

# **margaret** **michaelis** **CINC DIES PEL BARRI XINO**

*Margaret Michaelis. Five days in the barri Xino* focuses on the photo report created by Margaret Michaelis (Czechowice-Dziedzice, Poland 1902–Melbourne, Australia 1985) in April 1934 in the El Raval neighbourhood, commissioned by the Group of Catalan Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture (GATCPAC), to provide images for the *La Nova Barcelona* [The New Barcelona] exhibition held beneath Plaça de Catalunya in July of that same year.

The photographs in the piece show El Raval – also known as the barri Xino – from never-before-seen angles. With her Leica camera, Michaelis found a way to combine the hygiene-oriented perspective required by the GATCPAC commission with her own personal, respectful point of view, while recording the life and character of the neighbourhood.

The selection of photographs and documents that make up the exhibition reveal the importance of the photo report, while establishing new relationships and registers that confirm the importance and historical dimension of the photographer and her photographs taken in Barcelona. The exhibition also includes various architectural reports by Michaelis and a sample of her work for the Government of Catalonia's Propaganda Commission (1936).

Margaret Michaelis was foreign, of Jewish origin, an anarchist and a photographer. This exhibition, dedicated to her, demonstrates that her time in Barcelona was short but fruitful. In this period, she made the most of the professional opportunity presented by GATCPAC and produced a photographic report of unquestionable historical significance.

Margaret Michaelis's photo report on the barri Xino, commissioned by GATCPAC in April 1934, aimed to capture the social and architectural reality of Barcelona's District V in images. The industrialisation of the nineteenth century had led to increased population density, insanitary conditions and housing problems in the neighbourhood. The area also suffered from a lack of infrastructure, which had a direct impact on phenomena such as the spread of tuberculosis and lack of schooling for children.

At that time, the GATCPAC group was designing and formulating the Macià Plan, also known as 'La Nova Barcelona' [The New Barcelona]. This was an urban development plan that, as well as preparing for an expansion of the city of Barcelona based on the rationalist criteria of the twentieth century, envisaged sanitation measures for the barri Xino.

As well as capturing the neighbourhood and the state of repair of its housing and all its constituent elements, Margaret Michaelis noted down on the back of her photographs where and when she had taken them. All of this information has been used to reconstruct Margaret Michaelis's itinerary for the first time on an old map and examine the nature of her task. She moved around two main areas: Zone A, also known as the centre of the barri Xino, and Zone B, known as the south-port side. Her route, therefore, was not random; these are the two areas that GATCPAC was considering working on first and that needed to be photographed the most.

## **DAY 1**

**(Monday, 9-4-1934)**

Margaret Michaelis begins the photographic report on the barri Xino with one mission: to photograph the neighbourhood's streets and enter some of its dwellings to capture their state of repair. She mainly moves around Carrer de la Cadena and Carrer de Sant Rafael. She takes spontaneous, dynamic photos with her Leica camera. She talks to people in the neighbourhood, meets Rosita and photographs bedrooms, kitchens, interior courtyards, etc.

## **DAY 2**

**(Tuesday, 10-4-1934)**

She is accompanied by an architect from the Group of Catalan Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture (GATCPAC). She takes photographs on Carrer de l'Arc del Teatre, de l'Om, de Sant Bertran and del Migdia. From the neighbourhood's balconies, Margaret Michaelis uses high-angle shots to depict the insanitary conditions and market alive on the streets. She takes the opportunity to depict a woman going about her day in her home and the neighbourhood's workers.

## **DAY 3**

**(Wednesday, 11-4-1934)**

Margaret Michaelis is accompanied by GATCPAC architects again: this time, Josep Lluís Sert and Antoni Bonet i Castellana. This is perhaps why this is the day she covers the most streets, visits the most buildings and takes the most photos: of prostitutes in the street, the interior of housing with poor ventilation, wastewater drainage pipes in a very precarious state and dirty interior courtyards. Whenever she can, she interacts with people in the street, including children.

## **DAY 4**

**(Thursday, 12-4-1934)**

The photographer continues with her assignment on her own and photographs Carrer de les Tàpies, de Conde del Asalto (now Carrer Nou de la Rambla) and de Sant Oleguer. She takes quick, agile photos on the street. Though Michaelis mainly turns her lens to the neighbourhood's buildings and their state of repair, she also takes the opportunity to record the people who live there, combining her mission with her own, personal point of view.

## **DAY 5**

**(Friday, 13-4-1934)**

On her last day in the barri Xino, she covers Carrer d'en Robador, Carrer de Sant Josep Oriol and Passatge Bernadí Martorell. She alternates between quick, spontaneous photographs of the streets and more calculated images of building interiors. She captures dirty nooks and crannies, some roof terraces and one of the barri Xino's most characteristic features: the use of balconies as storage space (for cages, ladders, etc.) to free up room in small dwellings. She even finds a toilet for communal use in an interior courtyard.

## DESCRIPTION PANELS 5 DAYS

### DAY 2

#### Panel 1

Carrer de l'Arc del Teatre saw a lot of movement and hustle and bustle, with small businesses, a market, shops and a haberdashery whose shopkeeper was also a dressmaker. While Margaret Michaelis photographed a stall close-up, with a group of curious women and children looking on, the architect accompanying her took a photo of the street with perspective, using a large-format camera (plate camera). In the distance, on the left, the haberdashery can be seen.

#### Panel 2

Margaret Michaelis photographed Carrer de l'Om with her Leica camera, capturing passers-by. Moments before or after, the GATCPAC architect accompanying her took another photo with a more architectural perspective of the space, with hardly any people in it, using a large-format camera (plate camera).

## DAY 3

### Panel 1

Margaret Michaelis, with her Leica camera (rectangular, landscape images), and architect Josep Lluís Sert, with his Rolleiflex camera (square format), captured the same view from a roof terrace: that of the La Criolla building. The place – a combination of a cabaret, dance hall and private club – was the busiest among Barcelona’s more deviant spots. In the 1920s and 1930s, it became a hub for sexual freedom and transgression in the city.

### Panel 2

This photo portrays the hustle and bustle of the street, while showing that Margaret Michaelis was accompanied by architects Josep Lluís Sert and Antoni Bonet i Castellana that day, on her route around the barri Xino. The two architects appear on the right-hand pavement, watching Michaelis stop to photograph a boy carrying a dog.

### Panel 3

These two images of the same interior courtyard in the barri Xino offer another example of Margaret Michaelis and Josep Lluís Sert taking photographs almost simultaneously. Sert’s photo, taken with his Rolleiflex, is square, while Michaelis’s, taken with her Leica, is in landscape format.

## DAY 5

This picture of a family taken on the roof terrace on Carrer d’en Robador, number 5, illustrates Margaret Michaelis’s working style for her photographic report on the barri Xino: she gained the locals’ trust so that she could have access to their housing and buildings.

## MARGARET MICHAELIS 1902-1985

### 1902

**Margaret Michaelis** is born Margarethe Gross on 6 April in Czechowice-Dziedzice, Poland (then Austria-Hungary), into a Jewish family.

She is the daughter of Henryk Gross, a doctor, and Fanny Robinsohn, and has an older sister and a younger brother: Lotte and Erich, respectively.

### Vienna - 1918-1921

She studies at the Graphic Design and Research Institute. She graduates with a degree in photography and reproduction techniques.

### 1921-1922

She works in one of the most outstanding, avant-garde photography studios of the period: the *Atelier d'Ora*. The studio, owned by Dora Kallmus, known as Madame d'Ora, specialises in fashion photography and unconventional portraits. Michaelis works there as an assistant and develops new photography skills, especially in retouching negatives.

### 1922-1927

She works at *Grete Kolliner Atelier Für Porträt Photographie*, owned by Austrian portrait photographer Grete Kolliner, who also mentored renowned photographer Bill Brandt. Michaelis learns to carry out the different tasks required in a photography studio, builds on her darkroom technical skills and becomes a camera operator.

### Berlin - 1928

She works at *Binder Photographie Studio*, one of the biggest and most important photography studios in Europe, with Alexander Binder, one of the leading portrait photographers of the 1920s. Michaelis works as an assistant, making copies and prints of photographs and retouching them.

## Prague - 1928-1929

She works at *Fotoatelieru Fotostyl* for Czech photographer Olga Freundová. She is a camera operator and technical assistant.

She expands her repertoire to cover industry, advertising and fashion.

## Berlin - 1929

She moves back to Berlin, where Bauhaus - the leading school in architecture, design, art and craft at the time, spearheaded by László Moholy-Nagy - is marking a turning point in the European photography scene, with the creation of the movement known as The New Vision.

She works as an assistant at Atelier Karl Schenker, where she meets Mario von Bucovich, who has taken over the studio and specialises in urban and portrait photography.

## 1930

From March to April, she works as a printer at *Suse Byk Atelier Für Photographische Porträts*.

She meets archaeologist and anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Michaelis and they begin a relationship.

## 1931-1932

From October 1931 until August 1932, she works at *Photos Winterfeld*, retouching photographs. At the end of the year, she decides to work for herself and opens her own photography studio, Foto-Gross, which she runs from home.

## 1933

Margaret and Rudolf get married. Margaret Michaelis makes a living from freelance photography. Given the significant success of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, led by Hitler, in the November elections, Rudolf and Margaret Michaelis decide to go into exile in Barcelona in December. They are welcomed by writer and anarcho-syndicalist Helmut Rüdiger and his wife, Dora.



## Barcelona - 1934

They live at Carrer de Rosselló, 36 (floor 4, flat 4), in a building designed by architect Josep Lluís Sert. They set up a photography studio called *Foto-Studio Michaelis*.

Her working relationship with GATCPAC (Group of Catalan Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture) then begins. She works as a photographer, photojournalist and darkroom technician.

In April, she works on her first photo report with her Leica camera, in Barcelona's barri Xino neighbourhood. Her other activities include architectural photography, photomontage, enlargements and reproductions.

In July, the exhibition *La Nova Barcelona* takes place beneath Plaça de Catalunya, displaying much of the photographer's work on the barri Xino.

Margaret and Rudolf decide to separate.

She moves house to Avinguda de la República Argentina, 218 (floor 5, flat 1). She changes the name of the photography studio to *Foto-Elis*.

She gets in touch with the ADLAN collective (Amics de l'Art Nou, or 'Friends of New Art') and publishes photographs in the Christmas issue of the magazine *D'Ací i d'Allà* [From Here and There].

In September, she puts together a photo report on the Astòria building (built by Germán Rodríguez Arias, GATCPAC), which is published in issue 15 of the magazine *A. C. Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea* [A.C. Contemporary Activity Documents].

## 1935

In January, she is commissioned to produce a photo report on the Palau-solità i Plegamans school.

She takes publicity shots of products and of interior design. Some of these photographs are published in the magazines *D'Ací i d'Allà* and *Crònica*, among others.

In the summer, she creates a photo report on Torre Eugènia, a house designed by Ricard Ribas Seva (GATCPAC).

## 1936

She produces a photo report for the Second El Penedès Festival in Poble Espanyol, sponsored by the Catalan Board of Museums, the Regional Federation of Catalonia, and the Government of Catalonia.

In July, coinciding with the fascist uprising and outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, her relationship with the GATCPAC ends.

She joins the group of 300 photojournalists who work for the Propaganda Committee. She becomes a war photographer.

Not long after, she starts working for the External Propaganda Section of the CNT-FAI (National Labour Confederation-Iberian Anarchist Federation).

In October, she makes various journeys to different battlefronts, accompanying anarchist writer Emma Goldman. First, they go to Aragon. They then return to Barcelona, before heading to Valencia. She photographs collectivised areas and the rearguard.

## Europe - 1937

In January, Margaret and Rudolf get divorced. Shortly after, Margaret Michaelis leaves Spain and goes to Marseille.

Many of her photographs taken for the Commission and the CNT-FAI are published in *Nova Ibèria* (January and February).

Much of her photographic report on the barri Xino is published in issue 25 of the *A. C.* magazine.

## 1938

In January, she travels to Vienna, before going to Poland to visit her parents. She gets a German passport in September and is granted a visa in December to move to the United Kingdom. She arrives in London.

## 1939

She earns money doing domestic work. She gets involved in humanitarian aid, which leads to her getting a visa to move to Australia.

She arrives on 28 August 1939, aboard the *Esperance Bay* ship. She settles down and lives there for the rest of her life.

## Sydney – 1940

She opens her own studio, called *Photostudio M. Michaelis*. She specialises in portrait and dance photography.

Due to her recently acquired German nationality, she is monitored throughout the Second World War.

## 1941–1952

She works at her photography studio until 1952, when she closes it for personal reasons. She starts working as a secretary for Hauser&Menuhin, a social research organisation.

## 1960

She marries Albert George Sachs, an Austrian who has emigrated to Australia. She helps him with his business. After five years, she is widowed.

## 1967–1968

She goes on a long trip abroad (Europe, Israel, the Middle East, the USA, South America, India).

## 1985

She dies on 16 October. The year after, her archives and collection of photographs are donated to the National Gallery of Australia.

## LA NOVA BARCELONA: MARGARET MICHAELIS I ISSAC SAPORTA

The exhibition titled *La Nova Barcelona* [The New Barcelona] (11 July–14 August 1934) presented the urban development plan being drawn up by GATCPAC and indicated what sanitation work needed to be done in the barri Xino neighbourhood immediately.

It contained plans, a diorama of the city of Barcelona and a selection of the 148 photos from the photo report carried out by Margaret Michaelis. The images were displayed as part of a large photomontage on various information panels. The photographs were accompanied by descriptions of their content. Both the dimensions of the pictures and the relationship between the photographs and the text were entirely intentional: the aim was to have an impact on the visitor, to attract their attention and convince them that the reality of the barri Xino being depicted was true, and that sanitation measures had to be implemented in the area urgently.

Margaret Michaelis's images were not the only ones used in the photomontage. There were also photos taken by the GATCPAC architects who accompanied Michaelis on her assignment. Another set of images was previously attributed to Michaelis, but was actually taken by Greek architect Isaac Saporta (Volos, Greece 1910–Atlanta, USA 1998).

During the meeting of the International Committee for Solving Contemporary Architecture Problems (CIRPAC), which took place in Barcelona in March 1932, architect and amateur photographer Isaac Saporta had the opportunity to photograph the people of the barri Xino. A few weeks later, he sent the photos to GATCPAC, which published them in issues 6 and 9 of the magazine *A. C. Documentos de Actividad Contemporánea* [A.C. Contemporary Activity Documents] on District V and schooling, respectively.

## DESCRIPTION PANELS

### **Cover and inside of issue 6 of the A. C. magazine (second quarter of 1932). (Panel 1)**

GATCPAC published its first article on the barri Xino in issue 6 of the A. C. magazine, based on a report written by Greek architect Isaac Saporta on the neighbourhood. It contained three of the photographs he took: one on the cover, two inside. He sent both the images and the report to GATCPAC by post, after his trip to Barcelona, in March 1932.

### **Isaac Saporta. Reverse side of the 'Typical District V child' photograph, March 1932. (Panel 2)**

The photo of this child, taken by Saporta, was chosen to be part of the large photomontage included in the *La Nova Barcelona* [The New Barcelona] exhibition. It was selected by architect Josep Lluís Sert, who marked it with a red cross on the back, named it 'Typical District V child', and wrote 'Reproduction', to inform Margaret Michaelis that a copy of it was to be made.

### **Margaret Michaelis. 'Typical District V child', April 1934. (Panel 3)**

Michaelis created a new negative from the photo taken by Saporta in 1932, and used it to make the print used in the large photomontage in the *La Nova Barcelona* exhibition. The image of the child is enlarged and more centred. On the back of the new copy is Michaelis's professional stamp, 'Foto-Elis', which could lead to confusion around the authorship of the photo, as in this case she made the print but did not take the original photo.

### **J. M. Llovet. 'Typical District V child', autumn 1937. (Panel 4)**

On the back of the copy made by Margaret Michaelis is a note written by Josep-Torres Clavé, who was in charge of the A.C. magazine: 'ask Michaelis for negative and send it to Llovet'. J. M. Llovet was a renowned photoengraver at the time, and often received assignments from GATCPAC. With the new negative created by Michaelis, he enlarged the image and encircled it in black. This was then published in issue 25 of the A. C. magazine (June 1937), which examined details of the photomontage in the exhibition *La Nova Barcelona*.

**Cover and inside of issue 9 of the A. C. magazine (first quarter of 1933). (Panel 5)**

GATCPAC commissioned the Oriol photography studio to use the original photo, taken by Greek architect Isaac Saporta, to make a reproduction of the 'boy on crutches' (name used by Oriol to refer to the image on the docket given to the organisation). The reproduction was combined with another photograph taken by Gabriel Casas Galobardes to create a photomontage for the front cover of the issue dedicated to schooling.

**Isaac Saporta. Reverse side of the 'Barcelona – Barrio chino' photograph, March 1932. (Panel 6)**

Inside issue 9 of the A. C. magazine, another photo taken by Saporta was used. On the back, he wrote 'Barcelona, Barrio chino'.

**Inside of issue 25 of the A. C. magazine, June 1937. (Panel 7)**

The photographs of both Isaac Saporta and Margaret Michaelis continued to be used to illustrate reports on the barri Xino and sanitation in District V years after they were taken. The large-format image of children eating in the street is an example of GATCPAC's use of photography to guide the reader towards a certain discourse.

**Isaac Saporta. Reverse side of the 'Children eating' photograph, March 1932. (Panel 8)**

The Greek architect offered a brief explanation on the back of the photo: 'Barrio Chino: Children eating things they have found in the gutter'.

Architect Josep Lluís Sert marked the image with a cross in red pencil to indicate that it had been chosen for use in the large photomontage in the exhibition *La Nova Barcelona*. He named it 'Children eating' and wrote 'Reproduction', to inform Margaret Michaelis that a copy of it was to be made.

## EL BARRI XINO DE MARGARET MICHAELIS

The photo report on the barri Xino was commissioned by GATCPAC, but it shows that Margaret Michaelis was able to combine images that denounced the neighbourhood's poor sanitation conditions, requested by the group of architects, with pictures from her own, personal perspective, imbued with interest and curiosity.

The photographer made the most of her assignment to capture the neighbourhood's energy, local residents, workers and goings-on, as well as the hustle and bustle of the market. In short: she recorded life in the neighbourhood.

This restless gaze – a perspective that remained close to the people, respectful towards the neighbourhood and at the limits of what was requested by GATCPAC – produced a series of photos that captured the fun, joyous barri Xino, the neighbourhood of taverns.

On one of the days, Margaret Michaelis stopped at number 17 on Carrer d'en Robador and entered Cal Peret, also known as La Taverna dels Tenors. The photographs she took there focused on people and their activities: cooking, playing the guitar, singing, shining shoes, and more. They are all rather staged, but there is one that stands out: a couple is happily chatting away while a pickpocket is trying to steal the woman's purse.

Margaret Michaelis did not hand over to GATCPAC the photos taken in the tavern in the barri Xino while her assignment was still under way.

## LA NOVA ARQUITECTURA

(THE NEW ARCHITECTURE)

During her working relationship with GATCPAC (1934-1936), Michaelis received some architectural photography commissions. For these projects, instead of using her Leica, she opted for her large-format camera (plate camera). The group of architects needed these photo reports to keep a visual record of their finished buildings. The images were usually published in the A.C. magazine.

On these reportage assignments, Michaelis was usually accompanied by the architects who designed the building, for two reasons: the first being that the architects would tell her on-site which parts of the building to photograph, and the second being that the architects often wanted to take their own photographs of their project, as was the case for the Astòria building and the school.

The photos taken by Michaelis of the Astòria building (Germán Rodríguez Arias), the Palau-solità i Plegamans school (Josep Lluís Sert and Josep Torres Clavé) and the private home Torre Eugènia (Ricard Ribas Seva) act as a historical record of the new, modern architecture created by GATCPAC during the Second Spanish Republic.