

Heard and Seen

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROMANESQUE

Barcelona must be one of the most uninhibitedly spectacular cities in the world. The width and straightness of its boulevards, the plummy hugeness of its fountains, the richness of its contours and the abundant spaciousness of its *plazas* are matched and offset by an unbridled grandiose fantasy in its public buildings, many of which look like folded cardboard mock-ups made full size by a film-designer of eccentric genius. Gaudi's astounding *Sagrada Família*, indeed, is only a façade—the west front of an uncompleted project that looks like being many more decades a-building. But it is none the less moving for that: perhaps even more so, inasmuch as to walk round the site is to experience, *mutatis mutandis*, something like what the citizens of Chartres or Amiens must have felt as they watched the construction of their own cathedrals. At the city's western end, dominating a steep eminence of public park, and presiding over a progeny of smaller but architecturally no less elaborately splendid museums, stands the Palacio Nacional—normally the chief treasure-house of Catalonian art, but during this summer host to an exhibition of international (if predominantly Spanish) Romanesque art: while a companion exhibition is simultaneously in progress in Madrid.

This last your chronically disorganized and lazy correspondent did not contrive to visit: and to be sure the amount of time which the consciousness of a carload of hot and irritable dependents permitted him to spend in the Palacio Nacional was derisory in view of what there was to see. Entire apsidal frescoes have been peeled from remote village churches and reassembled in these vast and airy halls. Column capitals and large statuary groups (most notably two Descents from the Cross, both Spanish, of indescribable tragic beauty) are ranged against ample and luminous wall-spaces; while glass cases display missals and manuscripts of superlative quality, not to mention chasubles, reliquaries, ciboria and the like. No detailed commentary on such profusion is possible here. I can only offer, in the first place a wholehearted tribute to the initiative as well as to the skill in presentation of the organizers, and secondly a few generalized, random, and all-too-personal reflections on the Romanesque; which for brevity's sake shall be numerically tabulated.

1. Allowing that it is meaningful to speak of the Romanesque *en bloc* in contradistinction to the Gothic *en bloc* (and I think it is, if we take Abbot Suger's reconstruction of St Denis from about 1130 on as the watershed between them) why do I, in common with many of my contemporaries, react with readier and deeper emotion and less obligatory exercise of the antiquarian imagination to the first than to the second? A friend once said to me "The Gothic has no sense of wall". Suger would justly have resented this, since a major objective of

Gothic engineering was, as we all know, to admit light through the gaps in a leaping, attenuated bony-structure of rib-vault, pier and buttress: and without those gaps where would be the *vitraux* of Chartres or Bourges, than which nothing ever made by man is more beautiful: For all that, there is something about the foursquare fortress-like blankness of a Romanesque façade, set off by the occasional sharp and deep incision of arcade, window or portal which is essentially in accord with present-day sensibility, both religious and sculptural. Its tragic, beleaguered, defensive overtones relate only too obviously to our times: but paradoxically there is also a feeling of tubbiness, unshakeability, volume and mass which is as consoling as a home-made loaf. Such a building would be pleasurable to pick up, weigh in the hand and fondle, supposing one were some sort of aesthete-Cyclops able to perform the feat. There would be much less temptation to handle a spiky object like Rheims cathedral, superb though it most certainly is.

2. Coming down to detail—and by this I mean the sculpture—what differences are noticeable here? For me, again the Romanesque typically excels the Gothic in the matter of volumetric sense. Take those columnar saints and prophets who support the *voussoirs* of the south portal at Chartres, for example: admittedly they are marvels of dignity and spiritual force. But not one of them has as much front-to-back penetrability or sense of movement in deep space as have, say, the archangels at either end of the west front of St Gilles. Gothic sculpture *exists* in space, yes: any three-dimensional object does. I am talking here about the extent to which the beholder is made to *experience* space—and while late Gothic sculpture became increasingly free in its movement in depth, it also became increasingly *slick*: an adjective never in the remotest degree applicable to works done before about 1100.

3. Coming to still finer detail: what a marvellous sense of *linear incision* the Romanesque has! Only certain Benin bronzes and some vintage Chinese Buddhas can compare with it. Locks of hair, the curls of beards, whorls and fluttering fringes of drapery, the veins of acanthus leaves, the feathers of a Johannine eagle—everywhere there is fluting and hatching as fine-cut as a cockleshell and as organically strong. This extreme delicacy of finish would perhaps not move us—might even repel us—if it were found embellishing forms of a sophisticated, a world weary or a knowing ambience. Coupled as it is with an iconography, a *mise-en-cadre*, of vernal peasant directness and innocence, it has the same sort of poignancy as the agile grace-notes of a reed-pipe might affect us with, or the flowering descants of a primitive Christmas carol.

5. Romanesque metamorphic zoology. What is the meaning of those strange and various creatures, those men-that-become-lions-that-become-plants, those wolves-that-become-fish-that-become-dragons, which everywhere proliferate and entwine and disappear and re-emerge in these endlessly inventive carvings? Has any learned man ever collated and studied their symbolism, or are we to be content to regard them as mere amiable caprices of the ignorant? Every precedent in the history of art inclines us to believe that nothing happens—particularly in

an age highly conscious of symbol and emblem—quite 'by accident'. However it may be in the case of all this by-play of animal fantasy, a message emerges therefrom which is of prime relevance to our own times (as witness the constant recurrence of the metamorphic idea in modern art, most notably that of Picasso and the Surrealists). This message is, in short, what somebody has called the *all togetherness of everything*, or if you prefer a more pompous formulation, the universal inter-relatedness of phenomena. This concept (and its implications), is as fertile in potentialities for science and philosophy as any that could be named. The Romanesque civilization clearly had for birthright a type of awareness of created things which we ourselves are only slowly and painfully re-conquering. It had been forgotten as early as the mid-fifteenth century when the Palais Jacques-Coeur at Bourges was built. Around the fireplaces of this impressive mansion run exquisitely carved borders of vine-leaves and other vegetation, among which disport themselves the most life-like monkeys and rabbits and birds imaginable. In sheer accuracy of naturalism the 'advance' on the eleventh century is immeasurable. But something profound and precious has evaporated: the monkeys are just monkeys and the rabbits just rabbits—we are already in the cold clear light of 'commonsense' and prose, the light which the twentieth century likewise is obliged to live by.

6. A footnote. On my travels I was lucky enough to see Le Corbusier's new Dominican house at La Tourette. It is all, and more than all, that I had expected. The work of a single man (and not the collaborative output of a nascent civilization) working in an age of self-consciousness and religious confusion (and not in an age of simplicity and religious certitude) it nevertheless succeeds in making an architectural-sculptural-metaphysical statement as serious and majestic and moving as any Romanesque building I have seen. This one would have thought impossible.

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