

## Joan Miro's Art Through The Years

Visual Culture: Seminar

Spring 2015

Ana Sofia Batlle

Joan Miro, a Catalonian painter born on April 20, 1893, was one of the most important artists in the surrealist movement. Surrealism was a movement in which art and literature which flourished in the early twentieth century. This movement focused on expressing imaginative dreams and visions free from conscious rational control.<sup>1</sup> For Miro, this movement was a great source of inspiration. He appreciated all of its methods and the influence it had on his artistic career and technique<sup>2</sup>, you can see many of the surrealist techniques in his earlier work like that of *The Tilled Field* where the organic and geometric shapes fill the bright contrast creating a dream like image. He kept a strong connection with the movement until 1930, when he distanced himself from it because he no longer felt he agreed with what the movement stood for<sup>3</sup>. As the world around him changed, he had to adapt his artistic style to one that represented his true beliefs in relation to what was going on, with the beginning of the Spanish Civil war, Spain's devastation wasn't to be ignored and Miro felt a need to show to the world what was going on. There is no doubt that Joan Miro expressed strong political views through his simplistic art.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Surrealism Definition," Dictionary.com, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/surrealism>.

<sup>2</sup> "World Biography," Joan Miró Biography, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Ma-Mo/Mir-Joan.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "World Biography," Joan Miró Biography, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Ma-Mo/Mir-Joan.html>.

What might have appeared as simple lines to access the unconscious, actually carried deeper meaning that tapped into Miro's rebellious character and the situations that surrounded of devastation and destruction which he felt a responsibility to express.

The year after the civil war started, Miro fled to Paris, France, where he began creating the mural, *The Reaper* for the spanish pavilion at the international exposition in Paris.<sup>4</sup> "The Spanish pavilion, organized by the Republican government, was designed by the architect Josep Lluís Sert. For the pavilion's art pieces, Sert called upon his friends Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, and Alexander Calder. Picasso's Guernica was painted for the pavilion".<sup>5</sup> Miro exhibited his works alongside some of the greatest artists of the time and in a world known event. Although each artist's work differed in style and core value, they were all united by their love for Spain and the devastation brought upon it by the Civil War, thus they were willing to fight for it through their art.

Miro himself talked about his process in creating *The Reaper*; what would probably be one of the most influential artistic pieces in relation to the Spanish Civil War, he said "I painted on a scaffolding directly in the very space of the building. I first made a few light sketches to know vaguely what I needed to do, but... the execution of this work was direct and brutal."<sup>6</sup> As you can see in the process of creating this huge piece of work for what was and still is a very

---

<sup>4</sup> "World Biography," Joan Miró Biography, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.notablebiographies.com/Ma-Mo/Mir-Joan.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Art and Political Crises: The 1937 Paris International Exposition," Culturedallroundman, November 18, 2014, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.culturedallroundman.com/2014/11/18/1937-paris-international-exposition/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Art and Political Crises: The 1937 Paris International Exposition," Culturedallroundman, November 18, 2014, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.culturedallroundman.com/2014/11/18/1937-paris-international-exposition/>.

distinguished event, Miro said that he found the rage in the brutality that was taking over Spain and this is evident in the piece itself. The huge amount of contrast between the blacks and the whites and the strong outline that surrounds each shape perfectly represent what Miro along with all of his fellow Spaniards must have felt in that moment when president Franco was uncontrollable as he took over the army and led a revolt to take over spanish Morocco and caused division in Spain<sup>7</sup>. Also the fact that the mural was painted directly onto the wall gives it a sense of spontaneity and permanence. Not long after, the mural was destroyed on route to Valencia. It is also said that it might have been lost on route. Even the simple oversight that caused the destruction or loss of the prominent mural that was *The Reaper* is a statement within itself, since at the time many of the spanish people were losing their pride as they saw their home country fall apart.



*The Reaper*, Joan Miro 1937  
Created for the Spanish pavilion at  
the International Exposition in Paris

---

<sup>7</sup> "Spanish Civil War," Spanish Civil War, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teachinger/glossary/spanish-civil-war.cfm>.

According to Paul Mitchell's article, "Joan Miro: An Artist in the Service of Mankind", which was published in 2012, Joan Miro kept his distance from political Struggle, even though it is evident that his art intentionally and unintentionally did in fact represent his political ideals. In 1925, Miro painted *Head of Catalan Peasant*, which the same article described it as "strong and independent resistant peasant" and also said that it might have been an alter ego to miro himself<sup>8</sup>. This is an example of a time when Miro meant to give his opinions on a matter in this case the situations of rebellious peasants but never meant for it to be considered an alter ego of himself.

Right after the government collapsed, Joan Miro said "We are living through a terrible drama, everything in Spain is terrifying in a way you could not imagine". After this change in power, Miro focused on creating works whose names carried huge meaning and whose content represented what he had tried to represent so many times before Spain's current situation which had been constantly changing through the years of the civil war. For instance, in 1924, he created a Series called *Savage Paintings*, which according to Mitchell, where violent and sexually charged and which name also gives a clue to his intentions in creating these wild untamed creatures. Around that same time he also created a painting called *The Philosophers* which contrary to the series of *Savage Paintings* gives a more tamed and intellectual feel though its bright colors and composition, where the two tall figures seem to be addressing each other. This painting seems to be more focused on the people with power and greater economic status instead of focusing on the general public.

---

<sup>8</sup>Paul Mitchell, "World Socialist Web Site," Joan Miró: An Artist "in the Service of Mankind" -, March 27, 2012, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/03/miro-m27.html>.



Joan Miró. *The Two Philosophers*, 1936,  
Oil on copper, 14 x 19-5/8"



Joan Miro, *Man Savage*  
Paintings, 134, Oil on

In “El Ciervo” a spanish magazine published in 1993, Soledad Gomis said “Joan Miró logró crear un nuevo lenguaje artístico, logró descubrir nuevos mundos para el arte<sup>9</sup>.” which in english translates to Miro achieved to create a new artistic language and discovered new worlds for art, and in fact he did. By studying all of his drawings and paintings such as *The Catalan Landscape* 1923 where you can find the word “sard” and in the painting *Pomme de Terre* where you can find a hidden “M” you can see a combination of colors and words hidden in plain sight that created a bridge between language, thoughts and visual art. As for discovering new worlds for art, situations in Miro’s life such as the place and social status to which he was born into, to the historical events of the time pushed Miro to discover and succeed in a world where political ideas merged with paint to create powerful pieces that people today still can relate to. Soledad Gomis defined his career as “sereno y rebelde”; clear and rebellious.

---

<sup>9</sup> Soledad Gomis, "Joan Miró: Sereno Y Rebelde," El CiERVO 96 (1993): pg. #, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40816434.pdf?acceptTC=true>

Miro describes himself as an “Internationalist Catalan” he believed in spreading the pride of the catalan people and was in favor of unity, he said “the close world is obsolete”<sup>10</sup>. It is safe to say that even though Miro’s work might have been abstract he was in fact a political thinker. To Joan Miro being an abstract painter was somehow a political statement in itself, how his mind worked and how it could be visually represented his thoughts “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!” <sup>11</sup> in the abstract painting *Maternity* abstractly he did in fact represent his thoughts specifically on the relationships of a mother and her child by the placement and size of the figures<sup>12</sup>. On other occasions Miro could also be very realistic. In his painting, *Still Life with Old Shoe*, (Paris, January 24 - May 29 1937) he represented the most common object of everyday life of anyone in any type of economic or political status. Mitchell also said that this painting “portrays the moving poetry that exists in the humblest of things and the reliant spiritual forces that emanate from them”. Miro made this very simple and basic still life painting stand out in relation to all of the other still lives that might have been considered boring. This painting’s huge message of status can not only be seen in it’s subject, but also in its’s colors. The bright green, red, orange, and yellow pigments create huge contrast with the

<sup>10</sup> Paul Mitchell, "World Socialist Web Site," Joan Miró: An Artist "in the Service of Mankind" -, March 27, 2012, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/03/miro-m27.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Mitchell, "World Socialist Web Site," Joan Miró: An Artist "in the Service of Mankind" -, March 27, 2012, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/03/miro-m27.html>.

<sup>12</sup> "Joan Miró Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works," The Art Story, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-miro-joan.htm>.

pitch black background that covers the 32 x 46 canvas that now can be found in the prestigious painting and sculpture gallery at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City<sup>13</sup>. The contrast helps the viewer understand the intense separation between socio economic classes in Spain. At the time the new government was mainly composed of the middle class people and promoted policies that attacked the traditional privileged structure of Spanish society <sup>14</sup>.

Miro also once said, "I feel the need of attaining the maximum of intensity with the minimum of means. It is this which has led me to give my painting a character of even greater bareness."<sup>15</sup> There is no uncertainty that Miro gave the maximum intensity with the minimum means, and just by looking at this simple painting *Man*, from the series savage paintings mentioned above, you can see how all of the rage, fear and tension transcends into the body of one being, and completely integrates the suffering of the spanish people. The dark and dull colors in contrast with the bright green and orange give you a sense of how Spain must have been like during the civil war which resulted in more than 500.000 deaths.

Miro continued to be a painter that merged subjectivity and imagination with reality, confusing many people through the decades of the main purpose of his art. Art which in fact was related to how the viewer chose to understand it. When overlapped with historical events of the time, the underlying message of his art became immensely eye opening. Towards the end of his

<sup>13</sup> "Joan Miró. Still Life with Old Shoe (Paris, January 24-May 29, 1937)," MoMA.org, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, [http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=80555](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=80555).

<sup>14</sup> "Spanish Civil War," Spanish Civil War, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/teachinger/glossary/spanish-civil-war.cfm>.

<sup>15</sup> "Joan Miro Art," Joan Miro Art, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://joanmiro.com/joan-miro-quotes/>.

life Miro took outright political stands and was given to “political gestures” He created posters for liberal causes and created *Mai 68*, which celebrated revolutions that were stated by the youth during the 60’s in Paris<sup>16</sup>. Joan Miro is still considered a surrealist painter, who also formed part of the Dada movement and most importantly after his death his art began to be viewed through a political lens.



Joan Miro, *Mai 68*

---

<sup>16</sup> Ken Johnson, "Filtering Miró's Work Through a Political Sieve," The New York Times, August 02, 2012, section goes here, accessed May 12, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/03/arts/design/joan-miro-the-ladder-of-escape-at-national-gallery.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/03/arts/design/joan-miro-the-ladder-of-escape-at-national-gallery.html?_r=0).