On textiles, colonies and *indians*. A tale from across the seas

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The relationship between Spain and its former colonies can be viewed from a number of perspectives. Particularly important among them is the textile industry, which had numerous repercussions for the economies, societies and cultures involved in Spain's colonial adventure, particularly in Catalonia, which from 1778 onwards was a gateway for Atlantic trade. It is the history of this industry that underpins an exhibition organised by the Area for Culture of Begur Town Council for the 13th Fira d'Indians, an event that celebrates the enduring relationship between Begur and Cuba originated by prosperous Catalan traders who returned from the colonies, known as *indians* or *americanos*.

From the earliest days of the colonial period, the Antilles provided Europe with a great many products to satisfy the needs of an increasingly consumerist Old Continent society. Aside from coffee, sugar and tobacco, brought from Havana, Catalan ports were inundated with ships carrying bales of flocked cotton, much of it from the great plantations of New Orleans and Charleston. The fibre was used to fuel the growth of a Catalan textile industry that was still in its infancy.

Over the course of the nineteenth century a great many Catalan entrepreneurs – based in Cuba, in Barcelona, or on both sides of the Atlantic – grew wealthy from the cotton trade. Jaume Torrents, who traded the route between Barcelona, Havana and New Orleans, and the Vidal Quadras and Baradat families, *indians* who also ran trade routes, can be considered alongside the Biada i Prats brothers (sons of the Mataró-born *indià* Miquel Biada) and the Amell brothers, born into a family of *indians* in Sitges, who became two of the largest importers of flocked cotton in Barcelona.

It was thanks to this colonial cotton that the industry driven by Catalonia's *indians* reached its peak. Barcelona became the production capital of southern Europe for printed cottons, which were manufactured in huge quantities at affordable prices. In only a short time the Catalan capital grew to be the largest and most established supplier of printed cottons not only to the rest of Spain but also to the colonies themselves, which as well as producers and exporters of the raw material had also become major import markets.

Poster for the exhibition organised for the 13th Fira d'Indians in Begur, 2016.

Engraving of the 19th Century preserved in the Historical Archive Fidel Fita in Arenys de Mar.

The cottons manufactured in Catalonia were the most commonly sold fabrics across the Antilles, together with those imported from North America. Printed cotton was particularly popular among Cubans, for hygiene, cleanliness and comfort but also for aesthetic reasons. Equally successful were linens, imported in their raw state from northern Europe, printed in the factories of Barcelona's *indians* and sent in considerable volume to the colonial market. Cotton and linen fabrics produced in Catalonia quickly found favour ahead of sheepskin, first imported from Castilla and Andalucia, taffeta and silks, also of Spanish origin, and even linens produced in regions as renowned as Laval (France) and Landshut (Germany).

Another emblematic Catalan product exported to the Americas was lace, whose negligible weight and high price made it a prized commodity in transatlantic trade. Production houses along the east coast of Spain sent tens of thousands of yards of lace to adorn the clothes of the wealthy classes. The Catalan city of Mataró also provided the colonial market with large quantities of knitted fabrics: inexpensive products, many of them in bright colours, such as socks, t-shirts and stockings. *Hijos de Marfà* and *Font, Clavell i Coll* were two Mataró-based manufacturers of knitted goods that found particular success in the colonial market.

The success of the cotton industry following its emergence in the eighteenth century was not the only factor behind the rapid industrialisation in Catalonia over the course of the 1800s. The region's industrial revolution, though primarily textile-based, also saw rapid development in the mechanical and chemical sectors, and owed much to the great fortunes of the *indians* who had made their new home in Cuba. From the 1840s onward, it was their capital that funded the textile factories which would make Catalonia one of the foremost industrial powers in Europe. There are numerous examples from across

Fragment of indienne, printed cotton. Last quarter of the eighteenth century, CDMT rec. no. 2922. ©CDMT. Quico Ortega.

Catalonia of *americanos* who either invested in or took direct charge of these factories, notably Miquel Biada, financier of the first Spanish railway, who invested 100,000 pesetas of the era in a cotton mill in Mataró, and Josep Antoni Salom, who in 1854 invested in the cotton firm *Santacana Sadurní y Cía* in Vilanova i la Geltrú, a town in which 60% of the capital pouted into the cotton industry came from the Antilles.

The Antilles-based *indians* did not only fund cotton mills; their capital was also put into the wool industry. Antoni Samà i Urgellès, for exemple, invested part of his fortune in a cotton mill in Esparreguera and in a company specialising in the production of woollen cloth, which in 1872 operated 114 looms with 5,700 spindles.

Of the many Catalan *indians* who invested in the textile industry, the most emblematic is perhaps Joan Güell (1800-1872), who made his fortune in Cuba and played a major role in economic and political life in Catalonia and Spain, particularly between 1850 and 1870. Following a formative journey to England and various other experiences from which he gathered valuable information, in 1848 Güell formed an association with the mechanic Domingo Ramis and founded a modern textile factory in the Sants district of Barcelona that obtained exclusive rights to the national production of velvets and cotton corduroys, fabrics commonly used by the urban and rural working classes but which no Spanish manufacturer had been able to produce successfully. The

Caricature of the industrialist and *indià* Joan Güell, Josep Parera (1828?-1902), Barcelona, mid-nineteenth century, Frederic Marès Museum, rec. no. 5877. ©Guillem F-H.

Detail of the balcony of Casa Berenguer in Barcelona. ©Centre d'Estudis Domenechians, Canet de Mar.

company, *Güell, Ramis y Cía.* (the factory was popularly known as the *Vapor Vell de Sants*), initially relied on English machinery and the expertise of English technicians and would become one of the leading cotton manufacturers in Spain, with the largest number of spindles found anywhere in the Catalan cotton spinning industry.

The work of Joan Güell was taken up and expanded by his son, Eusebi Güell i Bacigalupi (1846-1918), who in 1890 joined forces with the engineer Ferran Alsina and transferred the factory to Santa Coloma de Cervelló. This was the first step in the creation of the *Colònia Güell*, the company town that would remain in use until 1973. Despite his prominent role as an industrialist, Eusebi Güell is now primarily known as the defining patron of the great architect Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926). Indeed, the Catalan *modernisme* movement was made possible in no small part by the wealth that flowed from the colonies and the growth of the textile industry, as can be seen in the ornamental motifs of many buildings from the era.

One of the most renowned *modernista* painters, Ramon Casas, the 150th anniversary of whose birth is celebrated this year, was very much a product of the long and fruitful relationship between the colonies and the Catalan textile industry. Casas was the grandson, nephew and son of *indians*; his father had made his fortune in Matanzas (Cuba) and his mother, Elisa Carbó, herself the daughter of an *indià* who bankrolled various textile firms, became the owner in 1907 of the company *Isidro Puig y Cía.*, based in Sant Benet de Bages and founded in 1856. The family fortune ensured that Ramon Casas had no material needs and could devote his whole life to his one passion: painting.

Of the vast oeuvre that survives, Casas is perhaps best defined by the beauty and sensuality of forms and colours in his portraits of *chulas* and *manolas*. Many of these stereotyped figures were depicted with a silk accessory whose fine texture, extoci image and rich combination of embroidered colours gained it great popularity in Spanish society: the Manila shawl. While the Spanish

Manila shawl, natural embroidered silk, early twentieth century, Viñas collection, L'Arca.

colonies never developed major textile industries of their own, they were the setting-off point for important textile products exported to Europe. Manila shawls, despite taking their name from the port city that exported them to Spain, in fact originated in China, a country with a centuries-old history of silk weaving.

Spanish traders wasted no time in adding the product to the range of exotic and luxurious items shipped from Manila, which crossed the Pacific between the Philippines and Seville from the late sixteenth century onwards. Originally used as coverlets or rugs, Manila shawls would eventually become one of the typical accessories of the Spanish woman's wardrobe, and though the earliest wearers were wealthy ladies, by the late-nineteenth century they were a common sight across all social strata, particularly in the regency period of Maria Christina (1833-1840), even being adopted into regional dress.

A history of textiles in the colonial territories before the Spanish conquest would itself provide ample material for more than one book. The material and symbolic value of textiles in the Mayan and Incan cultures, the production of *obrajes* (textile plants) across South America, and the great diversity of fibres

Surplice for Pope Leo XIII, 1887, pineapple yarn and cotton embroidery. Apostolic Sacristy, Vatican City ©Txeni Gil. See detail.

and dyes used across the continent are just some of the many themes that could be addressed. Here, however, we focus on a fabric produced in the Philippines, fine in appearance but deceptively strong, which came to be known in some circles as 'paradise cloth'. It was produced from the pineapple plant, native to Mexico, which adapted quickly to the sun and climate of the Philippine archipelago. Local artisans familiar with Chinese and Malay customs extracted a fibre from the long leaves that can be spun into yarn to create the finely texture and attractive cloth, *nipis*, which is hailed as among the most unique, sophisticated and exclusive fabrics ever produced. From the sixteenth century, embroidered nipis was used to make clothing and accessories for the men, women and children of the upper classes and decorative fabrics commonly found on the beds and tables of royal households. The golden age of nipis coincided with the last years of Spanish rule in the archipelago. After 1898, what had once been the epitome of eastern luxury, shipped around the world, fell into decline and was gradually forgotten by the world.

Within the vast commercial and economic framework erected by the textile industry, small businesses, shops and department stores also played

Fan decorated with colonial scene, painted satin, cherry wood, brass, last quarter of the nineteenth century, Arenys de Mar Museum, rec. no. 3349.

an important role. Travel journals, chronicles, newspapers and literary works describe the intense commercial activity of colonial Cuba, referring specifically to grand establishments dedicated to the sale of clothing – many of them run by Catalans – that displayed an enormous variety of products. The *indians* also funded the opening of large metropolitan stores in the home country. Pablo del Puerto and Eduardo Conde Giménez, for example, natives of Madrid who made their fortunes in Cuba, opened a shop selling shirts and linens in Barcelona, which in 1881 became *Almacenes El Siglo*, one of the most popular department stores in the city. Half a century later, Pepín Fernández and Ramón Areces, whose wealth also came from the Antilles, opened in Madrid the department stores *Galerías Preciados* and *El Corte Inglés*, respectively, two of the most prominent businesses in the production and commercialisation of Spanish textiles.

It was in stores such as these that affluent Cubans bought the fabric for their clothes. In Cuba, financial and social divisions were not only drawn along lines of race but also – as in most civilisations – because of clothing. Those without the means to buy clothes made in Paris, London, Madrid or the capitals of North America, following the latest fashions, had their own clothes made by tailors or designers – one of the most lucrative professions on the island – who either produced their own designs or imitated as closely as possible the trends of the old continent.

The tropical climate, however, soon saw the thick wools, cashmeres and damasks of Europe replaced by lighter fabrics with a softer feel: cotton and

The *indians* Vicenç Ferrer Bataller and Josep Caner, Cuba. Historical Archive of Begur.

linen – more breathable, helping the wearer to deal with the heat and keeping the skin cool – and simpler garments in lighter colours gradually became the norm. In time, a person's style of dress would ultimately come to reflect their stance on the future of Cuba: whether the island should remain under Spanish rule or seek independence.

The situation in the fields, however, was quite different; for a number of years the local population continued to dress in wool flannels, which are poor conductors of heat. Not only did this fabric irritate the skin, it also required more assiduous cleaning than cotton and provided a breeding environment for insects, eventually causing it to fall out of favour. The clothes worn by slaves, meanwhile, made from the cheapest and poorest quality fabrics, warrant a study of their own. Some slave owners employed seamstresses specifically tasked with supplying clothes for people they considered to be beneath the rest of society. From 1872, however, the famous American brand Montgomery Ward began to mass-produce a specific range of clothes for slaves in standard sizes. It is of anecdotal interest – without wishing to be frivolous – that Josep Xifré

Portrait of Judith Downing Xifré, Fidel Fita Historical Archive, Arenys de Mar ©Ramon Soler.

Casas, originally from Arenys de Mar and one of the wealthiest *indians* of his time, was said to send his slaves out into the streets of Havana each Sunday in white trousers, frock coats and top hats embroidered with his initials.

Clothing was one of the aspects that distinguished the returning *indians* in Spanish society, as were their frequent involvement in philanthropic initiatives, the use of Spanish or Catalan littered with colonial terms, and the construction of opulent mansions festooned with all manner of textiles. Although in the popular imagination they dressed in the style of the Antilles – a white linen suit, the famous Panama hat, and a waistcoat from which a large gold pocket watch hung – the *americanos* in fact dressed expensively, in the style of the European bourgeoisie and nobility with whom they wished to mix and be identified. This can be seen in portraits, sculptures and photographs from the period, in which solemn expressions and luxurious upholstery frame the quintessential garments of the wealthy classes – dress coats and frock coats, white shirts with heavily starched collars, waistcoats and bowed cravats.

The wives of the Catalan *indians* displayed far greater sartorial extravagance. One of the most extraordinary examples was the famed socialite and eccentric Judith Downing (New York 1801-Paris 1868), wife of Josep Xifré, who

moved in the most exclusive circles of Parisian society and shared intimate friendships with the Countess of Montijo – mother of Eugénie de Montijo, the future Empress consort of France – and Prosper Mérimée. The author often commented on her elegance and exquisite taste in clothes – luxurious fabrics and the finest accessories – and this is borne out by numerous portraits that survive, enduring images of a true style icon.

The colonial period may now be in the distant past, but the ties that bind Catalonia and Spain to the former colonies remain very much alive. As globalisation creates an ever more homogenous society, it is pleasing to see that certain fabrics, garments or accessories continue to tell a tale from overseas that, for all its darker aspects, enriched our lives in so many ways. The enduring example is the *guayabera*, the quintessential Cuban shirt, which has become a link between Cuba, the Caribbean and the rest of the world. ●

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