

Introduction

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Surrealism is destructive, but it destroys only what it considers to be shackles limiting our vision.

Salvador Dalí

Reaction to the atrocities of the First World War, seen as a failure of rational thought, spawned many different art and literary movements, including Dada and Surrealism, which were anti-establishment and shared an aversion to anything bourgeois (middle class). Dada became a tool of protest where provocative non-art objects such as Marcel Duchamp's *Urinal*, 1917, articulated disgust. Surrealism, on the other hand, developed ideas from Dada to provide solid and constructive roots from which the next generation of artists could flower.

Heavily influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud, the inventor of psychoanalysis, Surrealist projects aimed to merge the dream world of the unconscious mind with the rational everyday nature of the conscious mind. Paintings in this genre were designed to make viewers question their own belief in a fixed reality by portraying dreams, the unconscious and the irrational.

Dalí was aware that the work he was interested in pursuing was intimately connected with Surrealism. He had read *The Surrealist Manifesto*, by André Breton, the group's leader in 1924, and while studying in Madrid he became acquainted with Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), which he considered to be one of the most important discoveries of his life.

In April 1929 Dalí made his second trip to Paris, sponsored by the already established Joan Miró, the Catalan Surrealist, to make the revolutionary film *Un Chien andalou* with his friend Luis Buñuel. During the summer of that year Dalí was visited in Cadaqués by a group of prominent Surrealists including Paul Éluard, the poet, and his wife Gala, which led to his official membership of the Surrealist group in the following November.

André Breton's initial welcoming approach to Dalí is evident in the catalogue preface to the artist's first solo show in Paris at Goemans Gallery in 1929, where he wrote 'Dalí's art, the most hallucinatory that has been produced up to now, constitutes a veritable threat.

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in
United States 1940–48

*Surrealist composition with invisible
figures* c.1936

oil on cardboard

60.9 x 45.8 cm

Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí,
Figueres (0191)

© Salvador Dalí, Fundació

Gala-Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

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Ants,
 crutches,
 keys,
 watches,
 lobsters,
 bread,
 eggs where
 Dalínian
 symbols



Absolutely new creatures, visibly mal-intentioned, are suddenly on the move' (André Breton, 'Sterilizer Dalí', in *Salvador Dalí*, Camille Goemans Gallery, Paris, 20 November – December 1929, trans. in Ian Gibson, *The Shameful Life of Salvador Dalí*, Faber & Faber, London, 1997, p. 289; quoted in Robert Lubar, *Dalí: The Salvador Dalí Museum Collection*, Bulfinch Press, Boston, 2000).

The beginning of Dalí's Surrealist period marked a growing confidence in his own style. The establishment of the representation of 'hard' and 'soft', which formed the foundation of his aesthetic, and the creation of motifs and symbols that became part of his artistic vocabulary throughout his oeuvre, were consolidated at this time. Ants, crutches, keys, watches, lobsters, bread, eggs and other Dalinian symbols were all painted to be interpretable through the lens of Freudian psychology. Leading Dalí scholar, Dawn Ades, has suggested that just as Renaissance artists communicated through the shared language of symbols from the Bible, so Dalí used Freud's texts in the same manner.

In an attempt to unite the Surrealist group, Dalí and André Thirion were commissioned to put forward proposals for a common action that would draw together the threads of the disparate factions within it.

Dalí proposed the Surreal Object, the magical, transformative concept of the juxtaposition of diverse elements usually found in everyday objects. By adding a potent intensity to the idea of the 'found object', it prompted a new and creative period of Surrealist activity.

In *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, No. 3, December 1931, Dalí describes six different types of Surrealist Objects, including: symbolically functioning objects such as a shoe and glass of milk; transubstantiated objects such as a soft watch, and machine objects such as a rocking-chair for thinking (for more detailed information, see Dawn Ades, *Dalí*, Thames & Hudson, World of Art, 1995, London, p. 152).

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in
 United States 1940–48

Retrospective bust of a woman

1933, reconstructed 1970

painted bronze, feathers, plastic, tin

74.5 x 67.0 x 28.0 cm

Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí,

Figueres (5184)

© Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-

Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

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...even as
a child he
had been
intrigued
by mimetic
insects
camouflaging
themselves
through

May Ray's *Cadeau*, 1921, an iron with nails stuck in it; Meret Oppenheimer's *Object*, 1936, a fur-covered cup and saucer; and Joseph Cornell's fragments of once beautiful and precious objects preserved in boxes during the 1930s are key examples of the classic Surreal Object.

The invention of the philosophy known as critical-paranoia was Dalí's other major contribution to the Surrealist movement. The idea evolved from his life-long fascination with the idea of transformation – even as a child he had been intrigued by mimetic insects camouflaging themselves through metamorphosis into sticks and leaves. He studied works by artists who experimented with optical illusions, particularly paintings by Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526–1593), and also acknowledged the influence of Leonardo de Vinci, who had advised his own students to seek inspiration in damp spots and cracks on a wall.

Dalí's technique for inducing critical-paranoia involves staring fixedly at an object, then stimulating your visual skills to see something different, like looking at clouds and seeing recognisable forms. He links this to the mental condition known as paranoia, which involves chronic delusions and hallucinations. He intended to stimulate this trance-like state without becoming a victim of paranoia, as suggested by his well-known statement, 'The only difference between me and a madman is that I am not mad'. His obsession with, and diligence in mastering the process culminated in his popular double image pictures, such as *Slave market with apparition of the invisible bust of Voltaire*, 1940, which can be viewed on this site.

Dalí's relationship with the dour Breton began to sour as he gained increasing commercial success and habitually sprinkled his rhetoric with provocative political and racial statements.

When Dalí laid himself open to charges of fascism, it was too much for Breton who challenged him at the now famous Surrealist meeting in February 1934. Dalí responded to the charges made against him, in a mock courtroom situation, by declaring that they were irrelevant to the more important concerns of Surrealism. As he read out his prepared declaration he further humiliated Breton by pretending that he was suffering from a high temperature – with a thermometer in his mouth and clad in multiple layers of clothing, he peeled them off one by one in a hilariously irreverent manner.

Although Dalí survived the trial and continued to be an influential presence in the movement for the next five years, he was formally expelled by Breton in 1939. His famous remark that 'the only difference between me and the Surrealists is that I am a Surrealist' is perhaps a measure of how little he was affected by the enforced isolation from the group which had been decisively driven by his innovative vision.

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I do not understand why when I ask for a grilled lobster in a restaurant, I am never served a cooked telephone. I do not understand why champagne is always chilled, and why, on the other hand, telephones, which are habitually so frightfully warm and disagreeably sticky to the touch, are not also put in silver buckets with crushed ice around them.

Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, Haakon M. Chevalier (trans.), Dial Press, New York, 1942, p. 271

The Surreal Object, invented by Dalí and based on the magical, transformative concept of the juxtaposition of diverse elements usually found in everyday objects, prompted a new and creative period of Surrealist activity, particularly as it opened up possibilities for the use of a Surrealist language in the applied and decorative arts.

Lobsters and telephones had already made frequent appearances in Dalí's work for a number of years, with telephones '[haunting] Dalí's imagery in the dark paintings created in the prewar years of 1938–39 when they symbolised the British prime minister Neville Chamberlain's abortive attempts to control Hitler by conversational diplomacy.

'By combining the two objects in 1936, however, Dalí with a single stroke created one of the most memorable sculptures of the twentieth century. The idea apparently came to the artist during a visit to the home of his English patron Edward James, in June 1936. James, Dalí and other friends were eating lobsters and tossing aside their shells, when one happened to land on the telephone (Sharon Michi-Kusunoki, 'Lobster Telephone', in Dawn Ades (ed.), *Dalí: The Centenary Retrospective*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2004, p. 286). Dalí loved shellfish for their contrast of a hard protective shell with soft living centre, and saw an analogy perhaps with the telephone, where soft human sounds are transmitted across hard receivers ...

'James ordered the production of ten functioning telephones with attached crustaceans, four with red lobsters on black phones and six with white lobsters on white phones' (Ted Gott, *Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire*, National Gallery of Victoria, 2009, p. 145).'

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in United States 1940–48

Lobster telephone 1936
painted plaster, telephone
18.0 x 30.5 x 12.5 cm

National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra, Purchased, 1994.

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Slave market with apparition of the invisible bust of Voltaire exemplifies the calibre of Dalí's painting during this period. It is one of the finest examples of his double imagery, an optical illusion in which individual recognisable forms can alternately be seen as other objects. Created by the artist using his paranoiac-critical method, which involves staring at an object until your visual skills transform it into something else, the work questions the meaning of reality, perception, and rational and irrational thought.

Dalí has painted a shadowy, serene portrait of Gala as a semi-nude slave girl surveying the strange scene before her. Depending on the viewer's perception the eye is led to the head of Voltaire, modelled on the celebrated bust of 1778 by Jean-Antoine Houdon, or two Dutch women standing in the marketplace. The top of Voltaire's head is outlined by the archway in the decaying wall and aspects of the women form his eyes, nose, chin and neck. Dual images also appear in the Catalan landscape on the far right of the painting – the dark, gently sloping hill becomes a pear sitting in a fruit bowl, thus incorporating parts of the background and foreground. Similarly, a plum sitting to the left of the pear also transforms into the buttocks of a man standing behind the bowl.

Voltaire was a French Enlightenment philosopher whom Dalí had read about as a young man. In his book, *The Unspeakable Confessions of Salvador Dalí* (Quill, New York, 1981), Dalí says: 'The illustrious Monsieur de Voltaire possessed a peculiar kind of thought that was the most refined, most rational, most sterile, and misguided not only in France but in the entire world'.

The world of the painter was the antithesis of Voltaire's emphasis on rational thought and order, and Dalí has suggested that this image of Gala, his devoted muse, is a symbol that her presence in his life has protected him from Voltaire and the sceptical thought he espoused.

Dalí, whose passion for science was increasingly evident in his later oeuvre, must have been delighted when the December 1971 issue of the *Scientific American* magazine featured a detail from this painting to demonstrate the physical structure of the perception system of sight, in which the optical neurons reverse the images that can both be seen, although not simultaneously.

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in United States 1940–48

Slave market with apparition of the invisible bust of Voltaire 1940

oil on canvas

46.4 x 62.9 cm

The Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida

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In the USA: © Salvador Dalí Museum Inc., St Petersburg, FL, 2009

Dalí under the microscope



... to
research
the strange
paintings
of Giuseppe
Arcimboldo
(1527–1593).

Looking and discussing

- **Describe** all the things you can see in the painting. Which stand out more and why?
- Dalí used his technique of critical-paranoia to create this image containing **double imagery**. He stared intensely at an object until he saw a different image, just as we sometimes look at clouds and see recognisable forms.
- **Describe** where you can see double images occurring in the painting.
- Which single word would you use to describe the atmosphere?
- **Explain** which particular art elements, such as **form, colour, line** and so on, have been most important in creating a sense of mood and drama?
- What aspects of the painting do you find most interesting and why?
- If you could add something to the painting, what would it be?
- **What questions would you like to ask Dalí about this picture?**

Researching

- Use books and the internet to research the strange paintings of Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527–1593), who combined images of fruit and vegetables to create human faces. Why might Dalí have been influenced by him?
- **Locate and discuss** works by the following artists who also interested Dalí because of their interest in optical illusions: M. C. Escher (1898–1972) and Bridget Riley (1931–).
- **Locate** *The hallucinogenic toreador* (1969–1970) and *Gala contemplating the Mediterranean Sea which at twenty meters becomes the portrait of Abraham Lincoln – Homage to Rothko* (second version) (1976) on the Salvador Dalí Museum website: www.salvadoralimuseum.org or in books. **Discuss** the double imagery you can see in each case.

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in United States 1940–48

Slave market with apparition of the invisible bust of Voltaire 1940
oil on canvas

46.4 x 62.9 cm

The Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida

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Dalí under the microscope



metamorphosis
dislocation
juxtaposition

What is Surrealism?

In 1929 Dalí was accepted in a group called the Surrealists. This group was formed by artists and writers who were disappointed with their society and those who were ruling at that time. The Surrealists were from all over the world, but they mainly lived and worked in Paris, France, where they discussed new ideas. The Surrealists did not like the popular art of the time and their goal was to make art that would shock people and force them to think rather than just look at art. They were particularly upset with the horrors of World War One. They felt that if the rational mind (the mind you think with) had created the society they did not like, then perhaps the unconscious mind (the mind you glimpse on the verge of sleep or in your dreams) could build a better world. So they were looking into their unconscious and into their dreams for inspiration.

Some of the special techniques the Surrealist painters used involved challenging people's ideas of reality. Sometimes the artists would use *metamorphosis*, which is morphing or changing an object or person into something else. In one painting Dalí morphed one of his favourite artists into a table. *Dislocation* was another technique they used. This means putting something where you wouldn't expect to see it, like red lips floating in the sky. A third technique they used was *juxtaposition*, placing two things side by side that don't usually go together, like a donkey on top of a piano.

Dalí Times © St. Petersburg Times 2007, Newspaper in Education.

- Read and discuss the text above. Choose one of Dalí's works on this site or locate other famous works by the artist. **Study the picture** carefully. Find and describe examples of where Dalí has used metamorphosis, dislocation and juxtaposition.
- Cut out a collection of images from magazines. **Create a surreal collage** which demonstrates metamorphosis, dislocation and juxtaposition.
- **Describe and discuss** the *Lobster telephone*, 1936. What aspects make this object interesting and bizarre? Why might Dalí have been attracted to a lobster? How many opposites can you see occurring, such as natural/man-made?
- **Write your own definition** of the Surreal Object for an art dictionary.
- Dalí created a list of rules that described the Surreal Object. **Invent your own list** of crazy rules for making one. Give it to a friend and ask them to draw or construct a Surreal Object which follows your rules.

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Dalí invented his own 'alphabet' of symbols to express ideas and concepts.

Dalí and Surrealism

Dalí under the microscope



Symbolism

A symbol is a representation of an idea, for example, a heart can symbolise love and a dove, peace. Dalí invented his own 'alphabet' of symbols to express ideas and concepts. Look out for his most common symbols listed below to help you interpret his works.

- Ants – death and decay.
 - Crutch – several meanings, including support for inadequacy in life, tradition and death.
 - Melting clocks – the relative nature of time.
 - Grasshoppers – irrational fear.
 - Flies – decay and symbol of his homeland, Spain.
 - Eggs – Memories of the time before he was born.
 - Keys – tools to unlock dreams.
- **Locate and discuss** work by other artists who have used symbolism.
- **Consider** what symbols you might invent to convey ideas of your own in an artwork.

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in United States 1940–48

Surrealist composition (c. 1928)

oil, sand and collage on wood
79.7 x 38.3 cm

Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí,
Figueres (0027)

© Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

Salvador DALÍ

Spanish 1904–89, worked in United States 1940–48

Memory of the child-woman 1932

oil on canvas

99.1 x 120.0 cm

The Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida

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Why might
 surrealism
 be used
 frequently in
 advertising?

Dalí and Surrealism

Dalí under the microscope

I do not understand why when I ask for a grilled lobster in a restaurant, I am never served a cooked telephone. I do not understand why champagne is always chilled, and why, on the other hand, telephones, which are habitually so frightfully warm and disagreeably sticky to the touch, are not also put in silver buckets with crushed ice around them.

... I do not understand ... why no one invents taxi-cabs more expensive than the others fitted with a device for making artificial rain which would oblige the passenger to wear his rain coat when he got in while the weather was fine and sunny outside.

The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí, Haakon M. Chevalier (trans.), Dial Press, New York, 1942, p. 271.

- **Read and discuss** the two quotations above. **Write your own** quirky surreal paragraph, beginning with: 'I do not understand why ...'
- Why might surrealism be used frequently in advertising? **Discuss examples** in today's world that utilise surrealism.

Surrealist fun!

The Surrealists used a number of games and activities to try to let go of their rational conscious mind and access their unconscious mind. **Try the following activities** to inspire your own surrealist writing and art-making.

Automatic writing and drawing

- **Write** down everything that comes into your mind as quickly as possible without lifting your pen from your paper for a few minutes. What strange ideas have emerged from your inner mind?
- Carry out the same process, but this time **draw** instead. Can you find any hidden shapes or figures?

The association game

In pairs, one person calls out the name of an object. The other person responds by saying the first item that comes into their mind when they think of this object. What strange combinations have emerged?

Dalí under the microscope

Exquisite corpse

- Decide on a sentence structure such as:
 - Article, adjective
 - Noun
 - Verb
 - Article, adjective
 - Noun
- Provide everyone in a small group with **pencil and paper**.
- Each person in the group writes down the **first words** of the structure, folds over the paper and passes it on to the next person.
- The process continues until the **structure** is finished. The paper is unfolded to reveal a surrealist sentence. Note: Depending on the verb used it may sometimes be necessary to add a preposition to ensure the sentence flows smoothly. The game gets its name from the sentence created when it was first played: *The exquisite corpse will drink the young wine*. The game can also be played by substituting the words for drawings of parts of a human or animal body.

Random word play

Find a short article in a newspaper or magazine. Cut out each of the words and place them in a bag. Shake the bag and then scatter the words onto a flat surface. Try to find bizarre phrases and sentences in the random arrangement of words.

Creating

Poster design

- **Design a poster** that would particularly attract young people to a Salvador Dalí retrospective exhibition being held in a public gallery.
- **Create a title for the exhibition** that would be integrated into the design. Consider using images from this site or photographs of Dalí and/or his work gathered from the internet.
- Using your own **drawing skills** or a **computer program** such as Photoshop, illustrate how your poster would look in situ; for example, on a billboard in a city, on a café window or on a tram.

Didactic
 panels
 provide
 information
 and insights
 about works
 of art.

Dalí and Surrealism

Dalí under the microscope

A Dalí didactic panel

- Didactic panels are sometimes placed on the walls of public art galleries to provide **information and insights** about works of art. They are written by curators with specialist art knowledge.
- **Study** the two didactic panels below. You can find images of *In praise of dialectics*, 1937, and *Weeping woman*, 1937, on the NGV website.

René Magritte

Belgian 1898–1967

In praise of dialectics

L'éloge de la dialectique

1937

oil on canvas

Felton Bequest, 1971

© Rene Magritte/ADAGP, Paris.

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With their strange juxtapositions and memorable images, the paintings of René Magritte are based upon the conviction that depictions of mental ideas are as valid as the recording of external events. Few artists have given us so many clear depictions of the life of the inner self. In making the familiar so unfamiliar, however, Magritte also stops us short and reminds us of life as lived in the mind.

Pablo Picasso

Spanish 1881–1973

worked in France 1904–73

Weeping woman

1937

oil on canvas

Purchased by donors of The Art Foundation of Victoria,

with the assistance of the Jack and Genia Liberman family,

Founder Benefactor, 1986. © Pablo Picasso/Sussestion Pablo Picasso.

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In January 1937, Picasso had been asked by representatives of the Spanish Republican government to paint an enormous mural for the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition in the coming summer. On 26 April 1937, while Picasso was at work on the commission, German planes – acting in concert with General Franco – bombed the Basque city of Guernica for three hours, levelling it to the ground. Picasso's shock at the massacre of Spanish civilians contributed to his creation of the great *Guernica* mural.

The *Weeping women* compositions of late 1937 belong to what have been termed the 'postscripts' of *Guernica*. The common stark motif in these disturbing images, that of a woman's grief laid bare for public scrutiny, derived from the figure at the far left of *Guernica* – a woman who screams uncontrollably and attempts vainly to escape the bombing, grasping her dead child to her chest.

Aspects of Picasso's turbulent love life have also been read into *Weeping woman* – a complex web of relationships involving his first wife Olga Koklova and concurrent new lovers, Marie Thérèse Walter and Dora Maar.

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‘The only
 difference
 between
 me and a
 madman is
 that I’m
 not mad’?

Dalí and Surrealism

Dalí under the microscope

- **Read the texts** on this site about Dalí’s *Lobster telephone*, 1936, and *Slave market with apparition of the invisible bust of Voltaire*, 1940.
- **Choose one** of them and write a didactic panel that will help viewers to learn more about the work.

The bigger picture – Thinking beyond

- ‘*Surrealism is destructive, but it destroys only what it considers to be shackles limiting our vision*’ – Salvador Dalí.
- **Discuss the meaning** of the quotation above. In what ways does Dalí challenge our perceptions of what is real and unreal?
- **Discuss what Dalí might have meant** by the quotation ‘*The only difference between me and a madman is that I’m not mad*’?
- **What is beauty in art?** Can ugliness ever be beautiful? If so, in what circumstances?
- ‘*Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table*’ – Le Comte de Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror*.
- **Explain** why might Le Comte de Lautréamont, the writer of the quotation above, who greatly influenced the Surrealists, have found the combination of images he describes beautiful?
- Some people in the past were shocked and offended by some of the graphic imagery in Dalí’s work. George Orwell, the famous writer of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1949, wrote an essay strongly condemning what he regarded as the obscene nature of the artist’s work. **Discuss** whether there is ever a case for censorship in art?