



"Although the dream is a very strange phenomenon and an inexplicable mystery, far more inexplicable is the mystery and aspect our minds confer on certain objects and aspects of life."

g. de Chirico

Synopsis

The Surrealist movement was founded in Paris 1924 by a small group of writers and artists who sought to channel the unconscious as a means to unlock the power of the imagination. Disdaining rationalism and literary realism, and powerfully influenced by **Sigmund Freud**, the Surrealists believed the conscious mind repressed the power of the imagination, weighting it down with taboos. Influenced also by **Karl Marx**, they hoped that the psyche had the power to reveal the contradictions in the everyday world and spur on revolution. Their emphasis on the power of the imagination puts them in the tradition of **Romanticism**, but unlike their forbears, they believed that revelations could be found on the street and in everyday life. The Surrealist

impulse to tap the subconscious mind, and their interests in myth and primitivism, went on to shape the **Abstract Expressionists**, and they remain influential today.

Key Ideas

- Surrealism has come to be seen as the most influential movement in twentieth century art. Figures like **Salvador Dalí** and **Man Ray** not only had an important influence on avant-garde art, but through their commercial work - in fashion photography, advertising and film - they brought the style to a huge popular audience. Following the demise of **Minimalism** in the 1960s, the movement's influence also returned to art, and since the 1970s it has attracted considerable attention from art historians.
- Surrealism was officially founded in 1924, when **André Breton** wrote *Le Manifeste du Surréalisme*. In it, he defined Surrealism as "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner - the actual functioning of thought." In this, he proposed that artists should seek access to their unconscious mind in order to make art inspired by this realm.
- Initially a literary movement, many Surrealists were ambivalent about the possibilities of painting, however, the group's leader, **André Breton**, later embraced and promoted painting. The work of Surrealist painters such as **Joan Miró** would be an important influence on the **Abstract Expressionists** in the 1940s.

Beginnings

Though the Surrealist movement was officially founded in 1924, the term was first coined in 1917, when **Guillaume Apollinaire** used it in program notes for the ballet *Parade*, written by **Pablo Picasso**, **Leonide Massine**, **Jean Cocteau**, and **Erik Satie**. It began as a literary group strongly allied to the **Dada** movement, and emerged in the wake of the collapse of the group in Paris, when **André Breton's** eagerness to bring purpose to the group clashed with **Tristan Tzara's** anti-authoritarianism. Breton - who is occasionally described as the 'Pope' of Surrealism -

would go on to be the most important figure in the movement, the impresario whose strong leadership gave it cohesion through its many reincarnations until his death in 1966.

Concepts and Styles



Surrealism shared much of the anti-rationalism of Dada, the movement out of which it grew. However, Breton, who was a part of the Dada group, wanted to form a movement in which artists could unite to protest war by accessing subconscious thoughts. The original Parisian Surrealists organized group activities as a reprieve from violent political situations and to address the unease they felt about the world's uncertainties. Surrealists were interested in exposing the complex and repressed inner worlds of sexuality, desire, and violence, and interest in these topics fostered transgressive behavior. Many of the artists underwent psychoanalysis to study and uproot their latent feelings and behaviors as a cure for what they believed to be the constraining and repressed codes and morals of society.

The Surrealists generated creative works that exposed the artists' inner minds in bizarre, symbolic ways in order to uncover anxieties and to treat them analytically through visual means. The Surrealists depicted dream imagery and archetypal symbols derived from their

unconsciousness. The collage aesthetic was significant to the Surrealists, as they believed it tapped into the subconscious by creating unlikely juxtapositions using imagery garnered from popular culture. The Surrealists employed collage in every medium including film.

Rise and Decline of Surrealism



Photograph of the artists exhibiting in the *Artist in Exile* show at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, March, 1942. Left to right, first row: Matta, Ossip Zadkine, Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, Fernand Léger; second row: André Breton, Piet Mondrian, André Masson, Amédée Ozenfant, Jacques Lipchitz, Pavel Tchelitchev, Kurt Seligmann, Eugene Berman. Photograph by George Platt Lynes.

Though Surrealism originated in France, strains of it can be identified in art throughout the world. Particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, many artists were swept into its orbit as increasing political upheaval and a second global war encouraged fears that human civilization was in a state of crisis and collapse. The emigration of many Surrealists to the US during WWII spread their ideas further. However, following the war, the group's ideas were challenged by the rise of **Existentialism**.

And in the arts, the Abstract Expressionists usurped their dominance by pioneering new techniques for representing the unconscious. Breton became increasingly interested in revolutionary political activism as the movement's primary goal. The result was the dispersal of the original movement into smaller factions of artists. The Bretonians, such as **Roberto Matta**, believed that art was inherently political. Others, like **Yves Tanguy**, **Max Ernst**, and **Dorothea Tanning**, remained in America to separate from Breton. **Salvador Dalí**, likewise, retreated to Spain, believing in the centrality of the individual in art.

Further Developments:

Abstract Expressionism

In 1936, the Museum of Modern Art in New York staged an exhibition entitled *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, and many American artists were powerfully impressed by it. Some, such as **Jackson Pollock**, began to experiment with automatism, and with imagery that seemed to derive from the unconscious - experiments which would later lead to his 'drip' paintings. **Robert Motherwell**, similarly, is said to have been "stuck between the two worlds" of abstraction and automatism.

New York quickly stole the focus from Paris as the emergent center of a new vanguard, one that favored tapping the unconscious through abstraction as opposed to the "hand-painted dreams" of **Salvador Dalí**. **Peggy Guggenheim's** 1942 exhibition of Surrealist-influenced artists (**Rothko**, **Gottlieb**, **Motherwell**, **Baziotes**, **Hoffman**, **Still**, and **Pollock**) alongside European artists **Miró**, **Klee**, and **Masson**, underscores the speed with which Surrealist concepts spread through the New York art community.

Feminism and Women Surrealists

The Surrealists have often been depicted as a tightly knit group of men, and their art often envisioned women as wild 'others' to the cultured, rational world. Work by feminist art historians has since corrected this impression, not only highlighting the number of women Surrealists who were active in the group, particularly in the 1930s, but also analyzing the gender stereotypes at work in much Surrealist art. Feminist art critics, such as **Dawn Ades**, **Mary Ann Caws**, and **Whitney**

Chadwick, have devoted several books and exhibitions to this subject. While most of the male Surrealists, especially Hans Bellmer, Man Ray, and Salvador Dalí, repeatedly distorted the female form, and depicted women as muses, much in the way that male artists had for centuries, female Surrealists such as Claude Cahun, Unica Zurn, Lee Miller, Leonora Carrington, and Dorothea Tanning, sought to address the problematic adoption of psychoanalysis that often cast women as somehow monstrous. Thus, many female Surrealists experimented with cross-dressing and depicted themselves as animals or mythic creatures.

*Original content written by **The Art Story Contributors***

QUOTES

"Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality." - André Breton

"Contrary to prevalent misdefinitions, surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine, nor a philosophical system, nor a mere literary or artistic school. It is an unrelenting revolt against a civilization that reduces all human aspirations to market values, religious impostures, universal boredom and misery." - Franklin Rosemont, from *André Breton and the First Principles of Surrealism*

"Creativity is that marvelous capacity to grasp mutually distinct realities and draw a spark from their juxtaposition." - Max Ernst

"Putting psychic life in the service of revolutionary politics, Surrealism publicly challenged vanguard modernism's insistence on 'art for art's sake.' But Surrealism also battled the social institutions - church, state, and family - that regulate the place of women within patriarchy. In offering some women their first locus for artistic and social resistance, it became the first modernist movement in which a group of women could explore female subjectivity and give form (however tentatively) to a feminine imaginary." - Whitney Chadwick, from *Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*

"[the contribution was in their determination] to tap the creative and imaginative forces of the mind at their source in the unconscious and, through the increase in self-knowledge achieved by confronting people by their real nature, to change society" -Simon Wilson, from preface to Dali exhibition at Tate Gallery, London, 1980

Key Artists:



André Breton

André Breton, author of the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, was an influential theorizer of both Dada and Surrealism. Born in France, he emigrated to New York during World War II, where he greatly influenced the Abstract Expressionists.



Max Ernst

Max Ernst was a German Dadaist and Surrealist whose paintings and collages combine dream-like realism, automatic techniques, and eerie subject matter.



Salvador Dalí

Salvador Dalí was a Spanish Surrealist painter who combined a hyperrealist style with dream-like, sexualized subject matter. His collaborations with Hollywood and commercial ventures, alongside his notoriously dramatic personality, earned him scorn from some Surrealist colleagues.



Pablo Picasso

Picasso dominated European painting in the first half of the last century, and remains perhaps the century's most important, prolifically inventive and versatile artist. Alongside Georges Braque he pioneered Cubism. He also made significant contributions to Surrealist painting, and media such as collage, welded sculpture, and ceramics.



Alberto Giacometti

The Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti created semi-abstract sculptures that took up themes of violence, sex, and Surrealism. His famous later work is characterized by towering, elongated figures in bronze.



Joan Miró

Active in Paris from the 1920s onward, and influenced by Surrealism, Miró developed a style of biomorphic abstraction which blended abstract figurative motifs, large fields of color, and primitivist symbols. This style would be an important inspiration for many Abstract Expressionists.



Louise Bourgeois

Louise Bourgeois is a French contemporary artist whose work adds a feminist perspective to Surrealism's themes of sex, childhood, and the uncanny. She is best known for her installation 'Cells' and her large-scale spider sculptures.



Rene Magritte

Rene Magritte has achieved great popular acclaim for his idiosyncratic approach to Surrealism. His beautiful and troubling images of bowler-hatted men and nature scenes are popular in art and general circles.



Man Ray

Man Ray was an American artist in Paris whose photograms, objects, drawings, and other works played an important role in Dada, Surrealism, modern photography, and avant-garde art at large.



Yves Tanguy

Yves Tanguy was a French painter and one of the key figures of French Surrealism in the early 20th century. Having never received any formal training, Tanguy was a self-taught painter who became best known for his highly imaginative landscapes and detailed precision.



Dorothea Tanning

Dorothea Tanning is an American painter whose work is commonly associated with the Surrealists. Heavily influenced by the likes of Duchamp, Ray, Tanguy and perhaps most of all Max Ernst, her former husband, Tanning created a number of paintings in the 1940s that are now considered seminal to the Surrealist movement, including her

dream-like self-portrait *Birthday*. Later in life much of Tanning's work adopted increasingly abstract forms, yet always maintained a distinctly Surrealist aesthetic.

Major Works:



Artist: Max Ernst

Title: Two Children are Threatened by a Nightingale (1924)

Materials: Oil on wood with painted wood elements

Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York

Description: Max Ernst made this collage from painted found objects in the same the year that Breton published *Le Manifeste du Surréalisme*. The combination of three-dimensional objects with painted canvas anticipates Ernst's pioneering collage techniques. The composition is typically Surrealist - fraught with mystery and dream-inspired symbols: a man on a rooftop is shown carrying a woman away; the woman on the left holds weapons and appears to be in distress; and Ernst claimed that the startled nightingale referenced both the death of his sister, and a hallucination he experienced when he was ill in bed.



Artist: Hans Bellmer

Title: La Poupee (1935)

Materials: Vintage gelatin silver print

Collection: Ubu Gallery, New York

Description: Hans Bellmer made numerous *Poupées*, or dolls, throughout his career, and photographed them as studies of his own fantasies of the female form. Bellmer deconstructed and reassembled his *Poupées*, and would photograph them at extreme angles to evoke an uneasy, nightmarish presence. Bellmer was also fond of tying up his lover, Unica Zurn, with string, and photographing fleshy segments of her body as strange, abstracted forms. Bellmer's *Poupées* were popular among his colleagues such as Man Ray, who also deconstructed female figures. Bellmer's dolls have drawn much

critical ire for his positioning of the female figure as grotesque, monstrous and threatening, though they are a typical example of Surrealist artwork that is constructed and informed by anxiety and paranoia.



Artist: Salvador Dalí

Title: The Accommodations of Desire (1929)

Materials: Oil and cut-and-pasted printed paper on canvas

Collection: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Description: Painted in the summer of 1929 just after Dalí went to Paris for his first Surrealist exhibition, *The Accommodations of Desire* is a prime example of Dalí's ability to render his vivid and bizarre dreams with seemingly journalistic accuracy. The narrative of this painting stems from Dalí's anxieties over his affair with Gala Eluard, wife of artist Paul Eluard. These lumpish white "pebbles" depict his insecurities about his future with Gala, circling around the concepts of terror and decay. While *The Accommodations of Desire* is an exposé of Dalí's deepest fears, it is also, formally, an experiment with early collage techniques. The lion heads are glued onto the canvas, and are believed to have been cut from a children's book.



Artist: René Magritte

Title: Ce N'est Pas Une Pipe (1928-29)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Description: This widely recognized painting comes from a series Magritte painted called *The Treachery of Images*. Like Marcel Duchamp, Magritte appreciated visual puns and made this pipe painting to challenge definitions within representational art. Of course, Magritte claimed, this is an "image" of a pipe rather than an actual pipe. Magritte is known for his isolation of objects in paintings to call into question the symbolic resonance for the viewer. He painted hats, umbrellas, suits, and many objects associated with men and their pursuits.



Artist: Man Ray

Title: Mannequin (1938)

Materials: Assemblage of wood, oil, metal, board on board, with artist's frame

Collection: National Gallery of Australia

Description: *Mannequin* depicts André Masson's mannequin at the Exposition International du Surréalisme, Galerie des Beaux-Arts, in Paris 1938. These weird mannequins were also designed by Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Maurice Henry, and others to fill a room with uncanny female forms which looked both monstrous and sexually alluring. Man Ray photographed them all as discreet characters, of which this is one example. He repeatedly photographed his assistant, artist Lee Miller, and many other females, both living and inanimate. Like Bellmer, Ray was obsessed with the female form as the perfect embodiment of male desire, and sought to capture it formally in dream-like ways. Man Ray also pioneered many photographic techniques, including *rayographs*, named after himself, in which subjects appear to glow in silver auras.



Artist: Dorothea Tanning

Title: Birthday (1942)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Philadelphia Museum of Art

Description: *Birthday* is a self-portrait that Dorothea Tanning painted to commemorate her 30th birthday. Viewed up close, one notices the infinite rooms receding into the background, symbolizing Tanning's unconscious. Many Surrealists felt architectural imagery was well suited to expressing notions of a labyrinthine self that changes and expands over time; *Birthday* is one of the best examples of this. Also notable is the gargoyle at the subject's feet. Tanning said this was her rendition of a lemur, which has been associated with death spirits. Tanning juxtaposed natural imagery, like the skirt made of roots, against objects representing high culture, like fancy apparel and interior design, to both pay homage to culture and to express nature and wilderness as a feminine construct.