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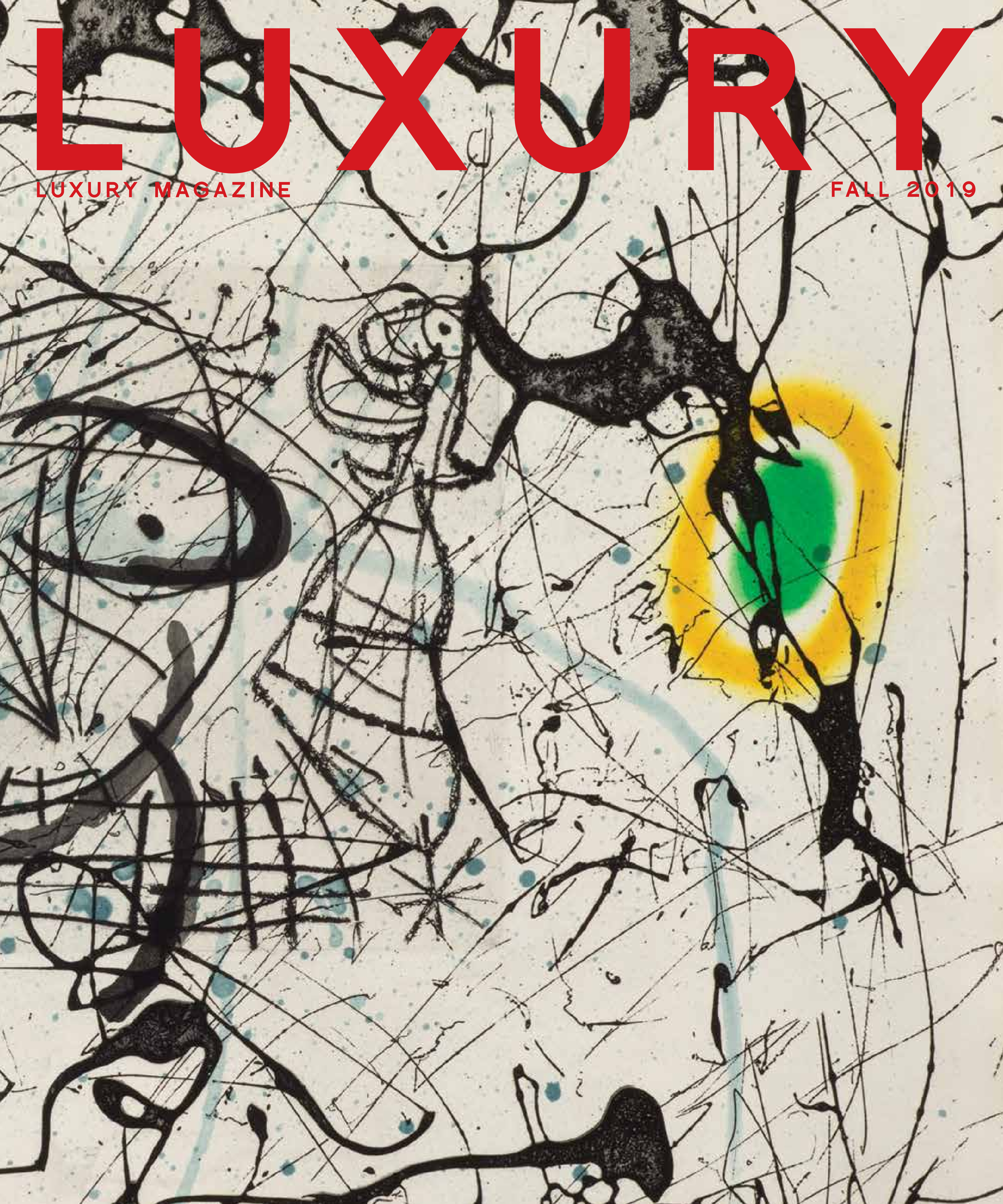
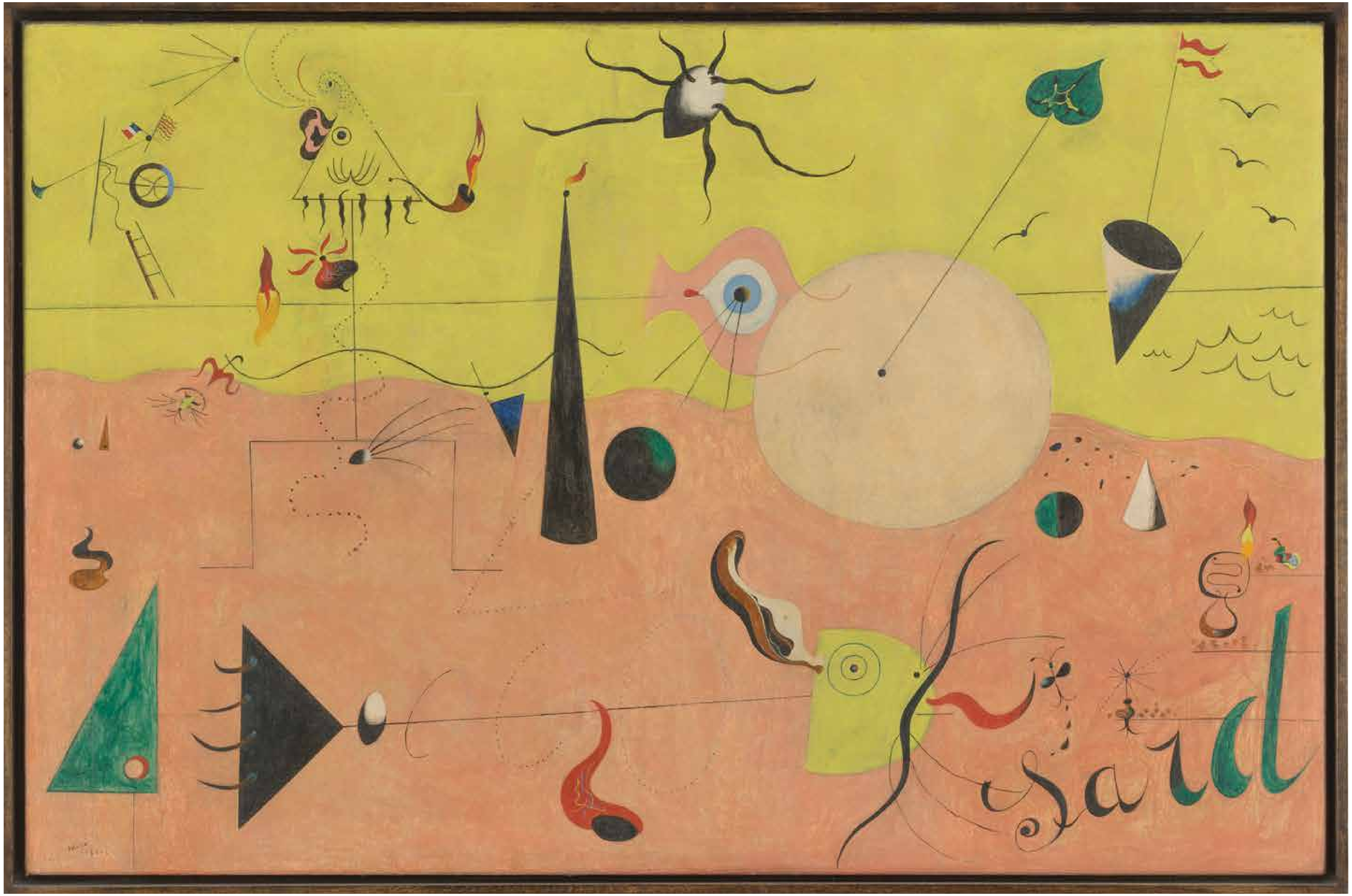


WHAT MIRÓ SAW

The upbeat abstract artworks of Catalan master **JOAN MIRÓ** (1893–1983) are enjoyed worldwide, but their populist appeal can obscure their revolutionary spirit.

by Jason Edward Kaufman



The Hunter (Catalan Landscape). Montroig, July 1923–winter 1924. Oil on canvas, 25.5" x 39.5"

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Left: Joan Miró standing before his painting *The Skiing Lesson*, 1966. *Opposite: Ciphers and Constellations in Love with a Woman*, 1941. Opaque watercolor with watercolor washes on ivory, rough textured woven paper, 18" x 15".

Joan Miró is best known for colorful abstract compositions populated by whimsical figures outlined in black. Primary shades—red, yellow, blue—fill in the surreal forms, emoting innocence alongside vulgarity, simplicity with depth, even whimsy with horror. A stick figure with a triangle head contains a target-like eye and a wispy mustache. A red shape indicates its heart, and a hairy orb its genitalia. Organic forms suggest insects, birds, the sun, and a star in the sunny yellow sky.

These decorative and often lightly amusing pictures, and related sculptures, have become so familiar that they no longer appear revolutionary. Yet when he forged his unique pictorial language a century ago, Miró was a leader of the avant-garde. Ceaselessly inventive, he devised new aesthetic forms that contributed to the epochal triumph of abstraction over representation as the dominant mode of visual art. His enormously productive career is regarded as one of the most influential and exemplary of the 20th century.

Despite his extraordinary popularity, Miró's genius has come under scrutiny. His work can be formulaic and repetitive, and the content lightweight and lacking emotive force. *The New Yorker*'s critic Peter Schjeldahl dismissed him in a 2008 article as an innocent whose art "generates no human drama beyond the range of a circus act." Even though his abstract figures typically are equipped with orifices and protrusions that humorously declare their sexuality, they come off as naive rather than risqué. Schjeldahl says that "his symbols of sex suggest prepubescent, wild guesses at what adults get so steamed up about." In other words, though formally radical, Miró's art reflects a shy and cerebral nature.

Focusing on a limited range of motifs—mainly faces and heads, female figures, birds, and stars—he created an abstract pictographic language with which he explored his reveries in paintings, drawings, sculptures, ceramics, prints, book illustrations, and tapestries. His vast oeuvre has been collected by museums in Europe and the United States, notably the Museum of Modern Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Pompidou Centre in Paris, and the two foundations that he established in his native Barcelona and in his adopted home of Palma, Mallorca. He is regularly celebrated in major exhibitions—the last two years have seen surveys at MoMA and at the Grand Palais in Paris—and there is broad demand for his work at multiple price levels. Prints can be acquired for as little as a few thousand dollars, but seminal paintings, particularly those produced in the early decades of his career, have sold at auction for more than $30 million.

MIRÓ THE MAN

A small, genial, humble person, Miró was reserved and socially tame, mingling with intellectuals and fellow artists, but keeping a few close friends and staying married for 64 years to the same Mallorcan woman, Pilar Juncosa, with whom he had a daughter. Despite the celebrity he achieved in his lifetime, he lived modestly rather than in vast villas and avoided the limelight, preferring to stay at home. A housekeeper recalls his disciplined routine: rise early to work in the studio, breakfast at 9 a.m., back to the studio, lunch at 2 p.m., a siesta, then reading and letter writing before dinner and perhaps theater. He did indulge a taste for fine suits, and once described visits to a Mallorcan pastry shop as "almost a religious rite." But he confessed that he found French cuisine "too skilled, too intellectual, which in the long run explains much about my painting." That iconoclasm impelled him to overturn the complacencies of tradition, and made him one of his era's towering figures.

In his youth, like most artists, he represented his immediate surroundings. But, for Miró—whose surname in Spanish means "he saw"—the act of seeing was both outward and inward. With his eyes he observed the creatures and substances of the natural world, and with his mind's eye he grasped their shared affinities and dreamed of intangible forces that animate the cosmos. His rudimentary figures, drawn in a crude manner ▹

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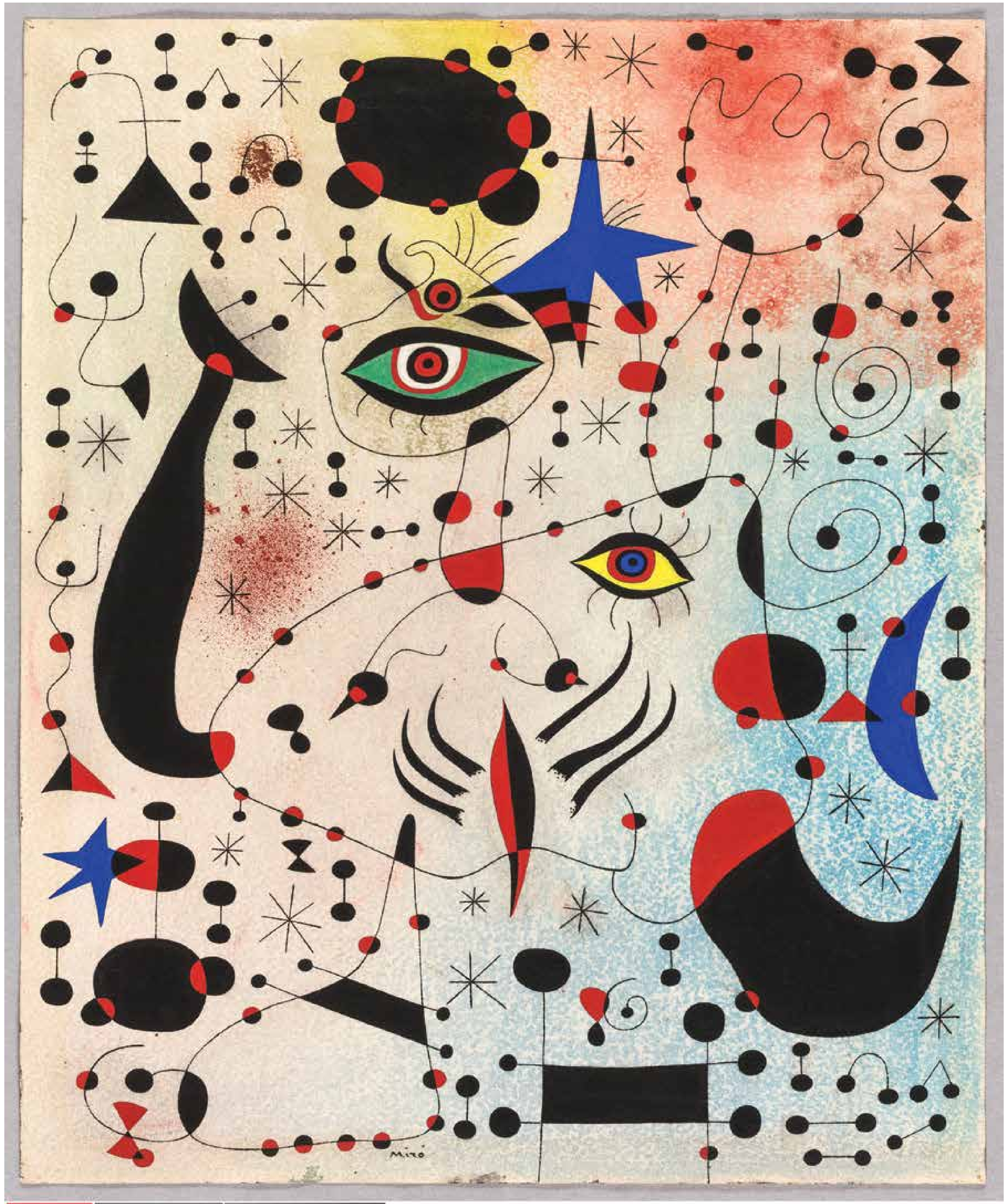

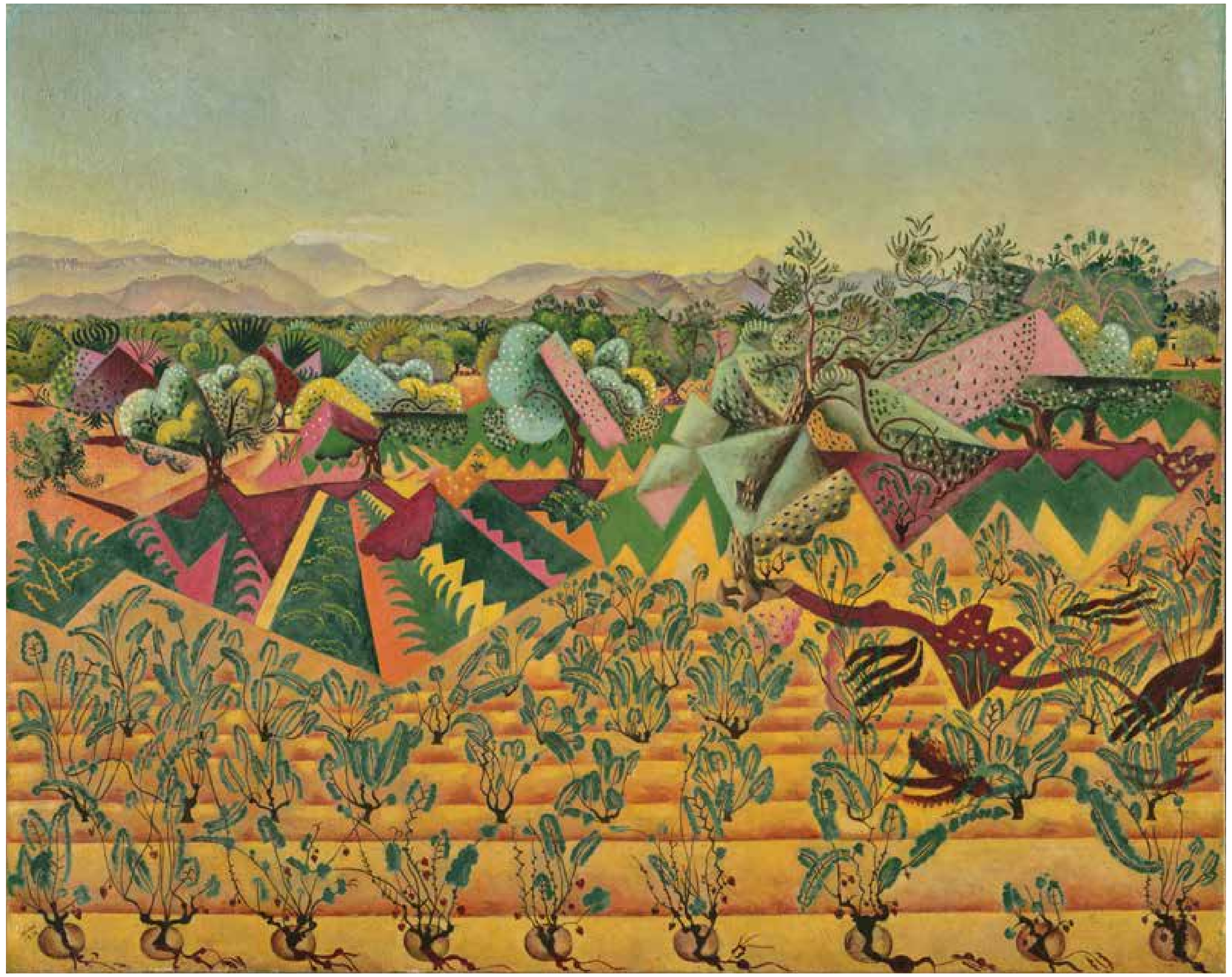

and set against seemingly random stains of color, can seem childlike and amateurish. In fact, he was a gifted draftsman and trained painter, but had little interest in superficial likeness. Fascinated by the latest artistic theories, and given to poetic rumination, he inclined toward abstraction and primitivist symbols in non-narrative compositions.

He was born in Barcelona in 1893, the eldest of four children in a bourgeois family. He began drawing as a child and attended art school as a teenager, but his father, a watchmaker and goldsmith, steered him into finance and a job as an accounting clerk. A nervous breakdown ensued, then a bout of typhoid fever, but after convalescing at the family farm in Montroig, south of Barcelona, he returned to art school.

CLOSE TO HOME

In his 20s, Miró stayed around the family farm where he painted still lifes, landscapes, and figures influenced by the planar structure of Cézanne, the gestural brushwork and palette of van Gogh, the chromatic exuberance of Matisse and the Fauves, and the angular geometry of Picasso and the Cubists. But even in his formative period he had a unique aesthetic. He recorded his rural milieu as if under the influence of a hallucinogen, turning mundane scenes into scintillating patterns of hard-edged details, each vibrating to its own rhythm.

In *The Table (Still Life with Rabbit)* (1920–1921), the floor, walls and tabletop are tilted up and geometrized as in Cubist pictures, but Miró depicts the rabbit, rooster, fish, and vegetables with hyperreal naturalism. This mesmerizing magic-realist effect is evident also in landscapes painted in and around Montroig, including *Vines and Olive Trees, Tarragona* (1919), *House with Palm Tree* (1919), and his early masterpiece *The Farm* (1921–22). Had his career ended with this phase, Miró would have claimed a place in art history, but his attention shifted from his surroundings to the world of his imagination, and led to even more groundbreaking pictorial breakthroughs.

PARIS AND SURREALISM

The transition took place after a 1920 trip to Paris. Miró was intent on becoming an "international Catalan," one who remained connected to his homeland but incorporated ideas resonating in cosmopolitan Paris, where he opened a studio in 1922, returning for summer to Montroig. His circle soon included Picasso, André Masson, Max Ernst, Alexander Calder, Ernest Hemingway, Serge Diaghilev, the poet Paul Éluard, and André Breton, leader of the avant-garde Surrealist literary movement. Miró was attracted to avant-garde poetry and the Surrealist idea of "psychic automatism," writing by free association to explore the unconscious. He joined the group in 1924, just as the Surrealist Manifesto was published.

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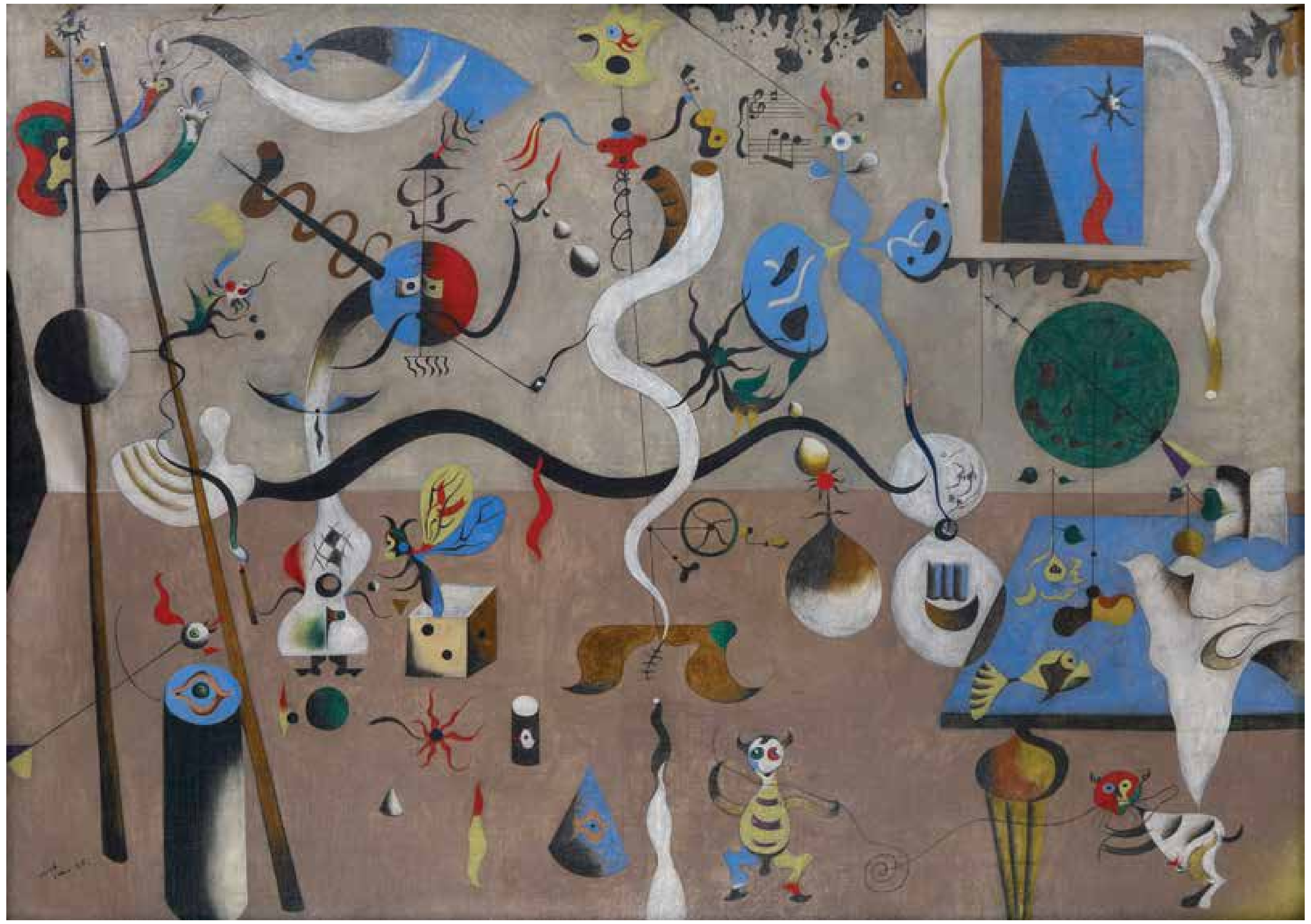


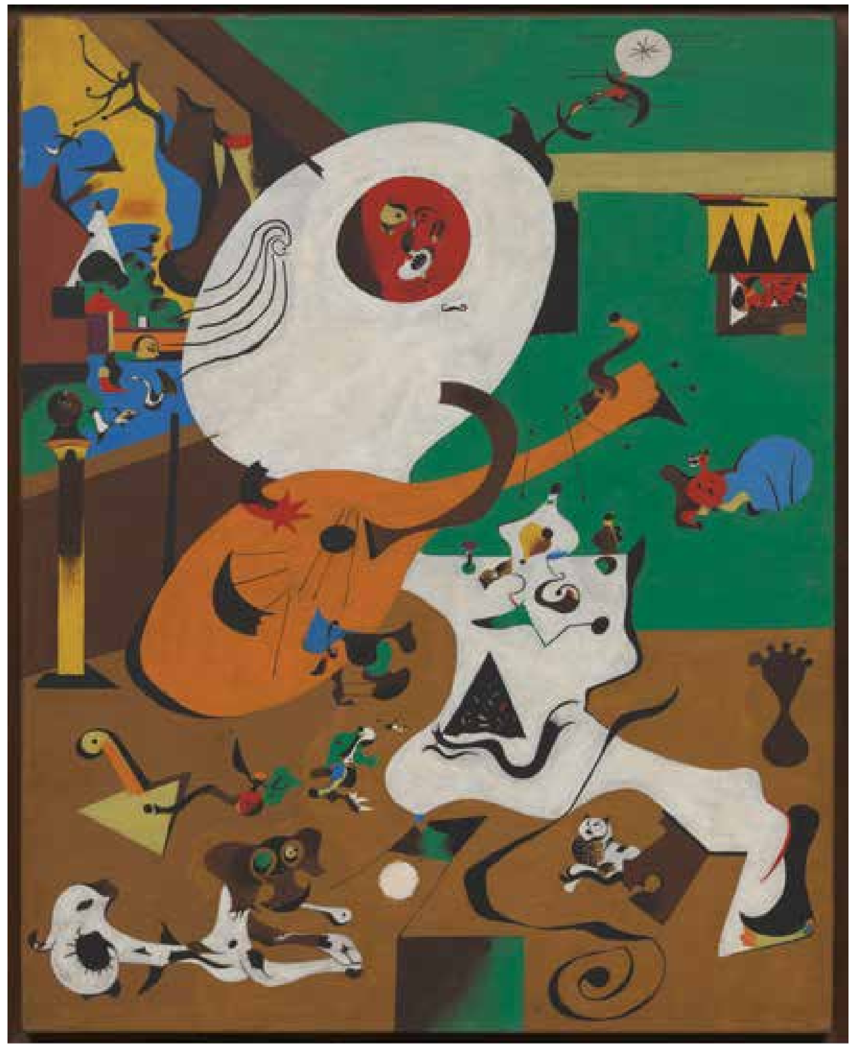
Above: Carnaval d'Arlequin (Carnival of Harlequin), 1924–1925. Oil on canvas, support: 26" x 36.625".
Opposite: Vines and Olive Trees, Tarragona. 1919. Oil on canvas, 28.5" x 35.625".

The year he wrote to an artist friend, "I have already managed to break absolutely free of nature, and the landscapes have nothing whatever to do with outer reality. Nevertheless, they are more Montroig than if they had been painted from nature." A stunning example is the painting *The Hunter (Catalan Landscape)* (1923–1924), in which he reduces the protagonist and the setting to a collection of abstracted details laid out on a flat plane like a schematic diagram.

The hunter on the left is a stick figure with a triangle head containing a target-like eye and a wispy mustache, sporting a Catalan cap and wavy lines suggesting his beard, and smoking a pipe that hovers nearby. A rounded red shape indicates the hunter's heart, and a hairy orb his genitalia. His arms are a single horizontal line that at one end holds a killed rabbit, and at the other a conical gun emitting a flame. Organic forms suggest plants, animals, and celestial objects in the yellow sky, along with an airplane-like contraption and tiny French, Catalan, and Spanish flags.

Schematic waves and seagulls in the top right indicate the Mediterranean, and a single leaf attached to a beige circle represents a carob tree sprouting an eye, possibly denoting the presence of the observant artist. In the lower right Miró has calligraphically written "Sard," an abbreviation of "sardine," which the artist later explained refers to the creature occupying the rose-colored foreground—consisting of a linear spine with a triangular tail and semicircular yellow head with whiskers, a red tongue, and a long brownish ear. (Perhaps intentionally, Miró abstracted the displaced fish to rhyme with the features of a hare.)

In this and related works—*The Family* (1924), *The Tilled Field* (1923–1924), and *Carnival of Harlequin* (1924–25), with its even greater profusion of characters and accessory elements—Miró abandons illusionism to paint instead landscapes of the mind. ▹



Above: Dutch Interior (I). Montroig, July–December 1928. Oil on canvas, 36.125" x 28.75". *Opposite: Still Life with Old Shoe.* Paris, January 24–May 29, 1937. Oil on canvas, 32" x 46".

An assortment of abstract disembodied attributes leaves the impression of the artist's flow of thought as he analyzed how to present his subject. The viewer must engage in a similar process to comprehend the scene. The Surrealists referred to this as *peinture-poésie* (painted poetry), and Breton himself endorsed Miró's effort by acquiring *The Hunter*. But two years later, when Miró collaborated with Hemingway on scenic devices for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes production of *Romeo and Juliet*, Breton denounced them as bourgeois sellouts and Miró's association with Surrealism ebbed.

However, two aspects of painted poetry that would persist throughout Miró's career are pictorial versions of literary tropes: synecdoche, the presentation of a part or feature to signify the whole (a mustache for the man, a vulva for the woman), and analogy, in which a single form performs multiple roles (an eye doubles as the sun which in turn resembles a sex organ) and proposes their physical or cosmic kinship.

Miró tested his new approach in relation to the Old Masters. In 1928 he went to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and brought back postcards of pictures that served as the bases for abstract variations. *Dutch Interior (I)* (1928) is his free rendering of Hendrick Maertensz Sorgh's *The Lutenist* (1661), a painting that shows an elegantly attired suitor with crossed legs playing a lute for a woman who rests an elbow on an adjacent table set with a fruit dish, wine glass, and pitcher. In the foreground a dog and cat lie on the floor, and to the left a window opens onto a canal.

Miró renders these elements as simplified organic shapes of brilliant flat color that create a collage of curvilinear forms. The lutenist's head is a white egg containing a red circle, displaced mustache, and wisps of hair. His instrument is a bright orange gourd bristling with pegs and strings. The woman appears as a white hourglass topped by a tiny black circular head, with a flowing white shape indicating the cloth-covered table, beneath which rest a cartoonish cat and a dog chewing a bone. The window view is summarily indicated in the upper left, and a rectangular shape recalls the painting that hangs in the background of the original. Miró amends the scene by inserting a frog, a bird, and a fantastic bat flying through the interior, and adds a footprint glyph, perhaps a stand-in for the artist himself.

ASSASSINATION OF PAINTING

The Dutch series set the stage for more radical departures from tradition. In the later 1920s Miró pared down his pictures to a few biomorphic motifs floating against backgrounds of washed color, sometimes adding words as graphic elements. In these "dream" paintings, including *The Birth of the World* and *This Is the Color of My Dreams* (both 1925), he allowed his brush to move intuitively across the surface, accepting whatever gesture or accidental effect resulted. But Miró maintained that his imagery arose from concrete forms that exist in the real world and in his imagination. *Dog Barking at the Moon* (1926), for example, features a dog perched on a sloping horizon line beneath a crescent moon, with a ladder on the left ascending into the sky. It calls to mind another evocation of the enigma of existence: Spanish painter Francisco Goya's Black Painting called *The Drowning Dog* (1820–1823) in the Prado.

In 1927, Miró declared his desire to "assassinate painting," an attention-getting provocation that overstated his intention to overturn the conventions of oil-on-canvas illusionism. Experimenting with new materials, he produced pictures on raw canvas, cardboard, Masonite, and copper, and incorporated found objects in constructions that anticipate the Combines of artist Robert Rauschenberg. To distance himself from rational composition, he arranged images of machines and consumer items torn from Catalan newspapers and catalogs into collages. He used these Dadaist armatures as points of departure for abstract paintings in which he transformed the commercial forms into biomorphic creatures, linking the modern and the primordial. Miró was interested in primitivism and prehistoric cave painting—then a relatively new field of study.

SPOILS OF WAR

Miró's work was rarely explicitly political, but he responded to the repressive dictatorship of Francisco Franco, whose campaign to homogenize Spanish culture threatened to annihilate Catalonian identity. In 1934, on the brink of civil war, he created the Savage Paintings series, depicting monstrous, toothy figures floating in murky fields, verging on caricature. Their gloom and distortion adumbrate violence, but Miró's Catalan nationalism generally remained covert.

An exception is *The Reaper (Catalan Peasant in Revolt)* (1937), commissioned by the Spanish Republican government for the Paris Exposition in 1937. Inspired by the Catalan liberation song "Els Segadors" (The Reapers), the subject is a bulbous profile with a protruding nose and projecting teeth. The left arm holds a scythe, and the right is raised with clenched fist, the Catalan gesture of solidarity and protest. The work, now lost, was displayed in the Spanish pavilion alongside Picasso's *Guernica* and Calder's *Mercury Fountain*.

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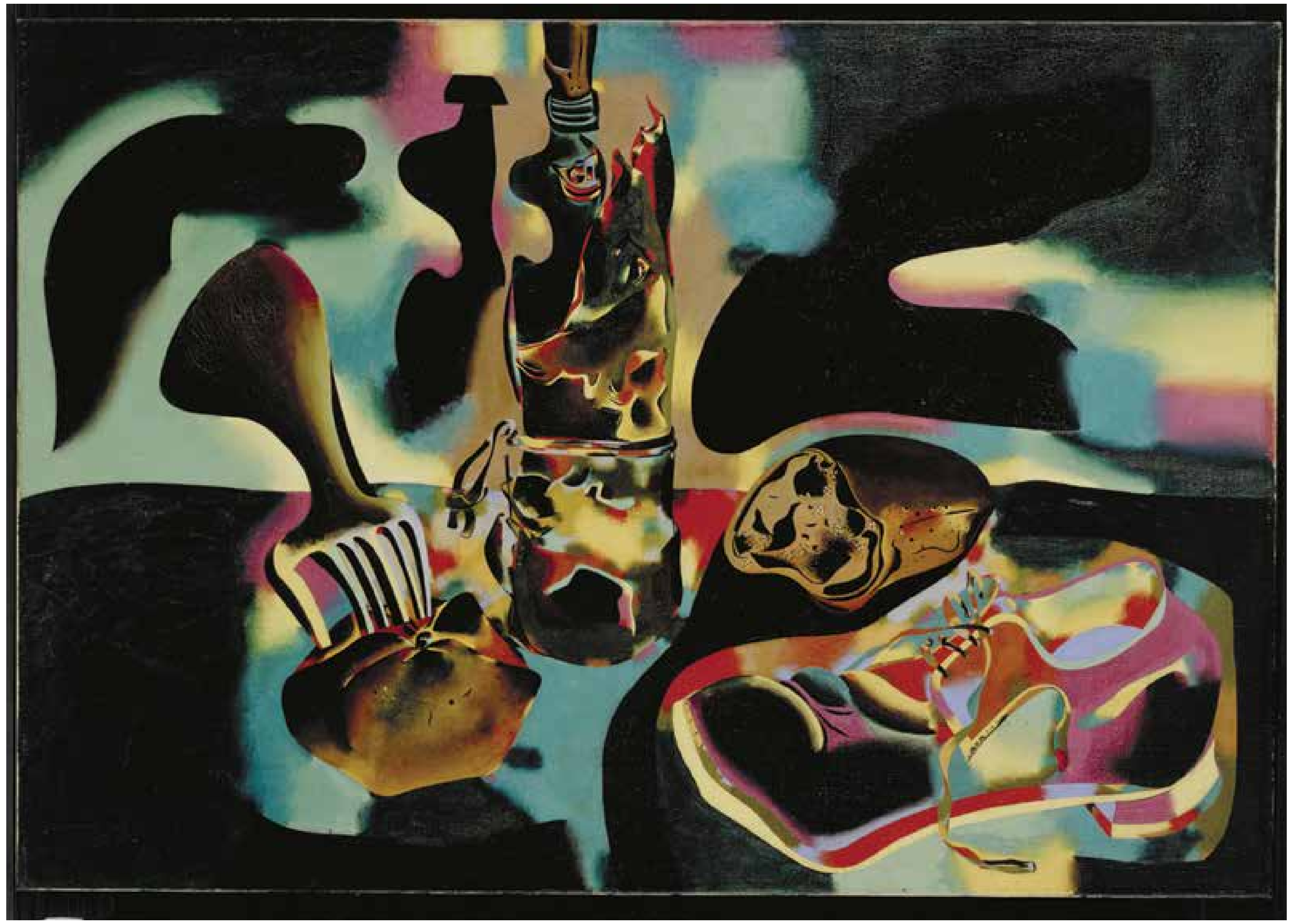


Another exception is *Still Life with Old Shoe* (1937), an unexpected return to realism that depicts a poor man's meal: a fork stuck into an apple, a cut loaf of bread, a bottle of gin wrapped in paper, and a haggard shoe symbolizing the Spanish people. The mood is dark and menacing, the distorted objects deeply shadowed and enshrouded in ambiguous space lit with an infernal shimmer of acid yellow and orange. The apocalyptic phantasmagoria registers Miró's anxiety during the Civil War and on the eve of World War II.

In 1940, he transcended worldly concerns by pouring himself into a series of 23 gouache and watercolor drawings that he titled Constellations. He and his wife had escaped the fascist occupation of Catalonia by relocating to Normandy and then they fled the Nazi invasion by retreating to Paris then to Barcelona, Palma, and finally Montroig.

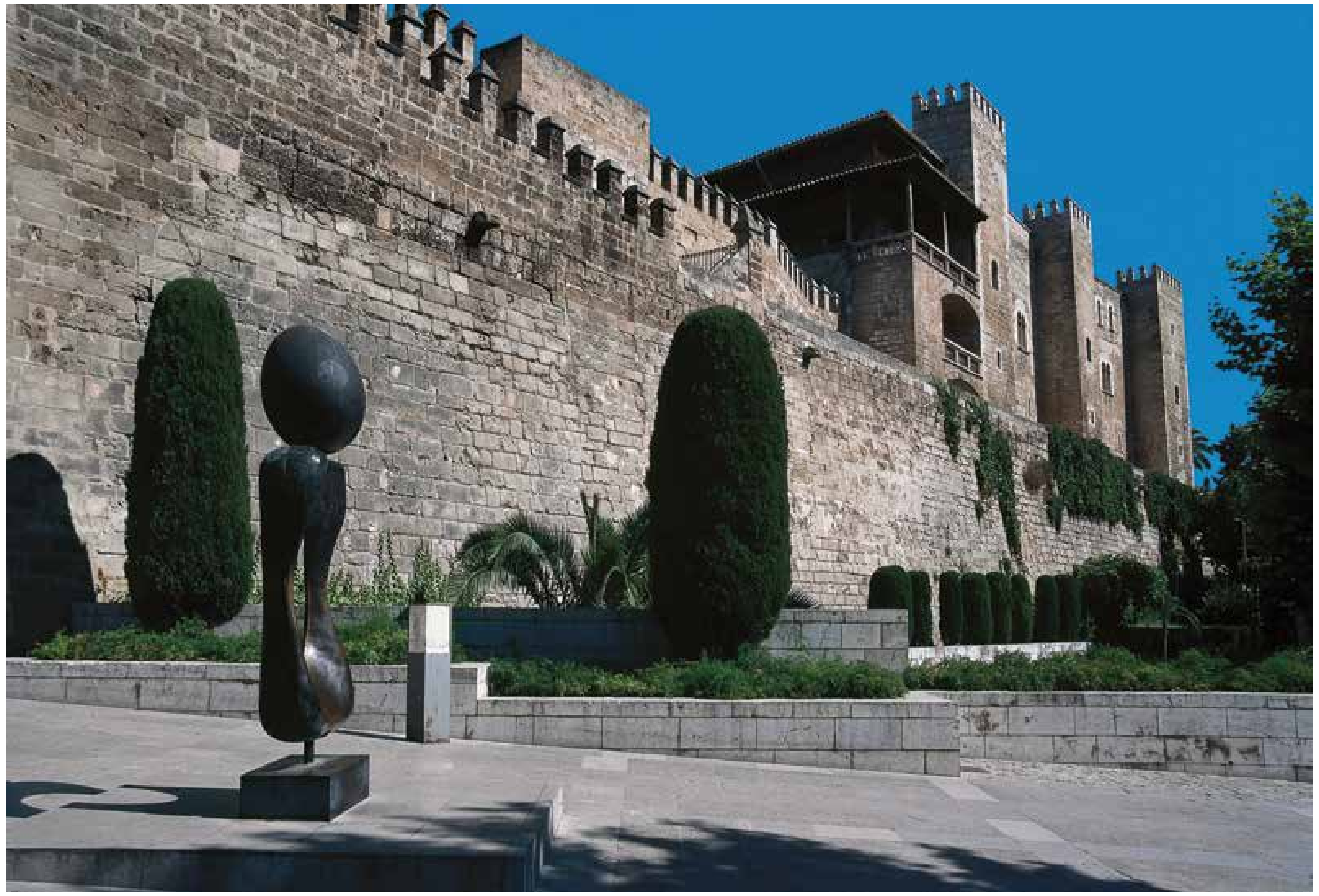
Amid this chaos he managed to concentrate intensely on one of his most transcendent and beautiful bodies of work. He covered modest-size sheets with his signature women, birds, and stars drawn with black ink on wash backgrounds. The skein of fine black lines interconnecting the motifs creates a constellation-like filigree of circles, stars, hourglasses and other shapes, some filled with vivid colors. Here and there, eyes and faces emerge, enabling the viewer to distinguish Miró's mythic personages and creatures entwined in the astral web.

The Constellations showcase Miró's polyvalent symbology. The recurring motif—a circle with lines extending outward that terminate in dots—may function as an analog for a hand, a flower, or a star, inviting us to imagine how they are interconnected. He achieves an exquisite harmonic balance among the disparate elements that embroider the compositions. He later recalled that during this period he had found solace listening to Bach and Mozart, and that music replaced poetry as a source of inspiration. The Constellations themselves have been aptly described as chamber music.

THE NEXT DIMENSION

After the war, Miró created mainly sculpture, ceramics, prints, and book illustrations. In the 1940s, as part of his campaign to expand painting, he collaborated with Josep Llorens Artigas, an accomplished potter he had known since art school. Working in a small town north of Barcelona, they produced hundreds of pieces, including traditional vessels and plaques made by Artigas that Miró embellished with his signature abstract forms and colors, and three-dimensional forms wholly invented by Miró.

Some of his statues translate the organic forms of his paintings to three dimensions, such as *Moonbird* (1946), whose bulging limbs and horns merge human, avian, and bovine ▹



forms to suggest a prehistoric fertility idol. And he concocted bizarre assemblages that celebrate his affections for rural Catalan culture and for abstract figuration. The 7-foot-tall *Personnage* (1967–1969), for example, began as a butcher block propped on a tripod, with the lid of a wheat container for a head, and an upright rake that suggests both hair and an arm thrust skyward. Cast in bronze and brightly painted, the comical sculpture exemplifies the creative abandon that many artists entertain in their twilight years.

He also produced thousands of lithographs, engravings, and book illustrations (he won the Grand Prize for Graphic Work at the Venice Biennale in 1954), and in the 1970s he collaborated with the Catalan weaver Josep Royo on massive tapestries for the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the World Trade Center (destroyed in the terrorist attacks), and his foundation in Barcelona.

HIS WORLD STAGE

Miró showed with various galleries in Paris, but his career took off in 1932 when he began his association with Pierre Matisse, who ran a prestigious New York gallery and would remain a close friend for the rest of the artist's life. Exhibitions proliferated on both sides of the Atlantic, accompanied by critical acclaim and increasing sales. His large-scale gestural and color-field abstractions, and his experiments with non-painterly materials, influenced the Art Informel artists of Europe and their American counterparts, the Abstract Expressionists. His reputation expanded with his first major exhibition in the United States, a retrospective at MoMA in 1941, and was reinforced by a show of the Constellations at Pierre Matisse Gallery in 1945.

He came to the United States for the first time in 1947, in relation to a mural commission for a restaurant in the Terrace Plaza Hotel in Cincinnati, one of around a dozen large painted or ceramic murals he would create for various institutions. In 1958, the year his UNESCO murals were installed in Paris, he received the Guggenheim International Award, presented by President Eisenhower in Washington, D.C. In 1959 he traveled to New York for his second retrospective at MoMA and encountered the dynamic large-scale works of Pollock, Franz Kline, and others whom he had influenced. He later said that Abstract Expressionism had, in effect, given him permission to work on a grander scale, far beyond the intimacy of the School of Paris where he began.

He took up the challenge in the spacious new studio in Palma that his friend, the architect Josep Lluís Sert, had built for him in 1956, but the late paintings rehashed earlier themes and are not widely admired. Curators and critics favor the first part of Miró's career, during which he underwent the amazing pictorial evolution that remains his greatest legacy. That protean enterprise continues to captivate new generations of art historians and a wide international audience. There may be no right or wrong interpretation of Miró's eccentric pictorial universe, but entering it, one cannot help but be captivated by its dichotomies and exclamation of unhindered creative freedom. ◆

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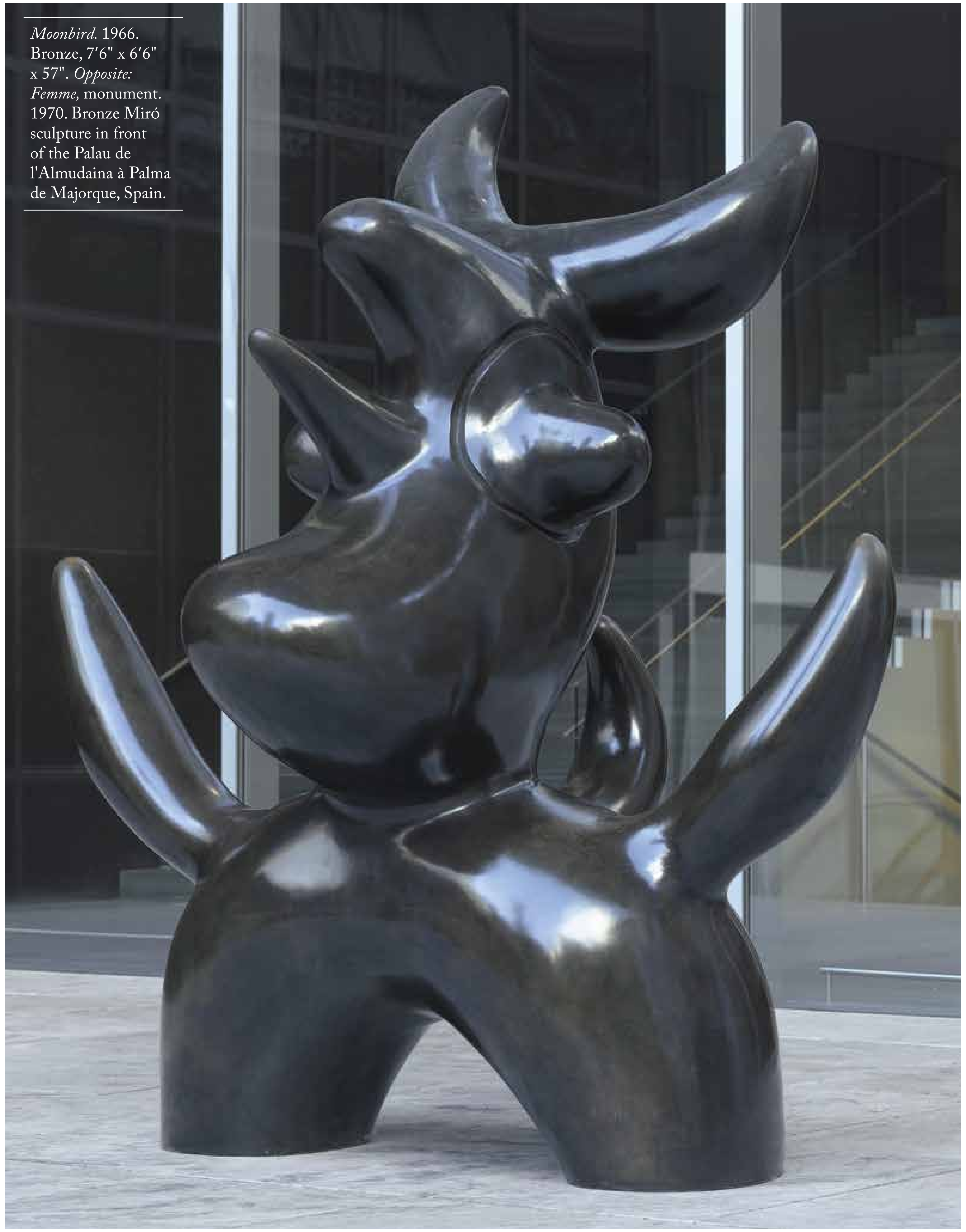

Moonbird. 1966. Bronze, 7′6″ x 6′6″ x 57″. *Opposite: Femme*, monument. 1970. Bronze Miró sculpture in front of the Palau de l'Almudaina à Palma de Majorque, Spain.