

IN PRAISE OF THE BOOK AS OBJECT



LIBRE DE LES PROPIETATS DE LES PEDRES. JOAN MIRÓ



FOR CENTURIES BOOKS HAVE BEEN THE BACKBONE OF CULTURE AND ITS TRANSMISSION. BOOK PUBLISHING IS AN ART BECAUSE, IN SPITE OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS, IT MAINTAINS SOMETHING OF THE ARTISAN ABOUT IT.

ORIOI IZQUIERDO CRITIC AND LITERARY DIRECTOR OF EDICIONS PROA

The world is changing inexorably. The world is changing and with it even the functions of the little things. Books, for example, have for centuries been the backbone of culture and its transmission. Leaving aside other socio-historical considerations, we are still the offspring of a literary culture, the paper culture, and we must almost certainly be the last generation which will be able to say that; then will come the time of the culture of the image, of the mass media, of design, which is already upon us. Books are adapting to the new situation as best they can, and with them the publishers.

Publishing not only has cultural implications, neither can it be considered a purely industrial activity. Publishing – I say it in all solemnity – is also an art. It is an art partly because, in spite of progress in technology, it still maintains something of the artisan about it, like a handicraft almost, in which the troublesome criterion of taste is often as important as the most technical and sophisticated professional knowledge. And it's good that it should be an art, too, or that it should conserve and progressively reinforce its artistic side: food isn't the only thing today that can be pleasing to the eye. In a society which is beginning to value design above all else, the book's presentation is no longer an extra; it has become an essential element of its prestige and its commercial success.

Between the book as a consumer product with an added artistic value and the valuable book as an object in its own right, there is, of course, a whole range of possibilities which extends beyond the examples that follow. The selection, which is personal and disputable, is intended precisely to offer the widest possible range of books published in the last few years which, for one reason or another, can also be considered of value as objects in their own right.

First of all, there are the great works of reference, monumental works aimed at a broad public, which can be exhibited with pride, presiding the living-room book-case. Particularly noteworthy is Enciclopèdia Catalana's *Història Natural dels Països Catalans*, a specialist work which stands out not only for the scientific rigour of the content, but for

the criteria of taste and quality in the design and the choice of illustration and its discreetly attractive, modern diagrams, all of which makes it a book whose appeal is not limited exclusively to specialists. The *Gran Enciclopèdia Catalana* also constitutes a leading work which could be included under the heading of consumer books with a high artistic value, and which is within reach of any reader.

There are also those books whose illustrations make them particularly pleasing: the eight volumes of Edicions 62's *Història de l'Art Català*, for example, which deal with ten centuries of painting, architecture and sculpture with plentiful photographs and reproductions. Or the collections of photographic reportages, especially suitable as gifts, which cover the more commercial flank of publishing as a fine art. The best examples today are Edicions 62's *Catalunya dia a dia* and *Història Gràfica de Catalunya*, real archives of our society's collective memory. This category also includes Enciclopèdia Catalana's *Catalunya Romànica* and Editorial Planeta's *Història de l'Art*.

There are other, equally attractive photographic reportages, such as *Catalunya a vol d'ocell* or *Catalunya des del mar*, and the photographic guides and illustrated travel books which provide the pleasure of discovering the landscape through often unusual pictures. One of the latest is *Veure Mallorca, Menorca i Eivissa*, from Destino. Recently, the prime target of this kind of book has been the Catalan capital: *Els Barcelonins*, *Barcelonès*, and the commemorative volumes *Barcelonès* –with which Empúries celebrated its fifth anniversary– and *Les Barcelones del món*, from La Caixa de Barcelona, help to consolidate the new image of the city, which looks forward enthusiastically to the future without forgetting the wealth of its roots.

It seems that it is often on very special occasions that select taste shines brightest: La Magrana celebrated its tenth birthday with another unique book, *Postals*, by Joan Salvat-Papasseit; and the Generalitat de Valencia's edition of *Tirant lo Blanc*, which with its engravings by Manuel Boix comes closer to the art book, is an exceptionally splendid reminder of the fifth centenary of the first publication of this famous novel of chivalry.

Apart from exceptional situations such as these, over the last few years the taste for publishing has given rise to certain collections which have a particular charm of their own, regardless of the titles they include, as a result of their exterior and interior visual presentation: Columna's "Capitell" poetry series, eccentric collections such as "Rag-time", from Fundació La Mirada, in Sabadell, or the bibliophile editions prepared by Palacios, in Sueca, or Jaume Vallcorba's books, all of them always correct down to the last detail. In view of the relative success and the prestige obtained by the imprints already mentioned, the Catalan publishing sector is living, though hesitantly, a design fever, which may tend to become more generalised. Perhaps we are witnessing another phase in Barcelona's development as a kind of capital of design, under the emblems of such names as Mariscal and Barceló.

Perhaps for this very reason various imprints have wanted to make the exception their norm, and have made books an object of hedonism before all else. Edicions de l'Eixample, inspired by the designers Saura and Torrente, has specialised in the preparation of books as objects: *Sol*, *solet* and *La nit*, by Els Comediants, *Carmen*, the book/record with smell, Pau Riba's *Transnarcís*, are all part of an unusual catalogue which is an invitation to live publishing as an adventure, the most important contribution to the country's modern bibliophily. For its own part, the children's and young people's publishers, Aliorna, has made book objects one of the pillars of its commercial success: the first book for reading in the dark, or *Minimals*, the book which is alive, are a sample of the daring and the ingenuity with which a new publishing company has managed to rapidly penetrate the market.

This hasty summary would not be complete if I were to forget another entire universe of object books: the art edition, in which La Polígrafa, the main publishers of Palau i Fabre's studies on Picasso, excel. They recently presented *El bosc a casa*, a bibliophile edition with poems by Joan Brossa and collages, etchings and lithographs by Perejaume. This exceptional work is a suitable point to end this article. There is no better pretext for singing the praises of the book as an object in its own right. ●