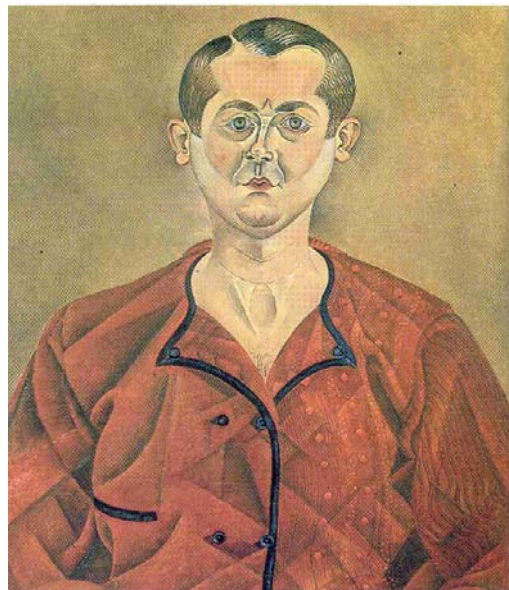


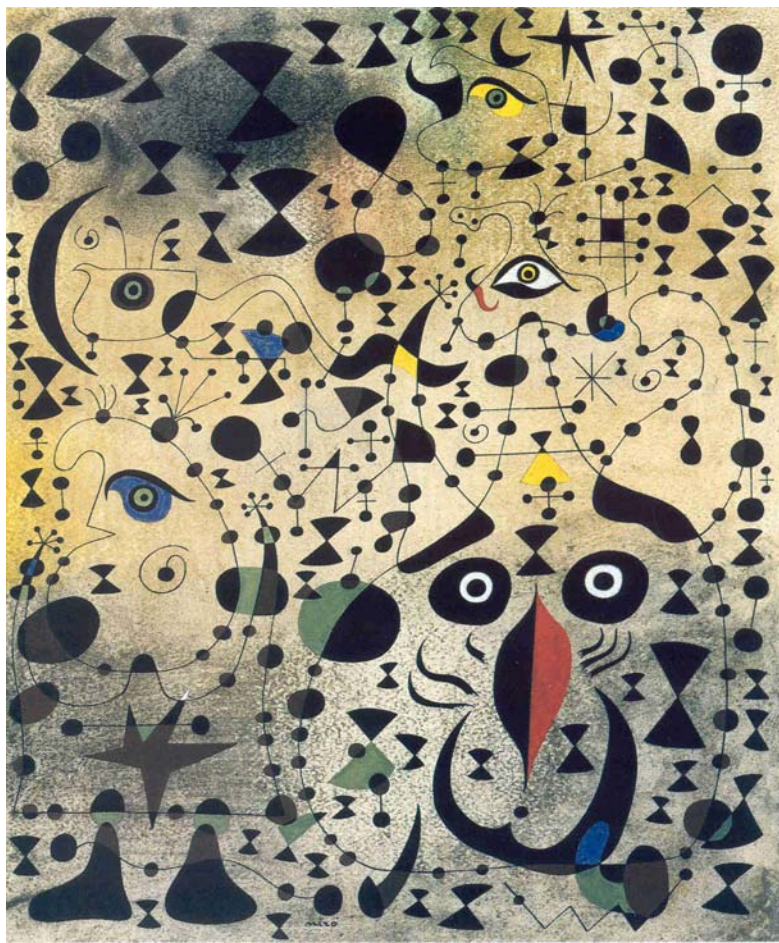
## FOR JOAN MIRO, POETRY AND PAINTING WERE THE SAME

And although the works of the noted Catalan artist appear spontaneous and free, they were really the product of disciplined intensity

On a sun-seared April afternoon 15 years ago, another foreign correspondent and I called on Joan Miro at his home on a hill just outside Palma on the craggy, medieval island of Majorca. A few days short of his 85th birthday, the impish yet seemingly shy painter, wearing a suit and tie, received us in his living room, a typical Spanish bourgeois salon with stuffed furniture, houseplants and shelves of knickknacks. The decor, in fact, included several pieces of the white-painted, clay-molded, folk-crafted whistle figures that tourists always buy in Majorca. The paintings, tapestry and fan on the walls, however, did not blend in. All were original Miro's. Polite, pleased to meet journalists from the country that first hailed his genius, Miro, during more than two hours of conversation in Spanish, acknowledged that outsiders might be surprised at how ordinary he seemed, how different from the images of his more bohemian, more histrionic, more eccentric compatriots Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali. "I live like a normal citizen," he said. "But there is a Catalan saying that the procession marches inside you. What happens is inside.



Self-portrait from 1919, painted at age 26 before Miro went to France, shows early influence of Cubism. (Musee Picasso, Paris)



*The Beautiful Bird Revealing the Unknown to a Pair of Lovers* is part of Miro's Constellation series, 23 works in gouache and oil done in 1940 and '41. These paintings "were my refuge during the war," the artist later said. (Museum of Modern Art)

"Inside?" he then asked, chuckling and waving an open hand near his chest. "Whew!

Miro, by then, was a tiny, stooped man with delicate, thinning white hair and the palest of gray eyes. His shoes seemed too large for him, making a visitor recall the enormous feet that are found in some of his paintings. Though a lover of poetry who often created titles out of fanciful imagery—*A Star caresses the breast of a black woman* (1938), *The Beautiful Bird Revealing the Unknown to a Pair of Lovers* (1941)—he was hardly glib. To emphasize a point, in fact, he often used a click of the tongue or a swing of his fist instead of a word. "America has influenced me greatly because of the vitality that you have," he said. "It has a push." Then he punched his fist through the air to show what kind of push.

Now that the world is celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of the great painter, who died on Christmas Day in 1983, I remember most what he told us about Catalonia, his native region of Spain. Ruminating about the symbol of the outsize foot, Miro explained that it represented Catalonia and the force emanating from its soil. He pounded the floor with his foot to illustrate the force. "My force enters here," he said. "It's an ancestral thing of blood.... Where I am

rooted the strongest is in Catalonia, and it enters through my feet." He clicked his tongue to underscore the force.

Since anniversaries are times of rediscovery, Miro is sure to attract new insight, analysis and admiration this year. The main vehicle is the sumptuous retrospective that opened on his birthday, April 20, at the Joan Miro Foundation in Barcelona and that, in an expanded and altered form, moved to the Museum of Modern Art in New York last month where it remains on view until January 11, 1994. Although the Spanish and American curators insist that they really have fashioned separate exhibitions, the two shows depend on the same cluster of works, mainly from American collections, for their power and enchantment.

At first glance, it would seem there is little to rediscover about Miro either in Barcelona or in New York. He is ubiquitous in Barcelona and, in fact, almost so in the rest of Spain. Barcelona, after all, is the capital of Catalonia, and Catalans feel the same identity with Miro that he expressed so often for the region. Although the Catalan

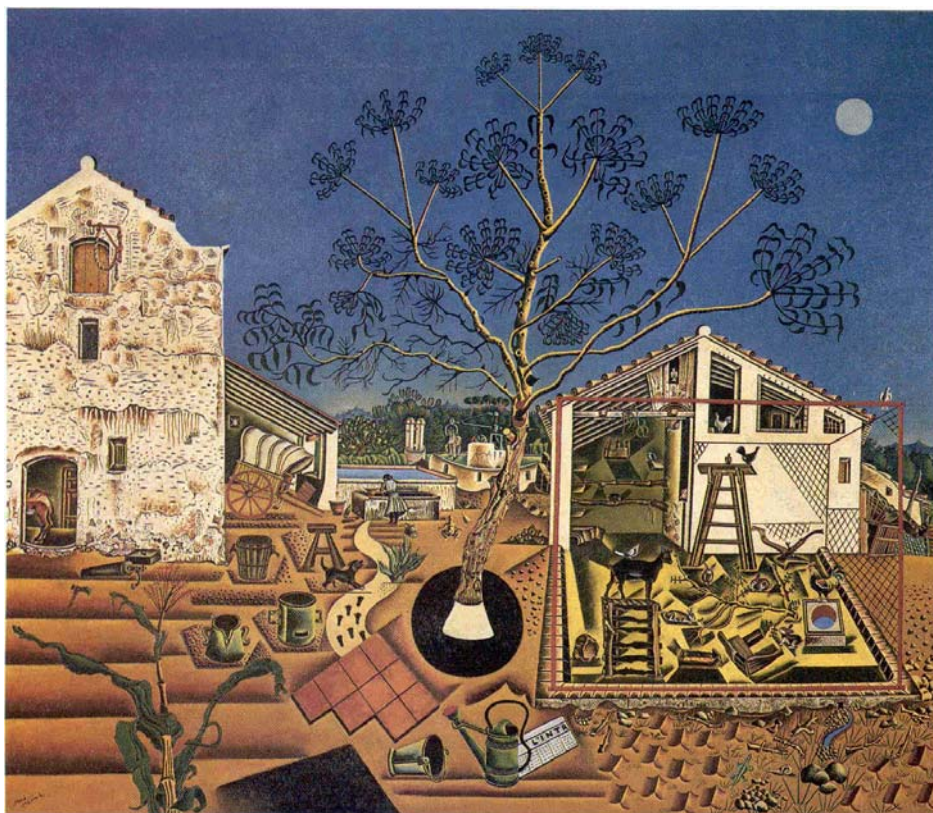
regional government has proclaimed 1993 the Any Miro (Catalan for the "Miro Year"), Spaniards did not need this reminder. In Barcelona, almost every bank uses a logo that either derives from a Miro design or imitates one. Spanish government offices dealing with tourists do the same. Miro's favorite colors of his last decades—black and the primary colors—dominate advertising. Even the symbol of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics—a leaping stick figure in a flash of blue, yellow and red—is patterned on Miro. "When I looked around at the Olympics on opening day," says Rosa Maria Malet, the director of the Miro Foundation, "I said to myself, 'This could not have been done without Miro.' The colors. The symbols. Miro was everywhere."

But, for the most part, Spaniards know only the later Miro. In the last 20 years of his life, heavily involved in printmaking and posters, he lent his art to countless causes, especially those extolling Catalan culture. His posters promoted the Catalan

language, a new Catalan newspaper and even Barca, the Barcelona soccer team. Spaniards became familiar with his large, bold, black figures and his thick splashes of primary colors.

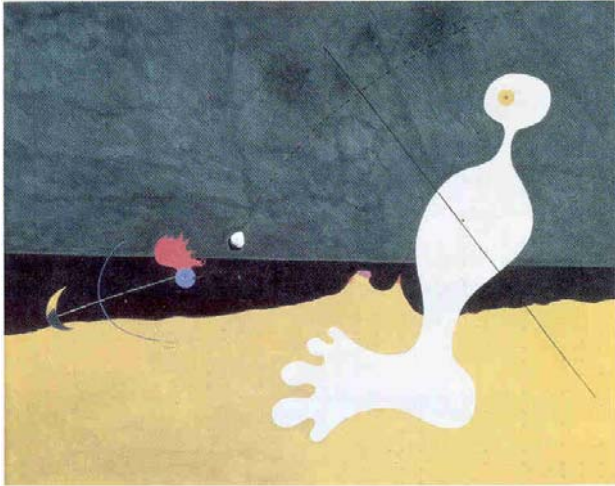
But they knew very little about the classic Miro, the paintings that had captivated the critics of New York and Paris in the 1930s and '40s and insured his reputation as a 20th-century master. Rich Spaniards did not buy early Miros before the Spanish Civil War. After the dictator Francisco Franco assumed power at the end of the war, it was not politically correct to buy a Miro. As a result, Spain has almost none of his best-known works. The Miro Foundation is rich in Miro notebooks and in paintings from his youth and old age—and little in between. Only one of the 23 Constellation paintings of World War II, perhaps Miro's finest achievement, belongs to a Spanish collection.

Most Americans, on the other hand, know little about the elderly Miro and his use of bold figures and colors to attract a wide public both to a host of Catalan and Spanish causes and to his own private world of poetic symbols. Nor have they had a chance until now to examine the notebooks that he turned over to the foundation. These notebooks help lay to rest the old notion that Miro would attack canvases without planning, like a child playing in finger paint.



*The Farm* summed up Miro's home at Montroig, which he felt was the most Catalan place of all: "I wanted to put everything I loved about the country into that canvas—from a huge tree to a tiny little snail." (National Gallery of Art)

The works of Miro always lent themselves to this interpretation. For several years, he associated with the Surrealists in Paris. They preached the need to lavish the images of the subconscious directly on the canvas. Over decades, Miro created myriad personal symbols of monstrous feet, grotesque women, twisted ears, enormous eyes, spiraling letters, clustering stars, dancing insects, playful demons, ink-spot birds, stick animals, escape ladders, angry cats, barking dogs and much more. Sometimes a canvas seems to brim with as many symbols as a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. But where Bosch is the alchemist of darkness, Miro is the prince of light and color. It is hard to enter a room full of Miro's without breaking into a smile and feeling a dollop of joy.



In Miro's personal lexicon, the big toe in *Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird* (1926) symbolized common humanity. (Museum of Modern Art)

And yet, if Miro were only playful, he would not be serious. If he painted only childlike dreams and hallucinations, he would be frivolous. Both Rosa Maria Malet, who designed the Barcelona show, and Carolyn Lanchner, the Museum of Modern Art curator responsible for the New York show, are trying to dispel these assumptions. "We wanted to break the myth," says Malet, "that Miro painted directly on the canvas, without preparation, like a child." In Barcelona, Malet has done this by exhibiting numerous treasures from the notebooks in the collection of the Miro Foundation, demonstrating how Miro ordered his ideas and images before committing them to canvas. While using the notebooks as well, Lanchner also breaks the myth by emphasizing Miro's penchant for working in series, conceiving and carefully planning whole groups of related paintings. In her lengthy essay for the MOMA catalog, Lanchner acknowledges that Miro's "oeuvre now stands as the paradigm of all that is free and spontaneous in twentieth-century art," but she stresses the need to understand the "tortuous paths he took" to achieve this.

### Approaching art as a religion

Joan (pronounced ZHOE-AHN, the Catalan equivalent of Juan) Miro was born at 9 P.M. on April 20, 1873, at home, 4 Pasaje del Credito, in the Gothic quarter of Barcelona, a few blocks from the cathedral and the Plaza Sant Jaume, where Catalan nationalists still dance their sardanas every Sunday. He came from a family of artisans. He was the eldest child and only son of Miquel Miro Adzerias, a goldsmith and watchmaker, and Dolores Ferrer, the daughter of a cabinetmaker in Palma de Majorca. Miro remembered himself as "a very poor student ... quiet, rather taciturn, and a dreamer." But he approached his after-hours drawing classes as if they were a religious ceremony. "The implements were like sacred objects, and I worked as though I were performing a religious rite," he told a French critic years later. Miro learned to paint in a city dominated by the elaborate and fanciful architecture of Antoni Gaudi and the other Catalan modernists. Great bounds of imagination surrounded him.

Miro grew up in a period of intense Catalan nationalist feelings. It was the age of nationalism in Europe, and the Catalans, who spoke their own language—a language closer to a French dialect known as Langued'Occ than to Castilian Spanish—revived historical memories and myths of Catalan medieval greatness and expanse.

His father bought a farm in Montroig a few miles inland from the Mediterranean in his native province of Tarragona, south of Barcelona; Miro, who from 1911 onward spent many of his summers there, proclaimed himself "an international Catalan," an artist who would explore the essence of Catalonia with a personal style derived from the main currents in avant-garde art. He intended to paint all that was real in the Catalan countryside, which he painstakingly observed at Montroig.

An outsider can probably best understand Miro's feeling for Catalonia at this time through *The Farm*, which he started in Montroig in 1921 and completed a year later in Paris. "I wanted to put everything I loved about the country into that canvas—from a huge tree to a tiny little snail," he told a friend. Miro stripped each element down to such exquisite realistic detail—dwelling on what would become familiar Miro symbols, such as the dog barking at

the moon, the creeping snail and the birdlike leaves of the eucalyptus tree—that he seemed to mock reality or create what Lanchner calls a magic realism."

A few years later, both Ernest Hemingway and an American poet, Evan Shipman, decided they wanted to buy The Farm from Miro's dealer. They rolled dice for it; Hemingway won but had to scurry around Paris to borrow enough money to pay the 5,000 francs asked by the dealer. According to his biographer Carlos Baker, Hemingway believed that "Miro was the only painter who had ever been able to combine in one picture all that you felt about Spain when you were there and all that you felt when you were away and could not go there."

Yet, while Miro gloried in Montroig and the Catalan countryside, he found Catalonia's capital, Barcelona, stifling. "If I have to live much longer in Barcelona," he wrote a friend, "I will be asphyxiated by the atmosphere—so stinky and such a backwater (artistically speaking)." So Miro headed for Paris.

On his first trip, in March 1920 when he was nearly 27, he stayed for three and a half months. At first he lived in a hotel favored by Catalan artists and writers. "When I arrived in Paris, I was disoriented, paralyzed," he recalled. "For three or four months, I was incapable of painting. . . ." He found the Louvre "powerful" and utterly divine." "Can't you just imagine my awe—I who have never been out of Barcelona," he wrote a friend. He admired Pablo Picasso—"very fine, very sensitive, a great painter." But a visit to Picasso's studio made his spirits sink. "Everything is done for his dealer, for the money," he said. "A visit to Picasso is like visiting a ballerina with a number of lovers." His inability to work lasted until he returned to Montroig in the summer. Then, he "immediately burst into painting the way children burst into tears."



Though it conveys a dreamlike sense of spontaneity, Miro's *Carnival of Harlequin* was actually painted only after numerous careful studies—to the annoyance of Andre Breton, who was "high priest" of Surrealism. (Albright-Knox Art Gallery)

For the next decade, Miro divided his life between studios in Paris and the farm in Montroig, painting in both places. Paris drew him into the intellectual currents of Europe; Montroig offered him respite and renewal of his roots. In Paris, his circle included Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Picasso, Louis Aragon, Max Ernst, Andre Masson, Henry Miller, Jacques Prevert and the high priest of Surrealism, Andre Breton. He sometimes boxed with Hemingway at the American Club "in a real ring." The results were "comical" since, as he recalled, "I didn't come up any higher than his belly button." More often, he served as timekeeper while Hemingway boxed with Canadian novelist Morley Callaghan.

Miro was no drunken Modigliani making his way through the bistros of Paris selling sketches for a drink. "I lived alone in total poverty," he recalled, "but every time I went out I wore a monocle and white spats." He kept his brushes clean, waxed and polished the floor of his studio and arranged his canvases in neat order.

Unlike Picasso, Miro did not have a succession of wives and mistresses to write memoirs about him or serve as subjects themselves for biography. In 1929 he married Pilar Juncosa of Palma, "the most beautiful and sweetest bride in the world," and lived with her until his death 54 years later. Pilar joined my session with Miro in the living room while he was discussing his numerous grotesque portraits of women. He smiled, clicked his tongue and punched the air. "Evil," he said, describing his portraits. Pilar interrupted and asked if we hadn't noticed that, although his women are all ugly, his self-portraits are quite handsome. Miro laughed and left the subject of women.

In Paris, Miro fell under the sway of Surrealism. Andre Breton described Miro as the "most surrealist of us all." The Surrealists took their inspiration from the publication of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900 and

the belief, as psychoanalyst C. G. Jung put it, that "in dreams we put on the likeness of that more universal, truer, more eternal man who dwells in the darkness of primordial night."

Breton wanted Surrealists to transfer a dream-"infantile, grotesque or immoral as it may be "-onto canvas. To best capture the essence of the dream, Breton insisted, the painter should attack the canvas without thinking, as if powered by the dream itself; powered, in short, by the subconscious. He called this "psychic automatism."

The poetry of Surrealism, its glorification of symbolism and metaphor, probably influenced Miro far more than its theory of dreams. As Carolyn Lanchner points out, he was a "voracious reader" of Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire. Surrealist writers like Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard interested him even more than Surrealist painters. "I make no distinction between painting and poetry," said Miro.

*Carnival of Harlequin*, completed in 1925, is as chockfull of poetic symbols as anything Miro painted during these Surrealist years. Miro did not paint from dreams as Breton demanded. Instead, feeling pangs of hunger, he tried to "capture the hallucinations caused by my hunger." The great variety of symbols led many to regard this painting as a modern version of Hieronymus Bosch. The painting brims with benign beasts and fanciful musicians. A ladder signifies escape, a black circle represents Earth, a black triangle stands for the Eiffel Tower. Miro did not rush at the canvas with his hallucinations. The notebooks show that he planned this work carefully and composed it upon a grid background like other paintings in the same series.

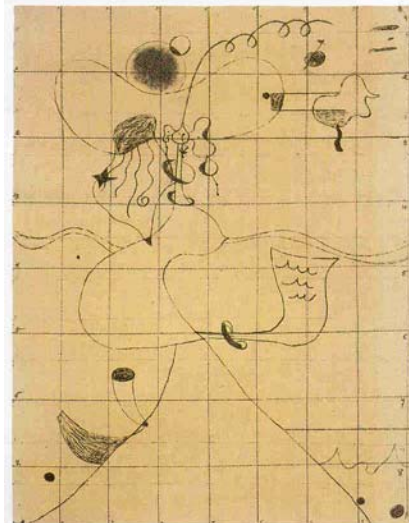
It was hard to keep up with the dogma of Surrealism. In 1926 Sergei Diaghilev commissioned Miro and Max The author, a Los Angeles Times correspondent who covers the United Nations, last wrote about American youth in Prague, for the June issue. Ernst to design costumes and sets for his Ballet Russe production of *Romeo and Juliet*, opening at the Theatre Sarah Bernhardt in Paris. At first Breton and his Surrealist cohorts were pleased. But Picasso reportedly complained to them, "The moment you see a check you collaborate with reactionary White Russians!" On opening night, the Surrealists staged a demonstration at the theater, handing out a broadside by Breton and Aragon attacking Miro and Ernst for negotiating "with the powers of money." Although Breton and the painters reconciled later, Miro steadfastly refused to sign any Surrealist manifesto, especially the ones extolling "psychic automatism." He simply refused to believe that any painting could come full-blown out of a dream.

### A new base in Barcelona

The 1930s weighed on Miro and left him troubled, unsettled, fearful. Although dealers had started to sell his paintings in both New York and Paris, the worldwide depression slowed sales. Miro found that he could not support his family in Paris anymore. In 1932 he, Pilar and their daughter, Dolores, moved into the family apartment in the



Miró's deliberate approach can be seen by comparing his *Portrait of Mrs. Mills in 1750* (below, at right) with the inspiration for the painting (the 18th-century work above, at left) and his studies that led to the final work.



Gothic quarter of Barcelona. He continued to summer in Montroig and make occasional trips to Paris, though Barcelona was now his base.

But the Spanish Civil War, which broke out in 1936, trapped Miro and his family on a visit to Paris. He decided to wait out the war there with them. A mood of impending disaster had shrouded his work for some time. A year before, feeling "a heaviness in the head, aching bones and asphyxiating dampness," he had tried "to depict this sensation of tragedy that gripped me deep inside." *Man and Woman in Front of a Pile of Excrement* and other works of dark comedy were the result.

A year later he painted *Still Life with Old Shoe*, which critics have since hailed as an allegory on the horrors of war, as powerful in its own way as Picasso's *Guernica*. The fork plunging into the heart of an apple, the burning bottle, the dried-out bread, the abandoned shoe—all seemed to reflect the cruelty and despair of Spain. Miro, however, insisted he had no such allegory in mind. He told his dealer Pierre Matisse beforehand that he intended "to push this painting to the limit, for I want it to hold up against a good still life by Velazquez." Later he confided, "I must confess that I wasn't aware that I was painting my *Guernica*." When he plunged the fork into the apple, he did not think "about the soldier sticking his bayonet into the enemy's body." But he did know that he was "painting something tremendously serious." In fact, he almost failed to finish it because of a "general feeling of terror."



Deeply depressed by the Spanish Civil War, Miro painted the brooding *Still Life, with Old Shoe* in 1937. (Museum of Modern Art)

When Josep Luis Sert, the Catalan architect who later taught at Harvard, organized the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 Paris World's Fair, he commissioned Picasso and Miro to create murals for it. Incensed by the German air raid that Gen. Francisco Franco had ordered to destroy the Basque town of Guernica, Picasso painted what is probably the best-known political painting of the 20th century. Turning once again to the Catalan peasant as his model, on six masonite panels, 18 feet by 12 feet overall, Miro painted *El Segador (The Reaper)*, a portrait of an anguished but defiant farmer. After the fair closed, this symbol of oppression was dismantled and shipped to Valencia, the wartime capital of the Spanish Republic. It was never found again.

With world war imminent in August 1939, Miro rented a house at Varengeville on the sea in Normandy. Georges Braques, Herbert Read and Alexander Calder had also taken refuge in the town. In January 1940 he began his series of paintings in gouache and oil on paper known as the Constellations. By the following May, the first bombs had fallen on Normandy and German troops were advancing on France. While panic seized France, Miro and his wife returned to Paris, then fled only eight days before the Germans marched in. They headed for Perpignan and slipped across the border into Catalonia, Miro clinging to his portfolio of the first part of the Constellation series. Friends persuaded him that it was too dangerous for an artist so identified with the Spanish Republic to show up in Franco-occupied Barcelona. They made their way to Pilar's ancestral island of Majorca, where Miro hid and worked, using his mother's name of Ferra.

A few months later he would be an internationally recognized artist. New York's Museum of Modern Art opened the first grand retrospective of his work in November 1941. But Miro could see no future. "I was very pessimistic," he said. "I felt that everything was lost. After the Nazi invasion of France and Franco's victory, I was sure they wouldn't let me go on painting, that I would only be able to go to the beach and draw in the sand or draw figures with the smoke from my cigarette. When I was painting the Constellations I had the genuine feeling that I was working in secret. But it was a liberation for me . . . I ceased thinking about all the tragedy around me."

Carolyn Lanchner calls the Constellations one of the miracles that art occasionally bestows." Miro painted a whirl of stars, moons, birds, eyes, whiskers, spirals, dots, squares and triangles hurtling through space in magnificent color and eerie balance. He said he took his inspiration from the night, from music and from the stars. Music, in fact, had led him along the way just as poetry had in the past. Miro managed to smuggle the series out to his New York dealer through the diplomatic pouch of a Brazilian Embassy cultural attaché. When Pierre Matisse exhibited them at his gallery in January 1945, they were the first sign to America that the war had not paralyzed all of European art. Andre Breton, exiled in New York, wrote that the exhibit opened a window for Americans to look onto "all the flowering trees that the distant storm might have spared." The paintings astounded and influenced the new American abstract artists like Jackson Pollock.

### **From Europe to the world**

There was no doubt about Miro's standing after World War II. Commissions for murals came rapidly. He produced some in ceramic in collaboration with an old friend, Josep Llorens Artigas, including two walls at UNESCO in Paris. Other murals graced the Terrace Hilton Hotel in Cincinnati (now at the Cincinnati Art Museum), the Harvard University law school and the Barcelona airport. Miro had never traveled outside Europe before, but he would make six trips to the United States and two to Japan after the war. Soon after his 65th birthday, in 1959, the Museum of Modern Art staged a second retrospective. That same year President Dwight D. Eisenhower presented him with the Grand International Award of the Guggenheim Foundation at a reception in the White House. The National Museum of Modern Art in Paris honored his 70th birthday with a retrospective. So did the Tate Gallery in London. The Grand Palais in Paris celebrated him with another retrospective soon after his 80th birthday.

When the vengeful mood of the Francoists began to dissipate in 1942, Miro moved back to the family home in Barcelona. A little more than a decade later, however, he decided to return to Majorca. He bought a house, Son Abrines, on the outskirts of Palma and commissioned his friend Josep Luis Sert to design a grand studio alongside. In 1956, when he was 63, he made his final move to Majorca.

Miro tried his hand at ceramics, bronze sculpture, printmaking, book illustration, posters, costume design, even tapestry (an enormous tapestry fashioned in collaboration with Josep Royo now hangs in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.). just as the murals, posters, tapestries and monumental sculptures reached out to a wide audience, Miro's paintings also turned bolder to attract mass attention.

The Sert studio allowed him the luxury of laying many canvases on the floor and working on them as he stepped or crawled from one to another. When Miro showed us around the studio in 1978, there were perhaps a hundred canvases, most on the floor. He told us that he awoke every morning at 4 and let thoughts and feelings race through his mind in a preview of the day's work. He would fall asleep again at 7. Waking an hour later, he would move among the canvases in the study, carrying cups of paint. He worked first on those that had excited him during his early-morning meditation. His latest painting had taken a year to complete; other canvases had lain there unfinished even longer. After lunching with Pilar at 1:30 P.M., the 85-year-old Miro would nap for 20 minutes and then resume painting in the studio until 8:30. "Everything seems disorganized," he said, "but it is very organized."

Despite his support of the Spanish Republic and Catalan nationalism, Miro never struck a strong political pose like Picasso. But he did not avoid quiet stands of principle. At first, the Franco government tried to ignore him. "There was a total indifference," he said. As his worldwide fame increased, "they wanted to attract me toward them for their own convenience, but I would not go." The Francoists offered to appoint him the Spanish government's director of fine arts, but Miro refused. He also refused to cooperate with all attempts by the Spanish government to mount Miro exhibitions. He only allowed one retrospective in Spain, for his 75th birthday, but it was sponsored by the Barcelona city hall, not the Franco government in Madrid.

After Franco died in 1975, Spain could embrace Miro more easily. As Spain transformed itself from a dictatorship to a democracy, in one of the most remarkable political transitions in European history, Spain also began to reinterpret its culture and cultural heroes.

Spain had produced three world-renowned painters in the 20th century—Picasso, Salvador Dali and Miro and it was time to reassess them at home. Picasso had painted the icon of Spanish democracy, *Guernica*, and almost every Spanish youth had tacked a reproduction of it onto a wall at home. The transfer of this mural from the Museum of

Modern Art in New York to Madrid (first to the Prado and later to the Queen Sofia Center of Art) was one of the great political moments of the Spanish transition to democracy. But Picasso had died two years before Franco, without setting foot in Spain for four decades, and most Spaniards were not familiar with any of his work other than *Guernica*. In truth, though revered, he had become a distant figure.

Dali was alive in his native Catalonia, but he was ill and discredited and somewhat silly. He had supported Franco during the dictatorship and had turned ever more eccentric; it was hard to take him seriously.

Miro, on the other hand, was alive, active, stable and committed to democracy. In 1978, the new Spanish government organized a retrospective for his 85th birthday. When he showed up, hundreds of young people surrounded and applauded him. "That was a pleasure," he said, "an intense pleasure, a reward." Soon Spaniards could sense Miro everywhere, painting his murals, erecting monumental sculptures, publishing posters and prints. All segments of Spanish society celebrated him. Somehow he managed to reflect both the greatness that Franco had sullied and the freshness that democracy promised. By the time he died in 1983, at the age of 90, he had become the grand painter of the new Spanish democracy.

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By Stanley Meisler



*Women, Bird by Moonlight, 1949*