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# **THE RECTOR OF VALLFOGONA**

Rise, Fall and Return  
of a National Legend

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## Rise, Fall and Return of a National Legend

There is something decidedly odd about the Rector of Vallfogona: everyone has heard of him, but few people know exactly who he is. Born under the name of **Francesc Vicent Garcia** in 1579, he was a religious man of letters who was well connected with the political power and current affairs of Catalonia in his day. He distinguished himself as a poet, and his work contributed decisively to the complete overhaul of literature in Catalan as signified by the Baroque.

Deemed to be a **classic writer** for more than two hundred years, the pioneers of the Catalan Renaixença rejected his legacy at the end of the 19th century but failed to erase his memory, which survived in the popular imagination through anecdotes and stories passed down from generation to generation. However, the man, **the poet and the legend** became confused in an increasingly hazy reality throughout the 20th century.

This exhibition invites us to discover one of the most beloved characters in Catalan culture, the surprising career of **the most important writer in Catalan alongside Ausiàs March and Jacint Verdaguer**. A journey through reality and fiction, through fame and oblivion, culminating in Garcia's explosive return to the present day, marking the commemoration of the fourth centenary of his death, an ephemeral event that has helped to rediscover the great literary and heritage value of his legacy.

## The Rector's world

At the turn of the 16th to the 17th century, the extreme winters of the Little Ice Age reduced agricultural production across Europe, and the rise in the price of wheat led to frequent riots. **Wars** between Catholics and Protestants ravaged the centre of the continent and, combined with recurring **epidemics**, punished a weakened population. Turkish **piracy** hampered Mediterranean trade, even after the Battle of Lepanto (1571). In Catholic countries, the **Counter-Reformation** meant a tightening of religious and ideological control over the population and the persecution of minorities.

The massive influx of gold and silver from the Americas led to a serious inflationary problem in Castile, with major **pockets of poverty** in the main cities. During the reigns of Philip II and Philip III, the Habsburg Monarchy struggled to maintain its hegemony in the international arena, but it failed while militarily and economically bleeding dry during the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648) and the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648).

The arrival of Occitan immigrants in Catalonia, displaced by the French wars of religion, helped to **revitalise the demographic situation**, which had been stagnant since the 15th century. Depressed agricultural areas were repopulated, trade and public life acquired some dynamism, and a network of urban centres was formed, increasingly involved in production processes in sectors such as textiles, leather tanning, glass, ice and wine.

Nonetheless, the country was in a **precarious balance**. Catalan institutions struggled to garner respect for their sovereignty from an increasingly centralised Spanish monarchy. The lower nobility, impoverished and removed from the prebends of the court, became organised around two major opposing factions, **the nyerros and the cadells**, which fed the plague of banditry.

Francesc Vicent Garcia's family was originally from **Tortosa**, which had become one of Catalonia's main cities during the first half of the 16th century thanks to the agricultural and natural wealth of its territory, as well as its status as a strategic enclave between the three peninsular states of the Crown of Aragon: the Principality of Catalonia, the Kingdom of Aragon and the Kingdom of Valencia.

The Ebro capital reached its **peak** during the second third of the 16th century. The splendour of that period can still be seen today in the city's historic centre, which has one of the most important Renaissance-style architectural heritages in Catalonia, with such outstanding structures as the Cathedral of Santa Maria and the Royal Colleges.

## The life of Vicent Garcia

Francesc Vicent Garcia was **born in Zaragoza on 22 January 1579**. Originally from Tortosa, the family had relocated there because of his father's work, a *passementerie* by trade. Following his untimely death in 1582, Vicent and his mother returned to **Tortosa**, where he received his initial education and his mother married Pau Bono, the city's official bookseller. It seems likely that young Vicent spent his childhood surrounded by books and that he was also familiar with music and popular festivals, given that several members of the Garcia family were among the musicians employed by the municipality.

He soon relocated to **Barcelona** to commence his theological studies. He also began to write poetry, some of which reflects a rather dissolute youth. He was ordained a priest in Vic in 1605 and became a relative and chapel master of the bishop of this diocese, Francesc Robuster. Under the latter's protection, he obtained the parish of Santa Maria de **Vallfogona de Riucorb** (Conca de Barberà) in 1607.

During the years that followed, Garcia frequently travelled around the Principality, either accompanying politicians and other religious figures, participating in literary activities or simply enjoying himself in Barcelona. Nonetheless, he was not an absentee rector. His **close ties with Vallfogona** can be seen in the preserved parish documentation, as well as in many of his poems, which refer to the town and its people. Furthermore, in order to enhance the prestige of his host destination, the Rector initiated the construction of a chapel dedicated to Saint Barbara, which was attached to the parish church. This was inaugurated on 6 May 1617 with the performance of one of his works, the *Comèdia de Santa Bàrbara*.

"Vicent Garcia's *Comèdia de Santa Bàrbara* is the first baroque style theatrical work in Catalan."

In 1621, Garcia became the personal secretary of the newly appointed bishop of Girona, **Pere de Montcada**. Following the funeral of Philip III in the cathedral, he delivered a sermon that is regarded as one of the most notable examples of Catalan Baroque homiletics. Following the sudden death of the bishop at the end of the year, the Rector relocated to Tortosa for a period of several months, during which he obtained his doctorate in theology.

He travelled to **Madrid** towards the end of 1622. His first biographers explain that he aroused great admiration at court for his poetic genius, that he befriended Lope de Vega and that he died embittered because of courtiers envious of his success. However, in the absence of evidence, it seems today that all three of these assertions are later inventions designed to exalt the figure of the Rector.

What is certain is that, shortly after his return from Madrid, Garcia returned to Vallfogona, where he died of unknown causes on **2 September 1623**, at the age of forty-four.

Like other 17th-century authors such as Cervantes or Shakespeare, we do not have any reliable portrait of Garcia. All those that have been preserved – some fifteen – are invented representations, most of them from the 19th century.

## Baroque poetry

Beginning in the latter half of the 16th century and extending into the first half of the 18th century, the **Baroque** was characterised by a conviction that reality is nothing more than a deception produced by the senses. This led artists to embrace the idea of **disillusionment**, thereby allowing them to access the truth that lies beyond appearances.

In poetry, this is exemplified by the use of distancing techniques, which the reader must be able to comprehend in order to grasp the underlying meaning of the message. This effect is achieved by experimenting with expressive forms, both on the linguistic level – use of hyperbaton, learned words, neologisms – and on the semantic level – profusion of **double meanings** and **metaphors** – as well as the formation of unthinkable associations between images, concepts and ideas. The poems are designed as challenges and in order to comprehend their meaning, readers must know how to sharpen their wits and utilise their linguistic, literary and cultural knowledge to the utmost.

At times, disillusionment can lead to existential restlessness and the treatment of serious and grave issues, often tinged with **pessimism**. Religious, elegiac, metaphysical and mystical poetry and literary vanities – texts about the futility of earthly things – are good examples of this phenomenon.

At other times, this discomfort takes refuge in irony and hyperbole, crystallising in **satirical poetry**. Casting an eye on the most inconvenient and harsh aspects of everyday life. This poetry has a playful and satirical purpose, as well as a decidedly moral intention, for it criticises the flaws of society at the time.

Although works of the former type can be found in Garcia's production, the main bulk of his poetry is contained in this latter group.

There was a **rebirth of learned poetry** in Catalan in the early 17th century that is comparable to that of 13th-century troubadours or the Catalan *Renaixença* in the 19th century. This can be attributed to the adoption of the **metrical forms of Italian and Castilian traditions** and the genres, clichés and expressive codes of the Baroque.

Garcia adapts Baroque fashion to Catalan. It is notable for its **ease of versification** and the shaping of a language that is both versatile and highly expressive, achieving a striking balance between the use of cultist slang and lively Catalan, often sprinkled with colloquial elements. He quickly becomes a model to be followed by a multitude of often anonymous poets. There are hundreds of preserved poems from the first half of the century alone, many of which remain unpublished to this day.

## Garcia the poet

**Garcia's work** represents a core part of our literary canon and an indispensable link for the continuity of Catalan as a language of culture throughout the modern era. It comprises approximately 160 poems – mostly satirical – a panegyric in verse dedicated to the rector of the *Estudi General de Lleida*, a theatrical work – *Comèdia de Santa Bàrbara* – and the sermon in memory of Philip III.

His poetry has proven to be the most enduring. It reveals a light-hearted, witty nature that is striking because of its formal and thematic breadth, as well as its **varied tones and approaches**. The latter can be especially noted in the treatment of one of the most recurring themes: **desire**. In some compositions, the poetic self openly discusses sexual relations with women from a materialistic and amoral perspective, akin to ruffianism. In others, he alludes to this topic with a vitalistic, carefree and graceful lightness. Finally, there are some compositions in which he satirises the effects of the repression of the libido, a problem with which both he and some of his early readers – also clergymen – must have had to experience.

Another of the great themes of Garcia's poetry is his **critical view of society**, which emerges in poems such as "Desengany del món" [Disillusionment of the world] as well as in others that depict powerful and controversial characters of his time. He also discusses **literature and the act of writing per se**, either creating meta-literary games in humorous poems or using his texts to praise or criticise the work of other contemporary poets.

Conversely, contrary to the cliché propagated from the 19th century onwards, **eschatology** does not constitute a significant theme in the Rector's poetry. The notoriety of an eschatological character is derived from the anecdote and a few poems that have been erroneously attributed to him.

One of the most notable influences on the Rector's work is the tradition of the Castilian Golden Age. This is unsurprising, given that it was the most advanced literature on the continent at the time, besides being the closest. But the author was also well acquainted with the classics of the Greco-Latin tradition, especially satirical poets such as **Lucius or Martial**. The latter was one of the main sources of inspiration in matters such as the utilisation of invective or explicit allusions to sexual matters and brothel environments. Conversely, Garcia also displayed a strong affinity with certain prevailing trends throughout Europe, such as **anti-Petrarchism**, which led him to reject – and often to ridicule – the highly idealised view of women that had prevailed during the previous centuries in love poetry.

Garcia's poems feature peasant women, shepherdesses, priest's housekeepers, women water carriers, prostitutes, nuns... Some are only objects of contemplation, but others play a key role in developing the poem's action.

## 16th & 17th centuries: Origins and consolidation of a legend

Shortly after Garcia's death, a number of miscellaneous manuscripts began to emerge that compiled the most outstanding poems of Catalan authors of the period, and his own compositions were invariably the most extensive. Although it can be claimed that the 1640s saw the Rector attain the status of a **modern classic writer**: Gaspar Sala greatly lauds the Rector's verses in the political libel *Proclamación católica*, published shortly after the Reapers' War (1641), while Francesc Fontanella identifies the Rector as a benchmark of modern Catalan poetry in his *Vexamen* pronounced at the Academy of Saint Thomas in March 1643.

In 1703, the **first edition** of the Rector's complete works was published under the auspices of the Academy of the Distrustful, the predecessor of today's Academy of Letters in Barcelona. This edition is pivotal in the canonisation of Garcia's work, as it represents the model from which the majority of subsequent editions have been derived, either directly or indirectly.

The curators of the 1703 edition compared various manuscript copies with the intention of detecting errors in the transmission and obtaining the **most reliable versions of the texts**. However, either by mistake or to enlarge his work with serious poems, they rejected passages and entire poems of certain attribution and included many compositions that were not by Garcia. They also authored the **first biography of Garcia**, which was needed in order to publicise the author, but which introduced several aspects that have subsequently been repudiated, including his supposed origins in a family of fishermen, his studies in Lleida, and an imagined relationship with the court of Madrid.

Since the 17th century, witticisms, songs and humorous anecdotes featuring the Rector had already been in circulation. He frequently appeared accompanied by characters such as the bishop, the vicar, the inhabitants of Vallfogona and, most notably, those who would become his most common and endearing castmates: **the altar boy and the priest's housekeeper**.

The majority of these anecdotes were part of the clerical humour of the time, in other words, they had no relation to Garcia's life, but nevertheless enjoyed considerable circulation and contributed to the rapid establishment of the Rector's character in the Catalan collective imagination. In this regard, the fortune of the Rector recalls that of other esteemed and controversial writers of our tradition, such as **Santiago Rusiñol or Francesc Pujols**, with whom he is also frequently associated as exemplars of a Catalan brand of humour.

The Rector's popularity as a poet and character can only be compared to that of another religious figure: Jacint Verdaguer. In fact, Garcia foreshadows the idea of a national poet that "Mossèn Cinto" (Father Jacint) would end up embodying in the late 19th century.

## 19th century: Rise and fall of a national poet

During most of the 19th century, the Rector's fame continued to grow both within the literary realm and that of popular culture. Most of his portraits were drawn, and he became a cultural icon in the context of an emerging mass society. Under the name of The Rector de Vallfogona, he became the subject of plays (Frederic Soler, 1871), satirical magazines (1874, 1902), novels and novelised biographies (Josep Feliu i Codina, 1876), and a society was founded under the same name (1876). The character also became an advertisement for commercial products, including restorative drinks, matchboxes, postcards and so forth.

In 1879, the Catalan Association of Scientific Excursions (ACEC) organised a **major tribute to Garcia** in Vallfogona, with notable contributions from Àngel Guimerà, Narcís Oller and Lluís Domènech i Montaner, among others. Even a young Antoni Gaudí designed several floats for the entourage parade, although a lack of organisational consistency prevented them from being built.

This exaltation of Garcia would be marked by a final significant event in 1882, when his portrait was displayed alongside that of Aribau in the Gallery of Illustrious Catalans.

During the latter half of the century, an image of the Rector was constructed that reflected the concerns and aspirations of Catalan society at the time. He became a symbol of a progressive, nationalist and anti-Carlist stance in magazines and publications of all kinds, and even a combative defender of the Catalan language.

The Rector became a figure of increasing controversy during the last third of the 19th century. The group of writers who followed the poet and playwright Frederic Soler "Pitarra" claimed that he was a **popular poet**. But those from the *Jocs Florals* [Floral Games] sector challenged this with increasing vehemence: influential authors such as Milà and Fontanals viewed him as a **Castilianised vulgar poet**, and a blight on the resurgence of a learned literature in Catalan that was advocated by them.

It is thought that the pioneers of the Catalan *Renaixença* were grounded in a view of the bourgeois world and conservative morals that prevented them from empathising with certain themes and approaches specific to the taste of the Baroque, an era whose expressive codes, moreover, they did not share.

The view of this latter sector prevailed. A recovery called for a shift in references to move beyond the more immediate past. Consequently, towards the end of the century, Garcia the poet became **progressively marginalised** within the literary canon. Conversely, the Rector's legacy would endure in popular memory.

## The 20th century: An interlude of lights and shadows

Garcia's work was either belittled or ignored in the circles of learned literature during the first third of the 20th century. *Noucentisme* promoted the recovery of mediaeval authors who were more in line with the ideal of a Catalan identity at the time, and therefore more apt to elevate them as classics. This view is profoundly conditioned by the rejection of all things of Castilian origin and of the modern era in general, which was perceived as synonymous with the loss of political independence and Catalan institutions – although this did not truly come about until after 1714.

Despite it all, the Rector's memory was not completely erased from the collective imagination. In the first half of the century, Pitarra's play was still being performed in various parts of the Principality of Catalonia, he was mentioned in newspapers and magazines, and some editions of his poems and biographies continued to circulate, albeit in increasingly modest formats.

The 1930s seemed destined to be a pivotal period. In 1935, the Majorcan poet **Bartomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel** published "Espatlla" [Shoulder] in his *Quadern de sonets* (1935) and wrote "Amor, senyor de l'amplia monarquia" [Love, lord of the broad monarchy] (published posthumously in *Imitació del foc* [Imitation of Fire], 1938). These poems engaged in a direct dialogue with Garcia's celebrated sonnet dedicated to a lady engaged in the act of combing her hair, one of the most elegant in his corpus. In that same year of 1938, during the Spanish Civil War, **Joan Amades** published a selection of anecdotes that had been compiled from oral tradition. The Rector's legacy thus began a process of revision parallel to that which had triggered the Spanish Generation of '27 with Góngora and the classics of the Golden Age.

The war of 1936–39 and the Franco regime crushed this revision. For many years, **the spectre of an evil called "Decadence"** deterred readers and scholars from engaging with the period. However, some historians began to propose an academic approach to Catalan Baroque poetry in the 1960s and 1970s. Poets also regained their curiosity about Garcia, and his mark is discernible in some of them.

In recent years, research and text publishing work, on the one hand, and a popular initiative, on the other, commenced in Vallfogona de Riucorb, uniting to request that the Government of Catalonia declared 2023 as the **Rector of Vallfogona Year**. During this year, a plethora of activities and a multitude of publications disseminated new modernised and updated content about the Rector's work, life and legend, thereby helping to reassess his legacy, work and time.

Among the highlights of the Rector of Vallfogona Year, the celebration of World Poetry Day (21 March) is worthy of particular mention. But the most notable event was the great popular tribute held in Vallfogona de Riucorb on 2 September, the exact date marking the fourth centenary of the poet's death.