

## Special article

### Manolo Hugué: from sculpture to painting due to arthritis

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#### ABSTRACT

There are several artists that have suffered rheumatic diseases. Even then, they continued their creative activity. Paul Klee suffered from systemic sclerosis, Dufy and Renoir suffered from rheumatoid arthritis and Gaudí and Boticelli had systemic-onset juvenile idiopathic arthritis. The famous noucentism sculptor, Manolo Hugué, presented chronic polyarthritis that suggested rheumatoid arthritis. Although he underwent several treatments, such as hydrotherapy or diathermic therapy, he had to stop sculpting. Using the chisel was too painful for his hands. He began, then, painting and composing poetry.

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#### Manolo Hugué: de la escultura a la pintura a causa de la artritis

#### RESUMEN

Son varios los artistas que, a pesar de haber sufrido enfermedades reumáticas, han proseguido de una manera u otra su actividad creadora. Paul Klee padeció una esclerosis sistémica, Raoul Dufy y Renoir padecieron artritis reumatoide y Gaudí y Boticelli sufrieron una artritis crónica juvenil. El destacado escultor noucentista Manolo Hugué presentó a los 55 años una poliartritis crónica compatible con una artritis reumatoide. A pesar de realizar diversos tratamientos, como la hidroterapia o la diatermia, debió abandonar parcialmente la escultura para dedicarse a la pintura y la poesía. El uso del cincel le hacía mucho daño en las manos.

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Manuel Martínez Hugué, known as Manolo Hugué, or simply Manolo, was a multifaceted Catalan *Noucentista* artist. He excelled as a sculptor, painter, jewellery designer and poet. Less well-known than he should be in our country, Manolo lived and interacted with artists such as Pablo Ruiz Picasso, Juan Gris and Paco Durrio. His work reflects the sensitivity of *Noucentisme* and assimilates Cubist concepts, becoming figurative and realistic with intense personality. Proof of his great ability is that his works are shown in such prestigious museums as the MoMA in New York and the Pompidou Centre in Paris.

Born in Barcelona in 1872, Manolo had a poor, unhealthy childhood. Due to various diseases acquired during this time (typhus and others), he was sent by Dr. Bartomeu Robert to spend seasons

with relatives and friends in Caldes de Montbui and Vallirana, so as to breathe air cleaner than Barcelona's. When he turned 12, Manolo was enrolled in the Fine Arts School of Barcelona (Llotja) because, since he knew nothing of arithmetic or grammar, he could "only" become an artist. Although he made some progress, he never finished his studies. Detached from his family, he took the initiative of spending his unruly adolescence on the streets, away from any kind of order and moderation.<sup>1-3</sup>

In 1890 he became interested in artistic practice once again and decided to go to the Lancaster Academy, where he practiced natural model drawing. Manolo decided on sculptural practice. In 1892 he learned to shape his first sculptures, working under the sculptors Torquato Tasso (who sculpted the allegories of the upper left side of the Arc de Triomphe in Barcelona) and Eusebio Arnau. At the end of the century, he also worked in bronze art foundries and consequently came into contact with the most important sculptors of the time.

Manolo frequented "Els Quatre Gats", a tavern, restaurant and cabaret that was one of the leading centres of intellectual and artistic life in Catalan modernism. During the 6 years it remained

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open, it hosted meetings of artists, art exhibitions and literary and musical gatherings. Manolo met and became true friends with the most important artists of the Spanish scene, such as Santiago Rusiñol, Ramón Casas, Joaquim Mir, Anglada Camarasa and Pablo Picasso.

In 1901 Manolo went to the capital of art, Paris, where he had a very tough start. Then he, along with Picasso, Togores and Gris, was hired at the gallery of Kahnweiler, a famous art dealer of the Cubist movement. Such was the worth of Manolo, that for many years he was the only sculptor financed by the dealer.

Ten years later, tired of Paris, he decided to abandon the city and settle in Ceret. This town in Vallespir would become an essential destination for any artist who appreciated modernity. Manolo was a key figure of what was known as the “School of Ceret”. Far away from crowds, Manolo sought peace in this new stage of his life; he believed in his work and executed it with precision.

Finally, in 1927, Manolo had become famous in France and Spain and was present at some of the most avant-garde exhibitions of the time: the Armory Show, the Little Gallery of New York and the various editions of the Society of Iberian Artists. His fame as an artist and, in parallel, his dimension as a character is undeniable; this is apparent, among other details, by the books dedicated to him in life by different writers. Among them is “Vida de Manolo” (“Life of Manolo”) by Josep Pla, full of anecdotes about the artist and reflections on his art.

### The arthritis years

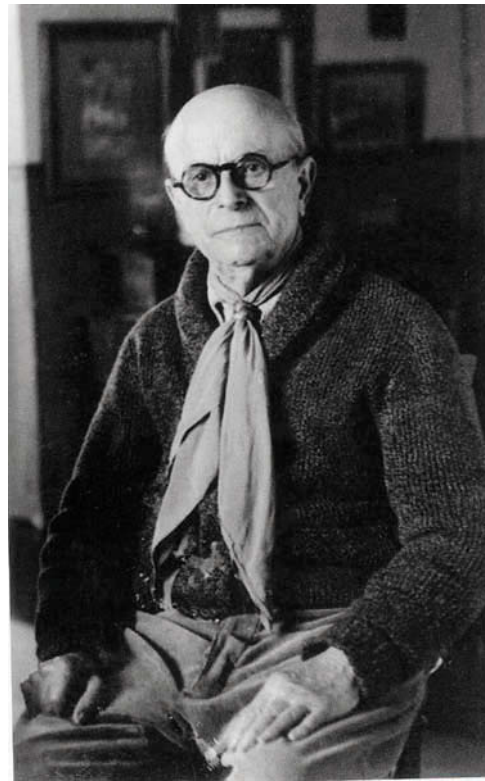
In autumn of 1927, Manolo developed a case of polyarthritis which became chronic. The work of Josep Pla mentioned previously, “Life of Manolo as told by himself”, offers the following references: *his fingers had become deformed, his hands had become rigid, he had lost strength, pain made him suffer and sometimes his knees wavered*. His capacity for work became severely affected. He tried various treatments: in spring the cherry cure<sup>4</sup> and in autumn the grape cure<sup>1,5,6</sup> (“*the cure which extracted demons from the body in the form of winds from a respectable person, powerful and underground, solid, liquid and gaseous demons*”), but with little success.

Feeling very ill, Manolo wished to return to Catalonia. At first he lived in Arenys de Munt and it was in this village where he was first visited by Dr. Estil-las. The latter confirmed the diagnosis of articular polyarthritis, and defined it as a *serious and dramatic disease, causing ossified legs and hands with a sinister deviation* (Figure).

Dr. Estil-las suggested a treatment: *diathermy sessions, a laborious treatment with subsequent physical rehabilitation*. We know that during this time Manolo could not walk, so the farmers of Arenys de Munt took him out with a bunk bed to lie in the sun. Subsequently, Manolo was transferred to the Broquetas Spa in Caldes de Montbui, seeking a thermal water therapy. He gradually improved in this new environment.

During the course of 1929, already much improved, Manolo went to Ceret for the last time, sold his property and decided to live in Caldes for the rest of his life. He moved into his own home and opened the door to his artistic maturity and his best productions. The acute crises of the disease were overcome, but he required regular treatment periods.

In the 1930s, Manolo resumed his work as a goldsmith, making jewels, rings and brooches. Due to his rheumatoid arthritis, he was



**Figure.** Increased volume of the metacarpophalangeal joints and interosseous atrophy in the sculptor's hand in a 1940 picture.

forced to abandon sculpture partially, *as the chisel damaged his hands too much*. That is the reason why he became more devoted to painting and poetry in the final phase of his life. Many of these paintings were passed to stone or bronze by his disciples.

He died of a *heart collapse* on the first of November 1945 in a room at the Broquetas Spa in Caldes de Montbui. He was 73 years old at the time. His body was taken to the cemetery in southeastern Barcelona on a grey and rainy afternoon.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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