Art History Basics: Surrealism

Surrealists feasted on the unconscious. They believed that Freud's theories on dreams, ego, superego and the id opened doors to the authentic self and a truer reality (the "surreal"). Like the Dadaists, they relished the possibilities of chance and spontaneity.

Their leader, the "Pope of Surrealism," was French writer André Breton (1896-1966), who joined fellow writers Philippe Soupault, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, and Robert Denos (among many others) in their appreciation of nineteenth-century "bad boys" Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) and Isidore Ducasse (whose pseudonym was Comte de Lautrémont, 1846-1870). One quote from Lautrémont's prose-poem *Les Chants de Maldoror* expresses the Surrealist spirit concisely: "the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella!"

**What Are the Key Characteristics of Surrealism?**

* The exploration of the dream and unconsciousness as a valid form of reality, inspired by Sigmund Freud's writings.
* A willingness to depict images of perverse sexuality, scatology, decay and violence.
* The desire to push against the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviors and traditions in order to discover pure thought and the artist's true nature.
* The incorporation of chance and spontaneity.
* The influence of revolutionary 19th century poets, such as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Isidore Ducasse.
* Emphasis on the mysterious, marvelous, mythological and irrational in an effort to make art ambiguous and strange.
* Fundamentally, Surrealism gave artists permission to express their most basic drives: hunger, sexuality, anger, fear, dread, ecstasy, and so forth.
* Exposing these uncensored feelings as if in a dream still exists in many form of art to this day.
* Two stylistic schools: Biomorphism and Naturalistic Surrealism.

**How Long Was Surrealism a Movement?**

* Surrealism officially began with "The Manifesto of Surrealism," published in 1924. However, it grew out of [Dada](http://arthistory.about.com/cs/arthistory10one/a/dada.htm).
* Surrealism never died, it simply splintered into numerous directions and influenced new movements, with different names.

**What Are the Best Examples of Surrealism?**

* Max Ernst, [*Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale*](http://arthistory.about.com/od/dada/ig/DadaatMoMAParis/dada_paris_03.htm), 1924. (Museum of Modern Art, New York).
* Joan Miró, *Carnival of Harlequin*, 1924-25. (Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY)
* René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), 1929. (Los Angeles County Museum of Art)
* Jean (Hans) Arp, *Head with Three Annoying Objects*, 1930. (Estate of the artist).
* Salvador Dalí, [*The Persistence of Memory*](http://arthistory.about.com/od/from_exhibitions/ig/dali_painting_and_film/dali_moma_0708_11.htm), 1931. (Museum of Modern Art, New York)