

Why is there a Columbus Monument in Barcelona?

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The Columbus Monument is the culmination of a remembrance policy born around 1860, the pinnacle of which was the Universal Exhibition of 1888. This monument simultaneously represents the most beautiful expression of the era and its swan song: after the inauguration of the Columbus Monument came the end of the golden age of "statue mania", characteristic of the late nineteenth-century Barcelona. But this unique structure, the largest in the world ever to be built as a tribute to the great explorer, cannot be separated from the bigger picture.

Columbus-mania

When the Columbus Monument was inaugurated in Barcelona, the Western world's enthusiasm for this figure had already been established since the 1830s. In Spain, as in Italy and France, thousands of works told the life story of the discoverer while disputing his national origins: throughout the 19th century, more than 20 pieces defended the theory that Columbus was a Catalan! Towards the end of the 18th century, monuments began to flourish, particularly in the United States. During the Romantic Period (1830-1860), the number of monuments and public memorials grew rapidly: in 1837, the first reference to Columbus was sculpted in bas-relief on the façade of Porxos d'En Xifré, in Barcelona. But it wasn't until after 1860 that a wave of statues inundated Europe and the Americas. In 1888, the monument in Barcelona was only the 58th commemorative structure in the world, taking into account the various commemorative plaques, monuments and sculptures decorating the façades of numerous buildings. Half of these sites depicted moments in the explorer's life; others, especially those in North America, bear no relation to the life of Columbus. At that time, there were already seven monuments installed in Spain: in Cartagena, Madrid, Seville, Salamanca and Barcelona. Eight more followed quickly between 1888 and 1892 on the occasion of the Fourth Centenary of the discovery of America: in Granada, Valencia, Seville, Pontevedra, Las Palmas, La Rábida, Salamanca and Cadiz. In Madrid, there are three Columbus monuments: one at the Overseas Ministry (1875), one in the Senate building and most importantly, one in Columbus Square (1885), the work of Jerónimo Suñol. However, the importance of the statue in Barcelona surpasses all others. Consequently, the Columbus myth can be understood on a Euro-American scale.

The mania can be explained by the romantic perspective of the Columbus myth: a man of the people whose genius forced the hand of destiny, the author of an act that brought about modernity, the embodiment of individual freedom against the prejudices of his time and the honour for countries that competed for his origins (mainly Spain, France and Italy). It was in the United States that this liberal interpretation prospered the most. Ultimately, Columbus was one of the first global heroes, and Catalonia did not shy away from this general perspective.

Barcelona, Columbus before his monument

Before his monument occupied one of the main squares of Barcelona, Columbus was already firmly embedded in the city's memory. He was initially revered alongside the Catholic Kings, whose supporters sought to tie the birth of modern Spain to its establishment of the American empire. The name Columbus is associated with the royal plaza, where a monument was erected in honour of Ferdinand of Aragon. By extension, the name *Colón* serves to honour the liberal reign of Isabella II and the Spanish colonial projects in North Africa in 1860: this association is very common among other Columbus monuments in Spain, especially those in Madrid and La Rábida. However, in Barcelona, the tribute to Columbus appears to break away from the monarchical cult during the 1860s.

In 1863, when Victor Balaguer assigned the street names of the Eixample district, the name Columbus was clearly connected to the colonial myth. Balaguer offered a general context that would see the Columbus Monument project thrive a few years later: first, through his liberal interpretation of history, Balaguer made Columbus a symbol of freedom. According to him, this interpretation characterised the Spanish people and, even more so, the Catalans. For Balaguer, it was the distinctive Catalan culture that enabled them to maintain a sense of freedom, a feeling he considered to be lost in the rest of the country due to the excessive centralisation of the State. Secondly, the monarchical Spain that Balaguer envisioned was made up of the union of the crowns of Aragon and Castile, a form of double monarchy: according to Balaguer, Columbus spoke to Ferdinand as much as to Isabella and that was the key to their success. Thirdly, Columbus also symbolised the success of Spanish imperialism because, according to the writer, all conquests are a sign of power and prosperity. That is why Victor Balaguer had a romantic predilection for the lives of adventurers (Columbus, Ali-Bey, Lauria, Llansa, Entenza, Vilamarí, etc.) whose individual destiny betrays that of Catalonia, "the first maritime nation of its time". However, this overseas conquest was not a *Reconquista*: in Barcelona, the adventure of Columbus was motivated by progress and not by

religion. Moreover, the Columbus monument in Barcelona does not make any reference to a religious motivation. Between the exaltation of the Catalan colonial empire of the Middle Ages and that of the American colonial empire at the end of the 19th century, Columbus is a symbol of transition because, although he was born in the Mediterranean, he provided Spain with an Atlantic horizon. He symbolises the success of the *Indianos* who, having accumulated wealth in Cuba, returned to Catalonia to invest their capital in the emerging industry. The finger of the Columbus statue points *simultaneously* to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Therefore, for the elite class at the time, commemorating Columbus was to affirm both their colonial ambitions and Catalonia's special place in Spain's project of grandeur.

Glorification of the empire

In Barcelona, the Columbus monument is not the only one honouring the colonial enterprise: the Galcerán Marquet, Prim, Güell and López monuments, and those of the wars in Africa in 1860 (Tetuan square, never completed) testify to that. It was then, in 1874, that the project for the Columbus Monument was born among the elite conservatives of the city. The initiative was immediately taken on by the city government, even before similar projects were undertaken in Madrid and Huelva. In other words, Catalonia played a leading role in Spain's veneration of Columbus. But from the outset, the meaning of the Columbus monument took a unique course: it was an ode to the individual values of the entrepreneur; an imperial gesture fitting the interests of the Catalan industrial and commercial elites.

The composition of the Monument Commission reflected the elite nature of the initiative: there were leaders of the conservative party (Duran i Bas, Coll i Pujol, Cabot i Rovirosa), as well as major industrialists, merchants and bankers (Arnus, Lopez i Lopez , Amell i Bou), and a notable representation from the art world (Pirozzini, Martorell and Buigas). The funding, carried out between January 1882 and March 1886, only brought together the elites, some companies and several contributions from different parts of Spain and America. It was not enough to cover the cost of the monument, but it was typical of the narrow model of mobilisation employed by the liberal elites, who had no intention of associating with the middle and lower classes. At the time of monarchical restoration (1874), the project represented a pledge of adherence from Barcelona's elites to the new regime, but as a condition of this adherence, it also set forth an economic and imperial demand. Moreover, when Spain proved incapable of achieving this objective, with the loss of the last American colonies in 1898, the elites of Barcelona shunned the monarchy to embrace the Catalan cause.

The Jewel of the 1888 Exhibition

The Columbus monument should not be separated from its particular framework: the 1888 World Exposition. From the start, this monument was conceived to be the jewel of the Exposition. In August 1887, Duran i Bas published an important memoir that foresaw the completion of major works to beautify the Catalan capital, prioritising the completion of the Columbus statue. The tourist guides given to visitors encouraged them to travel across the entire city along a route that connected all the monuments mentioned above: the Columbus Monument is thus integrated into the general narrative on the history of Barcelona; a great, open-air history book. Two ideas support this advocacy of Columbus: firstly, that he is a universal Spanish figure who brought with him civilisation. And secondly, that Columbus was a free and modern man, values which Catalonia claims to have embodied in Spain.

The monument itself invites visitors to relive the Columbus adventure, from his departure from Spain until the discovery of the New World. The square that houses the monument, flanked by sea monsters and the Nina and Pinta ships, evokes the dangers of the maritime world. This square served as a maritime gateway to Barcelona, particularly for the Queen Regent who opened the Exhibition: Barcelona is presented as the “New America” of modern Spain. The base of the monument represents all those who made the journey possible: Catalonia features prominently here, but is never separated from the rest of Spain, which is symbolised by the lions. The column, whose shaft recounts the perils of the journey, is also a lighthouse. The summit tells us of the key moment when Columbus sees solid ground and sets foot in America.

Many statements from the era also emphasise the technical prowess of the monument: at that time, it was the tallest column in the world (63m). Built entirely from metal and boasting a lift, this monument is proof of the expertise of the Catalan industry. Its construction was of Herculean proportions—the scaffolding was so captivating, they even thought of keeping it! The monumental scale of the construction demonstrated Catalonia’s superiority in the race towards progress. Likewise, it also reflects the claim of the Catalan elites that they should lead the renovation of Spain both on an economic (industrial) and political (empire and dual monarchy) level. Imperialism was at the heart of this claim for modernisation.

What happened after 1888?

The year 1888 represents both the triumph of Columbus in Barcelona and his swan song. Indeed, the future of the Columbus Monument was mixed: on one hand, it quickly disappeared from official commemorations in Barcelona, even as early as 1892. As a matter of fact, at that time, the various Columbus monuments inaugurated in Spain had entirely different meanings, including the religious reconquest and the exaltation of the Monarchy. This meant that the monument in Barcelona was out of step with the Columbus myth underpinning the other monuments in the rest of Spain. Starting in 1892, Catalonia began to disregard the monument as it saw the beginning of the profound cultural revolution that was taking place in modernism, which was very critical of the cultural and political projects of the liberal generation. For the new Catalan generation, this monument did not fit with the revised vision of Catalonia's past, which considered it to be separate nation. The monument was hardly ever at the centre of new commemorations, at least until 1911, when the first Columbus Day (Fiesta de la Raza) was celebrated. Nevertheless, the success of the monument among the public never failed, evidenced by the many postcards published at the time. This monument fits the profile of the Ciutat Comtal: it became one of Barcelona's icons, repeatedly depicted and photographed. In this sense, its success in terms of tourism far outweighs its political success.