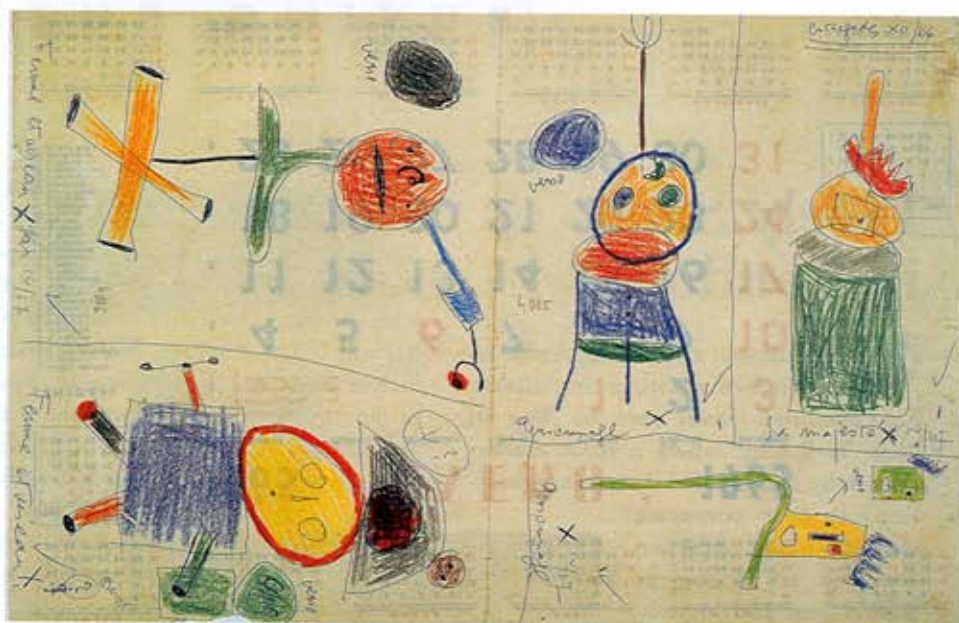


REVIEW

“Monsters” in America

Deconstructing
the soul of Miró’s
painted sculpture.

By Patti Verbanas



Joan Miró's sketches on a calendar sheet (above) for "Woman and Bird," "Figure," "His Majesty," "Figure" and a secondary "Woman and Bird," 1966-67. "Caress of a Bird" (below, left), 1967, painted bronze. "Woman and Bird" (below, right), 1971, painted bronze.

Young Joan Miró first learned how to truly see when he was blind. While studying in Barcelona under Francesc Galí, he amazed his teacher with his gift for color, but struggled when confronted with rendering the form of a model or still life. Noting that Miró's talent was bound by the limits of his physical vision, Galí blindfolded his pupil and presented him with objects, encouraging him to feel their contours, then draw what he "saw." Miró relied on this gift of touch, of transcendent vision, throughout his career, and it is especially evident in the product of his final years—the painted bronze and resin sculptures, which he affectionately called his "monsters."

"The Shape of Color: Joan Miró's Painted Sculpture" brings the artist's whimsical "monsters" to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., from September 21 to January 6, and analyzes the creative process behind these exotic

forms crafted in the 1960s and early '70s. While Miró's use of the term "monster" for this series of sculpture is fairly literal, these fanciful beings are not the haunted, tortured creatures that inhabit his "savage paintings" of the mid-1930s. "Miró intended his sculpture to have a figurative reference; they are meant to be companionable as well as truly monstrous," says Laura Coyle, the Corcoran's curator of European art who, along with William Jeffett, curator of exhibitions at the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, organized the exhibition. "These works are the children of his late age, and they are more optimistic than his earlier 'monsters.'"

When he created the painted sculptures, the world wars were more distant; he was happy living in Palma de Mallorca [Spain], was financially comfortable and very artistically productive."

This isn't the first time Miró's "monsters" have visited American soil. While they were well-received when they first were exhibited in the 1970s, since then they have been for the most part ignored by curators and art writers;

even today, literature on this aspect of Miró's varied oeuvre remains scant. In all, Miró created about 50 painted bronze and resin pieces. A selection of painted bronzes ended up in the Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona and in the Fondation Maeght in St. Paul de Vence, France, but the rest of these bronzes and the painted resin sculptures went into private collections. While the works enjoy some recognition in Europe, they are relatively unknown to U.S. museum-goers—a fact that makes "The Shape of Color" that much more important. However, what makes this show notable is also what presented the biggest challenge for Coyle and Jeffett, who, unable to locate a single painted bronze or resin sculpture in an American museum collection, were literally forced to pound the



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streets, scouring auction records, visiting galleries and using word-of-mouth to facilitate their search for Miró's missing "monsters." "Since many of the painted sculptures were purchased by private collectors and were made in very limited or even unique editions, they just kind of disappeared," Coyle explains.

Three years of detective work turned up examples of nearly all of the medium-to large-scale painted bronze and resin works. The exhibition marries these pieces to about 100 works on paper, including seldom-exhibited preparatory sketches directly related to the sculptures. It is the most complete presentation ever of Miró's painted sculpture, and the first time a generous selection of these works has been exhibited side-by-side with related drawings, sketchbooks and photographs. The vast majority of these rarely exhibited works on paper have never before been seen in the States.

The real treat in this exhibition is the juxtaposition of these drawings to the sculpture, which renders a kind of road map to Miró's creative process. Not that he necessarily used one. He spent years, even decades, mulling over his sketches before piecing together the final sculpture. At other times, there was no pre-planned design; the objects themselves determined the final piece. Wandering trance-like through the Spanish countryside of his beloved Mont-roig and Palma as well as the streets of Barcelona and Paris, Miró gathered natural and man-made objects that inspired him. Today, visitors to his sun-drenched studio and home just outside Palma still can see a hodge-podge of objects that so intrigued the artist: a dried seahorse, rocks, frog and mouse skeletons, curious roots, a parade of vividly colored Mallorcan puppets, among other sundries.



Miró painting an edition of "Caress of a Bird" (above), around 1968. "Girl Escaping" (below), 1968, painted bronze.



The resulting spirited, witty and sometimes in-your-face sexual creatures that people "The Shape of Color" tempt viewers to loosen up and, yes, even have a little fun. It is nearly impossible to confront one of Miró's painted sculptures without deconstructing the parts from the sum—or even indulging in a comparison to figures from past works. For example, a common motif throughout Miró's oeuvre is sizeable feet, which represent a person's connection to the earth and serve as a conduit for the earth's energy into the human soul. Contrast this concept to Miró's flirtatious sculpture "Girl Escaping," 1968. In this prominent exhibition piece, the young girl's curvaceous legs are painted a passionate red and her stiletto heel-encased feet are small, with only one tip of one toe touching the ground. "The legs further introduce the very 1960's idea of sex appeal, again offered as an antidote to social and moral repression," Jeffett explains. Indeed, he points out, a group

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—Curator Laura Coyle



of five drawings executed from November 25, 1964 to February 1, 1965 reveals that Miró actually began this sculpture with the idea of the legs. The thought that the deviation from his motif might have been intentional in this sculpture leads one to wonder if “Girl Escaping” does not derive her energy from her contact with the earth as do other subjects in Miró’s older works. Perhaps, her energy comes directly from another, more recently liberated source—her sexuality.

Compositions such as “Girl Escaping” illustrate the humor and double entendre embodied in Miró’s painted sculpture; the artist’s play with words and shapes continues to make these works provocative today. “Everyone can appreciate these sculptures on a number of different levels,” Coyle explains. “Miró’s magic works on all viewers who open their minds to them.” □

“The Shape of Color: Joan Miró’s Painted Sculpture” will be at the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, February 1 to May 1, 2005.



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