

# **SURREALISM: AN ART MOVEMENT OF PSYCHIC RESPONSES**

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The Surrealist movement started in Europe in the 1920's, after World War I with its nucleus in Paris. The aim was to "resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality". Artists painted unnerving, illogical scenes with photographic precision, created strange creatures from everyday objects and developed painting techniques that allowed the unconscious to express itself. Surrealist works feature the element of surprise, unexpected juxtapositions and non sequitur; however, many Surrealist artists and writers regard their work as an expression of the philosophical movement first and foremost with the works being an artefact. The French poet, Andre Breton, is known as the "Pope of Surrealism." Breton wrote the Surrealist Manifesto to describe how he wanted to combine the conscious and subconscious into a new "absolute reality". He first used the word surrealism to describe work found to be a "fusion of elements of [fantasy](#) with elements of the modern world to form a kind of superior reality". He also described it as "spontaneous writing". The first exhibition of surrealist painting was held in 1925, but its ideas were rejected in Europe. Breton set up an International Exhibition of Surrealism in New York, which then took the place of Paris as the centre of the Surrealist movement. Soon surrealist ideas were given new life and became an influence over young artists in the United States and Mexico. The ideas of Surrealism were bold and new to the art world.

Surrealism is defined as "Psychic automatism in its pure state by which we propose to express- verbally, in writing or in any other manner- the real process of thought. The dictation of thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason and outside any aesthetic or moral concerns". Breton said that "pure psychic automatism" was the most important principle of Surrealism. He believed that true surrealists had no real talent; they just spoke their thoughts as they happened. Surrealism used techniques that had never been used in the art world before.

Surrealists believed in the innocent eye, that art was created in the unconscious mind. Most Surrealists worked with psychology and fantastic visual techniques, basing their art on memories, feelings and dreams. They often used hypnotism and drugs to venture into the dream world, where they looked for unconscious images that were not available in the conscious world. These images were seen as pure art. Such ventures into the unconscious mind lead Breton to believe that surrealists equalled scientists and could "lead the exploration into new areas and methods of investigation". Surrealists strongly embraced the ideas of Sigmund Freud. His method of psychoanalytic interpretation could be used to bring forth and illuminate the unconscious. The work of Sigmund Freud was profoundly influential for Surrealists, particularly his book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). Freud legitimized the importance of dreams and the unconscious as valid revelations of human emotion and desires; his exposure of the complex and repressed inner worlds of sexuality, desire and violence provided a theoretical basis for much of Surrealism. Freud once said, "A dream that is not interpreted is like a letter that is not opened" and Surrealists adapted this idea into their artwork.

The Surrealist circle was relatively cohesive, but the individuals within it hailed from a variety of nations and their artistic approaches were similarly diverse. They believed that automatic drawings unlocked the contents of the subconscious mind, while hyper-real [landscape paintings](#) conjured the uncanny imagery of dreams. Incongruous combinations of found objects combined in Surrealist [assemblages](#) revealed the fraught sexual and psychological forces were hidden just beneath the surface of reality. The major Surrealist painters were- [Jean Arp](#), [Max Ernst](#), [Andre Masson](#), [Rene Magritte](#), [Yves Tanguy](#), [Salvador Dali](#), Pierre Roy, [Paul Delvaux](#) and [Joan Miro](#). The work of these artists is too diverse to be summarized categorically as the Surrealist approach in the visual arts. Each artist sought his own means of self-exploration.

Surrealist imagery was probably the most recognizable element of the movement, yet it was also the most elusive to categorize and define. Each artist relied on their own recurring motifs arisen through their dreams and unconscious mind. At its basic, the imagery was outlandish, perplexing and even uncanny, as it was meant to jolt the viewer out of their comforting assumptions. Nature, however, was the most frequent imagery: Max Ernst was obsessed with birds and had a bird alter ego, Salvador Dali's works often include ants or eggs and Joan Miro relied strongly on vague biomorphic imagery.

Dali employed Freudian symbols, such as ants to symbolize his overwhelming sexual desire. In 1930, Breton praised Dali's representations of the unconscious in the Second Manifesto of Surrealism. They became the main collaborators on the review *Minotaure* (1933–39), a primarily Surrealist-oriented publication founded in Paris. Throughout the 1930s, Surrealism continued to become more visible to the public at large. A [Surrealist group developed in London](#) and according to Breton, their 1936- [London International Surrealist Exhibition](#) was a high-water mark of the period and became the model for international exhibitions. Another English Surrealist group developed [in Birmingham](#) and was distinguished by its opposition to the London surrealists and preferences for surrealism's French heartland. The two groups would reconcile later in the decade. [Dali](#) and Magritte created the most widely recognized images of the movement. Dali joined the group in 1929 and participated in the rapid establishment of the visual style between 1930 and 1935. Surrealism as a visual movement had found a method to expose psychological truth; stripping ordinary objects of their normal significance to create a compelling image that was beyond ordinary formal organization in order to evoke empathy from the viewer.

1931 was a year when several Surrealist painters produced works which marked turning points in their stylistic evolution: Magritte's *Voice of Space* was an example of this process, where three large spheres representing bells hang above a landscape. Another Surrealist landscape from this same year was [Yves Tanguy's Promontory Palace](#) with its molten forms and liquid shapes. Liquid shapes became the trademark of Dali, particularly in his [The Persistence of Memory](#), which featured the image of watches that sag as if they were melting.



Salvador Dali: The Persistence of Memory, 1931

The characteristics of this style—a combination of the depictive, the abstract and the psychological—came to stand for the alienation, which many people felt in the [modern](#) period combined with the sense of reaching more deeply into the psyche to be “made whole with one's individuality”.

Ernst developed a fascination with birds that was prevalent in his work. His alter ego in paintings, which he called [Loplop](#), was a bird. He suggested that this alter-ego was an extension of him stemming from an early

confusion of birds and humans. He said that one night, when he was young, he woke up and found that his beloved bird had died and a few minutes later his father announced that his sister was born.



Max Ernst, Loplop, 1937

Long after personal, political and professional tensions fragmented the Surrealist group, Magritte and Dali continued to define a visual program in the arts. This program reached beyond painting to encompass photography as well. Like the other artists and poets associated with the Surrealist movement, Rene Magritte sought to overthrow what he saw as the oppressive rationalism of bourgeois society. His art during these essential years is at times violent, frequently disturbing and filled with discontinuities. He consistently interrogated conventions of language and visual representation, using methods that included the misnaming of objects, doubling and repetition, mirroring and concealment and the depiction of visions seen in half-waking states-all of them devices that cast doubt on the nature of appearances, both in the paintings and in reality itself. The persistent tension Magritte maintained during these years between nature and artifice, truth and fiction, reality and surreality was one of the profound achievements of his art.



Rene Magritte: The Lovers, 1928

Magritte invokes the cinematic cliché of a close-up kiss but subverts our voyeuristic pleasure by shrouding the faces in cloth. The device of a draped cloth or veil to conceal a figure's identity corresponds to a larger Surrealist interest in masks, disguises and what lies beyond or beneath visible surfaces.

The work aims to provoke a sympathetic response in the viewer, forcing him to acknowledge the inherent “sense” of the irrational and logically inexplicable. The most direct form of this approach was taken by Magritte in simple but powerful paintings such as that portraying a normal table setting that includes a plate holding a slice of ham, from the centre of which stares a human eye. Dali, Roy and Delvaux rendered similar but more complex alien worlds that resemble compelling dreamlike scenes.

A number of specific techniques were devised by the Surrealists to evoke psychic responses. Among these were [frottage](#) (rubbing with graphite over wood or other grained substances) and [grattage](#) (scraping the canvas)—both developed by Ernst to produce partial images, which were to be completed in the mind of the viewer; automatic drawing, a spontaneous, uncensored recording of chaotic images that “erupt” into the consciousness of the artist and found objects.

With its emphasis on content and free form, Surrealism provided a major alternative to the contemporary, highly formalistic [Cubist](#) movement and was largely responsible for perpetuating in modern painting the traditional emphasis on content. From the 1920s onward, the movement spread around the globe, eventually affecting the visual arts, literature, film, and music of many countries and languages, as well as political thought and practice, philosophy and social theory.

The Surrealist art movement opened the doors to a style of art that the world had never before seen. Odd techniques were used to paint and interpret images of the subconscious and the dream world. Though many Surrealist artists used traditional means of painting, they developed techniques to bring metaphor and meaning into their work. The meaning of Surrealistic art was symbolic and often opened to interpretation.

**Conclusion:** Surrealism was a cultural movement that began in the early 1920s and is best known for its visual artworks and writings. Most Surrealists worked with psychology and fantastic visual techniques, basing their art on

memories, feelings and dreams. To evoke psychic responses, the surrealists applied lots of techniques to create their art work.

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