

CONCENTRATION RESEARCH PAPER

GAUDI: A DISCUSSION OF THE
SCULPTURAL AND AESTHETIC
QUALITIES OF HIS WORK

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 1983

Gaudi must be seen primarily as a great innovative architect, but his relevance as an artist, and in particular as a sculptor, cannot be overlooked. His success in developing architectural forms to their fullest potential demonstrates his qualification as a sculptor. The aptness of his personal standards is reflected in his view that the highly-resolved architectural forms of the Greeks made the Gothic style "an incompletely evolved and 'industrial' architecture" by comparison.¹ For example, Gaudi felt that all parts of a structure like the Acropolis effectively contributed to its unity; whereas the repeated use of the flying buttress in the Gothic cathedrals became a cumbersome and arbitrary device.²

Gaudi was born, raised and lived in the Catalan region of Spain. Throughout his career his work reflects a strong regionalism. He loved the Mediterranean and its effect on the climate and atmosphere of the region. The Mediterranean represented for Gaudi a link with the land of the inspiring Greek culture. Gaudi also theorized that because of the latitude of the Mediterranean region, particular qualities of the sunlight enhanced form in a manner unexperienced in either tropical or northern countries.³ This fed Gaudi's belief that, for himself, Catalonia was a special and fertile place. Catalonia and Barcelona, in particular, were bustling, prosperous areas during Gaudi's life. They were also the scene of much political and social debate. Gaudi isolated himself in his vital corner of the world, but he remained aware of and interested in timely issues worldwide. Though fascism was eventually to prevail in Spain,

Gaudi strongly supported the Catalan separatist movement and the proud individuality it represented.⁴

Gaudi never wrote down his ideas or feelings about his work, and thus they must be analyzed through what has been quoted by his colleagues, but most of all by what is manifest in the work itself. The forms of his early career reflect the popular Gothic revivalist and eclectic styles of his day, but these fade and a rich personal style emerges.⁵

Gaudi approached each building as if he were devising a sculpture. Noting a working practice he used as early as 1878, Gaudi would sit in the yard of the Casa Vicens directing its construction. "And in that fashion for which he was later to become famous, he frequently made changes, had whole walls ripped out."⁶ This approach enabled the artist to develop the visual qualities of each piece as he worked. Though his work was functional, and he at times sought inexpensive materials or construction methods. Gaudi never relinquished his concern for his work's unity and his own growth as an artist.

Gaudi took his method of spontaneous reworking a step further when in mosaics, like those for the Park Guell, the craftsmen doing the work were instructed to make their own individually inspired compositions. They sometimes used broken factory seconds of tile or glass bottles and shards. The results are coloristically and formally free and unique expressions which bear strong similarities in attitude and style to those of the Abstract Expressionists.⁷ The Abstract Expressionists used paint as their medium but their achievements were made with the same individual freedom and sense of spirituality that Gaudi sought from his craftsmen.⁸

Pablo Picasso and Gaudi exercised this freedom of invention as they borrowed freely from every style and method of working which interested them.⁹

Gaudi established the Modernismo movement of which Picasso's style was derived.¹⁰ The stained glass windows of Gaudi's Colonia Guell Chapel are accented by lacy grills composed of needles from the textile factory the chapel served. In the same spirit Picasso used a toy car to form the head of his baboon. In the chapel and the Park Guell the stonework contains a wide variety of rubble, brick, and stone quarried on the site with bits of glass and tile mixed in the mortar along with anything else which seemed appropriate to Gaudi. The resulting intricate patterns are marvelous. Again, there is a corollary between Picasso and Gaudi in Picasso's use of collage, first in his cubist explorations of form and later in his welded sculptures.¹¹ Carrying this attitude farther into the Twentieth Century, Robert Rauschenberg collected and used magazine photos and selected junk objects with the same spirit which motivated Picasso and Gaudi. All three artists were interested in developing the unexplored visual potential of the objects which existed as a part of their everyday life.¹²

There is in this the suggestion that "anything goes." This does not imply a randomness, but rather a free selection as opposed to the fabrication or manufacture of the elements of a work.

Still, the fabrication of elements in Gaudi's work is not excluded. He used calligraphic messages in certain instances. These messages, generally of a religious nature, are widely used on the Sgrada Familia where they are carved in stone or set in mosaic. The written message applied to the surface of the work is used also by Marcel Duchamp to transform his freely-selected objects into his readymades. Duchamp went on to devise elaborate visual and intellectual word-plays.¹³ In Duchamp's work the essence seems to emerge as a questioning of the nature of art.

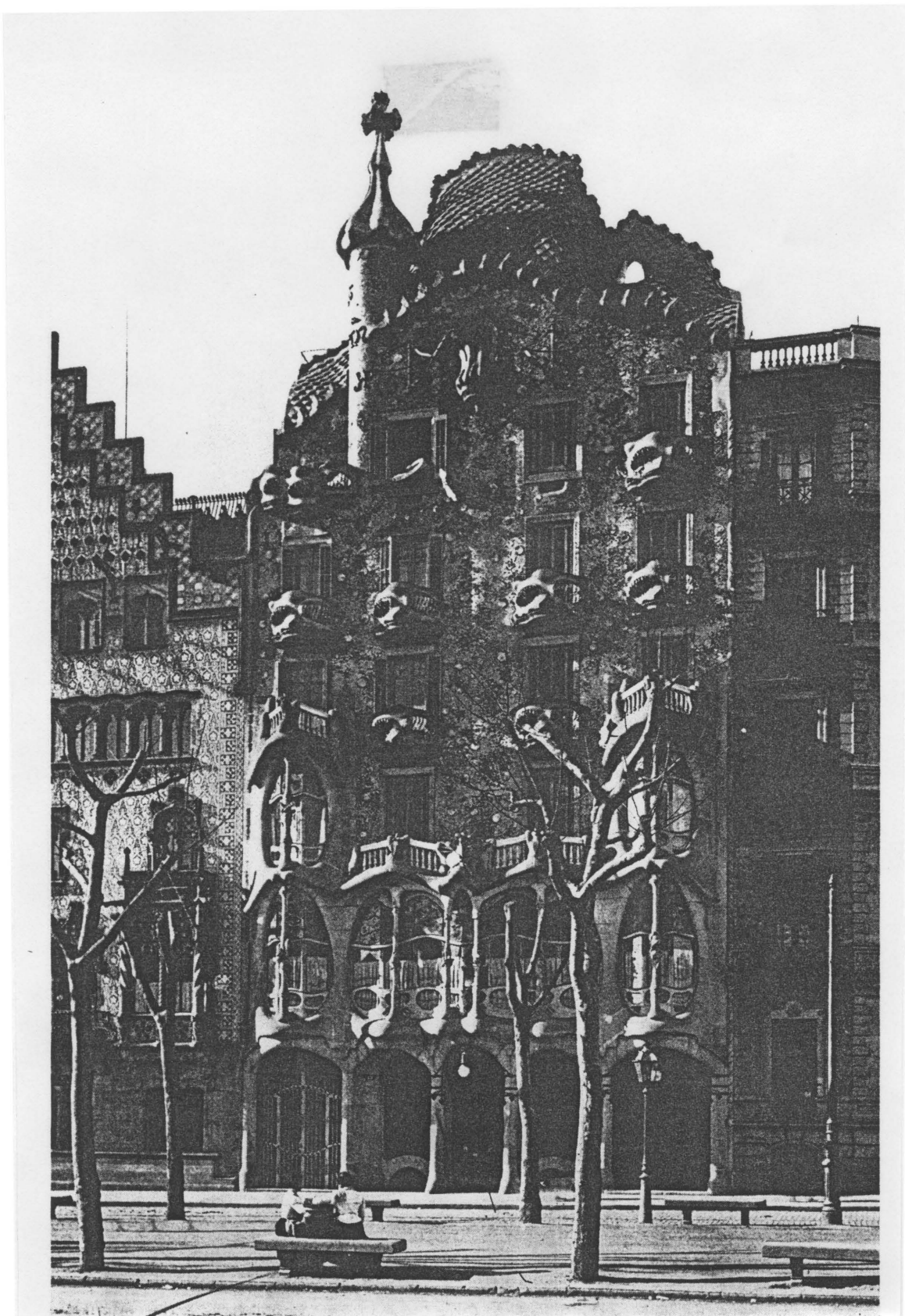
Gaudi was always seeking to expand and augment the bounds of expression. Gaudi was in his own way questioning the nature of art. His attitude, indeed, set the stage for the further questioning of Duchamp.

Gaudi's mastery of a free-wheeling attitude is exemplified in his use of form. His forms often imply growth and structure but rarely reflect the actual structure of the work. The building materials and techniques are never important in themselves. They are only a vehicle for Gaudi's ideas. In the same way, the forms of nature aren't mimicked; they are used as a point of departure.¹⁴

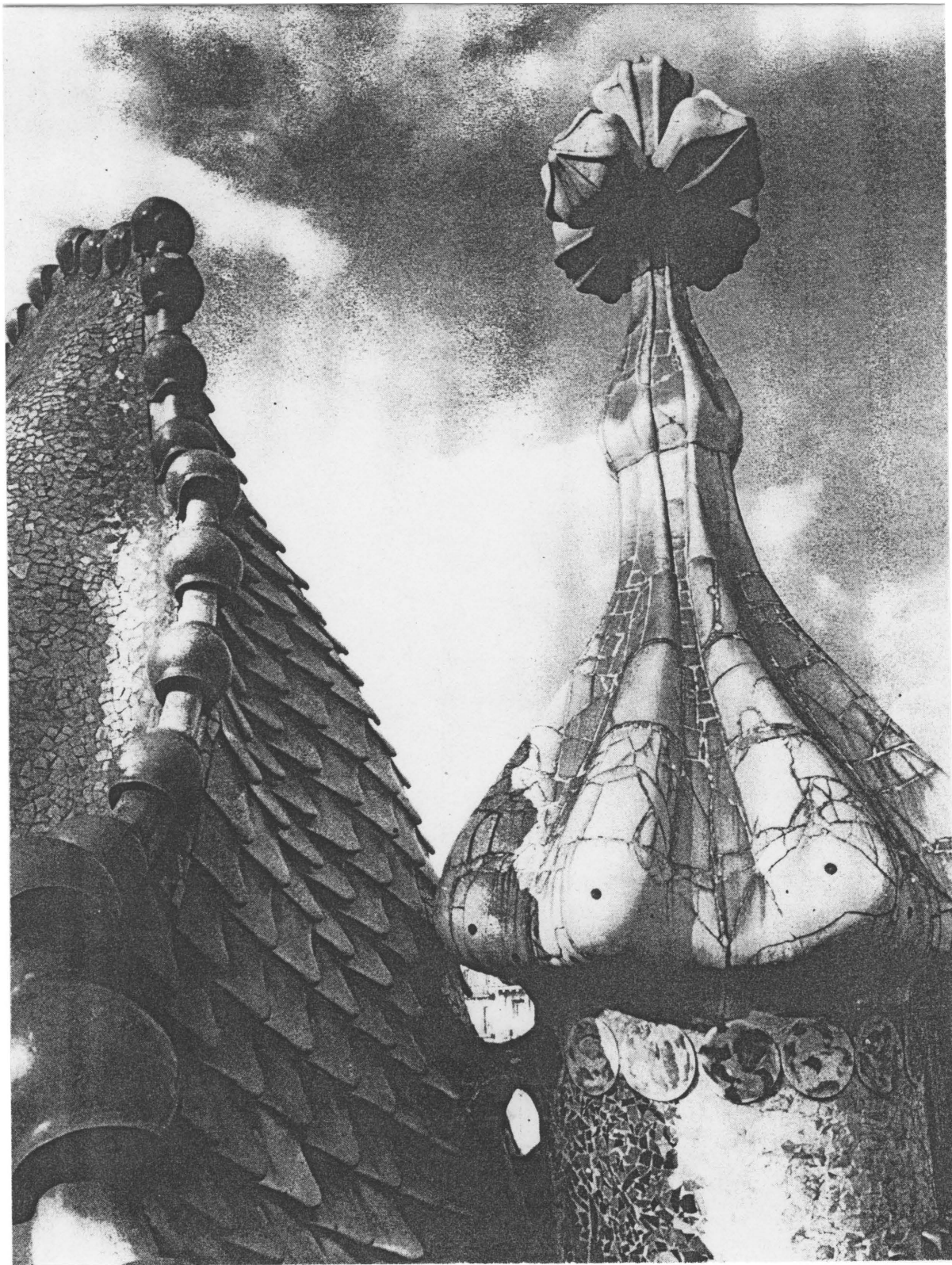
Although Gaudi's forms do not reveal the internal structure, they do reflect a spiritual structure. The outward appearance involves the viewer's imagination as he is made to ponder the meaning of the forms. The forms, though far from ambiguous, leave themselves open to interpretation.

On the roof of Casa Batllo a turret emerges from the facade on the floor below. By the time the turret passes through the roof it is a simple cylinder which then abruptly becomes a tight, convoluted growth form. This turret ends in a cricifix composed of five swollen bud-like forms. The turret is wholly unlike the juxtaposed fantastical roof whose tiles suggest a chameleon's scales. These tiles shimmer with color which gradually changes from gold to green, going from left to right across the roof. These images and their disparate appearance depart from the simple, nature forms of the rest of the building.

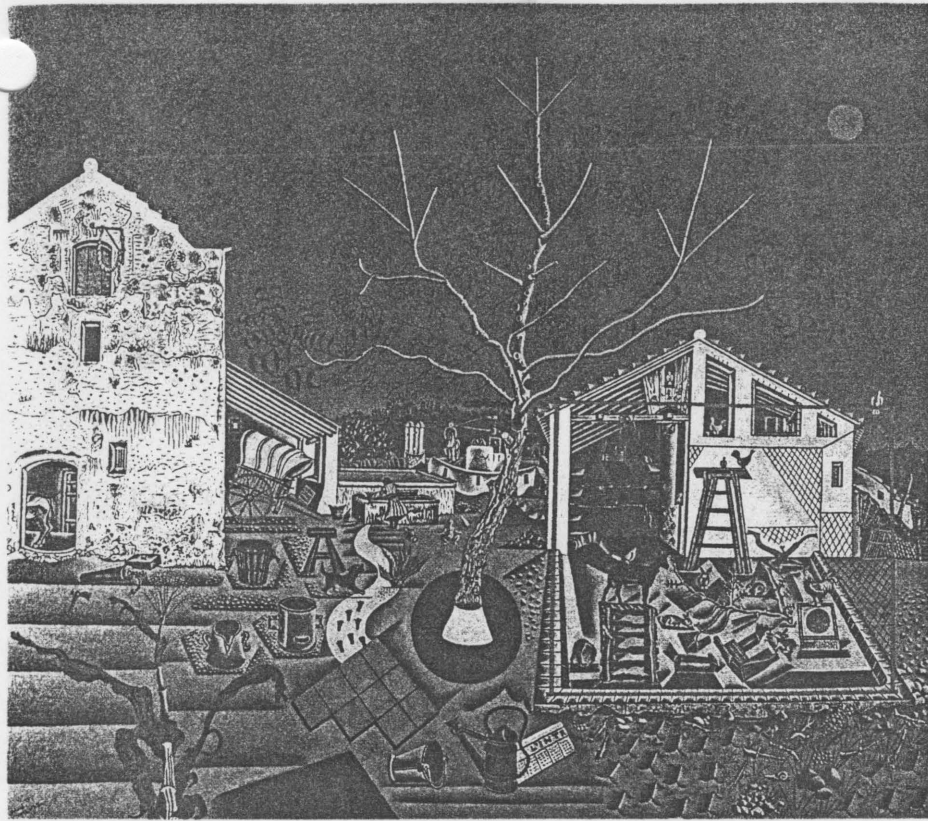
In comparison with two paintings by Catalan artist, Miro, there is seen a similar juxtaposition of images which seem to be conveying an idea. That idea is thematically related to Gaudi's roof images. In the first of these paintings, "The Farm," a snail and lizard are placed together outside of a generally domestic scene. In the second, "The Tilled Field," a snail



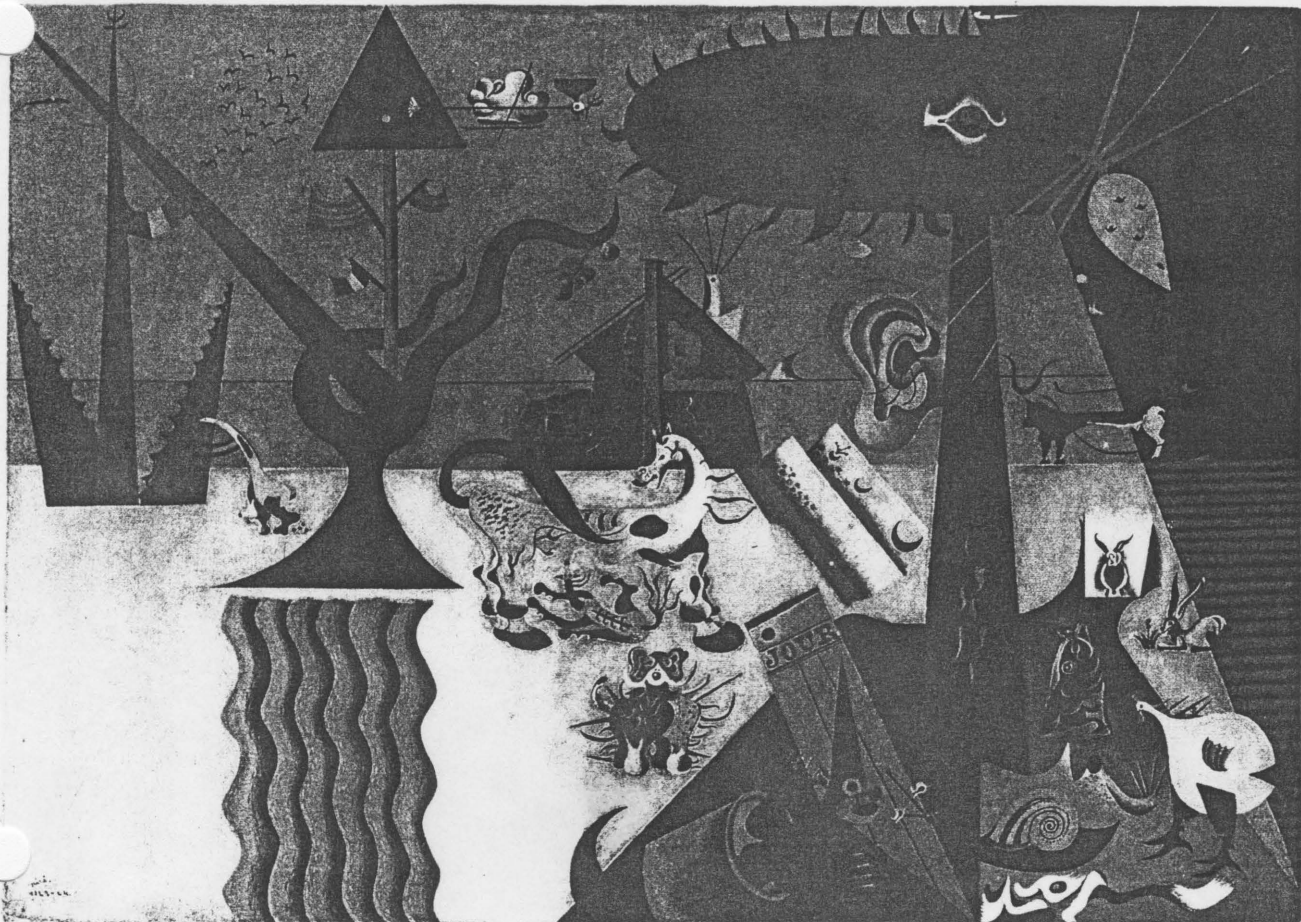
Roof; "Casa Battlo"



Roof: "Casa Battlo"



Miro:
"The Farm"



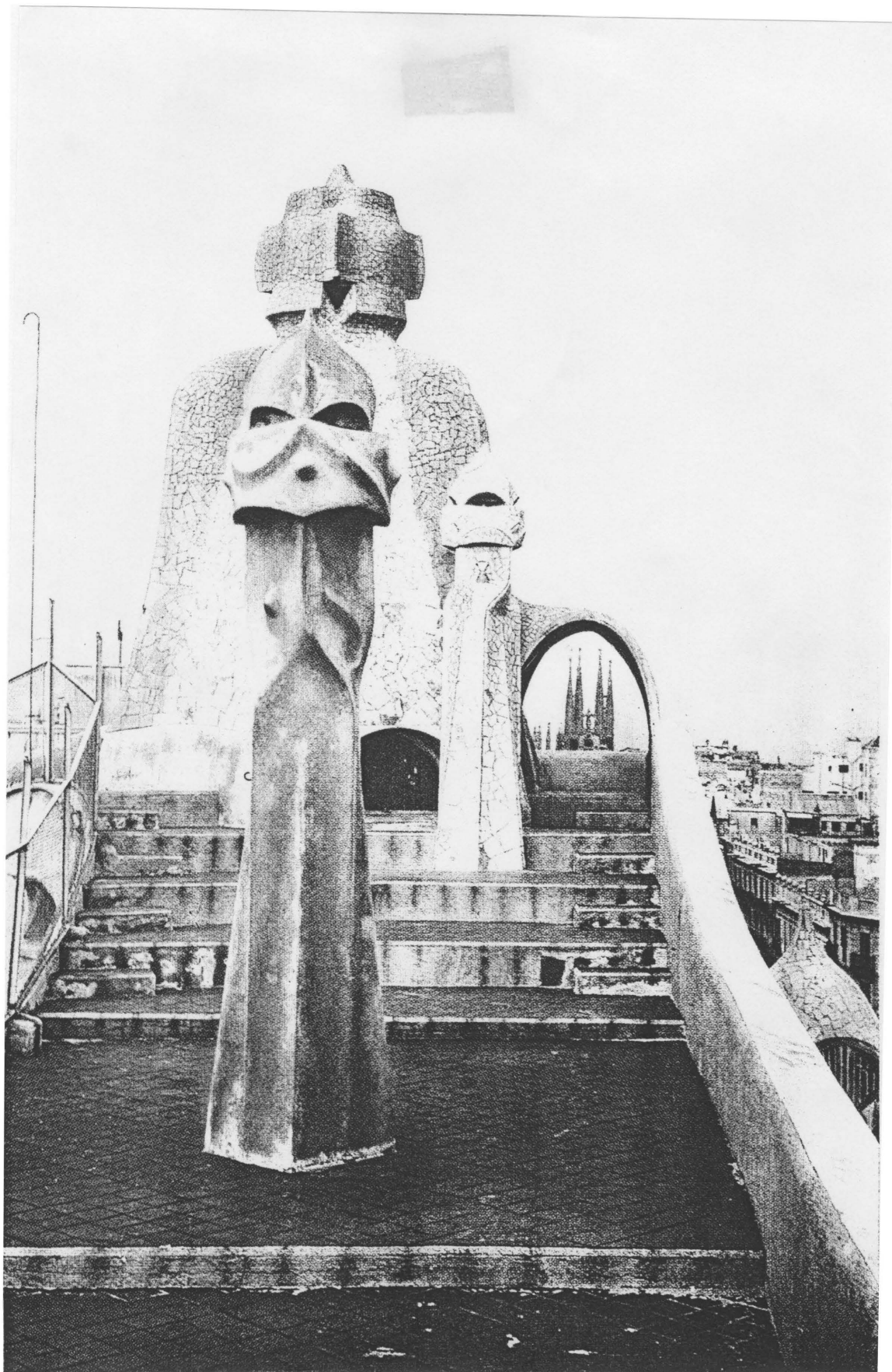
Miro: "The Tilled Field"

and abstracted lizard are similarly located but in this case they have a confrontational attitude and they serve as an introduction to a series of bizarre animal creatures. In the Casa Batllo and Miro's two paintings there is in the midst of a rather complex composition a prominent space devoted to the confrontation between a tight, self-contained attitude, the snail and turret, and one of a more transitory nature, the lizard and roof. It is interesting to speculate that Gaudi's and Miro's shared Catalan heritage is responsible for this strikingly similar use of metaphor.¹⁵

Another example of Gaudi's use of metaphor occurs in Casa Mila, built immediately after Casa Batllo. Casa Mila is a visually monumental apartment building sculpture. Its outer form described the carving out and wearing down of time and weather. The interior flows as if the ocean had swept through and softened its forms. The ironwork of the balconies echoes the refuse of seaweed tossed ashore by the sea. In addition, this building was to serve as the great base of the statue of the Virgin de la Garcia.¹⁶

Its departure from a simple reference to the powers of nature occurs on its bizarre roof. The Surrealists later saw Gaudi as a champion of their efforts to address subliminal anxieties and the spiritual quest of the soul.¹⁷

On the roof, smooth, puffed-up forms which are stairwell exits dominate the scene. Each of these forms has its own character. Some seem cold and stiff while others are complex and generous in form. The chimneys are in groups, each group being fairly similar in rigid, forbidding form, while the ventilators stand alone in subtle, graceful solitude. There seem to be references to ecclesiastical garb throughout these forms. In one area of the roof there is an arch which frames the four spectacular spires of the Sagrada Familia in the distance. There is an intricate pattern of



Roof: "Casa Mila"



Roof: "Casa Mila"

stairways linking the various levels of the roof which seem to be leading randomly here and there. On this roof Gaudi has set up a symbolic lexicon which reflects his religious fervor.¹⁸

The work of David Smith, like Gaudi's, has a particular thrust. Smith was, in much of his work, giving form to subliminal aggressions and at the same time trying to disarm those aggressions. This theme finds its most literal representation in Smith's, "The Rape" and "Propaganda for War." In his later work this theme becomes less readable though no less powerful.¹⁹ Gaudi and Smith explored and re-explored their personal convictions through specific forms. The result of this aspect of Gaudi's work is compelling and provocative sculptural form.

The unpretentious power of Gaudi's work has been selectively embraced by modern art and its creators. There have been popular movements, such as the Bauhaus, which undoubtedly viewed Gaudi's exuberance as an embarrassment to modern man.²⁰ The greatness of Gaudi's work lies in its ability to spark the imagination and delight the soul.



"Propaganda for War"

END NOTES

- 1 - George Collins, Antonio Gaudi, (New York 1969), p. 25,
- 2 - Cesar Martinell, Gaudi, (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), p. 125.
- 3 - Op cit., Collins, p. 25.
- 4 - Ibid., p. 7.
- 5 - Op cit., Marinell, p. 200.
- 6 - Op cit., Collins, p. 12.
- 7 - Calvin Tompkins, Off the Wall, (Garden City, New York 1980), p. 42.
- 8 - Op cit., Martinell, p. 357.
- 9 - Robert Hughes, The Shock of the New, (New York 1981), p. 32.
- 10 - Op cit., Collins, p. 7.
- 11 - Op cit., Hughes, p. 32.
- 12 - Ibid., p. 64.
- 13 - Rosalind Krauss, Passages in Modern Sculpture, (New York 1977), p. 74.
- 14 - Op cit., Collins, p. 19.
- 15 - Op cit., Hughes, p. 234.
- 16 - Op cit., Martinell, p. 387.
- 17 - Op cit., Hughes, p. 235-237.
- 18 - Op cit., Collins, p. 21.
- 19 - Op cit., Krauss, p. 170-171.
- 20 - Op cit., Hughes, p. 237.