

Aleix Clapés and the artwork of the “Gache Apartment” in the Casa Milà.

A large door opens wide before us and our view is entranced by a marvellous symphony of colours.

By Carlos Alejandro **LUPERCIO**

Alberto I. Gache (Mercedes, Buenos Aires, 1854 - Montevideo, 1933), Consul of the Republic of Argentina to Barcelona, resided on the first floor apartment of the Casa Milà from 1911. Besides the interest aroused by the décor of the “Gache apartment”, the diplomat’s art collections and, of course, his huge influence in the cultural, social and business affairs of his day, this article centres on the paintings done by Aleix Clapés for the lavish lounge in the consul’s Gaudí apartment. An intriguing work that is, undoubtedly, a milestone in the history of pictorial decoration of the time.

I The Argentine consul in Barcelona



2

Illustration taken from the pages of Mercurio: Revista Comercial Iberoamericana, showing the portrait of Alberto I. Gache next to the Casa Milà; at the time the premises the Consulate General of Argentina. Barcelona, March 1912.

In October 1924, Alberto I. Gache, consul general of Argentina to Spain, in an attack of nostalgia, wrote:

“At the time I resided in Barcelona’s most striking and bizarre building, [...] on the corner of Passeig de Gràcia and carrer de Provença, of which remarkable stories were making the rounds. [...] That cyclopean mansion with its great fenestration, its overhanging and perturbing balconies and especially those thick, twisted columns that seem to be collapsing, [...] seduced me, drew me, as does everything that departs from vulgarity.”¹

During the first decade of the 20th century, Consul Gache and his family were tenants of the first floor apartment of the Passeig de Gràcia side of the Casa Milà.



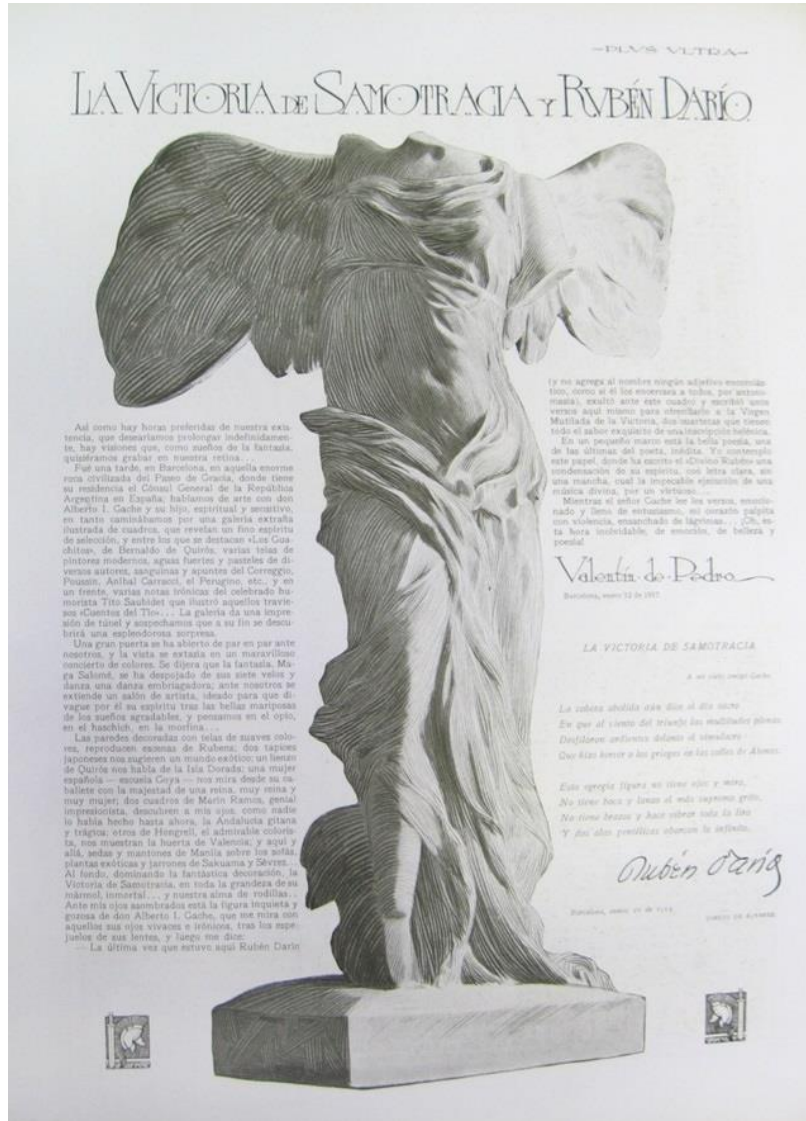
*Casa Milà. Façade of the Passeig de Gràcia vestibule.
The Argentine’s consulate’s flagpole and coat of arms are visible on the first floor
balcony.
Lucien Roisin. Post card, c. 1914. Casa Milà.*

The journalist Valentín de Pedro (Tucumán, 1896 – Buenos Aires, 1966) describes with relish the setting of the Gache family apartment:

“We discuss art with Mr Gache and his son as we stroll along a strange gallery adorned with paintings, which divulge an exquisitely

¹ Gache, Alberto I.; *Corazones y cerebros*; Juan de Gasso, Editor. Barcelona, undated, pp. 247-248.

refined taste [...]. The gallery gives the impression of a tunnel and we suspect that a splendid surprise awaits us at its end.”²



Page of the Buenos Aires review Plus Ultra with the article “La Victoria de Samotracia y Rubén Darío”, signed by Valentín de Pedro, March 1917.

In order that the consul himself explains what the aforementioned chronicler sensed, we have transcribed Gache’s own words of a visit paid by Rubén Darío’s to La Pedrera, exactly a century ago, in 1914.

‘Rubén entered the lounge on that memorable afternoon, [...], and paused to contemplate the room, which was fancifully illuminated so that the fabrics of varying colours, the Manila motifs as well as the wall hangings painted decorated by Clapés [sic] and other eminent artists – mostly reproductions of Rubens– stood out resplendent in all their colours, with all their details. A rendering of

² **Pedro, Valentín de;** “La Victoria de Samotracia y Rubén Darío”, *Plus Ultra*, No. 11; Buenos Aires, March 1917, p. 19.

Neptune emerging from the depths to destroy the boats of Ulysses particularly moved the poet.

The Winged Victory of Samothrace, so admirably reproduced in Carrara marble by my memorable friend, the notable sculptor José Cardona, prematurely snatched from life and art, stands tall and commanding on its plinth, somewhat hidden among the plants, the rhododendrons and the wall hangings that adorn the far end of the lounge, the creation of two genial men, Gaudí and Clapés [sic].”³

As an indelible memory of his brief visit to Casa Milà, Darío’ drew inspiration from that sculpture presiding over the lounge to compose the poem *La Victoria de Samotràcia*.⁴

³ Gache, Alberto I.; *Corazones y cerebros*; Juan de Gasso, Editor. Barcelona, undated, pp. 248-249.

⁴ Darío, Rubén; *Antología poética*; Ediciones Orbis, S.A., Barcelona, 1982. pp. 184-185.

LA VICTORIA DE SAMOTRACIA

A mi viejo amigo (Alberto) Gache

La cabeza abolida aún dice el día sacro/ en que, al viento del triunfo, las multitudes plenas/ desfilaron ardientes delante el simulacro/ que hizo hervir a los griegos en las calles de Atenas.

Esta egregia figura no tiene ojos y mira/no tiene boca y lanza el más supremo grito; / no tiene brazos y hace vibrar toda la lira/ y las alas pentélicas abarcan lo infinito.

(Barcelona, 21 January 1914).

According to Gache’s account, transcribed above, Darío visited him in April 1914. However, Darío dates his poem *La Victoria de Samotràcia* in January 21 of that year, which suggest that the poet visited Alberto Gache’s Gaudi apartment on at least two occasions.



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Lounge of the “Gache apartment” dominated by the reproduction of the Niké of Samothrace, sculpted in Carrara marble by Josep Cardona (Barcelona, 1878 – Moià, 1922); the decorative wall hanging of The Rape of Helen, executed by Aleix Clapés (Vilassar de Dalt, 1846 - Barcelona, 1920) and the “Imperial Roman style” furniture by Muebles Miarnau y Cia.

Photograph. ©Fundació Institut Amatller d'Art Hispànic. Arxiu Mas. 1914.



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BEFORE AND AFTER

Above: Photograph of the “Gache apartment” lounge.

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Below: Actual view of the first floor, Door 2, apartment of Casa Milà.

The stunning décor of the “Gache apartment” has all but disappeared, save a few charmed exceptions: the layout of the lounge, which is conserved intact; the remarkable mouldings of the

arches, window frames and doors; the sublime plasterwork of the ceilings and the original parquet tiles. Of the rest, there are only the cited chronicles and a dozen or so photographs taken by Adolf Mas, taken in 1914 and 1917. Also extant is an advertisement for the cabinetmakers Muebles Miarnau, from whom the consul ordered the manufacture of furnishings after the “Imperial Roman style”. This picture, published in the hefty business guide, *Barcelona Artística e Industrial*, from 1914, features among the documents presented.⁵

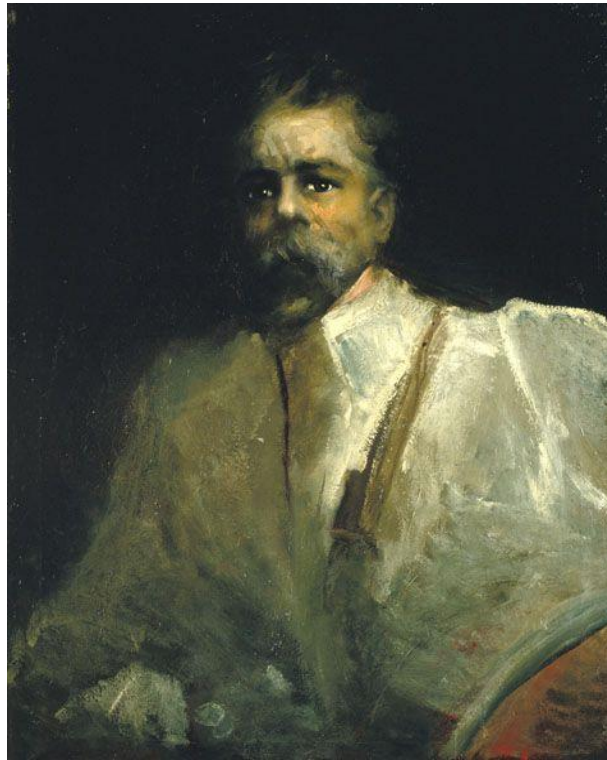


*View of the “Gache apartment” lounge.
Photograph published in Barcelona Artística e Industrial, 1914.*

⁵ Muebles de Miarnau y Cia, *Barcelona Artística e Industrial*, 1914.

The advertisement – cited for the first time – was provided by Sílvia Vilarroya Oliver, curator of the permanent exhibition of La Pedrera.

II Aleix Clapés, the creator of the mural paintings



9

*Aleix Clapés (1846-1920).
Self-portrait. Oil on canvas. C. 1902.
(Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona)*

The creator of the wall hangings, Aleix Clapés (1846-1920), is a legend in his own right: Born at Sant Genís de Vilassar – today, Vilassar de Dalt – (Barcelona), he moved to Reus during his infancy, and from his youth, on account of his innate talent, painted decorative murals much in demand by the emerging bourgeoisie of Baix Camp.

It would be wrong to regard Clapés as a purely decorative painter. The artist also pursued an enterprising and revolutionary career, which was influenced from early on among others by literary Naturalism, El Greco and the painters of tenebrism. Moreover, Clapés was a local exponent of Symbolism, Decadentism and Wagnerism. His expressionist work is an inadvertent precursor of the Expressionist School. Some of the more prominent of the progressive art critics of his day, such as Pirozzini, Casellas, Rahola and Opisso, were loyal to Clapés and lavished him with the highest praise. At the same time, others and the more conservative

newspapers of fin-de-siècle Barcelona slammed the ambiguous and murky aesthetics of Clapés' work.

Once established in Barcelona in the 1880s, Clapés – a close friend of Gaudí – and with whom he shared profound stylistic affinities, was asked to create the mural cycles of Güell Palace, finalised towards 1893.

Twenty years later, having worked assiduously in portraiture and religious painting under the influence of the French symbolist painter Eugène Carrière, and his ill-fated incursion into publishing – the artist was director and proprietor of the journal *Hispania* (1903)– Clapés concluded a new and titanic commission that took him back to the beginnings of his career: the managing of the pictorial decoration of the vestibules and patios of the Casa Milà, as well as the decorative artwork of the dwellings themselves.

III The pictorial decoration

10

Alexandre Cirici Pellicer omits Aleix Clapés' long artistic career, summarised above, in his ground-breaking work of *Modernisme Català*, noting that Clapés “was primarily a mural painter who found his form of expression in the ornate compositions of great iridescent masses and figures captured in movement”.⁶

An undoubtedly partial and tendentious consideration, but one that accurately describes Clapés' work in the vestibules of La Pedrera and in the walls hangings the consul's apartment. Both in the entrances and in the main residences of the Casa Milà, commonly called La Pedrera, his pictorial decoration consists of mimicking the tapestries of the National Heritage. While in the dwellings of the upper floors Clapés made more simple decorations, consisting in garlands and floral motifs.

The fabulous decoration of the “Gache apartment”, which, according to the diplomat's account, consisted of vast swathes of fabrics stretched over the lounge walls, reproducing tapestries held by the Spanish Royal Household. The painter chose the series *Heroes*

⁶ Cirici Pellicer, Alexandre; *El arte modernista catalán*; Aymá Editor, Barcelona, 1951, p. 321.

of the Trojan War and *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, both inspired by passages from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* respectively.

The *noucentista* appropriation of formal Greco-Roman repertoires exerted an influence on Gaudí and Clapés in their decorative approach for the Casa Milà. However, while exalting the most recurrent classical myths, Clapés breaks with the moderation and sobriety sought by Barcelona's intellectual class, inscribing the decoration of the "Gache apartment" in the Baroque tradition of Rubens.

Precisely, the creator of the 'cartoons' for the series of tapestries of the *Heroes of the Trojan War*, was the French rococo painter Jean-Baptiste Deshays (1729-1765), whose work caters to the most excessive eighteenth century decorativism. Although the *Télémaque* tapestries drew inspiration from the cartoons of Michel-Ange Houasse (1680-1730), it is important to clarify that in Clapés' time, they were erroneously attributed to Rubens.⁷

11

The extant black and white photographs offer only a hint of what this extraordinary colourful decoration looked like. In them, we can see copies of *The Rape of Helen* – the horizontal wall-hanging – in a prominent position, and the vertical tapestries: *Rape of Briseis*, *The Prophetess Cassandra* and *Chryses attempting to ransom his daughter Chryseis*. Taken from *Heroes of the Trojan War* series, they are set together in with an emblem: the shields of France and Navarre topped with a closed royal crown.⁸

The following description of *The Rape of Helen*, allows us to grasp the magnificence of the commission:

"Figures, architecture, bateaux et vagues sont ici rendus avec le même bonheur du pinceau, unis dans la même allégresse rococo. L'aspect massif et imposant de l'architecture est heureusement compensé par l'oblique de la voile. (...) le chien qui aboie apporte une note de familiarité à cet épisode légendaire."⁹

⁷ P. Rubens (sic). *Aventuras de Telémaco*. (Monasterio del Escorial), 1893-1954. Biblioteca Virtual del Patrimonio Bibliográfico. 1 glass plate negative 24 x 30 cm.
http://bvpb.mcu.es/es/consulta/busqueda_referencia.cmd?posicion=1&idValor=358827&forma=ficha&id=526 (Retrieved 4 April 14.)

⁸ Artiñano, P.M. de (dir.), *Los tapices de la casa del rey N.S.*, Madrid, Artes Gráficas Mateu, 1919, p. 147.

⁹ Bancel, André; Jean-Baptiste Deshays 1729-1765; ARTHENA, Paris, 2008, p. 111.



12



*Top: Beauvais tapestry of The Rape of Helen from the series
Heroes of the Trojan War, the cartoons were drawn by Jean-Baptiste Deshays
(1729-1765).*

Bottom: Fragment of the reproduction in the “Gache apartment”

“Figures, architecture, boats and waves are rendered here with a single joyful brushwork, united in an indistinguishable rococo delight. The massive and imposing architecture is offset by the obliquity of a candle. (...) The barking dog affords a note of familiarity to this legendary episode.”



Fig. P. 44a – L'Enlèvement de Briséis – La colère d'Achille, notice P. 44, p. 115.



Left: Tapestry Sacrifice of Iphigenia, also known as Rape of Briseis. Jean-Baptiste Deshays (1729-1765).
Right: Fragment of the reproduction in the "Gache apartment".



Fig. P. 80a – Chrysès, prêtre d'Apollon, vient demander sa fille Chryséis à Agamemnon en lui apportant des présents, notice *P. 80, p. 133.



Left: Tapestry Chryses attempting to ransom his daughter Chryseis Jean-Baptiste Deshays (1729-1765)
Right: Fragment of the reproduction in the "Gache apartment".



Fig. P. 71a – Hécube consacre à Athéna un riche tissu, notice *P. 71, p. 129.



Left: *Tapestry The Prophetess Cassandra. Jean-Baptiste Deshays (1729-1765).*
Right: *Fragment of the reproduction in the “Gache apartment”.*

14

In the same photographs we can see the reproductions of the tapestry *Telemachus and Mentor*, from the series *Les Aventures de Télémaque*.

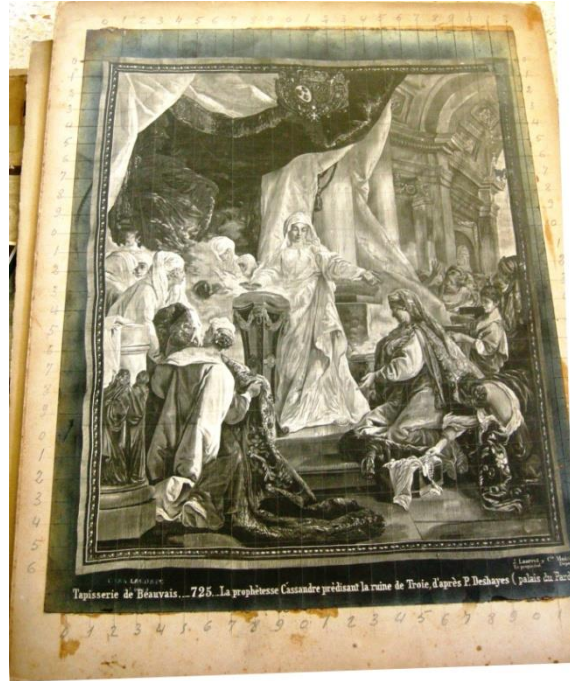
In all likelihood another area of the spacious lounge displayed one other reproduction, *Shipwreck of Telemachus*, which completes the series, although there are no surviving photographs of this work. We reached this conclusion on account of Gache's description, cited above, which suggests that Rubén Darío admired not least the *Neptune shipwrecks Ulysses*.



*Left: Tapestry Telemachus and Mentor. Michel-Ange Houasse (1680-1730).
Right: Fragment of the reproduction in the “Gache apartment”.*

To identify the motifs copied by Clapés for this commission, the Clapés Archive – held by the painter’s descendants – helped to locate the black and white reproductions, on millboard, of some of the imitation tapestries included in the apartment’s decoration. These small format reproductions were drawn in pencil using the grid method, in order to obtain a faithful amplification in oil. Despite their state of deterioration due to the course of time, they provide an insight on the painstaking reproduction process undertaken by the artist. The technique employed in the painting of these false tapestries, known as *diapré*, was originally employed to

shade the colours forming the foliage in heraldic shields. It creates startling effects, but demands great discipline and dedication



16

Millboards used by Aleix Clapés for his reproductions in the “Gache apartment”.

*Left: Tapestry Sacrifice of Iphigenia, also identified as
Rape of Briseis.*

Right: The prophetess Casandra.

Photograph. J. Laurent y Cia., edited by Casa Lacoste. Undated. Clapés Archive.



*Millboard used by Aleix Clapés to reproduce the tapestry Shipwreck of
Telemachus, also called Neptune shipwrecks Ulysses,
for the copy in the “Gache apartment”.*

Photograph. J. Laurent y Cia., edited by Casa Lacoste. Undated. Clapés archive



Print of the tapestry Neptune shipwrecks Ulysses featured in the book Los dioses de Grecia y Roma, by Victor Gebhardt. Barcelona, 1880.

17

Aleix Clapés died in December 1920, only a few years after completing the murals for the Casa Milà, Prior to his death the painter was working on the decoration of the staircase in the vestibule of the then recently opened Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau, in Sant Andreu, the same premises where the administrative headquarters of the Nou Barris district is currently located, in the northernmost part of Barcelona. This last commission by Clapés is also lost.

We conclude this article with the impression of the journalist Valentín de Pedro, upon opening the hall door of the apartment of the Consul General of the Argentine Republic to Spain:

“A large door opens wide before us and our view is entranced by a marvellous symphony of colours. It was said that the fantastic magician Salome stripped herself of her seven veils and danced a heady dance; before us we behold an artist’s lounge, conceived so that the spirit may wander after the beautiful butterflies of pleasant dreams, and our mind turns to opium, hashish (sic), morphine ...”¹⁰

¹⁰ **Pedro, Valentín de**; “La Victoria de Samotracia y Rubén Darío”, *Plus Ultra*, núm. 11; Buenos Aires, marzo de 1917, p. 19.



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Raimundo de Madrazo, Retrato de Señora; from the Gache consul collection.

A fragment of Clapés' work is visible behind it:

The Sacrifice of Iphigenia, and detail of the diaprè technique.

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Arxiu Mas. 1916.

18



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Four portraits of an unidentified adolescent in 18th attire. The four snapshots were taken in the "Gache apartment" lounge. A fragment of the imitation tapestry The Rape of Helen is can be seen ion one of them.

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-Seven photographs taken in the “Gache apartment”: © Fundació Institut Amatller d’Art Hispànic. Arxiu Mas. Barcelona, 1914, 1916 and 1918.

Barcelona, 2014

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