



HISTORIC ENSEMBLE OF
MERITXELL

0,50 €

ENGLISH



The Historic Ensemble of Meritxell is comprised of two buildings: the old Sanctuary and the new, both of them declared heritage of cultural interest *by the 9/2009 Act of June 12th on the Cultural Heritage of Andorra.*

The presence of both infrastructures perpetuates the continuity and constant renovation of religion and of the Church as an institution.

The pope Francis granted the Sanctuary the title of *Minor Basilica*, in honour of its singular liturgical life, its religious work and its history and cultural activity





THE NEW SANCTUARY

Besides its religious significance as the stronghold of Andorran religious fervour, the Sanctuary of Meritxell is one of the most representative examples of the Andorran architecture of the end of the 20th century. Ricard Bofill's monumental eclecticism has enriched the material culture of our country with a representative work and set a precedent for contemporary architecture.







THE PROJECT

The project for the new Sanctuary of Meritxell was born on the tragic night of the fire that burnt the church of Santa Maria de Meritxell between the 8th and 9th of September of 1972.

The architecture workshops of Moragues, Bohigas-Martorell-Mackay and Ricard Bofill all took part in the first project of the Sanctuary of Meritxell which, for various reasons, was left unfinished. Ricard Bofill then went on to assume leadership over the project of the new Sanctuary of Meritxell.

His original project included a gigantic Sanctuary with a viaduct connecting the mountains of the valley, an artificial lake, a bridge, a street full of shops and restaurants, a big staircase with terraces, small rain shelters and huge sculptures, besides amphitheatres for popular meetings and cultural acts.

But only a small part of Ricard Bofill's dream would come true. The construction began in September 8th of 1974 with the placing of the first stone. And even though the construction work was still unfinished, the Sanctuary of Meritxell was inaugurated in September 8th of 1976.



Three main pillars support the new Sanctuary of Meritxell: faith, identity and culture; and they all combine to uphold an architectonic ensemble that tries to blend with nature to create a cultural landscape and, at the same time, to visually strike the viewer.

The central building of the Sanctuary is made up of a distorted Greek cross-shaped nave and an apse of square floor plant. The roof is of barrel vaulting. The remaining areas of the Sanctuary are found around the Greek cross-shaped nave. The design of these areas, their sizes and proportions are an attempt to make use of the golden ratio or divine proportion, reminiscent of Greco-Roman temples, that was reintroduced by Renaissance churches.

The architectonic ensemble also contains a considerably large bell tower of square floor plant, reminiscent of the bell towers seen in Catalan Romanesque monasteries. This vertical architectonic volume is covered by copper strips, added by the architect so that, in time, humidity would turn them green in colour, thus further allowing the building to blend with the mountain landscape.

Unfortunately, the climate of the Andorran valleys didn't allow that to happen. The Romanesque influence can also be found in the southern cloister,





covered in rib vaulting and designed to remind the viewer of the cloisters of medieval monasteries. We can also find copper strips in this area.

On the other side of the cloister, to the north, we find a courtyard that is rather reminiscent of those found in Islamic architecture.

Aside of the Romanesque and Islamic influences, the main reference in the design of the Sanctuary are the burnt ruins of the chapel of Santa Maria de Meritxell, an homage the architect pays to the old church through the huge white semicircular arches that support and decorate the building.

The work is also inspired by other artistic currents such as Italian Renaissance, an influence that can be witnessed through the floor plant of the Sanctuary and in the set of geometric shapes of the flooring, which combines white and black, just like the outside of the Sanctuary, built with black schist stone and decorated with white prefabricated pieces.

The main image filling the area of the Sanctuary is that of Our Lady of Meritxell. This chiselled sculpture, created from the various existing photographs of the original, shows the main traits of Romanesque Marian imagery.

Dated from between the 11th and 12th centuries, it is a static, geometrical image, and plays a role that goes beyond that of the mother of the Infant Jesus.

Scattered through the church, the seven patron saints of all seven parishes of Andorra accompany the Mother of God. These wood carvings were sculpted by the Andorran artist Sergi Mas. Thus we can find the images of Saint Saturninus of Canillo, Saint Eulalia of Encamp, Saint Cornelius of Ordino, Saint Aciscus of La Massana, Saint Stephen of Andorra la Vella, Saint Julian of Sant Julià de Lòria and Saint Peter Martyr of Escaldes-Engordany.









THE OLD SANCTUARY

The old sanctuary is a chapel dedicated to Saint Mary. It is a Romanesque chapel built in an unknown moment prior to the second half of the 12th century.

The new Baroque church was built towards 1658; it largely matches the current one except for the roof, which was modified in the 19th century with the construction of a side chapel and the inclusion of paintings by Josep Oromí. The building that can be visited nowadays has a rectangular floor plan, a square floor plan apse, a gable roof, a bell gable and a porch on the southern wall.

A large portion of the church was destroyed in a fire on the night between the 8th and the 9th of September of 1972. The remaining ruins were restored and, in 1994, the chapel of Santa Maria de Meritxell became the host of the *Meritxell Memòria* permanent exhibition.

The starting point of this exhibition theatrically takes us back under a rose bush in bloom, the protagonist element that, according to the legend, gave shelter to the original image of Our Lady of Meritxell in the middle of January. Once inside, several showcasing panels, inspired by the shapes of altarpieces, become the means through which the village, the history, the patronage and the fire of Meritxell can be explained; while at the same time they exhibit the most representative elements that survived the fire. We can also find several photographs that remind us of past moments experienced around the Sanctuary.



MERITXELL MEMÒRIA EXHIBITION



THE LEGEND OF MERITXELL

It was the Day of the Magi.

The inhabitants of the small town of Meritxell were heading to Canillo to attend the mass. As they went through the spot where the Sanctuary stands today, they saw a dog-rose bush in bloom.

Astounded to see such a plant in bloom in the middle of the winter, they came closer to it and, to their surprise, they found a beautiful image of Our Lady amidst its thorns.

They ran to Canillo to tell the parson about this miracle and then went with the entire village to Meritxell to collect the statue and bring it to Canillo. There, they placed it upon the main altar and promised to build a beautiful church to house it.

The next day, as the parish sacristan opened the church doors, he soon found that the statue was missing and started screaming "sacrilege, the statue has been stolen!"

The people of Canillo were appalled, but then a passer-by who ignored what this was all about told them that as he went through Meritxell he had stumbled upon a beautiful statue at the feet of a dog-rose bush in bloom.

"That must mean that the Virgin would rather be in Encamp", the townspeople concluded. And so they told their neighbours of Encamp, who went to retrieve the statue as they thanked the Virgin for her preference and promised to build a beautiful church in her honour.

They went back to Meritxell and, once again, they found the statue at the feet of the dog-rose bush. Furthermore, the surroundings of the Virgin were clean even though it had been snowing heavily.

The dog-rose bush remained in bloom and still does bloom every year, as does the devotion of the Andorran people, who named Our Lady of Meritxell the Patron Saint of the Valleys of Andorra as a sign of gratitude for all the favours that the Virgin has granted them.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE LEGEND

The narration of the founding of Our Lady of Meritxell belongs to an archetypical legendary model that can be found in Mediterranean countries, especially in Italy, Spain, Portugal and France. Marian images with similar legends can be counted by the dozen in the Pyrenees. The narrative core is very well-known: a shepherd notices the atypical behaviour of an animal from his flock that emits strange sounds or strays from the others to show its concern with an enigmatic something. Surprised and intrigued, the shepherd usually searches the cave, tree, fountain or bramble where the animal lies and finds an image of the Mother of God. From that point onwards, there are two probable developments: in the first, the shepherd collects the image and runs back to the nearest village at the bottom of the mountain to share the news of his findings with the most important people in the village (usually the parson or the mayor). Upon seeing the image, these people decide to build a chapel for it in the village itself or to merely introduce it in the parish church. In all cases the image disappears and returns to its original finding place, a feat that is usually repeated three times. That is the ultimate sign that the Mother of God wishes to remain in the place where it had been found and thus the need arises to build a chapel, a shrine or a sanctuary for it.

In the second development, the shepherd doesn't collect the image and warns the rest of the townspeople who then come to the finding place. As they argue about where to build a chapel for it, the image usually produces a prodigy of some sort, thus indisputably proving its celestial will.

Some have wanted to see in such similar narrative configurations – often presenting a series of stereotypical variations – the Christianization of pagan cults and beliefs built around mother goddesses and fertility goddesses replaced by the Marian cult and with a strong devotional and popular gathering power.

THE VILLAGE

On January 8th of 1176, 380 heads of the household of the valley of Andorra signed a treaty with the canons of the cathedral of La Seu d'Urgell.

Among the heads of the household there was Joan Subran from Meritxell, and Mir Guillem from Molleres. That is the first known written account containing the names of Meritxell and Molleres.

The lack of older written sources about Meritxell doesn't exclude the existence of this place as an inhabited location at least in the 11th century. In that moment, though, it might only have been a small community formed by the inhabited areas of Meritxell and Molleres, connected by the church of Santa Maria and its cemetery. That inhabited area is located next to the Camí Ral road that connects Encamp to Canillo, right past the harsh location of Gorges de la Bor. The church, however, stood on an isolated rock at the feet of a strong height difference over the Valira d'Orient river and under the road that leads up to Prats.

Despite the enlargement works that were carried out on the church during the 1650s and the growing popularity of its gatherings, this village remained a small agricultural and stock-farming area in the parish of Canillo. By the end of the 18th century, there were only 8 houses and 30 inhabitants in the area comprising Meritxell and Molleres.

Meritxell lost its status as a crossing area with the construction of the general road nº2, which is located far from the town. This fact has allowed the area to maintain its rural physiognomy.

Nowadays, though, the existence of the New Sanctuary, understood as a significant and singular building, has granted the town of Meritxell a new and greater importance amidst the many towns of Andorra.



THE CHURCH

The church of the village of Meritxell is a building of Romanesque tradition that was transformed during the Baroque era.

There are few visible structures left from this primitive Romanesque building: the Romanesque west wall, which has been kept and is now part of the Baroque western wall, and the foundations of the apse, discovered during the archaeological excavations of 1991. These revealed the entire plant of the building -with one single nave- and of the southern porch.

These remains allow us to imagine a temple of simple structure and small size, executed in a popular style and bearing typological analogies with the religious architecture of the Pyrenean Romanesque era.

The pictorial decoration of the inner walls must have suggested the religious themes of the time. The archaeological works have revealed the existence of at least two layers of pictorial remains on the roof walls.

Erected under Marian dedication, the church contained a Romanesque wood carving of the Mother of God sitting on a throne and holding the Infant in her arms. Dated from the 12th century, this statue would later become the Patron saint of the Valleys of Andorra. By the 16th century, the Gothic altarpiece dedicated to Saint Mary was installed, containing a new central image that was better adapted to the shapes inherent to this style.

By the mid-16th century (1658), the church underwent a huge reform that practically transformed it into a new building. It was bigger, oriented north to south, and included a double-eyed bell gable as well as a porch on the southern side.

The new church maintained the typological shapes based on the medieval architecture of the primitive building.

This new effort filled the interior with new, monumental altarpieces that were artistically richer and included gilding, reliefs and images in round busts that were better in accordance with the Baroque style. Even though some universal biblical scenes were present at the predellas, the main part of the altarpiece was left exclusively for the images of the saints that were relevant back then.

The special devotion for Our Lady of Meritxell indirectly allowed the last remodelling effort that was carried out on the roof during the 19th century and included a side chapel to make the Romanesque image more accessible to the locals and the devotees. In 1866, the painter Josep Oromí of La Seu d'Urgell decorated the inner walls in a *horror vacui* style with *trompe l'oeil* ornaments in the shape of architectonic figurative decorations and curtain-like elements.

THE PATRONAGE

Through the 19th and 20th centuries, the cult of Our Lady of Meritxell was made official and supported by the Andorran authorities, both civil and religious.

In October 24th of 1873, the *Consell General* confirmed that “Our Lady of Meritxell is considered the patron saint of the Valleys of Andorra and its special protector since time immemorial”. In this same session, it was highlighted that people had always looked for the protection of Our Lady of Meritxell in dire situations, such as the Napoleonic and Carlist wars, or in times of high risk of floods and epidemics.

The writings of Father Lluís Ignasi Fiter, novice of the Order of the Jesuits, *Historia y Novena de Nostra Senyora de Meritxell* (“History and Novena of Our Lady of Meritxell”), further increased the devotion for this Marian sanctuary.

The progressive support shown by the various bishop co-princes towards Meritxell, together with ancient popular tradition, led the bishop Joan Benlloch Vivó to ask, in August 23rd of 1913, the canonization of the Patronage of Our Lady of Meritxell over the Valleys of Andorra, which was granted the following year by the pope Pius X.

This progressive acknowledgement came to a climax with the coronation of Our Lady of Meritxell as the patron saint of Andorra in September 8th of 1921. The solemnity of this act was further increased by the very first performance of the Andorran national anthem, written by the bishop Benlloch on music by reverend Marfany.



THE FIRE

The fire of the night of September 8th to 9th of 1972 destroyed the entire sanctuary and everything it contained. It sparked an immediate reaction of general uneasiness from the people. It was defined as a catastrophe, as a loss of a certain specific Andorran personality and as an utter destruction of our movable and immovable heritage. Still now there remains some questioning as to what became of the image of the patron saint.

In 1974, the architecture workshop of Ricard Bofill presented the project of the new sanctuary, which was inaugurated in 1976. The economic crisis, the state of politics and popular response all led to the project not being carried out in its entirety.

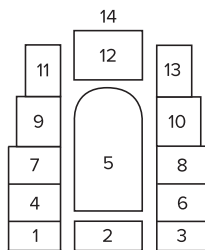
This new construction synthesizes and combines the shapes of the Romanesque world and the ruins of the old sanctuary with architectonic elements belonging to the Florentine Renaissance and to Islamic art.

With the adoption of the Constitution in 1993, the session of the *Consell General* that was traditionally carried out at the sanctuary every year on the day of Meritxell was abolished. This feat represented a separation between the political and secular powers, and thusly the festivities have recovered their authentic social and religious aspect.



THE ALTARPIECES

MAIN ALTARPIECE



1. Annunciation, 2. Visitation, 3. Nativity, 4. Escape to Egypt, 5. Niche with the carving of the Mother of God, 6. The Holy Family at the carpenter's shop of Nazareth
7. Epiphany, 8. Presentation at the Temple, 9. Assumption, 10. Resurrection,
11. Embodiment of the theological virtue of faith with the cross and the chalice,
12. Crucifixion, 13. Embodiment of the theological virtue of hope with the anchor,
14. God the Father in blessing stance

An altarpiece carved in wood, dated from 1754. It was originally made of a socle, a predella, two floors and an attic, all of them divided into three sections. This distribution, though, changed in 1865 with the construction of the side chapel which forced to lift the second tier and the attic, while two more neoclassical pictorial representations were added to showcase the Crucifixion scene.

The altarpiece had a didactical dimension to it, and iconographically illustrated the Marian cult of the time.

The altarpiece was articulated through pillars and pilasters which helped showcase the various scenes. The main architectonic support, though, were the Solomonic columns with Corinthian capitals and a shaft decorated with Eucha-

ristic symbols (vine leaves and grapes). This type of pillar was more striking and dynamic than the classical one and it was the one that gave a stylistic and typological unity to the altarpieces of the end of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th. The structure of these altarpieces was generally quite simple, with two vertical sections and a central niche with an image of God the Father, all of them divided into three sections.

This altarpiece, anonymous like most of the ones in the Principality, was one of the most monumental in the valleys. The reliefs were made with great care (dynamic characters, good proportions...). The pictorial representations were probably made by the painter Oromí from La Seu d'Urgell, who decorated the side chapel and the interior of the church with mural paintings in 1866.



ALTAR OF SAINT ANNE

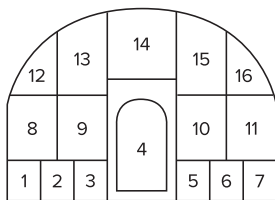
Original altarpiece from the first Romanesque building that was enlarged and remade to allow it to fit into the location of the Baroque church.

It was the work of an anonymous author of secondary background, known by historiography as the Master of Meritxell.

His chronology has been determined to the beginning of the 16th century and is part of a popular style of Gothic tradition. The narrative strength, the attention to detail and the chromatic variety and richness of the work are all worthy of notice.

Architecturally, it was made up of four vertical sections, divided by a broader central part that included the niche with the image of the standing Mother of God with the Infant. Horizontally, it included a stepping structure, a predella and two tiers. The date that appeared in one of the steps was that of the last intervention, when the upper crucifixion was added: 1783.

Even though the altarpiece is known as having been dedicated to Saint Anne (the dedication was changed in the early 19th century due to the fact of there two scenes involving this saint), most of its iconography gravitates around the life of the Mother of God. It should still be noted, though, that the primitive Romanesque church was dedicated to Saint Mary, and therefore, to include scenes of Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, in an altarpiece which depicted a Marian iconographic cycle, was perfectly normal.



1. Descent from the Cross, 2. Resurrection, 3. Saint Roch, 4. Image of the standing Mother of God with the Infant in her arms, 5. Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, 6. Imprisonment of Jesus, 7. Flagellation, 8. The kiss of Saint Anne and Saint Joachim, 9. Birth of the Virgin, 10. Nativity, 11. Epiphany, 12. Annunciation of the Mother of God, 13. Presentation to the Temple, 14. Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John, 15. Dormition of the Virgin, 16. The angel of the Annunciation

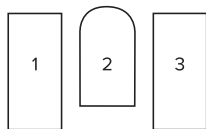
ALTAR OF THE REMEDIES

A Baroque altarpiece crafted and painted in 1804 by Josep Caselles of Solsona. It consisted of a register and an upper half. Horizontally, it was divided in three sections.

The carvings of Saint Francis-Xavier and Saint Isidore were of lesser quality than that of the Mother of God. This opens the possibility of them not being the originals and having been crafted later instead by a mediocre sculptor who was inspired by older images.

The entire surface of the altarpiece presented an abundant decoration through painted shapes imitating marble and vegetal elements, both painted and sculpted. Furthermore, the side pieces and the upper part also played an important role in the ornamental aspect.

The Solomonic column, with composite capitals and a profusely ornate shaft which turns sevenfold, also had a showcasing function.



The iconographic repertoire was typical of the Baroque period: 1. Saint Francesc-Xavier with the cross of the missionary, 2. Mare de Déu del Remei Virgin, 3. Saint Isidore with his farming tools

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