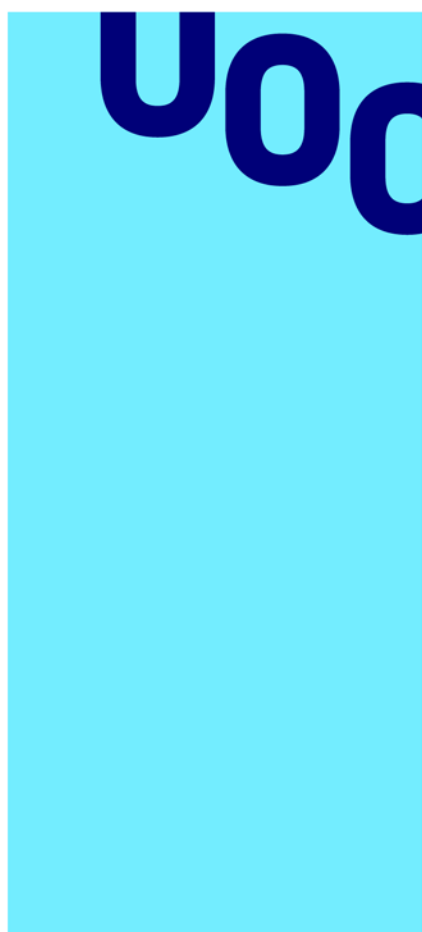


# Dr Manuel Borja-Villel

**Honorary doctorate  
award ceremony**

4 July 2018



Universitat Oberta  
de Catalunya



# Ceremony to award Dr Manuel Borja-Villel an honorary doctorate

President and members of the UOC's Board of Trustees, General Secretary, Dr Borja-Villel, Dr Fuster-Sobrepere, mayor of Borriana, vice presidents, professors, museum directors, ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to today's ceremony to award Dr Manuel Borja-Villel an honorary doctorate from our university. We began by listening to the voice of Mayte Martín, accompanied on the guitar by Alejandro Hurtado. With her musical sensitivity, she has brought us a taste of the rich tradition of flamenco. During her career, she has never ceased to explore new inspirations and fusions. Because as she herself says: *"flamenco is my origin, not my yoke"*.

What guarantees the survival of a musical style – or any other artistic work, I would dare to add – is its ability to reach out to us, to move us and to become part of our own personal soundtrack, as individuals and as a society.

The same is true, for example, with opera. For those of us who enjoy it, it is as much ours as it is Italy's or Germany's, and the Liceu is as important as any of the major French or American opera houses.

To show just how much opera is embedded in our culture, the very first opera performance in all of Spain was given in this building, the Llotja, in 1708, coinciding with the presence of the Archduke of Austria's court in Barcelona during the War of Spanish Succession.

Three hundred years later, this building and the institutions it houses remind us, through their art collections and their history, that economic and social progress is inseparable from technical and cultural progress. And I am not just talking about opera, but also the Free School of Design, opened in 1775.

A pioneering institution that, with time, would change its name, but not its spirit as the core of art education in Catalonia. This is where the origins of the "Llotja", as it was (and still is) popularly known, lie.

So, as you can see, there are more than enough reasons both to hold this event here, and to thank the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, ex officio member of the UOC's Board of Trustees, for its hospitality.

Having briefly explained the significance of this building, it is now the turn of Dr Joan Fuster-Sobrepere, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, to speak and give the oration for Dr Borja-Villel.

## **Oration by Dr Joan Fuster, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities**

Dignitaries, president, my friend Manuel Borja, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Manuel Borja-Villel is a historian who has had a decisive influence in redefining art's place in society by developing narratives through the combination of images in exhibitions. In the process, as a museographical programmer, he has explored ways to redefine the museum's institutional identity. In short, through a process of continual enquiry, he has sought to answer the question: *for what purpose and in what ways can art be placed at the service of people?*

His career in museums began in the city of Barcelona where he was director of the Tàpies Foundation and then the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA); later, he moved to Madrid as director of the Museo Reina Sofía. In his own succinct description of his career: "If there is one common theme that has followed me in my journey through these three museums, it has not been pessimism, but the belief that it is possible to change the institution from within. Even in its anachronistic and chaotic state, the modern museum can still play a significant role in the transformation of our social imaginary".

Manuel Borja-Villel was born in Borriana, Valencia, into a working-class family. He studied Art History at the University of Valencia and, upon graduating, he won a Fulbright scholarship to pursue postgraduate studies at Yale University. He spent ten years in the United States, completing his education with a doctoral thesis on Antoni Tàpies at the City University of New York's Graduate Center.

With this background, he chose museography as his field for experimentation over a career as a critic or academic, initially because of his shyness, but behind that choice, there was also the desire – as he himself put it – to "relate images and build a critical mental construct of the history of art while at the same time developing a political criticism of the art institution as such".

It was at this point that he met the late Miquel Tàpies – the Tàpies Foundation's first director – who offered him the job as director of the museum. So, in 1991, he came to Barcelona. The Tàpies Foundation, conceived as a tribute to Barcelona's most renowned artist of the time, was running the risk of becoming a mausoleum, but it had the advantage of being a blank sheet of paper, of being able to start with a clean slate. Manolo realized this, and perhaps Miquel Tàpies did too. Precisely because of that, the main task during those early years was to revisit the artist's work and reposition it within the history of art on the one hand and rethink the museum's institutional identity on the other.

The first goal was achieved with memorable exhibitions ("Communication on the Wall" in 1993 and "Celebration of Honey" in 1992); the second goal became a lengthy process of experimentation

and learning. An innovative programme of exhibitions helped, but the real learning process started when the museum began a dialogue with the city, heralded by the exhibition “The People’s City”. In a context in which museums were beginning to play a central role in the cities’ renewal process, criticizing the institution became a means for entering public debate and giving voice to dissent. Cultural management took on an ethical dimension. Whatever the case, in just a few years, the Tàpies Foundation had become a leading light.

When Manolo was appointed director of MACBA in 1998, which was when I first met him, the challenge was substantial. Opened three years earlier, the museum was trapped in a series of ambiguities that continuously brought into question its function in the city, forcing it to address false dilemmas. For instance, the discussion about whether its function was to project Barcelona as part of the art globalization process – one of the correlates of neoliberal globalization – or situate it in the local or national tradition; or the discussion about the role of the public or private sector, depending on the sources of funding, at a time when the Keynesian expansion of public spending had dried up. These discussions led to abstract, superfluous debates while the centre was still without a clear project.

Borja tried to resolve this by subverting the museum’s very identity as an institution. Neither global nor local nor national but vernacular: in other words, rooted in the material reality of a territory, its people, experiences, and a memory, but within a dynamic structure. It was a museum adapted to its surroundings.

Here too, in a way, he could start with a clean slate. The fact that there was no consolidated collection and the lack of resources to build a stellar collection moved him to diversify exhibition formats, devote attention to photography, to cinema, to documents, while also fulfilling the archival function. To focus on developing the Documentation Centre, the library and the publications, but above all, to focus on the public or, indeed, publics.

In Borja’s mind, if the conception of the museum as it had come down to us from the Enlightenment was obsolete and attributing a role as consumer to the public was unacceptable, the starting point must necessarily be the realization that outside of the museum there was a civil society composed of sectors in conflict. In this respect, the museum is not even conceived as a heritage owned by public authorities and cultural agents. It is a heritage owned by the citizens. The public museum’s task is to place itself at the service of society’s true complexity, to assist in radicalizing democracy through culture. That means including criticism of the democratic institutions themselves and how society works. So the institution has to think about how other publics are built that broaden this function. In actual fact, “the public” does not exist but rather it is a continual construction of citizenship in which the museum can take part by offering critical tools. The museum possesses a body of knowledge that perhaps many people do not have, but there are many things that society knows and which the museum does not. As a result, the education in democracy that the museum can give becomes an emancipating experience, because it is a process in which the institution and its publics ask themselves questions together.

This is the idea guiding the public programmes, which became an invitation to activist art and the social movements – which were just starting to question citizen consensus in an acute phase of global social conflict – to engage with the museum.

However, this by no means marked the limit of the museum's function. Drawing from Mallarmé, in the exhibition "Art and Utopia", Borja proposed an attempt to close the gap between two trends in art history that never seem to converge: art for art's sake and committed art. Bringing them together means building another history of modern art that puts the emphasis on the artistic work's self-sufficiency, beyond any reference to the milieu and on its ability to resist commodification, creating a space in which a relationship with the spectator can exist that elicits intimate, personal reflection.

There remained one more inescapable challenge: the institution's funding. The debate was not about whether to seek public or private sources of funding, but to powerfully ground the museum on a policy where it was the public that put its legitimacy beyond question, and, while accepting the need for private sponsorship, build what Borja aptly called "grassroots patronage".

Lastly, there was the creation of the Independent Studies Programme, giving voice to Borja's concern to modernize artistic syllabuses.

The MACBA experience was intense, at times contradictory maybe, but definitely successful. But there came a time when Borja decided he had to move on and considered applying for the position of director of the Museo Reina Sofía. As Borja himself explained: "There was a risk of shaping MACBA's museographic project in my own image if the museum did not start to walk on its own feet, assuming a continuity of its own without my leading it".

There was no clean slate to start with at the Reina Sofía. Already an acknowledged institution within the global art system, with its consolidated collection full of canonical works, it offered a very different challenge. Perhaps there is no better way to show how Borja addressed the challenge than with the case of *Guernica*. An emblematic work in any discourse on art and politics in our country, its exhibition as the museum's chief attraction was in itself a manifesto of everything that Borja had tried to subvert during his career. Perhaps this is why the *Guernica* hall was one of the first that Borja redesigned.

His solution was to shift the focus. If until now the work had been shown in isolation, aggrandized as the celebration of the artist's genius, Borja completely subverted the setting. *Guernica* was now exhibited beside a series of materials that sought to recreate the original functional conditions under which it was painted. The *Guernica* hall was converted to depict the Spanish Republic's Pavilion in the 1937 Paris Expo, evoking the Republican government's endeavour to show the world the democratizing influence of its cultural work. The posters, the model of the building, the model of Calder's Mercury Fountain, the films about the 1930s that were exhibited at the Pavilion, all acted as counterweights to Picasso's work and reconstructed *Guernica*'s original meaning. It was an unequivocal cry against the war that fascism had unleashed against the democratic ideal of the Spanish Republic. Not just to evoke the past. But to manifest it in the present with all its force and meaning.

It would be impossible to summarize here Manolo Borja's rich and lengthy career as director of the Museo Reina Sofía. Perhaps I could just highlight the importance of Manolo's idea of the expanded or networked museum and how the museum has been articulated with other agents, specifically, Latin American groups of artistic and political reflection, cultural activists, and other museums that share a vision of the history of contemporary art, and how the Reina Sofía has been

the central node of these connections. And perhaps I would leave it at that to avoid taking up too much time.

As a last point, I would like to highlight Manuel Borja-Villel's ties with our university, which has culminated in the agreement to offer a fully online Bachelor's Degree in Art jointly with the Museo Reina Sofía. The idea of expanding our courses to cover art was one of the first tasks that President Planell entrusted me with in 2014. It was a difficult venture but, at the same time, a stimulating challenge that could push the very limits of the UOC's areas of knowledge, its teaching and its technology. So, with Jordi Martí, with fearful hearts – there's no point in denying it – we began a series of contacts with professionals from the art world: artists, critics, and museum directors. The response exceeded our expectations but final confirmation – not just of our project's viability, but of the urgent need to modernize art education – came with Manolo's commitment and inspirational approach to the task. He had advocated that the museum's role could not be that of an isolated institution but had to be relational. And he had also expressed interest in the teaching and democratization of art. So, given these premises, his enthusiastic response was perhaps not so surprising.

Over the next two years, a core team from our faculty, led by Laia Blasco, a group of professionals from the Museo Reina Sofía – I would like to gratefully acknowledge Berta Sureda – and other outside experts, artists and critics, designed a programme that is transmedia in its handling of art media and wide-ranging in its coverage of art forms. Three hundred students enrolled for the 2017/2018 academic year.

Perhaps Manolo is not fully aware of this, or perhaps he is, but his unwavering commitment to the proposal, the optimism with which he has approached the lengthy process, and his institutional and personal confidence have been essential for this project's successful conclusion. And we are grateful to him for that.

Over the course of his lengthy career as a museographer and curator, Borja-Villel has shown a true calling to research with a limitless capacity to learn and accept the unexpected; an unwavering civic commitment, conveyed in his tenacious faith in the institutions as a public service devoted to democratizing culture and society; and a constant attraction to artistic expression, in all its breadth, that offers the possibility for change. These values and the achievements that endorse them can only be shared and celebrated by inviting him today to join our academic community as an honorary member.

Dr Pere Fabra, general secretary of the UOC, will now read the decision reached by the Executive Board to award Dr Manuel Borja-Villel an honorary doctorate.

## **Dr Pere Fabra, general secretary of the UOC, reads the decision reached by the Executive Board**

## **Dr Manuel Borja-Villel is awarded the title of honorary doctor**

## **Musical interlude from Mayte Martín and Alejandro Hurtado**

We have just listened to another piece by Mayte Martín and I would like to publicly express to her my gratitude and the gratitude of the whole university. Because, perhaps, from where the audience is sitting, performing a piece of music is a minor challenge, easily met if one has enough skill and experience. But I know that the reality is quite the opposite. With just one piece, there is no margin for error, there is no time to tune your voice, there is no room to win the audience's favour.

You have to get it right from the very first note... And, judging from the audience's reaction, it seems obvious that the performance has been spot on.

Thank you very much, Mayte Martín, Alejandro Hurtado. This pressure, this demand to be the best, to not disappoint but to enthuse, has also been a constant in the career of Dr Borja-Villel. As Dr Fuster-Sobrepera has explained, he has been – and is – the manager of and mastermind behind institutions that play key roles in the cultural life of Barcelona and Madrid. And, like Mayte Martín, he had to take up the challenge and get it just right. And he did. And it is he who, today, the UOC is proud to welcome as a member of the university. Dr Borja-Villel, the stage is yours.

## **Speech by Dr Manuel Borja-Villel on being awarded an honorary doctorate**

## **Words from Dr Josep A. Planell, president of the UOC**

Awarding an honorary doctorate means that leading figures from outside a university can be invited to form part of it. It is an honour, and what is more, an honour for both sides. Firstly, these awards let the institution establish the kind of genealogy it aspires to, a way of understanding the scholarship and research with which it identifies and wishes to project.

In this respect, the career and vision of Dr Borja-Villel is a spur to explore a path that no one better than him exemplifies: the ability to think “outside the box”, to use a colloquial expression; **to see opportunities where others only see obstacles**. In all frankness, frontiers don't get very good



press, as they are often seen as barriers or obstacles. I say often, because that's not always the case. The lines drawn on maps, for example, separate spaces on an administrative level, but that doesn't mean that they cut off any type of bond or relationship between the two sides of the line.

On the contrary, we know that frontiers are porous, and divisions are more for political than economic, cultural or historical reasons. If we look southwards, to the area lying astride the provinces of Teruel, Castelló and Tarragona, we will discover that, above provincial divisions – and far from their respective provincial capitals – there is a linguistic, cultural, social and economic unity. I don't know to what extent having been born in Borriana, in that frontier land, shaped Dr Borja-Villel's future approach to the world of art and museums, but, looking back on his career, it is obvious that frontiers have never been a limit, but a challenge, a space to conquer.

This was said earlier by Dr Fuster-Sobrepere, when he highlighted how, throughout his career, our new honorary doctor has always sought to break pre-established limits, explore unknown territories, and see frontiers as spaces for innovation and creativity.

For example, when he transformed both the institution and the vision of Tàpies and his work; when he opened MACBA beyond its physical and foundational limits; when he broke the chronological boundaries that had defined the Museo Reina Sofía; or when he became the ideal partner to help us turn “**that's impossible**” into a successful Bachelor's Degree in Art that is currently being rolled out at our university. As Dr Borja-Villel said, this programme is our contribution to the fight to help transform institutions.

This way of seeing frontiers as both dynamic and fragile can also be found in many other disciplines.

In my work as a researcher, when we used to grow crystals from a fluid, we would see how the atomic structures gradually acquired volume in ordered networks. However, order and growth had a limit when the crystals came into contact with each other.

Contact brought with it a region of disorder between the crystals, where the inner spaces were larger, where contamination with other elements was more feasible, where corrosion could find paths for entry thanks to the greater presence of oxygen...

In other words, homogeneity disappeared and gave way to dynamism, where order was replaced by uncertainty. Heterogeneity, dynamism, uncertainty... these are words that we immediately associate with opportunity, creativity, knowledge; words that we associate with the concept of frontier.

**Exploring these frontier lands has been a constant in Dr Borja-Villel's career. Exploring these frontier lands should be a necessary prerequisite for anyone who devotes themselves to art, humanities, science, engineering, research, teaching or management.**

**It is toward these unexplored lands that the UOC must go. Because, if we stay within our known comfort zones, maybe our lives will be quieter, but we will not be fulfilling what a university should be; what our university has been since its foundation.**



At the same time, exploring new limits must be compatible with a necessary spirit of societal impact, public utility, the progress of knowledge.

Marc Bloch, a leading French historian, made some very pertinent reflections on this very issue. In fact, as a man faithful to his philosophy, his work was almost lost when, in 1943, he joined the French Resistance to fight the Nazi occupation, until he was arrested and executed in June 1944. Fortunately, the manuscript could be published after the War.

In this manuscript, Bloch said that **in order to lend social legitimacy to intellectual effort, history cannot be confined to aesthetic enjoyment or to accumulating erudition, but, like any other scientific work – and let me add artistic or cultural work – it must also make that studied more intelligible. And it must do so while helping us to live better.**

**In his work, Dr Borja-Villel has more than fulfilled the requirements defined by Bloch. He has eschewed pure aesthetics and erudition and devoted himself to the intelligibility of artistic creation, tradition and contemporaneity, and to helping us live better. This is what the UOC must hold itself up to, this must be our aspiration as a university.**

**To help us, we have a powerful educational, training and research tool in the form of the web; and we have built a brief but impressive track record, driven by people accustomed to thinking “outside the box”, going beyond limits, leveraging the disruptive power offered by the internet to turn away from emulating the past and envisage a university of the future.**

Dr Borja-Villel, today a new honorary member of our university, leads the way and reaffirms us in this commitment. And for this we thank him sincerely for his example and generosity. We will close today's ceremony with a version of *Gaudeamus Igitur*, as we do at all such academic events. It is a version, however, that is very different to the traditional versions. With the utmost respect and the highest musical and audiovisual standards, we have looked to make it our own; to make it UOC. So, we close today's event with a version of *Gaudeamus Igitur* that is both solemn and festive.

Thank you very much.

[w.uoc.edu/hc/borja-villel](http://w.uoc.edu/hc/borja-villel)  
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