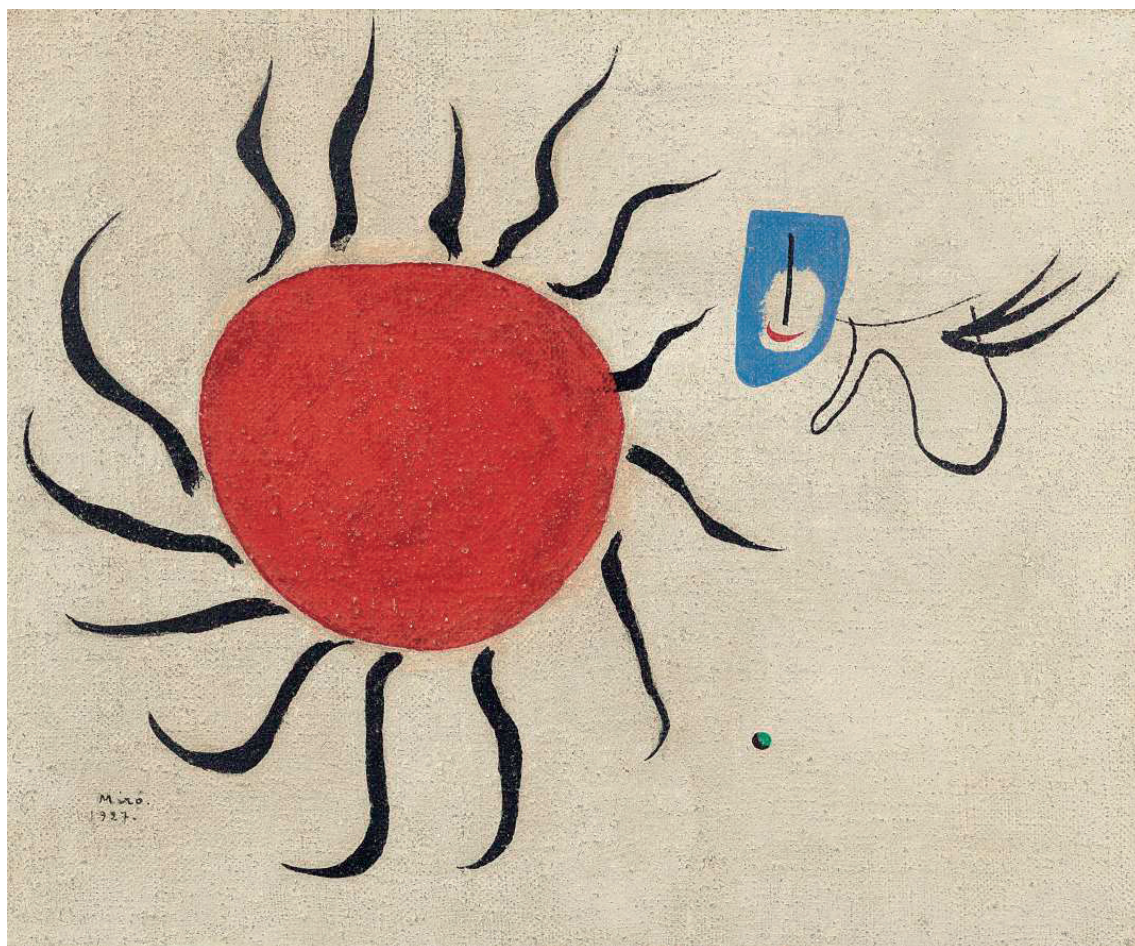


# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents on February 10

# JOAN MIRÓ

*Absolute Reality*

PARÍS • 1920–1945

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## *Joan Miró. Absolute Reality. Paris, 1920–1945*

- Dates: February 10 to May 28, 2023
  - Curator: Enrique Juncosa
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- In the 25 years of activity covered by the exhibition, there is a constant flow of new ideas ranging from his initial magic realism to his language of constellated signs.
  - In this period, it becomes clear that prehistoric art held a special interest for Miró, who proposed returning to the dawn of art in order to retrieve its original spiritual sense.
  - Admired for his formal innovations developed in the context of the first avant-garde movements, especially Dadaism and Surrealism, Miró is also considered a precursor of Abstract Expressionism and Conceptual Art.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Joan Miró. Absolute Reality. Paris, 1920–1945*, an exhibition that explores the career between the years 1920 and 1945 of one of the most outstanding artists of the 20th century. The start of this fundamental period in Miró's oeuvre is marked by the date of his first trip to Paris, a key city in his life and work, and it closes with the year when Miró, after producing his *Constellations* (1940–41) and then hardly painting at all for some years, created a great series of works on white backgrounds that consolidated his language of signs floating on ambiguous grounds.

In the 25 years of activity covered by the exhibition, there is a constant flow of new ideas ranging from his initial magic realism to his language of constellated signs. In this development, it becomes clear that prehistoric art, including rock paintings, petroglyphs, and statuettes, held a special interest for Miró, a fascination confirmed by his notebooks, where he proposes returning to the dawn of art in order to retrieve its original spiritual sense.

The work of Joan Miró (b. 1893 Barcelona; d. 1983, Palma) is admired for its formal innovations developed in the context of the first avant-garde movements, especially Dadaism and Surrealism, and he is also considered a precursor of Abstract Expressionism. Miró was moreover an artist interested in spiritual matters and fascinated by visions and dreams. More recently, attention has also been drawn to the political aspects of his work, emphasizing his firm opposition to Franco's dictatorship and his sympathy for the Catalan nationalism of the period. Some of his ideas like his proclamation of the "assassination of painting," made at a point in the late 1920s when Miró was painting unceasingly, remain intriguing, and point to an attitude heralding Conceptual Art. Forty years after his death, in short, his oeuvre still interests and fascinates us while remaining just as enigmatic as ever.

Miró's oeuvre is an exemplary mythopoetic project, a constant transformation of lived experience into art. As firmly as he ignored traditional realism, Miró also rejected the idea of pure abstraction, asserting that all the marks he painted on his works corresponded to something concrete and anchored in a profound reality

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that is part of reality itself. This idea relates to a phrase by poet André Breton, the leader of the Surrealist movement, who spoke of a new absolute reality in which the inner world of artists and poets was incorporated to the outside world. In the meantime, Paul Klee, an artist admired by Miró, called his own work abstract but with memories, meaning that in art, the real is the real transformed by memory. In statements made to *Cahiers d'Art* in 1939, Miró affirmed: "If we don't try to discover the religious essence or the magical sense of things, we shall do no more than add new causes of degradation to those already surrounding people today."

## TOUR OF THE EXHIBITION

Miró spent his formative years in Barcelona at a time when nationalist sentiments were blooming. The Catalan capital was then a conservative city, but various outstanding personalities emerged there in the late 1910s with a commitment to the new ideas arriving from Paris, among them the composer Frederic Mompou, the poet J.V. Foix, and Miró himself. During World War I, several significant avant-garde artists also took refuge in Barcelona, such as Francis Picabia, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, and Marcel Duchamp, all of whom Miró met.

At that stage, the Catalan painter already longed to travel to the French capital, and he and his friends would discuss the news that arrived from it. He imagined that he would find great creative freedom in Paris and would frequent the company of the most advanced artists, poets, and art dealers of his time, as was indeed to occur.

## 1918–1920

In 1918–1920, Miró painted what have been called his "detailist" works, characterized by great concentration and delicacy of execution. In them, the leaves of trees and plants look like minutely exact calligraphies, reminiscent of oriental artistic practices. The rural world in these early works becomes an Arcadian setting. Rather than representing reality precisely, Miró paints the emotions the landscapes arouse in him. The desire for objectivity is transformed into a visionary gaze.

Also from this first period is *Self-portrait* (1919), which still manifests a desire for objectivity related to visible reality. It is a long way from two later self-portraits, *Self-portrait I* (1937–38) and *Self-portrait II* (1938). In the first, Miró turns himself into a transparent figure and his eyes and the buttonholes of his shirt adopt astral or cosmic forms, while his face is the emblem of his inner world. In the second self-portrait of 1938, Miró transforms himself literally into the night, for this is a pure vision of himself at a moment of rapture. In this work, two red circles surrounded by tongues of yellow flame float in a black space with no limits or horizon, while all around are stars, fishes, birds, butterflies, and biomorphic abstract shapes. The whole thing suggests ecstasy.

For Margit Rowell, "Miró's spiritual life, his inner landscape, was as real to him as the sun, an insect, or a blade of grass. (...) His mythopoetic conscience seldom saw reality without a filter: the filter that transformed any truth into an Absolute Truth."

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## Early 1920s

Miró wrote to his friend J.F. Ràfols in 1923 on the subject of the new landscapes he was then painting: “I have managed definitively to break away and free myself from nature, and the landscapes no longer have anything to do with external reality,” the goal being “greater emotional power.” *Interior (The Farmer’s Wife, 1922–23)*, another painting of the rural world, is also a transitional work. To paint the farmer’s wife of the title, Miró used a doll, which heightens a final sensation of strangeness. In this picture, all the visible elements, including a cat and a stove, can still be clearly identified. However, the woman’s enormous bare feet confirm that mere representation is not the painter’s objective here, and that the energy which transfigures the real comes from the earth.

In his first Paris studio at 45, Rue Blomet, which he occupied in 1921, Miró painted the landscapes which bear no reference to external reality. André Masson was a neighbor of his, and among the outstanding artists and poets who passed through Miró’s studio were Antonin Artaud, Raymond Roussel, Robert Desnos, Paul Eluard, Michel Leiris, Benjamin Péret and René Char. He was interested in the formal innovations of all these figures, who rejected logic, cliché, and tradition while turning their attention to questions like automatism, the aesthetics of fragmentation, the arbitrary union of unexpected and unconnected images, and the visual and typographical use of poetic texts in calligrams. Miró’s pictures of the mid–1920s, known as the dream paintings, destroy any logical narrative structure, and the few elements that appear scattered over their surfaces appear to be the result of improvisation, although his sketches prove the opposite.

## Rue Tourlaque

Between 1926–1927, Miró changed studio and style. He moved to the Rue Tourlaque, where he worked until 1929, alternating with summers in Catalonia, and where he frequented the company of artists like Jean Arp, René Magritte, and Max Ernst, his new neighbors. Among his most outstanding works of that time are various large-format horizontal landscapes like *Landscape (Landscape with Rooster)* and *Landscape (The Hare)*, both of 1927. Here, Miró paints certain recognizable but stylized elements. The intensely colored backgrounds of these pictures suggest wide open spaces, while traditional procedures like shading, the construction of volume, and perspective all disappear. In 1927, Miró also produced a series of small paintings on white backgrounds like *Painting (The Sun)* and *Painting (The Star)*. In these works, the background is a pure pictorial space where recognizable but stylized forms of stars and animals float like emblems of this new reality.

## The 1930s

In the 1930s, expressionism became a dominant characteristic of Miró’s work. This is the case of *Group of Personages in the Forest* (1931), the so-called *Wild Paintings* (1934–38), a series of paintings on sandpaper, collages, small paintings on copper like *Man and Woman in front of a Pile of Excrement* (1935), an extensive series of paintings on masonite from the summer of 1936, and another on celotex of 1937. In general, all of them are characterized by displaying monstrous figures in ambiguous and disturbing settings, probably a reflection of his worry and anxiety over the political situation that led to the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Miró created the 27 paintings on masonite panels of the same size during the summer that brought the start of the Civil War. These works anticipate the Action Painting of the New York School, where the act of painting becomes the subject of the work. His images are an illustration of

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the process that has given rise to them. Miró paints on a highly textured material with an intense earthy color upon which he rapidly superimposes black strokes and fields of color, employing other richly textured materials like tar, gravel, or sand. Sometimes he scrapes or pierces the surface. In spite of their spontaneity, certain forms in these works are recognizable or suggestive of specific things, such as eyes, heads, and phalluses.

## Varengville-sur-Mer

With the start of World War II, Miró, who was exiled in Paris, moved to a small house in Varengville-sur-Mer in Normandy, where he received a commission to paint a mural. Once there, he painted five small landscapes entitled *The Flight of a Bird over the Plain*, a reference to the open plains of that area and the crows flying over them. It was a very different landscape to that of the Mediterranean.

From Varengville, Miró wrote to his friend Roland Penrose about the way the *Constellations* had arisen: "After painting, I dipped my brushes in turpentine and dried them on white sheets of paper, without following preconceived ideas. The stained surface stimulated me and led to the birth of forms, human figures, animals, stars, the sky, the sun, and the moon. I drew all these things vigorously with charcoal. Once I had achieved a balance in the composition and had put all these elements in order, I started to paint with gouache, with the minuteness of a craftsman or a primitive man; this took me a long time."

The 23 constellations were painted between January 1940 and September 1941. They were finished in Majorca, where Miró and his family took up residence after fleeing from the war in France. When they were shown at Pierre Matisse's gallery in New York in 1945, they were the first works created during the war to be exhibited in the United States, and they made a great impact. These paintings are the culmination of the potential of the language of signs created by Miró, with an emphasis on imagination and intuition, and a desire to find a primal and universal form of expression.

After the *Constellations*, Miró shut himself up in Majorca with his family and stopped painting for a time. Things changed in 1945, when he produced a great series of large-format paintings, once more on a white background, in which he resumed the development of his language of signs. *Woman and Birds in the Night*, *Figure and Birds in the Night*, and *Woman in the Night* are among the titles of this series, some of which are repeated. Nearly all the works have the word 'night' in their title, although the backgrounds are white and luminous. From 1944 on, Miró also took an interest in ceramics, working in partnership with Josep Llorens i Artigas.

## DIDAKTIKA IN FOCUS: JOAN MIRÓ

The Didaktika project accompanying this exhibition focuses on presenting the figure of the artist through the screening of excerpts from the three episodes of the TVE program *Trazos*, directed by Paloma Chamorro, on which Joan Miró appeared as the principal guest.

It also includes several reproductions of the artist's images on wall vinyls that round off the experience of the show, together with a biography and a showcase displaying several original photographs of Miró taken by Man Ray.

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## Activities

### **Introductory talk on the exhibition** (February 8)

Enrique Juncosa, curator of the show, will give a talk on the figure of the artist within the framework of the exhibition.

### **Shared Reflections\***

On these special tours, professionals of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao expound different points of view on the contents of the exhibition.

- Curatorial Vision (February 15): Lucía Agirre, Curator of the Museum
- Key Concepts (February 22): Luz Maguregui, Coordinator of Education and Interpretation.

\* Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

### **Screening of *Trazos: Joan Miró*** (March 10)

The Auditorium of the Museum will host a full screening of the three episodes of the program *Trazos*, directed by journalist Paloma Chamorro, who conducted a very personal interview with the artist that shone with Miró's wit and humor. An RTVE production to celebrate the artist's 85th birthday in 1978.

### **Performative Action for Families: *The Universe of Joan Miró*** (April 22 and 23)

Gallery 105 will provide the setting for the delicate movements of dancer and teacher Inesa Markava, inspired by the work of Miró.

## Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a monograph devoted to the artist with a general text by Enrique Juncosa, curator of the show, an essay by Remi Labrusse, professor of contemporary art history at the University of Paris Nanterre, on Joan Miró's relationship with the city of Paris, and an essay by William Jeffett, Chief Curator of the Dali Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida, on the paintings on white backgrounds from 1945, seldom explored. The volume contains illustrations of the works in the exhibition.

### **For further information:**

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Images for the use of the Press  
*Joan Miró. Absolute Reality. Paris, 1920–1945*  
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## Online press image service

In the press section of the Museum's website ([prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.eus](http://prensa.guggenheim-bilbao.eus)), registered users can download high-resolution images and videos of both the exhibitions and the building. If you have not yet opened an account, you can register and download the required material.

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For further information, the Press Department of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao can be contacted by phone (+34 944 359 008) or email ([media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus](mailto:media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus)).

### 1. Joan Miró

*Self-portrait*, 1919

Oil on canvas

73 x 60 cm

Musée National Picasso, Paris

© Successió Miró, 2022

Photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée National Picasso-Paris) /Mathieu Rabeau



### 2. Joan Miró

*Interior (The Farmer's Wife) [Intérieur (La Fermière)]*, 1922–23

Oil on canvas

81 x 65 cm

Centre Pompidou. Musée National d'Art Moderne-Centre de Creation

Industrielle, Paris. Dation in 1997

© Successió Miró, 2022

Photo © RMN-Grand Palais/Jean-François Tomasian



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3. Joan Miró

*The Gentleman (Le Gentleman)*, 1924

Oil on canvas

52.5 x 46.5 cm

Kunstmuseum Basel - Schenkung Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach, 1968

© Successió Miró, 2022

Photo: Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin P. Bühler



4. Joan Miró

*Catalan Peasant with a Guitar (Paysan catalan à la guitare)*, 1924

Oil on canvas

147 x 114 cm

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

© Successió Miró, 2022

Photo: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



5. Joan Miró

*Painting (Peinture)*, 1925

Oil on canvas

146 x 114.3 cm

Courtesy The David & Ezra Nahmad Collection

© Successió Miró, 2022



6. Joan Miró

*The Grasshopper (La Sauterelle)*, 1926

Oil on canvas

114 x 147 cm

Basil & Elise Goulandris Foundation, Athens

© Successió Miró, 2022



7. Joan Miró

*Landscape (The Hare) [Paysage (Le Lièvre)]*, 1927

Oil on canvas

129.6 x 194.6 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

57.1459

© Successió Miró, 2022





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8. Joan Miró

*Painting (Personnage: The Fratellini Brothers) [Peinture (Personnages: Les Frères Fratellini)], 1927*

Oil on canvas

130 x 97.5 cm

Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Sammlung Beyeler

© Successió Miró, 2022

Photo © Robert Bayer



9. Joan Miró

*Painting (Birds) [Peinture (Oiseaux)], 1927*

Oil on canvas

130 x 97 cm

Courtesy The David & Ezra Nahmad Collection

© Successió Miró, 2022



10. Joan Miró

*Painting (The Sun) [Peinture (Le Soleil)], 1927*

Oil on canvas

38.3 x 46.2 cm

Courtesy The David & Ezra Nahmad Collection

© Successió Miró, 2022



11. Joan Miró

*Painting (Peinture), 1934*

Oil on canvas

97 x 130 cm

Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona. Gift of Joan Prats

© Successió Miró, 2022



12. Joan Miró

*Birdsong in Autumn (Le Chant des oiseaux à l'automne), 1937*

Oil on Celotex

212 x 91 cm

Portuguese State Contemporary Art Collection, on long-term loan to the Fundação de Serralves - Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Oporto, Portugal

© Successió Miró, 2022

Photo © Filipe Braga



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13. Joan Miró

*Painting-Poem (A Star Caresses the Breast of a Negress)* [*Peinture-poème (Une étoile caresse le sein d'une négresse)*], 1938

Oil on canvas

129.5 x 194.3 cm

Tate: Purchased 1983

© Successió Miró, 2022

Photo © Tate/Tate Images



14. Joan Miró

*Painting (Birds and Insects)* [*Peinture (Oiseaux et insectes)*], 1938

Oil on canvas

114 x 88 cm

Albertina, Vienna – Sammlung Batliner

© Successió Miró, 2022



15. Joan Miró

*Woman and Birds (Femme et oiseaux)*, 1940

Gouache and oil on paper

38 x 46 cm

Courtesy The David & Ezra Nahmad Collection

© Successió Miró, 2022



16. Joan Miró

*Woman and Bird in the Night (Femme et oiseau dans la nuit)*, 1945

Oil on canvas

146 x 114 cm

Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona. Long-term loan from private collection

© Successió Miró, 2022

