

Visual Arts

## Art dealer Daniella Luxembourg: 'Is art an industry? I'm not so sure'

She talks about her new gallery in New York — and the need for action in trying times



Daniella Luxembourg in the Fuller Building, New York, the location of her new gallery © Weston Wells

**Melanie Gerlis** SEPTEMBER 1 2022

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In half a century at the top of the international art world, the London-based art dealer Daniella Luxembourg has combined the boldness to think big with the steel to make things happen. It's true again in her latest venture — a major new gallery in New York's Fuller Building, which opens this week with a show dedicated to the

early works of another determined dreamer, Joan Miró. The exhibition is an example of Luxembourg's ability to show the world's best-known artists in a new light, while its subtitle — *Feet on the Ground, Eyes on the Stars* — could easily apply to the 72-year-old dealer herself.

The New York opening is as much the vision of Luxembourg's daughter and business partner, Alma Luxembourg, and cements the latest shape of their New York and London gallery, now called Luxembourg + Co. The business has shrunk from being run by three partners to two after co-founder Amalia Dayan left in 2020, a split that Luxembourg says was natural and amicable. "We worked so well for more than 10 years together, and in many ways still do," she says. Dayan has since joined forces with three other dealers to form LGDR gallery.

The daughter of Holocaust survivors, Luxembourg grew up in a suburb of Haifa in the then recently formed Israel and uses the past to motor her very active present. "There is no doubt that the second world war is a seminal moment of life," she says when we meet in her roomy London apartment.

She has dedicated time during her varied art-dealing career to the restitution of Nazi-looted art and is said to have been instrumental in brokering the sale of Gustav Klimt's "Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer" (1903-07) to the billionaire Ronald Lauder and his Neue Galerie for a reported \$135mn in 2006. But her "claim to fame", she says, is that, in her role as the founding director of the Jewish Museum in Vienna between 1989 and 1991, she persuaded the authorities to organise an archaeological dig that unearthed the medieval synagogue on the city's Judenplatz.

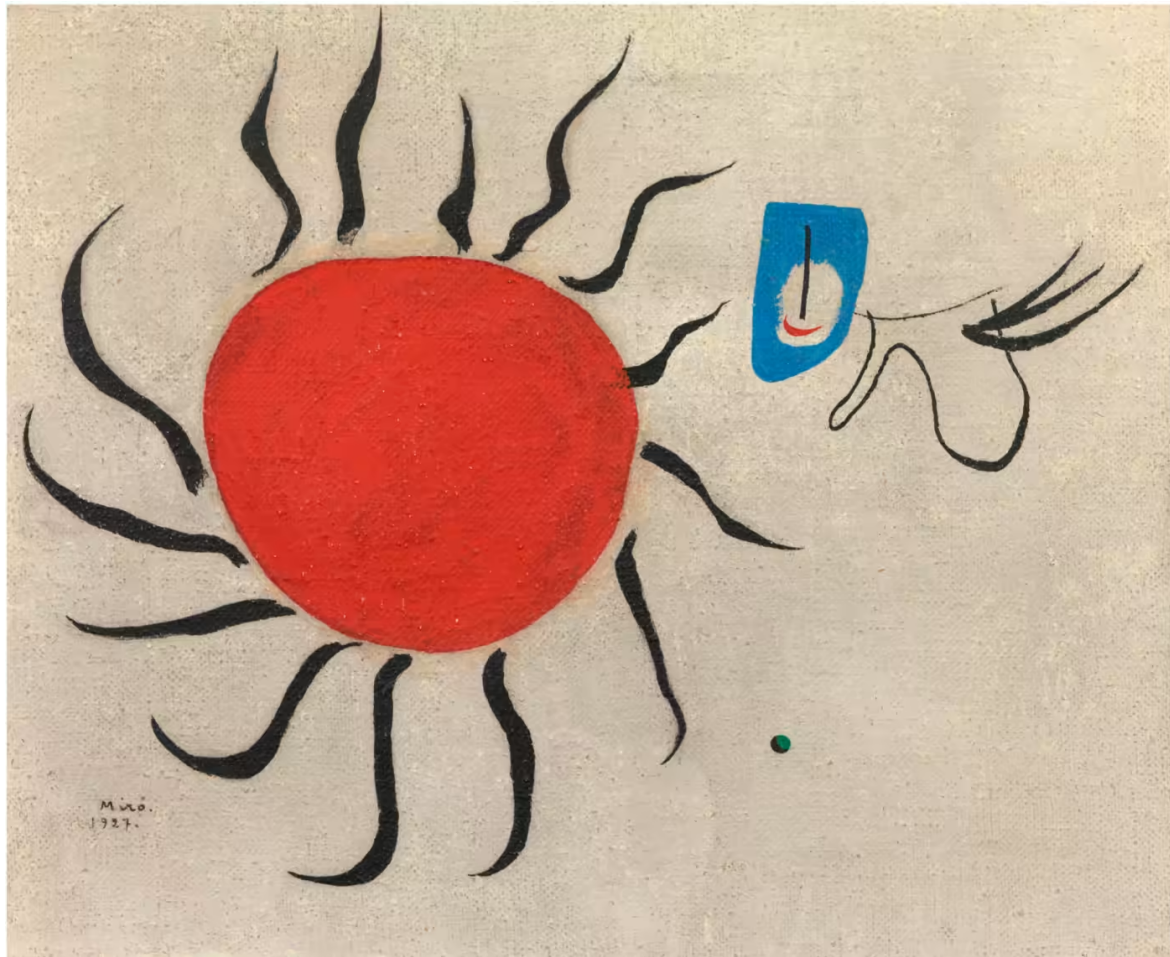
"Visiting is now part of the school curriculum so students can see how much the Jewish community was a part of the fabric of Austria's culture," Luxembourg says.



Joan Miró's 'Peinture (Les amants — Adam et Eve)' (1925) features in a show at Daniella Luxembourg's new gallery © Successió Miró/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Damien Griffiths

She herself came to art through reading. “I didn’t see much art growing up. But the idea of a painting as a structure was easier to understand from the point of view of literature, where you can see the patterns. Learning about art is a language, knowing art is a language, selling art is a language,” she says. It’s a favourite analogy, which she links back to her university studies of Surrealist poems — “the language of language” — and their accompanying illustrations — “the language of images”.

Luxembourg’s first language is Hebrew — she didn’t move to Europe full time until 1993 — and although she has an accomplished and nuanced command of English, she describes speaking it as an “obstacle”. But she finds the obstruction “instructive”, she says, and likens the mental process to an appreciation of art.



Miró's 'Peinture (Le Soleil)' (1927) © Successió Miró/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Annik Wetter

As well as running museums in Israel and Austria, she launched Sotheby's in Israel in 1984, was deputy chairman of Sotheby's Switzerland and has part-owned her own auction house, in collaboration with Simon de Pury, which merged with Phillips under its LVMH backing in 2001. She has also done plenty of private dealing, the role she says she most enjoys. In her spare time, Luxembourg has established the Bauhaus Foundation in 2008, a private museum in Tel Aviv dedicated to the design school, and was on the governing board of London's Courtauld Institute of Art between 2009 and 2019.

Relationships built along the way have helped Luxembourg present a stellar cast of artists, including Paul Cézanne, Alberto Giacometti, Alberto Burri, René Magritte and — Luxembourg's sweet spot — the Viennese artists Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele. In an ideal world — and Luxembourg has an idealist verve about her — “We work with the private collectors and museums whom we have known for many years, and we develop our dreams together,” she says. Alma Luxembourg describes it as “giving a twist on the 20th century's known masters” and sees the Miró show in New York as a natural extension of this approach.



Daniella Luxembourg with her daughter, Alma © Weston Wells

Their scholarly exhibitions have helped move the market. “Our aim is not to make our clients rich — though they have become it,” Luxembourg says. She too has benefited and now has homes around the world, though she is not comfortable with the price levels that 20th-century art now commands: “When the market gets so high, the best works seem to evaporate. Suddenly everything is expensive, whether it is great or not.” Unlike most art dealers, she takes some responsibility for today’s seemingly indiscriminate market. “It’s our fault. We’ve made art what it is not. Is it an industry? I’m not so sure. There are brand names, sure, but each work of art is a unique phenomenon, from one year, from particular surroundings, and with its own authenticity.”

Famously forthright, Luxembourg says she has softened with age, but expresses concern about today’s right-leaning political environment around the world, including in Israel. She senses a reactionary stasis that is potentially damaging to the positivity on which culture thrives. “We shouldn’t give up because of Brexit or Covid. People have become frightened but we shouldn’t succumb to collective fear and be unable to cope. We should use this as a time to develop, rethink, study, do things differently. Look what our parents did after the second world war.”

She must have been quite a powerhouse parent, I suggest to Alma, her only child. “Nobody really thinks that way growing up. But she certainly wasn’t a sleepy mother. She was always doing things, going places and dragging me around with her. There was action and interest,” Alma says with warmth. They have worked together officially since Alma left Christie’s in 2011 to join the partnership.

There is no talk of the future shape of the gallery beyond their current partnership. Both seem happy to enjoy the latest ride. Daniella says this has always been her mindset. “I strongly believe that it is not about achieving or making a sale. It’s about what we read and the quality of the people we are in contact with that makes the road to achievement richer.”

*‘Joan Miró: Feet on the Ground, Eyes on the Stars, Works from 1924 to 1936’ runs at Luxembourg + Co, New York, September 7-November 26, [luxembourgco.com](https://luxembourgco.com)*