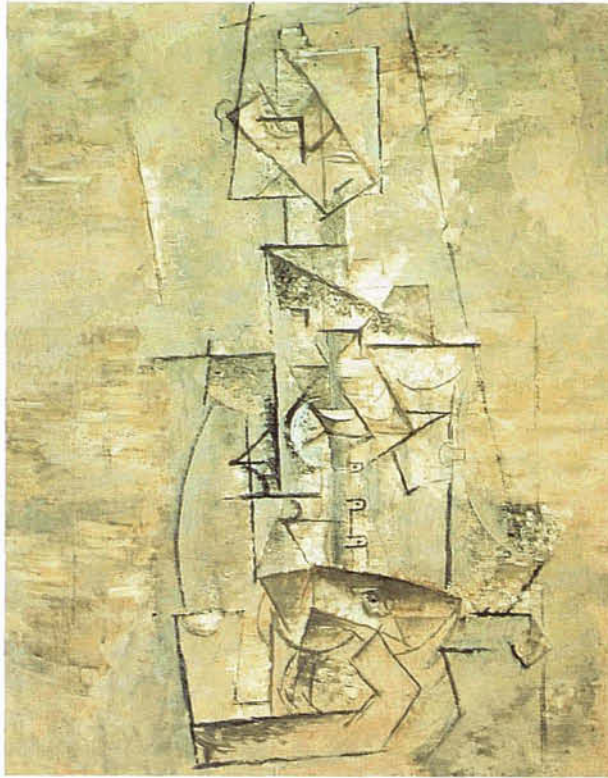


AVANT-GARDE ART IN CATALONIA



MARINA PICASSO COLLECTION. GENEVA

PABLO PICASSO. WOMAN WITH MANDOLINE, 1911

THE EXHIBITION "AVANTGUARDES A CATALUNYA (1906-1939)" HAS SERVED TO EMPHASIZE THE RELATIONS ESTABLISHED BETWEEN CATALONIA AND THE ART MOVEMENTS OF THE HISTORIC AVANT-GARDE.

JOAN M. MINGUET | BATLLORI ART CRITIC

The exhibition *Avantguardes a Catalunya (1906-1939)*, held in Barcelona in the summer of 1992, in Antoni Gaudí's building "La Pedrera", set out to offer an accurate summary of the history of the Catalan avant-gardes. Amongst other things, the exhibition –and especially the catalogue– has served to emphasize the rich and complex relations that arose between Catalonia and the art movements of the historic avant-garde. In two senses: first of all by explaining the influence the foreign art movements of

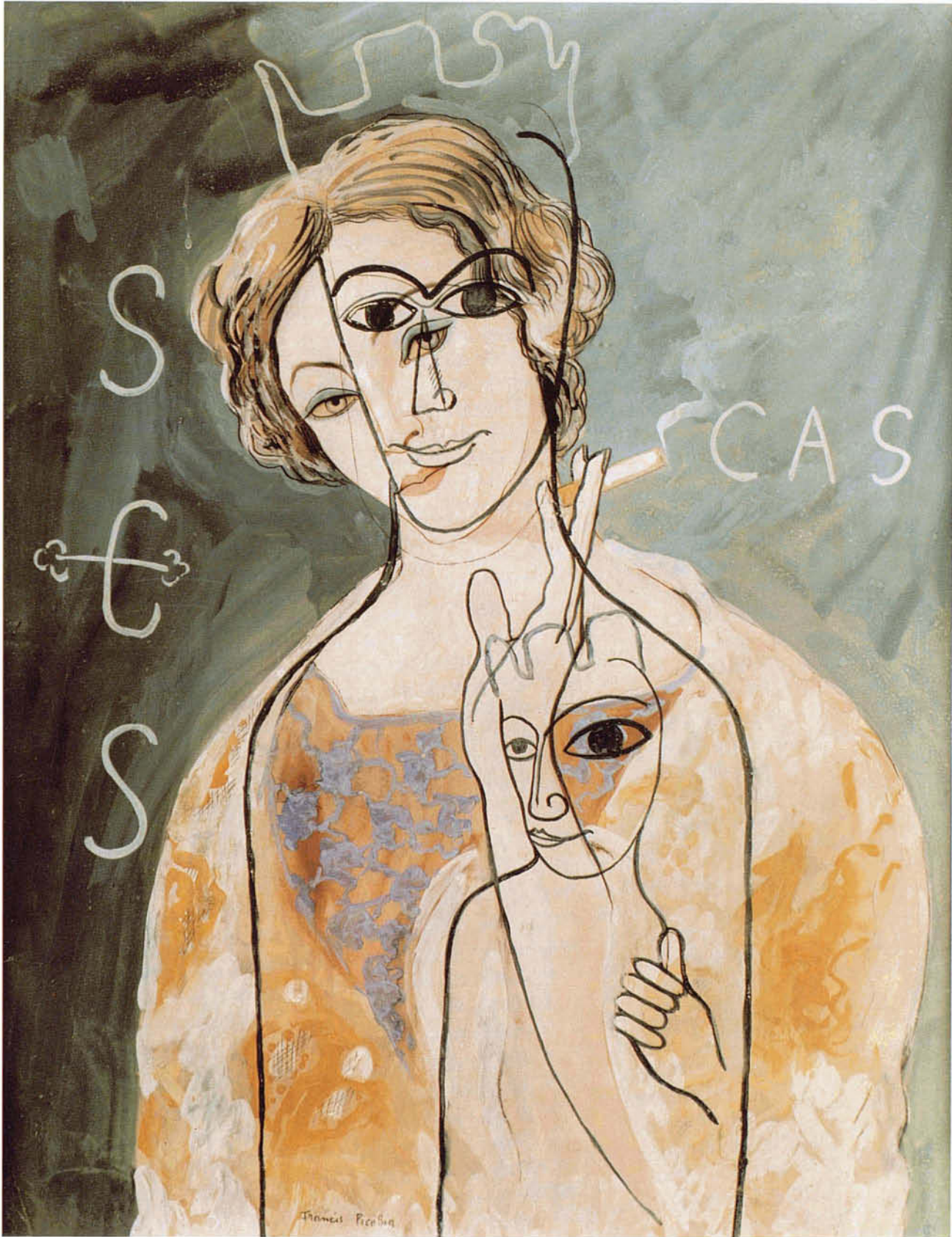
the first decades of the twentieth century had in Catalonia, and secondly by stressing the important part played by many Catalans in the international avant-garde of the period and in the subsequent development of contemporary art.

Catalonia, and her capital, Barcelona, never became a nucleus of continuous effervescence like Paris, Berlin or New York, but she never lost touch with the avant-garde spirit, either. Quite the contrary, a series of figures responded to what was happening all over the

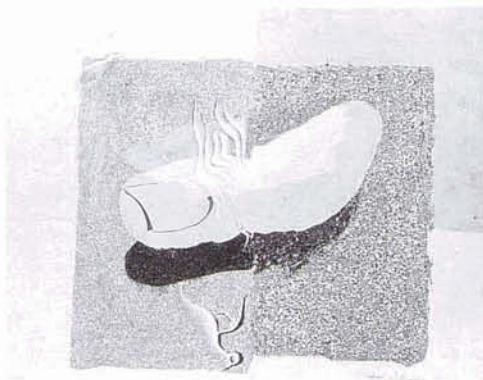
world in the field of art and advanced architecture. And largely as a result of this response, the work of some Catalan painters, sculptors and architects was later able to conquer these avant-garde centres. Let us look at some examples.

The introduction of avant-garde art to Catalonia

The first signs that something was happening in European avant-garde art were due to the untiring activity of the dealer in art and antiques Josep Dal-



FRANCIS PICABIA. VIRGIN OF MONTSERRAT, 1928 - PRIVATE COLLECTION. PARIS



DALÍ. WOUNDED BIRD, 1928

mau. Dalmau is one of the central figures, because through his gallery he managed to involve Barcelona, even if only indirectly, in the most important artistic initiatives of his time. In the spring of 1912 he organised an important exhibition of cubist art in which, amongst others, he showed works by Juan Gris, Jean Metzinger, Albert Gleizes and Marcel Duchamp, who submitted his famous "Nude Descending a Staircase". This was one of the first exhibitions of cubism outside Paris. Years later, Dalmau took advantage of the presence in Catalonia of several artists escaping World War I to make his gallery an unavoidable meeting-place. This, for example, was the origin of his friendship with Francis Picabia, who while in Barcelona produced the first four issues of the magazine *391*, so emblematic in the history of Dada. And this, also, was the origin of Serge Choune's abstract exhibitions in Barcelona (1916 and 1917), and of Picabia's own exhibition, in 1922, preceded by a conference by André Breton. But Dalmau's attention was not limited only to what was going on abroad, to the extent that in 1929 he made fruitful contacts with the abstract art of constructivist roots, exhibiting works by Mondrian and Van Doesburg. As well as this, Dalmau gave his support to the foremost Catalan art; in this respect, it is no surprise that Miró and Dalí should have given their first individual exhibitions in his gallery or that Miró's first exhibition in Paris, in 1921, should have been an initiative of his.

Some time later, in the thirties, a series of Catalan writers, artists and intellectuals tried to continue the stimulating work started by Dalmau. To this end they founded ADLAN (Amics De l'Art Nou – Friends of the New Art) and, amongst many other things, organised exhibitions by Joan Miró, Alexander Calder, Angel Ferrant, Hans Arp and Max Ernst, as well as a large exhibition by Picasso which also travelled to Madrid.

This wish by concerned cultural sectors to internationalize Catalonia is not to be seen only in the exhibitions by artists of renown that were held in Barcelona. Certain critics also made an important

contribution (Sebastià Gasch, Magí Albert Cassanyes, Rafael Benet, to a lesser extent) as did some of the press (with a special mention for the avant-garde magazine *L'Amic de les Arts*), who struggled to make the break in the arts known in Catalan artistic circles.

Catalan art in the international avant-garde

At the same time, as I have already said, Catalan art has had its own important influence on international avant-garde art. A series of painters, sculptors and architects born in Catalonia –Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Juli González, Josep Lluís Sert, Josep Torres Clavé...– or trained in Catalan artistic circles –Picasso, Joaquin Torres-García, Pau Gargallo...– made an especially important contribution to the revolutionary art movements that grew up during the first third of the twentieth century. What is more, some of these figures played a central role in these movements. In this respect, cubism would not have been the same without Picasso's participation. And modern historiography has stressed the enormous influence exercised on Picasso by the Catalan Modernist circles he frequented in Barcelona at the turn of the century. Joan Miró and Salvador Dalí also played an active and important part in the shaping of Surrealism, always on the basis of their native Catalonia. Whether from automatism or from dreams, Miró and Dalí have become two of the pillars of Surrealist painting. Torres-García got involved in geometric abstraction after his contact with the first Catalan futurist nucleuses (with the painter Rafael Barrades and the poet

Joan Salvat-Papasseit as the main figures).

In architecture, Josep Lluís Sert not only brought his teacher, Le Corbusier, to Barcelona, but also produced an impressive architectural *oeuvre*. And in sculpture, the work of Pau Gargallo and, especially, of Juli González in sculptural work with iron, have had a profound and notable influence. Very probably, modern sculpture would not have been the same without González's contribution.

Catalonia, then, played an important part in the history of the avant-garde art movement, in a two-way relationship, as I have said; welcoming some of the activities and figures in this story and letting their initiatives penetrate; and, in return, giving rise to proposals which, faced with the impossibility of becoming established in Catalonia's own artistic systems, had to take shelter in other cultural systems that were more in contact with the spirit of the breakthrough.

Despite this two-way relationship, Barcelona was always a peripheral cultural centre with respect to the great centres that drove the international avant-garde. Its importance, if you like, was, in the long run, relative: the city does not seem to have managed to take advantage of the many opportunities offered it over the years (Picasso's love of the city, the cubist exhibition, the presence of Picabia, the first exhibitions by Joan Miró and Salvador Dalí, Le Corbusier's projects for Barcelona, etc.). Nevertheless, in spite of being on the cultural periphery, Barcelona successfully combatted the more orthodox local cultural nucleuses through individual initiatives that were soon followed. If this is not enough to show the intense relations Catalonia maintained with the avant-garde, one need only remember, as I have done briefly here, the long list of Catalan artists who today are included in the manuals of contemporary art. All things considered, and whether in one sense or another, the history of the art of the twentieth century will have to pay special attention to everything Catalonia can contribute to an understanding of what are commonly referred to as the historical avant-gardes. ■