

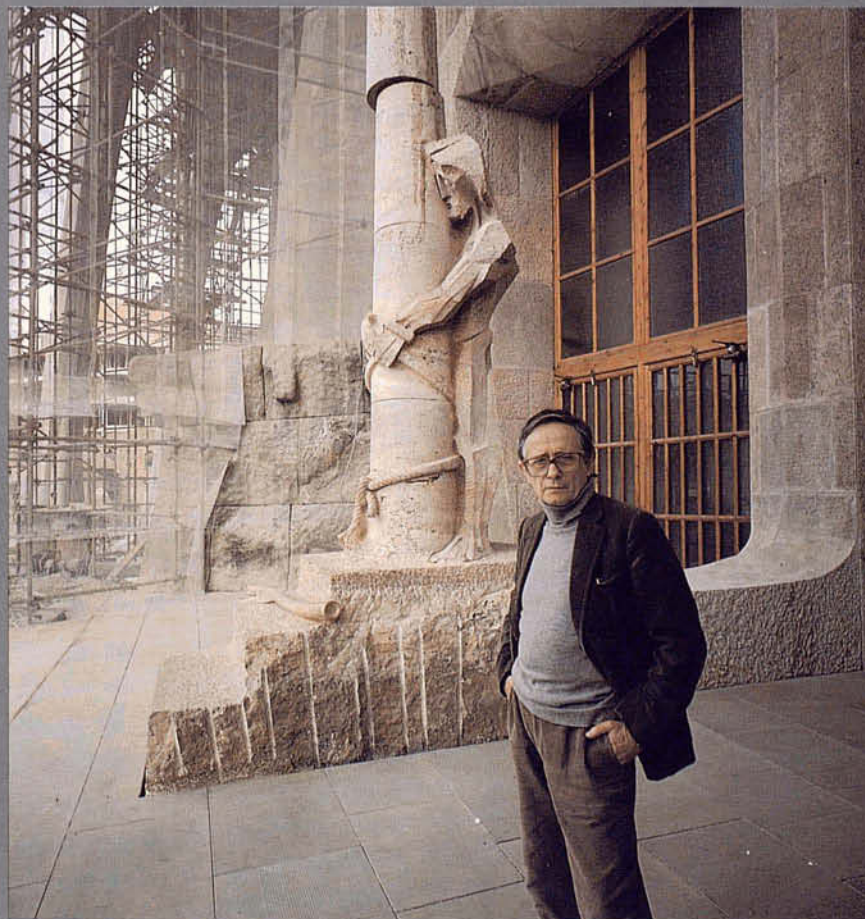
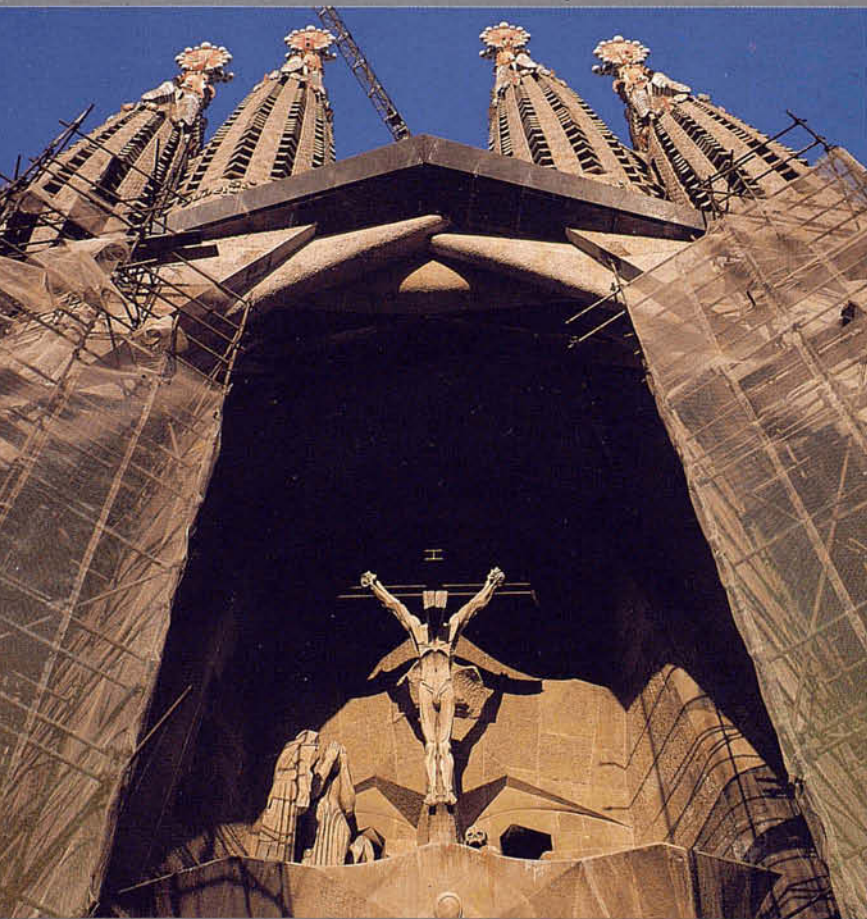
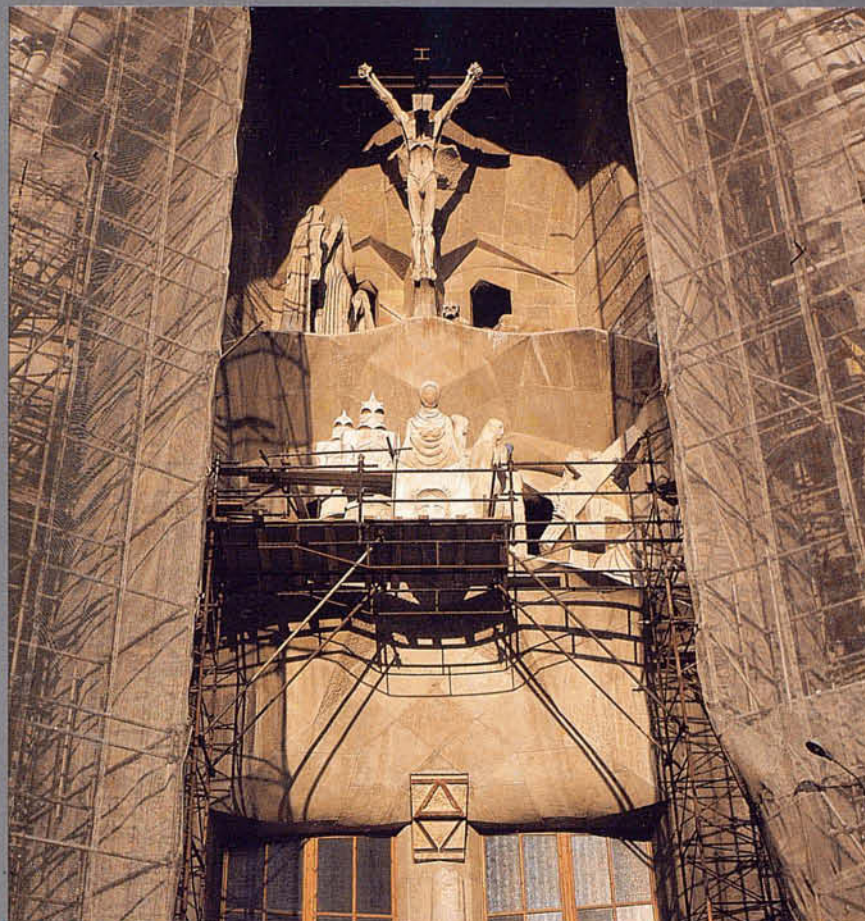
SUBIRACHS'S SCULPTURES FOR THE SAGRADA FAMÍLIA

WHEN THE ARCHITECT ANTONI GAUDÍ DIED, IN 1926, MANY YEARS WERE STILL NEEDED TO COMPLETE HIS MAGNUM OPUS, THE "EXPIATORY TEMPLE OF THE HOLY FAMILY" IN BARCELONA. THE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE GAVE THE JOB OF CONTINUING THE WORK TO THE SCULPTOR JOSEP MARIA SUBIRACHS.

VICENÇ PAGÈS JOURNALIST



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When the architect Antoni Gaudí died, in 1926, many years were still needed to complete his magnum opus, the "Expiatory Temple of the Holy Family" in Barcelona. Only one of the lateral façades of the "Cathedral of the Poor" was more or less finished: that representing the birth of Jesus Christ. The Management Committee gave the job of portraying Jesus Christ's last hours –la Passió, the other lateral façade, which was yet to be built– to the sculptor Josep Maria Subirachs (b. Barcelona 1927). The artist only accepted the challenge after he had been assured that he was under no obligation to follow to the letter the instructions left by Gaudí.

The time allowed for the completion of the sculptures on the façade of la Passió is fifteen years. Since 1986, Subirachs has been living in accommodation on the site itself, where he also has his workshop. Of the one hundred sculptures foreseen, he has completed seventeen, and the façade is gradually being filled with the sculptures of this man who defines his present style as "new figurative", where the function of the figurative elements is not realist but symbolic.

For Josep Maria Subirachs, the dramatic value of the Passion of Christ makes it an ideal subject for sculpture. He himself admits that he has never felt so much interest for the façade representing the birth of Christ as for the one representing "the last hours of a man who changed the course of history". The artistic freedom he has been given to portray the Passion in sculptures was also decisive when it came to accepting this unique commission. The admiration he feels for Gaudí motivates him and, paradoxically, forces him to search for an approach of his own, independent of the ideas of the architect, since "to imitate him would be to sully his work and would be harmful for both of us".

The façade of la Passió should portray pain, suffering and desolation. According to Gaudí, it should "actually inspire fear", its effect should be one of

"dismay". At first, the architect was prepared to "sacrifice the building itself, to break arches and cut off columns to convey the cruelty of the Sacrifice". Later, the final project achieved this effect through the façade's skeletal and anatomic structure.

Gaudí's poetic and symbolic conception of the Sagrada Família in general and the façade of la Passió in particular do not coincide with Subirachs's aesthetic approach, which takes into consideration the artistic movements which have arisen since the master's death. While in Gaudí's original project each of the different sculptural groups was placed in one of the three portals representing the theological virtues –faith, hope and charity–, Subirachs, in keeping with current cultural attitudes, goes from the Last Supper to the burial, following a simpler, more lineal arrangement of the sculptures in the form of a rising "S".

As regards the style, that of Subirachs is harder and drier than Gaudí's, and shows the influence of abstract art. The elimination of groups the sculptor sees as being superfluous or encumbering, such as Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem or the crucifixion of the two thieves, parallels the suppression of formal elements which are superfluous to the spirit of today. All the same, Subirachs's work contains a direct homage to Gaudí: the perceptive observer will notice that the helmets of the Roman soldiers in the crucifixion group are very like the chimneys of La Pedrera, Gaudí's famous building on Barcelona's Passeig de Gràcia.

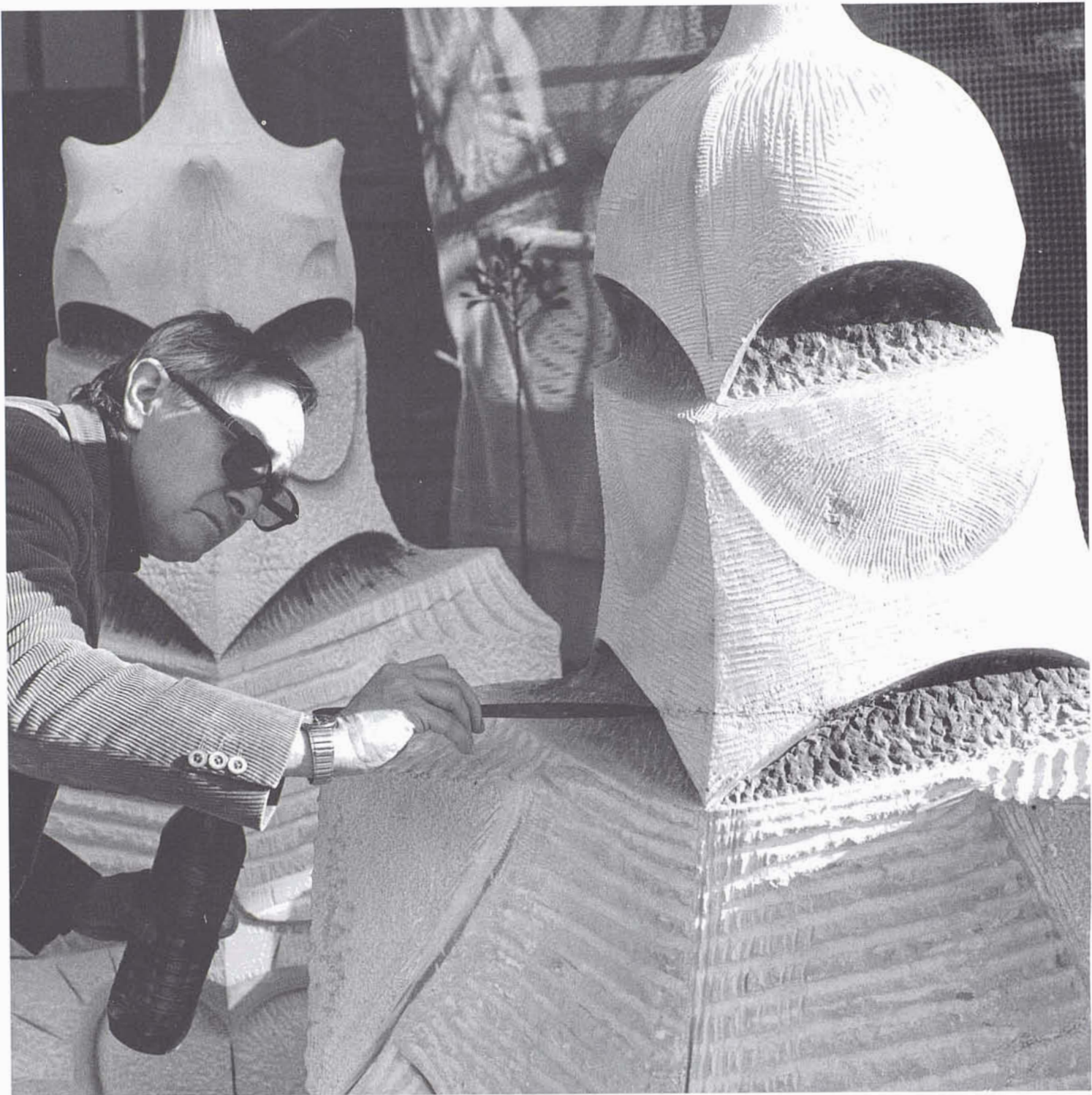
In his sculptures for the "Cathedral of the Poor", Subirachs uses a sandy stone from Lleida, which is the material most closely resembling the original stone from the old quarries on Montjuïc. His methods are not very different from traditional sculptural methods: his drawings provide the basis for a clay model, which is itself the basis of a plaster model, from which he works on the stone. Sculpture, according to Subirachs, has always consisted in "getting rid of everything that is unnecessary".

The Sagrada Família has been a controversial subject from the start. At first it was referred to as being "not modern enough", and now Subirachs is felt to be "too original". People well qualified to express an opinion have called for the work to be stopped, some because Gaudí's plans are not explicit enough to be carried out as he would have wished, others because they were never in favour of the original conception, yet others –such as Subirachs himself– because they feel the continuation should reflect the latest artistic tendencies.

Gaudí's own plans for the Sagrada Família –which were never completed– were changed several times. The work kept him occupied for 43 years and reveals the artist's different styles (gothic, modernist and even abstract). He himself often referred to the artistic eclecticism which would be an inevitable result of the continuation of the work: "It will not be possible for a single generation to complete the Temple; let us therefore leave a powerful impression of our passing, that the coming generations may feel stimulated to do the same, but at the same time let us not tie their hands for the rest of the work".

Subirachs regrets the criticisms of his work on the façade of la Passió, which he feels are "premature", since there are still years to go before it is finished. The sculptures are placed in position as he completes them. Although he would rather not exhibit the unfinished work in this way, the process is necessary to give an overall view of the façade and allow any finishing touches that may be needed at some point in the dialectic relationship between the sculptures and the expressive architecture of Gaudí.

Subirachs does not allow this work to absorb him, and he carries out other projects at the same time, like the monument to Francesc Macià –former president of the Generalitat– in a central square in Barcelona, or the recently completed monuments in Seoul. This other work, he says, "gives me another, free view of my work for the Sagrada Família, which in this way never becomes an obsession." ■



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