

it knows, sees without calculating and makes decisions according to degrees of emotional intensity: thus painting for Miró after the mid-1920s became a form of action. What he used to temper this was a rare sense of tact; he knew where to make the marks and when to leave the surface alone; he began to trust that the rawness of his own instincts could be delivered with care and precision in paint to a surface, or in his work as a sculptor, without any apparent signs of struggle. His paintings had the aura of pure voice, pure vision, but they also were controlled with exquisite care. The power came from the playful gap between what was released and what was meticulously put in place. There is plenitude in his colours and his imagery, but there is also a starkness, a fierce urge to control. Miró’s paintings have the beauty and sense of spontaneity of birdsong, but they also have a deep-seated and hard knowledge which comes from the eye, the selecting gaze, the sense of flight-path, destination, danger.

What he sought from the marks he made was a kind of purity, but it was not a simple kind; he used colour with zeal and authority and he understood the complexity which colour could offer a pictorial space. A simple splash of colour, or some form approximating to something in nature or something in dream, could suffice then to place over the background colour; he could use dots, squiggles, spidery or sexual shapes, amorphous shapes, blurs, planes of flat colour, black lines, figures, lines, birds. Miró liked the sun, the moon, the stars in the same way as he liked the other marks he made. He did not need to represent the sun, the moon, the stars, or even the human form, or even invoke them; he needed to find a form for them in the picture as though they had been lost to us, and needed to be restored as living forms, as essential shapes by which all other shapes could be judged or created. Or because the picture needed something there, in that place, and he responded to the picture’s need as a parent will to a child’s cry, or a bird will respond to the worm or the fly.

But it might be too easy to suggest that Miró’s images arose merely from a need which his paintings had for them; the images are too elemental and essential in their power and force for that. There is a special glow and purity about his late canvases, as there is in the late work of other artists—the late poems of the Irish poet W.B. Yeats for example, or the late quartets of Beethoven—but also a fullness, a sense of belief in the connection between Miró’s own consciousness, his nervous system, and the painting he made. He had a way of making this connection seem monumental or fundamental rather than personal. In the connections he made between earth and sky, and the connection between dream and reality, he seemed to move out of the self into another space, pushing harder and harder to find an image in a painting or a piece of sculpture, which would seem humble, simple, accepting, and yet might, in its vast mystery and ambiguity, equal the world itself.

JOAN MIRÓ AND HIS PASSION FOR THE SUPPORT

José María Pardo

The exhibition *Miró: The Light of the Night* features 25 paintings, 14 sculptures and one tapestry produced by the artist over a period spanning almost two decades from 1962 to 1979. These years were a time of busy pictorial activity for Miró following the construction of his new studio, complemented after his purchase of Son Boter by the conceiving of sculptures and production of graphic work. During this phase of his career, Miró, by now full of confidence in his own abilities, attained an astonishing level of freedom in his creative process and the treatment of his artistic material. He was now able to employ with ease any technique, procedure or support to express himself. He took his explorations further by working in series, groups of works he generally began, developed and concluded as a set, usually using the same pictorial procedure and the same support. This exhibition brings together a selection of works from a number of these series, which illustrate Miró’s artistic discourse during this period, some of which are on public display for the first time.

In 1959, the studio designed by Josep Lluís Sert gradually began to fill with works, though Miró found this difficult at the start: when it was empty, the light-filled studio could be as overwhelming as the white surface of a painting.¹ Miró had few referents but instead drew on his own resources. To continue expanding his imaginary, he needed to surround himself with works, some of them begun and at different stages in the process of creation, others already completed. Ten years later, his painting has become more spontaneous and direct, more open to experimentation with new materials. He did without the formal guide of charcoal lines drawn in advance and attacked the surface directly with paint, which entailed greater risk but was rewarded by increased integrity and freshness. He used a wide range of supports, and while this may have been the case earlier in his career as well, the diversity increased notably in the 1970s, as demonstrated by this exhibition. (P. 88, 89)

Miró’s creative process was complex and also subject to change, as the artist described on numerous occasions² in private, first-hand testimony on his work as a painter shut away in his studio, driven to paint “by a force more powerful than myself that I cannot control”,³ suggesting atavistic behaviour and a compulsion to paint, draw, print, sculpt or model his inexhaustible imaginary. Decoding the complexity of the material nature that made this imaginary possible calls for careful observation of the pictorial facture of his works, of the materials he used, their arrangement and their application on the surfaces. The purpose of this brief essay is to consider these works in the context of issues connected with his studio and his pictorial oeuvre as a whole, and to look at how he fashioned them and the materials he used.

To begin with the first of this selection of works in date order, *Painting* (CAT. NO. 1) is painted on a long canvas without primer or stretcher, as a result of which it calls to mind a medieval painted wall hanging or standard, perhaps with Oriental proportions. Miró worked on these pieces on the floor, dripping and spattering paint onto them, applying glazes

and drawing signs on them, the same approach he was to employ ten years later in *Paysage animé*, (CAT. NO. 6), done on a similar yet larger piece of fabric. These are austere, schematic works that appear repeatedly and which seem to represent a compositional challenge for the artist due to their unusual vertical format. Miró was experienced in resolving the compositional problems inherent in large panoramas, but he now faced greater difficulties arising from the vertical nature of this format and from the need to read it in a new way. The size of his new studio helped him considerably in dealing with this, as he was able to observe and analyse the development of his work with a perspective that had previously been impossible for him to achieve.

Miró’s vocation for painting became an absolute commitment to each and every pictorial medium. His usual tools were pigments and colours—in the form of oils, caseins, acrylics, gouaches, watercolours, waxes and pastels—but he had no hesitation in using lesser materials such as industrial colorants and resins, blacks and whites in liquid enamels and even putties: any material could be made to serve an artistic purpose by Miró. In addition, he had a powerful passion for the support, for supports in general, for the supports for his paintings.⁴ There are limits to the expressiveness of industrial canvases, fabrics, boards or cards: they are free of unevenness and imperfections and inevitably result in a kind of reiteration in the effects. Miró found the delicacy of this artistic material acceptable but inadequate and his experimentation led him to others that he was able to purchase in specialist outlets and even to things found by chance in the most unexpected places.

Miró was remarkably selective as regards colour. As the spectator can quickly appreciate, his palette is closer to that of an accomplished Palaeolithic painter than to that of a master of later times such as Delacroix, who was well supplied with palettes scrupulously structured by ranges of hues and prepared for him by assistants.⁵ With regard to Miró’s essential palette, it is not enough to speak of generic colouring or of ranges—greens, blues, reds or yellows. Instead, one must talk of specific varieties of colour, of cobalts and ceruleans in the blues, or of cadmiums in reds and yellows, to mention but a few key examples. He remained faithful to this colouring, which is an unmistakable identifying sign of his on each painted surface, be it in the background or the signs, as in 2+5=7 (CAT. NO. 2).⁶ The properties of these varieties of colours play a key part in determining the pictorial effect and are crucial to the stability and permanence of the colour. With them, Miró spanned the entire chromatic spectrum, visible in the degraded, rubbed or blended glazes and which we can discern in the backgrounds. This chromatic purity may be limited in terms of number but it was precisely this that enabled him, through repeated mixings, to obtain broad intermediate ranges of clean, transparent tones.⁷

Miró was familiar with the art of pictorial cuisine, so to speak, and added to these technical skills an admirable sense of intuition. His choice of support was crucial and depended on its intended purpose. He was able to obtain very different results on the same fabric, similar to the cotton wall hangings described earlier. In *Femmes et oiseaux II* (CAT. NO. 3), *Femmes et oiseaux III* (CAT. NO. 4) and *Tête, oiseau* (CAT. NO. 9), the canvas used is a fine, tightly and evenly woven linen, a fabric he knew well and often employed. The neutral, warm tone of this yarn

provides a magnificent backdrop: lightly sized, the fabric’s texture enabled him to apply liberally his coloured matter, the oil that impregnates and binds with the sober surface, and also to dilute as he saw fit. More importantly, however, this fabric enabled him to use white—which cannot easily be applied to primed surfaces—which becomes another colour and perceptible in the painting. Onto these neutral linen bases, Miró *painted white*, which he modulated by overlaying just as he did with any other colour of his palette. Indeed, in some instances white occupies almost the entire surface, creating subtle platforms onto which the artist superimposed his symbolic world of forms, signs and stars.

In principle, any type of material can become a surface for colour. The variety of Miró’s supports is indisputable, but it is difficult to specify preferences or tendencies, merely recurrent behaviour.⁸ He continued to use traditional supports throughout his career. He was fully familiar with them and knew how to make the most of them, while the unpredictable qualities of others that he had never or rarely used before generated all kinds of fortuitous effects. He was, however, especially fascinated by the dialogue between the support and the procedure, in which he adjudicated by bringing both together in the solitude of his studio.⁹ Miró could be stirred by an irregular, uneven and absorbent weave, just as he could by the polished and impermeable surface of zinc—as in *Femme, oiseau* (CAT. NO. 5)—on which, because the sheet metal has no absorbency whatsoever, the oil runs like a liquid, as a consequence of which thickness, density and opacity can only be achieved by using smaller amounts. The opposite occurs in two works that share the same title, *Tête* (CAT. NO. 11 AND CAT. NO. 24), which are both part of his exploration of not just unconventional but also extremely unusual textures and materials such as tarred paper¹⁰ (IL. 1 AND IL. 2), the corrugated structure of which, when stapled to a rough board, was sufficiently suggestive that it formed the basis of a series produced by Miró in early 1976.

These examples demonstrate the importance of the ‘skin’ of Miró’s works, the tactile sense of his painting, the facture of the work. Nevertheless, this facture varies considerably in the artist’s oeuvre, as it is affected by the type of procedure and by the physical properties and the texture of the support. On occasions, he opted for rough scrap materials, as in *Personnages* (CAT. NO. 23), which is painted on the extremely surprising surface of a sturdy polypropylene sack that had once held agricultural fertiliser. The worn outer part of the sack, with its printed label, was the surface chosen by Miró, as his eye must have been caught by its unusual colour, a striking yellow that provided the perfect backdrop for his *Personnages* in 1976. Even though it may be purely by chance, a work dated by Miró on the very next day, *Oiseaux en face de l’horizon* (CAT. NO. 8), is a notable oil painting on conventional canvas, the challenge of which resided in distributing the eye-catching orangey yellow across its surface without saturating it with colour while avoiding layering and mixes and carefully shaping the space occupied by drips and signs.

Naturally, not everything is poetic in Miró’s oeuvre. Violence also appears in his works, as is well known. Frequently, this impulse is reflected in the texture of the surface and sometimes even the support. It is an aggression that Miró conveys without sublimating it through scraping and perforating, a buried

and careful violence that is painstakingly controlled and programmed, like the two orifices cut into two paintings on thick card, *Personnage* (CAT. NO. 13) and *Femme, oiseau* (CAT. NO. 18), the centres of the tension in each of the works and made all the more important by the contrast with these same effects, which are attenuated when the centre of attention is simply painted, as occurs in *Femme* (CAT. NO. 19). In *Femme, oiseaux, constellations* (CAT. NO. 14) there is subtly veiled aggressiveness in some of the graphisms—those that define the subject’s mouth—which might seem to have been painted but which have in fact been incised with a sharp tool (grattage), removing layers of paint to the extent that the canvas fabric is revealed and thereby achieving the desired result in the disturbing human figure (IL. 3). This last work, together with *Femme, oiseaux* (CAT. NO. 15) and *Tête* (CAT. NO. 17), demonstrates the hierarchical position of the colour black, which occupies much of the surface and which the artist tackled by adding layer upon layer till he deemed them finished. These are admonitory and disturbing paintings with little room for pictorial subtlety, the presence of which can be intuited below the black that cuts it off abruptly. *Tête* (CAT. NO. 17), in particular, is a sinister, shadowy image, a searching gaze that even creates a sense of spatial confusion.

Miró’s spatial concept owes nothing to the Renaissance box that the Avant-garde threw into disarray in the early 20th century. His space has no frame, is subject to no rules and is rarely tangible. In view of this, the immaculate uniformity of the canvas would not seem to be the most appropriate means for obtaining the effects of spatial depth: transmuting this pristine wall in space calls for prior working of the backgrounds. Miró tackled the white canvas with the same ferocity or the same refinement as in earlier periods. His approach was conditioned by the time and the situation. In *Personnages, oiseaux* (CAT. NO. 10), the synthesis and violence of his gestures in the upper part of the background contrast with the painstaking care with which he constructed the dramatic red lines, which at a certain distance may seem to be a single, continuous brushstroke but which is the result of thick impastos achieved by small strokes applied with extreme precision and care. (IL. 4 AND IL. 5)

Accident, be it by chance or intentional, is the starting point for by far most of the works, in whose genesis violence plays a part to some degree: a trigger of unforeseeable consequences—action painting—that will guide him on the path towards forms and signs that is valid for both a conventional panel painting [*Personnage* (CAT. NO. 21)] and an accidentally mutilated work [*Personnage et oiseaux* (CAT. NO. 22)]. However, Miró allowed himself periods of peace, resulting in works begun without apparent struggle based on large distributions of the surface, ceasefire agreements, so to speak, that keep part of the pictorial terrain spotless, as in *Paysage* (CAT. NO. 7). In this case, the distributions are the product of reflection, accords and compromises in the allotting of the surface. It should be remembered that in the last unfinished, mysterious works, Miró confronted the white solely with black, trenchantly dividing the territory of the painting.

In any event, all of Miró’s works unfailingly refer us back to him, regardless of the support on which they may be painted, a kind of spell that turns any object on which he worked into a Miró.¹¹ The support alters the result, on occasions substantially, and also conditions the process, determining what may be applied

successfully and which procedure it would be better not to employ. Miró experimented with all kinds of fabrics, canvases, types of paper, thick and thin card, but the variety of canvases is limited and card also has its limitations.¹² Materials like card but more rigid and hardwearing—fibreboards—brought him close to the wall that provided a surface for rock artists thanks to the colour of the fibres (CAT. NO. 12).¹³ Some types, in particular Masonite and Celotex,¹⁴ are ideal supports for the tension of the materials that Miró overlays and which roughen the surface, and for withstanding rubbing, incisions, scraping and even perforations, which would be difficult if not impossible to achieve with other supports. The intermediate tone of these surfaces gives chromatically very rich results and varied finishes, with matt effects, glazed highlights and sheer colours; backgrounds that call to mind a space in which signs and galaxies pursue their course, in the case of *Après les constellations* (CAT. NO. 16), or vague, expectant morphologies that observe us, as seen in *Femme, oiseaux* (CAT. NO. 18).

On occasions, the symbolic content goes beyond the simple material appeal of the work. *Chevaux mis en fuite par un oiseau* (CAT. NO. 20) is one of an unusual series known as *pasterades*, paintings that might be termed pictorial kitsch produced by unknown artists during the period when the Franco regime was looking to achieve economic growth. Miró’s choice, emphasised by the title, is a knowing wink at the spectator and a rejection of the tackiest commercial painting of the time and what it represented.¹⁵

Turning now to another area, his collaboration with the tapestry weaver Josep Royo demonstrates Miró’s artistic capabilities in any technique, his ability to work with other experts in particular fields, as seen in pottery and ceramics with J. Llorens Artigas and Joan Gardy, in which together they arrived at the formula (the alchemy, one might say) for Miró to remain Miró at a thousand degrees in temperature. In the case of Royo, as the symbiosis with Miró entailed dealing with materials and processes very different to those of painting, the weaver was forced to explore textures and volumes that bear no relation to traditional tapestry work (CAT. NO. 40).

With regard to Miró the sculptor, the catalogue raisonné issued in 2006 reveals the artist’s immense body of work in this field.¹⁶ He produced his first sculpture in the 1920s and continued to produce works in this art form from time to time. However, his sculptural work picked up considerably following his purchase in 1959 of the Son Boter houses neighbouring Son Abrines. Son Boter became his sculptural headquarters and he was known to sketch some of his sculpted pieces on its whitewashed walls inside, adding a further pictorial facet—Miró the parietal artist—to his already extensive range of procedures and supports. (P. 97)

The collection of sculptures are artworks in their own right but are complemented by paint, making them painting in three dimensions. There is nothing ethereal about these volumes, and the forms that Miró suggests or hints at in two dimensions now take on a manifest corporeality. Miró was capable of making a painting appear on any surface; likewise, sculpture was an artistic form that he was able to construct using any object. He would focus on his chosen objects, scrutinise them, define their functions, bring or fix them together and endow them with a new physicality, a new identity, a new materiality,

pointing once again to his inexhaustible creative imagination. His interest in sculpture is further revealed by the fact that by using the lost-wax technique, he was able to have the works he constructed out of diverse materials cast in bronze. Miró pursued his sculpture in bronze with a number of foundries in Barcelona, France and Italy, a form of teamwork that proved beneficial for the artist and for those who did his smelting, who demonstrate their own singular skills in the range of patinas and finishes achieved. In addition, Miró worked in multiples as a way to reach a broader audience. One of his main goals was to show work in the public space outside the confines of museums. The sculpture *Femme et oiseau* (CAT. NO. 39) in this exhibition is a small version of the monumental piece in Parc Joan Miró (known popularly as Parc de l’Escorxador) in Barcelona.

Joan Miró’s work, be it in sculpture, painting, printmaking or ceramic, represented a break with artistic tradition. Even so, there remains in it a close link to that aspect of spell-weaving that runs through the history of art. As the artist continued along this long and uncertain path, without guide or master, with nothing other than his intuition to show him the way, he turned his boyhood dream to be a painter into a reality.¹⁷ His dream as a child was, however, as modest as Miró the man, as he achieved much more: he turned his craft into a magical ritual and his studio into an alchemist’s laboratory, without limits concerning his signs and without rules regarding his media.

1. The construction phase was completed in 1956, but assorted setbacks, trips and above all public commissions in the United States, meant that he was unable to take up his new space and painting until 1959.

2. In various conversations and interviews over the course of his life, Miró provided abundant information concerning the dynamic of this process and about his practice in his studio. See: Raillard, Georges, *Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves*, Paris, Seuil, 1977 (quotations from this work have been translated into English from the Spanish translation *Conversaciones con Joan Miró*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 1978); Rowell, Margit, Boston, *Joan Miró*, Boston, G. K. Hall & Co., 1986.

3. Raillard, Georges, op. cit., p. 146.

4. Raillard, Georges, *Ibid.*, p. 187.

5. Gage, John, *Color y cultura. La práctica y el significado del color de la antigüedad a la abstracción*, 1993, pp.185-187. (English edition: *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, Berkeley CA, University of California Press, 1999.)

6. Over the 19th century, the chemical industry produced varieties that offered better luminosity, stability and permanence than ‘fine colours for artists’, mainly reds, oranges, yellows, blues and white.

7. Miró avoided earthy pigments, the ranges of natural ochre, earth and red hues, which are less luminous and transparent and which can be obtained by mixing primaries.

8. It should be noted that we are referring here solely to his supports for painting, as his work on paper is catalogued separately.

9. On materials and procedures in Miró’s painting, see: Pardo Falcón, José M., “D’Altamira a Son Boter. Entre el ritu i la màgia, Aproximació al procediment pictòric de Joan Miró”, in *Institut d’Estudis Baleàrics*, no. 47-48, pp. 75-92, Palma, 1993-1994; Pardo Falcón, José M., “Miró frente al blanco”, in *Picasso, Guston, Miró, de Kooning. Painting for themselves: Late Works*, Bremen, Hirmer, 1996, p. 122.

10. Used as an insulating and protective lining for transport packaging, a material that was perhaps sophisticated for the time but which soon became obsolete due to advances in the plastics industry.

11. Fernández Miró, Emili, “Joan Miró, ¿pintando para sí mismo?” in: *Picasso, Guston, Miró, de Kooning. Painting for themselves: Late Works*, Bremen, Hirmer, 1996, p. 122.

12. Mainly with procedures that call for the use of large amounts of liquid.

13. Occasionally on hard, dense varieties commonly known as hardboard, the support Miró employed for *Femme, oiseaux* (cat. no. 12).

14. Pressed fibreboard that appeared in the USA in the 1930s in structurally strong panels of varying densities. Panels with the consistency of very thick cardboard are able to withstand damp.

15. He purchased these pieces at second-hand and antique shops in Barcelona. They are the kind of work that usually hung on the walls in furniture shops aimed at the working class.

16. Fernández Miró, Emili; Ortega Chapel, Pilar, *Joan Miró. Sculptures. Catalogue raisonné*. 1928-1982, Paris, Daniel Lelong-Successió Miró, 2006.

17. Raillard, Georges, op. cit., p. 142. Miró’s difficulties in conforming to the rules of academic drawing during his training caused him a series of emotional upsets.