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# Art Nouveau & Gaudí: The Way of Nature

## **Abstract**

Starting in the early 1890s, Art Nouveau was an international movement that integrated two of the most influential forces in the world: art and nature. While these two had been paired since the prehistoric times of Lascaux and Pech Merle, Art Nouveau's significance and effect extended far beyond any prior attempt. This revolutionary style was seen in paintings, sculpture, architecture, ceramics, and furniture around the world. As Art Nouveau spread to various countries, its definition and ideologies adapted to its surrounding culture. Although Art Nouveau had many followers and patrons, few reached the fame and distinction of Antoni Gaudí. In the mid-1800s, Gaudí came to represent Barcelona's interpretation of Art Nouveau: Modernisme. His sensational architecture with striking detail is exemplified in works such as the Templo Expiatorio de la Sagrada Familia and the Casa Batlló. Both of these masterpieces reflect what made Gaudí unique: his flawless use of nature, design highly influenced by religion, and unprecedented modernity. Not only did this pairing allow Gaudí and his style to rise to international fame, but it also elevated Art Nouveau to one of the most notable movements in art history.

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Honors Faculty Mentor: Dr. Allison Smith, Associate Professor and Chair, Art History

Art and nature—two of the most influential and longest lasting forces on our planet. Ever since the Paleolithic images at Lascaux and Pech Merle, these two forces have been working together, eventually forming one of the most culturally popular movements in art: Art Nouveau. Begun in the early 1890s, Art Nouveau went against what had become the definition art.<sup>1</sup> Spanning Europe and North America, Art Nouveau was based on the concepts of nature and modernity; however, this international style adapted to each country and city to which it was brought. In Scotland, it was known as Glasgow style; in Italy, it was known as Stile Liberty; in Austria, it was known as Sezessionstil.<sup>2</sup> Each of these countries had its renowned artists who came to represent the stylistic adaptation of Art Nouveau in his/her country. Gaining the attention and respect that few others achieved, Antoni Gaudí led the Art Nouveau movement due to his use of nature and religion throughout his work.

To truly understand the germination of this movement, one must look at the events of the time, especially the shift of industrial power. Great Britain, the world power of the era, was losing its “grasp on the production and sale of industrial commodities.”<sup>3</sup> This loss of power directly translated into a more competitive market around the world, which gave countries that had recently become a part of the international market the chance to search for power with a new form of Imperialism; a newly found desire for

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Greenhalgh, ed., *Art Nouveau: 1890-1914*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Michèle Lavallée, “Art Nouveau,” in *Grove Art Online*, (Oxford University Press, n.d.) (database online); available from Oxford Art Online (cited 19 July 2012).

[http://www.oxfordartonline.com.ezproxy.jccc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T004438?q=art+nouveau&search=quick&pos=1&\\_start=1#firsthit](http://www.oxfordartonline.com.ezproxy.jccc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T004438?q=art+nouveau&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit).

<sup>3</sup> Greenhalgh, 18.

dominance forced countries to scour for trading partners and territory.<sup>4</sup> This unavoidable rapid industrialization led to various technological advancements beyond the trading realm, such as the Eiffel Tower. Although this technology was innovative, the majority of people opposed it, as shown in John Ruskin's denouncement of the machine as "nothing but ugliness and despair."<sup>5</sup> Yearning for what was *real*, the world's masses returned to the basic premise of our world: nature.

At the same time of the increasing impact of industrialization came a shift to urbanization. This movement away from the outskirts and undeveloped areas towards commercial cities meant that nature was more of a rarity than it had ever been before. No longer was nature a part of life, for it had now become an observed science. As Paul Greenhalgh wrote:

By 1860, a truly international and exotic range of plant imagery was available. Books on the travels of eminent botanists, such as Alfred Wallace in the Malay Archipelago and J.D. Hooker in the Himalayas, allowed enthusiasts to discover the plant life of most regions of the Earth without venturing farther than a library or a book shop.<sup>6</sup>

These books contained "magnificent illustrations of cellular life" that "presented organic life to a wide public for the first time."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, direct observation of nature aided the appreciation and study of the natural world for scientists and the general public. This was possible due to the increase in "conservatories and hot houses in the public parks of Brussels, London, Paris, Vienna, and other cities."<sup>8</sup> This inevitable separation

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<sup>4</sup> Et al.

<sup>5</sup> Laurence Buffet-Challi . *The Art Nouveau Style*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Greenhalgh, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Et al.

<sup>8</sup> Greenhalgh, 56.

transformed nature into a “major source of urban pleasure” and artistic inspiration around the world.<sup>9</sup>

Besides nature, modernity contributed greatly to the ingenuity of Art Nouveau. This concept sought to break away from the old “formulations of art that had become dominant and resistant to change.”<sup>10</sup> Contemporary artists believed that “art and life were synonymous” and, therefore, attempted to incorporate their unprecedented style into daily life.<sup>11</sup> Every object—no matter how mundane it seemed—was given attention to its design and aesthetic value. Not only did Art Nouveau intend to enhance the appearance of every object, but it also brought the fine arts and the applied arts together, something that few other movements had done so successfully.<sup>12</sup>

Combining the ideas of nature and modernity, Antoni Gaudí took the Art Nouveau movement and made it into the Barcelona style of Modernisme. Hailed as Barcelona’s “priest of beauty,” Gaudí has had an everlasting impact on Spain.<sup>13</sup> Greatly influencing the Art Nouveau movement, this creative mastermind revolutionized art through his unique use of nature in all dimensions of his work and through his overwhelming devotion to God. This seamless and ingenious incorporation was exemplified in his work at the Basílica i Temple Expiatori de la Sagrada Família and Casa Batlló.

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<sup>9</sup> Greenhalgh, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Greenhalgh, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Et al.

<sup>12</sup> “Barcelona’s Natural Wonder,” National Geographic (2010) (internet on-line); available from Basílica de la Sagrada Família, <http://www.sagradafamilia.cat/sfup/prensa/2010-09-01-01.pdf> (accessed July 10, 2012)

<sup>13</sup> Gijs van Hensbergen. *Gaudí*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), XXVI.

Born in 1852 to a family of craftsmen, Gaudí grew up admiring the work of his father, a metal smith.<sup>14</sup> From an early age, it was quite evident that Antoni had an uncanny talent of mentally forming “three-dimensional volumes and structures.”<sup>15</sup> This ability was complemented by his reflective tendencies, which helped shape his fondness of nature.<sup>16</sup> Besides his admiration of nature, Gaudí’s schooling, too, influenced his design legacy. While Gaudí was growing up, the majority of schools were run by the Catholic Church. Emphasizing liturgy, prayers to the Virgin Mother and the Bible, his schooling clearly impacted his spirituality and relationship with God, a relationship that is evident in many of his works.

Exemplifying both his piety and admiration of nature, the Templo Expiatorio de la Sagrada Família, commonly referred to as the Sagrada Família, was Gaudí’s pièce de résistance.<sup>17</sup> Begun in 1866, the Sagrada Família was originally commissioned by the Asociación de Devotos de San José for St Joseph and the holy royal family.<sup>18</sup> While Gaudí did not start the project, he sought to transform the neo-Gothic base into a “soaring visual narrative of Christ’s



Figure 1: Gaudí, Sagrada Família, Façade, Barcelona, 1886.

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<sup>14</sup> Hensbergen, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Maria Antonietta Crippa. *Antoni Gaudí, 1852-1926: From Nature to Architecture*. (Köln: Taschen, 2003), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Et al.

<sup>17</sup> Jordi Oliveras, “Gaudí, Antoni,” in *Grove Art Online*, (Oxford University Press, n.d.) (database online); available from Oxford Art Online (cited 19 July 2012).

<http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T030991>.

<sup>18</sup> *Gaudí, Antoni*.

life.”<sup>19</sup> However, Gaudí knew that a masterpiece of this prestige could not be finished in his lifetime. Even with this knowledge, Gaudí devoted his life to his vision. To fulfill this dream, Gaudí took inspiration from what he believed to be the direct work of God: the natural world.

One of the most prominent organic designs in the Sagrada Família is the internal structural support. Rather than using traditional columns, Gaudí used a vertical structure that mimicked the support and appearance of trees.<sup>20</sup> These sculpted columns conveyed many characteristics of the forest that were applicable to a religious experience. Most importantly, trees in the forest provided a feeling a privacy and solitude. Therefore, Gaudí’s design would mimic the protection and comfort of the nature and could help make one’s religious experience more

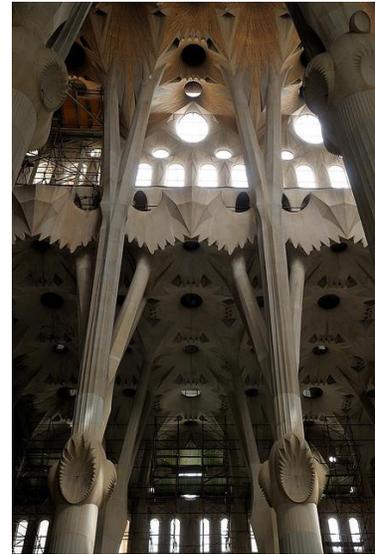


Figure 2: Sagrada Família, Interior Support, 1886.

connected with God. Naturally, these tree branches supported the weight of leaves; however, for Gaudí’s cathedral, they would be responsible for holding up the “canopy” of art that covered the ceiling. In addition, this method of support allowed the weight of the stone roof to be more evenly distributed by having multiple supporting branches off of the main column.

Similarly to the tree-like columns that support the interior of the church, the doorways, too, were directly influenced by nature. Prior to Gaudí, many styles of arches were used: Roman, Gothic, Tudor, and more. However, Gaudí ignored all of these styles

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<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Berlin, “The Big Idea: Biomimetic Architecture,” *National Geographic*, December 2010, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2010/12/big-idea/gaudi-text>.

<sup>20</sup> “Barcelona’s Natural Wonder.”

in favor of his own, one that was directly derived from the natural world. This new style of arch was formed by the visual tendencies of gravity, more specifically, the hyperbolic shape. To find the shape that would be the most “natural,” Gaudí attached bags of lead in a symmetrical pattern to a rope.<sup>21</sup> He then hung the rope against a wall with the ends fastened to the wall. The resulting shape, a hyperbole, was how Gaudí chose to shape the doorways in the Sagrada Família and many of his other works.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 3: Sagrada Família Interior Support Arches, 1886.

Beyond the basic support of the building, Gaudí sought to use nature as the inspiration for the cathedral’s ornamentation. As aforementioned, the ceiling was meant to resemble a forest canopy.

To do so, ceramic blooms covered with green and gold mosaics sprawled the ceiling; flowers were placed atop every vault; palm leaves encompassed the ceiling in its entirety; and with the help of colored-glass filters, these ornate ceilings were lit with natural, radiating light.<sup>23</sup>

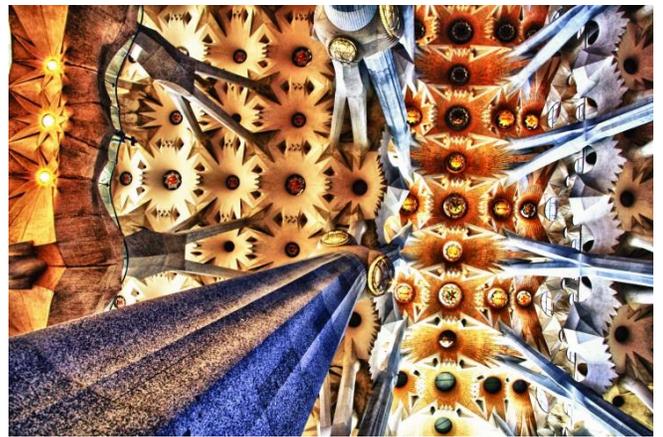


Figure 3: Sagrada Família Ceiling, 1886.

While the canopied ceiling quite clearly imitated, many other architectural and design details were inspired by Gaudí’s appreciation for all of God’s work.

An element that was frequently used throughout Gaudí’s work was the helix. Seen in nature in the shape of snail’s shells, this cylindrical spiral was used in a variety of

<sup>21</sup> “Barcelona’s Natural Wonder.”

<sup>22</sup> Et al.

<sup>23</sup> Temple Expiatori Sagrada Família. *The Tree Structure*. N.d. Internet on-line. [http://www.sagradafamilia.cat/sfeng/docs\\_instit/estructura2.php?pa=tree.structure](http://www.sagradafamilia.cat/sfeng/docs_instit/estructura2.php?pa=tree.structure).

manners for decoration. This shape was frequently used to form stairways, as exemplified in the Sagrada Família. Gaudí repeatedly observed the pattern of falling maple-seed pods



Figure 4: Sagrada Família Interior Stairwell, 1886.

and chose to model the staircase after this motion.<sup>24</sup> And, likewise, Gaudí used this shape to design details throughout the church, as shown in the intricate border of etched vines that were modeled after the complex, coiled helical pattern of fruit vines.<sup>25</sup> This ornate pattern depicted the beauty of God's elaborate work, but, additionally, Gaudí could have intended to show the complexity of religion through God's creations.

Besides the helix, Gaudí frequently used nature that was specific to his hometown, Barcelona.<sup>26</sup> He extensively studied various organic forms' function and structure so that he could incorporate their beauty and purpose into all aspects of his work. While not the focal point of this grand cathedral, these elements were placed primarily in the famed soaring towers; topping the pinnacle of the apse, a sculpted flowering lavender stem soars towards the heavens. Supporting the towers of the evangelists and apostles, stones sculpted into the same shape of pyrite rest.<sup>27</sup> By using these natural forms found in Barcelona, Gaudí showed his admiration for his hometown and, more importantly, his use of God's creations in a work dedicated to Him.

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<sup>24</sup> "Barcelona's Natural Wonder."

<sup>25</sup> Et al.

<sup>26</sup> Et al.

<sup>27</sup> Et al.

While the Sagrada Família may be Gaudí’s most distinguished piece, he also designed several other buildings in which he applied the same principles. Looking as if it were torn from the pages of a fairy tale, the Casa Batlló has been cited as “the most emblematic work” of Barcelona and its beloved imaginative mastermind.<sup>28</sup> At the time of



Figure 5: Sagrada Família Roof Pinnacles, 1866.

construction, this building was part of the developing Passeig de Gràcia in the Ciutat Vella.<sup>29</sup> This area quickly became *the* location for affluent and powerful families, such as Mr. Josep Batlló y Casanovas.<sup>30</sup> In 1904, after the foundation had been laid, Antoni Gaudí was hired to finish the structure and transform the building into the artistic work for which it has become known. Unrestricted by his client, Gaudí had absolute freedom in the design of Mr. Batlló’s house.<sup>31</sup> Never before had an architect been so daring in his

structure, color palette, media and overall aesthetic vision, all of which were influenced by Gaudí’s reverence of nature and religious beliefs.

One of the most striking features of Casa Batlló is the vibrant, undulating façade. This polychromatic mosaic has drawn comparisons to Monet’s famed *Water Lilies* due to abstracted color and organization. More importantly, the façade is home to what many have claimed to be a dragon,



Figure 5: Gaudí, Casa Batlló, Façade, Barcelona, 1904.

<sup>28</sup> Casa Batlló. *Gaudí’s Work of Art: Casa Batlló Barcelona*. July 10, 2012. Internet on-line. <http://www.casabatllo.es/en/history/casa-batllo/gaudi-work-art/> (accessed July 10, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Casa Batlló. *History: Casa Batlló Barcelona*. July 10, 2012. Internet on-line. <http://www.casabatllo.es/en/history/casa-batllo/history-building/> (accessed July 10, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Et al.

<sup>31</sup> Et al.

resting atop the building.<sup>32</sup> While never confirmed, this assertion would fit Gaudí's tendency to use natural and religious themes in one work, as exemplified in the Sagrada Família. This dragon could very well be a reference to St. George, for he is the patron saint of Barcelona. According to the Bible, St. George rescued the daughter of a Libyan king from a dragon and in return, all of the king's subjects would be baptized.<sup>33</sup> In order to show his dedication to his city and his religion, Gaudí could have designed the building with this idea in mind. Perched upon the cornice, the dragon was made from the vivid tiles that represent scales and cover the roof.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond the representation of a mythical beast, the façade was designed with much more detail that Gaudí meticulously planned. One of the most intriguing features that emphasized Gaudí's notion of Art Nouveau was his use of bones. Spanning the lower half of the façade, long cream columns that bear a resemblance to bones flank the windows. These peculiar structural supports gave Casa Batlló the nickname Casa dels Ossos—House of the Bones.<sup>35</sup> While one might think that these forms give the playful

building a rather grim undertone, this is simply not the case.



Figure 6: Casa Batlló Façade Detail, 1904.

<sup>32</sup> Et al.

<sup>33</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, "Saint George," accessed July 5, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/229970/Saint-George#tocBiblio>.

<sup>34</sup> *History: Casa Batlló Barcelona*.

<sup>35</sup> *History: Casa Batlló Barcelona*.

As *National Geographic* explained:

[Gaudí] understood that the natural world is rife with curved forms, not straight lines. And he noticed that natural construction tends to favor sinewy materials such as wood, muscle, and tendon. With these organic models in mind, Gaudí based his buildings on a simple premise: If nature is the work of God, and if architecture forms are derived from nature, then the best way to honor God is to design buildings based on his work.<sup>36</sup>

By imitating the work of God, Gaudí was applying natural perfection to man's flawed work.

Upon entrance into the Casa Batlló, it becomes quite obvious that Gaudí was immensely dedicated to his work and the reverence nature. Every detail, from the contour of the doorframe to the color of the stairs, was carefully planned. Out of all of the exquisite themes by which Gaudí designed, perhaps the most enchanting is the ocean. As previously mentioned, Gaudí had an affinity towards his hometown of Barcelona and its surroundings. Knowing this, we can infer that the coast and sea life associated with Barcelona made an impact on Gaudí. This influence is evident throughout the house, but most literally illustrated in the inner courtyard. Adorned from



Figure 7: Casa Batlló Inner Courtyard, 1904.

top to bottom in various shades of blue, this space gives the impression of being immersed in the sea.<sup>37</sup> The fading blue paired with the radiating natural light creates a sense of tranquility and peace that only nature can truly provide.

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<sup>36</sup> Berlin.

<sup>37</sup> Casa Batlló. *A Visit to Casa Batlló: A modernist house in Barcelona*. July 5, 2012. Internet on-line. <http://www.casabatllo.es/en/visit-us/information/visit/> (accessed July 5, 2012).

Throughout the rooms on the Noble Floor, Gaudí made reference to the ever-



Figure 9: Casa Batlló Noble Floor Ceiling, 1904.

changing sea through a unique architectural component: the ceiling.<sup>38</sup> Built from plaster, the ceilings were sculpted into various phenomena associated with the ocean. Located in the Batlló family's former residence, the whirlpool ceiling is by far the most well known. This helical structure

illustrates the beauty and power of the sea. In another room, Gaudí sculpted a ceiling with cylindrical depressions. Following the theme of the sea, these orbs echo raindrops splashing the water's surface. To further stress the marine theme, Gaudí designed skylights that resemble tortoises' shells.<sup>39</sup> In combination with the ceilings and the inner courtyard, these windows contribute to the overall marine aesthetic that Gaudí diligently designed following God's plan of nature.



Figure 8: Casa Batlló Ceiling, 1904.

Evolving from the two-dimensional cave paintings to the soaring sculpted steeples of the Sagrada Família, nature's impact on art is one of great extent. Their pairing is of unparalleled success; their masters of unrivaled talent; their creations of unmatched beauty. Out of thousands of artists, Gaudí best knew the strength of these two forces and consciously designed with them in mind. Because of his masterful design and religious dedication, his work and style have risen to international fame. Coming to represent his

<sup>38</sup> Casa Batlló. *The Building: The Floors*. July 7, 2012. Internet on-line. <http://www.casabatllo.es/en/history/floors/> (accessed July 7, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Et al.

country, Antoni Gaudí epitomizes the use of nature and modernity that are the basis of one of the most profound art movements in history: Art Nouveau.