

Magritte

Large-print booklet

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Wed 6.30pm

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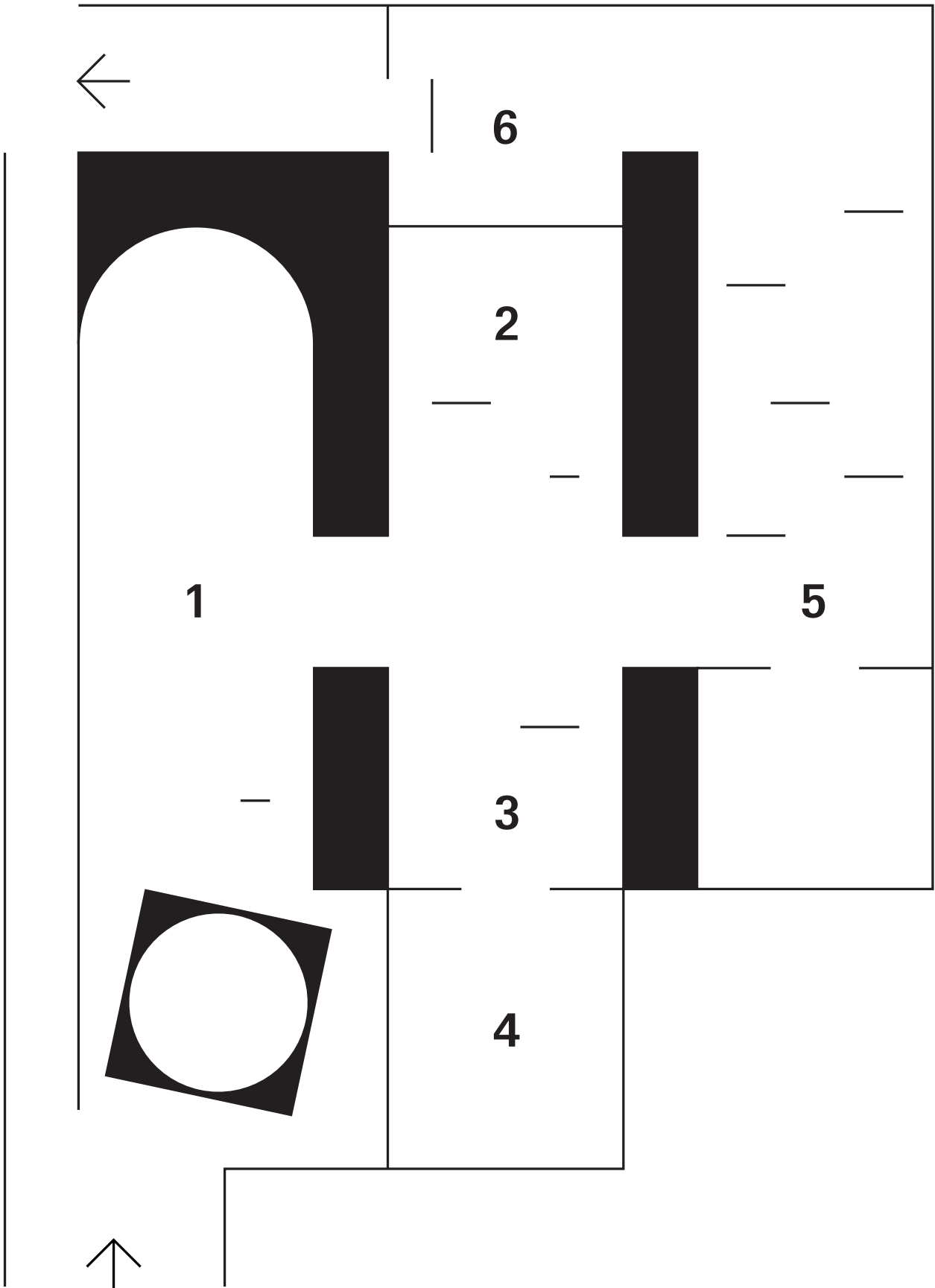
Magritte is the first Australian survey of the groundbreaking Belgian surrealist René Magritte. The exhibition shows us Magritte the painter, the philosopher, the subversive humorist and the restless innovator.

It leaves us with no question as to his status as one of the 20th-century's most influential artists.

Magritte is presented as part of the annual Sydney International Art Series, along with the exhibition *Cao Fei: My City is Yours* in the Art Gallery's north building, Naala Badu. The series has a commitment to program exceptional, thought-provoking exhibitions of Australian and international art. *Magritte* fits that brief completely. Exclusive to Sydney, *Magritte* promises to be a highlight of the summer season and we look forward to welcoming visitors from across the state and around the world.

I commend the Art Gallery of New South Wales on its development of *Magritte*. On behalf of the NSW government, I thank the Magritte Foundation for their collaboration and acknowledge the many lenders whose support has made this exhibition possible.

The Hon John Graham MLC
Minister for Jobs and Tourism
Minister for the Arts
Minister for Music and the
Night-time Economy



1. ***Les grands voyages***
Great journeys
2. ***L'alphabet des révélation***
The alphabet of revelations
3. ***La lampe philosophique***
The philosophical lamp
4. ***L'ellipse***
The ellipsis
5. ***Le monde invisible***
The invisible world
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Baucis's landscape

Introduction

Surrealist painter and provocateur René Magritte created some of the strangest and most memorable images in 20th-century art. With irreverent wit and sharp intellect, he revealed the mystery and poetry embedded within seemingly ordinary objects and everyday settings.

This exhibition is organised chronologically and divided into six chapters, each named after a painting by Magritte. It journeys from the artist's first experiments after art school, to his groundbreaking contributions to surrealism, and the enigmatic compositions of his final years. In the rooms that follow, iconic paintings sit alongside lesser-known works that show Magritte's fierce independence and subversive humour.

Magritte also foregrounds the importance of Brussels, where the artist was based for almost his entire career, and draws attention to the circle of friends who contributed to the development of his art.

Drawn from collections around the world, the exhibition includes more than 100 works that illuminate the evolution of an artist who regarded himself as a 'painter of ideas'. It is presented in the centenary year of the surrealist movement and provides an opportunity to reflect on one of the most enduring art movements of the modern period.

1.

Les grands voyages

Great journeys

The finished picture is a surprise, and its creator is the first to be surprised.

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 first hand, 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 room reveal the development of Magritte's art in the 1920s: from his first explorations through to his solo exhibition in 1927 which established him as Belgium's foremost surrealist painter. In addition to rarely seen early paintings, it showcases his publishing initiatives as well as the commercial projects that sustained him financially at the outset of his career.

Self-portrait

Autoportrait 1923

oil on board

Collection Sisters 'L'

The few self-portraits made by Magritte placed his likeness at the service of an idea. Elsewhere in this exhibition, 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.



Find out more
agnsw.art/magritte-audio

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

oil on board

Collection Sisters 'L'

The woman in this artwork, painted two years earlier than the self-portrait on the other side of the board, 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 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.



Find out more
agnsw.art/magritte-audio

The locomotive

La locomotive 1922

oil on cardboard

Carine Menache Collection, Monaco

Primevère 1926

lithograph

Collection Sisters 'L'

In the 1920s, Magritte often made commercial artwork to support himself and his new wife, Georgette. He drew on various stylistic influences, including the geometric forms and vibrant colours associated with '*le style moderne*', now known as art deco. The red curtain, a soon-to-be familiar motif in Magritte's paintings, makes an early appearance in this promotional poster for popular actress and singer Marie-Louise Van Emelen, who went by the stage name Primevère (Primrose).

Cinéma bleu 1925

oil on canvas

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

This painting marks a departure from Magritte's experiments with futurism as he began to explore surrealist juxtapositions of objects. Many of these motifs – the red curtains, the bilboquet (a turned wooden form), and the hot air balloon – would reappear throughout his oeuvre. The stylised female figure reflects the influence of his commercial work for Belgian fashion label Maison Norine. The sign 'Cinéma Bleu' relates to the cinema he frequented as a teenager with Georgette Berger, who would later become his wife, and where his brother Paul worked as a ticket seller.

It has also been reported that the walls of the cinema were painted blue, perhaps inspiring the sky-blue environments that Magritte would include in later paintings.

Great journeys

Les grands voyages 1926

oil on canvas

Private collection, Brussels

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 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.

The rediscovered landscape

Le paysage retrouvé 1926

oil on canvas

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

Le Centaure: Chronique Artistique

no 1 October 1926

periodical, facsimile

Courtesy of the Magritte Foundation, Brussels

For much of his early career, Magritte supported himself financially through commercial illustration work. The black-and-white advertisements displayed here appeared in the inaugural issue of *Le Centaure: Chronique Artistique*, a periodical published in October 1926 by Galerie Le Centaure, where Magritte would have his first solo exhibition in 1927. The issue included illustrations for Chenard & Walcker automobiles, Belgian fashion house Maison Norine, seamstress and milliner Jane Brouwers, and the Ravenstein restaurant.

**Alfa Romeo, advertisement first
reproduced in *Englebert* magazine,
no 59–60 November–December 1924**

advertisement, facsimile

Courtesy of the Magritte Foundation, Brussels

Waltz of love

***Valse d'amour* 1926**

Music by Ludo and Theo Langlois, lyrics by Fernand Servais
Published by Éditions Musicales de l'Art Belge, Brussels

Nothing

***Un rien ...* 1925**

Music by Willy Stones, lyrics by Fred Dolys
Published by Éditions Musicales de l'Art Belge, Brussels

Norine blues 1925

Music by Paul Magritte, lyrics by René Georges
Published by the Musical Office, Brussels

I get drunk in bars!

***J'me saoule dans les bars!* 1926**

Music by Paul Magritte, lyrics by Jef Orban
Published by Le Métronome, Brussels

My dreams

***Mes rêves* 1926**

Music by René Demaret, lyrics by Paul Max
Published by Éditions Musicales de l'Art Belge, Brussels

sheet music, facsimiles
Courtesy of the Magritte Foundation, Brussels

Alongside the commercial illustrations Magritte made for fashion houses and magazines, he designed covers for popular sheet music. The close link between his artistic practice and his graphic design work can be seen in the illustration for *My dreams (Mes rêves)* which features the same female figure as *Cinéma bleu* 1925, displayed on the wall nearby.

A love of music ran in the Magritte family. His brother Paul, a poet, pianist and composer who occasionally worked under the alias 'Bill Buddie', wrote the music for *Norine blues*, while René and Georgette wrote the lyrics under the name René Georges.

Marie: Journal bimensuel pour la belle jeunesse, Brussels, no 1 1 June 1926

periodical, facsimile

The Menil Collection Archive, Houston

Marie: Journal bimensuel pour la belle jeunesse, Brussels, no 2–3 8 July 1926

periodical, facsimile

The Menil Collection Archive, Houston

Autumn catalogue of Maison Ch Müller, S Samuel et cie 1927

periodical, facsimile

Courtesy of the Magritte Foundation, Brussels

In 1926, Magritte contributed to both issues of *Marie*, a 'bimonthly journal for the beautiful youth' edited by fellow Belgian surrealist ELT Mesens. The short-lived journal also included contributions from avant-garde artists Paul Klee, Marcel Lecomte, Francis Picabia, Man Ray and Tristan Tzara.

In 1927, Magritte illustrated a catalogue for furrier Maison Ch Müller, S Samuel et cie. His pictures, which include several of the surrealist objects and themes that appear in his paintings, were accompanied by a series of poetic phrases written by Paul Nougé.

Magritte: Exhibition, Galerie Le Centaure, Brussels 1927

exhibition catalogue, facsimile

Courtesy of the Magritte Foundation, Brussels

Oesophage 1925

periodical, facsimile

Courtesy of the Magritte Foundation, Brussels

391 1924

periodical, facsimile

Courtesy of the Magritte Foundation, Brussels

Magritte was a prolific writer, publishing numerous articles and manifestos, often in collaboration with other artists, poets and surrealist theorists.

In 1924, he collaborated with fellow Belgian surrealist ELT Mesens to contribute a series of aphorisms to the final issue of *391*, the influential magazine created by French dada artist Francis Picabia.

Inspired by Picabia, Magritte and Mesens co-edited a dadaist journal titled *Oesophage* the following year. The provocative first-and-only issue featured written contributions from leading figures in the European avant-garde, including Tristan Tzara, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes and Jean Arp, along with collages by Max Ernst and Kurt Schwitters and a drawing by Picabia. Magritte and Mesens' 'The five commandments' text provided a witty rejection of conventional values.

In 1927, Magritte's first solo exhibition was held at Galerie Le Centaure in Brussels. His friends Paul Gustave Van Hecke and Paul Nougé both contributed text to the exhibition catalogue, pages of which are reproduced here.

The paintings on the curved wall all formed part of Magritte's first solo exhibition, held at Brussels' Galerie Le Centaure in April 1927. It showcased an ambitious and daring body of work that signalled the young artist's allegiance to the burgeoning surrealist movement.

The paintings polarised viewers. Artist Pierre Flouquet described the work as 'anti-painting ... cultivated for its unreality and strangeness'.

Magritte's trademark images of clouds, seascapes, faux bois (wood panelling), turned timber-forms resembling 'ball-and-cup' toys or table legs, and the bowler-hatted man all made their public debut in this exhibition. Many of the compositions, or parts of them, would be reworked by the artist in decades to come.

The garment of adventure

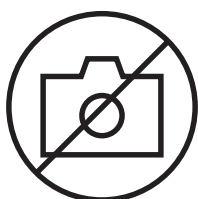
La robe de l'aventure 1926

oil on canvas

Kawamura Memorial DIC Museum of Art, Sakura

The gliding turtle in this painting is not a fantastical creature, but a depiction of a leatherback sea turtle that Magritte found illustrated in the *Larousse encyclopedia*. Beneath it, a naked shrouded figure bears a striking resemblance to John Everett Millais's painting *Ophelia* 1851–52, which depicts the character from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* floating peacefully moments before she drowns.

Echoes of Ophelia's tragic story can be found in Magritte's own biography. At the age of 13, the artist lost his mother who, after going missing for several days, was found dead in the Sambre River wearing her nightdress. She was reported to have drowned following a suicide attempt. While this event must have had a profound impact on the young Magritte, he rarely mentioned it in his extensive writing and interviews.



The face of genius

Le visage du génie 1926

oil on canvas

Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels

MJ 31

The meaning of night

Le sens de la nuit 1927

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

1979-34 DJ

It was in Magritte's solo exhibition at La Centaure 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.

To his left, we find a partial, undefined figure clothed with a glove and a furry garment that evokes Magritte's illustrations for the fur manufacturer Samuel et cie (as seen in the nearby showcase).



Find out more
agnsw.art/magritte-audio

The difficult crossing

La traversée difficile 1926

oil on canvas

Private collection

The difficult crossing was painted shortly after Magritte was introduced to the work of Giorgio de Chirico, whose concept of 'metaphysical painting' was a great revelation for the young artist. In his attempt to mirror the sense of disquiet de Chirico achieved through the juxtaposition of ordinary objects, Magritte depicts a series of incongruous items in an improbable room.

The hand of a mannequin on the table appears to entrap a red bird, while the table itself has been endowed with a human leg. Nearby, a turned timber form, like a cup-and-ball toy, stands looking over the room, anthropomorphised with a single blue eye. In the distance, replacing the far wall, we see a tempestuous storm and a ship torn apart on a dark and violent sea.

The dead bird

L'oiseau mort 1926 or 1927

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

1979-04 DJ

Portrait of Paul Nougé

Portrait de Paul Nougé 1927

oil on canvas

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels
11676

Paul Nougé was a writer and poet who played a leading role in the Brussels-based Belgian surrealist group. He and Magritte met in 1924 and, through shared interests and their collaboration on various artistic endeavours, became close friends.

Magritte has painted Nougé in duplicate, clothed in white tie and tails – unusual attire that may suggest his friend's formal and solemn manner. It is one of several works Magritte painted around this time that incorporated the photographic techniques of doubling and repetition. The identical figures stand in front of an organic white mass filled with red holes. This curious backdrop is similar in appearance to bone marrow when viewed through a microscope, perhaps alluding to Nougé's occupation as a biochemist.

An end to contemplation

***La fin des contemplations* 1927**

oil on canvas with metal snap fasteners
The Menil Collection, Houston
1980-12 DJ

Early in his career, and perhaps influenced by the work of German surrealist Max Ernst, Magritte experimented with paper collage. In *An end to contemplation*, he has used paint to imitate collage techniques, depicting jagged cut-out elements that appear to have been fixed to the canvas with metal snap fasteners.

This painting is one of a series of double portraits reminiscent of stereoscopic photographs – images created for a device that presents two slightly different images to each eye, creating the illusion of a single three-dimensional view. Here the two figures correspond so closely that it seems probable that Magritte used a paper cut-out as a template.

Landscape

Paysage 1920

tempera on cardboard

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

In 1919, Magritte was shown a catalogue of work by Italian futurist painters by his friend, poet Pierre Bourgeois. He was deeply affected by the reproductions of paintings that captured the energy and dynamism of the modern world, and described embarking on 'a whole series of futurist pictures in a veritable frenzy'. The results were not strictly futurist in style, but hybrids that borrowed from other art movements including cubism, orphism and rayonism, which Magritte had similarly encountered via books and journals.

Among his earliest attempts was *Landscape*, a tempera executed with great care and precision that has a close affinity with *The forest* 1913, a painting by Russian avant-garde artist Natalia Goncharova.

The lovers

Les amants 1928

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1990
90.1583

Magritte made two paintings of shrouded 'lovers' during his time in Paris, which have become among his most iconic works. They have been highly influential on the work of other artists, designers, filmmakers and musicians, from Pedro Almodóvar to Beyoncé. In the other version of this image, the couple kiss, while here they stand before a landscape as if posing for a photograph.

In a letter of 1927, Magritte's friend Paul Nougé encouraged him to emulate illustrations found in the pulp crime novels that had interested the artist since his youth. The draped cloth evokes images of victims wrapped in cloth, as well as the masks worn by fictional criminal masterminds, while also relating to the surrealist themes of concealment and disguise.

2.

L'alphabet des révélations

The alphabet of revelations

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

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. 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.

The false mirror

Le faux miroir 1929

oil on canvas

Museum of Modern Art, New York
133.1936

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.'

The demon of perversity
Le démon de la perversité

or

The monumental shadow
***L'ombre monumentale* 1929**

oil on cardboard

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

The primary title of this work, *The demon of perversity*, was borrowed from one of the artist's literary heroes – Edgar Allan Poe's 1845 tale 'The imp of the perverse'. The painting contrasts different materials and shapes – the smooth indeterminate form revealing an underlying structure of textured timber planks.

Change of colour

Le changement des couleurs 1928

oil on canvas

Collection Sisters 'L'

Word vs Image, Sidney Janis Gallery, New York 1954

exhibition catalogue

The Menil Collection Archive, Houston

RB ND 673.M35 A4 1954a

This pamphlet, created for Magritte's 1954 exhibition *Word vs Image* at Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, features an English translation of his landmark text 'Le mots et les images' (Words and images), first published in the journal *La révolution surréaliste* in 1929. In it, Magritte laid out his thoughts concerning objects' relationships to their textual and pictorial representations. He explored these ideas in numerous 'word-pictures', three examples of which are displayed on the adjacent wall. Recognised at the time as important contributions to the surrealist movement, decades later they influenced conceptual artists as well as philosophers working in the areas of semiotics and post-structuralism.

The alphabet of revelations

L'alphabet des révélations 1929

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

1978-143 E

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 simplified representation 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.

Reflections of time

Les reflets du temps 1928

oil on canvas

Magritte Foundation, Brussels



Find out more
ag NSW.art/magritte-audio

The literal meaning

Le sens propre 1929

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

1980-09 DJ

Magritte titled five paintings *The literal meaning*. He was, perhaps, considering the conventions through which we assign meaning to language. Here, the words *forêt* (forest) and *salon* (living room) appear in organically shaped frames that lean against an interior wall. The precise lettering, reminiscent of a schoolchild's cursive handwriting, is large enough that the words can be appreciated as visual forms rather than just elements of language.

The palace of the courtesan

Le palais de la courtisane 1929–30

oil on canvas

Carine Menache Collection, Monaco

Closely cropped female torsos appear in several paintings made by Magritte in 1928 and 1929, foreshadowing the breakthrough of *The eternally obvious* 1930 (displayed on the adjacent wall).

In *The palace of the courtesan* the shadowy fragment of a body is depicted at a disconcertingly large scale. Unlike other paintings where similar images are depicted within a painted scene, here it is an independent element, accounting for half of the composition. In the manner of a filmic jump cut, the torso is abruptly juxtaposed with an interior view of an elegant villa and the tantalising glimpse of the landscape beyond.

A courtesan's palace

Le palais d'une courtisane 1928

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

CA 6948

The original title for *A courtesan's palace*, inscribed on the back of the stretcher, was *The living mirror*. The painting and its neighbouring variant, *The palace of the courtesan* 1929–30, both feature a woman's torso. Here, the compositional device of the frame within the frame, and the original title, suggest that the body might be a reflection in a mirror. Magritte paints framed pictures within several other artworks in this room, as if by drawing borders around each mystery he can separate them from one another.

Character meditating on madness

Personnage méditant sur la folie 1928

oil on canvas

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels
11680

In this painting, Magritte creates an atmosphere of intrigue and suspense with a great economy of form. A man in profile, dressed in a nondescript suit, holds a cigarette. His expression is focused as he peers intently at something or someone just beyond view. He leans forward, lips slightly parted, as if about to speak or act. Is he engaged in an internal dialogue? Will he call out to an invisible figure beyond the frame? Or perhaps whisper conspiratorially, sharing a secret mystery with the viewer?

Cami Stone

Belgium 1892–1975

Five-part painting 1931

gelatin silver photograph

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1989
89.305

Cami Stone's photograph of Magritte's *The eternally obvious* 1930 shows the five canvases mounted on a sheet of glass. Taken the year after Magritte completed the painting, the photograph shows it installed not in a gallery, where its status as a painting would go unquestioned, but in a basement complete with a bathtub and drying laundry.

Magritte's friend Paul Nougé later referred to the 'shock' and 'revelation' when artworks were encountered in surprising settings.

The eternally obvious

L'évidence éternelle 1930

oil on five separately stretched and framed canvases
mounted on acrylic sheet
The Menil Collection, Houston
1978-004a-e DJ

In the final months of his stay in Paris, Magritte created three groundbreaking paintings that he referred to as the *toiles découpées* (cut canvases). Their subjects were a cloudy sky, a landscape and a female nude. Each was painted in a knowingly outdated academic style before being cropped into four or five smaller canvases. These were then framed and displayed with space between them, prompting the viewer to mentally fill in the voids surrounding each element and complete the overall image.

The eternally obvious is generally taken to be a portrait of Georgette, Magritte's wife. Painted at close to one-to-one scale, it is the largest and most ambitious of the *toiles découpées*. As is revealed by the photograph on the other side of this wall, it was installed by Magritte on a glass sheet, allowing it to occupy a space in the manner of a sculpture. In a solo exhibition of the 1937 it was catalogued as a *tableau-objet* (picture-object).



Find out more
agnsw.art/magritte-audio

3.

La lampe philosophique

The philosophical lamp

Poetry is a pipe.

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 room, 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

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
gift of the Collectors Committee
1987.55.1

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



Find out more
agnsw.art/magritte-audio

Illustrated youth

La jeunesse illustrée 1937

gouache on paper

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

This painting is a study for a work commissioned by British poet and art patron Edward James that was installed in the ballroom of his London house. In it, we find a strange collection of objects – including a barrel, female torso, lion, billiard table and a birdcage – lined up along an idyllic country road. Magritte found inspiration for these motifs in an encyclopaedia he found in James's library while staying with him in 1937.

The plain of the air

La plaine de l'air 1940

oil on canvas

Private collection

The tree, as the subject of a problem, became a large leaf the stem of which was a trunk directly planted in the ground.

– René Magritte, 1938

The song of the storm

***Le chant de l'orage* 1937**

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

V 416

In praise of dialectics

L'éloge de la dialectique 1937

oil on canvas

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne,

Felton Bequest, 1971

EA2-1971

Correspondence between Magritte and his friends Louis Scutenaire and Irène Hamoir (whose portrait hangs on the adjacent wall) give insights into the conception of this painting. In attempting to solve 'the problem of the house', Magritte sketched a house variously perched in a tree, beside a dog kennel, on railway lines, on a table set for a meal and over a lavatory pan. He evidently kept searching for the 'one correct answer' until he announced in a postcard that 'the problem has been solved as follows: a house-front, through an open window the inside of a room is visible and in the room is a house'.

The philosophical lamp

La lampe philosophique 1936

oil on canvas

Private collection, Brussels

While Magritte's approach to painting and its philosophical dimension was undoubtedly serious, many of his images reveal 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 bears 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.'



Find out more
agnsw.art/magritte-audio

Black magic

La magie noire 1934

oil on canvas

Private collection

In some of my paintings, colour appears as an element of thought. For example, a thought made up of a woman's body which is the same colour as the blue sky [*La magie noire*]. In other pictures, colour has to make the painted shapes look more like shapes in the visible world. It goes without saying that colour – even if it's a question of blue sky – comes into the picture to heighten its likeness to the world, but anyway, you can also like the colour of the sky for itself.

– René Magritte, 1962

Portrait of Irène Hamoir

Portrait d'Irène Hamoir 1936

oil on canvas

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels
11682

Irène Hamoir was a journalist, poet and novelist who, along with her husband Louis Scutenaire, was one of Magritte's closest friends. In this portrait, Magritte incorporates Hamoir's image into a painting that foregrounds some of the familiar elements of his practice. Three oval-shaped handheld mirrors balance on a ledge overlooking the ocean, each reflecting a different scene. On the left, the glass is engulfed in fierce orange flames. On the right, the mirror reflects a sheet or curtain of corrugated iron combined with bells that were a repeated motif throughout Magritte's oeuvre. The centre mirror frames Hamoir's face as she returns the gaze of the viewer, almost as if they were looking at their own reflection.

Georgette 1937

oil on canvas

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

10712

Magritte met Georgette Berger in 1913 at a town fair in Charleroi, a city south-west of Brussels. The two teenagers quickly formed a close friendship but were separated a year later when Germany invaded Belgium during the First World War, and the Magritte family relocated to Châtelet. They were reunited by chance in 1920 while walking through the Royal Botanic Gardens in Brussels and married two years later in June 1922.

Georgette was the centre Magritte's world. She was his wife, but also his model and inspiration, appearing in many of his paintings, drawings, photographs and films. In *Georgette* he has framed her face in an oval shape that could be a mirror, a precious miniature painting, or a photograph kept in a locket. A collection of surrealist objects surrounds her as she floats in the centre of a blue sky filled with clouds, the mystery around which everything else revolves.

Summer

***L'été* 1932**

oil on canvas

Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels

MJ 32

This is a piece of cheese

Ceci est un morceau de fromage 1936 or 1937

oil on canvas board in gilded wood frame

set in glass dome and pedestal

The Menil Collection, Houston

1980-14 DJ

4.

L'ellipse

The ellipse

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

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 Louis Scutenaire 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.*'

Woman bottle

***Femme-bouteille* c1945**

oil on glass bottle

Collection Sisters 'L'

Sky bottle

***Ciel bouteille* 1940**

oil on glass bottle

Private collection, Belgium

A rare old vintage Picasso

***Un Picasso de derrière les fagots* 1950**

oil on glass bottle

The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Alexander Iolas
CA 6038

Seascape with sky bird

***Paysage marin avec oiseau* 1961**

oil on glass bottle

Private collection, Belgium

Magritte first began painting on bottles during the German occupation of Brussels in the Second World War. With canvas and paint in short supply, he eked out his studio supplies by painting onto empty bottles of Bordeaux, port and sherry. Many of these diminutive paintings borrowed imagery from the artist's canvases, which he adapted to the bottles' curved, smooth glass surfaces.

Alice in Wonderland

***Alice au pays de merveilles* 1946**

gouache on paper
Collection Sisters 'L'

The meteor

***Le météore* 1943**

pencil on paper
Collection Sisters 'L'

Portrait of Rachel Baes based on Sheherezade

***Portrait de Rachel Baes d'après Shéhérezade* 1947**

gouache on paper
Collection Sisters 'L'

In 1947, Magritte concluded his impressionist-style paintings with a series of variations on the theme of 'Sheherazade', named for the legendary Persian queen and narrator of the Middle Eastern folktales known as *One thousand and one nights*. The small gouaches all include a pearl-masked figure, who also appears in *The liberator* 1947 displayed in room 5. The present example is also a portrait of Belgian surrealist artist Rachel Baes, who appeared in some of Magritte's amateur films and whose paintings he admired.

The flavour of tears

***Le saveur des larmes* 1946**

gouache on paper

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

The smile

Le sourire 1947

gouache on paper

The Menil Collection, Houston
CA 5408

The flame rekindled

Le retour de flamme 1943

oil on canvas

Magritte Foundation, Brussels

Detective novels and mysteries held a life-long fascination for Magritte. He was particularly enamoured with the character of Fantômas, a villainous mastermind devised by French authors Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre. The character first appeared in 1911 and would have 32 novels devoted to his exploits, along with various films, television shows and comic book adaptations in later years.

In *The flame rekindled*, Magritte drew inspiration from the original cover illustration for the first volume of *Fantômas*, which depicts the masked villain dressed in top hat and tails as he looms menacingly over Paris, bloody knife in hand. The Fantômas of Magritte's painting, however, appears a little more benign, wielding a rose in place of a weapon.

The mind's gaze

Le regard mental 1946

oil on canvas

Private collection, courtesy of Galerie Gianna Sistu

Despite his shift in style during the 'sunlit surrealism' period, Magritte continued to build upon themes he had developed in the 1930s. In *The mind's gaze*, he appears to revisit the 'problem of the house'. Here, he uses impressionistic brushstrokes and soft colours to depict an improbable building with a multitude of branching rooms. In a letter to surrealist poet Achille Chavée on 10 February, Magritte explained: 'I am finishing a picture, a house in the form of a tree.'

A stroke of luck

La bonne fortune 1945

oil on canvas

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels
11689

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.

The farewells

Les adieux 1943

oil on canvas

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

The reclining figure in this painting alludes to Edouard Manet's *Luncheon on the grass* (*Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*) 1862–63, a pivotal work in French art associated with the beginnings of impressionism.

The psychologist

Le psychologue 1948

oil on canvas

Private collection

Some of the works in Magritte's notorious *vache* exhibition appeared to take aim at the Paris art world, which, as Louis Scutenaire commented, 'so bitterly ignores those who live outside its walls'. The sleazy, over-the-shoulder gaze of the nude subject of *The psychologist* is perhaps a dig at what Magritte saw as surrealism's obsession with the unconscious.

The pictorial content

Le contenu pictural 1948

oil on canvas

Private collection

Here we find Magritte critiquing (with tongue in cheek) his approach to the discipline of painting. Previously, he had worked in an almost perfunctory, academic manner where the medium was a means to visualise an idea. In this work, however, the medium is the subject of the work. In it, a bespectacled figure – thought to be poet Marcel Mariën – is covered in self-inflicted knife and gun wounds from which streams of brightly coloured paint flow instead of blood.

The ellipsis

L'ellipse 1948

oil on canvas

Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

[The 'fake' Titian] 1944

oil on canvas

Collection Sisters 'L'

During the Second World War, Magritte conspired with fellow artist Marcel Mariën to paint and attempt to sell forgeries of other artists' work. While income was certainly a motivating factor, the subversive nature of the act itself was also a driving force. Magritte himself once remarked, 'If you buy a fake diamond unawares, you will be just as satisfied, because you have paid the price of the genuine article.'

For four years, Mariën sold drawings and paintings that Magritte produced in the style of artists including Hobbema, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, and Titian, as we see here. Rather than creating a direct copy, Magritte has combined elements from two different paintings, *Woman with a mirror* 1515 and *Flora* 1517. A postcard from Magritte to Mariën, displayed in the vitrine opposite, refers to two new paintings in the style of old masters.

**Surrealism in full sunlight: the
experience continues, manifesto no 1**
***Le surréalisme en plein soleil:
l'expérience continue, manifeste no 1***

October 1946

Signed by Joë Bousquet, René Magritte,
Marcel Mariën, Jacques Michel, Paul Nougé,
Louis Scutenaire and Jacques Wergifosse
leaflet, facsimile
Courtesy of the Magritte Foundation, Brussels

Magritte: Paintings and Gouaches
Magritte: Peintures et Gouaches,
Galerie d'art du Faubourg, Paris 1948

exhibition catalogue
The Menil Collection Archive, Houston
RB ND 673.M35 A4 1948

**'Glossing about the Parisian exhibition
in Paris of the works of René Magritte
is premature. Let's go then!'**
***'Gloser à propos de l'exposition
parisienne à Paris des oeuvres
de René Magritte est prématuré.***
Allons-y donc!' May 1948

Written by Louis Scutenaire
Published by Au Miroir d'Elisabeth, Brussels
leaflet, facsimile
Courtesy of the Magritte Foundation, Brussels

Surrealism in full sunlight: the experience continues, manifesto no 1 is the first of five manifestos Magritte wrote to elaborate upon his concept of 'sunlit surrealism'. In it, he described the criticism his ideas received from the Paris-based surrealists as 'a battle between those who want to preserve an ancient or a recent tradition and those who want change'.

The original manifesto was co-signed by members of the Belgian surrealist group and the artist's inner circle, including Joë Bousquet, Marcel Mariën, Jacques Michel, Paul Nougé, Louis Scutenaire and Jacques Wergifosse.

Also displayed here are two documents relating to Magritte's solo exhibition at Galerie d'art du Faubourg, which featured his *vache* works. Alongside the catalogue from this infamous exhibition is a provocatively worded leaflet (on pink paper), written by Louis Scutenaire in defence of Magritte's new paintings. One passage reads:

In the meantime, open your peepers, buddies!
You see, everything Magritte shows you is for your refreshment, but *it's above all to have fun*. And so it is that he wins every time, because if you're not perked up this time it's because there's truly no cure, but you can't take away the fact that he's had the time of his life. And us with him!

Postcard from René Magritte to Marcel Mariën 19 May 1944

ink on card

The Menil Collection Archive, Houston

MA 2003-083.002.1

This postcard was sent by Magritte to Marcel Mariën, his co-conspirator in the wartime forgery enterprise, in 1944. In it, he refers specifically to the fake Titian that is on display in this room. He writes:

I haven't done anything these last few days, except start a Titian and a Hobbema, destined for the sale room; I'm going to try this kind of painting, and if it goes better than Magritte-painting I'll give up the latter because of insufficient rewards.

**The extraterrestrials IV,
Jette (Brussels)
*Les extraterrestres IV,
Jette (Bruxelles)* 1935**

**The bouquet, Jette (Brussels)
Le bouquet, Jette (Bruxelles) 1937**

**The appointment, Brussels
Les rendez-vous, Bruxelles 1938**

**The soothsayer, Brussels
Le devin, Bruxelles 1942**

**God, the eighth day,
Jette (Brussels)
*Dieu le huitième jour,
Jette (Bruxelles)* 1937**

**The pharaohs or the eighth
dynasty, Lessines
*Les pharaons ou la huitième
dynastie, Lessines* 1935**

black-and-white photograph, facsimile
Courtesy of the Magritte Foundation, Brussels

These black-and-white photographs speak to Magritte's playful experimentation with the medium. Some of the images are related to his paintings, often featuring members of his close circle of friends in poses or situations that parody his artworks. As much as he enjoyed using a camera, Magritte never considered publishing or exhibiting the products of his photographic experiments, always considering himself a painter first and foremost.

5.

Le monde invisible

The invisible world

*Mystery is what is absolutely necessary for
reality to exist.*

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.'

Magritte or the object lesson

***Magritte ou la leçon de choses* 1960**

film, 35mm-to-digital, colour and sound, 14 min

Director: Luc de Heusch

Writers: Jacques Delcourde and Jean Raine

Cast: Camille Goemans, Irène Hamoir, Marcel Lecomte,
René Magritte, Louis Scutenaire

Cinematography: Frédéric Geilfus and Oleg Tourjansky

Courtesy RTBF and the Ministère de l'Instruction
publique, Belgium

Magritte or the object lesson is a short, experimental documentary featuring the artist and his close circle of friends. A voiceover meditates on the artist's ideas about the relationship between reality and representation and also offers mysterious commentary about several works in this exhibition.

The filmmaker has used cinematic devices – including dissolves, framing and mise en scene – to mimic some of the illusions Magritte created in his paintings.

Masks

Masques 1956–57

black-and-white film, 8mm-to-digital, silent, 1:15 min

Director: René Magritte

Cast: Irène Hamoir, Georgette Magritte,
René Magritte, Louis Scutenaire

Courtesy of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium,
Brussels

For Magritte, film was a medium for spectacle and amusement. Purchasing an 8 mm film camera in the 1950s, he made a series of 40 or so short films based on loose sketches and improvised scenarios, many featuring Georgette, Irène Hamoir, Louis Scutenaire and other close friends. Though they were not intended to be serious artworks, Magritte's films are nevertheless connected to his paintings. The gleeful skits often include familiar objects and ideas. In *Mask*, for example, the four actors, sometimes shrouded in white sheets and smoking a pipe, play with plaster heads, a spray of leaves and a bowler hat.

The liberator

Le libérateur 1947

oil on canvas

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of William Copley
52.31

This painting frees us from our intellectual habits.
The indefatigable traveller shows us the sky in a
more poignantly moving way.

– René Magritte, 1946

Megalomania

La folie des grandeurs 1962

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

1978-145 E

Magritte first explored the idea of a telescopic female form in 1927 and returned to the subject several times throughout his life. *Megalomania* was one of eight paintings he chose to transform into bronze sculptures, which were realised after his passing in 1967. The telescopic body may have been inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, a tale in which the protagonist undergoes several metamorphoses, shrinking or growing depending on her consumption of various foods or beverages.

The listening room

La chambre d'écoute 1952

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Fariha Friedrich
1991-53 DJ

One of the most significant developments in Magritte's art during the 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.

The listening room

La chambre d'écoute 1957

pencil, Indian ink and ink wash on paper

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

The red model

Le modèle rouge 1948

pencil on paper

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

This drawing reproduces one of Magritte's most recognised subjects. The disconcerting fusion of the animate foot and inanimate shoe initially appeared as a painting in 1935, and was then reprised six times in oil, gouache and, as seen here, pencil on paper. Speaking of the concept of the work in his 1938 lecture titled *Life line*, Magritte said: 'The problem of shoes demonstrates how the most appalling things go unnoticed through force of habit. Thanks to *Le modèle rouge* we feel that the union of foot and shoe is a monstrous custom.'

Madame Récamier 1950

red chalk on paper
Collection Sisters 'L'

Alexander's works

***Les travaux d'Alexandre* 1952**

coloured pencil on paper
Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

Madame Récamier belongs to a series from the early 1950s grouped under the title *Perspectives* in which Magritte replicated famous paintings but replaced human figures with coffins. Jeanne Françoise Julie Adélaïde Récamier (1777–1849), known as Juliette, was a French socialite and famed beauty who was the subject of numerous neoclassical portraits.

Alexander's works depicts a tree stump holding the axe that has led to its demise. The composition is based on the sketch for the letter 'A' which begins the text of the *Abridged dictionary of surrealism*, published in 1938 and edited by André Breton and Paul Éluard.

Untitled [Two girls walking along a street] 1954

oil on canvas

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

The kiss

Le baiser 1951

oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of an anonymous donor
91.1997

The origins of language

Les origines du langage 1955

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

V 821

You can't imagine living without ever seeing the sky –
or perhaps you can and it's better not to think about it.

– René Magritte, 1965

Golconda

Golconde 1953

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

V 414

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.



Find out more
agnsw.art/magritte-audio

The memoirs of a saint
***Les mémoires d'un saint* 1960**

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

X 2105

The endearing truth

L'aimable vérité 1966

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston
Y 139

In a postcard to fellow Belgian artist André Bosman, Magritte wrote from Milan that he was inspired to make this painting after seeing Leonardo da Vinci's *Last supper* 1495–98.

The telescope

La lunette d'approche 1963

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

1965-06 DJ

The window half opening onto absence of light.

– René Magritte, 1962

The invisible world

Le monde invisible 1954

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

V 615

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

Evening falls

Le soir qui tombe 1964

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

CA 64092

Evening falls is a variation on 'the problem of the window', which Magritte also explored in *The human condition* 1933 on display in room 3. In the earlier version, a painting on an easel appeared to be continuous with the view of a landscape seen through a window. Here, the illusion is literally shattered, with the shards of glass still portraying the view of the exterior landscape.

The art of conversation

L'art de la conversation 1955

gouache on paper

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

On first glance, the stack of stones in *The art of conversation* might appear to spell the artist's first name, 'René'. On closer inspection, however, a circumflex above the 'E' is plainly visible, instead leading us to register the following letter as a 'V', forming the word '*rêve*' (dream).

Sydney-based surrealism expert Simon Weir has offered a third reading of the composition, noting the subtle hint of a 'C' and 'L' to give the word 'Crevel'. René Crevel, Magritte's namesake, was a writer admired by the surrealists who tragically committed suicide at the age of 34. Weir suggests that, since '*rené*' means rebirth when used as a verb, this strange composition could be seen as a monument to Crevel, where death and rebirth surround an impossible dream.

The castle of the Pyrenees

***Le château des Pyrénées* 1962**

gouache on paper

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

The spirit of adventure

***L'esprit d'aventure* 1962–63**

gouache on paper

Private collection, courtesy Vedovi Gallery, Brussels

The dominion of light

L'empire des lumières 1954

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

V 616

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.



Find out more
agnsw.art/magritte-audio

Variation on sadness

Variante de la tristesse 1957

oil on canvas

Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth

Despite Magritte's aversion to symbolism, *Variation on sadness* seems to combine metaphor with morbid humour. A hen inspects a hard-boiled egg while another, apparently freshly laid, rests on the ledge behind her. Distant mountains are coloured melancholy blue, while the sky above them is tinted with soft pinks and oranges. It is unclear if we are seeing the beginning of the day or witnessing its end. Magritte presents a similar puzzle by including the eggs; one embodying potential for life, the other representing its absence. When asked in a 1947 interview why eggs were a recurring subject in his paintings, the artist replied: 'The egg, perhaps because I see the world in it'.

Force of circumstance

La force des choses 1958

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Alexander Iolas
1978-147 E

The song of the violet

Le chant de la violette 1951

oil on canvas

Private collection

In other paintings, stones reveal the perfection of their existence, they are called: *La parole donnée*, *Souvenir de voyage* and *Le chant de la violette*.

In *Le chant de la violette*, two people made of stone live in a land of stone, provoking at the base of the skull a distinct sensation of the song and the mental weight of the modesty of stones and violets.

– René Magritte, c1953

Memory of a journey

Souvenir de voyage 1951

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Adelaide de Menil Carpenter in honour of John and Dominique de Menil
2012-18

Magritte gave the title *Memory of a journey* to several paintings exploring the theme of petrification. In two earlier versions, Magritte uses *grisaille* – a technique in which shades of grey are used to create depth and dimension – to capture details reminiscent of more traditional still-life painting. In this variation, he has expanded the scene to encompass the interior of a room where the doors have been flung open to reveal a fossilised landscape. Magritte also used this technique to revisit past works, as seen nearby in *The song of the violet*, which depicts two figures inhabiting a world made of stone.

Pascal's coat

Le manteau de Pascal 1954

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Heiner
and Fariha Friedrich

1992-08

The title of this painting was devised by Magritte's friend, the poet Louis Scutenaire. It refers to Blaise Pascal, the 17th-century French mathematician, physicist and philosopher who experienced a religious vision that he recorded on a piece of parchment and sewed into his coat.

The spot on the map

Le lieu-dit 1955

oil on canvas

Private collection

The title of this painting, which translates literally as 'named place', was devised by Magritte's friend Louis Scutenaire. In French, *lieu-dit* is commonly used to refer to a small vineyard within a larger *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC) region.

The survivor

Le survivant 1950

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

Z 304

According to the Belgian poet Marcel Mariën, *The survivor* was submitted by Magritte for consideration in an exhibition organised by the French Communist Party in April 1950. Titled *Art and Peace*, the exhibition was described by Mariën as 'being organised under the aegis of Picasso's dove, a very active bird, at the time, in the skies of the Cold War'. In the context of the other entries, which featured predictable scenes of workers and May Day parades, Magritte's painting polarised opinions and prompted two hours of argument between members of the selection committee.

The sirens' song

***Le chant des sirènes* 1952**

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

V 312

6.

Le paysage de Baucis

Baucis's landscape

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

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 the 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.

The happy donor

L'heureux donateur 1966

oil on canvas

Musée d'Ixelles, Brussels

CC 1307

The title of this painting may refer to Magritte himself, as he gifted it to the Musée d'Ixelles in 1966, the year before his passing. *The happy donor*, which is closely related to the neighbouring gouache titled *Man and the forest*, 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.

Man and the forest
L'homme et la forêt c1965

gouache on paper
Collection Sisters 'L'

The childhood of Icarus

L'enfance d'Icare 1960

oil on canvas

Private collection

This depiction of a horse and jockey echoes Magritte's first acknowledged surrealist painting, *The lost jockey* 1926, in which a rider gallops his steed through an ominous landscape of bilboquet-shaped trees. Describing the picture in a 1954 text, Magritte wrote that *The lost jockey* was 'conceived without aesthetic concerns, for the sole purpose of RESPONDING to a mysterious feeling, an "unreasoning" anxiety.'

In *The childhood of Icarus*, the aimless jockey seems to have found his way, urging his horse toward an arched opening and the green forest beyond. A lone bilboquet stands sentinel to one side of the doorway, while, on the other side of the room, two pictures are propped against the wall. The gold frames enclose other familiar Magrittean motifs: rows of windows on the side of a building, and a blue sky filled with fluffy white clouds.

Good faith

***La bonne foi* 1965**

oil on canvas

Private collection

Baucis's landscape

Le paysage de Baucis 1966

oil on canvas

The Menil Collection, Houston

Y 207

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

– Rene 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.

The music lesson

***La leçon de musique* 1965**

oil on canvas

Carine Menache Collection, Monaco

The treachery of images

La trahison des images 1952

Indian ink on paper

Private collection

This still isn't a pipe.

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