

World of Art - CH 21

Surrealism was born of **Dada's** preoccupation with the irrational and the illogical, as well as its interest in ideas. When the French writer André Breton issued the First Surrealist Manifesto in 1924, the nihilist spirit of **Dada** was clearly about to be replaced by something more positive. Breton explained the direction his movement would take: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality."

To these ends, the new art would rely on *chance* operations, *automatism* (or random, thoughtless, and unmotivated notation of any kind), and *dream images – the expressions of the unconscious mind*.

Two different sorts of imagery resulted.

The first contained *recognizable, yet fantastic, subject matter*.

It was typified by the work of **René Magritte**, **Giorgio de Chirico**, and **Salvador Dalí**.

De Chirico claimed not to understand his own paintings. They were simply images that obsessed him, and they conveyed, Breton felt, the "irremediable anxiety" of the day. Thus, in *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street* (Fig. 21-10), the little girl rolls her hoop toward the ominous black shadow of a figure lurking behind the wall.

Dalí called paintings such as *The Persistence of Memory* (Fig. 21-11) "*hand-painted dream photographs*." The limbless figure lying on the ground like a giant slug is actually a self-portrait of the artist, who seems to have moved into a *landscape removed from time and mind*.

The other type of Surrealist painting was *virtually abstract*, presenting us with a world of indecipherable visual riddles.

The painting of the Spanish artist **Joan Miró** and many of the early mobiles of **Alexander Calder** (see Fig. 7-1) fall into this category. In Miró's *Painting* (Fig. 21-12), *biomorphic, amoeba-like forms float in a space* that suggests a darkened landscape. If we look closely, however, faces, hair, and hands begin to appear. *Everything in this composition appears fluid, susceptible to continuing and ongoing mutation, back and forth between representation and abstraction.*