

A Rival to Guernica?

Over five metres high, *The Reaper* was painted by Joan Miró (1893–1983) as a mural for the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris. One of his largest works, it showed a Catalan peasant holding a sickle, his face angry and contorted, railing at the heavens in protest against the plight of Spain, then being torn apart by a momentous civil war. It should have been one of the most important and iconic works of his career.

Less than a year before, the Spanish Civil War had begun with a right-wing uprising led by General Franco against the newly established centre-left Republican government. At the outbreak of war Miró moved his family from his home in Catalonia, in northern Spain, to Paris to escape the war. As an artist Miró used a highly personal iconography that sometimes verged on the abstract, but he was always clear about *The Reaper's* political message: 'Of course I intended it as a protest ... the Catalan peasant is a symbol of the strong, the independent, the resistant. The sickle is not a communist symbol. It is the reaper's symbol, the tool of his work, and, when his freedom is threatened, his weapon.'

More than fifty countries exhibited in the Paris World Fair in a series of buildings and specially constructed pavilions through the centre of Paris. The Fair's theme was the positive role that art could play in the development of new technology. But as each participant country built its pavilion it became clear that national propaganda – not art and design – was its real focus. The sight of the German pavilion and the Soviet pavilions squaring up across the Jardins du Trocadéro – symbolising the growing conflict between these two major powers and ideologies and the risk of a war in Europe as a whole – dominated the Fair.

The task of designing the Spanish pavilion on behalf of the beleaguered Republican government was given to the Catalan architect Josep Lluís Sert, working together with Luis Lacasa Navarro. Sert trained with the architect Le Corbusier in the late 1920s, and was heavily involved with pro-Republican activity in Paris. Two months before the Fair opened, it was decided that the pavilion would have a propaganda role in showing 'the life of Spanish people': 'in these dramatic hours ... it aims to raise awareness of the evolution of the Spanish nation since the Republic was proclaimed.'

Erected close to the towering German pavilion, Sert's modernist construction could hardly have provided a more striking contrast. Built in little over two months, its design of steel and glass created a two-storey container that appeared to float above the lower floors. Its colours – tan and deep red – evoked the colours of rural Spain, while the interior provided an airy and unobtrusive backdrop for the visual propaganda the

organisers wanted to include to show the fragile Republican government's struggle to survive in the face of the right-wing uprising.

Artworks and visual displays were key to the pavilion's aim of garnering international sympathy and support. A huge abstract concrete sculpture by Alberto Sánchez Pérez, romantically titled *The Spanish People Have a Path Which Leads to a Star*, greeted visitors at one corner of the building, along with changing photographic images and news about the War on the walls. One banner proclaimed this message from the Spanish President: 'We are fighting for the essential unity of Spain. We are fighting for the integrity of Spanish soil. We are fighting for the independence of our country and for the right of the Spanish people to determine their own destiny.'

Inside the pavilion the open-plan ground floor was dominated by the pairing of Alexander Calder's fountain *Mercury Fountain* and Picasso's now world famous painting *Guernica*. The fountain sought to draw attention to mercury as one of Spain's most important natural resources, while Picasso's massive canvas was a dramatic response to the bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica on 26 April 1937 by German and Italian warplanes at the behest of the leader of the uprising, General Franco. The ground floor also contained a shop and information area, where prints from Picasso's series of etchings *The Dreams and Lies of Franco* were sold alongside pamphlets and books promoting the Republican cause. Stretching into the courtyard was a performance area with seating for five hundred people, where displays of traditional Spanish music, theatre and crafts were staged.

From the ground floor, a wide external ramp took the visitor directly to the second floor, and a display of contemporary Spanish art, including sculptures by Picasso, Alberto Sánchez Pérez, Emiliano Barral and Julio Gonzáles. On this floor was also a series of photomontages by José Renau aimed at educating visitors about the regional crafts and industries of Spain, contrasting these with the already-realised horrors of war. The Basque region's display showed photographs of Guernica's destruction by Franco's allies. From here the visitor was led down to a further display of photomontage on the first floor by means of a three-metre-wide staircase; it was on a wall in the stairwell that Miró's mural was located.

Although Miró had spent much of his adult life in the French capital, his move to Paris with his family at the start of the civil war in 1936 was traumatic. From his arrival Miró was beset by depression and found himself unable to work, returning to life drawing classes in an attempt to regain his focus. Nightmarish in its acidic colours and deep shadows, *Still Life with an Old Shoe* was his first major oil executed in Paris, worked on between January and May 1937. However, it did not address Spain's political situation explicitly: only many years later did Miró say to a friend, 'The fork attacks the apple as if it were a bayonet. The apple is Spain.'

Miró was deeply attached to the land – the image of a Catalan peasant wearing a baretina or red beret was a recurring subject in his work – but he shunned overt

expressions of party politics and it was perhaps only through the persuasion of his fellow Catalan and architect of the Spanish Pavilion, Josep Lluís Sert, that he arrived at overtly pro-Republican works. In 1937 he designed a postage stamp called simply 'Help Spain', which was quickly turned into a small poster that could be bought in the Spanish pavilion. It showed a Catalan peasant wearing a traditional red cap and raising his powerful fist, presumably against fascist aggressors. Beneath Miró wrote:

In the current conflict I see massive forces on the fascist side, and on the other side are the people whose immense and creative resourcefulness will give Spain a vitality that will astonish the world.

A little later, in 1938, Miró wrote that he had 'never stopped thinking of how to get closer to the masses by means of painting', and this stamp-cum-poster, together with *The Reaper*, suggest a real determination to reach out to people. Interviewed in 1967, Sert claimed it was the Catalan hymn of liberty, *Els Segadors* (The Reapers) that had provided the title for Miró's mural in the Spanish pavilion.

However, the message of *The Reaper* was more oblique than that of Picasso's *Guernica* in that it did not explicitly show violence. One reviewer dismissed it as having 'no story or purpose other than the purely decorative', though other reviewers were also critical of Picasso's surprisingly allegorical treatment of war. For the Miró scholar Jacques Dupin, however, the sense of violence in *The Reaper* was not reduced by not being embedded in a narrative:

it is integral with the act of painting and with the dramatic accentuation of the form which raises, denatures, and simplifies the face and all the other features of the figure. The lower part of the painting, black up to the height of the peasant's shoulders, brings to mind the horizon line – the range of mountains in the distance – so that the head and the figure as a whole seem not just to issue from the earth, but to be a frenzied incarnation of it ... The head with its savage eye, the double bludgeon-shaped promontory of the nose and the barettina, the heavy jutting jaw with its three aggressive fangs, is that of Miró's monsters. The energy of the formless is at work in this head, standing high against a stormy sky ... Some vast tremor is shaking the heavens, a cosmic anger to the scale of the human anger portrayed.

Miró painted *The Reaper* directly onto the insulation panels lining the pavilion walls during approximately two weeks in early June 1937 (like most pavilions, the Spanish display opened after the advertised May start of the Fair). The finished mural – Miró's largest work to date – was visible from both the first and second floors, a focal point of the contemporary art display in the middle of José Renau's more factual photomontages. Although no colour photograph of *The Reaper* remains, in 1986 Catherine Blanton Freedberg gathered some sense of its striking colours from eyewitness accounts:

The colours used in the figure itself were predominantly red, black and white: white in the ... face ... nose and the base of the neck, black in the chin, cheekbone, eye, ear and teeth as

Joan Miró 1893–1983
The Reaper 1937
Oil paint on 6 Celotex panels
550 x 365 cm

well as in the left arm ... upper torso and ... details of the cap, hands and sickle ... various shades of red in the cap, nose, cheek and neck as well as in the right arm ... while each of these colours was echoed in the painting's background, here additional colours were also used: spots of brilliant green, blue and yellow amidst somewhat amorphous areas of colour including white and the exposed buff of the Celotex support. The star in the upper right hand corner was painted an intense blue.

The Paris Fair closed on 25 November 1937, having attracted thirty-one million visitors. The French Senate turned down a proposed extension and the process of demolition began in February 1938. Under Sert's supervision, the Spanish pavilion was completely dismantled in less than a month. Miró donated his mural to the Republic; it was accordingly split into its six component panels and packed for shipping back to the Ministry of Fine Arts in Valencia. What happened next remains unclear. It is thought possible that the mural's poor condition – noted by Sert when it was packed – led the Ministry to destroy it upon its arrival in Spain. Sert himself believed that the mural most probably fell victim to an assault on the train that transported it through Spain some time after March 1938. However, he also suggested, in a 1978 interview, that the mural might have been lost when stored in the Spanish embassy in Paris. Whatever the case, one of Miró's most important paintings is now known through only a few black and white photographs.

The significance of *The Reaper's* loss is perhaps indicated by the huge fame and global significance achieved by Picasso's *Guernica* in the years since 1937. Picasso, too, had intended to give his painting to the Republic; his last minute decision to allow the work to tour to Scandinavia, Britain and America saved it from *The Reaper's* fate and initiated its rise to fame as an anti-war icon. With the approach of war in Europe, Picasso asked the Museum of Modern Art in New York to look after the painting and, while he always intended it to go one day to his home country, he did not allow it to do so while General Franco remained in charge of Spain. Franco outlived Picasso by a few years and the painting, which had long been shown in a special gallery, was not in fact sent to Spain until 1981. (In compensation, perhaps, for the loss to New York of this famous anti-war work, a tapestry version of the mural was hung in the headquarters of the United Nations from 1985 and for a number of years formed a backdrop for press conferences given at the Security Council).

As a simultaneous yet very different response to the Spanish conflict, *The Reaper* stands as a lost companion to Picasso's masterpiece, and it seems Miró himself appreciated the scale of this loss. On the artist's eighty-fifth birthday in 1978, Sert gave him a large-scale black and white photograph of the mural. According to the architect, interviewed that same year, Miró received the photograph 'as if it were a long lost child, and sat at length before it in silence and wonderment'.

Text—
Jennifer Mundy