Joan Miró
(1893–1983 Spanish)

Vocabulary

irrational: not what is normally expected, unreasonable, illogical
organic forms: living body (plant or animal); shapes from nature
semi-abstract: not quite abstract — some reference to the real world can be seen

SURREALISM a modern art style interested in dreams and the subconscious

Discussion

What do you find irrational about this painting?

Hirondelle/Amour Winter 1933–34
Oil on canvas, 199.2 × 247.6 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Critical Study

Miró's imaginary, whimsical shapes which suggest creatures, animals, birds or parts of figures seem to belong to the dreamworld. The fanciful forms and shapes float in space and remind us of children's drawings. They stir our imagination in that they seem to belong outside or beyond reality.

Miró's semi-abstract shapes, organic forms and flowing lines are painted in bright, pure, decorative colours. His forms are suggestive rather than realistic. Miró's shapes are symbolic. They act as some kind of personal language.

Historical Study

Miró's dreamlike images belong to the Surrealist style. André Breton, a former Dadaist (a movement which tried to reassess cultural values and discover new meaning and methods for art), helped establish Surrealism. Surrealism carried further the Dada ideas of spontaneity and unconscious associations. His 1924 manifesto states the purpose of Surrealism is "to resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super reality. This concept of the Surrealist escaping from the world through fantasy and dreams can clearly be seen in the work of the painter Joan Miró.

The Surrealists were reacting against the ordered and restricted ways of civilization. They were influenced by a psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud, who studied dreams. Surrealists aimed to produce spontaneous imagery and automatic forms which came from the subconscious. They were trying to break away from the constriction of reason. They were reacting against the need to depict reality. They worked mainly within the subjective frame of art.

Studying Art

Critical study

Subjective frame
1. Which of the following words would you use to describe this painting? musical, joyful, crazy, dull, rich, cold
2. Imagine you could hop into this painting. Where would you be? Underwater? On the moon?
3. The title of this painting means 'Swallow's Love'. Does this help your understanding of the painting? What does it suggest to you?
4. What might happen next?

Structural frame
5. Are the colours real or imaginary?
6. What parts of the human body can you see?
7. How many eyes can you find?
8. What creatures other than birds can you see?
9. Count how many red shapes there are. What does the colour red add to the painting?
10. What are three characteristics or aims of Surrealism?

Structural frame
11. Miró has said 'a picture had to be right to a millimetre — had to be in balance to a millimetre.' What instance can you see in this work of his concern for balance?
12. Miró has said 'a form is never something abstract; it is always a sign of something. It is always a kind, or something else. For me painting is never form for form's sake.' What does this tell you of Miró's method of painting and his use of symbolism?

Further Research

Historical study
Subjective and cultural frames
Compare and contrast the work of another Surrealist, Yves Tanguy, with that of Miró. Consider their use of imaginary living forms, the mood created, colours, tone and how their art works reflect the social conditions at the time.

Making Art
Subjective frame
Create your own fantasy world. Perhaps you could look for inspiration from images under a microscope: amoeba, bacteria, cells. Do three small drawings in pencil in your Visual Arts Process Diary. Then choose one of these to develop into a larger work using colour. Work in pen and ink with watercolour or washes of coloured ink. You may find it interesting to work within a circular shape.