

What Is Surrealism and Why Is It Important?



“...beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.”

-Comte de Lautréamont

No one has ambiguous feelings about a Dali. When confronted by his work, viewers are either delighted or reject it outright, but in either case the person in question would likely have a difficult time explaining why they had such a reaction. And this is the whole point of Dali's work. Indeed, it is the purpose of surrealism—the dredging up of difficult to articulate feelings, thoughts, or sensations.

Does that seem like a rather vague definition? Don't worry, it is. But for us to make more sense of it, we'll have to first delve into the history of surrealist art.

The History of Surrealism

Perhaps the earliest forerunner of surrealism was Hieronymus Bosch, whose elaborately bizarre works featured fantastic creatures and landscapes. This, however,

A century later, Giuseppe Arcimboldo brought art closer to genuine surrealism with his weird portraits that showed the human form comprised of fruit, vegetables, and various animals. While not quite surrealist as we understand it today, for the 16th century this was just about as surreal as art could get. There was no real “reason” for his unusual painting style besides entertainment; no “meaning” behind it. But while a lack of inherent meaning is one aspect of surrealism, entertainment is not what the movement is all about.



"Vertumnus" by Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1590–1591)

Authentic surrealism emerged—like its strange cousin abstract expressionism—in the aftermath of the First World War. **Artists had two main goals: to cope with the horrors of war by examining the human unconscious, and to liberate the individual from systems they blamed for starting the war in the first place.**

So with the intention of not only shaking up society, but reinventing it entirely, artists got weird.

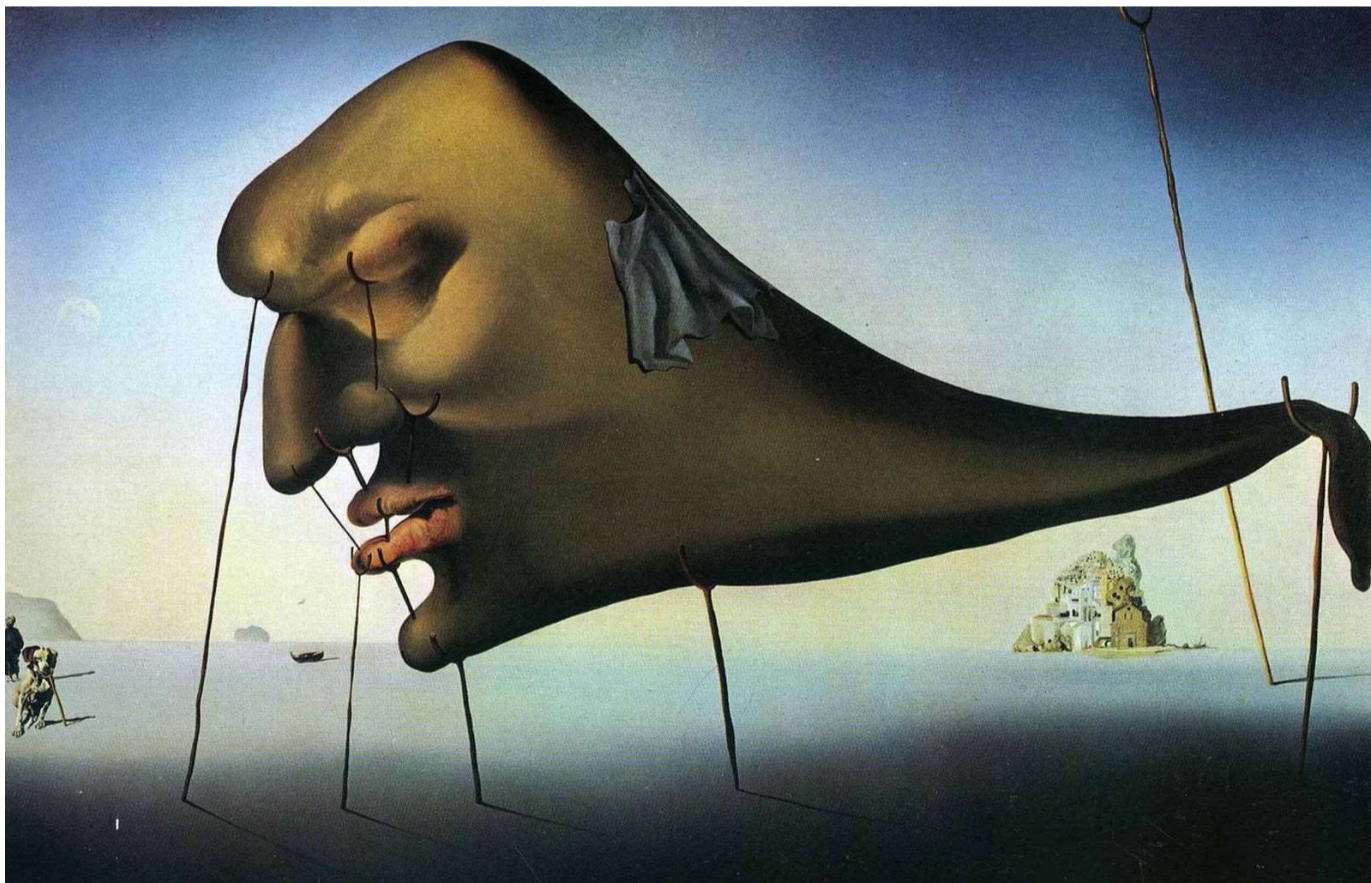
The Inter-War Surrealist Movement

would provide some clue to the motivations of humanity, and would break us out of the accepted, external social structures that had so obviously failed.

The first use of the word surrealism came from the French poet and playwright Guillaume Apollinaire, who used the term to describe Jean Cocteau's ballet *Parade* as well as his own play *The Breasts of Tiresias*. This was followed by Andre Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*, which defined surrealist art as "psychic automatism in its pure state...dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern."

If you're unfamiliar with **automatism**, it's any action that is performed unconsciously. Originally a legal term to describe those who had committed crimes without being aware of what they were doing, artists applied the word to a variety of techniques used to channel the unconscious. These included the transcription of dreams, recording trance states, stream of consciousness writing, automatic drawing, and so on.

One of the most famous of these methods came from Salvador Dalí, who was interested in capturing the experience of the instant between falling asleep and waking up, or vice versa. To achieve this, he would sit in a chair with a key held atop his palm, which in turn was positioned above a metal plate. The moment he fell asleep, the key would fall and strike the plate, waking him. And then he would paint.



"El Sueño" by Dalí (1937)

Dalí claimed that surrealism was best achieved through what he called the Paranoiac Critical method, which he described thusly: a "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectivity of the associations and interpretations of delirious phenomena." Does that make sense? Maybe not. But I interpret this as "go crazy and paint what happens."

The Surrealist movement began to shift with the onset of World War Two, when European artists were forced to flee to the United States where their art began to take on a definite meaning in relation to the conflict. At this point it began to lean toward becoming conceptual art as circumstances pressed artists to look beyond interiors to address the looming social catastrophes. Surrealism is inherently absent

As a concrete movement, Surrealism ended definitively after the war when it was adopted by advertising. But it persisted as a disorganized art form ever since.

The Impact of Surrealism

At its core, Surrealism was a radical, revolutionary movement that intended to shake things up on both individual and societal levels. While the loosely organized Surrealist movement might have faded away, artists have continued to use surreal art for revolutionary means ever since.

Surrealism provides the opportunity to escape external structures to peer into unconscious interiors and explore what's hidden there.

The Free Jazz of the 1960s and the New Left and Situationist social movements of the same decade, the writings of the Beats (perhaps most notably the cut-up technique leveraged by William S. Burroughs), a vast number of wide-ranging musical groups that have composed surreal audio landscapes ever since the 1970s (along with surrealist music videos that accompanied the rise of MTV), as well as contemporary surrealist painters and photographers like [Stefano Ronchi](#), [Carmelo González](#), and [Erik Brede](#)—the work of these artists and movements have all drawn directly from Surrealist concepts.



"Is There Anybody Out There?" by Erik Brede (2019)

Today surrealism is important because it provides what it has ever since its inception—the opportunity to escape external structures to peer into unconscious interiors and explore what's hidden there. It implies big questions about the nature of accepted reality, and urges viewers to redefine themselves based on their own internal worlds.

So when you look at a Dalí or any other surreal painting and find yourself either delighted, skeptical, or experiencing any other emotion, ask yourself—what could be concealed in my subconscious that would make me react this way? Who am I, and why am I feeling like this? And what does this tell me about the way I relate to the outside world?

Because in the end, a surrealist work isn't about the piece itself, or even the artist who created it. In truth, it's all about you.

Article written by Nick Hilden