

Ramon Casas (1866–1932), portrait of a time

Carmen Chica

International Microbiology Journal, Barcelona, Catalonia

Correspondence:

Carmen Chica
International Microbiology
Poblet, 15
08028 Barcelona, Catalonia
Tel. +34-933341079

E-mail: cchica@microbios.org

*My friend the sea
is the immense cradle of all blues,
and in its coming and going
of sound and color
I realize how little I have.*

From Cradle of all blues

(words and music by Catalan songwriter **Lluís Llach**)



In 1904, Ramon Casas, who was thirty eight at the time, hung off a scaffolding to direct the pleasant work of decorating the roof and walls of a solemn dining room in the Fonda España, a refurbished hotel near the Rambles in Barcelona. But, in fact, he was to have an arduous task: he was trying to “steal” from the sea a handful of mermaids for whom he had to invent a garden. He overcame the challenge with love and care, so the sirens would not be homesick. The young, gracile half-women creatures were to be accompanied by other marine beings in their natural environment, the Mediterranean Sea, the *Mare Nostrum* (“our sea”) of the Romans, and so he let them go, sgraffitoed in this garden he created for them.

It has been said that, for this work, Casas was inspired by *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, by Katsushika Hokusai (Tokyo 1760–1849), one of the most important artists of *ukiyo-e*, or “pictures of the floating world,” school. *The Great Wave* is the first and most famous print in the series *Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji*, and it shows the crest of a giant wave in the midst of a tempest. Both the work and the author were well known in European artistic circles, especially in France, which was a meeting place for artists from all over the world.

Keywords: Ramon Casas (1866–1932) · Catalan Modernism (*Art Nouveau*) · science in Ramon Casas · mermaids · sirens



Els Quatre Gats ("The Four Cats") café in the center of Barcelona (carrer Montsió). Self-portrait in oil titled *Ramon Casas and Pere Romeu on a tandem* (Barcelona, 1897; 191 x 215 cm; copy from the original in the MNAC). The large size of the painting can easily be appreciated in comparison with the café's tables. (Photo from www.bonart.cat)

In the dining room of the Fonda España, now Hotel España, where *The Garden of the Mermaids* is found, we can contemplate this impressive mural, under a coffered skylight which breaks down the natural light into coloured rays. The first Fonda España had been inaugurated in 1859, and the owners decided to renovate it in the early 20th century. They commissioned Lluís Domènech i Montaner to refurbish the building and he entrusted his friend Casas with the task of decorating the walls. Domènech i Montaner, together with Antoni Gaudí, Josep Puig i Cadafalch, and Josep Maria Jujol i Gibert, were the pillars and maximum exponents of the Catalan architecture of the time, the Modernism (or *Art Nouveau*). This cultural-artistic movement identified Barcelona all over the world since then, due to the singularity, beauty and innovation of its buildings and furniture [2,3].

Ramon Casas, a concise biography

Ramon Casas i Carbó (1866–1932) has been qualified as the painter of Catalan Modernism. He is a universal Catalan due to his work, recognised and admired everywhere. Born and died in Barcelona, Casas was a multifaceted artist: painter, poster-painter, draughtsman, portraitist, graphic designer, and caricaturist. In all these areas he acquired fame, prestige,

and recognition during his lifetime, something not many artists achieve, because many of them gain recognition only after their deaths. He was in fact representative of an elite of the time: social, economic, political and intellectual, mainly from Barcelona, Madrid and Paris. The concept of Catalan Modernism is evident in his posters and postcards.

His father, Ramon Casas i Gatell (1820–1897), had made his fortune in Matanzas, Cuba at a time when commercial development gave impulse to the prosperity of the people who established there. Many Catalans set off on the Americas adventure during the 18th and the 19th centuries, with varying degrees of success. Besides its industrial importance, this Cuban region is now better known as a tourist spot for the famous Varadero Beach. The artist's mother, Elisa Carbó i Ferrer (1837–1912) was from an industrial family that owned textile factories near the monastery of Sant Benet de Bages (around 50 km north-west from Barcelona), later acquired by the family. He was the second of three children: Montserrat, himself and Elisa. He was wealthy all his life and always had the approval (and love) of his parents and sisters. His precocious artistic bent was accepted from childhood. Perhaps the only manifest and persistent negative he faced was much later, in 1922, when he married his model and mistress for sixteen years, Júlia, a shy lottery seller [2,5].



Champagne Codorniu printed poster (R. Casas, 1898) [5].

In 1877, while still a boy, his father allowed him to leave school. Obeying his strong attraction to painting and drawing, he entered the studio of Juan Vicens Cots. In 1881, at fifteen, together with Jaume Massó he cofounded *L'Avenç*, a magazine that represented the Modernism spirit, innovative and Catalanist. That same year he travelled for the first time to Paris, where he was accepted at the Carolus-Duran atelier and painted his *Autoretrat* (self-portrait), which opened him the doors to the *Salon des Champs-Élysées*. His visits and stays in Paris were to be frequent throughout his life, as he shared artistic and intellectual interests with numerous artists established there. He even thought of moving there permanently a few times.

Scenes and friends in the life of Ramon Casas

Ramon Casas' artistic work has been studied in depth, so we will focus only on some aspects, including the printed posters related with advertisement and health-related topics. He participated in the main European, Spanish and Barcelona's contests. At a given moment, which we can date towards 1893 from sketches, he developed an interest in the feminine nude, which raised some controversies from moralists.

All over his artistic life he nurtured his ties to painter Santiago Rusiñol (with whom he had a mutual influence), and sculptor Enric Clarasó. Their joint exhibitions at Sala Parès, in Barcelona, were a regular occurrence for many years. Miquel Utrillo was another friend with relevant influence on Casas' life; among other aspects, as a promoter in many initiatives



Anís del mono printed poster (R. Casas, 1898) [5].

undertaken together. Among Casas' portraits, his younger sister Elisa is a fairly constant figure. Casas was often to be found at the circle of the *Maison Dorée*, a café and restaurant set up by the brothers Charles and Michael Pompidor, at Plaça Catalunya 22, in Barcelona, which lasted from 1897 to 1918. Outstanding for its decoration, Modernism-inspired, it was a meeting and conversation spot for intellectuals, artists and bourgeoisie of the time.

At the *Maison Dorée*, in 1905 or 1906, he met Júlia Peraire, then an eighteen-year-old girl—he was forty—who sold lottery tickets nearby. He first painted her in 1906, and she soon became his favourite model, and also his mistress. Without the approval of his family, as we have already mentioned, he married her in 1922, sixteen years after their first meeting.

Ramon Casas explored many Spanish cities, mainly Madrid, and also European, Paris being his favorite. In 1908 he visited the United States, stopping at several cities including New York, Washington and Chicago. During this time he



The Garden of the Mermaids (R. Casas, 1904). Walls of the dining room of the Fonda España. (©Francisco Urrutia)

painted about a dozen portraits in oil. He went to Miami and from there to Cuba. His intention was to visit friends and also go to Matanzas, the province where his father had lived for many years.

***Els Quatre Gats* and the Modernism movement**

In 1897, on the 12th of June, bar-art exhibition place-meeting room *Els Quatre Gats* (“The Four Cats”) opened to the public. Can we consider this a sort of compensation for the notable differences in artistic and intellectual environment between Paris and Barcelona? Its promoters were Santiago Rusiñol, Pere Romeu, Ramon Casas and Miguel Utrillo. Although Sala Parès was still the traditional centre for exhibitions, *Els Quatre Gats* became the novelty and the door

through which fresh air and modern creation could come in. Besides exhibitions, in which Picasso, among many others, participated, literary and musical evenings, Chinese shadows and puppet shows were also held there. Casas drew the publicity posters. In fact, Pablo Picasso’s first public exhibition was held there.

Modernism art found its centre of operations at *Els Quatre Gats*, which followed the style of *Le Chat Noir* in Paris. Casas financed this bar, placed on the ground floor of Casa Martí, a building by the architect Josep Puig i Cadafalch on carrer Montsió, close to the very center of Barcelona, Plaça de Catalunya. The most prominent work in the permanent collection of *Els Quatre Gats* was a large and humoristic self-portrait in oil titled *Ramon Casas and Pere Romeu on a tandem*. Placed on the main wall it presided over *Els Quatre Gats* from its inauguration in 1897 till 1900. At the hall table, together with Casas and Rusiñol, sat young artists who were just beginning their careers, such as Isidre Nonell, Joaquim Mir, Ricard Canals, Manuel Martínez Hugué, etc. Most of them became exponents of Catalan art not long afterwards or even, as in the case of Picasso, promoted changes that played a major role in the artistic vision of all Europe and beyond. *Els Quatre Gats* closed in 1903.

In 1899 appeared a printed magazine titled *Els Quatre Gats*, the same name as the exhibition place. Casas also contributed actively with the magazine, with ideas, art... and money. The life of the publication was ephemeral (only fifteen issues were printed from February to May 1899), but was continued by *Pel & Ploma*, begun in 1899 as an artistic and literary magazine that published 100 issues, from Juny 1899 to December 1903. It was also financed by Casas, who was the artistic director and principal illustrator, while Miquel Utrillo covered the literary section. Leandro Galcerán also joined, offering to take care of the administration. The *Pel & Ploma* magazine sponsored several art exhibitions and Casas’ first exhibition alone at the Sala Parès in 1899 [3,6].

Printed posters, much more than advertising

With his painting activity reaching success, Casas began graphic design, incorporating the *Art Nouveau* style. He was called to do publicity posters for several companies, (among which *Codorniu* champagne, see illustration in p. 231), and in 1898 won a contest with the poster for the *Anís del Mono* (Monkey’s Anisette, p. 231). Both were very popular drinks.



Tuberculosis poster (R. Casas, 1929). (Thomas printer, 155 x 106 cm.)



Syphilis poster (R. Casas, 1900) [5]. (Thomas printer, 46 x 28 cm.)

The label of the anisette crystal special bottle showed since several years ago the face of a monkey that clearly resembled Charles Darwin. We do not know if Casas had read *On the Origin of Species* (originally published in November 1859 and whose Spanish translation was published in 1877), or Darwin's book on the origin of man, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (published in 1871 and translated into Spanish in 1880). Probably not, because he did not paid special attention to science. In any case, Darwinian theory had become popular among intellectuals, but it was misunderstood and many people thought that humans had evolved directly from monkeys. All this without going into any depth on a theory that changed not only the knowledge on the origin and evolution of life but also the concept of human nature itself.

Water in the work of Ramon Casas

Las Regatas ("The Regattas"). The action takes place in Barcelona, probably during the celebrations in the harbor for the Barcelona Universal Exhibition (Exposició Universal de Barcelona). The harbor of Barcelona became one of the city central points. Just before the fair, many ships came to moor there. The Regattas Club organized this event, which was presided over by the Queen Regent, María Cristina, mother of infant King Alfonso XIII. For the artist, what was really interesting was the multitude gathered there, to whom he gave star category.

The Barcelona Universal Exhibition took place from May 20 to December 9, 1888. There were participants from 22 countries all over the world, and the city received some 2,240,000 visitors. The fair was held mostly at the Parc de la Ciutadella, which

had been a military fortress before reverting to the city of Barcelona in 1851. The works for the fair renovated almost the whole area now known as La Ribera neighbourhood.

El jardí de les sirenes, 1904 (“The Garden of the Mermaids”). Ramon Casas covered the walls of the Fonda España dining room with a recreation of the sea bottom, where imagination and reality combine in exquisite harmony. He planted a garden to house sirens, fish, cephalopods, and crustaceans, with a background of light colours and waves in movement. At the top, a frieze with waves reminds us of the great wave of Kanagawa, by Hokusai. Katsushika Hokusai (Tokyo 1760–1849) was one of the main artists in the movement “painters of the floating world.” The Wave belongs to a series of thirty-six images of Mount Fuji, an icon of the Japanese landscape.

Science-illness (printed posters)

Sífilis, 1900 (“Syphilis”). Original drawing for the poster that advertised the syphilis clinic of Dr. Abreu, located on carrer Major de la Bonanova in Barcelona. The poster includes the inscription “Sífilis”, with the two S shaped like snakes at the top and “*Curación absoluta y radical en el Sanatorio para sífilíticos*” (“Absolute and radical cure at the Clinic for syphilitics”) at bottom [5].

Syphilis is a chronic sexually transmitted infection caused by the spirochete *Treponema pallidum*. The name syphilis was first used by the Veronese physician and poet Girolamo Fracastoro in his 1530 epic Latin poem *Syphilis sive morbus gallicus* (Syphilis, or the French disease). The main character of the poem is the shepherd Syphilus (perhaps a variant of Syphilus, a character in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*). Syphilus and his friends defy the god Apollo and he punished them by infecting them with the disease. By adding the suffix -is to the root Syphilus, Fracastoro created the new name for the disease and included it in his book *De contagione et contagiosis morbis et eorum curatione* (“On contagious diseases”, Venice, 1546). In this text, Fracastoro states that at that time, in Italy and Germany syphilis was known as the “French disease”, and in France as the “Italian disease” [1].

In the poster, Casas represents a skinny woman half covered the shoulders by a withered Manila scarf. He introduces symbolic elements indicating the illness and the danger of the sexual contact. The woman, evidently a prostitute, is offering a white lilly, indicating pleasure, with her left hand while she hides a serpent in her right hand, indicating the danger of the contagion. Ramon Casas, in 1900, could not

know that syphilis was caused by a tiny spirochete, a snake-shaped bacterium, because the etiological agent of the disease was discovered in 1903 by German physician August P. von Wassermann (1866–1925). In the first years of the 20th century, syphilis was the most dangerous of the sexually transmitted illnesses, not only because of the serious effects it had on the health of both women and men, but also because it represented a social stigma [4].

Tuberculosis, 1929. Thomas printer. Text of the poster (originally in Catalan): “Tuberculosis threatens life and prosperity in Catalonia. For the best results in the fight against this disease, go to the Social Assistance service for TB patients, where you will find advise and help. Mancomunitat de Catalunya. Social Assistance service for TB patients. Carrer Radas. Poble Sec. Barcelona.” In the poster we can see the figure of a mother with two girls, one at each side, all with a sad, resigned expression. Fourteen years after having published the poster, Casas died of the disease. The white plague, as it was tuberculosis also known, was a devastating widely-spread illness, and while a real and often deadly suffering, during the Romantic Movement gave place to an important literary production, among which *The Lady of the Camellias* (Alexandre Dumas, fils, 1848) and *The Magic Mountain* (Thomas Mann, 1924).

Ramon Casas’ mother bought the monastery of San Benet de Bages in 1907 and commissioned its restoration to Josep Puig i Cadafalch. Casas loved that place, where he spent long periods and he inherited it at the death of his mother in 1912.

Ramon Casas died on the 29th of February 1932 after a months-long illness. He was 66, and lived at carrer Descartes, in the Sant Gervasi neighbourhood in Barcelona. He was buried at the Montjuïc Cemetery. 🇳🇪

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