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THE MARKET FOR SURREALISM

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René Magritte and Salvador Dalí, the "poster boys of Surrealism," are famous for bold, superrealistic renderings of fantastical subjects. Along with Joan Miró, they command the field's top prices. Right: Magritte's 1928 painting *L'espion*, from a private collection.

The Key to Dreams

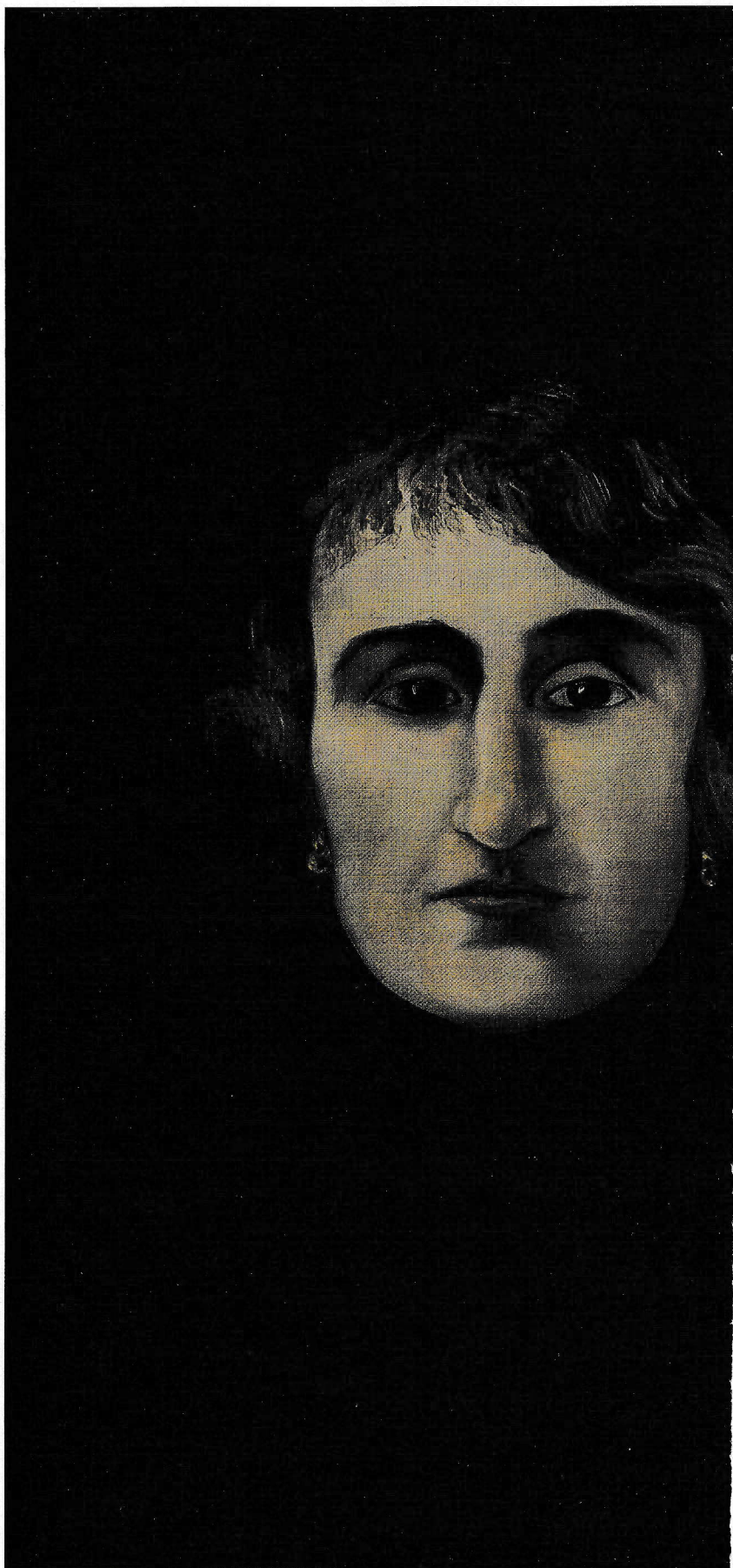
The market for Surrealist paintings is mercurial, but like the unconscious, it has a logic all its own.

By Carol Kino

WHEN ANDRÉ BRETON published his first "Surrealist Manifesto" in 1924, he aimed for a revolution in thought and life, whereby the power of dreams would usurp the reign of logic. "Surrealism is the invisible ray," he wrote, "that will one day enable us to vanquish our opponents." In many ways, he was right. Not only has the movement influenced later generations of artists from the Abstract Expressionists to the YBAs, but it also lives on today in films, fashion, music videos and pop psychology.

Feeding the fascination is a number of major museum shows, starting with "Two Private Eyes" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1999, featuring the collections of Nesuhi Ertegun and Daniel Filipacchi. "Desire Unbound," which opened at the Tate Modern in London, is showing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York through May 12, and "The Surrealist Revolution" is running through June 24 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. At auction, both Christie's and Sotheby's now hold annual sales in London devoted entirely to Surrealism.

But popularity with the public—or even currency in the art world—doesn't always translate into sales. As the auction houses are discovering, the



Man Ray's 1930 photograph *A Group of Surrealists at Tristan Tzara's House*. Front row, from left: Tristan Tzara, André Breton, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst and Man Ray. Back row, from left: Paul Eluard, Jean Arp, Yves Tanguy and René Crevel.



The Persistence of Fantasy

SURREALISM WAS EASILY THE MOST PROMISCUOUS ART MOVEMENT OF THE 20th century. Setting aside the sexual proclivities of the artists, many of whom were obsessed with chance encounters of all sorts, the movement itself also got around. Founded in Paris by André Breton, Surrealism ultimately traveled as far as New York and Mexico City. It crossed artistic borders as well—first launched as a literary movement, soon encompassing visual arts and along the way, infiltrating our everyday lives with a sense of the absurd.

But Surrealist art has never fully taken hold among serious collectors. In part because of its disturbing imagery, Surrealism can be a hard sell. Historically, the market for paintings has been limited to a handful of (primarily) European collectors, and interest in Surrealist photography is relatively recent. Now, with major exhibitions such as "Desire Unbound" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and special auctions in London, Surrealism is a market in transition. *Art & Auction* looks at the paintings that define the high end of the market, and the photographic works that just might define its future.

market for Surrealism is very much like the movement itself—a rather unruly beast. The “official” Surrealist movement includes artists as diverse as Hans Bellmer, the German artist known for his violent photographs and drawings of dolls, and Paul Delvaux, the Belgian painter who rendered dreamy, neoclassical scenes of beautiful nudes. New York private dealer and collector Timothy Baum has about 135 names on his master list of Surrealist artists. But that’s just the beginning, for there are also legions of artists, from Pablo Picasso to Alberto Giacometti, whose work is said to have gone through a Surrealist phase. The market is, in a word, sprawling.

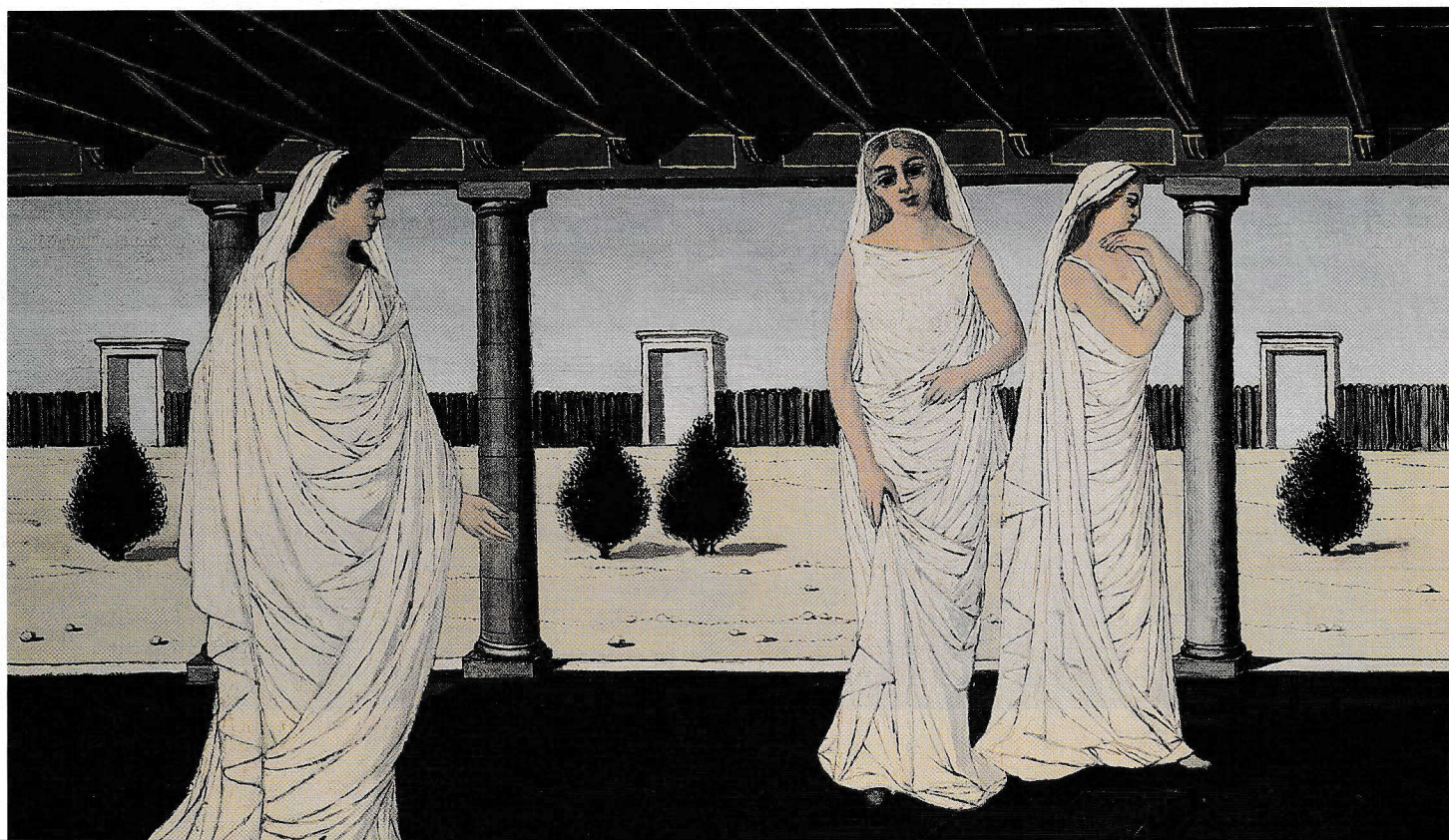
AT ITS HIGH END, WHICH consists primarily of paintings, three artists rather dramatically lead the pack: the Spanish artists Joan Miró and Salvador Dalí and the Belgian René Magritte. Their paintings represent distinct strands of Surrealist imagery. First, there’s Miró’s brand of biomorphic automatism, which is often linked to modernist abstraction. Then there’s the more illustrative work of Dalí and Magritte—“the poster boys of Surrealism,” as Baum calls them—whose superrealistic renditions of fantastical dreamlike scenes have made them household names.

In the past few years Christie’s New York has achieved eye-popping records for both Miró

and Magritte. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art pushed the envelope for Magritte by paying \$7.2 million at the auction house in November 1998 for *Les valeurs personnelles*, from 1952, which came from the estate of Magritte’s lawyer, Harry Torczyner. In November, several early paintings by Miró from the René Gaffé collection went for even more astonishing prices. One of the top lots, *Portrait de Madame K*, achieved \$12.6 million—a record for the artist and the field. Dalí’s auction record of \$4.1 million was established in May 1990, also at Christie’s New York, though dealers point out that his work on the private market can surpass this figure.

Not every artist has the same commercial power. Prices for artists outside the Surrealist trinity are all over the map and don’t necessarily square with their importance in art history. Although Delvaux, for example, can approach Dalí and Magritte in price, his top pieces are few and far between. Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy are considered even more crucial to the movement, but their auction records hover around \$1.5 million—just below Roberto Matta’s. More affordable are works by Victor Brauner, Oscar Dominguez, André Masson, Kurt Seligmann, and the women Surrealists, such as Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning. (Carrington claimed top-lot honors at Sotheby’s Surrealism sale in February with *Chiki, ton pays*, 1967, which brought £421,500 [\$596,000], more than triple its presale estimate.)

Surrealism was in essence a male fantasy, with women serving as the subjects of paintings and as objects of desire. But a few female painters, most notably Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning, made their way into the group’s official ranks. Right: Tanning’s self-portrait *Birthday*, 1942, from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Below: Paul Delvaux’s *Le cloître*, 1957, which sold at Sotheby’s London in February for £135,500 (\$192,000).







INDEED, SALES OF SURREALIST PAINTINGS—whether handled at auction, by specialist dealers or modern art galleries (such as Jan Krugier in New York and Zurich and James Goodman in New York)—tend to be uneven.

While records continue to be broken, long-time specialists complain that Surrealism can be a hard sell because of its jarring imagery and strong sexual content. The work can be “challenging,” says London dealer James Mayor. “People are delighted to go and see it in a show, but they’re not taking it home.” Marcel Fleiss, of Galerie 1900–2000 in Paris, warns that good material is becoming scarce.

Dealers also bemoan the dearth of new specialist collectors. Where, they wonder, is the next Daniel Filipacchi, the French publishing magnate who spent four decades assembling the works in the Guggenheim exhibition? “I have not had a major new collector of the subject in the last 10 years,” says Timothy Baum, “and none under the age of 45. Yet people say I’m lucky to be a Surrealist dealer!”

In some respects, it’s easy to blame this state of affairs on the Surrealists themselves, who often rejected or subverted the conventions of the marketplace. In pursuit of spontaneity and the subconscious, many of them switched styles and subjects, never developing the signature look of, say, Dalí.

Likewise, Surrealists often worked across a wide variety of mediums, experimenting in genres that receive short shrift from collectors. While Surrealist photography has carved a growing niche in the market (*see page 74*) and drawings and gouaches may approach those for oil paintings, works in other media—collage, assemblage, film, book art, stage design, interior design, poetry and ephemera—simply do not have the same collecting base. For example, collages by the poet Jacques Prévert, says Baum, can be bought for as little as \$5,000 and have never exceeded \$15,000.

The movement’s geographic diversity has also weakened the market in certain respects. World War II created something of a Surrealist diaspora, with artists fleeing to the U.S. and Mexico. The art capital was no longer Paris, where Surrealism was homegrown, but New York, where it decidedly was not. And in postwar America, Surrealism didn’t have the same groundswell of support that would soon buoy Abstract Expressionism. “It was a literary movement in a language Americans didn’t understand,” explains New York dealer Nicolas Ekstrom, who specializes in Dada and Surrealism. Generally speaking, the Surrealists whose markets have flourished are from countries that were able to support them with postwar shows and collecting attention, as Belgium did for Magritte and Delvaux.

