

# The Review

## Exhibition review

### MIRÓ

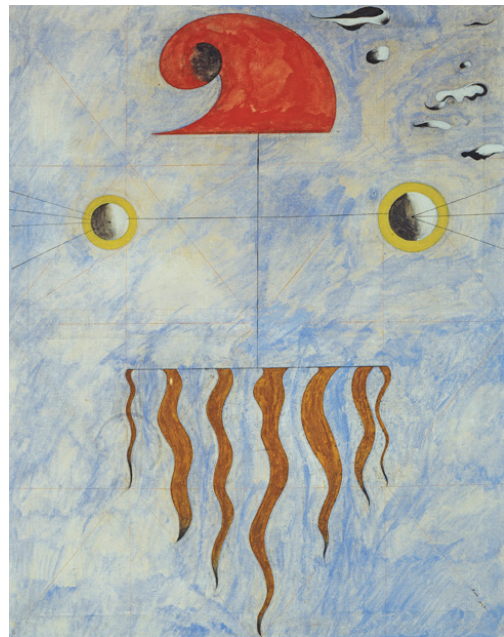
Tate Modern 14 April–11 September 2011

*'A painting must be fertile. It must give birth to a world. It doesn't matter if it depicts flowers or people or horses, as long as it reveals a world, something alive. Two and two do not make four. Only accountants think that. But that is not enough, a painting must make this clear; it must fertilise the imagination.'*

So said Joan Miró, the Catalan painter who has a major retrospective at the Tate Modern, in an interview in 1959. This exhibition links his work skillfully with events that were occurring in Spain and Europe generally and demonstrates how the suppression of Catalan autonomy, the Spanish civil war, the rise of Franco and Fascism, even the student riots of 1968 are influential on the surreal abstractism of Miró's painting.

Miró was born in 1893 in Barcelona, in a Catalonia that was an autonomous region of Spain. Modern and free-thinking, the optimism and freedom of those times can be gauged by the extraordinary outputs of other Catalan artists of the period, notably Antoni Gaudí and Salvador Dalí. Miró always acknowledged, and frequently came back to, his Catalan roots. Abstract representations of peasants, possibly reduced to a motif of

Joan Miró. *Head of a Catalan Peasant*, 1925.  
Oil on canvas. 920 x 732 x 26 mm



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the characteristic red cap, populate many of his paintings (*Catalan Landscape [The Hunter]*, *Head of a Catalan Peasant*). The cap, the barretina, becomes a symbol that, even when only just recognisable, evokes the sensation of an earthy peasant.

The barretina acts as a rosetta stone translating Miró's work. How can these bold colourful pictures with abstract, though frequently biomorphic and vaguely organic, shapes be so insightful, provocative, funny, sexy, and moving? Is it because we recognise a quality or motif about them that, even if we are not aware and cannot name it, evokes these responses? A parallel would be Jung's archetypes: 'innate universal psychic dispositions that form the substrate from which the basic symbols or representations of unconscious experience emerge'. It is postulated that the universal presence of certain character representations (for example the wicked witch, the young prince) in the folk tales of many diverse cultures is because they represent manifestations of these 'innate universal psychic dispositions'. Perhaps the attraction of Miró is that he taps into 'representations of the unconscious experience'.

Miró himself was in no doubt that his paintings were not meant as pretty and colourful designs. In 1937 he said:

*'I cannot understand — and consider it an insult — to be placed in the category of "abstract painters" ... As if the marks I put on a canvas did not correspond to a concrete representation of my mind, did not possess a profound reality, were not part of the real itself!'*

The exhibition at the Tate Modern displayed about 150 paintings, with some sculptures and installations, in a chronological order that allowed you to see the evolution of his work and the effects of the major external influences. The first room is dominated by the work *The Farm* (1921–1922). This is an almost pictorial representation of his family home in Catalonia. While some architectural and environmental detail is faithfully replicated there is the use of symbolic shapes that foretell his future direction.

Around this time Miró moved to Paris and spent time with Surrealist artists and poets, including his fellow

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Spaniard Pablo Picasso. The spirit of these times is captured by the riotous energy of such paintings as *Harlequin's Carnival* (1924–1925). Events in his homeland then started to affect the mood of his work; as savage political events occurred in Spain so the paintings become more bleak and barren. By the time General Franco comes to power in the late 1930s the figures are grotesque and menacing (*Head of a Woman*, 1938). Believing 'the artist ... uses his voice to say something', copies of his propaganda print *Aidez l'Espagne* were sold to fund the Republican cause at an exhibition where Picasso's *Guernica* was displayed.

During and after the Second World War Miró and his family lived in 'internal exile' in Mallorca. At first his work is angry and disturbed, illustrated by the *Barcelona Series* of lithographs depicting distorted, violent caricatures. Later a more benign mood is apparent. With a growing international reputation he seemed to want to explore his inner world rather than rage against the forces affecting his outer world. By the 1960s, which should have been a natural home for him, we see sparse but powerful works illustrated by *Painting on White Background for the Cell of a Recluse* (1968) and the triptych *The Hope of the Condemned Man* (1974). These canvases are no longer filled with busy symbols but speak loudly through their simplicity.

Miró lived long enough to see the fall of Franco and the restoration of democracy in Spain. His work records his emotional response to the tumultuous events of his life. We cannot be aware of the unconscious by definition, but Miró's paintings give a little insight into this world. We recognise something that he has managed to capture and represent, and that two and two do not always make four.

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### REFERENCE

1. Candela I. *Joan Miró*. London: Tate Publishing, 2011.