Public Programs

This is Not a Concert
Musical Performance
Saturday, February 8, 7:30 p.m.
In anticipation of the exhibition, Des Canaux’s Young Artists perform an arranged concert of music inspired by René Magritte’s early work.

Magritte: Beyond the Image, Beneath the Paint
A Menil Symposium
Saturday, March 1
10 a.m.–3:30 p.m.
Asia Society Texas Center
2750 Southwest Freeway
Organized by the Menil Conservation Department, curators, scientists, conservators, and engineers from all departments, curators, scientists, conservators, and engineers from all departments, curators, scientists, conservators, and engineers from all departments, curators, scientists, conservators, and engineers

Book
Magritte: The Mystery of the Ordinary, 1926–1938
Edited by Anne Umland, with additional contributions by Stephanie D’Alessandro, Michel Draguet and Claude Goemans, and Josef Helfenstein with Claire Elliott
256 pp., 252 illus.
Hardcover, $65; paperback, $50
256 pp., 252 illus.
Hardcover, $65; paperback, $50

In April 1927 the first solo exhibition of René Magritte’s work took place at Galerie Le Centaure in Brussels. Though the 18-year-old artist was already active as the sole visual artist among a group of Belgian Surrealist poets, writers, and philosophers that included Paul Nougé, Camille Goemans, Marcel Lecomte, and Louis Scutenaire, at that stage Magritte was known—to the degree that he was known at all—as a graphic artist and painter of stylized post-Cubist work. The exhibition of twenty-one paintings and twelve collages, all of which had been completed since January 1926, represented Magritte’s earliest Surrealist images: Works such as the large Usson mosaic (The Mexican Idiot) and its pendant Le Jouer s’escorte (The Secret Player), both 1927, demonstrated many of the strategies and motifs that Magritte would employ in the years to come, including his interest in scotomata, his use of photography and films as sources for both subject matter and composition, and the mysterious border-hatted figure that raphasses throughout his artistic production. The first major museum exhibition to focus on Magritte’s breakthrough Surrealist years, Magritte: The Mystery of the Ordinary 1926–1938 traces the strategies and themes of this seminal period.

Magritte, who began working as a wallpaper designer and later as an illustrator in the early 1920s, continued to accept commercial assignments after the Galerie Le Centaure exhibition. His designs display the same preparatory work with mystery and drama evident in his artwork and were likely subtly influenced by his Surrealist leanings. An advertisement that he made for furrier Müller Samuels, for example, shows a relatively standard illustration of woman in a fur coat. The woman’s face, however, is almost violently distorted, partially hidden by another illustration, while half of Magritte’s own head irrationally juts into the lower right corner of the composition. Rather than ad copy, or even a description of the goods on offer, the text (contributed by Nougé) reads straightforwardly “What one guesses is perhaps that what she is thinking. Dresssed thus she requires no explanation.” Masquerading as a commercial production to promote Samuel’s winter 1926 fur collection, the booklet is an insidiously subtle Surrealist document that was of interest to the Surrealists—collage, games of chance, biomorphic abstraction, and finally (for Magritte a breakthrough) the metaphors of one material into another.

Catalyst, Le Prince des objets (The Prince of Objects), 1927. One of only a few paintings in which he used collage—by melting and mixing the same images, Magritte increasingly engaged with the mysteries of the human mind and the clarity with which people can see and feel their internal visions in such works as Personnage méditant sur la folie (Figure Brooding on Madness), 1928. It was also during this period that he began to work with language in his paintings, deliberately misspelling objects and figures, as with the two veiled figures exchanging a kiss in Les Amants (The Lovers), also 1928. Magritte increasingly engaged with the mysteries of the human mind and the clarity with which people can see and feel their internal visions in such works as Personnage méditant sur la folie (Figure Brooding on Madness), 1928. It was also during this period that he began to work with language in his paintings, deliberately misspelling objects and figures, as with the two veiled figures exchanging a kiss in Les Amants (The Lovers), also 1928.

The Menil Collection
1533 Sul Ross Street
Houston, Texas 77006
713-651-4111
menil.org

The Menil Collection
February 14–June 1, 2014

THE MYSTERY OF THE ORDINARY
René Magritte (1898–1967), Les Charmes du paysage (The Delights of Landscape), 1927. One of the first Surrealist exhibitions to seriously engage the mass market, the exhibition included a range of objects and figures, as with the two veiled figures exchanging a kiss in Les Amants (The Lovers), also 1928. Magritte increasingly engaged with the mysteries of the human mind and the clarity with which people can see and feel their internal visions in such works as Personnage méditant sur la folie (Figure Brooding on Madness), 1928. It was also during this period that he began to work with language in his paintings, deliberately misspelling objects and figures, as with the two veiled figures exchanging a kiss in Les Amants (The Lovers), also 1928.
The confrontation between the words and image synthesizes the lessons explored in his earlier word-painting, the text appears almost disconnected but in direct contradiction. Paradoxically, of course, the assertion is true: the word and the image have nothing inherently common with each other in itself. Ultimately, with an actual pipe that the unconscious produces through displacement, juxtaposition, or fragmentation could be amplified when applied to a physical object rather than confined to an image. Better himself recognized this phenomenon, organizing an exhibition in 1931 entitled Exposition surréaliste d’objets (Surrealist Exhibition of Objects) that included an earlier version of This Is a Piece of Cheese.

Magritte accepted a commission for three paintings from Edward James, a London-based artist, and patron, and collector of surrealist art. James’s home, at 35 Wimpole Street in London, was somthing of a shorthand for the room’s unconventional tastes, displaying canvases by Salvador Dalí and Pablo Picasso amongst marble columns, ornate antique furniture, and voluminous drapery. For Magritte, the commission was a major artistic opportunity, representing the promise of a professional turning point and the chance to attract his audience both beyond France and Belgium. Working in a temporary studio in the building, Magritte completed three momentous works, each a literalization of a scene: La Jeunesse illustrée (The Eternally Obvious)—Adapted from texts in Le Thérapeute (The Healer), 1937, and La Duré -e (Time Transfixed), 1938, the famous work featuring the enigmatic juxtaposition of a locomotive barreling out of James’s fireplace.

In 1938, Magritte delivered an important, autobiographical letter titled “Le Ligne de vie” (The Line of Life) at the Kunsthall Museum van Schone Kunsten in Antwerp. In it, Magritte summarized his career up to that point, singling out the works he had made since 1929 as “the systematic search for a disturbing poetic effect,” and acknowledging the importance of his own historical relationship with the Surrealists. Despite this revealing account, Magritte’s early contributions to the movement, as well as the range and distinctive character of his efforts, remain underrecognized. World War II broke out the following year, and in response Magritte concealed his approach to painting, experimenting with new subject matter and new styles. By the time the war ended, the Surrealist movement and the world itself had irrevocably changed. Thus 1938 offers a biographically and historically defined endpoint to a chapter of Magritte’s career, bringing to a close the period when Magritte defined the essential terms of his Surrealist practice.


Magenta, La Côte d’Azur (J. H. & M. D. Ross). 2009. Oil on canvas, 192.5 x 152.4 cm. Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester.

Magenta, La Évidence éternelle (The Eternally Obvious), 1933. Oil on canvas, 89.2 x 56.8 cm. Private collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester.

Magenta, La Évidence éternelle (The Eternally Obvious), 1933. Oil on canvas, 100 x 81 cm. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester.