

footstool, and sofa as being cast from found furniture, while the coffin was constructed to Magritte's specifications. However, due to the close resemblance to the furniture in Magritte's original painting, some scholars have suggested that it was all made to the artist's design.<sup>3</sup> The wax molds for all eight of the bronze works were completed by the Gibiesse foundry in Verona, where Magritte inspected them and made modifications. Unfortunately, Magritte fell ill shortly after this visit; he died in August 1967, before the bronze casts were completed.

Though it's been nearly fifty years since the artist's death, his legacy is alive and well. During his lifetime, he created some of the most frequently reproduced images of the twentieth century, many of which have been appropriated by mass culture for both marketing and design. In addition to this popular appeal, Magritte's work has been a near constant presence in both museums and galleries over the last forty-odd years. It is no surprise, then, to find subsequent generations of artists, ranging from Robert Rauschenberg to Vija Celmins to Robert Gober, attempting to answer some of the provocative questions posed in Magritte's enigmatic paintings and objects.

1. René Magritte, quoted in *Secret Affinities: Words and Images by René Magritte* (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1976), 19.
2. Magritte in *Life* (April 22, 1966), quoted in *Secret Affinities*, 16.
3. David Sylvester, *René Magritte: Oil Paintings and Objects 1949–1967*, Catalogue Raisonné III (Houston: Menil Foundation; Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1993), 461.

*Memories of a Voyage: The Late Work of René Magritte* is organized by the Menil Collection and curated by Clare Elliott with Josef Helfenstein.

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René Magritte, *Souvenir de voyage III (Memory of a Journey III)*, 1951 (detail). Oil on canvas, 31<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 25<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches (80.2 x 65.1 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Adelaide de Menil Carpenter in honor of John and Dominique de Menil. Photo: Paul Hester

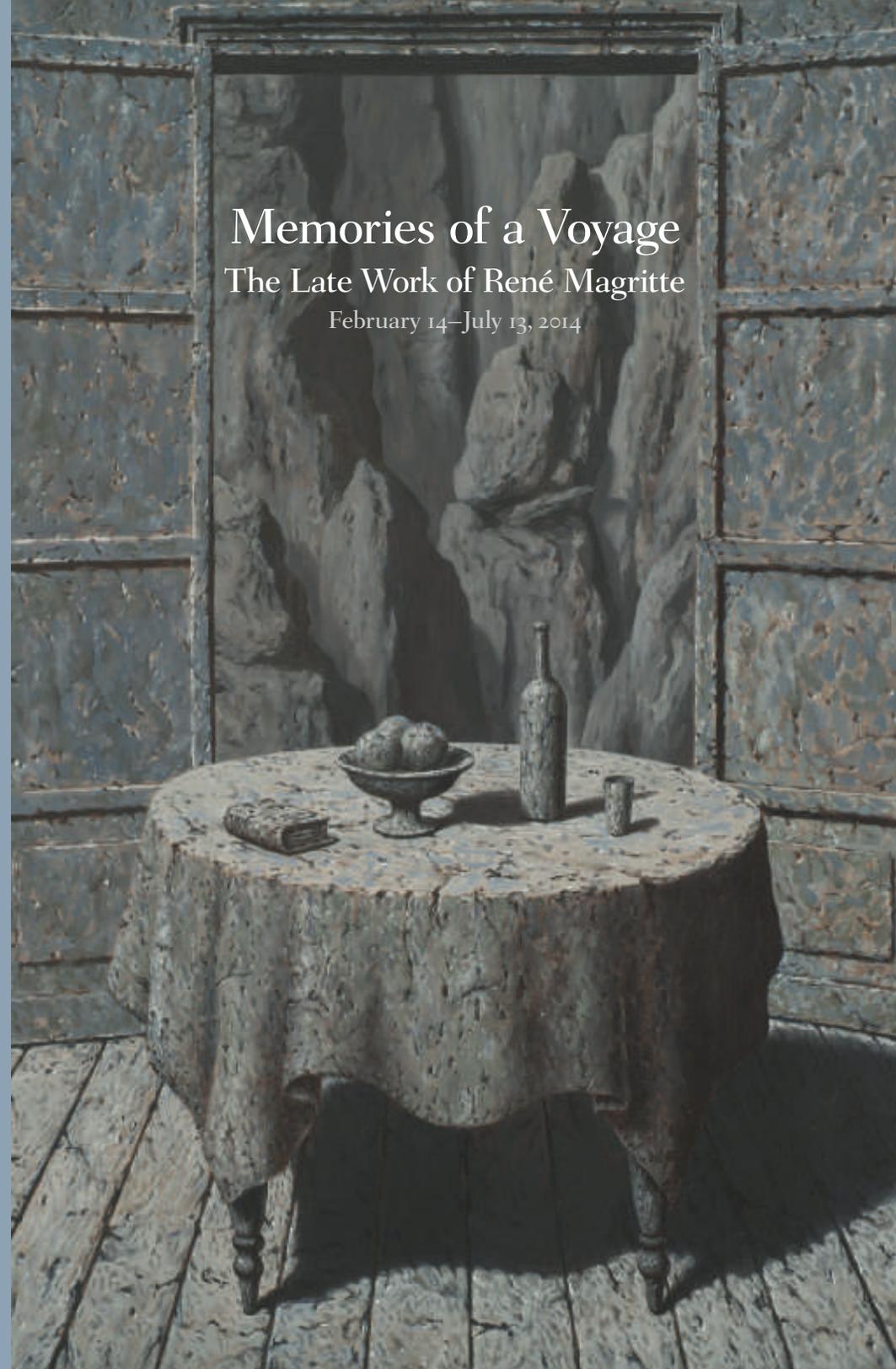
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# Memories of a Voyage

## The Late Work of René Magritte

February 14–July 13, 2014

By the beginning of World War II, Belgian Surrealist René Magritte had established his signature approach to painting, developing a realistic style that he used not to reinforce but rather to undermine the viewer's acceptance of what is real. Already well known, in the postwar years his reputation grew in tandem with the increasing visibility and popularity of Surrealism in the United States. Though he often revisited and reinterpreted themes from his earlier work, Magritte continued to create new imagery until his death in 1967, developing some of his most recognizable motifs. Bringing together a selection of works created after 1940, *Memories of a Voyage: The Late Work of René Magritte* examines the second half of the artist's career.

One of the best-known recurring images that Magritte created during the postwar period is a landscape in which day and night coincide. His close friend the Belgian poet Paul Nougé provided the title *L'Empire des lumières* (*The Dominion of Light*), and by the end of his life, the artist had created seventeen variations in oil and ten in gouache. The first version was created in 1949 and sold to Nelson Rockefeller the next year, and in 1951 John and Dominique de Menil gave the second version, also in oil, to the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The painting on view in this exhibition is one of four that Magritte painted in 1954 alone. He was, in fact, obligated to do so when the first 1954 version was sold to Peggy Guggenheim while having been inadvertently promised to three other buyers.

Stones were a frequent subject of Magritte's later work, functioning in some ways as the ultimate object. For the artist, their inert presence evoked a great mystery. In the artist's words, "A stone, which does not think, thinks the absolute."<sup>1</sup> Large rocks are depicted in unlikely places and seem to defy gravity in *Le Monde invisible* (*The Invisible World*), 1954, and *La Clef de verre* (*The Glass Key*), 1959. Closely related to representations of stones themselves are a number of works in which Magritte depicts objects or figures as though they are made of stone, a kind of painterly petrification. Frequently, such as in *Souvenir de voyage III* (*Memory of a Journey III*), 1951, he rendered entire scenes in stone. In the otherwise unremarkable still life, a book, bowl of fruit, bottle, and cup are arranged on a covered table within an interior. This tableau stands before a window, which overlooks a steeply pitched landscape. The blending of these diverse elements and textures into a single stone surface, an effect achievable only through painting, produces the uncanny feel characteristic of Magritte's best work.

Though he appeared in a limited number of early works, Magritte's iconic bowler-hatted man was deployed in earnest around this same time. He appears in multiple in *Golconde* (*Golconda*), 1953, in which the arrangement of

similar figures in varying scales gives the illusion of a deep space that is somehow distributed completely evenly. The figures are at once crowded together and eerily isolated. Though easily read as a commentary on the anonymity and conformity of bourgeois society, Magritte described it quite differently, saying "Golconda was an Indian city of riches, something of a marvel. I think it is a marvel to travel through the sky on the earth."<sup>2</sup>

Magritte often used gouache when revisiting and reinterpreting themes from earlier paintings, creating variations on his already established imagery, as with the 1957 version of *La Trahison des images* (*Treachery of Images*). It is a postcard-size near-replica of his 1929 masterpiece. No doubt the artist understood and exploited the marketability of these smaller versions of his most popular pictures, but Magritte, who delighted in undermining such lofty concepts as authenticity and originality, may also have enjoyed the irony of handcrafting miniature reproductions of his own work.

In the 1930s Magritte began experimenting with object-based works, and in late 1940 or early 1941, possibly in reaction to the wartime scarcity of canvas, he painted the first of many glass bottles. *Un Picasso de derrière les fagots* (*A Rare Old Vintage Picasso*), 1949, and *La Courbure de l'univers* (*The Curvature of the Universe*), 1950, demonstrate the versatility Magritte found in this unusual format. Because they were not carefully documented and it is likely that many were broken over the course of the years, it is not clear how many bottles Magritte ultimately produced. But though fewer than 25 are known to be extant today, we do know that he produced far more painted bottles than any other object.

At the prompting of his dealer Alexandre Iolas, in January 1967 Magritte conceived of eight large-scale bronze sculptures derived from images in his paintings. The most complex of these, *Madame Récamier de David* (*David's Madame Récamier*), consists of three pieces: a lamp, a footstool, and a curved sofa on which, rather than the socialite pictured in Jacques-Louis David's 1800 portrait of Madame Récamier, a coffin reclines. Iolas remembers the lamp,



René Magritte, *La Courbure de l'univers* (*The Curvature of the Universe*), 1950. Oil on glass bottle, 11 1/2 x 3 1/8 x 3 1/8 inches (29 x 7.9 x 7.9 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston