

THE ARTIST WHO WAS MASTER OF THE DOUBLE TAKE

By Bennett Schiff, *Smithsonian*, Sept. 1992

Magritte is called a Surrealist, but what he really did was show us the mystery that's there when our basic assumptions are challenged

Stroll along with Rene Magritte, the maker of improbable images, his wife, Georgette, and their beloved little dog, Loulou. They are in that solid bourgeois neighborhood of Brussels known for its restaurants and movie houses. It's about 1955. As usual, Magritte is wearing a good suit and a bowler, his favorite headgear.

Like a face in one of his paintings, Magritte's is expressionless. In fact, he looks as if he's just stepped out of one of his paintings. It is legitimate to imagine him stepping back in, a passenger in a revolving door set right into the canvas.

All is sober and ordinary, except that he and Georgette, as is their custom, are taking Loulou, the tiny, powderpuff Pomeranian, to the movies.

One of the things about Magritte, this gentle man with the stockbroker's face, is that he can always surprise you. He can make you ask questions, but don't expect answers. Magritte deals in images, in poetry and, ultimately, in mystery. If you must have answers, it is best that you make them up to suit yourself.

At heart Magritte was a detonator, a bombardier. "I detest my past," he wrote, "and anyone else's. I detest resignation, patience, professional heroism and obligatory beautiful feelings. I also detest the decorative arts, folklore, advertising, voices making announcements, aerodynamism, boy scouts, the smell of mothballs, events of the moment, and drunken people." His images were meant to upset the pattern, to undermine conventional expectations. To try to interpret his works as symbolic statements misses the point. You have it from the master himself:



How best to represent a train? A speeding locomotive emerges from a fireplace in *Time Transfixed* (1938).

"To equate my painting with symbolism, conscious or unconscious, is to ignore its true nature," he wrote. "People are quite willing to use objects without looking for any symbolic intention in them, but when they look at paintings, they can't find any use for them. So they hunt around for a meaning to get themselves out of the quandary, and because they don't understand what they are supposed to think when they confront the painting.... They want something to lean on, so they can be comfortable. They want something secure to hang on to, so they can save themselves from the void. People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image.... By asking 'what does this mean?' they express a wish that everything be understandable. But if one does not reject the mystery, one has quite a different response. One asks other things." At the expense of being slapped smartly on the wrist you are tempted to ask, what other things? There is, of course, no answer. The paintings are the answer.

"If the spectator finds that my paintings are a kind of defiance of 'common sense,'" wrote Magritte, "he realizes something obvious. I want nevertheless to add that for me the world is a defiance of common sense." Even in everyday life, very little got past him. He once told Suzi Gablik, author of a book about him, that he had been at the butcher's and had heard a woman ask for two nice kidneys. "When it was my turn," he said, "I was tempted to ask for two horrible kidneys."



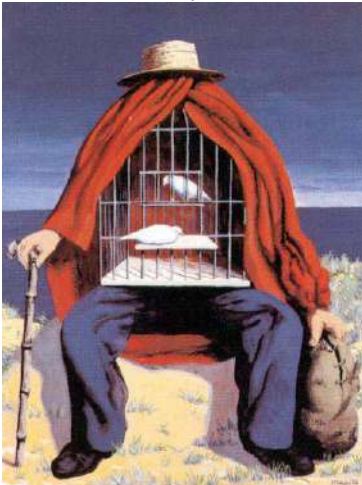
Magritte considered that he had done his work well when nothing could explain it. For example, a locomotive, smoke pouring from its stack, charges into a room from the center of the fireplace. Both toylike and ferocious at the same time, it hangs in midair, yet conveys speed, like a bullet frozen in its trajectory.

Is it a pipe or is it something else?

An ordinary, curved-stem pipe exists on a rectangular canvas. Underneath, painted in graceful script, is the legend: "Ceci n'est pas une pipe"—"This is not a pipe." True, it isn't a pipe; it's a painting of a pipe, a representation of a pipe. That simple painting of 1929, entitled *The Treachery of Images*, has intrigued many viewers, including contemporary French philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Several years later Magritte painted a small picture of a piece of cheese and displayed it beneath an actual glass cheese bell, entitling it *This is a Piece of Cheese*.



The small painting *The Treachery of Images* (1935) was a later version of his 1929 work of the same name. It posed the question: Do you see a pipe or a reproduction?



The Therapist, 1937
A seated, headless figure has a straw hat where the head should be. Its chest cavity is open to reveal a cage containing two white doves. The Healer confronts the viewer.



Red Model
A pair of ankle-high, lace-up boots end in naked, veined feet. The image is so compelling that a three-dimensional version of it caused a pedestrian jam when shown in a New York store window. It was once analyzed as a case of castration, to which Magritte commented to a friend, "Frankly, it is terrifying to see what one is exposed to in doing an innocent painting."
Innocent?

In *Clairvoyance* (1936)—a self-portrait in which he paints a portrait of an egg, which takes form as a bird—Magritte explores affinities between objects. An artist, stiff as a paper cutout, works at his easel. His model is an egg, and on the canvas he is painting a spread-winged bird.

What makes Magritte's paintings all the more remarkable is that the objects, which are precisely presented with superb technical facility, are readily identifiable. There are no abstractions and there is certainly nothing nonobjective. It is the shocking juxtaposition of the images that makes you see the commonplace in an entirely new way.

This exhibition proves once again that, for Magritte, the medium was definitely not the message; he was more interested in thought and poetry than in painting. The very idea of being thought of as an artist was irritating to him. Magritte never had a studio; he painted in an ordinary room of his house and wore a business suit as he worked. "I always try to make sure," he said in 1967, in one of his last interviews, "that the actual painting isn't noticed, that it is as little visible as possible. I work rather like the sort of writer who tries to find the simplest tone, who eschews all stylistic effects, so that the only thing the reader is able to see in his work is the idea he was trying to express. So the act of painting is hidden." For him, painting was merely a means to an end; "I could easily have devoted myself to mathematics," he said.

Abstruse as Magritte's paintings are, his influence on the commercial world of advertising—which is nothing but message—has been monumental. It is easy enough to understand why. While his images are immediately recognizable, they are put together in so unprecedented a way that they are jackhammered directly into your head. And that is, after all, the dream of advertising.

Sarah Whitfield counted up some accounts in advertising in which Magritte's images have been used and came up with: "books, records, insurance, credit cards, televisions, typewriters, calculators, cars, cosmetics, wallpaper, chocolates and clothes, starting even before a major American television company [CBS] appropriated *Le faux miroir* as its logo." Advertising, in fact, was how Magritte, who wasn't financially successful as an artist until late in life, managed to pay his bills.

Not that there was ever much question about the course his life would take. Born in Lessines, Belgium, in 1898, Rene entered art school at the age of 12 in the town of Chatelet, to which the family had moved. He spent his vacations at the home of his grandmother at Soignies, where he had a strange and indelible experience that he later enjoyed recounting. He and a friend often played in a nearby cemetery, descending through iron trapdoors into the burial vaults. One day, coming up from a vault, he saw an artist painting in the cemetery, a sight that seemed magical to him. It was there, on encountering that artist in the cemetery, that he decided he wanted to be a painter.

Other events also had a particularly strong impact on the way Magritte would see the world. When Rene was 14, his mother was found drowned in a river near the family home; she had apparently thrown herself into the water from a bridge. Her body was found with her nightgown wrapped around her head, a terrifying image that Magritte used many times in nightmarish paintings. Then, two years after his mother's death, World War I erupted around him.

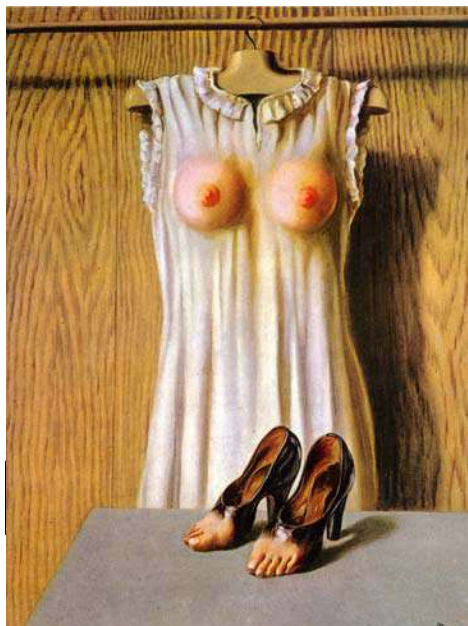
In 1916 Magritte entered Brussels' Academie Royale des Beaux-Arts, where he remained for two years. Over the next few years, he met the writers and poets, political radicals and esthetic avant-gardists who were to remain his close friends throughout his life.

The young Magritte looked at the world with a skeptical, ironical eye; he despised war, brutalism, totalitarianism. He was aware of—but not very sympathetic to—the Dadaists, who derided everything, and whose movement flamed, sputtered and died out just after the war. Keeping busy, he did a short tour of compulsory military service in 1920-21, and in 1922 married Georgette Berger, whom he had met at a fairground nine years earlier, when she was 12. In the early '20s, he worked as a wallpaper designer, moved into advertising illustration, painted in the new styles of French modernism, showed in a local gallery and Antwerp and abroad in Geneva, and became involved in experimental journals and experimental theater. Soon he discovered the new creed of Surrealism, delivered by its poet apostle, Andre Breton, in the First Surrealist Manifesto in Paris in 1924.



Recamier

To its theorists and practitioners, Surrealism, no matter how zany or comical it might look in its different aspects, was not to be taken lightly, for it was as much a poetic and literary practice as it was a visual one. Breton defined it as "pure psychic automatism, by which one intends to express verbally in writing or by any other method, the real functioning of the mind." There was to be no exercise of reason, or any other interruption by esthetics or morality, of the flow between the mind and the art. It would then be possible, he believed, to resolve "the states of dream and reality, in appearance so contradictory, in a sort of absolute reality, or surreality."



Magritte and his friends, writers Paul Nougé, Camille Goemans, Marcel Lecomte, Louis Scutenaire and Paul Colinet, formed the bedrock of Belgian Surrealism. Like the French Surrealists, they juxtaposed disparate images and ideas in an effort to find Breton's "surreality." The Belgians did not, however, accept psychic automatism. On the contrary, Magritte used esthetics and reason to present recognizable images completely removed from their normal context. The elements in his works make sense in their own right; it is their combination that forces the viewer to reexamine his or her notion of reality. "Reality," Magritte wrote, "is absolute, and unrelated to the various ways of 'interpreting' it.... Surrealism is the knowledge of absolute thought." The important thing was to bring thoughts into the open, to stun, shock and upset people, to irritate them out of their ruts. To make them see their everyday world in an entirely different way.

In 1927, he and Georgette set off for Paris. They lived there for three years, during which time Magritte achieved the height of his powers as a painter. A consistent man, he was never to change the basic ideas formulated there. And although he had many followers, some of whom achieved international stature, he never thought much of any of them.

Paris in the late '20's was alive with creative people –Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, Joan Miro, Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Louis Aragon, Man Ray, Jean Arp and many others. There was the bray of the music halls, hot jazz clubs, the Charleston and Josephine Baker. And there were the movies, of which Magritte was a great and devoted fan. Later, in Brussels, he would make a series of amateur movies, complete with cast and script.

And, to round him out a bit, one should note that he read deeply in philosophy, poetry and world literature and was a devoted and knowledgeable listener to and collector of music, both classical and popular. In all, an aware, alert, creative and cultivated modern man.

A rocky relationship with Breton

Several times Magritte fell out with Breton, who ruled Surrealism as if from Rome. On one occasion Magritte and Georgette, who was wearing a small gold cross on a chain around her neck, attended a dinner at Breton's home. Breton remarked that it was bad taste to wear religious emblems, and Rene and Georgette walked out.

Paris was good in every way for Magritte, except in sales. A large show he held there coincided with the stock market crash of 1929. That, the lack of ready cash and, as some have it, the disagreements with Breton precipitated the couple's return to Brussels.

They had had three good years in Paris. Magritte had been exposed to the pot in which Surrealism boiled, had met and exchanged views with its chief practitioners and theorists, had put a fine gloss on his technical ability and had decided it was time to go home to his friends in Brussels, where



Carte Blanche. 1963

together they could practice their own brand of Surrealism—quieter, less politicized and, with any luck, even more subversive of propriety.

The Belgian Surrealists were a more sober lot than their Parisian counterparts, who set out to be seen, to be noticed, as they prodded society. More cerebral, quieter in their dress, the Belgians were closer to one another and less doctrinaire.

All of this suited Magritte, the quiet cannoneer, very well. A supreme ironist, the model of the paradoxical man, the possessor of one of the most bizarre imaginations of any artist of the 20th century, an era that has perhaps exploited the farthest ranges of human imagination more than any other, he deeply enjoyed sinking into the self-effacing anonymity of the middle class, the very target of his visual detonations.

For the remainder of his years Magritte lived the quiet life he preferred. He did as he pleased, which was to stay put most of the time. Not fond of traveling, he liked being home, seeing his friends, reading, listening to music, painting. In the mornings, Loulou by his side, he would shop for groceries. The afternoons might be spent at a cafe with friends, playing chess, talking. Saturdays were reserved for gatherings of friends, at which titles for his paintings might come up.

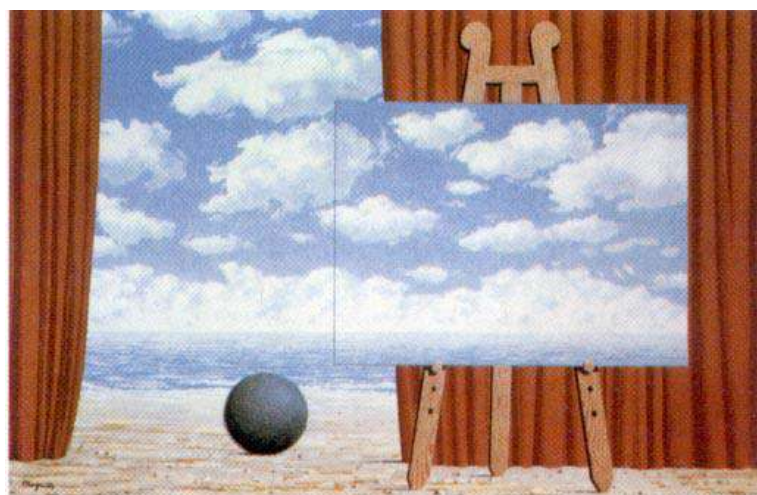
Magritte was tenderly devoted to his wife; time and again he captured her beauty in his paintings, even though the scenes themselves were often, to put it mildly, strange. Harry Torczyner, an American international lawyer who was a friend of Magritte's and collected his work, wrote of the time, in 1964, when the two men were strolling in Nice. They passed a shop window in which Magritte noticed a porcelain rooster. "'I must buy that for Georgette,' he said to me. 'She'll love it.' 'Are you still courting her, Rene?' 'It's true,' he replied, smiling."



The Tomb of the Wrestlers (1960) was result of a conversation with a friend about abstract painting. Challenged to produce an all-white composition, artist chose instead to show a red rose in a red room.

He painted, at the beginning of his major canonical phase, pictures of objects in the most disparate of situations, things that had nothing to do with one another or with the context in which they were placed. Then he moved on to uniting objects that had an underlying affinity—an egg in a cage, for example. The bird, which is not shown, is the bond between them. He called this the doctrine of "elective affinities." In the case of the egg in the cage, there is also a more subtle affinity: both egg and cage are images of confinement. Magritte also took up such concepts as unimaginable changes in scale (an apple occupying an entire room), gravity (huge boulders stationary in the sky), metamorphosis (figures growing into something else or made of something else) and the question of what lies beyond what one sees (a painting superimposed on a landscape that reproduces the identical landscape).

Even his house, a comfortable one he could afford to buy with increasing sales in the mid- and late '50s, looked like the houses in his paintings. The furnishings were ordinary, with very few trappings of an artist to be seen. Though he could have afforded a studio by then, he never had one. Previously, when he and Georgette had lived in flats, he had painted in the kitchen or the dining room. In the house, he worked in a boudoir adjoining the couple's bedroom. The set-up was bare: easel, tubes of paints, charcoal for sketching—the basics.



The Fair Captive. 1965

It took some 25 years before Magritte's work caught on internationally; at first, as so often with modern European painters, in the United States, and soon after in England, France and Italy. Now he is one of the major figures of 20th-century painting. "To the extent that my pictures have any value," he once said, lobbing a grenade at the experts and explainers, "they do not lend themselves to analysis." He quoted Victor Hugo, "We never see but one side of things." And to this he added, "it's precisely this 'other side' that I'm trying to express."

By Bennett Schiff

Contributing Editor Bennett Schiff wrote most recently on George Bellows (June 1992).



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