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## THE CATALAN CENTRES ABROAD

THE CATALAN “CASALS” ABROAD USUALLY PLAY TWO MAIN FUNCTIONS: THOSE AIMED AT MEMBERS, BASICALLY CATALANS, AND THOSE INVOLVING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY.

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**A** prominent feature of the Catalan presence throughout the world has always been the Catalan centres or *casals*, organisations which over the ages have provided a meeting-place for Catalans who for whatever reason have settled outside Catalonia.

The oldest of the *casals* still active today originated in Latin America. This

was no accident. For many years, basically until the fifties, this region was the most frequent destination for Catalans. There were several important waves of migrations, each of which enriched the activity of the *casals*. If we take the twentieth century, there was a significant exodus during the first third of the century as a result of the wars in Africa and the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera.

The fall of the republican regime in 1939 forced thousands of people to go abroad, many of them to America, while a significant number joined the fight against nazism in World War II.

After the end of the war, many of the Catalans who had taken part settled in European countries, especially France, as the dictatorship in the Spanish state showed no signs of coming to an end.



ANTONI CLAVÉ. LE VOYEUR. 1973

When the economic situation in Western Europe improved and economic growth took off during the sixties and until the oil crisis, many Catalans left to work in France, Switzerland, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Benelux countries, etc.

After the oil increase of 1973, which considerably affected the economies of the developed countries as a result of their marked dependence, Australia became for some years the only destination.

Finally, with the economy stabilized, there have been no more large-scale departures of Catalans abroad. In 1986, and as a result of Spain's entry into what was then the European Community, approximately two hundred Catalans left to work in the various institutions of today's European Union, many young people are studying in European or North-American universities, a timid internationalization is taking place in Catalan businesses, with Catalan executives settling in different parts of the world, and a still significant number of

Catalans travel to less well-off countries to contribute to the development of the local communities.

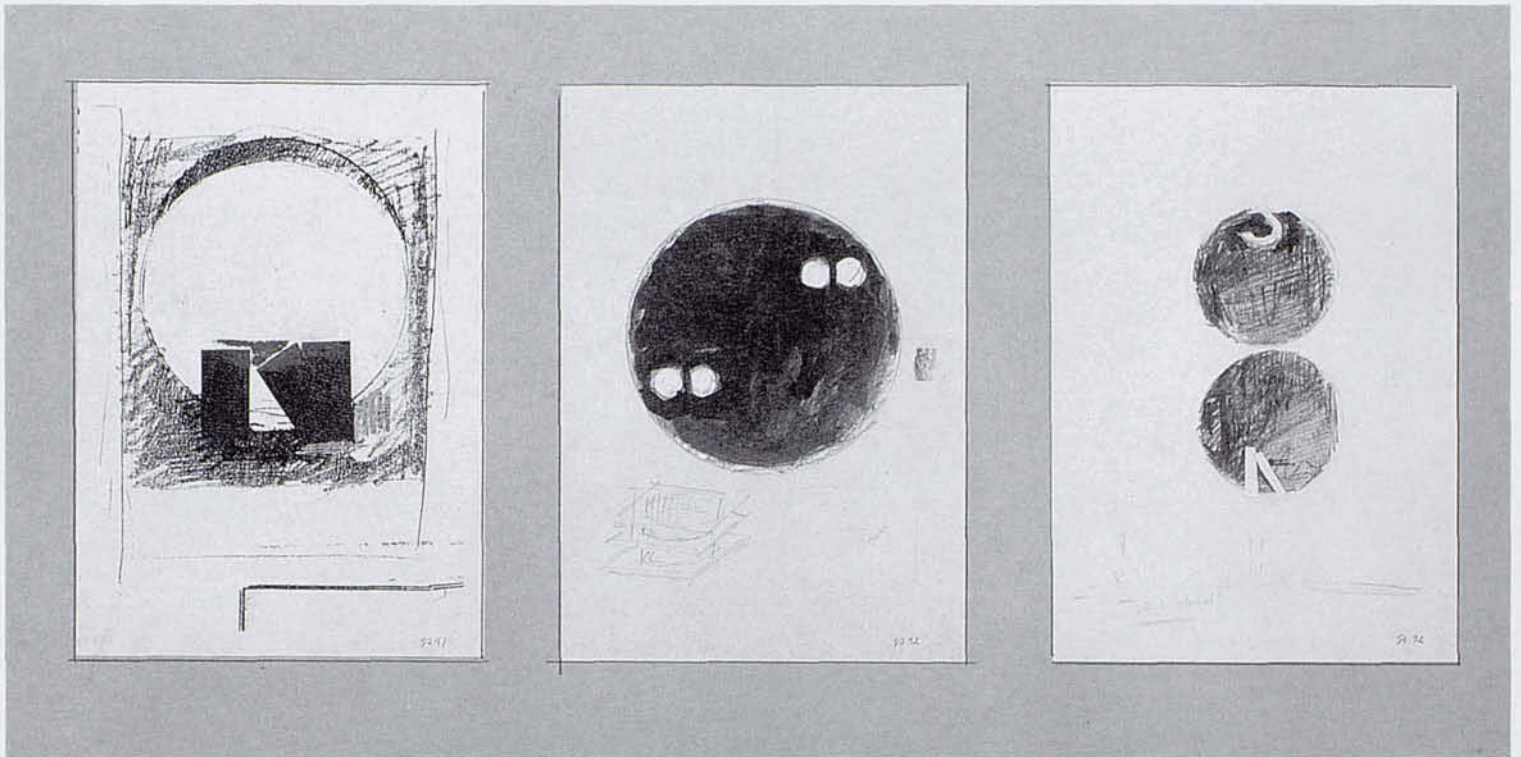
By following the various waves of Catalan emigrants, we can easily trace the Catalan *casals* scattered around the world.

The oldest, of course, are in Latin America. The Catalan Naturals' Charitable Society of Havana, in Cuba, and the Casal de Catalunya in Buenos Aires, Argentina, are the two oldest Catalan institutions abroad of the approximately one hundred Catalan *casals* that exist outside the country. Also in the Argentine Republic, and founded during the first third of the century, there are important Catalan centres in Rosario. There are also centres in Santiago de Chile, Montevideo and, much further north, there is the "Orfeó Català" in Mexico City. Founded much later but still going back a long way, are the Catalan centres in Mendoza, Córdoba, Pergamino, Caracas, Guayaquil and many other smaller ones in many Latin-American towns and cities.

North of the Rio Grande, the Catalan centres in the United States and Canada go back between ten and twenty years.

In Western Europe many Catalan *casals* were founded immediately after the end of World War II. France is an obvious example; Paris, Tolosa de Lenguadoc, Marseilles. In Germany, Switzerland, the Benelux and Sweden many Catalan clubs were formed in the sixties which still exist today, though one interesting exception is the "Casal Català" in Brussels, founded in the thirties thanks to the work of Francesc Macià, later to become president of the Generalitat de Catalunya. In the United Kingdom, the Catalans have always been fewer in number but active. People like Josep M. Batista i Roca are an example of the way in which local nuclei with a knowledge of Catalan affairs can be set up. Finally, there are some Catalan centres in Australia as a result of the economic emigration of the seventies.

As regards Spain, there is a Catalan



SERGI AGUILAR. APUNTS, MARQUES GEOGRÀFIQUES. 1991-92

presence in several cities, basically in Madrid, but I shall not discuss it in this article as it is a presence in the same state as Catalonia.

The Catalan centres usually fulfill two main functions: those aimed at members, basically Catalans, and those involving the local community. As regards the first aspect, nowadays we have to draw a clear distinction between the Catalan centres in Europe, closer to Catalonia and currently well communicated with the country, and those outside Europe.

In Latin America, essentially, the *casals* have a definite function in bringing together Catalans so that they can speak, improve or learn Catalan, celebrate national feasts and traditions (the national holiday on 11 September, Saint George's Day, the Day of the Virgin of Montserrat, All Saints' Day, etc.), follow the progress of Barcelona Football Club and, in short, all those activities that help the Catalans to preserve their roots.

In Europe, on the other hand, the geo-

graphical proximity means that this side of their activity is not so important, although events to celebrate traditional Catalan festivities do form part of their activities.

The other great contribution of the Catalan centres is to make Catalan culture and affairs known in their geographical area. In this respect, there is now considerable co-ordination between Catalonia and the outside. As could be seen at the I Conference of Catalan Clubs and Centres of the world, it is vital that there be a co-ordinated effort between the Catalan government, Catalan society at home and the Catalan centres. In today's society, the undeniably commendable work carried out over many years by the *casals* as the voice of Catalonia when Catalonia was gagged by the dictatorship has been much reinforced since the restoration of civil liberties and the Generalitat.

In 1980 the Catalan government set up the Institutional Affairs Service, today part of the Commission for Outside Activities, which has been and still is re-

sponsible for providing support for the initiatives of the *casals*, initiatives which range from holding Catalan-language courses for beginners or talks on any aspect, general or specialized, of Catalan culture and society, to organising recitals by Catalan singers, requesting the correction of mistaken information about Catalonia appearing in local newspapers, or supplying books in Catalan or about Catalan affairs to local libraries.

In this work of outside projection by the Catalan centres, one of the most important functions they carry out is that of being a door at which members of the Argentine, North-American, French or Swedish public, to give just four examples, can knock and ask for a translation of a song by Joan Manuel Serrat, ask what "Barça" (Barcelona Football Club) is, etc.

The "Casals Catalans", scattered around the world, help spread an understanding, day by day, of what Catalonia is, who her people are and what her culture means. ■