

de Proust a Marsans

A LA RECERCA

DEL TEMPS PERDUT



I. From Proust to Marsans, in search of lost time

Coinciding with the centenary of the death of Marcel Proust (Paris, 1871–1922), this exhibition aims to help the public discover, on the one hand, the world of a unique novelist and that of his great work, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time), and, on the other hand, that of his main artistic interpreter, Luis Marsans (Barcelona, 1930–2015), who spent his life recreating the work ever since his first exhibition at the Galeria Trece in Barcelona in 1972. However, Marsans does not try to exhaustively ‘reread’ the novel nor revisit the most memorable scenes but rather rescue its characters liberated from the tyranny of time, just as a Chinese watercolour painter would do. Thus, he lets all these Proustian characters, scenes and scenarios appear and take on lives of their own until they become the happy transposition of a literary world into an artistic one that seeks its own autonomy.

The exhibition is presented – in three sections – as an introduction to the narrative world of the novel *In Search of Lost Time* and the role that art and music play as great literary metaphors; it features a wide selection of drawings, watercolours, gouaches and engravings through which Marsans evoked the book with a broad interpretative freedom; and, in the final section, the unique reception Proust’s work has received in Catalonia from the nineteen twenties – Pla, Sagarra, Gaziel – to the present day, including the publication of a complete new translation, with another one in progress, and the creation of a Biblioteca Proustiana Ferran Cuito and the Societat Catalana d’Amics de Marcel Proust.

Glòria Farrés i Àlex Susanna, curators of the exhibition.

LIFE

Marcel Proust was born in Auteuil in 1871, in the 16th *arrondissement* of Paris, into a wealthy family

that allowed him to lead a comfortable life. His father is a prestigious Catholic medical professor and his mother is the daughter of a Jewish stockbroker. During his childhood he endures many difficulties with asthma but also enjoys a great affection from his mother, who engenders in him a strong literary and musical culture that reinforces his hypersensitivity.

He studies at the Lycée Condorcet and, though he later graduates in law, he manages to convince his father that he cannot devote himself to anything other than art and literature. He frequents aristocratic salons where he meets artists and writers, and gains a reputation as a social dilettante, nevertheless he is committed to justice by siding with the Dreyfusards and to art by publishing literary writings in the newspaper *Le Figaro*, beginning writing the novel *Jean Santeuil*, and translating two works by John Ruskin.

Shortly after the death of his parents, with his health beset by problems related to asthma, in 1907 he retires to his apartment on Boulevard Haussmann and begins his great work *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time), whose seven volumes are published between 1913 (*Swann’s Way*) and 1927 (*Time Regained*, posthumously). He dies of exhaustion in 1922 due to the conditions imposed by writing and illness. He is buried in the Père Lachaise cemetery.

THE SEARCH

In Search of Lost Time can be considered one of the most extraordinary books of all time. The novel recounts the growth of an artist in the midst of his family and society. The events are described precisely and in detail and in a very specific context, the French upper bourgeoisie and aristocracy at the turn of the twentieth century, but Proust also draws general and universal laws from that very particularly world. More than simply narrating a series of events from the

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past, *In Search of Lost Time* is above all a refined psychological reflection on literature, memory and time. Many elements that we find scattered throughout the different volumes are brought together and reconnected at the end, when the narrator discovers the meaning of life in art and literature. Proust argues that the artist helps us to elucidate our own life, it is he who expends the immense effort to express and enable us to know a deeper and hidden reality: “Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated – the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived – is literature”.

INVOLUNTARY MEMORY

The work features many themes: involuntary memory, the passage of time, homosexuality, love and jealousy, but literature itself is the central theme of the novel. The narrator is someone who wants to write, but cannot summon up the energy or self-esteem to do so until some experiences of involuntary memory – such as the taste of the madeleine, the three trees at Hudimesnil or tripping over the cobblestones – stimulate him to do it in order to elucidate and understand through art these impressions that remind him of a previous and hidden self. Involuntary memory testifies to the superiority of instinct over intelligence and it opens up access to the world of the unconscious because it resurrects the lost paradise of childhood and adolescence.

STYLE

His dense and precise style is expressed in long sentences full of subordinates, with a delicate and labyrinthine syntactic structure, with a rhythm of its own, in which the different phrases, one after the other, describe the impression until it is completed. The ambition is to fully grasp reality from the sensitive and emotional dimension. He shares the same concern of the Impressionists: we only know reality through the perception, real or imaginary, of the subject. And by carefully

observing this experience, Proust draws universal laws from it.

ART IN THE SEARCH

Art plays a key role in *In Search of Lost Time*, because Proust uses works of art as literary metaphors to introduce, highlight or deepen characters and actions in the novel. There are three iconic characters through whom he expresses his theory about the arts: the writer Bergotte, the painter Elstir and the musician Vinteuil. The writer Bergotte, in a Dutch exhibition contemplating Jan Vermeer’s *View of Delft*, reflects upon his style just before an attack of uraemia ends his life.

PROUST AND MUSIC. VINTEUIL SONATA

Music is an essential art for Proust, personally and in *In Search of Lost Time*, where it appears as a literary metaphor, just as occurs with painting. His relationship with Reynaldo Hahn, a talented and highly educated musician, gave him an enriching dialogue and knowledge of the musical world of his time. He attends the salon of Winaretta Singer and the Prince of Polignac, two great music patrons, where works by Stravinsky, Manuel de Falla and Ravel are premiered. His love of music leads him to seek out the members of the Poulet Quartet to come to his house to play César Franck’s *Quartet* for him, and he asks them to repeat the performance several times throughout the night.

As shown by the correspondence and the work, Proust became an authentic music critic. Passionate about the most recent Beethoven, defender of Wagner, he knew how to appreciate innovative musicians of his time, such as Debussy – he reviewed Debussy’s opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* when it premiered – and Stravinsky. He also had a special affection for the musicians Fauré, Bizet and Saint-Saëns, among others.

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BALLETS RUSSES

On 18th May, 1917, at the Châtelet Theatre, the ballet *Parade* premiered, performed by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. The plot was by Jean Cocteau, the music by Erik Satie, the choreography by Léonide Massine and the costumes and sets by Pablo Picasso. The ballet recreated a parade of circus actors through the streets of Paris to attract the public to a performance. Proust is very impressed by the work, he admires Picasso's costumes and decorations, as he says to Cocteau in this letter from May 1917:

Dear Jean,

If I didn't have this attack today, I would like to tell you – and for Mr. Picasso – the sneezing and spleen that (tirelessly) provokes in me the Sunday blue with the white astragalus of the misunderstood acrobat, dancing "As though he sent reproaches up to God". I live with this nostalgia.

The other ballets were ordinary. That one, poignant and it continues to develop in me, I'll tell you what regrets. I see the mauve horse like the Swan "with its mad gestures, foolish and sublime. As of an exile"

"And then, I think of you." I think of you, Jean, and I also think of the "Scottish" of the little girl, so touching, the girl who stops and starts so wonderfully. What concentration there is in all this, what nourishment for ages of famine, and what sadness that when I still had legs I did not frequent the dust of circuses and all the things that are causing me a heart-breaking sorrow this evening.

Thank you, dear Jean, for having helped me in every way to seek out the Châtelet

*"The only bread so delicious
Which does not offer on the table
The world we follow."*

How handsome is Picasso.

*Yours tenderly
Marcel*

[Note by Lluís Maria Todó: The letter is full of quotations from Baudelaire's poem *The Swan*: the "reproaching God", the "mad gestures...", the "ridiculous and sublime" swan; "I think of you" partially reproduces the first line of the poem. The final three verses are a humorous adaptation of a *Cantiques Spirituels* by Racine.]

II. Luis Marsans, interpreter of Proust

The illustration of *In Search of Lost Time* runs through Luis Marsans' work as one of its main guiding threads: having already done it on a smaller scale with *Extraordinary Tales* by E. A. Poe and the work by Arnau Vilanova and Ramon Llull, in about 1966 and 1968 Marsans begins to illustrate Proust's work and he does not stop for almost half a century. In fact, he dedicates his first exhibitions in Barcelona (Galeria Trece, 1972) and Paris (Maison de Balzac, 1982) to Proust, and later on in almost all his new exhibitions the drawings of Proust continue to be exhibited alongside his other works. This should come as no surprise: Proust's world also ends up being his world, Marcel's world merges and fuses with Proust's until it creates an almost indistinguishable whole. That is why in this exhibition his libraries, pianos, musical scores and views of Venice appear from time to time amidst Proustian drawings.

But, are we really dealing with a set of illustrations? Certainly not: Marsans does not set out to exhaustively 'reread' the world of *In Search of Lost Time* nor to revisit the most memorable scenes, but rather to rescue its characters liberated from the tyranny of the narrative time, just as a Chinese watercolour painter might do. He lets these characters appear and take on lives of their own: "The work on Proust is always automatic. I usually begin with some automatic doodles, which suddenly connect me to something that is dormant in the subconscious". This is

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a work, then, that arises from the gesture, but even more so from chance, from the fortuitous encounter: Proustian characters, scenes and scenarios that visit him when he least expects it. It is an ‘involuntary’ work, like the memory from which it comes, that is only possible from a great mastery of drawing. Thus, we see the happy transposition of a literary world to an artistic one that aspires to its own autonomy: a set of sketches, tests and studies for a final illustration that never arrives, just as occurs for the narrator in *In Search of Lost Time*.

III. Proust in Catalonia

Marcel Proust was discovered early on in Catalonia. Between 1918 and 1919, Joaquim Borralleras encouraged members of the Ateneu Barcelonès circle to read his work. Josep Pla and Josep M. de Sagarra did it enthusiastically, coinciding with the time when reading Proust was beginning to become popular in France thanks to the Goncourt prize. When Proust dies in 1922, Gaziel writes a magnificent obituary in *La Vanguardia*.

In the hundred years since his death, the translations of and essays on Proust’s work have continued apace and captivated Catalan readers. This part of the exhibition features the publications, both essays and partial and complete translations, that have emerged over the years. In addition, two important elements are shown that make Barcelona a Proustian focus: the Biblioteca Proustiana Ferran Cuito, one of the main private collections of Proust in the world, and the Societat Catalana d’Amics de Marcel Proust, created in 2014 to disseminate Proust’s work. A final audiovisual closes this part of the exhibition and highlights the importance of Proust in Barcelona.

BIBLIOTECA PROUSTIANA FERRAN CUITO

As he wrote to his brother-in-law exiled in Mexico, Ferran Cuito, a refugee in Perpignan, “with the Germans in the street”, he spends his hours under curfew to a passionate reading of *In Search of Lost Time*. With this reading and that of some early books on the life and work of Marcel Proust, he begins the library that he would build in exile in Paris from 1948. From the start, he is a member of the Société des amis de Marcel Proust et des amis de Combray and he becomes friends with his tireless promoter, Philibert-Louis Larcher, to whom he shows the translations of *In Search of Lost Time* in Catalan and Spanish, and subsequently the critical works that are published in these languages. Though he lives part-time in Barcelona from the sixties, Ferran Cuito keeps his residence in Paris, where he preserves and substantially develops his Proustian library which he continues to keep in the *Vieux Chêne*, the solid oak library which, bought during the uncertain time of the forties, will become for the family a symbol of faith in the superiority of the spirit over the forces of disorder. Ferran Cuito dies in Barcelona in November 1973. His son, Amadeu Cuito, who has inherited a keen interest in Proust, continues to enlarge the library, especially with the work of critics and scholars in English, and in 1985 he moves it to Barcelona, where members of the Societat Catalana d’Amics de Marcel Proust can consult it today.

SOCIETAT CATALANA D’AMICS DE MARCEL PROUST

The Societat Catalana d’Amics de Marcel Proust (Catalan Society of Friends of Marcel Proust) is a not-for-profit organization, created in 2014 and chaired by the lawyer, economist and writer Amadeu Cuito. Its founding members are: psychologist Jordi Ballabriga, professor Carles Besa, art historian and professor Daniel Cid,

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lawyer and singer Jordi Cortada, professor Glòria Farrés, professor Josep Maria Fulquet, journalist, professor and translator Valèria Gaillard, the literary director of Laie bookshop in Barcelona Lluís Morral, the translator Josep Maria Pinto, and the writer and translator Lluís Maria Todó. By now, it already has a hundred members, including important figures in the Catalan cultural and artistic scene.

The Societat Catalana d'Amics de Marcel Proust meets once a month at the Laie bookshop to discuss the latest developments surrounding Proust's work and to promote its dissemination through activities that raise his profile. In addition, it publishes an annual newsletter, *Recerques*, which gathers articles on Proust and reviews the activities that have taken place. To date it has published four issues.

AUDIOVISUAL

The president of the Societat Catalana d'Amics de Marcel Proust, Amadeu Cuito, gives an overview of the Biblioteca Proustiana Ferran Cuito and the reception of Proust in Catalonia. In addition, several specialists linked to the Societat Catalana d'Amics de Marcel Proust comment on specific aspects of his work: his artistic vocation (Víctor Gómez Pin), the conception of love (Estela Ocampo), homosexuality (Lluís Maria Todó), Judaism (Francesc Garreta), translation (Josep Maria Pinto and Valèria Gaillard) and readers of Proust and Barcelona (Lluís Morral and Rafa Burgos).