

Tête à Tête

Joan Miró &
Pablo Picasso

NAHMAD
PROJECTS

HELLY NAHMAD GALLERY

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It all started with a pastry. In 1920, the young Joan Miró arrived in Paris carrying an *ensaimada* from Pablo Picasso's mother in Barcelona. The Catalan capital meant everything to both of them. Miró was born there, Picasso spent his formative years there (1895–1904), and in the end, both men gave large portions of their life's work back to the city. It was an unlikely introduction to one of the great friendships in modern art, one that would last more than fifty years.

The two artists could hardly have been more different. Picasso was restless, prolific, and larger than life; Miró was quiet, precise, and regimented. Yet each seemed to bring

out something essential in the other. Picasso championed Miró to dealers and collectors; Miró kept a photograph of Picasso in every studio he ever worked in.

Their art reflects this same productive tension. Miró's works are meditative and dreamlike – floating birds, stars, and organic shapes that feel closer to poetry than painting. Picasso's span an extraordinary range, from intimate domestic interiors to bold reinterpretations of art history, always restless, always searching. What they shared was a refusal to follow the rules, and a belief that painting had no limits.

JOAN MIRÓ:

The four paintings by Miró here trace forty years of that singular vision. The 1933 *Peinture* belongs to a pivotal moment in his career. Following what Miró himself called his 'assassination of painting', a period in which he had turned away from the medium entirely, 1933 marked a dramatic return, and with it one of the most original series of works he ever made. Taking collages assembled from newspaper and magazine illustrations as his starting point, he translated their mechanical forms – propellers, plumbing, industrial parts – into large-scale oil paintings of startling organic energy. What had been a catalogue illustration became, on canvas, something alive and pulsating. The painting, owned by Alexander Calder in the 1960s, went on to be shown at Miró's Guggenheim retrospective in New York and has since been recognised as a cornerstone of the Modernist canon.

The 1953 *Peinture* shows a wiser, freer hand. By this point Miró had deliberately turned his back on the refinement and popularity his style had achieved, pushing instead towards something more raw and immediate. The same vocabulary of signs is present, the figures, the constellation-like forms that had defined his work since the 1940s, but here they are applied with a new physical directness, drips and rough brushwork left visible on the surface, the large scale used to amplify rather than contain. As the critic Jacques Dupin wrote, 'these paintings achieve a kind of improvisation that is at once grandiose and rigorous'.

By 1968, he had long since moved beyond the formal



Joan Miró in his studio with *Oiseaux en fête pour le lever du jour*, 1968

demands of Surrealism, a movement with which he was closely associated but never fully captured by. Where André Breton theorised the unconscious as something to be unlocked by method, Miró, true to himself, simply painted from instinct, with the directness of a child inventing imaginary characters. It was this unforced freedom that led Alberto Giacometti to remark that Miró 'could not put a dot on a sheet of paper without hitting square on the target'.

Le Passage de l'oiseau-migrateur, painted on 29 January 1968, a vast field of layered blue brushed with the patient, meditative attention of a fresco, is interrupted by a single white form and a line of purest black. Nothing else. It is an act of extraordinary restraint, and the more one looks, the more the painting opens. The blue is not flat but alive, shifting in tone across the whole surface. The lone form floats in it like a feather, or a wing, or a seed, never entirely naming

itself. Scholars have linked the great blue paintings Miró made at the beginning of the decade to the dream paintings of the mid-1920s, where colour first became the primary subject. Owned for many years by Hubert de Givenchy and Philippe Venet, and displayed proudly in their Paris apartment, the painting carries within its quietness an almost architectural authority.

The explosive and celebratory aspect of *Oiseaux en fête pour le lever du jour* (21 March 1968), painted nearly two months later, is in perfect contrast to Miró's earlier blue work. This is one of the most joyful paintings in this room. Against a blazing yellow ground, bold black calligraphic lines spiral and leap around a monumental green and red form, part eye, part sun, part something altogether invented. The birds of the title are not so much depicted as implied: creatures of pure gesture, animated by the thick, confident brushwork that Miró had developed after his encounter with Abstract Expressionism in New York, in 1947. Seeing the work of Jackson Pollock and his contemporaries had been, in Miró's own words, like 'a blow to the solar plexus', a liberation that freed him to paint with even greater physical immediacy. His subsequent trip to Japan deepened this further, and the flowing calligraphic lines of *Oiseaux en fête pour le lever du jour* carry the traces of both influences. Yet, the painting remains rooted in Miró's oldest obsessions: birds, women, and stars, that had been present in his work since his celebrated Constellations series of 1940.

These two works show the full breadth of Miró's late achievement: one painting all silence and depth, the other all energy and release. Both – in vibrant contrast – exemplify painting stripped to its core.

PABLO PICASSO:

Picasso once said that he painted 'the way other people write an autobiography' – each canvas a page from his diary. The four works presented in the gallery bear that out, spanning twelve years and mapping an artist in constant, restless motion. *Vauvenargues. Salle à manger (I)*, painted on 19 March 1959, is one of the most remarkable works of Picasso's late career: dark, heraldic, and quietly comic, it shows his Dalmatian, Perro, standing in the dining room of his newly acquired Château de Vauvenargues, the dog's flat spotted silhouette set against an elaborately rendered baroque sideboard in a palette of deep green, carmine, and black. The contrast between the ornate furniture and

the graphic simplicity of the dog is both funny and deeply strange. Picasso, here, mocks the grandeur of his new home as much as he celebrates it.

Le déjeuner sur l'herbe, painted between March and July 1960, belongs to the largest and most diverse series of variations Picasso ever produced after a single work. Manet's scandalous 1863 painting, a naked woman picnicking with two clothed men, had haunted Picasso since 1929, and between 1959 and 1962 he returned to it obsessively, producing dozens of paintings, drawings, and sculptures. The appeal was obvious: Manet's painting was itself an act of creative appropriation, drawing on Titian and Raphael, and it had shocked bourgeois Paris into confronting the nude anew. For an artist of Picasso's competitive nature, it was the ultimate challenge. In this version, the essential cast of Manet's composition is preserved: the female nude, the clothed companions, the lush outdoor setting, but Picasso strips away Manet's realism and takes the figures somewhere more primal. The green of the background is Manet's green, the park transposed into Picasso's own immediate, physical language.

Homme et femme nus (1965), painted in Mougins, is a later iteration that belongs to the same, sustained dialogue with Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Two figures, a man and a woman, are constructed almost in negative: their bodies left on the white canvas and defined only by the broad, dark brushwork of the background and a few defining marks – breasts, eyes, a beard. There is nothing polite about the painting. It is raw, funny, confident. Made by a man in his mid-eighties, still painting from desire.

Femme au chapeau, painted on 26 August 1971, is one of the most commanding works of Picasso's final



Édouard Manet (1832-1883), *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863

years. At nearly two metres tall, the figure pushes out at every edge of the canvas; wide-eyed, monumental, impossible to ignore. It was shown at the legendary second Avignon exhibition in 1973, installed high on the wall of the Palais des Papes, where it looked down over proceedings with what one writer called ‘the aspect of a helmeted Greek goddess’. The painting is in dialogue with Van Gogh’s work, specifically his peasant portraits and bearded self-portraits, and carries within

it Picasso’s lifelong belief that through the act of painting, artist and subject become one. The artist Julian Schnabel, who once owned the work, put it simply: ‘the painting brings the artist back to life’. Critics at the time found Picasso’s late work too raw, too unfinished. In retrospect, it looks prophetic; a painter in his nineties making work that the next generation would take decades to catch up with.

Both Miró and Picasso kept working until the end of their lives, into their eighties and nineties, with an energy that younger artists might envy. Both refused to settle. Both pushed – through different means, from different temperaments – against whatever painting was supposed to look like. That shared restlessness is perhaps what Picasso meant when he told Miró that their work had things in common, that they inhabited the same world. The works in this exhibition

make the case better than any words can.

When Picasso died in 1973, Miró responded the only way he knew how: with a painting. *Woman, Bird, Star (Homage to Pablo Picasso)*, now in the permanent collection of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, and completed on the day his friend passed, is less a farewell than a continuation – proof that some conversations never really end.



Joan Miró, *Peinture*, 1953



Pablo Picasso, *Femme au chapeau*, 26th August 1971