DEPRESSION AND THE SPIRITUAL IN MODERN ART
HOMAGE TO MIRÓ

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"RAIN OF LYRES
CIRCUSES OF MELANCHOLY":
HOMAGE TO MIRÓ

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"The artistic expression of the primordial mystery of creation, and man's place on earth and in the cosmos . . . [were] recurrent themes in the magical, mystical art of Joan Miró" (Schildkraut, 1982), the pre-eminent Catalan artist who lived from 1893 to 1983. Throughout his life, in his art, writings and interviews, Miró acknowledged and explored the interrelatedness of his tragic temperament, his depressions (Schildkraut, 1993; Schildkraut & Hirshfeld, 1995), his spirituality (Stich, 1980; Schildkraut, 1982; Rowell, 1986) and his artistic creation (see Note 1, p. 127).

Exemplifying his transcendent spiritual beliefs, in 1936 Miró noted: "Every grain of dust has a wonderful soul, but to understand it one needs to regain the religious, magic sense of things, the spirit of primitive people" (Miró, 1936, cited in Stich, 1980, p. 10); and in 1959, Miró summarized his temperament in the following way:

"My nature is tragic and taciturn. . . . When I was young, I went through periods of profound sadness. . . . I'm a pessimist. I always think that everything is going to turn out badly. If there is something humorous in my painting. . . . Perhaps this humor comes from a need to escape the tragic side of my temperament" (Miró, 1959a, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 247).

Commenting on Miró's moods, Roland Penrose, his friend and biographer, noted:

"Behind the cheerful, innocent, even tranquil look in his face (see Figure 12-1), Miró has never been immune to attacks of violent anguish and depression. . . . He has occasionally expressed this precarious condition in self-portraits, which . . . are metaphorical confessions of his inner life" (Penrose, 1971, p. 96).

PORTRAIT OF MIRÓ AND "MELANCOLIE"

While going through the midlife period, in his 45th year (1937–38), at a time of both international chaos and profound personal introspection, Miró created a series of spiritual or psychological self-portraits, for example, Portrait of Miró (1938) shown in Figure 12-2. Since Miró attached a superstitious
significance to numbers (see Rowell, 1986, pp. 44, 101, 164; Miró, 1977), turning 45 may have had special meaning for him. From 1921 to 1926, during the crucial period of Miró's development as a mature artist, his studio in Paris was located at 45 rue Blomet, and from 1924 until 1926 Miró also lived at this address (Rowell, 1986, p. 24). Moreover, in 1918 when Miró was 25, he wrote: "I am firmly convinced that no man . . . in modern times . . . will begin to know how to paint until he is 45 . . ." (Miró, 1918, cited in Rowell, 1986, pp. 54–55).

As shown in Figure 12-3, the number 45 is featured prominently in The Circus, a painting on celotex, which Miró executed in 1937. Painted sideways, this number appears in the lower right segment of the painting, while the number 5 fills the upper left corner, and the numbers 10 and 30 are painted along the bottom. In the light of what
we know of Miró’s fascination with numbers, it would seem more than mere coincidence that these last three numbers (5, 10 & 30) add up to 45—particularly since summing a string of numbers is the subject of an earlier (1925) painting by Miró, *L’Addition* (The Check).

This raises the possibility that *The Circus* of 1937, as well as many other works that Miró completed around this time (cf. Lomas, Chapter 13, this volume) may constitute psychological self-portraits of a sort, i.e. personal reminiscences and a summing up, characteristic of the midlife stage of psychological development. Lending credence to the notion that Miró is the true subject of *The Circus* is the appearance of his signature (in tiny letters) situated directly above the center of this work. Compatible with this notion is the prominence of the figure with a large oval sitting on its head, boxed in by numbers from below, a black sun on the right (situated above the number 45), and a vertical line on the left intersected by two horizontal lines (Figure 12-3).

A similar configuration of a vertical line on the left intersected by horizontal lines with a central figure and a black sun on the right may be seen in *Portrait of Miró* (1938), an engraving and drypoint created by Miró in collaboration with Louis Marcoussis (Figure 12-2). A surrealist mental landscape, in effect a psychological self-portrait of Miró, this engraving contains the inscribed phrases “pluie de lyres,” translated as “rain of lyres” (or, more freely rendered, “outpourings of artistic creativity”) and “circues de melancholie,” translated as “circuses of melancholy” (cf. *The Circus*, 1937). Inscribed as they are on this self-portrait, created by Miró in midlife, one must wonder whether these words were meant to allude to a cyclopthymic temperament in the artist.

The face and hands of Miró, which were drawn by Marcoussis, have been overwhelmed by a fantastic outpouring of the signs and symbols inhabiting Miró’s inner world: stars, a black sun, flames, primordial creatures, astral bodies, and a primitive ladder symbol. Annular forms on the left bring to mind the rings of Saturn, the planet associated with melancholy (Klibansky, Saxl & Panofsky, 1964; Panofsky, 1955; Wittkower & Wittkower, 1963). The artist’s head has been set aflame, one eye transformed into a star, the other an empty circle—perhaps a blind eye socket. Miró
seems to have depicted himself as a tormented, impassioned visionary, with heightened consciousness of both cosmic and inner reality, poetically suggested by the words "pluie de lyres" and "cirques de melancolie".

Rowell (1986, pp. 4–5) spoke of Miró’s entire oeuvre as marked by recurrent alternating styles: works "based on a study and transformation of the so-called real world" alternate with paintings in which "Miró appears to have lost touch with outer reality and to refer solely to the inner ‘real’ of the mind, the spirit, the imagination". Rowell went on to conclude: "In a sense, these two styles correspond to two aspects of the artist’s personality: the extroverted or active and the introspective or meditative, in which he claimed to be moved by forces greater than himself" (Rowell, 1986, pp. 4–5).

The phrase “cirques de melan-cololie” in this midlife engraving by Miró, brings to mind one of Albrecht Dürer’s great midlife engravings, Melencolia I of 1514 (Figure 0-1, p. xi), probably the most famous portrayal of melancholia in the history of art (cf. Schildkraut, Foreword, this volume). And many of the themes found in Miró’s art— Isolation, loneliness, despair, dissatisfaction with earthbound limitations, and the yearning to ascend to celestial heights—are all to be found in this master engraving (Schildkraut & Hirshfeld, 1995), that Erwin Panofsky, the great Dürer scholar, called “a spiritual self-portrait of Albrecht Dürer” (Panofsky, 1955, p. 171).

Deep feelings of sorrow, isolation and loneliness were rooted in Miró’s childhood. Teased by his classmates because he was quiet and prone to daydream, Miró did not have many friends as a boy. He recounted, “I was very much alone. Nobody paid any attention to me... I felt that loneliness in a very painful, violent way when I was very young...” (Serra, 1986, p. 29). Miró’s father especially did not understand his dreamer son. Of Miró’s strained relationship with his father, Dupin (1962, p. 40) wrote, “Miró’s love of solitude and his taciturnity doubtless have no other origin”.

Miró recalled that when he was young he began drawing in order to escape from his unhappiness. In 1957, he explained: “To escape from the daily drudgery, I took drawing lessons... That class was like a religious ceremony for me; I washed my hands carefully before touching the paper and pencils. The implements were like sacred objects, and I worked as though I were performing a religious rite. This state of mind,” he noted, “has persisted, even more pronounced” (Miró, 1957, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 44).

There is good evidence from his own descriptions, as well as those of his friends and biographers, that Miró experienced periodic episodes of depression. His first known episode occurred in 1911 when he was 18 years old. Opposed to his artistic aspirations, Miró’s father forced him to attend business school and subsequently procured a job for him in a large hardware (and chemical) store. Miró recalled, “I was demoralized and suffered a serious depression. I fell really ill, and stayed three months in bed” (Miró, cited in Gibson, 1980, pp. 52–56). Commenting on this period, Penrose (1971, p. 12) noted:

“This was the first major crisis in a life which... [was]... punctuated with periodic upheavals, each bringing with it marked changes in Miró’s work. Their frequency and violence [were] all the more remarkable because of his apparent calm and the gentleness of his nature” (cf. Figure 12-1).

There is no clear-cut evidence that
Miró experienced manic episodes. However, his descriptions of cycles governing his life and work, coupled with the marked variations in his style and productivity, provide reason to speculate about cyclothymia in the artist (Rowell, 1986, pp. 4–5, 279–280; Miró, 1931, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 117; Miró, 1970, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 280).

For example, between 1925 and 1927, there was a dramatic increase in Miró’s productivity. During this period Miró painted a series of highly poetic canvases that Dupin (1962) termed “dream paintings,” works that may have been stimulated by hunger-induced hallucinations, as Miró asserted (Dupin, 1962, p. 157). One of these paintings, *Birth of the World* of 1925, is shown in Figure 12-4. Whereas Dupin (1962) cataloged over 130 paintings completed during the three-year period 1925–27, only 35 were completed during the following three years (1928–30) and only 25 were completed during the preceding three years (1922–24). Although periods of intense inspiration, perhaps occurring during hypomanic states, allowed Miró to work prolifically at times, his nostalgic yearnings and depressed feelings underlay the content of many of his finest paintings, such as *The Farm*, of 1921–22 (Figure 12-5), and *The

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**Figure 12-4**

*JOAN MIRÓ*

**The Birth of the World,** 1925

Oil on canvas, 8 ft 2½ x 6 ft 6 in (250.8 x 200 cm)

Carnival of Harlequin of 1924–25 (Figure 12-6). The ladder, a symbol of transcendence for Miró, appears for the first time in The Farm (Figure 12-5); and perched upon the ladder is a bird capable of flight, one of Miró’s mediators between earth and the heavens.

THE ESCAPE LADDER
The ladder is also seen in The Carnival of Harlequin (Figure 12-6), one of Miró’s first departures from the hyperrealistic style of earlier works, such as The Farm (1921–1922), to a more fantastic style which fused a variety of surrealist images. In The Carnival of Harlequin, Miró expressed the mad chaos he felt around him and his longing to escape from the suffering he felt within. The harlequin, with a hole in its abdomen, has been read as a portrait of the artist, hungry and hallucinating as he described himself at that time. A sharp rod or nail pierces into the side of the harlequin’s head, perhaps symbolizing Miró’s psychological torment.

Miró described this painting in stream-of-consciousness prose (Miró, 1939, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 164):

“The ball of yarn unraveled by cats dressed up as smoky Harlequins twisting around inside me and stabbing my gut during the period of my great hunger that gave birth to the hallucinations recorded in this painting . . . coming back in the evening to my place at 45 rue Blomet a number that to my knowledge has nothing to do with 13 which has always exerted a tremendous influence over my life . . . I had pulled out a nail from the pedestrian crossing and put it in my eye like a monocle a gentleman whose fastening ears are fascinated by the grace of a flight of butterflies musical rainbow eyes falling like a rain of lyres a ladder to escape the disgust of life.”

The “rain of lyres” (cf. Figure 12-2) signifying the ladder seen on the left of The Carnival of Harlequin (Figure 12-6) offers an escape from “the disgust of life” into higher realms.

The ladder, in fact, was an important symbol throughout Miró’s oeuvre (Schildkraut, 1982). In 1948, he explained:

“In the first years it [the ladder] was a plastic form frequently appearing because it was so close to me—a familiar shape in The Farm. In later years, particularly during the war, while I was on Majorca, it came to symbolize “escape”: an essentially plastic form at first—it became poetic later. Or plastic, first; then nostalgic at the time of painting The Farm; finally, symbolic” (Miró, 1948, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 208).

A ladder also appears in The Dog Barking at the Moon of 1926 (Figure 12-7) in which Miró addresses the theme of the isolation and loneliness of earthbound creatures. In this painting, the dog longs to climb up the ladder on the left to the realm of the moon and the heavens.

In a group of paintings from 1939 to 1940, Miró graphically portrayed the successive steps of ascent to the firmament. In The Escape Ladder of 1939 (Figure 12-8), the creatures are still embedded in their earthly existence, but the ladder, firmly planted on the horizon line, offers a path towards transcendence.

In The Ladder of Escape of 1940 (Figure 12-9), the ladder ascends further into the heavens, and the viewer is projected into a celestial realm. However, one has the feeling that one could go higher; the figure on the right reaches upwards beyond the world she shares with the snake-like creature on the left.

And in his painting, On the 13th the Ladder Brushed the Firmament
12-5
**JOAN MIRÓ**

_The Farm, 1921–22_
Oil on canvas, 48 1/2 x 55 1/4 in (123.8 x 141.3 cm)


12-6
**JOAN MIRÓ**

_Carnival of Harlequin, 1924–25_
Oil on canvas, 28 x 36 1/4 in (76 x 93 cm)

12-7
JOAN MIRÓ

*Dog Barking at the Moon*, 1926
Oil on canvas, 28\%\% x 36\%\% in (73.3 x 92.7 cm)

(1940), Miró finally reaches the heavens (Figure 12-10). Unlike the other two paintings, here a myriad of astral bodies covers the picture, and we are beyond the realm of creatures.

The Ladder of Escape (1940) and On the 13th the Ladder Brushed the Firmament (1940) belong to the series of 23 gouache paintings, known as the Constellations, that Miró created from 1940 to 1941, working in the shadow of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. His comments on his state of mind at that time shed light on how Miró was able to transform his depressed feelings into energy for painting:

"... I was going through a very hard period. I was living in Palma, and living almost on the charity of my wife's family... But who was I in those days? Practically nobody, just a poor man who was perhaps a little mad, and who liked to paint things in a way of his own which nobody here understood... I found myself very much alone, as though forsaken. But I had a great inner strength which made me paint more furiously than ever. With rage, with sorrow, with desperation, because I could see how a civilization in which I had been brought up... was being crushed and destroyed... Looking back, I cannot understand how I managed to endure all that. Perhaps it was my very suffering, when I realized my impotence and my insignificance, that gave me new strength to go on painting" (Serra, 1986, pp. 58-62).

And on the theme of man's suffering, in a letter of 1915, Miró wrote:

"Mortals cannot aspire to complete happiness. That would be rebelling against God who was a man and suffered for us... Pain is the insepar-
able brother of pleasure; the one cannot exist without the other. . . . ‘La souffrance, c'est le sacrement de la vie’" (Miró, 1915, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 49).

Moreover, Dupin (1962, p. 156) noted that Miró's "own standard for creative work is the torment necessary to bring it to birth," and in 1917 Miró wrote of the suffering self-critical artist:

"[This] sort of man sees a different problem in every tree and in every bit of sky: this is the man who suffers, the man who is always moving and can
never sit still, the man who will never do what people call a 'definitive' work. He is the man who always stumbles and gets to his feet again... [This] man is always saying not yet, it is still not ready, and when he is satisfied with his last canvas and starts another one, he destroys the earlier one. His work is always a new beginning, as though today he was just beginning to paint" (Miró, 1917, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 51).

SELF-PORTRAITS
Returning to the midlife self-portraits Miró created during his 45th year, Self-Portrait I of 1937-38 (Figure 12-11), is a large drawing in black pencil touched up with oil (cf. Lomas, Chapter 13, this volume). Working before a magnifying mirror, Miró carefully recorded what the eye perceived. But as the work proceeded, Miró the observer was transformed into Miró the visionary, with eyes blazing like miniature suns. Dupin (1962, p. 304) described this work as: “the visionary portrait of a visionary painter... [in which] we are given a glimpse of the tragic Miró... at grips with his inner torment... Both the vision and the fire seem to originate in the eyes".
Indeed, the eyes are wide as if obsessed by inner turmoil, and the face reflects his distress. Miró had great hopes for this work, as he expressed to Pierre Matisse: “I have destroyed my portrait several times; I now feel that I am on the right track. . . . It will be a work that sums up my life, and it will be very representative in the history of painting” (Rowell, 1986, p. 158).

In Self-Portrait II of 1938 (Figure 12-12), Miró depicted himself as a mere pair of eyes—conventionally regarded as windows to the soul—that resemble flaming suns, surrounded by stars and fish. Dupin (1962, pp. 304–306) wrote: “What we have [in Self-Portrait I and Self-Portrait II] is perhaps a single self-portrait in two pictures. . . . If so, the first . . . would express tragedy, the confrontation of death in pure drawing, painstaking, relentless to the point of fury; the second would celebrate the triumph of life. . . .”

Self-Portrait I (Figure 12-11), was an unfinished work, an incomplete piece which Miró signed and put into circulation. Even after it had been circulated, Miró kept an exact tracing of this work in his studio. Dupin (1962, p. 303) wrote, “As a rule, unfinished works . . . betray self-doubts, a looking back, or basic dissatisfactions”. Thus, it is perhaps noteworthy, in relation to Miró’s psychological sense of identity not only as an artist but also as a person going through the midlife period, that this unfinished work was a self-portrait (cf. Lomas, this volume).

When Miró returned to the copy in 1960, as shown in Figure 12-13, he attacked it with bold black strokes, defacing his own image. In this metaphorically self-destructive act, he imposed a bold, Miróesque personage over his earlier work. The eyes are again highlighted, ringed by two black circles, one accentuated by a circle of red. A patch of yellow seems to flow from the lower phallic regions of the personage.

In a moving tribute to Miró, the abstract expressionist painter Robert Motherwell (1959, pp. 32–33, 65–67) wrote of Miró’s work from that period: “Lately, Miró’s art has become more brutal, blacker, torn, heavier in substance as though he had moved from the earlier comedies [of Shakespeare] through Antony and Cleopatra and Falstaff to King Lear, harsher, colder, ironic, more ultimate”. And Motherwell concluded, “There is one joke of God’s that no one can escape—consciousness of death . . .”.

A lithograph (Figure 12-14) created
12-11
JOAN MIRÓ
SELF-PORTRAIT I, 1937–38
Pencil, crayon and oil on canvas, 57⅞ x 38⅞ in.
(146.1 x 97.2 cm)
by Miró for the 1973 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York on the occasion of his 80th birthday may be seen as a later self-portrait of the aging artist, here depicted with but one eye. Though his hands are disintegrating, he is still capable of participating in the procreation of a new generation of artists, symbolized by the fresh black hand at the top of the picture and the eyes in the tadpole-like forms flanking a phallic organ and its associated triangular yellow patch at the bottom of the print (see Note 2, p. 128). For Miró, the phallus was a symbol of procreation, the source of seeds giving rise to new life. And the theme of procreation, a sustaining force in Miró's life, was fundamental to Miró's conception of the function of art. As Miró said (Miró, 1959b, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 251):

"Even more important than the painting itself is what it gives off, what it projects. It doesn't matter if the painting is destroyed. Art can die, but what counts are the seeds it has spread over the earth. . . . A painting must be fertile. It must give birth to a world."

CONCLUSION

In 1925, as noted above, Miró had in fact painted a work entitled The Birth of the World (Figure 12-4). Dupin (1962, p. 203) says of Miró's works of this year, "the aim had been to create a primeval void—intensely alive, bound up with the mystery of creation, which could contain within itself the seeds of all births and all metamorphoses". The large size of this painting, more than 8 x 6 ft, envelops the viewer; and there is a sense of being drawn into the
sense of grandeur and of gestation of the world” (Miró, 1941–42, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 191).

In an age marked by an absence of both societal myth and spiritual beliefs, Miró’s art puts the viewer in touch with the cosmic and mysterious forces at work in the universe. Commenting on modern art, the theologian Paul Tillich (1964, pp. 246–249) noted:

“...The arts ... open up a dimension of reality which is otherwise hidden, and they open up our own being for receiving this reality. Only the arts can do this; science, philosophy, moral action, and religious devotion cannot. The artist brings to our senses, and through them to our whole being, something of the depth of our world and of ourselves, something of the mystery of being. ... And as a theologian I want to say that this period, in spite of its poverty of religious paintings and sculptures in the traditional sense of the word, is a period in which the religious dimension has appeared with astonishing power in non-religious works.”

Jung (1966a, 1966b) also wrote of the artist’s role in putting the viewer back in touch with spiritual forces repressed by the culture, in giving shape to the human yearning for transcendence. Moreover, Jung (1966b) recognized that the artist is often forced to sacrifice personal freedom and happiness to become an instrument of his or her art, responding to the challenge of representing the collective psychic symbols of humanity.

Expressing similar ideas, Miró explained, “The artist ... must go beyond the individualist stage and struggle to reach the collective stage. He must go further than the self—strip himself of his individuality, leave it

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12-13

JOAN MIRÓ

SELF-PORTRAIT, 1937–60
Oil and pencil on canvas, 57% × 38% in (146.5 × 97 cm)
Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona. © 1996 Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADAGP, Paris

pulsating, infinite recesses of the dawn of history and the time of the original creation. The contrast between the luminous wash of the background and the solid opaque forms in the foreground creates what Miró called “an unlimited atmospheric space” (Rubin, 1973, p. 32). In connection with this painting, it is interesting that Miró reminded himself, in his working notes of 1941–1942, to “... always have the Bible open ... that will give me a
behind, reject it—and plunge into anonymity” (Miró, 1951, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 217). Echoing the Spanish mystics (e.g. St John of the Cross and St Teresa) whose works he read avidly (Rowell, 1986, pp. 202, 210, 227), Miró asserted, “Anonymity allows me to renounce myself, but in renouncing myself I come to affirm myself even more” (Miró, 1959c in Rowell, 1986, p. 253).

Throughout his life, Miró’s art continued to be fueled by both his depressions and by his visionary strivings. As he explained in a 1931 interview:

“The only thing that interests me is the spirit itself. . . . The only reason I abide by the rules of pictorial art is because they’re essential for expressing what I feel, just as grammar is essential for expressing yourself. . . . I’m only interested in anonymous art, the kind that springs from the collective unconscious” (Miró, 1931, cited in Rowell, 1986, pp. 116–117).

And referring to the depressive side of his temperament, he noted: "If I don’t paint, I worry. I become very depressed, I fret and become gloomy and get ‘black ideas’ and I don’t know what to do with myself" (Miró, 1947–48, cited in Rowell, 1986, p. 202). This suggests that Miró’s psychological sense of identity as a person (as well as his sense of identity as an artist) was dependent on his artistic productivity, and that art making, in part, may have served a healing function (Arnheim, 1992) for Miró.

Thus, through introspection and meditation, Miró’s spiritual beliefs sustained him in his suffering, allowing his depressions to fuel his artistic creativity. Isolation, loneliness, despair, dissatisfaction with earthbound limitations, and the yearning to ascend to celestial heights became themes for his art—an art that transformed these themes into visual images with the power to probe the deepest recesses of the viewer’s psyche. In sum, the art and life of Joan Miró may be seen as the rain of lyres or outpourings of creativity amidst circuses of melancholy, the pluie de lyres and cirques de melancholie, revealed to us in the 1938 engraving and drypoint, Portrait of Miró.

NOTES
1. Although it is clear to us, on the basis of our research, that there is a
connection between feelings of despair and inner torment in Miró and the evolution of his art, we cannot at this point match the depressed state to specific artworks. A further limitation of this article is our inability to pinpoint the particular nature of Miró’s affective disorder. Retrospective diagnoses made on the basis of historical sources, in the absence of direct clinical examinations, are often problematic; and the problems and pitfalls of the historical approach have been discussed extensively by Runyan (1984). While there is evidence that Miró experienced cyclicity in his moods, we do not know if Miró had a true cyclothymic or manic-depressive disorder. Moreover, we do not yet understand the exact nature of the relation between Miró’s mood swings and his productivity or the relation between his depressions and his creativity.

2. The abstract expressionist artists, who emerged as a group in New York during the 1940s and 1950s, can be seen as a new generation of artists spawned by Miró. They were influenced both by Miró’s artistic techniques and by his spirituality. After seeing reproductions of his work in European art magazines, they were exposed to a great number of actual works in a Miró retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (November 18 1941–January 11 1942). Some years later, many of them then met Miró during the 9 months he lived in New York (February–October, 1947). The show, Miró in America, organized by Barbara Rose at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts in 1982, documented the relationship between Miró and the abstract expressionists (Rose, 1982). Also see Schildkraut et al (1994 and Chapter 18, this volume) concerning the high prevalence of depression and depression-spectrum disorders in this group of artists.

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