

GAIÁS
CIDADE DA
CULTURA

OBJECTS OF DESIRE

SURREALISM
AND DESIGN
1924-2020

EXHIBITION
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Studio65, *Bocca*, 1970 © Gufram/Studio65,
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Objects of Desire. Surrealism and Design 1924-2020

Surrealism is one of the most influential art movements of the twentieth century. Its origins date back to 1924 when André Breton published the first Manifesto of Surrealism, in which he outlined Surrealism's intention to explore the world of dreams, chance, and the subconscious and harness it to create a new artistic reality.

From the very beginning, the Surrealists attached central importance to everyday objects, which they alienated, treated with irony, or conjoined to make curious hybrids. In this way, Surrealism has helped to liberate post-war design from the restrictive corset of functionalism, and shifted our focus from an object's form to its often hidden messages. As a matter of fact, since then, Surrealism has provided design with important impulses; it has encouraged designers to question the reality behind what is visible, and to design objects that offer resistance, undermine habits, and break free of quotidian existence. The exhibition *Objects of Desire* examines the dialogue between Surrealism and design, thereby delineating one of the most consequential and fertile relationships of art and design of the last 100 years.

ROOM 1

Dreams of Modernity

In its early years, Surrealism was above all a literary movement shaped by symbolist literature and the Dada movement. Its success story began in the mid-1920s when André Breton and his allies extended Surrealist principles first to painting, and at the end of that decade, to objects. Its inherent ideas soon began to influence design as well, and from the 1940s, Surrealism developed into a veritable fashion trend that shaped furniture, interiors, fashion, and film. Its growing influence on design and architecture was further reinforced by the fact that many designers became increasingly critical of the radically rationalist aesthetics of the 1920s. In Surrealism, they found the inspiration to focus on human emotions and engage with issues such as organic form and the irrational. In André Breton's own words: "Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought."

1.1

The Surrealist Object

Undermining the purpose and meaning of everyday objects played a central role in the Surrealists' creations. Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades were an important source of inspiration to artists such as Meret

Oppenheim, Salvador Dalí, and Man Ray, encouraging them to transform found materials into objects that exceeded expectations and turned ostensibly familiar things on their heads. The Surrealists outlined the concept of their new world of objects in theoretical papers and in their own journals and publications. André Breton spoke of "convulsive beauty" and Salvador Dalí of "objets à fonctionnement symbolique" (objects with symbolic function). In describing their ideal of beauty, many Surrealists turned to the French poet Lautréamont's metaphor from 1868-1869: "Beautiful [...] as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella."

1.2

From Surrealism to Design

Among the first mediators between Surrealism and design was the French architect Le Corbusier. From 1929 to 1931 he designed an apartment in Paris for Carlos de Beistegui, an important collector and patron of Surrealist art. The interior had opulent, colourfully upholstered furniture and the rooftop terrace—with its picturesque trees, ventilation duct in the shape of a periscope, and an ornate open-air fireplace—resembled a Surrealistic collage. The marriage of modern design and Surrealism is also exemplified by Salvador Dalí's house in Portlligat, which was furnished in 1931

with modern tubular-steel furniture, including models by Le Corbusier. In the 1930s, Dalí developed a much more opulent, eccentric interior design style. This is evident in his designs for the collector and patron Edward James' Monkton House, for which Dalí created the famous *Mae West Lips Sofa* (1938) and the *Téléphone-homard* ou *Téléphone aphrodisiaque* (1936).

1.3

Surrealism in The United States

The spread of Surrealism into everyday culture gained further momentum in the late 1930s when numerous representatives of the Surrealist movement emigrated from Europe to the United States. In 1942, the collector and patron Peggy Guggenheim commissioned the Austrian émigré Frederick Kiesler to design her New York gallery, *Art of This Century*, which resulted in an interior that was a Surrealist *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Exhibitions like *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, which the Museum of Modern Art presented in 1936, introduced Surrealism to a broader audience. It became a true fashion trend, also thanks to Salvador Dalí who designed shop windows for New York's Bonwit Teller department store and created fabric collections, advertisements, and even film sets for Alfred Hitchcock's film *Spellbound* (1945). Surrealism provided numerous young American designers with the Surrealist impulse, including Isamu Noguchi who contributed a chess

table to the 1944 Surrealist exhibition *The Imagery of Chess*, and Ray Eames who from 1941 formed a congenial designer couple with Charles Eames. The biomorphic design language of Surrealism developed into an important basis for the organic design expression of the post-war era.

ROOM 2

Image and Archetype

Surrealism's influence on numerous areas of everyday culture was already noticeable in the 1930s and '40s; and even though it ebbed as a fad in the 1950s, the power of its imagery and artistic attitude was still present in the following decades and remains influential today. This often reveals itself in a subversive view of daily life: must something always be what it appears to be? What unconscious memories, stories, and obsessions are embodied in everyday objects? Is what we see always reality? Such questions formed the basis for the Surrealists' attempt to undermine our daily routines and the established meanings of things, in order to instate the absurd, the confusing, and the coincidental. The early 1960s in particular saw designers apply similar methods to test the boundaries between reality and fiction, between art and everyday life. This often resulted in new and unexpected features—such as, already in the 1990s, the Italian designer Gae Aulenti's table *Tour* (1993), which moves through

the living room on bicycle wheels, referring to Marcel Duchamp's ready-made *Roue de Bicyclette* from 1913.

2.1

Collecting and the Ready-Made

Many Surrealists accumulated extensive collections reminiscent of the dream worlds in their paintings and texts: chance finds met with artworks, ethnographic sculptures with curiosities and industrial objects. Just like the Surrealist's mastermind André Breton, also the French architect Le Corbusier—who was in close contact with the Surrealist movement as early as the 1920s—was a passionate collector, describing the things he surrounded himself with as "objets à réaction poétique" (objects with poetic reaction). Likewise, the Italian designer Achille Castiglioni's collection of surreal and curious things motivated him to create several designs reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, including a stool with a bicycle saddle seat and a hat resembling a cake tin. To this day, many designers see accumulations of such things as an important source of inspiration for productive confusion and novel ideas, as evidenced by Konstantin Grcic's *Coathangerbrush* (1992).

2.2

Function or Fiction?

Since the 1960s, newly developed plastics made it possible to design furniture in nearly every shape imaginable. Representatives of the Italian Radical Design movement used this potential to criticize functionalism, designing sculptural objects that expressed their desire for poetic objects that enhanced controversy and reflection. In doing so, they also worked with elements known from Surrealism, designing furniture that featured absurd proportions and alluded to entirely different object categories, like fragments from Giorgio de Chirico's mysterious paintings. The new possibilities also inspired Surrealist artists like Roberto Matta, who designed the lounge chair *MAGriTTA* (an homage to René Magritte) in 1970; and Man Ray, whose furniture object *Le Témoin* (The Witness) from 1971 alludes to furniture's role as a silent observer of domestic life. All of these objects heralded the so-called semantic turn in postmodern design, which describes the fact that an object's message was now accorded as much (if not more) importance as its utility value.

ROOM 3

3.1

Surrealism and Eroticism

Love, eroticism, and sexuality played an important role in Surrealism. The psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud provided the Surrealists with important insights into the human psyche, which they turned into erotically charged works even in their designs for interiors or furniture. One of the best-known examples of this is Salvador Dalí's collage *Mae West's Face which May be Used as a Surrealist Apartment* (1934-1935)—an interior whose individual parts replicate the face of film star Mae West—from which Dalí later developed his famous lips sofa for the British collector Edward James. After the war, we can also encounter objects and interiors that engage in dialogue with gender roles and erotica. *The Bocca* (or Marilyn) sofa designed by Studio65 in 1970 as part of a design project for a fitness studio in Milan falls within this trend. Just like Dalí's lips sofa, the subject transposes a typical symbol of femininity to a 3D object.

3.2

Let Women in!

There were many pioneers of feminist art and design among women Surrealists, including Lee Miller, Mimi Parent, Dorothea Tanning, Leonor Fini,

Meret Oppenheim, Claude Cahun, and others. They took the motifs usually considered as stereotypes of female eroticism—mouth, breasts, hair, and high-heeled shoes—and subversively employed them to criticize sexual clichés and female oppression. The Surrealist's exploration of sexuality and eroticism even included the issue of transsexuality, as can be seen in Man Ray's photographic self-portraits as a woman or in the photographs of Claude Cahun, who presents her androgynous self-image in suggestive, often enigmatic everyday situations. This attitude has also left its mark in contemporary design, as exemplified in the object *Hairbrush* (1999) by BLESS. In this small object, the hair renders the brush completely dysfunctional and turns it into a biting commentary on aesthetic clichés and ideals of beauty.

3.3

Surrealism and Fashion

Surrealism's influence on fashion was felt as early as the 1930s. Quite a few Surrealist artists also worked as fashion photographers, Lee Miller and Man Ray among them. From Dalí's collaboration with the French fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli several groundbreaking designs emerged, including the so-called *Skeleton Dress* (1938) and *Lobster Dress* (1937) as well as the *Shoe Hat* (1937-1938), which transformed an ordinary shoe into headgear. Dalí's digressions into the fashion world continued in the following decades; for example, with

his advertisements for the hosiery manufacturer Bryans and his cover designs for the magazine *Vogue*. Of particular relevance today are Salvador Dalí's jewellery designs, which seem like hybrids between jewellery and prosthesis. From a twenty-first century perspective, they could be read as sharp commentaries on the increasing dominance of plastic surgery and body optimization. There are many examples of Surrealism's enduring influence on fashion, such as in the Fall/Winter 2007-2008 collection of fashion label Comme des Garçons, for which Rei Kawakubo designed clothing with appliqué hands that appear to touch the wearer's body.

3.4

Eros and Thanatos

Inspired by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theorizing, many Surrealists saw the life force Eros as closely linked to its counter-impulse Thanatos, which embodies the forces of death and destruction. Male Surrealists in particular incorporated fantasies of violence, power, and oppression into much of their work, with the female body serving as an object of projection. This attitude also found its way into design, exemplified, among others, in Gaetano Pesce's armchair *La Mamma* from 1969: an expansive seat sculpture into which the sitter sinks, while the footrest, bound by a chain to the seat, suggests the oppression of women. Like many

women Surrealists, the designer Ruth Francken simply reversed such clichés: in her sculpture *Homme* (1970), the male body becomes a seating object, which a woman can thus "possess". But Surrealism's examination of power and violence also influenced design beyond gender issues. In 2003, Dutch designer Wieki Somers, for instance, designed a teapot in the shape of a pig's skull, thereby undermining our notions of cosiness by melding the cute with the uncanny, in a way that recalls the objects by Surrealist Meret Oppenheim.

Carlo Mollino and Surrealism

Carlo Mollino was an Italian designer, photographer, architect, and dandy who adopted Surrealist concepts as early as the 1930s. Mollino kept abreast of Surrealism's developments by reading *Minotaure*, the magazine co-edited by André Breton, the contents of which included the interiors and paintings of Salvador Dalí. From the late 1930s Mollino began to design interiors that reflected the pictorial world of Surrealism, such as *trompe l'œil* effects, bizarre object fragments, or, again, a lip-shaped sofa, made for the Casa Devalle in Turin (1939-1940). Surrealism even left its mark on Mollino's significant work as a furniture designer: Mollino's table *Arabesco* from 1950 is clearly inspired by a table in Dalí's painting *Femme à tête de roses* from 1935.

ROOM 4

Main text

The Savage Mind

With the emergence of African, Oceanic, and Native American art, many Surrealists saw ethnographic artefacts as the epitome of the Surrealist impulse, since they understood these objects to be referring to a mythical world beyond the apparent reality. They regarded their own objects and paintings as mediums that should have a similarly suggestive, liberating effect on the viewer. Claude Lévi-Strauss illustrated the relationship between ethnography and Surrealism in his book *The Savage Mind* (1962), in which he drew parallels between the "mythical world view" of tribal cultures and the approach of the *bricoleur*, who "uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman". Surrealism's repertoire included many techniques that were radically different from any previous means of artistic expression, and with these the Surrealists wanted to open the doors to the unconscious and to chance: from the *frottage* (rubblings) in the paintings of Max Ernst to the practise of *écriture automatique* (automatic writing) and free association, which led to entirely new imageries and forms.

4.1

From Cult to Everyday Life

While André Breton attached importance to the homogeneity of Surrealist ideas and theories, "dissidents" such as Georges Bataille emphasized the movement's anarchic side. In 1929, Bataille founded the magazine *Documents*, which published contributions from diverse fields including the ethnographic studies of Michel Leiris. These texts, as well as Sigmund Freud's investigations into fetishism, influenced many Surrealists in their examination of ethnographic material. Non-Western art, combined with ideas borrowed from Surrealism, still inspire many designers today. The Brazilian brothers Fernando and Humberto Campana, for example, create expressive object sculptures from randomly found materials and explicitly name Surrealism as a point of reference. Their bookcase *Cabana* (2003) at first appears to be an unidentifiable, veiled entity; if we wish to remove something from it we must first penetrate the bast curtain.

4.2

Liberated Form

An important artistic technique of the Surrealists was *écriture automatique*: the practise of "automatic" writing in which the suppression of the conscious mind would allow coincidence and

the subconscious to find genuine expression. Based on Surrealism's literary origins, this approach influenced the works of numerous Surrealist artists whose flowing and dissolving forms often reflect this root. The drawings of designers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec illustrate the continued significance of approaches such as these in the twenty-first century: here as well, the intuitive drawing process allows a free stream of consciousness, which leads to new imagery, giving form to visions and fantasies. Other designers explore forms beyond established patterns by designing objects with melting, fragmenting, or sprawling shapes. Digital 3D printing offers new impetus to this design approach, because it allows the algorithm to determine certain design features, so that the element of chance can become part of the design.

duo Dunne & Raby, is a series of fictive objects designed to help human beings survive on an overpopulated planet. If it was the old-fashioned everyday objects for the Surrealists, for Dunne & Raby it is the twenty-first century's smart objects through whose harmless façades the irrational and dystopian breaks. The grotesque, the absurd, and the fantastic holds equal fascination for the Icelandic singer Björk: She quotes Surrealist pictorial motifs directly in many of her videos, thus demonstrating the extent to which the visual language of Surrealism has penetrated our collective consciousness.

4.3

Form Follows Fiction

Surrealism was not an aesthetic, but an attitude: the idea was to look behind the curtain and shake up the world with unsparing, uncensored openness and subjective visions. This makes Surrealism a source of inspiration for many twenty-first century designers who utilize experimental, speculative approaches to explore and subvert new technologies or social issues. For example, *Designs for an overpopulated planet: The Foragers* (2009), by the



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