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# THE “ATENEU BARCELONÈS”

CATALAN CULTURE HAS SURVIVED THANKS TO PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS LIKE THE ATENEU, WHICH HAVE, OF NECESSITY, ACQUIRED GREAT HISTORIC AND NATIONAL IMPORTANCE.

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**A**thena was the name of the Greek goddess of wisdom and intelligence, of the arts and science and, in general, of the gifts of civilisation. She gave her name to Athens, where her temple was a meeting place for orators, philosophers, poets and tragedians. This temple, the Atheneum, became in Rome an institution for the promotion of letters, and its name was applied to certain cultural societies which emerged in Paris at the end of the 18th century. The “Ateneu

Barcelonès” has to be seen in the light of this illustrious tradition.

In 1869, the Casino Barcelonès –an association for social and recreational activities– and the Cercle Mercantil –which held meetings and issued sectorial publications– merged to form the Centre Mercantil Barcelonès. At the beginning of the same decade, the Ateneu Català had been created, a more intellectual centre reserved for the bourgeoisie. In 1872, the Centre Mercantil and the Ateneu Català merged to con-

stitute the Ateneu Barcelonès, which was destined to become a key element in the intellectual life of the capital of Catalonia, often replacing or complementing other centres such as, for example, the University. Catalan culture, without a state structure to protect and encourage it, has survived thanks to private institutions like the Ateneu, which, in spite of being founded on a strong sectorial or class spirit, have, of necessity, acquired greater historic and national importance than even the founders intended.



From the first president, the jurist and member of the conservative party Manuel Duran i Bas, to the last, the chemist and republican leader Heribert Barrera, the Ateneu Barcelonès has stood out more for the intellectual category of its directors than for its political leanings and has seen its membership increase to the current figure of over 4,000. From the aristocratic fencing room of the last century to the complete season of talks held in 1983 to commemorate the death of the Karl Marx centenary, the Ateneu's various sections –cinema, the arts, economics and social sciences, geography and history, etc.– have carried out a frequently irreplaceable task. While the moral and political sciences section was the most important in the early days, the most active today is the language and literature section.

The Palau de Sabassona, an 18th century neo-Classical building a stone's throw from the Barcelona Rambla, in the centre of the city, has housed the Ateneu since 1906. Its halls and its romantic garden have been visited by Federico García Lorca, G.K. Chesterton, Igor Stravinsky, Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo and Paul Valéry, amongst others. At present, the Ateneu building is used as the seat of literary associations such as the Pen Club or the Association of Catalan-Language Authors.

Apart from the many activities reserved for members, the Ateneu has, over the years, organised public events which have been acclaimed throughout Catalonia. It was not by chance that when Salvador Dalí landed in Barcelona in 1930 he chose the Ateneu to give a surrealist talk which shocked the country's respectable thinkers. It is equally significant that the Ateneu Barcelonès should have the most important private library in Spain, with 450,000 volumes, which is also the most visited, with 120,000 readers a year. Like the Ateneu, the library is open more than 14 hours a day, 363 days a year.

The presidents of the Ateneu Barcelonès have often been leading figures on the Catalan intellectual scene of the time: specially worth mentioning are Angel Guimerà, who in 1895 made the first inaugural speech in Catalan, the architect and historian Lluís Domènech i Montaner, and Pompeu Fabra, the philologist who fixed modern Catalan.

Co-existence and tolerance have always been the association's irrenounceable values, except in the interval between the civil war and the transition to democracy, when Franco's government in Madrid appointed the board of directors (1939-1975). Apart from the musical recitals and concerts and the presentations of books, plays and films

held in the Ateneu, apart from the language classes, the lectures, etc., discussions and the exchange of ideas and opinions have characterised the association day by day, independently of the exterior repercussions of public events. The *penyes*, groups of people who meet to discuss aspects of political and cultural life, often gathered around the most renowned participant, have been an important contribution to Catalan intellectual life on the part of the Ateneu. One of them gave rise to the Joan Creixells literary award, which marked the celebration of Santa Llúcia, the Night of Catalan Literature.

The challenge facing the present board of directors of the Ateneu Barcelonès is how to preserve the interest of a traditional meeting-place, the product of an age without radio, film or –especially– television. Cultural life in Barcelona would benefit greatly if it were possible to change member's habits: get them out of their houses, especially the artists and the liberal professions, to get together or –even better– to meet by chance in this nerve centre and argue about the human and the divine. Insofar as this new temple of Athene –laic and tolerant as it was before the civil war– is recovered and reappraised, the Ateneu Barcelonès will earn the respect it deserves. ■