

FARÀNDULA*

ENG

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF FESTIVAL IMAGERY IN GIRONA

*The Catalan word faràndula is difficult to translate into English. A similar word, farandula, in contemporary Spanish means “entertainment” or “show business”. According to the dictionary of the Institute of Catalan Studies, the word faràndula in Catalan refers to a travelling theatrical troupe, often comic. For the purposes of this exhibition, it is probably best translated as “street theatre”, though it also refers to festival imagery, the figures that parade and dance as part of Catalan street theatre, that is, the public popular and traditional cultural performances that take place in cities and towns throughout Catalonia, and to the spirit of the world of street theatre.

Giants (or giant puppets; gegants), dragons and eagles are the most eye-catching elements of the retinue formed by Girona’s City Council in its public appearances. It is an entourage replete with banners, insignias, uniforms and abundant musical accompaniment intended to make municipal power visible.

Area 1

Ubiquitous imagery

The origin of the figures that make up festival imagery is unknown. The figures are elements, whether symbolic representations or simple ornaments, that are repeated in architecture, minor decorations, emblems, banners and religious iconography. They are also protagonists of mythical stories, fables, fairy tales and popular legends.

We cannot determine what their original symbolism is. Each generation has invested this imagery with different and complementary readings, and has given it a rich symbolic layering and integrated it into the collective imagination.

Area 2

Festivals with retinues

Corpus Christi is the origin of the modern major festival (festa major), the main event of which was the procession, in which all the city’s social ranks (estates) participated, appropriately organised and hierarchised. This successful formula has served as the model for all sorts of public festivals: military victories, religious vows, celebrations related to the monarchy and other festivities that require the presence of municipal retinues.

In this context, in 1513 documentation appeared for the first time of a giant, an eagle and a dragon, always alongside the municipal authorities, an accompaniment that over the course of five centuries has been amplified and transformed with the appearance of the giantess, the small dragon, the mule, the lion, the hobby horses and the different groups of bigheads (capgrossos).

The eagle (l’àliga)

The eagle has occupied a very special place in the city’s retinue and has enjoyed a prestige the rest of the festival imagery has not had. Its main role was to dance in different parts of the city. Over time, the eagle became the symbol of the City Council and of the city itself.

This preeminent character wrapped the eagle in different beliefs according to which only cities had at their disposal an eagle, the construction of which required the concession of a royal privilege, and its dance was the highest honour that could be given to important visitors. These suppositions cannot be substantiated documentarily.

The flags

The flags are essential component the retinue. Preceded by the flags of the city and of the official territorial units (vegueria, 12th to 18th centuries), the City Council was accompanied by the banners of the local guilds. The position of the flags in the parade corresponded to a hierarchical order strictly linked to the social reputation and prestige of the group being represented. This organisation, not without conflicts and tensions, converted the municipal retinue into a faithful reflection of the organisation of city life.

The bigheads [capgrossos]

In comparison with the rest of the imagery, the bigheads [capgrossos] are relatively new characters. They joined the festival retinue in 1868 with a burlesque objective, freed from the symbolic burden of the other figures. This new addition definitively changed the festival entourage, which had diminished considerably following the disappearance of the dragons and the mule some decades previously.

Since their first appearance, there have been 34 bigheads, organised into six different groups. The materials used to make these figures meant that they were extremely fragile and they deteriorated quickly and needed to be replaced after only a short period of time.

The giants [gegants]

The first known giant [gegant,] was brought in pieces from Barcelona in 1513 by the civil official Miquel Domingo. Just five years later, the painter Antonio Pascual was given the task of creating a new giant [gegant] employing any useful materials from the previous figure. His contract stipulated that the giant's body had to be made of cork and the arms and hands worked with boiled leather. The materials used, due to their fragility, explain the constant modifications to these first figures.

The first documented reference to the giantess [geganta] dates from 1535, and is the oldest reference of its kind in Catalonia. It is not clear, however, if this first giantess was a corporeal figure or some sort of disguise. We don't even know with certainty if it was a physical object until 1593, when the woodworker Esteve Bosch created a new figure. What we do know is that, unlike the giant [gegant], who was only carried, the giantess danced and, for almost three decades, was associated with the Dyers' Guild.

Municipal costumes and emblems

The municipal retinue was a public display that required specifically defined costumes. The person responsible for ensuring that this dress code was adhered to was the Master of Ceremonies, a position that for centuries was exclusively held by tailors. The Master of Ceremonies' tasks also included the maintenance of the festival imagery and the direction of protocol for the entire municipal entourage.

Even though, with the passing of the centuries, the pomposity of the past has been lost, concluding with the dissolution of the municipal retinue, well into the twentieth century the city authorities never abandoned the use of some badge or mark that indicated their rank and distinctions of social class.

Area 3

Music

The music is an intrinsic part of the municipal retinue. In the past, for all types of celebrations, various musical groups accompanied the City Council, and, in the evenings, provided music for public dances in the city's squares. In more recent times, the musical accompaniment required was almost always a military band from an infantry regiment posted to the city.

In the municipal retinue, there were also musicians who played for the festival figures. The giants [gegants] have danced to the sound of the pipe [flabiol] and the tabor [tambori] for almost five centuries. At the end of the Civil War, first the accordion was introduced, a rarity that ended up being a unique feature of the Gironan festival group, and later the shawn [gralla, traditional Catalan double reed woodwind instrument]. The eagle, in its moment of splendour, danced accompanied by the music of string instruments.

Area 4

Bothering Authority

From very early on, the festival imagery was the object of hostility from representatives of order. The religious authorities viewed it as a nuisance that distracted people from what was truly transcendent. Intellectuals always viewed it as nonsense, a fossil that was at odds with modern times and progress. And the civil authorities, more lax on moral issues, have not hesitated to sideline it, especially in times of economic austerity.

The persistence of the festival imagery, eluding all kinds of prohibitions, can only be explained by the steadfast support of the ordinary people.

Ecclesiastical prohibitions

The evocative power of festival imagery complicated the assimilation of the symbolism that the Church wanted to attribute to it. To the degree their evangelizing meanings were diluted, converting them into figures open to many interpretations, they became a distortion and a profanatory element that required removal.

Royal censorship

The most forceful ban that the festival imagery faced was the result of a Royal Decree (Reial Cèdula) by Charles III in 1780: "it is declared that in no church in these Kingdoms, whether it be a Cathedral, Parish or Ordinary church, will there be hereinafter Dances or Giants, that all this practice ceases in Processions, as well as in ecclesiastical functions, as unsuitable to the solemnity and the decorum that they require". It is not known if the giants (gegants) and the rest of the bestiary were retired. What is certain is that, following the publication of the Royal Decree, they disappeared from the proclamation of Corpus Christi and did not reappear in documentary records until the first decade of the nineteenth century.

Municipal obstacles

The festival imagery has always counted on the approval of the City Council. This indulgence permitted pleasing the citizenry and at the same time ensuring its involvement in public ceremonies. Festival imagery was only censored by the City Council in the heights of political radicalism. In the time of Republican government, the City Council refused to allow festival imagery to appear in any religious ceremony, and it was used in the children's festival of the Fairs (Fires, Girona's major festival). In contrast, during the first decades of the dictatorship, the appearance of festival imagery was restricted to the Corpus Christi procession.

The City Council refused to take out the giants (gegants) for strictly financial reasons. Thus, in 1870, the City Council agreed to suppress the giants, claiming that it was due to lack of funds, however a few weeks later, it was forced to reintroduce the figures due to the public's discontent. This is the first accredited record of popular will making possible the presence of the giants in the streets.

Area 5

The city and its imagery

An account of the evolution of the festival imagery over the last five centuries inevitably becomes a passage through local history. The wars and floods that often damaged Girona or other seemingly inconsequential events are shared vicissitudes that shaped the future of the city as much as of its imagery.

Demographic recovery at the beginning of the 16th century

The last third of the fifteenth century, Girona was in the setting of the end of the Catalan Civil War. A large part of the city was destroyed and the city suffered an alarming decline in population. The demographic recovery, however, was spectacular and, soon more than two thousand newcomers, mainly from Barcelona and Perpignan, settled in Girona. They reconstructed dwellings and built over one hundred new homes.

This demographic revival coincided with the sudden appearance of a giant, a dragon and an eagle. It is not surprising that this new festival imagery was contributed by the newcomers, with the intention of reproducing the successful festivities of their communities of origin.

The flood of 1843

On the night of 18th of September 1843, Girona suffered one of the most catastrophic floods in its history. The Galligants River bursting its banks caused more than one hundred deaths and devastated the quarter of Saint Peter (Sant Pere). Among the losses in this catastrophe was the figure of the neighbourhood's lion, which was stored in the Church of Saint Peter of Galligants, a figure popularly known as The Monoy of Saint Peter, owned by the Tanners' Guild and documented from the seventeenth century.

This lion demonstrated the existence the other elements of festival imagery that were not owned by the City Council. They are figures that have left almost no documentary trace. In addition to the leather-makers' lion, there were also hobby horses, sometimes owned by the Tailors' Guild and sometimes by the Tanners' Guild, which seems to suggest the coexistence of more than one group of festival images.

The collapse of the Chapel of Saint Michael (Sant Miquel)

The Chapel of Saint Michael, situated inside the City Hall building and built in the sixteenth century, remained in full use for over three centuries. During the years of the French occupation, it was used to house a regiment of soldiers. With the departure of the French, despite attempts to restore it for worship, the chapel suffered a progressive dismantling. It was used as a warehouse and, finally, it collapsed in 1859. The major damage was to the city's festival imagery. The popular dragons and mule, which had survived the bans of bishops and kings, disappeared crushed under the rubble of the city's chapel. The following year, the rest of the chapel was destroyed in order to enlarge the new Theatre of the Queen (Teatre de la Reina), the current Municipal Theatre.

Lack of municipal funds

Despite some stagnation in the city, at the end of the nineteenth century, the Girona City Council suggested the acquisition of a new pair of giants (gegants). They were to be built at Christian Art (El Arte Cristiano) in Olot and were budgeted at 1250 pesetas. The conditions indicated that the Olot company had to provide two plaster busts and different costume designs as a guarantee of the final quality of the giants. In the end, the project was never completed due to the shortage of City Council funds. This decision deprived the city of having giants similar to the magnificent giants of Olot.

The Post-war Years

The end of armed conflict was often a favourable time for the recovery of festival imagery, shelved for decades in municipal storehouses, to create a sense of normality. During the years Girona remained under French administration, all of the city's imagery reappeared after three decades. The giants' costumes, damaged as a result of the bombings, were replaced, the leather on the old dragons and the mule was renewed and the eagle was repaired. Even the lion of Saint Peter neighbourhood joined the municipal retinue.

Much later, at the end of the Spanish Civil War, all of the available figures were again recuperated and repaired: the giants (gegants), the eagle, the bigheads (capgrossos) acquired in 1925, and also an old group of five old bigheads that had been withdrawn for more than fifteen years.

Area 6

Giants (gegants) of the Fairs (Fires, Girona's major festival)

The suppression of the Corpus Christi procession and the disbanding of the City Council retinue led festival imagery to the brink of disappearance. With the arrival of democracy, a process of reinstatement began. For a few years, the festival imagery continued to go out for Corpus Christi, in a parade separated from the religious ceremonies; it also appeared at the opening of the Trade Fair (Fira de Mostres) of Girona's major festival (Fires), and it was used in some specific events such as the celebration of the first 11th of September (Catalan National Day), Carnival or at the Flower Show.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, the elements of the traditional group were gradually lost: in 1980, the eagle disappeared, three years later the bigheads disappeared and, lastly, in 1985, the old giants were replaced by a new pair, gegants who, years later, would be baptized with the names of Charlemagne and Anna Gironella.

The last stage

With the Meeting of Giants (Trobada de Gegants), organised for almost a decade by the Friends of the Giants of Matadepera (Amics dels Gegants de Matadepera), the possibility that giants will fall into disuse has been eliminated. Such a meeting was a novelty within the programming of Girona's major festival (Fires) that appeared following the huge Matadepera gathering in August 1982 that brought together more than 400 gegants.

The revival of festival imagery came about in 1993 with the start of the Association of Friends of Giants of Girona (Associació dels Amics dels Gegants de Girona), led by the siblings Raimon and M. Carme Ribes i Mora. That same year, under their leadership, replicas of the old giants (gegants) were made, the city's bigheads (capgrossos) were recovered, and the giants Xavier Cugat and the Muse (la Musa), property of the association, were introduced. Finally, the festival imagery became one of Girona's major festival's essential elements, under the direction of a new entity, the Fal·lera Gironina (Gironan Obsession).