

# Art history paper

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Art History: Automist vs. Dream Surrealism The roots of surrealism are planted in the rapidly changing environment of the 19th century. As industry and urbanization gave rise to the metropolis, the subjective society of the individual became replaced by the objective society imposed by the machine and the factory. This new rhythm to life in the city led to explorations of art, literature and science into the idea of the phantasmagorical. The concept of the phantasmagorical refers to the use of fantastic (meaning unreal) imagery and incongruous juxtapositions. J. C. Powys says it is the “ incongruous imagery in surreal art and literature” (Phantasmagorical, 2005). The purpose of the artists who worked with the phantasmagorical was to re-discover the base of humanity that had been largely lost within the confines of the city and the machine. Through their art, they provided “ their critique of modern culture, their celebration of creativity, and their stress on the immediate transformation of everyday life” (Marshall, 2000). Within this movement, the artist's argued everyday life in the city deadens the mind into a numb acceptance of being just part of the crowd, while exploration into the surreal realm provides a release and/or escape from this deadening experience and allows one to remain subjective. How this was to be accomplished designated the different movements that emerged during this time. The dream surrealists, such as Salvador Dali, worked to incorporate the images they saw within their dreams into their paintings in sometimes quite unusual ways while the automatist surrealists such as Andre Masson felt the best way to access the unconscious was to allow the body to work with the mind in unthinking collaboration. In one of his most famous paintings, Persistence of Memory, Salvador Dali presents a beach scene overlooking some far-away

cliffs and in which there are a number of melting clocks lying around. The play of the light upon the craggy surface of the cliffs as well as the reflection found within the water of the middle ground draws the eye deep into the picture with classic painterly techniques. A small blue rock placed high on the beach is easy to overlook, but is intended to symbolize how a stray idea can interrupt the flow of thought. The stump of an olive tree - a symbol for peace - has only a single branch which serves to hold up one of the melting clocks. Among the three different clock faces that can be seen, it can be assumed that Dali is indicating a time for peace, a time for hardness and a time for softness and dreams. There is also a watch depicted in the painting, but only the back of it can be seen and there are several large black ants running across it. This symbolizes the activity of the ant hill as modern workers constantly scurry around seeking survival. This clock cannot be read because it represents the effect that time has on factory workers, forcing them to turn away from their thoughts, dreams, aspirations and desires in the interests of the corporation. The inspiration for this painting, according to Dali, was the dreams he had one night after eating a particular kind of melting cheese (Ades & Taylor 2004), but the techniques employed in executing the painting were very carefully applied to achieve just the effect he was seeking. Andre Masson was also interested in the communication of dreams and what they meant for the modern man and followed the same writings of Andre Breton that Dali followed. Breton was aware that dreams defied any kind of logical reason and usually lacked any degree of common sense, but he felt these qualities gave them a strong importance that shouldn't be ignored. “ Breton was convinced that this was, in effect,

throwing away something of inestimable value” (Danto, 2002). His approach to the dream as it appeared in art was much different than Dali's. In his First Manifesto, he defines surrealism to be “ pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations” (Breton, 1924). With this definition, time became an important element in the creation of surrealist art such as Masson's " Automatic Drawing" in which there are no clearly discernable features. The artwork is ink on paper and presents the suggestion of hands, faces and figures without actually depicting any of these. There is definite energy and a paradoxical sense of struggle for release and interior dancing to harmony. What this piece shows about automatist surrealism is the quality of time being a factor in the creation of the artwork and the attempt to keep all conscious thought out of the final image. If Surrealism is defined as a quality of keeping conscious thought out of the work, Dali would have to be excluded. “ Dali painted like an old master, using perspective and chiaroscuro, building up glazes, creating illusions. There is no way it could have been done automatically, or without rational control. ... It would be like transcribing a dream in rhymed verse” (Danto, 2002). However, Breton acknowledged that Dali had, made a significant contribution to Surrealist thought despite the methods he employed because of his focus on capturing dreamlike images that reflected the seemingly disconnected juxtapositions celebrated by Surrealist masters. “ Dali has endowed surrealism with an instrument of primary importance, in particular the paranoiac-critical method, which has immediately shown itself

capable of being applied with equal success to painting, poetry, the cinema, to the construction of typical surrealist objects, to fashions, to sculpture and even, if necessary, to all manner of exegesis” (Breton, 1934). Although he didn't embrace the automatist point of view for this painting, Surrealism became more meaningful to the general public when artists from both schools merged their concepts of what Surrealism should be to create truly mind-bending images that continue to fascinate today. Works Cited Ades, Dawn & Taylor, Michael. Dali. Philadelphia: Advanta, (September 12, 2004 – January 16, 2005). Breton, Andre. The Manifesto of Surrealism. 1924. Danto, Arthur C. “ Seeking ‘ Convulsive Beauty.’” The Nation. (February 21, 2002). Marshall, Peter. “ Guy Debord and the Situationists.” Demanding the Impossible. Nothingness, 2000. Phantasmagorical. The Free Dictionary. 2005. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/phantasmagorical>