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Joan Miró's Work Examined in Landmark Exhibition, a First at the National Gallery of Art, Washington—Sole U.S. Venue, May 6–August 12, 2012



Joan Miró, *The Farm*, 1921-1922

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mary Hemingway

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Washington, DC (updated April 16, 2012)—Celebrated as one of the greatest modern artists, Joan Miró (1893–1983) developed a visual language that reflected his vision and energy in a variety of styles across many media. On view at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, East Building, from May 6 to August 12, 2012, ***Joan Miró: The Ladder of Escape*** reveals the politically engaged side of Miró through some 120 paintings and works on paper that span his entire career. They reflect the artist's passionate response to one of the most turbulent periods in European history that included two world wars, the Spanish Civil War, and the decades-long dictatorship of Francisco Franco. Through it all, Miró maintained a fierce devotion to his native

Catalonia, a region in northern Spain.

The exhibition was organized by Tate Modern, London (April 14 through September 11, 2011), in collaboration with Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona (October 14, 2011, through March 18, 2012), and in association with the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

"Telling the story of Miró's life and the times that he witnessed reveals a dark intensity of many of his works. Behind the engaging innocence of his style lie a profound concern for humanity and a sense of personal identity," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art, Washington. "The Gallery is honored to be the only U.S. venue for this landmark exhibition, and we are grateful to the many lenders, both public and private, who made the exhibition possible."

Exhibition Support

The exhibition is made possible through the generous support of the Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Foundation.

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The Institut Ramon Llull is an exhibition sponsor in Washington and London.

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The Exhibition

Joan Miró: The Ladder of Escape traces the arc of Miró's career while drawing out his political and cultural commitments. The exhibition presents these themes through three principal periods: Miró's early work, rooted in the Catalan countryside, and then transformed under the influence of the surrealists in the 1920s; his artistic response to the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the fall of France, and life under fascist rule; and the artist's late work just before the demise of Francisco Franco's dictatorship in 1975.

The first room of the exhibition explores Miró's early work and his so-called detailist style. Focusing on the Catalan coastal village of Mont-roig, where Miró spent most of his summers, the paintings include scenes of his parents' farmhouse, the village church,

and the region's tilled fields. Critical works from this period include *Vegetable Garden with Donkey* (1918) and *The Farm* (1921–1922), a painting that Miró regarded as a key work in his career. Painted in Paris, it combines Miró's memories of Mont-roig with elements of cubism, abstraction, and primitivism. Ernest Hemingway purchased *The Farm* shortly after it was painted. Years later, in 1987, Mary Hemingway donated it as a gift to the National Gallery of Art. Two important works painted just a few years after *The Farm*, *The Hunter (Catalan Landscape)* (1923–1924) and *The Tilled Field* (1923–1924), reflect not only the liberating influences of surrealism, but also Miró's own maturity.

Drawing upon the surrealists' interest in free association, Miró created a series of "animated landscapes" where he used only rich fields of color and a handful of forms. Miró juxtaposed animals with unrelated objects: a hare with a spiraling sphere in *Landscape (The Hare)* (1927); and a dog and rooster, respectively, with a ladder in *Dog Barking at the Moon* (1926) and *Landscape (Landscape with Rooster)* (1927). In these early appearances, the ladder motif suggests a bridge between earth and heaven, and reality and imagination.

Though he was born in metropolitan Barcelona, Miró identified with the peasant, which he took as an emblem of Catalan nationalism. In his *Head of a Catalan Peasant* (1924–1925) paintings, Miró reduced the face and body of the figure to abstracted symbols (including the peasant's *barretina*, or red cap). His self-identification with this figure, at a time when Catalonian autonomy was under siege from the government of Miguel Primo de Rivera, suggests these works may have been a direct political statement. The exhibition in Washington brings together multiple canvases from the series.

In 1929 Miró married Pilar Juncosa and they settled in Paris, but returned to Barcelona (the capital of Catalonia) in 1932. Working in Barcelona, Miró was well aware of the turmoil and uncertainty preceding the Spanish Civil War. He initially remained in Spain after the war began in July 1936, but by the end of the year he and his family went into self-exile in France. They followed the war from afar until the approaching Nazi troops forced them back to Spain in 1940, when they settled on the island of Mallorca. More than any others in his career, the works Miró made during this period depict war and

violence. Some works conjure the fearful times through their distorted imagery: figures crying in anguish, raising their arms in protest, standing by a volcano waiting to erupt. Other works evoke the danger through garish colors or violent application of their materials. *Still Life with Old Shoe* (1937), with its acid colors and distorted objects, transforms a tabletop still life into a profound commentary on the dramatic times.

While Miró's political statements were oftentimes subtle, the exhibition also showcases works that demonstrate overt resistance—such as *Aidez l'Espagne (Help Spain)* (1937). This work is an original design for a one-franc stamp in support of Spain's Second Republic; however, France's adoption of a nonintervention agreement stopped the stamp's production and the work became a poster instead. Initially exhibited clandestinely in Spain, the *Barcelona Series* of lithographs (1944), more than 40 of which are on view, draws upon traditions of political caricature and takes aim at tyranny and dictatorship.

The final two rooms of the exhibition cover the last years of Franco's rule, when Miró, influenced by abstract expressionism, turned to making monumental paintings, both calm and explosive. The works alternate between a growing dissatisfaction with the regime and a feeling of hopefulness as the rebellions of the 1960s prompted political change elsewhere. Miró's grand abstract paintings of the late 1960s and early 1970s, including *Mural Painting I–III* (1962) and *Fireworks I–III* (1974), became a mark of his resistance and integrity in the final years of the regime, a period of intense self-examination for the artist.

In *Composition* and *Untitled* (both 1972)—scroll-like works on Japanese paper that extend nearly 30 feet—Miró demonstrates a graphic flair that characterized his work throughout his life. These two works are on view in the National Gallery of Art Library along with Miró's introduction and lithograph from a 1972 Alexander Calder exhibition catalogue from the Sala Pelayres Gallery in Palma de Mallorca, where Miró was a resident. By that time friends with Calder for 40 years, Miró created an introduction that comprises a series of recollections from their friendship in both French and Catalan, illustrated with colorful shapes and symbols.

Franco's last years in power were marked by mass unemployment and a cycle of

protest and crackdowns. The tension culminates in Miró's *Burnt Canvases* from 1973, where he splashed paint onto a canvas, torched it, and then walked across the surface. He attempted to harness what he called the "inventive force" of fire.

Curators and Catalogue

The exhibition was curated by Marko Daniel and Matthew Gale, Tate Modern, in collaboration with Teresa Montaner, curator, Fundació Joan Miró. It is coordinated at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, by Harry Cooper, curator and head, modern and contemporary art.

Published by Thames and Hudson in association with Tate Modern, London, the exhibition catalogue includes essays by Daniel, Gale, and Montaner, with contributions by Christopher Green, Kerry Greenberg, William Jeffett, María Luisa Lax, Robert S. Lubar, and Joan M. Minguet Batllori. The 240-page catalogue includes 200 illustrations and is available for purchase in the Gallery Shops in hardcover and softcover. To order, please visit shop.nga.gov; call (800) 697-9350 or (202) 842-6002 Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. EST; fax (202) 789-3047; or e-mail mailorder@nga.gov.

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt) at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on [Twitter](http://twitter.com/ngadc) at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

Press Office

National Gallery of Art

2000B South Club Drive

Landover, MD 20785

phone: (202) 842-6353 e-mail: pressinfo@nga.gov

Deborah Ziska

Chief of Press and Public Information

(202) 842-6353

ds-ziska@nga.gov