

MIRÓ'S PRINTS



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MIRÓ AT WORK WITH JOAN BARBARÀ. SON BOTER, MALLORCA, 1979

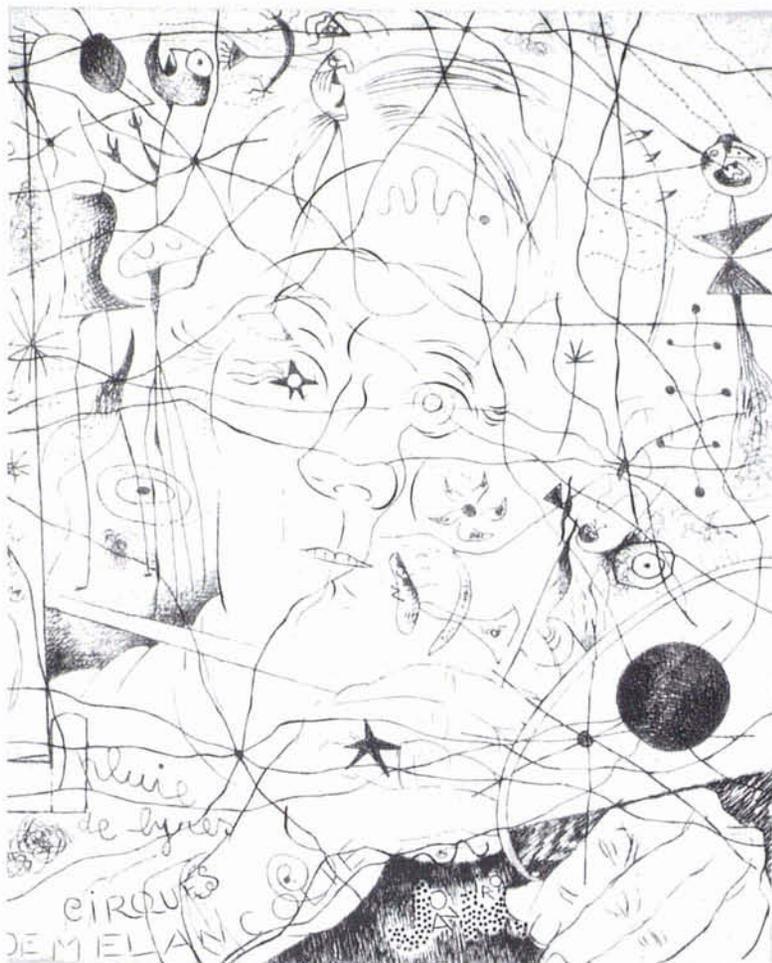
FOR MIRÓ, PRINTMAKING WAS A TECHNIQUE, LIKE PAINTING OR SCULPTURE, RULED BY LAWS OF ITS OWN. FROM CHISEL TO DRY-POINT, FROM ETCHING TO AQUATINT, FROM SOFT VARNISH TO CARVING, THE ARTIST EXPERIMENTED EXHAUSTIVELY, INVENTING VARIATIONS AND TECHNIQUES WHICH HE OFTEN COMBINED, IN A PROCESS THAT WENT FROM THE FIGURATIVE ART OF THE THIRTIES TO PURE ABSTRACTION.

MARIA LLUÏSA BORRÀS ART CRITIC

A print can have all the beauty and dignity of a good painting," wrote Joan Miró, and indeed, printmaking was an important aspect of his art and made up a large part of his production, as a technique governed by laws of its own, just like painting and sculpture. When he first took up printmaking, Miró was thirty-seven years old and had already made a name for himself as a painter with a language very

much his own. It was like starting from scratch and travelling a long road from engraving at the service of figurative art to that which explores the few but sufficient formal resources, to capture the renovatory ideas of the art of this century. From chisel to dry-point, from etching to aquatint, from soft varnish to carving, the artist experimented exhaustively, at the same time inventing variations and techniques which he often

combined, in a process that went from the figurative art of the thirties to pure abstraction; from the etching *Dafnis i Cloe* (1933), with its painstaking technique, to the resounding explosion of 1963, when he produced aquatints like *Lluna i vent*, *Fons marí* and *L'ocell del paradís*, colour lithographs of great energy and power he called *Dansa* (barbarous, nuptial fire-dancing), or else combinations of etching and aquatint in



AUTORETRAT, 1938

such remarkable pieces as *La cabellera de Berenice* or *L'ocell del foc*. (In 1928, Miró had made eight “pochoirs”, or stencils, to illustrate a story by Lise Hirst, *Il était une petite pie*. Six years later, in 1934, he returned to the “pochoir” procedure for the special number of the magazine *D'ací i d'allà*, and again in the poster *Aidez l'Espagne*.

Miró's graphics speak as eloquently as any of his work of his constant, bitter struggle against the facile. His mastery of the technique, rather than sinking into routine, opened new roads to creation for him, as we can see in this long period of thirty years marked throughout by the constant search for methods and processes that would make it possible to work faster while at the same time satisfying his wish for spontaneity and freshness.

Of Miró's constant searching we have ample evidence in a letter he wrote in 1968 to the excellent master engraver Henri Goetz, the inventor of the car-

borundum technique: “I have been spending a few days with Dutrou in Saint Paul, and we experimented with the new process you showed him. The results are exciting and very beautiful. The artist can express himself more richly and freely, achieving a beautiful texture and a stronger line. If you have no objection, I would like to make use of your procedure”.

Some months later he wrote again: “These days I have been working with Dutrou in Saint Paul and I realise more and more the richness and the new horizons your process brings to engraving. Never before had materials of such power been obtained. I can express myself with a single outpouring of my spirit, without any hindrance and without being obstructed or slowed down by an outworn technique with which I risk deforming the free expression, the purity and freshness of the final result”.

The work of the skilled engraver and stamper, which are fundamental to

printmaking, became for Joan Miró an excellent source of human contact. He always kept himself to a limited group of trusted artisans with whom he worked in an air of profound friendship, first in Paris, in Louis Marcoussis's workshop, and also for many years in the charismatic Lacourière workshop. Later on, with Hayter, in New York, he reached the height of technical perfection. After 1948, when Aimée Maeght, his dealer, became his main publisher, Miró produced a large quantity of graphic work: lithographs in Paris, in the Murlot Frères workshop, and after 1964 in the Adrien Maeght workshop with Robert Dutrou and René Le Moigne. In Barcelona, he worked first with Enric Tormo (*Barcelona* series), and after 1968 with Jaume Soto of the Polígrafa workshops. During the seventies he also worked with José Torralba and Joan Barbarà.

One aspect that should not be forgotten is printmaking's quality as a multiple



GRAN PERSONATGE NEGRE, 1938



L'ANTITÈTE DE TZARA, 1947

work, the possibility it gives the artist to obtain various originals from a single plate, something which makes it accessible to a larger number of people (it has even been called, not without a certain measure of demagoguery, “the democratic art”). Joan Miró was also well aware of this, and once said to Goetz, “from the social and human point of view, the print—even if produced in a limited edition—can reach further than a painting, which will always be religiously guarded in the museum”.

The artist was initiated to the world of printmaking thanks to the poets, since it was Tristan Tzara who introduced him to Louis Marcoussis when he suggested to him that he illustrate his poem “L’arbre des voyageurs”. It was 1930 and Miró made three prints in the Dada spirit, using the lithographic technique for the first time. These were also the years of the Rue Blomet, when the workshop of his neighbour, Masson, was port of call for Antonin Artaud, Paul Eluard, Max Jacob, Michel Leiris, Georges Limbour, André Malraux and, in general, all the Surrealists.

Soon afterwards, he made his first etchings for Georges Hugnet’s poem, “Enfances”, at Marcoussis’s workshop. In 1933, commissioned by Yvon Zervos, editor of *Cahiers d’Art*, he made the etching *Dafnis i Cloe*, mentioned earlier. Miró devoted himself fully to printmaking. Péret’s *Au paradis des fan-*

tômes also dates from 1933, as do Alice Paalen’s *Sablier couché* and *Casse-nuit* and he collaborated in the album, titled by Paul Eluard, *Solidarité*, a protest against the Fascist powers in which Kandinsky, Hayter, Masson, Picasso and Tanguy also joined.

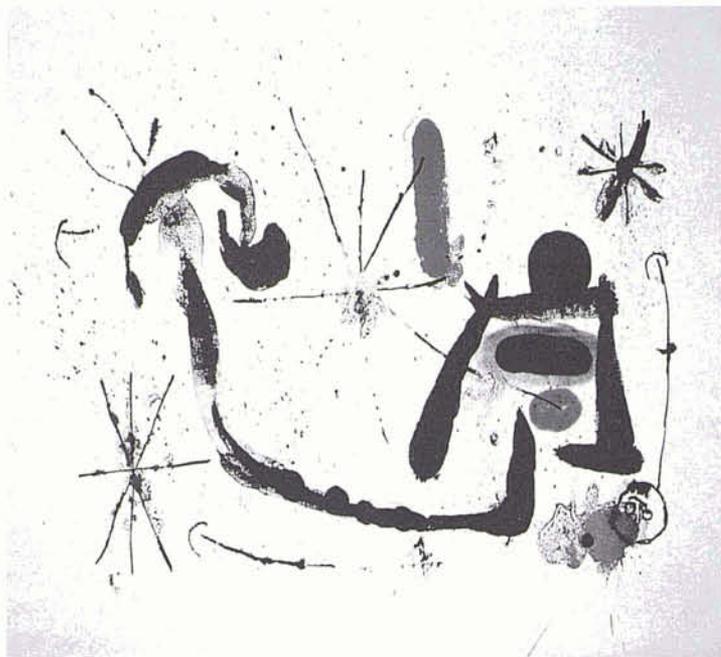
By the end of the thirties he had earned a name for himself as one of the most important of the poets’ collaborators, since rather than simply illustrate a given poem, what he did was to create the atmosphere, surreal and full of myths, revealing deep-seated impulses. In short, during these years Miró formulated a poetry of his own.

The period from 1937 to 1938 was to be enormously productive, as if printmaking were the ideal medium to express an atmosphere of anguish, of terror—the panic of war—with the deformation of bodies and objects; but he also did this in the painting *Natura morta del sabatot*. To create this atmosphere he used the dry-point (*El desvetllament del gegant*, *La geganta* or else the beautiful *Sèrie negra i vermella*). 1938 is the year of *L’autoretrat*, the last work he did at the workshop of Marcoussis, who died soon afterwards. Miró covered, or rather transformed his features in a sort of network of flames and stars, of birds and sexual organs, of suns and moons, in a process of disintegration of his face, and also, perhaps, as a kind of premonition of his later cons-

tellations. Various trials and versions of this self-portrait have survived on all sorts of paper as well as on parchment and in one case even on canvas. On signing it he wrote the name of Marcoussis next to his own, in recognition of his friend’s teaching and perfect collaboration.

Black appears in all its intensity and solidity in the series *Barcelona* and drives Joan Miró to explore in depth in other lithographs the qualities of black as a colour. At Mourlot Frères he produced the striking *Gran personatge negre* and the *Personatge sobre fons negre*. Afterwards he continued to work with black in the series of etchings he did with Lacourière, in which he looks for the effects of black obtainable through “morsure directe”. From the sixties, we have yet another testimony of his interest in black, the supreme colour, in his use of the carborundum process which Henri Goetz had introduced him to.

After World War II, in 1947, when he was in the United States to work on a ceramic mural for a Cincinatti hotel, he met up with Stanley William Hayter again, in New York, and immediately started working in his “Taller 17” in Harlem, where he experimented with textures using different kinds of soft varnishes, and with colour engraving using more than one plate, with which he achieved etchings of extreme techni-



DANSA NUPCIAL, 1963

cal complexity. The backgrounds are hazy and carefully worked so as to give emphasis to the figures that are represented. He worked steadily at the illustrations for Tristan Tzara's "Antitête"; for which, in his search for relief effects, he made use of bits of copper arranged on the plate.

He returned to Paris in 1948, and while preparing his exhibition at the Maeght gallery, introduced by Tristan Tzara, and working at the Mourlot Frères atelier, he discovered the colour lithography process which was to be his favourite technique during the forties, the lithographic pencil becoming almost as useful to him as the paintbrush. During 1952 and 1953, Miró worked a great deal with the "morsure directe" process in a series of etchings printed at the Lacourière workshop in eight states in black, and in other, colour states using a single plate. Miró said he liked the thick dark contours of the edges obtained with the "morsure directe" process.

Those of us who knew Joan Miró well knew that he took notes in a little notebook which he always carried in his top jacket pocket, though he avoided drawing in it unless he was quite alone. In it he recorded any form that came into his mind. Afterwards, in the workshop, he would choose one and think about it, using any piece of paper that came to hand to quickly draw endless sketches

based on that first idea. Eventually it would become a completed composition which he would transfer to a large piece of paper so as not to forget it. But when the moment came to attack the copper plate with the acid, he never needed to refer to anything, although he liked to have the sketches close at hand "so as not to lose contact".

While all this shows that he brought his ideas to fruition very gradually, at the crucial moment when he came face to face with the plate or the stone the lines were free and spontaneous, unplanned and automatic. Even though he had followed a deliberate and perhaps lengthy plan, when the moment came he would take a deep breath and say, "Let's go". From then on everything seemed to be driven by a force within him or by chance.

"No thing is lowly, nor any hour cruel", wrote Salvat Papasseit soon after he had asked Miró (who was only a year older than him) for an illustration for the cover of his magazine *Arc Voltaic* (*Arc Voltaic*, No. 1, Barcelona, February 1918). Years later, as if echoing the words of the poet, the painter said, "Everywhere there is sunlight, a blade of grass, the spirals of the dragonfly".

Miró always enjoyed his memories of junk-shops and the surprising forms of the rejected material he found as he went round Paris with Louis Marcous-

sis in search of old copper plates. During the forties, he applied his interest in non-artistic materials directly to painting so as to achieve greater expressiveness and at the same time emphasize the expressive qualities of the *objet trouvé*. As he himself admitted, "I am like a beggar. When I walk I always look at the ground to see what I can find". In Palma, every morning, he would walk barefoot along the water's edge, stooping to pick up anything lying on the sand that might attract his attention; when he got back to the workshop he would place the objects the waves had returned to the shore somewhere where he could look at them all day.

Although Joan Miró avoided intellectual discussions, and in spite of being reluctant to quote from his reading, I once heard him mention that John of the Cross had said that to obtain everything, it was necessary to have nothing: an idea that comes close to Salvat Papasseit's poem. The Japanese poet Takiguchi, a very close friend of Miró's, introduced him to the Zen philosophy which so fascinated him ever since the days at the Rue Blomet. After his visit to Japan in 1966, there is a palpable change in his work, which, leading on from the search for emptiness of 1925, incorporated large spaces which stress the power of the sign that makes poetry out of nothing. ■