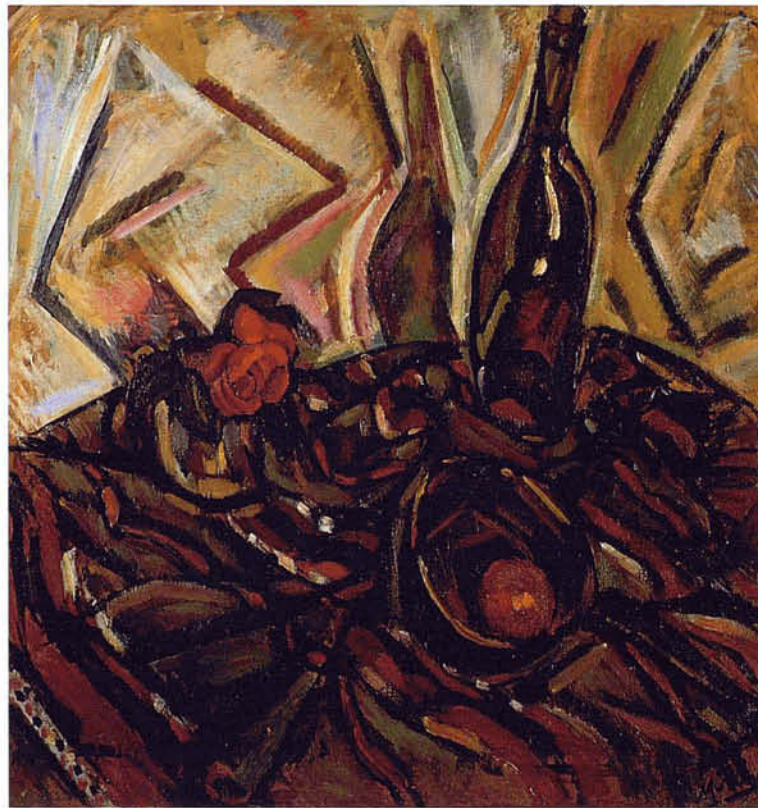


# JOAN MIRÓ AND THE ADVENTURE OF MODERN ART

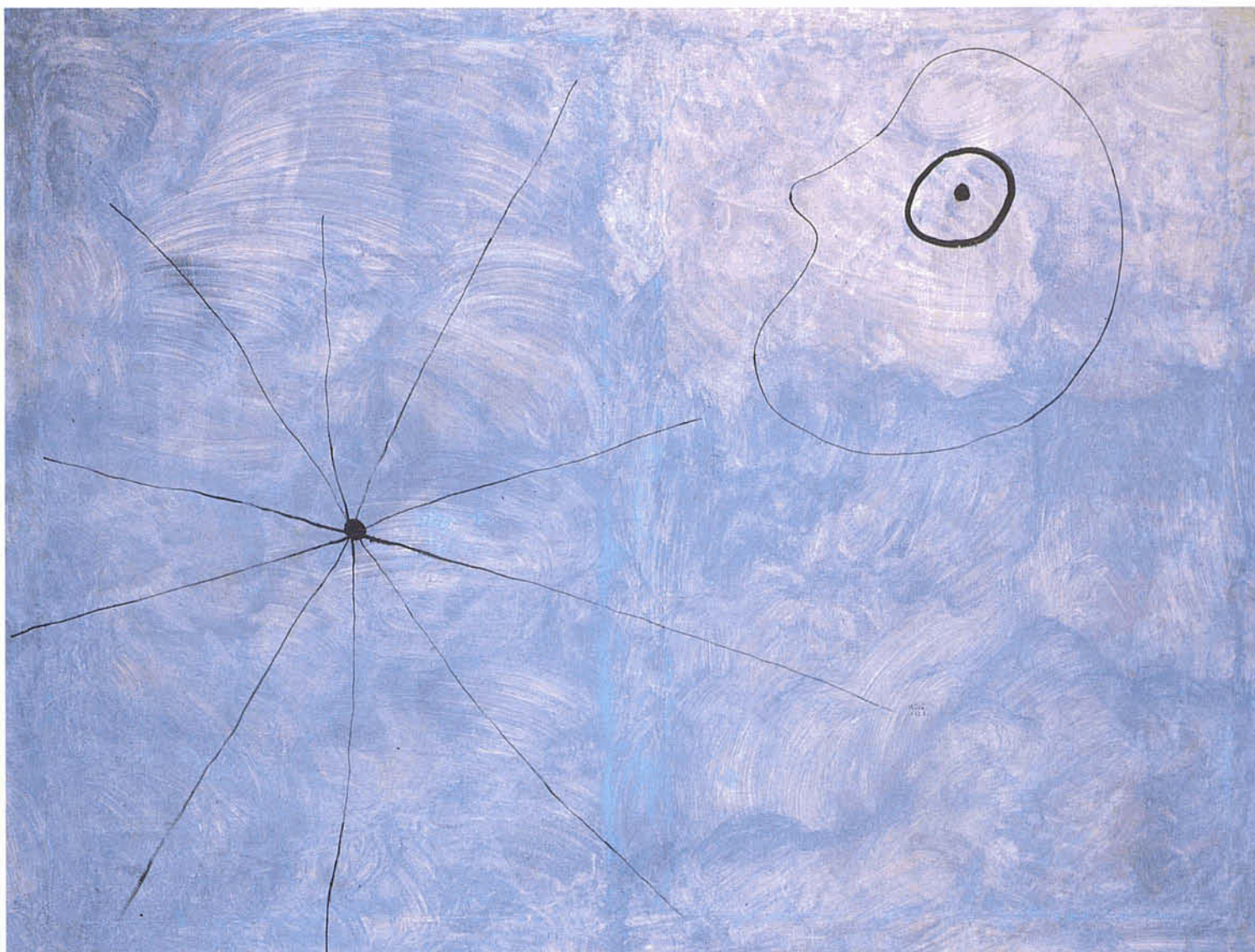


LA ROSE, 1916.

THE EXHIBITION “MIRÓ-DALMAU-GASCH. L’AVENTURA PER L’ART MODERN”, WHICH IS ON AT THE SANTA MÒNICA ART CENTRE DURING THE CELEBRATION OF THE JOAN MIRÓ CENTENARY, ATTEMPTS AN ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONS AND COMMITMENTS THAT EXISTED BETWEEN THESE THREE WARRIORS OF MODERN ART, THREE FIGURES WHO PUT CATALONIA AMONGST THE RANKS OF THE INTERNATIONAL AVANT-GARDE.

PILAR PARCERISAS ART CRITIC





PEINTURE, TÊTE ARAIGNÉE SUR FOND BLEU, 1925

**I**n an article published in the *Gazeta de les Arts* in 1925 the art critic Sebastià Gasch declared that “the work of Joan Miró represented the most original and most important undertaking since Picasso in the arena of modern painting”. With this categorical, resounding statement, Gasch committed himself in public to the eternal defence of the work of Joan Miró, an artist with whom he shared a deep friendship for many decades. If Miró is the first modern painter after Picasso’s classicism, Gasch also, in the context of Catalonia and Spain, is the

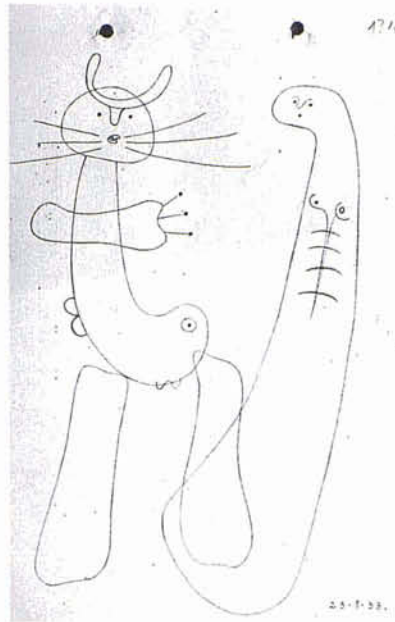
first art critic with a commitment to the avant-garde and modern art. But no mention of the part played by Barcelona and Catalonia in avant-garde circles would be complete unless it included the most emblematic figure of the spirit of the avant-garde, the gallery owner Josep Dalmau.

Now, an exhibition with the title “Miró-Dalmau-Gasch. L’aventura per l’art modern, 1918-1937”, curated by Joan Miquet i Batllori, Jaume Vidal i Oliveras and Pilar Parcerisas and presented at the Santa Mònica Art Centre during the celebration of the Joan Miró cente-

nary, attempts an analysis of the relations and commitments that existed between these three warriors of modern art: an artist, a critic and a gallery owner, three figures who, even if from a peripheral or fringe position, put Catalonia amongst the ranks of the international avant-garde.

Josép Dalmau (1867-1937), painter, restorer, antiquarian, gallery owner and promoter of the arts, was a visionary who emerged from the mists of symbolism to establish his utopia in the clear light of the avant-garde break with the past. It was in his gallery in the Carrer





MINOTAURE, SÉRIES, 1933

Portaferriassa in Barcelona, premisses he ran from 1911 to 1923, that he displayed his progressive leanings through international avant-garde exhibitions of which one of the most important was the exhibition of Cubist art in 1912, with such outstanding works as Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase", a canvas exhibited in Barcelona without pain or glory and which a year later was to immortalize Marcel Duchamp in the "Armory Show" exhibition in New York. Dalmau was also the promoter of the exhibition "Art francès d'avant-garda" in 1920 and other one-man shows by modern artists –Torres-García, Albert Gleizes, Helena Grunhoff, Serge Charchoune, Otto Weber, Van Dongen, Salvador Dalí and Francis Picabia, for example; the last of these at a famous exhibition presented by André Breton in 1922. Picabia had already made his presence felt in Barcelona before this when, taking refuge in the Catalan capital from the roar of the cannon of World War I, he launched the first four numbers of the magazine *391* in Barcelona, in the circles of which Dalmau was the centre. It is thanks to this that Barcelona, even if only peripherally and often blurred by mistakes, has figured in international accounts of "Dada".

But Dalmau's galleries also exhibited young artists in Catalonia who were trying to make a break with tradition and with the realism imposed by *Noucentisme*. Between 1916 and 1918 he exhibited one by one a new generation

who were fighting for modern art, something that forged a solid friendship between them and generated correspondence of great interest. These artists were J.F. Ràfols, E.C. Ricart, R. Sala and Joan Miró. For these and other artists, Josep Dalmau was more than just a gallery owner. The letters they wrote to one another during this period reveal that Dalmau advised them on painting techniques, on the use of materials, on the perdurability of pictorial work –one of Joan Miró's greatest concerns. We have to remember that Josep Dalmau had a reputation as a good restorer and that he made a name for himself with the recomposition of Marià Fortuny's painting *La batalla de Tetuán*. But Dalmau also bought the occasional painting from them, helped them find studios, and, because he was one of the few to have travelled to Paris, London, Antwerp and other European cities, had valuable contacts all over the continent. He was an open window on the world. His exhibitions at the Galeries Dalmau were always anxiously awaited by this group of young people.

In 1918 Dalmau put on the first one-man show by Joan Miró, made up of almost two hundred works, of which no more than about sixty were paintings and the rest drawings. These works reveal Miró's Catalan roots, his attachment to the red soil of Mont-roig, Ciurana, Prades, landscapes painted with a devotion for Cézanne and Fauvism, but that set out, as we have seen, to structure colour according to the dictates of a

special sensibility and eye to reflect reality. "Everything is contained in reality", says Miró to his friend Ricart in a letter of 1919. During this period, Miró looked on the landscape and all it contained as a great spectacle, "the theatre of nature".

His friend E.C. Ricart, for his part, speaks in his unpublished memoirs of Joan Miró's particular sensibility and his passion for Cézanne: "Miró found it very difficult to capture the exact form of objects and often had to make use of his sense of touch rather than sight. He couldn't always see at once whether the edge of that table was sharp or the handle on that pitcher was rounded, and he had to get up close to it and even touch it. His colour vision was no more accurate. His landscapes of Ciurana and Mont-roig during the Galinian period, with the colours of the sky against the trees and of the trees against the sky, are evidence enough of this (...). The influence of Cézanne and his great passion made him observe the spectacle of nature in a new way, and Miró was enraptured by the shape of things to the point of analysing the tiniest details and capturing them in a highly reasoned and decorative fashion. If he had to paint a vine, for example, he didn't just interpret what we see from above ground, but painted the roots and all." At the 1918 show at Dalmau's gallery –of which some of the paintings are included in the exhibition "Miró-Dalmau-Gasch"– not one of Joan Miró's works was sold. The exhibition was a





«AIDEZ L'ESPAGNE» POSTER, 1937

controversial one and went down badly with the public. Sebastià Gasch remembers it in later articles: “some of the drawings which Joan Miró exhibited in 1918 at the Galeries Dalmau were torn up without pity. And someone took on himself the burdensome task of not moving from the exhibition during the whole day so as to inform visitors that the whole thing was the work of a madman”. And in another article: “Everybody remembers the vicious jokes, the heartless attacks and the cruel treatment meted out to Joan Miró, who was considered quite simply a fool (...). Until the inevitable happened. Miró decided to emigrate. And he moved to Paris. And the heartless attacks which had never ceased their relentless persecution of him automatically became unconditional praise” (*La Publicitat*, 1932).

After this exhibition, Miró had a single obsession: Paris, where he moved in March 1920 and was made welcome by the surrealist circles with whom, while not joining them, he at least kept up relations as a travelling companion. Gasch, reflecting on this, once said, “The surrealists have appropriated our friend. In spite of having categorically refused to sign any group’s manifesto, he felt quite at home in such neighbourhoods for a certain time (...). If Miró paints as he paints, if Miró is in agreement with some of the directives of surrealism, it is not because he has consented to the dictates of a passing fashion. It is because his temperament advises him to do so. Miró has unwittingly

found himself on the path followed by the surrealists” (*La Veu de Catalunya*, 1928).

In Paris, Miró sought for contact with Picasso and at the same time took advantage of the contacts afforded him by the dealer Josep Dalmau –who managed to arrange an exhibition for him at the Galerie La Licorne in Paris in 1921, for which he paid the distinguished critic Maurice Raynal to write an introduction, possibly the first attempt at exporting Catalan painting abroad. The exhibition was not the success that was hoped for, either with the public or with the collectors, and was to mark the end of professional dealings between Joan Miró and Josep Dalmau. Miró’s success in Paris came through Pierre Loeb and his galleries, a far more powerful dealer who conveniently harvested the efforts Dalmau had made to promote Miró.

While Joan Miró’s relations with Josep Dalmau became ever more remote, his friendship with Sebastià Gasch grew stronger. Gasch was to become an ambassador for Miró’s painting in Catalonia, which did not see another individual exhibition by the artist until 1949, by which time he was the object of homage. Through his articles in the specialist magazines of the period, Gasch continued to defend Joan Miró as a landmark in modern art, in spite of the years of the Franco regime, bracketing him together with Picasso and Dalí (with Dalí he later also established a special relationship).

Gasch, then, in different writings, was

the first person to draw the connection between the central figures of the avant-garde in Catalonia. Dalmau remained the true introducer and Picasso, Miró and Dalí the gates to the future: “painting, though, is bound to disappear, because it is unable to satisfy the spiritual needs of our age (...). Equidistant between painting and the activities mentioned, though, there are some painters, very few: the most gifted, the most intense and the purest. Farsighted painters who have become aware of the tragic cul-de-sac in which painting is painfully evolving... There are three of these painters, Picasso, Miró, Dalí. The achievements of these painters, which can no longer be described as pictorial, are the weapon with which painting will be murdered, the springboard which will allow a new generation to make the leap from the pictorial age to the future age, which will allow younger people, perhaps not even born, to devote themselves fully to activities more in keeping with our age”. (*L’Amic de les Arts*, No. 30, 1928).

There is no doubt that Joan Miró, Josep Dalmau and Sebastià Gasch were united in their passion for the present, their vision of the future, the risk of what is new, their radical attitude, the spirit of modernity, the conscience of a new age, their untiring work, their genius and recklessness, the dream of changing the world and transforming the smugness of Catalan society, immersed in a provincialism that has lasted decades. ■