

*"Knowing how to look is a way of inventing."*

A stylized, cursive signature of the word 'Dali' in black ink.

## SYNOPSIS

Dali is among the most versatile and prolific artists of the twentieth century. Though chiefly remembered for his painterly output, in the course of his long career he successfully turned to sculpture, printmaking, fashion, advertising, writing, and, perhaps most famously, filmmaking in his collaborations with Luis Bunuel and Alfred Hitchcock. Dali was renowned for his flamboyant personality as much as for his undeniable technical virtuosity. In his early use of organic morphology, his work bears the stamp of fellow Spaniards Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró. His paintings also evince a fascination for Classical and Renaissance art, clearly visible through his hyper-realistic style and religious symbolism of his later work. Dali is most often associated with the Surrealist movement, despite his formal expulsion from the group in 1934 for his reactionary political views.

## KEY IDEAS

- Freudian theory underpins Dali's attempts at forging a formal and visual language capable of rendering his dreams and hallucinations. These account for some of the iconic and now ubiquitous images through which Dali achieved tremendous fame during his lifetime and beyond.
- Obsessive themes of eroticism, death, and decay permeate Dali's work, reflecting his familiarity with and synthesis of the psychoanalytical theories of his time. Drawing on blatantly autobiographical material and childhood memories, Dali's work is rife with often ready-interpreted symbolism, ranging from fetishes and animal imagery to religious symbols.
- Dali subscribed to Surrealist André Breton's theory of automatism, but ultimately opted for a method of tapping the unconscious that he termed "critical paranoia," a state in which one could cultivate delusion while maintaining one's sanity. Paradoxically defined by Dali himself as a form of "irrational knowledge," the paranoiac-critical method was applied by his contemporaries, mostly Surrealists, to varied media, ranging from cinema to poetry to fashion.

## **ARTIST BIOGRAPHY**

### **Childhood**

Dali was born in Figueres, a small town outside Barcelona, to a prosperous family. His larger-than-life persona started early: aged 10, he had his first drawing lessons where he claimed that he manifested hysterical, rage-filled outbursts toward his family and playmates. Throughout his life, Dali retained his love for Catalan culture, and he depicted the landscape surrounding Figueres in several key paintings throughout his career. Dali entered the Madrid School of Fine Arts in 1921.

### **Early training**

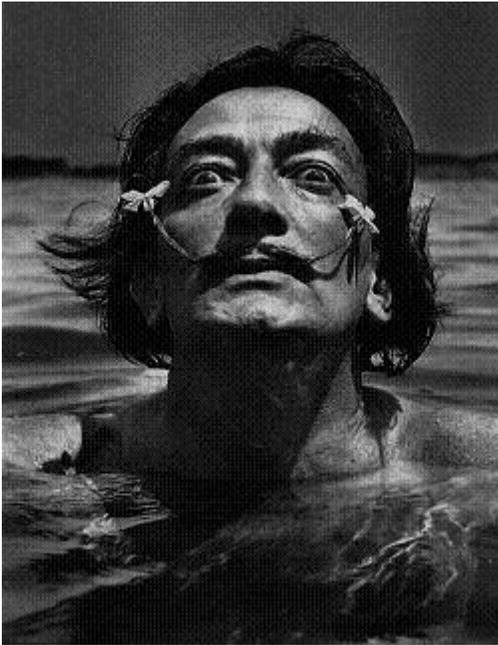


In Madrid, Dalí experimented with **Impressionist** and **Pointillist** styles, but abandoned these techniques after he won a bet that he could "paint a prize-winning Pointillist picture by splashing paint at a canvas from a distance of three feet," (Soby, p.4). In 1920, Dalí visited Paris where he became greatly interested in **Futurist** attempts to recreate motion and show objects from simultaneous, multiple angles. In exploring this style, Dalí began to consider a means of dramatically reinterpreting reality and altering perception. He discovered the psychoanalytic concepts of Freud as well as metaphysical painters like **Giorgio de Chirico**, and consequently began using psychoanalytic methods of mining the subconscious to generate imagery. By the time he was expelled from the art academy in 1924, Dalí was already exhibiting work locally, and had been adopted into a social circle that **Luis Bunuel**, **Federico Garcia Lorca**, and **Maria Mallo**.

### **Mature Period**

In the latter 1920s, Dalí was practicing **Cubist** styles and was deeply influenced by **Picasso**, whom he personally met in Paris in 1929. That same year, at the Galerie Goemans in Paris, Dalí exhibited canvases that explored symbolism and his interest in the subconscious. Through this exhibition, he met **Robert Desnos**, **Paul Eluard**, and **André Breton**, who wrote the essay for Dalí's catalog. Soon after, Dalí moved to Paris, and was invited by Breton to join the **Surrealists**. For the next several years, Dalí's paintings were notably illustrative of his theories about the

psychological state of paranoia and its importance as subject matter. He painted bodies, bones, and symbolic objects that reflected sexualized fears of father figures and impotence, as well as symbols that referred to the anxiousness over the passing of time. During this period, he also worked on *Un Chien Andalou (An Andalusian Dog)*, a filmic meditation on abject obsessions. His subject matter was so sexually and politically shocking that Dali became infamous, his notoriety exacerbated by his outlandish personal style.



Dali ascribed to Breton's theory of automatism, and claimed he didn't know the meaning behind the symbols in his paintings. He credited his childhood as inspiration, urging artists to be skeptical of modern technology and to embrace intuitive, craft-based art-making techniques instead. As politics of war were at the forefront of Surrealist debates, Breton expelled Dali from the Surrealists in 1934 due to differing views on General Franco and fascism. In 1937, Dali moved to Italy, and practiced more traditional painting styles that drew on his love of canonized painters, like Gustave Courbet and Jan Vermeer, though his emotionally-charged themes and subjects remained as strange as ever.

### Late Period and Death

In the 1940s and 1950s, Dali's paintings focused on religious themes

reflecting his abiding interest in the supernatural. He aimed to portray space as a subjective reality, which may be why many of his paintings from this period show objects and figures at extremely foreshortened angles. He continued employing his "paranoiac-critical" method, which entailed working long, arduous hours in the studio and expressing his dreams directly on canvas in manic bouts of energy. In 1955, he returned to Spain and became quite reclusive, but continued to paint until his death in the 1980s. His paintings came to be increasingly likened to Renaissance masterworks. And, like a Renaissance artist, Dali had many other creative outlets: he designed jewelry, sets for theater, worked in fashion design, collaborated with Chanel, and much more. These endeavors led to further commercialization of his work, whose impact has been recently academically reassessed in several large-scale exhibitions.

## LEGACY



Dali's manner of revealing the gap between reality and illusion influenced all manner of modern artists. Beyond developing his own symbolic language, Dali elaborated a way to represent the inner mind. He is considered one of the major Surrealists who used shock and unease to illustrate moments of pleasure, and in this his work remains highly contemporary. Though some second generation Surrealists, like **Joseph Cornell**, continued working in representational modes, other artists, like many **Abstract Expressionists**, drew on Dali's belief in mining the subconscious. Painters such as **Robert Motherwell**, who first

showed as Surrealists at Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery, also deeply admired Dali's way of personalizing the political and vice versa.

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

## **ARTIST QUOTES**

"There is only one difference between a madman and me. The madman thinks he is sane. I know I am mad."

"I would awake at sunrise, and without washing or dressing sit down before the easel which stood right beside my bed. Thus the first image I saw on awakening was the painting I had begun, as it was the last I saw in the evening when I retired . . . I spent the whole day seated before my easel, my eyes staring fixedly, trying to 'see', like a medium (very much so indeed), the images that would spring up in my imagination. Often I saw these images exactly situated in the painting. Then, at the point commanded by them, I would paint, paint with the hot taste in my mouth that panting hunting dogs must have at the moment when they fasten their teeth into the game killed that very instant by a well-aimed shot. At times I would wait whole hours without any such images occurring. Then, not painting, I would remain in suspense, holding up one paw, from which the brush hung motionless, ready to pounce again upon the oneiric landscape of my canvas the moment the next explosion of my brain brought a new victim of my imagination bleeding to the ground." >From Dalí's book, *My Secret Life*:

### **Major Works:**



**Title:** *Honey is Sweeter than Blood* (1927)

**Materials:** Oil on canvas

**Collection: -**

**Description:** Dali's first surreal painting, *Honey is Sweeter than Blood*, shows a marked progression away from Cubism toward the depiction of subconscious obsessions. Dali's preoccupations with decadence, death, and immortality returned repeatedly in future works. This painting was made between Dali's first visits to Paris where he was socializing with artists who would found the Surrealist movement.



**Title:** *Retrospective Bust of a Woman* (1933)

**Materials:** Painted porcelain, bread, corn, feathers, paint on paper, beads, ink stand, sand, and two pens

**Collection:** MoMA, New York

**Description:** *Retrospective Bust of a Woman* exemplifies Dali's found object sculptures in which the original materials would be recontextualized through a process of assembly and composition. This piece was constructed around an inkstand, atop which was placed a replica of figures from Jean-Francois Millet's painting *The Angelus* (1857-1859). Dali was fixated on this painting, deeming it a marvelous representation of sexual repression, which he worked compulsively to unleash. The necklace draped around the bust is made from a zootrope strip, indicating the potential for movement in a still object as well as Dali's interest in film.



**Title:** *The Persistence of Memory* (1931)

**Materials:** Oil on canvas

**Collection:** MoMA, New York

**Description:** This iconic and much-reproduced painting depicts time as a series of melting watches surrounded by swarming ants that hint at decay, an organic process in which Dali held an unshakeable fascination. Elaborated in the frontispiece to the *Second Surrealist Manifesto*, the seminal distinction between hard and soft objects, associated by Dali with order and putrefaction respectively, informs his working method in subverting inherent textual properties: the softening of hard objects and corresponding hardening of soft objects. It is likely that Dali was using the clocks to symbolize mortality (specifically his own) rather than literal time, as the melting flesh in the painting's center is loosely based on Dali's profile. The cliffs that provide the backdrop are taken from images of Catalonia, Dali's home.



**Title:** *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (1936)

**Materials:** Oil on canvas

**Collection:** Philadelphia Museum of Art

**Description:** This painting is an allegorical response to the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939, but it is also a garish and gruesome depiction of a body destroying itself. Dalí painted this work prior to General Franco's invasion, yet it predicts the violence, anxiety, and doom many Spaniards felt during Franco's later rule. *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans* is a fine example of a Dalí composition that simultaneously expresses his sexual obsessions as well as his political outrage.



**Title:** *Un Chien Andalou (film still)* (1928)

**Materials:** 35 mm film

**Collection:** MoMA, New York

**Description:** Considered the first Surrealist film for its non-sequential scenes, *Un Chien Andalou* recreates a dream-like setting in which images are presented in montaged clips as a means of tapping the unconscious. This film still from *Un Chien Andalou* is indicative of the Surrealist love of shock and bodily violation. Here, a cow's eye was used to stand-in for this woman's eye, which, in the next frame, was shown slashed by a razor blade in extreme close-up. Dalí was reportedly sick for a week after he helped Luis Bunuel shoot the scene. Other scenes include a woman cowering in the corner in fear of two donkey corpses draped over grand pianos as her presumed suitor watches ants crawl from stigmata-like puncture wounds in the palm of his hand.

