

The historical archives of *Grobelàstic S.A.*

The importance of heritage preservation

by MERCÈ COLOMER BARTROLÍ

Bachelor's degree in History. University of Barcelona

Diploma in Library Science and Documentation. University of Barcelona

Photographs: Grobelàstic archives

Archive: collection of the documentation generated and received by a public body, a religious or secular institution, an industrial or commercial business, a family or an individual in the course of their activity, conserved for legal or historical usage.

Thus reads the English translation of the original definition given in the 1995 edition of the *Diccionari de la llengua catalana*. From this definition we can infer that the creation of an archive is driven by the will of a person who understands perfectly the enduring importance of the documents it is to contain and the value of their orderly storage; what is less evident is that there are people capable of sensing this importance at the very moment a document is created. It is with this in mind that we must celebrate the vision and the will – as well as the remarkable constancy – of Magí Borrell Portabella, who rescued from obscurity (and from possible destruction) the abundance of documentation generated by the forerunners of the company *Grobelàstic S.A.* from the nineteenth century until 1984, when the present-day company was incorporated. The firm's head offices are home to a series of historical archives that chart the complexities of the commercial activities that preceded its creation, which date back to 1890 in the case of the company *S.A. Grober* in Girona and stretch even further into the past in the case of *Nacional de Manufacturas Matas S.A.*, a company originally based in Barcelona. As the Catalan capital grew, the *Nacional de Manufacturas Matas S.A.* factory was transferred to Pallejà, on the banks of the River Llobregat, where it formed part of a group of enterprises run by the Portabella family from Manresa, who oversaw a major hub of textile manufacturing in Catalonia, particularly in the production of ribbons. The factory specialised for many years in the production of accessories and adornments for clothing, including scalloped trims, satins, *gros-grain* and Jacquard-decorated ribbon, while *S.A. Grober* initially specialised in the production, dyeing and finishing of braid and laces in silk, wool and cotton, only later moving into the production of buttons and elastic fabrics.

Façade of the Grober factory in Girona, 1940.

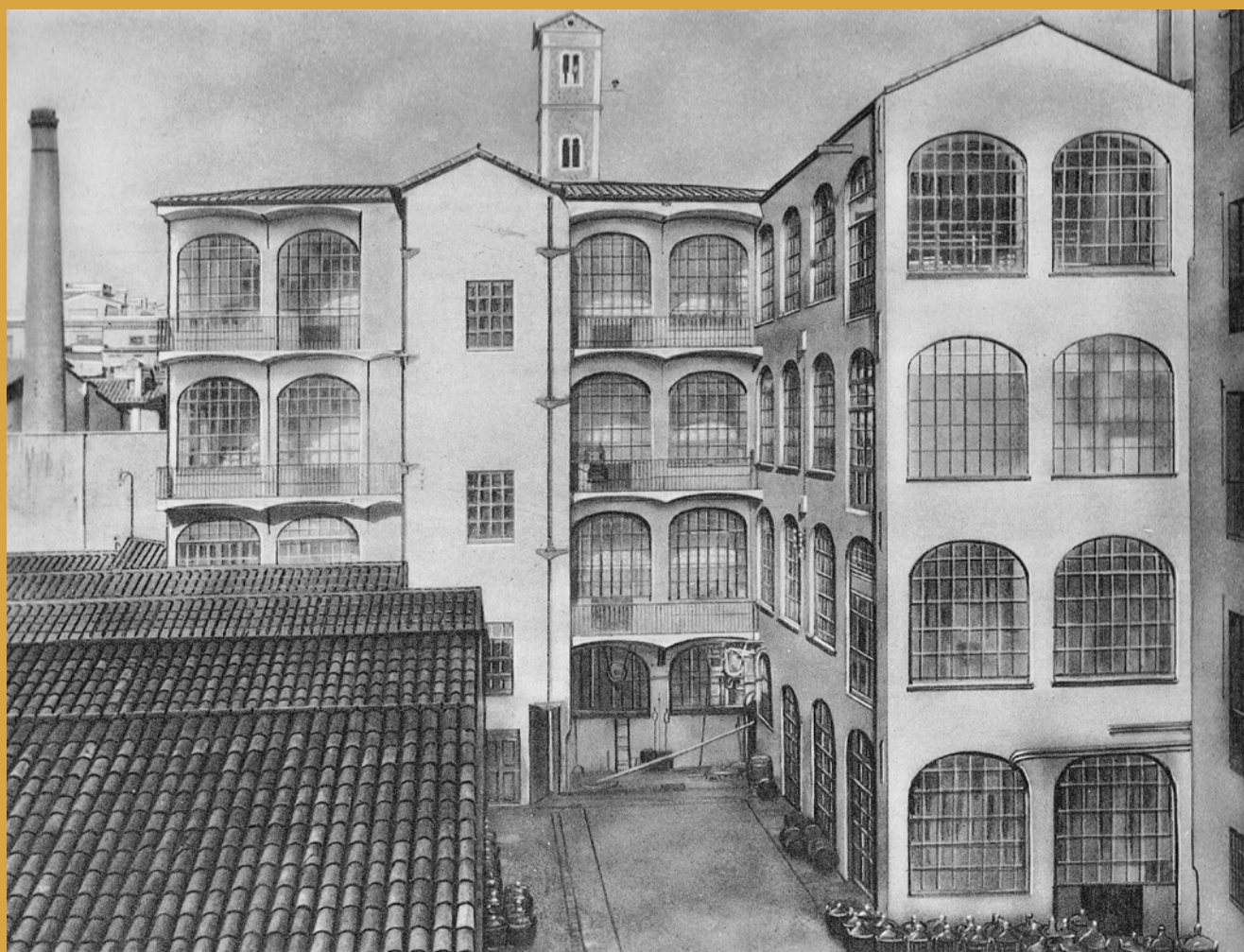


Detail of mohair spinners.
Grober factory, Bescanó, 1920s.



Keen to save many thousands of documents from destruction, Magí Borrell Portabella was implicitly aware that the vast collection should not be merely stored away but rather archived for the future and clearly classified, placed in a location that would allow easy access and consultation for many years to come. The location that met these requirements was the Regional Archive of Maresme, in Mataró, an area that was once home to many of the emerging textile businesses that have long since disappeared or seen their premises converted into spaces that no longer evoke their prominent role in Catalonia's industrial past.

In his endeavours to conserve this important collection of documents, Magí Borrell Portabella pays homage to his recent and more distant ancestors. They are brought vividly to life through the testimony of signed and stamped documents that open a window on a period of flourishing industrial and commercial activity that provided a valuable source of income to many people in Barcelona, Pallejà, Girona, Bescanó and Arenys de Munt.



Courtyard of the Grober factory
in Girona, 1930.

Historical researchers interested in *histoire appliquée*, or public history, have long viewed company archives as particularly useful to both the general and specific areas of their work, and recognise their value as a structured body of material on past practices that has practical applications for organisations in the present.

Recent years have seen a growing awareness in Catalonia of the need to preserve documents of this type, once dismissed as unimportant. There is a new attitude towards the constructive exploitation of this commercial source of historical memory, closely tied to a growing understanding the country's industrial heritage and efforts to harness it for new purposes. This emerging trend, which builds on the work of researchers interested in local and economic history, has prompted more detailed study of the period of industrialisation in Catalonia and brought a new appreciation of the value of company archives, particularly those of industrial firms.

The archives of S.A. *Grober*, which has been based in Girona, Bescansó (Gironès) and Arenys de Munt (Maresme), and *Nacional de Manufacturas Matas S.A.*, founded in Barcelona and later moved to Pallejà (Baix Llobregat), make a positive contribution to this movement and are a valuable legacy for the future.



Interior of the central hall, used for the production of braids and cords. Grober factory, Girona, 1930.

The archive reflects the often adverse historical contexts that the two companies had to tackle, not least the Civil War from 1936 to 1939, which is perfectly illustrated in the documents. It also sheds light on the corporate philosophy imparted to S.A. *Grober* by Emili and Joan Portabella Barrera, which encompassed many social and cultural activities that are fondly remembered by the communities of Girona, Bescanó and Arenys de Munt. Though first and foremost a business, the company was not only a commercial concern; it also served as an environment in which workers could socialise and grow as people and provided support to families through periods in which neither society nor the government offered extensive opportunities to learn or train, especially in the aftermath of the Civil War. With a patriarchal spirit that extended to workers' families, the company launched a range of initiatives, among them nurseries, that complemented the wide range of services offered by the *Germandats de Socors Mutus* (benefit societies), establishing affiliations with state primary schools and the *Escola d'Oficis i Arts Decoratives* (school of arts and crafts), funding the choral society "Cants de Pàtria" in Girona and Bescanó, and organising library services, sports teams, film screenings, a refectory service and an affordable lodgings programme. These many activities were clearly an effort to compensate for a lack of state and municipal provision



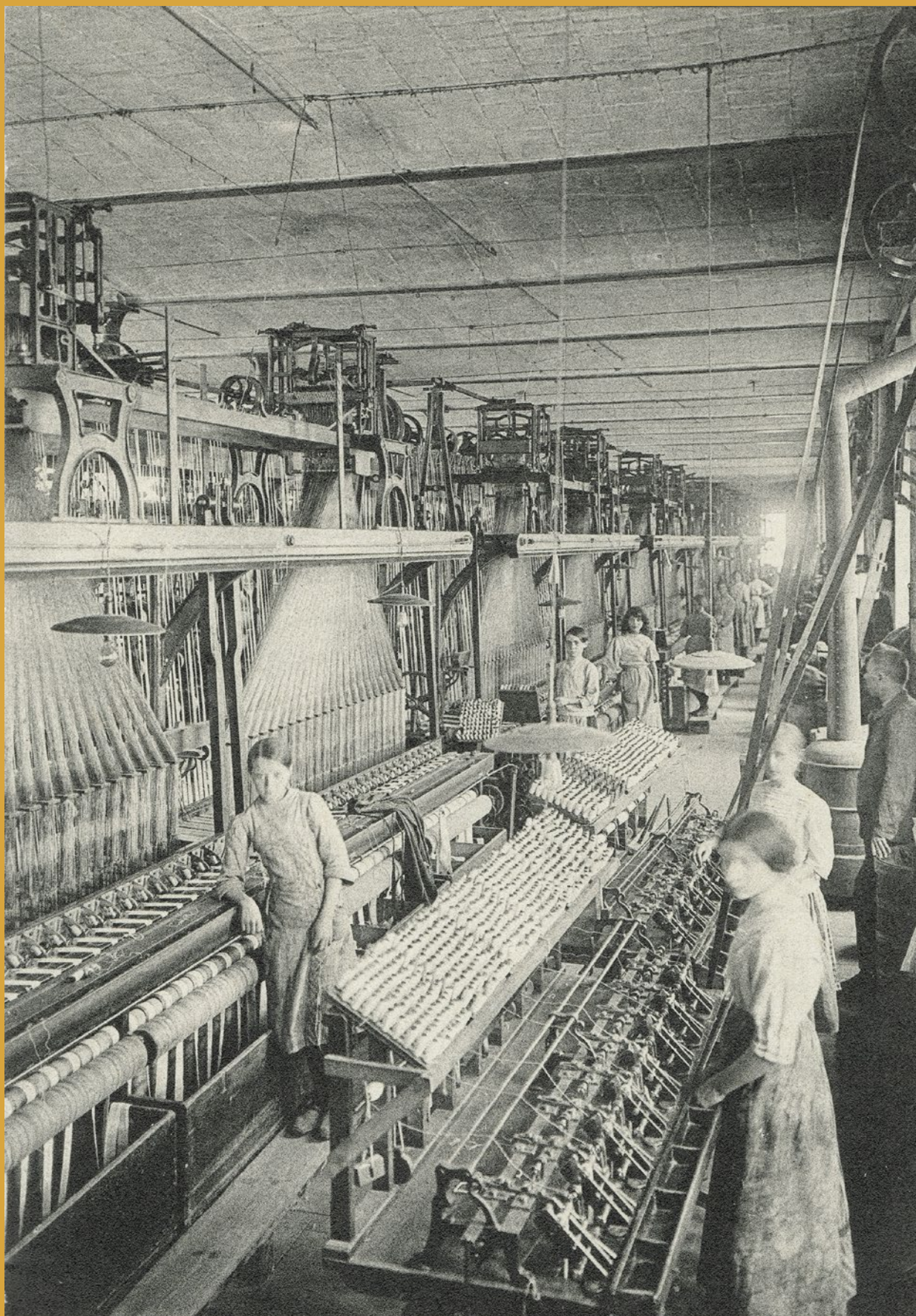
Grober factory in Girona, braiding section, 1920s.

in difficult times, and reflect the fact the Portabella Barrera brothers clearly understood the hardships faced by some of their workers. In Arenys de Munt, Joan Portabella Barrera pursued his own philanthropic goals, setting up a nursery for workers' children at S.A. *Grober*, which admitted children from one month old up to school age. All of these facilities and services are amply documented in the archive.

The wealth of materials in the archive have been classified following the parameters set for company documentation by the Archives Service of the Government of Catalonia, ensuring that each document is accurately described and detailed and can be easily accessed by researchers.

The figures speak for themselves: the materials compiled from the records of S.A. *Grober*, in Girona, Bescanó and Arenys de Munt, include some 79,000 documents, while the collection from *Nacional de Manufacturas Matas S.A.*, in Pallejà, contains around 25,000 more. Documents range from original articles of incorporation, shareholder statutes and executive resolutions to records of worker conditions, internal paperwork, and correspondence with public authorities and unions, with a particularly large body of materials on financial management, turnover and tax affairs and on production itself, including machinery specifications, quality control reports, monitoring studies and reports, and proposals for the improvement of equipment and installations. Commercial documentation includes market analyses and an abundance of correspondence with clients, with specific reference to prices, which provide

Grober factory in Girona. Mechanical looms with a Jacquard head for the production of decorative braids, 1920s.



the raw materials for potentially fascinating studies of the Catalan textile industry throughout various periods of history. The archive is also a window on the technical and technological improvements that were introduced as the companies evolved, and the extensive social initiatives referred to above, which are illustrated through a wealth of documents of unquestionable sentimental value. Finally, a series of specific documents outline the reasons behind the decision to relocate S.A. *Grober* away from Girona, as the city expanded under the Mercadal Plan.

An abundance of additional materials accompany the documents themselves, among them photographs, plans and machine schematics, which are an aid to scholars and chart interesting developments over the course of the twentieth century. The collection also tells us about shifts in fashion and how these can determine the continuing success or eventual decline of a particular product, texture or colour, as well as charting the distinct approaches that companies took in responding to each of the changes.

While all of the documents are of scholarly interest, some hold a particularly human appeal, telling us about the lives of workers, the salaries they received, the hours they worked, how they were organised, how benefits and pensions evolved, how the company managed its suppliers, the frequent power cuts when resources were scarce, and even the importance of holidays and festivals and the role that the company took in organising celebrations, cementing its place in the collective memory of the local population.

The documents, conserved with such care by *Grobelàstic S.A.*, speak to us of these and many other aspects of the company's past and will enable the scholars of the future to reconstruct realities that may otherwise have disappeared from memory forever. ●

BIBLIOGRAPHY

COLOMER BARTROLÍ, Mercè. *La guarderia de la S.A. Grober: 1954-1971*, Ajuntament d'Arenys de Munt, Fulls Arenyencs de Cultura vol. 5, 2001.

FORN SALVÀ, Francesc. *De Grober a Grobelàstic: 1890-1984: la continuïtat en la labor empresarial*, Grobelàstic, Arenys de Munt, 1995. A Spanish language version is also available.