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## **Ironworks and the Secretive Art of Santiago Rusiñol and the Catalan Modernistes**

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### **Abstract**

Can an artwork keep a secret? This question fascinated Santiago Rusiñol and the Catalan modernistes, an array of artists, writers, composers, designers, and architects active in and around turn-of-the-century Barcelona. Celebrated as a painter and playwright, Rusiñol was also an avid collector of decorative arts, in particular medieval and early modern ironworks. His collection, displayed at two successive studio-museums each called “Cau Ferrat,” contained hundreds of iron door knockers, handles, hinges, keys, and locks. As emblems of property and technologies of security, these ironworks galvanized Rusiñol’s interest in the spatial, temporal, and relational operations of secrecy—operations that became critical to his practice and theory of Modernisme.

**Key Words:** Santiago Rusiñol, Catalan modernisme, Cau Ferrat, ironworks, decorative arts, secrecy

### **Ironworks and the Secretive Art of Santiago Rusiñol and the Catalan Modernistes<sup>1</sup>**

“Where have they come from? Who could have suspected the existence of all of these ironworks?”<sup>2</sup> So asked José Puiggarí in the catalogue accompanying the Sección Arqueológica of the Exposición Universal de Barcelona of 1888, the first world’s fair to be held in Spain. The ironworks had come to Barcelona from private homes, artist studios, and church dioceses across Catalonia and Spain, and they included objects ranging from swords to reliquaries. “Dispersed,” declared Puiggarí, such objects were “disregarded.” But “gathered together,” he proposed, “they

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<sup>2</sup> Note: All translations are my own. “¿De dónde han salido, ni quién podía sospechar la existencia de todos esos hierros?” José Puiggarí, “Preliminar,” *Álbum de la Sección Arqueológica de la Exposición Universal de Barcelona* (Barcelona: Imprenta de Jaime Jepús, 1888), 31.

succeed, with their collective value, in reestablishing an art, a method, a rich history of teachings.”<sup>3</sup>

A significant number of the ironworks on view at the Exposición Universal had been “gathered together” by a single individual: “Rusiñol, D. Santiago, of Barcelona,” identified in the exhibition catalogue as having submitted a “great collection of ironworks, with more than 230 pieces: candelabras, crosses, chandeliers, doorknockers, nails, locks, chests and coffers, panoply, weapons, etc. There are objects of a very primitive nature, and all, at large, are well chosen and of notable curiosity.”<sup>4</sup> Of “notable curiosity,” indeed. Rusiñol impressed visitors to the Exposición Universal with the size and the scope of his collection. “In the important Sección Arqueológica,” enthused one critic, “the collector Santiago Rusiñol stands above the rest.”<sup>5</sup>

It was not unusual that Rusiñol, the wealthy heir-to-be of a prominent factory owner, would amass an art collection. Nor was it unusual that this art collection would center on medieval and early modern ironworks. To the contrary, collecting was prevalent among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Catalan artists and the bankers, doctors, lawyers, developers, and industrialists who patronized them. But if the decision to collect art—and specifically, irons—was unexceptional for Catalans of Rusiñol’s gender, class, and profession, the size and specialization of his collection set it apart: over five-hundred iron objects by the mid-1890s, with more than eighty door knockers alone.<sup>6</sup> Equally remarkable was the extent to which this collection became central to Rusiñol’s practice and theory of art, with ironworks made by others becoming a mode of investigating the ways in which art makes meaning.

Why collect and display historical artworks, iron or otherwise? For Puiggarí, the founding president of the Asociación Artístico-Arqueológica Barcelonesa (Barcelona Artistic-Archaeological Association), the foremost reason was to ensure the success of the industrial arts in Barcelona, from manufactured textiles to tableware. (Incidentally, the textile industry was the source of Rusiñol’s family wealth.) Two years after inaugurating the Asociación Artístico-Arqueológica, Puiggarí reflected on its establishment in a speech. “Art makes industry; industry makes wealth,”<sup>7</sup> he said. According to Puiggarí, the governments of affluent countries such as England and France had successfully established art museums, academies, and libraries that enabled artists to “steal plunder from time, and secrets from the unknown.”<sup>8</sup> This “plunder” and

<sup>3</sup> “[...] dispersos ú olvidados, se despreciaron, reunidos llegan, con valía colectiva, á restablecer un arte, un procedimiento, una historia fecunda de enseñanzas.” Puiggarí, “Preliminar,” 31.

<sup>4</sup> “Rusiñol, D. Santiago, de Barcelona. Gran colección de ferretería, en más de 230 piezas: candelabros, cruces, lucernas, llamadores, chatones, cerraduras, arcones y arquillas, panoplia, armas, etc. Hay objetos de índole muy primitiva, siendo todos, en general, escogidos y de notable curiosidad.” [Unsigned], “Catálogo de la Exposición Arqueológica por el orden alfabético de Expositores,” *Álbum de la Sección Arqueológica*, 81.

<sup>5</sup> “En esta importante sección arqueológica, lleva ante todo la palma el coleccionista don Santiago Rusiñol.” E. Támara, “Exposición universal de Barcelona. Sección arqueológica V,” *La Dinastía* (9 September 1888).

<sup>6</sup> These numbers are derived from an early inventory of Rusiñol’s ironworks, *Catálogo de los Hierros del “Cau Ferrat” y de “Maricel” de Sitges* (Barcelona: Junta de Museos, 1946).

<sup>7</sup> “El arte hace la industria; la industria hace la riqueza.” José Puiggarí, “Consideraciones sobre la importancia del estudio de las artes históricas, leídas por el Sr. Presidente en la misma sesión inaugural,” *Memorias leídas en la Sesión Inaugural. Asociación Artístico-Arqueológica Barcelonesa* (Barcelona: Establecimiento Tipográfico de los Sucesores de Narciso Ramírez, 1880), 24.

<sup>8</sup> “Otros países, y ahí está su ventaja, teniendo más generalizada la instrucción y más enlazados los conocimientos, suelen ofrecer al servicio de literatos y artistas menesterosos de saber [...] al efecto de sentar un principio, fijar un hecho, robar al tiempo sus despojos, y sus secretos á lo desconocido.” Puiggarí, “La importancia del estudio de las artes históricas,” 23.

these “secrets” converted the art of the past into a commercial resource for the present in London and Paris. Thus, if art made industry, and industry made wealth, then “plunder” and “secrets” made art.

Rusiñol shared Puiggari’s belief that historical artworks possessed “secrets.” But he disliked capitalist industry (while profiting from it), and he valued the artworks in his collection precisely for their ability to keep “secrets.” In his view, no artworks were more secretive than centuries-old ironworks. Who could say when, or where, or why an iron hinge, for example, had been fashioned, or what objects it had concealed by swiveling open and closed? These questions were addressed with speculative aplomb by Salvador Canals, a critic who reviewed Rusiñol’s art collection in 1895:

That iron would be the guardian of treasure; this one, a custodian of beauty. Below this heavy bolt a lady sought to hide a troubadour from a feudal and despotic lord, and below another a Jewish swindler wished to keep his riches from the treasury. This lock watched over the sacred door of a temple; that lock protected the sinful entrance to a medieval house of ill repute. With that door knocker the arm of a strongman was requested; with that other one, the love of a beautiful woman. Happiness and misfortune, joy and sorrow, splendor and misery, how many secrets are kept by venerable ironworks!<sup>9</sup>

The noxious ethnic and religious stereotype expressed here should be attributed solely to Canals. Yet they indicate—if inadvertently—that Rusiñol used the collecting and display of ironworks to broach broader issues of inclusion, exclusion, and Catalan modernisme. The most vital of these issues concerned the relationship between turn-of-the-century Catalonia and the vanguard cultural movement that he and his collaborators sought to create. Put simply, how would this movement situate itself in relation to the society, past and present, from which it emerged?

Beginning in the 1880s, Rusiñol deployed iron door knockers, handles, hinges, keys, and locks to position modernisme as a cultural movement that would define and defend its borders against society at large. Like other avant-gardes, the modernistes resolved to challenge the artistic and social conventions of their era. Their targets were numerous: commercial art and conservative critics, as well as materialism, capitalism, and positivism. But their challenges would come less from “avant” (in front) than they would from inside: inside newspapers and journals, inside galleries and exhibitions, and most of all, inside two successive studio-museums where Rusiñol displayed his ironworks collection. Each of these studio-museums was called Cau Ferrat (“Den of Iron”), and each served as a gathering place for a rising generation of artists and writers. Inside both, the modernistes established the boundaries of their fledgling movement surrounded by iron hardware from across Catalonia and Spain. Surrounded, in other words, by emblems of property and technologies of security.

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<sup>9</sup> “Aquel hierro sería guardián de un tesoro; éste custodio de una belleza. Bajo aquel abrumador cerrojo pretendió esconder del trovador á su dama el señor feudal y déspota, y bajo aquel otro quiso guardar del fisco sus riquezas el judío trapacero y avaro. Aquella cerradura guardaría la puerta consagrada de un templo; aquella otra defendería la entrada pecaminosa de una mancebía medieval. Con aquel aldabón solicitóse el brazo de un fuerte; con aquel otro pidióse el amor de una bella. Felicidad y desdicha, alegrías y pesares, esplendores y miserias ¡cuántos secretos guardan los hierros venerables! Pero Rusiñol lo sabe bien; ni el hierro guarda lo que se ha de ir, ni el tiempo borra lo que ha de durar...” Salvador Canals, “Los que son algo. Santiago Rusiñol: El modernismo en España,” *La Vanguardia* (18 January 1895): 1.

## Santiago Rusiñol, Collector

According to his biographers, Rusiñol began to collect ironworks while studying drawing and painting as an adolescent with the Catalan artist Tomàs Moragas from 1876 to 1883.<sup>10</sup> A gifted instructor with a richly decorated studio in Barcelona's Ciutat Vella (Old City), Moragas collected ironworks himself and encouraged the pupils who attended his academy to do the same.<sup>11</sup> It was through Moragas that Rusiñol met other young artists who would become instrumental to the care and growth of his own collection.<sup>12</sup> And it was at the encouragement of Moragas that Rusiñol joined numerous Catalan associations devoted to art and *excursionisme*, organized excursions that incorporated study and sport.<sup>13</sup> Taking part in the active program of expeditions, exhibitions, publications, and lectures sponsored by these associations, Rusiñol acquired a deep knowledge of Catalan heritage while adding to his growing collection of ironworks.

Although few records of Rusiñol's early acquisitions survive today, his presentation at the Exposición Universal of 1888 reveals a singular passion for a special class of ironworks: objects crafted in medieval and early modern Iberia to ensure the safety of self and property. Such ironworks feature prominently in *Metalistería (Metalwork)*, a survey published by the art historian Antoni Garcia Llansó in 1896.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Garcia Llansó portrays safety as the fundamental purpose of *all* ironworks, irrespective of period or region. "In addition to the beauty of form," the historian states on the opening page of *Metalistería*, "this industry also responds to one of the most intimate and imperative needs that man experiences, which is his personal security."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> On the importance of Moragas to Rusiñol's artistic formation, see Josep de C. Laplana and Mercedes Palau-Ribes O'Callaghan, *La Pintura de Santiago Rusiñol. Obra completa* [vol. I] (Barcelona: Editorial Mediterrània, 2004), 25-26, and Vinyet Panyella, *Santiago Rusiñol, el caminant de la terra* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2003), 37-39.

<sup>11</sup> Moragas as a collector and a mentor of young, emerging collectors is treated in Ignasi Domènech, "Rusiñol i el col·leccionisme de ferro," in *L'Art del ferro: Rusiñol i el col·leccionisme del seu temps*, ed. Ignasi Domènech (Barcelona: Consorci del Patrimoni de Sitges, 2007), 17-29, and Vinyet Panyella, "La col·lecció de forja de Santiago Rusiñol, origen del Cau Ferrat, i el col·leccionisme fet literatura," in *Mis hierros viejos: Edició facsímil de la conferència de Santiago Rusiñol a l'Ateneu Barcelonès el 21 de gener de 1893, publicada a la impremta d'El Eco de Sitges, 1900* (Sitges: Consorci del Patrimoni de Sitges, 2019), 11-49.

<sup>12</sup> At Moragas's academy, Rusiñol met several young artists who would assist him with his collection, most notably, Josep Llorens i Riu and Lluís Labarta. See Domènech, "Rusiñol i el col·leccionisme de ferro," 18, and Panyella, "La col·lecció de forja de Santiago Rusiñol," 26.

<sup>13</sup> See Domènech, "Rusiñol i el col·leccionisme de ferro," 19-20, and Panyella, "La col·lecció de forja de Santiago Rusiñol," 24.

<sup>14</sup> Edited and printed by the Barcelona publishing house Montaner Simón between 1886 and 1901, *Historia General del Arte (General History of Art)* comprises eight volumes on global architecture, painting, sculpture, ornament, costume, furniture, textiles, metalworks, ceramics, and glass. Authors of the volumes included prominent scholars, collectors, and architects in Catalonia, among them, Lluís Domènech i Montaner, Antoni Garcia Llansó, Francesc Miquel i Badia, and Josep Puig i Cadafalch.

<sup>15</sup> "Además de la belleza de la forma, preciso es tener en cuenta el ingenio que revela el uso y aplicación de algunas obras, y que esta industria responde asimismo á una de las más íntimas é imperiosas necesidades que el hombre experimenta, cual es la de su personal seguridad, ya que basta un sencillo cerrojo para asegurar la puerta del hogar." Antoni Garcia Llansó, *Metalistería* [Volume VIII], in *Historia General del Arte* (Barcelona: Montaner Simón, 1896), 47.

To complete *Metalistería*, Garcia Llansó relied on ironworks belonging to Rusiñol. The artist's credit line appears alongside many of the illustrations in the book, which he (or a colleague) later clipped from the volume and pasted into his personal albums. Even so, Garcia Llansó and Rusiñol had divergent understandings of the ironworks at Cau Ferrat. The art historian likened objects such as door knockers to books brimming with knowledge in which "one can read perfectly well the history of our social transformations, the preoccupations of humanity, the ideals pursued by workers."<sup>16</sup> The artist, by contrast, delighted in what he considered to be the obscurity of the objects in his collection: their obscure origins in long-ago forges, and their role in obscuring the insides of modest homes and opulent palaces, humble cabinets and intricate coffers.

These interests are evident as early as 1881, when the twenty-year-old Rusiñol submitted several dozen drawings of door knockers and related irons to an exhibition organized by the Fomento del Trabajo Nacional, a Catalan business association. The drawings won the young artist a prize, and he saw them reproduced by the Asociación Artístico-Arqueológica Barcelonesa the following year in its *Álbum de Detalles Artísticos y Plástico Decorativos de la Edad Media Catalana* (*Album of Artistic and Plastic-Decorative Details of the Catalan Middle Ages*). Alongside the drawings by Rusiñol, the *Álbum de Detalles* contains drawings of historical paintings, sculptures, and decorative arts by other artists. The book, as intended by its creators, is replete with models for industrial designers and producers.

Rusiñol's contributions, however, demonstrate a different set of concerns. While his colleagues contributed clear, crisp renderings of medieval artworks such as stone capitals and illuminated manuscripts, Rusiñol's drawings focus on the setting and usage of irons. In contrast to his colleagues, Rusiñol incorporates glimpses of the space around his irons. Also in contrast to his colleagues, Rusiñol incorporates shadows that extend across his irons and the space around them—shadows that underscore the functionality of iron devices which open and close, rise and fall, twist and turn. By accentuating the most mobile feature of each ironwork with a pronounced silhouette, Rusiñol underscores the role of their shifting parts—the striking knocker, the sliding bolt, the rotating hinge—in letting in and shutting out.

### **Cau Ferrat, Barcelona**

The inclusionary and exclusionary potential of ironworks acquired a social dimension in the years after the Fomento del Trabajo Nacional exhibition of 1881 and the *Álbum de Detalles* publication of 1882. In 1885, following half a decade of study with Moragas, Rusiñol and the sculptor Enric Clarasó established a shared studio at carrer Muntaner, 38, where they would remain until 1893. The carrer Muntaner studio soon became known as "Cau Ferrat" ("Den of Iron") due to the many ironworks displayed inside it. "More than an artists's studio," wrote Josep Roca i Roca in 1890, Cau Ferrat was a "true antiquities Museum, principally of artistic ironworks, which Russinyol gathers and collects with true affection."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "En ellos puede leerse perfectamente la historia de nuestras transformaciones sociales, las preocupaciones de la humanidad, los ideales perseguidos por aquellos obreros." Garcia Llansó, *Metalistería*, 382.

<sup>17</sup> "Allà en aquell taller del carrer de Muntaner, qu' ells han tingut á bé batejar ab lo nom de *Cau ferrat*, en rahó de ser á més d' estudi d' artistas un verdader Museo de antigüetats y principalment de ferros artistichs, que'n Russinyol



This “Museum,” though, was more boisterous than most. “It is impossible to describe the sessions at the *Cau*, the nights celebrated there, so candid and spontaneous,”<sup>18</sup> continued Roca i Roca. By the early 1890s, *Cau Ferrat* referred not only to the studio at carrer Muntaner but to the artists, writers, and journalists who met there as part of the *Sociedad de Cau Ferrat* (*Cau Ferrat Society*): Ramon Canudas, Ramon Casas, Raimon Casellas, Antoni Garcia Llansó, Pompeu Gener, Narcís Oller, Josep Lluís Pellicer, Frederic Rahola, Josep Roca i Roca, Modesto Sánchez Ortiz, Joan Sardà, Miquel Utrillo, and Josep Yxart, among others. With Rusiñol serving as president and Llorens as secretary, the *Sociedad* convened its members for studio visits and dinner parties.

The origins of *Cau Ferrat* were recounted a decade later by the Spanish writer Ángel Ganivet. “Rusiñol was very devoted to collecting old irons, and his friends called the conclave [*cónclave*] *Cau Ferrat*,” Ganivet explains, “a den of iron, a ferrous cave, or something of that sort. The name is impossible to translate with total exactness given the archaic flavor that it has in Catalan.”<sup>19</sup> “*Cau Ferrat*” may be untranslatable—numerous writers have said the same<sup>20</sup>—but not “conclave,” meaning a private or secret meeting in a lockable room, or simply the room itself. Derived from the Latin “*con*” (“with”) and “*clavis*” (“key”), “conclave” is an apt characterization of both the contents and the activities of *Cau Ferrat*. There, Rusiñol and his peers shared their works behind closed doors while striving to transform the cultural landscape of Barcelona. They did so, remarkably, in the company of keys and other objects produced to divide and protect space: “armor,” as it were, for the doors of churches, households, cabinets, chests, and coffers.

Yet Rusiñol did share his ironworks with wider audiences on select occasions throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the most important being the *Exposición Universal de Barcelona* of 1888.<sup>21</sup> During this showing of his irons, the artist published a provocative front-page article on museums in *La Vanguardia*. Beginning with its title—“Should we form antiquities museums?”<sup>22</sup>—the article posed a difficult question for the Catalan collectors, dealers, curators, and administrators involved in the ongoing *Exposición*. Rusiñol objected to the classificatory schemes at the *Exposición*, as well as the decontextualization of objects. “To see that administrative stamp, the precise arrangement, the methodical numbering,” he writes, was to see artworks “abandoned” and “ashamed” at their removal from palace walls and church altars.<sup>23</sup>

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recull y colecciona ab verdader carinyo [...]” P. del O., “Crónica. A ca ‘n Parés,” *La Esquella de la Torratxa* (25 October 1890): 674.

<sup>18</sup> “Impossible descriure las sesiones del *Cau*, las nits que se ‘n celebran, per lo que tenen de francas y espontáneas.” P. del O., “Crónica. A ca ‘n Parés,” 674.

<sup>19</sup> “Rusiñol era muy aficionado á coleccionar hierros viejos y los amigos nombraron al pequeño cónclave *Cau Ferrat*, madriguera de hierro, caverna férrea ó algo por el estilo, pues con entera exactitud el nombre es intraducible, por el sabor arcáico que en catalán tiene.” Ángel Ganivet, “‘*Cau Ferrat*,’ ” *La Vanguardia* (18 September 1897): 1.

<sup>20</sup> The difficulty of translating “*Cau Ferrat*” from Catalan into Spanish is a recurring trope in period criticism. In addition to Ganivet, see Víctor Balaguer, “Sitges la Blanca,” *Pro Patria* (August 1895): 661, and Emilia Pardo Bazán, “El ‘*Cau Ferrat*,’ ” *La Vanguardia* (1 October 1895): 4.

<sup>21</sup> Other occasions on which Rusiñol publicly exhibited his ironworks collection in the 1880s and 1890s include a speech delivered at the *Ateneu Barcelonès* in January 1893 and a showing in the *La Vanguardia* gallery in February 1893. On the latter, see “Salón de ‘*La Vanguardia*,’ ” *La Vanguardia* (7 February 1893): 1.

<sup>22</sup> Santiago Rusiñol, “¿Conviene formar museos de antigüedades?,” *La Vanguardia* (25 August 1888): 1.

<sup>23</sup> “Al ver aquel sello administrativo, la correcta colocación, la numeración metódica [...] se me figuró ver pintada en su patina la triste nostalgia de haber abandonado el querido rincón de su aldea y como avergonzados de ver tantos

“Museums must be formed,” Rusiñol concludes. “But they do not have to be office-warehouses for stockpiling antiquities out of selfish pride.”<sup>24</sup> The artist offers an alternate model for the display of art, a radical vision for an institution that would serve as:

A secure refuge where helpless objects find protection from the storms of men and history, a hospital for those who fall injured in revolutionary struggles, a shelter for invalids who succumb to the terrible battle continuously waged against indifference, a home that embraces those in danger of foreign enslavement, an island for emigrants [...]; in sum, houses of refuge, where [antiquities] find a roof to shelter themselves following their long, sad, difficult pilgrimage of so many centuries.<sup>25</sup>

When these words appeared in *La Vanguardia* in 1888, no such museum existed in Catalonia. But within the decade, the artist himself would attempt to create one.

### My Old Irons

In January 1893, Rusiñol delivered a speech on his ironworks collection at the Ateneu Barcelonès, an intellectual society in the Catalan capital. Due to its dramatic opening line, “Mis hierros viejos” (“My Old Irons”) has been remembered for its pathologization of collecting. “The mania to possess and to collect antiquities,” Rusiñol declared at the start of his speech, “is an incurable disease.”<sup>26</sup> Collecting was more than a desire for historical knowledge, social status, or aesthetic beauty, the artist said. It was also a compulsion.

But elsewhere in “Mis hierros viejos,” Rusiñol discussed a different aspect of his ironworks collection: his fascination with what he terms their “intimate life.”<sup>27</sup> According to the artist, medieval and early modern irons were produced “under anonymous mystery”<sup>28</sup> by skilled artisans whose names had been forgotten or were never known. Though experts in their craft, these artisans were, by the late nineteenth century, “covered by shadow.”<sup>29</sup> So, too, were the ironworks they had created. As Rusiñol explained, the details of when, where, how, and why medieval and early modern irons had been produced were often unknown. This unknowability, to the artist, was alluring. “If we were able to learn about their intimate life,” Rusiñol said in his speech, “if there were the power to make these pieces of iron narrate what they have seen during

ojos forasteros que les contemplaban, á ellos, acostumbrados á no ver otra luz que la del fondo de una románica iglesia, amortiguada aún por los colores de los ventanales.” Rusiñol, “¿Conviene formar museos de antigüedades?,” 1.

<sup>24</sup> “Deben formarse museos [...] pero no han de ser oficina-deposito donde se almacenen las antigüedades por el solo orgullo egoísta de enriquecerlos.” Rusiñol, “¿Conviene formar museos de antigüedades?,” 1.

<sup>25</sup> “[...] seguro refugio donde encuentren abrigo á las inclemencias de los hombres y del tiempo los objetos desvalidos, hospital de los que caen heridos en la lucha de las revoluciones, amparo de los inválidos que van sucumbiendo en la terrible batalla que libra de continuo la indiferencia, hogar donde se acojan los que estén en peligro de la esclavitud extranjera, isla de los emigrantes [...] casas de asilo, en fin, donde encuentren techo donde cobijarse después de la triste, larga y penosa peregrinación de tantos siglos.” Rusiñol, “¿Conviene formar museos de antigüedades?,” 1.

<sup>26</sup> “La manía de poseer y coleccionar antigüedades es una enfermedad incurable.” Santiago Rusiñol, “Mis hierros viejos,” *La Vanguardia* (22 January 1893): 4.

<sup>27</sup> “[...] vida íntima [...]” Rusiñol, “Mis hierros viejos,” 4.

<sup>28</sup> “[...] bajo el misterio anónimo [...]” Rusiñol, “Mis hierros viejos,” 4.

<sup>29</sup> “[...] se cubrían con la sombra [...]” Rusiñol, “Mis hierros viejos,” 4.

their large stay in this world, we would hear stories that would make us rejoice and tremble at the same time.”<sup>30</sup>

In “Mis hierros viejos,” what follows these “ifs”—if ironworks could speak, if we could hear them—is the story of a pair of irons found by Rusiñol in the province of Toledo, in the aftermath of a flood that devastated the town of Consuegra. “As living proof of what they could say,” Rusiñol told his audience, “permit me to remind you of the destruction of Consuegra, and what two Gothic door knockers told me there, in that field of ruins.”<sup>31</sup> What the irons “told” Rusiñol was how the town had been ravaged by flooding, and how they—the Gothic door knockers—had saved the lives of several men who took shelter in their doorway.

Rusiñol proceeds to describe his purchase of the Consuegra door knockers in the days following the flood. Importantly, he does not avoid the subject of his involvement in severing the irons from their original setting. To the contrary, he uses this severing as an opportunity to examine the ways in which objects generate different meanings in different contexts. Before the flood, the Consuegra door knockers were embedded in the life of their community. And after the flood, they were cleaved from this community, making their earlier existence even more like the “intimate life” of irons that so intrigued Rusiñol: remote, obscure, unknowable.

Other objects discussed in “Mis hierros viejos” include locks, keys, hinges, and additional door knockers. Like the Consuegra irons, these objects were crafted to enable the everyday actions of latching and locking, bolting and barring. From front doors to linen trunks, their purpose was to partition space and to secure its contents, separating inside from outside and shielding the former from the latter. It may seem curious that Rusiñol held these iron fragments in such high esteem, seeing as he also collected the larger objects from which these smaller objects were detached—for instance, entire doors replete with locks, hinges, and knockers. But if a door knocker could evoke the opening and closing of space and of meaning, the cleaving of this door knocker from its door could suggest something else: the impossibility of fully understanding an object from a long-ago time and far-away place, the inevitable gaps in knowledge between now and then, here and there. “If we were able to learn about their intimate life,” Rusiñol says of ironworks in “Mis hierros viejos,” “would hear stories that would make us rejoice and tremble at the same time.” In this sentence, “if” and “would” hover between the impossible and the possible, with the collector—the artist-collector-curator—serving as the bridge between the two.

### **Cau Ferrat, Sitges**

Several months after “Mis hierros viejos,” Rusiñol embarked on the construction of a new Cau Ferrat located in Sitges. This home, studio, and museum would be a “refuge” for artworks and artists alike, to quote from the artist’s 1888 article, “Should we form antiquities museums?” The completed Cau Ferrat astonished its earliest visitors.<sup>32</sup> “We lack words of praise

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<sup>30</sup> “Si de todos pudiéramos saber su vida íntima, si tuviera el poder de hacer narrar á esos pedazos de hierro lo que han visto en su larga estancia en este mundo, oiríamos historias que nos harían gozar y estremecer al mismo tiempo.” Rusiñol, “Mis hierros viejos,” 4.

<sup>31</sup> “Para muestra viviente de lo que podrían decir, permitidme que os recuerde la destrucción de Consuegra, y lo que allí, en aquel campo de ruínas me dijeron dos góticos llamadores.” Rusiñol, “Mis hierros viejos,” 4.

<sup>32</sup> The partially completed Cau Ferrat welcomed visitors as early as September 1893, for the second Festa Modernista (Modernist Festival). See, for example, “El corresponsal,” “La fiesta artística de Sitjes,” *La Vanguardia* (14 September 1893): 4-5.



for the profound impression caused by our thorough visit to the temple of Art raised by Rusiñol,” enthused a columnist for the local newspaper, *El Eco de Sitges*. “This nest covered in irons is a true palace.”<sup>33</sup>

As recognized by the *Eco de Sitges* columnist, Cau Ferrat aspired to the status of an iron-clad, iron-laden sanctuary for modernistes. This aspiration is evident in its sheltered site and guarded exterior. The building stands at a forty-kilometer distance from Barcelona, in a tranquil town nestled between the mountains and the Mediterranean. Even within this tranquil town, the property itself is sequestered, situated on a quiet street beside the sea. Its unassuming exterior, moreover, contributes to its air of seclusion: whitewashed walls, heavy doors, darkened windows, and iron grills. “We were standing at the doorway to Cau Ferrat,” wrote the novelist Emilia Pardo Bazán of her visit in July 1895, “and I still wasn’t aware of the peculiarity of Rusiñol’s *fantasy*. Except for a few old stones on the doors and windows, the façade that faces the village offers nothing extraordinary.”<sup>34</sup>

Behind this inconspicuous façade were (and are) hundreds of artworks. (Since 1933, Cau Ferrat has been a public museum.) Rusiñol displayed most in the Gran Saló (Great Hall), a vast chamber on the second floor occupying the entire length and width of the building. A photograph made around 1894 conveys its medieval-inspired grandeur, from the soaring wooden ceiling with carved quatrefoils to the rib-vaulted stone arcade featuring a three-paneled stained-glass window procured from the remains of a nearby castle. Yet ironworks—not wood, stone, or glass—were the protagonists of the Gran Saló. Tiered iron chandeliers hung from the pointed arches; punched iron censers sprouted from the lofty walls; branched iron finials jutted from the molded pilasters.

Throughout the Gran Saló, Rusiñol generated relationships—visual, material, and narrative—between ironworks and other artworks. A particularly powerful installation centered on the *Altarpiece of the Virgin Mary, Saint John the Baptist, and Saint Peter the Apostle* (1390-1400), among the oldest and largest works at Cau Ferrat.<sup>35</sup> The tempera-on-pine altarpiece depicts the Virgin Mary holding the infant Christ, flanked by Saint John, who holds a staff in his left hand, and Saint Peter, who holds a key in his right hand. Peter’s key is smaller and subtler than John’s staff; it is nearly indistinguishable from the column to its rear. Yet Peter’s key attracts the attention of the infant Christ, who reaches toward it with both arms outstretched.

Rusiñol accentuated the presence of Peter’s painted key by displaying irons beside and below it. To the left of the altarpiece’s leftmost panel—the panel with scenes from the life of Peter—were dozens of iron keys mounted on a wooden display panel. And beneath the altarpiece were iron door knockers mounted on a wooden display rail. At the center of this rail, under Peter, Rusiñol showcased one of his greatest treasures: the door knocker from the Casa de l’Ardiaca, in Barcelona. Formed by a ring that hangs from the neck of a dragon, this knocker functioned as an imposing guardian to the altarpiece. With sharp fangs, flared nostrils, and pointed ears, the

<sup>33</sup> “Nos faltan frases para ponderar la profundísima impresión que en nosotros causó la detenida visita al templo del Arte levantado por Rusiñol en la solitaria calle de San Juan.” “Este nido cubierto de hierros es un verdadero palacio [...].” T.V.O., “Cau Ferrat,” *El Eco de Sitges* (14 October 1894).

<sup>34</sup> “Ya estábamos á la puerta del *Cau Ferrat*, y todavía no me daba cuenta de lo peculiar de la *fantasía* de Rusiñol. La fachada que cae al pueblo, salvo algunas piedras viejas en puertas y ventanas, no ofrece nada de extraordinario.” Emilia Pardo Bazán, “El ‘Cau Ferrat,’” *La Vanguardia* (1 October 1895): 4.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed study of the altarpiece, attributed to Guillem Ferrer, see Francesc Ruiz i Quesada and Alberto Velasco González, “Atribuït a Guillem Ferrer, *Retaule de la Mare de Déu, sant Joan Baptista i sant Pere Apòstol*,” in *Museu del Cau Ferrat: Catàleg de pintura i obra sobre paper*, ed. Ignasi Domènech (Sitges: Consorci del Patrimoni de Sitges, 2019), 18-22.

dragon appears alert to passersby. Furthermore, the ring suspended from its neck shares the same ribbed texture as its snout and nape, likening a grip on the knocker to a brush with dragon's skin.

Rusiñol, in effect, constructed a portal to the altarpiece, and used the Casa de l'Ardiaca door knocker as a gatekeeper. In its previous existence, this knocker had safeguarded an archdeacon's palace. Now, it safeguarded an altarpiece at Cau Ferrat. Despite the drama conferred to Peter by his mythical attendant, however, it was another representation of the saint, keys in hand, that would capture the collective imagination of the modernistes: El Greco's *Tears of Saint Peter* (c. 1595-1614).

### The Keys of Saint Peter

The story of how Rusiñol came to acquire El Greco's *Tears of Saint Peter* has passed into modernista legend.<sup>36</sup> In the winter of 1894, Rusiñol was living in a sumptuous apartment on the Île Saint-Louis, in Paris, with the Catalan critic Josep Maria Jordà, and the Basque painters Pablo Uranga and Ignacio Zuloaga. Zuloaga introduced the housemates to El Greco, and Rusiñol, when he learned of two El Greco canvases for sale in Paris, purchased them through a multi-day campaign of high-wire schemes and ruses directed by Maurice Lobre, a French artist and self-described diplomat of the French art world.

Following the acquisition, Rusiñol recounted the arrival of El Greco's *Tears of Saint Peter* and *Penitent Magdalene* (c. 1585-1590) to the Île Saint-Louis in "El Greco en casa" ("El Greco at Home"), an article published in the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia*. The article avoids the story of the Lobre-led "conquest of the 'Grecos.'" <sup>37</sup> Instead, it is El Greco himself who emerges as a figure of mystery, misunderstood from his own era through that of the modernistes. "El Greco, crazy!" Rusiñol exclaims in the article. "Crazy because he did not follow, could not follow, did not want to follow the cold rules of academic drawing! Because he idealized and intensified line! Because he felt horror at adhering to the leveling norms of the masses!"<sup>38</sup>

Rusiñol, in "El Greco en casa," portrays himself and his housemates as rare admirers of a sixteenth-century enigma. Before the sale, they are disciples of El Greco's life and work; after the sale, they are devotees of *The Tears of Saint Peter* and *Penitent Magdalene*. Through rapturous viewings and ardent discussions, the housemates develop the conception of the early modern artist as a master of concealment on and off the canvas. El Greco's paintings and personhood alike required explication, Rusiñol claims—specifically, modernista explication.

Rusiñol begins with *The Tears of Saint Peter*, which he regards as—outwardly—a portrait of Saint Peter, and—inwardly—a self-portrait of El Greco. "Above a neck with contracted muscles," the modernista writes of Peter, "his head is foreshortened and his eyes, his nose, his lips, and his beard appear to have been painted feverishly, with terrible mysticism, with

<sup>36</sup> See Josep Maria Jordà, "Els 'Grecos' del 'Cau Ferrat,'" *Butlletí dels Museus d'Art de Barcelona. Publicació de la Junta de Museus* vol. III, no. 29 (October 1933): 289-295.

<sup>37</sup> "[...] Lobre amb molta solemnitat declarà que anava a començar la conquesta dels 'Grecos.'" Jordà, "Els 'Grecos' del 'Cau Ferrat,'" 291.

<sup>38</sup> "¡Loco el Greco! ¡Loco porque no seguía, ni podía, ni quería seguir las frías reglas del dibujo académico! ¡Porque idealizaba y robustecía la línea! ¡Porque sentía el horror de sujetarse á la pauta niveladora del vulgo!" Santiago Rusiñol, "Desde otra isla. El Greco en casa," *La Vanguardia* (8 March 1894): 4.

something of a hidden and palpitating suffering.”<sup>39</sup> According to Rusiñol, the vivid hues and vigorous facture with which El Greco rendered Peter are manifestations of suppressed spiritual torments shared by the sixteenth-century artist and the first-century saint.

It is easy to imagine the appeal that Rusiñol saw in Peter, a Jewish fisherman who rose to become the first bishop of Rome. Like the early leader of the Christian church, the Catalan artist was referred to as an apostle; like the early gathering places of the Christian church, Cau Ferrat was referred to as a temple. Built on a rock overlooking the sea—a rock formerly occupied by the homes of fishermen—this modernista temple would unite followers around its latter-day religion of art and reject what Rusiñol called the “leveling norms of the masses.” And within this modernista temple would be several representations of Saint Peter and his keys. Rusiñol transferred *The Tears of Saint Peter* to Cau Ferrat in 1894, where it hung—similar to the *Altarpiece of the Virgin Mary, Saint John the Baptist, and Saint Peter the Apostle*—alongside his ironworks, including iron keys.

## Curriculum Vitae

A Ph.D. candidate in Art & Archaeology at Princeton University, Annemarie Iker studies modern European art with a special interest in the art, literature, and culture of late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France and Spain. Annemarie received a B.A. in European Studies from Amherst College and an M.A. in Art History from Williams College and the Clark Art Institute. She has interned at the Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, and the High Museum of Art, in Atlanta, and she was a 2019-20 Mellon-Marron Research Consortium Fellow in the Department of Drawings & Prints at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and a 2021 University Administrative Fellow in Collection Development at the Princeton University Library. At present, Annemarie is completing her doctoral dissertation, “Secrecy in the Art of Santiago Rusiñol and the Catalan Modernistes” as a Graduate Fellow at the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies. Her most recent publications are “Scenes of Violence” and “Eye and Brain,” in *Cézanne Drawing* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art).

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<sup>39</sup> “Sobre un cuello de músculos contraídos, tiene la cabeza en escorzo y sus ojos, su nariz, sus labios, y su barba, parecen pintados con fiebre, con misticismo terrible, con algo de un oculto y palpitante sufrimiento.” Rusiñol, “El Greco en casa,” 4.