



Surrealism

by Michael G. Cornelius

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Surrealism is an artistic movement that grew out of Dadaism and flourished in Europe shortly after the end of World War I. Influenced by the psychological writings of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Carl Jung (1875-1961), and their belief that the workings of the mind can be discerned through the interpretation of dreams, surrealists believed in freeing themselves of any conscious control that might impede their artistic expression. For them, art was an expression of the subconscious.

Surrealism quickly attained an avant garde status. Although enormously popular in Europe, surrealism, in an attempt to distance itself from normative expression, nonetheless allied itself with outsiders. As a result, homosexual communities and artists quickly accepted the new form of expression.

The period after World War I in Europe was marked by great disruption and upheaval. The old political order had been shattered, and a tinge of hopefulness pervaded the continental artistic community. Dadaism, the forerunner to surrealism in which artistic works deliberately defied convention or comprehension, was heavily influenced by the ongoing war and was, consequently, a dark and negative type of expression. Surrealism grew out of Dadaism but also essentially grew away from it.

Far from being negative, surrealism focused on positive expression. This combination of the realities of the aftermath of World War I and the dreamy hopefulness of the continent between the world wars helps account for the seemingly contradictory elements of surrealism as it attempted to reconnect seemingly disjointed ideals: light and dark, the conscious and the unconscious, hope and despair, rationalism and irrationalism, dream and fantasy.

Surrealism began as a literary movement in France, but quickly became most popularly connected with the art world. Led by André Breton (1896-1966), a poet and critic who in 1924 published "The Surrealist Manifesto," surrealism soon became the "new" and "exciting" form of artistic expression worldwide, a popular alternative to the highly formalized Cubist movement that had recently dominated the art world.

At its essence, surrealism celebrates primitive art, the work of children or madmen. Ordinary forms and objects are used in often strange and stunning ways to create art. Surrealism often depicts what should not, or could not, actually exist; for example, the famous painting *Portrait of Edward James* (1937) by René Magritte (1898-1967) depicts the back of a man's head as he looks into a mirror, only to see the identical back of the head reflected in the mirror.

Over time, two distinct groups of surrealist painters emerged: the automatists, who favored the domination of the conscious over the subconscious, and the veristic surrealists, who favored the subconscious over the conscious. Pablo Picasso (1881-1974), though not considered a true surrealist, was the foremost of the automatists, while Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) emerged as the most famous of the veristic surrealists.

The major surrealist painters of the time now read like a who's who of twentieth-century art masters:



Like some other leaders of the surrealist movement, Salvador Dalí (above) was uncomfortably anti-homosexual. Photograph by Carl van Vechten, November 29, 1939. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Dalí, Magritte, Jean Arp (1887-1966), Max Ernst (1891-1976), André Masson (1896-1987), Yves Tanguy (1900-1955), Pierre Roy (1880-1950), Paul Delvaux (1897-1994), and Joan Miró (1893-1983).

With the popularity of cinema growing in Europe throughout this time, it is no surprise that surrealism also became a cinematic expression, especially in France. The most prominent surrealist filmmakers are Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) and Luis Buñuel (1900-1983), who collaborated with Dalí on one of his films, *L'Age d'Or* (1930).

While surrealism is still considered a popular artistic movement among homosexual artists, the initial and most influential members of the surrealist movement were noisily anti-homosexual. Breton, perhaps as a means of asserting his masculinity, was a loud and frequent critic of gay artists and authors, often complaining that he was the sole heterosexual in the field of surrealism.

Dalí, too, was uncomfortably anti-homosexual. Speculation abounds as to his true sexuality, especially in light of his rumored affairs with poet Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) and others, but nonetheless, he was known for his anti-homosexual views.

Breton and Dalí considered homosexuals to have too much influence in the artistic community in general, as critics, artists, and gallery owners, and often railed against this allegedly baneful influence.

The surrealist writers had their homosexual members, such as Rene Crevel (1900-1935), but the surrealist painters seem reticent about sexuality, their own and others. Surrealists were said to worship women, but they rarely included female painters in their artistic circles.

Given the fluidity of their paintings and the aggressive nature of their subject choices, it is difficult to discern interpretations of homosexuality, homoeroticism, or even homosociality in their works.

In Dalí, for example, sexuality is often brutal, carnal, or grotesque, but in most instances it is almost always overtly masculine, feminine, or masculine/feminine; gender rarely seems confused or ambiguous.

Dalí's painting *Crucifixion* (1954) presents a typical example. Dalí's interpretation of Christ on the cross, often an eroticized form in art, is extreme and austere; the draped woman gazing at the hovering form of Christ on the enormous geodesic cross suggests heterosexual longing, though there is nothing in the features of Christ himself that suggests homoerotic desire on the part of the artist. Through both topic and depiction, typical sexuality is subverted, but not in any way that suggests homosexual desire.

Surrealistic filmmakers, like surrealist writers, had more freedom in their celluloid creations, and one can find splashes of homoeroticism in the works of Cocteau and Buñuel.

Buñuel's film *Los Olvidados* (1950), for example, features a minor homosexual character (who, alas, is portrayed in a typically predatory manner) and also presents a male-dominant homosocial portrait of street-life in poverty-stricken, urban Mexico.

Cocteau, who was himself homosexual, offers similar glimpses of homosexuality in his works.

Surrealism failed to achieve significant popularity in 1930s America, and as World War II loomed, the movement began to wane in Europe as well. Its influences, however, are widespread; and surrealism and the surrealists, despite the anti-homosexual stance of their leaders, have been embraced by homosexual communities and artists worldwide.

Thus, while surrealism as a visual art did not initially embrace its homosexual members, it is now often the homosexual painters, critics, and writers who have worked to keep the movement alive as an artistic expression.

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