

Art OF OUR TIME

SELECTIONS FROM THE | ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART
| WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Patricia McDonnell AND *Emily Stamey*

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

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AND *Robert Silberman*

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Front cover: Joan Miró, *Personnages Oiseaux* (Bird People), 1977–78
(cat. no. 16)

Back cover: Tom Otterness, *Millipede*, 2008 (cat. no. 45)



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JOAN MIRÓ WAS A PIONEERING TWENTIETH-CENTURY SURREALIST WHOSE EXPERIMENTS WITH CHANCE AND THE UNCONSCIOUS YIELDED NEW EXPRESSIVE POSSIBILITIES AND PICTORIAL VOCABULARIES. Born in Barcelona, he spent most of his adulthood in France, where he was a leading figure in the School of Paris.

Miró drew *Signes et Symboles* in Paris, two years after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. He had fled there to escape the hostilities and would stay until 1940. Even before the war, he had been giving artistic vent to his apprehension about the rise of political turbulence across Europe. Later, he would call this his “savage period.” Tragic and horrific subject matter, vigorous paint handling, and extreme formal distortion characterized many of his works from 1934 through the late 1930s, a period of unease and creative difficulty for the artist. As the poet and art critic Jacques Dupin put it, “A poetic universe had suddenly been struck with terror.”¹ Both Miró and his countryman Pablo Picasso responded to the atrocities being carried out in their native Spain, and each produced a major canvas – *The Reaper* and *Guernica*, respectively – for exhibition at the Spanish pavilion of the Paris Exposition Universelle in July 1937, to protest the intensive air attack on the defenseless Basque town of Guernica that April.

Signes et Symboles is a product of this disturbing moment in world history and in the artist’s life. Fecundity, connection with the heavens, the exhilaration of flight, life’s natural cycles – none of these previous, optimistic themes in Miró’s work occupies him here. Instead, a black ground contrasts with an anxious white line. A smudged umber gouache frames hieroglyphic forms that vaguely suggest figures on a stage set. The drawing appears spontaneous and erratic: little is settled, and much is left in nervous agitation. Miró readily recognized that current events intrude on even the most apolitical artists. “The outer world,” he wrote in 1939, “always has an influence on the painter. [T]hat goes without saying. If the interplay of lines and colors does not expose the inner drama of the creator, then it is nothing more than bourgeois entertainment.”² Holed up in a cramped Paris studio, watching his homeland fall prey to fascist aggression, he poured his anxieties into his art. Miró had been among the first artists to tap the psyche directly as a creative resource. Now, that practice yielded art reflecting immense inner turmoil.

15 *Signes et Symboles* (Signs and Symbols)

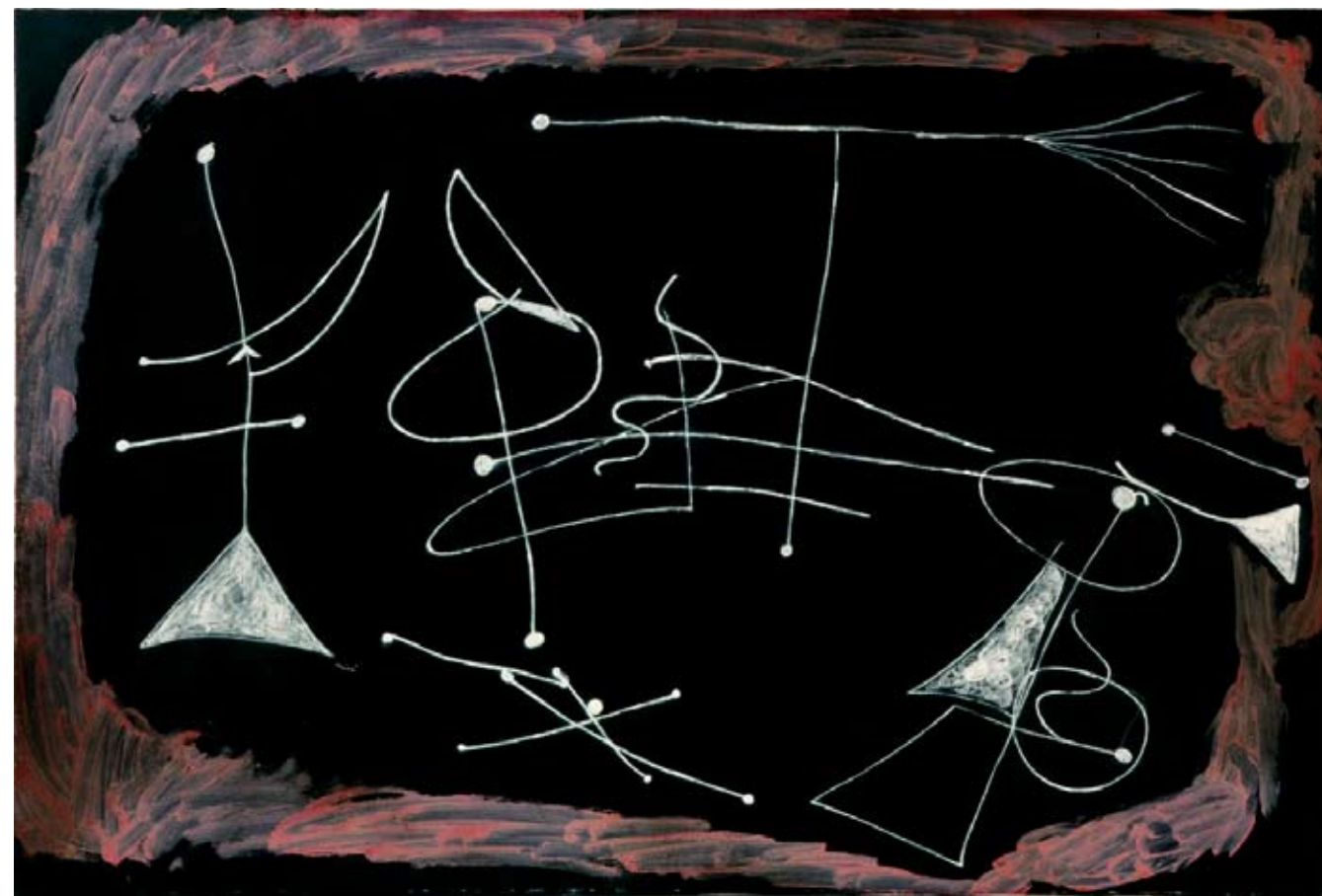
1938

Gouache and chalk on paper, 27 1/2 x 40 3/4 in.
Gift of Cornell Jaray, 1976.0018

Patricia McDonnell

1. Jacques Dupin, “Miró’s Woman in Revolt, 1938,” in *Joan Miró: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in association with Yale University Press, 1987), 41.

2. Joan Miró, *Cahiers d’art* 14 (April–May 1939), quoted in Margit Rowell, ed., *Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), 166.



PERSONNAGES OISEAUX, JOAN MIRÓ'S MOSAIC MURAL ON THE SOUTHERN-EXTERIOR WALL OF THE MCKNIGHT ART CENTER'S EASTERN SECTION, IS A VITAL SYMBOL FOR THE ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART, WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY (WSU), AND THE CITY OF WICHITA. A native of Barcelona who was mainly based in Paris, Miró was a key surrealist in the period between the world wars. His work enjoyed international success.

In 1923 Miró embraced the surrealist principle of automatism – that is, allowing the unconscious, rather than logic and reason, to guide the creation of a work. As he wrote a year later, “My latest canvases I conceived as if thunderstruck, totally disengaged from the external world.”¹ Like other surrealists, Miró frequently let dreams suggest his subject and how to represent it.

Personnages Oiseaux contains core ingredients of Miró's art. Colorful elements float freely across an expansive field. Perspective and modeling are absent, and the linear patterning suggests a sprightly calligraphy. According to the title, the abstracted figures are fantastical bird people. Miró regularly depicted birds, stars, and people to reflect his profound faith in humanity. The brilliant colors and fanciful creatures in the Ulrich mural embody the joyous celebration of life that is typical of his mature work.

Although best known as a painter, Miró was also an enthusiastic experimenter. “I have always been interested in media other than paint,” he wrote in 1960.² The Ulrich commission gave him his first opportunity to design a major work that would be executed chiefly in glass. Seventeen years before creating *Personnages Oiseaux*, he painted a large-scale canvas for Harvard University's Harkness Commons that was reproduced as a ceramic mural (1960–61). His other significant ceramic murals include those at UNESCO headquarters in Paris (1956), the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (1963–67), the Barcelona airport (1970), and the world's fair in Osaka, Japan (1970). For the Wichita project, he asked that Ateliers Loire in Chartres, France, a specialized decorative-stained-glass manufacturer, fabricate his design. An estimated one million pieces of glass and marble comprise the twenty-eight-by-fifty-two-foot expanse. *Personnages Oiseaux* is the only mural Miró made in this medium, although he later designed stained-glass windows for the Maeght and Cziffra art foundations in France.

The museum's founding director, Martin H. Bush, conceived and directed the commission. Miró generously donated his design. wsu students and private donors funded production. The mural is among the largest of numerous public-art commissions Miró undertook late in his career. “Doing work for public places is one of my passions,” he said in 1960. “The first mural I did was commissioned by an American university [Harvard]. I was fascinated by the idea because it would put me in touch with those students who would pass the mural every day.”³ Some six hundred thousand people annually traverse the wsu campus, where, fulfilling the artist's hope, they are able to encounter and marvel at this masterpiece.

16 *Personnages Oiseaux* (Bird People)

1977–78

Venetian glass and marble, 316 x 625 in.
Museum Commission with funds from Dr. and Mrs. Clark D. Ahlberg, Mr. and Mrs. Floyd T. Amsden, Mr. and Mrs. A. Dwight Button, Mr. and Mrs. Robert E. Buck, Dr. Martin H. Bush, Vincent D'Angelo, Fourth National Bank and Trust Company, Mr. and Mrs. Francis Jabara, William T. Kemper, Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Kiskadden, Victor Murdock Foundation, Price R. and Flora Reid Foundation, Dr. and Mrs. James J. Rhatigan, Mr. and Mrs. Earl O. Robinson, Edwin A. Ulrich, Mrs. K. T. Wiedemann, and the Student Government Association, 1978.0009

Patricia McDonnell

1. Miró to Michel Leiris, August 10, 1924, quoted in Agnes de la Beaumelle, ed., *Joan Miró, 1917–1934* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2004), 148.

2. Margit Rowell, ed., *Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), 294.

3. Ibid.





About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as *Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art* (2000), *Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s* (2002), and *The Old, Weird America* (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include *Marsden Hartley: American Modern* (1997), *On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art* (2002), and *Painting Berlin Stories* (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Book Review*. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, *Living to Tell* (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, *Bound*, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former *New York Times* photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series *American Photography: A Century of Images*.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, *On Fire: Larry Schwarm*, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.

Emily Stamey, the Ulrich Museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, is the author of *Jolan Gross-Bettelheim: The American Prints* (2001) and *The Prints of Roger Shimomura: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1968–2005* (2006). Her scholarship centers on ethnic identities and social themes in American art.

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