René Magritte

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Introduction

The world of René Magritte, the 20th-century Belgian painter who created some of the most remarkable paintings in the history of modern art, is full of startling visions that normally reside in our imaginations and dreams. With subjects including trains charging out of fireplaces and shoes with toes, Magritte is a master of the double-take. Something sensed in the first glance provokes a second, closer examination. His images evade expected meanings, leaving doubt and multiple interpretations. Many a viewer has stood pondering in front of a Magritte painting, "I think I get it, but wait, it could mean...", and yet the questioning process is never futile. Irony and wit lead to poetic insights concerning the nature of art, language, metamorphosis, and reality.

This teaching packet presents an overview of René Magritte's life, including important events, influences, stylistic developments, and recurring themes. A brief synopsis of the artistic movement of Surrealism is included for teachers who wish to discuss Magritte's work within this context. Following the short text are suggestions for classroom activities and an extensive bibliography for further research. A list of surrealist works in The Art Institute of Chicago’s permanent collection is also included for teachers to use when planning museum tours and/or classroom activities. Finally, slides of Magritte's works, as well as artworks by the surrealist artists Salvador Dalí (1904–89), Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1974), Joan Miró (1893–1983), and Yves Tanguy (1900–55) are provided to for the purpose of comparison, and to broaden this introduction to Surrealism.
Responses to the Art of René Magritte

People question images before listening to them, they question them with rhyme or reason. And then they are amazed if the expected answer is not forthcoming. Thus a word of advice is in order. A sunset, a river, a town, a woman, can be looked at in all simplicity. And in silence. A silence that SOMETHING will fill. So it is with the paintings of René Magritte. The expression ‘wait and see’ sometimes takes on a profound meaning.

Paul Nougé 1944

Who suspects that this triangle of canvas may perhaps contain something that will permanently alter the meaning of justice and love, the meaning, manner and tension of a human existence? Here are all our familiar objects...but presented in such a way that if we then turn back and look at the world again, something that was so banal that it no longer existed for us, suddenly acquires such formidable and fascinating density that we cannot even guess what new relationships we may form with it. The universe is changed; nothing is ordinary any more.

Louis Scutenaire 1942

René Magritte’s paintings—whose conditioning and objective make them unique in the history of painting—were created for the discovery, the preservation and the multiplication of the adventurous reality which is both the most elating and the nearest to us: the unknown.

Paul Colinet 1953

I would also like to remind you that what would appear to be the framework of Magritte’s daily life is humour, and that this is to be found in his work—sometimes—almost imperceptibly, but at other times in a far more precise fashion. Moreover, it is not entirely without a spirit of mystification. Magritte is not averse to people misunderstanding him, and he himself provokes these misunderstandings with obvious pleasure.

Camille Goemans 1949

My Dear René,
I have always felt that your paintings reverse the usual procedure: before one can look at them they are already scrutinizing the distracted onlooker. I shake your steady hand.

Man Ray 1937

Magritte paints in the mirror the positive image of fiction, points the finger in reverse towards the hand, pierces the eye through which the cranium is flooded with broad daylight by night...affirming the endless truth of the absurd.

Roland Penrose 1958

Would you like someone who can turn night into day?
Would you like to be sure that desires are often struck by lightning?
Would you like to walk through a transparent door?
Would you like poetic order from chaos?
And fire, wouldn't you like to control fire, and gravity and air and the stars?
Would you like someone who could make things seem what they really are?
Then you will like René Magritte.

Dorthea Tanning 1961
René Magritte: Life and Art

If the spectator finds that my paintings are a kind of defiance of 'common sense', then he realizes something obvious. I want nonetheless to add that for me the world is a defiance of common sense.

There is a mistaken idea about painting that is very widespread—namely that painting has the power to express, something of which it is certainly incapable. Emotions do not have any concrete form which can be reproduced in painting. To the fine man who asked me 'Which is the picture which 'expresses' joy?,' I can only say 'That one which gives you joy to see.' I particularly like this idea that my paintings say nothing.

René Magritte 1945

René François Magritte was born on November 21, 1898 in Hainaut, a province in Belgium known as the Black County for its barren, gray landscape and leaden sky. His parents, Léopold Magritte, a salesman, and Régina Bertinchamps, a dressmaker and milliner until her marriage, came from families which had lived in Hainaut for generations. They had three boys, René being the oldest, and enjoyed a fairly comfortable bourgeois lifestyle. In 1904, the Magritte family moved to Châtelet, a quaint Brussels’ suburb of 12,000 people where they bought a house alongside the River Sambre. There, the artist spent most of his childhood.

Magritte’s recollections indicate that his mother, Régina, was an extremely unhappy woman, taken to long bouts of depression. After attempting to take her own life on several occasions, she threw herself into the Sambre river in 1912 and drowned. Magritte was only fourteen years old at the time. He rarely spoke of this traumatic event, but mentioned on several occasions the memory of his mother’s face covered by her white nightdress when she was pulled from the river, her body laid bare in the moonlight. It is not known whether this horrific memory was a fantasy, produced in Magritte’s young mind as a way of coping with the premature death of his mother, or if, in fact, the strong river currents had actually veiled her in this way. Regardless, the memory appears to have many echoes in Magritte’s paintings; there are several which evoke death by water, and numerous instances of faces absent or concealed.
Throughout his childhood Magritte attended a weekly art class held above the local bakery in Châtelet. Later in his life he recalled, “The art of painting then seemed to me vaguely magical and the painter endowed with superior powers” (text found in Ollinger-Zinke and Leen (ed.) 1998, 44). His early paintings, consisting mostly of landscapes, are characterized by sensuous brushwork and conscientious naturalism. Magritte’s father considered his eldest son a young prodigy and supported him in every way. He sold several of Magritte’s childhood works to fellow business partners, boosting the young artist’s confidence.

From 1916 to 1918 Magritte attended the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. He considered schooling extremely important to an artist and studied anatomy and perspective. World War I (1914–1918) had shut down many universities in Brussels, and consequently, the Academy, which remained open, became a central gathering point for students of all disciplines. Magritte had more friends in the literary circle than among his fellow art students, and this companionship remained a life-long preference. He met frequently with writers and poets in cafés around the city to discuss ideas about art, literature, and modernism. Magritte’s student works reflect the diverse and sometimes contradictory influences of Henri Matisse (1869–1954), Cubism, Orphism, and the Italian Futurists.

At the age of twenty-two Magritte was called upon to serve for ten months in the post-war army. His recollections indicate that he had a relatively easy time in the service, spending many of his work hours painting portraits of commanding officers and using his graphic skills to make maps. After Magritte’s return in 1921, he encountered a friend from high school named Georgette Berger, and they were married several months later. Magritte earned a living designing wall-paper in a local Belgian factory, and, in addition, made posters and advertisements for businesses around the city. He continued to paint dynamic compositions that can be broadly categorized by Futurist tendencies toward fractured planes and brilliant colors. Magritte’s paintings became more and more abstract throughout the early 1920s. Working almost exclusively with the female
figure, he fractured the human form until it became virtually unrecognizable.

In about 1925, Magritte became interested in the art of the Italian *metaphysical* painter, Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1974) (see slide 7). The following passage exemplifies Magritte’s immense respect for this artist: (quoted in *Secret Affinities* 1976, 4)

This triumphant poetry (of de Chirico’s art) supplanted the stereotyped effect of traditional painting. It represented a complete break with the mental habits peculiar to artists who are prisoners of talent, virtuosity and all the little aesthetic specialties. It was a new vision through which the spectator might recognize his own isolation and hear the silence of the world. He was the first to dream of what must be painted as opposed to how to paint.

Magritte admired de Chirico’s use of dislocation, a combination of incompatible elements of reality, such as a cannon and a clock, within the same picture frame. De Chirico’s smooth, simplified brushwork and pronounced outlines also attracted Magritte who termed this style “the painter’s version of a collage.” Furthermore, Magritte was fascinated by the double illusions de Chirico produced through the depiction of pictures within pictures. These motifs, such as an oil painting within a painted room or an interior space with a window view of another world, interested Magritte because they complicated the relationship between reality and the illusionistic world of art. The close-up frontality of objects in de Chirico’s paintings also appealed to Magritte because of its directness and gravity.

Magritte’s mature style, which he maintained throughout most of his life, developed in the late 1920s. He experimented with many of de Chirico’s stylistic techniques such as collage-painting, the juxtaposition of identifiable objects with abstract shapes, illusionistic double images, and frontality. It is interesting to note that collage and dislocation were both techniques Magritte had previously explored in his advertisements and wall-paper designs. In contrast to de Chirico, who consistently gravitated toward the spectacular (steep high or low angles, acutely oblique angles, or extreme close-ups or long-shots), Magritte favored a straightforward
viewpoint: symmetrical, with receding planes placed parallel to the picture plane in a shallow, clearly delineated space.

In comparison to his earlier Futurist painting style, Magritte became increasingly "realistic" after 1925. That is to say, he turned away from arbitrary color, distortion, and bold brushstrokes in favor of a highly descriptive method of painting. Magritte relied on the illusion of space and the clarity of contours to create tactile forms that appear familiar and lifelike. The art historian Roger Shattuck describes this phenomenon wonderfully in his article entitled "This Is Not René Magritte" (1966, 32):

He takes the entire Western tradition of optical likeliness, perfected through two and a half thousand years of subsidized research, and applies it scrupulously to challenge the act of thought. Every separate item in his paintings looks like something we know. Yet no painting as a whole looks like anything we ever saw or conceived before we stood in front of it and looked.

The technical skills Magritte learned in the Academy and his background as a graphic artist helped him make this transition to descriptive painting. Except for a short 'impressionist' period in the 1940s, Magritte worked with this descriptive painting style throughout his life.

In the 1930s a group of artists, writers, and poets gathered in Paris around the poet André Breton (1896–1966). They called themselves Surrealists and were dedicated to revising the standard definition of reality. The means which they employed—automatic writing, accounts of dreams, trance narration, poems and paintings created as a result of random influences, and art which pictured images of paradox and dream, to name just a few—were all devised to serve the same fundamental purpose: to change the perception of the world and hence to change the world itself. The Surrealists were reacting against the traumatic period in which they lived, marked by the death and destruction of World War I, the poverty stemming from the worldwide Depression of the 1930s, and the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany. The Surrealists were interested in the art of children and the mentally ill because they felt works such as these resulted from pure creativity and imagination. Influenced by Sigmund Freud, they searched their own dreams and childhood memories for
understanding. The Surrealists embraced chance and, above all, attempted to shock their audience into action. They felt wonder at finding familiar objects in unexpected settings and searched for this kind of displacement in order to produce poetic revelations. There were multiple voices within the group; every artist had a unique way of working Surrealist theory into visual form.

Breton stated that a statue on a pedestal is apt to seem a bore, but the same statue in a ditch may become an object of wonder. Many of the Surrealist artists relied repeatedly on this device of dislocation for effect, and the effect, in turn, relied on the familiar look of the re-located image. Magritte became extremely interested in this aspect of Surrealist philosophy, for the most part because it was so similar to his own. In 1927 he moved to Paris in order to make closer contact with the Surrealists. Most art historical discourses refer to Magritte as a Surrealist even though this leaves out a great deal of the story. Magritte did not even view himself as a Surrealist, stating in a letter to his friend André Bosmans, "I'm neither a 'Surrealist' nor a 'Cubist' nor a 'Patawhatever' even though I have a fairly strong weakness for the so-called Cubist and Futurist 'schools' " (quoted in Torczyner 1977, 184). In reality, he only stayed in Paris for three years and had problems with certain Surrealist philosophies. He was interested in their ideas concerning the layered dimensions of reality and the power of dislocation, but did not share the group's enthusiasm for chance, the fantastic, or the intuitive creativity of trance-induced states. He was a man of reason and saw his works as premeditated reactions against the social order. He sought revelation in the ordinary and simple, believing in the power of human analysis as opposed to Surrealism's denial of the rational. Furthermore, the Paris Surrealists were flamboyant publicity hounds, which for the quiet, unobtrusive Magritte was unpalatable, to say the least. He was a quiet and contemplative man, prone to anonymity and camouflage. Magritte took care not to appear out of the ordinary. He wore a plain black suit and bowler hat—objects that appear in a number of his paintings and that may allude to the dominance of the bourgeois and a critique of conformity, as well as Magritte poking fun at himself. Despite these differences, Magritte maintained contact with the Paris Surrealists after his return to Belgium in
1930, exhibiting in several of their shows throughout the following decade.

The artist spent the majority of his life collaborating with a small band of friends in Brussels where he lived until his death in 1967. They called themselves the Belgian Surrealists and worked together for over thirty years. Committed to group activity, they drew up *manifestoes*, organized exhibitions, made films, edited reviews, and stimulated the art community in Brussels with their various projects. Magritte’s personal philosophy of art fits better into this context than it does with the Paris Surrealists. While the Paris Surrealists conducted their campaign of revolutionary action in public, the Belgian Surrealists made a point of conducting theirs in private, from behind closed doors. They adopted the guise of their own bourgeois background and settled into ordinary jobs. Paul Nougé (1895–1967), who was chiefly responsible for starting the movement (having already helped to found the Communist Party in Belgium), worked in a laboratory as a biochemist; Camille Goemans (1900–60), who acted as Magritte’s art dealer on more than one occasion, worked for many years as a civil servant, the Deputy Director of the Belgian Tourist Office; Marcel Lecomte (1900–66) was a schoolmaster; and Louis Scutenaire (1905–87) was a legal civil servant. René Magritte chose not to have a studio, but instead worked in a small corner of his living room, as if to hide the fact that he was a full-time artist. This attitude is best summarized by a statement Nougé wrote to André Breton in Paris, warning the French poet about the narcissism he saw creeping into artistic circles with the words, “I would quite like it if those of us whose names are beginning to make their mark were to erase them” (letter quoted in Whitfield 1992, 25).

The Belgian group rallied around its only painter declaring themselves “accomplices of René Magritte”. They illustrated his paintings with short poetic texts, thought up ideas/images for paintings, wrote of his work reviews, and found titles for them. Camille Goemans emphasized that finding titles was a sort of game, “They often start humbly, because they arise in gatherings of friends as a kind of game, but...once these titles have been let loose on the world with the works they accompany, they
take on a resonance at which their creators are sometimes at first to be amazed” (quoted in Whitfield 1992, 31). The group’s participation in finding images for Magritte’s work was also a regular pastime. For example, Magritte would say “I want to create a painting with a moon,” and the group would set about thinking of different scenarios in which the moon might exist, creating poems and short stories, or thinking of specific moon imagery (in books, paintings, catalogues, etc.) and then they would get together to discuss various possibilities.

This form of collaboration is especially interesting in a discipline that most often emphasizes the importance of originality, and yet it is completely in keeping with Magritte’s philosophy. He did not value personal artistic expression, but instead regarded his painting as an activity conceived in the spirit of scientific inquiry, an experiment in which other minds were welcome. Another example of this was his use of appropriation. Magritte searched postcards, illustrations, children’s books, and medical manuals for what he termed “neutral or indifferent” images and copied them in his paintings. He wanted to undermine the idea of uniqueness in a work of art. Magritte professed indifference to quality in his art and the work of others; he claimed to have no talent, no originality, no artistic aptitude, just ideas he sought to express in visual form. He once told an interviewer (quoted in Whitfield 1992, 28):

I always try to make sure that the actual painting isn’t noticed, that it is as little visible as possible. I work rather like the sort of writer who tries to find the simplest tone, who eschews all stylistic effects, so that the only thing the reader is able to see in his work is the idea he was trying to express. So the act of painting is hidden in my work.

This self-effacement and search for anonymity was in accord with the Belgian Surrealists’ desire to conduct revolutionary action from behind closed doors. And if revolution and anonymity seem contradictory, that’s okay, because the group loved contradiction. Above all, they saw the fusion of dissimilar or contradictory ideas as a way of questioning societal truths. The following statement was made in 1942 by Louis Scutenaire, a member of the group for over twenty years, “Magritte is a great painter. Magritte is not a painter” (quoted in Whitfield 1992, 35). The mystery and
playful contradiction which this statement embodies probably best summarizes the spirit in which Magritte and the Brussels group worked.

Several common themes recur throughout Magritte’s work. Humor, danger, and eroticism are ever present. Magritte once commented that these powerful sentiments saved him from chasing after formal perfection. His belief in contradiction fueled the search for the reconciliation of opposites. Thus, a painted landscape is pasted over a landscape viewed from a window, a gaping hole over the flat surface of a closed door, an evening landscape above a daytime sky, the shape of a man over the body of a woman, and so forth. Depending on how you interpret the images, their combination can emphasize difference or similarity. Metamorphosis is another element Magritte often used: he depicted women changing into fish, candles into snakes, feet into shoes, and bottles into carrots. He believed that the conscious combination of objects could reveal similarities that are often overlooked. He termed these mental connections “the recognition of elective affinities.” Magritte told Breton that his aim was to discover properties that belonged indissolubly to an object but seemed strange and monstrous when the connection was revealed. In contrast to other Surrealists, Magritte attempted to find connections that bind objects in the real world, as opposed to chance encounters staged in an imaginary world.

In several paintings Magritte transformed candles into snakes (*La Méditation*, 1936; *La Lampe Philosophique*, 1936). What might the combination of these two entities reveal? Applying the method of "elective affinities," this example underscores a candle’s inherent properties to be both firm and malleable, hard and soft, erect and flaccid: a reconciliation of opposites being achieved. Of course, everyone knows that a candle is soft and malleable when it’s heated, but rarely has the idea been so cleverly depicted. By combining two real objects, a candle and a snake, Magritte was able to reveal the “indissoluble properties” of a candle while addressing one of his favorite themes of contradiction.

Magritte was also interested in the degradation of traditional symbols. Lighted candles have long been a symbol of thought and knowledge, many
might venture to say a phallic symbol (i.e. firm, erect, hard...soft, malleable, flaccid). Mocking masculinity and reason, Magritte equated these ideas with snakes and all the unpleasant associations which these slimy, little creatures evoke. He also took the woman's body, a traditional symbol for purity and beauty, and transformed it in a way that evokes shock and horror. Women appear dismembered, mutilated, and metamorphosed in many of his works. In one well known painting, *The Rape*, 1934, a woman's torso is superimposed over her face so that her breasts become eyes and her pubic hair becomes a mouth. If we think of Magritte's "elective affinities," it appears he is saying that the indissoluble properties of a woman are her sexual parts. Yet it is always difficult to know exactly what Magritte meant to do. Was he working from a personal viewpoint (remember he sought to avoid subjectivity), commenting on the role of women in art and/or society, or just trying to be provocative/frustrating? What does he mean by the title? These questions will never be answered with absolute certainty because Magritte himself refused to answer them. Perhaps what he thought is not of the utmost importance. It seems more productive to assess the effect images such as these have on the contemporary viewer.

Magritte had a highly specific philosophy concerning the way humans perceive and extrapolate meaning from the world around them. He was particularly interested in how we attach words and images to ideas, or vice-versa. Thus, Magritte made a series of paintings in which both words and images appear, playing off one another in a way which emphasizes their function as conveyors of meaning. Magritte believed that, "an object never fulfills the same function as its name or image" (quoted in Whitfield 1992, 158). His most popular word-image painting, *The Treachery of Images*, 1935, depicts a pipe, a simple image that might have been taken straight out of a nursery school primer, and underneath it is printed the words "ce'ci n'est pas une pipe" ("this is not a pipe"). The crucial idea is that a picture of a pipe is not a real pipe, but rather, a painted illusion that humans have learned to equate with the actual object.

In many works, Magritte explored limitations of the oil painting medium. Many of his compositions resemble theatrical sets. The images
(props/actors) are placed in box-like spaces that resemble puppet theaters. In many works Magritte also included theater curtains, heightening the staged atmosphere which these works evoke. But the viewers of a "Magrittean play" are always aware that the curtains are frozen and will never open for another act. The actors are speaking scripts which cannot be heard. Theater and oil painting have fundamentally different properties: time and sound elements are impossible for Magritte to encompass with his media. Yet instead of turning away from this obstacle, Magritte embraced the challenge. He evoked the idea of sound and time through associative means: references in titles; depictions of instruments or phonographs; divisions, similar to comic-strip registers, within the picture frame; and the aforementioned creation of stage-like settings. Magritte also played with the sensation of touch, another limitation of oil painting. Many of his images, such as the furry cat/woman in the painting Discovery from 1927, draw attention to the feel of an object as opposed to its form.

Around 1940, Magritte began to explore a new painting style. He told the French poet Paul Eluard that he had decided to paint the "bright side of life" which included things such as women, flowers, birds, and nature. He imitated the painting style and images of Impressionism, a style which more than any other is associated with the happiness Magritte sought. At the time Belgium was struggling with food shortages, poverty and the hardships of German occupation during WW II (1939–1945). Magritte wanted to react against this pessimism, but right from the start he undermined the charm of Impressionism, mocking its air of innocence with bold colors and deliberate perversity. It seems his cynical nature could not be suppressed. Magritte borrowed certain images from painters such as Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), using parody to reinterpret their works. Indeed, Magritte never lost his savage humor, but rather embraced a new form of subversive activity during this time. He worked from within the Impressionist genre as a way of distancing the subjectivity of his own personal painting style, and in the process, poked fun at many Impressionist ideals such as truth, love, and beauty. Magritte's spirit of parody is tempered by his appreciation of the artists he mimics; he greatly admired the Impressionists for their passion. These new paintings were
not well received outside Magritte’s immediate circle of accomplices. Many felt he was being escapist and juvenile. Undaunted by these remarks Magritte told a friend, “So I’m taking refuge in the ideal world of art. An idealist position, you’ll tell me. Well, all right. But it’s only a way of amusing myself, after all, and that’s the main thing” (letter quoted in Whitfield 1992, 187).

In the late 1940s Magritte returned to his old style, perhaps working with an even stricter emphasis on simplicity and realism. Weightlessness is a common theme. In many works humans and boulders float in the air like balloons. An unsettling stillness fills his work. Like the eye of a storm, viewers are left to question what lies hidden behind their tranquil surfaces. Day and night are intertwined. A predominant theme of Magritte’s later work is what he called an “exploration of the void”. Windows open revealing only empty sky. Objects appear partially invisible or transparent giving new meaning to the word nothing, an idea Magritte came to embrace toward the end of his life. In 1958 he wrote, “Nothingness is the one and only wonder of the world” (letter quoted in Whitfield 1992, 246).

Magritte had a major impact on 20th-century art. Artists such as Robert Rauschenberg (1925– ), Jasper Johns (1930– ), Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997), and Andy Warhol (1928–87) were greatly influenced by his approach to art. Indeed, many of the ideas he embraced—appropriation, word-imagery, dislocation, collage, satire, and contradiction—continue to be explored by many artists today. What is more, Magritte’s art is familiar to a mass audience. His images have been used extensively by the advertising industry. As we look at Magritte’s work, it is important to realize the ways in which his voice resounds in our contemporary culture. Fifty years ago he commented, “I don’t want to belong to my time,” but then added, “or for that matter, to any other” (quoted in Gablik 1970, 72).
Glossary

appropriation: the act of taking possession or confiscating. Magritte's used appropriation by taking images that already existed, such as children's book illustrations or postcard images, and copying them in his own works.

bourgeois: middle class.

camouflage: concealment by means of disguise.

collage: derived from the French verb coller, to gum. A work of art made by sticking pieces of paper, material, or other items onto a flat backing, often in combination with painted passages. This technique, which was used extensively by Cubists such as Georges Braque (1882–1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), extended the boundaries of art by combining painted surfaces with other materials.

Cubism: art movement (c.1908–1920) led by the Spaniard Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and the Frenchman Georges Braque (1882–1963) that rejected traditional techniques such as perspective and modeling (use of light and shade to create a three-dimensional appearance) and theories that art must imitate nature. Instead, Cubist artists used shapes, planes, colors, and eventually collage to depict fragmented objects, revealing the many sides of an object simultaneously.

Dada: derived from the French word meaning "hobby-horse" to emphasize the anti-rational, anti-aesthetic, and, ultimately, anti-art stance of a group of artists working from approximately 1915 to 1923. European and American artists and writers used such arbitrary forms as nonsense poems, readymade objects, and collage to protest traditional values that they felt led to the chaos of World War I (1914–1918).

fascism: a system of government that advocates a dictatorship of the extreme right. This system of government often includes the merging of business and state leadership with a narrow-minded nationalism.
**Futurism:** an Italian art movement (1909–1916) with political implications begun by the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944). It sought to free Italy from the oppressive weight of the past and celebrated the modern world of machinery, speed, and technology in a series of manifestoes.

**Impressionism:** avant-garde art movement originating in France in the latter part of the nineteenth century regarded as the culmination of Realism that sought to capture, as if seen in an instant, the rapidly changing modern world, as well as the fleeting moods of nature. To do this, Impressionist painters analyzed natural effects and relied on optical blending to seize the impression of light at a given moment.

**manifestoes:** a public declaration of intentions, motives, or views.

**metamorphosis:** transformation from one physical state to another.

**metaphysical:** (metaphysical painting) term coined by the Italian artists Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1974) and Carlo Carra (1881–1966) for the calm, empty architectural scenes enlivened by mysteriously inappropriate objects, which they produced during World War I.

**Orphism:** a brief movement in French painting that developed out of Cubism. The word “Orphism” referred to Orpheus, the singer and poet of Greek mythology. Associated with the artists Robert Delauney (1885–1941), Fernand Léger (1881–1955), Frank Picabia (1879–1953), and Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), the movement sought to bring an element of color and lyricism to Cubism.

**Pataphysics:** ("Patawhatevers") a philosophy invented by the French writer Alfred Jarry, which was taken up by the Surrealists and Dadaist. Jarry defined his philosophy as "a logic of the absurd".

**perspective:** scientific method used by artists since the Renaissance to represent three-dimensional surfaces, so that they appear as in nature.
**phonograph**: a machine that reproduces sound by means of a stylus in contact with a grooved rotating disk.

**Surrealism**: a modern literary and artistic movement that began in France in 1924 and flourished in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s. The movement stressed the radical transformation of existing social conditions and values through the liberation of the unconscious mind. Surrealist art is characterized by its bizarre, dream-like, and sometimes non-representational imagery.
Classroom Activities

1. As an introduction to Magritte’s art, discuss some of the quotes on the first page with your class. Have students write reaction papers to one or several of the ideas brought up during discussion. Ask students to take one of the quotes and apply it to a specific painting. They should think of ways in which the text successfully, or unsuccessfully, describes Magritte’s work. Using the quotes discussed in class as models and showing the slides, have students write their own short interpretations/poems about one, or several, of Magritte’s paintings.

2. Ask students to create a story/poem about any one of Magritte’s paintings. The following are some possible topics: What will happen if the cannon goes off in On the Threshold of Liberty, 1937 (slide 3)? Who is looking over the balcony in The Banquet, 1958 (slide 2)? What other strange phenomenon is happening in the room in Time Transfixed, 1938 (slide 1)? Ask students to think creatively, but also, have them consider factors which affected their response, i.e., the title of the work, the colors, the imagery, the painting style, knowledge of Magritte’s history, the context in which the work was seen (museum, reproduction, slide).

3. Magritte’s art has been used by the advertising industry to sell books, insurance, credit cards, cars, televisions, clothes, candy, and many other consumer goods. A major American television company, CBS, appropriated the image of an eye in Le Faux Miroir, 1929, for its logo. Ask students why they think Magritte’s images are so popular with the advertising industry (they are instantly legible, witty, shocking, memorable). Have students create their own advertisements using Magritte’s Painted Object: Eye, 1936/37 (slide 4) or The Banquet, 1958 (slide 2).

4. Have students work on a painting/collage/drawing/sculpture in which dislocation or transformation occurs. You might ask them to work with specific objects (a clock, moon, eye) or let them choose their own. Remind students of René Magritte’s “elective affinities” and refer to specific examples of transformation/dislocation in his work. For example,
in *The Red Model*, 1935, boots are changing into feet, a transformation which reveals the concealing nature of shoes and the way they envelop/confine the human body. Ask students to write a short paragraph about what their own works reveal.

5. In the work *The Treachery of Images*, Magritte combines words with an image. Display the slide of the Art Institute’s version of this work, *The Air and the Song (The Tune and also the Words)*, 1964 (slide 11). Discuss Magritte’s ideas about the relationship between words, images, and meaning. A sample of Magritte’s writing on this topic is included in this teaching packet. Here are some questions to bring up when looking at this word image:

- Do words and images exist independently from one another?
- What does it mean to name things?
- Can names be easily changed?
- Does anything exist without a name?
- Do words and images carry equal weight in a painting?
- Can words replace images in a painting?
- Does the way words are written have any relationship to their meaning and/or the way they are interpreted?

Finally, have students create a work of art in which both images and words are used. They should look at word-imagery in the works of other artists as well as examples in newspapers, magazines, books, greeting cards, television, and film.

6. Magritte was inspired by the artist Giorgio de Chirico. Show students the slide of de Chirico’s *The Philosopher’s Conquest*, 1914 (slide 7). Then show the slide of Magritte’s *Time Transfixed*, 1938 (slide 1). Have students compare and contrast these two works of art. What items can be found in both paintings? How is the setting alike/different? What colors can be found in these works of art? What mood is conveyed in both of these paintings? Have students record their answers on paper, and then ask volunteers to share their ideas with the class.
7. Although Magritte was not interested in depicting the fantasy world, many Surrealist artists, such as Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy, and Joan Miró created images of fantastical places and creatures. Show students Dalí’s *Vision of Eternity*, 1936/37 (slide 5) and *Inventions of the Monsters*, 1937 (slide 6), *Miro’s Personages With a Star*, 1933 (slide 8) and *Man With a Pipe*, 1935 (slide 9), and Tanguy’s *Rapidity of Sleep*, 1945 (slide 10). Have students choose one of these images and write a descriptive narrative about this place/person. Students should describe the unusual setting and bizarre life forms. Other questions to ask could include: What is the name of this place/person? Where is this place located? Do the people from this place have special abilities; what are they?

8. René Magritte’s art raises interesting questions concerning objectivity. Regarding his art as a science, Magritte sought to limit self-expression and subjectivity through collaboration, appropriation, and the suppression of stylistic effects such as painterly brushstrokes (“I always try to make sure that the actual painting isn’t noticed.”). He also felt that originality and quality were not important criteria when evaluating a work of art. But certain themes in Magritte’s art, such as death by drowning or hidden faces, have origins in his past. The men in dark suits and bowler hats which appear in many of Magritte’s works also seem self-referential. Furthermore, themes which recur throughout his work were selected because of his personal interests in danger, humor, and eroticism; the reconciliation of opposites; and the relationship between words and images. Also, whenever someone appropriates images (from magazines, books, etc.), they always have the choice of selection, i.e. which image they are going to copy. Discuss these ideas with your class. Ask students if they have problems with ideas such as appropriation. Do they feel that it is copying? Do they think it would be difficult to allow someone else to title their works? What do they think about Magritte’s belief that art should not be self-referential? How do they decide if one work of art is better than another work of art? How do they feel about originality/quality? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; indeed, issues such as these continue to fuel lively debate in various artistic circles today. Have students write reaction papers on ideas generated in the class discussion. They may write about whether it is possible to be
completely objective in art; how other artists have sought to limit self-expression; or, in opposition to Magritte’s dismissal of self-referential art, they might discuss an artist who they feel successfully communicates a personal message.

9. Ask students to create a collage, drawing, or painting with Magritte’s ideas concerning appropriation and the need to limit self-expression in mind. Provide magazines and book illustrations that students can look at for images to appropriate in their paintings or drawings; if they are working on a collage, have old magazines around for them to cut apart. Ask each student to think of an idea for a work. If you have specific themes in mind, have students pick ideas out of a hat. They can be based on simple subjects, such as the moon, or more complex subjects, such as the reconciliation of day and night. When students are about half-way through with the assignment, ask them to get together with a partner and discuss their themes. Have students exchange works with their partners who will, in turn, complete the painting/drawing/collage that their partner started. When students are finished with the assignment, have them get together with a new partner and discuss/exchange their work of art again. The new partners should title the final compositions. Get back together as a class and discuss how the original idea changed through different people’s interpretations. How did they feel when they had to give up their half-finished works? Did they want to title the works themselves? How did they feel about appropriating images? Ask students how they feel about collaboration after this experience.

10. The Exquisite Corpse was the earliest of the many games invented by the Surrealist artists. Designed to create sentences that were left to chance, it was played with five players who, in turn, wrote an adjective, subject, verb, adjective, and object, each folding over the paper so the next person could not see what had been written. The name of the game derives from such a sentence: “The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine.” Divide your students into groups of five and have each group create its own Exquisite Corpse. Have the five groups share their sentences with the class. The results often are strange and humorous!
11. In *Time Transfixed*, 1938, Magritte used the process of dislocation by having a train emerge from a fireplace. Display the slide of *Time Transfixed* (slide 1) and have students discuss why this painting is unusual. Then, using the sheet provided (see the next page), have student create their own Magritte-inspired room, full of incompatible objects.
Surrealism in the Collection of
The Art Institute of Chicago

The following is a partial list of Surrealist works in The Art Institute of Chicago's permanent collection. Teachers may use the following works to place Magritte in the context of Surrealism on a museum tour or in the classroom. Starred objects are reproduced in this packet.

Jean (Hans) Arp
_Growth_, 1960
marble
Grant J. Pick Purchase Fund, 1965.357

*Giorgio de Chirico
_The Philosopher's Conquest_, 1914
oil on canvas
Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1939.405

*Salvador Dalí
_Inventions of the Monsters_, 1937
oil on canvas
Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1943.798

*Salvador Dalí
_Visions of Eternity_, 1936/37
oil on canvas
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Randall Shapiro, 1987.318

Paul Delvaux
_The Awakening of the Forest_, 1939
oil on canvas
Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1991.290

Max Ernst
_The Blue Forest_, 1925
oil on canvas
Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1988.221

*Joan Miro
_Man with a Pipe_, 1935
gouache on paper
Mr. and Mrs. Leigh B. Block, 1968.682
*Joan Miró
*Personages with Stars*, 1933
oil on canvas
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. E. Culberg, 1952.512

Pablo Picasso
*Head*, 1927
oil and chalk on canvas
Gift of Florence May Schoenborn and Samuel A. Marx, 1951.185

*Yves Tanguy
*Rapidity of Sleep*, 1945
oil on canvas
The Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1946.46

Yves Tanguy
Unknown title, 1928
oil on wood
Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1988.434

The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection

These galleries are filled with Surrealist art including works by: René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Francis Picabia, Joan Miró, and Paul Delvaux.

Of special interest are the two works by René Magritte:

*The Banquet*, 1958
oil on canvas
Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection, 143.1991

*The Air and the Song*, 1964
gouache on paper
Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection, 143.1991
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Foucault, Michel. *This is not a pipe*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1983.


Shattuck, Roger. "This is Not René Magritte", *Artforum*, special issue 'Surrealism" (1966), pp. 32-5.


________. “René Magritte”, *Artforum* (December 1965), pp. 30-3.