



IBM MURAL, BARCELONA

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THE MIRÓ-ARTIGAS MURALS

THE MURALS OF THE SUN AND THE MOON WERE INSTALLED IN THE PLACE DE FONTENOY IN PARIS IN THE MIDST OF GREAT EXPECTATION. THEY WERE WARMLY RECEIVED AND THE CRITICS AND PUBLIC WERE WILDLY ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT MIRÓ AND ARTIGAS'S WORK.

J. CORREDOR-MATHEOS AUTHOR AND ART CRITIC

Joan Miró always felt attracted by large spaces that seemed to overflow their limits. His work with Artigas in clay vases was eventually to lead him to the ceramic panel as a covering for large walls. The first opportunity arose in 1955, when the directors of UNESCO invited him to take part alongside other important artists in decorating the international organisation's new premises to be opened in

Paris. Miró was assigned two exterior walls beside the Conference Building. These formed two perpendicular surfaces, three metres high and fifteen and seven and a half metres long respectively. Miró proposed carrying out both murals in ceramic, in partnership with Josep Llorens Artigas. Once the proposal had been accepted, the long business of talking, planning, travelling and eventually of material elaboration got

under way. The artist himself has discussed these experiences in a text called *Ma dernière oeuvre est un mur*.

In carrying out the murals, they had to take into account their location in the open air, where they would suffer the ravages of sun, rain and cold. They therefore had to find the technical means of overcoming these difficulties. The job was a delicate one. In Miró's words, until then no ceramist had ever had the



DETAIL OF THE MURAL "EL SOL I LA LLUNA". UNESCO, PARIS

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opportunity to take on a work of these dimensions. Alongside the technique employed in carrying it out was the conception of the work itself. Here, in the solution the artists came up with and in the paths they followed in their search for it, we discover to what extent Miró's work is rooted in history, sharing in a vision of the world which, despite the distance in time, remains close to us. To seek inspiration, they decided to go to Santander. There, in the caves of Altamira, they gazed on the beautiful palaeolithic paintings and meditated "before the world's first mural art". They then visited the Collegiate Church of Santillana. In Catalonia, they also contemplated the Romanesque frescos in the museum on Montjuïc, which had always impressed Miró, and Gaudí's astonishing creations.

Full of ideas, they settled in at Gallifa. There, in the depths of the woods, they took their paper models. Their natural surroundings were to suggest certain

modifications, at the same time as it reassured them to see how what seemed to be simple smudges of colour stood their ground amongst the mountains, the huge stones, the old trees. As on previous occasions, when it was important to maintain the freshness and life of Miró's colours, they first fired the pieces with a base of potter's clay at a high temperature; on this highly resistant surface and before the final firing, Miró painted with suitable enamels to bring out his colours.

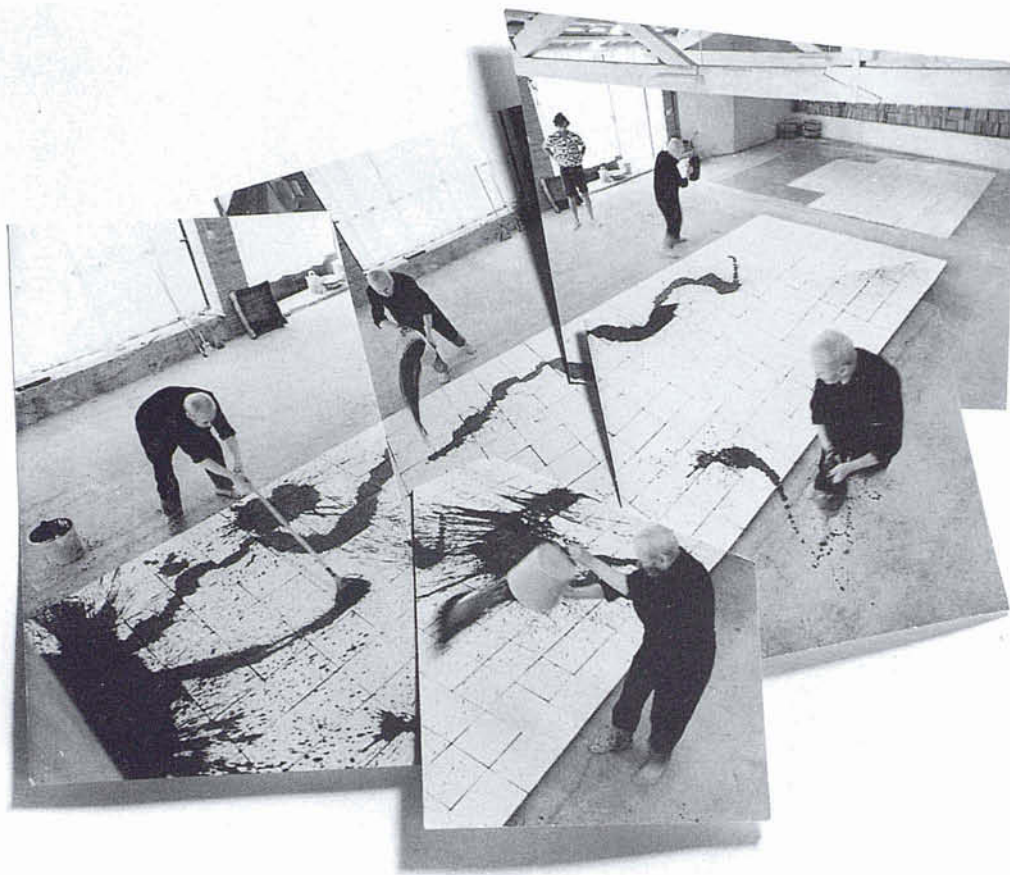
The last batch was fired on 29th May 1958. Altogether, 35 firings had been necessary. They had used 25 tons of firewood, 4,000 kilos of clay and 200 kilos of enamel. Add to this the further 4,000 kilos of clay of a first attempt, which hadn't lived up to the demands of either of the two artists and which had also cost another 250 kilos of enamel and 10 tons of firewood.

The murals of the Sun and the Moon were installed in the Place de Fontenoy

in Paris in the midst of great expectation. They were warmly received and, apart from the inevitable reticence on some people's part, the critics and public were wildly enthusiastic about Miró and Artigas's work. A sign of the huge international success of these murals was the award of the Guggenheim Foundation's 1958 Grand Prix.

The Harvard mural

The success of the UNESCO murals drew the attention of the world. So it was hardly surprising that Miró should receive further commissions of this sort, all of which he carried out with Artigas and his son, Joan Gardy Artigas. The first of the subsequent commissions was for a mural for Harvard University, intended to replace a mural painting carried out by Miró in 1951 which had been transferred to the Fogg Museum. With this new mural, Miró obviously introduced variations as regards the two UNESCO murals. He wanted at all costs



DIFFERENT INTERVENTIONS BY MIRÓ ON THE IBM MURAL. GALLIFA WORKSHOP

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to avoid resorting to the same ideas and to try something new. He therefore decided to throw himself into the adventure without a model to go by. He and Artigas also decided that the pieces would be of varying size, unlike those in the previous panels. He could not forget that it was intended for an interior. The aggressiveness and force of the UNESCO murals were to be replaced here by decorative values, in keeping with Miró's work. He also introduced another innovation at the moment of painting it; this time, rather than firing the pieces first, he painted on them in their raw state, without a model, as we have seen, and also without waiting for possible suggestions from other already well-known sources. Artigas, for his part, put all his considerable experience to work to come up with materials which, once fired, would produce a ceramic with the same quality as the backgrounds in Miró's 1951 painting. Once again, the understanding between the two great artists brought re-

sults, and once again the young Joanet Gardy Artigas had an important contribution to make.

The 120 pieces making up this mural were baked at a high temperature in the Nikósthene kiln in Gallifa. A subsequent firing at between 850 °C and 1,950 °C was to fix the living colours against the backgrounds and black outlines of the initial firing: chrome red, cobalt blue, uranium yellow, copper green.

Other murals

In subsequent murals the technique doesn't change substantially. There are quite a considerable number of them, especially bearing in mind the entirely artisan process by which they were made. In fact, this sort of work was now playing an important part in Miró's overall production. And the same goes for Artigas and his son Joan. In subsequent years it seems that the murals came thick and fast.

The University of Higher Business Stu-

dies of Saint Gall, in Switzerland, commissioned various artists to collaborate in the decoration of its premises. Along with Miró, the invited artists included Giacometti, Calder, Tàpies, Alicia Fernalba. The frieze Miró and Artigas were given to decorate ran the length of a wall whose view was interrupted by some columns, and Miró decided to paint signs that could be seen between these obstacles. This mural is 30 metres long by 1.5 metres high, and it was installed in 1964.

In January 1966 they started work on another one, measuring 5 metres by 2.5 metres, this time for the Guggenheim Museum in New York. An important point is that the wall it was to go on is concave, like all this museum's walls. The letters, like Miró's large star, are engraved, with incisions. The paint drips in some places and there is the odd stain.

The mural forming part of the Maeght Foundation Maze was the first they were able to put together in what they



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MIRÓ AND ARTIGAS ASSEMBLING THE OSAKA MURAL IN GALLIFA

called the "hangar", built in 1968 next to the kilns in Gallifa, precisely so as to be able to work on future murals with greater ease. It measures 12 metres by three and the colour is more subdued than in the other murals. Here, in the Maze, where a large part of their production is definitively gathered, we find that there is no hierarchy of any kind amongst the variously shaped and sized works. This is the natural result of Miró's understanding of the world: the mountain is not bigger than the grain of sand, nor man superior to the ant. The elements in the mural are not aggressive; there is a figure with bulging eyes like an insect's, and with long antennae, and then, like other eyes scattered here and there, unattached, the eyes of the mural, which look out at the visitor to the Maze with a certain indifference, not in the least menacingly. On the occasion of the Osaka International Exhibition, one of Japan's most important gas companies commissioned a pavilion from Miró. Miró also took

part in the exhibition, whose theme was "The Smile", with another mural, this time in paint applied directly onto the wall, which he destroyed once the Exhibition was over, in keeping with the original intention, the same as he had done shortly before with the one he painted at the College of Architects in Barcelona. On the other hand, the ceramic mural then went to the Museum of Folk Art in Osaka, built on the occasion of the Exhibition. It measures 12 metres by six, and is distinguished by the large number of eyes that fill the space, eyes like the ones that look out of the mural at the Foundation, but repeated obsessively here, always framed by colour. It took some months to complete, between spring 1969 and the beginning of 1970.

Before this they had also worked on a large mural, the biggest of all, for the facade of Barcelona airport. Because of its size, 50 metres by ten, it took a long time, almost two years, to complete. No less than 464 firings were needed to

make the 4,865 pieces it contains. Unlike the Osaka mural, the composition is simple, with large, clean shapes, and all of Miró's colours distributed in large areas. On this occasion Miró and the Artigas father and son team had the further collaboration of Michel Murao. Joan Miró's last mural with Josep Llorens Artigas and his son Joan Gardy Artigas was originally a commission for the Paris Cinémathèque, but it was eventually installed in the Museum at Vitoria (Basque Country) in 1972. Later on, Miró and Joan Gardy Artigas produced the murals for the IBM building in Barcelona (1976), Ludwigshafen (1979) and the Palace of Congresses in Madrid (1980). Ending this short tour of Joan Miró's long devotion to the ceramic mural is the one he produced in 1983 in collaboration with the Majorcan ceramist Lluís Castaldo for the Parc del Mar in Palma de Mallorca, the city where he lived and worked for almost thirty years. ■