Culture Wars: Spain’s uneasy and uneven modernization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries
Elizabeth Small – Department of Foreign Languages & Literatures

- This period in Spain is marked by relative calm and prosperity: The liberal and conservative parties made an agreement to take turns in power; this meant stealing elections, but reflected the closeness of the debate between traditionalism and modernizing ideas.
- The different regions of Spain moved to assert their identities in this period: This was the great flowering of Catalan nationalism, and they were as proud of their industrial modernity and contacts with the rest of Europe as Galicia was of its staunch traditionalism.
- Spain was a late and spotty adopter of new technologies: Railroads did come to Spain, but only late in the century and with great difficulty in terms of financing, legal, and political obstacles; modern transportation did not reach every corner of Spain until the mid-20th century. Other technologies such as photography and modern medicine found innovators and strong proponents in Spain’s cities but rural areas remained isolated.

>> I have been studying the ideas and attitudes behind the Arts and Crafts Movement, and were captivated by its longing for craftsmanship -- as a path to aesthetic appreciation and cultural rebirth. This flowering of the Arts and Crafts style in Britain and America, is the contemporary equivalent of the Gothic movement in the 19th century.  Other technologies such as photography and modern medicine found innovators and strong proponents in Spain’s cities but rural areas remained isolated.

In the late 1980s as a reaction to the negative effects of industrialization on both the workers and the items they produced— I wondered which group in Spain would feel most attracted to this movement, since it emphasizes a return to tradition and craftsmanship.  This was the great flowering of Catalan nationalism, and they were as proud of their industrial modernity and contacts with the rest of Europe as Galicia was of its staunch traditionalism.

Spanish novelists and essayists explored these conflicts, although the traditionalists nearly always argued in terms of religious or spiritual opposition to modern science, rather than reaction against the negative effects of industrialization. Spain’s most famous novelist of the period, Benito Pérez Galdós, wrote a novel enacting resistance of traditional Spain to any infusion of new ideas— Doña Perfecta (1887). In the novel, a young civil engineer visits the small town his parents originally came from, hoping to find a wife of his own, but immediately finds himself in a morass of ignorance, political and legal corruption, and the machinations of a local priest who views the outsider as a threat to his power.

Science destroys the marvellous in art, as well as faith in the soul.”

Did the Arts and Crafts Style find any popularity in Spain? John Ruskin and William Morris in England started that movement as a way to rebel against the cheap materials, shoddy workmanship, and cheap decoration that were the hallmarks of early mass-production. But as far as my research could discover, the “conspicuous modesty” of the Arts and Crafts style, with its emphasis on restrained decoration and fine materials, could not compete against Spanish society’s need to keep up with appearances as it struggled to deny the loss of its empire.

The Prado Museum, built by royal decree and financed in 1819, is a typical Neo- Classical building meant to exude imperial power and prestige. Large sectors of Spanish society were in denial about the loss of the Spanish Empire, and clung to old ways of seeing their world.

Some stones remain unturned so far in my search for echoes of the Arts and Crafts style and/or philosophy in Spain: Ignacio Zuloaga had a brother who was a ceramic artist and ceramics was one of the fields that the Arts and Crafts Movement sought to rescue from mass production and restore to artisan status. Also, Spain’s nascent labor movement in this period was involved with the education and training of craftsmen. I haven’t yet found out to what extent they might have been influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement’s ideas. Stay tuned!

This 1909 Catalan Modernisme building by Josep Domenech i Estapà is now Barcelona’s science museum. The decorative brickwork, horseshoe arches and colorful inlaid tiles recall the neo-Mudéjar style (though this isn’t the purest example—but I took the pic!).

This dresser (1770-1775) displayed at Barcelona’s Design Museum shows the first signs of the empire’s decay: rich decoration in front, flimsy construction and cheap materials in back. Medieval furniture pieces on display in this museum showed equal artisanship on all sides– nothing to hide!

Barcelona designers basically skipped the Arts and Crafts style and went straight to the more showy and elegant Art Nouveau to express craftsmanship and appreciation of fine materials. Antoni Gaudi designed the chair on the left in 1906.

[Image 33x300 to 180x408]
[Image 162x48 to 225x132]
[Image 216x300 to 346x408]
[Image 240x66 to 330x126]