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## **Max Ernst and the Unconscious Mind: Exploring Surrealist Techniques in Art**

Max Ernst was a prominent figure in both the Surrealism and Dada movements, renowned for developing innovative techniques to explore and access his unconscious mind. While surrealists like Dalí and Magritte were deeply influenced by Freud and the dreamworld, Ernst expanded on these ideas by embracing spontaneity and chance, entering the darker, more primal elements of his psyche. This essay will explore how Ernst used techniques like frottage, collage, and automatism to tap into these chaotic realms of the mind, guiding his creative processes to find what he believes to be the true, repressed version of ourselves.

Surrealism, which emerged in the 1920s, was aimed to be a 'liberation of the mind' seeking to invoke abstract realities by finding beauty in the bizarre. (Tate, n.d). Often considered the movement's leader, André Breton envisioned surrealism as a progression beyond the chaotic automatism of Dadaism, striving to establish a more systematic, Freud-inspired approach. At its core, the movement embraced Sigmund Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams," which theorised that dreams uncover our unconscious thoughts, desires, and emotions. Surrealists, sharing this belief, employed semiotics in their creative process to express these hidden inner experiences (Rubin, W. S., 1977, p. 63).

In his writings, Freud discusses how people often forget their dreams, noting that:

"What we remember of the dream, and what we practice our arts of interpretation upon, is first of all damaged by inaccuracy of our memory." (Freud, S., & Robertson, R., 1999, p. 332).

This suggests that dream imagery resides primarily in the unconscious and can only be truly accessed through methods like automatism. The retelling of dreams is often distorted by our ego, which may alter the narrative to fit societal expectations—especially when the dream content touches on darker, more personal aspects of the psyche. While people can consciously shape what they choose to believe, and create

art based on these selective beliefs, Max Ernst took this concept further. He developed techniques of automatism not just to explore the dream world but to access deeper truths buried in childhood memories, war trauma, and his own education in psychiatry. Through these methods, Ernst pushed surrealism beyond the dream world into the mysterious "other world" of the unconscious, sparking a deeper connection between art and psychology (Lieberman, W. S., p. 9).

“Ernst was intrigued by pictures painted by mental patients. He saw in these pictures, evidence of the countless possibilities afforded to visual expression once it is freed from the conventional reason.” (Ernst, M., & Faerna, J. M., 1997, p. 5).

Ernst believed that modern society stifled creativity and limited people's ability to express the more magical and dreamlike aspects of their personalities—what he saw as essential to their humanity. This quote raises the question of whether Ernst believed that those considered mentally healthy were the ones not being true to themselves, while those diagnosed with mental illness were more in touch with their inner world and had greater creative freedom. Facing scepticism and judgment from society, Ernst was motivated to experiment on his own, embracing whatever lay in the dark, unexplored corners of his mind. (Ernst, M., & Faerna, J. M., 1997, p. 5-6).

Embracing spontaneity, Ernst created the technique Frottage, while thinking of memories from childhood and having an unusual obsession with the texture of the wooden floor he was sitting on. The method consists of rubbing a pencil over paper on a textured surface to imprint the pattern onto paper. This process was said to be the equivalent of automatic writing, where one would freely express thoughts without any control, intention, or direction. (Ernst, M., & Spies, W, 1986, p. 6,7).

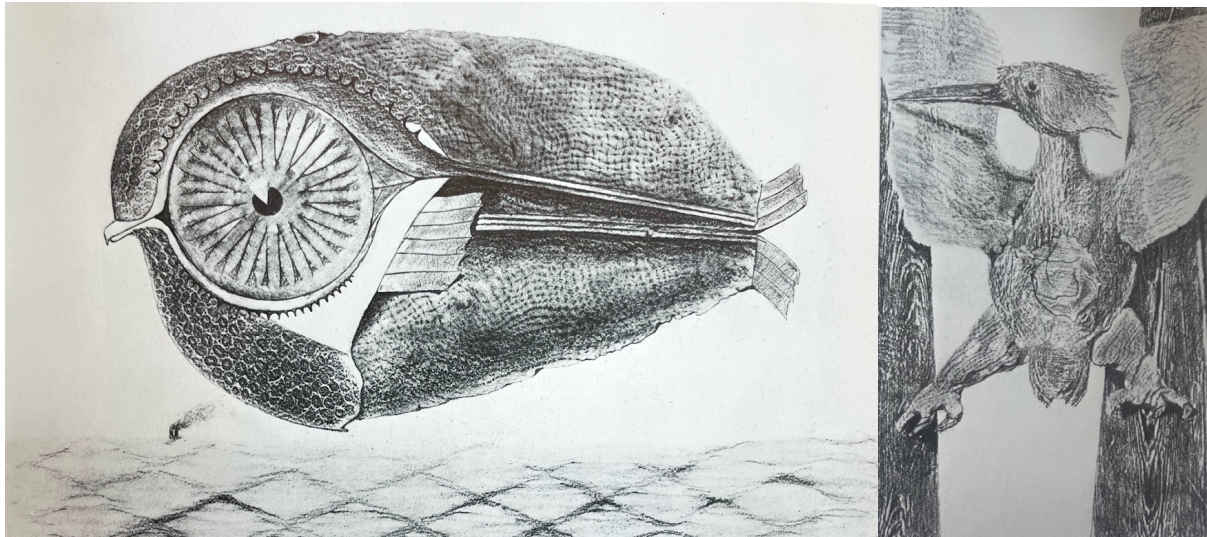


Figure 1,2: Ernst, M., & Spies, W. (1986). *Max Ernst frottages* (Rev. and enl. ed.). Thames and Hudson, p. 57, p. 52.

Figures 1 and 2 are part of a series named 'Histoire Naturelle', consisting of 34 plates of frottage all approximately 10x16 inches. The rubbings can be seen in figure 1 to form shapes in unusual and abstract ways, and Ernst has manipulated the textures to transform them into his subjects. What appears to be an eye and a typical shape of a fish stands out in the centre of the drawing with the rubbings of Ernst's surroundings. (moma.org, 2017). The drawings are intended to broaden the concept of nature, given the title 'Natural History' and this drawing is under the title of 'anthropomorphic sheets' suggesting that the fish has human qualities, or vice versa. (Ernst, M., & Spies, W, 1986, p. 15). The drawing could be perceived to resemble a piece of machinery, and as frottage is a way to discover unconscious thoughts, there is a dull, robotic atmosphere attached to the drawing perhaps linking to Ernst experiences in the war and society after. The title 'The Escaped' also highlights the idea that Ernst has escaped the war, or this could delve deeper into aspects of his childhood, as it has been written he had a particular obsession with animals and witchcraft, having a confusion between birds and humans. (Lieberman, W. S, p. 8-11).

By creating this technique, Ernst has succeeded in finding a way to bypass his rational thoughts and consciousness, leading to unexpected results that reflect his

deeper psychological state. The semiotics of his drawings and the textures from floorboards, walls, twine, and wires have evoked feelings and memories in him that have acted as a bridge between his creative processes and his unconscious mind. This is not only an influence on himself and future projects, but to the surrealist movement and its processes.

Another technique that played a pivotal role in Ernst's creative journey was collage. Early in his artistic career and during the Dada movement, he used this method to express his rejection of traditional artistic forms. Later, he refined and developed it further within the Surrealist movement (Ernst, M., & Faerna, J. M., 1997, p. 46)

The technique collage is the combination of miscellaneous random pieces such as objects, photos, textures, and papers, cut out and stuck together to create an image. This can be traced back to ancient times and is said to bring out primal and instinctual qualities within cultures, suggesting that the visual language we create from collage excels rational thought. This technique enabled Ernst to juxtapose unrelated elements and create a gateway to his deeper self. (Wolfram, E, 1975, p.7).



Figure 3,4,5: Ernst, M., & Faerna, J. M. (1997). *Ernst*. Harry N. Abrams, p. 46,47.

These images are from the collage novel made by Ernst in 1934, titled 'One Week of Goodness'. This is a retelling of the biblical creation of the world and Ernst uses

references to old zoology textbooks as well as cut out illustrations and engravings. By incorporating collage into the pictures, Ernst has transformed it from a typical love story into a bizarre, erotic encounter by including another man in the scene interacting with the lovers. Here is another example of anthropomorphic qualities in his work with a hawk's head stuck onto a man's body, highlighting that deeper part of Ernst that has connections with the animal world and the animalistic qualities in humans. It can be said that Ernst's art in this novel is garish and controversial, and a darker side of the art world than what society was accustomed to, which links back to Ernst's goals of delving further into the parts of our psyche that are dark and disturbing. This is an example of his work breaking the traditional boundaries of the surrealism movement by creating a surreal narrative engaging with the unconscious mind but also using collage to mix different realities and perspectives. He creates a visual experience that challenges how we see and feel art, opening his viewers and himself up to possibilities and ideas that are not always visible, but more challenging to reach.

In conclusion, Max Ernst's innovative contributions to surrealism, particularly his use of collage and frottage, have influenced both the surrealism movement and our understanding of the unconscious mind. By breaking free from traditional artistic forms, Ernst explored darker, primal aspects of human experience, encouraging viewers to connect with their unconscious thoughts and emotions. His influence remains relevant today, inspiring contemporary artists to embrace both traditional and digital collage techniques to explore their own identity, culture, and the nature of modern life. As I reflect on Ernst's work, it challenges me to see the world from multiple perspectives and question the connections between unrelated elements, cutting out pieces of my mind the same way I would cut and stick together a collage. What is originally thought of as a simple technique has revealed itself to have depth and meaning and in modern society, where information is constantly being reshaped and divided, collage provides a chance for reflection and self-analysis. Ernst's techniques, along with the lasting influence of the Surrealist movement, continue to inspire us to delve into the depths of our unconscious, encouraging both creative exploration and a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

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