

The Museum of Modern Art

Curatorial Statement

Joan Miró: Birth of the World

Joan Miró (1893–1983) is widely acknowledged as one of the 20th-century's most lyrical poet-painters. His belief in poetry as a means of understanding the world opened onto seemingly limitless artistic possibilities. Throughout his decades-long career, Miró sought to reveal the marvelous in the quotidian. His work celebrates the wildness of the imagination even as it remains firmly rooted in the realities of his life and times. Today, when so much value is placed on the prosaic—the data-driven, the quantifiable, hard numbers—Miró's poetic vision is newly urgent.

Joan Miró: Birth of the World provides an opportunity to explore the development of Miró's poetic process and pictorial universe. It focuses primarily on works made between 1920, the year of his catalytic first trip to Paris, and the early 1950s, when his unique visual language became internationally renowned. Even before going to France, Miró was a voracious reader of both Catalan and French avant-garde poetry. His friendships in the early 1920s with the young poets and painters who were launching the Surrealist movement, which prized the subconscious and the irrational over order and logic, encouraged him, he said, to work "feverishly, maybe as never before."

"You and all my writer friends have given me much help and improved my understanding of many things," Joan Miró told the French poet Michel Leiris in the summer of 1924, writing from his family's farm in Montroig, a small village nestled between the mountains and the sea in his native Catalonia. His letter to Leiris amounted to a manifesto: He spoke of using poetic devices such as "artificial" points of departure—an arbitrary word, or a found shape—to provoke "a surprising metaphysical state" and to move away from "all pictorial convention (that poison)." The next year, Miró's intense engagement with poetry, chance procedures, and material experimentation were among the factors that inspired him to paint *The Birth of the World*.

In this signature work, Miró covered the ground of his oversize canvas by applying paint in an astonishing variety of ways that allowed for varying degrees of chance and control. He then added a series of pictographic signs that are as much drawn as painted, transforming the broken syntax, constellated space, and dreamlike imagery of avant-garde poetry into a radiantly imaginative and highly inventive form of painting. He would later describe this work as "a sort of genesis," the beginning of a new creative process, and his Surrealist poet friends titled it *The Birth of the World*.

This exhibition is drawn from MoMA's peerless collection of Miró's work, augmented by several key loans. It situates *The Birth of the World* in relation to other works by the artist that

preceded and succeeded it in order to shed new light on an art in which visionary and cosmic elements are inextricably intertwined with the earthly and the mundane. Some 60 paintings, collages, works on paper, prints, objects, and ceramics that are rarely seen together are presented, along with a selection of illustrated books Miró produced in collaboration with various poet friends. Collectively, these works testify to Miró's ongoing pursuit of a heightened awareness of experience akin to that produced by poetry, and to his fundamentally animistic world view, in which every element is physically and spiritually alive and worthy of attention.

-- Anne Umland, *The Blanche Hooker Rockefeller Senior Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art*