

Maruja Mallo: Mask and Compass



MARUJA MALLO
Sorpresa del trigo, 1936
Óleo sobre lienzo. 66 x 100 cm
Colección particular
© Maruja Mallo, VEGAP, Madrid 2025

DATES:	8 October 2025 – 16 March 2026
LOCATION:	Sabatini Building. Floor 1 (Madrid)
ORGANISED BY:	Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and Fundación Botín, Santander
CURATED BY:	Patricia Molins
COORDINATED BY:	Ana Uruñuela and María López

Maruja Mallo: Mask and Compass

The exhibition **Maruja Mallo. Mask and Compass**, on view at the Museo Reina Sofía from 8 October 2025 to 16 March 2026, is the biggest retrospective to date on one of the most innovative artists in Spanish and international avant-garde art. Maruja Mallo (Viveiro, Lugo 1902 – Madrid, 1995) is a **salient artist from the Generation of '27** and a core figure among the artists who, **for the first time, put forward a female world view from an unprecedented perspective**: the **modern woman**, free, active and independent.

Organised jointly by the **Museo Reina Sofía and Fundación Botín**, the show is curated by art historian **Patricia Molins** and comprises a hundred paintings, thirteen from the Museo Reina Sofía Collections, around seventy drawings, and a further one hundred photographs and documents from the artist, some unexhibited and many acquired recently by the Museo as part of the Lafuente Archive legacy. The title ***Mask and Compass*** alludes to two defining elements in Mallo's work: the compass as a guiding instrument in the geometric lines at the heart of her painting, and the mask, in reference to the tension that exists in her work between the animate and the inanimate, between nature — ephemeral — and its plastic, timeless representation.

The exhibition, which comprehends the entire artistic trajectory and life of this hard-to-classify artist, is even more extensive than the show recently on view at Centro Botín, particularly with regard to documentation, and is presented chronologically across eleven rooms on Floor 1 of the Sabatini Building. It includes the **five *verbena*** (street fair) pieces that brought her to the attention of many through the exhibition organised by Ortega y Gasset in 1928 in the offices of *Revista de Occidente* — works displayed together for the first time since that show. Related research also enables spectators to view previously unseen works, for instance *Arquitectura fósil I* (ilil Architecture I), which was recorded as missing in the catalogue raisonné, and a formerly unknown drawing from 1933. Also on view is *Joven negra* (Young Black Girl, 1948), another of the Museo Reina Sofía's recent acquisitions, and *El espantapájaros* (The Scarecrow), which André Breton bought from the artist in Paris and kept in his collection until his death.

The variegated art of Maruja Mallo flowed in and out of different stages, her work materialising in series arising from different times in her life. In the first stage, for instance, she focused on popular art via magic realism, combining avant-garde and tradition, before evolving towards Surrealism, underscoring her association with the Vallecas School and Torres García's Constructive Art Group. Finally, she would embark upon a new path with her geometric and fantastical drawings as she sought to reconcile a vision of the macrocosm and microcosm.

In addition to **her social commitment to justice and equality**, Mallo's work reveals a **genuine curiosity in everything surrounding her**, from the artistic to the technological, the scientific and the philosophical, combining materiality and spirituality and melding the popular, the performative and the magical. Committed to the values of progress and reform in the Second Republic, she was forced into exile in Latin America, where her eyes were opened to its exuberant nature and cultural and religious diversity.

It was during this exile that Maruja Mallo embarked upon a personal journey towards cosmography and the universe, claiming that she had moved from geography in Spain to

cosmography in Argentina. Mallo became fascinated by the fourth dimension and believed that an artwork must have an order, an order which must be geometrical, adhering to the harmonic laws of numbers.

The artist also worked with the face, representation and identity, one of the cornerstones of her practice. Further, her interest in theatre and what she termed “plastic scenography” is portrayed in **a series of photographs she took of different stages from which she set forth a transgressive revision of gender, class and artistic and political identity.**

The exhibition is made up of works from the Museo Reina Sofía Collections and from the collections of 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 Museo Provincial de Lugo; and other major private collections from Europe and the Americas, allowing for a comprehensive survey of the artist’s career.

Room 1. Verbenas

The journey into Maruja Mallo’s world begins with two large-scale oil paintings, *Indígena* (Indigenous, 1924–1925) and *Retrato de señora con abanico* (Portrait of a Lady with Fan, circa 1926), from the Museo Provincial de Lugo, both of which represent a constant in her oeuvre: **her interest in other cultures and the portrayal of modern women.**



MARUJA MALLO
La verbenas, 1927
Óleo sobre lienzo, 119 x 165 cm.
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
© Maruja Mallo. VEGAP, Madrid, 2025
Archivo fotográfico del Museo Reina Sofía

In the first room we encounter her five *verbenas* (street fair) pieces displayed together, works which brought her into the public eye and for many today still a reference point of her work, including *El Mago/Pim Pam Pum* (the Magician/Pim Pam Pum, 1926), from the Art Institute of Chicago, and *Kermesse* (1928), from the MNAM Centre Georges Pompidou. The *Las verbenas* (1927–1928) series is framed within magic realism and marries tradition and popular art with avant-garde art. The composition of these works is

underpinned by a geometrical and symbolic division, built from references to popular theatre, for instance puppet theatre, and to the film concept of simultaneity and scene superimposition. Consequently, the spectator witnesses a visual satire which depicts

personages from different classes and races in caricatured situations — women dressed as black angels, kings and papier mâché magistrates or satirical puppet theatres of bullfighters and flamboyant *manolas* (women from Madrid dressed in traditional attire). The series critiques social and cultural structures with a *mise en scène* combining the grotesque and the oneiric.

Room 2. Prints



MARUJA MALLO
Estampa (cinemática), 1927
Lápices de color sobre papel. 44 x 31 cm
Colección particular

The joyful and somewhat naive colour of popular art and the dynamism of new forms of leisure (film, music, theatre) would inspire Mallo's early works, also expressed in a series on view in room two, the *Estampas* (Prints), which she would later dub "symbolograms" on account of their combination of images and acrostics.

In these pieces, Mallo contrasts the figure of the vigorous, sporty woman in nature with objectified images of mannequins and statures, and to the bustling backdrop of the city. Angels and magicians bearing their vials to cast spells fly above the scenes. Whereas in the *verbenas* the elements are juxtaposed like theatre scenes, in the *estampas* they are fashioned through superimpositions, a concept inspired by film montage.

Room 3. Sewers and Bell Towers

Set off against her early series, brimming with optimism and vitality, is *Cloacas y campanarios* (Sewers and Bell Towers, 1929–1932) in room three, a work which focuses on lifeless matter and its different textures.



MARUJA MALLO
Tierra y excrementos, 1932
Óleo sobre cartón. 43 x 55 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
Archivo fotográfico del Museo Reina Sofía

In the series, thronged with skeletons, cassocks and empty suits scattered around wasteland and in deserted buildings, Mallo approaches Surrealism to put forward a necrological and unsettling view of nature with paintings such as *Tierra y excrementos* (Earth and Excrement, 1932), from the Museo Reina Sofía Collection, and *El espantapájaros* (The Scarecrow, 1930), from a private collection.

Room 4. Architectures

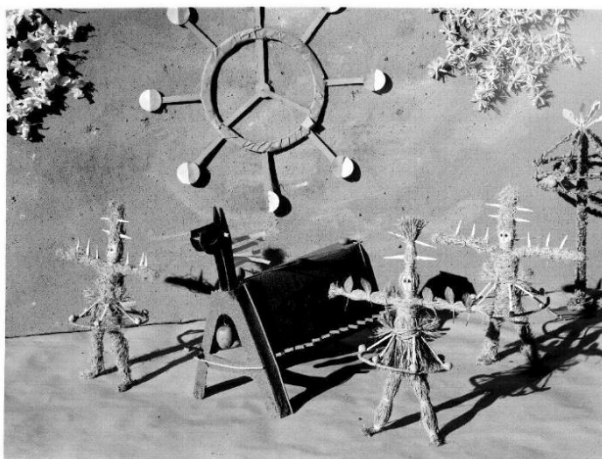
In room four visitors will observe *Arquitecturas minerales y vegetales* (Mineral and Plant Architectures, 1933), witnessing how Mallo reduces figures to lines or anatomical parts in an attempt to break the figure and ground dichotomy and lend prominence to both.

Further, in *Arquitecturas rurales* (Rural Architectures, 1933–1935) she draws skeletons and carcasses of silos, haystacks and other ephemeral constructions used to harvest grain, seeking to reconcile the animate and the inanimate. Matter is still given prominence, yet it is more geometrical, a process which would culminate in these ceramic pieces, the closest to abstraction and the popular, whereby the land gains a constructive value.



MARUJA MALLO
Arquitectura vegetal IV, c 1933
Óleo sobre tabla, 20 x 28 cm
Colección particular

Room 5. Theatre



MARUJA MALLO
Plástica escenográfica para la ópera bufa *Clavileño* de Rodolfo Halffter, c. 1934/1936.
Fotografía intervenida por la artista. Fotografía de Arte Casa Moreno.
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Colección Archivo Lafuente

In 1932 Maruja Mallo studied stage design and theatre in Paris. It was in the French capital where she met Picasso and Miró, and where her interest in space as a three-dimensional support for the artwork instead of the pictorial plane began to hold sway. Her most significant theatre collaboration was the set design for *Clavileño* (1936), a ballet by Rodolfo Halffter that would never be performed at the Student Residence in Madrid because of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

The photographs of the stage maquettes and sketches offer insight into the radical nature of her work and are accompanied by a replica of the puppet theatre, with wicker figures made for the exhibition.

Room 6. Photographs

From her earliest works, Mallo portrayed the modern woman — a figure that was emerging in those years — as a person that was active, independent and professional. She herself was a model of this figure and contributed to shaping her through her works and to emphasising

her role as an authorial subject at variance with the object or muse to which women had been constrained until that point.



MARUJA MALLO
Autorretrato con manto de algas, 1945
Fotografía y lápiz de color
23,8 x 16,4 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

Therefore, self-representation would become a key strand in her work and an aspect she would redevelop across her life owing to her belief that it was inexorably linked to her work.

Mallo, who conceived her photographs as performative and stage acts, chose this medium to portray herself. In 1929 she did so using an abandoned train carriage and track, and in 1945 she returned to this performative staging of self-portrayal, rendering herself on a Chilean beach as a marine goddess draped in seaweed. Moreover, she depicted herself alongside her works by virtue of images she used to publicise them, adding symbolic elements to the *mise en scène*. In Spain she would appear holding a map and ear of wheat in 1936, and in Argentina, towards 1939, with elements alluding to her work and to the changes in her life caused by exile: a swallow, a clay artefact brought from Spain, a compass and butterflies — a symbol of metamorphosis — as well as a globe.

Room 7. The Religion of Work

The final stage of the Second Republic in Spain fuelled a hugely radical political and intellectual environment, a period in which Maruja Mallo was on holiday in Galicia, sketching the local environment of fisheries and countryside.



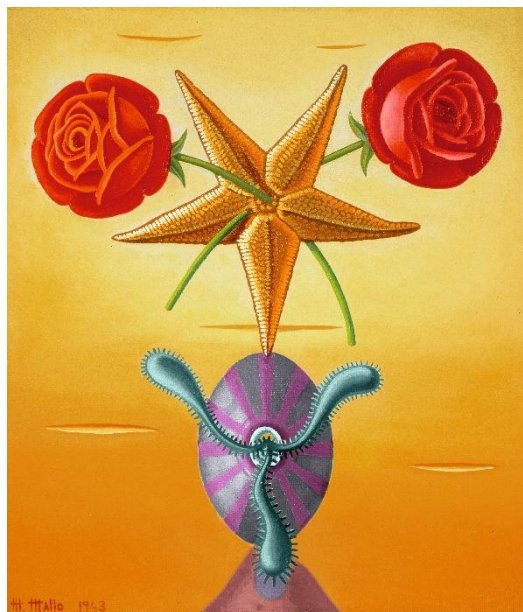
MARUJA MALLO
Canto de las espigas, 1939 (Fecha de 1929 inscrita en el lienzo modificada por la artista)
Óleo sobre lienzo, 118 x 233 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

These drawings led to the series *La religión del trabajo* (The Religion of Work, 1937–1939), which she would continue during her subsequent exile, made up of monumental figures, with ladies making

offerings, athletic women and classical figures surrounded by wheat spikes or nets. Through

these works she began what she believed to be a “new renaissance”, a new classicism, understanding art as salvation, with women at the centre and opposite time and wartime destruction. She harnessed the relationship with nature as a unifying, circular relationship; Mallo explained how the series stemmed from her “materialist faith in the triumph of fish, in the kingdom of the wheat spike”, as reflected in the *Canto de las espigas* (Song of the Wheat Spikes, 1939), housed in the Museo Reina Sofía.

Room 8. Living Nature Works

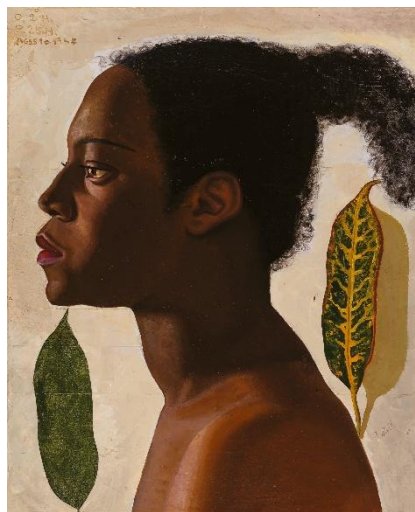


MARUJA MALLO
Naturaleza viva X, 1943
Óleo sobre lienzo. 42 x 36 cm
Colección particular Santiago de Compostela

At the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain, Maruja Mallo fled to Portugal and then to Argentina, where she began her exile. In the 1940s she realised her series *Las Naturalezas vivas* (Living Nature Works, 1941–1943) — nature-inspired still-life pieces — clearly suggestive of sensual and colourist female figures by way of compositions with shells and flowers representing the animal and plant kingdom, and as a metaphor for the human body, seemingly floating over earthly surfaces and distant shores. Their sensuality and colour evoke female sex organs and allude to the sea or the womb as the origin of life. From this juncture, one of Mallo’s primary concerns was to incorporate a fourth dimension into her pictures, following the discoveries of contemporary physics, which replaces the static conception of space with a dynamic of space/time.

Rooms 9 and 10. Heads and Masks

During her exile in Buenos Aires and on her travels, from 1937, around the Pacific, Uruguay and predominantly Brazil, the artist was fascinated by the landscapes and people she came across, particularly their physical diversity and the mixes of race and culture. From this point on, she sought to create a method to represent a new humanity, drawing from syncretism, the amalgamation of culture and race, as a vindication for universalism. In her search to incorporate circular spaces and times, at once present and eternal, she depicted heads, masks and acrobats as symbolic and idealised forms, starting from her belief in art as a vision perfected from the real, and gazing into the future. She executed her first static heads, practising with the fusion of races, as in the work *Joven negra* (Young Black Girl, 1948), recently acquired by the Museo Reina Sofía, or the melding of races and

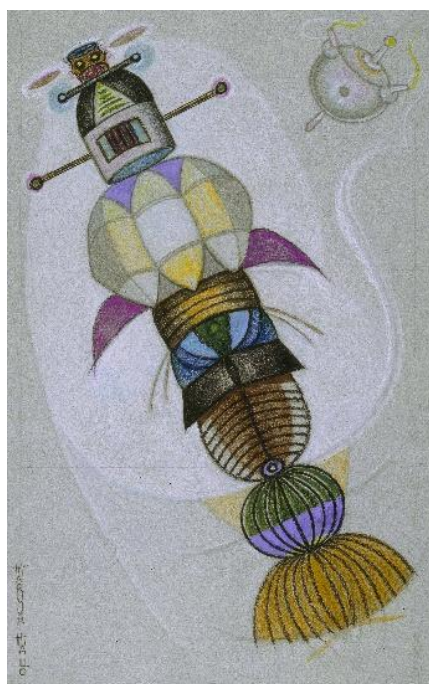


MARUJA MALLO
Joven negra, 1948.
Óleo sobre lienzo.
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
© Maruja Mallo, VEGAP, Madrid, 2025

animals, and of sexes, for instance in *La cierva humana* (The Human Doe, 1948), from the Museo Benito Quinquela Martín in Buenos Aires.

Her *Máscaras* (Masks), a mix of positive and negative emotions, bear the imprint of studies on Freud, with many representing or pairing intimidated figures with others that appear perplexed or inhibited; this could also bear a relation to being in exile, to living in two worlds, to her current world and the one she has left behind.

Room 11. Dwellers of the Void. Ether Travellers



MARUJA MALLO
Viajeros del éter, 1982
Lápiz, bolígrafo y cera sobre papel Canson. 39,9 x 24,6 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

In 1965, following years of exile in Latin America, the Galician artist moved back to Spain definitively, concluding her prolific career with two striking series *Moradores del vacío* (Dwellers of the Void, 1968–1980) and *Viajeros del éter* (Ether Travellers, 1982), as she transitioned into her most esoteric period, inspired by what she called “levitational experiences” encountered through crossing the Andes and sailing on the Pacific.

Her travels, real and imaginary, became encounters with superhuman dimensions. Fascinated by science and the universe, Mallo left her circular forms behind to build infinite sidereal spaces. In her pieces, winding geometries give rise to figures evoking symbiotic processes: mutant bodies which evolve from cells to spacecrafts.

The show also surveys the artist’s final works, in which she fused elements from every period in her career. Figures



MARUJA MALLO
Selvatro, c 1970-1975
Óleo sobre lienzo. 40 x 40 cm
Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

and symbols reappear in drawings and paintings dyed in deep blues, intense reds and bright yellows, colours which Mallo employed as a symbolic language. In unison she moved more prominently into the public eye in the final period; now a popular figure and an essential artist from the Generation of '27 — the members of which had also started to return from exile — Mallo recovered almost forty illustrations she produced in the 1930s for the covers of *Revista de Occidente*, the most significant intellectual publication prior to the Civil War. These covers, along with a series of prints made in 1979, were exhibited alongside photographic and audiovisual documents which reconstructed that vibrant avant-garde era.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication, in Spanish and English and published jointly by the Museo Reina Sofía, Fundación Botín and the publishing house This Side Up, which underscores the telluric, theatrical and theoretical underpinnings of the artist's work. It is illustrated with pieces from the show and features new texts by Argentine researcher Alejandra Zanetta, American artist and writer Johanna Hedva and the show's curator Patricia Molins, as well as writings by Maruja Mallo, some hitherto unpublished. Moreover, the catalogue includes a biography of Mallo written by Juan Pérez de Ayala, one of the main and earliest scholars of her work.

Public Programmes and Education

The **Museo Reina Sofía's Public Programme and Education Areas** have organised an array of activities related to the exhibition. On 7 October at 7pm, an **inaugural conversation** will unfold between its curator, Patricia Molins, and Museo Reina Sofía director, Manuel Segade, in the Auditorium 400, with both exploring the figure of Maruja Mallo in greater depth.

Also on 7 October, the **Asociación Cunchas e Flores de Bueu, with the support of the Xunta de Galicia (the Regional Government of Galicia), will make *Cunchas e compás* (Shells and Compass), a twelve-metre-long, two-metre-wide ephemeral rug** inspired by the art and personality of this brilliant Galician artist.

Further, the lecture series **Art and Exile**, with the participation of **Alejandra Zanetta and Estrella de Diego**, will be held across the autumn of 2025. The series looks to delve deeper into one of the defining aspects of the life and work of Maruja Mallo: her exile. An experience which for the artist was twofold: living in the Americas and her complex return to Spain. Alejandra Zanetta's lecture ***Maruja Mallo's Exile in the Americas*** will be held on 16 October, while the lecture given by Estrella de Diego, ***Holding Your Brain While You Sleep***, will take place on 3 December, both beginning at 7pm in the Museo's Cinema. Moreover, the **first quarter of 2026** will witness a string of sessions which, anchored in the work of Maruja Mallo, explore **the concept of the popular in Spanish art**.

In addition, the Museo's Education Area will set in motion the **transversal mediation programme *Mallo and Beyond***, which aims to drive, support and diversify readings and approaches to the *Maruja Mallo. Mask and Compass* show, including family activities, school visits, teacher and cultural mediator training, the Museo's communities and guided tours for the general public.

About Maruja Mallo

Maruja Mallo, whose real name was Ana María Gómez González, was born in Viveiro (Lugo) in 1902 and was one of the foremost artists in the so-called Generation of '27. She was the fourth of fourteen children in a family that frequently moved from place to place owing to her father's job as a customs officer. She began her training at the Escuela de Artes y Oficios de Avilés (the Avilés School of Arts and Crafts), and at the age of twenty moved to Madrid with her family, where she began to study at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando (the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts), remaining there until 1926.

In the Spanish capital she started to cross paths with artists, writers and film-makers from the Generation of '27, for instance Salvador Dalí, Federico García Lorca, Margarita Manso, Luis Buñuel, María Zambrano, Concha Méndez and Rafael Alberti, with whom she was in a five-year relationship.

In 1931 she travelled to Paris after being awarded a grant to study stage design and held an exhibition with several works from her *Estampas* (Prints) and *Cloacas y campanarios* (Sewers and Bell Towers) series, selling *El espantapájaros* (The Scarecrow) to André Bretón at the show. In 1932 she returned to Spain and in 1933 participated in the first *Exposición del Grupo de Arte Constructivo* (Constructive Art Group Exhibition). She passed a civil service exam to work as a teacher and in 1935 undertook the set design for Rodolfo Halffter's opera *Clavileño*, the premiere of which was cancelled due to the outbreak of the Civil War. For many years she contributed to the renowned *Revista de Occidente*, producing numerous vignettes and covers.



Maruja Mallo en su estudio de Buenos Aires con su serie *La Religión del trabajo*, 1939
Fotografía de época. 17 x 22 cm
Jose Ignacio Abeijón. Madrid

The start of the Civil War caught Maruja Mallo unawares in Galicia and she fled to Lisbon, before travelling to Uruguay and finally to Argentina to give a series of lectures. She found her place in Argentine society and remained there, forging strong friendships, contributing to magazines and décor stores, and working, painting and selling works directly to museums and collectors. During the 1940s Mallo travelled widely across South America and initiated her most representative series *Cabezas de mujer* (Women's Heads), *Naturalezas vivas* (Living Nature Works) and *Máscaras* (Masks). In 1950 in Paris, she exhibited a collection encompassing the sea, land, grapes and women's heads and masks. After various attempts, she returned to Spain definitively in 1965.

In the early 1970s the exhibition *Orígenes de la vanguardia española* (The Origins of the Spanish Avant-garde), held at Galería Multitud, brought her work to the attention of a whole new generation. Maruja Mallo passed away in Madrid on 6 February 1995 as a cult figure and a reference point for Spanish artistic modernity in the twentieth century.

About Patricia Molins

Patricia Molins, art historian and the show's curator, works in the Museo Reina Sofía's Exhibitions Department. Much of her work focuses on the involvement of pioneering women artists in the creation of a female visual imaginary, most notably with the exhibitions *Salomé*,

un mito contemporáneo (Salomé. A Contemporary Myth, 1996), *Delhy Tejero* (Patio Herreriano, 2024), the essay *La heterogeneidad como estrategia de afirmación. La construcción de una mirada femenina antes y después de la Guerra Civil* (Heterogeneity as a Strategy of Affirmation. The Construction of a Female Gaze Before and After the Spanish Civil War, Desacuerdos, 2012), and the edited volume *Feminismo y museo. Un imaginario en construcción* (Feminism and Museum. An Imaginary in Progress, Espacio tiempo y forma, UNED 2020).

“Exhibition organised by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and Fundación Botín”

Organised by:



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A rug made by the Asociación Cunchas e Flores de Bueu, with the support of the Xunta de Galicia (the Regional Government of Galicia)



Madrid, 7 October 2025

[Press Material](#)



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