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The Exploration of Revolution within Surrealism

The history of Surrealism is filled with a number of artists who spent their lives rebelling against the ordinary, against tradition, and often against authority figures. Surrealism is popularly considered to be a “revolutionary movement” overflowing with art that calls for justice and social change. However, does all good surrealist art spring purely and exclusively from revolutionary intention? To consider this question, we must look back into the 1920s at the birth of Surrealism.

At the height of Dadaism, the “anti-art” movement, lived a Frenchman named Andre Breton. Fascinated with the nature of the movement, Breton felt that despite its critics, Dadaism had achieved something meaningful, encouraging a new way of thinking through pushing limits. In 1924, Breton published Le Manifeste du Surrealisme (The Manifesto of Surrealism), in which he defined surrealism as “pure psychic automatism.” Influenced heavily by Sigmund Freud and, curiously, Karl Marx, the manifest heavily encouraged free expression and the release of the subconscious mind. The goal of the movement was

to discover and express thoughts in their purest form. "To release any energy that lies deep within us and that alone has value, is the aim of surrealism," as Breton explained it. In order to reach this state of consciousness, he espoused the idea that one must free oneself from the chains of tradition, convention, and logic. Breton worked with many Surrealists, including Salvador Dali and Max Ernst, to spread this ideology.

Despite Breton's view of Dali as "avida dolares" or "greedy for dollars," Dali is to this day arguably the most respected and successful surrealist artist to ever live. Dali was anything but ordinary with his long gelled mustache and very unusual and flashy wardrobe. In 1923 he was suspended from the art academy in Spain for "criticizing his teachers and allegedly starting a riot among students over the academy's choice of a professorship" ("Salvador Dali Biography").

Later that year he was arrested and briefly imprisoned for political reasons. He returned to the academy in 1926, but was permanently expelled for claiming that no member of the faculty was competent enough to critique his work for the final exams. ("Kristina Baatz on Salvador Dali")

Dali had a history of offending not only his professors but also his audience, and frequently incorporated Freudian concepts into his

work. In one famous painting entitled *The Great Masturbater* he depicts a giant head covered with insects, morphing into a woman's face with her mouth moving toward a man's crotch. The piece was a commentary on Dali's mixed views of sex. One of Dali's lesser-known paintings is his 1939 work entitled *Shirley Temple, The Youngest, Most Sacred Monster of the Cinema in Her Time*. The painting features the child star Shirley Temple as a sphinx with breasts and white claws, a bat above her head, and animal bones on the ground around her. The painting is known to be a satirical piece on the sexualization of child stars by Hollywood (*"Shirley Temple, The Youngest, Most Sacred Monster of the Cinema in Her Time"*). Like much of his artwork, the analysis was never confirmed by Dali himself. "I am the first to be surprised and often terrified by the images that I see appear on my canvas," he once said. "If you understand a painting beforehand, you might as well not paint it." Given that there is often a lack of intention when Dali set out to paint, could it still be possible that his paintings call for any sort of justice or social change? Could it simply be that this lack of intention paired with his pure, uncensored thought process was a revolution in itself? Let's look at other successful surrealist artists and how they came to be.

Meret Oppenheim was the only female artist to be accepted into the original Surrealist group. Born into a family of Swiss analysts,

she lead the group with her knowledge of psychoanalysis. Following the theories of Carl Jung, she kept diaries of her dreams for inspiration. Her aunt, a modern artist at the time, was another huge source of inspiration for her (*"Meret Oppenheim / Biography (1913 - 1985)"*).

Although the Surrealists were skeptical about a woman joining them, Oppenheim more than proved her worth to the Surrealists. In 1936, she created the famous *Object in Fur*, a fur lined teacup that was instantly embraced by the Surrealists as the icon of their movement. The piece was a commentary on human civilization in which refined ladies of the time wore fur and drank from teacups, but when the two were combined it screamed uncivilized. Oppenheim often made statements about female exploitation of the opposite sex in her work, making huge waves in the world of art. Her piece entitled *Ma Gouvernante (My Nurse)* which hung at an exhibition in 1936 in Paris was especially controversial. The artwork consists of a pair of heels tied down like an oven-ready chicken to a reflective dinner plate with the dirt covered bottom-side facing the viewer. Extremely sexual in nature, not only does the piece resemble a vagina, but has clear references to sexual fetishes such as bondage. The piece was so outrageous for the time, that an angered woman smashed the original piece at its first showing in Paris. Oppenheim created a second version not long after that still exists today.

Oppenheim's feminist and artistic values were passed down from a couple generations. Her aunt had been married to Herman Hesse and her grandmother, who studied painting in Dusseldorf, was an activist in the Swiss League for Women's Rights. Given her bloodline, it's not surprising that Oppenheim was as successful and outspoken as she was. The Freudian concepts found in her work were not accidental, considered outrageous by some and revolutionary by others.

Leonora Carrington was another renowned surrealist and feminist. Born in 1917, she rebelled against her traditional, conservative parents and ran away from home to study art in Paris. A founding member of the Women's Liberation Movement in Mexico, Carrington worked to neutralize the sexualization of women that was often found in Surrealist art. Themes of female divinity and life giving powers were common in her works. In *The Giantess (The Guardian of the Egg)*, she depicts an oversized woman wearing a cape and protecting an egg in her disproportionately small hands. Below her, a group of men hold weapons while numerous ships sail the seas on both sides of her. Animals including geese, dogs and sea creatures surround her as well. The painting expresses Carrington's protective feelings for her womanhood. In her self-portrait painting (1937-1938), she depicts herself in a blue armchair wearing riding pants and reaching out to hyena with a coat of similar color to her wild mane of hair. Drawn to the

rebellious characteristics and ambiguous sexual characters, Carrington often used the hyena in her works as a surrogate for herself (*"Important Art by Leonora Carrington"*).

In 1937, Leonora became romantically involved with Max Ernst, an older man and member of the original surrealist group who introduced her to the world of surrealist art. When war broke out, Ernst, a German soldier, was arrested by French authorities for being a "hostile alien". Devastated, Carrington plunged into a deep depression filled with anxiety and delusions. Her parents eventually intervened and had her hospitalized, however she managed to escape not long after.

On top of being a soldier in World War 1, Ernst was an innovative artist whose dreamlike art challenged and mocked social conventions. In his work, *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child Before Three Witnesses* (a straight-forward description of the painting), Ernst challenges Western art history with its conventionally loving scenes between the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Christ child. "Painting is not for me either decorative amusement, or the plastic invention of felt reality; it must be every time: invention, discovery, revelation," Ernst explained. In another one of his works entitled *Ubu Emperor* which translates to Commander, he depicts a leaning, unstable tower with arms extending from either side. The tower is perched upon a

spinning top that comes to a sharp end at the bottom. The piece hints at the lack of stability and authority in the commanders of war ("*Max Ernst Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works*").

The war became inspiration for many surrealist artists of the time, including Andre Masson. Like Ernst, he served in the army during the war. In 1917, he was hit in the chest by a bullet and left there for the night. Eventually he was found, however he spent several years in the hospital. Once he recovered, he returned to Paris, and joined the Surrealist movement in 1924. ("Andre Masson Biography")

His near death experience greatly affected much of his artwork, as shown in his painting *Gradiva*. In this piece he uses an intense color scheme including primarily red, and depicts a disfigured human body curled up around itself. One of the feet is very pale and stone-like while the other still shows signs of life. The body is atop a stone table that's falling apart as a volcano erupts in the distance. The piece is a perfect example of the war's effect on Masson's work and his changed view on the fine line between life and death. Disfigured or disconnected bodies were common in Masson's work and emphasize his feelings about the destruction of war. Some of his works from this time were displayed in the first Surrealist exhibition ever. Unfortunately, Masson wasn't fond of Breton's self-imposed claim

to leadership and decided to leave the group five years later due to this. ("Gradiva")

Whether Surrealist artists found inspiration from their relatives, their own experiences, or a combination of the two, each of them made waves in the art world in one way or another. From Meret Oppenheim's piece that was originally destroyed in anger to Ernst's painting of *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child Before Three Witnesses*, surrealists often look to make bold statements. Naturally, the artists involved in the original movement were quirky, rebellious, and outspoken individuals. Consequently, the art pieces that came out of this period were considered revolutionary at the time. Surrealism in itself was a revolutionary movement at the time period. Much of the artwork however, had revolutionary ideas outside of advancement in the art world. Art of this type falls into the realms of social and political commentary with the common themes of sex, war, and religion. Breaking off from the traditional views of art, the Surrealists received a lot of attention for their innovative, and often ridiculous works. However, given modern society's adaptation to the genre, for surrealist art to be effective in this time period, it would need to have revolutionary intention outside of simply being categorized as surrealist.

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