

# ANTONI VILADOMAT



THE FOUR SEASONS, WINTER

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ANTONI VILADOMAT I MANALT (BARCELONA, 1678-1755) GAVE FORM TO AN ENORMOUS PRODUCTION, OF WHICH IT HAS BEEN POSSIBLE TO PRESERVE A SUBSTANTIAL PART. TWO SERIES OF WORKS CONTAIN THE ESSENCE OF HIS ART: THE SERIES OF CANVASES IN THE CLOISTER OF THE CONVENT OF SANT FRANCESC, IN BARCELONA, AND THE BEAUTIFUL RELIGIOUS ECOSYSTEM OF THE CAPELLA DELS DOLORS, IN MATARÓ.

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**A**ny attempt to select one of the most intense and eloquent periods of the history of Catalan art in the modern age must include a mention of Antoni Viladomat (Barcelona, 1678-1755). According to the testimony provided by one of his pupils, Manuel Tremulles, we know that his work and career were both praised by such distinguished painters as Jacopo Amigoni (1750) and Anton Rafael Mengs (1769). The Italian perceived a unique ability in Viladomat, while Mengs, contemplating the paintings in the cloister of Barcelona's Sant Francesc convent, acclaimed him as the finest Hispanic painter of his time. Sub-

sequently, during the course of the nineteenth century, the fame of the Barcelona master grew to mythical proportions through the good offices of his biographer A. Fontanals del Castillo (1877), and he is in even greater debt to the writings of his best critic, Raimon Casellas (1907).

Certainly, we need to look closely at the praises heaped on him by the two court painters and contextualize them –especially if we read them in the light of Manuel Tremulles's “academistic” interests–, the same as the opinions of Raimon Casellas, who projected onto the eighteenth century master his own aesthetic, spiritual and patri-

otic ideals. However, within the echoes of his name bequeathed to us by history, Antoni Viladomat's work has been deservedly credited as one of the most prolific and brilliant chapters in the complex and unequal artistic history of the Principality.

Antoni Viladomat gave form to a huge volume of work, of which it has been possible to preserve a substantial part despite the repeated waves of destruction during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Museu d'Art de Catalunya and the Montserrat Monastery Museum, Girona Cathedral (the Capella de Sant Narcís and Capella dels Dolors), parish churches such as Mataró,





VILADOMAT, SUMMER

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with its adjacent Capella dels Dolors, collections such as the Cabanyes de Vilanova, etc. bear sufficient testimony to pave the way for a clear reconstruction of the master's work. No explanation for part of his considerable creative activity, however, would be possible without the constant presence beside the painter of a disciplined and efficient workshop, well trained to follow the master's orders. Thus, within his repertoire we can distinguish his own, personal work – the most skillful and demanding work – and more repetitive, routine work, carried out by his assistants or even, later on, by copyists who satisfied the demand of an admiring public eager for replicas of the master's creations.

What we now know of his life and work must be divided into an early period, which proved decisive for the moulding of the fundamental elements in his art, a central period that saw the creation of the majority of his more splendid pieces, and a later period of which, for the time being, we only have written references.

We must mention two decisive points within the early period. On one hand his formative years; his beginnings in the family workshop specialising in the

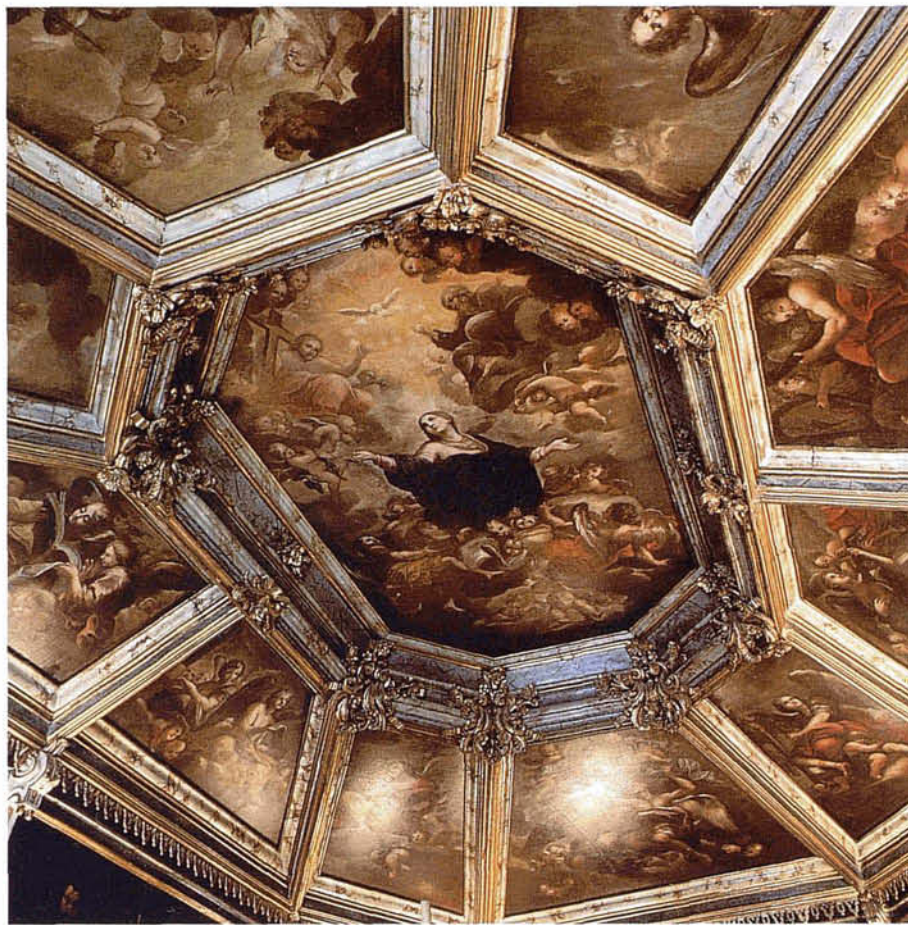
gilding of altarpieces, and the visit by J.B. Perramon, a Barcelona painter of whom little is known at the present moment. On the other hand, a quite spectacular period during which he frequented the artists of the Archduke's court, especially Ferdinando Galli Bibiena, with whom he worked on the pictorial décor for the church of Sant Miquel in Barcelona (1711). This relationship with the Bologna artist must have planted the seeds of a liberal mentality, which throughout his life led the stubborn Viladomat into conflict with the mechanical, guild-like organisation which the College of Painters maintained for the profession. Likewise, it must have provided him with a knowledge of architecture and perspective and a considerable grasp of the artistic culture of his time.

However, it is the central period of his life which waxes most eloquent as regards his creativity. This was the period between the end of the War of Succession and the mid 1730s, which, as far as we know at the moment, includes his most interesting pieces. From among the many projects he took on during this period, there are two examples that ought to be picked out: two magnificent and ambitious pieces which contain the

essence of Antoni Viladomat's art. Firstly, his series of canvases for the cloister of the Barcelona convent of Sant Francesc, executed around 1724 and still on view at the National Art Museum of Catalonia. These are twenty large-format compositions depicting scenes from the life of St Francis of Assisi, laid out in accordance with the old story of St Francis and the flowers. Among these are some of Antoni Viladomat's artistic masterpieces – "Baptism of St Francis", "A man spreading his cloak for St Francis to walk upon", "Fra Bernat de Quintaval distributing his possessions amongst the poor", etc. Secondly, we must include the beautiful ecosystem arrangement of the Capella dels Dolors in Mataró. Viladomat and his assistants worked on it at the same time as on the Franciscan cycle, but the work continued until the thirties. Here the great artist showed his enormous versatility, since as well painting the canvases, he also designed the sculptural and carved features and painted the vault.

On that occasion he adopted a more epic stylistic register, with much more emphasis on the baroque. This is the case both in the vault – a *quadrature* opening up towards an infinite space,





CHAPEL OF DOLORS, MATARÓ

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reminding us of the large Roman frescoes from the end of the seventeenth century –and on the walls of the chapel, covered with large canvases portraying the Stations of the Cross. However, in the portrait of the Apostles, in the Assembly Hall, he is at his most contained, in contrast with the fiery canvas of the Assumption, on the ceiling, the work of another artist.

In addition to these two ambitious projects, we should also recall the quality of the “Story of Joseph” in the Cabanyes de Vilanova collection, other paintings in the parish church of Mataró and those of the Capella de Sant Narcís in Girona, especially the busts of saints. These were some of his most delicate and modern pieces, and display the strongest influence from Roman and Neapolitan painting.

From that time until his death, the only information in our possession is exclu-

sively written and biographic material concerning work which has since disappeared. Some of this information is extremely interesting –for example, we are told that in 1737 the chapter of the Cathedral of El Pilar in Saragossa considered commissioning him to paint one of the domes; or that his workshop was considered to be a genuine school of painting with numerous followers.

His entire output evokes most expressively the strategic posture which he adopted in the annals of the history of our art and the features which were to bring him such fame. His work is a synthesis of his complex, many-sided personality and the developments in Catalan art during the first half of the eighteenth century. In it we can make out the traditional approach of the craftsman, but also the beginnings of a liberal outlook forged throughout his

life, and his incipient modern touch which must have been inspired by contact with Bibiena. Moreover, we also perceive a certain familiarity with European art, acquired from handling reproductions of works by such masters as Rubens, Pietro da Cortona or Carlo Maratti.

All this, however, is not enough for a complete understanding of his originality and the roots of his genius. Nevertheless, perhaps in our recollections of his pictorial world, its proximity to the real world in which he lived, the realistic nature of his figures, his subtle use of stylistic registers –which contrasted with the rhetoric dominating the centres of power– his restrained expression, the sincerity and spontaneous devotion of his secluded, monkish spirituality, we may grasp more clearly the fundamental principles behind his personality and artistic renown. ●