

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### This is Not a Concert

#### Musical Performance

Saturday, February 8, 3:00 p.m.

In anticipation of the exhibition, Da Camera's Young Artists perform an afternoon concert of music inspired by René Magritte's paintings.

### Magritte: Beyond the Image,

#### Beneath the Paint

#### A Menil Symposium

Saturday, March 1

10:00 a.m.—5:30 p.m.

### Asia Society Texas Center

1370 Southmore Blvd.

Organized by the Menil's Conservation Department, curators, scientists, conservators, and engineers from all three exhibition venues report on recent historical and technical findings concerning René Magritte's early work.

## BOOK

### Magritte: The Mystery of the Ordinary, 1926–1938

Edited by Anne Umland, with additional contributions by Stephanie D'Alessandro, Michel Draguet and Claude Goormans, and Josef Helfenstein with Clare Elliott

256 pp., 252 illus.

Hardcover, \$65; paperback, \$50

Available at the Menil Bookstore

Cover:

René Magritte, *Le Portrait (The Portrait)*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 28<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 19<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches (73.3 × 50.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Kay Sage Tanguy. Photo: John Wronn

All works by René Magritte © 2014 Charly Herscovici, London/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

## THE MENIL COLLECTION

1533 Sul Ross Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-525-9400 menil.org

Printed with low VOC (Volatile Organic Compound) inks on recycled paper containing at least 40% post-consumer waste.

### Why Magritte Matters

#### 2014 Marion Barthelme Lecture

Monday, March 3, 7:00 p.m.

Art historian, critic, and curator Sarah Whitfield, who co-authored the multi-volume catalogue raisonné of René Magritte, discusses the artist's work.

### Bowler Hats and Tubas

#### Family Concert

Saturday, March 22, 3:00 p.m.

Da Camera's Young Artists present a unique musical experience that leads visitors through the galleries of the Menil Collection with music inspired by the work of René Magritte.

### Surreal / Reel

#### Outdoor Film Screening

Friday, March 28, 8:00 p.m.

In cooperation with Aurora Picture Show, a selection of short Surrealist films and “home movies” by René Magritte are screened on the Menil Collection lawn.



# MAGRITTE

## The Mystery of the Ordinary, 1926–1938

The Menil Collection  
February 14–June 1, 2014

In April 1927 the first solo exhibition of René Magritte's work took place at Galerie Le Centaure in Brussels. Though the 28-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-nine paintings and twelve collages, all of which had been completed since January 1926, represented Magritte's earliest Surrealist images. Works such as the large *L'Assassin menacé (The Menaced Assassin)* and its pendant *Le Joueur secret (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 scenography, his use of photography and film as sources for both subject matter and composition, and the mysterious bowler-hatted figure that reappears 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 preoccupation with mystery and drama evident in his artwork and were undisputedly influenced by his Surrealist leanings. An advertisement that he made for furrier Müller S. Samuel, for example, shows a relatively standard illustration of woman in a fur coat. The woman's face, however, is almost violently dismantled, 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 enigmatically “What one guesses is perhaps what she is thinking. Dressed thus she requires no explanation.” Masquerading as a commercial production to promote Samuel's winter 1928 fur collection, the booklet is an insidiously subtle Surrealist document in which the worlds of fashion, fine arts, poetry, and publicity collide.

In September 1927, partially in response to the negative reception of his first solo exhibition, Magritte attempted to establish himself in Paris, the undisputed center of Surrealist activity. He remained in the city for slightly less than three years, working with and learning from several important artists and writers, including Jean Arp, André Breton, Salvador Dalí, Paul Éluard, Max Ernst, and Joan Miró. Despite the relatively short duration of his stay, Magritte's time in Paris was the most prolific of his career. Shortly after he arrived, Magritte completed *Le Prince des objets (The Prince of Objects)*, 1927. One of only a few paintings in which he used collage—by adding small patches of fabric to the canvas—it is part of a group of works that feature an irregularly shaped black outline that references a type of



René Magritte, *La Trahison des images (The Treachery of Images)*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 23<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 31<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches (60 × 81). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by the Mr. and Mrs. William Preston Harrison Collection. Digital Image © 2014 Museum Associates/LACMA, Licensed by Art Resource, NY

fortune telling popular among Surrealists in which melted lead was doused in cold water to produce irregular forms. In *The Prince of Objects*, the molten black shape frames part of the background wall, specifically an area in the process of transforming from a smooth painted surface into textured wood grain (or vice versa). The work embodies a number of techniques and tropes that were of interest to the Surrealists—collage, games of chance, magic, biomorphic abstraction, and finally (for Magritte a breakthrough) the metamorphosis of one material into another.

While in Paris, the artist began to employ several new strategies, such as the juxtaposition of seemingly unlike elements—for example, an empty picture frame and a rifle in *Les Charmes du paysage (The Delights of Landscape)*, 1928—and the concealment 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 mislabeling objects to undermine rationality, as in *La Clef des songes (The Interpretation of Dreams)*, 1927, or assigning imagistic names to near-abstract planes of color such as the empty black forms in *L'Apparition (The Apparition)*, 1928. Magritte's investigation of language culminates with *La Trahison des images (The Treachery of Images)*, 1929. Here, he presents an easily recognizable illustration of a pipe, flat and crisp as a commercial sign. The image floats against a creamy background above the seemingly contradictory declaration “*Ceci n'est pas un pipe*,” or “This is not a pipe.”

The confrontation between the words and image synthesizes the lessons explored in his earlier word paintings; the two appear not merely disconnected but in direct contradiction. Paradoxically, of course, the assertion is true: the word and the image have nothing inherently in common with each other nor, ultimately, with an actual pipe.

By 1930 the artist was experimenting with the physical conventions of painting itself. In the first weeks of that year, Magritte created three *toiles découpées*, or cut-up canvases: *Les Perfections célestes* (*Celestial Perfections*), an image of a cloudy sky; *Profondeurs de la terre* (*The Depths of the Earth*), a rural landscape; and *L'Évidence éternelle* (*The Eternally Obvious*), a nude female body. Magritte, always aware of the tension between composition and fragmentation, considered these disjointed images split across separate framed canvases among his most important and innovative works, the literal deconstruction of the academic ideals of painting. A photograph that Magritte staged of *The Eternally Obvious* adds further complexity to the meaning of the work. In it, the five canvases are mounted on a glass sheet standing in a filthy cellar-like space, in front of a washtub and surrounded by hanging laundry. The positioning of the piece in this crude environment increases the sense of the vulnerability of the body and conveys an impression of lurking violence. By locating the painting in this anti-aesthetic setting, Magritte fundamentally undermines the work's perception as "fine art." With the *toiles découpées*, Magritte reached new territory in his critique of representation, forcing the viewer to engage with and "complete" the painting in his mind.

Magritte's stay in Paris ended with the collapse of the European and American economies and the subsequent destruction of the art market in 1930. This financial disaster coupled with

René Magritte, *L'Évidence éternelle* (*The Eternally Obvious*), 1930. Oil on five canvases, overall: 69¼ × 24¼ inches (175.9 × 61.6 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester



René Magritte, *Le Thérapeute* (*The Healer*), 1937. Oil on canvas, 36¼ × 26⅞ inches (92 × 65 cm). Private collection



personal a one: Magritte and Breton had a serious falling-out that affected the artist's relationship with other members of the French Surrealist group. Magritte returned to Brussels where, in need of income, he turned most of his attention to securing graphic design commissions. Though cut off from the Paris circles and more or less insulated within the Brussels coterie, he continued his own artistic practice, albeit at a slower pace. In fact, he set out to revise his painting, tackling his work with an increasingly philosophical bent in works such as *La Condition humaine* (*The Human Condition*), 1933. His impetus was now no longer a matter of deconstructing language so much as uncovering a predetermined meaning in each object—a meaning not found in the thing itself but through the application of thought and inquiry. Magritte began to imaginatively depict associations between objects using a strategy he called "elective affinities." In *Le Modèle rouge* (*The Red Model*), 1935, an ordinary pair of boots mutates into a pair of feet. The strangeness arises from the combination of two closely related things rather than two disparate ones. Around the same time—in one of the most disturbing images he would ever produce—he explored what he saw as parallels between a woman's face and body in *Le Viol* (*The Rape*), 1934.

During the 1930s Magritte began to create objects and alter existing ones, playing with the Duchampian idea of the assisted readymade and pursuing the experiments that he had begun with his *toiles découpées*. A small oil painting of a piece of cheese ensconced within a commercially available

cheese dome comprises *Ceci est un morceau de fromage* (*This Is a Piece of Cheese*), 1936 or 1937. Even more so than his famous pipe, this morsel of brie exists in a new reality somewhere between object, image, and language. Magritte was not alone in his pursuit; in the 1930s a number of the Paris Surrealists had discovered that the uncanniness produced through displacement, juxtaposition, or fragmentation could be amplified when applied to a physical object rather than confined to an image. Breton himself recognized this phenomena, organizing an exhibition in 1936 entitled *Exposition surréaliste d'objets* (*Surrealist Exhibition of Objects*) that included an earlier version of *This is a Piece of Cheese*.

Early in 1937, Magritte accepted a commission for three paintings from Edward James, a British poet, arts patron, and collector of Surrealist art. James's home, at 35 Wimpole Street in London, was something of a showroom for the owner'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 expand his audience beyond France and Belgium. Working in a temporary studio in the building, Magritte completed three monumental panels for the house's ballroom: *Le Modèle rouge* (*The Red Model*), *La Jeunesse illustrée* (*Youth Illustrated*, not on view), and *Au seuil de la liberté* (*On the Threshold of Liberty*), the last of which is far larger than any of his previous paintings. Magritte also completed a number of iconic works during this period, including *Le Thérapeute* (*The Healer*), 1937, and *La Durée poignardée* (*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 lecture titled "*La Ligne de vie* (The Line of Life)" at the Koninklijk Museum van Schone Kunsten in Antwerp. In it, Magritte summarized his career up to that point, singling out the works he had made since 1926 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 consciously altered 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.

— Adapted from texts in *Magritte: The Mystery of the Ordinary, 1926–1938* by Clare Elliott, Assistant Curator



René Magritte, *La Condition humaine* (*The Human Condition*), 1933. Oil on canvas, 39⅞ × 31⅞ inches (100 × 81 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Gift of the Collector's Committee

Organized by The Menil Collection, Houston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and The Art Institute of Chicago

Menil exhibition curated by Josef Helfenstein with Clare Elliott

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