

Australian Surrealism Education Pack

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Surrealism emerges in Europe

Surrealism as an art movement grew from the ideas, events and artwork associated with an organised group of artists and writers who gathered around Andre Breton in Paris in 1924. This group became known as Surrealists and the movement known as Surrealism.

The term 'Surrealism' can be traced to the French poet Apollinaire. He chose as a subtitle for his play *Les Mamelles de Tiesias*, the term *drame surrealiste* in preference to the usual word *surnaturaliste*.

This group was united in the belief that the world of dreams and fantasy mattered more than anything else in making art. Dreams were associated with irrational things and events. To be irrational or ct irrationally meant relying on inspiration rather than rules. In this process the imagination was given complete freedom to explore as intuition suggested. A large body of Surrealist writing and theory supported the Surrealists.

Dada

The Surrealist movement emerged during the turbulent years, which followed the First World War (1914-18). During the war many young artists began to express their anger and disillusionment about the war and its violence. A movement with the nonsensical name of 'Dada' anticipated the Surrealist movement.

Dada was formed in 1916 in Zurich Switzerland by French and German youths who had escaped army service in neutral Switzerland. The Dadaists were opposed to authority, to conventions and traditions, and above all to any pretentious or boring art. When they met together at the music hall, the Cabaret Voltaire, they performed spontaneous, absurd dramas and cabaret acts and recited nonsense poems. The exhibitions they held showed work by revolutionary painters of many art movements including Giorgio De Chirico, Max Ernst, Wasily Kandinsky, Francis Picabia, Kokoshcka, Franz Marc and Pablo Picasso. Dadaism spread across Europe at the end of the war. In Berlin Dada grew from the activities of galleries and the journal *Der Sturm*, which had been launched before e the war by the German Expressionists. The Berlin group promoted the huge international Dada exhibition of 1920, the largest yet shown. Dada in its late stages as a movement was characterised by public demonstrations, violent arguments and riots.

The Surrealists

The artists and writers who gathered around Andre Breton (known as the 'Pope of Surrealism') in Paris in 1924 were different in many ways to the Dadaists. The group had a strong identity and it held closely to the ideas and personality of Breton. Breton in turn developed many of his ideas from his interpretation of Freud's ideas and work. Sigmund Freud elaborated the idea that the mind is a complex energy-system and that psychology's business was to explore and map this domain. His innovative treatment of human actions, dreams and cultural artefacts as possessing implicit symbolic significance was well known to the Surrealists as was his published material particularly *The Interpretation of Dreams* (pub. 1900). He had studied with Freud, had worked as a military psychiatrist. Breton had made a study of his own dreams and experimented with automatic writing as early as 1920. He worked with the artist Max Ernst on experiments in automatism. His theories on methods of inducing hallucinations by exciting the senses were probably responsible for Ernst's method of frottage (taking rubbings on paper from surfaces).

Members of the group wrote extensively. Much of the theoretical writing was concerned with experiments and studies of methods, some linked to psychology. They were interested in ways of stimulating the human mind to produce fantastical and dreamlike images. Another influential idea came from some contemporary studies into the nature of intelligence, which decided that sensation, and therefore physical reality was actually a hallucination. In the Surrealist's worldview new concept of humanity was emerging, one that was measured more by the psychology of the mind that physical structure. In this worldview art was a means to an end a way of 'tracing' or giving visibility to the subconscious mind. During the 1930s Surrealism dominated poetry and painting in Europe and had a significant influence on many major artists. A second manifesto was issued in 1929 and many large exhibitions were arranged in major cities across the world.

Breton's manifesto of 1924 united the artists and writers under the banner of Sigmund Freud. The artists who first came together to exhibit included Joan Miro, Andre Masson, Man Ray and Pierre Roy. The Galerie Surrealiste opened in 1925 and presented works by Man Ray alongside Oceanic sculpture from Breton's collection.

Artists

The artists attracted to Surrealism came from many different backgrounds. But most of them shared a tendency from their earliest work, towards fantasy. The checklist of artists include; Joan Miro, Andre Masson, Yves Tanguy, Man Ray, Giorgio De Chirico and Salvator Dali.

Joan Miro worked in a number of different styles (Fauvism and Cubism) before fixing on Surrealism

Style

There was no single style. Surrealist works can have a realistic though irrational style, usually describing dream like fantasies as in the work of Rene Magritte (Belgian 1898-1967), Salvador Dali (Spanish 1904-1988) and Yves Tanguy (French 1900-1955). These artists were partly influenced by Symbolism and partly by the Metaphysical painting of Giorgio de Chirico (Italian 1988-1978). It could have a more abstract style as in the work of Joan Miro (Spanish 1893-1983) Max Ernst (German 1891-1976) and Andre Masson (French 1896-1987).

Automatism

This term had special meaning when applied to the Surrealists' method of creating written works, particularly poetry by using 'automatic writing'. Using this method meant letting go of conscious control and allowing subconscious thought to rise to the surface. The Surrealist artists used similar methods to generate images. The works produced were called 'automatic drawings'. Breton created a term 'pure psychic automatism' to describe this total process.