

Gaudi's Stone Scriptures

The Sagrada Familia



Antoni Gaudi, Symbolism and the Gothic

Fifty years ago, the name Antoni Gaudi was not well known outside of Spain and indeed, if he was known, his work was often viewed in a negative light. Of his now famous Sagrada Familia, George Orwell (Homage to Catalonia) was of the opinion that it was 'one of the most hideous buildings in the world' and that 'the Anarchists showed bad taste in not blowing it up when they had the chance'.

Today, of course, all that has changed and millions flock to Barcelona each year to view his work. And yet, of those that do come and express their admiration, I doubt that many really appreciate the deep Christian symbolism embodied in his architecture and his ornamentation, particularly those on the exterior of the Basilica.

Both Gaudi and T.S. Eliot have been dubbed modernists in their respective trades (one a poet and writer, the other an architect) but both were in fact, traditionalists in the proper sense of that word. Gaudi once said that an 'original' piece of work meant that it sought to return to the origin. And Gaudi sought to return to the essence of the Catholic religion and its particular emphasis on the Holy Family and the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

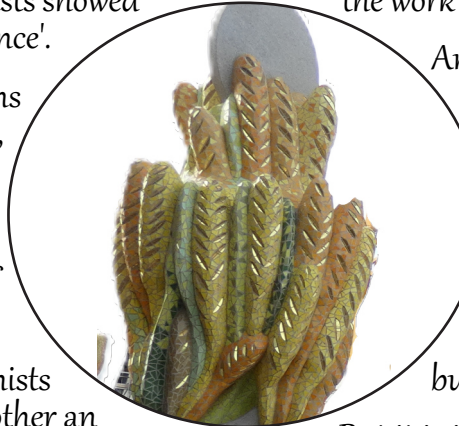
To do this, Gaudi went back to the Gothic style but re-presented it in a new and dramatic way. The early Gothic cathedrals placed most of their symbolism and didactic works of art inside the cathedral. Gaudi brought it outside for the whole world to see. But it was not there merely to 'see' as an onlooker. It was there as an aid to contemplation and prayer. Gaudi presented the Scriptures in stone. The stone carvings were not there to provide a mere sensory experience.

Likewise, whereas the earlier Gothic cathedrals relied heavily on what might be termed 'measure and light', Gaudi might be said to emphasise form and light. And the forms he used were the forms of nature. These, he surmised, could not be surpassed because they were the work of the Divine Architect.

And so, whilst Gaudi greatly admired the early Gothic builders, he regarded their flying buttresses as 'necessary crutches' to hold up the walls. He wished to improve upon the Gothic by using the architecture of nature, especially as one sees it in trees.

Thus came about those soaring arches, branching towards the top in the same manner as a tree so as to distribute the load and obviate the need for side buttresses.

But it is in the external symbolism where one gets a true insight into Gaudi's plan. Most of this is quite overt and requires no deep theological knowledge. The inset picture, for instance, shows Gaudi's representation of a sheaf of wheat, ready to transform its substance into the white host above it for the transubstantiation. Nothing is omitted in his careful representation of nature and the wild poppy, growing amongst the wheat (almost certainly a Flanders poppy) has its place in the overall scheme of things.



The Passion Facade



Gaudi died before detailed work on the Passion Facade commenced and the detailed stone carving was the work of Josep Maria Subirachs. His carvings and, indeed the whole architectural detail of the Passion Facade have been the subject of some criticism. People felt it was too harsh, too angular and altogether too "brutal". But this is precisely what Gaudi had in mind for this facade. He did not want to diminish the reality of the suffering of Christ and he wanted the facade to show the price of our redemption.

Even the giant, angular columns are like tortured limbs and the capitals at the head of the bone-like superstructure spell out the Roman inscription INRI. The scale of this work is enormous. Because you stand in front of it with the whole basilica as a backdrop, it is difficult to get a sense of the size. By way of example, the stone cross atop this bone-like superstructure is about 7.5 metres high and I read somewhere that it weighs something like 8 tonnes.

Starting at the base, the carved figures and scenes ascend through the passion and death of Christ, very much like the Stations of the Cross. Subirachs even pays his own compliment to Gaudi by carving the face of the Evangelist at the crucifixion (John) in the likeness of Gaudi.



High up above these scenes we then see the figure of the risen Christ, proclaiming his power over death. It is illuminated at night.

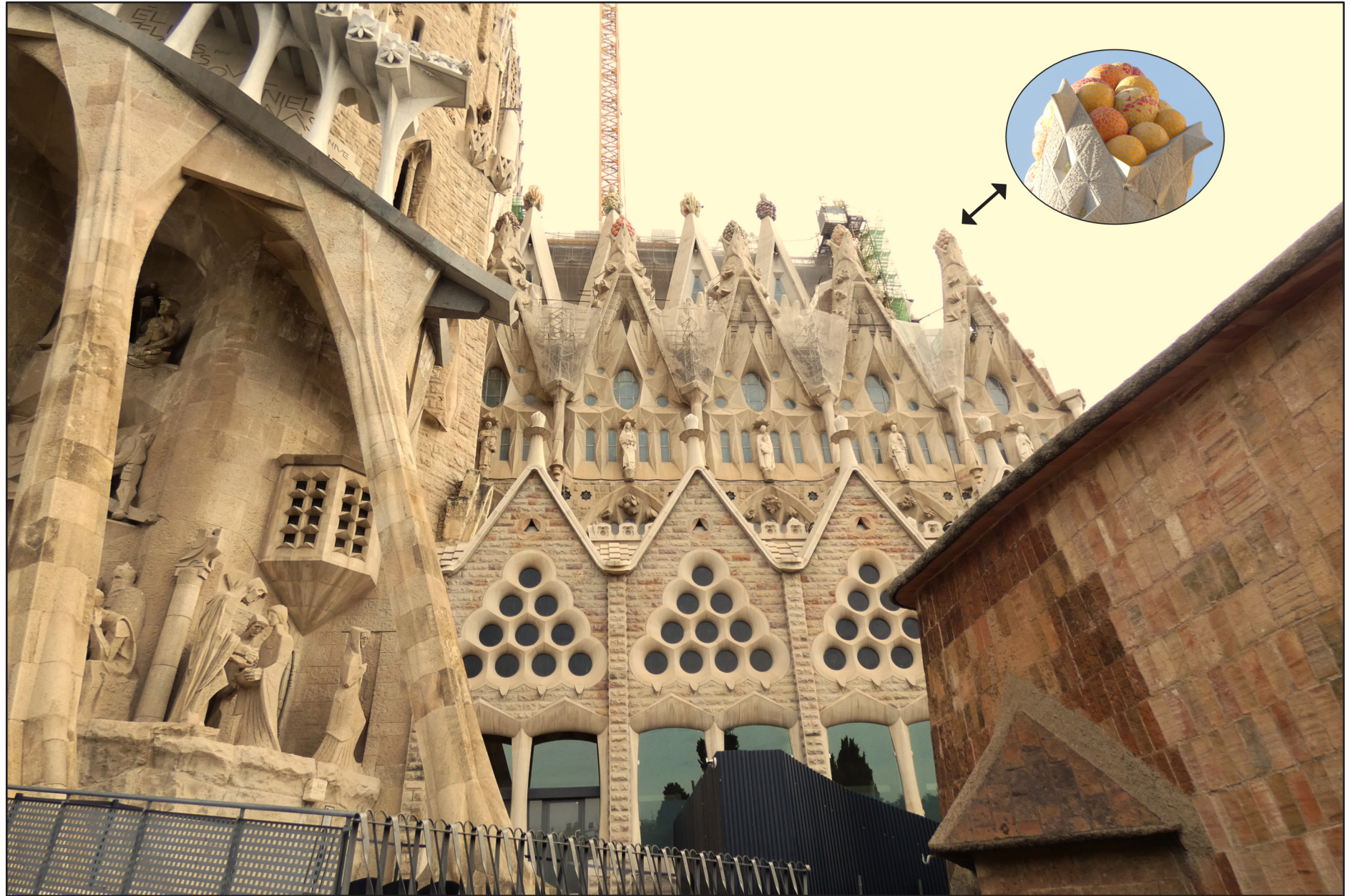


The amount of detail on this facade is extraordinary. The artwork is arranged in an ascending spiral, beginning at the bottom with the Last Supper, then moving horizontally to the arrest and betrayal by Judas (there is a snake at the foot of Judas!). From here, the eye is drawn to the scourging at the pillar, the denial by Peter, the judgement of Pilate, and so on. As we ascend, we see Veronica with the veil, and Longinus on horseback with his spear. Then central at the next level is the Crucifixion and here Subirachs produces a master stroke by having, above this scene, a depiction of the veil of the temple being torn asunder - two huge pieces of bronze.



One could spend the best part of a day simply recording the detail in this one facade alone. Seemingly every square inch of the facade surface is involved in some form of symbolism, most of it overt and easy to recognise, though some, such as Subirachs's magic square, require a little background. In this square all the numbers horizontally, vertically and diagonally, add up to 33, the age of Christ at his death.





The Fruits of the Earth

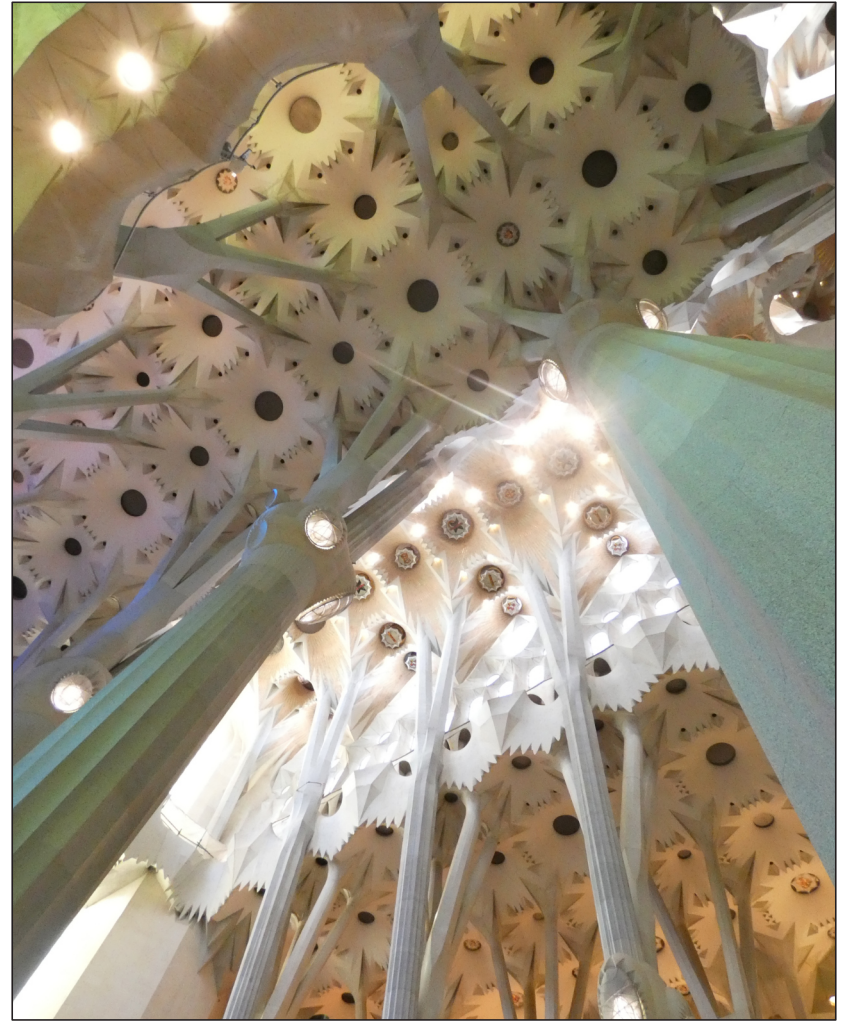
Amongst the myriad external symbols and higher overt scenes depicted by Gaudi, I choose here just to concentrate on one set - his representations both of the material source of the Eucharist (bread and wine) and of the fruitfulness of the earth itself. For this latter he has chosen the 'twelve fruits of Spain' - loquats, cherries, peaches, plums, pears, apples, almonds, figs, persimmons, chestnuts, oranges and pomegranates. Upon closer inspection it can be seen that each individual piece of fruit is formed of trencadis mosaic and this gives some idea of the huge scale of these symbols. Gaudi, being the careful observer of nature that he was, arranged these fruits in the order of their appearance in the seasons from Spring in the east to autumn in the west. Moreover, for each basket of fruit, leaves from the appropriate tree are carved in the stonework below. Nothing is omitted.

There is good reason to believe that Gaudi is also referencing a certain passage in Revelations where John has the vision of the tree of life growing at the river of life and producing its twelve fruits.

When he comes to represent the sheaf of wheat (for the Eucharistic bread), again, nothing is omitted. The white host is placed above the sheaf to make the whole representation quite explicit in its meaning. There are three representations of the grains and three for the three common varieties of grapes used for wine-making. Here again, a chalice is placed above the grapes.



Gaudi's Stone Forest



The Sagrada Familia is the tallest church building in the world today and this achievement was only possible because of Gaudi's revolutionary use of arched columns. The columns, which ascend to a prodigious height, then terminate in a great knot from which radiate out sub-columns to distribute the weight of the superstructure above them. This gives the spectator the distinct impression that he or she is looking at a giant forest of white-trunked trees, whose branches appear only at a great height. And indeed this is precisely what you see if you walk into a mature stand of mountain ash (Eucalyptus regnans) in a temperate rainforest. Now I was surprised to learn that when Gaudi spoke of his wish to take his forms from nature, he specifically mentioned a Eucalypt growing near his workshop.

But the "forest" effect is even more dramatic because most of the time you are not positioned centrally in the nave, but are viewing the columns at an angle such that many of the side-aisle arches are included in your view. Then, indeed, it does look very much like a forest.

The scale of this structure is difficult to comprehend. The photo on the right shows the choir staircase (which continues up and is lost in the heights) and the choir loft is large enough to accommodate 1000 singers!

But, perhaps the most remarkable stairway is the one that we descended within one of the towers. The perfection of the stone spiral here (a Fibonacci spiral when viewed from above) is truly extraordinary. The snail shell perfected! There are over 400 steps.



"Sunshine is the Best Painter" Gaudi





If I were to elect just one way in which Gaudí has perfected the Gothic style in cathedral architecture, it would have to be his use of light. The coloured glass in the windows is so arranged that the morning sun in the east reflects blues and greens, whilst the afternoon and evening sun reflects oranges and reds. Because Gaudí had done away with the need for flying buttresses (or their equivalent in English Gothic - essentially covered support arches forming the side-aisles), the sun has fewer obstructions at the lower level and can stream in. This allows Gaudí to use clear glass in the heights, such that natural sunlight can flood in to illuminate the higher reaches. But this transparent glass, in leaded frames, is of varying textures so as to diffuse the sunlight and scatter it more widely. The effect is stunning.