

Video Transcript

Title: but what is Surrealism?

Duration: 04:25

Summary:

One of the 20th century's most radical art movements, Surrealism sought to challenge convention through the exploration of the subconscious mind, invoking the power of dreams and the element of chance to challenge the establishment of the day. Where did this revolutionary movement emerge from, who were its key players and what legacy does it have amongst later artists?

Transcript

Narrator

Think Surrealism, and you may think of visual artists like Salvador Dali or Rene-Magritte, but the movement actually began in literature, in 1924 through the poet Andre Breton.

Influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud, Surrealists saw the subconscious as the means of revolution and sought nothing less than to change the world.

Surrealism rose from the ashes of Dada. Like Dada, it was an avant-garde movement reacting against the corrupt, hypocritical society responsible for sending millions to their death in the First World War.

Both sought to shock the establishment and shared a distrust of logic and a love of the absurd. Surrealism was also influenced by the ideas of Symbolism. Symbolist artists such as Gustave Moreau were seen by Breton as precursors of the Surrealist movement. Surrealist artists sought to liberate the subconscious mind in their art. Some like Salvador Dali did this through the depiction of dreamlike images

rendered in precise detail. Other artists like Miro explored automatism - the means of creating expressive images without engaging the rational mind. If a technique celebrated the serendipitous or the random, then Surrealists embraced it.

Georges Hugnet used decalcomania to produce this work. Paper is painted, stuck together, then pulled apart to reveal images that can be read or deciphered in many different ways. The element of chance was important to Surrealist artists.

Surrealism started in Paris but quickly spread throughout the globe. In 1936 the International Surrealist Exhibition was held in London. Breton and Dali gave lectures there- Dali in a deep-sea diver suit from which he had to be rescued when it became clear he couldn't breathe!

Surrealism thrived elsewhere in Europe too, particularly Belgium and Czechoslovakia. Toyen was a Czech Surrealist born Marie Cerminova. The name Toyen was adopted in early adulthood. Toyen identified using the Czech language's masculine form and dressed in men's working clothes. This exploration of gender has made Toyen a cult figure.

This work, *The Message of the Forest* depicts a huge blue bird against a dark, mysterious wooded background. It embodies a recurring theme in their work: nature's power over humanity this world is barren, dreamlike and inhabited by lone girls, fragmented female figures and birds, it is bizarre even sinister and its discussion of dreams and nightmares suggests intense anxiety.

As the Second World War ravaged Europe many surrealists fled across the Atlantic, Some found a new spiritual home in Mexico and others settled in America, where they inspired a new generation of artists. Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock were inspired by the Surrealist approach to automatism and the idea that

art should come from the unconscious mind. Other artists have found inspiration in dreamlike imagery and unexpected juxtapositions of Surrealism. The photographer Francesca Woodman was a keen student of Surrealism. In her photographs she included props with clear Surrealist associations, like the mirror. But was the mirror a device of Surrealism? Or was Surrealism the mirror, one helping us see the world with fresh eyes?