

Surreal Hero for a Nation of Contradictions

By Alan Riding, *The New York Times*, April 26, 1998

After centuries of being variously ruled by Austria, Spain, France and the Netherlands, Belgium was already suffering something of an identity crisis when it finally became a nation in its own right in 1830. Since then, things have not got much better. Divided between Dutch-speaking Flemish, French-speaking Walloons and polyglot Bruxellois, to this day Belgians often seem uncertain what, if anything, they have in common. No wonder local intellectuals entertain themselves by predicting that their country will soon break up.

But it may not happen quite yet. This year, at least, Belgians have discovered a rare point of unity in the dapper figure of Rene Magritte, Belgium's most influential artist this century. Joining forces to organize exhibitions, publications, television programs and walking tours to mark the centenary of his birth, they have embraced Magritte as the quintessential Belgian, the respectable pipe-smoking bourgeois in the bowler hat whose Surrealist paintings mirrored the absurdity of existence.

***A Mania for the Absurdist
Magritte who had a good
head near his shoulders.***

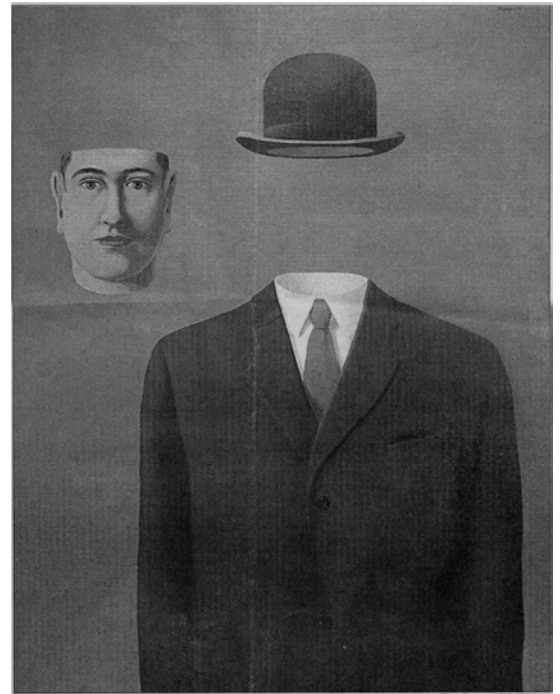
Thus, Belgians have found that to celebrate his art of the unlikely juxtaposition is to celebrate a nation in contradiction with itself. To accept the artist's refusal to explain his paintings is to be relieved of the need to explain Belgium. Magritte's "This is not a pipe" has become "This is not a country," which is fine, because Magritte's nonpipe was also a pipe, just different.

An alternative take on this year's Magritte mania is simply that, having seen France quietly appropriate many of their French-speaking heroes (from Georges Simenon to Jacques Brel), Belgians are delighting in seeing the French traipsing in large numbers to Brussels to pay their respects to Magritte. Then there is the pleasure in recognizing Magritte in everyday life, not just those of his images that have been endlessly plagiarized in advertising and the performing arts to the point that their provenance is often forgotten (two new productions at the Paris Opera are full of uncredited Magritte references), but also those visual and intellectual enigmas that are now simply called surreal but were in fact first isolated by Magritte.

Of course, there may also be a simpler explanation: that anniversaries are hard to resist. Once Belgium's Royal Museums of Fine Art decided four years ago to record the Magritte centenary with the largest art exhibition in this country's history, other shows were destined to follow. "Hommage a Magritte: 1898-1967" at the Galerie Christine et Ily Brachot in Brussels through May 31 focuses on his photography and sketches; "Rene Magritte and Contemporary Art," at the Museum of Modern Art in Ostende through June 28, looks at his influence on later artists, and "Magritte in Chatelet," at the Town Hall in Chatelet through May 17, is showing the work he did during his teen-age years while he was living there.

But the centerpiece, through June 28, remains "Magritte" at the Royal Museums of Fine Art, which is presenting 300 paintings and gouaches as well as posters, cover designs of musical scores, tracts, letters, magazine covers, photographs and homemade movies. The exhibition is displayed chronologically, starting with the groping steps that preceded the artist's discovery of Giorgio de Chirico and Surrealism in 1925. First came Magritte's encounter with Italian Futurism, which he proclaimed "a revelation" and which led him, as he later put it, to "do Futurism." A couple of years later, he belatedly found Cubism and produced what he described as "a mixture of Cubism and abstract art." But, he wrote near the end of his life, "these experiences gave me little satisfaction."

ENIGMA "*Le Pelerin*," 1966, by Rene Magritte is one of 300 works by the artist on view at the Royal Museum of Fine Art in Brussels.



From 1925, though, he developed the style that, with a couple of brief digressions, would stay with him until his death in 1967 at the age of 69. It was a style marked more by his eye and his mind than by his hand, more by its content than by its technique, more by his desire to disturb than to give pleasure. Today he is considered to have been a competent but unexceptional painter, yet more than de Chirico and Max Ernst, whom he regarded as mentors, his work remains remarkably popular and topical. He did not like to be called the Father of Pop Art, and he was right. This show demonstrates that he has survived Pop Art.

The decade that followed Magritte's conversion to Surrealism was enormously creative. Already in the 1925 "Nocturne," some of the motifs appear that would stay with him for decades, in this case the notion of a painting within a painting, a bird in flight and what he called a "bilboquet," the carved wooden pole that variously resembled an ornate table leg, a staircase balustrade and a chess pawn. Other favorite motifs, like the sea and clouds, joined his vocabulary the following year in "The Birth of the Idol" and "After the Water, the Clouds." In "The Musings of a Solitary Walker" of 1926, the mysterious bowler-hatted man, seen from behind, makes his entry, this time standing near the River Sambre where Magritte's mother drowned when he was 12.

In 1927, he became entranced with the double image: the back and front of a bowler-hatted man in "The Meaning of Night"; a man in tails on either side of a door in "Portrait of Paul Nougé," his closest friend at the time, and, in "The Secret Double," where the double is an illusion because what is missing from the face and torso of a woman is placed beside her. All this was relatively simple: things are not as they appear.

In 1928 alone, when Magritte painted no fewer than 100 works, including the famous hooded images of "The Lovers," he began introducing words into his paintings, invariably meant to create tension between the perception of the eye and of the mind. A white blob becomes the body of a woman, dark blobs are variously described as a horse, a cloud, a gun. In time, he came to use fewer words on his canvases and concentrated instead, often with the help of friends and children, on coming up with bizarre titles for his works. A 1930 full-length portrait of a nude, in which the body is divided into five separate paintings, became "The Eternally Obvious."

Amusingly, for a man who never explained the meaning of his images, Magritte in fact spent a lot of time explaining why they could not be explained. "Too often by a twist of thought, we tend to reduce what is strange to what is familiar," he once said. "I intend to restore the familiar to the strange." And perhaps unsurprisingly, this exhibition serves to confirm how many of his strange images are now all too familiar: the train emerging from a fireplace, a blue sky and clouds in the shape of a dove against a night sky, a lamp in a dark street against a bright sky, a green apple filling an entire room, a vast rock topped by a castle hovering over breaking waves, birds growing out of plants. Less familiar are the works of the early 1940's, in what he called his Renoir period, when Magritte embraced the rich colors of Impressionism as an antidote to the grimness of World War II, and of the late 1940's, when he created his "vache," or cow paintings, as a way of shocking Parisians who in 1948 belatedly gave him his first one-man show. But he soon returned to his old style, which in "Golconda" of 1955 would produce that most Belgian of images of dozens of men in bowler hats and dark overcoats falling like huge drops of rain among gray apartment blocks.

Magritte kept working to the end, often making several copies or variations of the same work (for example, he did 16 versions in oil and 7 in gouache of "The Dominion of Light"). But he never felt a need to apologize; he derided the idea of a unique work of art. Indeed, near the end of his life, he liked to boast that he had done 1,000 canvases but had only 100 ideas. Nonetheless, 31 years after his death, both his ideas and his images are still being copied, still drawing crowds, still provoking a frown or a smile, even threatening to unite Belgians, which isn't bad for a man who insisted he was not really a painter.

Note: This reading assignment includes [Magritte, Master of the Double Take, Smithsonian, September 1992](#).



STILL IN STYLE: Rene Magritte at home in Brussels in 1965. The man looked quite a bit like some of his paintings. Or was it vice versa?