



Murals by Josep M. Sert at the Rockefeller Center, New York. Photo by MMT

A GLAMOROUS CONTRIBUTION TO THE BELLE ÉPOQUE

by Manuel Manonelles i Tarragó

Few of the thousands of tourists, office workers, shoppers and journalists from the NBC TV Network that pass through the entrance hall of the Rockefeller Centre in New York know that the spectacular murals that decorate its walls are the work of a Catalan, the painter and muralist Josep M. Sert.

Josep M. Sert (Barcelona 1874-1945) was a well-known artist, and one of the most highly paid, who for years worked with and befriended the most glamorous elite of his time. The richness and monumentality of his murals, painted

with real gold paint and natural squid ink were –and still are– disputed by the ‘rich and beautiful’ of the Belle Époque, who were seduced by Sert’s scenographies for the Scala of Milan and Russian Ballets of the legendary Diaghilev.

Outstanding examples of works he carried out for celebrities he worked for and with include the palace of the Princess of Polignac in Paris, Kent House, Lympne Castle and Wretham Hall near London, the palace of Prince Mdivani in Venice (whose sister was to become Sert’s second wife), the palace of Baron Becker in Brussels, the orato-

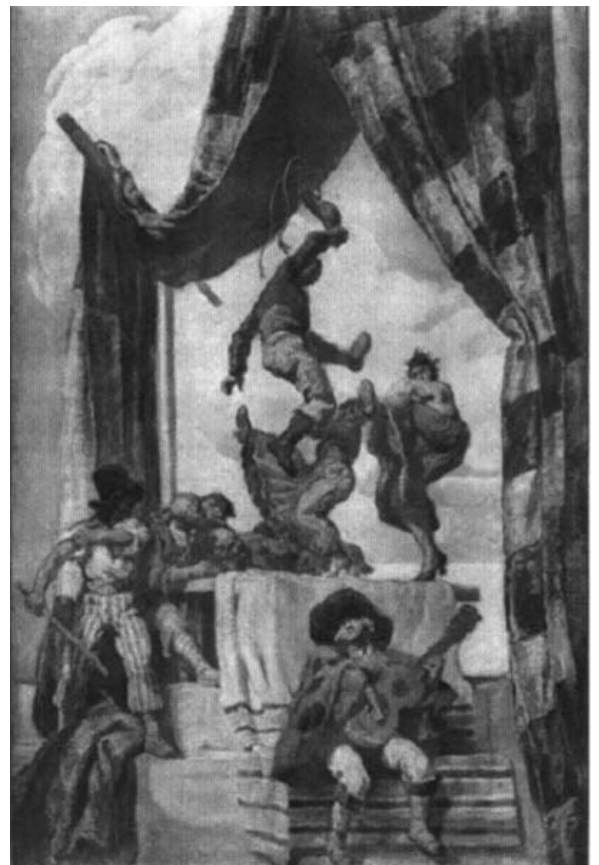


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rio of the Dukes of Alba in Madrid and the March Palace in Palma de Mallorca. In a more public dimension, Sert is the creator of the highly regarded murals in the Palace of Nations in Geneva (now home to the UN offices in Geneva), the Saloon of Chronicles of the Municipality of Barcelona, the panels for the ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York (now owned by the Bank of Santander) and what is considered his chief artistic work, the two colossal sets of complete mural decoration for Vic cathedral -the first being destroyed during the Spanish Civil War.

An even more curious example is the work known as *The Four Seasons*. This piece was conceived and commissioned for the residence of Arthur Capel, a millionaire and long-time lover of Coco Chanel. Capel died in a car crash near Cannes before the murals were installed. Once they were suitably adapted, the work of art ended up in the pavilion of the Château de La Versine, near Chantilly, property of the Rothschild family. During the Second World War the castle was occupied by the German Army and used as General Staff, when the murals were coveted by Marshal Goering, a known art predator. Today most of the pieces composing *The Four Seasons* can be admired in the Town Hall of Vic, the aforementioned Catalan city where Sert is buried, while

waiting for its final installation at the monographic museum the authorities are planning to dedicate to this glamorous artist.



One of the murals in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, New York