

René Magritte Biography

Painter (1898–1967)



René Magritte was one of the most well known and famous surrealist painters of all time, yet it was not until his 50s, when he was finally able to reach some form of fame and recognition for his work. He was extremely influential in the transformation of surrealism art, to the pop art movement, with the work he created, and the distinct style which he took with the creations that he made during the course of his career. Much of the work created by René Magritte, takes every day, normal objects, and he would simply rearrange the figures, and locations, forcing the viewer to take a deeper look at what was in front of them, and at what the image truly represented.

René Magritte was born in 1898, to a wealthy manufacturer father. In 1912, his mother committed suicide, and at this time René decided to study at the Academie des Beaux-Art, which was located in Brussels. Many of the early works he did, were reminiscent of the style in which [Pablo Picasso](#) painted, where he followed a Cubo-Futurist style of art. One such example of this work, was a piece he created in 1919, **Three nudes**, In 1922 he married Georgette, and took a number of small jobs, including painting cabbage roses for a wallpaper company, in order to be able to pay the bills.

During the early period of his career, shortly following his marriage, René Magritte would spend the free time that he had, creating art forms and worked on a number of pieces; it was during this time period that he realized surrealism was the art form which he most enjoyed. [The Threatened Assassin](#) was one of his earliest pieces in 1926, which showcased the surrealist style which he had been working on; [The Lost Jockey](#) was another piece that he introduced in 1925, which also showcased this art

form. Over the course of his career, he produced a number of variants on this piece, and changed the format to recreate what the viewer was experiencing.

In 1927, René Magritte had his first one man show, which took place at the Galerie la Centaurie, which was in Brussels. During this period of his life, he was producing nearly one piece of art work each day, which made for an extensive showing, and a variety of unique styles for visitors of the exhibit to see. But critics heaped abuse on the exhibition. Depressed by the failure, he moved to Paris where he became friends with artist Andre Breton, and became involved in the surrealist group. From 1927, through 1930, much of the work which René Magritte created, was described as cavernous, with many of his paintings showcasing bizarre scenes, with a hint of eroticism.

Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see. ”

- René Magritte

During the German occupation of Belgium in World War II, Magritte remained in Brussels, which led to a break with fellow artist Andre Breton. After the fallout with Breton, René Magritte briefly adopted a colorful, painterly style in 1943-44, an interlude known as his "Renoir Period", as a reaction to his feelings of alienation and abandonment that came with living in German occupied Belgium. During this time, Magritte supported himself through the production of fake painting of Van Gogh, Picasso, and Paul Cezanne - this venture was later taken over by his brother Paul Magritte.

René Magritte stayed in Brussels for the remainder of his life. During the majority of his career, his work followed a surrealist style, and he very rarely, if ever, strayed away from this form. Much of the work he created depicted similar scenes, and recurring themes. Some of his favorites were floating rocks, or creating a painting within a painting, and he also used many inanimate objects, within a human figure, creating the distinct styles which other artists did not.

During the course of his career, René Magritte would also use famous paintings, which were created by other artists, to put his own surrealist twist on it. One of the works he did, was recreate The Balcony (a piece after the masterpiece of the same name, by Edouard Manet), and in this piece he replaced the figures that were in the image, with coffins. This, was one way for Magritte to showcase his style, and to create a unique design, forcing viewers of his pieces, to look outside of the norm, and focus on the distinctive features which were not originally present.

Along the similar lines, and with a focus on the surrealist style which he stayed true to, during his career, René Magritte began to work on sculptures at a later part of his career as well. He had a playful and provocative sense of humor, which worked in to many of the pieces which he created, and which became some of his most well known pieces throughout the course of his career. One such example of this is the series of pipe paintings which he created. The fascination he had with a paradoxical world, is clearly seen when you view the entire series as a whole piece, rather than viewing the

images on their own.

Although in recent years many of the works created by René Magritte have been on exhibit, during the course of his career he also had certain features exhibited in Brussels, as well as around the world. In 1936, one exhibit was held in New York City, and following this, two retrospective exhibits were also held. One was in 1965, at the *Museum of Modern Art*, and a second was held in 1992, at the *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

If the dream is a translation of waking life, waking life is also a translation of the dream. ”
- René Magritte

Not only were a number of artists intrigued by, and influenced by the work René Magritte created, but popular culture, and the art world in general, were extremely influenced by his creative, and unique ability to take something so ordinary, yet make viewers of his pieces see something completely different. His ability to present figures in a suggestive, yet questioning manner, made his work extremely desirable, especially during the 1960s. In fact, much of his work has been plagiarized and used in books, print ads, and other manners, due to the distinct style, and the inability of artists to create in a similar manner.

Although he died in 1967, of pancreatic cancer, much of the work of René Magritte is still on display today, in his hometown, and around the world. Not only did he introduce a new style, he was a leader in the surrealist style. And, he brought an entirely new way of looking at art, with the paintings, as well as some of the sculptures which he created, during the course of his career.

Masterpieces of René Magritte



The Son of Man, 1946



Empire of Light, 1950



The Lovers II, 1928



Rene Magritte (1898-1967) (Mag-reet)

Surrealism and Magritte

Surrealists painted objects realistically, but combined them in an unusual or nonsensical way. They felt that such odd combinations would stir up ideas and feelings in the back of peoples' minds. These paintings often have a dream-like quality. Surrealism stresses the idea of being above or beyond reality. Many of their ideas were inspired by Sigmund Freud's theories on dreams.

Surrealists took a sentence from the poet Lautreamont to explain their search for the fantastical:

"Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table".

Rene Magritte (1898-1967), was born in Lessines, Belgium. His paintings have an eerie, dreamlike quality. Though he painted in a very realistic way, it was the objects that he chose to combine, and how he used his incredible imagination, that made his work so different. He combined elements that usually don't belong together. This odd mixture of components can achieve the effect of strange, sometimes extraordinary, imagery. His paintings can be mysterious as well as whimsical. Magritte used associations that are impossible in real life. Magritte's capacity for combination seems inexhaustible.

The Belgian Rene Magritte was a practitioner of realist Surrealism. His art, painted with such clarity that it appears highly realistic, typifies the Surrealist love of paradoxical visual statements, and though things may seem normal, there are anomalies everywhere.

The Empire of Lights is Magritte's most celebrated work. He painted no fewer than ten versions of this work, the last of which remained unfinished owing to the artist's death. This image or idea accompanied him over the final decades of his life. Each version does not vary substantially. It is a painting in which there is no sign of any human or animal figure. And yet the scene is not static or lacking in movement. Motion is evoked by clouds floating across the upper part of the painting. It is not this part, however, that attracts the viewer's gaze, which is drawn first to the lights that give the picture its title: light from lampposts and windows in a building apparently uninhabited, the lights reflecting on the adjacent water.

The area in *The Empire of Lights* that most immediately attracts and retains the viewer's interest is a nocturnal scene. However, this is juxtaposed with a clearly daytime blue sky dotted with floating clouds that occupies the upper part of the scene. A sky like the one depicted naturally rules out any illumination like that shown in the lower part, and especially the shadows dispersed by such illumination. There is no doubt that the painting would not be nearly so disquieting without this contradiction.

The house with the lighted windows and the light from the lamppost are given so much emphasis that they force the viewer to accept the scene fully and without reservations. The viewer tends to believe, for instance, that what he sees is simply an anomalous twilight in which darkness has come on much more quickly, possibly owing to the shadows in the dense foliage of the trees, or that someone has left the lights on during the day. None of these explanations is acceptable, of course, since the darkness enveloping both the house and lamppost cannot be taken for anything but

true nocturnal darkness. The vast majority of viewers do not quite realize that the scene represented is not realistically presented. It is so realistically painted that the viewer accepts the painting as true.

Magritte's principal source of income for many years was publicity drawing or industrial design (wall papers, advertisements, and publicity for couture). Magritte was a very reserved person. Despite the fame that his work brought to him, he and his wife, Georgette, lived a private, middle-class life. Rene Magritte and Salvador Dali, another surrealist artist, became friends during the 1920s.

Projects and Discussions

The most important idea to relay to the children is how Magritte combined familiar and recognizable objects to take on new meaning and symbolism. Sometimes Magritte chose objects for no particular reason. So whatever feelings or thoughts the children have about his paintings are correct. There is no right or wrong meaning to these paintings.

Read *Dinner at Magritte's* to the class. This is a wonderful book. Each page is filled with striking, colorful paintings, and intriguing surrealist imagery inspired by Magritte's art. You can ask the kids questions about the pictures in this book. Each picture offers many things to talk about. You should read this book before you talk to the class because of the many subtleties.

If it's a nice day with clouds, take the kids outside and have them draw what the clouds remind them of. This is good for younger grades because it is easy and fast.

Give each child a grouping of words. Have them make a picture using these familiar objects. If they want to combine some of them into one object, that's O.K. (e.g. a cat and an airplane--a flying cat) Anything goes. You can pass them out or let them pick them out of a hat. Have them use crayons, color pencils, or markers.

CRS Resources

Reproductions:

The Empire of Lights

The Surprise Answer

The Returne

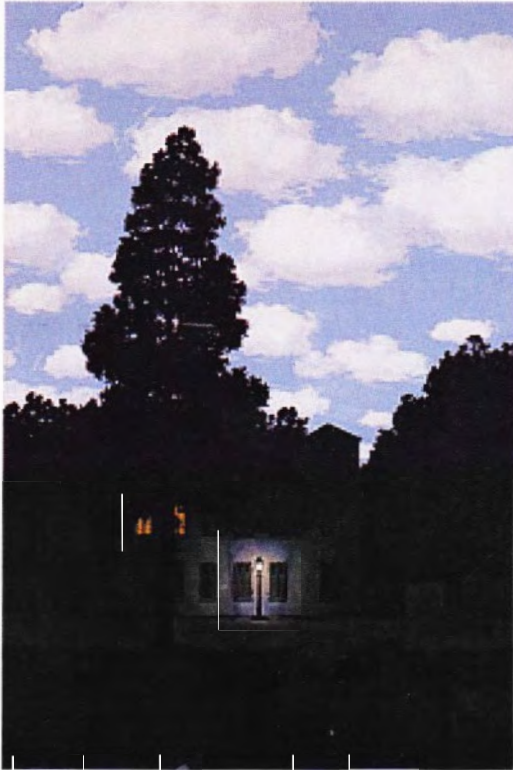
The Human Condition (National Gallery of Art)

Various postcards and small reproductions

Book:

Dinner at Magritte's (1998) Michael Garland

RENE MAGRITTE 1898-1967



René Magritte was born on November 21, 1898, in Lessines, Belgium.

He studied art between 1916 and 1918 at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.

Magritte first exhibited at the Centre d'Art in Brussels in 1920. After completing military service in 1921, he worked briefly as a designer in a wallpaper factory.

In 1927 Magritte was given his first solo exhibition at the Galerie le Centaure in Brussels.

In 1928 Magritte took part in the *Exposition surréaliste* at the Galerie Goemans in Paris. From

1953 he exhibited frequently at the galleries of Alexander Iolas in New York, Paris, and Geneva

Magritte died on August 15, 1967, in Brussels, shortly after the opening of a major exhibition of his work at the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam.

In *Empire of Light*, a dark, nocturnal street scene is set against a pastel-blue, light-drenched sky spotted with fluffy cumulus clouds.

With no fantastic element other than the single paradoxical combination of day and night, René Magritte upsets a fundamental organizing premise of life.

Sunlight, ordinarily the source of clarity, here causes the confusion and unease traditionally associated with darkness. The luminosity of the sky becomes unsettling, making the empty darkness below even more impenetrable than it would seem in a normal context.

The bizarre subject is treated in an impersonal, precise style, typical of the Surrealist painting and preferred by Magritte since the mid-1920s.

*Today in Art
Masterpiece...*

Rene Magritte's

Empire of Lights



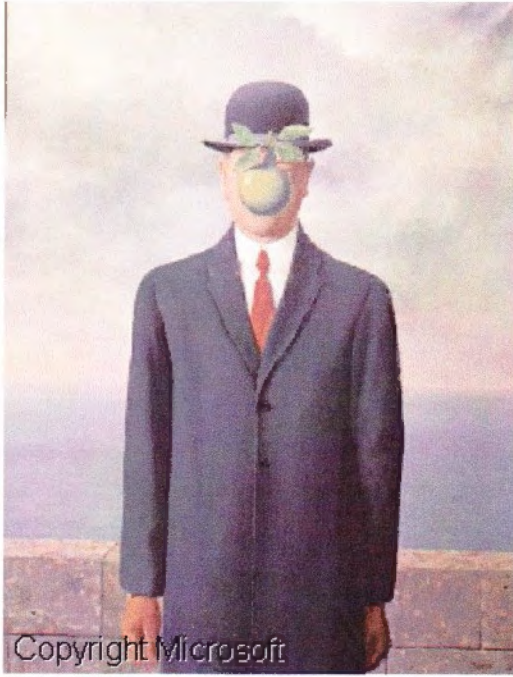
(1898-1967)

Oil on Canvas 1954



1. Where was Rene Magritte Born?
2. What style of art was he best known for?
3. Describe this style of Art.
4. What did we notice in the Empire of Lights?

1. Lessines, Belgium (He lived almost all of his life in Belgium).
2. Surrealism
3. It is a style in which imagery is based on fantasy and the world of dreams.
4. The sky was daytime, but the street scene was night.



Son of Man

Son of Man (1964) by René Magritte juxtaposes images that the artist used many times in different combinations. The apple, the wall, and the anonymous bowler-hatted man are meant to be unrelated. Magritte's work was not intended to be symbolic but was closer to the inexplicable quality of dreams.

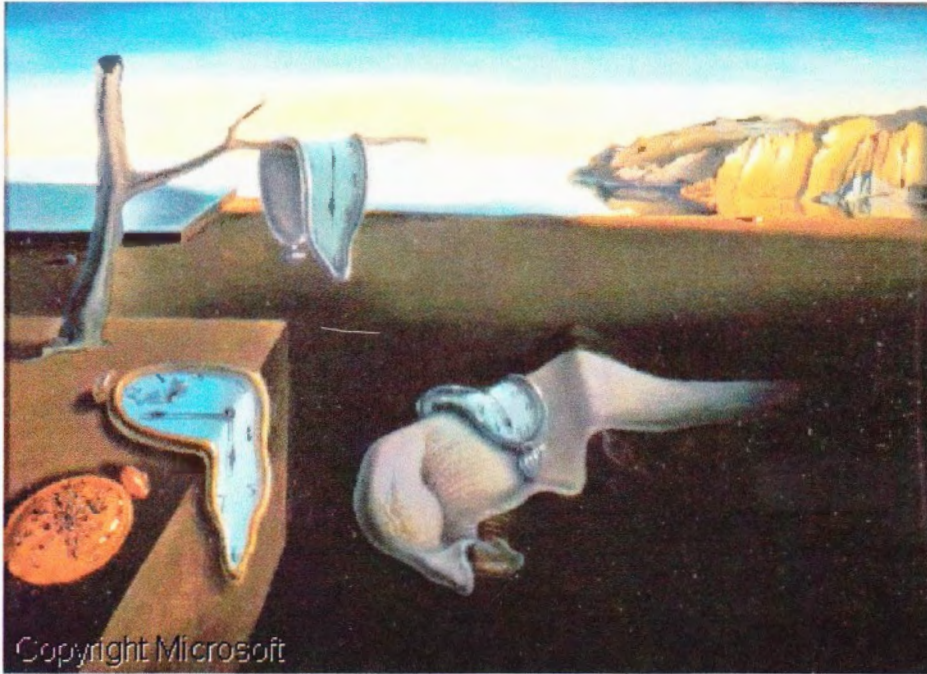
C. Herscovici/ARS, NY/Bridgeman ArtLibrary



The Uncertainty of the Poet

The Uncertainty of the Poet (1913) by the Greco-Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico is filled with dreamlike imagery. One of the images, that of a train in the distance, is probably a memory from the artist's youth, when his father was a railroad engineer. Although de Chirico began as a metaphysical artist, he is most often mentioned in the context of surrealism.

VAGA, NY/Bridgeman Art Library

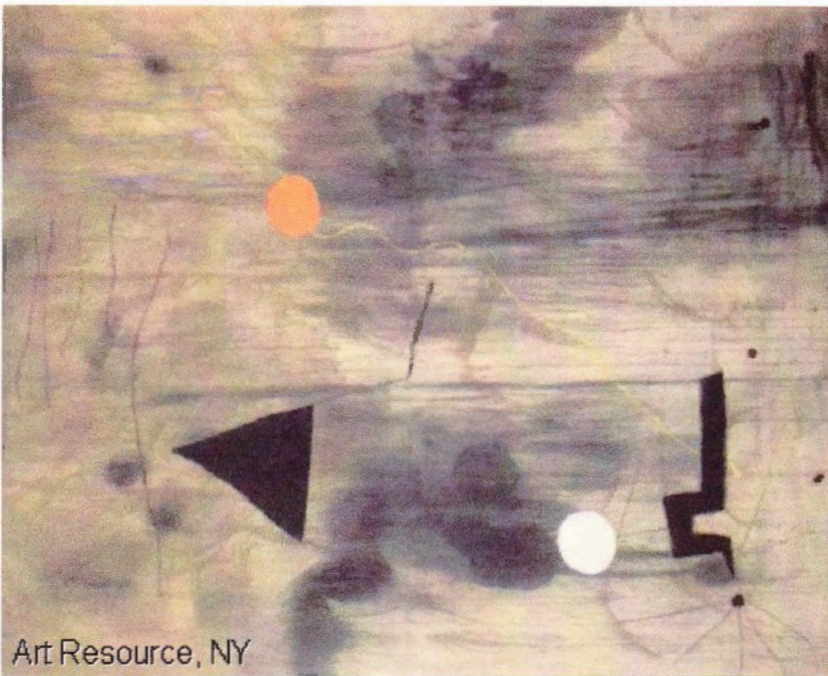


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The Persistence of Memory

Salvador Dalí's painting *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) ranks as one of the most famous paintings of the 20th century. A surrealist, Dalí referred to his work as "hand-painted dream photographs," and claimed that his imagery often came directly from his own dreams. The strange form in this painting's foreground, however, is based on an image from Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (about 1505-1510).

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Art Resource, NY

Miró's Birth of the World