

# **DREAMING ON CANVAS**

## **The Influence of Freud's Dream Analysis Theories on Three Surrealist Artists**

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Surrealist art as an organized movement officially occurred between 1924 and 1966. It was a monumental development that forever changed the conscious value of art. The viewer could no longer continue to assume that the images portrayed were to be construed as what was seen at first glance. Through Freud's published theories on the concepts of transference and dream interpretation, representational, hidden, and double meanings were introduced as elements in Surrealist art, thus interweaving a wholly original thread into the manner in which art might be seen and appreciated. While it took many years for this transformation to be taken seriously and become widespread, the revolutionary impact it had on the art world continues to be extremely influential, relevant, and significant today. The roots of this movement will be explored along with the works of three of its major contributors: Max Ernst, Dorothea Tanning, and Rene' Magritte. These artists' involvement in the Surrealist movement supports the idea of dream analysis as it pertains to the unconscious mind and hidden meanings.

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point (Andre Breton qtd. in Mundy 31).

In 1856, Sigmund Freud was born in a village that is located in what is now known as the town of Pribor, Czechoslovakia. In 1873 Freud enrolled in the medical school at the University of Vienna. He became so captivated by his studies in physiology

and neurology that he continued to attend courses in and explore these subjects until he received his degree in 1871. He later relocated to Paris to study under neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot introduced Freud to the treatment of hysteria and other nervous disorders with the practice of hypnosis. Freud then returned to Vienna in 1886 and set up a private practice (Freud v–vi).

Progressively, Freud became more and more fascinated with the field of psychopathology. He began to treat women afflicted with hysteria through the use of hypnosis and free-association with some success, gradually incorporating the theory of transference in his work. Transference refers to a subconscious redirection of feelings, fears, or emotions onto a seemingly unrelated object or person during the psychoanalytic process (“Transference,” def. 3). Freud perfected and harnessed the transference technique as a means to understand and translate the representation of underlying meanings in dreams. He conducted and recorded numerous case studies along the way, many of which would be included in his forthcoming publications (Freud v–vi).

Some of the texts which would prove fundamental to the Surrealists are as follows: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1926; *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 1922; *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 1923; and *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1930. The dates following each title indicate the year of the French translation publication. These years coincide directly with the birth of Surrealism (Mundy 58).

To concisely summarize Freud’s (sexual) interpretation regarding dreams, any elongated or pointed object represented the phallus; conversely any hollow or concave receptacle represented female genitalia (Freud 339). Movement of these objects

signified intercourse. Similarly animals had corresponding meanings, for example, a bird would symbolize a penis, and a bird in flight would signify sexual activity (Freud 355).

As his writings were published in the early 1900s, Sigmund Freud shocked Europe and then the world with his innovative theories about psychiatry and dream analysis. The overtly sexual meanings he attached to everyday objects through transference were completely original. His implications that dreams had intrinsic, revealing meaning and the associations he assigned them were singularly innovative and disturbing to many as well. Christianity and other religions, as well as the Nazi party, rejected his views as false and blasphemous and forbade followers to read or give credence to his doctrines. Nevertheless, or perhaps propelled by the controversy, thousands sought out and explored his ideas for themselves, and many were enthralled by what they discovered. Andre Breton and his nucleus of artesian friends were to be counted among these.

Immediately preceding Surrealism was Dadaism, an artistic and cultural movement that originated in Switzerland and enjoyed its peak from 1916–1922, during midst and traumatic aftermath of the First World War. Dadaism was a necessary and extremely influential precursor to the Surrealist movement. The Dadaists were outraged by the atrocities of the war, and sought freedom from the traditional bourgeois society that sat by unaffected. They expressed their disgust through art and literature that was purposely designed to shock and offend. The Dadaists paved the way for the Surrealists by portraying on canvas images that were unrealistic and often mocked the accepted values of the time. Many members of Dadaism, including Andre Breton, Max Ernst, and others would go on to become major figures in the founding and realization of

Surrealism. In many aspects, the Dadaist movement provided the essential platform upon which Surrealism would develop. (Frank 398-402).

However, Dadaism lacked cohesive focus or much success. During this time period, Andre Breton produced several poems and other writings in an attempt to bridge the gap between art and literature, but his work to this end was badly received and resulted in Breton becoming discouraged by the Dadaist faction. Dadaism was introduced in Paris in 1921. In 1923, a play called *The Gas Heart* written by one of Dadaism's founders, sparked a riot at a Paris theatre and caused a split in the movement. This insurgence, initiated by Andre Breton, signified the formal end of Dadaism and provided the spark that ignited Surrealism to commence taking definite shape as a movement in the spring of 1924 (Neff 24–33).

By the 1920s, Paris had become a hub for freethinkers of all kinds. Writers, artists, philosophers, musicians, and other bohemian types gathered there to commune and share ideas. With the official dissolution of Dadaism in 1922, Breton, at the core of this consortium, finally put his thoughts together in an organized format called *The Surrealist Manifesto*. It was published in 1924, formally beginning the Surrealist movement. In this document, Breton stated the group's intention as "... the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak" (qtd. in Frank 402).

The surrealists sought change in all aspects of life, personal as well as political. To realise this, they championed the cause of an unfettered imagination, and attacked the restraints - intellectual and social - that served to censor the human spirit (Mundy 53).

In the *Surrealist Manifesto*, Andre Breton outlined the concepts that distinguished this innovative movement from any artistic faction preceding Surrealism. The emancipation of unlimited imagination was paramount, up to and including madness, and not to be constrained in any way by perceived cultural norms or dominant traditions. Freud's publications were noted and praised as finally giving the rightful credence to imagination that it deserved. The significance of dreams was highlighted as having a much broader capacity to emphasize the importance of thoughts and ideas over traditionally held constrictive beliefs. Surrealism was to be an exploration of thought outside the parameters of concern for reason, esthetic, or moral restrictions (Durozoi 67–68).

Breton made multiple attempts to communicate with Freud to no avail. In general Freud dismissed the Surrealists and enforced a distance between himself and their party. After eleven years of trying, the only correspondence Breton ever received from Freud was a brief letter of response in 1921, which read, in part, as follows:

And now a confession, which you will have to accept with tolerance!  
Although I have received many testimonies of the interest that you and your friends show for my research, I am not able to clarify for myself what Surrealism is and what it wants. Perhaps I am not destined to understand it, I who am so distant from art (qtd. in Brandon 414).

This commentary cannot have helped but wound Breton, although characteristically he revealed little or no emotion. Breton persevered with his undertaking undeterred, and the Surrealist movement proved both meaningful and prolific. This was certainly in part due

to Freud's publications and inspirations, despite his lack of direct participation in the movement.

German-born artist Max Ernst was considered by many to be the father of Surrealist painting, as he was the first to translate what Breton had begun as a primarily literary/poetic movement into the visual art form. The two had been good friends and close associates from as far back as their mutual participation in the Dada movement (Neff 23). Ernst shared with Breton a fascination with the drawings of mental patients, believing them to be less inhibited by the bounds of acceptability and reality than the artist general population (Faerna 5). Ernst had been exposed to the psychoanalytic work of Sigmund Freud back in his college days at Bonn University and was therefore familiar with his theories (Mundy 61).

Even during his beginnings as a Dadaist, Ernst was prematurely on the path toward his future involvement in Surrealism. Back then he had railed against the conventional view of individual talent and what he referred to as "the fanciful myth of creativity." Ernst's vision was to achieve objectivity by "eliminating intelligence, taste, and conscious volition from the origination of the work of art" (qtd. in Faerna 5). Like his fellow Surrealists, it was the meta-physical, the subconscious, the *un-reality* that Ernst sought explore.

During the interim between Dada's demise and the rise of Surrealism, which was already in its developmental stages, Ernst was busy paving the way. He became involved with two other artists, Baargeld and Arp, who conceived a series of collages/photomontages they named *Fatagagas*. They attempted to show their collection at an exhibition in Cologne, Germany but were refused admission under the pretext that

the anthology was “undesirable.” Ironically, it was through some of these very collages that Ernst gained access to the avant-garde art scene in Paris. The result was that Ernst became reunited with Breton, who invited Ernst to display his works there (Faerna 7–8). A primary example of Ernst’s *Fatagagas* work was *Self Portrait*, 1920. The piece combined a photograph of the artist overlaid with incongruous images. The impact of the combination of such divergent images was to become a trademark of the Surrealist aesthetic (Faerna 18).

Two major Surrealist works by Ernst were painted in 1923. During this time, Breton was passionately preparing the *Surrealist Manifesto*. Both works of art are considered masterpieces and show enormous creativity as well as major influence from the work of Freud. The first, *Of This Men Shall Know Nothing*, has a revealing inscription in the reverse side of the canvas from Ernst to Breton. It provides a priceless descriptive explanation of the painting in the artist’s own words, and translates from the original French as follows:

The crescent (yellow and like a parachute) prevents the little whistle from falling to the ground. The little whistle, because someone is taking notice of him, thinks he might be going to the sun. The sun is divided in two to turn better. The model is extended in a dream pose. The right leg is bent (a precise and agreeable movement). The hand hides the earth. By this gesture the earth becomes a female sex. The moon runs through its eclipses and phases at top speed. The painting has a curious symmetry. The two sexes balance one another (qtd. in Wilson 34).



The second work, *Pieta or Revolution by Night* demonstrates many Freudian influences as well. In this piece, Ernst's father is in a kneeling position with a statuesque Ernst in his lap dressed in child-like clothing. Their pose is reminiscent both of the classic pieta, in which Mother Mary cradles her dead Son, and of a scene of sacrifice. Ernst endured a difficult relationship with his father, a devout Catholic, from his childhood on. The phallic shape of the showerhead on the corner above the blade-sharp shadow may be indicative of an Oedipal rivalry—the son versus the father for the mother's affection. Obvious Freudian and dream-like influences are already at play in Ernst's early paintings (Wilson 32).



Figure 1 Max Ernst: *At First Clear Word*. Oil on plaster on

Once again sexual symbolism is apparent in *At the First Clear Word*, 1923. Hands are often prominent in Ernst's work; this is noteworthy because his father was a sign-language instructor. In this piece, the two elongated fingers suggest the legs of a

woman. Delicately balanced between them is a red ball attached to a long green phallic insect by a thin string. In this precarious fashion, it seems that the female holds the (sexual) fate of the male in her hand (Faerna 28).

Another of Ernst's most prominent Surrealist masterpieces is *The Robing of the Bride*, 1940. The rich detail, bold use of color, and unique forms make this a mesmerizing painting. Ernst had through the years developed an obsession with birds, which is especially evident in this work. A woman who is nude except for an intricate rust colored robe takes up the majority of the canvas. The garment appears to be made of intricately woven feathers and is completed by a headdress out of which a pair of bird's eyes seem to peer. The headdress completely obscures the face of the figure. A second tall long-necked bird stands behind her thrusting a pointed staff towards her pubic area, which she covers with her hand. From a Freudian standpoint, the piece clearly symbolizes the loss of virginity (Wilson 98). A four-breasted hermaphrodite miniature monster lurks in the foreground of the painting and weeps. This figure greatly adds to the disturbing sentiment that the scene radiates (Faerna 38). In the background, a second nude figure turns away, and upon the wall, a mirror reflects the intended bride's image. Mirroring is often depicted in Surrealist art and can be seen in Dorothea Tanning's work as well.

The threat of fascism loomed large over Europe in the 1930's, and much of it was reflected in Ernst's art from that period. The Nazis blacklisted his name in 1933, and in 1938, he branched off with a group of other Surrealists. After much personal and political turmoil (Ernst was held at a French internment camp

at least once for being a German national), Ernst ultimately made his escape to the United States in 1941. Although a new era of his life was to begin upon his arrival, he continued to be haunted by the atrocities of the war for years to come (Faerna 8).

The father of Surrealism stayed in America, departing only to travel, and made contributions to new and exciting artistic realms. But his heart, his truth, and his reputation lingered in his Surrealist roots seemingly for the rest of his days. He also maintained a permanent link to American Surrealist Dorothea Tanning, another crucial member of the Surrealist faction.

Although discounted by Breton on the basis that she was merely an extension of Ernst, Dorothea Tanning was a talented member of the Surrealist movement of her own accord in many critically unique ways. She was one of a very small number of women who contributed to early classical Surrealist exhibitions and also one of few Americans imperative to the movement (Rubinstein 295).

Dorothea Tanning was an American artist born in 1910 and raised by Swedish parents in Galesburg, Illinois. At the age of seven, she found her true passion in a box of watercolors and continued to draw and paint without ceasing from that point forward (Rubinstein 293). Growing up in the conservative Lutheran atmosphere of the small Midwestern town, she supplemented her imagination by devouring fantastical literature from the public library. Tanning read the works of Lewis Carroll and Hans Christian Anderson, which included illustrations from artists such as Maxfield Parrish. Later she moved on to foreign lands through the novels of Oscar Wilde and Gustave Flaubert, as well as gothic works by Mary Shelley and Ann Radcliffe (Rubinstein 294). The

backgrounds and imagery she discovered here undoubtedly fed the creative ideas she would later translate onto canvas.

After only two weeks of study at the Art Institute of Chicago, Tanning rejected the idea of formal training. In 1935, she relocated to New York to live and work among other like-minded artists (Rubinstein 294). Here, Tanning was permanently and profoundly affected by a revolutionary exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art called *Fantastic Art: Dada and Surrealism*. She then began to enthusiastically embrace the Surrealist style, incorporating it into her own paintings (Farthing 711).

In 1942, when Tanning turned thirty, she painted a self-portrait that became not only an essential piece of Surrealist artwork, but also proved to have significant impact on the course of the rest of her life, both personal and professional. In the painting, Tanning wears only a purple ruffled masculine Shakespearian jacket on top, leaving her bare breasts exposed. Perhaps



Figure 2. Dorothea Tanning: Birthday. Oil on canvas. 1942.

more symbolically erotic is the brown skirt she wears below that is enveloped by a thicket of thorny twigs (Farthing 711). From Freud's standpoint, the twigs likely would have symbolized sexual innocence (Freud 335). The background is a series of doors

reminiscent of the mirroring effect often found in Surrealist art— another dream-like projection. This labyrinth of doors behind her may symbolize the unknown chambers of the subconscious mind. In the foreground, a composite creature, like a winged-lemur, lurks menacingly. Tanning's facial expression and posture likely convey trepidation about the unknown quality of the future (Mundy 197).

By this time, Max Ernst was in New York and assisting his current wife, Peggy Guggenheim, in the collection of works of current female artists. These works were to be featured in a 1943 exhibition she was putting together called *31 Women* (Rubenstein 294). This self-portrait was sitting on Tanning's easel when Ernst entered her studio. He was immediately impressed by her work and enchanted by her personality; the two found much in common and spent hours playing chess together. Days later, a collector who was enquiring about the portrait was told by Ernst that the painting was not for sale. Ernst stated, "I want to spend the rest of my life with Dorothea. This painting is a part of that life" (qtd. in Mundy 197). Ernst also named the painting *Birthday*. Ernst soon divorced Guggenheim. Of this turn of events, Peggy Guggenheim demonstrated a characteristic sense of ironic humor, later writing in her memoirs, "They now became very friendly and played chess together while I was in the gallery.... Soon they were more than friendly and I realized I should only have had thirty women in the show" (qtd. in Rubenstein 294).

Dorothea blossomed and continued to paint in a Surrealist manner, producing perhaps her most recognizable piece, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* in 1943. The title is "borrowed" from Mozart's paradoxically playful piece of the same name. Again an extremely dream-like setting blends figures with flora. Here a feeling of childhood

fantasies or nightmares is evoked. This painting depicts two pre-pubescent girls in a long hallway of numbered doors. An oversized wilted sunflower is lying at the top of the staircase leading up to the hall; its petals are strewn on the stairs, and one petal is held in the hand of one of the girls. It has been said to evoke emotions comparable to those in Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, a Surrealist favorite as well as a childhood influence of Tanning herself (Wilson 102). Tanning's art benefitted and grew under the guidance of Ernst, and she held her first solo show in New York in 1944 (Alexandrian 164).

I like Dorothea Tanning's work because the realm of the fantastic is her country of birth; because, in the daring undertaking that involves painting the intimate biography of the universe, the emotions of a child's soul, the mysteries of love and that entire monstrousness that is swallowing up the age of reason, she has found a method of figurative representation which is both new, spontaneous, and convincing... Precision is her mystery. This precision has allowed her to attain the power to guide us with the confidence of a sleepwalker through the real world as well as through that of the imagination (Ernst qtd. in Mundy 165).

Tanning and Ernst married in 1946 and relocated to Sedona, Arizona where they lived happily together until Ernst's death in 1976. Both continuously produced work inspired by their new landscape surroundings and each other's input and support (Alexandrian 164). While snubbed by Andre Breton and not given credit in his writing as being a serious individual Surrealist painter, Tanning contended that Ernst exuded none of this prejudice and that their relationship was equal and harmonious. Of Ernst she

stated, “We live without shadows... fascinated by what the other is doing” (qtd. in Rubinstein 295). Another prolific artist deeply influenced by the ideas of Sigmund Freud was Belgian painter Rene’ Magritte, who proved to be a prolific force in the development and propagation of Surrealism.

Rene’ Magritte was one of the most important and fascinating artists involved in the Surrealist movement. Unlike Ernst and Tanning, Magritte intentionally maintained some degree of separation from the tightly knit group of Surrealists in Paris. However, art historians consider him perhaps the most major contributor to Surrealist art.

His signature style was to arrange and depict items or mental states in a manner that could never co-exist in reality but only in the Freudian land of dream-state. This technique included the juxtaposition of objects, flawlessly exemplified in *Hegel’s Holiday*, 1958. In this simple painting, a glass of water is perched delicately atop the apex of an open umbrella. Presenting the water in an already contained state above the umbrella and rendering the accepted purpose of the umbrella as inconsequential reverses the roles of the two objects (Gablik 110). In *The Empire of Light II*, 1950, the lower portion of the picture depicts an ordinary scene of a quiet lane at night, complete with a glowing street lamp, darkened outlines of trees, and sleepy windows. Some of the windows are softly illuminated and some appear dim as if to suggest the inhabitants quietly slumbering within. In contrast, the sky above is bright blue and radiant, scattered with fluffy white clouds. The dissimilar halves of this work convey a subtle yet

psychologically disquieting lack of harmony (Farthing 743).

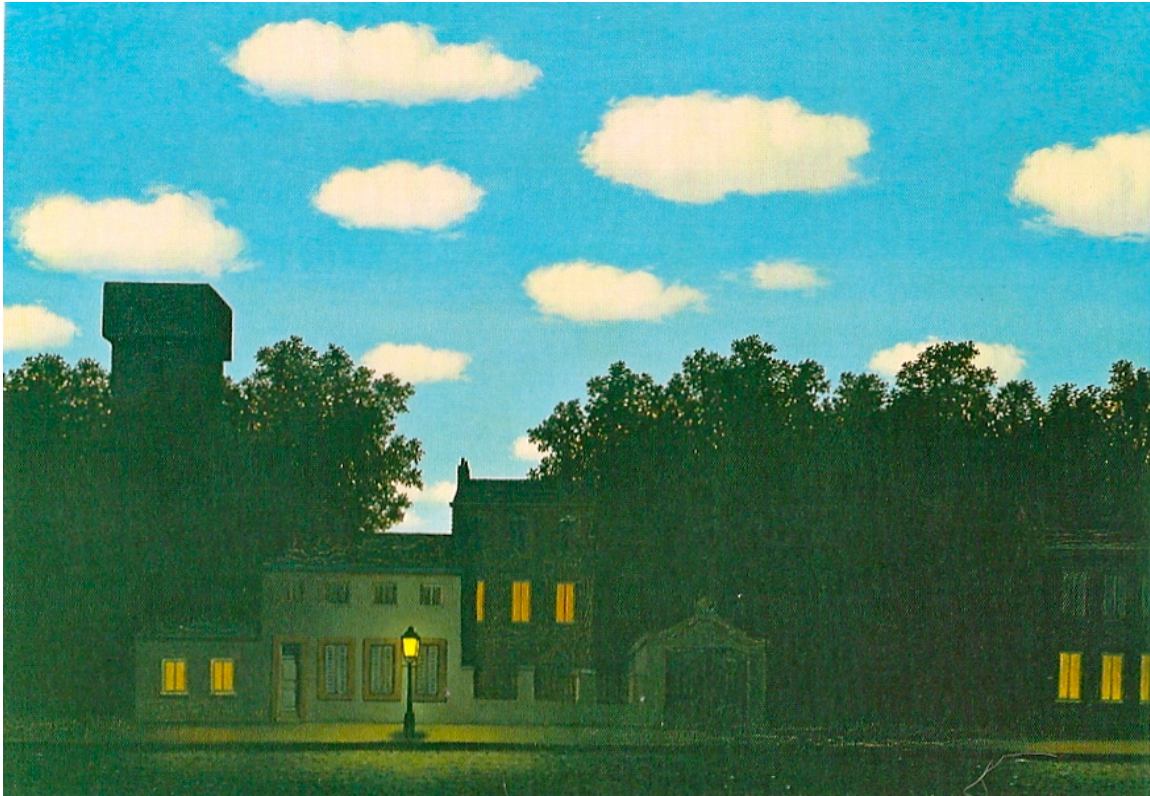


Figure 3. Rene' Magritte: *Empire of Light II*. Oil on canvas. 1950.

Born in Belgium in 1898, Magritte was the first of three boys. In 1912, Magritte's mother, Regina Bertinchamp, apparently walked out of the family home in the middle of the night and threw herself over the bridge of the local Sambre River. She was later discovered drowned with her nightgown wrapped around her face. It could never be determined whether the fabric veil was intentional or a trick of the tide, but it could be supposed that the unconscious memory had a profound effect on Magritte. Figures with covered heads appear repeatedly in his paintings (Gablik 18–19). The most significant perhaps, and certainly from a Freudian standpoint, is *The Lovers*, 1928. This piece depicts a man and a woman in formal attire. The figures face each other in extremely close proximity, nearly touching. Their heads are slightly tilted as if in the moment just



before a kiss. However, a sheath of fabric obscures each head so that only the profile of their faces can be seen (Mundy 87).

The painter also played with words, often contradicting their meaning in his work. Of this series of word examination, Wittgenstein has written the following:

The aspect of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes.) That is to say, new and unusual things get noticed; ordinary events do not (qtd. in Gablik 125–126).

This statement reflects Magritte’s intention to analyze and to reveal “the specific logical disorders produced by language” (qtd. in Gablik 129).

The most recognizable image of this kind is found in *The Use of Words I*, 1928–29. In this piece, a very realistic representation of a pipe dominates the canvas and is underscored by the statement “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe.*” The translation reads, “This is not a pipe.” Here Magritte states the obvious but in doing so forces the viewer to consider his implication: while the image presented *is* irrefutably one of a pipe, it is not the object itself but rather a depiction of it. The pipe will never be handled, packed with tobacco, or smoked because it exists only symbolically in a painting (Gablik 129).

Another work in Magritte’s series concerned with the correlation of words and objects is *The Key of Dreams*, 1936. In this piece, he shows us four recognizable pictures, yet beneath each he assigns a word with no obvious relation to the picture above. The canvas, divided into four portions as if by windowpanes, shows the following images clockwise from top left: the head of a horse labeled “the door”, a clock labeled “the

wind”, a suitcase labeled “the valise”, and a pitcher labeled “the bird”. Again we are shocked into reconsidering the verbal axioms attached to everyday objects (Gablik 131).

The female form was another central and exceptionally Freudian subject matter of Magritte. In the enchanting piece entitled *Discovery*, 1927, a nude woman is seen standing on a parapet overlooking the sea. She appears relaxed with her head lowered and her eyes peacefully closed. Though her body is realistically represented throughout, the skin above her waist turns the very same color blue as the sky in the background; in places, it is only distinguishable from the sky through the artist’s masterful use of shadow and light. This may symbolize her unity with the natural setting of the sea and sky behind her. In *The Rape*, 1934, the features of a woman’s face have been strategically replaced by female genitalia. Magritte referred to these parallels as “secret affinities” between objects (qtd. in Mundy 279). Another example of the unexpected parallels between objects can be seen in *The Red Model*, 1934. This painting depicts a pair of unlaced empty boots that clearly resemble a pair of human feet. The impossibility of this unnatural morphing of objects is intended to evoke shock, confusion, and even frustration in the viewer. The shoes appear so convincingly real, yet cannot be; therefore, they exemplify the Surrealist’s purpose of causing us to reconsider reality as it occurs in the dream-state (Wilson 66).

Magritte often acted in a manner directly contrary to crucial Surrealist principles and often found himself at odds with the movement and indeed with Breton himself. Magritte refused to participate in many of the measures other artists were experimenting with at the time, including premeditated dreaming and the use of drugs to alter reality (Gablik 64). He was a member of the Catholic Church, which incensed Breton

specifically. Breton rejected all forms of religion and declared himself an atheist, as did the majority of other Surrealists. Their final parting of ways occurred when Magritte and his wife were attending a Surrealist meeting in Paris, and Breton was in attendance. Magritte's wife had on a necklace with a gold cross. Breton made a general remark that the wearing of religious emblems was in poor taste. Magritte pulled Breton aside, and the two exchanged heated words. Shortly after, the Magrittes took leave of the party. Days later they returned to Brussels, signifying the final rift between Magritte and Breton and the Parisian Surrealists (Gablik 65).

Rene' Magritte remains one of the most visionary and imaginative members of the Surrealist movement. In spite of his self-imposed physical distance at times from the other Surrealists, his ideals and the works he produced embodied precisely the ideals that the movement sought to capture. By virtue of his extreme diversity, he certainly managed to attain what all of the Surrealists strove toward. Perhaps more than any other Surrealist painter, Magritte's curiosity and desire to push past the edges that had previously existed made him one of the most prolific artists of all time.

The Surrealists set out to turn the art world of the time on its head by throwing out preconceived ideas of what art *should* be. They sought the freedom of an unfettered imagination and looked to Freud's interpretation of dreams as a springboard to do so. They wanted the possibility of looking deep within and uncovering secret desires and feelings and the ability to display what they found without shame. Through Freud's work, they learned how to recognize the intrinsic meanings that objects and animals can signify in dreams and how sexual representation is rampant in the imagination and in dream-states. The Surrealists succeeded in changing the way art is viewed and

interpreted, and they freed the artist to paint what he/she *feels* as well as what he/she sees.

Art owes a great debt to Sigmund Freud and the Surrealists for removing the limitations of reality from the creative process.

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