

LESSON PLAN TWO

THE SURREAL DEAL

In this lesson, students are introduced to some of the art-historical contexts in which Salvador Dalí painted. Students will first read a series of paragraphs describing Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism and Classicism—all styles that Dalí worked in—and then they're asked to identify examples of these styles from pictures at hand, slides, or posters on the board. (Feel free to talk about the paintings as the students identify them.) Then, after they have some understanding of Dalí's development as an artist, they can focus on Surrealism itself, which Dalí is best known for, and some of which they should remember from yesterday's video, *Get Surreal with Salvador Dalí*. By playing the game Exquisite Corpse, by working with automatic writing or drawing, or by drafting their dreams, they are introduced to the playfulness, surprise, and freedom of imagination that Surrealism can offer. Lastly, a short, in-class or homework writing assignment asks them to write about Surrealism and why they think it's important.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Reproductions of: *Port of Cadaques (Night)*; *Still Life: Sandia*; *The Weaning of Furniture-Nutrition*; *Old Age, Adolescence, Infancy (The Three Ages)*; *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*; *The Hallucinogenic Toreador*
- Pencil and Paper for Exquisite Corpse, Automatic writing and drawing, or Dream Illustration
- Reproductions of following "Art History Worksheet"

ACTIVITY

1. Reading (In-class)

Just as you can flip through the stations on your radio and hear different types of music, so you can flip through the pages of an art history book and see many different types of paintings. When Salvador Dalí was growing up—and before he was famous—he spent a lot of time practicing and copying the styles of other famous painters who came before him. In fact, he spent so much time practicing that for a period he even painted while taking his baths! As he got better and better, he began to experiment with finding a different style—the style that he helped to make popular and which would make him famous: Surrealism. But just as Tiger Woods continually looks for new ways to be a better golfer, so Dalí continually experimented and eventually left Surrealism in favor of what he called his "Classic" period.

Read the short descriptions below and try to match the styles of painting they describe with the posters on the board. Which ones are Impressionist? Which are Cubist or Surrealist? Which could you call “Classic” and why?

Impressionism

When Dalí was growing up in the early 1900’s, a relatively new style of painting was called Impressionism. For hundreds of years in Western art, paintings were for the large part *representational*—that is, they looked like photographs. If we think of the history of art as a coloring book, then for hundreds of years everybody colored exactly inside the lines. Then came the Impressionists who claimed that there weren’t such things as hard and fast solid lines to begin with and that everything—even a photograph—was made up of smaller parts that depended on where the light was coming from. So the Impressionists started to paint using small dabs and swirls of paint, blurring the lines of the coloring book outlines so that, close up, it was hard to recognize what was being painted. (Try pressing your nose to a TV screen to get the idea.) From farther away, however, all the smaller parts came together into a whole picture. This was the cutting edge painting in the late 1800’s—a generation before Salvador Dalí was born. Can you find an example of a painting that seems to be an Impressionist painting?

Cubism

While Dalí was young and first learning Impressionism, there was a brand new art movement going on called Cubism. Made popular in the early 1900’s by another Spanish artist, Pablo Picasso, Cubism reacted against Impressionism. While Impressionists wanted to blur the lines of an object or landscape, Cubists wanted to show as many sides of an object as possible. They said we never see things like we do in photographs—stopped in time and only from one point of view. So to be true to life, they said, we have to try painting something from two or three sides at the same time on the same canvas. The results can be a bit confusing, though, because sometimes it’s hard to tell just what exactly we’re looking at—sometimes the painting becomes a mix of disconnected shapes more than it does a picture of something we can recognize. But maybe if we could slow down the way we see, we might discover that the world is nothing but a lot of shapes that our brains end up arranging into some sort of meaning. Can you pick out the Cubist painting on the board?

Surrealism

Surrealism was one of the most important art movements of the twentieth century. While Impressionists and Cubists were very concerned with painting the way we *see*—by blurring lines, or by showing an object from different sides at the same time—the Surrealists were more concerned with painting how we really *think*. They wanted to discover a new reality by mixing dreams with the imagination to

create strange and unusual paintings that allowed individual artists to express new emotions and that would make us think.

Surrealism began after World War I (in the 1920's) when a group of artists in Europe decided to get away from everything that they thought resulted in the war—all the governments, religions, philosophies, artistic styles, everything! They wanted to build a better world from the bottom on up and tried to do so by getting in touch with the *unconscious*, that part of our brain that's thinking and remembering even when we think it's turned off. Much of the time, Dalí's Surreal paintings look just like really odd photographs—done in the perfect and exact lines that the Impressionists and Cubists were trying to get away from! It's like the Surrealists were saying their dreams were as real as anything else we can see or hear in the world, so real they could even be photographed. If you pay attention, you can still see the influence of Surrealism on TV, in music and in the movies. Can you come up with any examples off the top of your head?

Classicism

After Dalí became famous for his Surrealist paintings, he became interested in science and math and history—things which existed outside of his unconscious and dreams in the world we all inhabit. So he began to work on paintings that included more universal topics and images like famous people from history, images from art history and references to great artists, stories from his Spanish and Catalan cultures, and mathematical, scientific, and religious concepts. Many of these paintings are huge—over twelve feet tall and took up to a year to paint! Dalí even had a special studio so that he could work on these large canvases inside. This period, which began just after World War II ended (1945), is called his “Classic” period because he stopped a lot of his experimentation and began painting in the tradition of the old masters—Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci for example—whom he studied when he first got interested in art.

2. Trying Surrealist Techniques (In-class)

As we learned from the *Get Surreal With Salvador Dalí* video, the Surrealists had a variety of ways of coming up with ideas and materials for their paintings and writing. Take some time and experiment with some of these methods—see if *you* can explore the subconscious. And remember, the Surrealists liked working with different people and getting different viewpoints. (They thought that this sort of *collaboration* helped them get away from the individual conscious mind.) So feel free to work in small groups yourself!

Exquisite Corpse

(Watch *Get Surreal with Salvador Dalí* for further instructions on how to play Exquisite Corpse.) In this Surrealist parlor game, a poem is

composed by a group of people. There are many variations on the process, but, basically, the first person writes a sentence or a phrase, then folds the paper so the next person can't see what's been written. The second person then writes a line, folds the paper, and passes it on. How much everybody is allowed to see is up to you, but the game revolves around linguistic chance and surprise juxtapositions, so you shouldn't reveal too much to any one person at any one time. The Surrealists composed word by word, adding (in order), an adjective, noun, verb, etc. The classic first sentence was: "The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine." Drawings were also made by Exquisite Corpse; fold a piece of paper in four and have four people draw four different parts of a mysterious creature. (Make sure to extend the lines over the folds just far enough so that the next person can pick up where you leave off.)

Automatic Writing & Automatic Drawing

(Watch *Get Surreal with Salvador Dalí* for further instructions on how to do Automatic Writing and Automatic Drawing.) In an effort to gain access to the unconscious, the Surrealists tried a number of ways to let go of the conscious and rational mind. In Automatic Writing, a person writes as quickly as possible without lifting pen from paper, hoping that the "stream of consciousness" captured thereby will come straight from the inner mind. Automatic Writing has a lot in common with the "free writing" or "brainstorming" which many authors use before writing. Its odd juxtapositions and strange phrases trigger thoughts and topics, in retrospect, that are worth serious examination.

In Automatic Drawing, a person draws without lifting pen from paper and without looking at the shapes being formed. When the allotted time is up, the person examines the lines for the "hidden" and unintended shapes and figures. The artistic process behind Dalí's "hidden image" paintings like *Old Age, Adolescence, Infancy (The Three Ages)* is similar to the process of "discovering" the images in an automatic drawing—or even looking for shapes in the clouds. This exercise highlights how the individual eye and individual mind makes art by seeing what others, perhaps, don't see.

Dream Illustration

Think of a dream that you've had and draw it on paper. Have you had this dream before? Can you make heads or tails out of it? Why did things happen in the order they did? What if things happened in a different order? Do you recognize any of the people or things in your dream? Are there any things you don't recognize? Have any of the people or things in this dream appeared in any other of your dreams? Are you dreaming in color or in black and white? If you could explain this dream in one

sentence, what would you say? Have you ever tried writing your dreams down in a “dream journal” before?

3. Writing (In-class or as homework)

For the past two days, you’ve been learning a lot about Surrealism and Salvador Dalí. You watched a video, and you read about Catalonia and why that part of Spain might have influenced Dalí. Then you read about and looked at the different styles of art that Salvador Dalí worked on through his career. You learned that Surrealist artists wanted to explore the subconscious part of our minds and that they did this through dreams and games like ones that you played: Exquisite Corpse, automatic writing and drawing, and dream illustration.

But not everyone knows as much about Surrealism and Salvador Dalí as you do. In a day or two, you’ll be going on a tour of the Salvador Dalí Museum, but there might be some people—other friends, your brothers or sisters, maybe even Mom and Dad!—who don’t understand why you’d want to go to the museum, or why you’d want to study Surrealism, in the first place. Thinking back to everything you’ve learned, write a letter to someone explaining why you think it might be important to learn about Salvador Dalí and Surrealism and why, as a result, you think it might be important to go to the museum.