

The oeuvre: symbolology and aesthetic

Symbolology

In the greater part of Monegal's oeuvre, symbolology is the tool used to convey subjective messages about ideas, emotions and concepts. We mainly find the symbolology of his work in his paintings on Biblical, mythological and spiritual subjects, although according to people who knew him well –his children–, Monegal held no preconceived dogmas in this regard, casting a curious gaze on all existence, which concealed for him a great mystery. We also find a certain symbolology in his works dealing with animals.

1. Biblical subjects and figures

Joan Monegal began to deal with Biblical subjects and figures in the 1960s, using different styles and techniques such as oils and tempera, and various supports such as canvas and plaster. The artist deploys his symbolism in these subjects, on many occasions based on iconography, as in the case of the pyramidal shape as a symbol of divine protection or in other instances in the interpretation of such concepts as the all-seeing God.

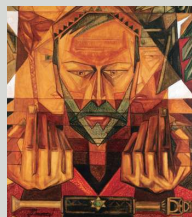
Apostles, ca. 1960, is a work that he carried out on a panel attached to his home in



Sabadell. Here we find a scene with three figures in the style of Monegal's first period, as may be seen in the outlining of these figures with black lines, which are nevertheless finer and less accentuated.

It may also be seen that the figures no longer show the voluptuosity of his first period and are now stylized and elongated. The artist portrays them with their eyes closed as a symbolic expression.

He subsequently did two other religious works: *Creation of the Angels* and *The Forces of Israel*, from the mid 1970s. In both these paintings one sees idealized,



static and geometricized figures. He presents these volumetric geometries both through drawing and the play of colours that he achieves by means of the chromatic variety of his glazes. In both these paintings one sees the pyramidal shape as a symbol of divine protection, in the awareness that it is universally accepted as part of the divine geometry. Ochres

are the dominant tones. One also observes the use of glazes that give rise to a play of colours, and the paintings clearly have a geometricist appearance. In each of them we find the characteristic features of his work, which he himself defined as "my own language, made of transfers and interferences, and of colours, lines

and juxtapositions”, with an evident mastery of the straight line. In *The People of Israel* we find a Star of David that is fractioned but never destroyed, the same as its people. Other symbolic elements here include the Torah with the Star of David.



In his last period, Monegal painted another version of the creation of the angels. In this painting, one sees the evolution of his artistic language. The figures are no longer robust and geometricized but rather are more stylized and highly idealized. The shapes tend to be more rounded, the lines are not so accentuated, and the juxtapositions are softer. The artist adds white to his palette of colours and he makes use again of the pyramidal shape to express the concept of divinity, from the Great Beyond to the earth.



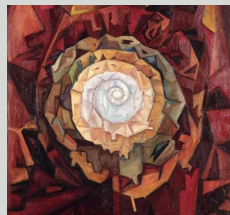
Also dating from Monegal's last period is the painting *Jesus*. This is a work full of symbology in the hands and the face. The large, open welcoming hands are set in the foreground. Within the framework of the concept of the *all-seeing God*, the artist applies the movement used by the Cubists, presenting the frontal deviation of the right eye as if it were in another face and as if it were looking elsewhere. In the background one glimpses a cross. In this work from Joan Monegal's last period we see that he continues to superimpose faces. The lines and juxtapositions of the glazes are softened, however, and the palette of colours shows lighter tones with the addition of white, which he had used very little in his earlier periods.

2. Philosophical and spiritual subjects

Joan Monegal took an interest in philosophical and spiritual subjects of concern to humanity. In these subjects, the artist presented his view of the physical body and the spirit, the passing of time and how time changes the features of our being, both physically and spiritually.

Monegal used different forms of artistic expression to carry out his paintings of philosophical and spiritual subjects, revealing once again his great creative capacity. Works dealing with these subjects include *Life*, *The Carousel of Life* (in two versions), *The Periods of Life*, *The Transition of Puberty*, and *The Wait*. All these paintings were done at different times in the course of the 1970s, evidencing his creative evolution.

Life is the first work that he did on this subject, reflecting on the passage of the



person within the dense physical body in the direction of eternity – of light. Indeed, this is the most abstract work of Monegal's oeuvre, showing a spiral that extends from the density of matter to the light, to eternity, represented by the colour white. With this painting of the body and the spirit, he gives us his view of one of the subjects that have

concerned the people of all civilizations since time immemorial, using an expressive language in which colours and shapes lend meaning to the message.

The Carousel of Life is a subject that the artist dealt with in two versions. Monegal

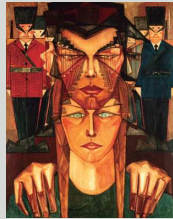


uses the roundabout or merry-go-round as a symbolic element. The carousel is a children's amusement ride in which the seats are in the form of animals or vehicles.

Joan Monegal chooses to depict wooden horses, which are beings that have symbolic and expressive connotations for him. All the symbology of the painting is arranged around the central cylindrical shaft, which may be interpreted as life itself. The little girl who is seated thus holds on to life in a posture of innocence, an innocence which is emphasized

by the colour of her dress. In the iconography of art, light blue is a colour that is associated with innocence. The young man, who is sure of himself, feels no need to grasp it. The adult, aware of the passing of time, holds on to the shaft once again, with his eyes reflexively closed. Lastly, old age, represented by the colour symbology of lilac (maturity), is depicted as an elderly man with a bent back and his head lowered – his is a body fatigued by the passing of time and, curiously enough, he clutches the central shaft more closely than any of the other figures. The artist conveys this symbolically by enlarging the old man's arm and his hands gripping life. Stylistically, one may observe the expressive language that Monegal developed in the mid 1970s. The figures are idealized, voluminous and geometricized in both the drawing and the play of colours. There is a preference for a palette of ochre tones. The movement of the wooden horses, like the passing of time, is interpreted

by animals that are repeated almost systematically on the right-hand side of the painting, as if they formed part of a filmed sequence, in a clear nod to Futurism.



The Transition of Puberty is a view of how the passing of time produces different periods in life, running from childhood to youth and maturity. This painting makes the period of youth more visible with the central figures, who turn their backs on childhood's little neatly uniformed tin soldiers, taking hold of the world of adults.

The human figures are completely idealized and show a geometricized and hieratic appearance. The composition is perfectly centred, arranging the same components on both sides and presenting a play of colours in the tin soldiers' uniforms.

In *The Wait*, Monegal returns to the concept of time, but here he presents the idea



that time passes for the birth of a new life. In this painting we see a woman who awaits the birth of her child, a child represented by a prominent black circle of hair in the woman's womb. The wait is symbolized by a clock. Indeed, clocks have been an iconographic element symbolizing the passing of time throughout the course of art history. This painting, which was

done after the two previously mentioned works, highlights an evolution in Monegal's artistic language. Stylistically, the figure continues to be idealized and yet it is no longer robust but rather elongated. At the same time it is no longer geometricized, showing rounder shapes. In this work the transparencies play an important role, giving the painting the rhythm of a geometry and an interplay of colours.

The Periods of Life is another version of the subject of the passing of time. It was



done in the artist's latter years, showing his stylistic evolution in the predominance of curved lines. Geometricization appears here, no longer in the juxtaposition of lines or in transparencies, but rather in the fact that Monegal draws the

figures with clearly marked fractions of chromatic contrast. It is one of his most expressive paintings, in which he gives the faces a great eloquence and clearly depicts the decadence of the human body –specifically the face– due to the passing of time on the path to death. All the figures are embraced by arms which emerge from the grey figure representing Death, present from the moment of our birth. Time is unstoppable in our existence: a human is born, matures and finally declines.

3. The subject of decadence in the human condition

For Joan Monegal, authenticity is a matter of importance and he stated this in relation to his painting: “Just like everyone, I am imperfect. I am full of contradictions and my work is too. What matters above all else, however, is that my work is authentic... I paint basically for myself and I search for truth, my truth.” Even more, we think that authenticity and self-consistency were the artist’s watchwords with respect to life itself.

He did two versions of *The Faces of Falsehood*. In this painting, which was the last of the two, the accentuated straight lines of his first period and juxtapositions of glazes are no longer to be seen. The shapes are rounded and he maintains his predilection for a palette of ochre tones, which characterises his whole oeuvre. He presents the faces with the symbology of markedly white eyes, surely referring to a concept of non-verbal language: when a person tells a lie, he does not look you in the eyes. Aesthetically, Monegal superimposes several faces on different planes, the most visible one being the face in the foreground.



The earlier version uses a very different language, which goes to highlight the artist’s great creative capacity. In the case at hand, the figures are more rounded –a feature that may be observed in his last works– and white has been added. In this painting, the eyes are completely lacking in expression: they are totally idealized and some of them would appear to belong to the underworld. Likewise, some of the faces resemble carnival masks.

4. History and mythology



Student and Charlemagne does not belong to any of the categories we have dealt with up to now. It is a subject clearly referring to Andorra as indicated by the name of Charlemagne, who may be identified as the figure in the centre dressed in armour, flanked by two soldiers and with a whole army behind him. A boy is studying in the foreground, concentrated on the book before him. Charlemagne is considered the figure who,

with his vast empire, established a common European identity amidst a resurgence of the Latin arts and culture.

Joan Monegal did a small painting on the subject of Greek mythology –*Leda*– and another titled *Ophelia*.

According to myth, Leda was bathing in a lake near the river Eurotas when she was seduced by a dazzling white swan. This swan was Zeus, who had taken this form to possess her.

Joan Monegal's *Leda* is portrayed in a language of rounded shapes characteristic of his last period. The background is of a bluish grey tone –an uncommon colour in this artist's palette–, representing the lake where Leda was bathing. With sinuous white lines and grey shadings, a swan is depicted, approaching its beak to Leda's lips.



Creative expression: aesthetic

One of the themes most cultivated by Joan Monegal over the course of his artistic production was that of animals and, among them all, horses in particular. The depiction of this animal clearly has two aims – on the one hand, aesthetic, and on the other, symbolic. When painting animals, he usually applies a creative language which differs from that used for the human figure. While people are usually given a hieratic appearance, the artist shows great interest in expressing the movement of animals. It may be noted that this movement undergoes an evolution, coming to reflect the aesthetic postulates of Futurism.

1. The subject of animals

a. Horses

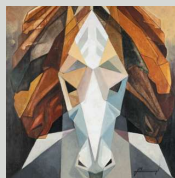
Equine art or the artistic depiction of horses, is one of the most ancient art forms practised by humankind in all periods and in all cultures, from the West to the East, going all the way back to the times of the prehistoric caves. The horse may be represented as a purely aesthetic element, as in the case of the German Expressionist Franz Marc, or else for both aesthetic and symbolic reasons.

According to Antoni Pol Solé, in the work of Joan Monegal the depiction of this animal is marked by a clear symbology. “His horses display all the strength and wild energy which can be tamed and channelled or calmed artistically through the shapes contained in his transfers and interferences.”

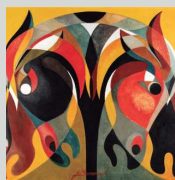
The horse was a figure full of aesthetic and symbolic connotations for Monegal and this is why, over the course of his career, he painted them on different occasions, either as the main subject or accompanying some other pictorial story, such as *The Carousel of Life*.

The representation of horses is quite different in Monegal's creative language between one painting and another over the course of time. During his training at the Fine Arts Academy of Sant Jordi, he painted *Stampede of Horses*, which reflects a more classic and formal aesthetic. Subsequently, his creative language evolved towards more contemporary aesthetics associated with Cubism and Futurism. The expressive wealth of the various aesthetic approaches between *Horse in Motion*, *Stampede of Horses* and *Horses* reveals the different creative resources and the various aesthetics with which he worked.

The aesthetic prevails over symbology in *Horse in Motion*, without excluding it. It is aesthetically quite a beautiful work, with geometricist shapes, the very clear and distinct white of the central figure and all the chromatisms accompanying it in blues, greys and pinks, which contrast with the ochres of the “horse's motion”. The aesthetic solution adopted to show the movement of the animal's head is the central composition of the horse, depicting on its left and right a sequence of horse heads, which recalls the Futurist solutions for expressing the dynamics of movement.



Stampede of Horses. This picture, which bears the same title as the one he painted as a student, shows a clear evolution towards a more avant-garde language. The angular lines in the drawing of the animals' faces, the geometrical decomposition and the play of colours give the movement a pure dynamism.



Horses. In this painting we see the clear geometrical decomposition of the animal into geometrical volumes accentuated by the likewise geometrical contrast. This is a picture in which colour takes on an outstanding importance. The shapes are rounded, making them quite different from those of the works discussed above.

Monegal showed an interest in painting the horse as an aesthetic and symbolic figure, and also worked on this animal in other art forms such as sculpture.



Horse is a glazed ceramic sculpture in which the artist presents the animal very schematically and with volumetric shapes within an aesthetic tending towards a certain primitivism.

Over the course of his career, Joan Monegal experimented with different materials and art forms. In his bidimensional works, he thus explores oils, watercolours, tempera and drawing. In his three-dimensional works, we find that he uses bronze and glazed ceramic. Even though sculpture is not the main discipline in which he developed his artistic vision, we can recognize a masterful knowledge of this art form in both the volumetric concept and the working of the material.

b. Swans, fighting bulls and cocks

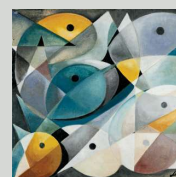
In addition to horses, Monegal was drawn to the pictorial representation of other animals. Their depiction shows clear aesthetic connotations, even if there may be some symbology as well. In all these works, however, the artist makes patent his intention to express movement as well as to experiment with aesthetics like those postulated by Cubism.



Swan in Motion presents once again Monegal's wish to express the animal's movement. In this work one may clearly observe what the artist called an "integrating transparency", since the swan is integrated into the forest that surrounds it. The swan's movement here is notable: Joan Monegal adopts the solution of depicting the animal almost as a sequence.



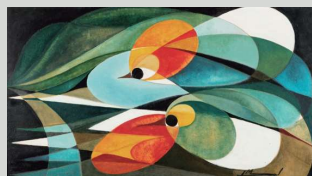
In dealing with another type of animal, the artist painted *Three Heads of Fighting Bulls*. This work is set within the Cubist aesthetic, as may be seen from its decomposition of geometrical volumes that play with the various tones of colour.



Heads of Sparrows is the most Cubist work painted by Monegal since not only does it show a geometrical decomposition but it is also a flat painting in which all perspective is eliminated. The geometrical shapes are strengthened by the juxtaposition of lines and colours. The palette of colours is dominated by blue and yellow tones, which are unusual in the artist's painting. Aesthetically speaking,

this is a very lovely picture with its interplay of curved and straight lines.

Cubism is the most significant artistic movement of the 20th century. It changed



the concept of beauty by creating a new language that entails a different relation between the work of art and the spectator, the latter being obliged to reconstruct mentally what he or she is seeing. Indeed, Cubism disconnects itself completely from

reality to become a form of painting that channels the expression of ideas.



Lastly, the artist dealt with the subject of cockfights, a widespread activity in South America. In *Cockfight*, the decomposition into geometrical volumes gives way to movement and the interplay of colours. The result is a picture of great elegance

in terms of composition and chromatism.

2. Genre painting

As has been seen, in his first period Joan Monegal showed an interest in subjects of social realism such as *Old Men*, *Farm Girl*, and *Gleaners*. In the 1970s he took up social realism again, but this time he explicitly dealt with trades. In particular, these are trades linked to the sea and to land and he dignifies them in paintings which show a surprising aesthetic diversity. These are pictures full of sensitivity, divested of anecdotes, in which the creative language is marked by its eloquence. Monegal's paintings on this subject include *Harvester*, *The Bread Oven*, *Picking Fruit* and three different pictures entitled *Fisherman*.



The Fishwife. The figure is not completely decomposed into geometrical shapes: it may be clearly seen that a woman is depicted. Even so, it tends towards the total geometricization of some parts of the figure, such as the breast in a circle, the triangular nose, and the trunk and arms in geometrical volumes. The other elements accompanying the figures, such as the fish basket or the sails of the vessels, give a geometricist view of the composition, a view that is strengthened by the chromatic contrast of the shapes. In

this picture one also observes the tendency towards flat composition influenced by Cubism.

In the formal concepts of the figure, *Fishwife* approaches the Cubism of Fernand Léger, above all in his *Woman Holding a Vase*, from 1927. The similarities between *Fishwife* and *Woman Holding a Vase* are the woman's breast depicted as a circle, a robust female figure, the woman's long black hair, her geometrical nose, the shape of her eyes, and the enlargement of her hands. These are stylistic aspects that characterise the French artist's way of depicting women.

A comparison of the two paintings gives us a clear example of how, upon considering specific details of the works of other artists or artistic styles, Monegal takes what interests him and expresses it through his own creative language.

In *Fisherman* and *Harvester*, both painted around 1975, Joan Monegal uses a creative



language that lies close to the one used by the Ibero-American artists. *Fisherman* presents a man's face with geometricized features in the foreground. The setting appears to be a port because one sees some anchored vessels and some boats

sailing in the background. Despite its being geometricized, however, the face is quite expressive and contrasts with the various yellow tones of the raincoat. The angularity of the face and the treatment of the garment dialogue with the aesthetic of Vela Zanetti, a Spanish artist who emigrated to the Dominican Republic during the Spanish Civil War. The works of both these artists recall the aesthetic to be seen in Diego Rivera's various versions of the Flower Seller, in the sense that he situates the figure close up in the foreground, as if zooming in on her.



The Baker Woman is a painting that is aesthetically very pleasing. It belongs to the last paintings done by Monegal. Here we can see Cubism in the geometrical decomposition of the rounded shapes of the bread and in the nose, forehead and hair of the figure. The woman has her eyes closed, as if blessing and giving thanks for the most prized of all goods, bread.

She holds the bread to her breast, completely crossing her arms. This embrace is unquestionably intensified by the long enlarged hands which once again, as in the previous painting, stand out within the work as a whole. There is a clear influence of El Greco in this case. The treatment of the hands in many of Monegal's paintings

plays an outstanding role in the overall painting, underscoring the dialogue that is maintained with El Greco's symbology of the hands.

Aside from these works of social character, Monegal painted *Chess Player*. It is



interesting to analyse this work because it presents some characteristic traits of the artist's creative language. On the one hand, one clearly sees what Monegal called the "integrating transparency". The figure and the horse (the chess piece equivalent to the "knight" in English) are perfectly integrated by means of glazes. On the other hand, there is a juxtaposition of lines and a decomposition of the figure into geometrical forms, while the hands here are also of special significance within the work as a whole.

3. Aesthetic of light

A large part of the paintings by Joan Monegal show relatively little interest in aspects relating to light, approaching in this way the postulates of the avant-gardes mentioned above. The colour gradings which can be observed may rather be attributed to interplays of colour.

Even so, Monegal painted a series of works revealing an evident interest in light. Within the framework of this aesthetic of light, we find *The Fishwife*, which has been discussed above, as well as *Seascape* and *Looking at Stars*.

Joan Monegal devoted very little attention to the landscape – in fact, only three



paintings on this subject by the artist are known. *Seascape* is a painting in which Monegal expressed an interest in showing the light achieved by glazes that lighten the tones and shadows. This work also has an interesting composition, with superimposed elements such as the sails of the little boats on the pitcher and the fruit, resulting in an optical interplay of colours and shapes. In this painting one sees quite clearly what the artist called the "integrating transparency".



It is believed that Monegal drew inspiration from a sculpture by Vigeland to paint *Looking at Stars*. He surely gained an acquaintance with Vigeland's work on the trip he made to the Nordic countries in his youth, and he expressed his admiration

for this artist. Indeed, Vigeland's work and that of Monegal dialogue on such interests as the creative interpretation of the passing of time, and physical decline.

Looking at Stars is one of the few pieces in which one finds light within the figure. Here, the faces –and especially the one in the centre– are of lighter tones, making the shadows evident with the darker tones of the hair.

4. Evolution of the creative language

In Monegal's last works we see a notable change in the creative language both of



shapes and colours, and of the figures. In his latter years, his palette became more diversified, adding blue, green, reddish and yellow tones as well as white – a colour that was practically inexistent in his previous period. The juxtapositions of straight lines become curves and, generally speaking, the curved line comes to dominate in his drawing.



Harlequins in Blue is a piece that exemplifies quite clearly the evolution of Joan Monegal's last works. It has undulating and rounded shapes, white has been added to the palette of colours, and the stylized figures reflect, as always, the idea that they are the fruit of his imagination and not of reality.

Conclusion

This study presents over 40 works by Joan Monegal, including paintings and drawings. In some cases they illustrate the artist's evolution, while in others they shed light on his demanding spirit with respect to both concept and aesthetic. Both these aspects convey very personal messages, from either the philosophical or intellectual standpoints, or in creative terms. What's more, all these works are key pieces within the scope of Monegal's artistic production.

What do we mean by speaking of works that are demanding in concept and aesthetic?

Skill in drawing and painting do not suffice to ensure the conveyance of an artist's concerns to the spectator, nor to make a work deserving of study. The work must be created from essence. Now, essence is something abstract in the human being, and to give shape to this abstraction in art is a thing of great complexity: it can only be done under a set of conditions that we call necessary items, as listed below. For his part, Joan Monegal transmits essence because all these indispensable items of art converge in him.

1. ***Privileged mind.*** Many of Monegal's works called for a prior intellectuality, from which an idea was developed. Many ideas are abstract, lacking any image. To provide an image requires a considerable intellectual effort, an effort that must subsequently be transferred to a physical form – in this case the surface of a sheet of paper so that it may later be painted with tempera. It is often said that artists have a different way of seeing things than the rest of us and this vision is the fruit of a privileged mind and a great sensitivity.
2. ***Sensitivity.*** Looking at what surrounds us with a sensitive spirit gives rise to authenticity, which is something personal and intimate in each person. Among other things, sensitivity is what gives us a special character with respect to others. However, sensitivities may coincide and this is why, in art, we feel affinities with some works while with others we do not. We feel strongly attracted to certain works and that causes them to become individual or collective icons. Joan Monegal created works with a great sensitivity in terms of their concept or aesthetic.
3. ***Conveyance of the recognition and development of the mind, and transmission of sensitivity, to the expressive medium – in this case paint.*** The recognition that within oneself there is a part that seeks to develop as a being through creative expression, is a very intense and almost vital feeling. Joan Monegal had this feeling, which was intense enough to deeply impress the people, his children, who accompanied him in his life and who today, post mortem, wish to share it with others. It is considered that his courage in developing his mind and sensitivity to create his paintings was an enormous act of generosity: a generosity that enriches other individuals and groups.

4. ***Final result: the oeuvre.*** Joan Monegal left us a splendid legacy to which no one who sees it feels indifferent. In some case the spectator must make an effort to recognize abstract concepts expressed through symbols, yet it is in this very recognition that one finds the genius of the work. In other pieces, the creative beauty of a cockfight or of the fluttering of some birds centres our attention for their contemplation. These are worldly topics that are presented from a creative perspective in the form of pure beauty.
5. ***Richness of the individual vis-à-vis society as a whole.*** Joan Monegal always wished to be self-consistent and authentic, developing an oeuvre that is very personal and intimate in both the treatment of his subjects and in his language. From this standpoint one must also consider his work as something absolutely unique.
6. ***Culture.*** Joan Monegal's legacy unquestionably enriches the artistic life of Andorra. His painting, with all the special items we have mentioned above, is by no means banal or accidental, but rather just the opposite. Consequently, it is an element that delineates the path followed by art in Andorra in the course of the 20th century.