

Salvador Dali (1904-1989) Venus Au Bain (1971)

Salvador Dali was a Spanish painter, sculptor, graphic artist, designer, and film maker. Dali passed through many phases of art including Cubism, Futurism and Metaphysical before joining the Surrealists in 1929. His oil paintings during this Surrealist period were based on Sigmund Freud's theories about the "unconscious as revealed in dreams". One of Dali's most famous Surrealistic paintings is "The Persistence of Memory (1931)". This painting, sometimes called "Soft Watches" shows melting pocket watches in a landscape setting. "The painting conveys the idea that time is not rigid and everything is destructible." Dali helped to develop the idea in art "that things may not be what they seem to be". He referred to his paintings as "hand-painted dream photographs".

By the mid 1930's Dali had become notorious for his colorful personality. Some critics felt his antics overshadowed his artwork. He is famous for his long mustache, cape, and walking stick. Dali was introduced to America at an exhibition of his art in New York in 1934 that caused quite a controversy. He appeared at a ball held in his honor wearing a "glass case across his chest which contained a brassiere". His talent for self-publicity and eccentricity made him the most famous representative of the Surrealist movement and of modern art. People either savored his comments, his antics, his remarks and his appearance as much as his painting or "held him in disdain" because of them.

At the beginning of WWII(1940), Dali and his wife moved to the United States and lived in New York until 1948 when he moved back to Spain. During his time in the US, Dali moved away from Surrealism and into his classical period. Dali loved America because the people believed in science and technology as did he. Dali applied science to his art and called this next period in his art "Nuclear Mysticism". "Over the next 15 years, Dali painted a series of 19 large canvases(some two stories tall) concerning scientific, historical or religious themes. His artwork "took on a technical brilliance combining meticulous detail with fantastic and limitless imagination. He would incorporate optical illusions, holography and geometry within his paintings. Many of his works contained images that depict divine geometry, the DNA, the HyperCube, and religious themes of Chastity."

In Dali's paintings or prints, he takes the object familiar to us and puts it into an entirely new context, "sometimes making it gay, sometimes queer, and often frightening us. Pianos pour like honey, sofas are lips, ruby hearts actually beat, taxis have their own interior rainfall- in his world the unconscious mind is set free, there are no conventions, no limitations." Dali painted from the dreams that shook his being whether asleep or awake.

I chose the Dali, Venus Au Bain(1971), from the KIA collection for my project because I had just visited the Dali museum in St. Petersburg, Florida this past winter. It is the largest collection of Dali's work in the United States. We visited the museum on a Saturday. Because the museum was mobbed with people, we chose to just walk through the museum rather than waiting for a docent tour. As we walked through, I was amazed and confused by the art that we saw. The artwork seemed so bizarre that it didn't have any meaning for me. I could tell that this artist was very skilled, but I wasn't at all sure I understood anything that he painted!

After finding the Dali in the collection, I knew that was the piece I wanted to study. I stood in front of the piece for a long time trying to construct a narrative about it, coming up with more questions than answers. In the KIA library I began to research Dali. When I spoke with the docent in the library about my project, she provided an interesting story. She said first of all, I would find no written information on this piece, but she said that the piece had been given to the KIA by a member who had purchased it when he and his wife had been on a cruise that Dali had also been on. Years later he donated it to the museum. In my research on Dali, I found that when he did frequently took cruises to visit Europe or the U.S. sometimes twice a year. I had a beginning to my story!

I would like to talk with a high school age group about this painting, perhaps a group from an art class who is studying modern art. Since one of the themes of modern art is “freeing the power of the imagination” this would be an appropriate piece to study. After a brief introduction, I think I would mention that the first piece of art we would be looking at would have a nude in it and that nudes have been the subject of artists since the beginning of time. I would mention that the subjects for Dali frequently came from his dreams and therefore created a new and unusual sense of reality. In order to get a good view of this new reality, I would divide them into groups and have them look at the print from different directions- each side, in front. Dali frequently includes double images in his paintings, so it is important to see it from all angles.

Some of the questions I would ask might be:

What do you see going on in this painting?

What colors are used? Did the artist use color to make something in particular stand out? How? Why do you think the artist did this? Do the colors affect the mood of the painting?

What kinds of lines do you see in the picture—straight or curved? Are most of the lines in the picture vertical, horizontal or diagonal? What effect do the lines have on the picture?

Are most of the shapes organic(natural or curved) or geometric (angular or straight)? What shape is repeated most throughout the picture? What effect does this have?

Why do you think the woman is nude? How would clothing on the woman change our perception?

What do you know about the artist’s life style? Were his/her works appreciated during his life or only after his death?

I would assume they would mention a nude woman reclining on a boat floating on water. The background of the painting is white. There are only two colors used, gold bubbles in the background and the blue of the water. The boat is a sort of mermaid-nude monster at one end of the boat. The other end of the boat looks like a fist or it could be the head of a snake. The bottom of that end of the boat also is made of some sort of animal with scales. The nude woman’s arm is supported by a crutch. She has no face also. The woman is framed by a curtain as if it is a stage. There are swans or something at the bottom of the painting.

Dali uses some recurring conventions in this print. He “floats images and color areas on empty white backgrounds, evoking the infinite space of the cosmos and of dreams.”

“Often Dali constructs bizarre images from biomorphic or rounded, amoeba-like shapes. Evoking life’s biological essence, such shapes are vital components of Surrealism’s formal vocabulary”.

The dots of light are “reminiscences of that paradise of the womb which I lost on the day of my birth”. The dots could also represent energy and matter floating in space, bubbles.

One of his favorite fetishes was crutches.

Dali’s “dream of Venus” included mermaids.

And at some point in the discussion I would like to point out that Dali said when asked about the meaning of one of his paintings, “Even I don’t know what my paintings mean.”

Hopefully, students can leave the tour understanding that Dali is a modern artist of the 20th century who was extremely well known during his lifetime. He was the most famous representative of the Surrealist movement. Dreams and the unconscious were the source of inspiration for his work.

Respectfully submitted,

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