



NOBLE PALMA

OLD PALMA IS A CITY OF STATELY HOMES, WHERE TIME HAS STOOD STILL SINCE THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY, WEAVING A TAPESTRY OF ITS PASSING OVER THE WALLS. THE HOUSES ARE A HISTORICAL AND HUMAN TABLEAU AND A REFLECTION OF THE SPLENDOUR OF A BYGONE AGE.

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Old Palma is a city of stately homes, where time has stood still since the end of the 19th century, weaving a tapestry of its passing over the walls. In his first novel, Llorenç Villalonga –the writer of the *temps perdu* of the island– wrote, “This quarter is venerable, noble and silent, with narrow streets and spacious houses that appear uninhabited”. Of their interiors, he said, “Like elegant paintings in which, all at once, one does not see the comfortable chairs and the baroque beds with their damask curtains. These beds have many matresses; one sleeps very well in them.” Sleep and dreams persist during the day, for in the silence, nothing can change the beauty and the memories of these houses. Memories which can be seen reflected in the various reforms to which they have been subjected –a result of the island’s intense commercial activity during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, and the different artistic influences of successive ages.

Visitors often confuse the homes of the ancient Majorcan aristocracy with the Mediterranean palaces. This is a mistake, since the mansions of Palma are not thought of in this way. In one of so many analogies with the island of Sicily –the Sicilians reject the word *palazzo* in favour of the word *casa* (house)–, palatine exoticism is reduced to just that:

pure exoticism. The houses all bear the family name of their original owners –members of the nobility and prosperous merchants– preceded by the word *can* (home of).

In spite of successive reforms, the Italian influence from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries is very considerable. Two of the original characteristics of the stately homes of Majorca remain unchanged: Gothic elements belonging to the original 14th and 15th century constructions, and the Roman notion of the house built round a central courtyard which also forms the mansion’s entrance, decorated with the coat of arms and other symbolic themes.

Starting from these basic details, which are always respected, the passage of time leaves its mark in the changing architecture: semi-circular arches, mullioned windows, renaissance archways, balconies with wrought ironwork, polychrome woodwork, red timber, plateresque motifs and eighteenth century decoration in all its splendour. Inside are orderly accumulations –for the members of the aristocracy and the great merchants, the money spent on furniture was an investment– of chairs upholstered in leather or velvet, Renaissance armchairs, trunks and chests of Gothic, plateresque or Baroque style, typical Majorcan writing desks, magnificent paintings, damask hangings and

garlanded beds, down to the more recent Elizabethan chairs, between walls that range from the white of the plaster to the vivid colours of the damask and the gilt moulding. The architect Guillermo Reynés has described the layout as follows: “A semi-circular door leads on to a spacious entrance with a central courtyard, from which a staircase rises... The courtyard is surrounded by a covered archway; and at the top of the stairs, which show a great variety, there is always the landing gallery –or *loggia*– which provides access to the upper storey through a door at either side. The first floor inevitably consists of a large hall and a series of reception rooms which increase in grandeur until we come to a bedroom. An *entresol* for study and a gallery which acts as both junk room and a place to hang the washing complete the services of our stately homes.”

All this continues unchanged. It’s true no trace survives of the wealth that gave rise to the beauty of these stately homes of the old quarter of the city of Palma. But they stand as an accurate reminder of the historic and human tableau of a time when life swung between peaceful bliss and the bloody battles of the aristocratic clans, and the home reflected a splendour which has now been lost. As the old Majorcan proverb says, “The house makes the lord.” ■



18th CENTURY STATELY HOME



CASA OLEZA

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