MAGRITTE
The Mystery of the Ordinary
1926-1938

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with essays by
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"THIS IS HOW MARVELS BEGIN" Brussels 1926-1927

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Figure 1. René Magritte. Detail of Le Jockey perdu (The Lost Jockey). 1926 (see plate 4)
On Saturday, April 23, 1927, René Magritte's first one-person exhibition opened in Brussels at the elegant, newly redesigned Galerie Le Centaure, located at 62, avenue Louise, one of the city's most fashionable streets. The show featured forty-nine paintings and twelve *papiers collés*, all produced since January 1926, around the time when the artist's contract with the gallerist and avant-garde impresario Paul-Gustave Van Hecke had begun. Although the local reviews were generally unfavorable, the exhibition launched Magritte's career as Brussels's leading—in fact only—Surrealist painter, in the months prior to his departure for Paris in September 1927.

The body of work Magritte created in anticipation of his Le Centaure exhibition and during the four months that followed was therefore pivotal. It was produced at a crucial moment of artistic self-definition for the artist, poised to move from the periphery of the Surrealist coterie to its center in Paris, in the circle of André Breton. To look closely at a series of key works from this foundational moment is to watch the twenty-eight-year-old Magritte reinventing himself as a figurative painter whose evolving Surrealist project was one of severing the links between surface and essence, representation and reality. In this, his works may be considered in relation not only to the specifics of his Belgian context, but to general Surrealist preoccupations with undermining rational systems, with dreams and the Freudian "uncanny," with violence, and with notions of originality.

**LE JOCKEY PERDU**

Magritte's *papier collé* titled *Le Jockey perdu* (The Lost Jockey, 1926; plate 4) is an image of dramatically arrested motion. A jockey, with his back to us, looks over his shoulder at unseen opponents and raises his crop to urge his horse on (fig. 1). The animal's nose stretches forward; its flying mane and tail and the position of its legs all indicate that it is traveling at breakneck speed. The contrast between these signs of movement and the stasis of the image offers an early example of what Breton would later identify as "the fixed-explosive," an important category of "convulsive beauty," in which the animate is abruptly brought to a halt. Magritte rendered his horse and rider using strokes of charcoal of varying length, density, and degrees of precision. The black-and-white tonalities and the pronounced contrasts of light and shadow combine to create an image that is illustrational in character. The sharp outlines, particularly those of the horse's hooves and legs, create the sense of a cutout or collage. The overall impression is that the steed and its jockey have been lifted from another context, with the original surrounding circumstances—other horses and riders, racetrack, spectators—left far behind.

Magritte did, in fact, find this jockey and racehorse elsewhere: careering across a page of his treasured *Larousse universel* dictionary (figs. 2, 3), among a series of line-engravings illustrating aspects of horse racing. He magnified and isolated the small *Larousse* horse and rider (possibly with the use of a pantograph—a standard graphic-arts tool used for enlarging directly). In *Larousse*, the jockey...
and his mount can be seen to be losing by a length, accounting for the powerful impression of desperate, last-ditch, forward-thrusting movement they convey even when isolated. Having delivered them from one fate (the loss of a race), Magritte consigned them to another: a lonely existence in a strangely populated forest, framed by curtains at either side that identify the space as a theatrical stage. Here, set upon an aberrant perspectival grid, horse and rider acquire a ghostly presence, an effect heightened by Magritte's strategic erasure of details found in Larousse: the horse's bridle is reduced to a bare minimum, saddle and girth are virtually eliminated, and the jockey's capped head is rendered as a featureless sphere. At the same time, Magritte was careful to preserve visual traces of the image's illustrational origins, which were themselves printed from an engraved translation of a drawing by a graphic artist of an actual race. This image of a "lost jockey," then, is not just one or two but at least three generations removed from the real world.  

Magritte spoofed the conventionally illusionistic dimensionality of the Larousse horse and rider by adding traces of shadows under the horse's hooves. These serve to anchor the image visually and to suggest that it occupies a physical position within this overtly artificial space. The same holds true for the five branch- or antler-sprouting bilboquets—the lathe-turned forms that feature so prominently in Magritte's work—cut out from a score of sheet music and collaged onto the work's support paper. Magritte carefully shaded each of these elements, articulating the curves of their silhouettes; he also outlined their right edges with dark pencil strokes. These additions, like the sketchy shadows behind them, have a quotational quality. They function conventionally to create the illusion of dimensionality and depth, and at the same time, this effect is countered by the sheet music's flat, nonspatial character, which draws attention to the notes' agency as conventions or signs.

Each of the five bilboquets in Le Jockey perdu is carefully individuated, not only in terms of dimensions and in the shapes and placement of their sinuous black ink branches (or antlers), but also in terms of their physical contours; they catch us up in a game of variety and sameness, uniqueness and repetition—central preoccupations for the artist at this time. Magritte's friend and "accomplice," the Belgian Surrealist Paul Nougé, acknowledged the important place the bilboquet held in the artist's early Surrealist works. It was a form with multivalent connotations, ranging from mannequins (as seen in Magritte's contemporary commercial work and paintings; plates 22 and 28) to balusters or table legs to chess pieces, and it would become one of Magritte's stock elements, a distinctive "type" that could be multiplied, resized, and repositioned ad infinitum, each time slightly differently, posing a provocative challenge (as did his lifting of the Larousse image) to prevailing definitions of originality in art.
D'autres ont moins de patience et tranchent les derniers fils qui les retenaient dans le cercle énchânié de la peinture.

Marthe Donas, après avoir fait le tour du cubisme, revient à un sentiment plus simple et moins fruste à la fois, à un tracé de plus en plus proche.

Enfin, René Magritte, s'éloignant à cœur perdu dans le vide, sépare ou rapproche des éléments sans valeur plastique apparente et compose ainsi un langage plein de surprise et essentiellement poétique.

Figure 4. Reproduction of Magritte's Le Jockey perdu (The Lost Jockey, 1926; Sylvester 1:81), illustrating Camille Goemans's article "La Jeune Peinture belge" ("Young Belgian Painting"), in Bulletin de la vie artistique (Paris), September 1926. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

According to Le Jockey perdu's first owner, the Belgian avant-garde collector Pierre Janlet, the work's original title was Le Jockey égaré (The jockey who lost his way)—words that correspond to those used by Van Hecke to describe Magritte, in the first full-length article published on the artist's work, written to coincide with his Galerie Le Centaure exhibition. A few months earlier, an oil-on-canvas version of the same subject—a mounted jockey, flanked by two rows of white biboquettes—was reproduced as part of an article on the state of contemporary painting in Belgium (fig. 4). The one sentence therein that was devoted to Magritte was positioned next to this image, which bore the caption "Le jockey perdu." The article's author, Camille Goemans, another Belgian Surrealist and a friend of Magritte's, described the artist as "hurting recklessly into the void," much like the jockey, galloping off into the unknown.

In the checklist for Magritte's Le Centaure exhibition, the painted version of Le Jockey perdu is the first entry. During the course of the exhibition, it was displayed in the gallery's street-level window—further confirmation of its early importance among Magritte's Surrealist works. According to the authors of Magritte's catalogue raisonné, Le Jockey perdu was also "the first image he repeated," ushering in what would become (by the mid- to late 1930s and especially after World War II) his frequent practice of producing different versions—"variants," as he called them—of successful works.

Magritte's friend and legal advisor, Harry Torczyner, acquired the former Jockey égaré in 1960. At that time, Magritte told Torczyner that this papier colle should be titled Le Jockey perdu, aligning the work more closely not only with the 1926 oil on canvas but with the multiple versions of the subject he created in the 1940s and later. He said to Torczyner that his new acquisition "announced The Lost Jockey," a statement that led the catalogue raisonné authors to conclude that the papier colle version preceded the 1926 oil painting. In fact, however, Magritte might well have meant that the papier colle ushered in the many versions of the theme that would follow through the years. Each of the later paintings and gouaches is distinct, but all share the distinguishing features of the horse and rider that Magritte had positioned center-stage in the papier colle. By contrast, in the 1926 oil on canvas (and in another early "lost jockey" papier colle; fig. 5), the silhouetted profiles of the horse and rider are markedly different from those in the later variants, and from those in the erstwhile Jockey égaré. A comparison of the three 1926 versions—one on canvas and two on paper—
offers precious insight into which of the "lost jockeys" Magritte would come to judge most successful: that of the horse and rider who, in the original Larousse illustration, are seen to be losing the race by a length. Even when isolated and repositioned, this pair best retains its dramatic momentum, the better to contrast with its permanently fixed and frozen state.

**LE SENS DE LA NUIT**

In Magritte's imposing painting *Le Sens de la nuit* (The Meaning of Night, 1927; plate 11), a bowler-hatted man commands our first attention. His eyes are closed and his face is white, only slightly warmer in shade than the stiff white collar that rises up to meet his chin. His lips, a cool, bluish-blood-red, provide the face's only note of color. The pronounced contrast between them and the man's skin recalls the exaggerated makeup worn by male actors in early films, although there is nothing animated about this particular "performer." His features are absolutely still and affectless, like those of a wax-museum figure, or a plaster death mask. From the tips of his polished black leather shoes to the top of his *chapeau melon* (the hat that would come to be so closely associated with Magritte), he is impeccably turned out. His long overcoat, Edwardian starched collar, and precisely knotted black cravat represent a type of conservative daywear that would have been instantly recognized by viewers in the late 1920s as a businessman's uniform, British in origin. The man's closed eyes, however, signal his remove from the everyday, as does the uncanny character of his surroundings, rendered in a subdued palette of blacks, grays, beiges, and occasional luminous whites.

Behind him is another figure, identically dressed, with his back to us. Slightly smaller in size, conforming to the rules of perspective, he stands on a sand-colored beach or platform that is jagged at left like a puzzle piece. He faces ominous skies and a deep gray sea. The position of his feet mirrors those of his forward-facing counterpart, hinting—as does his pose—that this might be nothing more than a reflection, captured in an immaterial mirror, the presence of which is implied rather than seen. His left foot and leg, however, cast their own distinct shadow: a visual clue to his presence as a physical entity within the stagelike perspectival structure of the scene.

The third figure in the painting, by contrast, conforms to no such spatial logic. It flies in from the right, as if out of nowhere, entering on a diagonal and disturbing the composition's otherwise straightforward, frontal harmonies. As such, it confirms what the bowler-hatted man's closed eyes suggest: this is the irrational space of a dream. The identity of this deracinated apparition is elusive. Its most clearly defined element is a prominent, disembodied hand or glove, which grasps the lower edge of what appears to be...
a furry garment, pulling it up to reveal a glimpse of lace and the tops of a pair of seamed-stocking legs. Its silvery-gray tones suggest it might have photographic origins, and (as others have pointed out) it connects in a general way to the fur-related imagery found in Magritte's commercial work and papiers collés of the time. The vaguely pincerlike shape of its two outer extremities, for example—which extend toward and perhaps even brush up against the back-facing figure—recalls the necklines of fur coats in Magritte's fashion illustrations for two Maison S. Samuel catalogues (see for example plate 30). Overall, the various components of the figure present a compendium of painterly effects and textures, all of which (as intimated by the bodyless hand or glove) evoke tactile experiences: the softness of fur, the delicacy of lace, the silkiness of stockings (fig. 6). Each is rendered with virtuoso handling that carries over to the strangely substantive clouds that litter the landscape's surface, the sheer weight of which seems to have caused them to fall to earth (although paradoxically they retain the scale of clouds seen at a distance in the sky).

Unlike everything else in the picture, including the earthbound clouds, the amorphous fur-covered figure casts no shadow. It hovers in an indeterminate space between the bowler-hatted men's world and ours, providing a visual corollary for the way irrational thoughts can suddenly intrude upon the mind. The fur shape's angle and imagery encourage us to consider what Sigmund Freud notoriously defined—in 1927, the same year as Magritte's painting—as a site of traumatic recognition and feminine "lack." Although Magritte rejected psychoanalytic interpretations of his paintings, by the late 1920s, and particularly in Surrealist circles (both in Brussels and Paris), this intruding figure would have been instantly recognized as an amalgam of Freudian fetish objects—stockinged legs, a lacy undergarment, fur, each related to a castration scenario that involved notions of illicit looking and erotic displacement. The fetish object, in standard Freudian interpretation, replaces "the normal sexual object" by "some part of the body [...] or some inanimate object which bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces and preferably to that person's sexuality (e.g. a piece of clothing or underlinen)." Fur was identified by Freud as a fetish object owing to its "association with the hair of the mons Veneris." Even flight, or the wish to be able to fly in dreams, was understood by Freud "as nothing else than a longing to be capable of sexual performance."

To point to these relationships is not to diminish or limit the painting's mystery but rather to sharpen our historical understanding of Magritte's imagery, including his (later iconic) bowler-hatted man. Such figures, to an even greater extent than those of the "jockey perdu," multiplied in appearance in Magritte's work, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, gradually becoming a persona adopted by the artist himself. To consider the bowler-hatted man here, at his point of entry into Magritte's work, in this original context, is to recognize him not only as a standard type, or traditional everyday man, but as a revolutionary dreamer, whose ordinary exterior conceals an unfathomable inner life of desire and poetic possibility. His closed eyes, which renounce the external world for the realm of the psyche, amount to a manifesto: a sign of Surrealist solidarity.
L'ASSASSIN MENACÉ

"All this will be called: The murderer threatened," wrote Magritte's friend Nouge in 1927. These words concluded a scenario he had composed (perhaps for a film), possibly in collaboration with Magritte. This text names all the protagonists in L'Assassin menacé (The Menaced Assassin, 1927; plate 12), Magritte's largest and most densely populated canvas to date. Included in the dramatis personae: a "corpse of rare perversity," a "young man of great beauty dressed with the most restrained elegance, leaning ever so slightly over a gramophone horn," "four heads [that] stare at the murderer," and "two men [...] on either side of the wide-open door." Of the subjects Nouge listed, only "a meditative cat" that "observes the corpse" failed to make an appearance in the completed canvas, along with the fourth "head," or witness, whose presence may simply be concealed from us by the brown-suited young man's right shoulder. Although the circumstances and nature of Magritte's collaboration with Nouge on this text remain uncertain, the relationship between the words and the image is undeniable. As a result, notions of "authorship" (as pertains to the painting) are muddied along the lines of French poet Lautréamont's dictum "Poetry must be made by all and not by one," a cri de cœur among Paris Surrealists who, like their Brussels counterparts, were advocates of group activity and communal creation.

Infrared imaging used with transmitted light allows us to see that Magritte painted the background of L'Assassin menacé rapidly (fig. 7). He used broad vertical strokes of pale lavender-white and pinkish paint to cover the interior walls, and warm, beige-brown ones to establish the floor. He reserved areas for each of his primary figures and possibly worked across the canvas from left to right, completing each character before moving on, although it is impossible to ascertain this with certainty. It is clear, though, that his process was additive and that each figure occupies a predetermined spatial zone, which helps to account for their eerie isolation and lack of interaction in the scene. Positioned within a tripartite series of architecturally defined, telescoping spaces, they are separated from one another not only physically but psychologically. The directions of their respective gazes offer a clue to their psychic...
Figure 9. Still from Louis Feuillade's 1913 film Le Mort qui tue (The Murderous Corpse), showing two assassins poised to ambush Monsieur Thomery (Luitz-Morat). Production Gaumont, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France

remove. The two bowler-hatted men, for example, look not at each other, nor in the direction of the room behind them, but slightly down and out of the picture, at something unseen. The elegant young man—presumably the "menaced assassin" of the work's title—gazes down into the oversized horn of a gramophone. Even the three heads looking in on the scene from the window, described by Nougé as "standing at the murderer," direct their eyes not at the young man or out at the viewer, but at something in the corner, hidden by the wall on the right, against which stands the man with the net (Fig. 8). The painting thematizes the act of seeing, while inviting careful, dispassionate investigation—like that of a detective—even as it reminds us of vision's limits and blind spots, which can cause us to miss things hidden in plain sight.39

The gramophone's presence alerts us to the painting's deafening stillness. Each figure appears as though in a state of suspended animation. To an even greater degree than in Le Sens de la nuit, the effect is akin to that of a wax-museum display, or some sort of perpetual tableau vivant. Paradoxically, it is the cadaver, with blood coagulated around its mouth, that is the most "lively" figure in the room—partly due to the peculiarly disjunctive, offset relationship between its head and its naked body, which appear to have been severed from one another (although what we can see of the neck is bloodless).

The image is intentionally disturbing; it recalls those in four other prose pieces Nougé composed in 1927 in which women play dominant and frequently gruesome roles.40 One of these, like the text related to L'Assassin menacé, corresponds to a painting of the same year by Magritte, Jeune Fille mangeant un oiseau (Le Plaisir) (Girl Eating a Bird [Pleasure], plate 15), which features a lace-collared young lady sinking her teeth into the exposed flesh of a bird. In this instance, the female plays the role of aggressor, not victim, and is seen close-up, accompanied not by other people, but by four brightly colored birds. In L'Assassin menacé, by contrast, a woman's body is offered up as a literal corpus delicti, the material evidence of a crime. However, there are no clues—a knife, overturned furniture—to indicate how she might have met her fate.

The art historian José Vovelle was the first to point to the connections between Magritte's paintings and the wildly popular, pre-World War I series of Fantômas films by the French director Louis Feuillade.42 Echoes of one Fantômas film in particular, Le Mort qui tue (The Murderous Corpse), first released in November 1913, seem to haunt L'Assassin menacé, which David Sylvester describes as the "most cinematic image in Magritte's œuvre."43 Although reticent in general about his childhood, Magritte later recalled going to the Cinéma Bleu in Charleroi, where
he moved in the spring of 1913 and might well have seen
*Le Mort qui tue* when it was released later that year.44
Whether he might have seen the film at a time closer
in date to realizing *L’Assassin menace* is unknown—it is
apparent, however, that it made an indelible impression.
As Vovelle notes, for example, there are compelling com­
positional parallels between the painting and a scene
in the film in which two hooded killers wait outside an
open door, just before garroting the mustached Monsieur
Thomery, one of *Le Mort qui tue’s* many murder victims
(fig. 9). Magritte replaced Feuillade’s two masked crimi­
nals with a pair of anonymous men, whose bowler hats
would have identified them in the context of the film as
representatives of law and order.46 Their role in Magritte’s
painting is, however, ambivalent. Poised like stalkers,
and armed with cudgel and net, they convey a sense
of frozen menace that conflicts with their respectable
attire—a substitution that may be read as a subversive
reversal entirely consistent with the Surrealists’ determi­
nation to place all supposedly rational systems and signs
of authority on trial.

Judging from the cut of his suit—and more specifi­
cally his soft-felt fedora hat, placed on the chair beside
him—Magritte’s “young man of great beauty” may also be
linked to *Le Mort qui tue*. He resembles the film’s inquisi­
tive young reporter, Jérôme Fandor (fig. 10), a morally
upright (and regularly imperiled) counterpart to the evil
Fantômas. Lifted from the film and repositioned in *L’Assassin
menacé*, this young man, too, becomes an anonymous type.
Identified by his stylish clothes and fine leather shoes as
something of a dandy or Jazz Age man, he provides a soft
foil for the somber, conservatively dressed would-be killers
and their stiff, hard-felt hats. As fashion historian Diane
Maglio has noted, all three men are depicted with their
jackets and overcoats buttoned on the "wrong" side for
menswear, a subtle detail that suggests the scene might
be considered a mirror image, contributing to its phantas­
magoric or imaginary character.

In the final, most memorable scene in *Le Mort qui tue*,
Fantômas’s nemesis, Inspector Juve, accompanied by Fandor,
strips a glove made of human skin from Fantômas’s hand
(fig. 11). Fantômas had used this glove—which, in an earlier,
particularly grisly scene, he is seen flaying from a murder victim's hand—to leave behind the dead man's fingerprints instead of his own when carrying out his crimes. A fingerprint is, of course, conventionally understood to be a unique and nontransferable sign of identity, physically connected to a singular self.\(^{47}\) What *Le Mort qui tue* slyly suggests, by contrast, is that this essential "proof" of identity is detachable and transferable. Several of Magritte's subsequent paintings—notably *La Fin des contemplations* (*An End to Contemplation*, plate 18) and *Le Double secret* (*The Secret Double*, plate 20), both from 1927—present images of epidermal detachment, of sections of skin peeled away. In *L'Assassin menacé*, however, it is *Le Mort qui tue*’s unsettling conflation of attire with identity that resonates: Fantômas’s macabre glove insists that there is no "natural" or "inherent" relationship between surface and essence, appearance and self. To equate human skin with gloves—and by implication, the human self with hats, suits, and overcoats—is to suggest that all are no more than repositional signifiers, radically destabilizing our sense of what constitutes "identity."

THE SAMUEL CATALOGUE

Probably at some point after the close of his Galerie Le Centaure exhibition in May 1927, and certainly prior to his move to Paris in September of that same year, Magritte and Nouge collaborated on a commission from a Brussels furrier known as "Maison Ch. Müller, S. Samuel et Cie."\(^{48}\) The small paperback catalogue that they produced together was not signed by either man (in keeping with the Brussels Surrealists’ penchant for anonymity). Masquerading as a commercial production whose sole purpose was to promote the Maison Samuel’s winter 1928 fur collection, it is in fact an insidiously subtle Surrealist manifesto, in which the worlds of fashion, fine arts, poetry, and publicity collide.

The publication has a decidedly plain cover (fig. 12).\(^ {49}\) It measures approximately eight by six inches, and includes only eighteen pages.\(^ {50}\) Nothing about its design or its material character is outstanding; if anything, the little booklet seems intended to look, from the outside, as nondescript as possible, all the better to blend in, undetected, among other small paperbacks on a shelf.\(^ {51}\) Magritte contributed sixteen photomechanically reproduced illustrations to the publication; all but two were printed in black and white. Nouge provided a prologue and an epilogue, along with sixteen concise texts—one for each of Magritte’s illustrations—most of them consisting of a single sentence or phrase. Within the catalogue, Nouge’s words appear on verso pages, centered, with large areas of empty space above and below. Magritte’s images are positioned opposite them on the recto pages; all are vertical in orientation and are likewise surrounded by ample margins. The sparseness of the text pages provides an effective counterpoint to the relatively dense, visually rich detail of Magritte’s illustrations, which combine hand-drawn and hand-painted elements with cutouts of photographs and photomechanically reproduced images.

No archival evidence concerning details of either the commission or the collaborative process seems to have survived.\(^ {52}\) It is unknown, for example, whether Magritte provided Nouge with all sixteen illustrations at once as a
fait accompli, or if they had some dialogue while Magritte was creating them. We also do not know if Magritte conceived of the illustrations independently—as individual works—or if he envisioned them as the sequence in which they appear in the book. That the finished Samuel catalogue presents a narrative line seems certain, but whether Magritte was responsible for this, or Nouge, or the two of them working together, presently is unascertainable. Regardless, the final result merits consideration as a carefully thought-out composition, not just in terms of the individual relationships between the sixteen pairs of text and image, but also in terms of the order in which these pairs fall in the booklet’s pages.

The first eight pairs in the catalogue introduce a series of stylized yet, with one exception, naturalistically rendered and relatively interchangeable female models (see for example plates 25–27). Each sports a different fur coat, and is placed in an ambiguous stagelike setting. The eyes of the women are invariably closed or otherwise obscured. Magritte included a bisected photograph of his own face, also with eyes closed, in the lower-right corner of the second illustrated spread, a subtle sign of authorship (although originally recognized, of course, only by a select few; see plate 25). The head of the model who appears to his left is partially hidden by a cutout of a car illustration (fig. 13). “What one guesses is perhaps what she is thinking,” Nouge tells us. “Dressed thus, she requires no explanation.” His words suggest that the collage element might be read as materialized thought, while adding to the illustration’s overall mood of interior reflection and silent reverie. In the pages that follow, a woman steps through a freestanding open door and, in each of the next three spreads, turns her back to us. In one particularly remarkable image, her body dissolves, replaced by a polka-dotted profile and amorphous limbs (plate 26). Nouge’s words repeatedly encourage readers to consider the relation between coats and concealment: “Not in the eyes, not in the hands, it is in the folds of her coat that she hides her secrets and yours.”

A color illustration marks the sequence’s halfway point (plate 27). Exceptionally, the model’s face is fully visible and turned toward us, showing that her eyes are closed. “She invents the world in complete security,” Nouge tells us. “Her dreams protect her as well as her coat.” In the following four spreads, the female models are abruptly replaced by Magritte’s characteristic bilboquets and strangely perforated cutouts, inanimate objects that function as mannequins, stepping into the role performed by the dreaming women in the prior pages (see for example plates 28, 29). A threshold is crossed: the real is supplanted by the imagined. Nouge’s words complement the images, conjuring a world of movement, reflection, and disappearance: “She advances fearlessly. The innocence of sleep and the fatality of spells precede her step by step” (plate 28). “Only a reflection of her coat remains as souvenir: She is gone, used, erased.”

The last spread in the series of four dream images features a curtain, two fur coats, one lacking a head, but with recognizable women’s legs beneath; the other supported by a flat, perforated shape (plate 29). A drawn bird swoops in from stage left, its head positioned over the neck of the “headless” coat, taking the model’s place. “Here the last likeness is discarded,” Nouge writes. “There are no longer any ordinary things.” In his prologue to the Samuel catalogue, Nouge had counseled “vigilance.” The message was clear: Be careful. Stay alert. Things are not what they seem.
His words implicated not only the Maison Samuel’s luxury products, and his and Magritte’s unconventional commercial catalogue, but the world of appearances, generally speaking. Evidently their goal with the Samuel catalogue was not just to sell furs, but to advertise the uncanny power of dreams. It was a reminder of all that remains hidden beneath the surface, whether of fur coats or of the psyche.

DOUBLES AND DOUBLING

The final four word-and-image pairs in the Samuel catalogue trace a path from dream state to the real. In the first, we see a naturalistically rendered model in a fur coat, accompanied by the words: “Now she returns to the world, she can smile at all the dangers.” Two pages later, she is joined by her dream-double; the two walk arm in arm (plate 30).

“A mirror would be useless,” observes Nouge. “She divides herself without trouble. But this is how marvels begin.” Nouge’s word choice here, as throughout the catalogue, is richly evocative. In French, “se dédoubler” translates literally as “to be divided into halves.” In psychoanalytic parlance, it means “to have a split personality,” inviting interpretation of Magritte’s illustration in relation to Freud’s concept of the uncanny, in which “doubles” and repetition play key roles.

For Freud, the uncanny entailed a conjoining of opposites: the familiar and agreeable with what, according to social mores, should be kept out of sight. The leering, distorted features of Magritte’s mannequin figure give physical form to what the model represses: her reified, commoditized, and innanimate “other,” whose appearance recalls that of a reflection in a fun-house mirror: isolated, cutout, and given thin yet solid form.

Magritte’s 1927 portrait of Nouge (plate 16) raises the representational stakes. Although iconographically connected to the Samuel catalogue — with Nouge portrayed in formal evening attire, and with one of the irregularly contoured, perforated “mannequin” cutouts redeployed as a strangely situated, almost free-floating door — it introduces a different approach to the subject of the “double,” reimagining it not only in psychoanalytic terms but as an image-generating strategy. In the Samuel catalogue, Magritte paired his fur model with a dream-double, a visually distinct doppelgänger, brought together on the page. In his portrait of Nouge, by contrast, there appears little, at first glance, to distinguish the image of the figure situated on the left side of the composition from its counterpart on the right. We are encouraged to consider the two figures as identical — in attire, in posture, and in the position of their heads. The implication is that they are duplicates of one another, and this duality forces us to recognize the obvious: neither image is Nouge; both are representations.

In the portrait of Nouge it is not only duplication, or reiteration, that renders the figures mysterious or unsettling; the pronounced slenderness of their bodies is also strange. They give the impression of something seen at an oblique angle, impossibly situated within a space defined by a perforated screen that rises up behind them, and by the “door,” the lower tip of which balances precariously on the edge of the painting, with its front edge seemingly pressed against the surface. At the same time, this element recedes diagonally, cutting into and/or bypassing the figure of Nouge at right in a way that differentiates what we can see of him from what we see of that at left. The two figures are also distinguished by the cropping of the right one’s proper left arm by the picture’s edge, and a subtle shift in lighting, which affects both figures’ skin tones as well as the atmospheric background behind their heads. Both figures appear to be missing their right hands.

Some have interpreted the bifurcated, “quasi-stereographic” structure of Magritte’s image of Nouge biographically, suggesting it alludes to Nouge’s double life as a biochemist and an avant-garde writer. By contrast, in what is believed to be among the last paintings Magritte completed before his departure for Paris, La Fin des contemplations (plate 18) — a title alleged to have been “found” by Nouge — Magritte dispensed with all clues that might encourage biographical or narrative speculation. The painting is among the most radically reductive in his entire œuvre. In the portrait of Nouge, a comparison of the painting’s right and left sides gradually reveals a number of differences. Such a comparison in La Fin des contemplations is an exercise in frustration. The three thick black lines that border the left and right edges of the composition and mark its exact center are identical in proportion. The same holds true for the two jaggedly “cutout” figures;
14a and b. Infrared images showing details (left and right eyes and brow lines) of Magritte’s *La Fin des contemplations (An End to Contemplation, 1927; plate 18)*. The Menil Collection, Houston

Figures 15a and b. Infrared images showing details (left and right ears) of Magritte’s *La Fin des contemplations (An End to Contemplation, 1927; plate 18)*. The Menil Collection, Houston

According to Menil conservators Katrina Bartlett and Brad Epley, examination of *La Fin des contemplations* using infrared reflectography reveals underdrawing and “minor artist’s changes in the brow line of the figures and in the ears” (figs. 14a,b; 15a,b). It appears that each figure “was initially planned with pencil in the same form”—possibly using “a template or cut-out”—and was then “altered in the same manner during painting.” This likely indicates that Magritte painted both figures together, “instead of fully planning and finishing one figure before starting the second.” On one hand, this implies that the slight differences (in the detailing of the ears, for example) were deliberate, or at least that Magritte deliberately let them be. More significantly, it means that the relationship between the two figures is not one of copy to model, but, instead, of equivalents (of same to same).

The French philosopher Michel Foucault would later define this type of relationship in Magritte’s paintings as one of “similitude,” which he opposed to “resemblance.” “Resemblance,” according to Foucault, “has a ‘model,’ an original element that orders and hierarchizes the increasingly less faithful copies that can be struck from it,” whereas “the similar develops in series that have neither beginning nor end, [...] that obey no hierarchy, but propagate themselves from small differences among small differences.”

To demonstrate his concept of similitude, Foucault turned to Magritte’s 1962 painting *La Réprésentation* (Representation; fig. 16), instead of to 1927 paintings like the portrait of Nougé or *La Fin des contemplations*. With this, Foucault elided the earlier works’ inaugural role, as well as the original context in which Magritte’s engagement with issues of doubling—similitude—first emerged: that of Brussels Surrealism, on the
eve of Magritte's departure for Paris, a moment of richly generative collaboration with Nouge, whose interests in concealment, split-subjectivities, and violence—as demonstrated by his texts related to paintings such as L'Assassin menacé and Jeune Fille mangeant un oiseau—appear to have paralleled Magritte's own.72

In La Fin des contemplations, as distinct from Réprésentation, Magritte visibly "cut" into three-dimensionally modeled figures, revealing them to be two-dimensional, partial, and insubstantial. In so doing, he located his attempts to reinvent the image as free-floating representation at a corporeal level, associating surface—what Foucault described as the "filmy thinness" of the image—with that of the body, and in particular, of skin.72 Although bloodless, this visual dissection has a visceral impact, one that severs the alliance of surface (the visible) with the essence of things. It helps us to recognize the degree of violence that informs Magritte's later assaults on the representational hierarchies and conventions that support fixed meanings, and on the normative association of what something looks like with what it is.
can be traced back to images in charts for 'cheval,' 'équitation' and 'courses.' In Lacroix [..]."

10. The specificLosanno source (see Figs. 2, 3) for Le Jockey perd (plate 4) is published here for the first time.

6. The next front leg could be explained by a slight shift in the pantograph, since the shape is otherwise the same as that in the original illustration. After establishing the outline, Magritte may have filled in the details from memory. Scott Gerson, email message to the author, August 22, 2012; and Michael Duffy, Paintings Consultant, The Museum of Modern Art, email message to the author, August 23, 2012.

7. See Allmer, Magritte: Beyond Painting, p. 142, for discussion of how encyclopedia imagery "short-circuits the artwork's relation to reality.

8. See Sylvester 1, p. 181, for discussion of "what Magritte calls a 'hitchcock' as 'something special to himself and not the wooden cup-and-ball toy the word normally means.'"

9. Magritte used the vocal score for The Girls of Gouvenhurgh, a 1907 English musical comedy for paper source materials for all but three of his thirty known paper collages dating from 1926-27. The author is grateful to Caitlin Kelly for her identification of the exact sheets used in each collage. On Magritte's use of this score, see Sylvester 1, p. 56.


11. See Paul Nougé, letter to René Magritte, n.d. (November 1927), repr. in Marcel Maréen, ed., Lettres surréalistes: 1924-1940 (Bruxelles: Les Lèvres nues, 1973), no. 110, p. 58. At least seventeen (and perhaps eighteen as one painting is lost) of the forty-nine paintings in the Le Centaure exhibition include bilbouquets.


14. Paul Gustave Van Hecke, René Magritte: Peintre de la pensée abstraite, Selection 6, no. 6 (March 1927): 442.


19. Ibid. The catalogue raisonne authors speculate that the painting was completed in February or early March, 1926, which leads them to surmise that the collage version was based on a painting around the beginning of the year. See Sylvester 181, p. 169, and Sylvester 4:600, p. 205.

20. See Sylvester 2:204, and Sylvester 4:178, 186, 2235, and 2452. For other works featuring the same Lumi horse and jockey, see Sylvester 3:293 and 392.


22. A number of other paintings from 1926 and 1927 include similar "death masks." See Sylvester 181, 110, 113, 115, 125, and 185.

23. I am grateful to Professor Diane Maglin, Fashion Dept., Berkeley College, Larry L. Living School of Business, for the analysis of menswear throughout this essay.


25. The feat on the forward-facing figure button on the "wrong" side for menswear, a sign that Le Sens de la Mode may be an imaginary or "reflected" image.


27. Later in life, the artist noted: "Psychoanalysis is a very intelligent system. But it is only an interpretation among many. It gives a symbolic value to represented things, to objects chosen by the artist. Me, I think that a cloud in a painting is nothing more than a cloud." See Pierre Descargues, René Magritte, le plus célèbre des surréalistes belges parle du mystérieux,不适XtLtS'diC1:4(1'111'vart1l11.111(11k.111, (November 1, 1921), repr. in René Magritte, Écrits complets, ed. by André Blavier (Paris: Flammarion, 2002 [originally 1949]), no. 150, trans. by Danielle M. Johnson.

28. Ibid.


30. Ibid., p. 189.

31. Ibid.


33. Infra-red imaging is traditionally used with reflected light to detect underdrawing and inscriptions; in transmitted light, paint density and Magritte's brushwork are more easily interpreted. Thanks
to Michael Duffy, along with his colleagues in The Museum of Modern Art’s Department of Conservation, Amy Aviram and Jim Cuddington, for their insights about this painting.


32. Following Nougé in stating the three come "gazing impassively at the obvious criminal."


34. See Sylvester 1, pp. 216–17.


39. For the common association of bowler hats with detectives in detective films and fiction from early decades of the twentieth century up to the 1960s, see Wollen, "Magritte and the Bowler Hat," in idem, Paris/Mahattan, pp. 133–35.


41. This was the second of two commissions for the Maison Samuel, the first catalogue had been undertaken the previous year. See Sylvester 1, pp. 17, 206–7, 74–75; Maruèn, L’Activité surrealiﬆe en Belgique, p. 146; and Georges Roque, Ceci n’est pas un Magritte (Paris: Flammarion, 1938), pp. 170–85.

42. For Magritte’s collection of the "nolle"—as well as the plainness of his catalogue reproductions produced by Paris fur companies like the well-known Maison Fourmazes Max.

43. The discussion that follows is indebted to conversations with Scott Gerum.

44. See Tom Gutt, "Ces Belles Fleurs de charbon," préface to the facsimile reprod. of Le Catalogue Smanent (Brussels: Didier Devillez, 1996), p. 10, for his suggestion that the book’s austere appearance may have been due to budgetary constraints. Sarah Whitfield proposes that the plainness of the catalogue’s identity in school textbooks, as was the case with another Magritte/Nougé publication, Clarisse Jarraville (plates 31, 32); see Sylvester 1, p. 75; and Josef Hofenstein with Clart Elliott, "A Lightning Flash Is Smoldering Beneath the Bowler Hats," in Le Catalogue Sement, pp. 59–60, on the lack of archival traces. It is unknown whether the catalogues were ever distributed to prospective clients, or what the response of their commissioners was to the highly unprecedented commercial publication.

45. For comments on certain pairs, see Sylvester, Magritte: The Silence of the World, p. 168.


47. For Nougé/Le Catalogue Sement, see Sylvester 1, pp. 71, 73, 74.

48. For all the images, see Magritte in Nougé, Le Catalogue Sement, p. 74. See ibid., trans. in Sylvester 1, p. 74.


50. In the catalogue preface for Magritte’s 1993 solo exhibition at the Salle Giso in Brussels, Nougé used a similar phrase, prefaced in a significantly different way: "The world has been altered, there are no longer any ordinary things." Paul Nougé, L‘ET Musee & E. van Toutouren prêtesentent serze tableaux de René Magritte (Brussels: Salle Giso, 1993); trans. in Sylvester 2, p. 8.


52. The "uncanny" is indebted to Foster, "Blunder/Blunder," pp. 72, 77–78, and 30–31.

53. The authors of Art Since 1900 write of Magritte’s "repudiation of compulsion" and remark that it could be said that what allows one to identify Magritte as a Surrealist is the sense that a form of doubling goes on work... the very start; see Hal Foster et al., Art Since 1990 (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), p. 312.


55. Sylvester 1:133, p. 221.


57. Marcel Boulestin, the first historian of the Belgian Surrealist group, claimed that Nougé "found" this title. See Sylvester 1:165.


63. Foucault, This Is Not a Pipe, p. 44.
Introduction MAGRITTE'S ESSENTIAL SURREALIST YEARS 1926–1938

Anne Umland, Stephanie D'Alessandro, and Josef Helfenstein

Figure 1. René Magritte at the family house, 16, avenue du Boulevard, Saint-Josse, Brussels, with [Seated Woman], 1920 (Sylvester 1:18), and an unidentified abstract painting. Dated on verso March 1921. Photographer unknown. 4 7/8 x 3 3/8" (11 x 8.4 cm). Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston
On Sunday, November 20, 1938, René Magritte delivered an important autobiographical lecture titled “La Ligne de vie” (“Lifeline”) at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp, some thirty miles north of Magritte’s home on the outskirts of Brussels. Falling just one day shy of his fortieth birthday and at a moment of increasing international recognition for the artist, the occasion provided him with a unique opportunity for retrospective self-assessment and an accounting of his artistic development and goals. Among the most significant leitmotifs of Magritte’s lecture was his own defining involvement with Surrealism, to which he referred directly and indirectly several times in “La Ligne de vie.”

Despite this definitive acknowledgment of the importance of his own historical relationship with the Surrealists, Magritte’s early contributions to the movement remain largely underrecognized. So too do the range and distinctive character of his efforts first created under the sign of Surrealism, beginning with the body of work he produced in 1926 and 1927 for his inaugural one-person exhibition in Brussels, and concluding in 1938, the year of “La Ligne de vie.” The outbreak of World War II the following year marks a caesura. After the war, Magritte’s relation to Surrealism took on a different character; as was the case for so many people and things, the war left him, and the movement itself, irrevocably changed.

This publication and the exhibition it accompanies look back at Magritte’s foundational Surrealist years, focusing with a historically specific lens on the works he produced between 1926 and 1938. The aim is to sharpen contemporary understanding of his achievement: What are the characteristics of Magritte’s work that identify him as a Surrealist? How does his work of this period compare to Surrealism’s other great painters, such as Joan Miró, Max Ernst, and Salvador Dalí? What is it that makes Magritte unique?

Although his figurative vocabulary, along with the traditional character of his chosen materials—oil paint and canvas—and his nominally “academic” technique, have led some to dismiss Magritte’s art as retrograde, the body of work he created during this intensely innovative thirteen-year period reveals that this is anything but the case. An investigation of these paintings shows that his famously deadpan style and approach to subject matter—the antithesis, in many ways, of Dalí’s lustrous, richly glazed surfaces and hallucinatory imagery—were but part of a methodically deconstructive practice, aimed at casting doubt on conventional systems of representation, both verbal and visual, in ways that remain utterly distinct.

Prior to 1927 Magritte was best known (to the degree that he was known at all) as a graphic artist and a painter of stylized, post-Cubist paintings that demonstrated he had absorbed the anti-illusionistic lessons of the avant-garde (figs. 1, 2). His first one-person exhibition, presented at the Galerie Le Centaure in Brussels from April 23 to May 3, 1927, introduced a dramatically different René Magritte.
It included forty-nine paintings and twelve *papiers collés* created between January 1926 and April 1927. These works bore witness to Magritte's deliberate decision, as retrospectively described in "La Ligne de vie," to introduce into his pictures "objects with all the details they show us in reality." Magritte contextualized this shift from semi-abstract to figurative painting in relation to a variety of factors: the Surrealist movement itself, which, he asserted, "claims for our waking life a freedom similar to that which we have in dreams"; the works of artists such as Giorgio de Chirico (fig. 3), Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and Pablo Picasso, whom he acknowledged as key precursors of "what is now called 'Surrealist Painting'"; and Magritte's own discovery and subsequent rejection of Futurism.

Magritte additionally noted that his decision to paint objects that could "be clearly apprehended" was precipitated by a specific moment of insight: the artist recalled "a prolonged contemplative experience [...] in an unpretentious Brussels brasserie [...] where I was in a frame of mind such that the moldings on a door seemed to me to be imbued with a mysterious quality of existence and for a long time I stayed in contact with their reality." By the late 1930s descriptions of such catalytic visual encounters were a well-established Surrealist trope. Max Ernst's quasi-autobiographical treatise "Au delà de la peinture" ("Beyond Painting") offers an early case in point that was surely known to Magritte. A portion of Ernst's text was first published in the October 1927 issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* (under the title "Visions de demi-sommeil" [Visions of half-sleep]), on the heels of Magritte's move to Paris. It was published again, in expanded form, in 1936 and yet again in 1937, just one year prior to Magritte's crafting and delivery of his "La Ligne de vie" lecture. The parallels between Magritte's talk and Ernst's "Au delà de la peinture" alert us to the highly constructed and selective character of "La Ligne de vie": it is by no means a transparent, straightforward, or factual account, but rather one in which the fictional and nonfictional are continuously entangled, in the artist's effort to project a logical consistency onto the narrative of his own development as a Surrealist painter up until 1938. The alignments between the two texts also suggest that Magritte may have conceived his lecture, at least in part, in response to Ernst's previously published accounts.

Thus the differences, as well as the similarities, between Magritte's and Ernst's narratives provide insights into both artists' approaches. Ernst memorably opens "Au delà de la peinture" with a description of a vision he had in his bedroom as a young boy, in a state of half-sleep: "I see before me a panel," he writes, using the vivid present tense, "very rudely painted with wide black lines on a red ground, representing false mahogany and calling forth associations of organic forms." This verbal picture of a *faux bois* panel that provoked associative visions of new, imaginary forms is followed by another image, of Ernst's father drawing on the same panel with a "fat crayon" while "panting violently." In the lines that ensue, Ernst identifies the occasion as "the night of my conception." This associates his elliptical descriptions of artistic activity and generation with copulation. It also identifies the overall scenario as an unusual Freudian "primal scene," in which the child observes his own making.

By contrast, the detached tone of Magritte's account of his "prolonged contemplative experience" at the Brussels brasserie, along with that experience's relatively prosaic character, seem particularly marked when held up against Ernst's psychosexually overdetermined text. Magritte locates...
his moment of visual revelation not in the sexually charged, intimate sphere of the bedroom, but in an “unpretentious” brasserie, a place of public discourse and conviviality. Equally significant is “the mysterious quality” of the “moldings on a door”—presumably made from real wood as opposed to Ernst’s “false mahogany”—that captured and rewarded Magritte’s intense and extended gaze. By staring at the moldings for a “prolonged” period, he was able to apprehend their ordinary mystery, reinforcing his conviction to “only paint objects with all their visible details.” Ernst’s act of looking at a painted representation of a mahogany panel, contrarily, produced visions of newly imagined things. He went on from this moment, which he described as “primal,” to pursue ever more new possibilities for automatically generating images, using found materials like “floor-boards […] leaves and their veins, the rugged edges of a bit of linoleum,” and so on.

In a later section of “Au-delà de la peinture,” Ernst cites Louis Aragon’s influential essay “La Peinture au défi” (“The Challenge to Painting”), which identifies Ernst as the first to create “the two forms of collage most removed from the principle of the papier collé—the photographic collage and the illustration collage,” as evidence of his own pioneering role as the inventor of Surrealist collage. A few pages later, Ernst itemizes the various “conquests” of collage, among which, he notes, was “surrealist painting,” in at least one of its multiple aspects, that which, between 1921 and 1924, I was the only one to develop, and in which, later, while I advanced alone, feeling my way, into the yet unexplored forests of frottage, others continued their researches (Magritte, for example, whose pictures are collages entirely painted by hand, and Dali). Illustrated directly above this passage is Ernst’s painting La Belle Saison (The Beautiful Season)—an enlarged 1925 version, in oil on canvas, of a small 1920 collage (fig. 4). The preceding pages feature numerous large, collagelike paintings, created — according to the captions — between 1921 and 1924: Oedipe Rech; Celtèbes (sic); and La Révolution la nuit (Revolution by Night), to name just a few. All bolstered Ernst’s claim to having invented not just one important new artistic tradition but two: Surrealist collage and Surrealist collagelike painting.

Magritte protested Ernst’s characterization of his own work in a letter he wrote to André Breton, the leader of the Paris Surrealists, most likely in the spring of 1937. Therein Magritte asked Breton to write about him, and specifically requested that Breton correct Ernst’s “too facile comment” that Magritte’s paintings were “collages entirely painted by hand.” Magritte complained to Breton that Ernst was disparagingly implying that his work involved more than a simple juxtaposition of images, discounting the very particular character of his approach to “objects,” which involved what Magritte described mysteriously as a “mental operation.” Though he didn’t mention this, Ernst’s text also implied that Magritte, too, was a “conquest,” passively pursuing a course of action initiated by Ernst.

Figure 4. Page from Max Ernst: Œuvres de 1919 à 1936
(Max Ernst: Works from 1919 to 1936), showing La Belle Saison
The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York
Magritte acknowledged in “La Ligne de vie” that for him (as indeed for most artists associated with Surrealism) “the placing of objects out of context” was a “basic device” for defamiliarizing the familiar. Juxtaposition, in other words—which Ernst broadly described as “collage”—played a fundamental role. But to suggest, as Ernst did, that Magritte’s paintings were nothing more than “hand-painted collage,” as such akin to his own collagelike works, elides the substantive differences in style and strategy that make them instantly recognizable and completely unique.

Consider, for example, the relation between Ernst’s *Pieta ou la révolution la nuit* (*Pietà or Revolution by Night*, 1923; fig. 5) and Magritte’s *Le Sens de la nuit* (*The Meaning of Night*, 1927; plate 11). This is one of several cases in which Magritte seems to point directly at the older artist’s work in order to “correct” him. Magritte’s painting is far simpler than Ernst’s; the palette is distinctively subdued, as is the facture, and there is a degree of spatial illusionism that at first glance appears to be straightforward but on further inspection reveals itself to have been subtly manipulated. More significantly, while Ernst presents us with three distinct subjects, Magritte offers a pair of seemingly identical figures, presented back to back. While these bowler-hatted men would years later come to be seen as stand-ins for Magritte himself—the bourgeois artist, going about the business of painting in a deliberate, dispassionate way—here, at their moment of entry into the artist’s œuvre, they play a different role. The reiteration of the figure forces recognition of both as purely and merely representational. Neither is “real,” despite their convincingly modeled, three-dimensional forms. Masquerading as ordinary, they reveal themselves to be extraordinary, their very “normalness” a key to what makes Magritte’s art so memorably strange.

All who study the life and work of Magritte are indebted to the vast corpus of critical commentary and primary documentation assembled and published by David Sylvester, author of many essays, exhibition catalogues, and books on the artist, and editor of the definitive Magritte catalogue raisonné. That multivolume reference is a model of its kind, providing an essential scholarly foundation upon which we hope to build in the present project, by bringing intense focus to specific groups of works by Magritte, made in specific places, at specific moments in time.

In the first of the four essays that comprise the core of this publication, Anne Umland investigates the body of work Magritte produced in Brussels between January 1926 and his departure for France in September 1927, a crucial period for Magritte’s self-definition as a Surrealist, and a time of close, collaborative involvement with Paul Nougé, leader of the Brussels Surrealist group. The second essay, by Josef Helfenstein with Clare Elliott, focuses on works created during Magritte’s almost three years of living just outside Paris, in the suburb of Perreux-sur-Marne—a moment of creative growth for the artist and the most productive period in his career. Following this Michel Draguet and Claude Goormans consider the works Magritte produced after a combination of personal and financial factors forced him to leave France in June 1930 and return to Brussels, where he lived for the rest of his life. The volume’s final essay, by Stephanie D’Alessandro, concentrates on the weeks Magritte spent working in London in 1937, and on the series of paintings he produced between 1937 and 1938 for the eccentric British collector and great Surrealist patron, Edward James, an opportunity that solidified the future public persona of the artist, and the perception of his work.
The overarching intent of this project is to position individual works created by Magritte between 1926 and 1938 within an expanded frame of references and relations. Throughout, the authors have aimed to make use of the insights gained by looking closely at Magritte's works with conservators, and to take into account the material qualities of individual objects, considered in themselves as primary evidence of the most important kind.

Admittedly, such tactics might not have met with Magritte's approval. To focus on the physical particularities of his work, understood materially and historically; to build, however possible, on insights gained by looking at individual objects with conservators; to situate individual works within the context of their times—such approaches run counter to Magritte's own post–World War II statements and practice. He repeatedly discounted the significance of what he characterized as mere "technical problems," insisting always that it is not the mode of realization but the idea that matters.30 Furthermore, beginning in 1946, the number of "variants" he produced of successful compositions increased dramatically—although he began this practice as early as 1926, it became more exclusively market-driven in the postwar years.31 As a result, works from the 1920s and 1930s and related variants from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s are often treated interchangeably in the Magritte literature, despite their many differences in composition and scale, and in the circumstances of their making.32 This lack of attention to the specific historical contexts of these variants, and the substitution of one for another, tends to obscure the important weight of the artist's very intentional strategies of doubling, duplication, and replication.33 All can be said to undermine notions of "originality" and "uniqueness" in ways consistent not only with Surrealist rhetoric, but with Duchamp's concept of the readymade, underscoring the rich complexity of Magritte's modern artistic identity.

"I don't want to belong to my own time, or, for that matter, to any other," Magritte told the artist and critic Suzi Gablik in 1966, a year before his death.34 Nearly thirty years earlier, in "La Ligne de vie," he was in a very different frame of mind, and careful to locate himself in relation to his moment (fig. 6). His opening salvo: "Mesdames, Messieurs, Camarades"—"Ladies, Gentlemen, Comrades"—announced his left-leaning sympathies, although he was careful during the course of the lecture to distinguish himself, and the Surrealists, from political parties of every stripe.35 His references to "that pain in the arse called Hitler,"36 and to the Italians and Germans bent on "murder[ing] the young Spanish Republic,"37 signal his keen awareness of the troubling political tensions that would culminate, in 1939, in the start of World War II. "Surrealism is revolutionary," Magritte told his audience, "because it is relentlessly hostile to all those bourgeois ideological values which keep the world in the appalling conditions in which it is today."38 Between 1926 and 1938, his art shared in those revolutionary aspirations. Rooted in the commonplace, it sought to act on perceptions in ways that rendered reality disturbing and strange, and that made, in Magritte's own words, "everyday objects shriek aloud."39 His paintings from this period are invitations to look closely and to pay careful, critical attention to what is seen, both in each image and, when turned away from them, in the surrounding world. If Magritte's work has performed as he intended, one may find that, as Nougé memorably wrote in 1931, "the world has been altered. There are no longer any ordinary things."40
References in the following notes in the form “Sylvester 1938” refer to the volume and catalogue numbers of works in the six-volume Magritte catalogue raisonné. Likewise, references in the form “Sylvester 1, p. 324” refer to the volume and page numbers of corresponding texts.

The first five volumes of the catalogue raisonné, published 1991–97, were edited by David Sylvester; the final volume, published in 2012, was edited by Sarah Whifield. For complete publication information for all six volumes, see “Selected Bibliography,” p. 352.

1. Ligne de vie (lifetime) is a term used by palmists to refer to the line or crease on the palm of a person’s hand that indicates the length of his or her life. Danielle Johnson suggests that Magritte may have enjoyed his ‘punning title’s quasi-mystical connotation’ and the way it introduces the idea of reading meaning into abstract symbols and signs. For an invaluable discussion of the lecture’s significance and its different published versions, see David Sylvester and Sarah Whifield, “Magritte’s Lost Lecture,” in Cahiers d’Art, 1937, vol. 11, nos. 5–6, and Frederik Leen, cds., Magritte, 1932–58 (Ghent and Brussels: Leduc, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 1995), pp. 41–43. For a similar discussion, see Sylvester 2, pp. 67–72.

2. Between 1936 and 1938, Magritte participated in many significant events and group shows of Surrealist art, including: René Magritte (Julien Levy Gallery, New York, 1936); René Magritte: Peintures, objets surrealistes (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1936); Expoision surreale des objets (Galerie Charles Estienne, Paris, 1936). The International Surrealist Exhibition (New Burlington Galleries, London, 1936); René Magritte (Huitre Édite Sarcey, The Hague, 1936); Fantastique Art, Dada, Surrealism (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1936); Surrealist Objects and Poems (London Gallery, London, 1937); René Magritte (Julien Levy Gallery, 1938); Expoision internationale du Surrealisme (Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1938); René Magritte: Surrealist Paintings and Objects (London Gallery, 1938); and Exposition internationale du Surrealisme (Galerie Robert, Amsterdam, 1938).

3. The catalogue raisonné is an indispensable foundation for Magritte studies and includes essential information about his interactions with the Surrealist movement. The 1930s and 1940s are treated primarily in volumes 1, 2, and 4, with supplements and newly discovered works in volumes 5 and 6. Beyond this resource, there have been few in-depth studies of his relationship to the larger Surrealist movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Lisa Kim Lipinski suggests that being labeled a “Surrealist” helped Magritte’s career but may limit our understanding of his art; she also examines his critical reception in the interwar period. See Lipinski, “René Magritte and the Visual Arts: Effects Beyond His Wildest Dreams,” Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2000, pp. 19–36 and 38–131. Gérard Duruzo includes Magritte in his survey of Surrealism, but does not fully address his relationship to the larger movement, instead treating him primarily in the context of the Belgian circle of artists. See Duruzo, History of the Surrealist Movement, trans. by Alison Anderson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 147–59 and 271–86. On Magritte’s “Les Mots et les images,” see Kim Grant, Surrealism and the Visual Arts: Theory and Reception (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 255–59. For an examination of Magritte’s work of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly in relation to Salvador Dalí, as well as for a discussion of how Magritte fit into the Surrealist movement and contributed to its development, see Danielle M. Johnson, “Salvador Dalí and René Magritte, 1928–1938,” Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2012.

4. This is not to suggest that others have not considered this period in Magritte’s work to be critical. In fact, Michael Drayard has noted, David Sylvester believed that “the period of the development of Surrealism in the second half of the 1920s was the key moment of Magritte’s development.” See Drayard, “La Reconnaissance Without End,” in Sylvester, Magritte (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2009 edition), p. VII. The 1932 Hayward Gallery exhibition selected by Sylvester and Whifield provides a case in point of the 168 works included in the exhibition, well over half were created between 1926 and 1938, although the exhibition itself covered Magritte’s entire career (1920–67). The present project is the first to focus exclusively on this important period and body of work.

5. For an account of Magritte’s unsuccessful attempts in 1946–47 to promote his conception of “surréalisme” with Paris Surrealism’s leader, André Breton, see, for example, Sylvester 2, pp. 151–71.


9. Allier addresses “La Ligne de vie” in relation to “Au dela de la peinture,” focusing more on the similarities between the texts and “Magritte’s possible appropriation and adaptation of these texts for his own autobiographical writings.” See Allier, Magritte: Beyond Painting, p. 112.

10. For another discussion of the relation between Magritte and Ernst, particularly Magritte’s appropriation and recontextualization of Ernst’s work, see Patricia Allier, René Magritte: Beyond Painting (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 168–74.

11. Max Ernst, “Visions de demisommeil,” in La Révolution surréaliste, nos. 5–6 (October 1–2, 1927): n.p. In a letter to Paul Nougé, written in the fall of 1927, Magritte mentions La Révolution surréaliste, undoubtedly referring to this October 1927 issue. He asks if Nougé has received it and notes that while this number disillusions him a little, he has not had the chance to examine it at length. See Magritte, letter to Nougé, September 1927, in Marcel Marien, ed., Lettres surréalistes: 1924–1940 (Brussels: Les Lettres, 1973), nos. 105.


14. Allier addresses “La Ligne de vie” in relation to “Au dela de la peinture,” focusing more on the similarities between the texts and “Magritte’s possible appropriation and adaptation of these texts for his own autobiographical writings.” See Allier, Magritte: Beyond Painting, p. 112.

15. Ernst, “Visions de demisommeil,” p. 243. See also Ernst, “Beyond Painting,” in Ernst: Beyond Painting, p. 3.


19. Ernst, Beyond Painting, in Ernst: Beyond Painting, p. 17.

20. This spread appears in both the 1937 and 1939 publications of Ernst’s Au-delà de la peinture (n.p. in the former, p. 21[fig. 4] in the latter). For a color reproduction of La Belle Saison (1935), see William A. Camfield, Max Ernst: Dada and the Dawn of Surrealism (Munich: Prestel, 1995), plate 184.

21. Unlike La Belle Saison, none of these works have actual collage sources.

22. René Magritte, letter to André Breton, May 1937(?). (The letter itself is undated, but “29 mai 1937” is handwritten, not in Magritte’s hand, on the envelope, perhaps indicating the date of receipt.) One passage from this letter has been transcribed in French, and another passage summarized and translated to English, both courtesy David Sylvester’s Rene Magritte Catalogue Raisonné Research Papers, Merrill Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston. The original letter is held in the Fonds Breton, Bibliothèque Jacques Ducet.

23. Magritte, letter to Breton, May 1937(?).

24. Ibid.


27. See Sylvester 1937, p. 259 for a discussion of Magritte’s L’Assaut (1937); plate 12 and Ernst’s La Vierge crucifiée (1937) and the menaced infant Jesus concept involving André Breton, Paul Eluard et le peintre (The Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus before Three Witnesses: André Breton, Paul Eluard, and the Painter, 1926). See also Sylvester 2:143, p. 215 for a discussion of Magritte’s I’Imporance des merveilles (The Importance of Marvels, 1937) and Ernst’s Gébetes (1931).

28. Sylvester’s monograph Magritte: The Silence of the World appeared in 1992. In the same year, the first volume of the Magritte catalogue raisonné was published. Also in 1992, the South Bank Centre in London organized a major exhibition that traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Menil Collection, and the Art Institute of Chicago.


30. The most notable recent example of such confabulations occurred at the exhibition and catalogue produced by the Tate Liverpool in 2001, both of which are organized by them. See Christoph Grünenberg and Darren Philp, eds., Magritte à Z (London: Tate Publishing, 2001).

31. Allier addresses Magritte’s variants but focuses primarily on those done in the 1930s and later, in response to the market. See Allier, Magritte: Beyond Painting, pp. 186-88. The authors of the 2004 volume Art Since 1900 suggest that Magritte’s early strategies of multiplication and his later willingness to make copies of his work may have derived from his work in advertising, from conceps current in the Surrealist movement in the 1920s and 1930s, and from the idea of what would later be called the “simulacrum,” or the copy without an original. See “1927a,” in Hal Foster et al., Art Since 1900 (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), pp. 213-14. Magritte died on August 15, 1967.

32. See Sylvester 1937, p. 259 for a discussion of Magritte’s L’Assaut (1937); plate 12 and Ernst’s La Vierge crucifiée (1937) and the concept involving André Breton, Paul Eluard et le peintre (The Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus before Three Witnesses: André Breton, Paul Eluard, and the Painter, 1926). See also Sylvester 2:143, p. 215 for a discussion of Magritte’s I’Imporance des merveilles (The Importance of Marvels, 1937) and Ernst’s Gébetes (1931).


34. Physically impossible to reproduce, his position vis-à-vis the party was as a “fellow traveler” and “strong sympathizer.” See Sylvester 2, pp. 33-34. Magritte, like many of the Surrealists, was disenchanted with organized politics by the end of the 1930s, noting in “La Ligne de vie” that “[w]e [Belgian and French Surrealists] put ourselves as the service of the proletarian revolution. It was a failure. The political leaders of the workers’ parties proved to be far too self-important and far too lacking in shrewdness to grasp what the Surrealists could contribute.” See Magritte, “Ligne de vie,” p. 45. For discussions of the complex and ever-shifting relationship between the Surrealists and the Communist Party, see Steven Harris, Surreal Art and Thought in the 1920s: Art, Politics, and the Psyche (Cambridge, U.K., and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 49-55, and Helena Lewis’s discussion of the years 1926-38 in The Politics of Surrealism (New York: Paragon House, 1983), pp. 55-60.

35. The surrealism of the years 1926-38, noting in “La Ligne de vie” that “[w]e [Belgian and French Surrealists] put ourselves as the service of the proletarian revolution. It was a failure. The political leaders of the workers’ parties proved to be far too self-important and far too lacking in shrewdness to grasp what the Surrealists could contribute.” See Magritte, “Ligne de vie,” p. 45.


37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., p. 46.

39. Ibid.

"A LIGHTNING FLASH IS SMOLDERING BENEATH THE BOWLER HATS"

Paris 1927-1930

Josef Helfenstein with Clare Elliott

Figure 1. Paul, René, and Georgette Magritte (at right), with an unidentified friend at the apartment in Le Perreux-sur-Marne, France, 1926. Photographer and location unknown
René Magritte lived almost his entire life in Belgium, in or near the capital city of Brussels. By the mid-1920s he was active among a group of Belgian Surrealists there that included Paul Nougé, Camille Goemans, Marcel Lecomte, and, later, Louis Scutenaire. With the notable exception of Magritte, the group was not made up of visual artists, but rather of poets, writers, and philosophers. Magritte's first extended stay in Paris was in early 1924, when he attempted to find work there as a commercial artist in one of the city's design ateliers. Unable to secure employment, he returned to Brussels after only a month.²

In 1927, a few months after his first solo exhibition at the Galerie Le Centaure in Brussels (a show that provoked a largely negative critical response), Magritte—perhaps believing he now had better career prospects in Paris—tried again to establish himself in the French capital. In doing so, the artist moved closer to the center of Surrealist activity, and was reunited with his friend Goemans, who had moved there in the summer of 1927 to establish a gallery.³ He introduced Magritte to Jean Arp, Max Ernst, and Joan Miró—all represented at Goemans's gallery, which finally opened in the fall of 1929, and to Salvador Dalí, who arrived in Paris in the spring of 1929. Magritte's connections to André Breton and Louis Aragon, both of whom he had met earlier, either in Belgium or on previous visits to Paris,⁴ deepened considerably during his almost three years in France.

Magritte's relationship with the French Surrealists, however, never grew to be very close, and his position among them remained ambivalent, even while he lived in Paris. He respected and admired a number of the artists and writers there—Aragon, Breton, Paul Éluard, Ernst—but always maintained a distance, both intellectually and geographically. Even while in Paris, Magritte was somewhat isolated; he and his wife, Georgette, lived in the suburb of Le Perreux-sur-Marne rather than in the city center.⁵ The Magritte household remained thoroughly Belgian, with the artist's brother, Paul (who followed the couple to France), living nearby, and the three sharing daily meals (fig. 1).⁶ Magritte was also on the outside in terms of his relationship to Paris galleries. Though he sold a few of his works discreetly through Goemans in 1927 and 1928, he was under contract with Paul-Gustave Van Hecke's Brussels gallery L'Époque until 1929.⁷ Magritte's only two solo exhibitions during this period took place in Belgium.⁸ He was never invited to show at the Galerie Surréaliste, nor did he participate in the important Surrealist exhibition at the Galerie au Sacre du Printemps in April 1928.⁹ Although Breton (as well as Aragon and Éluard) began to collect his work,⁰ he was not included in Breton's 1928 book Le Surréalisme et la peinture nor in the second Surrealist manifesto, published the following year.

Despite the relatively short duration of his stay (he and Georgette returned to Brussels in July 1930), Magritte's time in Paris was the most prolific chapter of his life. He completed more than thirty paintings between the end of September and mid-December 1927, and the following year more than one hundred (this in contrast to a typical average output during the rest of his life of twenty to thirty paintings per year). In total, he painted approximately one hundred seventy-five works in less than three years in Paris.¹¹ It was arguably also the most innovative period of his career. Many of Magritte's themes and concepts that had originated in Brussels in 1926 and 1927 matured during these years. He created entirely new groups of works that would eventually be considered among his most important and inventive paintings, among them the biomorphic images based on his discovery of metamorphosis and the melding of materials; the “word-paintings,” combining language and
image in unprecedented ways; and the toile découpées, or cut-up canvases, perhaps his most radical attack on the tradition of painting to date. During his time in the French capital, Magritte became one of the most creative artists of the era, systematically challenging representation in painting in ways that no other artist had done before.

ENTERING THE SCENE OF THE FRENCH SURREALISTS

Prior to Magritte’s arrival in Paris, Surrealism was dominated by painters who tended toward a style of biomorphic abstraction, often achieved through automatic techniques. Breton promoted “psychic automatism” in his first Surrealist manifesto (1924) as the core element of the creative process in literature. By using methods such as free association, or the mysterious visual material of dreams, the goal was to unleash the creative forces of the subconscious, freeing the process from the control of the rational mind. Applied by visual artists, automatism became a general term associated with collage, frottage, grattage, fumage, and other techniques developed by Surrealist artists in the 1920s and 1930s. In contrast, Magritte focused on familiar, yet idiosyncratic, subject matter, and honed a painting style that was decidedly readable. At the same time, his works questioned the logic of language and meaning, and exacerbated the puzzles of representation. Magritte never fully embraced the automatist techniques that were championed by Breton and practiced, to varying degrees, by the artists surrounding him—including Arp, Ernst, André Masson, Miró, and Yves Tanguy. Indeed, Magritte was suspicious of the “so-called spontaneity” and the mediumistic aspect of such techniques.

While Magritte continued to pursue his distinctive style and subject matter, exchanges with his new circle of friends soon became manifest. The first canvas he completed in Paris, Les Muscles célestes (The Muscles of the Sky; 1927; plate 34) features biomorphic shapes that recall those in Arp’s wooden reliefs, such as Soulier bleu renversé à deux talons, sous une voûte noire (Overtumed Blue Shoe with Two Heels under a Black Vault), c. 1925. Painted wood, 31 1/4 x 41 1/8" (79.3 x 104.6 cm). The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. In Magritte’s painting plays with the representative elements of sky, trees, and stage, but subverts the rational relationship between image and reality. The effect is collagelike—an apparent layering of forms—and yet not, as the painting simultaneously includes signs of three-dimensionality, such as shadows and perspectival structure. Clouds and air become corporeal, casting shadows, and what should be a thicket of trees is merely a two-dimensional dividing line between earth and sky. By combining physical solidity with abstraction, Magritte creates a pictorial paradox that is possible only in painting. The impression here, of something disturbing and yet recognizable, evokes a precarious familiarity that is fundamental to Magritte’s art.

Le Prince des objets (The Prince of Objects; plate 36), of the same year, shows the artist experimenting with ideas championed by the leaders of the Paris group even more directly. It is one of a few works in which Magritte uses actual collage—adding small patches of fabric to the canvas—and belongs to a group of paintings that feature a glossy, black, frameliike form with irregular outlines. According to David Sylvester, these oddly shaped frames “must be references to the traditional game, often used for fortune-telling, of melting lead pellets and dousing the molten mass in cold water so that it solidifies in strange
and evocative forms.

In this example, the molten frame encloses part of the background wall, specifically an area in the process of transforming from a smooth painted surface into a textured wood grain. The work embodies a number of techniques and tropes that were of interest to the Surrealists: collage, games of chance, magic; biomorphic abstraction; the wood pattern of Ernst's frottage; and finally (for Magritte a breakthrough) the use of paint to depict metamorphosis of one material into another. Magritte wrote to Nouge of this and similar canvases: "I think I have made a really striking discovery in painting. Up to now I have used composite objects, or else the placing of an object was sometimes enough to make it mysterious. [...] I have found a new potential in things—their ability to become gradually something else, an object merging into an object other than itself."[17]

This "discovery" would be echoed in the title of another 1927 painting, Découverte (Discovery; plate 35),[13] which features a female nude changing gradually but dramatically into wood, in a version of the myth of Daphne, the nymph transformed into a laurel tree to escape the pursuit of Apollo. But nothing is certain here: the pattern of the wood grain, imposed onto skin, recalls the stripes of feline fur;[19] and the solidity of the figure contradicts its apparent mutability. The levels of ambiguity are representative of Magritte's aim—to challenge the viewer's perception of reality.

**WORD-PAINTINGS**

The use of speech for the ordinary purposes of life imposes a limited meaning on words designating objects. It would seem that everyday language sets imaginary boundaries to the imagination.

—Magritte, "La Ligne de vie" ("Lifeline"), 1938

Painted in October 1927, within the first six weeks of his Paris stay, La Clef des songes (The Interpretation of Dreams [or more literally The Key of Dreams, a translation that avoids obvious Freudian innuendos]; plate 37)[12] presents four objects arranged within four trompe-l'œil frames of equal size. Dividing images into discrete spaces was a strategy with which Magritte had started to experiment while still in Brussels, with La Fin des contemplations (An End to Contemplation, 1927; plate 18), and would pursue in a variety of formats during his time in Paris. La Clef des songes is the first of Magritte's "word-paintings" that presents itself as a kind of "key," or legend, in which four easily read images are paired with words: an image of a suitcase is labeled with the words Le ciel (the sky, or heaven), a knife with L'oiseau (the bird), and a leaf with La table (the table). Only a sponge bears its expected name—L'éponge—a resolution that reinforces the puzzlement of the other disjunctions, while simultaneously estranging the expected. Two man-made objects are placed above two objects from the natural world. A leaf or a sponge divorced from its organic environment will soon disintegrate; their vulnerability evokes the fragility of the way we construct language and the unreliable nature of representing reality. Magritte signs the work directly above the knife (perhaps an allusion to the threatening aspect of his work, in terms of both content and technique). The knife—slashing at pictorial tradition—also brings to mind the technique of collage, a new form of image outside of painterly convention. As early as 1930, Louis Aragon noted the analogy of Magritte's word-paintings to collage in a footnote to his essay "La Peinture au défi" ("The Challenge to Painting"): "Is there a connection between collage and the use of writing in painting as practiced by Magritte? I see no way to deny it."[23]

La Clef des songes borrows its form from illustrations in children's reading primers of the time. Earlier in 1927 Magritte and Nouge had collaborated on a parody publication titled Clarisse Juranville: Quelques écrits et quelques dessins (Clarisse Juranville: Some Writings and Some Drawings; plates 31, 32). Juranville was the author of a common grammar workbook, La Conjugaison enseignée par la pratique (Conjugation taught by practice), first published in the 1880s.[24] The cover of Magritte and Nouge's book is unassuming enough in typography and layout to resemble a real textbook, but a strange insignia between the title and the name of the publisher hints that it might be something different.[25] Indeed, rather than providing a
set of rules establishing correct use of language and syntax, the booklet consists of eleven passages written by Nouge alongside five illustrations “recently discovered by Monsieur René Magritte” (as they are described in Nouge’s preface). The texts are composed in the simple manner of grammar lessons, but their meanings are sometimes absurd, and their themes of anonymity, displaced objects, and potential violence echo those of Magritte’s paintings. One passage, for example, reads:

They resembled everyone else
They forced the lock
They replaced the lost object
They shot guns
They mixed drinks
They sowed handfuls of questions
They retired modestly
while erasing their signatures.

In keeping with the intentionally confounding nature of this apparently inconspicuous booklet, Magritte’s role remains unclear (as indicated by Nouge in his preface). None of the drawings is signed; none of them features Magritte’s characteristic imagery. Any linear or logical relationship between text and image has been contaminated, and there seems to be no hierarchy between them. By thus removing both elements from their traditional functions, Nouge and Magritte succeeded in subverting rational conventions to liberate the mind—one of the highest overarching goals of the Surrealist movement.

Magritte’s interactions with the Parisian Surrealists spurred him to build upon what he and Nouge had begun in Brussels. He became familiar with Miró’s peinture-poésie canvases of 1925–27, which juxtapose abstract compositions with words and phrases written in a cursive hand with flourishes that distinguish it from Magritte’s plain, unembellished script (fig. 3). The appropriation of grammar and vocabulary primers is analogous to Ernst’s redeployment of illustrations found in La Nature, a popular magazine devoted to science and technology (another “objective” source whose authority the Surrealists loved to attack). This subversive take on educational texts grew directly out of the Surrealists’ idealization of the unregulated freedom of the child’s mind, not yet trammelled by the “civilizing” influence of education. The very tools designed to educate (or, to the Surrealists’ way of thinking, to rein in imaginative thinking) are here commandeered to ridicule the system. In undermining the logic and authority of these sources, the Surrealists were attacking the fundamental conventions of bourgeois society.

The investigation of the relationship between text and image would occupy Magritte throughout his stay in Paris, accounting for nearly a quarter of the works he completed there (interestingly, he would revisit the theme only occasionally after leaving the city). He wryly summarized his concepts in his illustrated text “Les Mots et les images” (“Words and Images”; plates 84–89)—a playfully programmatic set of principles about the two elements—published in La Résurrection surréaliste in 1929.

Like La Clé des songes, subsequent word-paintings contain niches enclosing written words; however, the words are no longer paired with images of objects. L’Apparition (The Apparition, 1928; plate 56) is the earliest and most narrative of these paintings; here, abstract biomorphic shapes contain the words nuage (cloud), fusil (rifle), horizon, fauteuil (armchair), and cheval (horse), all incorporated into a darkened landscape, surrounding a solitary figure with his back to the viewer. The word nuage appears just above the man’s head in the sky, where a cloud (or a speech bubble) might logically appear. Horizon is located where the blackened sky meets a featureless sand-colored ground. The remaining three words seem to be arranged at random, and the size and the outline of their compartments are arbitrary in relation to the meaning of the words they contain—save the cloud, which is a feasible cloud shape. Also from 1928, Le Masque vide (The Empty Mask; plate 41) is divided into four sections by what would appear to be picture frames or window mullions, or possibly the supporting bars of a stretcher on the back of a large canvas. The sectors are of nonuniform sizes and shapes, and the framework as a whole occupies its own space. The words within each niche—ciel (sky/heaven), corps humain (human body) (or forest), rideau (curtain), and façade de maison (house façade)—are familiar, but have no inherent
connection to one another (and the alternative of "forest" for "human body" is likewise mystifying). The compartments in Le Miroir vivant (The Living Mirror, 1928; plate 55), by contrast, do not constitute a framework, but are interconnected, biomorphic abstractions (highly reminiscent of Miró's peintures-poésies), set against a plain black background; they contain the words personne éclatant de rire (person bursting with laughter), horizon, cris d'oiseaux (birdcalls), and armoire. In L'Arbre de la science (The Tree of Knowledge; plate 61), the words cheval (horse) and sabre (sword) suggest battle, as does the form at the lower right, which resembles the barrel of a gun. The lettering is carefully rendered, like the writing of schoolchildren learning penmanship, character by character, as forms rather than as signifiers: language is disassembled into its elementary parts and given new meaning.

Le Paysage Fantôme (The Phantom Landscape, 1928; plate 50) shows the word montagne (mountain) written across the face of a woman who stares impassively at the viewer. Although the likeness is based on the photograph of a friend in Brussels, Magritte neutralized the identity of the individual through his choice of dull colors and style of academic flatness, reducing the portrait to an impenetrably generic image. As is so often the case in his most successful works, Magritte instills in the viewer a spark of suspicion that the apparently familiar, painted in the most ordinary way, is actually a trap, hiding something unknown, disturbing, even threatening.

In L’Usage de la parole (The Use of Speech, 1928; plate 42)—a title Magritte used no fewer than six times in 1928— the artist presents the written element as speech bubbles emerging from the mouths of two faces in profile, a convention of comic strips and cartoons. The somewhat grandiose title is another of the artist's word-traps: while it suggests a treatislike exploration of language, the painting fails to deliver on that promise. The division between the two parts of the work echoes the disconnection between image and word. It has been suggested that the pair may be Breton (left) and Magritte (right), possibly engaged in word association, an exercise the Surrealist artists frequently undertook to stimulate creativity and illogical connections. Another Surrealist activity is recalled in La Bonne Nouvelle (The Good News, 1928; plate 40): the game of Cadavre exquis (Exquisite Corpse), in which players collaborate by blindly completing each other's stories or drawings. This painting's inscription reads: "Je te passe la plume, ma pauvre amie, enchantée de tant et tant de conscience des délices. Geert" (I hand you the pen, dear friend, enchanted by so much awareness of distress. Geert). Magritte's investigation of language culminates in La Trahison des images (The Treachery of Images, 1929; plate 64). The previous year (according to the date given by the catalogue raisonné) he completed [Biomorphs with Words] (plate 39), in which a roughly outlined pipe-like shape is anchored with the label la pipe. This earlier work is one of a few in which Magritte uses heavy impasto, emphasizing the physicality of the paint used to represent form—an objective paralleled by the exploration of language to represent meaning. In contrast to the unusually experimental style of this untitled work, La Trahison des images presents an easily recognizable illustration of a pipe, flat and crisp as a commercial sign. The image floats against a creamy background above the seemingly contradictory declaration "Ceci n’est pas une pipe" (This is not a pipe). The confrontation between the words and the image synthesizes the lessons explored in the earlier word-paintings, for now the two appear not merely disconnected, but actually opposing each other. Paradoxically, of course, the assertion is true: a painting of a pipe is not a pipe, nor is the word pipe a pipe; finally, the word and the image...
denoting the object have nothing inherently in common with each other—not with an actual pipe.

In numerous ways, Magritte incorporated the written word into the act of painting as a means of deconstructing and redefining both image and language, in an attempt to nettle the problem of representation. Refusing to confer a subordinate role to either written or visual representation, and instead using language and image to disrupt one another, to upend logic, Magritte engages the revolutionary potential of both. Painting is thus redefined as an analytical, critical instrument, challenging perception and activating the mind of the viewer.

**PAINTING THE ACT OF PAINTING: TENTATIVE DE L'IMPOSSIBLE**

In *Tentative de l'impossible* (Attempting the Impossible, 1928; plate 44), Magritte pushed his investigation of painting to a level not seen before. Here he depicts, in the nontemporal medium of painting, the act of painting in the most literal way. The painter (Magritte himself) is shown “finishing” a female nude (modeled by Georgette) by painting her left arm, the only missing part. He is represented with the traditional attributes associated with the practice of oil painting—palette, brushes, wet paint, and palette cups. Part of the enigma of the work is its seeming naïveté, the literal representation of something “impossible.” Like the mythical sculptor Pygmalion, the artist here—in this case a painter—creates Galatea, the nude female body. The action is taking place in real space, while simultaneously its representation is frozen in time on the surface of the canvas. But unlike the passionate Pygmalion depicted by Jean-Léon Gérôme around 1890 (fig. 4), this artist—dressed in a suit, posing stiffly—seems utterly detached from the act of creation in which he is involved.

*Les Jours gigantesques* (The Titanic Days, 1928; plate 48) offers an interesting comparison. Both works depict a clothed man and a nude woman; in each the female is “completed” by the male, though in radically different ways. In *Les Jours gigantesques* the two bodies are collaged onto each other, and—unlike the classically proportioned figures in *Tentative de l'impossible*—they are solid to the point of exaggeration. (The title *Les Jours gigantesques*, provided by Nouge, refers both to their massiveness and to the mythological fight of the Titans.) The woman’s posture here is contorted, in contrast to Georgette’s frozen contrapposto in *Tentative de l'impossible*. In place of the comfortable middle-class surroundings seen in that canvas, in *Les Jours gigantesques* we find an undefined, unfurnished space. The background—bluish, indistinguishable—may be interpreted as a flat wall, an open sky, or an abyss; it augments the threatening mystery of the scene. As violent and theatrical as *Tentative de l'impossible* is dispassionate, *Les Jours gigantesques* demonstrates the artist’s ongoing fascination with the notion of negating, through painting itself, the conventions of pictorial space, as well as his continuing exploration of the visible and the hidden. It is one of the most disturbing images Magritte ever painted.

*Tentative de l'impossible* is likewise ambiguous in what it represents and conceals. On one hand, it is a key example of Magritte’s investigations into the power of painting and the tension between object and representation. On the other, it demystifies the creative process: painting here is a rote
act, nothing more than the application of medium in order to achieve likeness. The artist has been subversively redefined, from a hero with spiritual powers to a Sunday painter, acting mechanically in an uninspiring domestic setting.

Furthermore, Magritte here challenges the archetype of the female muse, a recurring Surrealist conceit. Exemplified by the title character of Breton's 1928 novel Nadja, described as a “verbatim sphinx,” the figure of the muse was celebrated by the Surrealists—mainly for her uncanny ability to inspire creativity in male artists. But in contrast to Breton's Nadja, “so pure, so free of any earthly tie,” Magritte’s model seems rather bland, like an unfinished statue in the living room of his apartment. In Tentative de l'impossible the romantic bond between painter and painting—here between artist and muse—is nonexistent; and the stakes of this particular bond are especially fraught, since it is Georgette and Magritte themselves who are represented.

In Tentative de l'impossible, Magritte masterfully illustrates the layers of constructing reality, exposing the tricks and traps of this endeavor. A series of photographs sheds further light on Magritte’s thinking and adds yet another stratum of representation. One image, made in 1928, shows him with his palette in front of the unfinished painting (plate 71). Magritte stares to the right, his hand poised in midgesture. The attributes in the photograph replicate exactly those in the painting: the large brush points conspicuously upward to the canvas, emphasizing the staged connection between the painting in progress and its producer.

This is one of the earliest known instances of Magritte confronting himself as a painter through the medium of photography. By posing in front of this representation of the act of painting and mechanically reproducing its unfinished status, Magritte undermines the originality of the work, thereby increasing the conceptual complexity of what is represented. He orchestrated a second photograph (plate 74), today known as Amour (Love; a title likely given after the fact). Here, in a case of medium role-reversal, the photograph is set up to resemble the painted portrait. (Along these lines, Nougé would later observe that in Magritte’s work “the model tries to resemble her portrait.”) Again, Magritte poses here as if “painting” Georgette in real space, with his brush touching her left arm. The quasi-pictorial quality of the photograph and its lack of sharp focus counterbalance the matter-of-factness of the staged scene itself. Perhaps provoking the photograph’s given title, here Georgette’s gaze meets that of her husband/the painter—whereas in the painting, there seems to be no visual or emotional communication between artist and model.

Using the camera allowed Magritte to deepen the investigative process of Tentative de l'impossible. (As we shall see, he would employ photography in the following years to even more provocative ends.) The act of painting is here represented as both creation and reproduction. The photographs, paradoxically, emphasize creation, while the painting illustrates Magritte's thinking about both the attraction and abyss of representation. Photography is a medium drained of all metaphysics, no longer laden with what Aragon called painting’s “carpetbag of superstitions.”

By visualizing the act of painting with the antimodernist literalness and naïveté of a Sunday painter and choosing as a setting the prosaic surroundings of his own living room in Le Perreux-sur-Marne, Magritte succeeds in extinguishing from the very outset the metaphysical spark of what is depicted. The mystery of the creative act had long been targeted by Dada and Surrealist artists, including Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia starting in the 1910s, and later by Ernst, Aragon, and Breton. However, no artist before Magritte had represented the creative act with such understatement and antiheroic banality. Far from a parody, Tentative de l'impossible is a playful manifesto about creation, illusion, and representation in painting. It is, all at once, a self-portrait, the only known painted image of him and Georgette together, and, most importantly, an ironic portrait of the act of creation.

1929: SUCCESS AND CRISIS

Although Magritte completed fewer canvases in 1929, it was his most productive year of collaboration with the Surrealists while living in Paris. While he continued to work with his colleagues in Brussels, his involvement with the group in Paris expanded significantly. Breton and Aragon served as editors for a special issue of the Belgian
periodical *Variétés*, titled "Le Surréalisme en 1929," which included two paintings and a drawing by Magritte. He was also among the artists and writers invited to respond to a questionnaire issued by Breton and Aragon concerning collective political action. At the end of the year, the journal *La Révolution surréaliste* published four contributions by Magritte. A full-page photomontage shows portraits of sixteen contributors to the issue arranged around a female nude—a reproduction of Magritte's 1929 painting *La Feme cachée* (The Hidden Woman). The group, all pictured with eyes closed, includes Magritte and his Belgian friends among the current members of the Surrealist group (plates 90 and 91). Opposite this montage appears Magritte's reply to the question "What sort of hope do you put in love?" The issue also includes a small, unsigned collage by the artist titled *Paris en '30* (Paris in '30) and his page-and-a-half-long illustrated text "Les Mots et les images* (plate 89). Magritte had begun compiling the observations set forth in this piece shortly after he moved to Paris in the autumn of 1927; it is not known how far in advance of the publication date he completed it.

The year 1929 was a tumultuous one in terms of Magritte's relationship with his dealers, all of whom were hit by the global financial crisis. In Brussels, the Galerie L'Epoque and its share in Magritte's contract were taken over by the Galerie Le Centaure. Le Centaure, however, survived for only three more months, and in July its arrangement with the artist was terminated. The shifting situation allowed Goemans to deal with Magritte's work more actively from Paris, and in September he offered the artist a contract with his gallery, which opened the following month—coinciding precisely with the crash of the stock market on Wall Street and the beginning of the worldwide depression. Within a short time, the entire art market collapsed; Goemans was forced to close in early 1930, after only three exhibitions.

Dali arrived on the Paris scene in the spring of 1929, ready to work with Luis Buñuel on their film *Un Chien andalou*. There is scant documentation about the friendship between Magritte and Dali, but the latter's autobiography indicates that he knew Magritte by reputation before coming to France. Dali also mentions Magritte in four of the seven known "Documentals" (reports on the Surrealist activities in Paris) that he wrote for the Barcelona newspaper *La Publicitat*. Dali was several years younger and his eccentric personality differed vastly from Magritte's. He was also among the artists and writers invited to respond to a questionnaire issued by Breton and Aragon concerning collective political action. The end of the year, the journal *La Révolution surréaliste* published four contributions by Magritte. A full-page photomontage shows portraits of sixteen contributors to the issue arranged around a female nude—a reproduction of Magritte's 1929 painting *La Feme cachée* (The Hidden Woman). The group, all pictured with eyes closed, includes Magritte and his Belgian friends among the current members of the Surrealist group (plates 90 and 91). Opposite this montage appears Magritte's reply to the question "What sort of hope do you put in love?" The issue also includes a small, unsigned collage by the artist titled *Paris en '30* (Paris in '30) and his page-and-a-half-long illustrated text "Les Mots et les images* (plate 89). Magritte had begun compiling the observations set forth in this piece shortly after he moved to Paris in the autumn of 1927; it is not known how far in advance of the publication date he completed it.

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In August 1929 Magritte and his wife joined Goemans and his companion, Yvonne Bernard, along with Buñuel, and Paul and Gala Éluard at the family home of Dali in Cadaqués, Spain. Here Magritte completed an unknown number of paintings, including *Le Temps menaçant* (Threatening Weather; plate 65), in which three incongruous objects—a nude female torso, a tuba, and a chair—dominate a seascape. Painted in white, afloat over the brilliant blue water, the objects seem formed from the amorphous substance of clouds. The painting's title (supplied by Paul Éluard) contradicts the scene's placid sea and calm skies. The painting's highly polished technique, bright palette, and rocky forms doubtlessly reflect the influence of Dalí as well as the landscape of Cadaqués. At the same time, Magritte's influence on Dalí's painting is also manifest here, as seen most clearly perhaps in the latter's *L'Enigme du désir: Ma mère, ma mère, ma mère* (The Enigma of Desire: My Mother, My Mother, My Mother; 1929; fig. 5) in which *ma mère* is inscribed, in the cursive typical of Magritte's writing, over and over in separate compartments (reminiscent of other Magritte canvases of this period, as we have seen).

As Magritte's involvement with the French Surrealists was intensifying in the last year of the decade, the movement was facing a crisis. Tensions with the political left, especially the Communist Party, led Breton to reposition the circle of artists both intellectually and politically. In an effort to reaffirm his leadership, he condemned a number of recent developments and purged the group of dissenters in a wave of expulsions. By the end of 1929 Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, Robert Desnos, Michel Leiris, André Masson, Joan Miró, Pierre Naville, Philippe Soupault, and Roger Vitrac had distanced themselves from the movement.
quit altogether, or been forced out. Newly emerging artists compensated for the loss of several of the founding writers and painters, and Dali—and to a lesser extent Magritte—moved to the forefront.

But just as he was being accepted to the inner circle of the Surrealist group, Magritte came to a breach in his relations with Breton. On December 14, 1929, the day before the publication of “Les Mots et les images” in *La Révolution surréaliste*—Magritte’s most important contribution to the movement yet—he and Breton had a serious falling out. At a gathering at Breton’s apartment, the writer demanded that Georgette remove a cross that she was wearing. Georgette refused, protesting that it was a family heirloom, and the offended Magrittes left the party immediately, despite the intervention of several friends who tried to convince them to stay. As minor as the incident may seem, it represented a real rupture: Magritte and Breton did not reconcile for several years. The break with Breton affected Magritte’s relationships with the other members of the French Surrealist group (with the exception of Éluard, with whom he remained close); furthermore, it had the flavor of personal defeat—Magritte had failed to establish a lasting link to a group with which, despite his ambivalent position and desire for independence, he had made such a concerted effort to connect.

**PAINTING-OBJECTS FROM 1930**

In the last few months of his stay in Paris, however, Magritte completed some of his most significant paintings to date. He created three *toiles découpées*—*L’Évidence éternelle* (The Eternally Obvious or The Eternal Evidence; plate 66), *Les Perfections célestes* (Celestial Perfections; plate 67), and *Profondeurs de la terre* (The Depths of the Earth; plate 68)—in the first weeks of 1930, with plans to show them at his first solo exhibition, at Goemans’s Paris gallery, in April. Based on Magritte’s comments in his February 1930 letter to Nougé, the artist considered these to be among his most important and innovative works. They are a culmination of his far-reaching investigation into representation and illusion, and the roles of painting and object in general.

*L’Évidence éternelle* has received far more attention than the two other *toiles découpées*, both during and after Magritte’s lifetime. The life-size standing nude, presumably a portrait of Georgette, is made up of five small paintings, each one radically cropped; every panel is in a gold frame, emphasizing the compactness of the enclosed images. The gaze of the viewer cannot help “reconstituting” the full image of the body, by imagining the missing parts between the canvases. The familiarity of the subject matter and the anachronistically academic style in which it is painted are contradicted by the unfamiliarity of the composition.

By choosing the iconographic model of the female nude, Magritte inserted himself into a distinguished and yet loaded tradition of figurative painting. It is known that the artist was familiar with Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’s 1848 *Vénus Anadyomène* (fig. 6), a masterpiece of Western mythological and academic painting celebrating the female nude. Ingres’s own preparatory drawings, focusing on the head, breasts, navel, and lower torso (figs. 7a–d), show a surprising similarity to Magritte’s dissected painting in both study and execution. However, Magritte’s “Venus” (à la Georgette) is stripped of all idealized appeal and aura.
of classical mythology. Taking on the full weight of a canonized tradition, this work constitutes the end point of the classical era of painting, by literally deconstructing the academic ideal of the female nude.

Magritte was aware of the tension between composition (traditionally a means of aesthetic unification) and fragmentation. His painting Les Idées de l’acrobate (The Acrobat’s Ideas, 1928; plate 47) may be seen as an earlier manifestation of this awareness, although here the female nude is not merely fragmented but also twisted and deformed. In his February 1930 letter to Nouge (see p. 230, fig. 1), Magritte wrote of L’Annonciation (The Annunciation, 1930; plate 70) and Au seuil de la liberté (On the Threshold of Liberty, 1930; see p. 199, fig. 6): “It may be observed that with this type of picture it becomes impossible to cut them up without destroying them completely,” while simultaneously noting, perhaps with some satisfaction, “(in the case of the woman, the sky or the landscape, it seems to me they gain from being subjected to such a process).” Indeed, L’Évidence éternelle successfully both carries on and disrupts the time-honored tradition of voyeurism and the female nude. Fragmentation here clearly invokes a feature of pornographic voyeurism, as well as the aggressive, predatory aspect of the act of seeing. It alludes to the violence of new modes of visual production and reproduction—photography, film, and the fetishizing of the female body in advertising.

A comparison of L’Évidence éternelle to Tentative de l’impossible reveals striking similarities, especially with respect to the composition of the nude. It is possible that the earlier painting (and the related photograph known as Amour) inspired the pose and/or the deliberate cropping of the female figure in L’Évidence éternelle. Although the
figure is presented frontally in the later painting, with the head and upper body moving slightly to the right, the classical pose of Georgette in these two works is very similar, albeit a mirrored image (figs. 8, 9, and 10).

The title L'Évidence éternelle is ambivalent in its own right: its affirmative certainty belies the fact that the image hides as much as, if not more than, it reveals. The proclamation of any "eternal" truth is of course ironic. The word evidence relates to different forensic realms—among them philosophy and (to the point here) criminology. In this painting, Magritte has created a symbolic connection between representation and crime: the puzzle of the fragmented female nude body replicates the mystery of misdeed.

With L'Évidence éternelle, Magritte moves very close to the Surrealists' notoriously anticonformist attitude toward crime. In the tradition of the Marquis de Sade (much venerated by the Surrealists), the group fundamentally opposed the Judeo-Christian idea of sin. More than once, they publicly commented on controversial legal cases, extolling certain criminal acts as the ultimate form of social revolt on the one hand, and as poetic expression on the other. Identifying with such antisocial behavior was part of a commitment to a broad social revolution, and to what Breton described in 1934 as "Surrealism's dedication to the 'liberation of the mind' outside the Western traditions of rationalism."

Two photographs of L'Évidence éternelle, taken sometime between July 1930 and January 1931, add further complexity to the meaning of this work. One was first reproduced in the catalogue of Magritte's 1931 solo exhibition at the Salle Giso (plate 112). The manner of the painting's presentation in the photograph is decidedly perplexing. In the image, the five canvases that make up the work are seen mounted on a glass sheet, which stands in a filthy cellar.
like space, in front of a washtub and surrounded by hanging laundry. In another photograph, apparently taken in the same claustrophobic space, the work leans against a brick wall, beside a bucket of coal (fig. 11). The positioning of the piece in the basement—its isolation in this crude environment—increases the sense of the vulnerability of what is represented and conveys an impression of lurking violence. The tension between the fragility of the painting and of its subject, and the distant, cold eroticism of the photograph evokes a disturbing sense that this is the scene of a sexual crime. Furthermore, by locating the painting-object in this antiaesthetic setting, Magritte fundamentally undercut the work's perception at the abstract level of "fine art." The placement of the painted image among the objects in this basement points again to Magritte's interest in playing with the distinction between two-dimensional images and three-dimensional physical reality.

Nougé's role with regard to these photographs may have been more pivotal than has so far been noted. Magritte's correspondence with him about the creation of the toiles découpées is documented in the Magritte catalogue raisonné. Nougé also refers to similar notions of "shock" or revelation in the experience of decontextualized objects in his 1933 essay "Rene Magritte ou les images défendues" (René Magritte or the forbidden [or protected] images). He mentions that such objects become isolated "in the most charming way" simply by going "into the attic." A third photograph of L'Évidence éternelle was made several years later, during the installation of Magritte's 1938 exhibition at the London Gallery (fig. 12). Neatly dressed
Figure 13. René Magritte. Le Salon de Monsieur Goulden
(Mr. Goulden’s Drawing Room), 1928 or 1929. Oil on canvas,
18 x 15 in (46 x 38 cm). Location unknown. (Sylvester 1:300)

and with a cigarette in his mouth, the artist poses rakishly
with his arm around the glass panel, touching with his hand
the canvas that features an image of the model’s breasts. It
recalls the photomontage he created in 1929 for La Révolution
surréaliste, in which the (fully clothed) male Surrealists
are juxtaposed with a painted naked female figure.

The conceptual relationship between the painting-
object and the photographs, however, is much deeper than
Magritte’s casual posture here suggests. With its five rig-
orous “close-ups,” L’Évidence éternelle is the result of a
subversive clash between style and technique: while the
figure is painted in a conventional academic manner,74
Magritte used means more commonly associated with photo-
graphy—such as cropping and (in the most literal sense)
framing—to fragment the body. Utilized like photography,
here painting mimics the other medium’s “predatory side”
and “incongruity.”75 The photographs of L’Évidence éternelle
in different settings further obscure the boundaries between
the two mediums and increase the confusion about what
is real.

In 1937, seven years after painting L’Évidence éternelle,
Magritte created another version of the same idea. In that
work, with the title La Représentation (Representation;
plate 121), he developed the central canvas of L’Évidence
éternelle, playing the same game of presence and absence,
parodying the idealized female nude and deconstructing it.
The frame, however, now follows the contours of the two-
dimensional body; fragment and frame have become unified.76

No photographs exist of the original arrangements of
canvases that comprise Magritte’s two other object-paintings,
Les Profondeurs de la terre and Les Perfections célestes, and
the original glass panels upon which they were mounted
have been lost. However, the artist indicated the arrange-
ment of the four canvases of Les Profondeurs de la terre
with a sketch in a letter to E.L.T. Mesens, who negotiated
the sale of Magritte’s paintings before the artist left Paris.77
In Les Perfections célestes, however, the configuration can
only be guessed at, and has varied in publications and exhi-
bitions through the years. The overall layout—two canvases
on top and two below—can be deduced from two earlier
Magritte paintings, La Vie secrète (The Secret Life, 1928)78
and Le Salon de Monsieur Goulden (Monsieur Goulden’s
Drawing Room, 1928 or 1929; fig. 13), both of which show
similar arrangements of four canvases that together add
up to an illustration of a cloudy sky. Magritte’s signature
on one of the canvases offers the only hint that the panel
should perhaps occupy the lower-right position in the
quartet. What may be two halves of a long, gray cloud sug-
gest that the two upper canvases should be placed adjacent
to each other (as pictured here), although none of the
other cloud formations necessarily reinforces this relation-
ship. Along with L’Évidence éternelle, both Les Profondeurs
de la terre and Les Perfections célestes were among a group
of works, then untitled, sold to Mesens in 1930 and exhibited
under their current titles twice in 1931.

Magritte’s toiles découpées marked his ingenious
response to a widely perceived “crisis of painting” at the
center of an ongoing theoretical dispute within the Surrealist movement. Painting as commodity and as a traditional medium of art making had been under attack throughout the 1920s, a charge led by Aragon, Breton, and Pierre Naville, and waged by such artists as Duchamp, Ernst, Miró, and Picabia. The debate about the legitimacy of painting intensified in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and Aragon's brilliant 1930 essay “La Peinture au défi” (“The Challenge to Painting”)—published only weeks after Magritte had executed his group of new works—indicated an unprecedented level of urgency. With the toiles découpées, Magritte reached new territory in his critique of representation. By physically deconstructing the image, the artist forces the viewer to engage and "complete" the painting in his mind. With these works, Magritte succeeded in articulating the tensions between painting as image and painting as object more convincingly than ever before.

THE FINAL MONTHS IN PARIS
In March 1930 Magritte stopped painting and started looking for work as a commercial artist. He participated in a group show called Exposition de collages organized by Aragon and Goemans, with only one work among over thirty contributions, by Arp, Georges Braque, Dalí, Duchamp, Ernst, Juan Gris, Man Ray, Miró, Picabia, Picasso, and Tanguy. Goemans's plans for Magritte's solo show that spring, which was to include his most important paintings to date, never materialized, as the Paris gallery closed its doors in April. It was not until 1948—nearly twenty years later—that Magritte would have his first one-person exhibition in Paris.

Magritte's estrangement from Breton (and hence from the majority of the Surrealists); the closing of Goemans's gallery, which left the artist without a contract or a monthly stipend; and the consequences of the global economic depression that began with the stock market crash in October 1929 made Magritte's situation in Paris untenable. Spring 1930 marked the beginning of an extended artistic crisis. He left Paris in July and went back to Belgium. Forced to support himself and Georgette, he returned to commercial design work. Symbolically, this decision constitutes a fundamental break with Magritte's ambitious artistic and intellectual objectives during the years in Paris.

Living in the suburbs of the French capital put Magritte simultaneously in proximity to and at a distance from Breton's Surrealist group and those affiliated with it. The fact that he remained geographically apart, even in the three years he worked most intimately with the Parisian Surrealists, and carefully kept a distance from the consuming politics of the movement, may well have been among the conditions he needed in order to create a unique body of work. Magritte produced some of his most iconic paintings in this period—including La Clef des songes, Les Jours gigantesques, Les Amants (The Lovers; plate 54), Tentative de l'impossible, La Trahison des images, Le Faux Miroir (The False Mirror; plate 59), and L'Évidence éternelle. He deliberately adopted the techniques of academic representation—and then turned representation on its head. In Magritte's paintings, the familiar becomes uncanny; recognizable representation is a trap—a veritable denial of what is known. In Paris, Magritte succeeded in fundamentally questioning the connection between image and interpretation, establishing for himself a unique position in the ongoing modernist discourse about the role of art, and especially painting, in contemporary society.
The first file I illustrated for their support and contributions: Bred Eley, Chief Conservator; Katrina Bartlett, Assistant Paintings Conservator; Joseph Neumaier, Head of Publications; and Eric Wolf, Head Librarian, and to former Mend intern Marie Léon de Castelein for her initial research on the project.


2. Although the exact dates are not clear, Magritte seems to have gone to Paris and returned within the month of February 1924.

3. Goemans had had close connections in Paris since 1924.

4. The works, originally used to effect the illusion of repairs and reconstruction: the additional pieces of fabric appear to be “patches” either the wall or the canvas itself. We thank Anne Umland for this observation.

5. The work’s original title was “L’Expérience du lionceau” (“The Experience of the Minotaur”); this title was inscribed by Magritte on the stretcher bar and later crossed out. Sylvester 1:187, p. 248.

6. Magritte may have had in mind Fernand Khnopff’s painting Des Canards (1896), which shows a figure composed of a leopard body and a woman’s head. See Sylvester 1, p. 249.

7. See Sylvester 1:189.

8. The watercolor is described by Magritte in a letter to Paul Valéry (2 March 1928, letter to C. Pascale, Brussels, 1933, in the Bibliothèque de la Ville de Paris, by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 239.) The more literary translation was adapted from that in Sylvester 5, pp. 9–23.

9. According to the authors of the catalogue raisonné, the title La Clé des soucis comes from Henry Vidal’s 1921 French translation of The Interpretation of Dreams. The painting’s English title was based on the translation of that book, which has been known since the mid-seventeenth century as The Interpretation of Dreams. (See Sylvester 1, p. 249.) The more literal translation, The Key of Dreams.
might better serve the work because it avoids Freudian connotations that Magritte would not have intended.

22. Magritte made a second version with the same title in a vertical format after returning to Brussels in 1930, and a third in 

33. (plate 103, Sylvester 1:320 and Sylvester 2:370).


24. See Sylvester 1, p. 7.7.

25. The cover is illustrated in Sylvester 1, p. 7.7.


27. Ibid., p. 18.


31. Michel Foucault has remarked that Magritte’s art is superimposed the “femme cachée” especially


33. Ibid., p. 90.

34. See Sylvester, Magritte: The Silence of the World, p. 130.


36. Ibid., p. 68.

37. We thank Brad Epley for clarifying these technical details.


39. Ibid., p. 90.


41. See Patrick Roegers, Magritte et la photographie (New York and Ghent: DAP, Ludion, 2005), pp. 22-23. The authors of the catalogue raisonné hold that photographs of Magritte with “les images des exercices” were “manifestly taken at the same session in the autumn of 1928.” See Sylvester 1, pp. 318-19.


43. Éluard was the first owner of this painting; he probably purchased it from the artist while in Cadaqués. See Sylvester 1, pp. 338-39.

44. That this work reflects Magritte’s time in Cadaqués is noted in ibid., and in Sylvester, Magritte: The Silence of the World, pp. 224-26.

45. The history of schisms within the Surrealist group is a complex issue, made more confusing by the fact that a number of artists—Duchamp, Picasso, Picabia, and Miró among them—never joined the Surrealist group to begin with. See Robert Kopp, “If Images Could Change the World,” in Philippe Bortz et al., Surrealism in Paris (Basel: Fondation Beyeler, 2011), pp. 24-45.

46. This incident has been recounted by various participants and observers, including Georgette Nougé, Goemans, and Claude Spak. See Sylvester 1, pp. 111-12.

47. Magritte’s term toile découpée (cut-up canvas) does not literally reflect the process by which the works were created. Microscopic examination of L’Evidéncce éternelle reveals that each of the five canvases was painted separately. The paint layer does not extend onto the tacking margins, as it would if the painting had been initially realized as a complete image and then cut into smaller sections before stretching. We are grateful to Epley and Barletti for their careful study of L’Evidéncce éternelle, upon which this and subsequent observations about the painting here are based.

48. The translation provided for this work in the catalogue raisonné, The Eternal Obvious, seems perhaps interrogative; the more literal translation of “evidence” for évidence is possibly less so. It is not known who created the original title for this work, although Nougé presumably provided titles for the other two toiles découpées.

49. See Sylvester 1, p. 332.


51. Magritte’s classification of the toiles découpées, especially with regard to their status between painting and object, changed over the years. Initially, he
described the works as "objects"; and in 1937 L'Évidence éternelle was exhibited in London in E.L.T.
Meeson's exhibition Surrealist Objects and Poems under the category of "Surrealist objects." In the exhibition René Magritte: Surrealist Paintings and Objects at the London Gallery, 1938, however, it was termed a "picture object." See Sylvester 1, pp. 349-50.

64. Cézanne's untitled nude, one of his last works, is also reproduced in Sylvester 1, p. 114.

65. In transcribing and translating this passage, the authors of the catalogue raisonné overlooked the line Magritte drew connecting the phrase "Voici ainsi les croquis de deux grandes tableaux" (Here are sketches of two large paintings [followed by sketches of L'Annunciation and Saint Paul de la Liberté]) to his remark that works such as these would no longer be "the Surrealists topic later by being cut up; by contrast, "the woman, the sky or the landscape" that is, works such as L'Évidence éternelle, Les Profondeurs de la terre, and Les Perfections célestes" gain from being subjected to such a process."

66. See Sylvester 1, p. 349.

67. Perhaps coincidently, the cropping that occurs by line of sight in Tentative de l'impossible by Ammar (here both are reversed for the sake of comparison) is very similar to that which Magritte initiates on the left side of the top three canvases in L'Évidence éternelle, before the angle of the viewer alters the composition. Again, we are grateful to Epley and Bartlett for calling attention to this intriguing relationship among these three works; this observation seems nothing less than a discovery.

68. The first issue of La Révolution surrealiste, for example, carried a photomontage centered on a portrait of Germaine Breton, an anarchist activist who assassinated a right-wing politician in November 1933. Both Eluard and René Crevel sympathized with the sisters Christine and Léa Papin, two domestic servants who brutally murdered and disfigured their employer's wife and adult daughter in 1933. Both Eluard and René Crevel sympathized with the sisters, deciding the press's sensationalistic coverage of their trial. The same year, Magritte contributed to Violette Nozières, a booklet produced by a group of Surrealists in tribute to an eighteen-year-old working-class woman who poisoned her father and attempted to poison her mother, claiming to be motivated by years of sexual abuse. See Jonathan P. Ehrward, Surrealism and the Art of Crime (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), and Sylvester 2, pp. 23-24.


71. The photographs were taken by Camille Stone, the professional name of the Belgian photographer Wilhelmine Scharnhorst (1892-1975). Little is known about her role in composing these images. See Sylvester 1, p. 349.

72. Ibid.

73. See Nougé, René Magritte on les images défendues, p. 31.

74. While many of Magritte's canvases appear at first glance to have been achieved via traditional academic painting techniques, in fact the artist only appropriated such methods. Brad Epley proposes that a more precise description of his technique may be "calculated realism": paintings executed just well enough to convincingly depict form, with nothing more to convey the individuality of the artist. We are indebted to Epley and Bartlett for their observations with regard to Magritte's technical approach.

75. See Sylvester 1, p. 349.
