

Surrealism



Surrealist artists Learn about Surrealist artists, particularly André Breton and Salvador Dalí. © Open University (A Britannica Publishing Partner) [See all videos for this article](#)

Surrealism, movement in visual [art](#) and [literature](#), flourishing in [Europe](#) between [World Wars I](#) and [II](#). Surrealism grew principally out of the earlier [Dada](#) movement, which before [World War I](#) produced works of anti-art that deliberately defied reason; but Surrealism's emphasis was not on negation but on positive expression. The movement represented a reaction against what its members saw as the destruction wrought by the "rationalism" that had guided European [culture](#) and politics in the past and that had culminated in the horrors of World War I. According to the major spokesman of the movement, the poet and critic [André Breton](#), who published *The Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924, Surrealism was a means of reuniting conscious and [unconscious](#) realms of experience so completely that the world of [dream](#) and [fantasy](#) would be joined to the everyday

rational world in “an absolute reality, a surreality.” Drawing heavily on theories adapted from [Sigmund Freud](#), Breton saw the unconscious as the wellspring of the imagination. He defined genius in terms of accessibility to this normally untapped realm, which, he believed, could be attained by poets and painters alike.



Salvador Dalí: *The Persistence of Memory* *The Persistence of Memory*, oil on canvas by Salvador Dalí, 1931; in the Museum of Modern Art, New York City. © M.Flynn/Alamy

In the [poetry](#) of Breton, [Paul Éluard](#), [Pierre Reverdy](#), and others, Surrealism manifested itself in a juxtaposition of words that was startling because it was determined not by logical but by psychological—that is, unconscious—thought processes. Surrealism’s major achievements, however, were in the field of [painting](#). Surrealist painting was influenced not only by Dadaism but also by the fantastic and grotesque images of such earlier painters as [Hieronymus Bosch](#) and [Francisco Goya](#) and of closer

contemporaries such as [Odilon Redon](#), [Giorgio de Chirico](#), and [Marc Chagall](#). The practice of Surrealist art strongly emphasized methodological research and experimentation, stressing the work of art as a means for prompting personal psychic investigation and revelation. Breton, however, demanded firm doctrinal allegiance. Thus, although the Surrealists held a group show in Paris in 1925, the history of the movement is full of expulsions, defections, and personal attacks.

The major Surrealist painters were [Jean Arp](#), [Max Ernst](#), [André Masson](#), [René Magritte](#), [Yves Tanguy](#), [Salvador Dalí](#), Pierre Roy, [Paul Delvaux](#), and [Joan Miró](#). The work of these artists is too diverse to be summarized categorically as the Surrealist approach in the visual arts. Each artist sought his or her own means of self-exploration. Some single-mindedly pursued a spontaneous revelation of the unconscious, freed from the controls of the conscious mind; others, notably Miró, used Surrealism as a liberating starting point for an exploration of personal fantasies, conscious or unconscious, often through formal means of great beauty. A range of possibilities falling between the two extremes can be distinguished. At one pole, exemplified at its purest by the works of Arp, the viewer is confronted with images, usually biomorphic, that are suggestive but indefinite. As the viewer's mind works with the provocative image, unconscious associations are liberated, and the creative imagination asserts itself in a totally open-ended investigative process. To a greater or lesser extent, Ernst, Masson, and Miró also followed this approach, variously called organic, emblematic, or absolute Surrealism. At the other pole the viewer is confronted by a world that is completely defined and minutely depicted but that makes no rational sense: fully recognizable, realistically painted images are removed from their normal contexts and reassembled within an ambiguous, paradoxical, or shocking framework. The work aims to provoke a sympathetic response in the viewer, forcing him to acknowledge the inherent "sense" of the irrational and logically inexplicable. The most direct form of this approach was taken by Magritte in simple but powerful paintings such as that portraying a normal table setting that includes a plate holding a slice of ham, from the centre of which stares

a [human eye](#). Dalí, Roy, and Delvaux rendered similar but more complex alien worlds that resemble compelling dreamlike scenes.

A number of specific techniques were devised by the Surrealists to evoke psychic responses. Among these were [frottage](#) (rubbing with graphite over wood or other grained substances) and [grattage](#) (scraping the canvas)—both developed by Ernst to produce partial images, which were to be completed in the mind of the viewer; automatic drawing, a spontaneous, uncensored recording of chaotic images that “erupt” into the [consciousness](#) of the artist; and found objects.

With its emphasis on content and [free form](#), Surrealism provided a major [alternative](#) to the contemporary, highly formalistic [Cubist](#) movement and was largely responsible for perpetuating in modern painting the traditional emphasis on content.

Though it was a movement dominated by men—and often regarded as outright sexist—several talented women made inroads, if only briefly, into Breton’s tight-knit circle. Many of the women had close, usually [intimate](#), relationships with the male artists, but they also flourished artistically and exhibited at Surrealist exhibitions. Artists such as [Dorothea Tanning](#), [Kay Sage](#), [Leonora Carrington](#), and [Meret Oppenheim](#) were essential members of the Surrealist group. Their role in the movement was explored in depth by scholar Whitney Chadwick in her groundbreaking book *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (1985).