

Joan Miró: An artist “in the service of mankind”

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The works of Joan Miró were the subject of a recent major retrospective exhibition, “The Ladder of Escape”, at the Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona.



Joan Miró, *Head of a Catalan Peasant* 1925
Tate © Succession Miró/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London

The exhibition first appeared at the Tate Modern in London last year, attracting huge crowds, and will open at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. on May 6.

On display are more than 150 paintings, drawings, sculptures and prints highlighting the artist’s response to three turbulent periods in the twentieth century—the years following World War 1 and the Russian Revolution (1918-25), the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent fascist dictatorship (1934-41) and the radical upsurge of 1968-75.

The exhibition shows that Miró, in his own words, saw the role of the artist “to be someone, who amidst the silence of others, uses his voice to say something and who has the obligation that this thing not be useless but something that is of service to mankind”.

Born in 1893, the young Joan spent his childhood in Barcelona, a city undergoing rapid industrialisation and generating explosive struggles by the working class. In 1911, Miró’s watchmaker father bought a small farm at Montroig some 120 kilometres from Barcelona, where the young artist spent long periods painting.



Joan Miró *The Escape Ladder* 1940
Museum of Modern Art, New York © Joan Miró and Fundació Joan Miró,

In 1917, Spain’s first nationwide general strike took place, along with rural revolts by landless labourers and insurrections in the cities, leading to a state of war being declared in Barcelona. The future dictator Francisco Franco participated in the murderous assault on the miners’ strike in Asturias in which 80 workers were killed. Miró spoke with deep regret of how his regiment was forced to break up strikes and fire on workers while he was on military service.

He reacted by co-founding a group named after the artist Gustave Courbet, whose paintings of peasants, petty bourgeois townsfolk and labourers reflected a desire to be “a partisan of the revolution and above all a Realist ... for ‘Realist’ means a sincere lover of the honest truth”.

Miró’s own work was highly detailed, as can be seen in the “House with Palm Tree” (1918). However, his hallmark dreamlike symbols and signs soon began to emerge firstly in the “The Farm” (1921-22) and then “The Tilled Field” (1923-4).

This development coincided with Miró’s annual visits to Paris from 1920 onward and his contact with the surrealist movement. André Breton described Miró as “the most ‘surrealist’ of us all”, although he criticised him for undervaluing the “chemistry of the intellect” and his tendency “to demand nothing from reality but the superexpressive, the expressive in its most childlike sense”.

Perhaps Breton was referring to Miró’s series of works begun in 1924 featuring the archetypal stick like figure of a Catalan peasant with traditional red *barretina* hat, rifle, pipe and wispy beard (picture 1). For Miró, “the strong, the independent, the resistant” peasant was an alter ego and the images a symbol of opposition to the 1923 military coup of Miguel Primo de Rivera, the response of the Spanish bourgeoisie to the period 1919-1921, known as the “three Bolshevik years”.

Many of the most advanced figures within surrealism joined the French Communist Party (PCF), but by the late 1920s Breton and others had broken from Stalinism in order to remain associated with the revolutionary communism of Leon Trotsky. The likes of Paul Eluard and Louis Aragon accepted Moscow's political line and its so-called "socialist realism"—breaking from surrealism to become little more than Stalinist functionaries in the PCF.

Miró kept his distance from the political struggle. He refused to accept Stalinist art declaring, "The worst thing that could happen would be to put ourselves above the crowd, to flatter it by telling miserable little stories. The present leaders, the bastard products of politics and the artists who claim to be regenerating the world are going to poison our last sources of renewal. While they talk about nobility and tradition or, on the contrary, about revolution and the proletarian paradise, we see how their little bellies grow and how the fat invades their souls".

The exhibition jumps to the period after the fall of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship in 1931, which ushered in the start of the Spanish Revolution. A Republican-Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government was elected with a huge majority, but its failure to carry out land reforms and improve working conditions led to the loss of much of its support amongst workers, and encouraged the growth of right-wing parties.

In 1933, faced with a number of attempted military coups, and an increasingly combative working class, the government collapsed and a right-wing coalition government was formed. The appointment of three members of the extreme conservative Catholic Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rightist Groups as ministers in October 1934 precipitated an uprising in Asturias and the proclamation of an independent republic of Catalonia, which were rapidly crushed.

Miró wrote, "We are living through a terrible drama, everything in Spain is terrifying in a way you could not imagine".

He undertook a series of violent, sexually charged "savage paintings" dated October 1934 and simply entitled "Man", "Woman" or "Person".

They were followed by a sequence of paintings with dramatic names such as the "Two Philosophers", and "Figures in the Presence of a Metamorphosis", which reflect the polarisation that developed during 1934-35, the "two black years" of reaction.

Following elections in February 1936, a Popular Front coalition government was formed comprising the PSOE, the Communist Party, separatist and pro-capitalist Republican parties. With the aid of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the workers' militias were disbanded, press censorship reinstated and the seized farms and factories handed back to the bourgeoisie.

Just five months later, Franco, backed by the Catholic Church, the big landowners and the most powerful sections of finance and industry, launched his coup. Miró was at Montroig at the time and reacted with a set of 27 works simply entitled "Paintings", daubed with black tar embedded with sand. He objected to them being called abstract, declaring, "I cannot understand—and consider it an insult—to be placed in the category of 'abstract painters'... As if the marks I put on a canvas did not correspond to a concrete representation of my mind, did not possess a profound reality, were not a part of the real itself!"

In late 1936 Miró went into exile in France, but he remained preoccupied with the Civil War. He returned to a luminescent realism with "Still Life with Old Shoe" (1937) in an attempt to portray "the moving poetry that exists in the humblest of things and the radiant spiritual forces that emanate from them".

The following year, Miró took part in the Paris International Exhibition, designing the powerful stamp size print, "Help Spain" for sale in the Republican Pavilion. He wrote beneath the image, "In the current conflict on the Fascist side I see massive forces; on the other side are the people whose immense and creative resourcefulness will give Spain a vitality which will astonish the world".

Miró's five and a half metre high "direct and brutal" mural, now lost, of "The Reaper" (1937) waving its scythe hung side by side with Pablo Picasso's "Guernica".

As the fascist forces advanced on Barcelona and Madrid, Miró produced a set of distressed, vulnerable images with titles such as "Woman Fleeing a Fire" (1939). Within weeks the revolutionary movement of the Spanish working class was crushed, thanks to the policies of the Stalinists, above all, and Franco proceeded to destroy every aspect of the workers' organisations. Hundreds of thousands were imprisoned, tortured and executed in an orgy of repression that was to last nearly forty years.

Miró signalled his intention to resist, "There is no longer an ivory tower. Retreat and isolation are no longer possible", and insisted there was a "deep necessity" for the artist to "take part in social upheavals, that attaches him and his work to the heart and flesh of his neighbour and makes the need for liberation in all of us a need of his own".

He began on what is probably his most famous and beautiful series the "Constellations" in January 1940, including the "The Escape Ladder" (picture 2). Breton declared the new paintings a "gust of fresh air" and proof that Miró had joined "the loud chorus of the most inspired voices of all time".

In 1941 Miró returned with his family to Montroig to finish the Constellations series and begin work on 50 black and white prints for the Barcelona Series. Miró said the "violent" nature of his works often depicting a central oppressive character (Franco as "ogre" or "bogeyman") surrounded by diminutive victims and their "sense of liberty", was his means of opposing the regime.

The third part of the exhibition deals with Miró's response to the revolutionary upsurge that began in 1968 and led to the end of the fascist regime in Spain. With his "May 68", Miró wanted to portray "a sense of drama and expectation in equal measure ... that unforgettable rebellion of youth, not uncharacteristic of our time".

The painter continued to refuse to participate in official events, including those held by the regime in 1969 to celebrate his 75th birthday. Instead, he took part in "The Other Miró" exhibition, painting a huge "action mural" on the windows of the Association of Architects in Barcelona denouncing political repression and proclaiming "Death to the ogre".

In 1973 Miró produced the "Burnt Canvases" series, which involved a complicated process of painting, cutting and burning. They were inspired, he says, by an attack by youths on the Stock Exchange and criticism of the art establishment—"another way of saying shit to all those people who say that these canvasses are worth a fortune".

While Miró was creating the "Burnt Canvases", Franco's Prime Minister Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco was assassinated. In the same year, a young anarchist Salvador Puig Antich was unjustly accused of the shooting of a Civil Guard officer during a shoot-out. Miró completed a huge triptych, "The Hope of a Condemned Man" (1974), on the day Antich was executed by garrote. In each of the three paintings a blob of colour seeks to break free from an enveloping black line. Miró described how the "minimalist" triptych form, first begun in 1961-62 inspired by visits to New York and contact with abstract expressionist painters involved "an enormous effort on my part, a very great inner tension [in order] to reach the emptiness I wanted".

Miró did not confine himself to paintings. The final room of the exhibition shows some of his bronze sculptures and the wooden "Majesties" created in 1974 from discarded farm implements that mock the idea of royalty—the king, queen and prince of Spain.

The retrospective reveals that virtually until the day he died, on December 25, 1983, Miró continued to produce works of art with a profound aesthetic and social content. He understood that "The outer world, the world of contemporary events, always has an influence on the painter ... The forms expressed by an individual who is part of society

must reveal the movement of a soul trying to escape the reality of the present, which is particularly ignoble today, in order to approach new realities, to offer men the possibility of rising above the present”.

The symbol of the ladder, for Miró, represented this hope and “elevation” and not just a means of escape as the title of the exhibition might first suggest.

The visitor to the Barcelona exhibition was made aware of the attempt by the organisers, the Institut Ramon Llull, set up by the governments of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands and “dedicated to the international promotion of the Catalan language and the culture of the areas in which Catalan is spoken”, to use Miró to promote Catalan nationalism.

Always Miró was careful to describe himself as “an internationalist Catalan” and that “a homespun Catalan is not and never will be worth anything in the world”. He detested the parochial, anti-modern character of the Catalan nationalist forces.

Moreover, his magnificent statement made after the death of Franco in 1975 and the transition to bourgeois democracy shows a hardening of his position towards nationalism with age.

“I’m not in favour of separatism”, he declared. “I’m for Spanish unity, worldwide unity. The closed world is obsolete. Borders are already causing enough trouble. The closed world is the bourgeois world”.



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