Fundació Joan Miró

MIRÓ AND THE UNITED STATES

EXHIBITION TEXT

Joan Miró's international standing was established by the enthusiasm his work excited among artists in the United States. This began in the 1920s and continued for more than fifty years. The pivotal moment was his stay in New York in 1947. Miró's capacity for reinvention was enhanced over six subsequent visits, during which his exchanges with colleagues opened new directions for art practice.

While Miró's work was initially controversial, regular exhibitions mounted by his dealer Pierre Matisse confirmed his position as a "leader of the inter-war generation of painters." Museum of Modern Art retrospectives, in 1941 and 1959, that traveled around the United States allowed artists to measure themselves against his achievement. In 1944 Jackson Pollock placed Miró alongside Picasso as "the two artists I admire most." Twenty-five years later, Miró stated: "it was really American painting that inspired me."

Within a broadly chronological sequence, including medium-specific and in-depth displays, *Miró and the United States* tells the story of these exchanges across fifteen galleries. It brings together artistic conversations through a selection of works and connections with more than forty artists of different generations. At its heart are the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, which proved highly innovative among New York artists and for Miró were marked by significant public commissions. Through regular exchanges stretching late into his life, Miró shared with these contemporaries the ideals of making personal but universal art.

Early Exchanges

In 1929, a New York art critic identified Joan Miró as the "latest sensation among younger elements in Paris." His inventiveness would inspire artists and audiences throughout the city over subsequent decades.

Three years earlier, Katherine S. Dreier and Marcel Duchamp had included *The Somersault* and *Painting* in the 1926 *International Exhibition of Modern Art* at the Brooklyn Museum. Soon after, and with a similar purpose of bringing contemporary art to the public, A. E. Gallatin included Miró's *Painting (Fratellini)* in his Gallery of Living Art. These three paintings, representing the inception of Miró's public career in the United States, are shown in this gallery.

Pierre Matisse (son of the painter Henri) organized Miró's first solo exhibition in New York at the Valentine Gallery in late 1930. When Matisse opened his own gallery, his regular exhibitions championed Miró's versatility, and the artist recognized a "bright future for us." The Museum of Modern Art endorsed Miró's importance, with acquisitions (including *Figure Throwing a Stone to a Bird* in 1937) that provided artists with further opportunities to see how he addressed what one commentator described as "a recall of the imagination to painting."

Calder Miró Sert

Miró and Alexander Calder were great friends. In Paris in December 1928, the sculptor wrote to introduce himself; fifty years later, Miró said simply: “we are like brothers.”

Calder’s witty wire portrait of Miró is the earliest sign of this friendship. While their differing temperaments are reflected in their art, they created a generous habit of exchanging works. Calder and his wife encouraged Miró and Pilar Juncosa to visit the United States and, when they eventually arrived in 1947, were at the airport to meet them *Black Polygons* was exchanged with one of Miró’s paintings during that stay.

Josep Lluís Sert had commissioned Calder’s *Mercury Fountain* in 1937 for the Spanish Republican Pavilion in Paris, following Miró’s introduction. Sert, who eventually became Dean of Architecture at Harvard, was a vital contact for Miró in the United States. Miró’s murals for the university (1951 and 1961) were followed by the mural made for the Serts themselves. The works assembled here reflect these friendships that culminated in Sert’s design of the *Fundació* itself.

Sculptural Materials, Choreographed Form

Miró was impressed by the “energy and vitality” of the art scene in the United States. While he was exploring mural painting and printmaking, his enthusiasm for sculpture was growing. The works in this gallery offer its wider context and longer trajectory.

Louise Bourgeois’s *Personages* were a remarkable development in sculptural form. They condensed individuals into totems. She already knew Miró in Paris, and they became friends when he and his family arrived in New York in 1947. He gave her a print in recognition for her help at Atelier 17. Among many other artists also making prints, there was the sculptor Louise Nevelson. Her early sculptural work shows figurative concerns held in common with Miró, while her commitment to using found materials would chime with his development. Similarly, Herbert Ferber’s three-dimensional wall structures captured an atmosphere responsive to Miró’s work.

A concern with process and poise was also seen in experimental films made by contemporaries. Among the most inventive, Maya Deren’s works distilled the physical dynamism of the creative process, while Len Lye left his trace directly in celluloid stock, unfolding the choreography of gesture across the duration of the film.

Surrealism

Surrealism arrived in the United States through exhibitions in the 1930s. These included shows at the galleries of Julien Levy and Pierre Matisse and culminated in the survey exhibition conceived by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. for the Museum of Modern Art in 1936: *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. As a controversialist, Salvador Dalí had come to embody Surrealism in the public imagination. More than a dozen of his illusionistic works were included in the exhibition, matching a similar number of paintings by Miró. This contrast was reaffirmed when the two Catalan artists were given simultaneous retrospectives at the museum in 1941. By then, many Surrealists had reached New York as exiles from the European war.

It was among the remaining exiles that Miró reconnected with long-standing friends and made new connections when he arrived in 1947. All of those whose work is shown in this gallery were active in New York in these years. Miró's supporters, however (notably his dealer Pierre Matisse, the curator James Johnson Sweeney, and the critic Clement Greenberg), however, were prominent in distancing him from Surrealism, which they considered literary and too closely identified with Dalí.

Prints and Atelier 17

The printmaker Stanley William Hayter relocated his Paris workshop to New York in 1940. His own experimentation and generous support for others attracted artists of many origins and across generations to work side by side in an atmosphere of inventiveness. Primarily concerned with developing methods of etching and engraving, Hayter was also closely involved in the promotion of printmaking throughout the city.

Miró spent months working in Atelier 17 in 1947. There he enjoyed the international creative atmosphere, working alongside artists including Louise Bourgeois, Minna Citron, and Alice Trumbull Mason. He began by making prints for a book by Tristan Tzara, *L'Antitête*, and enthusiastically explored new techniques. His improvisations were captured on film by Thomas Bouchard, who also filmed Miró at work on the vast Cincinnati mural painted in the studio of the artist Carl Holty in Spanish Harlem. New York artists visited as the mural reached completion in the summer of 1947, and the finished work was displayed at the Museum of Modern Art before being transferred to Cincinnati.

Constellations, 1940–59

The works in this gallery represent two interlocking stories over more than twenty years. Miró considered *Still Life with Old Shoe* "the capital piece of my oeuvre." It was acquired in 1938 by the painter Peter Miller (whose work is shown in the adjacent gallery), and it proved important to Arshile Gorky when seen in Miró's 1941 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Two months before that retrospective, and cut off in Spain, Miró had completed the series of gouaches that would become known as the *Constellations*. They were widely acclaimed and had a far-reaching impact in New York when they were shown by Pierre Matisse in early 1945 as the first works to come out of wartime Europe.

A little over a decade later, Matisse masterminded a limited edition of pochoir prints. With texts by André Breton responding to each image, the pochoirs were made under Miró's supervision by the master printer Daniel Jacomet, and launched in Paris, New York, and Los Angeles in 1959. Miró had imagined that the display of the originals would allow both back and front to be seen, a wish fulfilled in this gallery.

Possibilities I

In early 1945, Barnett Newman wrote: “Miró marks the beginning of a new art movement ... he is the creator of a new idiom, the pioneer in a new field that will change the face of art for many years to come.” This enthusiasm reflected the impact of the *Constellations*. It also anticipated the reception Miró would receive on arriving two years later, for, Newman continued, “In New York there has already appeared a spontaneous movement of diverse artists who are traveling forward from Miró’s concept, into a new field of subjective abstraction.”

By 1947, Clement Greenberg considered it “impermissible that any new painting which ... advances the frontiers of art historically should fail to deal with Miró any more than with Matisse and Picasso.” Another writer received the artist’s new exhibition as “fresh and spontaneous—an experience that renews itself every time.” This context was enlarged in *Possibilities*, a single-issue publication primarily edited by the artist Robert Motherwell and the critic Harold Rosenberg. It published reproductions and statements by those artists, including William Baziotes, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko, whose individual development was stimulated by Miró’s example.

Possibilities II

Interviewed by Francis Lee in June 1947 for *Possibilities*, Miró identified the postwar moment as a "period of transition." When asked what he thought of American painters, he responded: "I especially like their enthusiasm and freshness," and added that their "force and vitality" were potential influences. The original notes of the interview show that Lee had specifically asked about the artists shown at Samuel Kootz's gallery, citing William Baziotes, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell (editor of *Possibilities*). Miró acknowledged that he knew their work.

A transatlantic exchange soon gathered pace. Peggy Guggenheim caused a sensation when she showed her collection of European and American art at the 1948 Venice Biennale, and two years later she mounted a solo exhibition of Jackson Pollock in Venice. The calligraphy and encrustation incorporated in *Le Soleil rouge* in 1948 demonstrates Miró's response to the energy that he admired among his New York colleagues. When the Washington collector Duncan Phillips acquired the painting in 1952, he immediately included it in *Painters of Expressionistic Abstraction*, alongside works by Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Alfonso Ossorio, Theodoros Stamos, and others, thus acknowledging Miró's central position within current developments.

Flying Lines, 1951–53

Energetic gesture as the expression of a personal encounter with the world characterized the painting of many New York artists. Combined with a tendency for a grand scale, the paintings often enveloped the viewer by filling the visual field. Jackson Pollock was recognized as setting the pace; Elaine de Kooning wrote of this trend in 1949 as "flying lines ... spattered on in intense, unmixed colors to create wiry, sculptural constructions." That year also brought wider recognition when popular *Life* magazine published a feature on Pollock provocatively subtitled "Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?"

Those artists who gathered for the debates defining Abstract Expressionism in April 1950, were a self-selecting (predominantly male) group of individuals. Soon, however, this circle expanded considerably through the artist-organized *Ninth Street Show* in 1951 that encompassed a new generation of artists working with abstraction.

Having painted his mural for Harvard University in Barcelona, Miró visited the United States for the second time in 1952 to see it installed. He subscribed to American art journals, however, and probably took the opportunity to see *15 Americans*, at the Museum of Modern Art, which included works by Baziotes, Ferber, Pollock, and Rothko.

The New American Painting

Although faced with extraordinary challenges, Lee Krasner made *The Seasons* in a burst of activity in 1957. She had been in Paris the previous summer when she received news that Jackson Pollock had died in a car crash. In mourning, Krasner helped mount the Pollock memorial show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and resumed her own painting in his now vacant studio. From that "time of life and death," as she called it, this painting remains astonishing, with the physical effort of the bodily gesture matched by sweeping, productive forms. When included in Krasner's solo show in 1958, one reviewer recognized that "the artist is directing her compositions, not just submitting to her material."

It remains an indictment of gender inequality that Krasner was overlooked in constructing the roll call of Abstract Expressionism. This was primarily internationalized by the Museum of Modern Art, most notably through *The New American Painting* that toured Europe in 1958–59. Miró attended the opening when the exhibition arrived, in May 1959, during his third visit to New York. This fulfilled his expressed desire to be in contact with the painters there as "American painting interest[ed him] very much."

Color Fields

New developments in the 1960s, especially in fields of color, invigorated painting in New York. Following the installation of Miró's ceramic mural at Harvard in 1960, Josep Lluís Sert commissioned murals from Mark Rothko. The artist devised a rhythm of vertical elements that are evident in the preparatory canvas, preserving the vigor that light has, unfortunately, drained from those put in place. They can be compared to Helen Frankenthaler's subtle saturation of color in achieving luminosity.

It may be in response to both colleagues' work, as well as reviewing his own 1920s paintings in his 1959 Museum of Modern Art retrospective, that Miró reinvented the relation between sign and ground in his work. By means of handprints and an explosive energy, *May 1968* expressed his alignment with the student protestors of that year. He also experimented further with pouring and working with the canvas flat on the floor. "You say that I have influenced a generation of younger painters," he said in 1961, "Perhaps, but it is also true that I have been greatly influenced by my own period." Such generosity was symptomatic of Miró's openness to sharing developments with his contemporaries.

Projects for Monuments

New workspaces heightened Miró's ambition to reach wider audiences. The Palma studio designed by Sert allowed him to reassess stored paintings. The purchase in 1959 of the adjacent eighteenth-century house, Son Boter, facilitated the production of sculptures and resulted in a varied sequence of "Projects for Monuments." Far from heroic statues, these projects juxtaposed humble objects, assembling them for aggrandizement. Miró's admiration for Alfred Jarry's *Ubu* plays points to an underlying subversion of the traditional monument.

Miró and Sert had discussed the harmonious interaction of art with architecture at length. "This facility for relating is an architectural quality," Sert wrote in 1961, "that makes [Miró] especially well-suited to move at ease in vast spaces with an awareness of their scale." Developers in the United States proved keen to transform Miró's projects into reality, though the processes were slow. Work on enlarging *Figure and Bird* (1970) for Houston took five years (1978–82). In 1965 he traveled to Chicago to consider a commission that only came to fruition in 1981, although the model in bronze, *Moon, Sun, and One Star*, stands at the *Fundació* (on the North Patio outside this gallery).

Toward the Fundació Joan Miró

Remarking on his 1959 retrospective in New York, Miró said that it allowed "rigorous self-criticism of my work." That process was repeated in 1974 when he contemplated his retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris. The writer Jacques Dupin reported that the artist had "concentrated his attention on this project which became the great preoccupation of his days and of his nights." Certainly the *Fundació Joan Miró*, which first opened its doors in 1975, was incubated with equal dedication.

Some of Miró's most ambitious recent works were tested in Paris. These included *Sobreteixim with Eight Umbrellas* (1973) and *Hands Flying Off Toward the Constellations* (1974). Seen there first, they were then installed in this gallery. A tapestry made for the National Gallery in Washington, DC, was previewed on the double-height wall that now houses the Fundació's equivalent tapestry. Two other works shown here locate the *Fundació* in history: the preparatory study for the tapestry for the World Trade Center in New York, lost with so many lives in 2001, and, in the adjacent space, Calder's *Mercury Fountain* made for the 1937 Republican Pavilion. Appropriately enough, it recalls the earliest common project among Calder, Sert, and Miró.

Sculptural Objects

The relationship of people to sculpture, painting, and architecture was a perennial concern to Miró as he increasingly turned toward public spaces. He wanted to reach a wide audience, to enhance everyday lives, and the *Fundació* became a powerful expression of that desire.

It was by repurposing everyday objects that his inventiveness was returned to the public. Sert recounted in 1976 how Miró gathered "fragments of objects selected, picked up on the roadside ... poor, simple, often deteriorated," to which, by repainting or casting, he could bring a "noble and timeless quality." Miró shared this practice with contemporaries of several generations, for whom disposable culture reflected on the state of modern society. When, in 1961, the curator William Seitz mapped this practice for the Museum of Modern Art in *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition, his choice ranged from Miró to younger sculptors such as John Chamberlain, famous for repurposing the ultimate symbol of the American dream: crushed automobiles.

Jeanne Reynal's totemic sculptures are on a different register. With color inherent to the mosaic tesserae, they share with Miró's work an uplifting sense of the joy of making art with a public purpose.

Around and About Miró

Thomas Bouchard began filming Miró at work in New York in 1947. Two documentaries resulted: *Miró Makes a Color Print* and *Around and About Miró*, also filmed in Spain in 1953. The latter, longer film, which closes our exhibition, shows Miró rooted in the cultural traditions of Catalonia.

As early as 1920 Miró had declared himself to be an "international Catalan," and it is this combination of identity and openness that endeared him to colleagues. Substantiating that internationalism, the works in this gallery are drawn from those gifts made in tribute to Miró on his death and by artists practicing in the United States. The connections stretch across their careers. They range from Miró's Surrealist friend Dorothea Tanning to the younger Spanish artist José Guerrero and Robert Rauschenberg. Sam Francis had already paid homage in two 1963 lithographs titled *For Miró*, while Robert Motherwell had simply declared: "I like everything about Miró." Summarizing his enthusiasm, he concluded: "Miró's art ... so original that hardly anyone has any conception of how original, immediately strikes us to the depths."