

DADA AND SURREALISM

Rethinking Reason

The devastation wrought by World War I gave rise to a virulent critique of certain grand ideas such as reason, progress, and a kind of nationalism that had led to use of technology for destructive ends.

International Dada movements during the War and, afterward, Surrealism were central to these critiques. Freewheeling and anarchistic, Dada often generated a wide range of heterogeneous artistic *reactions* against earlier aesthetics. By contrast, Surrealism, headed by its so-called “Pope” André Breton, was frequently characterized by more unified, programmatic, or positive *actions*. Partly owing to this contrast in purposes, it is not surprising to find, both in this exhibition and throughout the intellectual history of the twentieth century, a slight imbalance in the importance of material objects deemed essential to our understanding of the two movements. Characteristic works of Dada may be harder to locate, classify, and even appreciate, precisely because of the looser, more immediate, and ephemeral nature of Dada itself. Surrealism left more traces, partly because its effects were intended to be deeper and more transformative.

In this exhibition, artists associated with Dada, such as Hans Arp and Man Ray, are thus sometimes represented by later works, produced long after the initial flush of youthful post-WWI alienation. Arp’s amorphous, unnameable creature accompanying his own poems, collected as *Hairy Heart* (1923–26) and *Kings before the Deluge* (1952–53), or Man Ray’s amusing reference to Leonardo da Vinci in *The Father of Mona Lisa* (1967), are visually typical of their earlier work, even if they are years removed from Dada’s initial vitality and relevance.

Whereas Dada’s original purposes—to revolutionize consciousness and, by extension, society—were ultimately seen as largely unfulfilled, Surrealism had, by contrast, a strong ongoing life in artistic and literary imaginations. At first the Surrealists were, almost without exception, great admirers

of Dada, before dissociating themselves from its anarchism. From about 1921 on, they appear to have seen a different type of light, internal and hidden from most people and accessible only through a use of several new techniques. These included “automatic” writing and drawing and other unstructured collaborations, intended to open doors onto the unconscious. Automatism was a key procedure for André Masson, who used it to liberate artistic form from conscious control, as in his later *Composition* (1967). Max Ernst, having emerged from a thorough participation in Dada to become one of the central figures of Surrealism, employed another of these techniques, frottage, which involves taking the imprint of a natural texture in the manner of a gravestone rubbing. In his portfolio *Natural History* (1926), Ernst used frottage to transform vegetal forms and textures into animals, uniting the botanical and the zoological in absurd and sometimes marvelous combinations. The techniques of Joan Miró, too, had their roots in Dada. In the painting and prints on view here, Miró adapted Arp’s practice of biomorphism—making mutable animal or plant forms representative of no real species—to create worlds replete with strange insectile, aquatic, or wormlike creatures. These odd messengers from the unconscious can appear at once amusing and threatening.

Pablo Picasso was never associated with Dada, and he also resisted Breton’s efforts to recruit him to the Surrealist cause. But his work in the 1930s exhibits many Surrealist themes and techniques. Mythic creatures such as the Minotaur—half-man, half-bull, an embodiment of the Surrealist struggle between reason and instinct—frequently appear in his work, as in *Combat in the Arena* (1937). In *Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937), Picasso brought his evocations of uncontrolled violence into the arena

Artworks selected for Dada and Surrealism: Rethinking Reason are drawn from the collections of Washington University’s Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum and the University Library’s Special Collections. The exhibition was coorganized by Stamos Metzidakis, professor of French and comparative literatures in the Department of Romance Languages & Literatures, and John Klein, associate professor of modern and contemporary art in the Department of Art History & Archaeology, in conjunction with their course of the same title in spring 2011.

TEACHING GALLERY

MILDRED LANE KEMPER ART MUSEUM
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

DADA AND SURREALISM (con't)

of politics in these cartoonlike condemnations of Spain's dictator Francisco Franco, whose rule was an affront to Picasso's republican sympathies. Although not a self-defined Surrealist, Picasso tended to distort, disrupt, and provoke, which led him to empathize with Surrealist practices if not always its purposes.

The Surrealist emphasis on the unconscious, especially its instinctual and violent elements, had a significant afterlife too in the next generation of artists. Works by the Chilean Roberto Matta and the American William Baziotes, both of whom knew and exhibited with the Surrealists in the United States, exemplify the movement's continuing importance and international impact. The many periodicals that proliferated under the banner of Surrealism, a few of which are represented in the exhibition, also helped to extend the movement's impact outside its original ambit. Dada's initial rejection of a world torn apart by national interests was thereby recovered, in a sense, by the Surrealists' transcendence of such borders and barriers through their committed exploration of the uncharted territories of the individual psyche, and their desire to reach a wide audience with their revolutionary ideas.

Further Resources

Andrei Codrescu, *The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara and Lenin Play Chess* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Matthew Gale, *Dada & Surrealism* (London: Phaidon, 1997).

Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1989).

Maurice Nadeau, *History of Surrealism, with an introduction by Roger Shattuck* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1989).

Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).

Michel Sanouillet, *Dada in Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

See also related artworks on view in the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum's Bernoudy Permanent Collection Gallery, including key examples of Surrealism by Arshile Gorky and Yves Tanguy, as well as Joan Miró.