**INTRODUCTION TO SURREALISM**

Surrealism is one of the preeminent art movements of the 20th century. The movement was proclaimed by André Breton in his *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924. Like all art movements, Surrealism is a product of its historic period, yet it is not limited to the 1920s and 1930s. Art historians argue over the approximate date of the movement’s completion. To many, Surrealism ended after World War II, when other modern art movements became popular. The death of André Breton in 1966 marks the end of the movement for others. While others contend that the movement continues to this day and is reflected in the work of contemporary artists. Breton defined Surrealism as follows:

**Surrealism**. *Noun, masc*. Pure Psychic automatism by which one tries

to express verbally, in writing, or by any other method, the actual process of

thinking. Thought-dictation without any control exercised by reason, beyond

any aesthetic or ethical consideration.

Encyclopedia. Philosophy. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior

reality of certain heretofore neglected forms of associations, in the omnipotence of the dream, in the free-wheeling play of thought. It wants to bring about the ultimate destruction of all other psychic mechanisms and put itself in their place in order to solve the primary problems of life.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Surrealism stems directly from the effects of modern age warfare. Europe was left devastated and disillusioned after years of fighting in World War I. The effects of the war were visible everywhere in Europe as populations became stagnant, economies plummeted, buildings remained in ruins and many survivors suffered from depression. The general population had a feeling of utter destruction at the hands of man. There was a great void left in European cities that were battered and destroyed by the atrocities of war.

Emerging from this chaos, however, new artistic, political and scientific ideas developed in Europe. One example of this new growth of creative activity was the emergence of Dada, which in turn, brought about the birth of Surrealism. Dada was created by a group of writers and artists and began as a series of cabaret acts in Zurich, Switzerland in 1916. The term “Dada” was chosen to signify general disgust with the turbulent times. It is a nonsense word with different meanings in different languages. In French Dada means a child’s hobbyhorse, in Russian it means “yes, yes,” and in Rumanian, it means “no, no.” While Dada artists produced a great variety of images and performances that may at first appear to have nothing in common, they are similar in that they all attempt to provoke chaos and disgust in their viewers.

Dadaists sought to break with all previous artistic movements and to create an anti-aesthetic style. The Dadaists perceived this "anti-art," filled with irony and mockery of the conventions and rational thinking of the modern world as the appropriate manner to represent post war Europe. The death and destruction that lay all around the Dadaists after the massacre of war as an outcome of the western world's rationale. The Dadaists wanted to deny any connection with the system of beliefs that man was a “rational” being. Max Ernst, a Dada and Surrealist artist said of the Dada movement:

*Dada was first of all a mental attitude . . . our aim was total subversion. A ghastly and senseless war had cheated us out of five years of our lives. We had seen all that had been held up to us as good, beautiful and true topple into an abyss of ridicule and shame. The work I produced in those days was not meant to please but to make people scream.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

While Zurich is considered the birthplace of Dada, the movement soon spread to other hubs of cultural activity and international influence -- Paris, Colgne, Berlin and New York City. After World War I, Paris remained a haven of artistic growth. Like the US, Paris experienced the "roaring twenties." The city became a meeting ground for writers, poets, sculptors and painters where new ideas could be developed and exchanged. Coco Chanel began a new line of fashion. Pablo Picasso, a new Parisian resident, received international acclaim for his innovative art style of Cubism. And, countless other artists from photographers to sculptors flooded into the city. Some of the greatest Dada artists like Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and Kurt Schwitters either moved to Paris or began exhibiting their work within the city during this time. Many of the images created by these artists alienated the viewer in a manner similar to the first Dadaist cabaret series. The artists placed objects in settings with which they are not normally associated. Furthermore, objects that are not normally considered appropriate subject matter for art were cast as such. Duchamp, for example, presented a urinal on a pedestal, called it *Fountain,* and signed the work “R. Mutt, 1917.” In this way he challenged the limits of representation as well as the viewer's conception of art.

Perhaps Dada's most important contribution to art history, however, is that it spawned the Surrealist movement. Many of the Dada artists who moved to Paris adopted the ideas of André Breton, the literary founder of Surrealism. Breton expressed similar ideas to those of Dada in his first *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924. He too ridiculed conventional artistic traditions and western confidence in reason and order. Breton first envisioned Surrealism as a literary group and it was not until a few years after its conceptions that it came to encompass the visual arts. Like Dadaist’s images, Surrealist works share similar theories, but vary greatly in style. Thus Surrealism encompasses the realistically rendered dreamscapes of Salvador Dali as well as the biomorphic characters of Joan Miró.

Breton proclaimed in the *Surrealist Manifesto* that the ideal art form was created through the unconscious mind. Automatic writing, and later, painting, was encouraged in order to free the mind from the restrictions placed by modern day society. Freudian psychoanalysis, which became popular during this time, was one source of inspiration for Breton and other Surrealists. Freud was a major proponent of exploring the unconscious mind and dream imagery in order to uncover human desire and break down taboos surrounding human sexuality. In some respects Surrealist images can be considered visual renditions of Freudian analyses. The desires of the unconscious mind of the artist may manifest themselves in displaced images of women, the human form, birds, or insects. These estranged fragments float in dream like spaces and are often disturbingly violent whether they are rendered in paint, photography or film.

The role of women within Surrealism became that of the object of desire. Female Surrealist artists struggled to define a space for themselves within a movement which presented women as the muse of art rather than as its creator. Because of this, female Surrealists have been largely ignored by art historical discourse. It is only within the last few decades with the growth of feminist theory that important female Surrealists such as Dorthea Tanning and Meret Oppenheim have received their overdue acceptance and acclaim.

The Surrealists experimented with photography and film. *Un Chien Andalou*, a film by director Luis Buñuel co-written with Salvador Dalí in 1929 is the most famous example of Surrealist films. Prior to the 1920s, photography had been considered a lesser art form and was relegated to practical purposes only. With the photographic experimentation by such great Surrealists as Man Ray, the medium gained acceptance as a true form of artistic expression. Within painting, other techniques such as frottage and decalcomania were also explored. These two methods, invented by Max Ernst, were thought to be techniques by which artists could express their unconscious minds. In frottage the artist builds up certain materials on canvas such as sand and grit and then scrapes away the paint to create a textural surface within a two dimensional space. In decalcomania, the artist applies paint to a surface, sandwiches the paint in-between the surface and another, and then peels it apart. The outcome of the pressed paint becomes the painting. With the two methods, the artist uses the chance happening to then create a work. The artist will take the frottage or decalcomania technique and then add to the design. Due to the properties of the materials used for frottage and decalcomania, artists are not able to entirely control the outcome of their work. Many Surrealist artists, in an attempt to reach the sublime unconscious or spontaneous mind, would attempt to give up control over their work purposefully. One painting created by Joan Miró, a Spanish Surrealist, was said to have been inspired by a fallen blob of jelly. In other cases, artists collaborated so that no one person could dictate the direction that an individual piece would follow.

Surrealism was also influenced by non-western artistic traditions. At this time, art from Africa and Oceania was flooding into European galleries and becoming popular around the continent. The Surrealists saw this non-western art as primal and magical, devoid of the rationalization that typified their own culture. Because of this Surrealists became fascinated with it and attempted to incorporate the aesthetics of this art into their work.

Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, Surrealism enjoyed widespread acclaim culminating in the International Surrealist Exhibition held in London in 1936. Surrealist theory embraced the irrational in human thought and behavior and its practice in the visual arts resulted in several different styles of art. Thus the biomorphic forms of Jean (Hans) Arp and Joan Miró and the realistic visions of Salvador Dalí and René Magritte are considered Surrealist images as they incorporate Surrealist ideas such as incongruous juxtaposition, dream imagery, and/or automatic or accidental art practices. Many practices of the Surrealists continue to influence artists today.

**BIOGRAPHIES OF SURREALIST ARTISTS**

**Joseph Cornell** (1903-1972)

Cornell was as enigmatic as his works of art. He was an American sculptor known for his disjointed collages of objects and images in small, wooden boxes. Although he had no formal art training, he explored New York City’s museums, theaters, and second-hand bookstores, and during the 1920s began collecting old books, engravings, and other objects from earlier eras. His incongruous juxtaposition of objects was influenced by Surrealist poetry. Cornell's selection of objects had an extremely personal quality. He would use similar objects repeatedly such as a clay pipe, a cordial glass, spheres, postcards and drawings made by his disabled brother.

**Salvador Dalí** (1904-1989)

A Spanish painter and writer, Dalí is probably one of the most well-known members of the Surrealist movement. His reputation as an eccentric preceded him and his ego was probably as big as the fantastic images he created. Dalí was heavily influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud. His paintings depict dream imagery and everyday objects in unexpected forms, such as the famous limp watches in *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). Dalí's paintings are characterized by meticulous draftsmanship with realistic detail. Dalí designed and produced Surrealist films, illustrated books, hand-crafted jewelry, and created theatrical sets and costumes.

**Marcel Duchamp** (1887-1968)

Duchamp was a French artist who grew up in a family of artists. Three of his five siblings, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Jacques Villon, and Suzanne Valadon also became professional artists. Duchamp’s work had a major impact on the direction of 20th-century art. He worked in Cubist style, and helped develop Dada and Surrealism. Duchamp influenced later movements like Pop art and kinetic sculpture. His controversial work *Nude Descending a Staircase* was included in New York City's groundbreaking Armory Show in 1913, the first major showing of modern art in the United States. He soon presented unaltered, everyday objects as sculpture, radically changing the course of modern art. His “ready-mades” questioned the aesthetics of art and demanded who decides what is art. His work *Fountain* which was an upturned urinal, signed R. Mutt 1917, was a groundbreaking work. In 1923 Duchamp announced that he was through with art and returned to Paris. He dedicated the rest of his life to chess, only rarely completing works of art.

**Max Ernst** (1891-1976)

Ernst was an important artist for both Dada and Surrealism. He experimented in a variety of media. Attracted by the Dadaists' revolt against convention, Ernst helped create the Cologne movement of Dada. When he moved to Paris, he turned to Surrealism, painting pictures in which human-like forms and fantastic creatures inhabit precisely detailed Renaissance landscapes. Ernst was interested in automatism, creating art from a chance happening. In 1925 he invented frottage and would develop decalcomania. After the invasion of France in World War II, Ernst was interred three times in Nazi war camps before he escaped to the United States. He immigrated to the United States in 1941 with the help of the heiress Peggy Guggenheim, who became his third wife in 1942. He would later marry the American Surrealist Dorthea Tanning and move to Sedona, Arizona. Ernst returned to France in 1953.

**René Magritte** (1898-1961)

Magritte was a Belgian Surrealist whose paintings seem fairly realistic at first glance, as they are depicted with extreme detail. However, upon closer inspection, the juxtaposed images, incongruous scenes and plays on words, question reasoning. Magritte was interested in what lies beyond surface appearances. He altered conventional images, created new images and mixed the messages between word and meaning and titles and paintings. In *The Art of Conversation* Magritte has carefully rendered a stone structure in a landscape setting. The structure spells out the work *rêve* which in French means “dream.” This word connotes an airy quality as well as something ethereal, since a dream is created with the imagination. Magritte makes the dream solid as stone and has placed it in an auspicious setting, untouched by the human imagination.

**Joan Miró** (1893-1983)

Miró was a Spanish painter, whose Surrealist works look like dream inspired, hallucinatory renditions. In 1920 he moved to Paris where, under the influence of Surrealist poets and writers, his art evolved into the globular biomorphic forms for which he is most known. Miró drew on memory, fantasy, and the irrational to create works of art that are visual analogues of Surrealist poetry. His forms are painted in a limited range of bright colors, especially blue, red, yellow, green, and black. Although generally apolitical, he was unable to control his feelings after the atrocities in his homeland during the Spanish Civil War. Miró completed a series of *tableaux sauvage* or wild paintings such as *Persons in the Presence of a Metamorphosis* in which amoebic figures watch another figure disintegrate into biomorphic parts.

**Man Ray** (1890-1976)

An American painter and photographer, Man Ray was born Emanuel Rudnitsky. After meeting Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia in New York, he helped to found the New York City Dada group in 1917. With Marcel Duchamp, he helped to found the New York City Dada group in 1917. After moving to Paris in 1921, Ray became a leading figure in the artistic avant-garde. He developed "rayographs," which were abstract images made by placing objects on light-sensitive surfaces. Ray became involved in Surrealism, photographing the movements leaders. He also made art films, including *L'Étoile de Mer* (1928). Man Ray is most remembered for his photographs of the Parisian avant-garde as well as fashion photography.

**Kurt Schwitters** (1887-1948)

A German artist, Schwitters was a member of the Dada movement and is best known for the collages and sculptures he assembled from found objects and trash that he termed ***Merz*.** This term was developed from a collage that contained the words *Kommerz und Privatsbank*. Discarded train tickets, newspapers, broken artist’s palettes, and other such objects were incorporated into Schwitters' works. He was interested in the juxtaposed objects’ color, texture, and surprise value.

**Dorthea Tannning** (b. 1913)

Tanning, an American painter, sculptor, illustrator and writer, was one of the few female Surrealists. Fulfilling her dream to become a painter, she entered the circle of the New York Surrealist movement after World War II. A chance meeting with Max Ernst in 1942 initiated her desire to paint among the Surrealists. In 1946 she married Ernst. They lived together for eight years in Sedona, Arizona before moving to Paris. From 1942 to 1956 Tanning painted in a Surrealist manner using erotic imagery and the psychosis of nightmares with metamorphic figures. *Guardian Angels* is created with pastel blues and greens and at first glance seems serene. However, after closer inspection, one notices headless, adolescent girls being whisked away by eerie angel-like figures.

1. Breton, André, *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969); quoted in Uwe M. Schneede, *Surrealism*, trans. Maria Pelikan (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1973), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Schneede, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)