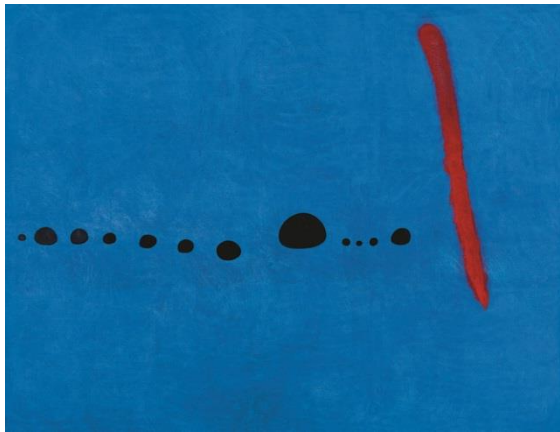


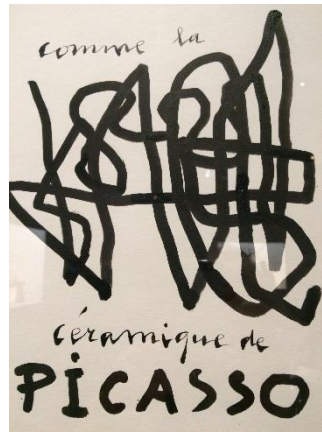
Gilets Jaunes, Miró's blacks, and Picasso's Blues and Pinks Letter from Paris II

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Joan Miró Blue II 4 March 1961



*Joan Miró Page from
his sketchbook*



*Pablo Picasso Acrobat
and young harlequin 1905*

Three years ago this month, Paris suffered grievously. I was here at the time, and the horror of the Bataclan was visible everywhere and on every face. Not knowing what to do, I did what I always do in crisis. I couldn't make any art, but I went and looked at art. I paid homage to the dead at the Place de la République and then went to the empty top floor of the Louvre and looked at Rembrandt. Timeless, truthful and human, he always gives me strength.

Autumn is the traditional time for "manifs", when militant Parisians of all political hues and ages take to the streets. Last weekend the Champs Élysées was the scene of barricades and street fighting - the first time in Parisian history, even during the Commune of 1871, that this most sedate of boulevards was the centre of civic rage. Anarchists and agitators of the Far Right infiltrated what was originally meant to be a populist protest against the fuel policies of Monsieur Macron, and it turned very nasty indeed. Cobble stones hurled, burning blockades, teargas and water cannons. Paris came to a full stop. As was the plan. Museum going was out of the question. It also seemed somehow quite wrong

So, it was a good thing for me that I had been wearing down my shoe leather so energetically in the week before. Joan Miró at the Grand Palais was going to be the highlight of my week and I had high expectations of this retrospective. His studio in Mallorca is a place of pilgrimage, and when my parents lived there, he was considered one of the great citizens of Catalonia. Of the other citizen, more anon....His humility and kindness to other artists was legendary.

I know Miró's work at the Fondation Maeght in the South of France very well. Perhaps it needs sunny Mediterranean skies. The dull, beige, crowded, and old-fashioned spaces of the Grand Palais badly serve his work. To me it has always looked better in reproduction than in reality - not a good sign. Room after room of arbitrary meandering black line, zoomorphic blobs in primary colours and whimsical floating discs are ultimately dull to me. I feel the same way these days about his friend Alexander Calder's work which one can see in the Tuileries next door. Heresy, I know....

This show left me feeling empty and agnostic about his work. Pretty, polite, pleasant and polished. All the p's. But I left in a better frame of mind. Miró's last paintings, made in his late 80's, look wonderful here. He jettisons his twinkling in favour of thinking. Charm is replaced by psychic depth. They are huge and minimalist paintings. Full of joie de vivre and compassion. It's a cheering thought - that artists get better in old age.

And talking of artists who get better in old age I almost didn't go to *Picasso Bleu et Rose* at the Musée D'Orsay. Friends and frenemies, Miró and Picasso are reigning together over the museum season. I thought I knew everything about Picasso's early 20's after he arrived in Paris in 1900. I was wrong. Before his radical leap into Cubism in 1907, Picasso is already experimental. A provincial and impoverished young "barceloni" like Miró, Picasso is processing the work of the masters he sees in the big, bad city (Puvis de Chavannes, Degas, Lautrec, Gauguin and Cezanne among others) and he is working out how his skill in drawing, learned at his father's drawing school in Barcelona, can be translated into a new kind of painting. While Miró seems to work the same ideas for decades, Picasso devotes only 6 years to this particular phase of observational realism.

Picasso can be infuriating. He can be virtuosic. He can be arrogant. He can be mean. But he is always interesting. There is sentimentality. There is - perhaps a slightly inauthentic - empathy for the emaciated family groups, the saltimbanques and acrobats, the prostitutes and his fellow artists and lovers. There is some misogyny too. But ultimately there is such seriousness. Every painting is made with complete commitment to its medium. His drawing line is sure and resolute. The reduction in his palette to a range of blues and later to ochres and pinks makes the most of his focus on draughtsmanship. Even if he had never changed his shape - and what a shape shifter he was - he would be deeply significant just for this short period of work.

Picasso was not modest. He had a strong sense of his own importance and his development; a hubristic idea which I think was completely foreign to the humble Joan Miró. Picasso once said that when he decided to become an artist, he didn't know that he would become Picasso. If Miró and Picasso were wearing the *gilets jaunes* last Saturday I think I know which of them would be throwing the cobblestones.