

Antonio Gaudi: Genius and Sorcerer: Architecture

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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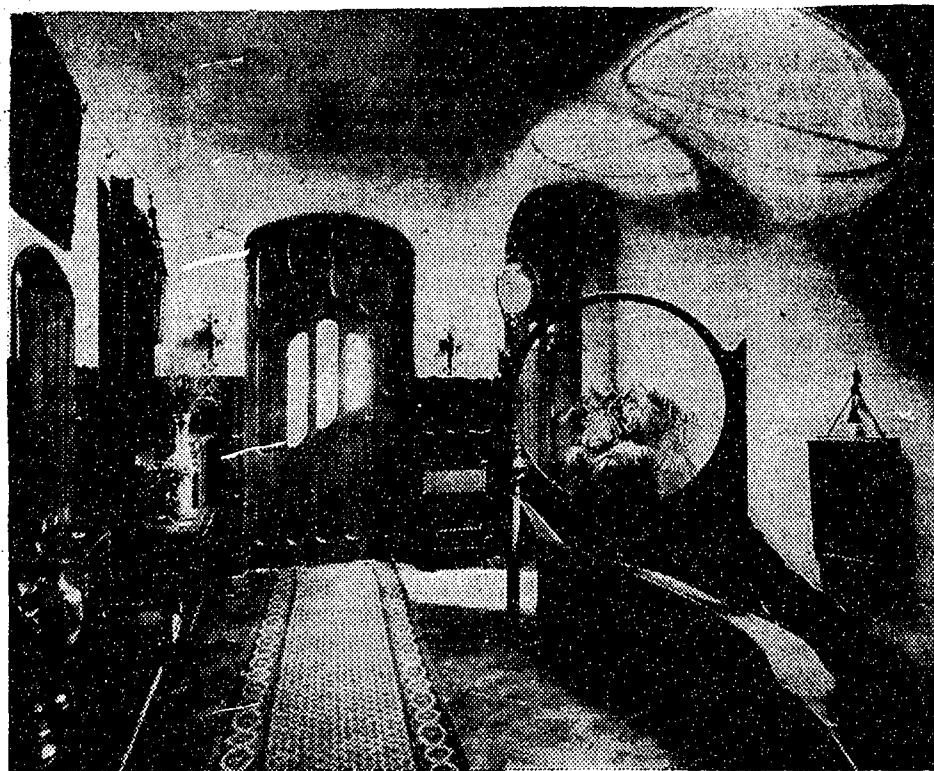
Antonio Gaudi: Genius and Sorcerer

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I DON'T know how many shows make a season, or whether three architecture shows make a trend. October has produced the New York Cultural Center's "1930's Expositions," reviewed two weeks ago, "The Furniture of Antonio Gaudi" at the Spanish Institute, Park Avenue at 68th Street (through Nov. 30) dealt with here, and an exhibition of architectural models from the collection at the Museum of Modern Art.

All are what might be called near-history—a genre of increasing popularity—and none are major shows. The Gaudi display can hardly be called a show at all. One could probably just as well sit down with a monograph and catalogue raisonné, but this serves as a modest summary of the subject for non-scholars short on catalogues raisonnés. And the Spanish Institute is one of those less-publicized, delightful places in which New York abounds, in a landmark building.

There is only one actual piece of furniture in the show, a reproduction of a bench from the Casa Calvet sent by the Friends of Gaudi in Barcelona. The rest consists of a selection of small black and white and color en-



Entrance hall of the Casa Batlló, Barcelona, 1904-06
God, or the devil, is in the details

largements of Gaudi-designed rooms and furnishings from the 1870's to 1914 in a single gallery, supplemented by two scrapbooks that complete the record of *meubles*, or movable furnishings produced by the Spanish master. The display is the work of Nieves Peris and Janet Lauren, and an exhibition folder with a brief text offers about as succinct a summary of Gaudi's work and style as one would wish.

Even at this small scale, Gaudi is overwhelming. Genius always is. Born in Catalonia in 1852, the Spanish architect—far better known for his buildings than for his furniture—was a genuine eccentric. A dandy in his youth, he never married, and eventually dropped all secular commissions for church work, although no one quite knows why. In later years he begged alms on the street for work on his masterpiece, the Church of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, an incredible surreal structure in which molten dream imagery joins with precise structural de-

sign. He met an Ionesco-type end when he was struck by a streetcar in 1926.

His late work is almost fearful in its ingenuity. One can see the thin dividing line between his wildly talented expression of Art Nouveau pushed to dazzling tour de force extremes and what would easily reduce, in lesser hands, to a whiplash horror show. Here floor plans undulate like snakes and furniture writhes with tortured life behind sinuous facades and wrought iron grilles of piercing virtuosity.

Never has Art Nouveau been more brilliant and contorted, more rational in its pursuit of irrationality, more provocative in its calculated distortions of conventional esthetics, more ugly-beautiful. It is work that seduces the imagination until normalcy seems flat and dull; each venture must be more outrageous than its predecessor. It becomes a special taste and obsessive addiction. The viewers' minds and responses are totally co-opted. How sad that this show could not have been of the scale and ambition of the Museum of Mod-

ern Art's Hector Guimard exhibition a few years ago.

One reason for Gaudi's impact is that he was not designing furniture alone. As the exhibition text points out, his was a truly environmental art. "His furniture, his statues, his dazzling polychromed tile surfaces are all integral parts of the buildings, units and areas for which they were intended... a unifying nexus between structure and furnishings."

Stylistically, the furniture progresses from "spiky medieval to an image of generalized organic growth," in the words of George Collins, whose excellent monograph on Gaudi in the Braziller series of 1960 still stands as an authoritative account. The work is full of astounding vitality, not the least element of which is its firm dependence on basic structural principles, even at its most far out, which is very far out indeed. "There is a madness here that Gaudi shared with a number of Modernista designers," Professor Collins says.

The delusory obsession with so-called organic or natural

form, in which nothing is allowed to be straight or static, appeared early in Gaudi's work, before it briefly engulfed the arts everywhere at the turn of the century.

There is, for example, the extraordinary Art Nouveau dressing table that appears to be walking off in all directions at once in a Groucho crouch, done in the 1880's for the Palacio Güell.

Gaudi's earliest work, labeled eclecticism in the exhibition, is strong in Gothic references, with a kind of Moorish recall breaking through in the smoking room of the Casa Vicens (1883-88) with its carved grotto ceiling. Nature is already the theme in panels of birds and leaves.

The next stage, here called revisionism, is marked by two handsome and disparate examples, the Palacio Güell (1885-89) and the Convent School of the Order of the Teresas (1888-90). Güell, with its superb parabolic entrance arches, is lush, elaborate and quasi-historical in its interior references. The spaces are open and free-flowing. By comparison, the convent school is austere, dependent for effect on contrasts of tile and brick, with a matching stricter geometry for its furnishings. The structural artistry of Catalan brickwork can always be found in the attics and underpinnings of Gaudi buildings.

Modernismo, the Spanish Art Nouveau, appears full blown in the Casa Calvet of 1902. The next step, which the show calls a transition from modernism to functional expressionism, is marked by the famous Parque Güell, a project in landscape and urban design in Barcelona that remains one of architecture's most remarkable products.

Radical functional expressionism appears in the last two houses, Casa Batlló (1904-06) and Casa Milá (1905-10)—Milá, unfortunately, is not in the present show. The sheer creative brilliance of Casa Batlló is breathtaking. What is barely implied in the interior photographs is the incredible molding of space, not only through sculptured walls and ceilings that suggest a sorcerer's, rather than an architect's manipulation, but also through the subtle, shifting and shaping element of illumination through skylights and lightwells, with fluid shafts of

white and colored luminescence.

For Disneyland, one need go no farther than a Gaudi rooftop, where everything breaks loose. A garden of whimsical chimneypots, in a riot of colored tiles shows the architect as sculptor, colorist and craftsman.

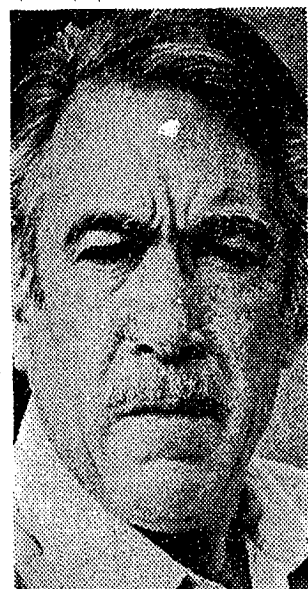
These rooftops, the Parque Güell, and above all, the clustered towers and pinnacles of his crowning work, the Church of the Sagrada Familia—for all the world like some giant confection but totally without wedding-cake innocence—appealed strongly to the later surrealists. They were more intrigued by the church's strangeness than by its structural mastery, but every unique form grew out of engineering studies conducted in Gaudi's workshop.

Strange the work surely is, and compelling. Even the bench for the Casa Calvet, in the exhibition, has a sinister kind of fascination, with an armature more like a polished skeleton than wood, and arms like jawbones, even to suggestions of teeth underneath. Only the rather pedestrian floral punchwork on this piece is disappointing. With Gaudi, God, or the devil, is in the details.

In late years, Gaudi did no furniture at all. His work, totally directed to the completion of the Sagrada Familia, became a complete fusion of the structural and the esthetic. His style, his energy, his flamboyant personal sense of beauty, have never been surpassed. He was, as they say, an original, in the finest meaning of the word.



"THE FRENCH CONSPIRACY"—Jean Seberg co-stars with Jean-Louis Trintignant in the film, Wednesday at the 68th St. Playhouse and UA Eastside.



"THE DON IS DEAD"

—Anthony Quinn stars in Richard Fleischer's suspense film, due Wednesday at the Rivoli and other houses.