

# RISD MUSEUM

*Art of the Unconscious: Surrealist Works from the Museum's Collection*,  
June 22, 2001-September 16, 2001

*Perhaps the imagination is on the verge of recovering its rights. If the depths of our minds conceal strange forces capable of augmenting or conquering those on the surface, it is in our greatest interest to capture them.*

With these words, taken from the *First Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924, the French poet and thinker Andre Breton helped launch an artistic revolution. Driven by an unshakable belief in the power of the unconscious, as defined by Sigmund Freud, the Surrealists set out to plumb the hidden recesses of the mind. Their ultimate goal was freedom from an over-civilized society with its rationality and logic, which they believed to be responsible for the exploitation of the masses and the carnage of World War I. Borrowing from the imagery of children, the insane, and preliterate societies, as well as the dream, Surrealists envisioned an alternate reality in which fantasy and magic penetrated into and coexisted with the everyday world.

In the hope of inciting a worldwide intellectual revolution, the Surrealists spread their message internationally. The movement served as an important stage for artistic interchange among modernists. Many European and North American Surrealists (e.g., Breton, Louis Aragon, Antonin Artaud, Luis Buiuel, Leonora Carrington, Gordon Onslow Ford, and Kurt Seligmann) spent considerable amounts of time in Latin America, which Breton described as "naturally surrealist." Others, such as Henry Moore and Max Ernst, projected a romanticizing, mythic power onto Latin American landscapes and cultural expressions, particularly Hispanic folk art and pre-Columbian sculpture and architecture. From their Eurocentric perspective, the region perfectly embodied the contradictions of the human mind. Its European colonial heritage represented the order, rationality, and normalcy they so reviled, and its indigenous cultures the precivilized realm of the unconscious.

Several of their Latin American contemporaries - Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Wifredo Lam, Roberto Matta, Carlos Merida, and Roberto Opazo - found in Surrealism an approach that matched their own identities and artistic interests. Some of them, such as Matta, took advantage of the movement's claims of universality to create artwork that transcended cultural stereotypes. Others, Lam among them, used Surrealism to address the political situations of their particular nations or ethnicities. Their work shows the crucial participation of Latin American artists in 20th-century artistic currents, which include important contributions to the development of many different art forms, such as performance, conceptual art, and geometric abstraction.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Carlos Mérida, Guatemalan, 1891-1985  
*The Race*, 1932  
Watercolor over graphite on paper  
Anonymous gift 81.178



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Hans Arp, French, 1886-1966

*Idol*, 1961

Woodcut

Collectors' Acquisition Fund 69.037

Jean Eugène Auguste Atget, French, 1857-1927

*Boulevard de Strasbourg*, mid 1800s-early 1900s

Museum Works of Art Fund 70.009.3

Atget's photographs were much admired by the Surrealists, particularly his images of the uncanny displays of ordinary goods in shop windows. Man Ray was instrumental in publishing four of Atget's photographs in the periodical *La Revolution surrealiste*.



Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Mexican, 1902-2002

*Optic Parable (Parábola Óptica)*, 1931

Gelatin silver print

Nancy Sayles Day Collection of Modern Latin American Art 79.032



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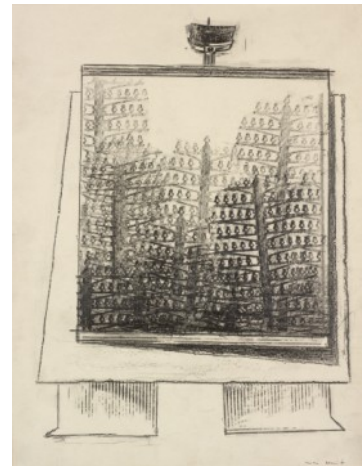
Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Mexican, 1902-2002  
*The Good Reputation Sleeping (La Buena Fama Durmiendo)*, 1938  
Gelatin silver print  
Nancy Sayles Day Collection of Modern Latin American Art 79.029



Max Ernst, German, 1891-1976  
*Untitled*, 1900s  
Frottage (graphite rubbing)  
Gift of Mme. Helena Rubinstein 54.123

Ernst described his discovery of the *frottage* technique in a 1937 article, "Beyond Painting," written for an issue of *Cahiers d'art* devoted to his work.

*...finding myself on a rainy day in an inn by the seacoast, I was struck by the obsession exerted upon my excited gaze by the floor...! took a series of drawings from the floorboards by covering them at random with sheets of paper which I rubbed with a soft pencil. When gazing attentively at these drawings, I was surprised at the sudden intensification of my visionary faculties and at the hallucinatory succession of contradictory images being superimposed on each other...As my curiosity was now awakened and amazed, I began to explore indiscriminately, by the same methods, all kinds of material - whatever happened to be in my visual range...*



He goes on to discuss how this process is the "true equivalent of that which was already known as automatic writing." The imagery in the RISD *frottage* is related to that on the frontispiece of the book illustrated by Ernst, *Misfortunes of the Immortals*.

Max Ernst, German, 1891-1976  
Paul Eluard, French  
Black Sun Press  
Gemor Press  
*MISFORTUNES OF THE IMMORTALS*, 1943  
Wove paper  
Museum Collection 71.085

The text for *Misfortunes of the Immortals* was a collaborative effort between Ernst and Surrealist poet Paul Éluard. In response to the

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pictures, each author conceived sentence fragments, which they then traded and fused together randomly through correspondence. The result of this chance method was a series of verbal collages that perfectly matched the irrational hodgepodge of the images. For example, one "sentence" reads, "You will be astonished to find once more the splendor of your mirrors in the claws of eagles."

Wifredo Lam, Cuban, 1902-1982

*The Eternal Presence (An Homage to Alejandro García Caturla)*, 1944  
Oil and pastel over papier mâché and chalk ground on bast fiber fabric

Nancy Sayles Day Collection of Modern Latin American Art 66.154

Wifredo Lam left Cuba in 1923 and eventually settled in Paris, where he became friends with members of the Surrealist group. Fleeing World War II, he returned to the Caribbean in 1941 with several of them. The shocking poverty of Cuban blacks prompted Lam to fuse European Surrealism with Afro-Cuban cultural traditions in an art that encompasses social protest.

Lam borrowed from Santería, a complex blend of African and European religious lore and ritual with which he was well acquainted through his godmother, a Santería priestess. In paintings such as *Le Présent éternel* and *Près de Îles Vierges*, Lam uses the mythic jungle that stands for the spiritual plane in Santería to create his Surrealist vision of the unconscious and to comment on various issues. This jungle is inhabited by a variety of African deities, such as the horned trickster god near the upper left-hand corner of *Près de Îles Vierges*, and Shangô, the god of thunder, who is represented as a lightning bolt in the upper right-hand corner of *Le Présent éternel*. The part-horse, part-human figures wearing flamboyant hats refer simultaneously to forced prostitution among poor mulatto women and the spiritual possessions that sometimes occur during Santero ceremonies. Such human/animal hybrids also appear in more typical Surrealist imagery, as in Masson's *Un Chevalier*. Lam presented revolutionary themes using the aesthetic language of the cultural elite. In his own words, he hoped to "spew forth hallucinatory figures with the power to . . . disturb the dreams of the exploiters."



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Wifredo Lam, Cuban, 1902-1982

*Near the Virgin Islands (Près des Îles Vierges)*, 1959

Oil, charcoal and pastel on canvas

Nancy Sayles Day Collection of Modern Latin American Art 69.054



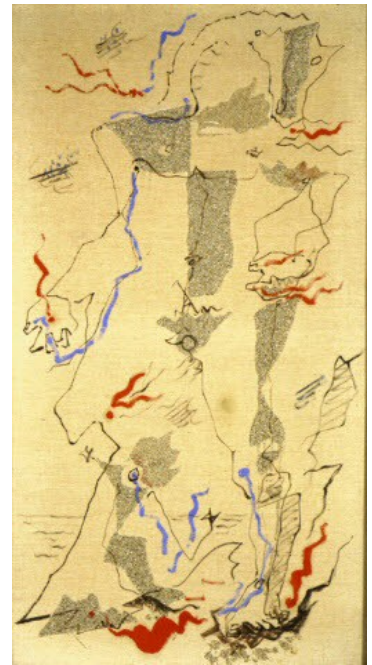
André Masson, French, 1896-1987

*Un Chevalier*, ca. 1926-1927

Oil and sand on canvas

Gift of the Bayard and Harriet K. Ewing Collection 1991.100

This painting is a prime example of work produced through the Surrealist technique known as automatic drawing or writing. Derived from Freudian theories of the unconscious and free association, automatism involves the creation of texts or images without any preconceived idea and without any "conscious" control over the outcome. The assumption is that such an approach allows for the direct recording of deep-seated unconscious knowledge and imagery. The influence that automatism would later exert is incalculable. Even before the Surrealist wave had abated, the Abstract Expressionists had pushed further toward the same goal of derationalizing the artistic process.



Roberto Matta, Chilean, 1911-2002; d. 2002

*Composition*, 1961-62

Oil on canvas

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Kern 2001.8

Matta uses automatic drawing as a means to visualize the darkest and most anxious recesses of the mind. The artist represents psychological realities as frenetic explosions of cosmic energies, set amid dizzying, many-layered spaces. Matta played a major role



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among the Surrealists, whom he joined in Paris in 1936. The Nazi threat caused the artist to relocate to New York in 1939. Matta visited Mexico in 1941 and was strongly affected by the landscape, which he likened to an infinite, primeval, and threatening inner universe, much like the worlds he created in his pictures. The artist made a lasting impression on a younger generation of artists there, including Gunther Gerzso and Rodolfo Opazo.

Hans Arp, French, 1886-1966  
*Configuration*, 1926  
Painted wood  
Gift of Mrs. George H. Warren, Jr. 66.356



Roberto Matta, Chilean, 1911-2002  
*Abstraction*, ca. 1948  
Oil and charcoal  
Gift of Mrs. Peggy Guggenheim 54.189



Matta uses automatic drawing as a means to visualize the darkest and most anxious recesses of the mind. The artist represents psychological realities as frenetic explosions of cosmic energies, set amid dizzying, many-layered spaces. Matta played a major role among the Surrealists, whom he joined in Paris in 1936. The Nazi threat caused the artist to relocate to New York in 1939. Matta visited Mexico in 1941 and was strongly affected by the landscape, which he likened to an infinite, primeval, and threatening inner universe, much like the worlds he created in his pictures. The artist made a lasting impression on a younger generation of artists there, including Gunther Gerzso and Rodolfo Opazo.

Kurt Seligmann, Swiss, 1900-1962  
*Fantastic Composition*, 1941  
Oil on glass  
Gift of the Bayard and Harriet K. Ewing Collection 67.091

Joan Miró, Spanish, 1893-1983  
*Dog Barking at the Moon*, 1928  
Charcoal on paper  
Gift of Mrs. George Henry Warren, Jr. 56.056



Joan Miró, Spanish, 1893-1983  
*Composition*, 1900s  
Color etching  
Museum purchase: gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 49.476



As opposed to the playfulness of Miró's drawing *Dog Barking at the Moon*, 1928, his works of a decade later, including the prints from the "Black and Red Series," are filled with disturbing imagery reflecting the artist's distress about the Spanish Civil War. This etching was printed from two plates. The plate printed in black bears signs/images, while the plate printed in red holds frenetic figures in a rural landscape. One writer has suggested that the three figures may represent a family (Miró and his wife had one child in 1938) and the fierce head might represent evil forces at work in Spain. It is possible that the red and black themselves have political significance, as they were the colors of the anarchist movement in Miró's native Barcelona.

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Joan Miró, Spanish, 1893-1983  
*Untitled*, 1947  
Color etching on paper; plate  
Gift of the Fazzano Brothers 1997.58.1



Henry Moore, British, 1898-1986  
*Working Model for Upright Internal/External Form*, 1951  
Bronze  
Mary B. Jackson Fund 52.082



Rodolfo Opazo, Chilean, b. 1935  
*Agamemnon!!! Donde estás padre mio?*, 1967  
Oil paint  
Nancy Sayles Day Collection of Modern Latin American Art 68.023

It is difficult to estimate the influence of Surrealism in Latin America throughout the 1950s and 60s. Many younger artists such as Opazo looked to Lam and particularly to Matta as masters of a mode of expression that combined international avant-garde art with the option of addressing artists' immediate political, sociological, and cultural concerns. Opazo's eerie painting evokes the kind of blind search through the psyche that the Surrealists insisted was necessary for social revolution. The title recalls Freudian psychoanalysis in its reference to Greek mythology and especially to the search for the lost father figure. This symbolic quest takes on an especially poignant significance given the heated political situation in Chile around the time the painting was executed, an intense power struggle between



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leftists and rightists. The strife would eventually culminate in the overthrow of the Allende government in 1973 and the rise of the repressive Pinochet dictatorship.

Pablo Picasso, Spanish, 1881-1973  
*Sueno y Mentira de Franco*, 1937  
Etching; aquatint  
Museum Works of Art Fund 58.033.2

Although Picasso was never an official member of the Surrealist group, he was a good friend of Breton, whom he met in 1923, as well as many other Surrealist poets and artists. The Surrealists' use of distorted biomorphic forms provided the stylistic format for some of Picasso's most politically charged efforts, culminating in the 1937 painting of the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). These prints are related to his *Guernica*.

*The Dream and Lie of Franco* is a narrative in comic-strip format (it reads from right to left because the printmaking process reverses the original image). It depicts the fascist general (later dictator) Francisco Franco as a bundle of grotesque protuberances performing horrific acts, among them the destruction of Spain's artistic heritage, the terrorizing of its peasants, and the murder of its women and children. The prints are accompanied by a poem written by Picasso, which is most closely reflected in the last four images in the set. The two etchings and the poem were published to raise money for the Republican cause. In addition, the eighteen panels of the series were designed as postcards to be sold at the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 Paris World's Fair, where *Guernica* was first exhibited.

Pablo Picasso, Spanish, 1881-1973  
*Untitled, Sueno y Mentira de Franco* 1937  
Etching; aquatint  
Museum Works of Art Fund 58.033.1



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Jackson Pollock, American, 1912-1956

*Untitled*, 1939-1940

Pencil on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Erwin Strasmich in memory of Ida Malloy

1991.023

Throughout the 1930s and 40s, key members of the European avant-garde fled their war-ravaged countries. Many of them, including Matta, Lam, Masson, Ernst, and Seligmann, passed through New York City, where they made a lasting impact on the group of artists who came to be known as the Abstract Expressionists. For Pollock, firsthand contact with the Surrealists was crucial in reinforcing the linkage of his experimental art with the concept of the unconscious.

In 1938, Pollock began to undergo prolonged psychiatric counseling. This drawing is a particularly developed example of images that Pollock created and discussed as part of the therapeutic process. The drawing refers to the theories of Carl Jung, who viewed the unconscious as a vast reservoir of collective meaning that manifested itself as universal myths and symbols, such as the mandala forms that surround the figure on the horse. These strange emblems were inspired in part by occult mysticism and the imagery of Native American religions, which were also typical sources for Surrealist production.

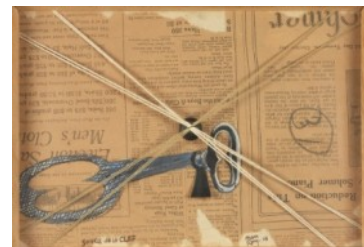


Man Ray, American, 1890-1976

*Songe de la Clef*, 1941

String (fiber product); rubber; paper; watercolor; crayon

Gift of Mrs. John G. Dean 71.056



Man Ray, American, 1890-1976

Jean Cocteau, 1889-1963

*L'Ange Heurtebise*, 1925

Photogravure

Fanny and Julius Bloom Photography Fund with additional funds donated by the friends of Aaron Siskind 1995.034

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Man Ray saw the camera as a tool for revealing the imagination rather than for recording facts. Shortly after he moved from New York to Paris in 1921, he happened upon a technique for producing photographs without a camera, which he named "rayographs." Commonly called photograms, they are made by placing objects on photosensitized paper and exposing the paper to light before normal developing. The Surrealists considered these shadowy recordings of chance encounters of objects and light akin to automatic writing.

Roberto Matta, Chilean, 1911-2002; d. 2002

*The Remainer*, 1945

Oil on canvas

Nancy Sayles Day Collection of Modern Latin American Art 66.159

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