

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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## FIVE SURREALISTS FROM THE MENIL COLLECTIONS ON VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D.C. June 13, 1983. Works by five masters of surrealism from the collections of Mrs. John de Menil and her family go on view in the National Gallery of Art's East Building on June 19, 1983. The paintings, sculptures, and drawings by Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, René Magritte, Yves Tanguy, and Victor Brauner will remain on view through September 28, 1983. Several surrealist books and documents are also included, along with seventeenth- and nineteenth-century found objects.

This exhibition previews one area of art that will be housed in The Menil Collection, a new museum in Houston, Texas, scheduled to open in 1985. A highlight of the collection, which comprises twentieth-century art, European antiquities, and primitive art, is one of the finest assemblages of surrealist art in the world, from which this exhibition has been selected.

The first formal definition of surrealism occurred in 1924 with the publication of André Breton's First Manifesto of Surrealism, although the term had been in use in Paris

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since 1917. The most important component of surrealism, as defined by Breton, was the investigation of the human unconscious--a direct product of Breton's interest in Freud (whom he visited in Vienna in 1921). Free association, automatic writing, and hypnosis were the tools employed to release spontaneous writings and imagery from the unconscious.

According to Breton, two routes were open to surrealist artists: the rendering of "dream images" and automatism. The five artists included here exemplify the first option in their image-oriented illusionism. Max Ernst and Tanguy both pursued automatic creative techniques, however.

Giorgio de Chirico's paintings exercised a strong formative influence on surrealist art, although he had ceased to work in his prophetic early style before the emergence of the surrealists. His mysterious juxtaposition of objects, tilting perspectives and dramatic lights and shadows established precedents for surrealist iconography and pictorial structure. The extraordinary juxtaposition of ordinary objects became a fixed principle of surrealist imagery.

In de Chirico's Internal Metaphysic with Biscuits (1916), for example, wooden furniture parts, a de Chirico canvas and biscuits mounted on a free-standing rectangular box are combined in a tunnel-like room. The figures representing the characters of Hector and Andromache (1918) from The Iliad are tailors' dummies, as is The Astronomer (c. 1915).

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Max Ernst (1891-1976) was a pioneer of surrealist painting and, in the range of his styles and techniques, arguably its greatest master. Works by Ernst from the Menil collections date from as early as 1924 and as late as 1944 and include a sculpture, The King Playing with the Queen, modeled in plaster in 1944 and cast in bronze in 1954. The paintings and drawings by Ernst display his experiments with a variety of techniques--collage, frottage (rubbing), and grattage (scraping).

Yves Tanguy (1900-1955) became a painter after seeing two canvases by de Chirico in a Paris gallery window. He met Breton in 1925 and became a surrealist. His paintings, executed in an academic and precise manner, employed non-literal biomorphic images placed in a deep and indeterminate space. His fusion of illusionism (space) and automatism (biomorphic shapes) was an important influence on the next generation of surrealists.

René Magritte's illusionistic style was also derived largely from de Chirico and came to represent peinture-poésie or "poetic painting" within the surrealist movement. He rejected experimental techniques in favor of precisely rendered images that depend on unexpected disparities of scale or juxtapositions for their surrealist content. A Chambre d'Ecoute (The Listening Room) depicts an enormous apple which entirely fills a room; in La Clef de Verre (1959) a massive boulder hangs in space above a barren and rocky mountain landscape. One of the highlights of the exhibition is Magritte's bronze sculpture, Madame

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Récamier (1967), in which a coffin reclines on an eighteenth-century chaise longue. This represents Magritte's sardonic view of the academic tradition in art, epitomized by Jacques-Louis David's 1800 portrait of Madame Récamier.

Victor Brauner, a Rumanian, was introduced to surrealism by Tanguy in 1933. He developed a highly personal style, reflecting the influence of Paul Klee. During World War II, Brauner hid in a small Swiss village; there, deprived of artist's materials, he devised a technique in which he applied a layer of candle wax to his surface. Images were then incised into the wax using a stylus. Six works by Brauner in this exhibition display this technique, including La Fiancée Mécanique (1945).

Guest curator of the exhibition is Walter Hopps, Director of The Menil Collection. An illustrated brochure with text by surrealist scholar Dawn Ades, working in conjunction with The Menil Foundation in London, accompanies the exhibition.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs please contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Information Officer), or Marla Price, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565 area code (202) 842-6353.