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Hidden in plain sight.

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'Operative or Speculative?'

A Masonic House in L'Olleria

Just round the corner from the Parish Church of Santa Maria Magdalena, sits Casa Santonja/Palau Marau, on Calle Ravulet in the small town of L'Olleria. An imposing building, built in the Valencian style of the 18th century, it hides many secrets which shield themselves from the eyes of the 'un-instructed and popular world', but to a more seeing eye, are revealed a fascinating glimpse of the Marau family who built it.

Generalitat Valenciana awarded a substantial grant to L'Olleria Town Council for extensive renovation and restoration owing to its uniqueness and importance. Some sources speculate that it was perhaps even an operating Masonic Temple. If that was the case, then it would be unique in Europe.

"The building represents the enlightened and liberal nobility who led the political and economic society of the time. Sample of this power arise the important mural paintings full of iconography and symbolism related to the Valencian masonry. Of particular note are the 12 human figures in the main room who respond to allegories." (Generalitat Valenciana Ministry of Education Culture and Sport).

Inside the house are an abundance of frescoes and wall paintings which point to the Masonic history and heritage of its primary owners. The house was built by a 'Liberal and Enlightened family' connected to Freemasonry, particularly the two Marau brothers, Estanislao Marau Bru and Antonio Marau Bru. They were both military men and served in many campaigns during the Spanish/French wars. They were part of a Spanish nobility, many of whom were Freemasons.

The Maraues were an old established family in L'Olleria with extensive lands in Val de Abaida dating back to the 17th century. Some of the family members were prominent military, lawyers, mayors, royal officials, and two of them were deputies in the Cortes in Spain in the nineteenth century. José Marau Castaño married Catalina Mompó and their son José Marau Mompó held the Temporary Chair of Law at the Institute of the University of Valencia from 1778 to 1782. Through marriage, Julio Santonja Ansaldo acquired the house and his nephew, Melchor Marau was an influential member of the ruling class. He was a deputy in the Cortes Generales during the Liberal Triennium in 1821-1823 when General Riego was head of Government. Riego was a recognised Freemason. Melchor Marau was also related to the 'Sanmiguelistas' which was a society in honour of San Miguel, the patron saint of L'Olleria. The Valencians: Vicente Salvà and Beltrán de Lis, both also Freemasons were also members.

("Melchor, had been part of the Patriotic Meeting in Valencia in 1821 and being already a councillor of Valencia City Council, he joined Freemasonry as a "three-point brother" and then sublime Master of the Accepted Scottish Rite with the symbolic name of Esquiues "... Source -'The Marau de l'Olleria family its link with masonry: an attempt approximation: Germán Ramírez Aledón, University of Valencia')

The two brothers, Estanislao and Antonio, strongly influenced by their uncle Melchor, travelled extensively during their military campaigns and would have undoubtedly been even more strongly influenced by their involvement in Freemasonry with both the English and French (Scottish) rites. Knowledge of Freemasonry had spread rapidly during the Age of Enlightenment and became established in Spain as a consequence. By 1767, a Grand Lodge of Spain (Gran Logia Espanola) was founded, and Spanish Freemasonry declared itself independent from England. The first Grand Master was the Count of Aranda, Prime Minister of Charles III. Nobles and landed gentry, such as the Marau family in L'Olleria were members and with their military background, they would also have been strongly influenced and associated with the various military lodges with the presence of the Napoleonic and English armies in the Spanish territories. They would also probably been familiar both with English Rite because of the close contact with English forces, but there was also a strong 'cross influence' with the French who had embraced to a large extent, the Scottish Rite. The French Rite would later become the foundation of Spanish masonry and would probably be the system adopted by the Marau brothers and family. That masonic influence determined the decoration and embellishment of Casa Santonja/Palau Marau.

To appreciate the significance and design of the interior decoration, both artistically and masonically, we should first examine the growth of Freemasonry and its roots in Europe through the 'Age of Enlightenment' which was perhaps one of the Golden Ages of Freemasonry. With the 18th century Enlightenment, came the new concepts of free thinking, liberal ideas, deeper understanding and appreciation of the world. It brought the ideals of Fraternity, Liberty, Freedom of thought, Justice, Truth, and a rejection of controls by institutions of government and The Church. It also probably began the uprising against authority of the ruling classes throughout Europe.

Within this background, Freemasonry spread, with its concepts and tenets of Fraternity, Brotherly Love, Relief, Truth, Justice, Charity. All of these attributes are reflected in the designs and content of the wall and ceiling frescoes and glimpses of the Masonic influence can be clearly seen to the 'more enlightened' eye. The decoration of the room recreates firstly, liberalism and also specifically linked to Freemasonry and Spanish constitutionalism.

If we speculated that the house was actually used as an operating Masonic Lodge, we can clearly imagine the impact to an initiate, when after climbing the stairs to the upper story, he would be faced with a magnificent ceiling fresco. The painting is not visible from the lower floor because it is hidden by an arch and only reveals itself at the top of the staircase above him. It depicts a female form as an angel and carries a banner with the words "Honor to Merit". Also another depicting "With Harmony, the small grows; with discord the great perishes".

When entering the great room (or admitted by the Tyler?) you are confronted by 12 magnificent giant wall murals, depicting The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy; together with 5 others: Prudence, Merit, Union, Peace and War and Religion.

Towards the top of the 12 great murals, the four continents of the then known world are illustrated with their names – Europe, Asia, Africa and America. (Oceania had yet to be discovered). These show a remarkable knowledge of the peoples of those continents in their dress etc.

At the very top of the murals, Astronomy is illustrated along with the twelve signs of the Zodiac and appear to be combined with the depictions of the continents, possibly symbolising the Terrestrial and Celestial globes pointing out Masonry universal.

The ceiling itself is richly and elaborately decorated in vivid colours and appear to form a network thrown over the whole area. To the more 'informed' eye, the relationship and symbolism to the globes and network of the two great pillars in Masonry becomes apparent.

The mural of 'Religion' hides a further interesting secret, because the female form is depicted holding a book which is not shown as a Bible but the Volume of the Sacred Law because it carries the inscription GADU. Great Architect of the Universe and also an all Seeing Eye (!) therefore representing a civil belief.

The image representing Poetry holds a five pointed star which is a symbol associated with The Holy Royal Arch. We know from historical documents that at least one of the Marau brothers, the uncle Melchor was a Companion of the order. The murals, Architecture and Geometry contain symbols – the level and a drawing plate or tracing board. War and Peace are depicted with their backs to each other, symbolising Harmony and Concord.

There are two beautiful and enormous renderings which face each other across the room, one in the North and one in the South. One illustrates a hunting scene and the other, a seaport scene. Both are framed by two columns or pillars, and sit on black and white chequered pavements. The Masonic influence and impression is immediate to 'the more discerning observer'. In the hunting scene, 'an ear of corn near to a fall of water' can be detected.

There seems to be no example anywhere of the Square and Compass symbol but that may have been deliberate as perhaps being too obvious. There is a glimpse of the letter 'G' but it is hard to find and not 'in the centre of the building'. In admiring the whole decoration of the room, there is no doubt that the iconography and symbolism relates directly to Freemasonry. Iconography is defined as "*The use of images and symbols to represent ideas, concepts etc.*" (Cambridge Dictionary).

So the murals, frescoes and decoration are not merely exquisite works of art but are intended to convey a deeper and hidden meaning. So, was this building used as an actual and operating Masonic Temple, and could we imagine Masonic ceremonies and rituals performed here in the very early 19th Century? Did the leading figures and political influences of the time, many who we know were Freemasons meet here? There is popular opinion that they indeed did but there are no historic documents to prove that.

Perhaps that is not surprising because the Catholic Church continued and intensified the repression of Freemasonry, strengthening the powers of The Inquisition with a two edicts in 1814 issued by The Grand Inquisitor, Bishop Mier y Campillo under the direction of The Holy See. The Church was wary and fearful of the liberal anticlericalism and political free thinking of the Enlightenment and targeting Freemasonry even further. (See Wikipedia "*Freemasonry reappears in the Liberal Triennium, and develops a political role. It was repressed again during the Ominous Decade. In 1824 Fernando VII enacted a Royal Charter prohibiting "In the domains of Spain and the Indies, all congregations of Freemasons, rebels (Sp:comuneros) and other secret sects."* Pere Sánchez Ferré, *La maçonneria a Catalunya (in Catalán)*, L'Avenç 76, 1984, pp. 53-61)

There is a wealth of information relating to the Marau family and their influence both socially and politically as well as their involvement in Masonry – much too long for this paper, and it leaves no doubt as to the deliberate designs and symbolism in the iconography. The tenets and principles which are embodied both in Freemasonry and the Enlightened age were part of their own philosophy and life and contributed to much of the political changes occurring in Europe at the time.

As to the house itself, we can only speculate as to whether Palau Marau/Casa Santonja was used as a temple. The geometry and decoration does not seem quite appropriate. There is little further enrichment of decoration in the East which would have been expected. Although two pillars are depicted in both the North and South frescoes, they do not have a much a very prominent place in the overall plan. However, the iconography and symbolism of the Celestial and Terrestrial and their conjunction is apparent. The entrance doors are in the wrong place for our understanding of modern ritual but may work in a different form of ceremony. However, it cannot be denied that the symbolism and iconography is without doubt Masonic and would have been deliberately designed as such by this prominent Masonic family.

One can imagine the room being used as a Grand Salon, a massive living room or perhaps a Ballroom and salón de baile and guests and visitors staring in wonder at the decoration and artistry without seeing the secrets and symbolism; not even beginning to speculate on the meaning. For the owners of the house, there would be a constant reminder of Freemasonry, unnoticed and kept secret even when the increasing repression halted their Masonic work.

To the un-instructed and popular world – all would be Hidden in Plain Sight.

