

Interview with André Masson, 19 March 1987, by William Jeffett and Françoise Levailant

Q. Could you describe for me your first meeting with Joan Miró?

A. When I first met Miró we were to rent a studio at the same place, 45, rue Blomet. (6) We were quite close because his studio was right next to mine and there was a hole in the wall between the studios. I lived there with my wife and daughter and I remember shouting through this hole as if there were some sort of fantastic creature behind the wall so as to amuse her.

Q. What were his artistic preferences at the time?

A. When I first met Miró, he said that he loved Van Gogh but that he did not like Cézanne. (7)

Q. Could you describe Miró's first encounter with André Breton?

A. When Breton first met Miró, through me, he told me he did not like Miró's painting because it was too childish (*'enfantine'*). However, a few days later I heard he had bought a painting by Miró. It was called *Le Chasseur*. (8) I don't know through whom Breton acquired this painting. He obviously changed his mind about Miró.

Q. How did Miró come to meet Surrealist poets such as Michel Leiris?

A. Miró met all of the poets he met through me. He was Spanish and when he arrived from Spain he knew nobody in Paris. He knew only poets in Paris. (9)

Q. What authors did Miró read at the time?

6 Masson recounts his first meeting with Miró in Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec André Masson*. 1985 (first edn 1958), p. 49, where he says he met Miró in 1922. Margit Rowell has suggested that they actually met in the spring of 1921. See Joan Miró, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, Margit Rowell (ed.), 1985, p. 24. For another account of this first meeting see André Masson, *le rebelle du surréalisme, émus*, Françoise Levailant red.), 1978, p. 76 ff.

7 Ibid., p. 87.

8 *Le Chasseur*, oil on canvas. reproduced in William Rubin, *Miró in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*, p. 23.

9 He also arrived with a letter of introduction addressed to Picasso.

190

A. When we would ask Miró what he thought of a certain writer, he would ask what *we* thought. When I asked him what he thought of Rimbaud he said, *'et toi?'*

Q. Was Miró particularly interested in Guillaume Apollinaire and Alfred Jarry; did he read the *l'enchanteur pourissant* for example? A. Miró read all the same authors as *we* did at the rue Blomet. We all read poetry and Miró liked the same authors as the others. Of course, he read Jarry and Apollinaire but I am not sure he liked these two especially. I don't know if he read *l'enchanteur pourissant*. Certainly he read Jarry's *Ubu*.

Q. You have said that at this time you were steeped in the writing of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. Did Miró read these authors as well?

A. When I first met Breton I was very interested in Nietzsche and Dostoevsky. But when *we* first met, he said to me these were the writers he detested the most. Miró as well read these authors. (10)

Q. When did Miró first use the phrase, *'Il faut assassiner la peinture'*? (11)

A. When I first moved to the rue Blomet, Miró said to me *'Il faut assassiner la peinture'*.

From the very start he said this.

Q. What was the relationship between Miró and André Breton?

A. Miró and Breton had no problems. Breton liked Miró, as did everyone. There was no conflict. *He* got on very well with Leiris, perhaps better than with Breton.

Q. Did Miró often visit the rue Fontaine and the rue du Château? (12)

A. Miró, as was the case with all of us, moved easily between the rue Blomet, the rue Fontaine and the rue du Château. It was very close then; everybody knew each other. It was like a '*communauté*'.

Q. What was Miró's interest in politics?

A. Miró was not at all interested in politics. He was equivocal and cautious, perhaps he was too cautious. At the Saint-Pol-Roux Banquet Michel Leiris shouted '*A bas la France!*', Max Ernst '*A bas l'Allemagne!*'. Breton (13) asked Miró to say something. He cried, '*A bas la Méditerranée!*'. Miró was very prudent. (14)

Q. In 1945 Miró exhibited his series of gouaches entitled *Constellations* at the Pierre Matisse Gallery. You were in New York at the time, as were many of the Surrealists; did the Surrealists visit this exhibition and *were* they interested in Miró at this time? (15)

A. He was quite admired by the group. He didn't look for an argument. He was always accepted by the Surrealists. He always avoided taking part in their discussions, which were numerous in the Surrealist circle. He was peaceful in the midst of very turbulent people.

Q. Did Miró know Georges Bataille and do you think he was interested in Bataille's ideal on eroticism?

10 For another account of this story by Masson. see Georges Charbonnier, op. cit., p. 35 ff. See also Masson and Levaillant, op. cit, p. 77.

11 See footnote 19 of the following interview with Michel Leiris.

12 The rue du Château was where Tanguy, Prévert and Malkine lived. The rue Fontaine was where André Breton lived. The Surrealist group met for discussion in the Café Cyrano. Place Blanche, adjacent to the rue Fontaine. The other two groups of writers and painters were slightly removed, at least geographically, from the focal point of Breton's circle. Masson has described the rue Blomet as a '*foyer de dissidence*'. See Charbonnier. op, cit., pp. 52-53.

13 This word was not intelligible on the tape recording used as the partial basis for this interview. At any rate, someone said to Miró, 'say something'.

14 The banquet for Saint-Pol-Roux was given at the Closerie des Lilas in July 1925. In the course of the evening a riot erupted. Sparked off by an anti-German comment by a certain Mme Rachilde. Leiris in defence of his friend Max Ernst shouted 'down with France'. Ernst followed suit with the same remark about Germany and Miró said 'down with the Mediterranean'. Leiris was almost lynched by the crowd which poured out into the street and he had to be 'escorted' away by the police who then roughed him up. For various accounts of this evening, see Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme*, 1994, pp. 78-79; José Pierre. *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives 1922-39*. 1980, pp. 41-49, pp. 53-55, pp. 389-91, and pp. 396-97. See also Leiris, op. cit., p. 192, where Leiris recalls his experience with the police.

15 Pierre Matisse Gallery (New York), 'Joan Miró. Ceramics and Constellations', 9 January-3 February 1945.

190b

A. He didn't confide that at all.

Q. In your *Entretiens* you have written that you loved jazz and Michel Leiris has written in his *L'âge d'homme* about his love of jazz as well. But André Breton detested music; did Miró like jazz and music? (16)

A. All the Surrealists loved jazz. Breton did not like music, but he accepted jazz. Miró loved what we all loved; jazz, dance.

Interview with Michel Leiris, 19 May 1987, by William Jeffett

Q. You met André Masson for the first time in 1922. Did you meet Joan Miró at the same time, at 45, rue Blomet?

L. I knew Masson and Miró together. I knew Miró from 1922. At that time they were neighbours; neither were Surrealists. When I met Miró he worked on the painting called *La Ferme*. (17) I was closer to Masson than Miró. Miró had read less widely than Masson.

Q. You visited the studio at the rue Blomet for Masson's work on your portrait in 1924. Did you write *Simulacre* (18) in the same studio at the rue Blomet?

L. *Simulacre* was written at 45, rue Blomet and Masson and I signed it together. *We* had made *Simulacre* alongside one another in order to make it clear that, as illustrator, he was not in an inferior position to the author as is usually the case.

Q. Do you remember exactly when Miró began to say that he wanted to '*assassiner la peinture*'? (19)

L. It was when he became a Surrealist that Miró said that he wanted to 'assassinate painting'.

Q. I am very interested in the objects and sculptures of Miró. I think that, for Miró, there is always a combat, a struggle, between painting and sculpture. Do you think this idea is true?

L. One cannot really speak of combat here. The idea of combat is not right. Sometimes Miró used painting, sometimes he used sculpture.

Q. Do you think it is possible to consider Miró as a Surrealist in his temperament and spirit, or not?

L. Miró, in my judgement, was not a Surrealist, for while his paintings may be very extraordinary, I consider him rather to be a 'plastician', although, historically, he might have been undoubtedly a Surrealist and was never repudiated by Breton.

Q. André Breton visited rue Blomet in 1924, and several days after he bought the painting known as *Le Chasseur*. What were the relations between Miró and André Breton? (20)

L. Breton bought *Le Chasseur* in 1924. Relations were very good between Breton and Miró, very easy.

Q. Through whom did Breton acquire the painting?

L. Perhaps it was Jacques Viot, (21) who

16 Charbonnier, op. dt., p. 60; Leiris, op. cit., p. 191.

17 *La Ferme* was Miró's first great masterpiece completed in Paris. It was painted during 1921-22 and while Miró began it in Montroig, he finished it over a period of several months in the rue Blomet studio. Through Evan Shipman, Ernest Hemingway acquired the painting and it remained in his family's possession until it was recently given to the National Gallery in Washington. See Ernest Hemingway, *The Farm*, in *Cahiers d'Art*, IX, no. 4, p. 28 which recounts the circumstances under which Hemingway bought the painting. Hemingway also purchased paintings from Masson, as did Gertrude Stein.

18 Michel Leiris, *Simulacre* (with cover and six lithographs by André Masson), 1925.

19 In the newspaper *L'Intransigant*, 7 April 1930, Tériade referred to a Surrealist artist who wanted to assassinate painting without mentioning Miró's name. In the dissident Surrealist review *Documents*, no. 7, *deuxième année*, 1930, Georges Bataille quoted Miró as wanting to 'Kill painting', (*Joan Miró; peintures récentes*, p. 399). And in an interview with Francisco Melgar entitled 'Los artistas españoles en París: Juan Miró', in *Ahora*, 24 January 1931, pp. 16-18, Miró used the phrase 'destroy everything that exists in painting'. [Reprinted and translated in Joan Miró, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, Margit Rowell (ed.), 1989.]

20 *Le Chasseur* (oil on canvas) also known as *paysage Catalan*, is now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. It was painted in Montroig, Miró's family farm in the Catalan region of Tarragona, and in Paris between the summer and winter of 1923-24. See William Rubin, *Miró in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*, p. 23.

21 See Jacques Viot, 'Un ami, Joan Miró', in *Cahiers d'Art* XI, nos 8-10, 1936, pp. 257-60. 190c

afterwards became a film-maker; he was interested in Ernst, Arp and Miró, and he acted as intermediary between Breton and Miró. Through him Miró had an exhibition at the Galerie Pierre.

Q. In 1930 two friends of Miró's tried to hang him. Afterwards Man Ray made a portrait of Miró with a piece of rope. Did you yourself know the two poets and why they tried to do this thing? (22)

L. It was Patrick Waldberg (historian and poet) who told me that story. Ernst was one of the two poets. They said to Miró, 'We are going to hang you if you do not blaspheme against God.' Miró was terrified, but did not want to utter any blasphemous remarks. The other two eventually left him alone. The whole thing was just a joke.

Q. You have written in *Documents* (23) that the painting of Miró reflects a 'veritable vide' in the positive sense of this word. What is the sense for you of this 'void' in the work of Miró and do you think that this 'void' is an important element for Miró during all his life? (24)

L. Why I am led to speak of a void, is that Miró's canvases at that time contained very few elements.

Q. At the time the review *Documents* was published (1929-30) did you see much of Miró?

L. At the time of *Documents* we saw each other from time to time.

It was through Miró that a good many of us came to know Dali. *Le sang est plus doux que le miel* (25) was the first painting by Dali that I saw. It was after Dali adopted a pro-Franco stance that they angrily parted company. Miró until then had been an active propagandist on Dali's behalf; it was he who had introduced him to Breton. Other artists in his place would have been jealous and would not have publicized a compatriot.

Q. Could you describe the relations between

22 See Man Ray, *Self-Portrait*, 1963, pp. 251-52 for a first-hand account of this escapade.

23 The review *Documents* was edited by Georges Bataille and published by Wildenstein. Its aim was to examine culture from the point of view of a materialist ethnography. It appeared in 1929-30. Michel Leiris and Carl Einstein were among the regular contributors and the works of André Masson regularly appeared in its pages as did those of Joan Miró.

24 Michel Leiris, 'Joan Miró', *Documents*, no. 5, October 1929, pp. 263-66.

25 The whereabouts of *Le sang est plus doux que le miel* is now unknown. The picture appeared in the pages of the review *Documents*, no. 4, September 1929 and was formerly in the collection of Coco Chanel. It was painted in Spain around 1927 and brought to Paris by Dali where it was among the first of his works seen by the Surrealists.

191a

Georges Bataille and Miró? Was there a friendship between Miró and Alberto Giacometti? (26)

L. There were no real relations between Miró and Bataille. Neither were there any ties between Miró and Giacometti. All that can be said is that they met.

Q. Miró loved jazz very much and dance as well. Do you think that Breton also liked jazz, or not?

L. Breton detested music.

Q. Because there are many images of sexuality in the paintings of Miró, do you think Miró

was interested in the idea of eroticism?

L. I do not think that Miró was interested in eroticism; sexuality was for him something natural, but the idea in itself did not interest him. He had the most peaceable emotional life possible. He adored Pilar and stayed with her until the end.

Q. You have written many things on Miró: you wrote *Marrons sculptés pour Miró* (27) and Miró made illustrations for your books, for example, *Bagatelles végétales*; (28) do you think Miró wanted a true collaboration between poets and himself?

L. *Fissures* (29) were poems by myself and etchings by Miró. The poems were not illustrated by Miró, they were poems commissioned by the Galerie Maeght in order to illustrate Miró's etchings. Miró came first and I did something as a result.

Q. When you wrote *Marrons sculptés pour Miró* did you have in mind the idea of his sculptures in bronze?

L. I did not have a particular idea for *Marrons sculptés*; the title seemed to suit Miró who adored the popular. He had whistles in terracotta from the Balearic Islands which represent little figures.

Q. Miró loved boxing. Do you think he also liked the bull fights?

L. Miró was someone constantly striving to exceed his own limitations. As when

26 Alberto Giacometti joined ranks with the Surrealists between 1930 and 1933. His works also appeared in the review *Documents* with an article by Michel Leiris, no. 4, September 1929.

27 Michel Leiris, *Marrons sculptés pour Joan Miró*, (with a colour lithograph on the cover by Joan Miró), 1961.

28 Michel Leiris, *Bagatelles végétales*, with six colour etchings by Joan Miró and an untitled text on Joan Miró by Michel Leiris, 1956. See 'Joan Miró' in Michel Leiris, *Brisées*, 1966, pp. 32-37.

29 Michel Leiris, *Fissures*, with 13 etchings by Joan Miró, 1969.
191b

Miró used to measure himself against the much larger Hemingway.

Miró boxed with Hemingway According to Hemingway, as long as he got the opponent, Miró was very good at theory but not at practice. (30)

Miró wasn't at all like Picasso who was a man of the South. As Miró saw it, the bulls were not his thing.

Q. Do you think when Miró wrote the *Jeux poétiques* (31) that he was influenced by your *Glossaire j'y serre mes glosses*? (32)

L. The Surrealist tradition of word play began with Marcel Duchamp. Miró there became part of this tradition. There was no particular friendship between Miró and Duchamp. Duchamp was a man of great politeness, but he was not particularly warm

Q. Could you tell me why Kahnweiler (33) did not choose Miró for the Galerie Simon and what do you think was Kahnweiler's opinion on the subject of Miró, of sculpture and of Giacometti?

L. He didn't like it, that's all. For the same reason he did not like sculpture either - he did not choose Giacometti. He just did not like this kind of painting at all.

Q. In 1947 you wrote, '*Caractère enfantin, folkloristique du merveilleux chez Miró. Rien de sophistiqué chez lui comme chez tant d'autres surréalistes.*'

When did you and Miró's other poet friends begin to refer to him as a naïve artist?

L. At the time of the rue Blomet we did not consider him a naïve artist but we had a tendency to mock him. This joke about the hanging could not have happened with anybody else. Miró really was afraid that they would hang him. His main quality lay in his freshness. He spoke

very little; he spoke a little about his projects but stopped there. He would say, '*Je voudrais faire des arlequins à tête de grenouilles!*' He was always very well turned out, with a certain elegance.

30 See André Masson, *Le rebelle du surréalisme, écrits*, Françoise Levailant (ed.), 1976, p-79.

31 Joan Miró, 'jeux poétiques', *Cahiers d'Art*, XX - XXI, 1945-46, pp. 269-72.

32 Michel Leiris, *Glossaire, j'y serre mes glosses*, with sixteen lithographs by André Masson, 1940.

33 Kahnweiler owned the Galerie Simon which represented Picasso and Masson. Kahnweiler did not have much taste for sculpture, with the notable exceptions of the work of Picasso and of Manolo. He did not represent Miró or Giacometti, who both exhibited first with the Galerie Pierre and then, after World War II, with the Galerie Maeght.

191c

1 Michel Leiris, *Simulacre*, with lithographs by André Masson, 1925.

2 *Portrait of Michel Leiris* by André Masson, 1925, ink. reproduced in William Rubin and Carolyn Lanchner, *André Masson* 1976. p. 85 and *Man Seated at a Table* (portrait of Michel Leiris). oil on canvas, 1924, reproduced in *ibid*, p. 97.

3 *Portrait of André Breton* by André Masson, 1922, ink, reproduced in *ibid*. p. 32.

4 *Portrait of Limbour* by André Masson, 1922, oil, in *ibid*. p. 85.

5 Michel Leiris, *L'âge d'homme*, 1939.

6 Masson recounts his first meeting with Miró in Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec André Masson*. 1985 (first edn 1958), p. 49, where he says he met Miró in 1922. Margit Rowell has suggested that they actually met in the spring of 1921. See Joan Miró, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, Margit Rowell (ed.), 1985, p. 24. For another account of this first meeting see André Masson, *le rebelle du surréalisme, émus*, Françoise Levailant red.), 1978, p. 76 ff.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

8 *Le Chasseur*, oil on canvas. reproduced in William Rubin, *Miró in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*, p. 23.

9 He also arrived with a letter of introduction addressed to Picasso.

10 For another account of this story by Masson. see Georges Charbonnier, *op. cit.*, p. 35 ff. See also Masson and Levailant, *op. cit*, p. 77.

11 See footnote 19 of the following interview with Michel Leiris.

12 The rue du Château was where Tanguy, Prévert and Malkine lived. The rue Fontaine was where André Breton lived. The Surrealist group met for discussion in the Café Cyrano. Place Blanche, adjacent to the rue Fontaine. The other two groups of writers and painters were slightly removed, at least geographically, from the focal point of Breton's circle. Masson has described the rue Blomet as a '*foyer de dissidence*'. See Charbonnier. *op. cit.* pp. 52-53.

13 This word was not intelligible on the tape recording used as the partial basis for this interview. At any rate, someone said to Miró, 'say something'.

14 The banquet for Saint-Pol-Roux was given at the Closerie des Lilas in July 1925. In the course of the evening a riot erupted. Sparked off by an anti-German comment by a certain Mme Rachilde. Leiris in defence of his friend Max Ernst shouted 'down with France'. Ernst followed suit with the same remark about Germany and Miró said 'down with the Mediterranean'. Leiris was almost lynched by the crowd which poured out into the street and he had to be 'escorted' away by the police who then roughed him up. For various accounts of this evening, see Maurice Nadeau, *Histoire du surréalisme*, 1994, pp. 78-79; José Pierre. *Tracts*

surréalistes et déclarations collectives 1922-39. 1980, pp. 41-49, pp. 53-55, pp. 389-91, and pp. 396-97. See also Leiris, op. cit., p. 192, where Leiris recalls his experience with the police.

15 Pierre Matisse Gallery (New York), 'Joan Miró. Ceramics and Constellations', 9 January-3 February 1945.

16 Charbonnier, op. dt., p. 60; Leiris, op. cit., p. 191.

17 *La Ferme* was Miró's first great masterpiece completed in Paris. It was painted during 1921-22 and while Miró began it in Montroig, he finished it over a period of several months in the rue Blomet studio. Through Evan Shipman, Ernest Hemingway acquired the painting and it remained in his family's possession until it was recently given to the National Gallery in Washington. See Ernest Hemingway, *The Farm*. in *Cahiers d'Art*, IX, no. 4, p. 28 which recounts the circumstances under which Hemingway bought the painting. Hemingway also purchased paintings from Masson, as did Gertrude Stein.

18 Michel Leiris, *Simulacre* (with cover and six lithographs by André Masson), 1925.

19 In the newspaper *L'Intransigant*, 7 April 1930, Tériade referred to a Surrealist artist who wanted to assassinate painting without mentioning Miró's name. In the dissident Surrealist review *Documents*, no. 7, deuxième année, 1930, Georges Bataille quoted Miró as wanting to 'Kill painting', (*Joan Miró; peintures récentes*, p. 399). And in an interview with Francisco Melgar entitled 'Los artistas españoles en Paris: Juan Miró', in *Ahora*, 24 January 1931, pp. 16-18, Miró used the phrase 'destroy everything that exists in painting'. [Reprinted and translated in Joan Miró, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, Margit Rowell (ed.), 1989.]

20 *Le Chasseur* (oil on canvas) also known as *paysage Catalan*, is now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. It was painted in Montroig, Miró's family farm in the Catalan region of Tarragona, and in Paris between the summer and winter of 1923-24. See William Rubin, *Miró in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*, p. 23.

21 See Jacques Viot, 'Un ami, Joan Miró', in *Cahiers d'Art* XI, nos 8-10, 1936, pp. 257-60.

22 See Man Ray, *Self-Portrait*, 1963, pp. 251-52 for a first-hand account of this escapade.

23 The review *Documents* was edited by Georges Bataille and published by Wildenstein. Its aim was to examine culture from the point of view of a materialist ethnography. It appeared in 1929-30. Michel Leiris and Carl Einstein were among the regular contributors and the works of André Masson regularly appeared in its pages as did those of Joan Miró.

24 Michel Leiris, 'Joan Miró', *Documents*, no. 5, October 1929, pp. 263-66.

25 The whereabouts of *Le sang est plus doux que le miel* is now unknown. The picture appeared in the pages of the review *Documents*, no. 4, September 1929 and was formerly in the collection of Coco Chanel. It was painted in Spain around 1927 and brought to Paris by Dalí where it was among the first of his works seen by the Surrealists.

26 Alberto Giacometti joined ranks with the Surrealists between 1930 and 1933. His works also appeared in the review *Documents* with an article by Michel Leiris, no. 4, September 1929.

27 Michel Leiris, *Marrons sculptés pour Joan Miró*, (with a colour lithograph on the cover by Joan Miró), 1961.

28 Michel Leiris, *Bagatelles végétales*, with six colour etchings by Joan Miró and an untitled text on Joan Miró by Michel Leiris, 1956. See 'Joan Miró' in Michel Leiris, *Brisées*, 1966, pp. 32-37.

29 Michel Leiris, *Fissures*, with 13 etchings by Joan Miró, 1969.

30 See André Masson, *Le rebelle du surréalisme, écrits*, Françoise Levallant (ed.), 1976, p. 79.

31 Joan Miró, 'jeux poétiques', *Cahiers d'Art*, XX - XXI, 1945-46, pp. 269-72.

32 Michel Leiris, *Glossaire, j'y serre mes glosses*, with sixteen lithographs by André Masson,

1940.

33 Kahnweiler owned the Galerie Simon which represented Picasso and Masson. Kahnweiler did not have much taste for sculpture, with the notable exceptions of the work of Picasso and of Manolo. He did not represent Miró or Giacometti, who both exhibited first with the Galerie Pierre and then, after World War II, with the Galerie Maeght.

191