

Exhibition October 8, 2025–March 16, 2026

Sabatini Building, Floor 1

Maruja Mallo

Mask and Compass



Sorpresa del trigo (*Wheat Surprise*), 1936. Private collection

**MUSEO NACIONAL
CENTRO DE ARTE
REINA SOFIA**



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Maruja Mallo (Viveiro, 1902–Madrid, 1995) is one of the most significant figures of twentieth-century Spanish art. She was a member of the Generation of '27 with links to the Vallecas School and the Constructive Art Group and was deeply marked by the trauma of the Civil War and exile. Her art and personality defy all attempts at classification. Her painting can be read as an exercise in autonomy and freedom bringing together a variety of styles, influences, and techniques not confined by the precepts of the avant-garde nor by the motifs of Spanish classicism. *Maruja Mallo: Mask and Compass*, the title of the exhibition organized by the Museo Reina Sofía and the Fundación Botín, condenses two of the themes that make the artist's production so singular: the mask as invocation, a questioning of identity, and an emblem of transformation, and the compass as a guarantee of harmony and as a guide for the geometric rigor that governs her work.

In her early phase, Mallo created a new notion of “the popular,” which she defined in her own words as “the lyrical representation of the creative force of man.” In the late 1920s, she began her *Estampas* (Pictures) and *Verbenas* (Fairs) (1927–1928), dynamic, energetic scenes that indulged her fascination with popular festivities without succumbing to the pitfalls that trap some folklorists. In the *Verbenas*, she produced a vibrant, multifaceted portrait of different cultures, traditions, and social classes, as well as of intellectuals of the period like Juan Ramón Jiménez and Ramón María del Valle-Inclán. Full of detail and unreal presences, they become narratives in which Mallo comments on the social and political life of the time. The *Estampas*, on the other hand, portray magicians, angels, Christmas motifs, and fairground attractions. These monumental compositions laden with social content reclaim the carnival and the popular fiesta as ideal democratic spaces that dilute differences. We see this, for example, in *Verbenas de la Pascua* (Christmas Fair) (1927), which places the bourgeoisie and servants on the same plane.



Verbenas de la Pascua (Christmas Fair), 1927. Private collection, Buenos Aires

In the series *Cloacas y campanarios* (*Sewers and Bell Towers*) (1929–1932), Mallo abandoned the vitalist depiction of human figures, whose presence is now discernible only in traces left behind and remnants of bones. The apocalyptic outlook of this series with its harsh, dry, deserted landscapes—where the artist plays with the confusion between the animate and the inanimate, as in *Antro de fósiles* (*Fossil Den*) (1930)—can be interpreted as the dark underside of the *Estampas* and *Verbenas*. It is here that her work comes closest to surrealism, which she thought possessed a “destructive capacity.”

During the early 1930s, Mallo enjoyed growing prestige. She contributed vignettes to the *Revista de Occidente*, exhibited her work at the Galerie Pierre in Paris (where she met Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, and André Breton), and poured herself wholeheartedly into the Second Republic’s educational project. She taught freehand drawing and composition at the Instituto Arévalo, and she established ties with the Vallecas School alongside Alberto Sánchez, Benjamín Palencia, Pablo Neruda, and Miguel



Espantapájaros (Scarecrow), 1930. Jake & Hélène Marie Shafran

Hernández. Interested in material culture, she created a series of plates during that period for the Escuela de Cerámica (School of Ceramics) in Madrid that were based on work by the mathematician Matila Ghyka, which she probably was familiar with thanks to Joaquín Torres-García's Constructive Art Group. In 1936, with the Civil War looming, she took part in three important exhibitions: the *Exposició Logicofobista* in Barcelona, *L'Art espagnol contemporain* in Paris, and the Spanish pavilion at the 20th Venice Biennale.

The start of the war took Mallo by surprise in Bueu, a Galician village whose fishing tradition she recorded in a sketchbook. Thanks to the poet Gabriela Mistral, then the Chilean consul in Portugal, the artist managed to escape to Lisbon. She set sail from the Lisbon port at the beginning of 1937 to take up residence in Buenos Aires, where she produced the rest of her work. The war thwarted all of Mallo's expectations, at a time when she was



Estrellas de mar (Starfish), ca. 1956. Colección ABANCA

regarded, together with Benjamín Palencia, as one of the foremost artists on the Spanish scene. In exile, despite these difficulties, she did not lose the vitality that defined her *Estampas*, and she began a phase of political commitment marked by the series *La religión del trabajo* (*The Religion of Work*) (1936–1939), a set of large-format portraits in honor of the working woman, from the farming women of the countryside to the fisherwomen of the coasts. Statuesque heads and bodies with harmonious proportions celebrate the strength of the net, the wheat stalk, and manual labor. *Sorpresa del trigo* (*Wheat Surprise*) (1936), the work that opens the series, was inspired by the sight of a woman holding up stalks of wheat during a May Day demonstration in Madrid.

In exile, Mallo joined groups that supported the Republic and reencountered old friends like Ramón Gómez de la Serna, who had once described her as “the woman with twenty souls,” and



Naturaleza viva XIV (Living Nature XIV), 1943.
Colección Navarro-Velero

Pablo Neruda, who had shared her aesthetic adventures. She also had dealings with other Spanish artists like Jorge de Oteiza and Luis Seoane. In Buenos Aires, besides continuing to explore the visual possibilities of painting, she also turned to muralism, theater, and writing. In 1938, she published the essay “The Popular in Spanish Visual Art Through My Work,” in which she surveyed all of her oeuvre up to that point and stressed the political power of the popular as a universal language capable of subverting the established order.

Her interest in the mythical dimension of the female body, which began with *La religión del trabajo*, continued to unfold in the formal exploration she carried out in the series *Cabezas de mujer* (*Woman's Heads*) (1941–1952) and *Máscaras* (*Masks*) (1948–1957), as well as in her *Naturalezas vivas* (*Living Natures*, a play

on the term *naturaleza muerta*, still life) (1941–1944), made up of images of seashells, conches, and flowers that take on sexualized forms. This series, which Mallo defined as a “plastification of combined flora and fauna,” synthesizes her interest in hybridization and transcends the limits of the traditional representation of nature. She understood nature as a continuous whole, a symbiosis of water, sea, vegetation, and landscape—a universal synthesis of all the beings that inhabit the world.

While her investment in geometry and proportion had been evident in her earliest works, it was with the *Naturalezas vivas* that she began to explore spatiotemporality in painting by rotating figures, incorporating shadows, and shifting planes. In this series, like in the mural she painted in 1945 at the Los Ángeles cinema in Buenos Aires on the relationship between the sea and the evolution of species, Mallo insisted on the symbiosis between human form and vegetable or animal form. This approach was a direct result of her exploration of how natural laws follow artistic lines: The dynamism of the elements in her paintings and drawings defends the idea that the rhythms of art and the universe share a common origin.



Dos máscaras en la playa (*Two Masks on the Beach*),
ca. 1948–1955. Private collection



Maruja Mallo dressed in seaweed on El Tabo beach. Photograph with modifications by the artist. Chile, 1945. Museo Reina Sofía. Colección Archivo Lafuente

Perhaps influenced by theosophy and the scientific models of Matila Ghyka and the German naturalist Ernst Haeckel, Mallo's oeuvre pursues the absolute communion of nature and art, the disarticulation of racial and gender essentialism, and the blurring of the boundaries between the popular and high culture. In 1945, she and Pablo Neruda went to visit the beach of El Tabo in Chile. Photographs of her there portray her as a symbiotic human and marine creature, wrapped in a cloak of seaweed and personifying living nature.

With her *Máscaras*, she continued to explore the independence of the human form. The harmoniously proportioned masks, always lit from the side, lighting suggestive of the transition between day and night, appear over maritime motifs—beaches or swelling waves—accompanied by butterflies or acrobats, forming a tragicomic composition that integrates the superimposition of figures and spatial planes of the *Naturalezas vivas*. The masks express cultural and racial syncretism and return to the vitalist and carnivalesque spirit of the *Verbenas*. Poised between the mortal and the immortal, these figures, wearing an



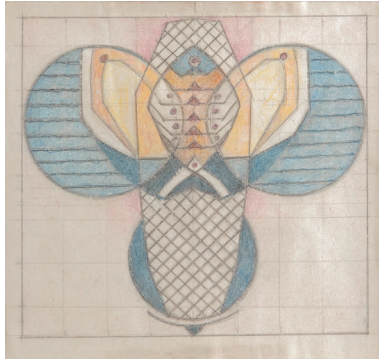
Máscaras. Naranja y limón (Masks. Orange and Lemon), ca. 1953.
Private collection, Santiago de Compostela



Almotrón. Geonauta, ca. 1968–1970. Private collection, Santiago de Compostela

ambiguous expression and not bound by the laws of classical representation, combine the artist's scientific, artistic, religious, and political concerns. Her friend, the philosopher María Zambrano, drew a connection between the mask and the experience of exile, the mind being split in two, and the feeling of being out of place. When Mallo painted these *Máscaras* in the late 1940s, many of those in exile were returning to Spain.

In her last few series, prepared before her return to Spain, Mallo relinquished human and natural figures and launched herself into the cosmos. The drawings in the series *Moradores del vacío* (*Dwellers of the Void*) (ca. 1968–1980) and *Viajeros del éter* (*Ether Travelers*) (1979–1982) return to the spatial and geometric principles of the *Máscaras* but venture into the figuration of



Morador del vacío II (Dweller of the Void II),
ca. 1970. Private collection

elements outside earthly time and space. Mallo claimed to have pictorially surpassed nature, orienting her work toward what she had already described in the 1930s as the “plastification of signs.”

Both series are populated by hybrid figures that break down the traditional oppositions between nature and the machine, the local and the universal, and the human and the animal. Fused with the ether, the element that Aristotle regarded as making up the sublunar world, they function as the symbolic culmination of a unique artistic career. In their composition, these creatures express harmonious cohabitation among species, which Mallo had insisted on ever since her *Estampas*. The human, the natural, the animal, and the divine are united in these geometric figures such that any cultural, social, or political difference is erased. This work was the culmination of an artistic project that sought to compose a visionary image of reality under the sway of new laws of geometry and harmony, new expressive principles, and a new mythology.

The last years of Maruja Mallo's life were marked by the juxtaposition between her emergence as a public figure during the years of Spain's transition to democracy and her reclusion and silence during the 1980s. Some mystery surrounds the artist's final creations, although a small portion of her last cycle of works was shown in her first anthological exhibition, held in Madrid in 1979 and followed by other shows at galleries and museums that revived interest in her work. Thirty years after her death, *Maruja Mallo: Mask and Compass* reveals the continued relevance of the artist's aesthetic and political thought on display in the inexhaustible diversity of her artistic creations, which integrate scientific, mythological, and ecological proposals for molding an art of the future. Her oeuvre, dense with cultural, contextual, political, and religious references, constitutes the most singular imaginary of the Generation of '27, one that follows a path, as she put it herself, "from geography to cosmography."

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

Exhibition

Curator

Patricia Molins

Project director

Teresa Velázquez

Coordination

Ana Uruñuela

María López

Administration

Natalia Guaza

Administrative support

Nieves Fernández

Registrar

Antón López

Restoration

Manuela Gómez

(chief restorer)

Ana Iruretagoyena

Silvia Montero

Regina Rivas

Juan Antonio Sáez

Design

María Fraile

Furnishing coordination

Beatriz Velázquez

Nieves Sánchez

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Willis Iberia Correduría de
Seguros y Reaseguros, S.A.U.

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Research on the figures and stage sets of the ballet

Clavileño by Maruja Mallo

Álvaro M. Leiro, Casa Atlántica

Research project on ceramic designs by Maruja Mallo

Álvaro Perdices, Escuela
de Cerámica de la Moncloa
del Ayuntamiento de Madrid

Main venue

Sabatini Building

Santa Isabel, 52

Nouvel Building

Ronda de Atocha s/n
28012 Madrid

Tel. (+34) 91 774 10 00

www.museoreinasofia.es

Opening hours

Monday to Saturday and public
holidays from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Sunday

from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Closed on Tuesdays

The exhibition galleries will
be cleared 15 minutes before
closing time

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