



SYNOPSIS

Early in his career, Miró primarily painted still-lives, landscapes, and genre images. Influences ranging from the folk art and Romanesque church frescoes of his native Catalan region in Spain to 17th-century Dutch realism were eventually superseded by more contemporary ones: Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism captivated the young artist, who had relocated to Paris in 1921. His exposure to the ideas of **André Breton** and his Surrealist circle prompted Miró to make radical changes to his style, although the artist cannot be said to have identified consistently with a single style. Rather, his artistic career may be characterized as one of persistent experimentation and a lifelong flirtation with non-objectivity. Miró's signature colorful, biomorphic forms, roughly geometric shapes, and marginally recognizable objects are expressed in multiple media, from ceramics and engravings to large bronze installations.

KEY IDEAS

- Conducting his own Surrealism-inspired exploration, Miró invented a new kind of relational pictorial space in which carefully rendered, self-contained objects issuing strictly from the artist's imagination are juxtaposed with simple, recognizable forms - a sickle moon, a simplified dog, a ladder. There is the

sense that they have always coexisted both in the material realm and in the shallow pictorial space of Miró's art.

- Miró's art never became fully non-objective. Rather than resorting to complete abstraction, the artist devoted his career to exploring various means by which to dismantle traditional precepts of representation. Miró's radical, inventive style was a critical contributor in the early twentieth-century *avant-garde* journey toward increasing and then complete abstraction.
- Miró balanced the kind of spontaneity and automatism encouraged by the Surrealists with meticulous planning and rendering to achieve finished works that, because of their precision, seemed plausibly representational despite their considerable level of abstraction.
- Miró often worked with a somewhat limited palette, yet the colors he used were bold and expressive. His chromatic explorations, which emphasized the potential of fields of unblended color to respond to one another, provided inspiration for a generation of color field painters.
- Artists have traditionally confined themselves to visual expression in a single medium with occasional forays into other materials. However, Miró was, in a sense, a modern renegade who refused to limit himself in this regard. While he explored certain themes such as that of *Mother and Child* repeatedly throughout his long career, Miró did so in a variety of media from painting and printmaking to sculpture and ceramics, often achieving surprising and disparate results.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Childhood

Joan Miró was born in Spain in 1893 to a family of craftsmen. His father, Miguel, was a watchmaker and goldsmith, while his grandfathers were cabinetmakers and blacksmiths. Perhaps in keeping

with his family's artistic inclinations, Miró exhibited a strong love of drawing at an early age; according to biographers, he was not particularly inclined toward academics. Rather, Miró pursued art-making and studied landscape and decorative art at the School of Industrial and Fine Arts (the Llotja) in Barcelona. Despite his professed desire to forge a career in the arts, at the behest of his parents, Miró attended, the School of Commerce from 1907-10. His relatively brief foray into the business world, characterized by constant study, instilled a strong sense of order and a robust work ethic in Miró but at a very high cost. Following what has been characterized as, in essence, a nervous breakdown, Miró abandoned his business career and subsequently devoted himself fully to making art.

Early Training

In 1912, Miró enrolled in **Francesco Gali's** art academy in Barcelona. Gali taught Miró about modern art movements in Western Europe and introduced him to contemporary **Catalan poets**. Gali also encouraged Miró to go out into the countryside in the midst of the landscapes he wished to paint and to study the artistic practices of his contemporaries. Between 1912 and 1920, Miró painted still-lives, nudes, and landscapes. His style during this period in his early career has been referred to as "poetic realism." It was during this phase of his career that Miró developed an interest in the bold, bright colors of the French Fauve painters and the fractured, geometric compositions of the Cubists.

Mature Period



In 1919, Miró moved to Paris to continue his artistic development. Due to considerable financial hardship, his life in Paris was difficult at first.

When discussing his life during those first lean, early years in Paris, the artist quipped, "How did I think up my drawings and my ideas for painting? Well, I'd come home to my Paris studio in Rue Blomet at night, I'd go to bed, and sometimes I hadn't had any supper." It seems that physical deprivation enlivened the young Miró's imagination. "I saw things," he explained, "and I jotted them down in a notebook. I saw shapes on the ceiling..."

Artistically, Miró was drawn to the **Dada** and **Surrealist** movements. He became friends with the Surrealist writer **André Breton**, forming a relationship that lasted for many years. The Surrealists were most active in Paris during the 1920s, having formally joined forces in 1924 with the publication of their **Surrealist Manifesto**. Their members, led by Breton, promoted "pure psychic automatism," which heavily informed Miró's work. While the Surrealists experimented with the irrational in art and writing, Miró's art manifested these dream-like qualities, becoming increasingly biomorphic, enigmatic, and innovative.

To his utter disappointment, Miró's first solo show in Paris in 1921 was a complete disaster; he did not sell a single work. However, a determined Miró went on to participate in the first Surrealist exhibition in 1925. He collaborated with the group's members in the creation of larger commissions, working with **Max Ernst** in 1926 on the creation of **Sergei Diaghilev's** ballet set designs. In his own work at the time, Miró painted fantastic and bizarre interpretations of his dreams.

Miró married Pilar Juncosa in 1929, and their only child, Dolores, was born in 1931. His career flourished during this time. In 1934, Miró's art began to be exhibited in both France and the United States. He was still residing in Paris when war broke out in Europe, and by 1941 Miró was forced to flee to Mallorca with his family. Perhaps not surprisingly, warfare and political tension were prominent themes in his art during this period; his canvases became increasingly grotesque and brutal. Concurrently, Miró's first retrospective was held at the MoMA in New York City to great acclaim. His renown continued to grow both in America and Europe, culminating in a large-scale mural commission in Cincinnati in 1947. Miró's simplified forms and his life-long impulse toward experimentation inspired a generation of American artists, the **Abstract Expressionists**, whose emphasis on non-representational art

signaled a major shift in artistic production in the U.S.

In the 1950s, Miró began dividing his time between Spain and France. A large exhibition of 60 of Miró's works was held at the Galerie Maeght in Paris and subsequently at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York in 1953. By the mid-1950s, Miró had begun working on a much larger scale, both on canvas and in ceramics. In 1959, Miró along with Salvador Dalí, Enrique Tabara, and Eugenio Granell participated in *Homage to Surrealism*, an exhibition in Spain organized by Andre Breton. The 1960s were a prolific and adventurous time for Miró as he continued to break away from his own patterns, in some instances revisiting and reinterpreting some of his older works. While he never altered the essence of his style, his later work is recognized as more mature, distilled, and refined in terms of form.

Late Period and Death



As Miró aged, he continued to receive many accolades and public commissions. In 1974, he was commissioned to create a tapestry for New York's World Trade Center, demonstrating his achievements as an internationally renowned artist as well as his place in popular culture. He received an honorary degree from the University of Barcelona in 1979. Miró died at his home in 1983, a year after completing *Woman and Bird*, a grand public sculpture for the city of Barcelona; the work was, in a sense, the culmination of a prolific career so profoundly integral to the development of Modern art.

LEGACY

Testing the limits of representation and relying on the imagination rather than the objective world, Miró identified a sort of aesthetic point of no return and instead blazed a trail upon which subsequent artists would tread soon thereafter. Along with other Dada and Surrealist artists like Jean Arp and Yves Tanguy, Miró explored the possibility of creating an entirely new visual vocabulary for art that, while not divorced from the objective world, could exist outside of it. Rather than transitioning to complete abstraction, Miró's biomorphic forms remained within the bounds of objectivity. However, they were forms of pure invention and were made expressive and imbued with meaning through their juxtaposition with other forms and the artist's use of color. Much has been made of his influence on the color field painters - Motherwell, Gorky, Pollock, and Rothko, among others, on Calder, who was a close friend of Miró, and, more recently, on designers Paul Rand, Lucienne Day, and Julian Hatton.

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ARTIST QUOTES

"The joy of achieving in a landscape a perfect comprehension of a blade of grass...as beautiful as a tree or a mountain...What most of all interests me is the calligraphy of the tiles on a roof or that of a tree scanned leaf by leaf, branch by branch."

"Never, never do I set to work on a canvas in the state it comes in from the shop. I provoke accidents - a form, a splotch of color. Any accident is good enough. I let the *matiere* decide. Then I prepare a ground by, for example, wiping my brushes on the canvas. Letting fall some drops of turpentine on it would do just as well. If I want to make a drawing I crumple the sheet of paper or I wet it; the flowing water traces a line and this line may suggest what is to come next."

"How can it be said that, given the fact that all the signs I transcribe upon the canvas correspond to something concrete - how can it be said that they back a foundation in reality, do not form part of the real world?"

Major Works:



Title: *The Ear of Grain* (1922)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Description: *The Ear of Grain* is an early work in which Miró demonstrates his close study of everyday objects, in some ways a by-product of study in a traditional academic setting. As a young artist, Miró was influenced by the painstaking, detailed realism of the Dutch Masters. The attention he gives to objects is reflected later in the care Miró takes with constructing the clean-edged, biomorphic forms of his trademark style.



Title: *The Farm* (1921)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Description: A dramatically tilted picture plane presents the viewer with a glimpse of a busy Spanish *masía* or "family farm." Miró wrote of this work, "*The Farm* was a résumé of my entire life in the country. I wanted to put everything I loved about the country into that canvas—from a huge tree to a tiny snail." The artist spent sometimes as many as eight hours a day for nine months working on this painting, for which he then struggled to find a buyer in a Parisian modern art market crazy for Cubism. In *The Farm*, Miró combines an interest in primitivism, perhaps harkening back to his attraction to Catalan folk art, and a Cubist vocabulary to produce a strangely haunting landscape that prefigures his Surrealist work. His almost maniacal attention to detail where carefully rendered objects are displayed against stark, monochromatic expanses of space makes for an unsettling contrast. Flattened forms exist side-by-side with carefully rendered and

modeled objects, a testament to the influence of Cézanne and the Cubists. Collection: National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Title: *The Tilled Field* (1923)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Description: Populated with complex, often inscrutable forms, *The Tilled Field*, with its puzzling iconography, is an abstract depiction of the landscape of Miró's Catalan homeland. The painting, teeming with organic forms that merge and meld seemingly in defiance of nature, is a testament to Miró's ever-increasing stylization and abstraction at this point in his career. The picture may be viewed as both an homage to Spain's past and a statement on the political upheaval in Europe. In subtle ways, Miró's works frequently expressed his own political sentiments as does this one as well as works from the period leading up to and throughout World War II. The painting also emphasizes how extremely radical was Miró's departure from his previous, naturalist style once he arrived in Paris and was exposed to the *avant-garde* art of that city in which innovation thrived.



Title: *Maternity* (1924)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: National Gallery of Art, Scotland

Description: The composition of *Maternity* is very schematic: reduced to its simplest forms, the female figure is scarcely recognizable in this painting. With one breast in profile and the other frontally depicted, almost moon-like, she nurses two stick-figure children as they hover in mid-air. Miró's interest in abstraction and the bizarre is evident as he takes a typical motif of Mother and Child and eliminates any element of realism. However, with the title, *Maternity*, Miró suggests that what remains after stripping away excess representation are the instinctual and emotional aspects of the relationship between mother and child that may not be evident in more naturalistic depictions.



Title: The Beautiful Bird Revealing the Unknown to a Pair of Lovers (1941)

Materials: Gouache, charcoal, and oil wash on paper

Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York

Description: In his Constellations series of 1940-1, Miró set about to create new challenges in composition and then to solve them. One from this series of ten multi-media works on paper, *The Beautiful Bird Revealing the Unknown to a Pair of Lovers*, features a reduced palette, including a solid background that emphasizes the simplified forms and lines that together mimic the appearance of a complex constellation in the night sky. In the midst of producing this series, Miró was forced to flee with his family from France to Mallorca to escape advancing German troops. Evidently the family took little else with them aside from these paintings. The crowded, chaotic feeling of these compositions in some ways echo Miró's feelings regarding the violent upheaval in Europe at the time.



Title: Lunar Bird (1946-49)

Materials: Bronze

Collection: Fundació Joan Miró

Description: Miró's experimentation with multiple media led him into the third dimension, where one of his most favored materials became bronze. The principle of mystical oppositions underlines much of Miró's Surrealist sculpture, including *Lunar Bird*. With this work, the sun and the moon, male and female, and night and day are both contradictory and complementary forces. The work resembles ancient votive statues and is highly polished so that, despite its dark, solid appearance, it becomes paradoxically reflective. Lighter, curving elements lift the ensemble of shapes upward while a solid, sturdy base, like the legs of a primal mother, root the sculpture firmly to the earth. Bereft of color, unlike the artist's later sculptures, *Lunar Bird* relies on alternating, contrasting shapes to bring the object to life.

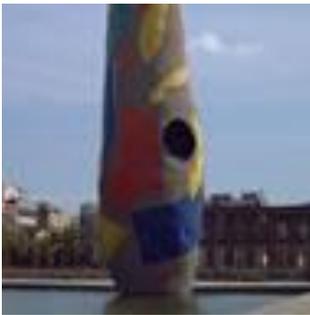


Title: *Woman and Bird* (1967)

Materials: Bronze, polychrome

Collection: Fundació Joan Miró

Description: Highly polished surfaces and unusual patinas added to the intrigue of his Surrealist sculptures as with *Lunar Bird* (above). By the 1960s, he was utilizing the bright colors he favored in combination with the solidity of the bronze. The woman and bird theme was thus explored in the round yet still carrying with it the enigmatic charge of its two-dimensional counterparts. With this sculpture, Miró expands the visual space of the work, inviting the viewer to interact in a directly physical way, to inhabit the space of these symbolic figures. The artist is also working on a larger scale-roughly 4' tall and 3' wide-and thus the figures lose their mysterious intimacy and become more interactive and, in a sense, accessible.



Title: *Woman and Bird* (1982)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Description: This monumental sculpture, standing 66 feet tall, was part of Barcelona's public art initiative and is considered Miró's last great work. Assisted by a team of craftsmen, *Woman and Bird* was built of concrete and colorful, broken ceramic tile; its irregular contours and tile mosaic were in part an homage to the great architect Antonio Gaudí whom Miró admired and studied with at the *Cercle Artistic de Sant Lluc*. The sculpture is sited at the corner of a large reflecting pool in the Parc de Joan Miró, which is populated with 30 other sculptures by the artist. The massive figure of a woman on whose head perches a bright yellow bird is evocative of the colossal sculptures that guarded the ports of ancient cities and presided over their most hallowed sites like the Athena Parthenos on the sacred Acropolis.