

Joana Valls: the echo of modernity

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- 1** CARBONELL, S.; CASAMARTINA, J. *Les fàbriques i els somnis: modernisme tèxtil a Catalunya*, Textile Museum and Documentation Centre, Terrassa, 2002, p. 373 and in the catalogue *Barcelona Alta costura*, CASAMARTINA, Josep, *Barcelona Alta Costura*, El Triangle Postals, Sant Lluís, 2009, p. 24.
- 2** SOLER, Francesc, (Serafi Pitarrà), *Lo trinch de l'or: comedia en quatre actes* (1884), Barcelona, Imp. Salvador Bonavía, 1911, p. 20.
- 3** OLLER, Narcís, *La Febre d'Or* (1890-1892, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1980, p. 142.

At the end of the nineteenth century, arts and crafts experienced a remarkable revitalization in Catalonia. Fashion was a key element in this revival, and around it a new business model developed. However, we still lack studies of the protagonists of this trend, most of whom were women. Joana Valls, for example, was a leading fashion designer in late nineteenth-century Barcelona, but very little is known about her today.

Probably one of the main reasons for our neglect of Joana Valls is the fact that hardly any of her creations have come down to us. Art history tends to base its discourse on the presence of objects: art historians may talk of anonymous objects, but they rarely speak of creators without a legacy; it seems that it is difficult to recognize the work or the skill of someone of whom only the shadow remains. However, judging from the testimony of her contemporaries, Joana Valls enjoyed real prestige among the Catalan elites.

The recent discovery of one of her pieces offers a good opportunity to devote an article to this unjustly ignored creator of fashion and to shed some light on her achievements.

Joana Valls (1855-1935)

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Barcelona had been establishing itself as a European capital. Among the new professions which emerged inside its new commercial framework, driven largely by the needs of the affluent middle-classes, were the designers of luxury fashions.

Joana Valls was one of these first creators and one of the most recognized and respected in Barcelona at the turn of the nineteenth century. There are very few references to her in the panorama of Catalan historiography¹ but some representative testimonies remain in the form of literary images. For example, in 1884 Serafi Pitarrà mentioned her as a renowned designer of hats in a play that premiered in that year². There is also a brief but illustrative reference to her in *La Febre d'Or* by Narcís Oller:

“— And how stylish you look! What lovely hats! Are they by Joana Valls? I always say you are the best dressed girls in all Barcelona!”³



Silk shoulder cape, c. 1900, by Joana Valls (no. 131588, Design Museum). This piece was made entirely by hand, in gauze silk satin and embroidered tulle, with tatted applique. The front opening is constructed to open as two flaps, or lapels ([See more](#)). The gauze flounces give the cape considerable movement. A highly intricate piece. © Barcelona Design Museum. Estudio Rafael Vargas, 2015

⁴ NADAL, Josep Maria de, *Recuerdos de medio siglo. Siluetas y perfiles barceloneses*, Madrid, Ediciones Cid, 1957, p. 12.

⁵ VALERO, Juan, *Guide illustré de l'exposition universelle de Barcelone en 1888, de la ville, de ses curiosités et de ses environs*, Barcelona, G de Grau, p.157. See also: *Exposición Universal de Barcelona 1888: Catálogo Oficial*, Barcelona: Imprenta de los Sucesores de N. Ramírez y Cia, 1888, p. 93.

⁶ AMCB, Registry of births, book 1, 1855, n. Registry 986.

⁷ *La Vanguardia*, 7 October 1919.

Years later Joaquim M. Nadal i Ferrer, in his *Recuerdos de medio siglo*, also mentions the dressmaker: “the marchioness of Marianao, with one of those large hats adorned with *aigrettes* and feathers, created by Juana Valls, which were the admiration of many ladies and the envy of many more”.⁴ Although these literary fragments refer to hats, we know that Joana Valls also created dresses – though the only testimony we have today is a silk cape.

Valls was the only Catalan designer to participate in the Universal Exhibition of 1888, at the Pavilion of Industry, where she exhibited various creations and the exhibition guide stated that “la réputation de cette maison à Barcelone est suffisamment établie pour que les élégantes étrangères puissent s’y diriger en toute confiance”.⁵ This gives us an idea of the significance of Joana Valls in the Barcelona of the time.

Joana Valls was born in Barcelona on March 6, 1855⁶ and was christened Francisca Juana Maria del Pilar Giralt Miró. Probably she adopted the surname Valls on marrying Juan Valls Parellada (ca. 1850-1919) in 1869.⁷

Joana was the daughter of Juan Giralt Alemany and Juana Miró Sarcena, owners of a milliner’s or children’s clothing shop (references have been found to

The Joana Valls label, sewn into the neck of the cape (no. 131588, Design Museum). The use of labels on clothing manufactured in Catalonia dates back to approximately 1875, and can be seen as the designer's stamp of acknowledgement, adding value to the piece. © Laura Casal-Valls, 2015.



8 Even so, on her birth certificate her father's profession is recorded as "tinsmith". AMCB, Registry of births, book 1, 1855, n. Registry 986.

9 SAURÍ, Manuel, *Manual Histórico-topográfico estadístico y administrativo o sea Guía General de Barcelona dedicado a la Junta de Fábricas de Cataluña* (1849) Barcelona: Imprenta y Librería de D. Manuel Saurí, p. 268.

10 *Anuario del comercio, de la industria, de la magistratura y de la administración*, Madrid, Carlos Bailly-Baillière, 1881, p. 693 and *Anuario del comercio, de la industria, de la magistratura y de la administración*, Madrid, Carlos Bailly-Baillière, 1882, p. 700.

11 In 1881 Juan Valls appears as the owner of a hatmaker's shop and of an establishment of dressmakers, classified as rate I, class 3, with a quota of 65 pesetas for the first activity and 162.50 for the second. ACA, Hisenda, Matrícules Industrials, 1881-1882, inv. 1, n. 16503.

12 *Anuario del comercio, de la industria, de la magistratura y de la administración*, Madrid, Carlos Bailly-Baillière, 1884, p. 804.

13 ACA, Hisenda, Matrícules Industrials, 1883-1884, inv. 1, n. 16513.

both specialities) located in c/ Avinyó in Barcelona. So costume design appears to have run in the family.⁸

Joana Valls worked in Barcelona from the 1880s until 1921. She was therefore a contemporary of renowned designers such as Maria Molist, also known as Maria de Mataró, Ana Renaud and Montagne.

It is likely, therefore, that the designer began her career continuing the family business. In fact, 1849 a Juana Giralt is recorded as a designer at c/ Avinyó 18;⁹ this may have been the mother of Joana Valls, under the surname of her husband. In 1863, at c/ Avinyó 1, Juan Giralt was registered as the owner of a "fashion shop", In 1881 and 1882 at the same number, Juan Valls also appears as dedicated to 'fashion',¹⁰ which suggests that at first the business was in the name of husband.¹¹ The business was still running in 1884, when the name of Joana Valls appears at c/ Ferran 34.¹² In the industrial registry the establishment was classified as "a fashion designer's shop making luxury dresses and clothes".¹³ In 1885 both shops were registered under the name Joana Valls.¹⁴ During the years 1896 and 1897 Joana Valls Parellada was based at c/Ferran 34,¹⁵ first floor, where she had a "luxury fashion design establishment"¹⁶ and she remained there in later years.¹⁷ From this period a photograph survives (although unfortunately we cannot publish it here) showing the front of the building; on the first floor balcony there is a sign, probably made of glass, where it says "Modas Juana Valls". In fact, the tariff at which the dressmaker was registered allowed her to have signs outside, unlike others.¹⁸ In 1910 she moved to 34 Passeig de Gràcia,¹⁹

14 *Anuario del comercio, de la industria, de la magistratura y de la administración*, Madrid, Carlos Bailly-Baillière, 1886, p. 764.

15 At this address we also find other dressmakers such as Madame Berbegier and Fanny Ricot.

16 ACA, Hisenda, Matrícules Industrials, 1896-1897, inv. 1, n. 16592.

17 ACA, Hisenda, Matrícules Industrials, 1897-1898, inv. 1, n. 16614; 1905, inv. 1, n. 9642; 1906, inv. 1, n. 9646; 1907 inv. 1, n. 9648; 1908, inv. 1, n. 9652; 1909 inv. 1, n. 9648.

18 *Contribución industrial y de comercio. Reglamento y tarifas aprobadas por Real orden de 13 de julio de 1906 anotados y seguidos de un índice alfabético por la Redacción de la Revista de los tribunales y de la legislación universal*. Madrid: Centro Editorial Góngora, 1906, p. 149.

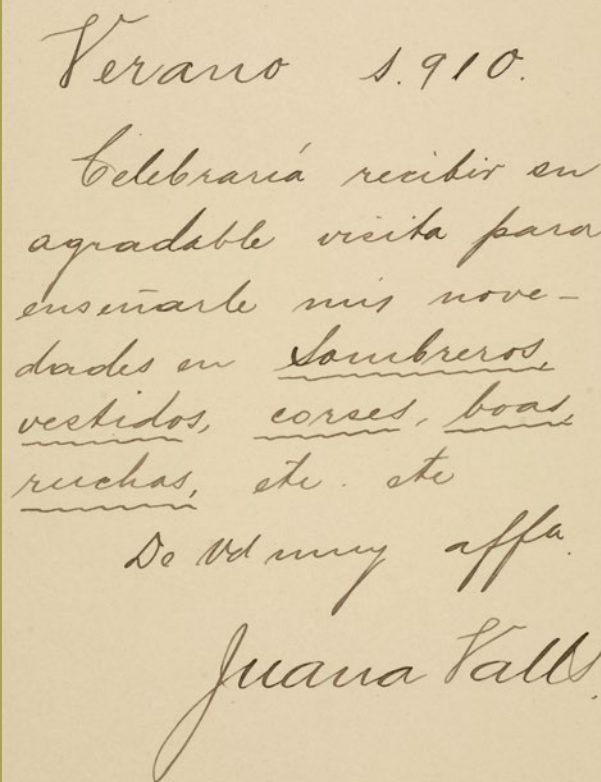
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Casa
 Joana Valls.
 Fernando VII. 34 pral
 Barcelona.

Front of an invitation card given by Joana Valls, showing the designer in a fashionable pose, although in a far more conventional style than seen on the invitations of many of her contemporaries. Given that the card dates from 1910, at the height of the *modernista* period, the image hints at a certain distance from current trends. It was in 1910 that Valls moved her fashion house to Passeig de Gràcia, so it may well be that this was one of the last invitations from her previous premises in Carrer Ferran.

Carrer Ferran 34 was home to a number of different enterprises, including the Parera i Peitx fashion house, and the renowned Matorrodona photographic studio, which, together with Joana Valls, occupied the first storey of the building. © National Library of Catalonia. Barcelona.



Verano 1910.

Celebraría recibir en
agradable visita para
enseñarle mis nove-
dades en Sombreros,
vestidos, corsets, boas,
ruchas, etc. etc

De Ud muy affa.

Joana Valls.

Reverse of the handwritten invitation, 1910. The card provides an insight into the types of clothing sold by the company: hats, dresses, corsets, boas and frills. © National Library of Catalonia. Barcelona.

¹⁹ ACA, Hisenda, Matricules Industrials, 1910, inv. 1, n. 9661.

²⁰ *La Publicidad*, n. 7970 (1900), p. 1.

²¹ *Los debates: diario político defensor de los intereses de la comarca*, n.3644 (1905), p. 3.

²² These advertisements give us an idea of the type of employees who worked there (hatmakers, seamstresses, and so on) and so we can deduce the type of products made.

the new centre of trade in luxury goods in Barcelona, probably as a commercial strategy.

Valls built up her business as an important fashion house. Established independently, it became one of the leaders of elegance in Barcelona. We know that her workshop had a library or collection of fashion books and figurines, among them Puiggarí's *Monografía histórica e iconográfica del traje*, and plates from the *Album Rêve* and other publications which she probably received on subscription. Some of these plates bear the designer's stamp.

The products sold by the firm had a reputation for quality and fashion and were aimed at a clientele with a high purchasing power, as shown in the following excerpt: "How much will I have to pay, more or less? – We're not going to argue about that... as you know, the stitching, you know, eight *duros*; the adornments, twenty-five; the linings, the *serrapollera*, buttons, the rods, the brush and so on, five or six. In all, it won't be more than fifty *duros* – Come on, it's not as if it's by Joana Valls!"

An advertisement for the firm El Mechero de Venus suggests that Joana's establishment was very luxurious and had gas lighting: "The best lighting at the theatres Novedades and Tivoli, in the elegant salons of the dressmaker Joana Valls, in the Old England and in the best establishments."²⁰

In fact, the designer's popularity spread beyond the city of Barcelona. In the press we find dressmakers who advertised their skills saying they had worked at the workshop of Joana Valls.²¹ Her firm grew rapidly over the decades and placed advertisements for employees at times when there was more work.²²



Plates acquired by Joana Valls.
Album Rêve, Paris, at the
beginning of 1900.
©CDMT Quico Ortega.



23 *La Vanguardia*, 7 October 1905, p. 2.

24 *La Vanguardia*, 16 September 1918.

25 Probably, the constant contact with the bourgeoisie of the time, and a substantial economic capacity, made luxury dressmakers into ladies of a certain culture and refinement. We know, for example, that Joana Valls bought two paintings by Roig i Soler (Sala, Lluïsa. "Joan Roig i Soler. Llibreta de comptes (1881 - 1908). MS.3023 Biblioteca de Catalunya-Estudi i transcripció", *Butlletí de la Reial Acadèmia Catalana de Belles Arts de Sant Jordi*, n. 15 (2001), p. 151-225) and she had a painting by Ramon Casas in her workshop, which was embargoed on the occasion of the closure of the banks in October 1899. This episode has been studied in detail in the article: Casal-Valls, L. & Sánchez Saulea, S. "El taller d'una modista embargat: Joana Valls, el Tancament de caixes i l'obra de Ramon Casas", *Butlletí de la Societat Catalana d'Estudis Històrics* (forthcoming).

26 *La Veu de Catalunya*, 22 October 1919, p. 7.

27 ACA, Hisenda, Matricules Industrials, 1920-1921, inv. 1, n. 9759.

28 AMCB, Registry of deaths 1935, book 732, registry no. 766. See also: *La Vanguardia*, 1 May 1935 and *La Vanguardia*, 9 May 1935.

The type of products they sold were varied, as shown in the advertisement appeared in *La Vanguardia* in 1905:

"To carry out a complete renewal of our stocks, we are selling at considerable discounts our current stocks of coats, velvet, woollens, embroidery, tulle, gauze, trimmings, flowers, feathers, ribbons, braids of all kinds, adornments and everything related to dressmaking."²³

In 1915 the firm sought a director of dressmaking, a post that remained in 1918.²⁴ The existence of this position indicates that the business had grown considerably and that it was Joana Valls who managed the business and was no longer a seamstress sewing with her own hands. Her figure, then, clearly reflects the change in the profile of these professionals, who rose from anonymity to run important businesses.²⁵

In 1919 Valls announced her retirement, and a brief chronicle was published praising her achievements:

"One of the aspects that affirms the capital status of Barcelona is our intense artistic life, and (...) highlights everything that is related to ladies' fashions, which have reached such a high level, giving us a well-deserved reputation. One of the most solid reputations and most grounded in Barcelona is undoubtedly that of Joana Valls (...) we deeply regret the departure of the great dressmaker Joana Valls, who has contributed so much with her taste to elevating the craft of fashion."²⁶

In 1920-1921 we find her name in the industrial registry for the last time.²⁷ Her business, which had acted as a sounding board of modernity in the 1880s and 1890s, probably went into decline in the early decades of the new century, with the emergence of a new generation of creators, such as Anita Monrós (1882-1959) and Pedro Rodríguez (1895-1990), among others. Joana Valls died in Barcelona on April 30, 1935²⁸ leaving behind her testimony of change. ●