

# SALVADOR DALÍ AND HANS ARP

## »THE BIRTH OF MEMORY «

16 February – 16 August 2020

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### GENIUS

Like Salvador Dalí, Ludwig van Beethoven was one of the most radical artists of his day: eccentric, brilliant, constantly reinventing himself. Surprisingly, although Dalí claimed to feel a much greater affinity to painting than to music, he nonetheless made multiple references to the great composer. For example, *L'Âge d'or*, the Surrealist cinematic masterpiece he created with Luis Buñuel, was accompanied by Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Dalí also recalled with fascination a vivid childhood memory in which he saw Beethoven's head, with its lofty brow and unruly hair, in a lowering sky filled with storm clouds. This vision stayed with him, and in 1942 he immortalized it in the ink drawing *Beethoven's Cranium*. Looking at it, one can almost hear the rumbling of the towering cloud in which Dalí had discovered the likeness.

"I recognized it right away! ... Beethoven's cranium, bowed in melancholy over the plain, augmented in volume. ... Soon Beethoven's entire face was reabsorbed by his immense brow which [was] growing at an accelerated speed."

This relatively small and early drawing was followed thirty years later by a no less thrilling confrontation in the form of a monumental portrait – painted with squid ink.

The enduring popularity and relevance of both artists marks them as visionaries who have carried the past into the future. Beethoven's groundbreaking innovations in classical music shaped the next generation just as much as Dalí's unique Surrealistic visual worlds.

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## SALVADOR DALÍ AND HANS ARP: THE BIRTH OF MEMORY

Paris, 1929: The meeting between Hans Arp and Salvador Dalí takes us right to the heart of Paris Surrealism. Whereas Dalí would later declare, “I am Surrealism,” Arp was more reticent, yet no less present. The latter had already been part of the movement’s innermost circle for some time when Dalí, seventeen years his junior, joined the group and immediately won over many of its members, including its founder, the writer André Breton.

Although Dalí had still been experimenting with a language of abstract forms akin to Arp’s just a few months before, he surprised the French metropolis with a completely new style of painting. He conjured his surreal visions and dreamlike encounters with academic brushstrokes, while Arp continued no less passionately to explore the possibilities of abstraction. As representatives of the two main currents of Surrealism, their visual languages could hardly be more different. The parallels and associative connections that are revealed through the dialogue between their visual and visionary worlds are therefore all the more surprising. Correspondences can be found both in their motifs and in their overarching artistic principles, especially in their object-languages and visual metamorphosis or transformation of forms.

For nearly a decade, Arp and Dalí took part in many of the same exhibitions and events. Amid the bustling activity of the Surrealists, previously unsuspected relationships and intersections await discovery. Join us on a journey by way of amusingly eccentric mustaches and navels to reveal a rich world of surreal iconography.

## THE OBJECT

A key concept in Surrealism is the elevation of the object to the status of an autonomous art form, as called for by Dalí and others. Everyday items – telephones, shoes, bottles, hats – are removed from their normal, logical contexts and placed in new, sometimes absurd relationships to one another. Dreams and the unconscious serve as models for these fantastical realities beyond the world of our customary imaginings.

Arp and Dalí were both masters of the Surrealist object. As early as 1923, Arp had begun to develop a poetic object-language that is as present in his prints and reliefs as it is later in his poetry and certain sculptures. In the humorous hermaphroditic figures that populate his work, the boundaries between humanity and the world of things are completely effaced, while his abstract compositions employ artistic methods such as alienation and deformation. Dalí made use of these as well, initially in the detail-obsessed images he captured on canvas with academic precision. Later he created real sculptural objects, including the lobster telephone that became one of Surrealism’s most popular icons.

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### BUREAU SURREALISTE

Between 1929 and 1938, Arp and Dalí were both included in a large number of Surrealist exhibitions and publications, as evidenced by a variety of often unconventional printed objects, many of which were designed with the direct involvement of the artists. The profusion of catalogs and magazines provides further proof of the importance of Surrealism as an international art movement in the interwar years. These documents also illustrate how the exhibitions, having originated in the avant-garde galleries of the Rive Gauche, soon grew into highly visible mass spectacles accompanied by bizarre staged events. These shows ushered in a new era in the presentation and orchestration of exhibitions. The singular atmosphere at the New Burlington Galleries in London in 1936 is superbly documented in photographs, as is that of the even more elaborate show at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1938.

A true treasure trove of the Surrealist imagination can be found in the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme*. Both Dalí and Arp are represented by numerous entries in this unique reference book from 1938.

### THE BODY

The image of the human body is perhaps the most prevalent subject in art history through the modern era. That includes the oeuvres of Salvador Dalí and Hans Arp, who dealt with the body in every phase of their careers. Both artists repeatedly made the torso the focal point of their creative explorations. It stands at the inception of Arp's fully sculptural work in 1930, albeit less in the sense of a fragment than as the epitome of growth and vitality. A parallel can be found in a painting by Dalí from the same year. His painted torso depicts the likeness of a freestanding sculpture on a stagelike, unsettlingly deserted piazza.

A broad spectrum of bodily representations appears in the work of both artists. In Dalí's, it ranges from drawn illustrations of an unrecognizable anthropomorphic mass to highly detailed, almost photorealistic paintings. In the latter his wife, Gala, can often be found at the center of complex image sequences.

A thoroughly unexpected picture among Dalí's late works provides a final surprise. Utterly reduced and devoid of extremities, the silhouette bears a remarkable resemblance to Arp's *poupées*, the symmetrical, sexless doll forms he produced in hundreds of variations.

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### FORM

Arp and Dalí followed many related creative impulses. During a brief phase circa 1928, Dalí even turned to organic abstraction, which he hailed at the time as a major development in modern art. He chose a visual vocabulary that was quite similar to Arp's cosmic forms, especially his moving ovals. These were frequently interpreted as motifs of symbolic power, such as the navel or the egg, and epitomize emergence and growth. Similarly, astonishing parallels to Arp's vegetable shapes can be found in Dalí's early work.

Even after 1929, when Dalí took a completely new path, returning to a detail-obsessed, naturalistic style in his paintings, the oeuvres of both artists are linked by an unexpected intersection of artistic principles – the foremost of which is metamorphosis. Arp's works are emblems of transformation, containing the same multiplicity of potential perspectives as the double images Dalí created by following his critical-paranoiac method. In his *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, for example, the mythical apparition of the kneeling figure is transformed before the viewer's eyes, via the reflection on the surface of the water, into a sculpturally ossified hand.

Of course, the two artists' visual approaches were virtually antithetical. On the surface, at least, Arp's main concern was to grapple with form itself, condensing it and thereby pushing it to its limits. Dalí, on the other hand, always incorporated socially and/or psychologically charged references into his evocative and elaborate compositions.

### DREAM OF VENUS

In 1932, when the New York avant-garde gallerist Julien Levy introduced Salvador Dalí to the American public with *The Persistence of Memory*, no one could have guessed that that painting's "melting clocks" would soon come to epitomize Surrealism. Dalí conquered the American art market in the blink of an eye, and in 1939 he was invited to design a pavilion for the New York World's Fair. With *Dream of Venus*, he created a total work of art in which he gave free rein to his obsessive fantasies.

The exterior – in the form of a monumental coral reef, with a fish head for a ticket booth – gave an idea of what awaited inside. Visitors passed through an entrance flanked by women's legs to arrive at an interior divided into wet and dry sections. The former consisted of two tanks in which bare-breasted women put on a bizarre underwater show. In the dry section, a similarly scantily clad Venus, intermittently adorned with lobsters, lay in a gigantic bed. Another highlight of the installation was an enormous painting in which Dalí combined a number of his Surrealistic motifs in an open landscape. That picture prominently features his melting clocks alongside a lobster telephone and a drawer-headed figure. While the rest of the pavilion fell victim to demolition and is documented only by a number of photographs and some filmed footage, the painting was preserved from destruction.