

Santiago Ramón y Cajal at the Ateneo in Madrid

Santiago Ramón y Cajal, founder of modern neuroscience, was born in Petilla de Aragón (Navarra, Spain) on the 1st of May 1852 and died in Madrid in 1934. He was member number 6.074 of the *Ateneo* (or Athenaeum). The *Ateneo*, at the time, was considered a refuge for free expression and thought; it was referred to as “Spain’s little Holland”. At the *Ateneo*, Ramón y Cajal was President of the Exact, Physical and Natural Sciences department in 1895-1896, and Vice-President of the Governing Board in 1898-1899.



Madrazo y Garreta, Ricardo de (1852-1917). **Portrait of Santiago Ramón y Cajal**. Oil on canvas, 69x61 cm. Inventory N°: AM/00053-A. Collection of the Scientific, Literary and Artistic *Ateneo* in Madrid.

Particularly Segismundo Moret, President of the *Ateneo* in the period 1894-1898 and 1899-1913, was on good terms with Ramón y Cajal. Moret considered that the *Ateneo* was the most important cultural center in Spain. He wanted to turn it into an outstanding teaching institution. On June 29th 1896, Moret proposed a plan to create a Graduate School to the General Board, a place where science could be cultivated for the sake of science. His plan was unanimously approved.

In 1896-1897 the first course began. The classes were given by 22 chairs. Among them are José Echegaray (Nobel prize for Literature in 1904), the writer Emilia Pardo Bazán teaching on contemporary literature, and the writer Leopoldo Alas Clarín. Ramón y Cajal, who holds the Chair for *Structure and Activity of the Nervous System*, offers two courses,

one in 1896-1897 and another in 1897-1898. A large number of students ~~assist~~ attend his classes on the nervous system, ~~taking~~ that took place each Saturday from 6pm to 7pm.

Their activities bear witness to the intellectual rigor of Krausopositivism in Spanish scientific thought by the end of the 19th century. They are also related to the Free Institution of Education [*La Institución Libre de Enseñanza*] created in 1876, which is to influence most of the initiatives for pedagogical renovation.

In 1899 several laboratories (for Biology, Psychology and Anthropology) were founded at the *Ateneo*, with the purpose of “experimental investigation, a direct professor-student relation and team-work”, within “the most valued Athenaeum tradition” (Villacorta, 1985, cited by Olmos, 2018, p. 444). Ramón y Cajal was in charge of the Biology lab.

On December 6th 1906, 54-year-old Ramón y Cajal ~~obtains~~ is awarded the Nobel prize in Physiology, together with Camilo Golgi, a scientific adversary. His lecture upon receiving the prize is called: “The structure and connections of neurons”. Unlike Golgi, he defends the neuronal conception of the nervous system, that is, a whole of separate but interconnected neurons.

The same year, Segismundo Moret, who was also leader of the Liberal Party, offers him the Public Instruction portfolio so as to reform education Moret accepts the proposals made by Ramón y Cajal, namely: to get the University out of its lethargic state, to hire foreign investigators, to send the best young intellectuals to foreign centers for their formation and to establish a kind of “Collège de France”. Despite Moret’s good intentions, Ramón y Cajal thinks that this would be difficult to realize and rejects the portfolio. Nevertheless, in 1907 Ramón y Cajal accepts the presidency of the “Board for enlarging Scientific Studies and Investigations” and he remains president until his death. This board gives scholarships to students for studying abroad. He is also involved in the Mental Hygiene movement of the 1920’s, presiding the Spanish League for Mental Hygiene (Campos 2022; Villasante, 2022).

Ramón y Cajal belongs to Spain’s revered Generation of `98 [*Generación del 98*], involving writers, essayists and poets. Yet in 1900, during the tribute organized by the Central University, he states to the faculty members: “I am not really a sage, but rather a patriot, more of a tireless worker than a calculating architect, more soldier than captain; in sum, more a man of action than a man of thought and words” (cited by Moreno, 2004). He distinguishes between original and copied science, stating that “nobody wants to create, because creation is long and painful work”. He considers that an adequate social

environment is needed for scientific activity. That Spain lags behind in comparison to other countries can be repaired by the unique circle of teachers, through which the state can work directly and effectively. Ramón y Cajal thinks that by rapidly transforming the professor into a European, his students and the entire nation can be made more European.

When Moret passes away in 1913, elections for the *Ateneo* presidency are held. Ramón y Cajal defeats - with 226 against 201 votes - the other candidate, Álvaro de Figueroa y Torres, the count of Romanones who is Government leader at the time. Paradoxically, Ramón y Cajal does not authorize his candidacy. It takes him less than a minute to send the *Ateneo* his irrevocable resignation to occupying the position of President, due to “his many occupations” in laboratory work. He never strayed from investigation.

In 1916, the *Ateneo* participates in a visit to France in favor of the allied forces. Manuel Azaña, another distinguished member and president of the *Ateneo* (in 1930-1932), as well as president of the Second Spanish Republic (1936-1939), places himself at the front. The delegation includes the Count of Alba, Américo Castro and Menéndez Pidal among others. Ramón y Cajal resigns, for health reasons.

When Ramón y Cajal, aged 82, passes away in October 1934, the whole *Ateneo*, both directors and associates, jointly with members of the Government and representatives of the highest social and cultural spheres, follow his coffin in procession.

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