
Potsdam, October 22, 2022

Museum Barberini Presents a Major Exhibition on Surrealism

Potsdam, October 20, 2022 – On Saturday, October 22, 2022, the Museum Barberini will open the first major exhibition to examine the Surrealists’ interest in occultism and magic. Including around ninety works, the exhibition covers topics ranging from the “metaphysical” painting of Giorgio de Chirico from around 1915 and Max Ernst’s iconic picture *The Attirement of the Bride* from 1940 to the occult visual worlds in the late work of Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo. Well-known paintings by artists who have long been part of the art canon such as Salvador Dalí, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, and René Magritte will be juxtaposed with key works by lesser-known artists including Victor Brauner, Enrico Donati, Óscar Domínguez, Wifredo Lam, Wolfgang Paalen, Roland Penrose, and Kurt Seligmann. The exhibition also examines the significant contribution made by women artists such as Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, Jacqueline Lamba, Kay Sage, Dorothea Tanning, and Remedios Varo.

Including works by artists from fifteen countries and dating from the period between 1914 to 1987, this exhibition presents Surrealism as a global, transnational movement whose influence extended far beyond France of the 1920s and 1930s. Loans from over fifty museums and private collections including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Menil Collection in Houston, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, the Museo nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity* was organized in cooperation with the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, where this exhibition was shown from April to September 2022, parallel to the Venice Biennale.

Including around ninety works by over twenty artists, the exhibition traces the development of the Surrealist movement. The works selected provide a rich overview of the stylistic and iconographic diversity of Surrealism – a movement that did not see itself first and foremost as an artistic and literary undertaking, but rather as an attitude to life. The point of departure for the exhibition project was the research of both curators from Venice and Potsdam: Gražina Subelytė’s dissertation on Kurt Seligmann, *Surrealism and Magic* (The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2021), and Daniel Zamani’s dissertation on the interplay of medieval and occult motifs in the work of André Breton (University of Cambridge, 2017).

“Our extensive loan negotiations were based on the exceptional holdings of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, which has one of the most significant holdings of Surrealist painting in the world. Many works that Guggenheim acquired as a patron of the Surrealist movement vividly demonstrate their appropriation of iconography from occult symbolism –

including Victor Brauner's *The Surrealist*, Paul Delvaux's *The Break of Day*, Max Ernst's *Attirement of the Bride*, Leonor Fini's *The Shepherdess of the Sphinxes*, and Yves Tanguy's *The Sun in Its Jewel Case*," says Ortrud Westheider, director of the Museum Barberini. This foundation is supplemented by loans from over fifty international museums and private collections, many of which are icons of Surrealist painting. Proponents of the twentieth-century canon such as Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, and René Magritte are represented in the exhibition as well as artists who deserve to be rediscovered, including Óscar Domínguez, Wilhelm Freddie, Jacques Hérold, Wifredo Lam, Jacqueline Lamba, Wolfgang Paalen, and Roland Penrose.

"Through their dreamlike images, the Surrealists aimed to stimulate the human imagination and inspire viewers to confront their emotions," explains Daniel Zamani, curator of the exhibition. "Accordingly, an encounter with a Surrealist work was seen as a transformative event that should open a new view of reality. Dorothea Tanning, for example, explained, 'My work is about leaving a door open to the imagination so that the viewer sees something else every time.' The exhibition *Surrealism and Magic* invites the viewer into this realm of fantasy that distinguishes itself decisively from the 'alternative truths' that are being proclaimed today."

Organized by the Museum Barberini, Potsdam, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, the exhibition is curated by Gražina Subelytė (Venice) and Daniel Zamani (Potsdam). The exhibition is accompanied by a 240-page catalogue published by Prestel (2022) in English and German, with essays by Susan Aberth, Will Atkin, Victoria Ferentinou, Alyce Mahon, Kristoffer Noheden, Gavin Parkinson, Gražina Subelytė, and Daniel Zamani.

Shift to the Unconscious and Irrational

With the publication of the *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924, French writer André Breton founded a new literary and artistic movement. Originating in Paris, it soon became an international movement that set the tone of the avant-garde. In the acclaimed *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, which took place at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in 1938, Breton brought together over two hundred works by sixty artists from fourteen countries. The focus of Surrealism was the world of dreams and the unconscious. Unlike Impressionism and Cubism, Surrealism does not have a unified style; it is a way of thinking. The artists wanted to examine their inner emotions to express their desires and fears. They chose between abstract, semiabstract, and figurative processes. This mysteriousness was aimed to introduce viewers to a dreamlike, "surreal" view of reality.

Magic and Occultism

Many Surrealists were familiar with Sigmund Freud's treatise *Totem and Taboo*. In this text, published in 1913, Freud associated the beginning of art with a magical impulse. He saw the belief in the "omnipotence of thoughts" as the main characteristic of magic. Breton and his companions were fascinated by the idea that inner desires and longing could directly influence external reality. Although they rejected the belief of the supernatural, they used magic as a many-layered metaphor for the surreal – a state in which the distinction between dream and reality was blurred. In addition, the Surrealists were familiar with the traditional comparison of magicians and painters, which are both in a position to create new, illusory worlds with the power of their imagination.

Magic is closely related to occultism – a millennia-old system of ideas based on a belief in the existence of higher powers pervading the universe, while being closed to rational science. The "Theory of Correspondences," according to which the universe is a single living organism in which humans and their environment, the micro- and macrocosmos, are interlinked through analogies and symbolic correspondences, is a central aspect. The Surrealists' understanding of the occult was linked to the Latin term *occultus*, meaning "hidden" or "concealed." For Breton and the Surrealists, however, the occult was not a synonym for a supernatural other world. Instead, they instrumentalized it as a metaphor for the surreal and the unconscious, whose abysses they aimed to investigate in their art and literature.

Regeneration and Transformation

While the investigation of occultism had played an important role since the beginnings of the Surrealist movement, they took on additional significance after the beginning of World War II. With the rise of fascist regimes in Europe, many Surrealists created works whose uncanny, fantastical landscapes mirrored their existential fears. Simultaneously, they used occult and magical motifs to express their hopes for regeneration and transformation. One source of inspiration was the symbolic language of alchemy, an occult secret science based on the idea of spiritual and material transformation. Like many of the Surrealists, Breton emigrated from Nazi-occupied France to the United States in the early 1940s and continued the group's avant-garde activities in New York. His book *Arcanum 17* (1945) is exemplary for the Surrealist program during World War II. The title of the book refers to the seventeenth Major Arcanum of the tarot deck, "The Star," which in occult interpretations symbolizes hope, regeneration, and magical protection. Breton interwove his story with numerous allusions to myths and legends, especially magical female figures such as the Egyptian mother goddess Isis or the medieval mermaid Melusina – figures that he viewed as an expression of spiritual healing and cultural new beginning.

Modern Artist-Magicians

Many of the artists who were in the circle of the Surrealists shared Breton's interest in magic and occultism, including Victor Brauner, Leonora Carrington, Enrico Donati, Max Ernst, Leonor Fini, and Kurt Seligmann. Ernst, who was born in Brühl in western Germany, had been interested in the medieval folklore of his home country from an early age and explored alchemical symbolism as a student in Bonn. His move to Paris in the early 1920s contributed significantly to the "occultation" of the movement. A special issue of the American avant-garde magazine *View* published in 1942 celebrated Ernst as the leading artist-magician of Surrealism. One of the many illustrations in the magazine was a portrait of Ernst by his former partner Leonora Carrington, in which Ernst is led through a snow-covered landscape by a white horse. His crimson feathered robe is reminiscent of ritual clothing of Siberian shamans. Ernst responded to the painting with his own picture *Attirement of the Bride*, one of the key works in the exhibition in Potsdam, in which he represented Carrington as a seductress with magical powers and for which Ernst was inspired by paintings of the Renaissance. Like many other artists featured in this exhibition, Ernst and Carrington were included in the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* that Breton and Marcel Duchamp organized in 1947 at the Paris gallery of Aimé Maeght. The exhibition, which was dedicated to the subjects of myth and magic, comprised around two hundred works by around one hundred artists from twenty-five countries and marked the impressive new beginning of Surrealism in postwar France.