

Girona Photography. CRDI Collections. The First Hundred Years (1839-1939)



David
Iglésias
Franch
Spain

The Centre for Image Research and Diffusion in Girona (abbreviated CRDI in Catalan) was created in 1997 in order to know, to protect, to promote, to offer, and to disseminate the Image Heritage of Girona. It offers a collection of photographs and audiovisual material that reflects and records every aspect of the life in the city, from the old times until today. The photographic collection, which has grown to 3,5 million photographs, provides a broad perspective for recreating the history of photography in the city.

The first hundred years (1839-1939) are very well represented in the collection. We can highlight some photographic sets that are relevant for this period of history. The fond **Foto Lux** (from 1915) contains the photographs of a commercial gallery as well as artistic and anthropological portraits, some of them published in postcard series. We can find images of other topics such as the Spanish Civil War and the cork industry, too. The fond **Fotografia Unal** (from 1867) comes from a centenary portrait gallery that started its activity in 1866 and finished in 1983. The fact of establishing a photographic gallery was considered a pioneering initiative in the photographic business of Girona. The collection shows interesting stereographic views edited by the Unal Gallery as well as different photographic processes of the early years. The fond **Josep Jou** (from 1900) comes from a government employee who opened a portrait gallery in Girona (1920-1944) and it has interesting images about bullfights and boxing. The Valentí Fargnoli collection (from 1901) contains postcards made by **Valentí Fargnoli** himself that have an artistic value. He is considered the most important photographer in Girona at the beginning of the 20th century. He worked as an itinerant photographer, taking pictures of landscapes and **monuments**

Unal y Marca. 1867-1870



around Catalonia. The fond **Joan Masó** (from 1920) was produced by a chemist who made the first photographs in colours of Girona, using the technique of autochromes. The **Josep Bronsoms** collection (from 1877) is an exhaustive postcard collection of Girona. These were published at the beginning of this popular commercial format. It includes complete series from most of the editors and authors who commercialized those postcards.

The CRDI also holds **vernacular photography** produced by amateur photographers, all wealthy people who became interested in the new art: Lleó Audouard, dentist; Joan Carrera, sculptor; Daniel Boschmonar, economist; Alberto Maroto, statistician; Carles Batlle, industrialist.

All these photographs are not only important for their thematic contents but for their technical value, since the collection's main treasures are: callotypes, daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, and albums. Some albums that stand out are: the album **Bellezas de Gerona** (Beautiful Girona), 1877, whose images show off the splendours of the city; an album of the



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railway that shows the construction process of the railroad tracks from Girona to France in 1880; the album Rif War that report the Spanish occupation during this War (1912-1927) and whose photographs were taken by a Spanish soldier.

The different authors, themes, photographic techniques, and photographic practices represented in all these fonds and collections allow us to better know about the history of photography in this period, mainly since 1860 when photography became a real business. In the 1860s, photography first begin to establish itself as a social phenomenon, and it was around this time that the first portrait photographers - Ramon Massaguer, Amís Unal, Dalmau i Boadella, Tomas Bernardi, Bartomeu Serra, etc.– began to set up galleries in some towns in Girona province, just as others were doing at the same time in most large Spanish towns. Having your photograph taken was now a distinct possibility for many people and only depended on the desire to do so and the money to pay the photographer. The opening of numerous photographers' studios is probably the most significant element in the process that led to the acceptance of photography as part of social life in Girona in this period. Portrait photographs were highly popular at the time. They had great commercial success and many professional photographers came to depend on them for their living. Nevertheless, many professionals were adept at combining this aspect of their work with the production of catalogues of local monuments and series of urban and rural views.

The presence of photographers in Girona from the 1860s onwards can be explained largely by technological advances and social factors. In terms of technology, photography was

able to expand its usefulness and thus its commercial possibilities thanks to the invention of the wet plate collodion process (1850) for negatives, and the albumen prints (1851) for positives. These twin processes replaced the techniques hitherto in use and came to define an age of photography that lasted almost to the end of the century. Previously, photographers had had to make do with Daguerreotypes that could not be duplicated or with Callotypes (negatives on paper) that offered poor results from the narrative point of view. Now, however, they could enjoy the virtues of these new processes and those of another decisive factor in the technological development of photography, the evolution of lens and optics. These circumstances greatly favoured the practice of photography, although a long road still lay ahead to the industrialization of photographic products and the invention of instantaneous and colour photography.

Reasons exist to believe that during this period the social situation of the city of Girona and its hinterland was ripe for the introduction of photography. The city of Girona was, for example, connected to Barcelona by railway in 1862 and this line was then extended to France in 1878. Other technological advances include the construction of five iron bridges in the city (1866-1878), and the arrival of electric lighting to the city in 1886. As well, the Grober factory, a standard-bearer of the city's first timid industrialization, was opened in 1887; the first car, a Dion-Boutton, arrived in the city in 1902; and by 1907 the first car with a Girona number-plate, a Hispano-Suiza, was on the road. This was thus the beginning of the railway age, an epoch marked by the development of modernizing forces such as iron architecture, electrification, industrialization and the arrival of the car. Nevertheless, it was also an age in which society was still greatly under the sway



of a church that resisted any ideas of abandoning the old ways of life. Photography was one of these elements of change and was one of the most eloquent symbols of modernity, a fact reflected in its acceptance in industrialized societies such as France, Great Britain, and the United States. In these countries the history of photography began way back in 1839, the year the Daguerreotype, the first photographic process, was presented in public.

In Girona a number of isolated precedents – above all, visits by foreign photographers and public demonstrations of the art - exist from the earliest days of photography. In terms of actual photographs, two Daguerreotypes from 1842 are known through the engravings of Antoni Roca and were the first-ever photographic images taken of the city of Girona. We should also mention the local politician Joan Maria Pou i Camps, who took the first-ever Daguerreotype in Madrid in 1839. Other photographers were active in these initial 20 years and other interesting dates could be cited. Nevertheless, in general photography was of little relevance in Girona in these formative years. The inexistence of a bourgeoisie was possibly the main reason for this lack of photographic activity, given that above all photography was causing a *furor* in the most advanced industrialized societies where Daguerreotypes were principally being employed to portray the middle classes.

The combination of collodion plates and albumen prints maintained its dominance right up to the 1880s despite the popularity of other techniques such as cyanotypes and carbons, both of which produced prints. Most studio portraits and exterior scenes of the time were developed on albumen paper. Perhaps the most outstanding exterior photographs from the period are contained in the album *Bellezas*



Joan Martí. 1877



de Gerona (Beautiful Girona) by Joan Martí Centellas, a photographer from Barcelona (1877), which was put on sale by the photographer as a way of showing off the splendours of the city. A version of the album made from carbon prints - a much more stable photographic technique – was also made and presented as a gift to Pope Pius IX by Girona Cathedral.

Photography has continued to evolve ever since its invention. Nevertheless, in the 1880s a number of especially relevant leap-forwards occurred that coincided with production on an industrial scale of most of the basic consumer items needed to take up photography. The substitution of the glass collodion negative by the dry gelatine plate made outdoor photography much simpler, since plates could be prepared at home and did not need to be exposed immediately after preparation. New techniques such as aristotypes were well re-

ceived and began to compete with, above all, albumen prints. Plastic films offering the photographer many advantages appeared and co-existed with glass plates for many years. As a result of these advances, professional photographers were able to improve their work and were finally able to capture movement with instantaneous photographs. Josep Maria Canel-las from Figueres was a fine exponent of this new technique. Gradually, photography began to broaden its horizons and was soon to enter the homes of ordinary folk. The establishment in Rochester (New York) by George Eastman in 1888 of a new company, Kodak, was to be crucial in bringing photography into the home: in 1888 the company produced a camera with 100 exposures that could be developed by Kodak itself and meant that for the first time amateurs now had access to photography.

Another key development during the 1880s was the substitution of engravings by photographs in the printed press and the integration of photography into printing: engravings, a more interpretative art, were abandoned as the use of photoengravings in the illustrated press rapidly expanded. Despite the fact that the photomechanical reproduction of collotypes had been possible since 1855, it was not until 1880, when new techniques such as photogravure and halftone engraving appeared, that the mechanical reproduction of photographs became linked to the art of printing. Previously, photographs had been popularized via engravings and thus were subject to the aesthetics of this technique. With the new photomechanical techniques, photographs could be reproduced on a much greater scale without any loss of the key interpretive elements of the language of photography. The book by Amadeu Mauri *Fotografias de la ciudad de Girona y sus alrededores* (Photographs of the City of Girona and Surroundings) (1900), produ-

Foto Lux. 1930 ca.



ced using photomechanical techniques, is a good example of this new technology.

In the twentieth century, photography consolidated itself in all walks of life and permeated in one way or another all levels of society. Photographs became objects of mass consumption, although access to photographic equipment was still largely restricted to a privileged minority. Portraits remained the cornerstone of commercial photography, even though the purchase of postcards began to play an increasingly important part in photographers' livelihoods. The commercialization of postcards continued in the line of the collections of stereoscopic photographs so typical of the previous century, with series devoted to familiar subjects such as landscapes, monuments and social events. Postcards printed as collotypes and photoengravings enabled many thematic collections to reach a mass market and publishers such as Thomas, Angel Tol-dra Viazó (ATV) and Llucía Roisin put on sale numerous postcards of Girona and surrounding areas. Some postcards such as the collections by Valentí Farnoli were printed using a gelatino-bromide process instead of the mo-



Foto Lux. 1928

re typical photomechanical technique. This photographer took numerous pictures of the towns around Girona and their inhabitants in a style that sets him out as the most important figure in the history of photography in the Girona area at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Also of great importance was the demand for photographs of the recently deceased (known as **post mortems**), a practice that continued right up to the 1930s and of which various series such as those taken by the Unals still exist. Female nudes were also popular, although the few such photographs that were taken locally tended towards a more artistic style. The consumption of erotic photographs was satisfied almost exclusively by supplies from other countries, above all France. From the 1920s onwards, fashion and advertising were two other important markets for photography and by the 1930s journalistic photography had become fully established, largely thanks to the ease with which the latest much smaller cameras could be handled.

In terms of the consumption of photographic material, a new market was created by amateur photographers who, thanks to technical developments, now no longer had to develop their own photographs. Well-off families could buy a camera and take their own photographs **ing**

without having to depend on a professional. The exact impact of this new form of consumerism on life in Girona is unknown, although it is highly unlikely that the number of families with cameras could be compared to the 10% of English families and the 12% of American families that owned a camera at the time. The intellectual camera-owning elite of the Girona bourgeoisie included two brothers, Joan and Rafel Masó, of which the former devoted much of his photographic production to outdoor activities. Joan Masó's interest in photography and mountain climbing led him and Josep Xaudiera to create a photographic section within the Girona sports club (*Grup Excursionista i Esportiu Gironí - GEiEG*) in 1930; this was a very significant event since local mountain climbing groups were to become one of the most important driving forces behind amateur photography in Catalonia.

Regardless of his importance as an amateur photographer, Joan Masó deserves his place in the history of local photography as the first photographer from Girona to take colour photographs. In 1923 he began to use a technique known as Autochrome, a commercial colour process that was patented in 1907 by the **Lu-miere** brothers. The taking of colour photographs had been a challenge for many years. Maxwell had taken the world's first colour photograph in 1861 by using separate **negatives;**





however, it was not until Autochrome appeared that colour photography became available to the general public and stopped being purely a tool of the technically most advanced photographers. Nevertheless, Autochrome needed a screen to project the image since colour film (or what we know today as modern colour film) did not appear on the market until 1935 with the development of Kodachrome film.

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) it was very hard to obtain photographic material and as a result the photographic output of the time suffered. Few pictures were taken during this period and most of these were taken by foreign press photographers who had come to cover the war. This is the case of Albert-Louis Deschamps, who took many photographs of Girona, Figueres, and other towns during this period.

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Fotografia Unal. 1928



in postcards and journalism. Their work is an important document of everyday life at the time, even though there was also an inherently creative side to their labours. Many of these pictures provide us with an idea of their authors' aesthetic and conceptual visions, a revelation that is most clear in the case of the small number of local photographers (but significant on a Catalan scale) who also saw themselves as artists. These artist-cum-photographers, not represented in CRDI collections, include Antoni Campana (Arbúcies), who worked within the post-pictorialist tendency, the painter Jaume Ferrer (Llagostera), who excelled in the scenification of his photographs, Emili Vila, famous for his female nudes, and Salvador Dalí in his facet as a photographer in the vanguard of Catalan photography. We could even include here the ethnological work of Pere Ferrer and Barber (Foto Lux) and Josep Esquirol.

Beyond these illustrious names lies a further body of work that is imbued with the particular imprint of its authors and contains a recognizable aesthetic content that sets it apart from photographs taken purely as a documental record. Although the authors of these portraits, urban views and everyday snaps had no essential artistic vocation, today their photographs lend themselves to a certain degree of contemplation and analysis. Photography must be understood as a scientific process, but one with an artistic component that has existed right from the beginning. Research into the artistic content of this body of work will lead us to view our heritage from a different standpoint as we begin to appreciate that the value of these images goes beyond their simple worth as documental records.