

Head of a Woman, 1938

Joan Miró , 1893 – 1983

Medium: Painting, Oil on Canvas

Culture: Europe, Spain

#64.44.1; on view G376

submitted by James Allen



Joan Miró (zjo-AHN mee-RO)

BTW, Joan is a guy. Born in 1893, in Barcelona, the son of a watch making father and a goldsmith mother. He attended art schools until about the age of 25. In his early years he was influenced by the pure brilliant colors of Fauvism, shapes of cubism, folk art of Catalonia, and the frescos of Rome found in churches. In 1921 he traveled to Paris and became a surrealist. He remained in Paris, like his friend, Picasso, exiled from Spain by the Spanish civil war. In 1940 he narrowly escaped the German army as it advanced on Paris. Later he created collages, sculptures, and ceramic murals. In his later years he concentrated on monumental and public work.

“Joan Miró ’s style has been interpreted as Surrealism combined with the playfulness and whimsical nature of a child. Miró and Andre Masson were considered the beginning of the Surrealist movement although Miró chose not to be labeled as a Surrealist.” (from [joanMiró .com/style-of-joan-Miró /](http://joanMiró.com/style-of-joan-Miró/), a website on the artist).

He never joined the surrealism movement nor did he sign the manifesto of the French poet Andre Breton, but the surrealism movement loved him. Surrealism began in Paris in 1924. It was not an artistic movement as much as a way or philosophy of life. It was a constant revolt against the conformities of thought and developed out of the Dada activities of WWI. Its three most important elements were:

- a conviction that the dream is a valid and integral part of life experience
- a belief in the creative power of the unconscious
- an acceptance of a universal need for myth, a common myth for all humanity which unites people of all civilizations

Joan Miró was very much against the established painting methods of the time, and is often credited with being the founder of automatic drawing. Automatic drawing is the process of allowing the hand to move randomly on the canvas, leaving the artwork to chance. Many Surrealists believed that this form of drawing would reveal something about the subconscious human mind. For Joan Miró, automatic drawing was also a way to break free from conventional form. Miró was very much against bourgeois art, claiming that it was used for propaganda and the promotion of a wealthy culture. Miró referred to his work as the *assassination of painting*. (From www.joanMiró.net/Biography.aspx)

Throughout his life Miró remained true to the basic Surrealistic principle of releasing the creative forces of the unconscious mind from the control of logic and reason. However, even though Breton wrote that he was 'probably the most Surrealistic of us all', Miró stood apart from the other members of the movement in the variety, geniality, and lack of attitudinizing in his work. Much of his work has a delightful quality of playfulness about it, but he was inspired to much more somber and even savage imagery by the Spanish Civil War. (Oxford Dictionary of Art)

Miró began a painting by doodling. Surrealists believed that through the accident of doodling, we might relax our rational control and draw something that bubbles up from our unconscious. Miró usually doodled on the canvas, then examined his product to see what shapes it suggested, then applied more lines and colors to bring out what lay hidden. Miró was fascinated by the art of children, which he regarded as spontaneous and expressive. (Stockstad)

His *World Trade Center Tapestry*, 1974 hung in the World Trade Center and was the most expensive piece of work lost in the towers on 9/11.



Joan Miró , photograph by Yousuf Karsh, 1965
from MIA (Accession number 95.12.2), not on view

Quotes:

“For me an object is something living. This cigarette or this box of matches contains a secret life much more intense that that of certain human beings.

My characters have undergone the same process of simplification as the colors. Now that they have been simplified, they appear more human and alive than if they had been represented in all their details.

I feel the need of attaining the maximum of intensity with the minimum of means. It is this which has led me to give my painting a character of even greater bareness.

Head of a Woman

Miró imbued his pictures of this period, such as the nightmarish Head of a Woman (1938), with a demonic expressiveness that mirrored the fears and horrors of those years (the Spanish Civil War). (www.britannica.com)

Joan Miró had an interest in such automatic processes. He started his pictures with

aimless doodles and let images develop from the doodles. “In the act of painting, a shape will begin to mean woman, or bird . . . ,” he said. “The first stage is free, unconscious.” This figure of a frantic, ghastly woman gives form to Miró’s feelings about the civil war just starting in his native Spain. (Teaching the Arts, on the MIA website.)

This painting is playful, but the longer one regards it, the more horrifying it becomes. It’s about aggressors and victims. The woman looks to be in panic while ? bombs are being dropped around her. She has tiny arms with fluttery little fingers, sparse scraggly hair (even in the arm pits), a large beak with teeth of three different colors. The head is large and does not seem very real. More surreal. To me it recalls both a bird and a cat. The neck is tiny and there are whimsical breasts that look like brightly colored fruit. The colors are intense blues, reds, yellows, greens, and black typical of Miró painting and reflecting his origins with Fauvism. It may be a commentary like Picasso’s *Guernica* of the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. There is some resemblance of this woman to the man on the right of Picasso’s masterpiece with head looking to the sky and arms thrusting upward.

It can be compared to our *Dance Mask with Bird Totem* from Papua New Guinea.

Other local art by Miró :

The MIA has 27 pieces by Joan Miró , of which two are on view. The other on view is seen below.

The Walker has another 11 pieces.

The Mayo Clinic has several huge murals in its lobby.



Joan Miró , The Spanish Playing Cards, 1920
on view, G367

Gallery Label:

Joan Miró's first encounter with the Cubist works of Picasso and Braque in 1919 inspired a group of still lifes - including *Spanish Playing Cards* - that he executed in 1920. Here, the stylized realism of Miró's previous work combined with the geometric faceting of synthetic Cubism. The densely painted objects retain their identity, but the surrounding space is fractured into patterned lines and angles. Miró continued working in this manner until 1924, when he joined the Surrealist movement.

Surrealism

See the article on this subject in the Teaching the Arts section of the MIA website
www.artsmia.org/index.php?section_id=16&showall=1