

Words / Sam Harrison → Photography / Adrian Morris

Visit any Catalan festival and you'll see *gegants*: giant puppets inspired by folk heroes. But who makes them? And why are they more in demand than ever?

Telling a tale of







Mustafá and Elisenda make pretty good dancing partners – and they should: they’ve been busting moves together for more than 200 years. The Saracen and his lady friend turn, dip and sway coquettishly in the Plaça Sant Jaume, in Barcelona’s Old City, surprisingly nimble for figures over four metres tall.

The *Gegants Grans del Pi*, as the pair are jointly called, are two of the giants of Barcelona, part of a custom that traces its roots to the early 17th century. Supersized puppets like these, with engorged heads and long flowing robes, are a much-loved feature of traditional life across the whole Catalan region.

Over the centuries since they first appeared in the Corpus Christi parades of the 1600s, their popularity has waxed and waned. During the Spanish Civil War in 1936, many of the churches where giants were stored were destroyed, but they’ve seen a huge revival since the end of Franco’s dictatorship in the 1970s.

In fact, after the restrictions placed on Catalan identity were lifted after his death, there has been such a surge in enthusiasm for trappings of traditional culture that, according to local expert Jan Grau, “many towns that didn’t have giants bought them or made them because they wanted to have their own celebrations”.



Today, there are more than 4,500 giants across the region and the appetite for new figures shows no sign of abating. Each town has at least one pair, and city neighbourhoods often also have their own, all of which take part in regional celebrations, like Barcelona’s Fiestas de la Mercè this month.

Underneath their skirts, an easel-like frame allows a person to carry each giant (typically around 40kg) on their shoulders. If you look closely, you can spot these operators through a small mesh gap in the giant’s clothing. It’s far less easy to get a glimpse of the real talents behind these impressive puppets though – craftsmen and women who are, somewhat surprisingly, ever more in demand. »

Opening pages✓
Jordi Grau has been making giants for around 35 years; Barcelona’s *Gegants de la Ciutat* From top✓
The *Gegants nous de la Casa de la Caritat o del Corpus* were made in 1919 and restored in 1987; *castellers* making a human pyramid



Thirty kilometres outside Barcelona, one of these artists, Ramon Aumedes, runs the Sarandaca workshop with his partner, Francina Morell, and two of their children. Their workshop is filled with legless, armless busts and heads waiting their turn to be painted, buffed or restored. Giants are always legless, since they wear long robes to hide the person carrying them; the arms are attached separately, so their clothes can be easily removed.

Aumedes has been working as a sculptor for 30 years, making pieces for festivals and theatres – most of which are inspired by real people. “That way the faces are much more alive,” he explains. “These aren’t paper dolls.”

Behind him, the bust of his own giant stares down at us, a likeness he sculpted of himself 30 years ago. The other half of the pair – a giantess based on his partner – isn’t in the workshop today, but the smaller giant they made of their son as a child is here, smiling next to its now-very-adult human counterpart, who’s employed by the family business and working on a mould nearby.



Ramon Aumedes

Over his 30-year career, Aumedes has made more than 200 *gegants* and heads known as *cabezudos*, as well as numerous *bestiari* (animal puppets in a similar style).

He likes working on big projects and has made, during his career, an 18m-long crocodile and an eight-metre gorilla. “When I work in my workshop, I give it my all,” he says.

Some of the giants he’s made have ended up as far afield as northern France and Belgium, where people have their own, slightly different, giant traditions.

“I always ask my customers what kind of face they would like, and often they’ll say, ‘We want the man to have a face with character, to have a big nose, sharp features. But we want the woman to be very beautiful.’” Aumedes shakes his head. “Then I say, ‘No. I’m not going to make them a Barbie.’”

Once customers see the result, they come around. “Beautiful or not, she looks like a person,” he says, “and that’s the interesting thing.”

In the past, almost all of the giants were based on

medieval characters, kings and lords, and sometimes peasants. Nowadays the requests – and designs – are more varied. “Often they represent historical characters and other times they represent people from the present day,” he explains.

If a town has a claim to fame, Aumedes will incorporate that, like the pair of cavemen he made for L’Espluga de Francolí, a town known for its nearby cave paintings, or the journalist-photographer duo he put together for the Catalan newspaper *La Veu de l’Anoia*.

Once the design is finalised, he sculpts the giant’s head out of a block of clay, and then uses it to make a mould for the polyester. When it’s dry, he smooths the surface and paints it. In the past, heads were mass-produced, the moulds reused several times, »



From top left ✓
Ramon Aumedes surveys his heads; dressing a giant; Aumedes in his workshop in Granollers, 30km north-east of Barcelona »



“When I work
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I give it my all”

Play i-spy at Catalan festivals

Their size means they get a lot of attention but the giants are only one element of Catalan festival culture. Other things to look out for include *sardanas* (dance circles), *castells* (human pyramids) and the explosive *correfocs*, or fire runs.

Apart from the giants, some of the biggest figures in the pantheon are *bestiari*, puppets of animals and mythical creatures that often parade with the giants. Many are made to look like monsters, and some carry firecrackers or shoot water at the crowd.

One of the more friendly looking figures is the famous *Mulassa de Barcelona*, a mule who does double duty by carrying a garland of flowers in parades and shooting firecrackers from her muzzle in the *correfocs*.



“I was born here among giants – just like my father”

but these days each model is unique and can take several weeks or even months to finish.

Other workshops use fibreglass or traditional *cartón piedra* (a technique similar to papier mâché that uses cardboard and glue). The latter approach is taken by Teresa Casserras, who runs the Casserras workshop in Solsona – a multi-generational outfit her grandfather founded 60 years ago, and one of the oldest workshops in the region. “I was born here, among giants, just as my father was born among giants,” she says, passionately.

Although Casserras originally studied biotechnology, she came back to the workshop to keep the family tradition going, roping in her partner Ferran Fontelles (pictured right), and her mother and sister occasionally, too. The couple’s Border Collie trots in and out, weaving through skirts the size of curtains as they explain what the giants represent to the people of Catalonia. “They’re part of the heritage of a town,” says



Teresa Casserras

The Casserras family has worked on many of Catalonia’s most historic giants, including restoring the original *Gegants Grans del Pi*, which date back to around 1800, and making the outfits for the *Gegants de la Ciutat*, or city giants.

“You’re always doing something different, you know?” says Teresa Casserras. “It’s not only giants or *cabezudos* [puppet heads]. You might work on a sculpture, or some restorations.”

The former scientist is proud and passionate about honouring her grandfather’s legacy. “Being able to keep working with all of the figures that come from this workshop is very rewarding work.”

Fontelles. “Just like the bell tower, or the main square, or the high street.”

For Jan Grau, who himself carried giants for 44 years, this sense of community is key to the continuing popularity of the giants. “Why do we carry giants?” he asks, rhetorically. “Because we like it and we have a good time, but on top of that, you’re taking on this role of representing your community. It’s a question of identity.”

Unlike those puppets first commissioned in the 1600s to celebrate major Catholic festivals, today’s giants are most closely tied to local festivals, especially the *fiestas mayores*, which celebrate the patron saint of each place (La Mercè is one of Barcelona’s two yearly fiestas). Each pair of puppets is looked after by a *colla* (group) that’s responsible for carrying them, making sure their clothes are washed, their hair is combed and their paint doesn’t chip. Taking care of them as a part of a *colla* is a matter of local pride.

“They’ve been passed down from grandparents to grandchildren, and people love them because »



Jordi Grau

Grau is a self-taught sculptor who's been working with giants for around 35 years. He started off restoring old giants with his father, and eventually began building his own, using traditional *cartón piedra*. His native town of Terrassa has a unique giant tradition. Each year the community chooses one notable citizen to immortalise with a *cabezudo* sculpture of their head and shoulders. For the last 33 years, Grau has made 33 different *cabezudos*, which are revealed each year at the town's *fiesta mayor* at the end of June.

their grandparents saw these same giants," Nico Alonso, the co-captain of the colla in charge of the Pi giants, explains. "It's very popular, but only on a local level."

These days, however, the fame of giants is growing, and a burgeoning enthusiasm for "giant spotting" means the custom is becoming more popular with other Catalans, who travel to small towns and villages simply to see these figures. Jordi Grau, a giant-maker who runs workshop El Drac Petit in Terrassa (and happens to be Jan Grau's brother), knows of locals who act like "giant paparazzis" and travel to see each inauguration. "They know when a new giant is going to be unveiled and they flock to take its picture," he says. "It's a whole world."

But while it's seen as broadly positive that their fame and popularity is spreading, for those who treasure the gegant tradition, outsiders aren't part of the picture. The much more important thing, is to keep the community engaged. "That way, you guarantee the continuation," says Jan Grau.

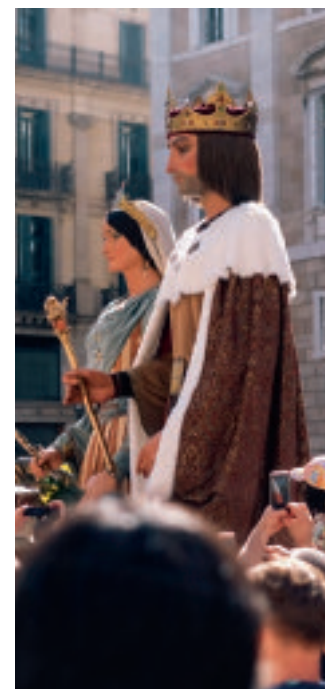
This is partly why in the last 15 years, collas have started requesting more smaller, lighter giants (from 1.8m to 2.5m), created for children and teenagers to literally carry on the tradition.

Back in Plaça Sant Jaume, where Mustafá and Elisenda are still dancing away, there's further evidence of these puppets' popularity with the next generation. In one hand, the former holds a scimitar, but in the other he clutches a handful of baby pacifiers.

"Children are fascinated by the giants," and will often happily give their pacifiers to their favourite giant once they've outgrown them, explains Grau. "It creates a bond."

This young fan base might well be the most important factor in ensuring the custom continues for the next 400 years. As Aumedes says: "When local traditions don't attract young people, they disappear. But when young people participate a lot, that's when they grow and endure."

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Where to spot gegants

La Mercè

One of Barcelona's biggest festivals, this rousing event takes place 20-24 September this year. Spot the giants parading in the Gothic Quarter on the first and last days of the event.

Spring festivals

If you visit early in the year, check out the gegants at the Corpus Christi parade, which happens shortly after Easter, or at the Santa Eulàlia festival in February.

Casa dels Entremesos

Visit 80 of the city's giants at this museum of Catalan popular culture, where they live year-round. Located in the El Born district, it was founded in 1439. lacasadelsentremesos.cat