

ADOLF MAS
THE EYES OF
BARCELONA

18.02–08.05.2022

When **ADOLF MAS GINESTÀ** (1860-1936)—solicitor by obligation and photographer by vocation—journeyed through the streets of Barcelona in around 1900, the city’s walls had already disappeared decades ago and its urban layout was being enriched by the effervescence of Modernism. The city was changing and the people of Barcelona were witnessing the establishment of new social infrastructures.

At that time, camera in hand, Mas captured in his photographs a profound and simultaneously dynamic vision of a city that had just shed its provincial reputation. His eyes became a vehicle through which to approach this new reality. The illustrated press found its way into people’s homes, and so did the photographer’s reportages. His photographs provided insight into a new urban, social, and institutional reality by portraying current and public events, as well as the city’s new infrastructures. The paths he traced between the broad arteries of the Eixample district and the narrow alleys of the city’s old quarter—sometimes awaiting their imminent demolition—configured a collective memory of early 20th century Barcelona.

But Mas’s photographic work went beyond urban reportage. The relationships he established with important architects and art historians of the time led to his specialization in the subject of heritage. In 1907 his participation in the mission set up by the Institut d’Estudis Catalans with the objective of documenting Pyrenean artistic heritage signified a turning point for his career and for his business; indeed his business would go on to become the main photographic archive in Europe specializing in Spanish heritage.

Carmen Perrotta, curator of the exhibition

With this show, KBr Fundació MAPFRE consolidates its exhibition program in collaboration with Catalan archives and initiated last year with the Centre de Recerca i Difusió de la Imatge (CRDI) in Girona. On this occasion, we are delighted to play a role in the dissemination of the legacy of Adolf Mas—undoubtedly a key figure in the history of modern photography in Spain—in partnership with Fundació Institut Amatller d’Art Hispànic, one of the leading institutions in Europe specializing in Hispanic art history research.



View of Portal de l'Àngel

Adolf Mas, 1902

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Neighborhood of La Barceloneta

Arxiu Mas, 1916

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Adolf Mas Ginestà was one of the key figures in the field of Catalan photography in the early 20th century. Born into a wealthy family from Solsona (Lleida), he renounced a stable job as a solicitor in order to move to Barcelona, the city where he trained as a photographer. He must have arrived in the city before 1890, because that year he married Apolonia Castañeda de Ortega (1866–1954), a young seamstress from Itero de la Vega (Palencia) with whom he had two children: Pelai (1891–1954) and Màrius (1896–1902).

Although evidence exists of his activity as a photographer during the last decade of the 19th century, it was not until the early 20th century that his first reportages were published in the press. In 1901, as the director of Heliuss, he combined his role as manager of the business with that of a photojournalist. From 1905 Heliuss, a newly renamed commercial enterprise, would become known as Etablissements “MASS” (also Estudi de Fotografia A. Mas, Estudio de Fotografia A. Mas and Photographic Studio A. Mas). In the decade of 1910 further restructuring of the business would lead to the consolidation of the Mas Archive as we know it today. In 1924 the business moved its commercial headquarters located on Carrer del Rosselló to Carrer de la Freneria, leaving the recently renovated Eixample district behind and taking over a space in the old quarter that had once belonged to two important figures in Catalan art nouveau, Alexandre de Riquer and Miquel Utrillo.

Mas’s ties to the cultural and artistic circles of the time were reflected in his photographic repertoires—which ranged from artists’ studios to portraits of the musicians, poets and intellectuals of the time—and also in the graphic and advertising materials produced for the business from its early beginnings as Heliuss until its final years as the Mas Archive. Ramon Casas, a friend of the photographer and a great exponent of Catalan art nouveau, was one of the renowned artists Mas commissioned to produce emblematic logos for the business.



Adolf Mas touching up an image
Pau Audouard Deglaire, c. 1909

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Mas Archive. No. 277 Carrer del Rosselló
Estudi de Fotografia A. Mas, 1923

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The famous café Els Quatre Gats (1897-1903), located on the ground floor of Casa Martí on Carrer del Montsió and designed by Josep Puig I Cadafalch, was an important catalyst in Mas's relationship with the artistic trends linked to Barcelona. A drawing by Ricard Opisso from 1900 is proof that Adolf Mas was a regular visitor at the café, possibly since it first opened. His familiarity with the cultural circles linked to the establishment undoubtedly allowed him to come into contact with the great figures of the time, such as Santiago Rusiñol and Ramon Casas. The reportages he produced in the company of the most important artists of his generation give a perspective on the interiors of the main studios operating at the time, from the studio of Lluís Masriera to that of Manuel Cano de Castro, and from the studio of Salvador Alarma to that of Félix Urgellés de Tovar.

The elite of early 20th century Catalan society—painters, architects, sculptors, musicians, dancers, singers, intellectuals, collectors and politicians, among others—posed in front of Mas's camera at some point during their time in the limelight. These images were mostly unpublished portraits and allow an even more precise understanding of Mas's position in contemporary artistic circles, while also revealing a previously unknown aspect—one that was far from the kind of documentary photography with which he is generally associated. Although he cannot be directly linked to pictorialism, his portraits were reminiscent of an aesthetic search and his use of formal devices such as blurring, contrasts in lighting, and the representation of introspective states of mind sets them apart from the structure of conventional portraiture; in this way they are similar to the artistic movement known as pictorialism which clearly influenced Mas. The interplay of light and shadow, and the use of extreme close-ups on the subjects' faces, give the portraits a strength and intensity and in some cases a resemblance to phantasmagoric apparitions.



Ramon Casas painting Júlia and Flora Peraire in the presence of Adolf Mas
Estudi de Fotografia A. Mas, 1912

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Montserrat Blanc
Adolf Mas, ca. 1909

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The first reportages by Adolf Mas were set in Barcelona, a city that from a social, cultural and urban planning perspective was undergoing a radical change. Assignments produced for illustrated magazines such as *Los Deportes*, *Álbum Salón*, *Il·lustració Catalana*, *Femina* and *Il·lustració Artística*, among others, led to the substantial growth of Mas's photographic repository. His collaboration with the publishers Editorial López, at the time managed by Antoni López i Benturas, resulted in his reportages being circulated in the main journalistic outlets of the day. Mas began to make his way in photojournalism and was one of the first photojournalists of his generation in Catalonia.

Among his first repertoires are those of the main sporting events that took place in the early 20th century, such as the celebrations of the Spanish Gymnastics Federation (1900); the grand political events linked to the Liga Regionalista, among others; and a wide range of recreational events like the Fiesta de las Palomas, organized by the Real Sociedad Colombófila de Cataluña (1904), and the traditional Batalla de Flores (1907).

Mas also participated in the documentation of ambitious urban projects like the construction of Via Layetana, and took part in the Old Barcelona artistic competition (1908).

In 1909 his camera bore witness to the dramatic event of the *Semana Trágica*. In addition to his documentation of the destruction suffered by ecclesiastical heritage, there were other images related to a wide range of motifs such as his portrayal of the *Compañía Barcelonesa de Electricidad*, which he photographed after the building had been raided. Within the framework of his production, it is also important to note Mas's documentation of the avant-garde infrastructures that were being implemented by a number of institutions at this time. These included social initiatives promoted by the *Diputació de Barcelona* and led to a turning point in welfare practices. Early 20th century Barcelona cannot be properly understood without the photographic repertoires of Adolf Mas: his wide-ranging body of work not only encompasses images of recreational, political, and religious events, but also documents Spain's cultural heritage.



Interior of a Tower in the Sagrada Família
Adolf Mas, 1905

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Games. Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes
Adolf Mas, 1906

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PERFUMERIA IDEAL AND BAR TORINO

Perfumería Ideal (established by Teodoro Sánchez Illá at number 642 Gran Vía de les Corts Catalanes) and bar Torino (founded at number 18 Passeig de Gràcia by Faminio Mezzalama, the representative of Martini & Rossi vermouth in Barcelona) were the finalists of the first annual competition for urban buildings and businesses awarded by Barcelona City Hall in 1902, in the new category for best decorated business opened that year. Both were included in the *Anuario estadístico de la ciudad de Barcelona* (1903), which highlighted Perfumería Ideal’s “ostentatious richness [...] boasting its grandiose construction and splendid decorations” while Bar Torino’s “flattering simplicity and its fine and aristocratic elegance [...] surpass anything seen before.” Ultimately, the latter—which was the work of Ricard Capmany, Antoni Gaudí, Pere Falqués, Josep Puig I Cadafalch, Eusebi Arnau, and Ricard Urgell, among others—became the winner of the competition.



Bar Torino

Adolf Mas, 1905

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PHOTOGRAPHY AND PRESS

Photography became fully integrated into the Spanish press from the 1890s, when the great illustrated magazines—such as *Blanco y Negro*, which stands out for its track record—began to appear. At the turn of the century, the growing demand for photographic repertoires by newspapers, magazines, and large editorial projects, which illustrated their pages with photographs, consolidated the profession of the photojournalist. It was during the first three decades of the century that Spanish photojournalism achieved a high degree of professionalism, and photographic techniques advanced considerably. Text and photography began to be regarded as an informative unicum and *Noucentista* reporters were faced with readers who were eager to consume eloquent and immediate images capable of relaying information while remaining clear and understandable. The binary relationship between press and photography allowed public figures to enter readers' homes enabling their deferred participation in the most contemporary current affairs.



The “Xiquets de Valls”

Adolf Mas, June 29th 1907

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The legacy of Adolf Mas goes beyond his work as a photographer. In order to fully understand his oeuvre one must look at the photographic repository and business model he established, which was unlike any other at that time. The innovative nature of this enterprise, on which Mas spent nearly twenty years, was based on a hybrid formula offering both the sale of photographic materials and the possibility of consulting the collections on-site, following the model of a public archive. Anyone interested in consulting the photographic materials at the archives could do so in dedicated rooms by means of “graphic cards”. These were presented in the form of postcards printed directly onto photographic paper which showed an image of the subject on the front and provided basic information on the location and characteristics of the subject on the back. The system was unique in Europe and Mas took advantage of the 1925 VI Congrès International de Photographie in Paris to reveal it to an international audience.

At this point Mas’s business had already moved toward a specialization in heritage photography. Its participation in the expedition organized by the Institut d’Estudis Catalans with the object of documenting Pyrenean heritage would be another turning point. In 1915 Adolf Mas was commissioned to compile an iconographic repertoire of Spain for what would become the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition. The scope of the project led him to expand the number of staff photographers as his son Pelai, who had been officially working alongside his father since 1907, was no longer able to cover all the business’s production requirements.

The success of the Mas Archive, which survives today as part of the repository at the Institut Amatller d’Art Hispànic, must be understood as the result of the work of its founder Adolf Mas, his wife Apolonia, and their son Pelai. It is also important to highlight the work of archive staff, a team comprising apprentices, archivists, typists, photographers, officers and lab directors.



Work Room and Library at the Mas Archive
Arxiu Mas, 1927

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Sunset at the Llobregat River
Adolf Mas, c. 1911

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Barcelona Photo Center

