

# An Artist's Diaries and Personal Notes as a Source of Understanding His Art

## Joan Miro's Catalan Notebooks

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**Abstract**—An important source of studying art in modern art history are notebooks, personal letters with friends, interviews and talks. But researchers have an important task to keep impartiality and some distance from the object of their research. The article covers this issue using Joan Miro's personal correspondence as an example.

**Keywords**—Miro; diary; personal notes; Catalan notebooks; artistic language; art study

### I. INTRODUCTION

An important source of understanding painter's art in modern art history are diaries, personal correspondence with friends, interviews and talks. A researcher has to study this material and take it into account, but it's also important to keep neutrality and some distance from the object of research, diaries do not sometimes help to understand master's art, moreover, they can prevent researchers from being impartial.

The same genre of diaries is very diverse. There are a lot of sub-types of diaries pointed out by researchers, which only makes their further studies difficult because the borders between these sub-types are vague. We will only mention some sub-types such as a diary-confession, a diary-apology (they are close in their meaning and have the same kind of narrative and account of the events, but in the latter the inner voice of the author is convinced that 'he is right' while in the former he can afford to write that 'he was wrong') – these are so-called everyday notes which describe the psychological condition of the author, his relationships with other people and his reaction on the events at the given moment and drafts-diaries which are most often created by writers, artists and other people dealing with art.

Diaries usually combine elements of drafts and everyday notes. But it's not about Joan Miro's 'Catalan Notebooks'. Miro's diaries are drafts-diaries, a unique artist's 'workshop'.

Everyday diaries are more secret, intimate. And it's usually out of the question whether to publish them. At the same time a draft-diary with sketches etc is supposed to be published. What inspires an author to create such a diary? Why does he start writing? Miro never wrote theoretical essays which means we can expect to see in his diaries

something that reveals his creative credo, his relationships with other artists etc. Joan Miro Foundation in Barcelona keeps all his diaries. There are notebooks with preparatory sketches, reflections on the purpose of art, his views on the war, on other artists, writers etc written in 1940-1941 and there are some notebooks with drawings made in 1930. It is interesting to compare these notebooks as they appeared with absolutely different purposes.

### II. NOTEBOOK MADE IN 1930

Notebook made in 1930 – Cuaderno de 1930 – is a unique item in the whole of Miro's art as it contains self-sufficient artist's drawings – not sketches, not drafts, but completed works of art drawn in pencil which were originally supposed to be drawings. There is no single line of text, only the drawings. Approaching Miro's art of this period I would like to remind that this is the time of the so-called 'the murder of painting', the time when the artist is in a deep crisis and bitterly disappointed in the capacity of art in general. At this time he is keen on collages and pictures-objects, assemblages, drawings on sand paper. The painter creates his assemblages using everything he comes across, manipulates with different objects and textures: wood, metal, ropes, paper and demonstrates a superb knowledge of the chosen materials. Miro tries to cross the borders established by painting, to 'run away' from purely visual impressions and to invent another kind of approach. He said he sometimes had felt anger and annoyance because of the limited capacity of art and with these drawings he proclaimed 'the murder of painting': 'When I say that I want to get rid of painting – it refers only to oil-painting, to the rules of the academic school of painting, the old-fashioned idea of art.' [1]. Gaëtan Picon thought that Miro's idea of 'the murder of painting' is his response to his own painting and not to the painting in general: 'he wants to see what he can do rejecting the shine of his own magic' [2]. Ropes, a handful of sand thrown on the picture, a piece of wood attached to a net, painted and covered by sand or sand paper – this is the way to 'kill the painting' (e.g. 'Collage', 'Object' or 'Relief Construction').

It is clear that in these years he hardly creates any picture. Apart from the mentioned collages and the kind this notebook with drawings appears. I wonder why Miro related this notebook to his diaries? Which message do these drawings have that he referred them as not everyone's art? If a diary often lets us understand the artist's life in a more profound way, realise what was the motive, the reason to create this or that work of art, then this notebook must reveal to us some motives of Miro's art. And it does as while he was creating these drawings there was a minimum of paintings, he used a minimum of the magic of light in general – but a dominance of line. Miro is completely absorbed by lines.

This attention to lines at this time makes him close to Paul Klee who liked to use an unbroken melodic line. The line that, according to Denys Chevalier, was flowing freely and unboundly like 'an endless tune', only vibrating a bit' [3]. The same art historian writes 'He gave the line his own meaning and supernatural qualities. He was skilful at the whole scope of its tone, he reached extraordinary effects of space and light – sometimes gentle and poetic, sometimes transparent and crystal, sometimes again a warm and intimate impression' [3]. The same can be said about Miro's line. We have to notice, however, that these drawings very much remind the previous stage of Miro's art. As an example one can look at his paintings 'Queen Louisa of Prussia' or 'Landscape (The Hare)'.

Wavy silhouettes of figures from Hans Arp's paintings also influenced Miro. Softened organic contours became later a kind of artist's cliché.

### III. SEVEN NOTEBOOKS OF 1940-1941

The notebooks created in 1940-1941 in Varengeville-sur-Mer and Palma de Mallorca are completely different. Here we can find everything: thoughts, feelings, evaluations, all in Catalan, of course, and preparatory sketches. Here artistic notes, deep thoughts and brief phrases like spells ('Let my pictures be like musical poems written by an artist') are mixed and scattered all over the pages.

The first notebook – I Corrida de toros (1940) – is full of small drawings-symbols and sketches which will move to big canvasses later. Signs-symbols alternate with notes and brief comments like 'banderillas are like multicoloured butterflies' or 'insert into the space of the canvass a graphic expression of a hollow groan of a seagull'. Miro's remarks are poetic in themselves and combined with graphic sketches they make an impression of a short poetic text. We can see how Miro works on small but very precious details of his big paintings.

A draft-diary is a step to making a further work of art. Here the question is about the way the artist works. We can look at how Miro gradually comes up with the idea of some work of art. It is as though we find ourselves at the artist's workshop and see the whole process of his creative work: from the idea to the realisation of it.

The second notebook – II Souvenir d'un poème, created in 1940-1941, is dedicated to working on illustrations of

poetic texts and on some pictures from his series 'Constellations'. It is full of preparatory drawings and comments left for his own use. For example: 'this picture made me remember Lisa Herz's book. I must see it again before starting to work on canvass'. Or some purely prosaic remarks: 'in some places around the drawing stains of pure colours should be put'. Or: 'I must try not to do something obscene'. The paintings of the famous series 'Constellations' are beautiful, balanced and are made in a rhythm of classic melody. Miro appreciated music keenly; it gave a stimulus to his creative art as well as poetry. The artist often visited the cathedral of Palma to be filled with the spirit of music and colourful stained-glass windows. We learn about it from the pages of the artist's diary, he writes: 'these 11 works (preparatory drawings) made in Palma for big works are inspired by music. I was making them in the cathedral listening to evening services accompanied by the organ when there was almost nobody in the cathedral and the light was magically gleaming in the stained-glass windows'. In this notebook several sketches to the series can be found.

In the next notebook - III Gran cuaderno de Palma 1940-1941 – preparatory coloured drawings and some short artist's remarks are collected. I will give one of them as an example: 'before starting work on these pictures one must deeply think what it is that I would like to make, one must look closely at the new size of the canvass, where the fabric attached to the canvass stretcher will lead and one can immerse into a game while creating the picture, express the highest level of sensuality, discover new ways and new potential...'. Miro thinks over every step, there are almost no occasional and spontaneous details in his works. Even during the surrealist period Miro worked on his canvasses thoroughly: the preparatory drawings kept in the Foundation are the evidence of it. And here we can see that the artist is not in a rush to start working, he carefully thinks over his actions. I also want to mention such a small detail: all Miro's notes are written in lower case characters, he doesn't use capital letters and quite often doesn't follow orthography rules. The notes (which can be very small, such as 'the huge power of the colour') are separated from one another with a small sign. In this notebook the drawings follow the same motive: women and ballet dancers. Miro is keen on creating female images having in mind siurellas – his favourite traditional art of Mallorca – small clay whistles painted in bright colours. Miro had a lot of such whistles, he started collecting them in the 1920s. In his diary Miro mentions their poetic power, simplicity and harmony which he aims to achieve. And we discover his sources of inspiration.

IV Dafnis y Chloe 1940 represents a small essay-reflection on how he sees 'Daphnis and Chloe' book: with the most poetic illustrations, his own poems turning the book into 'a book-object', 'an artist's book'.

And here he writes about his desire to make something like Picasso's 'Guernica', he plans a large canvass of a tragic content which will shock the public the same way. But Miro could never create such a thing. Miro will respond to Picasso's work with 'Still Life with Old Shoe', his own picture on the same topic. It is undoubtedly interesting for the researchers the mere fact of a wish to respond to Picasso

with his own work, to make a statement in the same vein and to have an evidence of Miro's high appreciation of his colleague's work.

In the fifth notebook - V Palma de Mallorca 1940 – Miro continues to work on his series 'Constellations'. On these pages new names for possible future pictures-poems appear, e.g. 'the wings of a sea swallow joyfully move because of being charmed by a young ballet dancer with a skin wounded from the tenderness of the moon'. At the same time, here in his very short notes you can find some disappointment from the work already done. During this period of his life Miro is more interested in abstraction, his previous works do not satisfy him anymore, he writes: 'I looked once again at the album made in Varengeville-sur-Mer and lost for 6 months, it seems to me insignificant. Before starting work on blue canvasses, I must have another look'.

The sixth Miro's notebook - VI Cuaderno "Une femme" 1940-1941 – is entirely dedicated to female images. As in the previous notebooks here there short personal notes which sometimes have something in common with the notes of the first six notebooks because they were written at the same time on the topics which constantly inspired the artist: 'to keep in mind the grandeur of the sculptures from Easter Island', 'to avoid sculptor Arp's ideas' (he didn't manage to avoid them, he was influenced by them and for a long time), 'not to forget about phantasmagorias and romanticism of Modesto Urgell's works (Miro's teacher)', 'the pictures must be planned by a hot and ardent soul and be fulfilled by clinical cold' (it sounds like a message to Cheka members).

It seems that the biggest number of Miro's comments and thoughts are concentrated in the last – the orange notebook - VII Cuaderno naranja 1940-1941. Here one can find names Miro focuses on in his creative work: Braque, Bruegel and Bosch, Picasso, Chagall, Tzara. Besides already familiar phrases-comments we find reflections which help a researcher to study the artist's works. We can look at 'Self-portrait' (1937-1938) as an example.

Having painted 'Self-portrait I' in 1938, Miro felt unsatisfied with his work, he tried to alter it several times. In the end, in order not to lose this portrait he asked Max Frisch to copy it with the aim to improve this very copy in the nearest time. But it never happened, at the end of 1941 he wrote on the pages of this diary:

'As for the portrait – one should use a wet sponge over Frisch's drawing to rub a little bit the drawing that he made, then rub it with sand paper, immediately cover it with a layer of white gouache and plaster in order to have a white canvass. After that one should paint it adding some symbols of 1940-1941 at the background, this will bring a bigger mystery and will establish some parallelism in my work. For example, a Catalan hat which I wanted to paint in [my first] self-portrait 20 years ago, it could join the symbols of my work 'Catalan Landscape' which I made several years ago in Paris, but I would make it more sketchy as in 1940-1941. So I would make a portrait-landscape as it stood in my plan' [4]. However, Miro could not work on it even in 1941. The painter could go back to his 'Self-portrait' only in 1961, but the alterations which he introduced there were far away from

those which he wrote in this diary about. These alterations were of course in tune with Miro's outlook and creative ambitions of the 1960s, not of the 1940s. So it is from the diary entries where we learn about all the stages of making a work. Without Miro's comments we wouldn't know what his desire to treat his old self-portrait in this way was attributed to.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Studying artist's diaries, we see the way the author makes: from art, work to the diary or the other way round, from the diary to art, which event and what exactly was the reason to make this or that work of art. Sometimes the author analyses the work already done, sometimes he only plans to start work. Such notes have always been important historical artefacts when studying by-gone epochs, events and processes because they have been notable for documentary truthfulness, self-consistency and attention to detail which allowed to evaluate to the full extent what was going on.

Why do people write diaries on the whole? Diary is a genre accessible to everybody, therefore it is interesting what makes every person take a pen and transfer to paper these or those events, reflections related to what is happening around etc? Undoubtedly, we cannot talk about the inner motives pushing people to such actions, however, the diary itself most often answers this question. According to Martin Jurgens, 'the essence of every kind of literature is an expression and a message', therefore the topics of the diary, the events and the facts placed in the centre of the narrative let us easily understand what was the most important thing for the author when he was creating the text [5].

So looking through all Miro's diaries it becomes clear that Miro doesn't need to share his personal feelings, his personal life, to reflect on political events going around, to leave some kind of message to his descendants, verbalise his feeling and emotions in general. His diary is his workshop, a draft-diary, a notebook-diary for comments on his creative work and only on his creative work.

We learn much more about Miro as a person from his correspondence with friends, from his talks and interviews collected in different books, such as 'Selected Writings and Interviews New' Ed. by Margit Rowell, 'Miro and Sert in Their Own Words: Correspondence 1937-1980', 'Epistolari catalá 1911-1945', 'Ceci Est La Couleur De Mes Rêves: Entretiens Avec Georges Raillard', 'Mirar Miró: el Joan Miró de Català-Roca' and many others.

And Miro's Catalan Notebooks is a kind of author's 'workshop' which uncovers the secrets of the creative process and doesn't reveal to us Miro as a person, it most probably shows the artist as a closed personality.

A propos. At the moment Miro's diaries exist in three languages: French, English and Spanish, though they were written in Catalan and were then translated into French by a famous French literary critic and art historian Gaëtan Picon. The very first edition 'Joan Miró Carnets Catalans. Dessins et Textes Inédits. Picon, Gaëtan' was in French and was published in Switzerland in 1976. All the further editions

were translations from French: in 1977, the diaries were published in English and in 1980 the first edition in Spanish appeared. In 2002, the diaries were published in Spanish for the second time.

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- [5] J. Jurgensen, *Das Fiktional Ich (Untersuchungen zum Tagebuch)*. Bern und Munchen: Franckle Verlag, 1979, p.236.