

**Miró prints & books from New York
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11, 1994, the Museum of Modern Art,
New York, Paul J. Sachs Gallery and
Tatyana Grosman Gallery**

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Miró Prints & Books

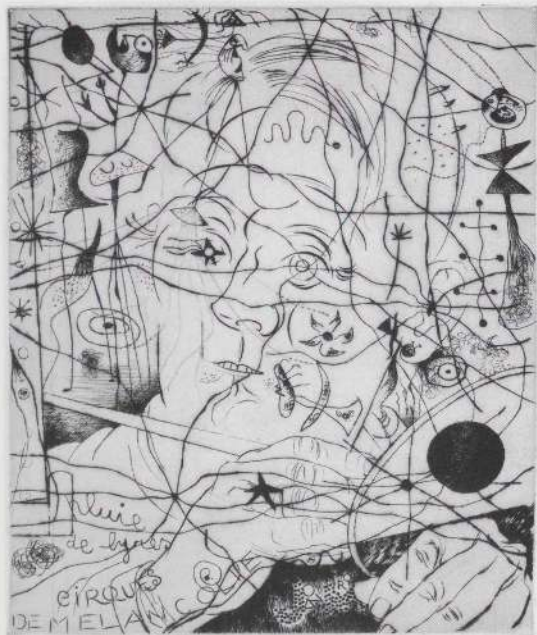
from New York Collections

October 17, 1993–January 11, 1994

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Paul J. Sachs Gallery and Tatyana Grosman Gallery

How does a great painter become a great printmaker? For Joan Miró (1893–1983), the answer involved a combination of factors: fortuitous circumstances, a delight in new materials and tools, and a natural inclination toward systematic approaches that channelled and expanded his creativity. Miró was thirty-five years old in 1928, when he published his first prints, to illustrate a book of poetry. Collaborating with a poet was a logical first step for him, since he had been deeply influenced by poetry and by poet friends during his early years in Paris. These friendships, and the discussions generated by them, were formative elements in his development of a Surrealist idiom in the twenties. It was at this time that Miró arrived at his language of artistic signs: visual approximations that meld the conscious and the unconscious. Although he made use of abstraction, his imagery always remained linked to reality, even as it aimed to reveal essences and liberate the imagination. Through symbols for elemental humanity (in the form of man, woman, and child), for nature (in the form of animals, fish, birds, and trees), and for the cosmos (with its suns, stars, and moons), Miró attempted to join the universal with the particular.

Miró's earliest printmaking was often linked to his friendships or to particular events. He illustrated several of his friends' poems, and created prints for periodicals edited by other friends. In his efforts to support the Republican cause at the time of the Spanish Civil War, he also made prints. His *Aidez l'Espagne* of 1937 shows a frightening figure, half man and half beast, representing a Catalan peasant with fist raised in a violent gesture of defiance against fascism. The pochoir technique, which is a form of stencil, is especially effective here: the distinct shapes and flat colors, with their ragged outlines and garish tones, intensify the fierce call to arms.



Joan Miró and Louis Marcoussis. *Portrait of Miró*. Paris and New York: Pierre Loeb and Pierre Matisse, 1938. Drypoint, 13¹³/₁₆ x 10¹⁵/₁₆" (33.5 x 27.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund

In 1938, Miró continued to express anguish over the Civil War but more indirectly, in a series of twenty drypoints created in the workshop of the Cubist painter Louis Marcoussis. It was the poet Tristan Tzara who introduced him to Marcoussis, an accomplished engraver. Over an extended period, Marcoussis taught Miró the intaglio techniques of etching and drypoint. Miró's growing fascination with the potential of intaglio is revealed in these prints. It should not be surprising that Miró, who was born to a family of craftsmen, would be attracted to a new



Plate XXIII from the *Barcelona Series*. Barcelona: Joan Prats, 1944. Transfer lithograph, 24³/₈ x 18¹/₁₆" (61.9 x 47.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase Fund

medium's unique potential, in this case, its scratched line, its concentrated intensity, when executed on small-scale copperplates, and its experimental possibilities, through the printing of more than one plate for a single composition. (It was at this point that Miró first took advantage of the print's inherent capacities for thematic variation in color and imagery.) The length of time spent with Marcoussis, which was similar to the scheduled periods that are customary arrangements between artists and printshops, set certain limits on the project at hand. Such a specific time period would incline Miró, who was methodical and orderly by nature, to create a group of prints held together by a common theme. While not depicting actual incidents or events, the prints that resulted from Miró's encounter with Marcoussis represent a profoundly affecting symbolic expression of war's toll on the unconscious. As a group, they are a tour de force of printmaking.

The sense of a terrorized and ruptured inner life is carried over frighteningly in the specific torment conveyed in *Portrait of Miró*. Engraved in collaboration with

Marcoussis, it renders a shattered sensibility, living a nightmare and overrun by frenzied creatures with claw-like appendages, and jaws agape in silent screams. The features of the artist were drawn on the plate by Marcoussis. The entangling web was superimposed by Miró. As he stated in this period: "We are living through a hideous drama that will leave deep marks in our mind."

Lithography provides the next area of printmaking through which Miró expressed his deepest feelings during the war years. In 1939, he was encouraged to delve extensively into this medium by the artist Georges Braque, who was a neighbor in Normandy, where Miró lived for a short time. Braque described for him the process by which drawings made with lithographic crayons are transferred to stones for printing. Again, Miró embarked on a group of works with thematic similarity. The result was the *Barcelona Series*, consisting of fifty lithographs eventually drawn in Barcelona and printed in a workshop there in 1944. It was his friend Joan Prats, a well-known Catalan businessman, collector, and champion of the avant-garde, who saw to it that the printshop arrangements were made and the editions completed. The *Barcelona Series* has an underlying sense of narrative cohesion, with a cast of characters and with an unfolding drama that rises and falls in intensity. Much of the imagery continues to evoke the nightmarish cruelty that appeared in the intaglio prints of 1938. In one example, a heraldic figure raises both arms in a gesture of terror that frequently appears in Miró's work of the period. This figure is male and seems to be the head of a family, with a woman at the right, and a small child at the left. Such elemental groupings, though in different contexts, recur throughout Miró's career.

In 1947, Miró came to the United States for the first time, to create a mural for a hotel in Cincinnati. Since he was working in a studio in New York, he had occasion to see Stanley William Hayter, the master engraver who had moved his celebrated print workshop, Atelier 17, from Paris to New York during the war. Miró had previously made two etchings with Hayter for small publications that were conceived in tribute to the Spanish people during the Civil War. Finally, at Hayter's workshop in New York, Miró saw the possibility of extending the knowledge of intaglio printmaking that he had gained with Marcoussis in 1938.

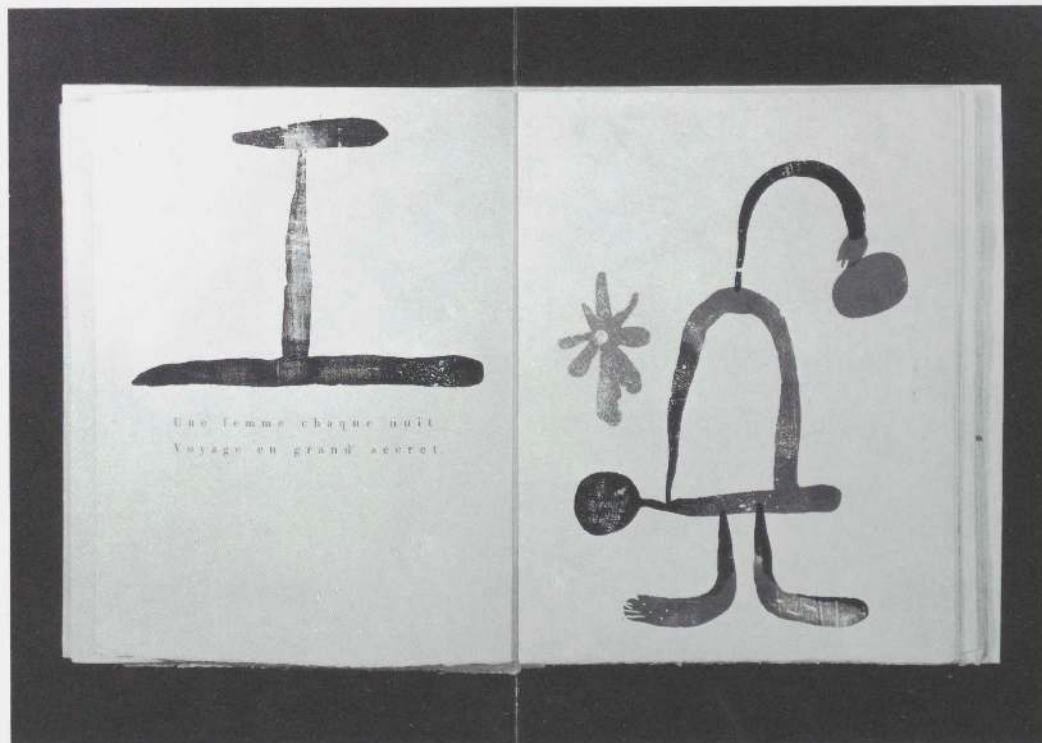
Miró used the occasion to experiment, that is, to break the rules of printmaking—which is a quasi-

mechanical method of making art. It is as if the systematic rules themselves proved an enticement for Miró's desire to tinker and to introduce unconventional procedures. Reacting against a system seemed to enhance his creativity, whereas such rigor could be stifling to other artists. He said: "For me, engraving is a major means of expression. It has been a means of liberation, expansion and discovery."

Miró engraved over twenty-five plates at Hayter's. He cut up plates and incorporated the remaining scraps; he experimented with glowing color by hand application, special inking, and wiping; he varied the printing of line with the pressure of the press; and he ventured into the possibilities of printing textured surfaces. He worked on plates for several series, such as the illustrations for Tristan Tzara's *Le Désespéranto* (part of *L'Antitête*), which were conceived in three variations. And his *Series* prints, often referred to by the title *Family* because of their elemental signs, were executed in many color and surface variations.

The primary impetus behind Miró's continued interest in printmaking upon his return to Paris was the publisher and art dealer Aimé Maeght. In 1948 Miró had his first exhibition at the Galerie Maeght and began a long association with its publishing activities. He had the opportunity to explore lithography fully, as well as to continue with intaglio printing. Color lithography, in particular, began for the first time to provide a rich area of experimentation for him. A joyous and playful part of his sensibility that seemed deeply buried during the war years came to the surface in lively, optimistic color prints. In addition, Miró began to produce ephemeral printed works in conjunction with Maeght Editeur. Over the years, he made numerous posters and catalogue covers, as well as invitations, announcements, and holiday cards. Between 1948 and 1978, his prints also filled fifteen issues of *Derrière le miroir*, Maeght's periodical that doubled as an exhibition catalogue and included texts by poets and critics.

In the late forties and early fifties, Miró also turned his attention with great seriousness to illustrated books. As he said, "I have made some experiments that



A toute épreuve by Paul Eluard. Geneva: G rald Cramer, 1958. 79 woodcuts, 74 with collagraph and 10 with collage, printed in color; page, 12 7/16 x 9 13/16" (32 x 25 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Louis E. Stern Collection

have allowed me to see what it means to *make* a book, as opposed to illustrating it. . . . A book must have all the dignity of a sculpture hewn from marble." Among his major efforts in this area was *Parler seul*, published by Maeght Editeur in 1950. Its text, by his old friend Tristan Tzara, is integrated with lithographs, in black and in color, which function as illuminations, creating a journey of the senses and the imagination as the reader turns each page.

In 1947, the Swiss publisher G rald Cramer had also approached Mir  to undertake a book project, in this case with his intimate friend of many years, the poet Paul Eluard. Over the course of a decade, artist, poet, and publisher worked together to create *A toute  preuve*, issued in 1958 and now considered a landmark in illustrated books and an unqualified masterpiece by the standards of any medium. Here, through the book format itself, Mir  was again inspired to think in terms of a common theme, a method that for him came naturally. In addition, the very idea of collaboration invigorated him. He reflected: "The journey we have made to get to a point of complete agreement among the three of us has been long and hard, which has only enriched the final result and made it more moving and powerful."

Mir 's medium for *A toute  preuve* was woodcut, the most primitive print-making technique. He chose pieces of wood found on the beach and scraps left over from his brother-in-law's furniture factory, finally completing 240 blocks that make up the book's illustrations. The unfolding sequence of calligraphic signs and hieroglyphic-like figures results in a rapturous visual counterpoint to Eluard's text of love, dreams, and desire.

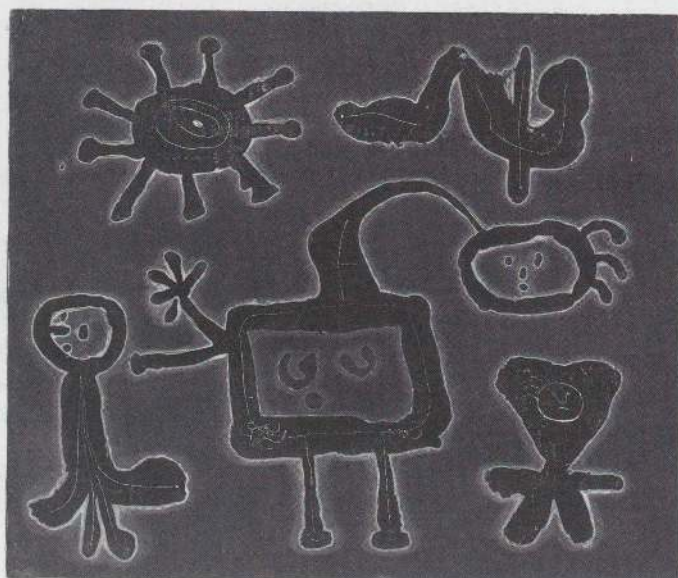


Plate V from *Series I*. Paris: Maeght Editeur, 1952. Etching, engraving, and aquatint, printed in color, 14¹⁵/₁₆ x 17⁷/₈" (38 x 45.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Curt Valentin Bequest



Equinox. Paris: Maeght Editeur, 1967. Etching, aquatint, and carborundum, printed in color, 41 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 29 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (104.3 x 73.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Studebaker-Worthington, Inc.

Miró's fascination with prints and illustrated books continued to the last years of his life. In 1967, he discovered yet another new material and technique that captured his imagination. Applying carborundum in a silicon-based compound onto the plate, he produced textures and surfaces previously impossible. He was even moved to write to the inventor of this method, saying, "I . . . have become more and more aware of the richness and new horizons that your process brings to printmaking. Never has one had materials with equal power." Miró employed this new material in a burst of activity, producing a series of large-scale prints that confront the viewer with a power and directness comparable to painting. In *Equinox*, for example, he fashioned an immense figural sign from broad, black, calligraphic strokes, showing the influence of a recent trip to Japan. The configuration is at once man and beast, in a conflation of elemental natures that had appeared as far back as 1937, in the figure of the tiny pochoir *Aidez l'Espagne*.

But the contorted figure of rage in that print has now turned to the viewer head-on, in a bold, broad-shouldered posture that exudes stature, authority, and confidence. Miró's language of signs has become a most direct form of communication.

In his long career, Miró made well over two thousand printed works, a good number of these to accompany poetic texts. He was an artist who reveled in new materials, working not only in printmaking and book illustration, but also in drawing, collage, ceramics, sculpture, stage design, murals, and tapestries, in addition to the paintings for which he was best known. His was an insatiable creativity. In print, this artist/artisan could combine the systematic and the spontaneous. And for his methodical and orderly temperament, the combination was a winning one. By enlarging his technical means, Miró extended his creative ends.

Deborah Wye, Curator
Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

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Miró Prints & Books from New York Collections is presented in conjunction with the retrospective exhibition **Joan Miró**, on view in the galleries on the ground floor and the lower level, October 17, 1993–January 11, 1994.

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COVER: *Aidez l'Espagne (Help Spain)*. Paris: *Cahiers d'art*, nos. 4–5, 1937. Pochoir, printed in color, 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 7 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (24.8 x 19.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Pierre Matisse

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