

# THE SEXENNIAL OF MORELLA



■ Six years have passed. What was then just a prophesy – veiled by sighs of relief after all the efforts, with a trace of nostalgia and a feeling of unease concerning the eventual reencounter, so far off yet so unequivocal – has now become reality again.



# THE SEXENNIAL *of Morella*





This is the way life in Morella (Castellón) is measured: “De sis en sis anys”, or in 6-year periods.

**[It was decided thus as far back as 1673 by the Town Council and Clergy, determined as they were to honour their patron saint, Our Lady of Vallivana, by means of a solemn novena, or nine-day period of thanksgiving:]**

*El Justicia, Jurats y Consell de Morella tenen á be donar gracias á la Imperatris de totes les creatures y Senyora nostra la Verge de Vallivana ara y en tot tems en un novenari de sis en sis anys, per l'benefici de la salud alcanzada en l'any pasat. [...] Que comense lo primer en Maig del any 1678, fent dit novenari per conte de la present vila un dia de festa, y los restans per los devots particulars, que al present se oferiren y cofrades y ofisis, deixant esta disposició als Mag. Jurats que es trobaran.* “The Justices, Juries and Council of Morella are pleased to give thanks to the Empress of all creatures, Our Lady, the Virgin of Vallivana, now and forevermore, by means of

a novena to be held every six years for the purpose of giving thanks for the blessing of health received last year (...) and that it should begin this first year, 1678, with said novena being celebrated at the expense of the present Town on the first day of the festivity, and on the remaining days at the expense of private devotees, who hereby offer their services, and of confreres and tradesmen, leaving this resolution to the Juries currently on duty.”



The “last year” referred to was 1672. An epidemic was devastating the population, and when it reached its peak the ruling powers decided that the brotherhood of Our Lady of Vallivana should ask for divine intervention by bringing her image to town from her sanctuary 24 kilometres away. This was done, with 30 men being chosen for this honourable commission, and no sooner had the sacred image arrived in the town than the disease began to remit. A miracle was worked: Morella was saved from the shackles of the black plague.

The Morella-born writer, Carlos Gazulla de Ursino, whose parents had witnessed the events, summarised them in this manner: “The sick to whom the sacraments had been administered and even those who had already received the extreme unction began to look out of their windows and adore this celestial princess, and all those who rose from their beds never returned to them; from that very moment death fled from them.” Similarly, one of the verses in honour of the Virgin of Vallivana, written by an anonymous poet in the mid-19th century, went something like this: “Mediatress against the plague / So beautiful a Virgin / Making whole and healthful / The town where you were found / Refreshing grace and purity / Bringing health from clay / Although you come from clay / Your beauty is the work of God.”

**[Today’s descendants of those distant Morellans still welcome the Virgin with similar emotions when they flock round her in praise at the end of August.]** She is received by the Marquise of Fuente el Sol, who has the privilege, among others, of organising one day of the festivity. This is one example of the way the town has preserved certain features of its medieval structure. Even in the third millennium, Morella still celebrates its Sexennial feast at the expense of the Town Council, the clergy, the nobility and the various town guilds.



# *The Arrival of* **THE IMAGE**

■ The arrival is an apotheosis. The procession first comes to a square outside the town walls known as the Pla d'Estudi (Student's Plaza), where people await it with bated breath. In the light of the porters' torches, only a few canticles break the silence. The men and women of Morella (and thousands of visitors accompanying them) have had to wait six long years for this moment to be enacted. For the youngest, the memory has not yet been deeply engraved – one Sexennial is worlds apart from another – but for the older folks it is, simply yet excitingly, another example of how life continues.









A few hours earlier, the town had been witness to the solemn announcement of the Sexennial event: following a speech from the balcony of the Town Hall, the Mayor delivers the regional flag, the “Senyera”, to the senior member of the students’ union, who announces the start of the festival before the expectant crowd. The young man charged with the duty of proclaiming the 50th Sexennial (1994), Vicent Milián, made a profound declaration of principles:

[ ***“We are proud of a tradition that will never die as long as there is one drop of blood left in Morella.”*** ] After the announcement, the students’ parade commences, headed by the standard of the Mother of God.



As soon as the Virgin is brought inside the town walls, she is placed in a small temple near the gate and the Marquise of Fuente el Sol, the Virgin's Attendant in the Town, places a finely-embroidered shawl over her shoulders. Although the image is relatively small, her head carries a large crown. She is then placed on the platform on which she will be transported through the town over the next few days. The welcoming committee has dressed up in fine clothes, fanning out over the esplanade in front of the Archpriest's basilica, to which all the townspeople flock.

The first night features the procession of dancers and biblical characters, which for some onlookers is like an initiation rite, whereas for others it is nothing but a comforting re-encounter. The procession of the entry of the Virgin is identical in structure and composition to the General Procession; the only difference being that the pilgrims who have accompanied the Virgin from her sanctuary in Vallivana also take part in the initial procession. This finishes after nightfall at the basilica, the Virgin is placed on the high altar, and people sing canticles and pray to her until the wee hours of the morning.



# The PREPARATIONS



- To receive the Virgin, the Mother of God of Vallivana, Morella has been making preparations over the long winter months. During all this time, in well-timed daily shifts, women busy themselves creating the famous frilly-paper decorations made on panels that will adorn the town throughout its Sexennial festivity. This is still a job that is undertaken mostly by women.





*[In the end, over two kilometres of panels decorated with frilly paper are erected along the 15 streets to be traversed by the various processions and parades.]*

To make these curious street ornaments, over 4,000 kilometres of 1 cm-wide crêpe paper strips are used. So great is the need for this raw material that the Year 2000 Sexennial had to purchase this material from Mexico, Canada and central Europe, some of which – a sign of the times – was ordered over the Internet.

Modern advances also influenced the process when popular ingenuity encouraged locals to adapt sewing machines for cutting the silk paper strips, replacing needles with scissors. Formerly this task, like others, was carried out by hand. Still surviving today in Morella is a long textile tradition, and this sector, like others, is billeted for the benefit of the Feast.



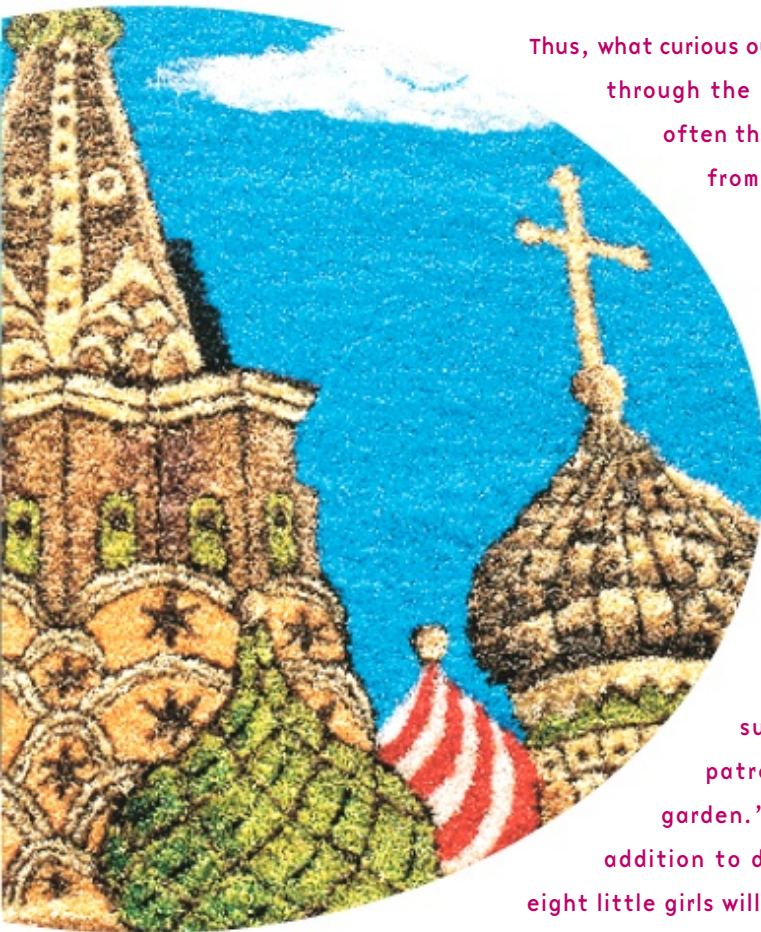
The measurements used for this paper are called “quires of paper”, equivalent to two hundred 75-cm-long by 6-cm-wide strips. To cover one square metre of a decorative frame, 3 “quires of paper” are required, or in other words, 600 strips have to be folded patiently one by one. After being cut into strips, they are crinkled and unfolded, after which each strip is ready to be individually glued onto the layout on its corresponding panel.

**[*Absolute secrecy is maintained with respect to the ornamental motives being created, and each street takes pride in keeping its work well hidden with the aim of surprising everyone and surpassing their neighbours.*]** Without this touch of competitiveness, of healthy rivalry, many of the true marvels still existing in local traditions would have vanished long ago.

This is why, on the night of the “plantà de carrers”, or the assembly of the panels in the street, there is a special feeling in the air, a mixture of delight at being able to display at last the results of so much effort, and of surprise at seeing what the neighbours have been able to achieve. These rituals prior to the festivity are a basic part of the celebration per se, helping to prepare the spirit and enhance people’s enjoyment of the occasion. In a small community such as Morella, comprising barely 2,700 people (the census in 1877 showed a population of 7,190), it is not difficult to understand what it means for one third of the population – hopeful, enthusiastic and practically tireless – to actively participate night after night in the preparation of the festivity.







Thus, what curious outsiders have the occasion to contemplate as they stroll by the thousands through the streets of Morella before, during and after the Sexennial, are more often than not motifs of local inspiration, but there are also examples harvested from the history of art, biblical passages or simply popular imagination.

Flowers, birds, windmills, Moorish arches, geometric drawings, reproductions of famous paintings, regional and national tales, ancient tiles and heraldic bearings are some of the most frequent figures.

[ *The designs are democratically chosen among each group of neighbours.* ]

In some cases, objects are made first in clay, then moulded in plaster, stuffed with paper and glue and, when finished, adorned with crêpe paper.

The first printed programme on the festivity, dated 1856 in Valencia, states that “the neighbours of the Plaza de Tarascons, who have made such strenuous efforts on all occasions, will erect an altar to their patron, St John the Baptist. The little square will be converted into a garden.” There was also mention of another street “called Noguer, where in addition to decorating an altar of the Virgin with flowers and water fountains, eight little girls will be dressed as Augustine nuns.”

# THE ROGATIONS

■ On the Friday before the festivity, early in the morning, the rogation leaves the Archpriest's basilica and heads for the sanctuary of the Virgin of Vallivana, Neo-classical in style with a Baroque façade. The existence and maintenance of this sanctuary is an integral part of life in Morella, a town that prides itself on its past, but also looks towards the future. The municipal area is divided into twelve districts called "denes", each of which has one representative from the town, and another, called a "masovero", an inhabitant of the outlying areas. A "mas" is a farmstead set in the rough, rocky and sometimes desolate terrain of this strangely beautiful district. One of the obligations of these 24 "lords" or "alets" consists in collecting tithes, called the "acopte" each year. This was formerly in the form of wheat and wool, but today produce has been replaced by money, to be given over to the upkeep of the sanctuary.

The rogation procession, comprising some 1,200 people, presided over by the priest, a municipal representative and the Rogation Mayor, is today made up of equal numbers of men and women, who walk a total of 24 kilometres to fetch the image of the Virgin and bring her back to town.







Both on the outgoing journey and the return journey there are three ritual stops: one at the Hostal Nou for a mid-morning snack, another at the Torreta (an estate belonging to the Marquise of Fuente el Sol, where traditionally the Virgin was dressed in new vestiments that the proprietors gave her each new Sexennial) for lunch and at the Pont de la Bota ("Boot Bridge") for the afternoon refreshment. The return trip is logically the other way around. During the journey, the pilgrims say the rosary, and sometimes stop to sing to the Virgin. All this follows a pre-established itinerary that has been preserved down through the ages, and that people in Morella strive to maintain.

Thus, the exact position occupied by each pilgrim, and his or her proximity to the image of the Virgin, was finally established in 1982 by the drawing of lots, held at the Torreta. This was due to a long history of heated debates taking place at the start of the procession, both at the Hostal Nou and the Pla dels Estudis, successfully remedied in this way. Another polemical matter was the participation of women in the pilgrimage, as recently commented on in the local press by Julián Pastor, administrator of the sanctuary of Vallivana, who stated "There have been many arguments in the bosom of the Commission of Lords, held at the Town Hall under the presidency of the Lord Mayor. There are indeed differing opinions; however, on behalf of this administration and on behalf of the clergy, there is no objection to women taking part."

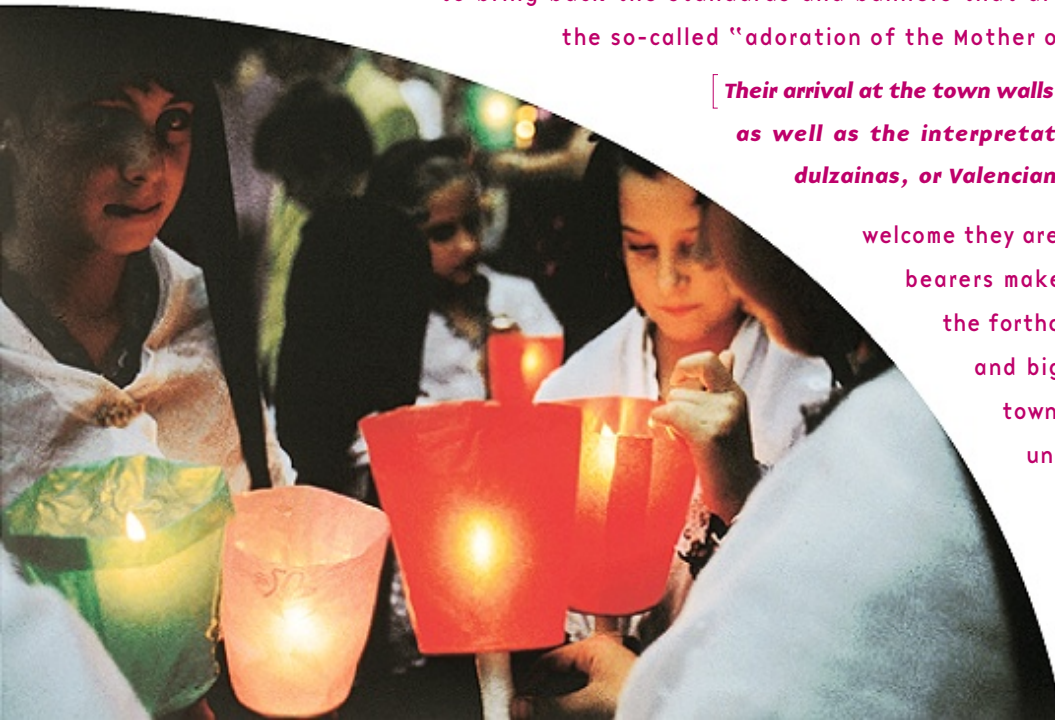
The pilgrims arrive at Vallivana at around six in the evening, spending the night there in a local hostel, yet not without singing numerous Hail Marys to their patron saint. On Saturday they arrive at the walled town again at dusk, which by then is totally decked out for the festival. Thousands of people flock to the gates to see the pilgrims walk in with the authentic image of the Virgin, a Gothic, 14th-century burnt clay figurine measuring some 25cm in height, after having deposited a replica at the sanctuary of Vallivana.

The porters of the Virgin wear dark-brimmed hats adorned with the medals that the administrator of the sanctuary gives to those who participate in both the outgoing and incoming rogatory processions held during the month of May. The Virgin travels inside a portable altar borne by the vicar of the church.

On Thursday eve of the festivities, the town holds the so-called “entrance of the colonies” – the Morellan Catalans and the Absent Morellans – through the monumental gateway of St Michael. These colonies comprise men and women who for reasons of their own, and usually with great suffering in their hearts, have been obliged to live outside the walls of the town. In the late afternoon they head for the sanctuary of Vallivana to bring back the standards and banners that are kept there, and they also stage the so-called “adoration of the Mother of God” before returning to Morella.

**[ *Their arrival at the town walls is announced by showers of fireworks, as well as the interpretation of the town anthem played on dulzainas, or Valencian pipes...* ]**

In response to the welcome they are given, one of the group of standard bearers makes an emotion-packed speech about the forthcoming festivities. Afterwards “giants and bigheads”, standard-bearers and the town float all parade through the streets until reaching the church square.










# RETAULE

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■ Following the vibrant welcome given to the Mother of God of Vallivana (normally held on the Saturday before the fourth Sunday in August, although occasionally brought forward to the third) come nine days of celebrations, the novena. In all of them the “retaule” plays an important role. The “retaule” is a procession in which all the different dance and Biblical troupes of the Sexennial Feast take part: Dansa dels Torners (The Turners’ Dance, one of the most spectacular, exclusive to the Sexennial festivity), Dansa dels Llauradores (The Farmers’ Dance), Carro Triomfant (Triumphal Carriage), Quadre d’Heroïnes Bíbliques (Biblical Heroines) Dansa dels Teixidors (The Weavers’ Dance), Dansa de les Gitanetes (Little Gypsies’ Dance), Dansa d’Arts i Oficis (Arts and Crafts Dance), Santetes (Little Saints) and Miravergeres (girls having taken their first Communion and representing the 11,000 virgins who defended themselves from the Barbarians, accompanied by Saint Ursula).







Among all the dances, the Turners' is the most unique, although both its name and its presentation are reminiscent of the Turners' Dance held during the procession of the Mother of God of Health in the town of Algemesí (Valencia). In Morella, however, the Turners' group is composed of youths entering military service in the current year – a rare privilege that only those who are born at the right time can hope to attain.

*[ They show a full repertoire of abilities using long, thin batons that they spin round in their hands, under their legs, round their necks and even throw up into the air and dextrously catch again in their hands. ]*

If a baton should fall they are obliged to pick it up using their feet only. During their dance they also perform acrobatics which are greatly applauded by the crowd.







This “retaule” is repeated on each of the nine days of the festival, and it is organised and subsidised by a different commission every day: the Town Council and the clergy (Sunday, with a solemn general procession), the Marquise (Monday, including a rosary with torchbearers, incorporated in 1922, during which Ave Marias are sung to Virgin of Vallivana), the Farmers Guild (Tuesday, with the Farmers’ Dance marking the highpoint), the Catalan colony (Wednesday), the Absent Morellans colony (Thursday), the Professional, Industrial and Transport Guild (Friday, with a triumphal carriage), the Tradesmen’s Guild (Saturday, with the special participation of the Biblical Heroine troupe: Queen Esther, Judith, Jael, Bathsheba, Sarah, Abigail, Salome, Ruth, Rebecca, Zipporah, Rachael and David), the Arts and Crafts Guild – blacksmiths, bakers, chair-makers, joiners, bricklayers, weavers, shoemakers and tailors – (Sunday, with the participation of the Weavers’ and the Arts and Crafts Dance, the Little Saints and the Little Virgins) and the Youth Guild (Monday, featuring the Little Gypsies’ Dance).

# GENERAL PROCESSION



■ From its very beginnings, the solemn general procession on Sunday marks the apotheosis of the celebration. Around the image of the Virgin are congregated all the main characters in the highly imaginative Morellan festivity: giants and bigheads, “l’àliga” (the eagle), dance companies, guilds, insignias and parochial crosses, banners, images of Saints, biblical characters (Jacob and his 12 sons, David and the head of Goliath, Abraham and Isaac, the four evangelists, among others), the triumphal carriage... All these are accompanied by solemn processional music supplied by the municipal band, and the merrier sounds of drum and dulzaina.











The itinerary is marked out by two “conventets” (small convents), which are actually small stages presided over by the image of the Virgin of Vallivana, where groups of girls dressed as nuns (accompanied by a diminutive chaplain) and other girls in religious garb sing songs “at the request of the public”. [ *When fascinated onlookers drop a coin onto a tray prepared by the girls for this purpose – true to the saying “no penny no paternoster” – they sing out:* ] “Ave Mari Stella / Dei Mater Alma / Atque Semper Virgo / Felix Coeli Porta”. These little convents, organised by each neighbourhood and known as “Soldevila” and “Sant Francesc”, are maintained throughout the festivity, much to the pleasure of all visitors.

There are many other attractions during the Sexennial, such as the acrobatic puppets known as “volantins” in the Calle de La Font. They are called Gertrude, Paul and Cleopatra, and their puppet hands are fastened to rods fixed high above the street. They fly round and round as the procession and the “retaules” go by, offering a curious example of trapeze artistry. In addition, there is the so-called “taula cap per avall” (the upside-down table) decked out with all sorts of provender, but then hung upside down without any of the food falling off.







In this very same street we encounter another sight referred to as "l'àngel de la taronja" (the angel of the orange). As the Virgin passes, the orange segments open up and a boy dressed as St Michael pops out. He recites verses, greets the public and when finished, he descends from the orange and joins the processional committee in front of the Mother of God.







# MORELLA

■ This old walled town, seat of the Els Ports district, full of history and sites to see, requires a leisurely stroll to start getting acquainted with it, either during the Sexennial, before or after it.

It is embraced by a stony enclosure measuring some 2.5km long, around 10m high and 2m thick. The town walls have 16 towers opening onto the outside world through six gateways, among which the St Matthew and St Michael gates are the most outstanding, both dating from the 14th century and playing major roles in the Sexennial and other festivities.

Dominating the town is the proud yet battered silhouette of the castle, standing above the maze of steep streets girdling the slope of the hill and offering an unforgettable sight when magnificently illuminated at night. A visit to the top will give the sightseer a panorama such as the one commanded by the infamous Ramón Cabrera, known as the Tiger of the Maestrazgo Mountains, who defended this hilltop domain in the mid-19th century during the Carlist Wars.







***[The Gothic basilica of Holy Mary the Highest, from the 13th century, is one of the privileged scenarios of the Sexennial Feast.]***

***Its Door of the Apostles and Virgin, painstakingly sculpted in stone, open onto a choir accessible by a spiral staircase running around a column. Inside the church is a restored 18th-century organ. Close to the church is the restored Convent of Saint Francis, dating from the 13th century, today a site for staging cultural events. Also worth visiting are sights such as the arcaded street Calle Blasco de Alagón, with its traditional shops, the Gothic 15th-century Town Hall, the mansions belonging to ancient noblemen, and other important buildings bearing coats of arms, plus the interminable stairways going up and down the steep slope, and the numerous ceramic plaques showing some of the miracles attributed to St Vicente Ferrer.***



The town has a palaeontological museum with remains of the dinosaurs that inhabited this region 65 million years ago, and 8km from the Els Ports district seat, in Morella la Vella, visitors can see the remains of Iberian settlements and rock shelter paintings from the Late Palaeolithic.

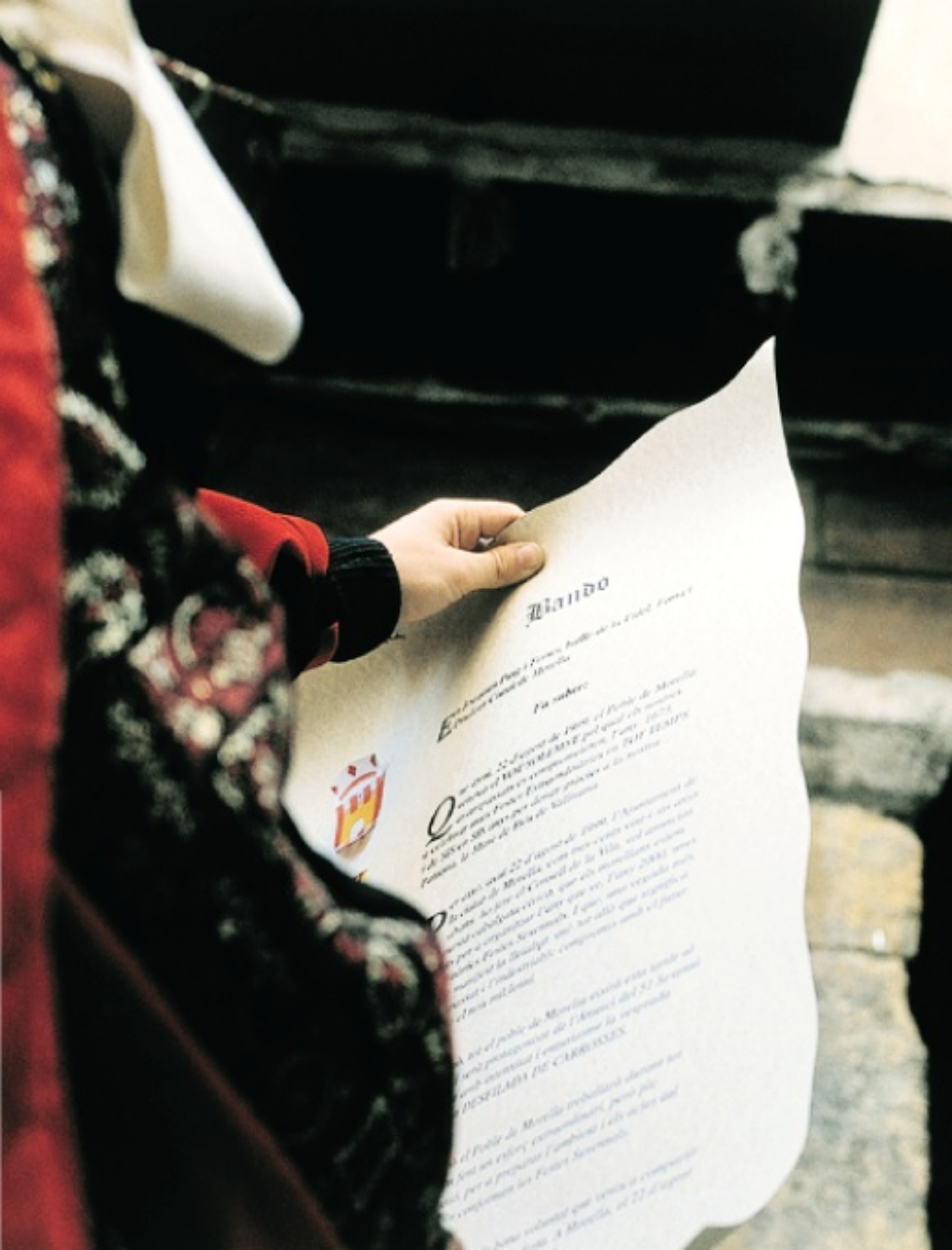
According to the local writer Santiago Casanova i Giner, from the back cover of a facsimile edition of some 19th-century verses honouring the Virgin, published in 1988, “Morella [as translated from the Valencian] is the mother of many illustrious sons. Among them we can mention two cardinals, thirteen bishops, two viceroys and a veritable multitude of wise men and virtuous priests and religious men, poets, musicians and writers... During Medieval times and the Renaissance it was an important art centre for painters, sculptors, enamellers, ceramists and wrought iron masters.”

Fortunately, there are still many surviving examples of the work of these illustrious men.





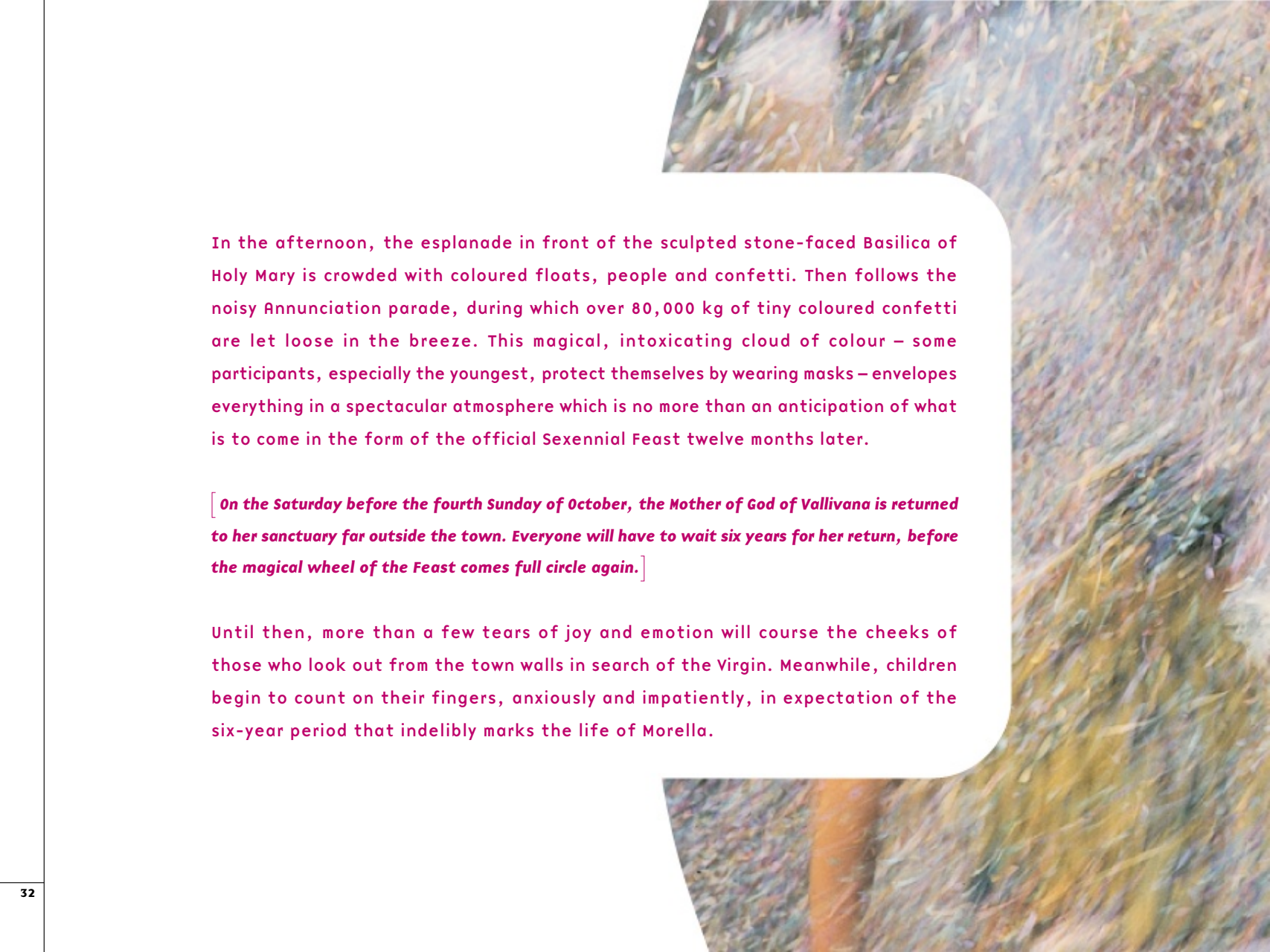
# L'ANUNCI





■ Taking place the year before the Sexennial Feast, normally on the last Sunday of August, is the so-called “L’Anunci” (The Annunciation). During this celebration, a herald rides through the town proclaiming the forthcoming festival, first in front of the restored Town Hall, and then at other important points around the town. Drums and dulzainas, giants and bigheads, accompany him on his way round the streets.





In the afternoon, the esplanade in front of the sculpted stone-faced Basilica of Holy Mary is crowded with coloured floats, people and confetti. Then follows the noisy Annunciation parade, during which over 80,000 kg of tiny coloured confetti are let loose in the breeze. This magical, intoxicating cloud of colour – some participants, especially the youngest, protect themselves by wearing masks – envelopes everything in a spectacular atmosphere which is no more than an anticipation of what is to come in the form of the official Sexennial Feast twelve months later.

*[ On the Saturday before the fourth Sunday of October, the Mother of God of Vallivana is returned to her sanctuary far outside the town. Everyone will have to wait six years for her return, before the magical wheel of the Feast comes full circle again. ]*

Until then, more than a few tears of joy and emotion will course the cheeks of those who look out from the town walls in search of the Virgin. Meanwhile, children begin to count on their fingers, anxiously and impatiently, in expectation of the six-year period that indelibly marks the life of Morella.





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