon Casas himself, added to their repertory with certain practical solutions that owed a debt to the visual effects of the shadows cast. These borrowings were used as a highly effective technical resource to emphasise the contrast between the areas of colour and the monochrome areas and to produce isocephaly.

Some posters, like La Sera (1892), for example, by Leopoldo Metlicovitz (1868-1944), or one of the covers for the weekly The July Century (1895), by Charles Herbert Woodbury (1864-1940), provide paradigmatic examples of the influence of graphical solutions that are clearly reminiscent of Chinese shadow plays. However, the most emblematic work of this type and the one that has eventually become a modern icon is Steinlen’s poster Tournée du Chat Noir (1896). The sinister figure of the cat casting its enigmatic, evil shadow creates a troubling, disturbing effect at the sight of the physical presence of an animal whose feline nature, which comes closer to the dark side and the most unpredictable acts of human conduct, is concealed beneath the cultural stereotype of the tame, docile pet. After all, the name of the Barcelona tavern Els Quatre Gats drinks from the literary, ideological, artistic and symbolic sources of the Chat Noir cabaret.

Ramon Casas is a paradigmatic example of the modern artist in any literal sense of the term. Critics and historians have built up an unambiguous view of Casas’ work and figure and have pointed him out as a great painter and the creator of some of the most emblematic and iconic works in the history of Catalan art. Nevertheless, the fact is that while showing unmistakable signs of belonging to what has conventionally been described as canonical culture, behind his outward appearance a contradictory figure emerges who was very receptive of more traditional forms of art which were such a favourite with Casas and, by extension, with the whole of Barcelona’s bohemian circle.

In this respect, his pictorial production is a fairly representative example of the influence and assimilation of other media which, like advertising art, arrived on the European artistic scene during the last decades of the 19th century. Casas had definite empathy for a type of work in which he found figurative resources, a graphic repertory and compositional models with which he was able to construct a poetry of hybridisation characterised by the use of combinatorial formulas that did away with the habitual supremacy of painting over posters.

For one period of his life, the artist flirted with practices of an informal, unorthodox type that reflected the influence of popular traditions in the artistic imaginary of a group of artists who were seduced by experiences far removed from commercial formality. Fantasy and imagination, cloaked in irony, sarcasm or social criticism, had no place in a very conservative ideological framework that wasn’t inclined to exhibit a type of practice containing a hefty dose of social transgression. Whatever the case, when the popular tavern Els Quatre Gats opened, it was an important landmark in the quest for freedom that drove the work of many of the artists and promoters who gathered at this venue, where ideas that helped undo the seams of a corseted society were welcome. The idea was to foster recreational activities of a playful type, in which play, as a factor contributing to social disinhibition, helped break out of social roles, stereotypes and conventions.
Théophile Alexandre Steinlen, 
_Tournée du Chat Noir_, 1896, 
Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya.

Next page: Ramon Casas 
& Josep Melfrén, Shadow puppets 
for the theatre at ‘Els Quatre Gats’, 
c. 1897-1898, Col·lecció de Pere 
Jiménez-Melfrén Caraips.
During the years this bohemian nucleus operated, there were regular performances of puppets and of Chinese shadows to fill the leisure time of the regulars gathered at the premises and also to spur new forms of creativity linked to amusements like the carnival celebrations, which themselves were motivated by the wish to break with restrictive and reactionary social conventions. Obviously this urge to escape is not exclusive to modernity, as it has always been commonplace since ancient times, when artists used the ‘artistic back room’ to put on playful, fantastic and provocative performances with which they gave expression to a highly fertile imagination.

The Museu Nacional keeps a large number of drawings that document the fortunes of this type of practice among Catalan artists in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Without exaggerating the value of this rich and varied repertory, I would like to emphasise the importance of all this material as a way of approaching other facets of these artists, those to be found at the epicentre of their most private activity, reserved for the enjoyment of a handful of people. At the same time, these productions also constitute an instrumental resource of a methodological type, centred on unknown or unfamiliar aspects of the multidisciplinary interests of Catalan artists during this period of history. The discovery and showcasing of these collections also helps understand the creative act in all its complexity and true dimension, as it provides a totally new approach and reveals original, amusing and, in some cases, unusual views and perceptions. In this respect, the recovery of this set, as well as showing off the wealth of the museum’s collections, also gives visibility to the aim of promoting a public heritage which until now has not been given the consideration it deserves, either through ignorance or from an attitude that looks down on work considered a minor practice of little artistic importance.

Rescuing this heritage could also help to lay the foundation for an archaeology of modernity, a kind of genealogy, made up of episodes featuring eclectic, unorthodox characters who, before the flourishing of modernity, were forerunners of a versatile sensibility and were wide open to influences of all sorts –Orientalism, Japonism, Medievalism, popular traditions– constructing an attitude and a willingness for modernity avant la lettre that has not been given the attention it deserves from critics and historians.

The legacy of these artists includes episodes that respond to the need to express themselves or that simply act as an instrumental resource through which they seek out less conventional routes removed from traditional forms of art. Looked down on as lesser products, seen with elitist prejudices because they do not have the results expected from a work of art and do not live up to the expectations created, they make up an important group of works that respond to the interest in exploring forms of art to be found in the subconscious and that materialise in whimsical, random forms falling outside the parameters of what was accepted as art in the 19th century.

In fact, these submerged experiences that show themselves at moments when the artist’s fantasy and imagination are not subject to social restrictions or conventions are common in all stages of human creativity. In this sense, the drawing by Apel·les Mestres Je rêve, which represents a man dozing and belongs to one of the albums kept in the collections of the Museu Nacional de Catalunya, can only be interpreted with an eye on Goya, as a kind of evocation of Goya’s popular engraving The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters.
It’s quite obvious, though, that Mestres’s drawing is far from having the implications illustrated in Goya’s work, which has become a true declaration of principle, an affirmation of the triumph of Reason. In Mestres’s case, it’s an exercise of idleness, of being carried away by a moment’s irony that translates as the appearance of unrelated artistic forms that fail to establish any kind of relation of cause and effect. Whatever the case, Mestres’s attitude is worthy of special recognition because, with his contribution, he generated a very positive trend that helped catapult the hopes and wishes of the immediate generations of artists. In symbolic terms, the role of Mestres was to act as a nexus or link in an imaginary genealogical chain that found continuation in the Quatre Gats group and culminated with the appearance of work by the young Picasso.

Francesc Quílez i Corella
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L’Esquella de la Torratxa (Carnival)

Quatre Gats magazin