

Time Transfixed (La Durée Poignardée) Project René Magritte

Volunteer:

Date:

Grade Level: Fifth Grade

Artist: René Magritte (1898-1967)

Print/Sculpture: Time Transfixed (La Durée Poignardée), 1938

Art Vocabulary: Surrealism (artistic movement which created fantastic or incongruous imagery or effects by means of unexpected juxtaposition or combinations)



I The Artist:

René Francois Ghislain Magritte was

a Belgian surrealist painter, born in Lessines. He studied at the Academie Royale des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. His first one-man exhibition was in Brussels in 1927. At that time Magritte had already begun to paint in the style, closely akin to surrealism, that was predominant throughout his long career. A meticulous, skillful technician, he is noted for works that contain an extraordinary juxtaposition of ordinary objects or an unusual context that gives new meaning to familiar things. This juxtaposition is frequently termed magic realism, of which Magritte was the prime exponent. In addition to fantastic elements, he displayed a mordant wit, creating surrealist versions of famous paintings, as in *Madame Recamier de David* (1949, private collection), in which an elaborate coffin is substituted for the reclining woman in the famous portrait by Jacques Louis David. Magritte's work was first shown in the United States in New York City in 1936 and again in that city in two retrospectives, one at the Museum of Modern Art in 1965 (U.S. tour, 1966), and the other at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1992.



Magritte

Today we are discussing the artist, René Magritte, who lived in Belgium, which is in between France and Germany. He was born in 1898. He went to the Brussels Academy of Fine Arts, and worked as a designer for a wallpaper factory and did sketches for advertising. His work in advertising helped make his style of painting so realistic. When he was 28 he quit advertising and became a full-time painter. **(Show a Picture of Magritte at 28)**

He is wearing a suit, tie, and bowler hat, and as you can see, he's holding one of his paintings of a man in a bowler hat. He did many paintings of men in bowler hats (**see image, *Golconda***), and it is how he always dressed. He always lived in the suburbs. He was married, with no children. He was a leader of the Belgian surrealists. Surrealism was a movement in art and literature between WWI and WWII. Its aim was to express subconscious mental activities. Subconscious thoughts are thoughts that are in your mind, but you're not aware of them. One way these thoughts come out is in your dreams. One of the Surrealists said they wanted to "reunited conscious and unconscious so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world in an absolute reality, a surreality." There were different kinds of surrealism. Magritte's paintings show us a world that looks completely realistic but doesn't make sense. Often you have to look twice to see what is off, or wrong (**see image, *Not to be Reproduced*** and ***Dominion of Light.***) He said that "the main function of painting is to convert a gaze into a tool of knowledge, forcing one to think in distinct unaccustomed ways." He wanted to make us think, to look again, and to look at the world around us differently. He had several ways of making us do this. One was displaced objects, that is everyday objects in the wrong place.

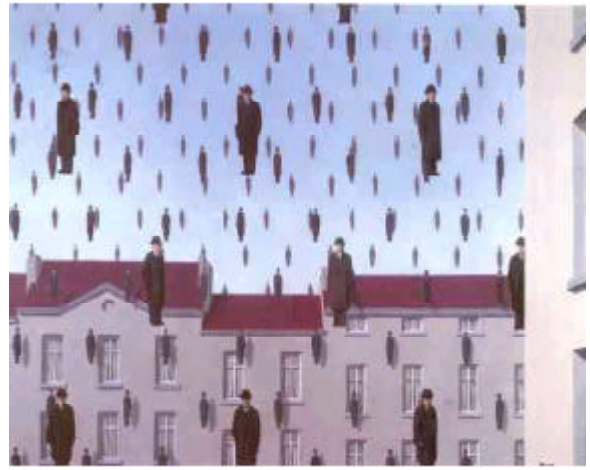
What is surreal in the picture? Another way was scale, which means size (**see image, *Personal Values***). He used transformation, that is, one thing turning into another.

He said "the problem of shoes demonstrates how the most frightening things can, through inattention, become complete innocuous." He wanted us to think about shoes and feet. He played with interior and exterior, and absence and presence.

The connection between a word and the object it stood for fascinated him. He said, "No object is so attached to its name that another cannot be found which suits it better." (**see image, *The Empty Mask***).

II The Painting: Time Transfixed (*La Durée Poignardée*), 1938

Hide Magritte's picture and begin presentation with a little game of Surrealistic Association of ideas. Ask the children to take a piece of paper and a pencil.



Golconda
René Magritte
1953



Not to Be Reproduced
1937

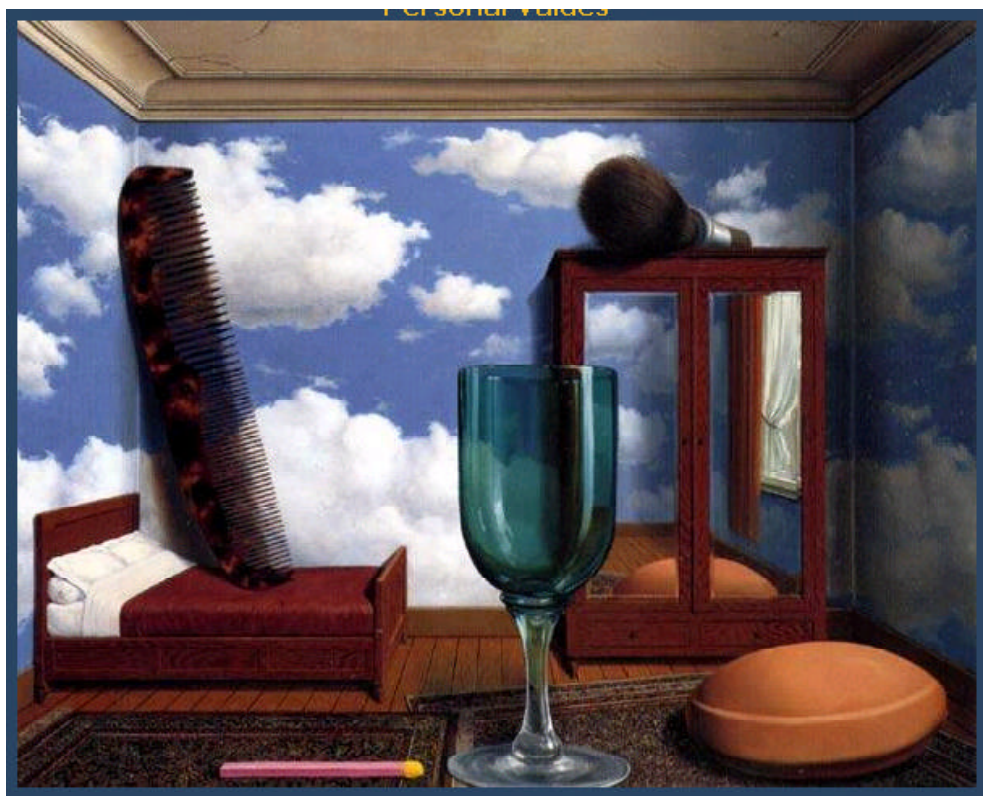


Dominion of Light

Give them a word and ask them to jot down the first two words that come to your mind when I say that word:

- Rope
- Banana
- Egg
- Mysterious

Compare the children's answers. If possible, point out some of the underlying assumptions that incited the children to make their connections: Images from movies, popular expressions, jokes, visual memories vs. intellectual associations or emotions responses, etc. Dwell on the associations made with the word mystery.



Personal Values

Show Magritte's picture, Time Transfixed.

Does this picture fit with your idea of something mysterious? Why is it puzzling and mysterious?

The objects in the picture are represented in a very straightforward manner: no blurriness, no hiding screen, no abstraction. Every object is immediately recognizable and familiar to most people. Every object is painted realistically, with photographic accuracy. Note, for example, the wood grain in the floor, the veins in the marble of the fireplace, the shadows, etc. Also, the artist's brushstroke is very smooth, slick. All this makes it look like a photographic reproduction.



The Empty Mask

What types of lines did the artist use? Mostly straight, vertical and horizontal lines. Something serious and conventional; there is seemingly no room for fancy or flight of the imagination in this decor.

What types of colors did the artist use? A lot of grays and browns; dull colors; nothing exciting and vibrant here.

Yet there is an aura of mystery about the picture. For one thing, the artist has added one object which we do not normally expect to see with the others: a smoking locomotive coming right through the fireplace. And we want to find a connection between that object and the others.

For another thing, the artist has modified the scale of the objects in the picture: The enormous locomotive, which could never fit inside a room, has been reduced to the size of a toy.

Is it meant to represent a real locomotive or a toy?

Where does it come from? Where is it going? It is not running on tracks, it is suspended in mid-air. It has been taken out of its proper environment and context.

Does the locomotive come out when people are out of the room or sleeping in their beds? Does it go somewhere to return later?

Is this night or day? Could it be the moonlight casting all those shadows in the picture?

Which words was Magritte thinking of when he painted the different objects in the picture? Smoke, Fire? Both fireplaces and locomotives make fire and smoke. Instead of creating the kind of VISUAL relatedness we expect in a picture, the artist, René Magritte, made a VERBAL connection. One word led to another.

The kind of art in which objects are taken out of their contexts and thrown together in an unfamiliar way is called **Surrealism**. It influenced many poets and painters between the two world wars. One of them is Marc Chagall. Surrealist artists believed that the act of spontaneous writing or drawing would reveal important truths about themselves. They jotted down images or words very quickly and tried not to allow their brains to sort these images or sift them out. They wanted raw material, not something that would “make sense.” You might compare their process for finding raw material to somebody who wants to make applesauce and picks his own apples in a tree, instead of buying prepackaged applesauce in the grocery store. The Surrealist artist wanted to pick his own images directly from the unconscious, instead of accepting images that have been processed by others before him.

When we say “He was green with envy,” we use a popular image that people have used so often that they do not even conjure up the color green anymore. But Chagall uses the color green with a new personal connotation and his use of the color becomes striking. In *I and the Village*, for example, he paints his face green because he sees himself as a visionary, a poet. For him, green is the color of vision, of inner illumination. Similarly, Magritte uses objects with personal connotations attached to them.

Can you see other objects in the picture besides the locomotive and the fireplace which have an association with the ideas of smoke or fire? The hardwood floor and the panelling are made of wood which is a fuel for fire.

What kind of association exists between a clock and a locomotive? A clock tells time and trains run on time. They must abide by a particular schedule. In train stations, there are always many clocks. Also in 1938, before WWII, when this picture was painted, steam engines were symbols of speed, and speed is distance travelled in a certain time. There is no speed without a sense of time.

The title of the picture is **Time Transfixed**.

What does transfixed mean? Transfixed means pierced through as if with a weapon. Stabbed. It also means held motionless, as if pierced by something.

Does the title mean anything or does it simply add another note of mystery to the picture? There is a frozen quality to this picture as if time were frozen still or suspended. Even though the speed of the locomotive is an important element here, the only thing that suggests movement is the smoke.

Do the hands on the clock move? Or, are they transfixed? We do not know. This painting leaves us with many unanswered questions.

III Composition of Artwork

IV Artist's Materials or Techniques

V Students' Self-Expression: Guided Activity

- A. Play the Surrealist game of "Exquisite Corpse" as a drawing. Divide the classroom into groups of 5 students.

Student #1 draws a head (animal or human, or imaginary) at the top of the piece of paper and folds the paper over at the base of the head so that other players cannot see his/her drawing.

Student #2 draws an upper torso that extends from the fold made by Student #1. Then he/she folds his/her drawing to hid it from the other students.

Student #3 draws the lower torso.

Student #4 draws the legs.

Student #5 draws the feet.

When the drawing is unfolded it shows a strange creature.

- B. Play the Surrealist game of "Exquisite Corpse" as a text. Divide the classroom into groups of 5 students.

Student #1 writes an adjective at the top of a piece of paper and folds it over.

Student #2 writes a noun and folds the paper over.

Student #3 writes a verb.

Student #4 writes an adjective.

Student #5 writes a noun.

The name of the game results from the constructed sentence: "The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine." The game represents "a victory of collective over individual invention and served as an exploration of conscious and unconscious thought."

C. Experience with the technique of "frottage" (French for rubbing). Paper is placed over some rough substance such as grained wood and rubbed with a pencil or crayon until the design appears on the paper. The artist then searches for and/or creates images within this design and highlights and elaborates on them with color or darker outlines.

D. Print out attached paper and cut up the words with nouns on them (or make your own) and put them in a paper bag. Have each child pick 3 slips of paper and create a picture that combines the three objects in an imaginative, surreal way.

Adjective: A word used with a noun, or substantive, to express a quality of the thing named, or something attributed to it, or to limit or define it, or to specify or describe a thing, as distinct from something else. Thus, in phrase, "a wise ruler," wise is the adjective, expressing a property of ruler.

Verb: The part of speech that expresses existence, action, or occurrence in most languages.

Noun: The part of speech that is used to name a person, place, thing, quality, or action and can function as the subject or object of a verb, the object of a preposition, or an appositive.

rock	bucket	sock	hat	sun
cow	glove	shoe	airplane	elephant
boat	frog	river	window	mirror
mouth	ostrich	scissors	bee	book
ear	flame	flag	cat	plum
moon	orange	horse	train	bird
table	pencil	desk	boat	turtle
sheep	skate	snake	peacock	bear

ball	mouse	pipe	snow	spoon
flower	eye	owl	lion	clock
shirt	tiger	egg	ice cream cone	balloon
mouth	shark	chair	doll	door
hand	watermelon	comb	lamp	key
seashell	pillow	fire	trumpet	pig
bread	fork	spider	sled	strawberry
hand	penguin	bike		