

Point of view

The Shape of Color: Joan Miró's Painted Sculpture Through January 6, 2003

In a career spanning three quarters of the twentieth century, Joan Miró (1893-1983) became one of the most renowned artists of the modern era. His signature two-dimensional works are instantly recognizable – colorful canvases and prints populated by eccentric figures outlined in black, often amid splashes of red, yellow and blue. But his three-dimensional objects in ceramic and sculpture remain relatively unfamiliar, particularly the later sculptures in bronze, plaster, cement and fiberglass, some of which he painted. These works haven't been the focus of a major US show for three decades, very little has been written about them, and not one resides in a US museum collection. So it is a rare treat to have so many on view at the Corcoran this fall, accompanied by a substantial publication packed with new information about this period of Miró's work.

"It is in sculpture that I will create a truly phantasmagoric world of living monsters," Miró wrote in his notebooks of 1940–41. But that visionary world would not materialize until the 1960s, when he himself was in his seventies. The result was a race of remarkable creatures or "personnages," as he called them – generally females, though there is no doubt that some are self-portraits or alter-egos. Although at first they may seem like somewhat ridiculous accumulations of ordinary objects cast in bronze, these colorful constructions embody challenging ideas about identity and artistic expression.

Joan Miró was a kind of philosopher-jester, discoursing on life, desire and the enigma of existence, who always managed to make his audience smile. Loath to waste time on trivial matters, the grand themes got his juices flowing—the timeless dance of men and women, the dignity of life lived close to the land, the spiritual wonder of the cosmos. Recurrent motifs in his artistic universe were Woman, Bird and Star – metaphorical counterparts for Earth, Sky and Heaven. Yet however sublime his subjects, he leavened them with humor.

SEXUAL IMAGERY

Part of the humor of Miró's sculptures is their unselfconscious embrace of sexuality. Miró was not squeamish when it came to representing people's privates. His women always display their sex, either as mandorla-shaped recesses, triangular openings, or some variation thereof. Some sculptures' buttocks appear as two balls affixed to the rear, often flanking a demure circle. He was our foremost artificer of orifices, and a formidable fashioner of phalluses as well. "Remember," he said, "that in primitive, non-decadent races the sex organ was a magic sign of which man was proud, far from feeling the shame that today's decadent races feel." Yet, however flagrant his innuendo, Miró was never crass. As the artist explained late in life, "If I represent sex, it is in the religious sense — like the Hindus. Love is for the gods, pornography for the pigs."

The Shape

by Jason Edward Kaufman

Joan Miró painting *La Caresse d'un oiseau*, 1967

The nude, of course, was a perennial theme in high art. Sex was not, and critics tended to ignore it, preferring to "appreciate" an artwork's tamer "plastic" aspects such as its color, line and form, oblivious to its overt sexuality. But in 1959 critic Hilton Kramer pointed out what everyone else had overlooked: Miró had "one thing on his mind at all times – a comical and cosmological fantasy of eroticism." With the 1960s sexual revolution afoot, others glommed onto the sexual liberation of Miró. The British critic David Sylvester fancied the way *Oiseau lunaire* (1946; 1966) "rises, all rampant libido, looming up...cocky, bullying, tumescent, and one can imagine avid women urging themselves onto the great spike that sticks out in front of it." Well, this is a far cry from stuffy formalist criticism. But then, face to face with the erotic anatomy of Miró's sculptures, what choice does one have?

There's no mistaking what's what in a work like *La caresse d'un oiseau* (1967), which features a big, bright red tortoise shell to denote the figure's sex. Or in *Monsieur et Madame* (1969), in which a rigid rectilinear stool represents a man who eyes a woman, here played by a curvy stool with an egg balanced on the seat. If sometimes the iconography is more elusive, and the forms playfully seem to represent more than one body part, deciphering the imagery is half the fun.

Miró's personality and behavior were less salacious than his artistic preoccupations might suggest. Socially reserved, he kept to a few close friends and remained true to the same

woman for 64 years. If he had a sexual obsession of sorts, he confined it to the studio. And he rejected Freudian and other interpretations of the work, insisting that there is "nothing literary or intellectual about it." Indeed, for Miró, sexuality was as innocent and natural a presence in his artistic universe as was his deep and heartfelt connection with his native Catalonia.

HOMAGE TO CATALONIA

Miró made Catalonia a leitmotif in his work. Born in Barcelona, he spent much of his youth on the family farm near Taragona where he became inextricably bound to the land and its culture. When he painted landscapes, they were the landscapes of Catalonia. When he gathered objects for sculptures, they were often folk objects redolent of Catalonia. And when he made a political statement, it had to do with Catalan politics. (He contributed an anti-Fascist mural—*The Reaper, Peasant in Revolt*—to the Spanish

of COLOR



Photograph by Francesc Català-Roca

La Caresse d'un oiseau, 1967, painted bronze, The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection, Los Angeles © 2002 Successió Miró / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

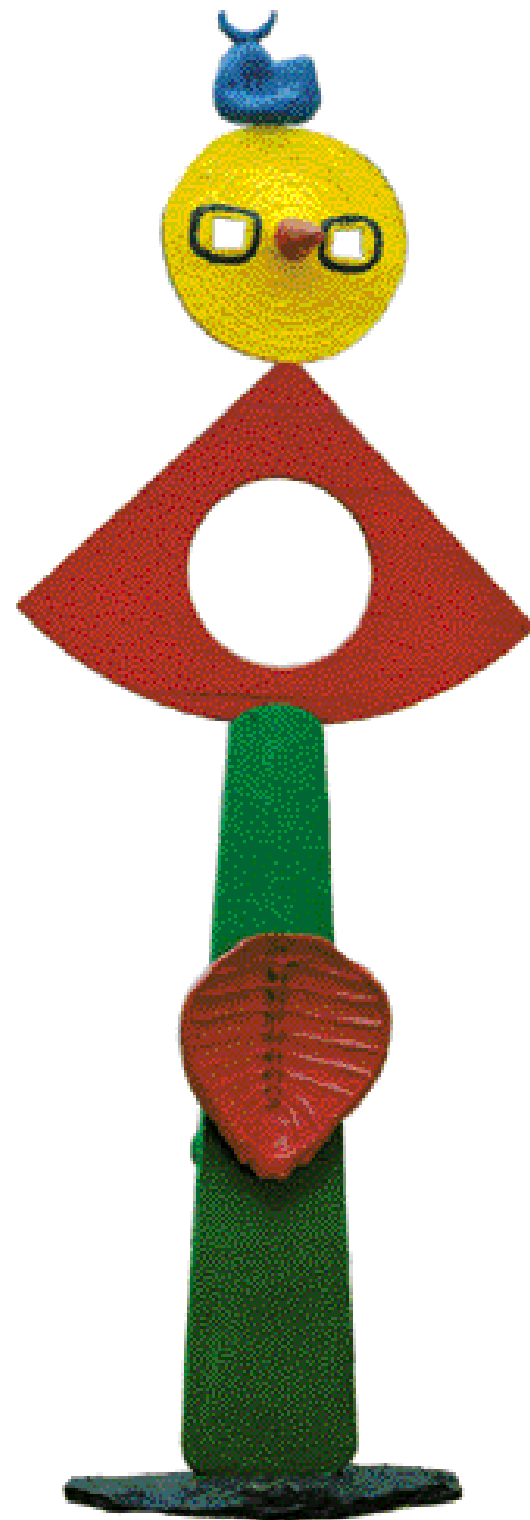
Republic's pavilion at the 1937 Paris World's Fair where it hung alongside Picasso's *Guernica*.)

He spent a considerable amount of time in France, first in the 1920s when he mixed with the Parisian avant-garde (Picasso, Breton, Diaghilev, Hemingway, Eluard, Calder and Arp), and the following decade when he and his family fled the Spanish Civil War. But throughout his life, Miró returned to the Catalan countryside where he tapped into the homespun honesty of things, to renew the "direct contact with the elements." During the Second World War, he went to the Mediterranean island of Mallorca where he found a home away from home, an idyllic rustic setting imbued with Catalan culture. There, during the last three decades of his life, he created most of the sculptures in the Corcoran show.

POETIC ASSEMBLAGE

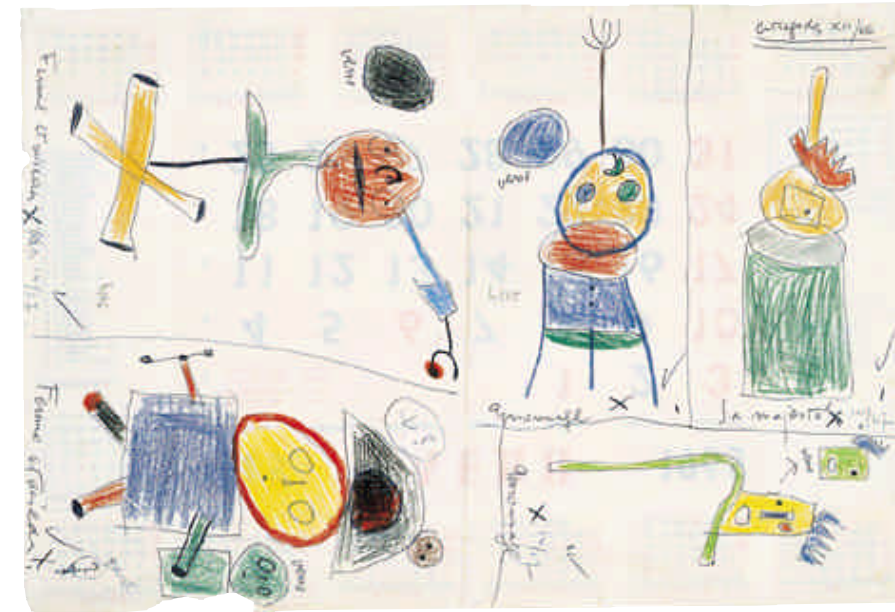
Rocks, gourds, the trunk of a palm tree, a chunk of bread, a lump of clay – all were placed in the crucible of Miró's visual imagination. A spigot from the cistern of the family farm, an ironing board, the toilet seat from a rural outhouse – in they would go, cast in bronze and combined in the most astonishing ways. The poet Jacques Dupin recalled, "It all begins with an impromptu harvest. Miró slips out of his studio like a shadow and comes back loaded down like a peddler with worthless, unusable things, everything that nature and men have abandoned, forgotten." In his studio, Miró would arrange his finds on the floor, decide on a composition, then send the components off to the foundry in Paris where he would supervise their casting. In one work, a broad-brimmed straw sun hat worn by a plowing donkey becomes the face of a figure, with eyeholes cut on either side of the protruding nose. In another piece, the circular lid of a wheat canister becomes a face sprouting a pronged rake, the whole placed atop a three-legged wooden butcher's table to form a Catalan agrarian totem – with, incidentally, a subtle resemblance to the artist himself. Even his palette of red, yellow, green, blue and black harks back to Catalan Romanesque frescoes. With so much of his work bound up in the region's identity, it's little wonder Miró has become one of Catalonia's most cherished symbols.

There's a strong dose of Surrealism in Miró's bizarre gatherings of found objects, and more than a dash of Dadaist insolence. They clearly were intended as affronts to convention and social norms of all kinds. There is no



Femme et oiseau, Personnage, Sa majesté, Femme et oiseau, Personnage, Ballpoint pen, graphite pencil, and colored pencil on paper Collection of the Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona

Personnage, 1967, painted bronze, Collection of the Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, © 2002 Successió Miró / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris



doubt that making a bronze cast of an outhouse seat is a grinning provocation to accepted aesthetic taste, but it also is a proud assertion of artistic freedom as well as the dignity of Catalanian peasant life – with a characteristic touch of raucous humor. Miró liked the perversity of using bronze, with its noble high-art associations, to fabricate his far-fetched, deliberately off-handed assemblages of lowly objects. Coating the valuable bronze in "ripolin," a French house paint, further diminished its elevated status. But Miró didn't just slap together found objects to thumb his nose at convention. He composed with them in a poetic language related to that of his two-dimensional work. And just as his seemingly free-form paintings were meticulously worked out in drawings, so his sculptures were carefully planned, as the exhibition's many preparatory drawings illustrate.

In any case, Miró's sculptural metaphors are so far-out, it's easy to mistake them for abstractions. But he wasn't an abstract artist. "For me a form is never abstract. It is always a sign of something. It is always a man, a bird or something else," he said. But neither was he a realist. Abstraction and realism are endpoints of a continuum that includes expressionism, cubism, minimalism and other isms. Miró worked somewhere in the middle

ground. He didn't make pure or "non-objective" abstraction devoid of recognizable images. Had he done so — had he abandoned representation completely — his work would have become less accessible to its audience. Part of the delight in "reading" his sculptures is recognizing what sorts of objects he used, then decoding their descriptive functions in the figures. As the eye searches and the mind stretches, the mouth inevitably begins to a smile, for penetrating Miró's whimsical visionary universe is invariably an enjoyable experience.

Jason Edward Kaufman is a New York-based critic and U.S. Correspondent for *The Art Newspaper of London*. His work has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Smithsonian Magazine* and other publications.

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