

# ANTONI GAUDÍ'S SAGRADA FAMILIA

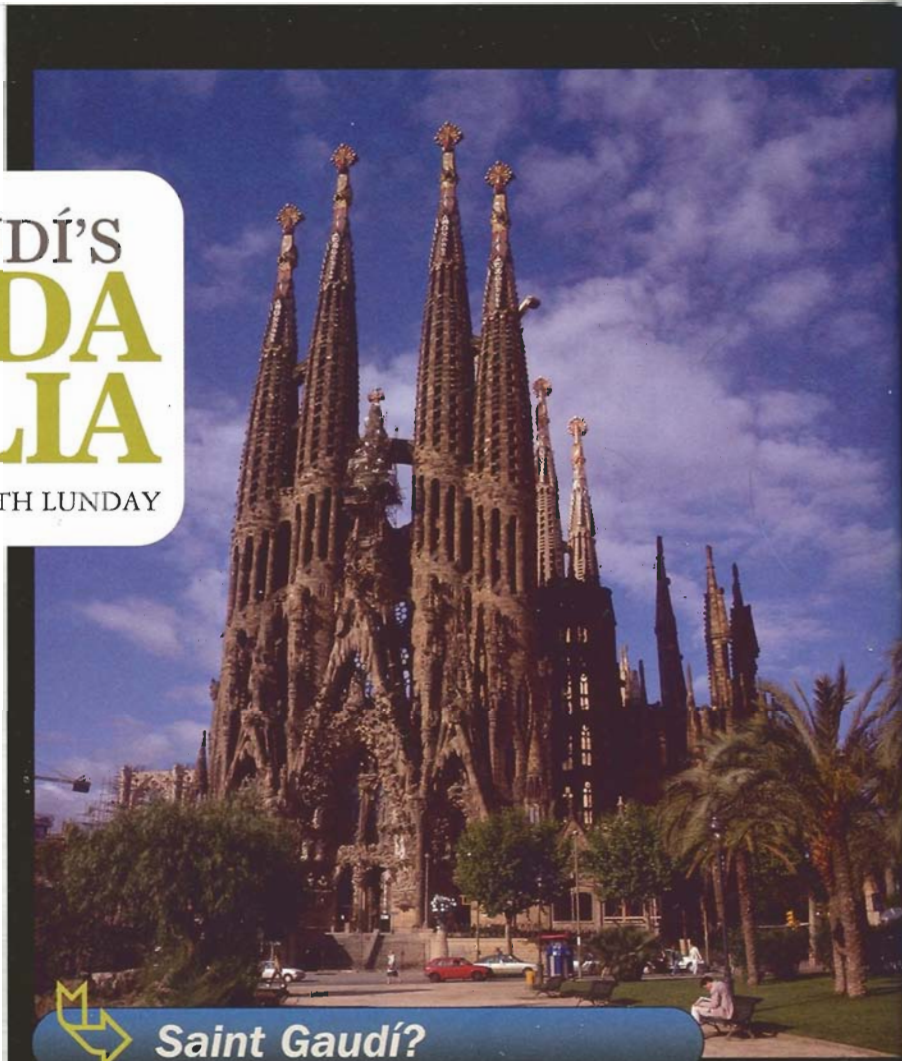
BY ELIZABETH LUNDAY

**TAKE ONE BASILICA,** throw in a few Gothic towers, a couple of Moorish mosaics, and a dash of Art Nouveau sculpture, and you've got the Sagrada Família, a masterpiece that defies classification. Some people call it genius; some call it an eyesore; but it can only be defined as simply "Gaudí."

## IN THE BEGINNING

Antoni Gaudí i Cornet was born June 25, 1852, in the Catalonia region of Spain. He had a humble upbringing as the son of a coppersmith, but—longing for more lively surroundings—he headed for the bustling city of Barcelona to study architecture. At the time, Barcelona was experiencing a cultural renaissance influenced by the *Modernisme* movement—a kind of local interpretation of Art Nouveau that (in art) celebrated the flowing shapes of organic forms. It was a good environment for a young artist, and into it, Gaudí introduced the influences of Catalonia's architecture, which included Romanesque churches (think heavy brick walls) and Moorish palaces (pointy arches and colorful tiles).

Bits and pieces from all those styles came together in Gaudí's architecture. Even his earliest projects, such as the Casa Vicens in Barcelona, defied convention by mixing straight lines with colorful decoration and floral designs. But Gaudí always added his marks of originality. Casa Vicens, for instance, features a heavy focus on detailed ornamentation and the use of common materials such as glazed ceramic. Gaudí's



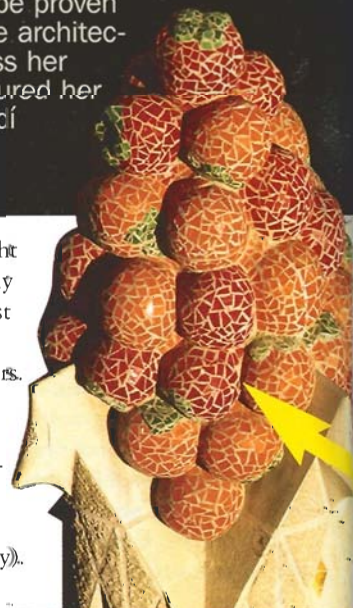
## Saint Gaudí?

Devoted Gaudí fans want the architect canonized as a saint, and the Roman Catholic Church seems to think that's a pretty reasonable request. The Church began the laborious beatification process in 2000 and is currently investigating Gaudí's holiness. To achieve sainthood, Gaudí must be proven to have performed miracles. Thus far, one architecture student claims Gaudí helped her pass her exams, and another woman asserts he cured her kidney stone. If all goes as planned, Gaudí would be the first architect saint.

work quickly began to turn heads. It certainly caught the eye of the Güells, a Barcelona industrialist family whose commissions resulted in some of Gaudí's most notable work, including Pavellons Güell, Güell Cellars, Colonia Güell, and Park Güell, among others.

## PIÈCES DE RÉSISTANCE

If you're looking for an example of any of the elements that make up the Gaudí style, you'll find them all in his masterpiece, Barcelona's Sagrada Família (the Expiatory Church of the Holy Family).



[right\_brain]

*Author George Orwell declared Sagrada Familia “hideous” and regretted that the building survived the Spanish Civil War. “I think the anarchists showed bad taste in not blowing it up when they had the chance,” he once said.*

Although Gaudí received the church commission in 1883 when he was only 31 years old, he worked on the project until his death at age 75. Ultimately, the project consumed his career. In fact, in 1910, he stopped accepting other work so that he could focus on the church.

While working on Sagrada Familia, Gaudí became increasingly pious. Undertaking Sagrada Familia appealed to him as a fervent Catholic, and as he continued to immerse himself in the project, he became a sort of architect-monk with an ascetic lifestyle that bordered on self-destructive. A strict vegetarian, Gaudí would embark on life-threatening fasts lasting 15 days or more. **He abandoned such frivolities as cutting his hair and wearing underwear.** He usually owned only one suit at a time, which he wore day after day until it fell apart. Unmarried, he renounced the flesh and embraced celibacy. To him, all the better to avoid distractions from his work. By the 1920s, he couldn't even bear to leave the site, and took to living in the basilica workshop.

To look at Sagrada Familia, it's easy to understand why it was Gaudí's obsession. In form and structure, the edifice resembles a Gothic cathedral. But, instead of flying buttresses (a Gothic trademark Gaudí abhorred), **the structure features twisting towers resembling seashells, pillars that look like palm trees, and arches that seem to drip like wet sand.** These organic allusions are hardly an accident. Gaudí believed natural forms were the most perfect, so his designs mimicked patterns found in nature.

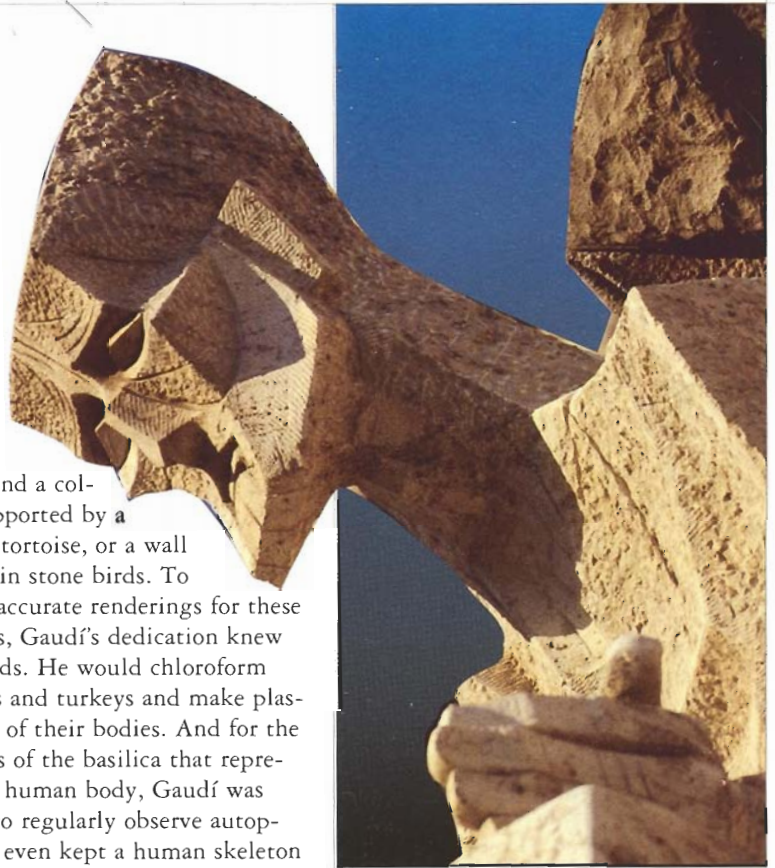
Throughout Sagrada Familia, you

might find a column supported by a massive tortoise, or a wall covered in stone birds. To achieve accurate renderings for these elements, Gaudí's dedication knew no bounds. He would chloroform chickens and turkeys and make plaster casts of their bodies. And for the elements of the basilica that represent the human body, Gaudí was known to regularly observe autopsies. He even kept a human skeleton in his workshop.

Perhaps more remarkable, each element of the design conveys a specific symbolic meaning. Gaudí saw the church as Roman Catholic liturgy in stone, awash with sacred numbers, symbols, and codes. The three entrances to the church mark the birth, life, and death of Christ. The three doors of the Nativity Portal (or entrance) symbolize faith, hope, and charity. Curving lines first seen as decoration reveal themselves as liturgical text or Bible verses. “Gloria in Excelsis Deo” winds around a depiction of the birth of Jesus. On the towers, white tiles spell out “Hosanna” and “Excelsis.” Every detail evokes deeper meaning.

#### LIFE AFTER DEATH

The master behind one of the greatest architectural achievements in history met an untimely, and unfittingly anonymous, end. On his way to Confession one evening, Gaudí was hit by a trolley. Because he was dressed in shabby clothes and carrying no identification, passersby assumed he was a pauper and took him to a charity hospital. He died four days later, on June 10, 1926.



For all his painstaking attention to detail, Gaudí paid a price. While he devoted more time to the project as time went on, progress was slow, and he died with only a fraction of Sagrada Familia complete. Work continued after his death, but then the Spanish Civil War threw the region into chaos. Gaudí's papers and models were destroyed, leaving few hints as to the architect's plans for the remainder of the building. Construction resumed in 1952, but today, Sagrada Familia is still less than two-thirds complete.

Newer sections of the basilica include the Passion Façade, designed by the current chief architect Jordi Bonet and featuring sculptures by Spanish artist Josep Subirachs. Still to be constructed are the Glory Portal and the church's remaining towers, the largest of which will climax in a gold cross stretching 550 feet high, making it Europe's tallest spire. The building's sponsors optimistically estimate that Sagrada Familia will be completed by 2026, the 100th anniversary of Gaudí's death. That's a long way off, but as Gaudí once said, pointing heavenward, “My client isn't in any hurry.”