



HEAVENLY ASYLUM

Not for nothing was this Spanish sanatorium nicknamed the Pavilion of the Distinguished. Designed by the great Catalan architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner in ravishing Art Nouveau style, it showcased the skills of eminent artisans – and treated the rich. Were the bothered and bewildered ever so bewitched, asks Cosmo Brockway. Photography: Mark Luscombe-Whyte

Opposite: a blue-and-white ceramic panel high on the original façade depicts the sanatorium's protective angel. This page: sgraffito garlands dance across a Catalan vaulted ceiling under which patients would gather to play cards

At mealtimes in the dining room, menus were laid out on tables covered in crisp damask linen. Patients from less salubrious wings of the sanatorium complex were pressed into service as waiters





AN HOUR or so's drive southwest of Barcelona, down a dirt track, is the most bewitching asylum. Entirely founded on the promise that 'The Light Will Shine Again', L'Institut Pere Mata is the acme of the Enlightenment ideal that mental healing could be aided through communing with both nature and ravishing surroundings. The creation of the great architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner, Pere Mata is that rare thing – a secular building with a purely altruistic foundation.

Rising out of the sandy scrub around the small city of Reus, made wealthy in the 18th century through the export of spirits, the institute is a shock of Art Nouveau effulgence. A constellation of Catalan Modernism, described by Dalí as having a 'terrible and edible beauty', is scattered throughout the region, culminating in the soaring surreality of Gaudí's Barcelona, and it was Montaner who led the charge. Here, at a provincial psychiatric hospital, in the last years of the 19th century, the visionary threw himself into creating something that could help lead the institute's incumbents out of a mental maze of confusion through the power and clarity of inspired design. The architect's plans for the revolutionary hospital, the first of its kind in the country, eschewed the industrial fashions of the day and was interwoven with the craftsmanship of the region – alongside, so the heraldry enthusiast declared, tributes to the mythic legends of old Catalonia.

It was envisaged as a series of pavilions, with the first building, seen in these pages, conceived as a sanctuary for those of a bourgeois background, leading it to be christened the 'Pavilion of the Distinguished'. The seed of the institute's creation had

been planted by a visit of local doctor Emili Briansó to the city's then psychiatric hospital, Casa del Desfrarat. Horrified by the squalor and neglect he witnessed, he rallied the wealthy worthies of the area to purchase a large plot of land, looking across to the sea, with the aim of creating a safe haven for patients.

For inspiration, Montaner, having been commissioned to design a building that would draw attention and further investment, delved into both the history of the region and the burgeoning Catalan Modernism movement. Starting with the pavilion for the high-society patients, the architect first decided to have the façade in exposed brick – an industrial material to which he gave startling prominence rather than hiding it under plasterwork. Neo-Plateresque windows, evoking the style much used in Renaissance Spain, were crowned with ceramic figures adorned with flowers; the arched loggia was topped with botanical reliefs in stone, each one unique, along with the Rose of Reus, which appears throughout the interior. Panels of turquoise tiles created by Hipòlit Montseny, a ceramic-maker in Reus, add a touch of Moorish brio to the brickwork, alongside arched stained-glass windows offering visitors a tantalising glimpse of the inside.

Montaner was passionate about recovering artisan techniques in the feverishly industrial atmosphere of the fin de siècle. The archives of Catalan craftsmen such as Barcelona's famed tilemaker Pujol i Bausis still retain drawings and plans by him illustrating his desire to patronise the region's brightest stars. Montaner's great-grandson, fellow architect Domènec Girbau, describes him as 'essentially a great conductor. He surrounded

Top: every detail of Pere Mata's architecture bore symbolic or functional purpose of some sort. For ease of cleaning, tiling in the dining room was the same height as a person. Opposite: the billiard room's vaulted ceiling is adorned with roses, the symbol of Reus





This page, clockwise from top left: the marquetry furniture is untouched since the days male patients brought their butlers or private secretaries to sleep in an adjoining room; a sitting room in an upstairs suite; many wardrobes house a hand-painted china sink for washing; protected from the sun by shutters, the murals remain as vivid as the day they were finished. Opposite: frescoed palm trees stand sentinel in a room with views across the Cape of Salou



himself with the finest of artisans, potters, sculptors and glaziers. He had a gift for seeking out the very best.' Engaging master builder Pere Caselles ensured that the hospital would stand as a hallowed beacon to the embryonic architectural movement, even in this backwater setting.

The interiors are no less surreal than the approach. A central galleried hall, designed for gathering after dinner to play piquet and backgammon, has the air of a gentlemen's club. Garlanded by a balustrade of amber-coloured glass, the room rises up to a Catalan vaulted ceiling embellished with peacocks, floral finials and, at its heart, a medallion containing a blindfolded goddess holding a flaming torch and the pledge *De nou lluirà*, meaning 'it will shine again'. On some evenings, an orchestra would play to the assembled men and genteel dances were arranged. Flanking this convivial chamber, still containing its original 'conversation' furniture inlaid with marquetry of chestnut leaves, is a splendid billiard room. Panelled with oak to lend dignity, the space is dominated by the striking table, handmade in Toulouse, to complete the illusion of a country house for the well-bred inmates.

Anecdotes abound of past incumbents of the muralled bedrooms, with their views across to the blue waters around the Cape of Salou. The Catalan artist Joaquim Mir spent two years 'resting' here after a breakdown induced by tumbling down a cliff while painting in Mallorca. Having been influenced by the mystic Belgian painter William Degouve de Nuncques, Mir turned his brush to the landscape around Pere Mata. The man described by Picasso as 'the one of the Sun' captured winter-streaked views

of Maspujols, a village in the hills – compositions of stillness perhaps reflecting his state of mind. He was later to write 'all I want is for my works to lighten the heart and flood the eyes and the soul with light'. Those words tell of the emotional redemption the troubled artist found during his confinement at Pere Mata.

A 1904 visit by Alfonso XIII took a bizarre turn in the dining room – with its lemon murals and vast chandelier – when an inmate declared himself to be the king of Spain. 'How wonderful,' replied the game monarch, 'I am a king also,' much to the impostor's surprise, tactfully adding 'of England', thereby avoiding a diplomatic incident. Another patient took revenge on his family for abandoning him under the guise of insanity by inviting his Savile Row tailor for frequent and very costly fittings, frittering his estate on purpose, unbeknown to his conniving heirs.

Today the shadows of the tweed-suited gentleman are felt in the bedrooms. The beds, once made by the local nuns in charge of linen, lie almost enshrined as the light dances through the stained-glass windows on to murals of swans and palm trees. There are no more footsteps in this pavilion save those who are privileged to visit: the institute has opened its finest flourish to the public. Other parts of the hospital remain in use, but here in the Pavilion of the Distinguished, a flame of the past still flickers. Listen closely and the orchestra might still be heard on a moonlit night, paying homage to one of Spain's greatest 'conductors', Lluís Domènech i Montaner ■

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Opposite: amber-coloured glass balustrades line the gallery looking down on to the recreation room. Top: the staircase hall is a riot of mint-green and pink ceramic tiling. The building's stained-glass windows were inconspicuously reinforced to prevent patients escaping