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THE WEIRD WORLD OF
SURREALISTIC PAINTING

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THE WEIRD WORLD OF SURREALISTIC PAINTING

- I. Introduction and definition of Surrealism
- II. The forerunners of Surrealism
 - A. Early "Surrealists" during the Romantic era
 - B. Dada
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When the topic Surrealism is introduced to the average conversation, the general knowledge concerning it is that Dali is supposedly the main Surrealist, and that the Surrealists painted nonsensical make-believe canvases. But the weird world of Surrealistic art goes much deeper than this, and its roots are far more attached to the importance of man's existence. The movement of Surrealism, though somewhat short-lived, was one of tremendous fervor and power. The men who developed it had an entirely new insight toward not just painting pictures, but toward building a new philosophy of life.

Two of the main characteristics of Surrealism are that the artist (1) gets his ideas from dreams of the subconscious, (2) organizes his paintings into designs without conscious control.¹ The poet and dramatist, Guillaume Apollinaire, was the first to use the term surrealist. He said that it was a way of capturing the essence of reality, not by copying nature, but by expressing it in ways that make the work of art more real than reality--super-real, sur-real.² So Surrealism is more than a technique of painting. It is an attitude of the mind, a way of life, a way of looking at the world.

In the first "Surrealist Manifesto," written by André

Breton, is found this dictionary-like definition and description of Surrealism.

"Surrealism. Noun. Masculine, Pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, be it verbally, in writing, or by any other means, the true functioning of thought without any control by reason, and outside any aesthetic or moral preoccupation."

"Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association hitherto neglected, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the free play of thought. It tends toward the definitive destruction of all other psychic mechanisms and to put itself in their place in the solution of the main problems of life. . . " ³

Some truly early forerunners of surrealism include the artists Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, and Rodolphe Bresdin. These men were symbolists of the nineteenth century. They drew their inspiration from dreams and fantasy while their contemporaries, the Realists and the Impressionists, were exploring nature.

Moreau, the adept teacher of Matisse and Rouault, turned out color abstract sketches many years before abstraction became widespread. He squeezed his paint directly from the tube onto the canvas, used a palette knife instead of a brush, and left his fingerprints in the texture. All of these are techniques of modern artists.

But he was proudest of his mythological paintings that definitely conveyed the nightmarish quality used by many Surrealists.

Redon was more important to the Surrealism movement. His paintings were childlike fantasies of centaurs, sphinxes, and Cyclops with floating eyeballs, ears that resembled wings, and strange plants sprouting out of human heads. Redon said that fantasy is "the messenger of the 'unconscious,' of the eminent and mysterious personage. . . who arrives in his own time, according to the moment, the place, even the season."⁴

Bresdin's power was imagination. In his "Holy Family Beside a Rushing Stream," every twig of every tree can be distinguished. The landscape includes a forest, a stream, and a nativity in the foreground, and a city, mountains, and the sky in the back. It is truly a masterpiece in technique and patience and also in hypnotic effect. A viewer must remain attentive to the painting for quite a while in order to explore the entire scene.⁵

The Surrealists who rose to fame in the 1920's were influenced by the early dream pictures of Chagall and of de Chirico, cubism, but mainly by the Dadaists. A group of poets, painters, and musicians exiled in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1916 founded this movement, called the Cabaret Voltaire. The name dada, picked at random from the diction-

ary, means "hobbyhorse," a name that came to signify their derision of anything of importance.

The Dadaists' paintings were meant to express the artist's state of mind, and they were intended to shock. The Dadaists gave nonsensical theatrical shows as well as art exhibitions. The audiences received these performances about as well as the paintings and threw eggs and cabbages at the actors.⁶

The seeds sown before the war by the cubists and dadaists germinated into a harvest of artistic creation that frightened the adherents to the sublime and beautiful romanticism in art out of their wits.⁷

Surrealism could not have come into being without war. It arose as a reaction to the futility of World War I. And it was the dadaists who began this reaction. They were purely negative in intention. They wanted to destroy the bourgeois concept of art by pouring ridicule on any idealistic concept of beauty. Nothing was sacred to them. Nothing escaped their derision. They were completely Nihilist. The Dadaists proclaimed "total nonsensicality as a weapon against the various ways in which war was supposed to make sense."⁸ Dadaism was a total rebellion against war. It waged its war in favor of the total destruction of all values which, until then, had seemed sacred. It ridiculed patriotism, honor, religion, ambition, human greatness, every kind of ideal. The dadaists meant to abdicate

all false gods.⁹ In these ways was Surrealism like Dadaism. It was a deep psychological depression that found its expression by the dadists and surrealists. From this post-war state of mind, a movement and a method were born, and an idea gained ground.

A painter named George Grosz was a member of the Dadaist group. He and other young artists and writers began publicizing their views that showed themselves to be "moderns" utterly opposed to any kind of tradition. It was "a new spirit, the poetical experiment at any price, . . . the eternal surprise."¹⁰

It was the influence of Sigmund Freud and a disagreement with the dada concepts that made Andre Breton, the chief founder and exponent of Surrealism, and his friends become deeply preoccupied with the artistic potentialities of the human subconscious. Upon returning to Paris after World War I, this group became disgusted with the unchanged state of affairs they found. They set out to change the old modes of politics, religion, morality, art, and philosophy. The basis for their revolution was Surrealism. Their enemy was any kind of formal logic; the only necessity that counted was psychological necessity. They felt that the truth could only be obtained from the subconscious in dreams or dream-like states.

All of the aesthetic values once applied to literature and art were totally discarded as hypocritical rituals of the commoners. Realism and naturalism were also abandoned. Surrealism was to be an entirely new approach by which to discern realities. But the new position in art, politics, philosophy, and religion were not sufficiently easy to discern, and once discerned, it failed to combine highly individualistic, gifted men into a society. Friction was more common than agreement.¹¹

In politics, the Surrealists favored permanent revolution; at first it was Leninistic Communism, then Trotskyism; they were always in violent opposition to the Stalin regime. Many surrealists have since become permanent Communists and Dali, whose art was dictated by "paranoia-criticism," was at first Fascist-oriented.¹²

Surrealists denied the early Dadaist concept that nothing in life has any meaning. They believed in a meaning in life, but they sought to find it on the border of consciousness. The basis of Surrealism was that individual vision rather than group action. Breton declared in 1924 in his Manifesto that only the marvelous could be beautiful,¹³ thus leaving himself open to ridicule. Nonetheless, the young writers and artists he gathered around him to support his theory began to lay the foundation of a new philosophy to govern the arts and propose a new definition for the word "poet." This was that anyone could be a

poet merely by becoming aware of the daily miracles of life, not necessarily through involvement with one of the art forms.¹⁴

Unlike its dadaist forerunners, Surrealism was not totally destructive because it does present methods to replace old concepts rather than merely annihilating them. There began to be a "method in this madness."¹⁵ From here on, Breton developed Surrealism as an instrument of conception and cognition.

The movement itself lasted from 1918 to 1939, between the two world wars. From 1918 to 1923 was the preparatory period; 1923 to 1925 was its heroic period; 1925 to 1930 was its critical phase; and from 1930 to 1939 was its autonomous period.¹⁶

The first group of Surrealists became very active, circulating pamphlets and publications all over Paris in order to clarify their intentions and aims. Trials were staged in defense of freedom of thought, scandals were frequent, and slogans were coined against family life and religion. Members of the movement argued over politics. In 1938, one of the Surrealistic exhibitions held had fourteen different countries participating. Obviously, Surrealism was no small movement.

Of the artists exhibiting in these shows, the one coming nearest to Surrealism as visualized by the Surrealists

was Max Ernst. After 1930, Salvador Dali joined the group which then was comprised of Ernst, Dali, Arp, Yves Tanguy, Giorgio de Chirico, the sculptor Giacometti, and the painters René Magritte, Brauner, Joan Miró, Man Ray, Henry Moore, Picabia, and André Masson.¹⁷ These men are now being recognized as major artists in their own right. Each one is different from the other. They are all complete individuals. Each has his own approach to the world of the subconscious. Each has his own technique.

The artist must be completely free to reshape the world in order to achieve this super-reality:

"His universe is the play
 Within which he is God the Creator
 Who disposes at will
 Of sounds, gestures, movements, masses,
 colors
 Not merely in order
 To photograph what is called a slice
 of life
 But to bring forth life itself in all
 its truth."¹⁸

In order to draw out conscious ideas from the subconscious, these men experimented in hypnotism, automatic writing, accounts of dreams, fantasies and states of hallucinations, and absurd games. They believe that man's inspiration comes from his being inwardly listening, aware of his inner self. He thus rejects the process by which universal conclusions

are obtained, that of logic.

Max Ernst, the foremost member of this talented first group, was a German romantic painter who had the gift to turn any accidental blob of paint into a dream landscape of haunting power and lyrical delicacy.¹⁹

The Spaniard, Salvador Dali (1904-), had participated in the Surrealistic experimentations of collective dreaming and the simulation of mental aberrations, what was considered a key to a more total understanding of the workings of the mind. Dali proved to be the cleverest in picturing Surrealistic adventures: the juxtaposition of objects, the creation of new forms, the obliteration of horizons, the materialization of desire.²⁰ And though he is very cunning and skillful at his drawing and coloring besides, the other Surrealists consider him to be an outcast.

Dali's "The Persistence of Memory" is a strange, eerie world of dreams where natural laws are banished. The watches hang as limp as melted butter on a desolate landscape. The only living things are ants clustered on the face of one watch. Another watch lies across what seems to be the grotesque image of a face. This is the work Dali is best known for.

Another Spaniard, Joan Miró (1893-), captures in his paintings the same sensation of dreaming that Dali's do. Miró's pictures are filled with uneasiness and horror, but sometimes the little creatures in them seem to scamper around

playfully as if they are having great fun, as in his "Harlequin's Carnival." ²¹ Miró and Paul Klee, the great non-objectivist, are ^{the} only two who express the gaiety as well as the horror and fright of dreams. Paintings in the Surrealistic manner over its twenty year period also included the absurd, those with openly comical twists.

René Magritte, the Belgian Surrealist, paints pictures that are precise, orderly, and very real. They are clearly delineated, but are mischievous in that they trick us into suspending our customary ways of seeing things. Alternate and even contrary possibilities coexist. Although a skilled craftsman, Magritte says he is more concerned with matter than manner. De Chirico said that one must first "dream of what must be painted and not how to paint." ²² Magritte's paintings reflect Chirico's in handling of space, distortions of scale and perspective, precision, and juxtaposition of apparently disparate objects. It is all a matter of "how we see the world."

Such artists as Ernst, Magritte, Arp, early Giacometti, and Tanguy created a metaphysical climate through the transfiguration of objects and their relocation in dimensionless space. So Surrealism came to be identified with painting techniques and the idiosyncracies of some of the more notorious painters instead of being appreciated for its philosophy of faith in the human potential, which was its true and essential objective. Breton, sarcastically called the "Pope," found it necessary to excommunicate many of his

colleagues for not adhering to the Surrealistic adage "to transform life," and instead to the Communist dogma "to transform society." ²³

To the Surrealist, the infinite variations of sensual receptivity made it possible for man, as an individual, to constantly defy and disprove the relationships between humans and the outside world.²⁴ They saw the need to explore the many untapped resources of the mind and to give a new meaning to imagination. Breton said, "The imaginary is what tends to become real."²⁵ Human imagination would no longer shun reality but it would create new forms of reality out of dreams and the subconscious, that indefinite area that the Surrealists considered to be the powerhouse of the mind. Poetry by the early Surrealists was written in French and was quite difficult to translate and still retain the same ideas. But painting was the media capable of conveying the aesthetic message further and more quickly.

In the first Surrealist Manifesto, Breton describes his efforts to remove rationality and conscious deliberation from the creative process. Always before, art had been regarded as an act of supreme deliberateness and rationality with the application of the highest degree of conscious design, learned skills, and ingenious methods developed to produce foreseeable and intentional effects. Freud pointed out that there had always been a subconscious motivation which made use of and molded conscious effort.^{25^a}

Many people mistakenly apply the term Surrealism to the entire modern painting movement. However, it is only one of modern art's forms and, contrarily, painting is only one of the media used to convey surrealism. Photography, poetry, and films are also very important in expressing the surrealist view of life. Surrealism, founded soon after the end of World War I, stems from war and reflects the disruptions of it. It attempts to assemble the familiar recognizable objects of the every day world into an illogical dream-world.

It would be erroneous to apply the term surrealism to painting only because it has perhaps found purer and clearer expression in poetry and films. The surrealist is concerned not with aesthetics but with creating a new attitude towards life, a new pattern towards existence, a corrected vision of the world.²⁶ These aims must necessarily be revealed more through writing than painting, and painting thus plays a minor part in the surrealist movement. In reality, Surrealism was a revolutionary phase in our century which used the media of literature, philosophy journalism, and the graphic arts. Therefore, surrealist painting took a modest place and earned renown by strength of the several ingenious artists who undertook to explore it. Surrealist painting did not originate the surrealist idea, nor did it contribute much to the movement as a whole.

The fundamental differences between Surrealism and

all other artistic movements of our time are that it evolved from a much broader background of philosophy and stakes an all-embracing claim. Surrealism in art sets itself apart from the Expressionist and Cubist movements in that its paintings are more intertwined with its parallel literary movement and seeks a total transformation of life. It sees itself, unlike the Impressionists, Fauvists, and abstract artists, as not just a type of painting, but as a "way of existence."²⁷

First of all, surrealism is discovery, the opening-up of new material worlds, the search for the unconscious. In fact, many Surrealists began as psychiatrists, and all of them pay allegiance to the basic concepts of Freud. Dreams with their absurd, fantastic encounters and transformations is one of the main realms of experience claimed by Surrealists. The existence of man seems more important while dreaming. The state of dreaming takes on as much significance as wakefulness. In fact, waking thought takes a second place to subconscious thoughts to the Surrealist, and the events experienced in dreams are taken as as much reality as those moments experienced in waking.

Therefore, Surrealist paintings, since they are taken from dreams, often strongly resemble dreams or dream situations. Ernst, Dali, and Tanguy called their works "landscapes of the soul."²⁸ They are like inner worlds of glassy rigidity, precise density, diamond hardness, and cold, gem-like strangeness. Strong lighting makes the weird contours stand out with crystal clarity. This gives

the impression of their being heightened dream images.

Surrealistic paintings rely almost always on realistic means. Everything in these pictures are usually recognizable objects. However, these well-known objects are used in such a fantastic manner that they come up with combinations and realities unheard-of in our conscious, wakeful, purposeful reality. This is the aim of surrealism --super-realism.

Since the artists do use accepted techniques and familiar objects, their paintings are more easily understood. "Surrealist paintings are reflections, but reflections of an underlying world which, in some mysterious way, has been broken up into fragments, leaving cracks and fractured lines to hint at new associations.²⁹ But unlike Cubist paintings, where the fracturing of lines makes the objects practically indistinguishable, Surrealism allows familiar objects--trees, human beings, rocks--to be recognized.

Therefore Surrealism is classed as a realistic art since its peculiar realm of hallucinations and shadowy experiences of dreams are translated into the terms of solid matter. Their alienation from the world is their moonlit, eerie quality that is cast over their scenes. This mood is nothing like that of the romantic paintings; it is one that corresponds to the alien experience of war, the desolate zone of annihilation, no-man's-land. Some Surrealist paintings seem to be painted after a

bombardment; they look like still-lives arranged by a demolition squad. They show empty landscapes broken by bizarre mountains or rocks. Everything seems to be arranged haphazard. Watches become soft and drapable. Human shapes may look like chests with many drawers. The delicate mechanics of exact reproduction and meticulous technique become a farce by portraying things as they would be in a displaced, borderline frame of mind.

Surrealists also play havoc on the entire concept of space. Walls become boundaries that one may walk through; you can walk or look through the floor. Direct sunlight may beam down through a ceiling. A new dimension often appears to confuse the tangible, realistic world. While objects, persons, and animals look the same, the new dimension of penetrability is added.

The contradiction in Surrealism is between the corporate and the infinite. The law of gravity is expelled, so that things lose their terrestrial order. Objects penetrate each other and give birth to new beings no longer "after their kind, whose seed is in themselves upon the earth." ³⁰ The Surrealist painter spends many months on his work, going about it as calmly and meticulously as the Old Masters, until the painting gels into a concrete form which transfixes the floating objects for their own eternity. In many Surrealistic paintings, the meaning is so private and personal that other people cannot understand it.

Because of this personal quality, the spectator, though he can define the objects presented, cannot understand their meaning. He will not be able to do so unless he can learn to dispose of his controlling reason and "break the sound barrier of reality in order to enter the realm of fantasy."³¹ Therefore, when "people complain that they can't understand 'modern painting,' they are justified, at least as far as Surrealism is concerned. All they can do is to look as receptively as possible and wait for the subconscious to respond to the subconscious of the painter."³²

The other favorite Surrealistic subject is the "landscape of the soul" in which diverse objects are scattered at random upon a desert scene.

Dreams are the means by which we master alienation and retain the characteristics of the uncanny, the incomprehensible, and the irrational. Important to picturing scenes of dreams is the "surrealist object." It can be any object that is taken from its original surroundings and used in a new, unknown way. It is anything that can be used to stimulate the imagination. The artist de Chirico was entranced by the idea of finding pieces of furniture in some unlikely place, like the plainslands for instance. This was a favorite subject of his.³³

In order to inspire the subconscious, Surrealists keep the conscious occupied to put it out of action, so that the unconscious can function more freely. Uninterrupt-

ed, automatic surroundings create the atmosphere in which Surrealists can meditate best.³⁴ Under these conditions he can best discover the unrevealed regions of his mind. He rebels against the mechanization of man, the orderly power of reason, conventional and moral considerations, and the monotony of daily routine. This is their ideal: the "liberated man."³⁵

What they are questing after is the basic freedom of man--free choices between good and evil, order and chaos, paradise and destruction. Breton said that this wonderful freedom was the "only source of the eternal communication between men."³⁶

Surrealism's attack on logic, while refreshing, is naïve, says one critic. The discovery that a statement about a thing is as "real" as the thing, and if true must be in some way identical to that thing, and further that a true statement about chaos must itself be chaotic is the kind of paradox that analysis is easily able to resolve. Logic, in any case, is not like an unwelcome guest who will go away if he is ignored or insulted. It is more like the tax collector who, though unwanted, has the power to impose certain directions upon our destinies. Much of what is avant-garde today is merely elliptical or simple paradox, and when the missing elements are supplied, Surrealism becomes subject to all of the old arguments about form, process, implication, etc. By no means the only

important development in our century, Surrealism was one of the most vital, and it continues to retain the capacity to inspire artistic creativity.³⁷

During the Second World War, the surrealists dispersed to several American countries so that Surrealism spread to the New World. After the war the movement continued to become well known in countries all over the world. Now the weird contortions and concoctions "dreamed up" by surrealist artists are generally tolerated.

Surrealism ended in World War II, ideologically, but its effects are still to be seen in art, movies, decoration, architecture, and poetry. The Theatre of the Absurd derived its sense of spontaneous, automatic dialogue from Surrealist "spoken thought." Breton convinced the exponents of the new French anti-novel that the eye liberated from its prejudices and its premeditated perceptions cannot only see more vastly, but can also give to others the power of vision.³⁸

A new awareness of Surrealism is being realized today through "beat" poetry, action painters, Pop artists, the invention of the "happening," and so on. Its political consequences have been few, but an important movement that may be classified as surrealist is the John Birch Society.

The Surrealists were more shocking and revolutionary

in their day than artistic innovators usually are. Their feuds and factional strife gave the world the idea that they were useless beings, yet the Surrealists were able to produce important works of literature, drama, painting, sculpture, photography, and cinema. Since art critics used form, texture, and color to base their criterion of paintings on, Surrealistic works were dismissed as illustrations, accounting for their decline in the forties and fifties.³⁹

One of Surrealism's major battles was waged on photography for merely reproducing the surface appearances of nature. It taught the photographer to use his own individualistic interpretation of his subjects to relate the true meaning of a thing rather than just its outside appearance. Breton blames man rather than the universe for his meagerness in the life experience; he himself is an individualist in a world preoccupied with group dynamics. Surrealism emphasizes the primacy of the intellect, and a desire to exercise free will far into the recesses of the consciousness.⁴⁰ It refers to the total functioning of the mind, as opposed to the partial play of the mind in what we call "reason." The mind, used to full capacity, can satisfy both the physical and metaphysical needs of man. In beckoning man toward a more complete understanding of the infinite range of the material reality

about him, Surrealism is as optimistic about human destiny as the scientists who make breakthroughs in the knowledge of life itself. As such, Surrealism is a vital philosophy, compatible with the inventive spirit of our age.

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