



Time Transfixed

1938

By René Magritte

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education

Division of Student and Teacher Programs

The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

ART
INSTITUTE
CHICAGO

René Magritte (Belgian, 1898–1967)

Time Transfixed, 1938

Oil on canvas, 147 x 98.7 cm

Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1970.426

René Magritte believed that all beings and objects are mysterious. An enigmatic man frequently dressed in a dark suit and bowler hat, he too possessed an aura of mystery. Unlike the other **Surrealists** of his time, Magritte found mystery not in fantastical imagery, but in everyday reality. The Art Institute of Chicago painting *Time Transfixed* is a perfect example of the mystery that can be found when ordinary, yet incompatible objects collide.

A mirror, a clock, and two candlesticks are placed strategically on the mantel. These ordinary objects further add to the mysterious setting. Magritte felt that mirrors provide mystery in the sense that they are a false reflection of reality, and thus he often included mirrors in his paintings. Although we find both the clock and one candlestick reflected in the mirror, the second candlestick, and the rest of the room, do not appear in this mirror which, strangely, is as dark as the hearth below.

Magritte believed that the conscious combination of contradictory objects could reveal similarities that are often overlooked. In *Time Transfixed*, we find the surprising juxtaposition of a locomotive protruding from a fireplace. In explaining the painting, Magritte said: “I decided to paint the image of a locomotive.... In order for its mystery to be evoked, another immediately familiar image without mystery—the image of a dining room fireplace—was joined” (quoted in May 1997). In this work we also find another device that Magritte frequently used, modification of scale. Here, the locomotive has been shrunk to a non-traditional size to fit inside the fireplace. It is in the surprising juxtaposition and shift of the scale of these common and unrelated images that mystery, magic, and humor merge. Magritte situated the train in a fireplace vent so that it appears to be emerging from a railway tunnel. The tiny engine races out into the stillness of a sparsely furnished dining room, its smoke neatly floating up the chimney, as if to suggest smoke produced by a fire.

Although this Surrealist imagery seems to originate in a dream, we can also trace Magritte's interest in these sensory distortions to a sense of dislocation and disillusionment in Europe between the World Wars in the mid-20th century.

Biography

The oldest of his family's three sons, Magritte was born on November 21, 1898, in the small Belgian town of Lessines, just outside Brussels. His father was a salesman, his mother worked as a dressmaker and **milliner**, and the family lived a comfortable bourgeois life. However, Magritte's father was a restless man, and the family moved frequently from town to town. Consequently, as an adult, Magritte hated to travel.

Playing in a local graveyard, the young Magritte one day witnessed an artist painting in a nearby grove. From that moment onward, the boy viewed painting as a magical, mysterious act. During his youth, Magritte attended weekly art classes where his talent was recognized. His boastful father considered the young Magritte a child prodigy and sold his childhood works to fellow business partners.

Magritte's mother suffered from depression. In 1912, when Magritte was just 14 years old, she committed suicide by drowning in the nearby River Sambre. Although he rarely spoke of this tragic event, the artist did mention on several occasions the memory of his mother's face covered by her white night-dress when she was pulled from the river, her body laid bare in the moonlight. To what extent this memory was fact or fiction is unknown; however, in later years Magritte painted several works that evoke death by water, as well as others in which faces are absent or concealed (Sylvester 14).

In 1916, Magritte moved to Brussels to begin his formal studies at the Académie des Beaux-Arts (the National Academy of Fine Arts). While at the academy he studied anatomy and perspective. During World War I (1914–1918), many of the universities in Brussels had closed; consequently, the Academy, which remained open, became a central gathering point for students of all disciplines. Magritte made more friends in the literary circle than with other art students, and this companionship remained a life-long preference.

In 1921, Magritte married Georgette Berger, whom he had first met when he was just 14 years old. The two lived a simple lifestyle in Brussels. Instead of painting in a studio, Magritte chose to paint in the dining room, where he could be closer to Georgette. As an artist, fame did not come until the last 10 years of his life. To earn a living, he worked as a wallpaper designer and commercial artist, making posters for businesses. In his advertisements and designs he experimented with collage and dislocation, which would later appear in his paintings. Today Magritte's legacy is still apparent in advertising: for example, the CBS eye logo was appropriated from Magritte's painting *False Mirror* (1928) (Whitfield 11).

What was Surrealism?

Beginning in the 1920s, a group of artists, writers, and poets gathered in Paris around the poet André Breton (1896–1966). These artists, the Surrealists, were dedicated to revising the standard definition of reality, by focusing on automatic writing and drawing, creating fantastical images, recounting dreams, and exploring the **subconscious**. Magritte worked with these artists during a three-year stay in Paris. In 1930, he returned to Brussels, where he collaborated with a group of writers who began referring to themselves as the Belgian Surrealists. Unlike the flamboyant Parisians, this Belgian group better suited the artist's reserved manner and his desire for anonymity. Members rallied around the group's only painter, creating poems and other texts to accompany works.

In 1924, Magritte became interested in the art of the Italian **Metaphysical** painter Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1974). Magritte admired de Chirico's use of dislocation, the combination of incompatible objects of reality, such as a cannon and a clock, within the same picture frame. He also was attracted to de Chirico's tight brushstrokes and pronounced outlines. Magritte's mature style developed in the late 1920s. He experimented with many of de Chirico's stylistic techniques such as collage-painting, the juxtaposition of identifiable objects, and the illusion of double images.



Giorgio de Chirico, *The Philosopher's Conquest*, 1913–1914. Joseph Winterbotham Collection.

Time Transfixed serves as a perfect example of Magritte's inter-est in de Chirico. The combination of the train and the clock is reminiscent of de Chirico's work *The Philosopher's Conquest* (1914), also found in the Art Institute's collection. Magritte's smooth brushstrokes, use of shadow, and dark palette also are reminiscent of de Chirico's style.

The setting for *Time Transfixed* was inspired by the dining room in the London home of the eccentric art collector Edward James. The previous year, James had commissioned Magritte to paint three works, including the Art Institute's *On the Threshold of Liberty*. James, one of the few English collectors interested in Surrealism, became acquainted with Magritte after viewing his work at the 1936 Surrealist Exhibition in London (Whitfield 75). While working on these commissions, Magritte briefly lived in a studio above James's garage before returning to Brussels. One painting, *La reproduction interdite* (*Not to be reproduced*) was an unusual portrait of his **patron** that featured the same mantel and mirror found in *Time Transfixed*.

Magritte's paintings often had unusual titles. He named the work now at the Art Institute *La durée poignarde*, which translates literally as "the concept of ongoing time stabbed by a dagger." When he sent the picture to James, he expressed hope that it might be installed at the bottom of the collector's staircase so that it (presumably the outward-thrusting train) would "stab" James's guests on their way up to the ballroom. James, however, chose to place the painting over the fireplace.

A few years after completing the painting now referred to as *Time Transfixed*, Magritte changed his style to one that portrayed the "bright side of life." This included painting women, flowers, and birds in a mock **Impressionist** style. A parody of Impressionism, his new style was not well received by the public and, by the late 1940s, Magritte returned to his old style, focusing once again on finding mystery in the most familiar of things. He continued in this manner until his death in 1967, and his works impacted such important 20th-century American artists as Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), Jasper Johns (1930–), Roy Lichtenstein (1923–1997), and Andy Warhol (1928–1987).

Glossary

bourgeois: middle class.

collage: derived from the French verb *coller*, to glue or stick. 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 was used extensively by Cubists Georges Braque (1882–1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973).

dislocate: (dislocation; dislocated) to put out of place; displace. Magritte experimented with dislocation by combining incompatible objects together in the same picture.

Impressionism: avant-garde art movement originating in France in the latter part of the 19th century 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.

linear perspective: scientific method used by artists since the Renaissance to represent three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane, so that they appear as in nature. Linear perspective involves a system of lines that converge at one or two vanishing points in the distance.

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

milliner: a person who designs, makes, or sells hats for women.

patron: a customer or client. An art patron is a person who supports an artist or museum with money or endorsements.

Surrealism: a modern literary and artistic movement that began in France in 1924 and flourished in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s. The movement, influenced by the writings of the psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), stressed the radical transformation of existing social conditions and values through the liberation of the unconscious mind. Surrealist art is characterized by bizarre, dream-like imagery.

World War I: (1914–1918) also known as the Great War, this conflict was the largest war the world had yet seen. Prominent causes for the war were the imperialistic, territorial, and economic rivalries between Germany, Great Britain, France, Russia, and Austria-Hungary. The United States entered the war in April 1917.

Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

• The Exquisite Corpse

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 article and adjective/noun/verb/adjective/noun, 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 sentence by following these steps:

- Instruct one student in each group to write the first word or words of the sentence (article plus adjective) at the top of a piece of paper. He or she should then fold the piece of paper over to conceal the written word and pass it to the next person.
- The next person should fill in the next part of speech (a noun), conceal it, and pass the paper to the next person.
- When the sentences are complete, instruct students to open the papers and share with the class. The results are often strange and humorous!
- Please note that sentences may need slight editing.

• Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream...

Oftentimes, Magritte would create a painting after awaking and recalling a bizarre dream. With its dislocated objects and mysterious mood, *Time Transfixed* is reminiscent of an unusual dream. Assign a creative writing exercise in which students imagine and describe a dream that includes the scene represented in the painting. How did the train appear in the fireplace? What other unusual things are located in the room? Ask students to concentrate on their sensory experiences of the work. What do they see? Feel? Taste? Smell? Hear? Have students share their dreams with the class.

• A Train Is Speeding...

Have students create a word problem using *Time Transfixed*. For example: Pretend that the train is speeding out of the fireplace at 45 miles per hour. How long would it take for the train to reach a town located 32 miles away? Have students work together in small groups to create a word problem related to the painting. Have each group share their word problem and then find the solutions!

• Surrealist Room

In *Time Transfixed* Magritte used the process of dislocation by having a locomotive emerge from a fireplace. Display *Time*

Transfixed and have students discuss why this painting is unusual, asking: What do you see? What kind of room is this? What is out of place? Is the image serious or lighthearted? Then, using the sheet provided (see the next page), have students cut out objects from magazines to create a collage of a Magritte-inspired room.

- **What's for Sale?**

Magritte's paintings are often used in advertisements. Pretend that *Time Transfixed* is a billboard advertisement. What might it be advertising? Have students create an advertisement using the painting.

Related Resources

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