

Music and Society during the Golden Age of Valencia: The symbolism of sculpted figures in Valencia’s *Llotja de la Seda* (Silk Exchange)

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The *Llotja de la Seda*

Valencia’s *Llotja de la Seda* (or *Silk Exchange*), also called the *Llotja dels Mercaders* (or *Merchants’ Exchange*), is a veritable masterpiece of civic architecture from Spain’s Gothic era. It was declared World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1966. The building [**Picture 1**] is emblematic of the economic progress achieved by Valencia’s bourgeoisie during the so-called Golden Age of Valencia in the fifteenth century. The fact that it is a civic building instead of a religious one allowed the sculptors to let their imaginations run free or to soar, removed from institutional constrictions imposed by either church or court. For this reason, this building’s iconography is a chronicle of inestimable value that preserves the values and customs of Valencian society in the Middle Ages.

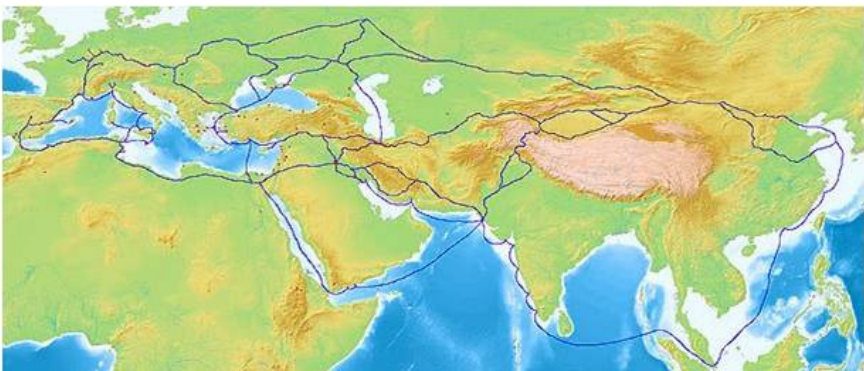
In the epoch when *La Llotja*¹ was constructed, beginning in 1482, the Silk Road from Orient countries [**Picture 2**] was at its peak. Valencia was the most active city—from the mercantile perspective—in the west of the Mediterranean sea to have maintained commercial relations with the people and towns of the East. As such, one can notice on the map that of the two trade routes to Europe that were available, the principal one originated in Persia and then ran along the

¹ The term *Llotja* in Catalan (*Lonja* in Spanish), comes from the Italian word *loggia*, which refers to the portico (a sort of entrance-porch or gateway). The portico was an architectural element characteristic of churches and public buildings, a place that provided shelter for the merchants who were there to conduct business and make commercial exchanges.

northern part of Africa until its eventual arrival on the Iberian Peninsula. The Persians had learned how to make silk from the Chinese. When the Arabs invaded Persia, they appropriated for themselves the techniques for silk production and later introduced them to the southeast regions of the Iberian Peninsula in the seventh century. Subsequently they came in contact with Jewish dye-masters who perfected the said art.



Picture 1. *Exterior façade and Patio of Oranges in the interior courtyard*



Picture 2. *The Silk Road from Orient*

During the rein of Alfonso the Magnanimous, Valencia was transformed into one of the most flourishing capitals of Europe due to its cultural and financial activity. In the seventeenth century, the expulsion of the Moors and the Jews – along with the increasingly domineering power of the nobility – negatively impacted the country’s economy. This merge of cultures (Christians, Jewish and Moors) are seen in works as *la Llotja*.

The architects and sculptors of the Llotja de la Seda

Pere Compte from Girona was appointed as master mason (as well as Johan Yvarra of Basque origin) of the new *Lonja* on the 12th of January, 1481. Alongside these two stone cutters or sculptors, we find cited the names of Johan de Córdoba and Miquel Johan Porcar.

Together with these four, a large number of other artisans were also involved in the construction of this building. These artisans included carpenters, sculptors, wood carvers, stone cutters, wood engravers, and the like, all of whom were financed by the monarchy or by the emerging bourgeoisie. Construction on the building began in 1482 and reached completion in 1548.

The coffered ceiling of the Consular Pavilion (*Pabellón del Consulado*) dates from the century prior to *La Lonja*’s construction. The wood comes from the City Hall (*Casa de la Ciudad*). After managing to survive two fires in the its original building site, this coffered ceiling was relocated and adapted to serve as the ceiling of the Consular Pavilion.

The complex is divided into four parts:

- a) the **Trade Hall** (*Sala de Contratación*);
- b) the **Tower and Chapel** (*Torre y Capilla*);
- c) the **Consular Pavilion** (*Pabellón del Consulado*); and
- d) the **Patio of Oranges**.

The proportions succeed in creating a sense of perfect harmony and balance, as can be seen in the floor plan mapped out in the following diagram [**Picture 03**].



Picture 3. *Llotja de la Seda of Valencia. Floor map*

Analysis of the Musical Iconography of *La Lonja*.

I. Façade of the Merchant Plaza. The Cardinal Sins.

The iconographic program of this façade appears to be focused on the representation of different scenes related to the Cardinal Sins.

One scene of witchcraft stands out, located on the capital of the mullion of the main door. The fact that the witches [Picture 4] are located immediately below the Virgin is noteworthy [Picture 5], since Mary—with her purity—is the only woman who is capable of saving them. These two scenes exemplify the main idea that permeates the iconography of the whole entire building. That is, the confrontation and reconciliation between the pagan, earthly world and the celestial, heavenly world. In this reconciliation, music plays a prominent role, as we shortly shall see.



Picture 4. *Scene of witches*



Picture 5. *Scenes of the Virgin*

In the *arquivoltas* (that is, the concentric rings or moldings that decorate the arch above the exterior door), we find scenes referencing the Seven Cardinal Sins. Figures of actual real animals are utilized for these depictions (with the figures of imaginary, fantastical animals being reserved for the gargoyles). The representation of **Lust** appears as a couple engaged in the act of making love

[**Picture 6**]; **Gluttony** by a wolf with its swollen stomach [**Picture 7**], although the wolf also could be representing **Avarice**. **Sloth** is symbolized by a snail, and **Envy** by a dog [**Picture 8**]. **Wrath** is represented by a wild boar [**Picture 9**], and the lion references the sin of **Pride** [**Picture 10**].



Picture 6. *Scenes of Cardinal Sins*



Picture 7. *Scenes of Cardinal Sins*



Picture 8. *Scenes of Cardinal Sins*



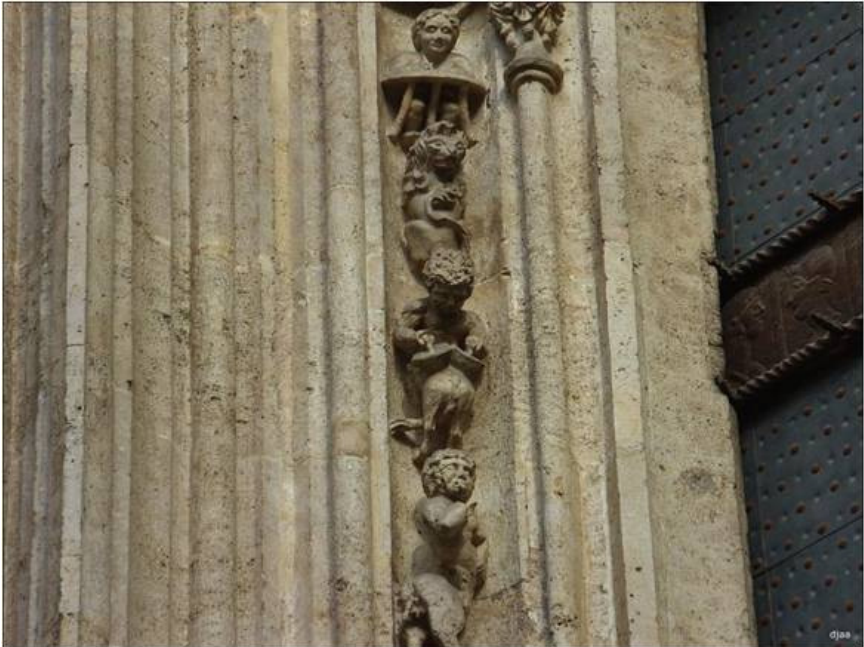
Picture 9. *Scenes of Cardinal Sins*



Picture 10. *Scenes of Cardinal Sins*

And here we encounter two important symbols: a **merchant [Picture 11]**, in an unmistakable allusion to the purposeful destination of this building; and

musical centaurs playing drums and *flabiols* (small flutes), thus linking music with the pagan world.



Picture 11. *Merchant and musical centaurs*

One must keep in mind that in the early Middle Ages nude human figures symbolized carnal sins of the flesh, for which reason the majority of the representations of human figures here are nudes, owing to the fact that all of the iconography of this doorway is addressing the Seven Deadly Sins.

The Trade Hall (*Sala de Contratación*) [Picture 12], also called the Hall of Columns (*Salón Columnario*) constitutes the main corpus of the building, consisting of a large room divided into three longitudinal naves, the vault supported by spiral columns that prop up the crossing arches of the vault, providing the spectacular visual appearance of a palm tree. The most accepted interpretation of this palm-like structure is that of balls of silk that later open up in the roof, extending its strings like nerves into the vaults.



Picture 12. *The Trade Hall (Sala de Contratación),*

In the door that provides access to the internal garden and Patio of Oranges, we find in the corbels where the canopy arch that crowns the door comes to rest, once again the figures of musical centaurs playing instruments [Pictures 12, 13, 14, 15 & 16] and a youth playin a *tarota* (a popular Catalan instrument from the double-reed family of shawms) [Picture 17]



Picture 13. *Doors to the Patio of Oranges: centaurs playing the “flabiol” (small flute).*



Picture 14. *Doors to the Patio of Oranges: centaurs playing the drums.*



Picture 15. *Centaur playing the sackbut*



Picture 16. *Centaur playing the dulcian*



Picture 17. Youth playing a “tarota”

II. Gargoyles: human beings succumb to sins, to vices, and to their animalistic or monstrous character.

La Lonja has 28 gargoyles that go completely around the uppermost edge of the monument. Generally speaking, they are figures of monsters with humanistic features or even of monsters devouring humans alive. In interpreting these images, it might be that they are meant to signify humankind being devoured by the sins and vices that are part of human nature itself, those aspects that are monstrous or animalist in character. Let us take the following examples: a monster devouring a naked man [**Picture 18**], and a monster with a lizard on top of a masked human [**Picture 19**].



Picture 18. Gargoyles. A monster devouring a naked man



Picture 19. *Gargoyles. A monster with a lizard on top of a masked human*

Representations of music appear in two of the gargoyles. In one a chained man is playing a drum [Picture 20]. In the other, a winged man plays a Moorish guitar or an *ud* [Picture 21]. This last figure is the only one in which there appears no sign at all of violence or of vice. This scene let us think about the power of music providing harmony to human soul.



Picture 20. *Gargoyles. Chained man playing a drum*



Picture 21. Gargoyles. A man playing a Moorish guitar or an “ud”.

It is curious to observe, once more, that the types of instruments best represented here are those from the **percussion** family, **plucked strings** (**Moorish guitar/ud**), or **winds** (**flute, sackbut, shawms**)—instruments always tied to **profane music** and most likely with **dance**. In order to confirm that which was said previously, we have yet another image of one of the doors that provides access to the chapel: it contains dancing figures, side by side with other figures that explore scatological themes.

In the image at the left, a frog plays a **Catalan tarota** while another frog **dances** [**Picture 22**]. In the image at the right we encounter a woman that is holding an animalistic creature: as she holds up its tail, a devil is using a bellows to force air up the creature’s anus [**Picture 23**].



Picture 22. A frog plays a Catalan “tarota” while another frog dances



Picture 23. *A frog plays a Catalan “tarota” while another frog dances*

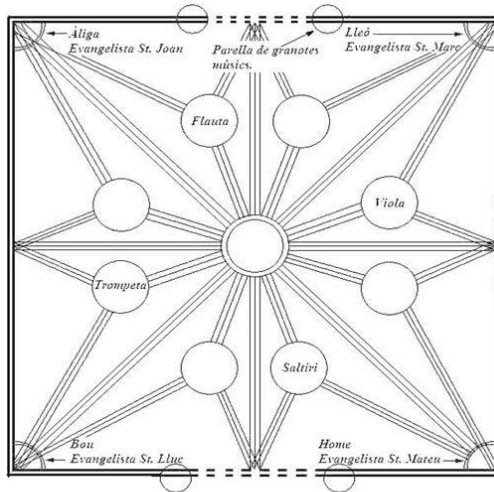
III. Chapel. The Angels of Mercy and of Salvation.

In the keystone of the vault, where the arches cross to form the shape of a star in the center part of the chapel’s ceiling [Picture 24], we find the image of the Virgin of Mercy, and in the remaining keystones of the vaulted ceiling, we see angels and coat-of-arms for the city of Valencia.

In the corbels we find the symbols of the four Evangelists [Picture 25].



Picture 24. *Chapel’s ceiling*



*Creuer de la Capella de la Torre
Vista en planta.*

Picture 25. Chapel’s ceiling diagram

1. **Saint John:** with the figure of the **eagle** [Picture 26], that represents **speed** and **height**. To the side, an **angel** is playing the **flute** – an instrument from the woodwind family that is associated with celestial music, due its nature that is more refined than the *tarota*, shawm, etc. [Picture 27]



Picture 26. Saint John



Picture 27. *Angel playing the flute*

2. **Saint Mark:** in the lower part of this figure we find a **lion [Picture 28]** that represents **bravery**. To the side, an **angel** is playing the **fidula [Picture 29]**. Here we do not encounter the Moorish guitar, but instead a bowed instrument associated with music that is more refined, more elevated.



Picture 28. *Saint Mark*



Picture 29. *Angel playing the fidula*

3. **Saint Matthew:** in the lower part, we see the face of a **man** [Picture 30], thus representing **intelligence**. To the side, an **angel** is playing the **psaltery** [Picture 31], the only polyphonic instrument probably associated with humankind’s intelligence.



Picture 30. *Saint Matthew*



Picture 31. *Angel playing the psaltery*

4. **Saint Luke:** with the figure of an **ox** [Picture 32], that represents **strength** and **gentleness**. To the side, an **angel** plays the **trumpet** [Picture 33]. In the Gospel of Saint Luke, a passage appears that makes reference to the trumpet, that well could be imbued with a triumphant character.



Picture 32. *Saint Luke*



Picture 33. *Angel playing the trumpet*

According to the Christian tradition in Spanish musical iconography, the most developed tetramorph in Christian symbolism is that of the four evangelists, the Four Living Creatures. “In Christian symbolism, the symbolic associations of the four Evangelists are: Matthew, the winged man; Mark, the lion; Luke, the ox; John, the eagle” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetramorph> - cite note-0(Cirlot, J. E. (1993). *A Dictionary of Symbols*. p. 339.). This originated from the Biblical book of the Jewish prophet Ezekiel, who describes his vision in which the likeness of four living creatures came out of the midst of the fire thus:

As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle. Ezekiel 1:10.

The coffered ceiling (“artesonado”) Pavilion of the Consulate

The *Pabellón del Consulado* (Pavilion of the Consulate) or “*Consolat del Mar*” (“Consulate of the Sea”), is an institution created in 1283 by the King Pedro III of Aragon and it was the first mercantile court that was founded in Spain.

The musical figures that appear in the coffered ceiling [Picture 34] merit more detailed and specific study. It is a work made a century prior to the construction of the Llotja and also proceeding from another building, the old Town Hall (*Ayuntamiento*) of Valencia. It does not have any connection with the iconographic program to the rest of the building.



Picture 34. *The coffered ceiling of Valencia's Llotja de la Seda*

Here the decoration presents exuberant specimens of the allegorical symbolism of life, whether it be animal or plant, both merging together in intriguing disputes and symbiosis, next to the humans. In this vital context, the struggles of life are represented [Picture 35], as much in reference to images of peasant life as to the struggles for power, and in representations of cosmic allegories of the life cycle of humanity and of the entire universe. In this context,

32 figures of pairs of musicians stand out, devoted to the tasks of harmony.

The scenes are distributed in a chance way and without a clear iconographic program. The instruments that these musicians use provide us an understanding of the cultural interconnectedness that existed between Europe and the Arabic world. Thus, we are able to observe diverse types of flutes and vihuelas (pertaining to European instrumental practice), right next to tambourines, crotales, triangles, shawms or dulcians (pertaining to Arabic culture) [Pictures 36, 37 & 38], as well as wind or brass instruments that could well be traced all the way back to Roman or Etruscan practice.



Picture 35. *Men struggling or playing music. Allegorical symbolism of the struggles of life and the harmony provided by music.*



Picture 36. *Men struggling or playing music. Allegorical symbolism of the struggles of life and the harmony provided by music.*



Picture 37. *Men struggling or playing music. Allegorical symbolism of the struggles of life and the harmony provided by music.*



Picture 38. *Men struggling or playing music. Allegorical symbolism of the struggles of life and the harmony provided by music.*

Conclusions

The concepts that I observe captured in the musical iconography of the *Llotja* are the following:

1. Dichotomy of the music:

- Linked to **pagan activities**, inciting one to the (*musica profana*)
- Linked to **Mercy or Salvation** (*musica sacra*)

2. The instruments are also linked depending on this dichotomy:

- *Musica profana*: dance music, music performed outdoors: *tarotas* or shawns o -dulcians, sackbuts, Moorish guitar or *ud*, drums,
- *Musica sacra*: psalteries, viols, flutes, and trumpets

3. **The meeting and merger of cultures, blending European Christian culture with pagan tradition of oriental origin.** The *artesonado* belongs to another iconographic program. There are other instruments of oriental origin (crotales, triangles, ornate tambourines). Whatever the case, and with a global vision of the entire coffered ceiling, a symbolic differentiation of its themes becomes strikingly obvious. In that way, a series of representations whose characters are human, plant, or animal, are placed next to other series of representations of superior beings in the form of satyrs – among which one can differentiate those that fight among themselves and those that act in harmony with each other – just like musicians.

4. Interpretation of the Music Iconography program of the *Llotja de la Seda*: the Mediaeval world and the role of music:

	Doors	Outdoor gargoyles	Inside (Capilla´s ceiling)
	EARTH	PURGATORY OR INFERN	HEAVEN / PARADISE
Figures	Men and animal	men devoured by monsters	4 Evangelists
Scenography	Eschatological attitudes	apocalyptic scenes	celestial ambience
Musicians	Centaur and frogs	winged man or monster	angels
Instruments	drums, sackbuts shawns, dulcians	Flageolets (monster) Moorish guitar/ <i>ud</i> (winged man)	psalter, fídula flute, trumpet