Salvador Dalí, Exploding Raphaelesque Head [Tête Raphaëlesque éclatée]

[Duration 3.45]

Patrick Elliot, Chief Curator, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art
Well the Surrealist movement can broadly be divided into two types of paintings. One, the very realistic kind of painting, which Dali practiced, Magritte practiced and they had imaginings in their head; and there’s the other kind of painting which is the automatic painting, practiced by Miro, Masson... Ernst, to some extent where their subconscious was, in theory, supposed to spill out onto the canvass. But Dali was very much in favour of the first kind, he was very committed to old-fashioned old-master technique.

Lauren Rigby, Curator, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art
His paintings are incredibly detailed, exquisitely detailed. He was interested in old-master painting which many of the Surrealists weren’t interested in and didn’t think was relevant to what they were doing in the 1930’s, but Dali always had that interest and I think you can see that, particularly in ‘Exploding Raphaelesque Head’ where he’s used – deliberately- referencing Raphael

Patrick Elliot:
So this is Dali’s ‘Raphael Head Exploding’ – ‘Tete Raphaëlesque eclatee’ 1951. And we can see here, obviously it’s a painting of a woman and it’s done in the style of Raphael, the great Renaissance Old-Master painter. A virgin looking down, possibly, at her child. And at the same time we’ve got this image here of the roof of the Pantheon building in Rome, which has an open top to it to let the light in. You can see that Dali’s painted rather tenderly this light coming in to the virgin’s head.
Lauren Rigby:
He was at that time really interested in advances in nuclear physics, so in atomic explosion and that sort of thing and in the painting you can see that its sort of split up into these atomic particles which form the head and this was of course painted after World War Two and the advances that had happened in nuclear physics at that time.

Patrick Elliot:
And he liked these double-mages, he called them, these optical effects where it rather depended on what the person’s interests were which way they saw it. Whether they were mainly seeing this as a painting of the Pantheon in Rome or if they were mainly seeing it as a painting by Raphael. That it showed something of their paranoia, as he called it. He did a lot of this double-imagery, triple-imagery, some of them we read in seven or eight different ways. So this is a fairly simple one for him. And in the corner of the picture, you’ve got a peculiar little detail of a wheelbarrow. It’s after a painting by Millet called ‘L’angelus’ which was a picture that fascinated him. It was a fairly standard late 19th century sort of social realist picture, which I thank many others, in the Surrealist movement in particular, wouldn’t have given a second thought to. But he saw this as imbued with all sorts of sexual interest, particularly the wheelbarrow, with the sort of forks that you pick it up by, and there’s a man and a woman standing over it. This appealed to him greatly. I don’t think that anyone else really saw it in quite the same light. But you see this wheelbarrow, this sort of emblem of rustic sexuality, popping up in quite a number of his pictures and you see it just here, in this painting.