

Joan Miró



The Museum of Modern Art

Carolyn Lanchner

Joan Miró

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Joan Miró in front of his 1967 painting
Le Vol d'Oiseau par le Claire de Lune

This book presents ten works chosen from the almost five hundred pieces by Joan Miró in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. Miró's work first entered the Museum in 1935, when MoMA acquired a collaborative drawing the artist had made with Surrealists Yves Tanguy, Max Morise, and Man Ray. Miró was featured prominently in the 1936 exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, and that same year the Museum acquired two of his works on paper and one painting, *The Hunter (Catalan Landscape)* of 1923–24 (discussed here on page 8). In 1941 MoMA mounted the first major retrospective of Miró's oeuvre and published what was then the only monograph about his work. The book featured seventy paintings and drawings, including seven of the ten works by Miró then in MoMA's collection. In it, author James Johnson Sweeney recognizes Miró as a pioneer in modern painting and "one of the most gifted artists of our period." The Museum followed Miró's development, organizing major exhibitions of his work in 1959, 1973, and 1994. The latter exhibition, curated by Carolyn Lanchner, author of this volume, was among the first to explore the artist's entire body of work, from 1915 to his death in 1983. This book is one in a series featuring artists represented in depth in the Museum's collection.



Portrait of Enric Cristòfol Ricart (1917)

In October 1917, when he was twenty-seven and had yet to travel beyond his native Catalonia, Joan Miró wrote to Enric Cristòfol Ricart—the Catalan artist with whom he sometimes shared a studio [fig. 1]—that the future was theirs for the taking: “After the grandiose French Impressionist movement . . . and the courage of the Symbolists, the synthesism of the Fauves, and the analysis and dissection of Cubism and Futurism—after all that . . . a new spirit of radiant Freedom” would, he predicted, prevail. Should the “error of wanting to rally around the flag” of some “ism” trip them up, “instinct will take over despite our very selves.”

Bent on converting both traditional and vanguard art to his own uses—to become, as he put it, an “international Catalan”—Miró shows no inclination to favor any particular movement in this portrait of Ricart. Rather, the picture is structured through a series of democratic confrontations between opposing systems of representation—in effect it is a condensed inventory of available choices.

Portrait of Enric Cristòfol Ricart 1917
Oil and pasted paper on canvas,
32 ¹/₈ x 25 ⁷/₈" (81.6 x 65.7 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Florene May Schoenborn Bequest, 1996



The flat yellow ground of the left half, its implicit right angle obscured by the figure, evokes the severe geometries of such emergent schools of abstraction as Neo-Plasticism. Here it is at radical odds with the delicate play of pictorial incident and perspectival retreat in the adjacent Japanese print collaged on the canvas: Thus a purist aesthetic meets a favored Impressionist strategy. But the more relevant oppositions may be between painting and collage and, secondarily, between painting and printmaking. Although the disjunctions of collage came to play a paradigmatic role in Miró's art and it became a favored technique, the importance given to the painter's palette (level with Ricart's head at the upper left) proposes painting as the ultimate aesthetic weapon. Subsequently, an abstracted amalgam of palette and head [fig. 2] became a recurring motif in Miró's oeuvre.

The poet and Miró initiate Jacques Dupin wrote of this painting that from its hybrid ground, the figure of Ricart emerges

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1 E. C. Ricart (Spanish, 1893–1960)
Joan Miró in the Studio He Shared
with Ricart 1917
Oil on canvas, 18 1/2 x 23 1/4" (47 x 59 cm)
Collection F. X. Puig Rovira, Vilanova i la Geltrú



"in an immobility at once hieratic and barbaric." More than one commentator has seen echoes of Vincent van Gogh in this figure—a not-unlikely connection given its Expressionist intensity and high, strident color. But other sources are also at work. Cubism and Fauvism are respectively implicated in the sculptural planes of the face and the brash, almost iridescent, yellow, green, blue, and violet stripes of Ricart's pajamalike Oriental costume.

The highly stylized realism of this portrait continued to inform Miró's art in one guise or another until about 1923, but there are few rivals to the expressive impact of this work. Empathically identifying with Ricart, Miró endowed the portrait with the power of his subject's passionate, youthful concentration and his own will to create an art that could transform particularities of place into a universal idiom. Not least, *Portrait of Enric Cristòfol Ricart* demonstrates Miró's already formidable powers as a colorist.

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2 Collage (Head of Georges Auric) 1929
Tarboard, chalk, and pencil on paper,
43 3/8 x 29 1/2" (110 x 75 cm)
Kunsthaus Zurich. Gift of Dr. Georges and
Josi Guggenheim

The Hunter (Catalan Landscape) (1923–24)

In July 1923, immediately after arriving from Paris for his annual extended stay at his farm in Montroig, Catalonia, Miró sent his Parisian dealer a postcard—a new “offensive” was, he advised, in the works. By September he was more specific: “This year I am really attacking the landscape. . . . I have already managed to break free of nature, and the landscapes have nothing whatever to do with outer reality. Nevertheless, they are more *Montroig* than had they been painted from nature.” Although necessarily lacking distance, Miró’s critique of his own work has nonetheless been confirmed by history.

The result of his offensive, his “attacks” on the countryside around his beloved family farm, was, in the words of Jacques Dupin, “the revelation” showing “the union of the real and the imaginary that would be a constant . . . thereafter” in the artist’s work. Miró’s subjects were, as in previous summers, drawn from the quotidian rural life around Montroig, but a new freedom transforms them. *The Hunter (Catalan Landscape)*, the most important of the paintings started in that decisive summer of 1923, began as a scene of a Catalan peasant about to barbecue a newly caught rabbit for lunch [fig. 3] and ended as a parable of cosmic and earthly union and generation and regeneration, delivered with the enabling gravity of humor. It belongs in the domain of Miróesque metaphor, where, according to the artist’s close friend Michel Leiris, “the sky is a rarified earth, the earth a denser sky . . . and a dog running . . . is just as much the run that is dogging.”



The Hunter (Catalan Landscape) 1923–24
Oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 39 1/2" (64.8 x 100.3 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Purchase, 1936

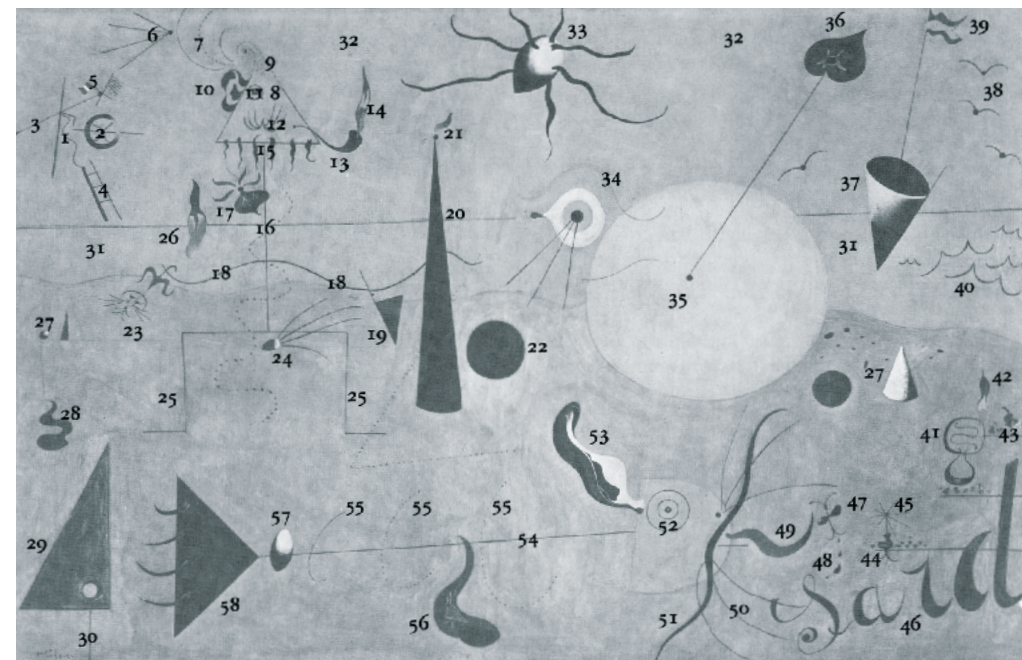


In *The Hunter* the roll of land's pink edge into yellow water and sky suggests the possibility of flux and posits an equivalence of matter not just of the elements, but of the substance of the hunter as well. His genitals are of the earth, his arms the water, and his heart and head the sky. Thanks to the glossary Miró made much later of the curious objects floating across earth, sea, and sky on this sunny afternoon in Catalonia [fig. 4], we now know what each represents. But even without that privileged knowledge, the similarity of the forms of the "sun-egg" above with the sex organs of the mustachioed hunter, the rabbit-eared sardine, and the tiny distant star at the upper left can be intuited as linking the generative powers of the cosmic and the earthly. Just to the right of center, staring out over the landscape is a giant, flesh-englobed eye—the eye, Miró said, "of the picture which gazes at me." In this sense the picture is another sort of parable—of the power of sight. In its symbolic gaze the eye reveals to the mind the warmth of the world, accomplishing, to borrow from the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "the prodigious work of opening the soul to what is not soul—the joyous realm of things and their god, the sun."

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3 Preliminary study for *The Hunter* (*Catalan Landscape*) 1923–24
Pencil on paper, 6 1/2 x 7 1/2" (16.5 x 19.1 cm)
Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona

4 Diagram of *The Hunter* (*Catalan Landscape*). Most of the identifications were made by Miró on a visit to The Museum of Modern Art in 1959. They were supplemented by the artist in later conversations with Museum curator William Rubin.



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|-----------------------------|------------------------|--|---|
| 1. Bird-airplane | 17. Hunter's heart | 33. Sun-egg | 47. Fly |
| 2. Propeller | 18. Hunter's arm | 34. Eye | 48. Defecation of fly |
| 3. Fuselage | 19. Knife | 35. Carob tree | 49. Sardine's tongue |
| 4. Rope ladder | 20. Gun | 36. Carob leaf | 50. Sardine's whiskers |
| 5. French and Catalan flags | 21. Smoke from gun | 37. Small boat | 51. Surface of water |
| 6. Star | 22. Bullet (shot) | 38. Seagulls | 52. Sardine's eye |
| 7. Rainbow | 23. Rabbit | 39. Spanish flags | 53. Sardine's ear |
| 8. Hunter's head | 24. Hunter's sex organ | 40. Waves | 54. Sardine's spine |
| 9. Hunter's Catalan cap | 25. Hunter's leg | 41. Grill | 55. Sardine's bones |
| 10. Hunter's ear | 26. Flame | 42. Hunter's campfire to cook lunch | 56. Sardine's bowel |
| 11. Hunter's eye | 27. Landscape elements | 43. Pepper | 57. Sardine's eggs (reproductive organ) |
| 12. Hunter's mustache | 28. Turd | 44. Potato | 58. Sardine's tail |
| 13. Hunter's pipe | 29. Vine | 45. Potato flower | |
| 14. Smoke | 30. Stem | 46. First four letters of word "Sardine" | |
| 15. Hunter's beard | 31. Mediterranean sea | | |
| 16. Hunter's body | 32. Sky | | |

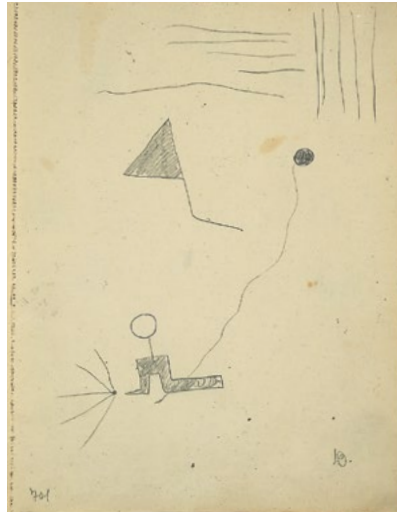


The Birth of the World 1925
Oil on canvas, 8' 2 ³/₄" x 6' 6 ³/₄" (250.8 x 200 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired
through an anonymous fund, the Mr. and Mrs. Joseph
Slifka and Armand G. Erpf Funds, and by gift of the
artist, 1972

The Birth of the World

(1925) At once ephemeral and monumental, this image was described by Miró as "a sort of genesis." As such it is the first of many Surrealist works to equate artistic creation with the emergence of a universe. More significantly, it is one of the most important in a series of radically innovative paintings that prolifically issued from Miró's brush between 1925 and the latter half of 1927. In these works he did no less than introduce an entirely new space to the language of pictorial representation. As freely constructed as the experimental poetry he loved, canvas after canvas discarded traditional syntax in favor of empty, monochromatic fields articulated by signs floating in an indeterminate space. At the beginning, in mock alarm at his own audacity he wrote to his friend Michel Leiris, "This is hardly painting, but I don't give a damn." Later he said that he had moved "beyond painting."

In part owing to the artist's own rhetoric and in larger part deriving from the accumulated weight of French Surrealist André Breton's 1928 endorsement of the series—and especially *The Birth of the World*—as evidence of the "pure psychic automatism" freed from intellectual control that his brand of Surrealism endorsed, a mythology of the improvisational grew. Known as the "dream" paintings by the 1950s, the series was understood to have anticipated post-World War II action painting (Abstract Expressionism in the United States and Art Informel in Europe). And so it had—but much less in means than effects. As has only recently become clear, when Miró made *The Birth of the*



World and his other dream paintings, he took their compositions intact—even occasionally including penciled indications of paint to be dripped—from the inventory of drawings he had accumulated in his notebooks [such as fig. 5].

If *The Birth of the World's* drawn elements and even some surface incidents adhere to a prior plan, the ground is largely designed to welcome accident. To achieve the illusion of what he called an “unlimited atmospheric space,” Miró primed the canvas unevenly so that paint would sometimes sit on its surface and sometimes soak into it. And his methods of applying paint—pouring, brushing, flicking, spreading with a rag—allowed for varying degrees of chance. It was primarily these aspects of the painting that prompted Breton in the 1950s to another appreciation of it, this time as the “*Demoiselles d’Avignon* of the Informel.” However he may have been prompted, Breton’s equation of Pablo Picasso’s groundbreaking 1907 painting with *The Birth of the World* was on the mark.

Explaining the “reality” of the Cubism that succeeded *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, Picasso compared it to an olfactory sensation: “It’s more like a perfume—in front of you, behind you, to the sides. The scent is everywhere, but you don’t quite know where it comes from.” This reality as spatial permeation is the conjuration on a two-dimensional surface of the real voluminosity of space. What Analytic Cubism did in a shallow, atmospheric space was construct a model, an illusion of the real-life experience of the reversibility of dimensions. Miró emptied out Cubism’s illusionism to fashion a pictorial site of global locality from which height, width, and depth are abstracted. Miró’s space, a prime example to Abstract Expressionists and countless others, has now become so common that it is often forgotten how radical it once seemed.

In 1928, reviewing a Miró exhibition that included some dream paintings, Waldemar George, an important critic of the day, remarked that the work evoked “the void of the infinite.” Concluding, he characterized Miró as one of art’s “revolutionaries.” Lest anyone doubt his meaning, he clarified: “I said revolutionaries, even in comparison with Cubism. In fact Cubism . . . is a constructive style. . . . Whatever liberties the masters of Cubism took with appearances, they never departed from the logic of understanding. Miró leaves the level of painting as image or equivalence of the world. From now on he acts in the world of magic.”

5 Preliminary drawing for
The Birth of the World 1925
Graphite pencil on paper,
10 ³/₈ x 7 ³/₄" (26.4 x 19.8 cm)
Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona



Rogi-André (Hungarian, 1905–1970)
Joan Miró 1935
Gelatin silver print, 11 x 11 1/8" (27.9 x 28.3 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Frank Crowninshield, 1940

Joan Miró was born in 1893 in Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, in northeastern Spain. Miró studied art from 1912 to mid-1915, and during the remaining years of the decade he followed new developments in modern art from Barcelona, where he was actively involved with various groups of artists. His early paintings and drawings mix modernism's new styles with Catalan content, witnessing the artist's aspiration to become an "international Catalan."

Early in 1920 Miró made his first trip to Paris. Initially, he would remember, he was "overwhelmed," but his contacts with Dada painters and poets soon began to suggest to him ways of going beyond his realist style. Through the next two years it was the examples of the current poets—their experiments with randomness, automatic writing, and dreams, and their willingness to abandon traditional syntax—that opened the way to the foundational breakthrough of Miró's career, between 1925 and 1927, when he produced his great series of "dream" paintings. Discarding all post-Renaissance pictorial conventions, these works conjure a space free from perspective, gravity, illusions of volume, shading, and color. Miró's invention of a new pictorial space would open up a vast range of possibility for generations of future artists.

During the following five-plus decades of his extraordinarily productive career, Miró produced an art of tight formal control and soaring, imaginative freedom. Distinguished by high color and enlivened by his signature assemblies of animate, organic signs, his paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, and ceramics constitute their own instantly recognizable world. Miró died in 1983, in Palma de Majorca, Spain, acknowledged worldwide as one of the twentieth century's most influential artists.

Produced by
The Department of Publications,
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Edited by Rebecca Roberts
Designed by Amanda Washburn
Production by Elisa Frohlich

Printed and bound by Oceanic
Graphic Printing, Inc., China
Typeset in Avenir
Printed on 140 gsm Gold East Matte
Artpaper

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New York
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Library of Congress Catalogue Card
Number: 2008921258
ISBN: 978-087070-725-4

Published by
The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53 Street
New York, New York 10019-5497
www.moma.org

Distributed in the United States and
Canada by D.A.P./Distributed Art
Publishers, Inc., New York

Distributed outside the United States
and Canada by Thames & Hudson,
Ltd., London

Printed in China

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