



( CASA VICENS, SPAIN )

# GOTHIC REVIVAL: The eclectic ornamentation of Gaudí's first commission.

WORDS  
Agnish Ray  
PHOTOS  
Marina Denisova



(left) One of the more unusual features of Catalan modernisme architecture is the use of cartón piedra. Gaudí used the material to make lightweight moldings in order to decorate the ceilings of Casa Vicens with natural motifs.

When Antoni Gaudí graduated from university, the school's director said that he was either a genius or a madman. It's uncertain which of the two appealed to Manel Vicens, the stockbroker who commissioned the recently qualified—and somewhat unpredictable—architect to build his summer home in 1883. The result was Casa Vicens, a flamboyant burst of color and style in the elegant village of Gracia (now a district of Barcelona) and the first of Gaudí's many masterpieces whose collective eccentricity would become the defining symbol of the Catalan capital.

The hand-painted tiles that adorn the home epitomize the architect's vivid imagination: Green, white and turquoise ceramics, many painted with marigolds, populate the facade; the naturalist ceiling tiles in the dining room are made of *cartón piedra* (similar to papier-mâché), while sgraffito ivy leaves creep up the walls. Roses dance across the blue and ochre checked ceramics on the walls of the smoking room.

Before Casa Vicens opened as a museum in 2017, restoration of these vibrant ceramics was an essential task; many original pieces were found to be damaged beyond repair. Local ceramicist Manel Diestre made replicas using the same transfer printing technique as Gaudí's original artisans, painting over wax paper stencils called *trepas* in Catalan.

Not yet displaying the awe-inspiring scale and sublime emotion of Gothic architecture that appeared in his later works, Gaudí's first commission represented the

whimsical experimentation of a young, intrepid visionary playing with different styles. "He had a lot of ideas in his head," says Casa Vicens director Emili Masferrer, "often very mixed, even contradictory." The vaults in the basement, for example, are typical of a traditional Catalan farmhouse, but the blue *muqarna* vaulting in the smoking room's ceiling resembles an Iranian mosque.

The arched windows and the minarets on the roof also signal Gaudí's romantic gaze toward Islamic architecture, as does his use of a water fountain for cool respite during Barcelona's sultry summers. Meanwhile, the wooden lattices covering the windows mimic Japanese *shitomi* shutters. Gaudí never visited the Middle East or Asia but he devoured texts and images related to their design traditions; the explosive confluence of styles found at Casa Vicens captures the fever of Orientalism in 19th-century Europe—a dreamy, ornamental vision of the distant yet alluring aesthetic cultures of "the East."

From the floral motifs in the tiles to the leaf patterns of the cast-iron railings, organic shapes and fertile imagery were the architect's homage to the gardens he found on the original plot. "In Casa Vicens, nature becomes architecture," explains Masferrer. "Gaudí eliminates the limit between interior and exterior, so that even inside the house it feels like a garden." Gaudí's representation of nature is devotional: In the flowers, plants and trees surrounding Casa Vicens, he saw the vision of the Almighty—one for the architect to imitate faithfully in order to rejoice in God's glory.

