Magritte

Art Gallery NSW

Learning resource

‘The surreal is reality which has not been separated from its mystery.’

René Magritte, 1962

This learning resource is designed to engage primary and secondary students with the exhibition *Magritte* and inspire art-making, critical thinking and discussion about the art and life of one of the 20th-century’s greatest image makers. It also celebrates the centennial of surrealism, marked by the publication of André Breton’s Surrealist Manifesto in 1924.

Using key works from the exhibition, our *Magritte* learning resource brings together exhibition texts and wall labels, artwork images, artist quotes, audio and curriculum-based strategies for making and responding.

Like the exhibition, it is divided into six key chapters within Magritte’s life and traces the artist’s aesthetic journey, from his early avant-garde experiments to the recurrent motif of the bowler-hatted man in his final decade:

- **Great journeys**
  Magritte’s first avant-garde explorations in the 1920s
- **The alphabet of revelations**
  The prolific Paris years and development of central themes and images
- **The philosophical lamp**
  A new philosophical approach to uncover the hidden poetic nature of objects
- **The ellipsis**
  The Second World War and Magritte’s ‘sunlit surrealism’ and *vache* periods
- **The invisible world**
  Exhibitions in the United States and a return to images of earlier decades
- **Baucis’s landscape**
  Magritte’s final decade and focus on the bowler-hatted man.

Use this resource in the classroom or in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition *Magritte*, on view at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 26 October 2024 to 9 February 2025.

cover:
René Magritte *The listening room (La chambre d’écoute)* 1952, oil on canvas, 45.2 × 55.2 cm, The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Fariha Friedrich, 1991-53 DJ © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo: Adam Baker

Who is Magritte?

René Magritte (Belgium, 1898–1967) was one of the greatest image makers of 20th-century art. A renowned surrealist, his paintings of clouds, bowler hats, pipes and apples are among the most recognisable of the movement. Magritte's art is characterised by these trademark motifs, uncanny juxtapositions, *trompe l'oeil* illusions, distorted scale, word-paintings and a deadpan realist style.

Magritte was born in Lessines, Belgium, to father Léopold, a commercial salesman, and mother Régina (née Bertinchamps), a dressmaker and milliner. He had two younger brothers, Raymond and Paul. At 16, Magritte moved to Brussels to study at the Académie des Beaux-Arts, later undertaking compulsory military service, before working as a commercial poster designer and draftsman at a wallpaper manufacturer.

In the early 1920s, Magritte saw a reproduction of the painting *The song of love (Le chant d'amour)* 1911 by the Italian artist and writer Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978). It inspired him to think about not *how* to paint, but *what* to paint. With his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Le Centaure in Brussels in April 1927, Magritte established himself as Belgium's foremost surrealist painter. Many of his signature motifs, including clouds, seascapes, *faux bois* (imitation wood) and the bowler-hatted man, were introduced in this exhibition.

In September 1927, Magritte moved to Paris with his wife Georgette (née Berger). Here he met the core group of Paris-based surrealists, including poets André Breton (1896–1966) and Paul Éluard (1895–1952), and artists Max Ernst (1891–1976), Joan Miró (1893–1983), Jean Arp (1886–1966) and Salvador Dalí (1904–89). He lived in Paris for less than three years, but it was the most prolific period of his career, resulting in approximately 175 paintings as well as the development of themes and images that would come to underpin his practice. Magritte's influential word-pictures, such as *The treachery of images* 1929, and *toiles découpées* (cut canvases) were made at this time.

Back in Brussels, Magritte became less interested in questions concerning representation, perception and language, and instead developed a theory concerning the hidden poetic potential of objects. *The human condition* 1933 is among the works he made at this time. The Second World War provoked further experiments in material and style, including painting on empty wine bottles, his 'sunlit surrealism' period in which he used a freewheeling impressionist style, and the quickly painted *vache* paintings that parodied Magritte's earlier works.

The last two decades of Magritte's career were marked by his engagement with galleries and museums in the United States and the 'hypertrophy' works in which he juxtaposed commonplace things and spaces at disjunctive scales. *The listening room* 1952 is arguably the most successful of these works. The bowler-hatted man also took centre stage during this period, appearing in over 50 works between 1950 and Magritte's death in 1967. While the figure often became associated with the artist himself, it was never intended to function as a self-portrait. 'The bowler', explained Magritte, 'poses no surprise. It is a headdress that is not original. The man with the bowler is just a middle-class man in his anonymity.'

previous:
Duane Michals *Magritte with upside down hat* 1965

What is surrealism?

Surrealism is a 20th-century international avant-garde art movement that originated in France in the 1920s. Founded by the French poet André Breton (1896–1966), the surrealist group sought to channel the unconscious mind to unlock the power of the imagination.

Surrealist art is characterised by dream-like imagery, the heightened awareness of an alternative reality, subversive humour, distorted and exaggerated imagery, the juxtaposition of incongruous items, symbolism and elements of fantasy. The term itself was first used in 1917 by the French writer Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918). 'Sur' is a French word meaning 'above'. Surreal then means 'above real'.

In 1924, Breton published the Surrealist *M*anifesto. In it, he defined surrealism as,

> Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

View surrealist artworks in the collection

Surrealist techniques

The surrealists used a range of techniques to challenge our sense of reality and provoke the imagination. Can you identify any of them in Magritte's work?

Collage
Arranging and adhering a range of ephemera such as pieces of paper and photographs onto a supporting surface.

Dislocation
Placing objects in unusual or unexpected locations.

Doubled images
Repeating the image of a figure or object, offering multiple meanings and ways of seeing.

Juxtaposition
Bringing together elements that don't usually belong together.

Levitation
Creating the illusion of objects suspended in mid-air without any physical support.

Transformation
Depicting objects or beings in the process of change, creating a sense of metamorphosis and surprise.

Transparency
Making typically solid or opaque objects appear see-through, blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination.

Scale
Distorting proportions and playing with the size of objects.

Symbolism
Using symbols or coded imagery to convey a sense that things aren't always what they seem.

Great journeys
Les grands voyages

‘The surreal is reality which has not been separated from its mystery.’

René Magritte, 1962

Magritte was born in the small town of Lessines, Belgium, on 21 November 1898. He demonstrated an early talent for painting and at the age of 16 moved to Brussels to enrol at the Académie des Beaux-Arts where he studied the traditional techniques and subjects of European art. While Magritte absorbed these lessons, he also recognised their limits and began searching for what he described as ‘a position that would enable me to see the world in a different way from the way people wanted me to see it’.

Brussels provided limited opportunities to experience avant-garde art firsthand, so Magritte turned to books, journals and magazines, where he encountered cubism, futurism and other new approaches to painting. Arguably his most formative moment was being shown a reproduction of a painting by the surrealist forerunner Giorgio de Chirico. The Italian painter’s image of an incongruous collection of objects affected Magritte so much that he was brought to tears, finding in de Chirico’s composition ‘a new vision’ that set him on a great journey of artistic inquiry.

The works in this first chapter reveal the development of Magritte’s art in the 1920s: from his first avant-garde explorations through to his solo exhibition at Brussels’ Galerie Le Centaure in 1926. In this exhibition, Magritte’s trademark images of clouds, seascapes, *faux boix* (wood panelling), turned timber-forms resembling ‘ball-and-cup’ toys or table legs, and the bowler-hatted man all made their public debut. Drawing big crowds and unfavourable reviews, it established him as Belgium’s foremost surrealist painter.

Self-portrait
Autoportrait 1923

The few self-portraits made by Magritte placed his likeness at the service of an idea. Elsewhere in this resource, you will encounter a surrealist depiction of the artist with his nose extending into a pipe. Here, in what is his earliest known self-portrait, Magritte experimented with cubist techniques. Likely working from a photograph, he created an abstracted self-image of brightly coloured, fractured planes. On the reverse side of the board, Magritte painted *Woman playing piano* 1921 (right) two years earlier in a similar style.

Listen to the audio guide for this double-sided painting

Woman playing piano (Georgette plays piano)
Femme au piano (Georgette au piano) 1921

The woman playing the piano in this artwork, painted two years earlier than the self-portrait on the other side of the board (left), is Magritte's future wife, Georgette Berger. Having first met as teenagers, René and Georgette married in June 1922 and were virtually inseparable until the artist's death in 1967. This is the first known painting of Georgette, who featured as a model for numerous paintings in the 1920s and 1930s.

The influence of French cubist Albert Gleizes (1881–1953) is plainly visible. Magritte owned a copy of Gleizes's polemic from 1920, *Du cubisme et des moyens de le comprendre* (Cubism and the means to understand it), into whose margins he sketched abstracted figures, pianos and miscellaneous objects. It is probable that he also had a reproduction of Gleizes's *Woman at the piano* 1914. In his own painting, Magritte has not so much copied Gleizes's earlier work as synthesised its compositional principles while simplifying them into larger planes of unmodulated colour.

René Magritte *Self-portrait (recto); Woman playing piano (Georgette plays piano) (verso) (Autoportrait (recto); Femme au piano (Georgette au piano) (verso))* 1923, 1921, oil on board, 43.1 × 35.5 cm, Collection Sisters 'L' © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photos © Ludion Image Bank

Great journeys
Les grands voyages 1926

The title of this painting, *Great journeys*, was found by Magritte's friend Paul Nougé and may allude to *Discovery of the Earth: general history of great voyages and great travellers*, a series of texts by French writers Jules Verne and Gabriel Marcel published in the late 1800s. Magritte often borrowed the titles for his paintings from literary works and was known to be an admirer of Verne's writing, citing *Journey to the centre of the Earth* (1864) as one of his favourite novels.

Nougé, in a letter to Magritte in 1927, discussed the artist's recent surrealist experiments and the significance of *Great journeys*, noting that it was the first work in which Magritte truly explored the concept of metamorphosis, where one object transforms into something else.

René Magritte *Great journeys (Les grands voyages)* 1926, oil on canvas, 65 × 150 cm, private collection, Brussels © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo © Photothèque R Magritte / Adagp Images, Paris, 2024

The meaning of night
Le sens de la nuit 1927

It was in Magritte's solo exhibition at La Centaure in Brussels that the figure of the bowler-hatted man made his first appearance. His long overcoat, starched Edwardian collar and black tie would have been recognised by contemporary viewers as the unremarkable uniform of professional men. He faces us with closed eyes, his ordinariness perhaps veiling an inner life of dreams and poetic invention.

Listen to the audio guide

René Magritte *The meaning of night (Le sens de la nuit)* 1927, oil on canvas, 138.4 × 105.4 cm, The Menil Collection, Houston, 1979-34 DJ © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo: James Craven

K–6 discussion questions

- The artworks in this section demonstrate Magritte's early experimentations with different artistic styles and techniques. Look closely at these paintings and describe how they are similar and different. Why do you think it's important to experiment with different art techniques when you are learning to be an artist?

- *Great journeys* 1926 is considered Magritte's first painting to explore metamorphosis. What is metamorphosis and how is it being used in this work? If it implies the transformation from one thing to another, what do you think the object or figure in this painting will look like when the change is complete?

K–6 activities

- Inspired by the double-sided artwork *Self-portrait* 1923 and *Woman playing piano (Georgette plays piano)* 1921, create a two-sided painting on canvas, board or thick card. How do the two sides relate? Think about what story you want to tell across the two sides and how they are connected through colour and composition.

7–12 discussion questions

- In his early years as an artist, Magritte borrowed from other art movements he came across in books and magazines, including cubism and futurism. Can you see evidence of these movements in the works featured in this section?

- Magritte credits seeing a reproduction of Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico's painting *The song of love* 1914 as a formative experience that inspired and propelled his artistic journey. Do you see elements of de Chirico's art practice in Magritte's? Why do you think de Chirico might be considered a forerunner to surrealism?

7–12 activities

- Create your own artwork based on the title *Great journeys* and the idea of metamorphosis. What or who is going on this transformational journey? Where does it begin and where does it end? What makes this journey so great?

The alphabet of revelations *L'alphabet des révélations*

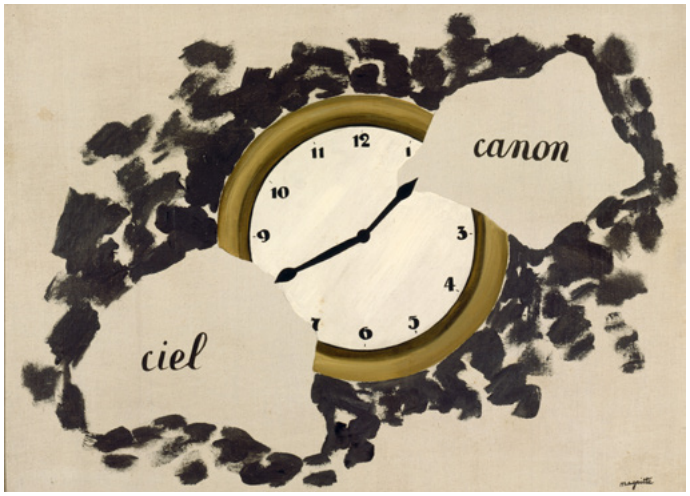
'Surrealism claims for our waking life a freedom similar to that which we have in dreams.'

René Magritte, 1938

Magritte moved to Paris with his wife, Georgette, in September 1927. The next three years would be the most prolific of his career, resulting in around 200 artworks as well as the development of themes and images that would come to underpin his practice.

While he had relocated to be closer to the core group of surrealists, Magritte forged an independent path which led to a sometimes-fractious relationship with the movement's most prominent figure, André Breton (1896–1966). Based in the suburbs, more than 20 kilometres from the city's artistic centre of Montmartre, Magritte disregarded the surrealists' interests in psychoanalysis and spontaneity, seeking instead to portray 'visual thoughts' using words and recognisable images.

Painting in a precise, dispassionate style, he aimed to 'challenge the real world'. His artworks investigated the nature of language, representation, perception and reality – testing and cajoling them until they no longer seemed part of a natural order.



Reflections of time
Les reflets du temps 1928

Reflections of time 1928 is one of Magritte's 'word-pictures', a collection of works he developed in Paris that emerged, in part, from experiments conducted with friend and surrealist writer Paul Nougé. In it, he uses the language of collage to bring disparate elements together, combining objects and words that are dislocated from their original meaning – a clock and two French words, '*ciel*', meaning sky, and '*canon*', or cannon. The words are written on what looks like scraps of paper, hovering near the central clock. Their positioning at the end of the clock hands suggests they may somehow be linked to this moment in time.

Listen to the audio guide

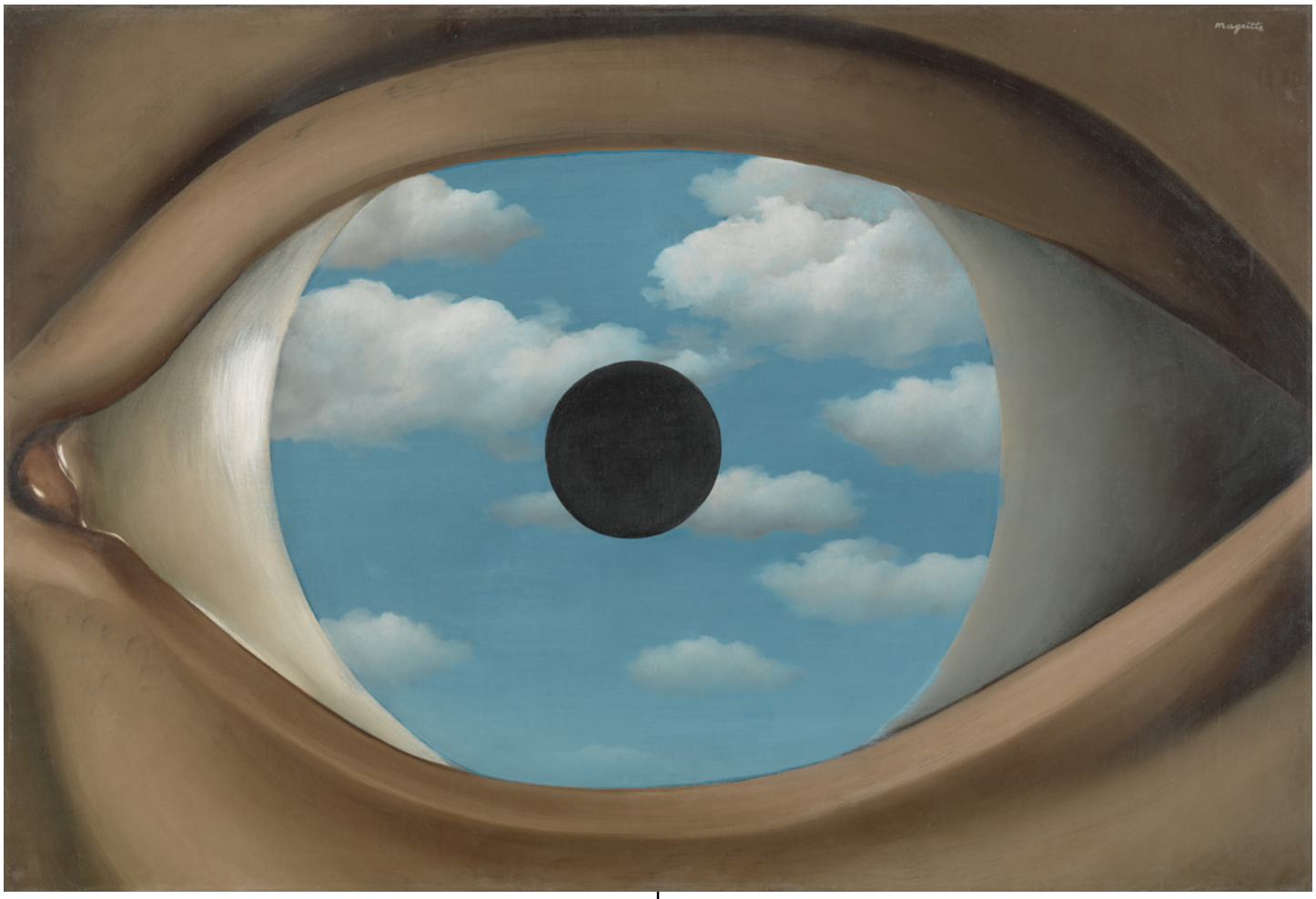
René Magritte *Reflections of time (Les reflets du temps)* 1928, oil on canvas, 55.5 × 74.5 cm, Magritte Foundation, Brussels © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo © Photothèque R Magritte / Adagp Images, Paris, 2024

The alphabet of revelations
L'alphabet des révélations 1929

While there are no textual elements in this painting, its title, devised by writer Paul Nougé, suggests a relationship to the artist's 'word-pictures'. In it we find a realistic depiction of a two-part timber frame, each half containing a different form of visual language. On the left, an amorphous shape appears against a deep black ground. On the right, four objects have been depicted as silhouettes, as if cut from a sheet of paper. The illusionistic tear in the 'paper' is a tantalising detail that contrasts with the reductive shapes of the four objects.

We are, perhaps, being invited to consider the different relationships between reality and representation that are contained within the image: the timber frame and paper that might be mistaken for the things they depict, the silhouettes that have a signifying relationship to actual objects, and the abstract form that refers to nothing beyond itself.

René Magritte *The alphabet of revelations (L'alphabet des révélations)* 1929, oil on canvas, 54.3 × 73.3 cm, The Menil Collection, Houston, 1978-143 E © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo: Paul Hester



The false mirror
Le faux miroir 1929

Magritte's giant eye stares at the viewer while also functioning as a window (a false mirror?) through which we see a cloudy sky. The glossy tear duct at the painting's centre-left gives the painting an uncanny, life-like quality that contrasts with the pupil rendered as a matte-black disc.

Before it was purchased by New York's Museum of Modern Art, this painting was in the collection of fellow surrealist artist Man Ray. In 1933 Man Ray wrote, '[Magritte's] "eye of the sky" is hanging in my apartment, and it sees many things! For once, a picture sees as much as it is seen itself.'

René Magritte *The false mirror (Le faux miroir)* 1929, oil on canvas, 54 × 80.9 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York 133.1936 © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo © The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence 2024

K–6 discussion questions

- After his early experimentations, Magritte settled on a realistic painting style. What does painting 'realistically' mean? Look closely at the works in this section. Can you identify the objects in them clearly? Are the colours he's used like the colours of these things in real life? Are the surfaces of the paintings flat or textured?

- Gaze into the eye of *The false mirror* 1929. How does it make you feel? Do you feel you are being watched? The surrealist photographer Man Ray said that 'for once, a picture sees as much as it is seen itself'. If the owner of this eye could talk, what do you think they would say about what they've seen?

K–6 activities

- Collect images of everyday objects and words from magazines. On a piece of black or white paper, arrange these realistic objects and words in an unrealistic way. Title your work and write a description for it that is as absurd as the artwork itself.

7–12 discussion questions

- What was Magritte trying to achieve with his word-pictures? Do you think he was successful? Describe why or why not. Can you think of other artists who employ language in their work to challenge the idea of representation?

- Analyse and unpack *The alphabet of revelations* 1929. What objects or symbols do you see? What artistic strategies has Magritte used? If his goal was to 'challenge the real world', then how do these elements encourage us to think differently about the world as we know it?

7–12 activities

- Magritte created 'word-pictures', using the language of collage to bring disparate elements together, combining objects and words that are dislocated from their original meaning. Experiment with various materials such as photographs, paper and fabric to create an interesting and unexpected collage composition. Pair words or phrases with unrelated objects in your artwork to challenge viewers' perceptions.

The philosophical lamp
La lampe philosophique

‘Poetry is a pipe.’

René Magritte, 1929

In late 1929, following a falling-out with André Breton and facing the financial strains of the Great Depression, René and Georgette Magritte returned to Brussels.

Surrounded once again by a close circle of friends, writers, and artists, Magritte began to consider new philosophical ‘problems’ to interrogate in his paintings. He developed a theory concerning a hidden poetic layer of reality, whereby every object we perceive had ‘an amazing new poetic secret’ – a resonance that could be discovered through intellectual and pictorial inquiry.

In this chapter, we find paintings concerning the ‘problem of the window’, ‘the house’, ‘the tree’ and ‘rain’. Magritte described seeking the correct answer to each problem by considering ‘the object, the thing tied to it in the shadow of my consciousness and the light into which this thing had to emerge’.

The human condition
La condition humaine 1933

'The problem of the window led to *La condition humaine*. In front of a window seen from inside a room I placed a picture representing exactly that part of the landscape masked by the picture. So the tree in the picture hid the tree behind it, outside the room. For the viewer, the tree was simultaneously in the room in the picture and outside in the real landscape. That existence in two different spaces at once is like the moment existing simultaneously in the past and the present as in déjà vu.'

– René Magritte, 1938

Listen to the audio guide

René Magritte *The human condition (La condition humaine)* 1933, oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, gift of the Collectors Committee 1987.55.1 © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo © Photothèque R Magritte / Adagp Images, Paris, 2024

The philosophical lamp
La lampe philosophique 1936

While Magritte's approach to painting and its philosophical dimension was undoubtedly serious, many of his images belie his irreverent, pranksterish sense of humour. When asked in an interview what are the things he liked best, Magritte responded, 'I like subversive humour'.

Although he never explicitly referred to *The philosophical lamp* as a self-portrait, it bares more than a passing resemblance to the artist. In 1946, he wrote of this painting: 'The meditations of the obsessive, absent-minded philosopher can suggest a mental world closed in on itself, as here a smoker is the prisoner of his pipe.'

Listen to the audio guide

René Magritte *The philosophical lamp (La lampe philosophique)* 1936, oil on canvas, 50 × 66 cm, private collection, Brussels © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo © Photothèque R Magritte / Adagp Images, Paris, 2024

K–6 discussion questions

- Look closely at *The human condition* 1933 and describe what you see. Do you think the painting is an accurate description of the landscape seen behind it out the window? How do you know?

- Describe the strange transformations taking place in *The philosophical lamp* 1936. Does this image make sense to you? Imagine having an elongated nose stuck to a pipe. Could you breathe? What does this man's expression tell you about how he feels or what he might be thinking?

K–6 activities

- Using *The philosophical lamp* as your inspiration, design a costume or wearable accessory that incorporates Magritte's surreal elements. Consider using unusual materials and ordinary objects to create unexpected shapes and fantastical themes in your costume design. Present your costume in a surrealist fashion parade.

- Choose an ordinary object from your house or classroom. Imagine it has a secret. What would it be? Create an illustrated story that brings this object to life and describes its hidden secret.

7–12 discussion questions

- Back in Brussels, Magritte developed a new theory of art. He believed that all objects in the world contained a hidden secret that could be uncovered by placing them in unusual juxtapositions. Observe *The human condition* 1933. What is the subject matter in this work? How are illusion and juxtaposition used? What questions or meaning does it provoke? Have you uncovered the secret?

- In *The philosophical lamp* 1936, Magritte transforms a face (supposedly his own) and ordinary objects to make a strange and startling image. Think about why Magritte may have used and depicted these things or symbols in this way. If, say, the candle represents knowledge, the extended nose references Pinocchio, and the pipe signifies philosophical thought, what do you think is being communicated in this work? If it is indeed a self-portrait, what is being said of the artist himself?

7–12 activities

- One of Magritte's favourite motifs was a painting within a painting. Compare *The human condition* to two works in the collection that also depict a picture within the picture, Basile Lemeunier's *Portrait of Édouard Detaille* 1891 and Max Pam's *Kashmir* 1977. What is each artist's intention in using art as a subject? Create an image of your own that depicts an artwork within the artwork. Think about what you are trying to communicate to your audience. Is it biographical, conceptual or perhaps, like Magritte, a comment on the nature of representation?

The ellipsis
L'ellipse

'My only wish is to be enriched by exciting new ideas.'

René Magritte, 1947

The outbreak of the Second World War had a profound impact on European artists, leaving many to reconsider their role in society. What kind of art was required at a time of such violence and social upheaval?

Aside from a brief period immediately following the German invasion of Belgium, Magritte spent the war years in Brussels. Confronted by the horrors that unfolded, he questioned the relevance of surrealism's revolutionary aspirations. Concerned that the movement would be regarded as 'a bridge between two wars', he proposed replacing its 'dark visions' with images designed to evoke an atmosphere of happiness. In 1943, Magritte abandoned his refined brushwork for a freewheeling impressionist style that he called 'sunlit surrealism'.

In 1948, Magritte's art took an even more surprising turn. For his first solo exhibition in Paris, he created some 40 garishly coloured paintings of deformed characters and vulgar, irreverent scenes. Known as the artist's *vache* period (*vache* meaning 'nasty or 'mean'), these works laid bare the pranksterish sense of humour that underpinned Magritte's outlook as an artist. His friend, the surrealist poet Louis Scutenaire (1905–1987), wrote in the exhibition catalogue: 'open your peepers, buddies! You see, everything Magritte shows you is for your refreshment, but it's above all to have fun.'

Listen to the audio guide

A stroke of luck
La bonne fortune 1945

A stroke of luck is among the strangest and most arresting of Magritte's 'sunlit surrealism' images. A pig stands upright in the foreground, wearing a dark blazer and casting a sardonic glance. In the mid-ground is a cemetery where a floral wreath has been laid in front of a well-kept grave (a soldier's?), and in the background we find a swirling, Van Gogh-esque sky.

While the painting technique is impressionistic in style, its non-naturalistic colouration, not to mention its ridiculous subject, signal Magritte's lack of interest in an impressionist representation of the truth of visual sensation. Instead, his approach appears closer to postmodern strategies of quotation or pastiche. And it hardly needs to be said that the effect of the painting is humorous: 'PLEASURE-HUMOUR', Magritte named it, to differentiate it from the black humour he felt characterised surrealism prior to the war.

René Magritte *A stroke of luck (La bonne fortune)* 1945, oil on canvas, 60 × 80 cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, 11689 © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo © Photothèque R Magritte / Adagp Images, Paris, 2024

The ellipsis
L'ellipse 1948

The ellipsis 1948 is one of the more bizarre works featured in Magritte's vache period. A garishly green figure with ping-pong eyeballs and a rifle for a nose is depicted wearing an all-seeing Magritte bowler hat. The image is both comic and horrid, and not surprisingly, shocked viewers when it was exhibited in 1948 in Magritte's first solo exhibition at Galerie Faubourg in Paris. Unique to this period, Magritte painted these cartoonish characters quickly, often completing a canvas in a single sitting. His loose brushstrokes and gleeful disregard for tradition present a stark contrast the meticulous style his audiences had become accustomed to.

René Magritte *The ellipsis (L'ellipse)* 1948, oil on canvas, 50.3 × 73 cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, 11695 © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo © Photothèque R Magritte / Adagp Images, Paris, 2024

K–6 discussion questions

- Do you think these artworks are funny or absurd? What about them makes you laugh? Think about the different types of humour – slapstick or physical comedy, wordplay or puns, or making a funny story out of everyday events, for example. How would you describe Magritte's humour in these works? Which kind of humour do you find most funny and why?

- Look closely at *The ellipsis* 1948 and come up with a character profile for the figure in the work. Who do you think he is? What's his name and where did he come from? Is he trying to tell us something? What do you think he sounds like? Take turns acting out your imagined characters in your class.

K–6 activities

- Magritte experimented with the technique of juxtaposition, bringing together elements that don't usually belong together, like a man's body and a pig's head. Create a series of playful sculptures by giving everyday objects a surreal twist. Give your sculptural series an unexpected title and write a wall label describing the artworks in a humorous way.

7–12 discussion questions

- With the 'sunlit surrealism' and *vache* works from this period, Magritte sought to shock his audience. Look closely at these artworks and describe what makes them shocking or scandalous. What did Magritte hope to achieve? Think of other artists who have used this strategy. Is it still possible to shock audiences with art, or have we seen it all?

- The curator of the exhibition writes that the artist's approach in the painting *A stroke of luck* 1945 appears closer to postmodern strategies of quotation or pastiche. What does he mean by this? In what ways does Magritte draw or comment on impressionism?

7–12 activities

- Magritte painted these cartoonish characters quickly, often completing a canvas in a single sitting. Create your own cartoonish character in a single sitting. Describe the process, how did you feel? Inspired? Frustrated?

- In the wake of the Second World War, Magritte reinvented surrealism to focus more on images that evoked happiness and laughter rather than the 'dark visions' of earlier work. He called this approach 'pleasure-humour'. Find inspiration from Magritte and challenge yourself to create an artwork that makes a friend or classmate laugh.

The invisible world
Le monde invisible

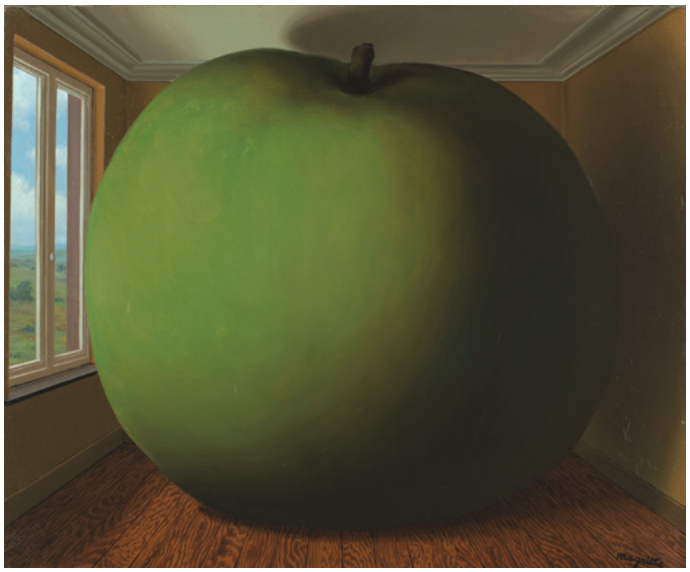
‘Mystery is what is absolutely necessary for reality to exist.’

René Magritte, 1961

In the 1950s and ’60s, having scandalised the Parisian art world with his *vache* paintings, Magritte increasingly exhibited his works at galleries and museums in the United States. There he found audiences eager not only for the now famous pictures of earlier decades, but also for new themes and subjects, some of which would become icons in their own right.

Returning to his fastidiously painted, realistic style, Magritte focused on composing mysterious and deeply arresting images. He often worked on a larger scale than in previous decades and was able to create ever more beguiling illusions on his canvases. By carefully considering perspective and framing – often using rooms, doorways and windows – and skilfully manipulating light, Magritte’s works took on a cinematic quality.

When asked about the meaning of his art, Magritte emphasised that ‘Mystery is the supreme thing’. His paintings of familiar objects in unfamiliar arrangements, sought to open the viewer up to perceiving the strangeness already embedded in the everyday world. ‘It’s reassuring to know,’ he wrote in 1961, ‘that there is more than what one knows.’



The listening room
La chambre d'écoute 1952

One of the most significant developments in Magritte's art during 1950s were the so-called 'hypertrophy' works, in which he juxtaposed commonplace objects and spaces at disjunctive scales.

When Magritte first shared a work from the series with his new American dealer, Alexander Iolas, it provoked a visceral response. 'It may be a masterpiece,' Iolas wrote, 'but every time I look at it, I feel ill. I would be grateful if you would write to me about this picture because it leaves me helpless, it puzzles me, it makes me feel confused and I don't know if I like it.' Magritte was encouraged by Iolas's strong reaction, responding 'this is proof of the effectiveness of the picture. A picture that is really alive should make the spectator feel ill'.

In *The listening room*, Magritte depicts a gigantic apple barely contained by the room in which it is situated. The painting gives the unsettling sense of the object not only pushing up against the walls and ceiling but threatening to expand beyond the confines of the canvas itself. Despite the painting's modest size, its composition imparts an overwhelming, almost suffocating sense of scale.

René Magritte *The listening room (La chambre d'écoute)* 1952, oil on canvas, 45.2 × 55.2 cm, The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Fariha Friedrich, 1991-53 DJ © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo: Adam Baker

Golconda
Golconde 1953

Golconda takes its name from a city in south-east India, a place the artist described as 'a magical city. A fanciful city of riches and luxury'. He went on to explain that 'the title means something of a marvel. And I think it is a marvel to travel through the sky on the earth'.

Here, Magritte renders his most iconic figure – the bowler-hatted man – floating in the sky like so many droplets of rain. The ubiquitous everyman appears in more than 50 artworks throughout the artist's oeuvre and is depicted no less than 172 times in this painting. The title was found by Magritte's friend Louis Scutenaire, who bore a remarkable resemblance to one of the larger figures floating near the roofline of the building, looking directly at the viewer.

Listen to the audio guide

René Magritte *Golconda (Golconde)* 1953, oil on canvas, 80 × 100.3 cm, The Menil Collection, Houston, V 414 © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo: Paul Hester

The invisible world
Le monde invisible 1954

'The art of painting, as I see it, makes possible the creation of visible poetic images. They reveal the riches and details that our eyes can readily recognise: trees, skies, stones, objects, people, etc. They are meaningful when the intelligence is freed from the obsessive will to give things a meaning in order to use or master them.'

– René Magritte, 1955

René Magritte *The invisible world (Le monde invisible)* 1954, oil on canvas, 195.6 × 131.1 cm, The Menil Collection, Houston, V 615 © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo: James Craven

The dominion of light
L'empire des lumières 1954

In early 1949, Magritte had the idea for what he described as 'a nocturnal landscape and a sky above in broad daylight'. 'The landscape,' he continued, 'evokes night and the sky evokes day.' So began the artist's exploration of *The dominion of light*, a haunting image he would continue developing for the next five years, ultimately creating 27 versions.

Each painting has its own unique characteristics, but common among them is a scene divided into two halves: at the bottom we find a dark urban neighbourhood punctuated by light emanating from a streetlamp and through the occasional window, while above stretches an idyllic, sunlit sky. At first glance, the eye tends to make sense of the composition as an image of dusk – the final blast of sun before the night sets in. But on closer inspection, we register the clear brightness of the sky and the deep intensity of the darkness below and recognise we are in fact viewing qualities of light that belong to opposite times of day.

Listen to the audio guide

René Magritte *The dominion of light (L'empire des lumières)* 1954, oil on canvas, 129.9 × 94.6 cm, The Menil Collection, Houston, V 616 © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo: Paul Hester

K–6 discussion questions

- Look closely at *The listening room* 1952 and describe what you see. Is this a big apple, or a tiny room? Is the apple about to burst out of the frame or is the room shrinking around it? Describe how Magritte plays with scale in this artwork. Compare his approach to other works in the collection that accentuate proportion and size: *Here Comes Everybody* 2022 by Francis Upritchard, Beyond fission lies fusion (untamed) 2003–04 by Vanila Netto and *Old woman in bed* 2000–02 by Ron Mueck. How do these works make you feel as a result of their distorted scales?

- Magritte was more interested in *what* to paint than *how* to paint it. He developed a repertoire of subject matter to paint over and over again, including apples, bowler-hatted men, clouds, windows, faux-wood and rocks. Can you find them all in these works? Do they have anything in common? Why do you think he repeatedly painted the same things? If you were to paint only a few things for your entire life, what would they be and why?

- One of Magritte's gallerists and admirers said that looking at his art made him feel ill! Do any of these artworks make you feel uneasy or a little uncomfortable? If so, which one and why? Magritte took his friend's comment as a compliment. Why would making an artwork that made someone feel sick be a good thing?

K–6 activities

- Magritte's painting *Golconda* 1953 includes at least 172 floating figures of the bowler-hatted man. Inspired by this work, create stencils of human figures and use them to make a pattern of floating people. Experiment with scale, colours, repetition and placement to achieve a surreal effect. Go one step further and create a 3D version of your artwork in the scale of your classroom.

- In *The listening room* 1952, Magritte depicts a gigantic apple barely contained by the room in which it is situated. Experiment with the concept of scale by creating an artwork that distorts proportions and plays with the size of objects.

7–12 discussion questions

- In this period, Magritte returned to the familiar motifs of earlier works and continued his experiments to uncover new mysteries hidden within the everyday. Trace the treatment of everyday objects in art from dada to surrealism and pop art. How did artists within each of these art movements use the ordinary to communicate something new? How does Magritte's approach compare?

- Many of Magritte's paintings are set in rooms, usually those of ordinary houses like in *The listening room* 1952 and *The invisible world* 1954. Why do you think he chose familiar rooms as the setting for some of his paintings? How would these paintings differ if, for example, they were painted in a school yard or a classroom? Research the various settings or preferred backdrops used by Magritte and the surrealists. What purpose do they serve? Do they relate to dreams or the unconscious?

- Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland* 1865 became an affirming story for surrealist artists, providing a rich iconography of elongated bodies, metamorphosis and distorted scale. Become familiar with the story and discuss why Magritte would have found synergies with its characters, setting and storyline. What parallels can you see in the artist's body of work and Alice's nonsensical world?

7–12 activities

- In each of these works, identify Magritte's trademark motifs and describe which surrealist technique he has used to make them strange or unusual. Select one of these works and experiment by applying a different technique to the same subject. What is the effect of this new approach? Compare your work to a classmate's.

- *The dominion of light* 1954 makes use of one of Magritte's favourite subjects, an image of night and day seen at the same time. Organise a photography session that experiments with different types of light, from natural daylight to nighttime or electric light. Combine your images to depict these contrasting light forms simultaneously. What is the effect of this juxtaposition?

Baucis's landscape
Le paysage de Baucis

'The man with the bowler is just middle-class man in his anonymity. And I wear it. I am not eager to singularise myself.'

René Magritte, 1966

In Magritte's last decade, the figure of the bowler-hatted man increasingly took centre stage. By repeating this image, Magritte created a motif so recognisable that it became a kind of alter-ego that could be signified with the barest of visual clues: rendered as a silhouette, or reduced to sensory organs, hat and suit.

When he travelled to New York in 1965 for the opening of his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Magritte played up the association by donning a bowler for photo shoots. In a curious echo of a comment made years earlier, Magritte allowed his own identity to be subsumed into the everyman. 'It can happen,' he told his friend Louis Scutenaire, 'that a portrait tries to resemble its model. However, one can hope that this model will try to resemble its portrait.'

Magritte died on 15 August 1967. He had made groundbreaking contributions to the development of surrealism in 1920s and 1930s, reinvented it in the wake of the war, and by the end of his career was influencing a new generation of artists associated with pop and conceptual art. Today, we find echoes of Magritte's 'visual ideas' in diverse fields, from philosophy and fiction to advertising and cinema. We can well imagine his delight at the multifarious ways in which his images continue to circulate and take on new meanings in the 21st century and beyond.

Baucis's landscape
Le paysage de Baucis 1966

'I have discovered how to paint the emptiness between a hat and a man's suit without suggesting 'the invisible man'.

– René Magritte, letter to André Bosmans, 19 February 1966

The title of this painting relates to Baucis, a character from Greek mythology, who stood on a mountaintop looking down over her hometown after it was destroyed by a flood sent by the god Zeus.

Listen to the audio guide

René Magritte *Baucis's landscape (Le paysage de Baucis)* 1966, oil on canvas, 55.6 × 45.7 cm, The Menil Collection, Houston, Y 207 © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo: James Craven

The happy donor
L'heureux donateur 1966

It is possible that the title of this painting may refer to Magritte himself, as he gifted it to the Musee d'Ixelles in 1966, the year before his passing. *The happy donor* is one of the final appearances of the bowler-hatted man. In the last years of his life, Magritte often represented the instantly recognisable figure as a silhouette containing another image within the outlines of his shape. Here, appropriately, the windows of a distant house glow warmly in a landscape bathed in shades of twilight, a beacon of welcome at the close of the day.

René Magritte *The happy donor (L'heureux donateur)* 1966, oil on canvas, 55.3 × 46.4 cm, Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels, CC 1307 © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo: Museum of Ixelles, Brussels

K–6 discussion questions

- Magritte depicted the bowler-hatted man in more than 50 artworks. Who is this man and why is he always wearing a hat? Look at *Baucis's landscape* 1966 and *The happy donor* 1966 and piece together a story about who this person might be based on the elements you see in the works. Write your story down and read it aloud to your class.

- Consider this quote by Magritte, 'I have discovered how to paint the emptiness between a hat and a man's suit without suggesting 'the invisible man'.' What is missing and what is visible in these two artworks?

K–6 activities

- Describe the way Magritte has represented the invisible man in *Baucis's landscape*. Experiment with floating objects and unexpected combinations to create a dream-like self-portrait. Consider the choices you make in terms of clothing, background and atmosphere.

- Magritte's trademark motifs like the bowler hat, green apple and pipe have been widely referenced and incorporated into popular culture. Use the bowler hat or one of Magritte's other motifs to design a poster or ad for a new product.

7–12 discussion questions

- The bowler-hatted man has inspired artists all over the world. Study the photograph *Majority rule* 2014 by Michael Cook and the series of sculptures titled *Over the rainbow* 2015 by Michael Parekōwhai. How are they influenced by Magritte's character to create new meanings?

- 'It can happen,' Magritte said, 'that a portrait tries to resemble its model. However, one can hope that this model will try to resemble its portrait.' Consider this quote in relation to the bowler-hatted man and discuss the relationship between this figure and Magritte as a person. Do you know any other artists who have become synonymous with one of their artistic motifs, or taken on a persona based on their art?

7–12 activities

- In the figure of the bowler-hatted man, Magritte created a motif so recognisable that it could be rendered as a silhouette. Experiment with different ways of capturing and depicting silhouettes to make a unique new composition. Draw and cut out the shapes of various objects, animals or people from black paper and then glue them onto white paper to create a striking contrast. Or, in small groups, take photographs of each other or objects against a bright background and reduce the image to just its outline. Try different poses, such as jumping, dancing or holding hands, or combine interesting shapes with everyday objects like bicycles, umbrellas or musical instruments.

Essay

Déjà vu

by Nicholas Chambers
Senior curator, modern and contemporary international art, Art Gallery of New South Wales

Encountering a painting by René Magritte for the first time, the contemporary viewer may well experience a sense of déjà vu – registering uncanny echoes of the artist's pictures in the world around them and recognising the extent to which his art has infiltrated visual culture at large.

The unsettling combination of familiarity and confusion, of the known and the unknown, which underpins the sensation of déjà vu lies at the very heart of Magritte's practice. His images of giant boulders hovering in the sky, shrouded couples, room-sized apples and trains hurtling out of fireplaces do not pertain to our experience of the world but they nonetheless depict, with arresting detail, things encountered in everyday life.

While he was a self-avowed surrealist, Magritte was also a materialist whose interests lay less in the unconscious than in the physical world of things. 'I don't create paintings, I create reproductions in oil,' he once quipped, pointing

to the manner in which his paintings sought to accurately portray real objects, phenomena and spaces; underlining the philosophical roots of his penchant for reproductions. The role of the painter, as he saw it, was to create pictures of ideas – ideas that were best portrayed by images of things we have already seen but whose secrets we have never imagined.

The beginnings of Magritte's practice can be found in 1915 when, at the age of 16, he moved from the small Belgian town of Châtelet to Brussels to enrol at the Académie des Beaux-Arts. For five years he attended classes at the Académie, where he is known to have painted works in an impressionist style but was searching for what he described as a 'position which would enable me to see the world in a different way from the way people wanted me to see it'.

On completing his studies and establishing himself in the capital, he was surrounded by the relatively conservative Brussels art world, one that was a far cry from the hotbed of experimentation that could be experienced in Paris and other European centres in the early 20th century. So, appropriately enough, it was through reproductions that the young artist embarked upon an intensive period of research and discovery.

The first revelation came in 1919 when, aged 21, Magritte met the poet Pierre Bourgeois who shared with him an illustrated catalogue of futurist painters, likely to have been from the *Great National Futurist Exhibition* which relaunched the movement in Italy after the First World War. Magritte was deeply affected by the catalogue, which included photographs of paintings by Filippo Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla and others; and, in his words, he embarked upon 'a whole series of Futurist pictures in a veritable frenzy'.

The results were not strictly futurist in style but hybrids that also borrowed from other movements including cubism, orphism and rayonism, which Magritte had similarly encountered via books and journals. Among his earliest attempts was *Landscape* 1920, a tempera executed with great care and precision that has a close affinity with *The forest* 1913 by Russian artist Natalia Goncharova, reproduced in an exhibition catalogue for the *First German Autumn Salon*.

Increasingly, Magritte became dissatisfied with approaches to painting that were, in varying ways, abstractions of the visible world concerned with formal questions about *how* to paint. Instead, he was interested in the question of *what* to paint. In late 1923 or 1924 (accounts vary), he had his second major revelation when he was exposed to the work of Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico, who appeared to be preoccupied with the same dilemma. It was once again a reproduction that would pique Magritte's interest, this time a black-and-white photograph of de Chirico's *The song of love* 1914.

It would take until 1925 for the lessons of de Chirico to become plainly apparent in Magritte's oeuvre. Once he had come to terms with them he began developing his own lexicon of things that 'must be painted' and which he would continue to paint for the rest of his life. Magritte soon began creating more complex images inspired by the enigmatic and dreamlike atmosphere of de Chirico's art, while defining his own distinctive visual language.

In April 1927, 49 paintings featured in Magritte's first solo exhibition at the Galerie Le Centaure, located on Brussels' fashionable Avenue Louise. It was an extraordinarily ambitious and daring show, and it established Magritte as Belgium's foremost surrealist painter. It was in this exhibition that the bowler-hatted man made his first appearance.

The exhibition drew big crowds and unfavourable reviews. Fellow artist and former studio mate Pierre Flouquet delivered one of the most contemptuous responses, describing the work as 'anti-painting … cultivated for its unreality and strangeness, displayed for the sake of its 'succès de scandale'.

It is not hard to imagine that Magritte along with his co-conspirator, Paul Nougé, who contributed a stridently surrealistic text to the exhibition catalogue, took pleasure from the discomfort that the exhibition provoked in certain quarters of the Belgian art world. Nevertheless, it was clear that Brussels would not be a supportive environment for the new directions Magritte's work was taking and so, along with his wife, Georgette, he left for Paris.

previous:
René Magritte *Golconda (Golconde)* 1953, oil on canvas, 80 × 100.3 cm, The Menil Collection, Houston, V 414 © Copyright Agency, Sydney 2024, photo: Paul Hester

Magritte lived in Paris for less than three years but it was the most prolific period of his career, resulting in approximately 175 paintings as well as the development of themes and images that would come to underpin his practice. The bodies of work created at this time, including the word-pictures and *toiles découpées* (cut canvases), are today regarded as landmark developments in European modern art.

The word-pictures – arguably Magritte's most significant Parisian breakthrough – evolved within six weeks of his arrival. Building upon earlier experiments conducted with Nougé in Brussels, and with an awareness of Miró's *peinture-poésie* (poetry paintings) of 1925–27, these new works underlined an analytical dimension to Magritte's project that differentiated it from ideas about automatism and the psyche that preoccupied other members of the surrealist group.

Indeed, Magritte was reportedly sceptical about the 'so-called spontaneity' as well as the spiritualist implications of some of his colleagues' working methods. He focused his attention instead on qualities pertaining to language, perception and reality, testing and cajoling them so they no longer seemed part of a natural order but rather codes that could, and perhaps should, be rewritten. As he wrote in '*Les mots et les images*' (Words and images) published in the December 1929 edition of the journal *La révolution surréaliste*, 'Everything tends to suggest that there is little connection between an object and what represents it'.

In the final months of his stay in Paris, Magritte worked on a small group of works for a solo exhibition at Camille Goemans' gallery in Paris. Among the works were three paintings, referred to by the artist as *toiles découpées*. The subjects of these works included a cloudy sky, *Celestial perfections* 1930; a landscape, *The depths of the earth* 1930; and a female nude, *The eternally obvious* 1930. Each was painted in a knowingly outdated academic style before being cropped into four or five smaller canvases. These were framed and displayed with space between them, prompting the viewer to mentally fill in the voids surrounding each element and complete the overall image.

Unfortunately, in the aftermath of the Wall Street crash of October 1929, the eagerly anticipated exhibition at the Galerie Goemans, which was to be the artist's first solo presentation in Paris, never eventuated. The Magrittes were left in a precarious situation. René was unable to find work as a commercial artist in Paris, and the couple relied on modest support from Georgette's father and the sale of their library to keep afloat.

In June, the Belgian writer and artist ELT Mesens learnt of their dire situation and offered to buy 11 paintings. The proceeds were significant enough to enable the Magrittes to leave Paris and rent an apartment on the outskirts of Brussels. Away from the intensity and scrutiny of Paris, Magritte began to consider new philosophical 'problems' that his painting might interrogate. Over the course of 1931 and 1932 he became less interested in questions concerning representation, perception and language, and instead developed a theory concerning the hidden poetic potential of objects.

Magritte began exploring what he described as 'an amazing new poetic secret'; a resonance not contained in the thing itself or in its readily identifiable properties and associations, but which could be discovered through a process of thought and inquiry.

—

This article is an edited abstract from the *Magritte* exhibition catalogue. It first appeared in the Art Gallery's member magazine *Look* October–November 2024.

Resources

Exhibition resources

- Purchase the exhibition catalogue *Magritte*, edited by Nicholas Chambers 2024
- Listen to the exhibition audio guide, available in English, French and Mandarin
- Access videos and articles about the exhibition

Learn more

- View surrealist artworks in the Art Gallery's collection
- Research resources on René Magritte in the Art Gallery's research library, archive and children's library

Participate in the Art Gallery's learning programs associated with the *Magritte* exhibition

- Big Art Day 'Magritte: absolutely absurd' for primary students
- 'Magritte: the extraordinary ordinary' workshop for primary and secondary students
- 'Online regional connect: Magritte' for secondary regional, rural and remote schools

Developed and written by the Art Gallery of New South Wales' creative learning team

On Gadigal Country

Art Gallery of New South Wales
Art Gallery Road, The Domain
Sydney NSW 2000 Australia
T +61 2 9225 1700
artgallery.nsw.gov.au