

## Rene Magritte (1898-1967)

### *Surrealism and Magritte*

Surrealists painted objects realistically, but combined them in an unusual or nonsensical way. They felt that such odd combinations would stir up ideas and feelings in the back of peoples' minds. These paintings often have a dream-like quality. Surrealism stresses the idea of being above or beyond reality. Many of their ideas were inspired by Sigmund Freud's theories on dreams. Surrealists took a sentence from the poet Lautreamont to explain their search for the fantastical:

“Beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table”.

Rene Magritte (1898-1967), was born in Lessines, Belgium. His paintings have an eerie, dreamlike quality. Though he painted in a very realistic way, it was the objects that he chose to combine, and how he used his incredible imagination, that made his work so different. He combined elements that usually don't belong together. This odd mixture of components can achieve the effect of strange, sometimes extraordinary, imagery. His paintings can be mysterious as well as whimsical. Magritte used associations that are impossible in real life. Magritte's capacity for combination seems inexhaustible.

The Belgian Rene Magritte was a practitioner of realist Surrealism. His art, painted with such clarity that it appears highly realistic, typifies the Surrealist love of paradoxical visual statements, and though things may seem normal, there are anomalies everywhere.

*The Empire of Lights* is Magritte's most celebrated work. He painted no fewer than ten versions of this work, the last of which remained unfinished owing to the artist's death. This image or idea accompanied him over the final decades of his life. Each version does not vary substantially. It is a painting in which there is no sign of any human or animal figure. And yet the scene is not static or lacking in movement. Motion is evoked by clouds floating across the upper part of the painting. It is not this part, however, that attracts the viewer's gaze, which is drawn first to the lights that give the picture its title: light from lampposts and windows in a building apparently uninhabited, the lights reflecting on the adjacent water.

The area in *The Empire of Lights* that most immediately attracts and retains the viewer's interest is a nocturnal scene. However, this is juxtaposed with a clearly daytime blue sky dotted with floating clouds that occupies the upper part of the scene. A sky like the one depicted naturally rules out any illumination like that shown in the lower part, and especially the shadows dispersed by such illumination. There is no doubt that the painting would not be nearly so disquieting without this contradiction.

The house with the lighted windows and the light from the lamppost are given so much emphasis that they force the viewer to accept the scene fully and without reservations. The viewer tends to believe, for instance, that what he sees is simply an anomalous twilight in which darkness has come on much more quickly, possibly owing to the shadows in the dense foliage of the trees, or that someone has left the lights on during the day. None of these explanations is acceptable, of course, since the darkness enveloping both the house and lamppost cannot be taken for anything but

true nocturnal darkness. The vast majority of viewers do not quite realize that the scene represented is not realistically presented. It is so realistically painted that the viewer accepts the painting as true.

Magritte's principal source of income for many years was publicity drawing or industrial design (wall papers, advertisements, and publicity for couture). Magritte was a very reserved person. Despite the fame that his work brought to him, he and his wife, Georgette, lived a private, middle-class life. Rene Magritte and Salvador Dali, another surrealist artist, became friends during the 1920s.

### ***Projects and Discussions***

The most important idea to relay to the children is how Magritte combined familiar and recognizable objects to take on new meaning and symbolism. Sometimes Magritte chose objects for no particular reason. So whatever feelings or thoughts the children have about his paintings are correct. There is no right or wrong meaning to these paintings.

Read *Dinner at Magritte's* to the class. This is a wonderful book. Each page is filled with striking, colorful paintings, and intriguing surrealist imagery inspired by Magritte's art. You can ask the kids questions about the pictures in this book. Each picture offers many things to talk about. You should read this book before you talk to the class because of the many subtleties.

If it's a nice day with clouds, take the kids outside and have them draw what the clouds remind them of. This is good for younger grades because it is easy and fast.

Give each child a grouping of words. Have them make a picture using these familiar objects. If they want to combine some of them into one object, that's O.K. (e.g. a cat and an airplane--a flying cat) Anything goes. You can pass them out or let them pick them out of a hat. Have them use crayons, color pencils, or markers.

### ***CRS Resources***

#### **Reproductions:**

*The Empire of Lights*

*The Surprise Answer*

*The Returne*

*The Human Condition* (National Gallery of Art)

*Various postcards and small reproductions*

#### **Book:**

*Dinner at Magritte's* (1998) Michael Garland

## Word Groups

hat  
ex-large apple  
eyes  
sky

ocean  
castle  
ex-large orange  
clouds

a smile  
moon  
sky  
dog and hat

sky  
loaf or loaves of bread  
large window  
turtle

ex-large flower  
room with a window  
chair

large leaf  
glass of water  
bird  
sky  
table  
piece of watermelon

ocean  
clouds

one eye  
ballon  
sky  
lips

bird  
clothes  
sky  
turtle

tennis ball  
tree  
bricks  
sky with moon and  
stars

car  
large apple  
worm  
sky

dog  
airplane  
sky

window

ex-large fish  
hat  
pipe  
sky with clouds

ex-large leaf  
house with windows  
clouds and a pizza

ex-large comb  
bed  
room with a window  
clouds

ex-large apple  
face  
sky  
bowtie