SURREALISM

50 WORKS OF ART YOU SHOULD KNOW

PRESTEL

1

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO

The Enigma of a Day

1914

“To become truly immortal a work of art must escape all human limits: logic and common sense will only interfere. But once these barriers are broken it will enter the regions of childhood vision and dream.” (Giorgio de Chirico, 1913)

Like Marcel Duchamp, Giorgio de Chirico produced a body of work before 1920 that would profoundly influence the Surrealist movement. De Chirico and his friend Carlo Carrà invented a style of painting they called “metaphysical.” It transformed the Renaissance Tuscan piazza into an alien, warped landscape, and it populated these backgrounds with disfigured and emotionally distant human characters—characters that resemble broken antique sculpture. De Chirico perfected this imagery during the years around World War I, and many artists felt it captured the disorienting trauma of that time.

One of de Chirico’s most characteristic metaphysical works was *The Enigma of a Day.* In it we see the way de Chirico could stretch and bend his spaces, giving them an elastic quality. The colonnade is painted with dramatic and unrealistic foreshortening, making the space seem larger and deeper than it should be. At the same time, the harsh lighting gives the entire space an eerily intimate feeling, like a warped stage set. The general feeling of unease is further enhanced by the stark marble statue, which appears to be delivering an oration without an audience, except for the tiny figures in the background. De Chirico seems to be blending the ancient and modern worlds in uncomfortable ways. The giant towers in the background were likely inspired by medieval structures in San Gimignano and other Tuscan hilltop towns. But here they resemble ominous factory smokestacks.

Works like *The Enigma of a Day* would provide basic ideas for much Surrealist imagery. Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst also used landscapes and figures from traditional art as a starting point for exploring the modern world’s changing customs and psychological angst. They would often make the dreams of Europe’s past into the nightmares of an early twentieth century in flux.

Giorgio de Chirico, **The Enigma of a Day**, 1914,
oil on canvas, 73.25 x 55 in (185.5 x 139.7 cm)
Museum of Modern Art, New York

2

MARCEL DUCHAMP

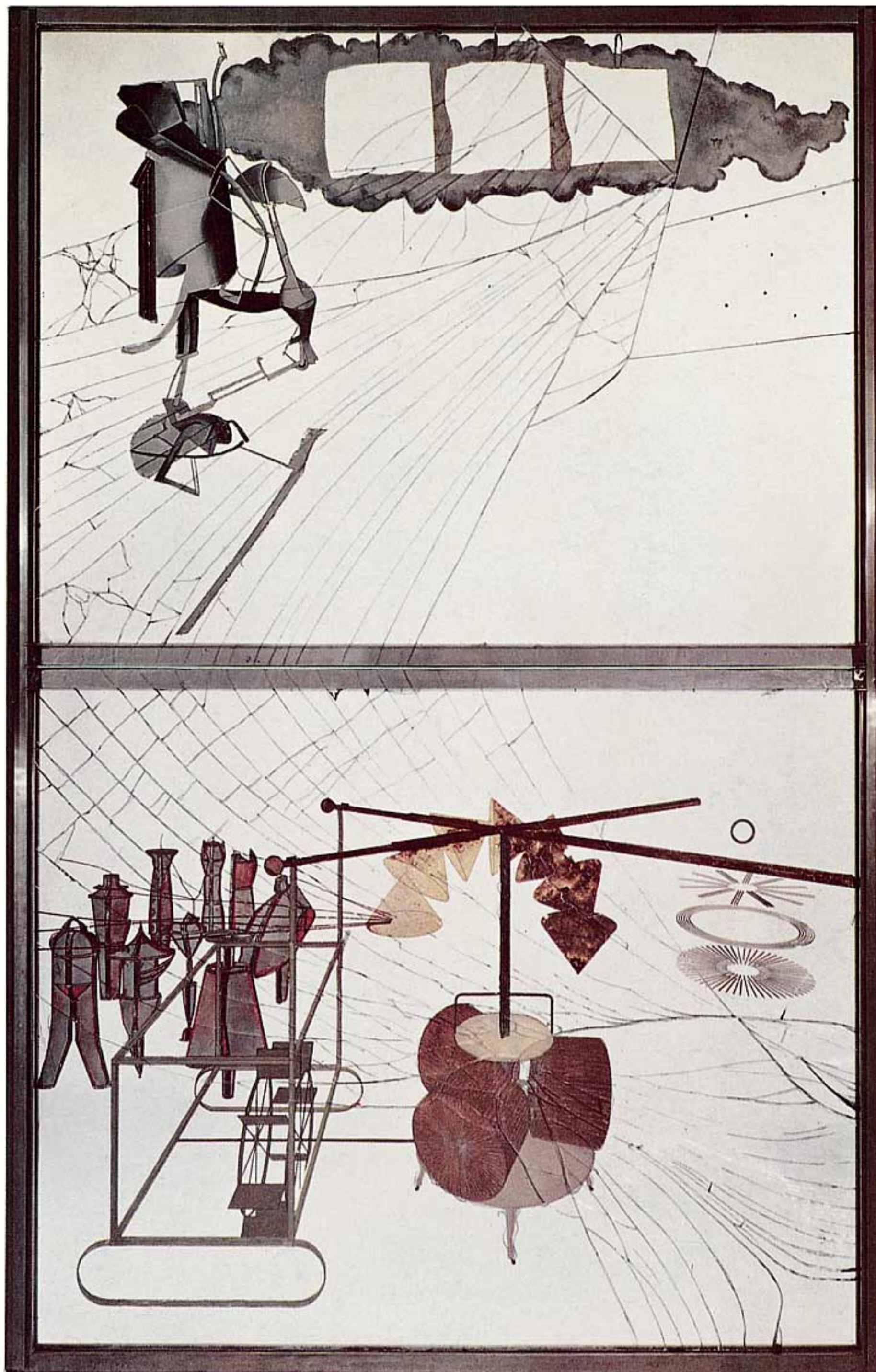
Large Glass

1915–23

World War I may have provided emotional inspiration for Surrealism and Dada, but a key intellectual father of both movements was Marcel Duchamp. He helped discover the technique of composition "by chance" in 1913, while working as a librarian at Paris's Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève. He used the random act of dropping three pieces of thread onto a canvas to "capture" an expressive composition. Duchamp titled the work *3 stoppages étalon* (3 Standard Stoppages), and it led to a series of similar experiments. The most famous of these was *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*Le Grand Verre*), or *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (*Large Glass*) (1915–25).

According to Duchamp, *Large Glass* was inspired "without an idea. There were things that came along as I worked. The idea of the ensemble was purely and simply the execution ..." The basic composition evolved "organically" through experimental sketches. To produce the final artwork, however, Duchamp laboriously transferred the sketches onto the glass with such materials as metal foil and wire. This combination of random ideas and painstaking execution would directly inspire the highly detailed Surrealist fantasies of Salvador Dalí and Yves Tanguy. Even Duchamp's title resulted from a process of random composition. "Words interested me," he said, "and the bringing together of words to which I added a comma and *même*, an adverb that makes no sense ... This 'antisense' interested me a lot on the poetic level ..." The title also has humorously erotic connotations, drawing attention to the "feminine," cloudlike form dominating the spindly "masculine" suitors below.

As with much of Duchamp's work, *Large Glass* consciously avoids straightforward interpretation, inviting viewers to draw their own conclusions about the work. The open-ended, poetic nature of this art would be adopted by André Breton and the Surrealists, who were as well known for their poetry as for their paintings. The image's sexual undertones would also influence the Surrealist era and its exploration of human desire.



Marcel Duchamp, **Large Glass**, 1915–23,
oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels,
109.2 x 69.2 in (277.5 x 176 cm)
Philadelphia Museum of Art

3

RENÉ CLAIR/FRANCIS PICABIA

Entr'acte

1924

When the film industry began around 1900, audiences were astonished by the new medium. The sight of a "bloody" gun battle or a train appearing to move at full speed toward the screen elicited feelings of fear, excitement, and disorientation. By the 1920s, however, people had grown accustomed to such optical tricks. Moreover, film studios were establishing the commercial, plot-driven movie types that would become standard fare for the industry. Yet the twenties also saw visual artists take up the camera and create their own works. Many were looking for new ways of using film technology to excite and arouse viewers.

In 1924, the year Surrealism was born, artist Francis Picabia and composer Eric Satie created a Dadaist ballet entitled *Relâche*. Like much Dada art, their piece ridiculed the pretensions of Western high culture. *Relâche* was structured as a series of absurd moments in which elegantly dressed characters performed "acts" similar to those found in music hall variety shows. Picabia's set featured a giant arch of "round metal reflectors" and "flashing electric lights."

The humorously "low-brow" nature of *Relâche* was further enhanced by two remarkable *entr'actes*, or intermission performances. Instead of viewing live performers on stage, the audience was treated to two separate films. Both movies had been directed by a young acquaintance of Picabia's named René Clair. The first film, a short piece played after the overture, starred Picabia and Satie as "actors" firing off a cannon. The main film was then played after the ballet's first act. It featured a series of events as incongruous as the opera itself—floating eggs that transformed into birds, Marcel Duchamp playing chess on a rooftop, and a carnival-like funeral procession with live camels. Clair experimented with the latest "tricks" of film technology. Characters were shown traveling backward and in slow motion, actors were shot from angles that intentionally obscured their faces and actions, and inanimate objects were made to move on their own. The resulting film was a kaleidoscope of energy and movement, more like a musical composition than a plot-driven movie. Satie even wrote music to accompany the main film, making *Entr'acte* one of the first movies to have a "synchronized" score. *Entr'acte* would also inspire the provocative imagery and unconventional structure of later Surrealist film.

René Clair/Francis Picabia, **Entr'acte**, 1924,
film

4

JOAN MIRÓ

Harlequin's Carnival

1924–25

"I painted this in my studio in the rue Blomet. That was when I was friends with the Surrealists. I was hungry and I was trying to capture the hallucinations caused by my hunger. I wasn't painting things in my dreams like Breton and his followers said you should. It was simply that hunger that sent me into a sort of Oriental trance. That was when I made preliminary sketches of the general layout of the painting so that I'd know just where everything was going to go. Then, after having thought about it for a long time, I started painting and making changes as I went along."
(Joan Miró, 1978)

When Joan Miró painted his famous *Harlequin's Carnival*, his art was undergoing an important transformation. The painter's own description of his working method at the time, which he later shared in a radio interview, reveals an artist still working in traditional ways, especially in his careful use of preparatory studies and predetermined compositions. Yet *Harlequin's Carnival* also shows Miró combining highly symbolic, surreal elements in complex ways. "I was trying to capture the magic side of things," he said. So he represented the earth as a black circle, the Eiffel Tower as a black triangle, and the cats and insects from his Paris apartment as globular, primeval shapes. All of these characters appear suspended together in a kind of dance, a musical image that even includes musical notation floating in mid-air.

As Miró's career progressed, his work would become even more spontaneous and his compositions less crowded. But *Harlequin's Carnival* remained a source of pride to him for most of his life. It even inspired a Surrealist poem in 1939, where Miró writes of the image's "ball of yarn unraveled by cats dressed up as smoky harlequins twisting around inside me and stabbing my gut ... beautiful bloomings of fish in a poppy field marked down on a snow-white page shuddering like a bird's throat against the sex of a woman in the form of a spider with aluminum legs ... the revolting drama of reality guitar music shooting stars crossing blue space to pin themselves on the body of my fog that goes around in a luminous circle before diving into the phosphorescent Ocean."

Joan Miró, **Harlequin's Carnival**, 1924–25,
oil on canvas, 26 x 35.6 in (66 x 90.5 cm)
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York

5

JEAN ARP

Danseuse

1925

As with many modern art movements, Surrealism often blurred the distinction between one medium and another. During the early part of his career, Jean Arp created Surrealist works that melded the techniques of painting, sculpture, and collage. One of his most effective early images is *Danseuse* (Dancer). In it, he uses oil paint and cut-and-pasted wood to create an effect that resembles a children's puzzle—a sculptural painting that is also a painterly sculpture. Arp's figure, with its elephantine head, oversize breasts, and thin, watery legs, captures the joyous, primitive spirit of the dancer.

Jean Arp's work was often far more abstract in appearance than that of other Surrealists. During the early 1930s, in fact, Arp would abandon the Surrealist movement and focus on abstraction more directly. Yet pieces like *Danseuse* reflected Surrealism's interest in composition by "chance," or the random combination of forms and colors. Arp's friend German artist Hans Richter wrote that Arp discovered this technique during his earlier Dada period, when he tore up a drawing that dissatisfied him and "let the pieces flutter on the floor of his studio ... Some time later he happened to notice these same scraps of paper as they lay on the floor, and was struck by the pattern they formed. It had all the expressive power that he had tried in vain to achieve.... Chance movements of his hand and of the fluttering scraps of paper had achieved what all his efforts had failed to achieve, namely expression."

Surrealist founder André Breton would soon refer to this kind of "chance" technique as "automatic" composition. By letting a work of art evolve "on its own," without the self-conscious guiding hand of the artist, the work could better express the artist's inner, subconscious feelings. Surrealism would thus become the first major art movement to incorporate ideas from Freudian psychoanalysis.

Jean Arp, **Danseuse**, 1925,
oil on wood collage, 58.6 x 44 in (149 x 112 cm)
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

6

ANDRÉ MASSON

Délire Végétal

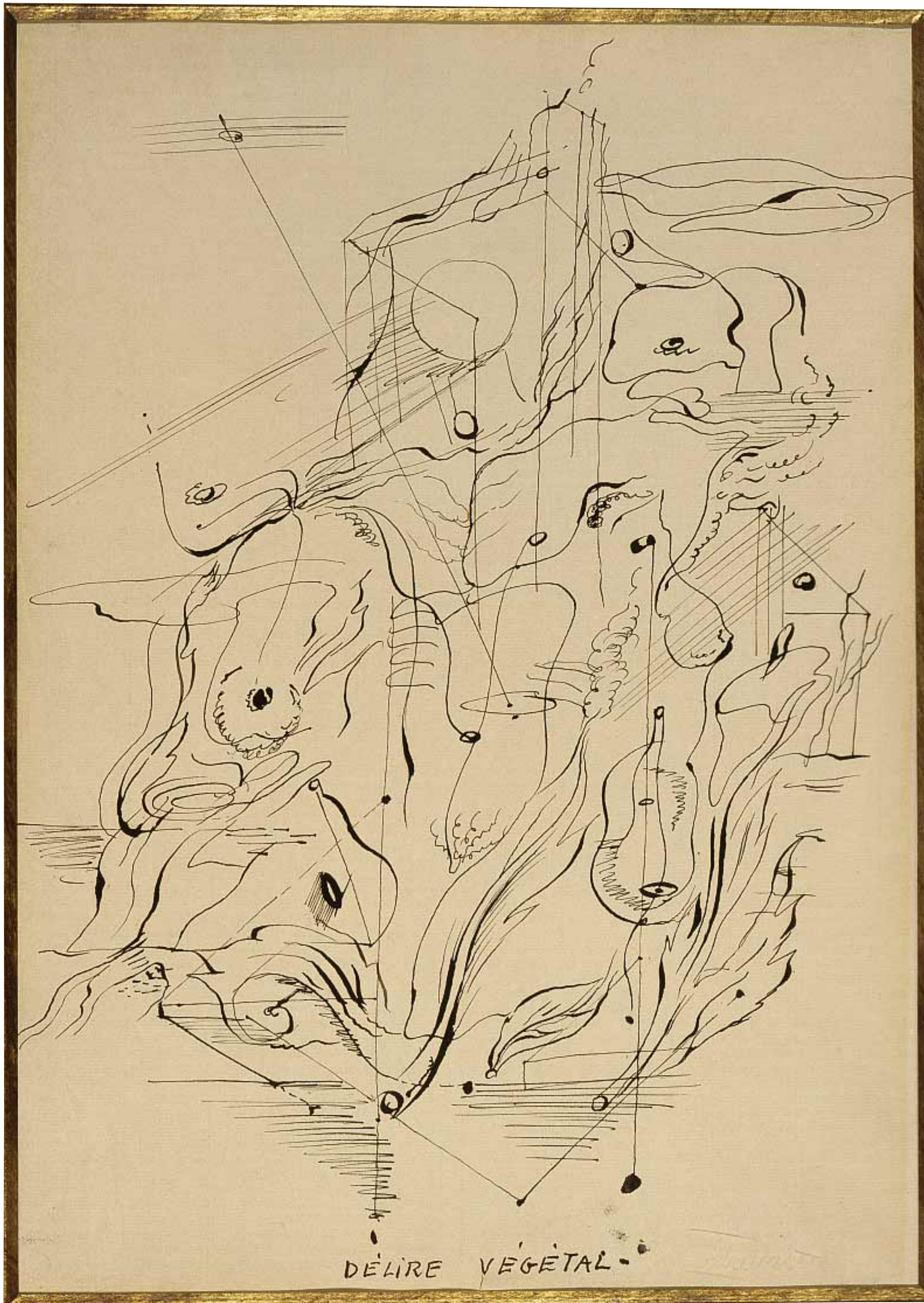
ca. 1925

"Indeed, the essential discovery of Surrealism is that, without preconceived intention, the pen that flows in order to write and the pencil that runs in order to draw spin an infinitely precious substance that ... appears charged with all the emotional intensity stored up within the poet or painter at a given moment." (André Breton, 1928)

When Surrealism began in 1924 it was primarily a literary movement. André Breton and his followers sought to create verse and prose that "flowed" from the pen organically, capturing the writer's momentary, transient inner thoughts. They considered such thoughts to be a kind of window into the psyche. At the same time, a few Surrealist artists were also looking for ways of using compulsive actions to explore inner worlds. It was André Masson, with his spontaneous line drawings, who developed Surrealism's first "automatic" visual art.

The title of this particular drawing, *Délire Végétal* (Vegetal Delirium), embodies the general spirit of Masson's work. The artist's curving pen strokes suggest a mass of swirling leaves, seeds, and vegetable forms. Masson also incorporates random angles and broken, cubic shapes to heighten the work's mazelike appearance. Such studies were designed as an alternative to the static, three-dimensional illusions of traditional art. In this sense, they resemble the earlier work of the Cubists, in which figures and objects were broken down into geometric shapes. But unlike much Cubist imagery, which was often preplannned, Masson's spatial jungles took shape during the act of creation.

Délire Végétal also captures Surrealism's fascination with time. In *The Persistence of Memory* by Salvador Dalí, the Spanish artist uses melting clocks to embody the notion of time as ambiguous. Masson's drawings achieve a similar effect. They represent the artist's thoughts and feelings at a particular moment in time. But their twisted lines and forms—their "infinitely precious substance"—reveal that moment to be indefinite and elastic.



André Masson, **Délire Végétal**, ca. 1925,
ink on paper, 16.7 x 12 in (42.5 x 30.5 cm), private collection

7

ANDRÉ KERTÉSZ

Distortion, No. 51

1925

“The studio was arranged with two large circus mirrors that were quite beautiful in themselves. Originally, there were two women for contrast—the young and the old—then I settled on one. She was a society girl in Paris, a White Russian. The older model was a cabaret dancer.

I photographed the young woman over a period of four weeks, usually twice a week. I would develop glass plates and make prints for myself. When I showed them to the model, she told me she was quite sure that it was not her in all the photographs.” (André Kertész, 1983)

Like his countryman and contemporary George Brassaï, the Hungarian photographer André Kertész captured Surrealist shapes and evocative moods in Paris’s city streets. In 1933, he was approached by the risqué leftist magazine *Le Sourire* (The Smile) to create a series of “artistic” nude portraits. Using warped “circus mirrors,” he created about 200 variations with his model Najinskaya Verackhatz, of which twelve were published in 1933. These images transformed Verackhatz’s limbs and torso into elongated shapes. Parisian Surrealists quickly acclaimed Kertész’s photos as exemplary products of the “automatic” technique—in which the final work of art was revealed only during the process of creation. Moreover, the elastic shapes seen in these works are reminiscent of figures in Surrealist paintings, especially those by Yves Tanguy and Salvador Dalí.

In the example shown here, *Distortion No. 51,* the circus mirror effects seem to intensify the image’s erotic content. Kertész’s model is seated in a rather restrained, sterile pose. But the mirror transforms her right leg and the paneling behind into a sexually charged, curving shape, something like an inverted uterus. Kertész also captures a sense of fear and desperation in the image, turning Verackhatz’s placid facial expression into a primal scream. This combination of eroticism and psychological anxiety would become more prevalent in Surrealist art as the 1930s progressed, and as the forces of Fascism gradually repressed Europe’s creative art world. Ultimately, the horrific side of Kertész’s imagery would prophesy the warped, mutilated bodies of concentration camp victims in World War II.

André Kertész, **Distortion, No. 51**, 1925,
gelatin silver print, 3.7 x 2.7 in (9.6 x 6.9 cm)
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris