

## “Catalonia and the Sciences,” sculptoric group by Josep Llimona at the Institute for Catalan Studies

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**Resum.** El març del 1913, l'escultor Josep Llimona va acabar el conjunt escultòric *Catalunya i les ciències*, encarregat per l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans (IEC) i que durant molts anys va presidir la sala de la Biblioteca Nacional de Catalunya (precursora de la Biblioteca de Catalunya). El conjunt de cinc peces estava ubicat a la part superior de la porta de la sala de lectura, damunt un frontó triangular. Aquesta obra, creada per a simbolitzar l'Institut i per a projectar una imatge de consolidació, va donar una nova mostra del gran nivell de les arts plàstiques que es va assolir en aquella època a Catalunya. En els últims mesos, l'obra es va restaurar i recuperar, i, actualment, es poden veure totes les peces juntes, tal com les va concebre Josep Llimona, en el vestíbul d'entrada de l'IEC.

**Paraules clau:** Catalunya i les ciències · Josep Llimona · Biblioteca de Catalunya · Josep Puig i Cadafalch · Noucentisme

**Abstract.** On March 1913, sculptor Josep Llimona completed the sculptoric group, “Catalonia and the Sciences”, commissioned by the Institute for Catalan Studies (IEC), and which presided the room of the Catalan National Library (precursor of the Library of Catalonia). The group consisted of five pieces over the door of the reading room, on a triangular pediment supported by two columns. This work, created to symbolize the Institute and to project an image of consolidation, is an example of the high standards achieved in the plastic arts in Catalonia at that time. In the past few months, the work was restored and recovered and currently all the pieces can be seen together, as originally intended by Josep Llimona, in the IEC's entry hall.

**Keywords:** Catalonia and the sciences · Josep Llimona · Library of Catalonia · Josep Puig i Cadafalch · *Noucentisme*

From its very beginning, one of the main objectives of the Institute of Catalan Studies (IEC) was the creation of a major library. This library, originally the Catalan National Library [6] and later re-named the *Biblioteca de Catalunya* (Library of Catalonia), was opened to the country in the Institute's founding year, 1907. The library's collection was based on very rich and specialized private libraries, as well as highly exceptional works, all of which were acquired under the care of competent professionals, including the IEC members of that time Josep Pijoan, Pere Coromines, and Jaume Massó i Torrents, along with a scholarly young man, Jordi Rubió i Balaguer, who later became the Library of Catalonia's first director. The country immediately appreciated the magnitude of the project and augmented the library's acquisitions with remarkable donations.

The Library was allocated to parts of the third floor and the attic on the Sant Sever Street side of the Palace of the Government of Catalonia, the headquarters of the body that led the construction of the entire Institute, the *Diputació de Barcelona*

(Barcelona Provincial Council). It was an enclosed space, containing a reading room with a capacity for some sixty readers as well as other rooms (Fig. 1). Josep Puig i Cadafalch, in his role as architect, was in charge of remodeling the rooms that the Library was to occupy when it opened to the public. He gave them a noble air of unmistakable classicism, as reinterpreted by someone who had already shed his modernist affinities, but who had yet to acquire—and never completely would—what we today consider quintessential architectural *Noucentisme*.

The design made by Josep Puig i Cadafalch for the Library's reading room was quite eclectic, in the most literal sense of the word, and mixed together elements that included notes of a medievalism more northern European in quality than Mediterranean, what we now recognize as the signature of modernist Puig i Cadafalch. For example, the room's gabled roof and even the extreme simplicity in the design of the reading-room's chairs—some of which are still in use today—joined the architect with a creative and functional European spirit similar to that of Van de Velde. It must be noted that, in spite of the extreme social significance represented by the renovation, Puig's work of restoration was not documented, such that it long remained unnoticed in the architect's biography.

Notwithstanding, in what was to be the Library's reading room, all of the attention was given over to the emblematic central element, the *testera* (gable) [12]—a triangular pediment,

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**Fig. 1.** Reading room of the Library of Catalonia in Palace of the Government of Catalonia (1914). Source: Library of Catalonia, Barcelona.

supported by two columns of a nearly Ionic style, covering the door that projected out into other, smaller chambers of the Institute, especially those of the Section of Sciences and the Secretary General. It was a decorative construction that emphasized the most representative room of the new institution and bestowed upon it an especially sumptuous aspect as well as an emphatic solemnity, in accordance with its significant mission. Just below the aforementioned portico was the librarian's table. This location within the reading room gave the structure, no doubt intentionally, an air of officiating over a noble secular ceremony.

Above the pediment, a group of figures sculptured in stone was installed, a discernible reference to the classical world. Nonetheless, it was a rather heterodox element, since, instead of being positioned within the pediment—in the tympanum, as was habitual in classical architecture—the sculpture's five figures were situated above it, resembling a gigantic and out of proportion acroterion that effectively turned the pediment into a pedestal. It was a solution that showed that this was not conceived as a humble copying of classical forms but rather inspired by them, with an entirely new perspective [1]. A very significant example similar to this was already present in modern Catalan sculptural tradition: the matrons that symbolized Commerce and Industry sculpted by the Vallmitjana brothers and placed above the pediment of the *Banc de Barcelona* (Bank of Barcelona) in 1858–1859, in the first great sculptural construction of import entrusted to artists native to mid-19th century Barcelona.

Josep Llimona i Bruguera (1864–1934) was commissioned to make the figures in the Institute's sculpture, known as *Catalonia and the Sciences* [2]. A seated and majestic matron dressed in a tunic presides over the peak of the pediment, representing Catalonia. At each extreme stands a female figure: the one to the left, bare and half turned backward, and the other facing three-quarters forward and semi-covered in a tunic. Between these and the central figure are two more females, seated in profile and also dressed in tunics, but because of the effect of the pediment's incline, they are on a lower level than that of Catalonia, who dominates the arrangement (Fig. 2).

On the ceiling's frieze is a tablet surrounded by a garland that contains an inscription reminding the reader that the Insti-

tute opened the "Library of Catalonia with the munificence of the Barcelona Provincial Council and the City," and with the date of the act, 28 March, 1914, in Roman numerals.

These sculptures stand above a decorative background of lemon tree branches painted on the wall (either an homage to the sculptor based on his last name or simply a coincidence?) as if it were a tapestry or a damask. This aspect was the work of the multi-talented artist Francesc Canyelles, the most consistent and discreet champion of the canonical, *Noucentista* aesthetic in architectural decoration. Sadly, Canyelles—painter, sgraffito artist, engraver, and decorator—has not yet received the attention that the quantity, quality, and significance of his work deserves.

The installment and completion of the works in the reading room were the last stage in the Institute's establishment in its location, which was considered finished on 25 October 1911 [14]. *Catalonia and the Sciences*, which is now being transferred to a more prominent location in the Institute, namely, the central indoor lobby of the *Casa de Convalescència* (House of Convalescence), was finished in March, 1913 [11]. Its installment in its original site had already been announced in mid-November, 1912 [10]; yet the official inauguration of the room in a presentable state would not take place—as the aforementioned inscription indicated—until 28 May 1914. Nevertheless,



**Fig. 2.** Image of the face of one of the sculptures. Archive of the Institute for Catalan Studies. Photograph: Jaume Mestres i Capitan.

the premises had already received several official visits, including by the participants in the *Congrès Regional d'Art Cristià* (Regional Conference on Christian Art) in October, 1913. This was a highly relevant event that was extensively covered by the press [15].

Besides Aristides Maillol—whose Catalan self-identity, in the eyes of many Catalan subjects of Spain of that era, was obscured by the political border between the Spanish and French states—Josep Llimona was, at that time, the greatest sculptor of Catalonia. Among these two revered sculptors, he had the most personality and was the most committed to the country's civic life. Even though he is normally identified stylistically with Modernism, which is indeed logical since his very characteristic female figures do more to evoke a canon of Northern European symbolism than a Mediterranean one, Llimona enthusiastically participated in the task of re-founding the country that the Noucentistes promoted. Indeed, many years later, he would become the very active president of the *Junta de Museus* (Board of Museums) created, like the Institute, in 1907, which contributed greatly to the formation of modern Catalonia.

The Catalan Noucentista era was rich in sculptors. During the time in which the first Library of Catalonia of the IEC was established, two very skilled sculptors, younger than Llimona, were highly regarded: Josep Clarà and Enric Casanovas. Both achieved fame in the year 1911. At the *Exposició Internacional de Belles Arts de Barcelona* (The International Fine Arts Exhibition of Barcelona) of that year Clarà received an honorary degree (formerly known as the award of honor, it was granted at the previous Exhibition, in 1907, to Llimona), and a celebration in recognition of the event was held on June 2nd. On that occasion, the most charismatic Catalan poet and intellectual of the moment, Joan Maragall, read a poem dedicated to Clarà that, beyond a highly appreciated tribute to the sculptor, was nearly the equivalent to a public enthronement.

Casanovas triumphed as well, namely, in his solo exhibition at the Sala Fayans Català in Barcelona, during October and November of 1911, and became the paradigm of new Catalan sculpture. Both Clarà and Casanovas represented Mediterraneanism, perfectly translated by means of the female nude, a trend that Maillol had already initiated several years earlier in Rosselló and Paris. However, there was never a connection with those other Mediterraneanists from below the Pyrenees; thus, the fact was being ignored that what was starting to be called *Noucentisme* in Southern Catalonia was already clearly represented in all of Catalonia, from one side of the border to the other between the Spanish and French states.

Clarà and Casanovas created bodies of work with Greek roots, but that of the former was more classical and that of the latter, more archaic. Both sculptors had spent time in France and enjoyed great success. Clarà lived there for many years and achieved significant prestige; Casanovas remained more rooted to his country and was, in the eyes of many, the most authentic sculptor of the *Noucentisme* movement. Josep Clarà had been invited to collaborate with the Institute but did so with works of smaller dimension. His busts of Ramon Llull, Francesc Eiximenis, and Joan Lluís Vives were installed in March, 1913, on the same columns where they are now to be found [13].

Regrettably, however, there is no trace of Casanovas in the IEC, perhaps because of the fact that, at the time when Llimona's group was commissioned, he had not yet achieved the prestige that he ended up having.

On the other hand, another singular sculptor of that era, Ismael Smith is represented by his bold bust of the patriarch of the Renaissance philologist, Manuel Milà i Fontanels, for which he did not want to be paid. Smith was the first artist to be "named" Noucentista, by Ors, even though, in retrospect, his genteelly perverse style differed greatly from the sober classicism of others. In fact, in that same era (1908), Smith had also collaborated with Josep Pijoan on a project for a monument to Milà, intended for Vilafranca del Penedès, his place of birth. However, the proposal for the sculpture was not accepted by the selection committee, which preferred another, more conventional piece made by older artists.

In theory, it seems that the pediment with the figures of Catalonia and the Sciences was not pre-planned by Llimona. The documents belonging to Puig i Cadafalch, now in the National Archive of Catalonia, suggest that, in the first sketches of the Institute's planning [3], the architect had placed two tall columns in another section of wall, the only sumptuous decorative element. The columns framed a rather undefined altarpiece, each one crowned by a slender allegorical figure, generically dedicated to Diana of Empúries and Apollo of Tarragona. There is no evidence that these figures went beyond being a simple, detail-less sketch, made by the hand of Puig himself, on top of the perfectly drawn columns. The resolution of the columns crowned by the small, lithe statues is found in another Puig i Cadafalch creation: the four famous columns—currently dismantled but under reconstruction—situated at the *Palau Nacional de Montjuïc* (National Palace of Montjuïc), which, when one looks at the façade, are placed down a level. These columns were initially supposed to have been crowned with winged figures. Therefore, the idea for Llimona's group must have been conceived along the way, when construction was already in progress.

The Institute likely wanted to project an image of consolidation. For this reason, when it was time to single out a dominating space of the new Library by the placement of a veritably emblematic sculptural group, the commission would be secured by an indisputable name, specifically, the teacher of Casanova and many others, Josep Llimona. This choice was made despite the fact that this was a sculptor who, as he himself confessed to Feliu Elias, took a long time to appreciate the Greeks, something that the great critic succinctly put when he said that, instead of a Phidian, Llimona was a romantic, an "Alexandrine of the morbid genre" [4]. By August, 1912, Llimona had already made great progress since *La Veu de Catalunya* (*The Voice of Catalonia*) was able to publicly state that the work was "grandiose and had a profound sweetness. And the artist frames in it, through images of the most lovely femininity, the symbol of Renaissance Catalonia and the sciences that surround it" [7]. Three months later, the arrangement was nearly done [8]. As interpreted by the *La Veu de Catalunya*—the journalistic organ of the *Lliga Regionalista* (Regionalist League), the hegemonic party in Catalan politics of the time—the group rep-



resented Catalonia and the Sciences and not, as would often later be claimed, “Catalonia, the Sciences and the Arts.” The former makes sense in that the sculpture symbolizes an institution that, by definition, is dedicated to study and not to artistic creation.

Even though in its creation and its concept it is quite close to his great female nudes of the modernist era, such as the famous *Desconsol* (*Distress*) of 1903, this arrangement by Josep Llimona belongs to the sculptor’s mature era and is practically concurrent with one of his finest figures, *Joventut* or *Ondina* (*Youth* or *Ondina*, 1913, MNAC). In the words of Feliu Elias, the piece expressed the “painting of life of the female nude, [in which] Josep Llimona lingered with such pertinence, that he managed to express the most infinite values of the blurred feminine anatomy... those very vague undulations, so light that only well reflected light could reveal” [17]. Thus, because of its quality, but also because of its chronology, this is doubtlessly a work of depth [9]. The time had not yet arrived in which Llimona produced sculptures “perhaps a bit systematically”, as Feliu Elias himself said [16], a detour that the sculptor took throughout the 1920s, without reducing the quality of his work, when a touch of affectation could be noted in some of his later pieces, although always based in his most characteristic style.

Indeed, it is known that while the sculptor was working on the arrangement on *Catalonia and the Sciences* he was also elaborating other remarkable pieces. There was a group composition, cast in bronze and whose whereabouts is now unknown, commissioned by an American family for the upper part of a fireplace. A sculptural group was also installed in the chapel of the Sacrament, in the parish church of Sant Augustí in Barcelona, which accompanied a mural by Torres Garcia [8]. Both the sculpture and the mural were destroyed during the Spanish Civil War. During the same era as those pieces, Llimona made a highly enlarged version of his famous *Forjador* (*Forger*), a work that was at once sober and energetic, intended as a donation to the *Universitat Industrial* (Industrial University). This was another initiative of the Parliament of Prat de la Riba, where the sculpture is still kept today, in the grand lobby of the *Escola del Treball de Barcelona* (Barcelona School of Work) [7].

Puig i Cadafalch, the architect of the Library so liked the arrangement that Llimona created for the space that he placed a plaster model of it—which, as so often happens, was more subtle than its translation into stone—above the fireplace of his Barcelona home, a central location that within the architect and politician’s domestic realm would confer upon the work the same presidential meaning that it had in the reading room of the Institute’s Library. Indeed, Puig i Cadafalch was again the architect of the library in the 1930s, when the move to the old Hospital de la Santa Creu was proposed; however, in that move, the Llimona group did not find its proper placement. This fact together with the outbreak of the Civil War would keep the figures in storage, encased in wood, for many years until the most recent renovation, completed in the year 2000, when the architect Àngel Valdés placed the sculpture’s figures separately, at ground level and well-illuminated, on top of metallic pediments made expressly for this purpose.

Joaquim Folch i Torres, future tenured member of the IEC

and at the time one of the most orthodox art critics of triumphant *Noucentisme*, voiced his opinion on the Llimona group from his stand, the above-mentioned *La Veu de Catalunya* [10]. Folch saw it as a representation of a “serene and tranquil Catalonia who presides over the gracious band of Science,” which symbolized that the country “[has taken] up the paths of science and of normality in order to move toward the rehabilitation of our nation.” Catalonia, the central figure in the group, became—strictly according to Folch i Torres—“the image of our national stability.”

For Folch, Llimona—who sculpted figures of all kinds, ones that wore anything “from the *barretina* (traditional Catalan cap) to a tunic”—had earned “the indisputable title of national sculptor.” Llimona had already represented the heroic Catalonia of the people in the monument to Dr. Robert, originally installed in the square of the University of Barcelona but now in Tetuan Square. Undoubtedly influenced by the Orsian rhetoric, Folch valued a “magnificent example of maturity and discipline, of gravity and correction” in that group of the Institute’s Library, but he especially congratulated the fact that, within the artistic movement of the times, “the fine sketches begin disappearing and the Rodinesquely dressed inabilities and ineptitudes lose the prestige that in times of romantic turbulence they could have had.”

With that comment, Folch was referring to the dominant line in Catalan sculpture in the first decade of the 20th century, represented by young artists in whose figures a sketched vibration was noted, the fruit of a Rodinesque style. Therefore, the Noucentista, Folch believed, was declaredly bothered by Rodin, the most forceful sculptor of his day, who had enormous influence on young, international sculpture and, logically, Catalan sculpture as well. It was now time for something distinct, as Folch i Torres believed, and Llimona, it was hoped, would represent it. But, this ignored the fact that Llimona himself had also come under Rodin’s spell, as seen in the figures of his vibrant and heroic series—for example, in his quite recent *Forjador*, mentioned above—as well as in his airy female figures, quite like the allegories of the Sciences in the group that led to Folch i Torres’ doctrinal article.

In fact, it would hardly be misleading to assure that the choice of Llimona to create this sculptural group, emblematic of the Catalonia of Prat de la Riba, was linked to the personality of the architect who directed the arrangement, Josep Puig i Cadafalch, one of the great representatives of architectural Modernism and one of the formidable men of the first Institute. Llimona made an excellent group that was not a typical representation of the philhellenistic aesthetic that would end up characterizing *Noucentisme*. He was the country’s great sculptor, without a doubt, and the Noucentista poet Josep Carner had dedicated a well known poem to him, but he was about to be surpassed by a new style, that of Clarà and Casanovas. Eugeni Ors, for example, who did not write much about Llimona—probably because of the little connection he felt toward the sculptor’s style—even wrote ironically about the “meager breasts of a girl who [shows signs of] pre-tuberculosis” that, according to him, the great Barcelonan sculptor’s figures expressed [12]. Thus, if at the time the sculptural group was com-

missioned, Josep Clarà had already become the successful sculptor that he was to be in Catalonia from the spring of 1911 on, he would have been the creator of the piece and not Llimona. But, in the end, Llimona was the sculptor of this emblematic group, and with this work he gave us a new example of the high standard achieved in the plastic arts in our country at that time, regardless of how close they were to a style that posterity would decide was the most genuine of each era.

Thus, from this point on, a work that was created to symbolize the Institute will once again be seen in the form it was conceived in, and will serve as the IEC's emblem, as originally intended by its creators a little less than a century ago.

## Notes and references

### Notes

- [1] It is a solution that was also adopted in another, earlier work for the Barcelona Provincial Council. At the front door to the clock building of the School of Industrial Engineers, four Tuscan columns held up a pediment crowned by three, quite ephemeral, allegorical female figures, a work by the sculptor Gabriel Bechini from the end of 1927 [Vilaverde Rey M et al. (2008) *L'Escola Industrial de Barcelona (1904–2004): cent anys d'ensenyament tècnic i d'arquitectura*. Parliament of Barcelona, Barcelona City Hall and the Consortium Industrial School of Barcelona, Barcelona, pp. 442-445]. This was undoubtedly a sign of inertia of the *Mancomunitat* (Commonwealth) aesthetic, still existent in the middle of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship.
- [2] In fact, in the op. cit. of reference [12], the representation of the allegorical statues, of which there are five, opted for Catalonia—in the middle—surrounded by the Arts, Sciences, and Letters, but, writtten this way, in plural, there are too many characters.
- [3] Plans and sketches by Josep Puig i Cadafalch. National Archive of Catalonia (no. F.737, U. Install. 2637, extract), Sant Cugat del Vallès, Barcelona
- [4] Sacs J (Feliu Elias) (1934) *L'escultor Josep Llimona*. *Mirador*, no. 266 (8 March 1934), Barcelona, p. 7. A good analysis of his style is expressed by the author in the classic book: Elias F (1928) *L'escultura catalana moderna*. Barcino, Barcelona, especially in volume II, pp. 115-118. Another good analysis of Josep Llimona's oeuvre, which coincides quite a bit with that of Feliu Elias, is given to us by: Benet R (2006) *Cròniques d'art a La Veu de Catalunya, 1934-1936*. Rafael Benet Foundation, Barcelona, pp. 29-33.
- [5] Stated in an article in *La Vanguardia Española* (24 January 1954), pointed out by: Jardí E (1980) *El Noucentisme*. Proa, Barcelona, p. 46. An anthology that, significantly, did not include the group "Catalonia and the Sciences," despite the significance it had within Noucentisme.

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- [14] *La Vanguardia* (25 October 1911), Barcelona
- [15] *La Vanguardia* (31 October 1913), Barcelona, p. 2
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