

Art in context essay sample

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

1. Abstract

This essay analyses the works of art Face of Mae West Which May Be Used as an Apartment and Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire by Salvador Dali and places them within their historical / critical context. It looks at them in relation to the history of art and in relation to the time in Salvador Dali's life at which he did them, and explores their relevance to both of these aspects.

2. Salvador Dali

2.1 Biography

The important Spanish painter Salvador Dali lived from 1904 – 1989 and is considered the greatest artist of the surrealist movement and one of the greatest Masters of Art of the twentieth century. In fact at 8.45 on 11 May 1904, the most significant event in Salvador Dali's life occurred – he was born. He believed that he could remember his prenatal experiences and this either attests to or explains the role that fantasy was to play in his life (Leaseall, 2005).

By 1929 he'd found his personal style that was going to make him famous – the world of the unconscious, recalled during our dreams. (Art Auctions, 2005) This became known as the Paranoiac-Critical Method and was developed by him alone. He made use of representational images which often have more than one dominant interpretation, an idea which became known as double imagery, of which he was to become the best renowned exponent, and which was to have a profound impact on all his work.

Dali's paintings do not rely on the viewer's unconscious projection. Rather, they are generated by the artist's willful submission to the associative power of the psyche. This process resembles the interpretive disorder of paranoia. The primary function of the paranoiac-critical method is to produce images of a startling and authentically unknown nature. The paranoiac mind perceives alternate meanings of individual signs, and interpretations displace one another almost instantaneously. Whether these new relationships are created or merely noticed by the paranoiac is irrelevant. (Ross, 1991).

His Catalonian upbringing and heritage were to have a great influence on his work (Great Masters, 1999). He brought out all these styles and influences in his work.

3. Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire (1940)

(figure 3)

3. 1 Historical Background of the Painting

This work is an example of the instantaneous paranoiac-critical hallucinations Dali received on the edge of sleep. The slightest movement or time lapse would change the relationship of the figures and the face would disappear. In 1971, the magazine *Scientific American* used the *Slave Market* to illustrate this effect. Dali visualized this apparition within a bust of Voltaire by the French sculptor Houdon. Dali has the bust transformed through the chance arrangement of two 17th century Dutch merchants in a marketplace. It is said that whilst painting the picture Dali recited without stopping the poem of John Salvat Pappaseit, "Love and War, the Salt of the Earth".
<https://assignbuster.com/art-in-context-essay-sample/>

Salvat Pappaseit was a Catalan anarchist whom Dali greatly admired.

Voltaire was a French Enlightenment writer, essayist, deist and philosopher (1694 – 1778) (Wikipedia, 2005)

3. 2 Composition

The bust's outline is formed by the opening in the wall behind the merchants. Their faces form the bust's eyes, and their collars make his nose and cheeks. The fruit dish on the table also creates a double image, for the pear becomes a distant hill, and the apple forms the buttocks of the man standing in the market. The slave-figure looking on could be Gala. (Dali Museum, 2002). The composition is balanced (the shirtless woman is balanced by the fruit bowl), but is not symmetrical. But all objects in the picture are completely necessary for the double imagery that Dali has brought off.

It is a still life of placed in front of an architectural structure, through which we glance a fragment of the landscape – a concept used frequently by Dali (Dali-gallery. com, 2005)

3. 3 Iconography

This work was painted at the very beginning of the paranoiac-critical period, during which he interpreted Freud's symbols and often interspersed them with religious icons. He wanted to create the iconography of the interior world, the world of the marvelous, that of Freud. In " Slave Market" he does this, bringing the apparition that all is not what it seems. (Latus, 2004) Two women in seventeenth century Spanish costume disappear and the bust of

Voltaire by Houdon appears (Leaseall, 2005). The images represented here have dual functionality.

3. 4 Main Image

At first glance, Dali has made an arrangement of a slave-market scene, which is populated with 17th-century buyers and sellers. When you look at it again, they have metamorphosed into the ghostly visage of the French writer, Voltaire. It's meticulously composed with objects fraught with Freudian and religious relevance, as well as scientific theory. Why do we sometimes see the nuns and at other times see the bust? Lizann Bonnar, Frédéric Gosselen, and Phillippe G Schyns of the University of Glasgow conducted two experiments and determined that part of the reason why we see one image or another depends on what we saw immediately before. Our visual system filters out the “noise” of the random pattern, and so can only see details that are sufficiently different from the pattern we just saw. (Cognitive Daily, 2005). In other words, optical neurons reverse the images. This image perfectly exemplifies the concept of double imagery in art.

This work lets us experience Dali's paranoiac-critical transformations in a unique and personal way. Any change in head position, or time itself, is expressed as a switch between the shifting images of the Dutch traders or the bust of French philosopher Voltaire (Dali-gallery, 2005). The imagery is personal to the artist too: There is a conceptual relationship. Dali had been struggling with his repudiation of his Catholic heritage, so his spontaneous visualization of nuns within the visage of the atheist Voltaire had a signifier-

signified connection. It is possible that the two forms of association operated at different levels in the artist's psyche. (Ross, 1991)

3. 5 Detail Images

The shirtless slave girl in the foreground is surmised to be Gala herself, overseeing the transaction. The faces, collars, and midribs of the two Dutch merchants become the eyes, nose, and chin of the bust of Voltaire. Although the brain is unable to focus on both images simultaneously, they are blended together perfectly, and in such a way as to suggest a more subtle level of interaction. (Dali-gallery, 2005)

The landscape of Catalonia makes another appearance here, and parts of it are made into a more subtle double image on the left side of the painting. Notice the gently downward sloping hill, nearest the building on the right, and how it also becomes a pear sitting in a fruit dish propped up on the table at which Gala is sitting. This is particularly interesting, since like many other double images, it incorporates parts of both background and foreground. Additionally, a plum sitting to the left of the pear also becomes the buttocks of one of the men who are standing there watching the scene. (Dali-gallery, 2005)

4. Face of Mae West which May Be Used as an Apartment (1934 – 1935)

(Figure 2)

- Historical Background of the Painting

In this instance Dali is looking at the subject, Mae West, not in her role as a person, but in her role as an American icon. To give a brief background and

history of Mae West (1893 – 1980), she was a highly popular and well known American playwright and actress of both stage and screen during the 1920s and 1930s. (Wikipedia, 2005). The painting was done in 1934 / 1935, at the height of her popularity. It constructs and deconstructs West's face as a theatrical artifice and provides visual evidence that since the beginning of her movie fame, some cultural observers have construed West's appearance and performance as an elaborate masquerade. (Curry, 1996).

It was in 1931 that Dali first proposed the idea of Surrealism, and with it the surrealist object. These works were initially put together by assembling seemingly unrelated objects into a three-dimensional collage. Intent was not conscious and no consideration was given to the final form. I believe that in relation to the history of art, this is important because it may be considered as a fore runner of modernism. In fact, Andy Warhol's "Marilyn Monroe Lips" of 1962 was inspired by Dali's work, as was the work of many other pop artists. (Wikipedia, 2005).

- Composition

Later, as the movement developed, surrealist objects were created with more planning and attention to form.

There is balance and almost complete vertical symmetry in this image, with the only differences being detectable in the curtains / hair. One can almost fold the canvas exactly down the middle and each half will be almost exactly the same. The two photographs balance one another. The curtains balance each other. The entrance has two balancing sides.

- Iconography

All of the objects represented in this work are iconographic in that they symbolize more than one object recognizable to man and have more than one representation upon the same canvas. The photos are eyes. The curtains are hair. The fire place is a nose. The sofa is a mouth.

Years later Dali took this iconographic representation a step further when he, based on this painting, sculpted a real couch, which led to the development of the Mae West room which is presently available to view in the Salvador Dali museum..

In doing this Dali reversed his usual method of trying to see images in objects and actually began his point of reference with an image (West's lips) and created an object (the sculpted couch) (Design Gallery, 2005)

- Non-Verbal Communication

Whilst any form of art or photography is a form of non-verbal communication, Dali has taken it to another level by in essence confusing the sense by which he is communicating with his audience. He has put unspoken questions into our heads – what am I looking at? What am I going to see when next I look at this image? With this particular image he further asks a question about American ideology, drawing attention to the burgeoning idolizing of individuals after the First World War.

- Main Image

The image depicts the face of the star Mae West as a stage, upon which an apartment is set out, with each item in the image doubling as another item depending on whether the image is being looked at as a face or as an

apartment. We enter the stage through the curtains (hair), pass the mouth (couch) and end up at the fire place (nose) and pictures (eyes).

- Detail Images

In this image Mae West's eyes are depicted as picture frames (look closely at each "picture" and you see that they are in fact pictures of eyes! All the images are cleverly tied together in a flowing, unobtrusive way that is not obvious to the viewer.

The voluptuous red couch in the centre of the stage doubles as her lips. Her hair is the stage curtains and her nose is a standard theatrical prop used in drawing room comedies – it's a decorative fire place. The edge of the stage becomes her chin and neck. (Curry, 1996). The chequered section of her jersey suggest to me that Dali is portraying a kitchen or bathroom is the room leading into the lounge (chequered linoleum tiles were particularly popular in the 30s).

Each image is a small part of the composite whole, in both the stage and the face, and they tie together to make up the whole. Each image is exactly in proportion, and this work of art too is a mastery of double imagery.

1. Conclusion

In this essay I analysed the works of art Face of Mae West Which May Be Used as an Apartment and Slave Market with the Disappearing Bust of Voltaire by Salvador Dali and placed them within their historical / critical context. I looked at them in relation to the history of art and in relation to the time in Salvador Dali's life at which he did them. The essay explored

their relevance to both of these aspects and deemed them both to have had impacts on the future of art in general and Dali's career and image in particular..

4. Works Cited

Art Auctions “ Salvador Dali Biography 1904 – 1989” 1996, retrieved 25 Nov 2005 http://www.artelino.com/articles/salvador_dali.asp

Cognitive Daily (2005) *How do we decide what we are seeing?* Retrieved 29 Nov 2005 from the website <http://cognitivedaily.com/?p=15>

Curry, Ramona (1996) *Too Much of a Good Thing* published by the University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, United States of America

Dali-gallery.com (2005) *Analysis of Slave Market with the Disappearing bust of Voltaire, 1940* retrieved 29 Nov 2005 from the website http://www.dali-gallery.com/html/analyses/1940_05a.htm

Dali Museum, retrieved 25 Nov 2005 from the website http://salvadordalimuseum.org/collection/surreal/slave_market.php

Design Gallery (2005), retrieved 29 Nov 2005 from the website http://designmatcher.com/nl/gallery_detail.php?galleryID=292

Great Masters (1999), retrieved 25 Nov 2005 from the website <http://www.artcult.com/dali.htm>

Latus, J (2004) *The Method in His Madness American Way*

Leaseall. net (2005) *I am Surrealism – The Life of Salvador Dali* retrieved 29 Nov 2005 from the website <http://www.leaseall.net/art/dali/index.htm>

Ross, Aaron, (1991), *A Semiological Explanation of Dali's Paranoiac-Critical Method*

Wikipedia (2005) *Mae West* , retrieved 29 Nov 2005 from the website http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mae_West