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How Successful was surrealism in accessing the unconscious mind?

Surrealism is an art movement that was founded by André Breton in 1924. André Breton was a French writer and poet who wrote the first manifesto for the surrealism movement. (Mann 2016) Breton studied medicine and psychiatry, which led to him working at neurological wards in Nants during World War I, which was where he met Sigmund Freud. (Foundation 2020) He had a particular interest in Freud's theories on the mind, which is what inspired him to start the surrealism movement. The original intentions of this movement were to access what Freud called the "unconscious mind", which was where dreams supposedly come from. As well as creating art to represent this deeper level of the mind, Breton also intended for surrealism to break people out of a rational order of society, much like the Dadaists who had similar ideologies. (Mann 2016) Freud saw the mind in three levels: the conscious, the pre-conscious and the unconscious. The conscious is made up of our thoughts and perceptions, which we have constant access to. The un-conscious contains stored memories and knowledge, so we can access it when we choose to think about it. For example, you know what your password is but it isn't constantly at the front of your thoughts. The unconscious mind is where your fears and instinct come from. Freud believes that we cannot access this part of our mind, however that does not stop it from affecting our actions and decision making. (McLeod 2024) Breton wanted to explore this unconscious mind in the form of art, and this has arguably been achieved through two methods: automatism and hyper-realism.



Figure 1

A key artist that used automatism was André Masson, a French artist born in 1896. He started off as a pattern drawer at an embroidery studio, however he was sent to war during 1914-1919 where he served in the French Army. (Tate n.d.) He suffered great physical and psychological trauma, leaving hospital in 1917 after a severe chest injury. (SMB 2023) After this, he went back to Paris where he met André Breton, and his surreal artworks began. His earliest, "Automatic Drawing"

1924 (*Figure 1*), was a direct attempt to gain access to the unconscious mind. He did this by letting his hand move freely across the page, almost like spirit channelling. Masson believed that his art would be free from rational control if it was worked on with a reduced state of confidence, so he often worked under the influence of drugs and would deprive himself of basic necessities. (WikiArt n.d.) I think it's very interesting how he managed to form some sort of body, despite not being in conscious control of his hand movements. From afar it looks like a page of scribbles, but if you study it then you can pick out different forms and shapes that could be hints of his true self. For example, there are quite a lot of suggestions of a female body, lining up perfectly with the male instinct to be drawn towards women.

Just under 10 years later, he created a piece called "Massacre" 1931 (*Figure 2*).

(REDAKTON 2023) Again there are hints of the female body, however the way the figures twist around each other, the colours



Figure 2

and even the title of the piece represent snippets of his trauma from the war. This type of trauma is one that would live deep down in the unconscious mind, and the sharp-edged shapes can symbolise distress or pain. I think it's fascinating how although there is no clear object, you can get an idea of what the piece means and feels like. It arguably provokes much more emotion than a realistic painting, however there will always be people that disagree with abstract art since it's difficult to comprehend.

The other method of surrealism is hyper-realism, more commonly used by modern day surrealist artists. René Magritte's work is a great example of this and like Masson, his art relates directly to the trauma he has suffered. René Magritte, born in 1898, was a surrealist artist originating from Belgium. (Tate n.d.) His work includes everyday object in unfamiliar settings, creating a dream-like feel to his art. When Magritte was 14 years old, he witnessed his mother being fished out of the river Sambre; she died from suicide. His work "Rape" 1945 (*Figure 3*) is believed to be a direct reference to this



Figure 3

traumatic memory. When his mother was found, she was fully naked and her face was covered with a cloth, which explains why Magritte drew his mother without a real face. (René Magritte n.d.) He instead constructs her face using female body parts which is obviously very disturbing. Whether this was a way of coping with grief or something else, it clearly has some link to the unconscious mind. There is the instinctive obsession with the female body, combined with the trauma of his mother's death so it creates a very uncomfortable image. Perhaps this is why Freud

believed that there is a reason why we don't have proper access to the unconscious, because it is too disturbing for our conscious mind to cope. It also feels disgusting to look at, which is perhaps why the piece is called "Rape". Another artwork that links to his trauma is "The Lovers II" 1928 (*Figure 4*). (René Magritte n.d.) The two heads are covered in a white cloth which is an exact reference to how he found his mother's body. This seems more like an attempt to cope with the grief rather than to access his unconscious mind, since a trauma like that is so huge that it would have been brought to his conscious quite easily. It doesn't however take away the fact that you can feel the emotions in his paintings, and although maybe not all, some of the features are a successful link to his unconscious mind.

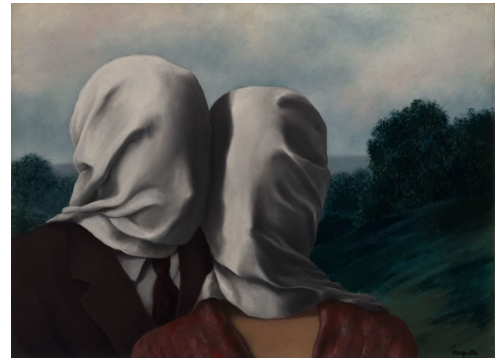


Figure 4



Figure 5

Magritte inspired the contemporary artist Emily Mae Smith who was born in 1979, Texas. (Petzel 2022) She did extensive research into Magritte's work for her 2024 exhibition show, "Emily Mae Smith X René Magritte", which took place in the Musee Magritte at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. She used direct references to Magritte's work in some of her pieces, for example "A Reckoning 2019" (*Figure 5*). This surreal illustration of an apple refers to Magritte's "The Son of Man 1946" (*Figure 6*)

and I find it interesting how both art pieces have a religious title. Smith is known for her unusual stick-like avatar which is similar to the man in a hat that Magritte used. Like Magritte, Smith's avatar is used in many different situations to represent a wide range of topics, including gender and capitalism. In some more obvious paintings, it represents the painter's brush which could be considered a self-portrait. It also can symbolise a broomstick which is a reference to domestic labour for women. The most common way the stick avatar is interpreted is as the phallus, and her paintings have quite a disturbing sexual feel to them, just like Magritte's "Rape" painting. (Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium 2024) I believe that these types of illustrations can have a stronger impact than realistic images, because it disturbs the viewer which causes them to think deeply about what the painting means and therefore questioning their values and morals. This is again a way to access the unconscious mind, encouraging people to question their reality and society itself which is a key part of the movement.



Figure 6

After researching the early artists of surrealism as well as a very recent one, I can conclude that the movement has definitely made people aware of their deeper feelings and has provided a way to express them. Freud's concept of the unconscious mind goes much deeper than childhood trauma; it is the instinctual behaviours that shape the human soul from the core, hence the many references to the female body in male artist's work. The unconscious mind is a theory, so no artists can truly access it since it isn't a proven fact. However, surrealism was founded by artists who believed in this theory and the movement has proven to connect to their original beliefs and is a very clear attempt to access the unconscious mind. Surrealist art is nothing but a glimpse into this unconscious world, however it has shaped modern artists today and has given art a new purpose. Looking at a surrealism gives art more meaning, and connects society to themselves rather than the social normalities which is what Breton originally intended.

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