

Surrealism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The development of Surrealism had several influences, including artists of Dada and teachings of Freud. In this lesson, you will explore:



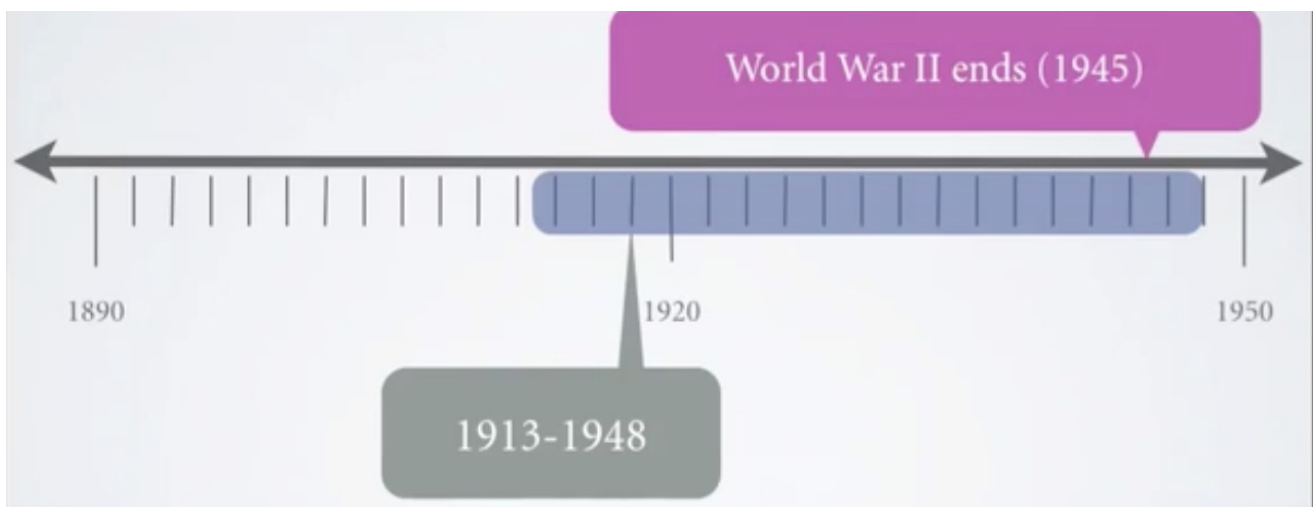
BIG IDEA

Surrealism was strongly influenced by the artwork of Giorgio di Chirico, the Dada movement, and the teachings of Sigmund Freud.

1. Period of Time and Location: Surrealism

The artwork covered in this lesson is from the years 1913 to 1948, as highlighted in the timeline below. The geographical locations of these artworks are:

- Rome, Italy—Giorgio di Chirico died here in 1978
- Paris, France—André Masson died here in 1987
- Viguera, Catalonia in Spain—Home of Salvador Dali
- Basel, Switzerland—Méret Oppenheim died here in 1985
- Brussels, Belgium—René Magritte died here in 1967
- Coyoacan, Mexico—Home of Frida Kahlo



2. Examples of Surrealism

Surrealism is essentially depictions of dream imagery, imagery from the subconscious and **unconscious mind**, and/or imagery meant to liberate the unconscious mind.

One technique that surrealists used was known as an **exquisite corpse** drawing. With this technique, one person folds a piece of paper into sections like an accordion, so that the other sections are hidden from view. Then that person starts the drawing, leaving lines indicating where the drawing ends. The next person takes those lines and continues the drawing. Then they pass it to the next person, and so on and so on until the drawing is finished. This is meant to be a technique that will expose the inner workings of the unconscious mind.



TERMS TO KNOW

Surrealism

A 20th-century art movement and style characterized by imagery and subject matter of the subconscious.

Unconscious Mind

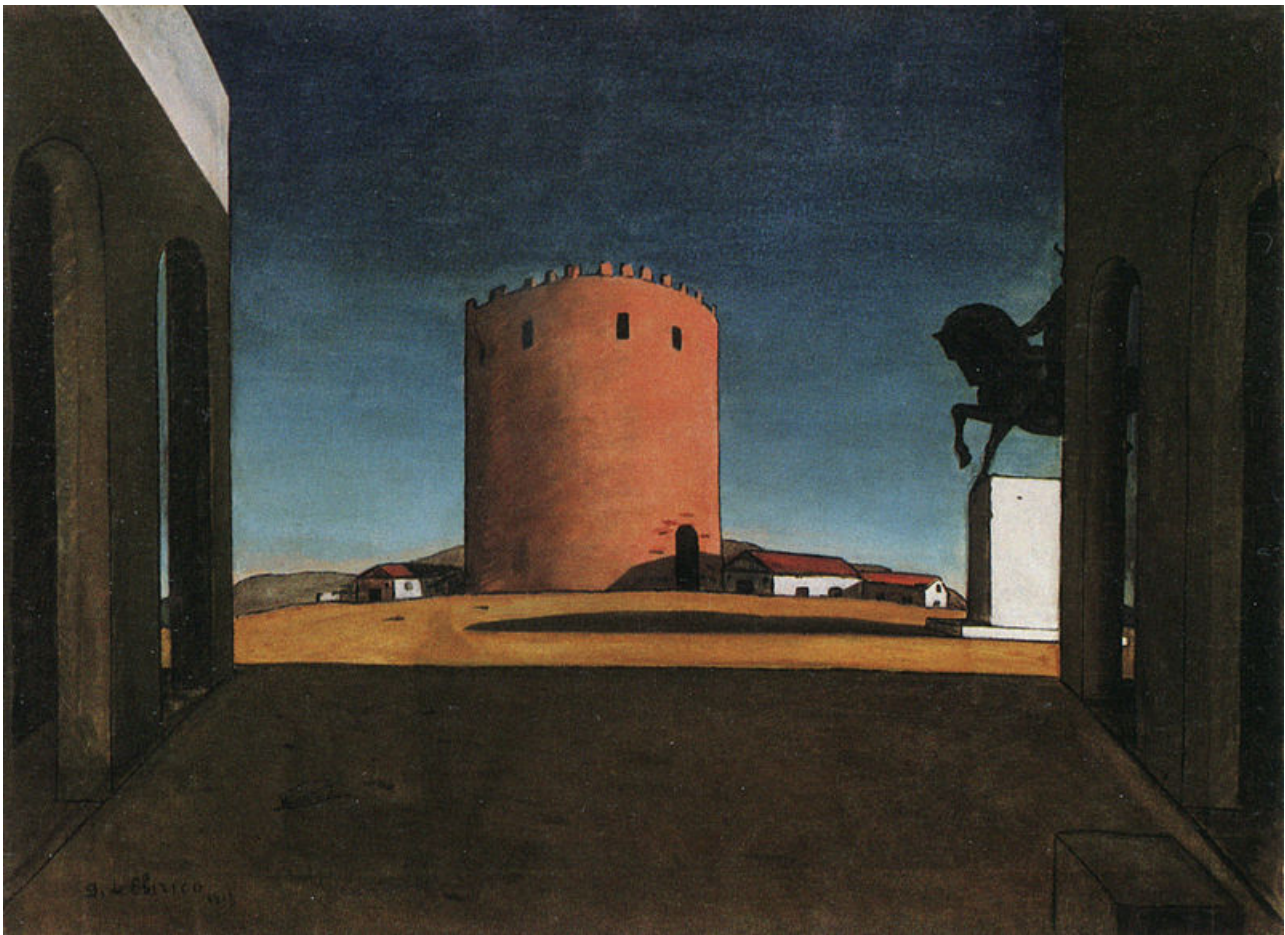
The part of the mental process where thoughts are not controlled.

Exquisite Corpse

A technique used by surrealists where words or images are created, collected, and assembled in a concealed collaboration.

2a. “The Red Tower”

The Dada poet André Breton started the Surrealist movement. Breton was inspired by the metaphysical painting “The Red Tower,” shown here:



The Red Tower by Giorgio de Chirico

1913

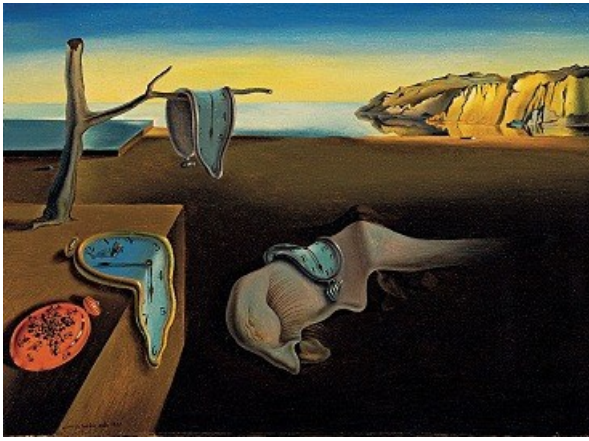
Oil on canvas

The above painting was by the Greek-born artist Giorgio de Chirico. Early in his career, Chirico depicted rather bleak landscapes with anachronistic imagery and strong contrasts between light and dark, all of which are seen above. Notice the sense of mystery and unease. These techniques are used to depict the unseen imagery of the mind.

2b. “The Persistence of Memory”

The techniques used in Surrealism had a strong influence on artists such as Salvador Dali. Dali was also influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud in the field of psychology and interpretations of the unconscious mind.

This painting by Dali, called “The Persistence of Memory,” is perhaps the most famous example of surrealist work. It is one of his most famous works of art.



The Persistence of Memory by Salvador Dali

1931

Oil on canvas

Notice the melting, limp clocks that hang and slide off surfaces. Interpretations vary, but on the whole it doesn't really seem to make a whole lot of sense. That may just be the point. Surrealists such as Dali and René Magritte attempted to depict the disjunction of reason in irrational dream imagery of the unconscious mind in the most naturalistic, detailed way possible.

2c. “Automatic Drawing”

Compare the above pieces of art to this next image, which is an ink on paper drawing from French artist André Masson.



Automatic Drawing by André Masson

1924

Ink on paper

André Breton, in his Surrealist Manifesto, described Surrealism as pure **psychic automatism**. This could take on the form of automatic painting, automatic writing, or in this case, automatic drawing. As opposed to the reactive imagery of Dali and Magritte, which depicts the unconscious mind, Masson's automatic drawing is

proactive in its attempts to liberate the unconscious mind through an artistic style that resembles automatic writing.



TERM TO KNOW

Psychic Automatism

A technique used by surrealist artists where “chance and random mark making” allow freedom from the decision-making process in creating artwork.

2d. “Fur Breakfast”

Surrealism was not limited to painting or drawing. Sculpture existed as well in this form of art. Although the artist Méret Oppenheim has historically been suggested as rather indifferent to the symbolism of her work, many interpretations from critics have been posited.



Fur Breakfast by Méret Oppenheim

1936

Tea cup, saucer, and spoon covered in fur (Chinese gazelle)

Given the ubiquity of Freudian psychological symbolism that existed at the time, critics have pointed out that sexual undertones exist in the phallic shape of the spoon, for example. Critics also make note of the symbolism of the cup representing female genitalia as well as the association with the human mouth. Oppenheimer herself said she was only considering the contrast of material textures based on a discussion she had with Pablo Picasso.



THINK ABOUT IT

This brings up an interesting question as to where the meaning associated with art originates. Where some people see only furry chinaware, others may see the surrealist underpinnings of the creation of

incongruity and the departure from reality. What do you see in the image above?

2e. “The Treachery of Images”

This next painting, by René Magritte of Belgium, is more than just an image of a pipe.



The Treachery of Images by René Magritte

1948

Oil on canvas

Magritte's painting was more of a philosophical question regarding the nature of reality. His point is rather clear; this is not a pipe, but it is the image of a pipe. It is not real.

2f. “What the Water Gave Me”

In 1940, André Breton traveled to Mexico and appropriated the entire country as the surrealist place par excellence. He met with Frida Kahlo and subsequently appropriated her art for the surrealist movement. Even though Kahlo herself never considered herself a true surrealist, she said that her painting was simply depicting life the way she saw it.

Take a look at Kahlo's painting below, titled “What the Water Gave Me.”



What the Water Gave Me by Frida Kahlo

1922

Oil on canvas

That she said her painting was simply depicting life the way she saw it is a bit unsettling at first glance. Even though she may not have identified as a surrealist, the label seems fair, given what appears to be a depiction of disconnected mental imagery.

On closer inspection, the central theme seems to be one of a deeply personal nature scattered with imagery of past and present events from her life, like a lifetime flashing before the eyes of the central character. The central character is thought to be Frida herself, on the verge of drowning in the water. Taken in this context, it's a touching depiction of human reflection and sadness.



SUMMARY

Surrealism was an artistic movement that was influenced by Dada and teachings of Freud, among other things. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of Surrealism**.

To do this, you explored several **examples of Surrealism**, including:

- “The Red Tower”
- “The Persistence of Memory”
- “Automatic Drawing”
- “Fur Breakfast”
- “The Treachery of Images”
- “What the Water Gave Me”

Source: THIS WORK IS ADAPTED FROM SOPHIA AUTHOR IAN MCCONNELL.



TERMS TO KNOW

Exquisite Corpse

A technique used by Surrealists where words or images are created, collected, and assembled in a concealed collaboration.

Psychic Automatism

A technique used by Surrealist artists where 'chance and random mark making' allow freedom from the decision making process in creating artwork.

Surrealism

A 20th-century art movement and style characterized by imagery and subject matter of the subconscious.

Unconscious Mind

The part of the mental process where thoughts are not controlled.