

*Late Surrealism* is curated by Michelle White.

This exhibition is generously supported by Taub Foundation: Marcy Taub Wessel, Henry J.N. Taub II, and H. Ben Taub; and the City of Houston.

## PUBLIC PROGRAM

### Gallery Talk

Thursday, June 6, noon

Exhibition curator Michelle White and University of Houston professor of art history Sandra Zalman discuss Surrealism and abstraction and the shift of the center of the art world from Paris to New York in the 1940s.

## NOTES

1. Rosamund Frost, 1942, quoted in Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, MA, and London: M.I.T. Press, 1995), 196.
2. See Isabelle Dervaux, "A Tale of Two Earrings: Surrealism and Abstraction, 1930–1947," in *Surrealism USA* (New York: National Academy Museum, 2005), 48–55.
3. Robert Motherwell, quoted in Thomas Hess, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase* (New York: Viking, 1951), 132.

Cover: Joan Miró, *Oeuf (galant ovale)*, ca. 1943. Glazed ceramic, 1½ x 2¼ x 1¾ inches (3.7 x 5.7 x 4.5 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Bequest of Marcia Simon Weisman. © 2013 Successió Miró/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY/ADAGP, Paris

## THE MENIL COLLECTION

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# Late Surrealism

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Surrealism, a revolutionary artistic and literary movement, began in the early twentieth century with an “official” start date of 1924, when André Breton wrote the first Surrealist Manifesto. Centered in Paris, it can be described as a retreat from the rational and an inquiry into the mysterious depths of the mind through experimentation with imaginary images, juxtaposition, and chance. Born in the aftermath of World War I, its absurdist tendencies were politically driven, and the works often made grand statements about the futility of war and the horrors of death and destruction.

Beginning with the Nazi occupation of Poland in 1939 and continuing throughout World War II and the post-war years, many Surrealist artists and thinkers sought refuge in the United States. As a result, in the 1940s New York City quickly displaced Paris as the center of the art world. Indeed, the community of émigré artists in the city, which included Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, Arshile Gorky, Kurt Seligmann, and Roberto Matta, among many others, flourished. Surrealist publications were being produced, exhibitions organized, and American-born artists such as Joseph Cornell, Alexander Calder, and Dorothea Tanning were aligning themselves with the surrealist sensibility.

At the same time, the methods, techniques, and philosophies that would become Abstract Expressionism, or the New York School, were gaining an important foothold. American art historians and scholars of the 1940s generally saw the two movements as diametrically opposed, and most championed Abstract Expressionism. They believed Surrealism’s emphasis on subject matter expressed an irreconcilably different way of thinking about representation, one that was equated with a *démodé* European sensibility that they saw as increasingly irrelevant. Influential modern art critic Clement Greenberg claimed it was illustrative and thus aligned with what he felt were debased forms of visual art like advertising. At least according to the critics, a victor had to be crowned. In a 1942 issue of *Art News*, Rosamund Frost wrote:

In less than a decade, America has made room for the biggest intellectual and artistic migration since the fall of Constantinople. Outwardly the infiltration has been peaceful enough, yet the conflict is already on and, as there is no melting pot which fuses ideas, one side or the other must inevitably dominate. Another ten years will tell us which.<sup>1</sup>

As a sign of her impartiality, art patron Peggy Guggenheim famously attended the 1942 opening of her gallery, Art of This Century, wearing a small abstract work by Calder in one ear and a miniature Surrealist landscape painting by Tanguy in the other.<sup>2</sup> The story of this unlikely pair of earrings illustrates just how divergent Surrealism and abstract art were thought to be and how contentious the atmosphere had become.

Yet when we look at work made during this fascinating and fertile time, there is a wonderfully fluid intersection and fusion of the two. The automatist ideas espoused by the Surrealists, which involved strategies of making art by allowing the subconscious to drive the process, were a tremendous influence on the Abstract Expressionists in terms of their interest in probing the psyche and inventing new ways of painting in order to channel the subconscious. Reflecting back, artist Robert Motherwell said, “Don’t underestimate the influence of the Surrealist state of mind on the young American painters in those days or that through them we had our first understanding of automatism as a technique.”<sup>3</sup>

Jackson Pollock, for example, who would become a leader of Abstract Expressionism, was deeply influenced by automatism. Working with a Jungian psychoanalyst, he made his early drawings and paintings in trance-like states. In these works, recognizable imagery competes with the complex networks of painterly lines and drips that would come to define his gestural abstraction. It is a tension also seen in the early work of Mark Rothko. Influenced by Matta’s biomorphic imagery and the mythological iconography of the Surrealists, his drawings and paintings from the 1940s have been characterized as a push-pull between the poles of expressionist abstraction and Surrealism.

Art historical categories are not always neat in terms of boundaries and linear narratives. In the works that came out of this delightful period of exchange between Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, nonrepresentational forms hint at figures or quietly slip into dreamscapes, and there are moments when fantastic images transform into abstract passages. It is in this fluid space that we are best able to reflect on Surrealism’s impact on modern art and the pioneering legacy of this influential group of émigré artists on the emergence of Abstract Expressionism in the United States.

—Michelle White, Curator