

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

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NEW ACQUISITIONS: THREE MIRÓS

Joan Miró's The Birth of the World, characterized by William Rubin, Chief Curator of the Museum of Modern Art's Painting and Sculpture Collection, as in many respects the most radical painting executed between the two World Wars, is on view there with two other newly acquired works by Miró from October 5 through November 6. Portrait of a Man in a 19th Century Frame (1950), gift of Mr. and Mrs. Pierre Matisse, a unique and hilarious picture that Miró made by painting his own forms over an academic portrait of a pompous bourgeois, and The Opera Singer, gift of William Weintraub, a large pastel of 1934, complete the trio of pictures recently added to the Museum's representation of Miró's works.

Describing The Birth of the World, the most daring and one of the largest of the artist's improvisational paintings of the 1920's, Mr. Rubin observes that no other work made before World War II so clearly anticipates the painting of the 1940's and 50's known as l'informel in Europe and Abstract Expressionism in America. The painting was acquired by purchase and exchange.

The three Mirós in this exhibition are the fruit of a continuing effort on the part of the Museum to build its representation of the works of Miró, the most important painter of the generation following that of Picasso and Matisse.

The 80th birthday of Miró in 1973 will be celebrated at The Museum of Modern Art with an exhibition of all the Miró paintings, sculpture, prints and drawings in, and promised to, the Museum Collection. The show will be accompanied by an extensive catalog by William Rubin similar in format to that published in connection with last year's "Picasso in the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art."

Miró's work has been shown in numerous Museum loan exhibitions including a major retrospective in 1959.

Photographs and additional comments on The Birth of the World and Portrait of a Man in a 19th Century Frame are available as excerpts from William Rubin's forthcoming catalog from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. Phone: (212) 956-7504 - 7501.

Excerpts from William Rubin's forthcoming catalog on Miró in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, to be published by the Museum in the Fall of 1973.

The Birth of the World, 1925 Oil on canvas, 96 1/2 x 76 3/4 inches

Late in 1924 Miró developed a new manner of painting, which in the originality of its means and effects remained unrivalled until the work of Jackson Pollock over two decades later. This spontaneously executed, manifestly post-cubist type of picture dominated Miró's output in 1925 and continued to play an important role--alternating with images in a painstaking, precise style--until the end of the nineteen-twenties. Indeed, the new manner and the "automatic" techniques by which it was effected have, with modifications, remained basic to Miró's arsenal as a painter ever since. The Birth of the World, executed in Montroig in the summer of 1925, is his masterpiece in this style.

The new method, which involved loose brushing, spilling and blotting thinned-out paint in tandem with cursive, automatic drawing not surprisingly led Miró to a larger average format. But even among his new large canvases, The Birth of the World--slightly over 8 by 6 feet--was exceptional in size, which intensified the effect of its unexpected style. An extraordinary challenge to the conception of easel painting that obtained at that time, The Birth of the World was to enjoy an underground reputation among a handful of artists and critics who saw it in the studio in 1925-26. However, the response of most--even those interested in Miró's work--was negative, an attitude that prevailed until after World War II toward all Miró's paintings in this style. René Gaffé, the pioneer Belgian collector who purchased The Birth of the World the year following its execution, spoke of the reactions of his collector and critic acquaintances: "It goes without saying that they took Miró for a madman, a farceur or both. But they took me for an even greater fool for having bought the picture. The informed opinion of the day was that I had been taken."

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Gaffé was to develop an extremely protective attitude toward The Birth of the World, never allowing it to leave his home until its first brief public exhibition in Brussels over thirty years after it was painted; it would not be shown again until the Museum of Modern Art's Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage in 1968 and has never been publicly exhibited in Paris.

The "underground" reputation of The Birth of the World was certainly among the considerations that led André Breton in the mid-fifties to liken it to Picasso's Demoiselles d'Avignon, itself not publicly exhibited nor reproduced until many years after its execution; but when Breton called The Birth of the World "the Demoiselles d'Avignon of the 'informel'," he had primarily in mind the picture's radical character: large size and, above all, the fact that it had anticipated the type of Post-World War II painting known as l'informel in France (the counterpart of Abstract Expressionism in America). And earlier, in 1928, when Breton had written that it was "by such pure psychic automatism that Miró may pass for the most Surrealist of us all," he was thinking of Miró's improvisational, loosely brushed paintings of 1925-28 as a group, "but above all," he said, "of The Birth of the World."

To be sure, the methodological automatism of The Birth of the World and Miró's other paintings in that manner was neither "pure," nor even as rapid or unedited as certain of Masson's works of the time. Nevertheless, its character is inconceivable without Miró's contact with Surrealist ideas, notably the definition of Surrealism as given in Breton's first Surrealist manifesto of 1924:

"SURREALISM, noun. masculine. Pure psychic automatism by which one intends to express verbally, in writing or by other method, the real functioning of the mind. Dictation by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, and beyond any esthetic or moral preoccupation."

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Miró was impressed by the idea of automatism (and by the use Masson was already making of it in his drawings) both as a mechanism for making images which could be drawn from the artists' deepest instincts, impulses and fantasies and as an antidote to the "rationality" of Cubist realism, against which Miró was then strongly reacting ("I shall break their guitar," he said of the Cubists). Surrealist ideas had already influenced the paintings Miró had completed in 1924 insofar as the anti-rational character of the motifs depended on "free association"--that aspect of Freudian theory which, along with the description of dream images, constituted the dual underpinning of Surrealism and accounted for the two polar styles of its art. But while free association led Miró to "irrational" juxtapositions of motifs in such pictures as The Hunter and The Family, the introduction of the motifs was much pondered, and the execution of the image slow and painstaking.

Automatic drawing, on the other hand, allowed Miró to free associate, in effect, on the canvas--to discover his motifs in the act of painting them. The difference may be measured by the fact that The Hunter was worked on over a period of at least eight months, while The Birth of the World was completed, Miró recalls, in two or three days. Surrealist ideas thus suggested not the content but the methodology for certain of Miró's pictures--a methodology, however, for getting at a certain kind of content. Its application in the form of draftsmanly or painterly automatism led, as in The Birth of the World, to pictures of a very new appearance and character.

As observed above, this automatism was--Breton's formulation notwithstanding--far from "pure"; such totally mediumistic, unconscious activity would be, in any case, inimical to art. Automatism was used primarily to get the picture started and to provide its essential motifs, after which the ordering of the canvas became a conscious proposition. The same obviously holds true even for Surrealist texts. Indeed, it is clear that in Breton's and Soupault's Champs magnétiques ("Magnetic Fields") of 1919,

later identified by Breton as "incontestably the first Surrealist works ... since they were the fruit of the first systematic applications of automatic writing," the raw material of free association was subjected to no small amount of editing to arrange the flow of images in normal grammar and syntax. Later, Miró was to describe his somewhat analogous procedure:

"Rather than setting out to paint something, I begin by painting and as I paint, the picture begins to assert itself, or suggest itself under my brush. The form becomes a sign for a woman or a bird as I work ... The first stage is free, unconscious ... [But] the second stage is carefully calculated."

Let us see how these procedures operated in The Birth of the World.

Miró began by covering the canvas with glue sizing which was purposely laid on irregularly, in varying densities, so that the painting would take to the canvas unevenly, here consisting of a film atop the sizing, there impregnating or staining it. This tended to make the reflected light vary slightly from point to point on the surface thus implementing an illusion of "an unlimited atmospheric space." The suppression of all perspective devices and of sculptural modeling makes this space all the more unmeasured and unmeasurable, while the elimination of the horizon line—one of the first instances of this in Miró's art—prevents the viewer from locating the space in his world and suspends the motifs in a kind of non-gravitational universe.

After sizing the canvas, Miró rapidly laid down successive veils of transparent bistre and black glazes. These were both poured and applied with the brush and, in some black areas, spread with a rag while still wet. Then a layer of ochre glaze was poured from the top, forming rivulets of greater density—hence opacity—here and there. Miró also dipped his brush in ochre and flicked it to create the "sprays" visible in particular in the lower part of the canvas. "One large patch of black in the upper left seemed to need to become bigger," Miró recounts. "I enlarged it and went over it with opaque black paint. It became a triangle, to which I added a tail. It might

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be a bird." The need for an accent of red to the right led Miró to make the precisely painted red disc with yellow streamer, which he later identified as a shooting star. These motifs and the nature of the ground, in turn, called forth the blue descending lines on the upper right. The "personage" with a white head, whose right foot almost touches a spider-like little black star, was the last motif to be introduced.

Miró has spoken of the picture "as a sort of genesis" and although the title, The Birth of the World, was invented as the artist recalls, by Breton or Paul Eluard, it was very much in what Miró considered the spirit of the picture. As such, it is the first of a long series of visionary Surrealist works which deal metaphorically with the act of artistic creation through an image of the creation of a universe. Matta's The Earth is a Man of 1942 and Vertigo of Eros of 1944 are among the last such images. In the Mattas as in the Miró, the configurations lend themselves to being interpreted as both macrocosmic and microcosmic visions--the universe in terms of the poet's telescope or microscope. Or they may be seen as an image of the infinity of the recesses of the mind--the Surrealist "inscape"--embodied in a primordial galactic vision. But the canvas also might be thought of as a giant litmus paper stained with grey matter from which micro-biological beings begin to emerge.

The marriage of method and metaphor in The Birth of the World is total, for the imagery recapitulates the process of its own creation. Miró the painter begins with the void, followed by a "chaos" of stains and spots. As he looks at these they suggest other forms to him; or he sees that they need to "grow" into another shape or color. The act of making the picture is thus literally the implementation of mirómonde, the painter in the place of God as the "intelligence" behind the new universe.

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The Birth of the World shocked Miró's colleagues not only for the sparseness of its configuration, but for the manifest role of accidental effects. Accidentality (what the Surrealists called le hasard objectif) merges here with automatism. But it is not the same thing. However "unconscious" the artist may be as he doodles, scribbles rapidly or spreads liquid paint with rags, the impulse always comes from within the man. That his hand zigs here rather than zagging there may feel totally undirected to him, and certainly, in comparison with traditional painting methods it is. Nevertheless, on some level of the artist's functioning--however instantaneously it happens a decision was made to do one thing and not another. Psychologically speaking, nothing the human being does is totally unmotivated, accidental. This does not apply, however to the patterns made by liquid paint when it spills on a vertical surface which are to some extent determined by the properties of the pigment and canvas, and the "laws" of gravity.

The value of such accidentality for Miró--as for Masson and other Surrealists--was that of a stimulus to pictorial ideas. (The starting point, for example, of one Miró painting was an interesting stain of blackberry jam that had fallen on the canvas. Miró developed the picture around it.) "These accidents are also a challenge," Miró has said. "The painter has to be like a seer; he has to make some sense out of them."

Leonardo had written, as we know, of the value of stains, patterns in old walls and marble striations as starting points for images; but in the finished work, the spectator was not to be aware of the sources. This precisely is what separates the modern picture from the Old Master one. The modern painter wants the accidents to be manifest--as he does his responses to them. The creative procedure, and thus to some extent the finished picture, is characterized by a world of forces in which everything is not entirely structure or predictable a priori--an image of experience truer to the nature of 20th century life than are those of the closed universes of the Old Masters.

Portrait of a Man in a Late 19th Century Frame. Oil on canvas, 1950

Miró's childhood friend Juan Prats, once a student of painting and later Barcelona's leading haberdasher, came upon a preposterously framed, pompous memorial portrait and sent it to the artist as a joke. The sitter was the epitome of the self-satisfied, pietistic, bien-pensant bourgeois; his pose and costume, the official medal and ribbon on his table, the religious pictures on the table and wall and the rose garden visible through the window all allude to the secure, self-assured universe in which he functioned.

Into this world Miró mischievously inserted an unsettling dose of the irrational. Profiting from the glance of the sitter--whose eyes seemed directed toward the garden--Miró superimposed his own creatures, which crawl on the rose bush and hover bird-like in the air, confronting the illusioned bird which swoops down in the upper right corner of the original. As if to suggest the sitter's confusion at this unwonted interruption into his orderly world, Miró drew on his forehead a little coil pattern, rather like a broken spring.

Now the whole ambiance began to change. By scraping away the paint around the sitter, Miró produced a suggestion of vague, unmeasurable space that, like a cloud of malaise, envelops the pompous bourgeois. This space is totally at odds with the ordered illusionism of the original--determined as it was by precise coordinates--and derives ultimately from the atmospheric space of Miró's fantasy pictures of the mid-twenties (e.g. The Birth of The World).

Suspended in front of this space, situated on the picture plane itself, are a group of Miróesque symbols--the forms in the garden, a sharp-toothed little monster approaching the sitter on the lower right, a horned grotesque flying between the sitter's head and a blue cloud and, below, a red disc with a white halo. All these signs appear to have been suddenly made manifest as if the picture plane were a kind of X-ray put before the sitter's conventional world, a visionary X-ray that reveals the metaphysical forces actually at work (much in the manner of Duchamp's Large Glass, whose "4th dimensional" forms are suspended against the vista of the real world seen through the glass).