

About the Cover

Joan Miró's Call and Response

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“Best of luck to the globule of life and so may it agglomerate with itself as many times as the raindrop on the leaf and windowpane, according to tracings no sooner here than gone of which it guards the secret and this in as many directions as the rays of the sun describe. It's like the pearls in those little round boxes from childhood a toy you don't see anymore that didn't let you go for as long as, with great patience, you hadn't punctuated to the very last cavity a mouth putting on a smile. The head of Ogmios coifed as a wild boar always rings so clearly through the squally thunder: it offers us a countenance forever struck from the same die as the heavens. In the middle, primordial beauty, stammering out vowels, served with supreme adroitness by numbers.”

André Breton, 1958, “Ciphers and Constellations in Love with a Woman,” *Constellations*

The cover art for this issue of *EcoHealth* sets the stage for a dialogue among disciplines. “Ciphers and Constellations in Love with a Woman,” is one painting in a 23-piece series created by surrealist Joan Miró during early World War II.

As a young man, Miró was steered toward a business career by his father. In 1910, after a childhood of sketching and attending art classes, he became a bookkeeper for a hardware and chemical company. However, art was never far from his mind: Miró often found himself drawing in the accounting books. After just a year on the job, he suffered a nervous breakdown, which was complicated by a bout of typhoid. He abandoned his business career and sought

solace in Francesco Galí's Escola d'Art in Barcelona, and he moved to Paris in 1920 (Mink 2000; Hammond and Breton 2000).

As the years passed and Miró established himself as a respected artist in Paris, the beast of World War II slouched slowly toward France. In the uncertain time of January 1940, Miró began his series of twenty gouaches now known as *Constellations*. When the Germans marched on France in May 1940, he returned to Spain and continued to paint new *Constellations* pieces for the next sixteen months (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2000).

“A new stage in my work began which had its source in music and nature,” Miró later told a French interviewer (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2000). “It was about the time that the war broke out. I felt a deep desire to escape.” While the name *Constellations* is our reference point, the distorted shapes also suggest reflections in water, lending a compositional balance and healing quality to the paintings.

As Miró turned to art and nature during the dark years of the war, a prominent poet was also in exile from France. André Breton, a key initiator of the surrealist movement and Trotsky's coauthor of the manifesto *Pour un art révolutionnaire indépendant*, found his works banned by the Vichy regime. He chose exile in the U.S., which is perhaps where he first saw Miró's *Constellations* on display in the New York Pierre Matisse Gallery (Hammond and Breton 2000).

Breton described Miró as “the most Surrealist of us all,” and the *Constellations* paintings resonated deeply with him (Strickland and Boswell 1992). In 1958, Breton published a set of twenty-two hermetic poems that gave a

written voice to all but one of the paintings. In their flowing and prose-like lines, the poems establish a dialogue between visual art and written poetry, a call-and-response across the disciplines.

The poem for “Ciphers” specifically refers to the Celtic god Ogmios, a deity of eloquence, a language-giver who held people in his thrall by a golden chain attached from his tongue to their ears. Ogmios is said to be the source of the *ogham*, a medieval Celtic script of dashes and lines. Breton nurtured a passion for ancient ciphers and glyphs, and perhaps he saw the symbols of *ogham* in Miró’s paintings. Dots and dashes connected by thin lines suddenly conjure images of not just trees and beasts, but also the cycles of life and war; the isolation of their exile and the tumult of disease; and, more than anything, the human need for conversation.

In these two works, we find two people from different backgrounds who were thrown together in a call-and-response between their art forms. Both sought solace, health, and balance in art, and they found a way to communicate across the artistic divide.

Divisions among the disciplines abound in science, too. In this issue of *EcoHealth*, Brisbois and Ali (2010) call for a breakdown of boundaries between climate and health sciences. Our journal already has a rich history of building bridges across the social, ecological, and health sciences. While there’s work ahead to move this from call-and-response to a true conversation, with such clear links among environment, culture, and health, this will surely be a rich dialogue.

*When I see a tree, [...] I feel that tree is talking to me.
It has eyes. One can talk to it. A tree is also a human
being and so is a pebble.*

Joan Miró (attribution Weinstein Gallery 2002)

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Joan Miró (1893–1983) was a prominent painter, sculptor, ceramist, and printmaker. Born in Barcelona, the son of a

goldsmith and grandson of a blacksmith and a cabinet-maker, Miró inherited a rich culture of craft, and a tradition of Catalanian folklore. For health reasons, he spent childhood summers with his grandparents in Palma de Majorca, a quiet rural island to which he repeatedly returned throughout his adult life.

After a brief stint as a clerk at the age of 17, Miró fully dedicated himself to studying art. As he developed his painting style, full of vibrant color and dreamlike shapes, Miró quickly established himself among the Paris art community. While he is considered a pioneer of Surrealism—and was known to take inspiration from the verse of Surrealist poets—Miró never fully adopted the politics or discipline of the movement.

Recognition of his work expanded rapidly in the 1950s, with myriad international exhibits of his paintings and etchings. Miró continued to expand the scope of his work, dedicating more time to ceramics, murals, and sculptures, even up to the year of his death in 1983.

ON THE COVER

“Chiffres et constellations amoureux d’une femme” by Joan Miró, 1941. Gouache and watercolor with traces of graphite on ivory wove paper, 456 × 380 mm.

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