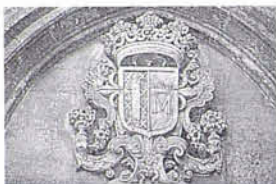


PALACES IN VALÈNCIA. THE HIDDEN MEMORY OF STONE



A CITY PALACE IS AN ATTRACTIVE MONUMENT, WITHOUT THE DOCTRINAIRE WEIGHTINESS OF A CHURCH OR THE COERCITIVE DEMANDS OF A CASTLE. IN VALENCIA SOME TWENTY STately HOMES HAVE BEEN PRESERVED, GIVING THE VISITOR THE CHANCE TO DISCOVER A CITY OF HARMONY AND GREAT BEAUTY.

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Ah, Valencia, capital of oblivion!, reads a passage from Lluís Fernández's fresh, coarse romance, *l'Anarquista nu*, a home-made but fully justified reply to the capital of memory of Durrell's Alexandria.

To have owned a lot and to have lost everything is the destiny of many men and also of some towns. To have then forgotten everything is the peculiar hell of Valencia, a hell which is unknown. Oblivion is the kingdom of Valencia, the grey matter of her dreams. Hence the strange, convulsed and baroque beauty of the ritual gestures which reflect –exaltation of a mere present continuous– the agitation of her hopes and the vanity of her discussions.

Ancient trading centre of the Mediterranean, Valencia could be one of the cruellest cities in Europe with her heritage. Perhaps the cruellest is Naples,

another great city which has been lost and forgotten, but Naples still decays with style, her ruin is a sign of greatness, while Valencia has long since past, and forgotten, this stage.

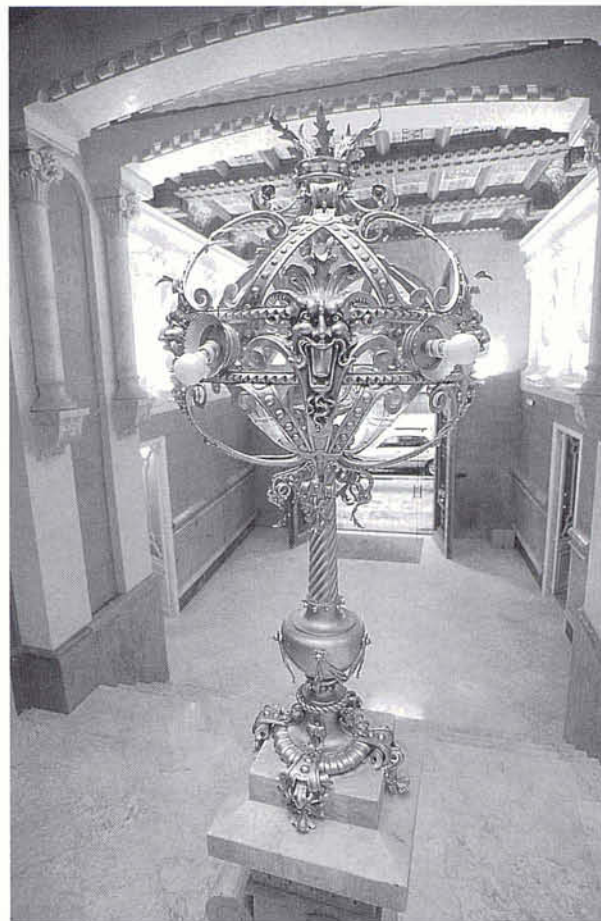
Not everything has disappeared, though. There are remains, streets, perspectives where one glimpses a warm, comforting harmony, like the dark Carrer de la Mare Vella, or the now unfortunately disembowled Pujada del Toledà, next to the Cathedral, the site until recently of the house of Pere Balaguer, architect of the "Miquelet"; the Plaça del Correu Vell or the Plaça de Viciàna, an untouched miniature marvel. Luckily, few Valencians know about these vestiges of a previous beauty, and so they survive. The best time to see them is the moment the great photographer Luis Cuadrado called the bewitched hour, a bit before

evening and lighting-up time, just as night falls.

The best way to hunt for the ghosts of this ancient charm is to follow the winding route of the Valencian palaces, an example, but also an indication, of another, wiser geography. The Valencian palaces have been through and are going through difficult times. In *Viatge al País Valencià*, Joan Fuster remarks, with pained resignation, that, "Here, a few high-ranking mansions still resist, with their carved coats of arms and their tranquil courtyards... It's true that they're dying out; the illustrious families they belong to pull them down or sell them to be pulled down –between 1940 and 1950 some sixteen stately homes of interest disappeared, and the craze continues–, and what's more, the survivors haven't always managed to escape indecorous reforms". Fuster has



PALAU DE VILLAHERMOSA



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never quite been a writer of shall we say "Annunzian" whims, but the courtyards of the Valencian palaces, "quite worthy of being visited", with their aesthetic balance, as medieval as our classic writers who lived in them, so much like the palaces of Majorca and Catalonia, must have been to his liking. In fact, a city palace is an attractive monument. It lacks the doctrinaire weightiness of a church or the coercive demands of a castle. Of all the ways there are of manifesting power, this one at least is attractive. Theirs is a civil pride, expressed in the motto of the knights "Reig", *The king does not make me, I am a citizen*, or in that of the Ferrer de Pròxita family, which would have delighted Llorenç Villalonga: *More than he who most*.

There must be about twenty of any value in Valencia, possibly more. They are

to be found all over the old part of the city, an area bounded by the streets of Colom and Guillem de Castro and the river. But before starting the search, one has to know what one is looking for. The Valencian palaces tend not to be sightly from the outside. To start with, the most unashamedly notorious palaces long ago fell prey to the pick axe; also, it seems that until the rise of Baroque the Mediterranean sense of beauty was largely unobtrusive: order, the tenuous charm of a cool well, of a solemn but sober staircase, only hold any fascination for the more subtle observer. But it is precisely this type of visitor who will fully appreciate the city's bittersweet flavour: the discreet charm of these silent courtyards, where one finds the better part of what is graceful, beautiful and worthy of attention in Valencia. To walk through the old

district and see a Gothic courtyard, green and tiny, by the light of the typical lamp beside the doorway, is one of the few gently soothing experiences the city has to offer.

Generally speaking, a Valencian palace is made up of a Gothic core wrapped in a baroque or eighteenth century shell, as Joan Reglà says is the case with the city itself. An austere facade leads through broad arches to a shady courtyard with stone well and parapet. On the right is the porter's lodge and a small staircase leading to the entresol. The structure isn't easy to make out from the courtyard, assuming the porter lets us in: "trap doors, entrances/through the roof,/passages, short cuts,/hideyholes,/dens and retreats", in Jaume Roig's caricaturesque description. At the back of the courtyard there is always a stately staircase, sometimes im-



posing, which leads to the main floor, which is where, if they have survived, we can find the great halls, the moulding and the long, ornamented corridors. The servants lived on the top floor, in the *porxos*, rooms lighted by a characteristic row of windows giving onto the street.

The greatest of the Valencian palaces, the royal palace, has met a characteristic fate; unnecessarily destroyed during the Napoleonic war, the foundations appeared in the middle of roadworks in 1986, and now lie buried under the asphalt of a busy city thoroughfare.

The most outstanding of the public palaces is that of the *Generalitat*, in the Carrer de Cavallers, which includes work by the best of the medieval architects, Pere Compte. It contains the most spectacular mouldings in the city, courtly murals and some pictures, amongst which is a splendidly intense Ribalta. Close at hand is the solemn elegance of the Palau de la Batlia, much restored at the beginning of the century.

Some of the great palaces of the Valencian aristocracy now belong to the public institutions, which have sometimes made a successful job of restoring them, as in the modernist and elegantly middle-class Palau de Castellfort, now officially the Palau de Fuentehermosa, surely a much more appropriate sounding name; or the monumental palace of the Boil family, holders of the title of Marquis d'Scala. The former owners

kept a diary in Catalan, which lists the contents of a stately home: books, pictures, weapons, fittings... an inventory for nostalgia. The Palau Borja (or Benicarló) has been less fortunate. Once the home of the richest and best-connected family of old Valencia –with kings, emperors and even popes–, it is now the seat of the Valencian parliament, which, as in so many other things, has opted for a purely functional decoration, flat, uniform, anodyne, as the client likes it. The best example of a rococo palace, that of Dos Aguas, is now the national ceramics museum. This admirable example, with its famous carved doorway and exquisite corners in which to linger, is a must for all visitors.

Some private owners have also maintained enormous properties in good condition, a worthy effort for which we should be grateful. We can find a good collection in the Carrer de Cavallers, amongst them that of the Marquis de Malferit, that of the Mercader family, scene of the *Parlament en la casa de Berenguer Mercader*, immortalised by Joan Roís de Corella, the flower of an elitist Ovidian renaissance which didn't succeed; or the immense palace of the Centelles family, Counts of Oliva and leaders of the city's medieval "tory" team. Once the biggest and most lavish of the Valencian palaces, it has a cosy little courtyard, perhaps over restored, and the present owners keep it in good condition.

Not far away, in the Plaça de Nules,

opposite the Maestrança, is the Palau dels Català dels Valeriola, with its elegant façade and deep courtyard, with sculptures and reliefs, all very well preserved. It is now the seat of the "Societat Econòmica d'Amics del País".

Further away, in the Carrer del Palau, close to the beautiful Carrer del Trinquet de Cavallers, is the best all-Gothic example in the city, the palace of the Cardona family, admirals of Aragon, with a magnificent ogived courtyard. Recently restored, it is now the seat of the Treasury department. Almost next door, in the Plaça de Sant Lluís Beltran –a corner of renaissance Valencia which has miraculously survived–, stands the Palau dels Escrivà, very well restored by the present owner. In contrast, the palace of the Boïls d'Arenós, next to the Plaça de la Creu Nova, with one of the most beautiful courtyards in the city, is closed and almost in ruins.

But there are more, quite a lot more. Sometimes, for the walker without resources, they're no more than closed doors. Others allow interesting investigations. But the main thing is not so much to make an inventory, to assess their strictly artistic value –often considerable–, or witness their slow decline. The search for the palaces of Valencia can provide other, greater joys: a walk through bewitching streets, a glimpse of the other worlds and other ages that lie hidden within the city, a chance to learn to look at the city, to feel it, to undo the spells: to remember, to rejoice, to live. ●