

MARUJA MALLO



Maruja Mallo, El mar, 1933. © Maruja Mallo, VICCAI, Santander, 2025.

MASK AND COMPAS

Paintings and drawings from 1924 to 1982

12/04
14/09
2025

CENIKU
BOTÍN
CENTRO DE

MUSEO NACIONAL
CENTRO DE ARTE
REINA SOFIA



GOBIERNO
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO
DE CULTURA

Tickets at
centrobotin.org

***CENTRO BOTÍN PRESENTS MARUJA MALLO: MASK
AND COMPASS. PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS FROM
1924 TO 1982', THE ARTIST'S MOST
COMPREHENSIVE RETROSPECTIVE TO DATE***

- Maruja Mallo (Viveiro, Galicia, 1902 - Madrid, 1995) was a significant artist of the Spanish avant-garde and a leading female artist belonging to Spain's 'Generation of '27', a 20th century movement of artists which comprised of figures such as Federico García Lorca, Luis Buñuel, and Salvador Dalí. Her work blurred the boundaries between the popular and the modern, between aesthetics and politics. She was a visionary artist who succeeded in reflecting the concerns of her time and anticipating many of ours.
- Co-produced with the Reina Sofía National Art Museum and curated by Patricia Molins from the museum's Temporary Exhibitions Department, the exhibition features over ninety paintings and drawings, spanning the artist's entire career from the magical realism of her early years to the fantastical geometric configurations of her later works.
- It includes works from the collections of MNCARS; the Art Institute of Chicago; the MNAM Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris; the Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales de Montevideo, in Uruguay; the Museo Benito Quinquela Martín and the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano, both in Buenos Aires; the Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes Rosa Galisteo, in Santa Fe (Argentina); the Asociación Colección Arte Contemporáneo - Museo Patio Herreriano, in Valladolid; the Provincial Museum of Lugo, as well as other important national and international private collections, allowing for a complete analysis of the artist's career.
- As part of Centro Botín's commitment to offering new perspectives on the great masters of the 20th century, this exhibition features documents, photographs and writings by the artist herself, held in the Lafuente Archive, among other collections, which show her work process and theoretical context, as well as capturing the extraordinary circulation that her work found among her contemporaries.

Santander, 12 April 2025 - Centro Botín kicks off its exhibition programme with the show MARUJA MALLO: Mask and Compass. Paintings and Drawings from 1924 to 1982, which presents over ninety paintings by the artist – as well as drawings – which trace her entire career from the magical realism of her early years to the geometric and fantastical configurations of her later works. From 12 April to 14 September 2025, on the second floor of Fundación Botín's art centre in Santander, visitors can discover this comprehensive retrospective of one of the most outstanding and unique figures of the Generation of '27, the influential group of artists and writers based in Madrid that included Rafael Alberti, Salvador Dalí, Federico García Lorca, Luis Buñuel, the writer Rosa Chacel, and the philosopher María Zambrano.

The personal and heterogeneous artistic production of Maruja Mallo (Viveiro, Galicia, 1902 – Madrid, 1995) blurred the boundaries between the popular and the avant-garde, between the aesthetic and the political. She **was a visionary artist who succeeded in reflecting the concerns of her time and anticipating many of ours**. Fundamental to all her work is the essential universality of human aspirations above economic, racial or sexual differences, and the consideration of the world as an ecological system in which everything is interrelated and must be preserved, as well as the power of art to reveal unknown aspects of reality.

Curated by Patricia Molins, a member of the Department of Temporary Exhibitions at the Reina Sofía National Art Museum, this exhibition features works from collections such as MNCARS; the

Art Institute of Chicago; the MNAM Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris; the National Museum of Visual Arts in Montevideo, Uruguay; the Benito Quinquela Martín Museum and the Museum of Latin American Art, both in Buenos Aires; the Rosa Galisteo Provincial Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe (Argentina); the Contemporary Art Collection Association – Patio Herreriano Museum in Valladolid; the Provincial Museum of Lugo, as well as other important national and international private collections, which allow for a complete analysis of the artist's career. The exhibition is also **accompanied by a publication, in Spanish and English, co-published by Fundación Botín, MNCARS and the publishing house This Side Up**, which focuses on the telluric and theatrical aspects and theoretical basis of the artist's work. It is illustrated with works from the exhibition and includes new texts by the Argentinian researcher Alejandra Zanetta, the American artist and writer Johanna Hedva and the exhibition's curator, in addition to the artist's own writings, some of which have remained unpublished until now. The catalogue also includes a biography of Mallo written by Juan Pérez de Ayala, one of the leading and earliest scholars of her work.

The Woman as the Protagonist

Mallo began her work during the period of economic crisis prior to the Civil War, in which artists and intellectuals showed a strong social and aesthetic commitment to revitalising the country an extricating art from the confusion following earlier avant-garde movements. In the context of the interwar period in which women artists had to construct their image as artists and as modern, active and professional women, Mallo made women the protagonists of her paintings, creating a previously unseen female worldview from the perspective of the modern woman. In her work she creates a feminine epic that anticipates those of the feminist artists of the seventies, which had been absent from previous periods when the feminine imaginary had been constructed by men.

Mallo found the source of inspiration for her first works in the joyful and naïve colourism of popular art as well as in the dynamism of forms of entertainment such as cinema, music and theatre. This interest in the popular evolved towards the rural, the land and the people's work, incorporating syncretic religiosity, the mixture of races and the exuberant landscapes in the paintings she produced during her exile in South America, where she went after the start of the Civil War. In those works, she maintained the search for order and measure, which she had already shown in her earlier works as the guiding principles of her paintings.

Her work is clearly organised in serial form, which she maintained throughout most of her life and which this exhibition has adopted. Within the order and the measure of her painting there is an almost obsessive concern for finding a constant logic. Mallo's settings move from the working-class neighbourhoods of Madrid to the outskirts of the city, ending up in the cosmos, the ultimate non-place, delving into the chain that links human beings with the furthest possible reaches, the cell or the universe.

Exhibition Tour

Working chronologically, the exhibition begins with her time at the San Fernando Academy, where Mallo studied with teachers such as Chicharro and Romero de Torres, whose post-impressionist influence is present in her early paintings. The 1925 publication of the book 'Magical Realism' by Franz Roh had a profound effect on her generation, reintroducing the new realism (anti-narrative and inspired by popular culture) as a reaction against cubism and abstraction. **Two early paintings by the artist – *Indigenous Woman (1924-1925)* and *Portrait of a Lady with a Fan (c. 1926)*, both from the Provincial Museum of Lugo – foreshadow two themes that would become central to Mallo's career: an interest in other cultures and the portrayal of modern women.**

The exhibition continues with *The Festivals (1927-1928)*, Mallo's first personal works that participate in the debate – fundamental for the Generation of '27 – about the relationship between the avant-garde, popular art, social regeneration and tradition. The composition, based on a geometric and symbolic division of the painting, is inspired by the relationship between figure and backdrop in popular theatre, such as in puppet shows, and in the cinematographic concept of simultaneity and superimposition. In them, people from very different classes and races are mockingly portrayed: women disguised as black angels, kings and magistrates made of papier-mâché, tiny puppet theatres of bullfighters and manolas, and intellectuals riding pigs pulling a carousel that transports them to alternate worlds, such as the pyramids of the desert or China.

It is worth highlighting that this is the first time that the five festival scenes have been brought together since they were published in Occidente magazine in 1928, including *The Magician / Pim Pam Pum* (1926), from the Art Institute of Chicago, and *Kermesse* (1928), from the MNAM Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. In contrast to these, is the exhibition of the series *Sewers and Belfries* (1930–32). If the festivals captured vital humanity, in these the human figure only appears as an imprint or residue, with the focus of attention on the material and its different textures. With paintings such as *Earth and Excrement* (1932), from the MNCARS, or *The Scarecrow* (1930), from a private collection, Mallo approaches surrealism to present an obituary and disturbing vision of nature. Alongside these, visitors will discover her Mineral and Plant *Architectures* (1933), in which Mallo reduces the figures to anatomical lines or sections while focusing her attention on the generous treatment of the pictorial material, which she applies with pronounced textures in an attempt to break down the dichotomy between figure and background and give prominence to both. Meanwhile, in *Rural Architectures* (1933–1935) she draws the skeletons or shells of silos, haystacks and other ephemeral constructions used for harvesting grain, which once again is the result of a conciliatory and paradoxical attempt: plant life as inanimate and mineral life as animate. Matter remains the protagonist, but it is subjected to geometry, a process that culminates in ceramics, where earth takes on a constructive rather than a destructive value, as in the works brought together in the section *Sewers and Belfries*.

It was in 1932, in Paris, where the artist studied set design and theatre. There, she met Picasso and Miró, and began to take an interest in space as a three-dimensional backdrop for the work instead of the pictorial plane. Her most important theatrical collaboration, the set design for *Clavileño* (1936), was a ballet by Rodolfo Halffter that was never performed at the Residencia de Estudiantes because of the outbreak of the Civil War. The photographs of the stage models and costumes, which are on display in the exhibition room overlooking the bay, allow us to understand the radical nature of the proposal. They are accompanied by a replica of the theatre with basketwork figures.

Mallo also conceives of her photographs as theatrical acts, not just the obviously performative ones, such as the series of photos with skulls in the mountains outside Madrid, but also those in which she represents herself with her works and other symbolic elements, such as compasses, butterflies (a symbol of metamorphosis) and maps.

The exhibition also dedicates a space to *The Religion of Work* (1937–1939), displaying archaic images of goddesses or offering ladies, with their faces surrounded by ears of wheat or nets, images that can also be seen in the work *Song of the Spikes* (1939), at the MNCARS, or in *The Net* (1928). With these works she began what she considered to be 'a renaissance', a new classicism, understanding art as salvation from time and the destruction of war. As Mallo herself stated, the series arose from her 'materialist faith in the triumph of fish, in the reign of the wheat spike'. In these human architectures, hands – instruments of work and of contact – do not seem to capture but rather link up with the fish and the spikes of wheat, with the nets and the sickles, fusing with them and mutually protecting each other. It is at this moment that Mallo begins to use a low light source that shines on the figures from the side. It is a light typical of the beginning and end of the day, that hybrid moment of dawn or dusk.

Her *Living Nature* series (1941–1943) clearly suggests sensual and colourful female figures through compositions with shells and flowers representing the animal and plant kingdoms as a metaphor for the human body, and which seem to float above distant land and sea surfaces. From this moment onwards, one of her main concerns is incorporating the fourth dimension into her paintings, following the findings of contemporary physics, which replace the static conception of space with a space/time dynamic. In paintings such as *Living Nature II* (1941–1942), from the National Museum of Visual Arts in Montevideo (Uruguay), or *Living Nature XII* (1943), from the María José Jove Foundation, the marine elements criss-crossed by plants take on a sexualised and organic aspect that recalls the common origin of life and the universe.

This exhibition focuses on her work produced during her exile in Buenos Aires and her travels, starting in 1937, through the Pacific, Uruguay and, above all, Brazil, where Mallo was fascinated by the landscapes and people, with their physical variety and cultural and racial syncretism. From then on, she set out to create a systematic method of representation of a new humanity, proposing this syncretic concept also as a response to the racism and nationalism of the 1930s. In her quest to incorporate circular spaces and times, at once present and eternal, she depicts heads, masks

and acrobats as symbolic and idealised forms, stemming from her belief in art as a perfected vision of the real, with an eye to the future. She first produced static heads in which she experimented with the fusion between races, between races and animals, and between sexes, such as *The Human Deer* (1948), from the Benito Quinquela Martín Museum in Buenos Aires, and *Gold* (1952), from the Contemporary Art Collection Association – Patio Herreriano Museum. Her *Masks*, a contrast of positive and negative emotions, bear the mark of her studies of Freud, which she began during these years. Many of them pair intimidating figures with others who seem perplexed, inhibited, which may also be related to her condition as an exile, living in two worlds: the present one and the one she has left behind.

In 1962, she returned to Spain, a trip she had been planning since the end of the 1940s, and produced her last series: *Dwellers of the Void* and *Travellers of the Ether*. Mallo felt that her journeys – real or imagined – crossing the Andes and traversing the Pacific had been transcendental experiences, bringing her into contact with other supra-human dimensions. Her interest in science, combined with her interest in the universe (she said that when she arrived in South America she had progressed from geography to cosmography), led her to culminate her changes of location in the creation of infinite sidereal spaces; the circle gives way to more complex, snaking geometries, as can be seen in several of the paintings in the MNCARS. The figures become beings transformed by symbiotic or metamorphic processes that reconcile the complete evolutionary process, ranging from cells to animals and space machines.

The exhibition ends with the works she created during her final years, when she continued with these series and recovered motifs from her earlier periods, combining them in drawings or paintings with a markedly symbolic colour (shades of blue, red and yellow). At the same time, Mallo had become a popular figure and an important representative of the Generation of '27, who were just returning from exile. She recovered the cartoons she had made for the covers of *Revista de Occidente*, the most important intellectual publication before the Civil War, and in 1979 she produced a series of engravings which are displayed alongside those covers and photographic and audiovisual testimonies of that period.

****This exhibition is co-produced with the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, where it can be seen from 7 October 2025 to 16 March 2026.**

.....

Centro Botín

Centro Botín, designed by architect Renzo Piano, is Fundación Botín's most significant project. An international art centre that aims to offer a fresh perspective to the art world, its social mission is to enhance the creativity of all visitors through the arts, in order to foster human, economic, social and cultural development. It boasts an ambitious exhibition programme featuring both solo and group presentations by international artists and Fundación Botín grant recipients. Its educational programme, developed in collaboration with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence over more than 12 years, comprises artistic and cultural activities designed to stimulate curiosity, imagination and creativity among all audiences, encouraging play and learning through the arts. Additionally, the Centro Botín is an integral part of daily life for local residents, contributing to the strengthening of the local social and cultural fabric. It serves as a meeting place that enlivens the city's life through art, music, cinema, theatre, literature and dance.

For More Information:
Fundación Botín. María Cagigas
mcagigas@fundacionbotin.org
Tel.: 942 226 072

Sutton. Elise Hammond (International press)
elise@suttoncomms.com
Tel.: +44 (0) 78 8973 3757